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Site Search

Quick Links



Home > Publications > Research Reports

BCTF Research Report

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Ten Problems with Charter Schools

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What are charter schools?

Definitions vary, according to rules set by different jurisdictions. Legislation allowing for charter schools is on the books in several U.S. states and in Alberta. Britain passed legislation in 1988 allowing for "grant maintained" schools, essentially their version of what have been called charter schools in North America.

Some common elements apply, despite the differences: a privately operated school holds a charter that allows it to receive full public funding without being subject to many of the regulations and decisions that apply to public schools.

Much of the criticism of charter schools has been based on a concern that they contribute to a breakdown of the public purposes of public schooling. Others have found that experience indicates that many of the positive hopes for effectiveness have not been achieved in practice.

Charter schools create two-tiered education.

Opposition to charter schools has been expressed by the B.C. Minister of Education, Art Charbonneau. He told the legislature that charter schools produce "a system where some groups of parents see that through more extensive control and participation, they can deliver one level of education in that school, and they feel the public schools in that area can be satisfied with a lesser level of education."

Research indicates that inequalities in schooling and segregation by social class have increased in Britain since the system of grant-maintained schools was introduced. Most of the people who choose the alternatives are from high socio-economic status. They want their children in schools with similar students and have the time and money to ensure that their children can make it to a school from outside their neighborhood.

Charter schools encourage social fragmentation rather than common experiences.

An important historic role of the public school has been to provide a meeting place and common experiences for students from a variety of cultures and homes. With the increasing diversity in our society, it is more important than ever to have students from different backgrounds in classrooms and playgrounds together.

Charter schools lead to balkanization as groups create schools to reflect their special interests. As an example, one charter school in the U.S. is being promoted by promising parents that they will teach creationism through the school's distance education program.

Charter schools make a priority of the private benefit determined by the parents, rather than balancing and accommodating both the individual and public good.

Charter schools aren't the answer to inequalities in Canada.

Some advocates of charter schools point to the situation in the U.S. where charter schools have been started in the core of major cities. Those founding the schools in communities like Harlem and Detroit are looking for improvements over the existing situation where schools are of poor quality and often violent.

Those situations reflect social conditions of racial ghettos and major inequities in funding. White suburban schools have the resources and quality, while the cities have been abandoned with inadequate funding. In this context, any change may appear to be a solution and charter schools may help a few escape the problems. Yet, one school district in California found that its choice programs aimed at equalizing actually increased the disparities. Even in this situation, parents with the most resources took the most advantage of the situation for their children.

The degree of "savage inequalities" of the U.S. school system is not present in Canada. Funding of schools is much more equal, both between provinces and among school districts within the provinces. In the Canadian context, charter schools will increase inequalities rather than reducing them.

Charter schools don't encourage system reform and improved quality.

The theory put forward by many charter school advocates is that the competition of charter schools will lead to reform and improvement to the mainstream of the public schools.

In the U.S. and Alberta, most of the charter proposals have been for "niche schools" that serve a particular special population. Charter schools end up serving special interests, rather than creating programs that develop alternatives that would be offered to most students. They divert money and attention from improving all schools to enhancing a few.

Charter schools don't reduce spending on administration.

While some have argued that administrative efficiencies will be improved with competition, experience doesn't bear this out.

In Britain, grant-maintained schools have spawned new agencies to serve administrative needs. Many individual schools have had to create jobs for people to handle finances; where schools have not, the principal ends up spending a great deal of time on day-to-day business administration, like insurance, benefits, and building repair, rather than educational concerns.

The advantages of bulk purchasing and efficiencies of scale are lost, making materials and services more expensive. Salaries of principals in the grant-maintained schools have soared.

The concerns of most parents can be addressed by the current system.

Many program options are currently offered in public schools and schools are increasingly open to program options. Particular languages, areas of focus such as the arts, and special needs are already met by programs within the public schools. This approach better serves the public good than setting up what are often essentially private schools with full public funding.

Parent advisory committees, mandated in the School Act, provide an opportunity for parents to provide input into the school policies.

Marketing, rather than educational improvement, becomes a central focus.

The British grant-maintained system is based on a model of competition in the market place. The assumption is that the value of education can be determined by consumer choice. Consequently, significant attention is placed on selling, advertising, and promoting in order to recruit and retain pupils.

Recent studies indicate that resources are devoted to marketing instead of educational program change. One study (Gewertz) says that "concerns about self-presentation, surface appearance and image [are] increasingly becoming a main preoccupation for school managers." Further, "significant amounts of money which could be spent on teachers and textbooks are being diverted to meet the costs of publicity and presentation."

Charter schools may exclude students with special needs.

In a system based on an educational marketplace, students with special needs may detract from the marketability of the school. Research in Britain indicates that the "most effective strategies are

1. to recruit more students who are likely to perform well academically, and
2. exclude students who are likely not to do well academically."

There is concern in Britain over the trend away from integrating children with special needs into the regular classroom. These students are seen as impediments in achieving test scores that can be used to comparison-market the school.

Hidden impediments get in the way of real choice.

Proponents of "choice" through charter schools often claim that the choice is open for any parents. In practice, hidden factors, such as the cost of transportation or the lack of skills to take part in meetings, get in the way of any real opportunities for many to choose. A case study on one California district demonstrated that a school choice program designed to overcome economic inequities resulted in increasing stratification because of these hidden factors.

As James Guthrie told Education Week, "let me tell you why schools aren't like chocolate bars. When you or I eat a chocolate bar, the gratification and the effect is virtually immediate. Schools have a lagged effect, some of the consequences of which are not immediately evident." In the absence of data, he says, "parents will make a judgment based on the social class of students."

A charter school could mean the end of a neighbourhood school.

If charter schools become part of the school system, some existing schools would be converted from neighbourhood schools to charter schools. This would mean that the neighbourhood public school would not necessarily be accessible to everyone who lives in the neighbourhood.

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