



THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY CAPSTONE PROJECT

Charter Schools and Educational Diversity in Alberta

*Assessing the success of Alberta charter schools and the potential for expansion
in Alberta and other Canadian provinces*

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THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

Capstone Executive Summary

Charter schools have been operating in Alberta for over twenty years, yet their growth has been limited in the province and the model has not expanded to the rest of Canada.

Functioning as autonomous, government-funded, non-profit schools which charge no tuition – each offering a unique educational approach and performing independent research – charter schools represent an innovative model of public education. An analysis of provincial enrollment data shows charter school enrollment is growing relative to total school age population in Alberta, and anecdotal evidence shows strong parental demand for charter schools. An analysis of grade six and nine Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) score data in Alberta between 1997/98 and 2016/17 shows that charter schools on average almost always outperform all other types of schools – notably outperforming independent schools – while operating at a much lower cost to government than traditional public schools. When broken down school by school, it has been shown that charter schools achieve consistently high average PAT scores, and the few charter schools that fall below the traditional public school average scores have shown steady improvement over time. Yet, the provincially mandated cap on the number of schools in the province has not been reached. It appears that regulatory and practical barriers have constrained the expansion of charter schools in the province. The Alberta government could implement policy reforms

to remove these barriers, reallocate additional funding for transportation and some capital costs, and encourage charter school growth.

For decades, charter schools have served as an integral part of the educational choice frameworks in both Alberta and the United States, and represent an opportunity for other Canadian provinces looking to increase diversity within their education systems and better engage students who are not best served by traditional public schools. A review of the education systems in each Canadian province and a literature review of existing research on charter schools in the United States and Alberta demonstrate that charter schools likely cannot be introduced without overcoming some political barriers. However, charter school policies bring great potential for offering a wider range of educational options to students of all income levels, and may be exceptionally valuable for engaging disadvantaged student populations in classroom learning.

By several measures, the Alberta government's experiment with charter schools has proven successful for students, but there is room to grow. The introduction of charter schools is a worthwhile policy for other provincial governments to consider, and the Alberta model offers useful lessons to aid in the process.

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are an integral part of Alberta's educational choice framework, offering an alternative form of fully funded public school for students. In Canada, charter schools are unique to Alberta, and cross-country growth of charter schools has been extremely limited, in stark contrast to the United States (U.S.) experience. Expanding charter schools across Canada would require the removal of regulatory and practical barriers in Alberta, and the introduction of the charter school model to other Canadian provinces. This expansion would add choice and innovation to provincial education systems, and may allow for cost savings and customized benefits, such as improved test scores, research opportunities, diverse educational approaches, and targeted outreach to disadvantaged student populations.

Drawing on data showing student enrollment and Provincial Achievement Test scores, this report assesses how the charter school model is working in Alberta, more than two decades after it was introduced. This report explores whether Alberta charter schools have a) been successful; and b) would be worth expanding to other Canadian jurisdictions. School success is subjective and difficult to define. This report attempts to measure whether charter schools produce good test results; if they are popular with parents and students; if they are cost effective; and if they offer other societal benefits and drawbacks. Looking at the differing experiences of both U.S. and Alberta charter schools, this report also extracts lessons for other Canadian jurisdictions.

Ultimately, the charter schools experiment in Alberta has produced positive results. The data analysis performed in this report does not control for socioeconomic status, but finds government-funded charter schools on average outperform all other types of schools in Alberta, including independent schools which require some level of tuition from parents. Based on both measurable and anecdotal evidence, charter schools are popular with parents and students and enrollment is growing. However, charter school growth is restricted. By some measures, the supply of charter school availability does not currently meet the demand. Yet the number of charter school authorities in Alberta falls below the legislated cap. This puzzling juxtaposition illustrates the need for policy reform to remove regulatory and practical barriers to charter school expansion in the province.

Seeking an answer to whether charter schools would be worthwhile and realistic to introduce in other Canadian provinces, this report assesses the degrees to which each province offers educational choice to students, parents, teachers and principals. Alberta offers the most school choice, but other provinces offer unique benefits and drawbacks. Charter schools have been successful for students in Alberta and other countries, and are a worthwhile model for other provincial governments seeking increased school diversity to explore. Introducing charter schools may be particularly advantageous in Ontario and Atlantic Canada, where school choice is lacking. However, this introduction may not come without political and policy challenges.

ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS: THE BASICS

Charter schools are autonomous, non-profit, publicly funded schools within Alberta's K-12 public education system. These schools are founded by societies of parents and/or educators dedicated to a specific vision of education delivery, focusing on alternative programming not offered in traditional public schools within the charter school's operating area. The "charter" for each school is the unique educational program it is mandated to provide (The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools [TAAPCS], "Charter School Facts", 2011). This could be anything from a different educational philosophy to a schoolwide focus on sports or arts designed to engage students. They cannot be religious schools, and they cannot turn students away if space is available.

Only accredited teachers may teach at Alberta charter schools (Alberta School Act: Certification of Teachers Regulation, 1999), and the Alberta curriculum must be taught. Charter school teachers cannot be full members of the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), the province's teachers' union, but they can be associate members. Charter school students are required to take standardized provincial tests like all other Alberta students. Charter schools are held accountable by the Minister of Education through regular evaluations. Charter school authorities each have their own board of directors, which is a distinct aspect of the model.

An Overview of Alberta's Current Charter Schools

Alberta currently has 23 charter school campuses under the umbrella of 13 charter school authorities. Charter schools are mostly located in urban areas, but some are in smaller centres. The following is a list of the current charter schools and authorities in Alberta:

- Almadina School Society
 - o Calgary-based charter school focused on English language acquisition for students for whom English is second or third language
 - o Two school campuses, including kindergarten to grade four and grade four to nine
- Aurora School Ltd.
 - o Edmonton-based charter school focused on traditional public education, discipline and orderly teacher-directed instruction
 - o Two schools housed on the same campus, including one elementary school and one middle school
- Boyle Street Education Centre
 - o Edmonton-based charter school focused on providing additional supports for students who have experienced interruptions in their education, such as mental health struggles, unstable housing or trauma
 - o One high school campus
- Calgary Arts Academy Society
 - o Calgary-based progressive school focused on arts immersion, self-directed student learning and community action

- One school with two campuses, including kindergarten to grade three and grade four to nine
- Calgary Girls' School Society
 - Calgary-based all-girls school focused on inquiry-based education with an emphasis on women and girls
 - One school on two school campuses, including grades four to five and six to nine
- CAPE – Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence Institute
 - Medicine Hat-based charter school with a strong focus on academics
 - One school for kindergarten to grade nine
- Connect Charter School Society
 - Calgary-based charter school, with a focus on technology, science and research
 - One school for grade four to nine
- Foundations for the Future Charter Academy Charter School Society
 - Calgary-based charter school focusing on academics, character development and parental involvement
 - Seven school campuses, including one high school, two middle schools and four elementary schools
- Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Society
 - Rural Leduc County-based charter school with a focus on Indigenous learning
 - One school for kindergarten to grade nine

- New Horizons Charter School Society
 - o Sherwood Park-based charter school focused on academic enrichment for gifted students
 - o One school for kindergarten to grade nine
- Suzuki Charter School Society
 - o Edmonton-based charter school focused on intensive music education based on the philosophy of Dr. Shinichi Suzuki
 - o One school for kindergarten to grade six
- Valhalla School Foundation
 - o Rural Valhalla Centre-based charter school focused on fostering rural community leadership
 - o One school offering both elementary and junior high
- Westmount Charter School Society
 - o Calgary-based charter school focused on multi-faceted education specifically targeted to gifted learners
 - o Two school campuses, including one elementary school and one middle/high school

INTRODUCTION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

Premier Ralph Klein and Education Minister Halvar Jonson introduced charter schools to Alberta on March 31, 1994, to improve student outcomes through the creation of unique, innovative public schools. Charter schools did not exist anywhere else in Canada, so it was framed as an educational policy experiment or pilot project. On May 25, 1994, Bill 19, *The School Amendment Act*, came into law and charter schools were officially permitted. Later in the *Charter Schools Regulation*, a legislated cap was imposed on the number of charter schools permitted to operate in the province at any given time (Alberta School Act: Charter Schools Regulation [Alberta Charter Schools Regulation], 2002). Alberta's first charter school opened in the fall of 1995.

Klein Government's Broader Education Reforms

Around the same time, the Alberta government introduced a sweeping number of changes to education policy, predicated on public and stakeholder consultations held across the province. In fall of 1992, before Ralph Klein was leader of the PC Party (to which he was elected in December of that year), the government met with 300 education stakeholders for what were termed "Fiscal Reality" meetings, discussing alternative methods of education delivery. With the findings from these meetings summarized into a workbook, public roundtables were held in October 1993 – four months after Klein was elected premier. Additionally, eight stakeholder meetings took place and the government received 17,000 submissions from the public. Charter schools were one of the alternative education ideas

proposed in the province's roundtable workbook, but they were not the only change made (Bruce, Kneebone & McKenzie, 1997).

Along with introducing charter schools, the province implemented several education reforms:

- Reduced the number of school boards from 140 to 60 and reduced the number of school trustees;
- Centralized control over education funding to the provincial level;
- Created school councils composed primarily of parents, but also principals, students and community representatives to enhance local control and parental influence over schools, possibly drawing influence from similar models in the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Bruce et al., 1997, p. 405);
- Decreased the size of the province's education bureaucracy;
- Shifted superintendent appointments to the provincial level;
- Introduced site-based management, giving principals greater control over their school budgets;
- Opened boundaries between school boards and schools and informally encouraged increased movement between school districts to foster greater competition between schools;
- Required schools to publicize student results on Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams and parent and student satisfaction survey data; and encouraged school boards to publish additional performance indicators, including

student-teacher ratios, student transfers in and out of schools, graduation rates and vandalism occurrences;

- Restructured education funding into “blocks” of instruction, support, and capital (Bruce et al., 1997, p. 388);
- Reduced early childhood education funding (which was later marginally increased as a response to public dissatisfaction);
- Reduced overall education funding by 12.4 per cent and reduced teacher pay (and the pay of all government employees) by five per cent (Matsumoto, 2012), though the net overall budget cut to Alberta Education was 6.2 per cent, as half the school districts’ budgets came from unaffected municipal taxes, and Bruce et al. explain that the actual wage cut to Alberta Education employees was 1.2 per cent (1997, p. 387).

The budget cuts were implemented during the Klein government’s aggressive debt-elimination effort, cutting spending by 20 per cent across the board after the government was elected on a mandate to balance the provincial budget in three years. While the education budget was reduced, it was spared the deeper cuts faced by other departments. Charter schools fit within the government’s mandate of increasing competition between schools, as it was expected that public schools would feel resulting pressure to compete and become more responsive (Bruce et al., 1997).

While the policies of the Klein government were transformative and drastic, and some or all measures were criticized as being too much, too fast by interest groups and the public, extensive public consultations both preceded and followed the policy changes. Budget cuts occurred alongside structural policy changes to Alberta's education system, undoubtedly influencing the policy outcomes but not painting the whole picture.

Charter schools were introduced in Alberta at a time when education reform was in focus at provincial, national and global levels. Market-driven reforms were at the forefront (Thompson, Kowch & Gereluk, 2016). The ATA, no fan of charter schools, noted that in 1995, as five charter schools opened in Alberta, the federal government, (then under Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien), "took a neo-liberal turn" (Matsumoto, 2012) and downloaded increased responsibility for education to the provinces. A 1992 Economic Council of Canada report titled *A Lot to Learn* found that Canada's education systems could be improved through reduced interference, increased principal flexibility, publication of provincial assessments, and increased parental and student choice – and that report was well-received by the public in Alberta. Additionally, several of Alberta's education reforms followed similar reforms that had recently gained popularity in the U.S., including increased local control, parental choice and charter schools (Bruce et al., 1997, p. 395). In 1993, an Alberta government report titled *Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools* identified a lack of competition in the traditional public system as an impediment to educational excellence (Ritchie, 2010).

Political Motivations

The political motivations behind the introduction of charter schools are not obvious.

Education Minister Halvar Jonson, who brought in charter schools, was president of the ATA and a school principal before entering politics. The sweeping education reforms that happened on his watch were unpopular with the union; however, the ATA cites Jonson as being “the best minister we could have had at a very difficult time,” even suggesting that some of his reforms were positive (Virag, 2012).

It is clear, however, that reducing government expenditure, encouraging competition and introducing free enterprise policy models were prevalent throughout the early years of Ralph Klein’s premiership. Charter schools fit within this mandate. Beginning in the late 1980s, the push for competition and choice within the Alberta government had begun. Outside of government, associations of parents and stakeholders pushed for increased choice. Internally, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) such as Stockwell Day pushed to reform the education system from a monopoly to a system of various school classifications. Both Premier Ralph Klein and before him, Premier Don Getty were not passionate advocates for school choice, but both were open to these ideas. While Education Minister Halvar Jonson was not the primary influencer behind the policy shifts toward increased choice and the introduction of charter schools, he didn’t erect roadblocks to these ideas, either.

Some advocates outside of government were also pushing for charter schools before they were introduced. Joe Freedman, a Red Deer-based radiologist, formed the non-profit *Society for Advancing Educational Research* and in the early 1990s released reports titled *Failing Grades: Canadian Schools in a Global Economy* and *Proposal for an Alternative Model School*, to influence the Alberta government to enact a charter school bill (Lawton, Freedman & Robertson, 1995). However, the movement within the Alberta government to introduce competition into various government programs was already in motion.

The idea that monopolies increase costs and reduce quality permeated government policy under Ralph Klein's premiership. Instead of focusing on criticizing the traditional public system, the government introduced accessible alternatives for Alberta students, with the aim of improving all schools in the province through competition and increased efficiency. The overarching philosophy behind this was not unique to education. Klein's government also introduced choice in inspection services such as plumbing and electrical inspections, the private delivery of licensing services in Alberta, and the privatization of liquor stores – all with the stated goal of increasing choice and quality.

CRITICISMS AND CONTROVERSY

Debates within the Legislature

Charter schools are a unique model of education delivery and there's no question that model isn't popular with every stakeholder. The debates that occurred in Alberta's legislature during the Klein government's introduction of *Bill 19*, which ushered charter schools into the province, illustrate a philosophical divide between the governing PCs and the opposition Liberals. Charter schools represent a market-based philosophy, centred partially around the idea that competition between schools and diversity among education providers will drive innovation and improve results. The opposition Liberals had scattered concerns about charter schools, mostly around the erosion of the traditional public system, but took issue with the whole suite of reforms in Bill 19.

Some Liberal MLAs showed tepidness but recognized the potential benefits of charter schools or the importance of competition in the system. Liberal MLA Percy Whitman (1994) expressed the need for Alberta schools to compete on a global scale, stating:

I guess that as you travel throughout the province, you would tend to get a different reaction on chartered schools. The concept of teachers and parents getting together and setting out certain programs and making certain decisions and saying that this is what's good for this particular district, that this is what's good for our children does have some merit to it. It has some very, very interesting concepts (p. 1653).

He went on to express concern, however, about the government's lack of detail around the roll-out of charter schools. Liberal MLA Terry F. Kirkland (1994) shared a mixed view:

I have a concern. I have attempted to understand the charter school system. I would suggest that I see positive there. I would offer a bit of warning that we have to be cautious as to how many charter schools we actually move to. Certainly the public school system will not be hampered or hurt by competition, but if we do not watch the charter school development in this province, I have a large fear and concern that it may erode the public system (p. 1655).

Andrew Beniuk (1994), another Liberal MLA, lamented what he viewed as the potential weakening of the public and Catholic school boards because of charter schools:

The creation of a charter school is very interesting because while the Catholic school board feels it is under attack – and it is losing a great deal – the creation of charter schools is being created to target a specific interest group or a number of interest groups. So what we have is that while the established school system is becoming vulnerable, special interest groups are being allowed under this legislation to flourish (p. 1661).

Liberal MLA Paul Langevin (1994) expressed his preference that the government proceed with caution:

Under section 24, the charter schools, I have some problems with that one. I would advise the minister to be very cautious as we move to private schools to keep evaluating this and to monitor that very carefully. If there's a problem that develops, we should look at this part of the Act in the future. I'm not totally convinced that this is a good step (p. 1660).

Other Liberal MLAs expressed concerns about students being divided based on aptitude or socioeconomic status, which Liberal MLA Robert Gary Dickson stated was already occurring in Calgary before the introduction of charter schools (Dickson, 1994). Liberal MLA Duco Van Binsbergen suggested in the same legislature debate that the impressive level of choice programs already existing within Edmonton public schools was sufficient without charter schools providing another option (Binsbergen, 1994). The political concerns about charter schools eroding the public system and replacing traditional public schools shed some light on the government's decision to impose a cap on the number of charter schools.

PC Minister of Labour Stockwell Day (1994) responded to the Opposition remarks in the legislature:

What we're talking about here is a classic clash of philosophies, and it's been very evident with the remarks that have come out. ... I am just overwhelmed to hear the concern about marauding bands of parents who are going to sweep in like the proverbial Huns and ravage the system. ... The fear and trembling I've heard about charter schools – that's where a group of citizens in a community, the parents and the trustees, would get together and ask to have a school that would have certain distinctives (sic), and I hear fear and trembling because it breaks the monolithic mold. It allows for some diversity, and who knows – are you ready for the really nasty word that Liberals just go white on? – it might allow some competition (p. 1669).

The responses from the PC government in the legislature make clear that the *ideas* behind charter schools – increasing choice and involvement for parents, and encouraging competition to improve the system – were important to the government.

Private Schools in Public Clothing?

It is obvious that teachers' unions tend to be hostile toward charter school policies. Even in Ontario, where charter schools have never existed, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation has published multiple pieces criticizing charter schools, or rejoicing in the fact that "Canada has been able to mostly resist the charter school movement and voucher systems" (2016). In Alberta, the ATA expressed public concerns about its lessening influence in the province, in response to the introduction of the broad swath of education reforms brought in by Klein's government. In 1994, the ATA launched a half-million-dollar campaign, which Matsumoto (2012) characterized as being "against cuts to education and attempts by the Tory caucus to erode the teacher's union's control." Many teachers saw the Klein government's broader education reforms as an affront to their profession, and were demoralized by the cuts (Bruce et al., 1997). Protests were held and court challenges were launched in response, though they were more directly focused on policies impacting the province's Catholic school boards and not specifically related to charter schools.

The ATA made and continues to make its dislike of charter schools known, due at least in part to the fact that charter school teachers did not have to be full members of the union (to

this day, they are only associate members). Further, implicit in the introduction of charter schools was the notion that existing public schools were not doing a good enough job to satisfy students and parents (Bruce et al., 1997). In 1998, the ATA passed a resolution against charter schools, arguing that they were exclusive by nature (though legally charter schools cannot exclude students, they are designed to cater to specific students so they are unlikely to attract others). The ATA went so far as to say that charter schools violate human rights legislation, and again argued against the fact that charter school teachers are not full union members. The ATA maintains that charter schools divert funds away from traditional public schools – which, of course, is true (ATA, “School Choice”, n.d.).

Elitism and Equity

Though charter schools are technically public schools, the service is delivered by non-government entities, so critics have characterized these schools as being private in public clothing, as noted above (Thompson et al., 2016). Concerns were made clear from Alberta’s existing educational establishment that charter schools would be elitist, turning students away based on some degree of aptitude. The provincial government’s 1995 *Charter Schools Handbook* attempted to alleviate some of those concerns by spelling out that charter schools could not turn students away, if they had the capacity to take them on. Tuition could not be charged at charter schools, so concerns about financial elitism were dampened.

The major argument against charter schools in Alberta is that they will undermine the public system (though others contend that they exist as a part of the public system using an alternative delivery model); and that they are elitist. It is alleged that charter schools cater to an engaged portion of the population – parents who desire a higher level of engagement and are involved enough to research these schools, sign their children up and endure wait lists. This level of engagement takes time – arguably, time that wouldn't be available to a single parent working multiple jobs. This alleged elitism presents an issue for two reasons: first, it may skew Provincial Achievement Test scores because the students who are attending charter schools may perform exceptionally well on tests regardless of which school they attend; and second, if something is elite then it is not worthwhile to fund with tax dollars. Additionally, the ATA claims that charter schools “promote the segregation of children and create social fragmentation” (ATA, “School Choice”, n.d.), as they eschew the all-encompassing approach of traditional public schools.

Alternative programs exist within Alberta's traditional public schools, and could be accused of segregating students in the same fashion. These programs, which will be elaborated on, allow local public schools and school boards to be selective in which students they admit. School boards may also charge fees associated with these programs, though not all alternative programs have additional costs.

In Alberta, charter schools exist within a broader framework of school choice. Parents can send their children to independent school and their education tax dollars follow their child

to that school, but they must pay at least a portion of that tuition and any associated fees to cover school trips, uniforms, extracurricular activities, and so on. As in every province, for wealthy families, this is easy. For other families, the sacrifice involved might be worthwhile if their child's learning needs are better served by an independent school. For families of lesser means, even if their child requires an alternative learning approach not offered in traditional public or separate schools, it is likely to be out of the question. The additional tuition payment, however small, is not available. These families are not served by subsidized independent schools (other than in some cases where students may be eligible for bursaries or scholarships, or in cases like Nova Scotia's *Tuition Support Program* where the government fully funds independent school tuition for learning disabled students). From this perspective, charter schools increase equity for students. In provinces where there are no educational choice options funded by the government, only wealthy kids or middle-class kids whose parents make large sacrifices may attend independent schools. In Alberta, kids with no family money whatsoever may attend a unique, privately operated educational institution.

FUNDING

The Big Picture

Alberta Education spent a total of \$9.8 billion in 2016/17, with \$7.9 billion directed to operating expense and \$1.9 billion directed to capital. That's about \$45 million spent every day students are in class (Education Funding in Alberta Handbook, 2016). The Alberta government fully funds traditional public and separate (Catholic) schools, and fully funds charter schools for operations. Independent (private) schools and homeschools are partially funded on a per-student basis. The Fraser Institute has noted that Level 2 Accredited Funded private schools in Alberta are eligible for some maintenance grant funding (Van Pelt et al., 2017). Funding for independent schools and private early childhood services comprises \$248 million or 2.5 per cent of the total education budget, and typically families pay additional tuition to send their children to independent schools.

Government funding for schools comes from two sources: general revenues for the Alberta government, which is the primary source, and education property taxes levied at the municipal level but collected by the province. These education property taxes may be chosen by individual taxpayers to be directed toward public or separate schools.

Alberta Education divides its funding into blocks. Individual groups of students receive different levels of funding based on factors outside of school type. Base funding is granted on a per-student basis, then other levels of funding (differential, targeted, other provincial

and capital)¹ follow where applicable. Capital funding is also divided into three blocks. Additionally, the government directs money to the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund and the pre-1992 teachers' pension liability, costing \$883.5 million in total government support to teachers' pensions in 2016/17 (Education Funding in Alberta Handbook, 2016). Education is no small expenditure.

The Funding of Charter Schools

Charter schools in Alberta cannot charge tuition. It would logically follow that they are structurally more financially constrained than independent schools, which do charge tuition, sometimes well beyond the per-pupil government funding.

Government funding directed to all schools in Alberta is done primarily on a per-student basis, referred to as base funding. However, unlike public schools, charter schools in Alberta do not receive government funding for capital – i.e. the physical infrastructure of the school. For context, in 2016/17, the Alberta government provided \$1.8 billion in capital funding to public schools in the province (Education Funding in Alberta Handbook, 2016).

¹ Differential funds are allocated for Severe Disabilities, English Second Language (ESL), Francophone language, First Nations/Metis/Inuit, Socio-Economic Status (SES), Northern Allowance, Equity of Opportunity (targeted mostly at schools with sparse student populations), Plant Operations and Maintenance (maintaining schools), and Transportation. Targeted funding is allocated for Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD), High Speed Networking Services (Internet), Class Size and Building Collaboration and Capacity in Education (a First Nations support initiative). Other provincial support is allocated for the Education Program in an Institution (for students in institutions or group homes) and the Fort McMurray Allowance, which is only for schools with employees that live and work in Fort McMurray (Education Funding in Alberta Handbook, 2016).

Notably, public and stakeholder consultations held by the Klein government prior to the education reforms of the early 1990's found that many respondents preferred more school funding to be allocated on a per-student basis than had previously been the case.

Respondents cited increased responsiveness to students and parents by schools, if financial incentives were more clearly defined (Bruce et al., 1997, p. 386).

In Alberta, charter schools are less expensive to taxpayers than public schools. In a 2015 report, the Fraser Institute found that per-pupil funding for an Alberta public school in 2012/13 was \$13,234 (Clemens, Van Pelt & Emes, 2015). That figure includes capital funding and contributions to employee pension funds. When applying that calculation to charter schools – in the 2016 school year, based on \$83 million spent on charter schools and a total enrolment of 9,275 students – the Fraser Institute found that per-pupil funding was \$8,950 (Van Pelt & Clemens, 2016). Based on these numbers, the Alberta government's per-pupil subsidy for charter school attendance saves \$4,284 for every student, every year, versus enrolling in public school.

To put the costs into perspective, consider a brief counterfactual. Total student population in Alberta's traditional public, separate, independent, charter, provincial and Francophone schools in 2016/17 was 694,209. That includes 473,174 students in traditional public schools, and 9,400 students in charter schools. Based on the Fraser Institute's 2012/13 numbers noted above, if 50 per cent of Alberta's 473,174 traditional public school students moved into charter schools, the cost savings would be over \$1 billion per year. Again, per-

student traditional public school funding includes capital costs and per-student charter school funding does not. However, the Alberta government only spends about 19 per cent of its education budget on capital costs per the 2016/17 budget, while the rest is spent on operations. Whether allotting some capital funding to charter schools would significantly increase per-student costs is difficult to say, but ultimately it comes down to the government's policy decisions. At present, charter school funding decisions may not involve the political pressures that exist for public school funding, from teachers unions and other stakeholders, because charter schools are so limited in numbers. This may allow charter schools to operate more efficiently.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE MEASURES: HOW DO CHARTER SCHOOLS MEASURE UP?

In a school choice environment, standardized tests are important measurement tools for parents, teachers and policymakers alike. These test scores measure which schools produce the strongest and weakest results and in which areas, and they can be used to encourage all schools to keep pace. This is true in an environment with little to no school choice as well, but it is doubly important when various schools are competing against one another for students.²

Standardized tests provide helpful information to parents, students, teachers and educational think tanks. This report examines student scores on Alberta's Provincial Achievement Tests; standardized tests administered annually in grades six and nine, and previously in grade three. These tests measure student aptitude in English and French language arts, math, science and social studies; and the results are made public. Though

² There is less available information on academic performance results in homeschooling, but some existing research points to important differences between the types of homeschooling and associated test scores. An analysis done by Concordia University assistant professor Sandra Martin-Chang compared 37 primary-aged homeschooled children with 37 children in the public system, finding that students of comparable backgrounds in structured homeschool programs achieved significantly higher test scores than students in public school or those unstructured homeschool programs (who scored worst), in seven different subjects (Chang, Gould & Meuse, 2011). This is consistent with U.S. research referenced by the Fraser Institute, showing homeschools with high levels of academic motivation and structure are associated with higher academic performance (Van Pelt and Clemens, 2016). This gives a brief snapshot.

standardized tests are the best tool we have, they are an imperfect measurement tool – perhaps in particular for charter schools.

The target demographics for Alberta’s charter schools are varied. Some Alberta charter schools target students with interrupted learning experiences due to various struggles, students with English as their second or third language, and First Nations students. Other Alberta charter schools target academically enriched students or students with aptitudes in arts or science. Comparing charter schools’ test scores to the scores of the local public or independent school will have varied results. In some cases, the scores may be worse, but the students may benefit from the targeted outreach provided by the charter school (something not captured by a standardized test score, but that could be explored by looking at graduation rates). In other cases, the charter school students likely come from a self-selecting demographic, which may push the results upwards. Assessing standardized test scores is useful but imperfect.

Alberta students are not bound by catchment areas, meaning they can attend any school they choose, provided the space is available. This is especially true for charter schools, which typically don’t cater to a local population the way that traditional public and separate schools do. Without having the home postal codes for every charter school student, tracking their socioeconomic status is difficult. For this report, we will assume that the student populations in most Alberta charter schools tend to be, at the very least, self-selecting. This doesn’t mean the families are necessarily wealthier, but that they tend to

have a high level of engagement in their child's education. This level of parental engagement might be on par with selective public schools with audition-based or test-based entrances, such as the audition-based Performing and Visual Arts program offered at Central Memorial High School, a public high school in Calgary (Central Memorial High School, 2018). This assumption is made because these parents would have had to sign their children up for charter school in the first place. Additionally, charter schools explicitly aim to involve parents more than public schools, so we can assume that parents who seek involvement, seek out charter schools. It is essential that the Provincial Achievement Test score data be viewed with this in mind.

In 2013, the C.D. Howe Institute published research finding that after controlling for socioeconomic status, Alberta charter schools outperform traditional public, separate and private schools. The performance gap between traditional public and separate schools was not statistically significant. After controlling for socioeconomic status, 11.8 per cent more students in private schools than public schools achieved what Johnson calls the standard of excellence, and 6.4 per cent more students did the same in grade nine. However, the gap between these schools was not statistically significant in grade six after controlling for student background.

The only consistent, significant gap was between charter schools and all other schools, and it was found across all three grades (three, six and nine). Relative to public school results, charter school students in grade three are 18.8 per cent more likely to achieve a standard

of excellence; 15.6 per cent more likely in grade six and 14.1 per cent more likely in grade nine. Here, we can see that charter schools' outstanding performance results cannot be explained away simply by factoring out socioeconomic status. Johnson hypothesized that the gap may be explained by several factors, the first being that charter schools can be selective, choosing the best students. However, private schools would also have this advantage, possibly to an even greater extent. Johnson also speculated that charter schools may be able to hire better teachers, and that charter schools' mandates to meet the needs of students, parents and teachers may give these schools an edge (Johnson, 2013).

[An Analysis of Provincial Achievement Test Score Data](#)

This report looks at Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) scores for grades six and nine for charter schools, independent (private) schools, traditional public schools, separate (Catholic) schools and Francophone schools, between the school years 1997/98 and 2016/17.

Grade three PAT scores have been omitted, because grade three PATs were only administered until the 2012/13 school year. After June 2014, the government eliminated the grade three PAT and switched to a different, optional test called Student Learning Assessments for grade three. These tests are administered at the beginning of the school year (as opposed to PATs which are administered at the end of the school year), and are computer-based; they are designed to help teachers gauge student aptitude in math and

reading (*Edmonton Sun*, 2017). The most important difference is that these tests are optional for teachers, and are therefore a significantly less reliable policy tool for measuring and comparing student achievement.

Test results from First Nations schools are not included. Students at these schools take PATs but the schools are not governed by provincial policy. Provincial schools for students in provincial institutions such as hospitals are also omitted. Provincial school scores represent a small portion of total schools and do not change the data in any significant way.

The PAT score data was provided by the Fraser Institute, which annually publishes report cards for elementary and high schools in Alberta and other provinces. The Fraser Institute data made available began in the 1997/98 school year. Alberta's first charter school opened in 1995.

The report first compares PAT score data for all school authority types, then breaks down the data by individual charter school. The figures below represent combined averages of grade six and grade nine PAT scores. Years during which students at a charter school did not complete PATs, for unknown circumstances, have been removed. Students may be exempt from taking PATs for various reasons, including catastrophic events such as the Calgary floods or Fort McMurray wildfires. The data reflects the years during which charter

schools were in operation and taking PATs.

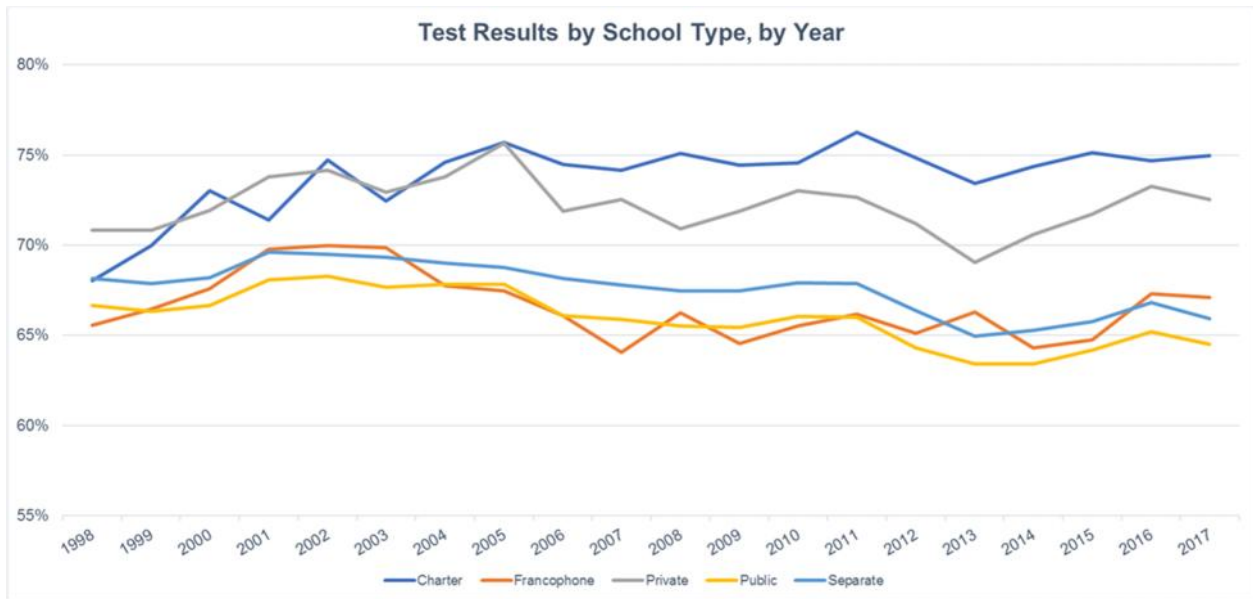


Figure 1

Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data

Figure 1, above, shows the combined grade six and grade nine PAT results from the 1997/98 to 2016/2017 school years, aggregated by each type of school authority (charter, Francophone, private, public and separate). Though Francophone schools dip significantly in some years, traditional public schools tend to perform the worst on average. By comparison, charter schools almost always outperform all other types of schools – most notably, private schools.

When attempting to measure the success of charter schools, it is helpful to isolate these schools from other schools and measure each individual school against itself over time.

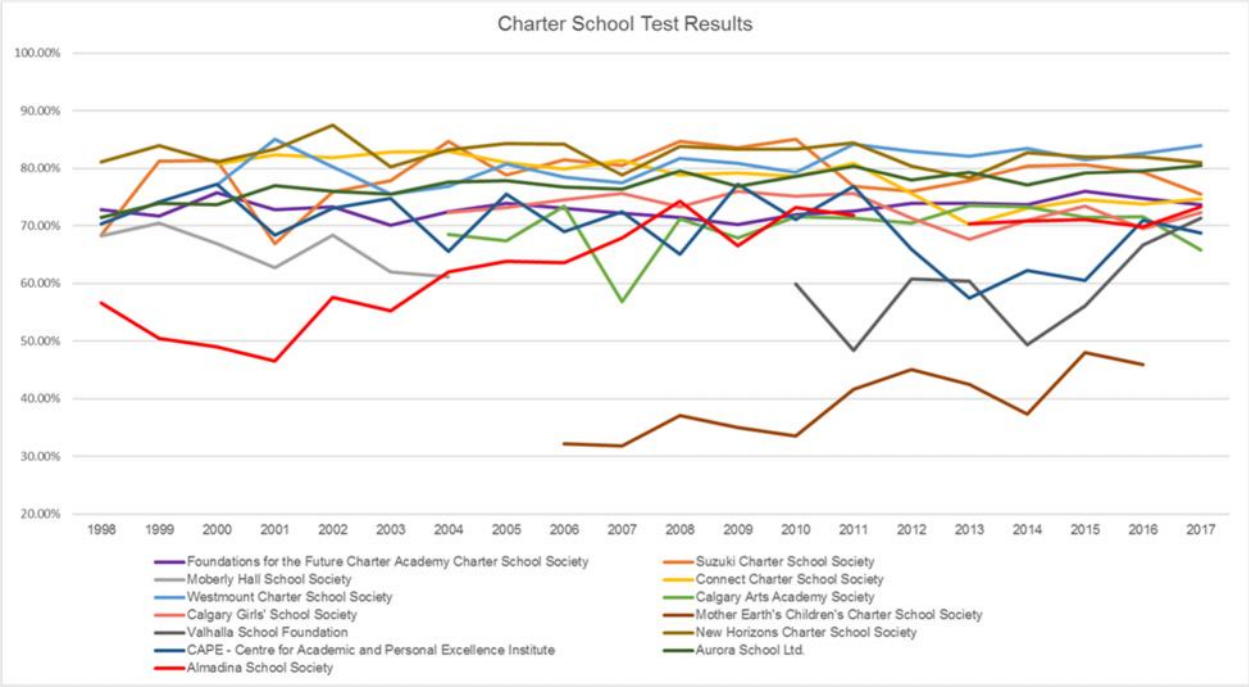


Figure 2

Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data

Figure 2 tracks the combined grade six and grade nine PAT scores of individual charter schools over time, between 1997/98 and 2016/17. The data for each school starts when test scores have been recorded. Most charter schools cluster around a relatively high average score and have stayed at a consistent level over this period. The more poorly performing charter schools have improved over time, with one exception – the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence Institute – dipping in 2013 then improving steadily.

Given the improvement, and the fact that Alberta’s standardized tests have changed multiple times over the course of this period, it is useful to look at these charter school test results over the last ten years.

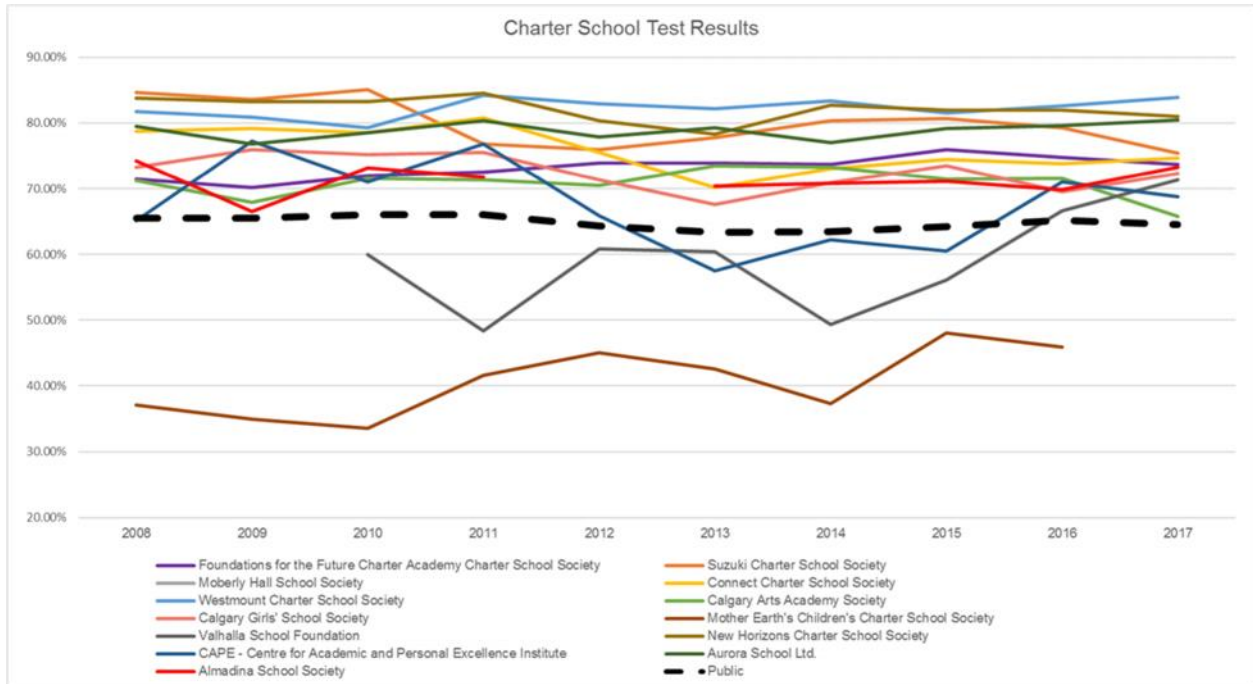


Figure 3

Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data

Above, figure 3 illustrates the combined grade six and grade nine PAT scores for individual charter schools over the last 10 years. To put these scores in perspective, the thick dotted line is an average of all PAT scores at traditional public schools. Three charter schools performed worse than the traditional public school average during this period, but two of those schools improved significantly and surpassed the traditional public school average toward the end of this period. Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School Society, a First

Nations-focused charter school, underperformed traditional public schools. However, to get a clearer idea of this school's success, future research should compare these results to those of other First Nations schools.

What is clear from looking at the data is that, without controlling for socioeconomic status, charter schools on average outperform all other types of schools in Alberta. This is particularly significant when comparing charter schools to private (independent) schools. Independent schools, which require some form of tuition payment from parents, perform worse on average than charter schools, which are wholly government-funded for parents. The reasons for this are not obvious, but it may be partially explained by the fact that 61.1 per cent of independent schools in Alberta are religiously affiliated. Religiosity certainly doesn't preclude a school from focusing on academic achievement, but these schools necessarily recruit from a narrow religious base, rather than targeting students based primarily on academic performance. In addition, eight per cent of Alberta independent schools are special education schools (Allison, Hasan & Van Pelt, 2016). However, charter schools also offer a diverse range of focus. Some Alberta charter schools recruit academically gifted students or focus on strong academic performance, but others focus on rural leadership, First Nations education, English Second Language learning and education for students who've experienced interruptions in their school careers. With a total of only 23 charter schools operating in the province, each school has a significant impact on the average test scores.

When broken down school by school, most charter schools steadily achieve high average test scores. The charter schools with more erratic individual test scores have improved over time since 2012/13.

ENROLLMENT

Charter schools have developed a reputation for being sought-after by parents, which comes with downsides, given the restrictions on expanding the availability of charter school spots. A 2015 CBC news report noted that 11,000 students were on the waitlist for Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, and quoted Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools co-president Judy Gray, stating most Alberta charter schools have waitlists and that some parents call from the hospital immediately following the birth of their child, ensuring they have a spot (CBC Calgary, 2015). A 2015 *Calgary Herald* news report quoted Connect Charter School principal Darrell Lonsberry, stating that on the day when parents call to reserve a waitlist spot, the phone rings off the hook and snowballs to 400 names within a few hours, at which point they cut it off (*Calgary Herald*, 2015).

Only 1.4 per cent of Alberta's total school-aged population attends charter schools. Overall, charter school enrollment has steadily increased, but parents cite long waitlists as one of the major drawbacks to the charter school system. Waitlists are well documented in existing charter schools research, and this issue poses a challenge for charter schools. A 2016 assessment found that the self-identified leadership at Alberta charter schools dedicates nearly half of their efforts to administrative issues instead of on planning, equity and instruction, because waitlists and student access have become such a dominating issue (Thompson et al., 2016).

The growth of Alberta charter schools is constrained for several reasons. There are very few charter schools in Alberta relative to the number of other types of schools. Looking at the raw numbers of students attending charter schools relative to other schools doesn't assess the demand for charter schools. However, examining the percentage of students enrolled in each school type relative to the total school aged population, as well as the relative growth rates of enrollment in each school type, informs the discussion. This data provides a clearer picture of the demand for charter schools and alternative schools more generally.

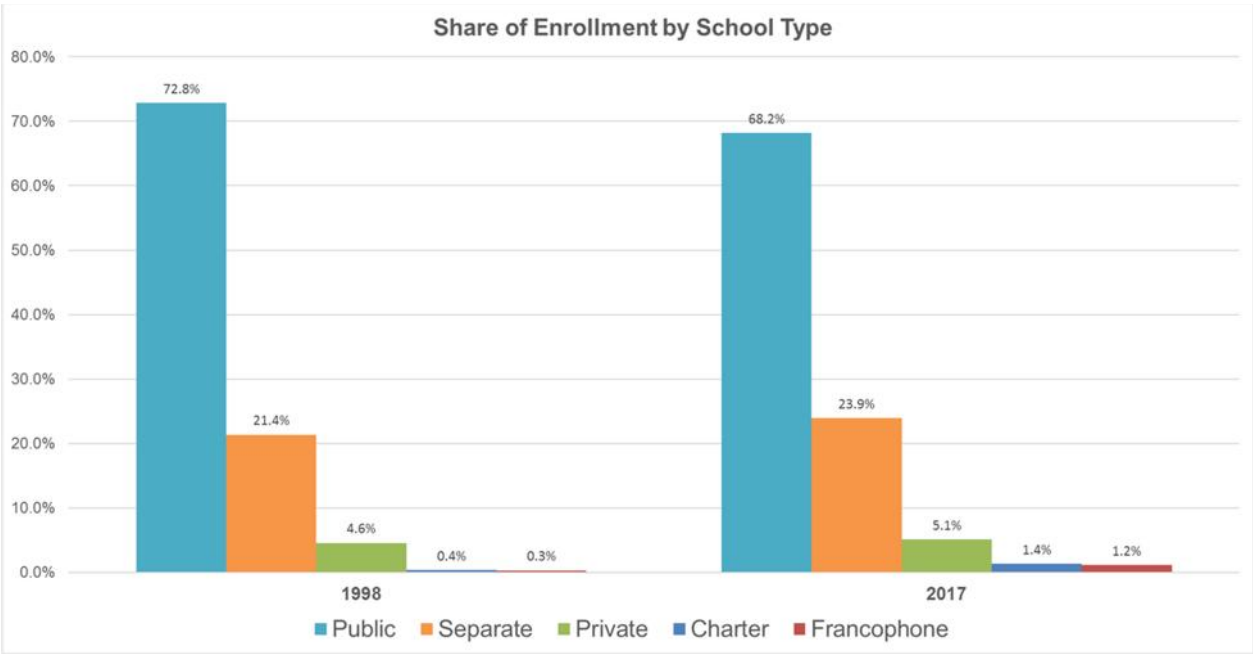


Figure 4

Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so "1998" refers to the 1997/98 school year.

Despite the options available to parents, traditional public schools enroll by far the largest share of school-aged children in Alberta. Separate schools enroll the second largest share, followed by private, then charter and Francophone following far behind. As figure 4 illustrates, every other school type has increased enrollment since 1997/98 at the expense of traditional public school enrollment – the only school type that has experienced a declining share of student enrollment.

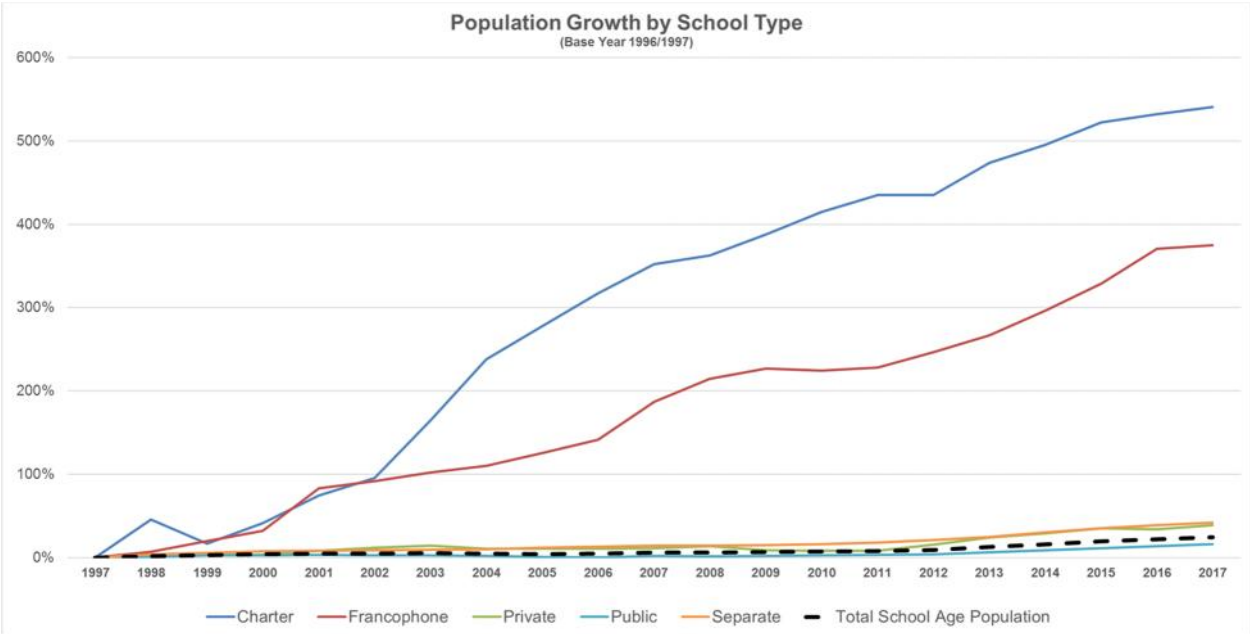


Figure 5

Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so “1997” refers to the 1996/97 school year. The first charter schools opened in Alberta in 1995. The datasets made available by Alberta Education appeared incomplete in 1994/1995 and 1995/1996, so 1996/1997 is used as the base year.

It is not surprising that, compared to the base year, enrollment in Alberta charter schools appears to have exploded between 1996/1997 and 2016/2017 in figure 5. During this

time, new charter schools opened and the public became more familiar with their existence. Interestingly, enrollment in Alberta Francophone schools also grew rapidly compared to the base year. Charter and Francophone schools enroll the smallest proportion of the student population, but they are the fastest growing. This can partially be explained by the fact that one new charter school would represent a large amount of growth within that category, while one new traditional public school would not. It may also reflect a growing desire for alternative educational programming. It is also interesting to look at a more recent timeframe, when charter schools were already well established in Alberta and the province came much closer to the legislated cap on the number of charter schools.

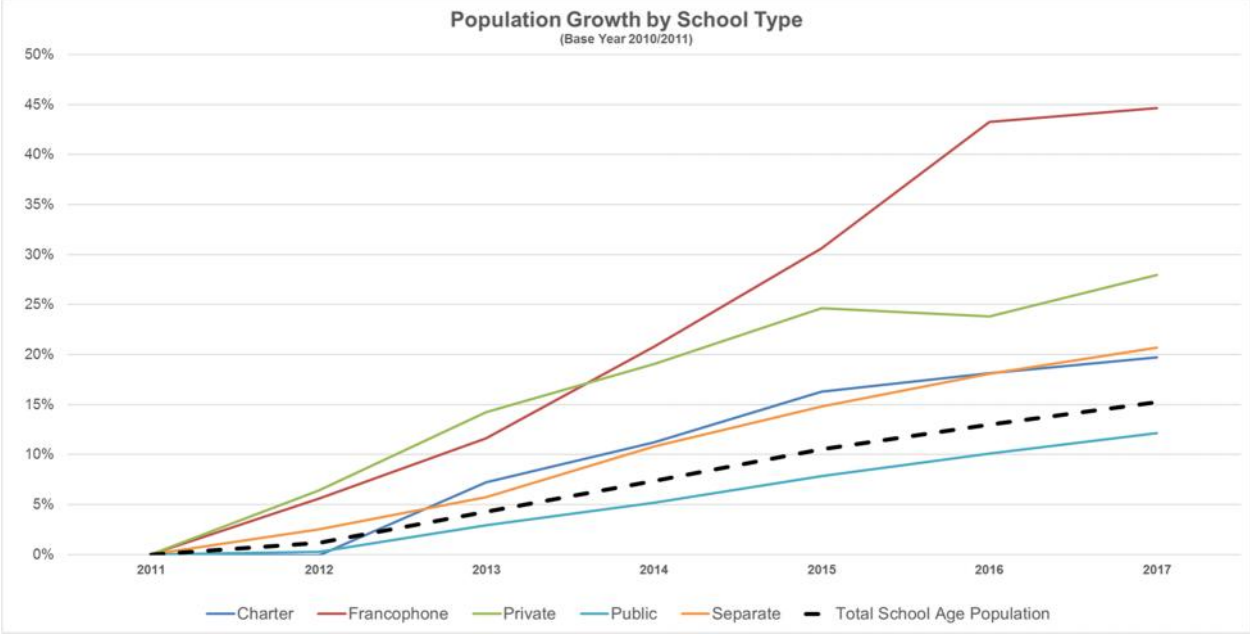


Figure 6

Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so “2011” refers to the 2010/11 school year.

Using 2010/11 as the base year, with every subsequent year compared to the base year, we get a clearer picture of student enrollment in an environment where charter schools exist in a more established form (though still in a limited capacity). Notably, figure 6 illustrates that Francophone schools have experienced the greatest level of enrollment growth since 2010/11, increasing by nearly 45 per cent. During the same period, total school age population only increased by about 15 per cent. Similarly, the enrollment growth in charter, separate and private schools has also outpaced total school age population growth during this time. Public school growth closely mimics the growth in the total school age population, but falls below it in relative terms. The obvious inference to draw from this is that in Alberta's choice system, wherein parents have a variety of school options for their children, the growth of public school enrollment lags the growth of the total school age population. Alberta families appear to be selecting alternative educational options outside of traditional public schools. If the cap on the number of Alberta charter schools was lifted, it would allow for more rapid growth in charter school enrollment.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The legislation and regulation governing charter schools in Alberta both facilitates and constrains their development. Charter schools in Alberta are subject to much of the same legislative framework as public schools, with some exceptions. They typically face fewer regulations than public schools (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan & Van Pelt, 2015).

The *Charter Schools Regulation* of Alberta's *School Act* (2002) imposes a cap on the number of charter schools which may operate at 15 schools. Though the wording in the *Regulation* ambiguously refers to charter schools, in practice the cap applies to 15 school authorities, which can each operate more than one school facility. As of 2018, there are 13 charter school authorities operating in Alberta, with a total of 23 school facilities. The details around charter schools are outlined in the government's *Charter Schools Handbook*, which was released in 1995. To successfully open a charter school and receive per-pupil funding from the government, charter societies must complete several steps. First, the society must approach the local school board with their proposal for an alternative program – something that isn't currently being offered in the public schools under that board. The board then has 60 days to refuse or agree to establish that program. If they refuse, the board must notify the society within that timeframe (Alberta Charter Schools Regulation, 2002). Next, the charter society may apply to the Education Minister for the establishment of a charter school designed to offer their alternative program.

The Alberta government's *Charter Schools Handbook* outlines the charter school application process in a flow chart:

II. Flow Chart for the Establishment of a Charter School

The following flow chart summarizes the steps that lead to the establishment of a charter school.

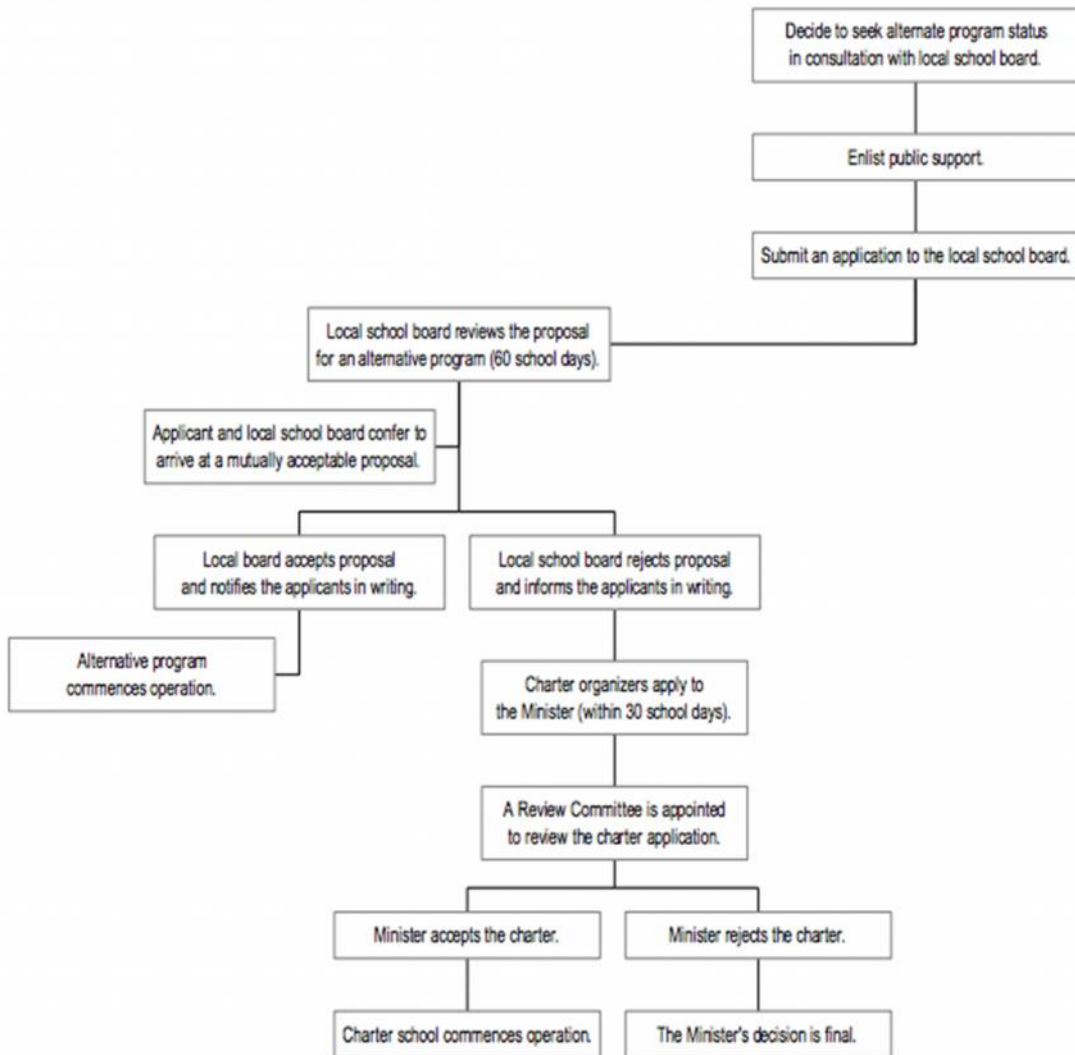


Figure 7

Source: Alberta Education Charter Schools Handbook

Charter schools operate in designated terms of five years, after which a school must re-apply for renewal of the charter by December 1st in the final year of its term. The maximum term renewal of a charter school is 15 years (Alberta Charter Schools Regulation, 2002). To be renewed, charter school authorities must demonstrate that they are meeting their charter objectives, operating a sound financial program, meeting provincial student performance measures, and receiving community and parent support. The Education Minister can provide recommendations to the charter school following the ministerial review, and the school authorities then have two years to implement the recommendations. Once a decision is made by the Education Minister about the charter school's renewal, it is final. There is no appeal process.

Alternative Programs Within Alberta's Traditional Public Schools

Alternative programs exist within Alberta's traditional public schools and are unique streams focusing on an educational philosophy, language, culture, religion or other form of subject matter. These programs are distinct from Francophone and special needs programming. The Alberta government's *Alternative Program Resource Manual* characterizes alternative programs as somewhat of a response to the introduction of charter schools in Alberta. The *Manual* explains that boundaries were removed between school boards, and charter schools were introduced in 1994, and in 2000 the *School Act* was revised to allow for the establishment of alternative programs, engaging school boards, staff, school councils and societies formed to advise and support the alternative programs (Alberta Alternative Programs Handbook, 2010). If a school board is active in denying a

charter society the ability to open a charter school, but there is demonstrated community demand for the alternative programming that the charter school would offer, that school board can offer an alternative program with that focus.

The main difference between charter schools and alternative programs is clear: charter schools are independently run, while alternative programs are run by the local school board. However, these programs are encouraged by Alberta Education to be particularly connected to the community. School boards are encouraged to partner with local groups (such as a theatre group for a fine arts program), and engage with parents and students in the community, as these alternative programs should ideally be a response to community interest. Some examples of existing alternative programs include an all-girls program in Edmonton, a fine arts program in St. Albert, a Montessori program in Lethbridge and a German program in Calgary. School councils can be engaged in developing the program, and independent societies may form officially under the *Societies Act* or informally as Program Advisory Councils. However, the ultimate control over these programs remains with the school board, as does the decision to involve the society or not.

Like charter schools, alternative programs require a clear definition of the program's focus. Alternative programs function entirely at the discretion of the board. If there is parental demand for a certain type of programming in a community, it does not necessitate the local school board operating an alternative program. Boards determine their own evaluation of

the success of their alternative programs, and can shutter alternative programs at any time (in accordance with laws and regulations).

Students enrolled in alternative programs are taught the Alberta curriculum and take Provincial Achievement Tests. School boards have discretion over which students may, or may not be, enrolled in alternative programs. Parents initially must choose for their child to be enrolled in the program; however, if the board determines that there are insufficient resources and/or facilities to support the student, or that the program is not an appropriate fit to meet that student's needs, then the board may refuse to enroll the student.

Some alternative programs within public schools require additional costs for parents, such as the costs of transportation, uniforms and supplies. The local school board is not required to cover these costs. Given that some of the major critiques of charter schools are that they are permitted to be selective in which students they target and that they may require additional costs borne by parents (such as transportation), it is ironic that existing programs within traditional public schools fit the same description. Ultimately, increased choice within the public system means a more diverse range of options for students of all income levels. Expanding choice and increasing quality within traditional public schools were among the intended benefits of charter schools in Alberta when they were introduced.

BARRIERS FACING ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS

Regulatory Barriers

The regulatory framework governing the establishment of Alberta charter schools imposes two main barriers: the imposed cap on the number of charter schools, and the process by which charter societies must apply to open a school. The imposed cap on the number of charter schools which can operate in the province creates a clear barrier. Though existing charter school authorities have mapped out expansion plans within this framework, opening new school campuses to house more students, the cap is an issue for new charter societies that wish to open a school, which curbs the potential for diversity in the system.

Demand for charter schools has been increasing, yet there are only 13 charter school authorities in the province, despite the cap allowing for 15 school authorities. This indicates that other barriers may be having an impact. The traditional public school board operating in the area in which a charter society wishes to open a school may stop that society's efforts by offering a relatively comparable program. This may be aided by the Education Minister, who has final say on the establishment of a charter school. Alberta's Department of Education does not collect information regarding applications received and rejected by school authorities, but charter school applications do get denied. Since 2010 there have been nine applications for charter schools, illustrating that at least some have been denied (Brown, 2018). In 2016, Alberta Education Minister David Eggen rejected two charter school applications – one Spanish language school with a science focus and one

special needs school – because they were too similar to existing public school programming (CBC Calgary, 2016). That is the most common reason for the Education Minister to deny charter school applications. Other reasons include: lack of a detailed program plan, lack of an assessment plan, failure to have at least 100 students at start-up time (which the government considers necessary to be financially viable), lack of a capital plan and lack of independent research supporting the charter proposal (Brown, 2018).

It is also possible that the defined term limits provide a regulatory barrier for the continued operation of charter schools. At the very least, these term limits create an uncertain atmosphere among teachers, parents and administrators (Ritchie, 2010).

Charter schools face additional regulatory constraints on the physical spaces in which they must operate. The lack of available space means that charter school administrators are forced to spend a great deal of time on infrastructure considerations. Each school is required to first negotiate for space with the nearby public school boards prior to acquiring physical space from these boards or prior to building new physical spaces (Thompson et al., 2016). Of the 23 school buildings currently housing charter schools in Alberta, 20 are owned by school districts (Alberta Education, “Charter Schools in Alberta”, 2018).

Charter schools operate on five-year terms and the maximum renewal term of a charter is 15 years. This limiting time frame places an administrative barrier on charter schools with which other schools do not have to contend.

Political Barriers

Before the Alberta PC Party was voted out of office in 2015, the PC government had made clear its intentions to remove the cap on charter schools. Following the 2015 election, the newly elected New Democratic Party (NDP) government put an end to those plans. As noted, in 2016, Alberta Education Minister David Eggen rejected applications for two charter schools.

Groups opposed to charter schools quickly took advantage of the dampened enthusiasm for charter schools under Alberta's NDP government. Public Interest Alberta, a left-leaning advocacy group, launched a campaign opposing government funding for independent schools and "end[ing] Alberta's charter schools experiment" (Public Interest Alberta, 2016). Progress Alberta, another left-leaning group, joined the campaign. The Edmonton Public School Board echoed those calls, additionally calling on Minister Eggen to incorporate the province's existing charter schools into traditional public school boards (Global Edmonton, 2016). In most Canadian provinces, teachers' unions carry political influence and often spend money advertising during elections. The ATA opposition to charter schools creates a clear political challenge for policymakers.

Finally, a lack of public understanding may be one of the largest political barriers to charter schools. A 2010 Canada West Foundation report found that there is a persistent lack of public knowledge around charter schools, as has been documented by Alberta government

surveys (Ritchie, 2010). Without a strong public understanding of charter schools, there is little political incentive for vote-seeking politicians to encourage them.

Funding Barriers

In theory, parents sending their children to whichever schools they choose makes sense. In practice, parents sending their children to the closest neighbourhood school may often prove more convenient and desirable. Most school boards cannot afford to fund transportation for students outside of the school's general vicinity (Bruce et al., 1997). It would logically follow that for a charter school program to be as successful as possible, increased funds would need to be allocated to transportation.

As charter schools do not receive funding for capital, Ritchie (2010) notes that they have trouble securing long-term loans required to build new schools and are not able to access municipal reserve lands due to their tenuous status. As such, they rent or lease school facilities, for which some money is provided by the government. A great deal of effort must be dedicated by charter authorities to maintaining the (often old) facilities they use. Much thought goes into crafting the unique educational approach offered by a charter school. Ideally, the physical spaces in which these schools operate would complement that approach with a suitable design (for example, a soccer-focused school may offer large indoor and outdoor soccer fields, and a school focusing on the Waldorf educational philosophy would design the school building in accordance with Waldorf architecture

guidelines). The current policy, wherein charter schools lease old space from school boards, makes it unrealistic that this is the case.

The start-up costs for opening a charter school are more onerous than for opening a public school. Offering charter schools more money for capital costs would remedy this, but it would also make charter schools more expensive. Determining whether to provide charter schools with transportation funding and capital funding is simply a policy choice. In Alberta, the government chooses to forgo these costs, but the trade-off may be a substantial barrier to seeing more charter schools open. What's clear is that the provincial government is currently saving money on a per-student basis by offering charter schools.

Practical Barriers to Charter School Success

There are other reasons why parents might be hesitant to send their children to a charter school outside of their neighbourhood. Parents may prefer that their children have friends in their neighbourhood with which they share a common school and associated extracurricular activities. Parents may also encounter difficulty hearing about schools outside of their neighbourhoods (Bruce et al., 1997), which suggests that the Alberta government, and any other provincial education departments that wish to introduce charter schools, may need to focus efforts on disseminating information about charter schools and charter school availability to the public.

CHARTER SCHOOLS BEYOND ALBERTA

Charter schools have been introduced in one form or another in several countries, including the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The U.S. charter school experience differs significantly in some ways from the experience in Canada, and being Canada's closest neighbour with cultural similarities, it serves as a useful comparison.

Charter schools entered the North American educational discussion as a serious idea in the late 1980s, and have caught on at a much quicker rate in the U.S. than in Canada. Alberta is the only province or territory in Canada to allow for charter schools, and they have not come close to being introduced in any other Canadian jurisdiction, despite the schools existing in Alberta for over 20 years. In contrast, Minnesota passed a charter school law in 1991, and by 2015, 43 U.S. jurisdictions had done the same (Bosetti et al., 2015).

Charter Schools in the United States vs. Charter Schools in Alberta

Like Canadian provinces, U.S. states have a good degree of control over their education systems, so the approach to charter schools varies from state to state. Charter schools were first proposed in the U.S. as centres for innovation and research – a trait that is shared with the Alberta model (TAAPCS, “Recent Research”, n.d.). Additionally, most U.S. charter schools are not-for-profit, though there are exceptions. For example, in Michigan, for-profit management companies may be contracted by non-profit charter schools to oversee the

schools. This is a contentious political issue. In Alberta, they are all non-profit. The U.S.-based National Charter School Resource Center website explains that charter schools are funded on a per-student basis, like Alberta charter schools, and the level of per-student funding varies from state to state. U.S. charter schools also have access to most of the same grants that public schools do, though the extent of this varies (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

A 2014 University of Arkansas report looking at funding and standardized test scores found that U.S. charter schools are more efficient than public schools, because charter schools score better or the same on tests using significantly less public money (Wolf, Cheng, Batdorff, Maloney, May & Speakman, 2014). Alberta charter schools also score better on tests and take less public money. However, critics of that U.S. report explain that charter schools sometimes share resources such as transportation with public schools, and that standardized tests are merely a one-dimensional measure of student performance, not painting the whole picture (Kamenetz & Sanchez, 2014). The latter is a common criticism.

The U.S. experience with charter schools differs from Alberta's experience, most notably in the type of students who appear to have benefitted the most significantly from the existence of charter schools. In the U.S., charter schools have often been designed to particularly focus on students facing poverty, students with low academic performance or those who belong to a disadvantaged group. This is particularly true in urban charter

schools (Bosetti et al., 2015). These students are thought to be at risk of falling through the cracks in traditional public schools.

At the same time, in both Alberta and the U.S., one of the major criticisms of charter schools is that they are *too* elite. The idea is that charter school students come from a self-selecting group, whose parents need to be engaged enough to sign them up for a speciality school. This is cited as the reason that charter schools produce good scores on student assessments. It is certainly true that not all U.S. charter schools target disadvantaged students. Charter schools are diverse by nature. The important policy question that follows is whether being from a self-selecting group is the major determining factor in charter school student performance. A 2017 Manhattan Institute report compared the test scores of 73 charter middle schools to those of New York's 98 public selective middle schools (those which selectively admit students, based on some form of aptitude or unique trait). The report found charter schools outrank the selective middle schools in math, and perform the same in English, after adjusting for socioeconomic status and race. This provides at least some evidence that charter schools outperform comparable schools for reasons other than selectiveness (Winters, 2017). Additionally, charter schools in Alberta outrank even independent schools on student assessment tests. Nevertheless, this criticism persists both north and south of the border.

Charter schools in Alberta were introduced to provide a unique form of education outside of the more one-size-fits-all approach of public schools, but they were never specifically

intended to help disadvantaged youth (though Alberta's legislated charter school model does not prevent this, and Alberta does house several charter schools targeted to at-risk populations). Both the U.S. and Alberta experiences show that charter schools are merely a vehicle for unique educational outreach; the target group could be elite or very much the opposite.

A review of existing U.S. charter schools by Bosetti (2015) found that in terms of student performance, charter schools have been found in numerous studies to deliver better student test scores than traditional public schools, with notable exceptions in the first few transition years, during which a student first attends a charter school, with scores then evening out or exceeding traditional public schools after a few years. Similarly, new charter schools appear to suffer growing pains, underperforming in their first few years of operation, but improving over time. However, not all charter schools delivered better results than public schools, and some studies found worsened results. U.S. charter schools often cater to disadvantaged student populations with poor test scores, so comparing performance results to other schools can only be considered one measure of success, and must be taken with a grain of salt. Bosetti notes that the more in-demand charter schools tend to produce better results, but several studies in a variety of states have found that disadvantaged students see the largest achievement gains from attending charter schools. When tracking patterns in charter school performance, one obvious difficulty arises: charter schools are not homogeneous – in fact, diversity is their *raison d'être* – so a range of findings would be expected. Bosetti notes research confirming this about U.S. charter

schools. Surely the same could be said for Alberta. To a certain extent, this may explain the inconclusiveness in the research on U.S. charter school performance results and their variation.

One clear difference between U.S. and Alberta charter schools is the growth in the number of jurisdictions that allow for these schools. While Alberta charter schools have experienced comparatively modest growth in the number of schools and the number of students enrolled since they were introduced in 1994, they are still not an educational option in any other Canadian jurisdiction. By contrast, U.S. charter school availability has grown to 43 jurisdictions since they were introduced in Minnesota in 1991. In terms of overall enrollment, Bosetti notes that Alberta and the U.S. experienced similar growth between 1990 and 2006, but in the following seven years the U.S. growth grew more rapidly – a 586 per cent growth compared to Alberta’s 306 per cent growth. Enrollment in U.S. charter schools as a proportion of the total school population in jurisdictions that permit charter schools also outpaced this form of growth in Alberta. In some areas, charter schools are more popular than others. Notably, in 2012/13, 45.9 per cent of all school-aged students in Washington, D.C. were enrolled in charter schools (Bosetti et al., 2015). By contrast, Alberta has maintained a cap on the number of charter schools that are permitted to operate in the province.

If charter schools were expanded to other Canadian jurisdictions, the U.S. experience illustrates an area in which Canadian charter school policy could expand, catering more to disadvantaged students requiring unique educational outreach, with the goal of keeping

hard-to-reach students engaged in classroom learning. So far, the Alberta experience has dabbled in this approach, but not to the extent seen south of the border. Additionally, the popularity and growth in charter school enrollment in the U.S. may justify other Canadian jurisdictions experimenting with charter schools, and for the Alberta government lifting the current restraints on charter school growth.

THE POTENTIAL FOR EXPANDING CHARTER SCHOOLS INTO OTHER CANADIAN JURISDICTIONS

Canadian provinces looking at ways to expand educational choices for families, offering students more options to suit their diverse educational needs, may be wise to look at the charter school model. Alberta's over twenty-year experience with charter schools provides a helpful case study.

Some, but not all Canadian provinces do not strictly enforce catchment areas, allowing parents and students to choose which school they attend (even if the choices only exist between traditional public schools), and employ "money-follows-the-student" models, directing funds to schools based on student enrollment. Having both of these policy models in place may simplify the introduction of charter schools to a new province. For provinces in which students are strictly bound by catchment area to attend their local public school (other than in exceptional circumstances), loosening these rules may be a helpful first step in beginning to introduce some level of choice, and by extension, charter schools. All Canadian provinces currently employ the use of standardized testing, which is important in ensuring that charter schools keep pace with traditional public schools, Catholic schools, Francophone schools and independent schools.

In political climates such as Ontario's, where government funding for independent schools is controversial, charter schools may be a good policy option to expand student choice.

Governments can set regulatory limits on which types of charter schools can open (for example, prohibiting charter schools from being religious) and can mandate that these schools be non-profit. By introducing charter schools, unique educational approaches can be offered to students beyond the expansion of these programs in traditional public schools, which may be an abbreviated version of what a full-sized charter school would offer (for example, an entire school dedicated to a science focus rather than a smaller science-focused stream in an existing school). Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that the costs associated with introducing these programs are lower in charter schools, based on Alberta's per-student costs for charter schools versus traditional public schools, as well as the operating cost comparisons in the U.S.

If another provincial government chose to introduce charter schools, Alberta's example would offer a useful case study in regulatory and practical barriers that restrict growth. Other Canadian provinces may also benefit from drawing on the ability to use charter schools to target disadvantaged student populations.

CONCLUSION

More than twenty years after charter schools were introduced in Alberta, the educational experiment has been mostly successful, yet charter schools face significant challenges restricting them from reaching their full potential. Based on a review of Provincial Achievement Test data and enrollment numbers, the findings in this report corroborate the findings from other studies of Alberta charter schools: that they outperform all other types of schools, on average – including independent schools which charge tuition. When broken down school by school, most Alberta charter schools perform strongly and consistently on PATs, and those that have fallen below the rest show steady improvement over the last six years. Since 2010/2011, enrollment in Alberta charter schools has outpaced total school age population growth – and in fact, enrollment in all forms of schools other than traditional public schools has exceeded school-age population growth. There is clearly a demand among Alberta parents for educational choices outside of traditional public schools.

Policy Recommendations

In five other Canadian provinces – Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador – non-wealthy families have very few educational options outside of the traditional public system, and no other Canadian jurisdiction permits charter schools. In these cases, charter schools offer a compelling educational policy alternative for students seeking unique or targeted learning approaches, without the cost

for parents required by independent schools. Charter schools are a particularly attractive policy option in Ontario, where the funding of independent schools is controversial, and in the Atlantic provinces, where educational choice is limited. Charter schools also represent significant cost savings for provincial governments, compared to traditional public schools. The financial accessibility of charter schools makes them a strong policy option for truly increasing school choice, giving students of all income levels the opportunity to attend diverse, independently operated schools, for which a high level of accountability can be demanded by government. Drawing from the U.S. experience and some case studies from Alberta, other Canadian provinces could leverage the charter school model to target disadvantaged student populations with the goal of better engaging them in classroom learning and improving student performance results. Alberta charter schools could also expand in this area. An added layer of competition brought by charter schools, as originally proposed in Alberta, may also improve results at existing schools.

Lifting the regulatory and practical restrictions on charter schools is a worthwhile policy initiative for the Alberta government. Removing the cap on the number of charter schools, and removing the requirement for local school boards to serve as gatekeepers between charter societies and the education minister, would help assist in provincial charter school growth. Further, the Alberta government could consider some level of both transportation funding and capital funding for charter schools, to assist in both their growth and the ability for the physical schools to complement the charters' approach.

Introducing charter schools in other jurisdictions would not come without political challenges, but the Alberta model offers a helpful framework for what to do and what not to do. Ultimately, there is significant potential for charter school expansion in Alberta and across Canada, representing a new realm of diverse educational options for students across the country.

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APPENDIX

THE VARYING DEGREES OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN CANADA

In exploring whether Canadian provinces outside of Alberta should introduce charter schools, it is useful to view each provincial education system through the lens of school choice. In this context, there is an invisible line drawn on the Ontario-Manitoba border, west of which students have a broad variety of accessible educational options, and east of which students have very few (excluding Quebec). School choice refers to the availability of a diverse range of educational programs, tailored to different learning styles and interests, beyond what's offered in traditional public schools. For most families to truly have this choice, each school option must be accessible to all income levels. This generally means parental tax dollars follow their student to whichever school they choose. School choice involves any number of schools, including traditional public schools and choice programs within them, religious schools, independent schools, charter schools, homeschooling, distance education, and more. Schools could offer any approach, be it an educational philosophy, level of discipline, religious, cultural or language programming, an extracurricular focus, a focus on gifted children or those with severe learning disabilities.

There is reason to believe that demand is increasing in Canada for diverse educational options outside of traditional public schools. Research released by the Fraser Institute in 2018 shows that the share of students attending independent schools in Canada is increasing (MacLeod, 2018a), and that absolute homeschool enrolment has grown significantly in the past five years (MacLeod, 2018b). Alberta offers a higher level of school

choice than any other Canadian province, and charter schools play a large role. Should other provinces also permit charter schools, they would increase their level of school choice for families at all income levels.

There is no single Canadian education system, because Canadian provinces each have control over and responsibility for their own education systems. Similar across every province is the general requirement for students to attend school until the age of 16 or older, with few exceptions.

In every province, homeschooling children is an option for elementary and high school, but the degree to which parents receive some of their education tax dollars back varies, ranging from relatively generous to no funding at all. Similarly, attending independent schools is an option for students in every Canadian province, but in provinces where no tax dollars follow those students to independent schools, this is only a practical reality for those who can afford it.

Every province has at least a few public schools that offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, called IB World Schools, which is an alternative K-12 educational stream within existing schools. IB focuses on international, inquiry-based learning and thorough assessment. The availability of these programs varies greatly from province to province (International Baccalaureate, n.d.). IB provides a small level of educational choice to

parents in every province, provided they live close enough to the schools that offer these programs.

Additionally, there is some availability of choice programs within traditional public schools in many Canadian provinces, including programs for academically gifted students, those with an extracurricular focus, French students and First Nations students. These programs are usually clustered in urban areas. In English-speaking provinces, Francophone programs are generally restricted to students with parents who speak French as their first language.

This report examines each provincial education system through the lens of school choice. The level of school choice is determined by a few factors, including whether or not students are bound by catchment areas requiring them to attend the school in their neighbourhood; the level of tax dollars that follows students to schooling options outside of traditional public schools, including independent schools, homeschooling and charter schools; the availability of these alternative programs; the level of diversity within the traditional public school system, including choice programs, French schools and Catholic schools; and any other unique education programs offered. Essentially, this section looks at how easy it is for parents to choose the education that best fits the learning needs of their children, without having to spend additional funds beyond their mandatory education tax dollars.

The degree of regulation placed upon independent schools and homeschooling families (and in Alberta's case, on charter schools) also impacts how difficult or easy it is for these

alternative educational programs to operate, and in some cases, how easy it is for parents to access these schools. This report does not include a comparative analysis of these regulations from province to province, but an assessment of private school regulations across Canada published by the Fraser Institute in 2017 noted that government-funded independent schools generally operate under more regulation than non-funded independent schools in each of the provinces that offers this funding (Van Pelt & Allison, 2017). Interestingly, this research found that funded independent schools in Alberta and B.C. are subject to a high level of regulation, despite these provinces offering a good deal of school choice. A 2015 Fraser Institute analysis of homeschool regulations found that Alberta is one of the highest-regulated provinces, alongside Saskatchewan and Quebec (Van Pelt, 2015).

There is diversity of opinion as to whether funding that follows the student, along with associated regulations and oversight, amounts to greater educational choice for students and families. For example, the Halifax-based homeschool mentor and resource group HEMS holds the position that families having the freedom to homeschool per their preferences with little government interference trumps the benefits of government funding (HEMS, 2014). However, this report assumes that the biggest impediment to families seeking forms of education outside of traditional public schools is funding restrictions, and that many other challenges (like adequate transportation) could also be alleviated with funding. Stemming from that is the assumption that tax dollars following students to various forms of education does increase educational choice for students.

British Columbia

British Columbia (B.C.) has a high level of school choice relative to most Canadian provinces. Per B.C.'s Ministry of Education (B.C. Education), the province had 553,000 public school students, 81,000 independent school students and 2,200 homeschooled students enrolled in 2018 (B.C. Education "Ministry of Education homepage", n.d.). B.C. students are not bound by catchment areas, when space is available at their desired school (Vancouver School Board [VSB], n.d.).

Independent schools in B.C. receive per-student funding of up to 35 per cent or 50 per cent of traditional public school levels depending on their classification, via operating grants. Approved distance education schools can receive 63 per cent of per-student funding (Van Pelt, Hasan & Allison, 2017). To receive government funding, independent schools must be operated by a non-profit society, employ B.C. certified teachers, teach the B.C. curriculum and meet other basic requirements (B.C. Education "Grants to Independent Schools", n.d.). Public schools and independent schools are permitted in B.C. to share resources such as transportation and facilities (B.C. School Act, 1996). In some cases, B.C. independent schools also qualify for an exemption from municipal property taxes.

Homeschooling is partially funded and families must register each student with a public or independent school, but parents have the flexibility to opt out of the B.C. curriculum (B.C. Education "Homeschooling Policy", n.d.). B.C. students in grades 10-12 may participate in

online distributed learning, taught by certified teachers, but taking place at home (B.C. Education “Online & Self-Paced Learning”, n.d.).

B.C. also has some level of choice within its traditional public school system. There are several government-funded French education options, including French immersion and Francophone schools. B.C.’s public system allows for some unique programming, including Vancouver’s Mini School program, which are learning enriched streams for students who maintain a minimum B average and pass a required test, within some Vancouver public secondary schools (VSB “Mini Schools”, n.d.). There is also an Aboriginal Focus School in Vancouver – a unique model within Canada – which offers Aboriginal-focused programming to First Nations students and non-First Nations students (VSB “Aboriginal Focus School”, n.d.). These schools offer fully funded educational alternatives for some B.C. students, but they are dependent on location.

Alberta

Alberta offers the most school choice of any province in Canada, and fully funded charter schools are an important part of this. Relative to other Canadian provinces, Alberta offers the most fully funded educational options. The Alberta government fully funds traditional public schools (some with French immersion programs), separate (Catholic) schools, Francophone schools, provincial schools (for students in government institutions such as hospitals), and alternative programs within traditional public schools, which are like

charter schools but are operated by local school boards (Alberta Ministry of Education [AB Education] Alternative Programs Handbook, 2010). The reformation of Edmonton Public Schools in the 1990s to incorporate choice programs within traditional public schools has received international attention. The changes were overseen by Edmonton Public School Board Superintendent Angus McBeath, who cited competition from independent and charter schools as a positive, motivating factor. Edmonton Public Schools implemented school-based management, open enrollment and diverse programming with notable success (Frontier Centre, 2005). The Alberta government declared that it designates funding to schools based on the level of accountability to which each school type is held – so traditional public schools receive the most funding, while independent and homeschools receive less (Alberta Home Education Handbook, 2010).

Independent schools receive partial per-student funding. From a regulatory perspective, there are two main types of independent (private) schools in Alberta: registered private schools, which do not receive government funding, are not required to teach the Alberta curriculum, do not need to hire Alberta accredited teachers, but must meet provincial learning standards; and accredited private schools, which are eligible for partial government funding. There are some independent schools that are not funded within this category, but Accredited Funded schools and Designated Special Education Private Schools receive some government funding. Additionally, Heritage Language Schools are independent schools which are also eligible for funding (AB Education, “Private Schools in Alberta”, 2018). Level 1 Accredited Funded private schools receive 60 per cent of per-

student funding and Level 2 Accredited Funded private schools receive 70 per cent (Van Pelt, Hasan and Allison, 2017). Generally, independent schools are not funded for capital costs, but grants are available to some schools.

Parents of homeschooled children in Alberta are also eligible for government funding. Homeschooled students must be registered with a public, Catholic, Francophone or Accredited Funded private school, which is then called the associate school authority. Blended programs are also an option, wherein 50 per cent of the programming is home instruction and 50 per cent of the programming is provided by an Alberta certified teacher. Reimbursement for home education expenses is determined by the associate school authority. Many, but not all, expenses are eligible (AB Education, “Home Education Reimbursement”, 2017). Associated schools receiving funding from the government must allocate no less than 50 per cent of that funding to the parents, though the parents may decline the money (Alberta Home Education Handbook, 2010).

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan offers a good level of school choice, with parents having funded or partially funded access to traditional public schools, Catholic schools, Francophone schools, independent schools and in some cases, homeschooling. Students may also move between school divisions. The Saskatchewan government fully funds traditional public schools, separate (Catholic) schools and Francophone schools. There is only one Francophone

school division in the province (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education [SK Education], “K-12 School Divisions”, 2017). At the time of this report being published, the Saskatchewan government and one Catholic school division are appealing a court decision which declared that non-Catholic students should not be permitted to attend government-funded Catholic schools. The government invoked the notwithstanding clause and is pushing for non-Catholic families to continue to be able to access these schools (*Regina Leader-Post*, 2018). Students in Saskatchewan are not strictly bound by catchment areas. If a student wishes to attend a school in a school division outside of the designated attendance area, the parents must make an application. These decisions are based on availability and are made by school division authorities and the school principal (SK Education, “PreK-12 Education for Newcomers”, n.d.).

Students in Saskatchewan may be homeschooled and must be registered with their local school authority. Funding varies and is dependent on the policies of each individual school division (Saskatchewan Home Based Educators, n.d.). Special needs students who are homeschooled qualify for some provincial funding. Homeschooled students have access to distance education opportunities that are made available at their local school. Qualified independent schools in Saskatchewan receive operational funding grants on a per-student basis, but do not receive funding for capital expenses (Saskatchewan Education Act, 2009).

Manitoba

Manitoba offers a good amount of school choice, though less than each of the provinces to the west. In Manitoba, there is funding available for some independent schools, which are required to hire certified teachers, teach the provincial curriculum and be legally incorporated. There are also independent schools in the province which receive no funding from government, however these schools are eligible for a \$60 per-student textbook grant (Province of Manitoba Ministry of Education [MB Education], “Non-Funded Independent Schools”, n.d.). Funded independent schools are required to have parent-student advisory councils, and receive funding on a per-student basis, typically at the rate of 50 per cent of what traditional public school net operating expenditure was in the two previous years (MB Education, Funded Independent Schools”, n.d.). There is no government funding made available to homeschooled students.

The government is flexible when it comes to allowing students to attend traditional public schools outside of their local school districts, under the province’s *Schools of Choice* initiative. Funding for transportation to these schools is sometimes, but not always, available.

Ontario

Ontario ranks low on the school choice scale. Students may be homeschooled or attend independent schools, but in both cases, they receive no funding from the government.

Ontario has Catholic schools, like Alberta, which offers an additional level of choice within the public system. Ontario students may attend fully funded traditional public schools, French public schools, Catholic schools, and French Catholic schools. Within the public system there is a variety of small programs providing alternative approaches to help students graduate.

Within the public boards in Ontario, some choice programs are offered, particularly in urban centres. For example, the Toronto District School Board offers two fully funded Africentric schools, and several schools with fine arts programming, IT programming, athletics and more (Toronto District School Board, n.d.).

School choice made headlines in Ontario's 2007 provincial election, when then-Progressive Conservative (PC) leader John Tory proposed public funding for religious independent schools in addition to traditional public and Catholic schools. The religious characterization of the issue and lack of detail was incredibly unpopular and defined the campaign, ultimately losing the PCs the election (CBC Archives, 2007).

Quebec

Quebec offers the most school choice in eastern Canada, by a wide margin. In Quebec, accredited private schools receive per-student government funding for operations at about

60 per cent of the rate that traditional public school students receive. These schools also receive some per-student funding for capital, in addition to funding for transportation and some special programming. Accredited private schools are required to submit financial documents and any other requested documents to the Education Minister, and are subject to requested school inspections. Non-accredited private schools do not receive funding, but they are still subject to various regulations and three- to five-year permits (Van Pelt et al., 2017).

Teyssier (2009) notes that the public funding of independent schools has a long, oft-controversial history in Quebec, and much of it has been centred around religious or cultural schools. Despite that, high levels of Quebec students attend independent schools. Fraser Institute data from 2017 showed 12.3 per cent of Quebec students attend independent schools – the second highest level of enrollment in Canada, behind only B.C. (MacLeod & Hassan, 2017).

School boards in Quebec support homeschoolers and receive per-student funding for homeschooled students registered with each board. In 2016/17, per-student funding was increased to \$1,000 per child, per year. Soon after, the province introduced new legislation to crack down on compulsory school attendance and modernize homeschool laws. The Quebec government has attempted to push students once educated in illegal religious schools into homeschooling instead, with increased government support, oversight and regulation (*Montreal Gazette*, 2016).

New Brunswick

New Brunswick has a low level of school choice. Parents only have three government-funded options: English and French traditional public schools, or English public schools with a French immersion focus. As French immersion schools do not exist in all areas, there is a pilot program by the New Brunswick government to provide four sites for French immersion learning for rural students (New Brunswick Ministry of Education, n.d.). Though student enrollment is declining in New Brunswick, enrollment in French immersion schools is increasing (CBC New Brunswick, 2017). The curriculum is the same across all schools.

New Brunswick students are bound by catchment areas. A 2016 CBC news report on a town hall about a catchment area being changed, to relieve some of the overcrowding at a Fredericton high school, documented parents distressed about the fact that their children would be pushed into a new school, particularly for one autistic child, with parents threatening to move if the boundary changed. This anecdotal example illustrates, in a small way, how catchment areas restrict choice in education, particularly for children with learning challenges (CBC New Brunswick, 2016).

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia scores low on the school choice scale. Students are bound by catchment area and have few government-funded school options, including traditional public schools,

French immersion schools and French first language programs. There is also a small assortment of more flexible programming available, including correspondence studies, virtual learning in high school and credits for community-based programs as a substitute for high school classes, but these programs are not far-reaching (Nova Scotia Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development [NS Education], “Specialized Programs”, 2018). Nova Scotia students may be homeschooled but parents receive no funding. Homeschooled students must be registered with the province’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (NS Education, “Home Schooling”, 2018). Nova Scotia students attending independent schools do not receive funding.

Nova Scotia offers one unique program, raising the level of school choice above the rest of Atlantic Canada. The Tuition Support Program is a voucher system for students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder or another Learning Disability (NS Education, “Tuition Support”, 2018). These students must be signed up for a designated or registered special education independent school and must have first attended traditional public school, ultimately determining that it wasn’t a suitable option to meet their needs. These students receive per-pupil funding from the Nova Scotia government.

Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.) offers little school choice to parents and students. The province funds English public schools, 47 per cent of which offer French Immersion programming, and six French schools. P.E.I. has five independent schools but students

receive no funding from the government. Homeschooled students in P.E.I. do not receive government funding, and must be registered with the government (Prince Edward Island Ministry of Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2017).

The province also has agreements with a handful of schools in other countries. These schools, called International Affiliated Schools, teach the P.E.I. curriculum or a blend of the P.E.I. and local curricula, employ P.E.I. teachers and grant P.E.I. diplomas (Prince Edward Island International Student Program, n.d.). While an interesting facet of P.E.I.'s education system, International Affiliated Schools are not a practical option for students physically based in P.E.I.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador today ranks low on the educational choice scale. The province only has two school boards, public and Francophone, and a total of six independent schools which receive no government funding (Newfoundland and Labrador Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2017). Students may be homeschooled but are subject to annual approval by the school district, and receive no funding. French immersion schools are an option within Newfoundland and Labrador's public school system, however transportation for students outside of their zoned school district is not available. The province is grappling with declining enrollment as the population ages and there are low levels of in-migration.

What is interesting about Newfoundland and Labrador's education system is its history: in 1997, the province voted by referendum to abolish its Christian-controlled education system and establish a homogeneous, public, non-denominational system in its place. Prior to this, schools were owned and operated by various Christian churches, yet funded with public dollars (Higgins, 2011). This is like the Catholic systems that exist in Ontario and Alberta, but markedly different in that multiple churches played a role. This denominational system would have offered parents more choice than the two options that exist today, but of course, the choices were all Christian. Immigration from different cultures, a declining school-aged population and urbanization meant the per-student funded denominational system faced significant funding challenges. The referendum in 1997 (which saw 73 per cent of voters elect to establish a single public system) was preceded by another referendum in 1995, which produced much closer results, with 54.4 per cent of voters in favour at that time. Changing the educational system was a constitutional matter for the province, as the Terms of Union spelled out when the province joined Confederation (also by a close referendum) enshrined church control over schools. Ultimately, there were unsuccessful court challenges by the Roman Catholic Church, and the federal government allowed Newfoundland and Labrador (then named Newfoundland) to change its system. The first non-denominational schools opened in the 1998/99 school year. That system exists today, and for government funded education, students may choose between French or English public schools.