

Should Private Schools Be Publicly Funded?

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In some jurisdictions in Canada at the present time, Alberta in particular, private schools receive 60% of their annual funding through government sources. Some of the very best schools in terms of success on provincial examinations are funded in this way, notably the Webber Academy in Calgary, which advertises itself as an academically oriented institution for those with a scholarly bent. In other jurisdictions, notably Ontario, private schools are funded privately by their donors, churches or other religious institutions and by the families whose children attend them. Some of these institutions have national reputations, like Upper Canada College for the boys and Havergal for the girls, both embedded in central Toronto on lovely campuses and with fine old buildings.

Many private schools are extensions of religious interests. Many private Catholic or Anglican schools dot the landscape of Canada and have done for many decades or even centuries. Often these are residential and suit those who wish their children to have a privileged education among the Canadian better financed class who will potentially make friends for life among those who attend such schools. A number of Jewish schools have existed as private schools for most of the last century, though most people of Jewish faith send their children to the public schools or to some of the better private ones regardless of their religious backing. More recently the influx of Muslim families has created an interest in Muslim schools where, besides the provincially required curriculum, Arabic and the Koran are studied and children find themselves going to school with those whose background is similar. Sometimes paying for the fees at such schools, unless as in Alberta there is some public money helping the school, becomes very burdensome for parents who have often lost practically everything in their haste to leave a war-torn homeland.

In Alberta, where the notion of a special-interest or "Charter" school embedded in one of the publicly funded boards (public or Catholic) has become common, many schools that wish to emphasize certain forms of conduct, high academic achievement, high intelligence, or perhaps natural science, or perhaps a special

language or cultural interest (Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, French, German...) are fully funded by the public purse. Although these schools often share the same interests and approach as private schools they are included in the publicly funded school budgets in their jurisdictions and have similar privileges to them. Not everyone qualifies for admission to such schools, even though publicly funded schools normally take all comers (except of course for the religious requirement for Catholic schools, which can sometimes be waived when spaces are available). The Charter school movement has been very successful in Alberta and has many other Canadian jurisdictions interested in principle, though it is really only in Alberta where it is at present taken for granted.

The notion of the public school, modified in a number of Canadian jurisdictions such as Alberta and Saskatchewan to include a fully publicly funded Catholic or separate school system, is the notion of a school for all and for which no entrance requirements of academic, ethnic or financial ability arise. This is the notion of a school for all in which democratically speaking all have equal access and opportunity. This is the system that was initially forged in Ontario under the regime of Egerton Ryerson in the middle of the 19th century to combat "crime, poverty and ignorance" by requiring all children from any circumstance to attend the same schools in order that the next generation would have advantages in knowledge and skills and moral values that the previous generation did not have access to. And it is this system that spread to the rest of Canada with two notable exceptions: Quebec and Newfoundland.

Quebec, like Ontario, was a founding province of Canada. Its education arrangements were based as a publicly funded system on the notion that all the schools except those designated for Protestants were essentially Catholic schools under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic faith. This system held from 1867 to the mid twentieth century when a new wave of politicians in Quebec wished to secularize the province from top to bottom and to convert the religious tenor of the school system to that of a secularized school system rather like that of France. This system is now dominant in Quebec for both the French and English languages, although there is still some difficulty in creating a teaching force that is appropriately secular in its manner and approach according to recent scholarship.

Newfoundland has the oldest colonial history of any Canadian province and one that goes back to 1498 with the arrival of John Cabot. But it took a number of centuries for the European population of Newfoundland to increase significantly

such that a publicly funded school system was needed. When the population finally warranted it a school arrangement that was based on a number of religious denominations was established in the early 19th century. First this was essentially an Anglican/Catholic split of public educational funds but by the early 20th century the Pentacostals, the Anglicans, the United Church of Canada, the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholics each had their share of the public school funding pie. Until the scandals arising specifically out of the child physical and sexual abuse relating to a number of the residential schools often taught by religious teachers that came to public attention in the 1980's this system held. But now it has been transformed into a publicly funded system with no denominational ties and the standards have been consistently rising. So in Newfoundland today there are essentially publicly funded schools for all and a few religiously based private schools for some, three large ones in St. John's the capital.

In the Maritimes, in Manitoba and in British Columbia the public systems are dominant though private religiously based private schools are also common. Saskatchewan's constitutional situation is similar to that of Alberta but it has a very large and increasing aboriginal population that requires special consideration.

The question that our political jurisdictions face today in all parts of the country are whether or not private schools should receive, as they do presently in Alberta, some measure of public funding. Part of the argument for this is that the Supreme Court of Canada had judged that ultimately it is the parents that are responsible for the kind of education that their children are receiving. And parents characteristically pay taxes to their provincial not municipal governments a portion of which is designated for publicly funded schooling. If parents wish their children to have a special kind of schooling not the schooling offered by the public system, why should they not have their taxes so designated for the education of their children?

The argument has become a little more complicated in Alberta with the recent advent of a New Democratic Party replacing the Progressive Conservative government in Alberta. The NDP have argued that they think that public funding for private schools is a misuse of public funds. Tax money should only spent on benefits that are available to all and private schools are not available to all in terms of their admission requirements and their invariable levying of a large fee annually required for each student over and above the 60% offered by the province.

For my part I prefer a first class publicly funded system for all. Although history is against it and the constitutional documents that established Alberta and Saskatchewan in the first place set up two publicly funded schools systems, it seems to me that if one were to change our school arrangement the best thing would be to have a single public system for all. Religious needs can be handled more directly in other ways by parents and religious institutions and need have nothing to do with the school system. Of course one worry about such arrangements in the minds of some parents is that one's children are likely then to grow up in the company of people of many faiths not one's own. Perhaps they might even fall in love and marry. However it seems to me that if this does not happen, if we organize around silos of belief and practice in our school system, then we are not likely to have a unified country in the long term future.

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Editor*