

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

**IMPLICATIONS OF WIDER PARENTAL CHOICE  
IN PUBLIC SCHOOLING**

**with particular reference to one group's response to  
charter school legislation in Alberta**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1997



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0-612-22950-5

## ABSTRACT

There has been a growth in public policies which enable parents to choose the school their child attends. Advocates of choice see such policies as prompting significant improvements within public education which, at least in part, is perceived as having lost touch with its current constituency. Alberta is Canada's first province to pass legislation to enable the formation of charter schools whereby the district monopoly on the delivery of education is challenged. The focus of this study is upon one group who responded to this legislation in seeking to set up their own school.

These developments raise many questions. At the policy level, the trend can be better understood within the context of acceptance of competition as incentive to stimulate the delivery of public services. This has ramifications for the state of public education and its link with democratic community, as the attitudes of the next generation's citizens are shaped by what they experience in school. At the local level, the trend can be better understood within the context of the differing perspectives of various "stakeholders". In assessing the impact of choice promotion within Alberta, much can be learned from the experience of other countries, combined with analysis of the early outcomes of policy implementation: Canada's first charter schools.

Key criticisms of granting parents wider choice include the notion of fragmentation which may occur as societal inequities are exacerbated by the process. This is partly the result of the lack of equality in parents' ability to be able to take advantage of the opportunities presented by choice. As other provinces consider following Alberta's lead in order to address pervasive educational problems, they should do so on the basis of the greatest possible awareness of such implications of this initiative. By attempting to provide "grounding" for the concepts of policy-makers in the outcomes within one local education market, the purpose of this study is to contribute to this awareness.

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## SETTING OUT THE QUESTION

The purpose of this study is to examine some of the processes and outcomes when the politics of choice are applied to public education. The provision of educational choice has become a focal point in the heated debate over education reform in Canada as well as other Western countries. It involves the adoption of public policies which enable parents to choose the school their children will attend. It also increases the pressure on schools to convince parents to enrol their children. Each side in the debate is portraying school choice as either the saviour or the destroyer of Canadian public education. This movement can be usefully placed within the wider context of the ideology of choice since the emerging phenomenon of alternative kinds of schooling--which purport to be more responsive to parental choice, local control, and differentiated needs--is an international one. A central part of my aim is to gain an understanding of extended parental choice through focus on one group as they responded to charter school legislation in Alberta.

While not wishing to argue in opposition to any specific change entailed with extending educational choice, in writing this dissertation I am conscious of adopting a sceptical stance in partial response to the preponderance of literature and discussion in favour of choice. Symbolic appeal is one basis of its popularity because choice is linked to notions such as the promotion of individual rights. Indeed, in many ways it is hard to speak against choice without deserving accusations ranging from being patronizingly paternalistic to being positively anti-democratic. But, as Carl (1994) points out, "Parental choice is an arena in which people who hold different conceptions about the meaning of 'choice' and unequal amounts of power gather to

influence the course of education reform" (p.321). Part of this arena provides me with my topic.

### The choice of topic/ the topic of choice

An important personal experience with policies promoting choice took place when I was a teacher. The last British school in which I taught had one attempt to obtain grant maintained (GM) status before my arrival. This change would have meant opting out of local authority control and gaining a greater degree of autonomy. After causing considerable divisions among both staff and parents, the move was defeated by parental ballot. During my time at the school, a second attempt was proposed by the principal. Although there were staff visits to neighbouring GM schools at her instigation, I did not volunteer to take part in these; indeed I was relatively indifferent towards the whole process. Lesson preparation and marking were a greater preoccupation. This lack of reflection perhaps is typical of practitioners within a process of change wherein teachers are required to respond to a multiplicity of simultaneously mounted initiatives with little time for coping, and still less time for reflecting-what Apple (1986) describes as the intensification of teachers' work. This also was a time when the professional associations had been significantly weakened and rendered less vocal by the Thatcher Government.

The school governors decided not to hold a parental ballot until a supportive ballot of the staff had been obtained; this was an unusual step and one not required by the legislation. Literature extolling the benefits of opting out was distributed to staff, and a presentation was made to an after-school staff meeting about the financial benefits which the school would experience. A ballot would be held the following Monday. For the second time in thirteen

years of teaching, I was sufficiently motivated to take personal action. Until then I had not felt strongly about the issue, but I became incensed by the blatant partisan position adopted by the administration in a debate in which reasonably intelligent people were expected to weigh up two sides before voting. There was little time; by 7 a.m. on Friday I placed an announcement of a lunchtime meeting in staff mailboxes. My aim was simply to provide a forum for broader debate. When the ballot took place, a majority of staff voted against the change, much to the chagrin of the principal who felt that a major financial opportunity had been lost. (The school has recently obtained Technology College status with significant funding attached.)

On moving to Alberta in September 1993, I was struck by the apparent similarities in the new proposal for charter schools as a means of extending parental choice. This seemed to be a natural topic for me to combine my interest in politics and developments in educational policy. Thus started my introduction to the implementation of the politics of choice, which I have found to be personally involving and academically illustrative of the literature. I was also able to obtain an excellent introduction to several of the aspects within the debate on educational choice by joining, as an observer, a local group which was hoping to form a charter school. The two strands of practice and theory provide a stimulating mixture with which to analyze this debate. For example, the group I observed were censorious of parents who were indifferent towards the education of their children. This prompted me to look at notions of community and what was changing in people's perceptions of *public* education.

These experiences serve to outline the roots of my dissertation work: examining community responses to legislation which enhances parental

choice, while also analyzing concurrent academic responses. In some ways it is understandable that much attention has been concentrated upon bold educational initiatives of government, given their widespread consequences and media coverage. There exists a considerable degree of interest in academic commentaries at this level, with a consequent much lower focus at the local level where activities within a school district may seem relatively parochial and unexciting. However, it is of the greatest importance to go beyond the level of policy-makers, desires of politicians, and resulting legislation. Few people could disagree with objectives set out in consultative documents promising to raise standards, teachers' expectations, and general school performance. But the implicit side of such proposals requires examination. Are the improved standards obtained by one school achieved at the expense of the marginalization of another school? How widespread among families is the social and economic empowerment required to make the freedom to choose a viable reality? Research which addresses policy issues only at the macro level tends to overlook the micro level, producing conclusions which can be reductionist and deterministic.

It is the local level which mediates provincial government policies, and such policies are affected in the process of transmission in both political and administrative ways: "Central policy initiatives have multiple effects, some of which were not intended by their promoters or expected by their detractors" (Hargreaves, 1989, p.215). Such effects can be adequately described and analyzed only through local studies at both the school and the district level. There is a tendency of macro analysis to assume that the relationship between policy making and policy implementation is relatively unproblematic. In the terms of Aronowitz and Giroux, this locks us into a discourse of critique

to the exclusion of a discourse of possibility (1985, p.154). It leads to an underestimation of the extent to which local bodies, individuals and groups are mediating agencies. The approach of this analysis is to incorporate macro considerations together with the local and institutional level at which policy is interpreted and implemented.

A central purpose of my research is to consider what lies behind the broad notion of the politics of choice: how such politics are actually being worked out in Alberta, and what degree of coherence exists within the choice movement. Given that school choice takes various forms, what is it that channels interest in choice in the direction of charter schools and subsequently into an up-and-running institution, and why does one group succeed in forming a charter school while another opts for alternative program status? Another issue concerns the type of relationship that arises between charter schools and the rest of the public system. My aim is to go beyond the ideological level and investigate how choice operates "on the ground". What do parents have to do in order to activate their choice? The movement is presented as a means of obtaining control, but is parental choice significantly extended? And what do parents do when they come to realize that this control is often of a more limited nature than they had assumed originally?

#### Changing emphases in the educational debate

The postwar period witnessed marked changes in the perceived purposes of a school. It would be an oversimplification to describe any linear movement from consensus over traditional transmission of cultural heritage to a situation of greater conflict arising from greater focus upon child-centredness and awareness of social issues. But there has been general

recognition of political influences on pedagogic issues, and claims about the neutral nature of concern for "the good of the children" have become rare. Political dynamics seem to have been more subtle and understated in the past, but are becoming more explicit in current debate with greater polarization in the priorities of educators. As Pinar et al. (1995) state, "Today no serious curriculum scholar would advance the argument that schools in general and curriculum in particular are politically neutral" (p.244).

Erosion of the comfortable belief that public education operates within a neutral framework has paved the way for those who wish to foster the perception that it is a creaking bureaucracy, too often reactive rather than proactive, its top-down authority structure excluding the majority of stake holders from having any significant input. In the words of Pinar et al. (1995), "Many believe that the public schools are overbureaucratized, overcentralized, and glacier-like in their capacity to enact dramatic reform" (p.678). Thus, there have been calls for decentralized control by passing on the running of schools to those directly affected (Lawton, 1995). This represents a type of privatization of decision-making as the state relinquishes some of its control over educational services. It results in the type and quality of education offered becoming more dependent upon consumer (parent) choice within a marketplace of competitive provision.

The New Right rejects the Keynesian postwar welfare state and the preeminence it gives to community and equality of opportunity, charging that it has led to gross institutional inefficiency and a severe restriction of individual choice. Concerns about bureaucratic domination have led to attacks from those who see public education as being too sheltered by its state administration, and thus in need of the accountability and efficiency brought

about by competition. The market is portrayed as enabling a more just society by fostering initiative, social fluidity, and the freedom to make individual decisions from the wider choice which becomes available. As an arbiter of "quality" schooling, proponents of excellence hold the market to be efficient, effective and accountable. It will increase the powers of "consumers" of education rather than self-serving vested interests, and lead to higher standards in all sectors (Boyd and Walberg, 1990).

As critics paint a picture of falling test scores, rising dropout rates, and decreasing levels of literacy, public education has become increasingly on the firing line. The claim of the New Right is that, in spite of a wide range of reforms and prescriptions for change, schools have improved very little. It is also argued that significant gain in educational standards is virtually impossible under the present organization of public education. This is illustrated in the words of Rinehart and Lee (1991), "Public schools are a government monopoly, and predictably operate contrary to the best interests of their customers. The lack of competition and parental control is the root cause of the poor performance of our schools" (p.x). They argue that the solution to current deficiencies lies in increased parental and student choice, deregulation, and privatization. Schools which respond to the wishes of their "customers" will become more effective institutions than those which impose a specific approach upon their clients. Unencumbered competition among schools will provide the incentive for excellence and this will lead to dramatic improvements in education. Rinehart and Lee seek to demonstrate that public school systems consistently fail because they ignore fundamental traits of human behaviour, such as the need for clear incentive to stimulate optimum performance.

Following this line of free market logic, concern about the inferiority of an education system sheltered from the rigors of competition is growing. Government intervention is characterized as being insufficient at some times and extravagant at others. Ending the monopoly of public control is seen to prevent wasteful excess and the possibility of "blackmail" on the part of teacher unions. On this view, bureaucratic inertia, lack of accountability, and the tangle of politics will dissolve once education enters the marketplace. Such a change will also serve to stem the tide of ever-increasing expectations that government offer something for everyone. As well, absence of the profit criterion in the public sector supposedly encourages reckless expansion which is engineered by self-interested bureaucrats (Wilkinson, 1994). The result is an ostensibly abysmal performance on international scales relative to investment (Economic Council of Canada, 1992), a situation which used to be exacerbated by politicians promising various goods and services in order to get re-elected, with little regard for the cost.

Proponents of choice claim that because the market system is more democratic in that it gives priority to parents, it is a more responsive way to change educational directions than waiting for a change in government. Prevention of the state detracting from family cohesion and parental responsibility provides a moral justification for the diminution of the government's role. The practical consequences of such beliefs include policies of open enrolment so the market decides funding: less attractive schools lose students and receive their just desserts. Greater testing and publication of results enable parents to make "informed decisions" in the educational marketplace. Finally, a logical extension of such a view is the voucher system which would change parents' perception from seeing themselves as recipients



of "free" education, to customers who pay for it. This would represent a significant step towards realizing the right-wing goal of lowering taxes, as it would eventually lead to the direct purchase of education from the private sector, with a minimalist state merely ensuring that every child receives at least a basic education. Such a stance would have been seen as radical a few years ago, but its wider discussion is indicative of the greater credibility presently accorded to market forces.

### Coming to the Question

Critics see the market focus as indicative of the appropriation of the educational agenda by New Right ideologues. A newly defined hegemonic discourse of current educational policy is suggested to have arisen which has made the different treatment of comparable students an acceptable element of educational debate. Such discourse would be a particularly efficient way of de-emphasizing egalitarianism since it is less visible, less open to public objection. From this perspective, dissent is controlled by co-opting the means of systematic inquiry: the elimination or displacement of potential sources of questioning, critique, and opposition to government policies. The legitimacy of academic criticism of government policies can easily be denied unless it has a substantial research-based foundation (Hargreaves, 1989).

An interesting explanation for this reluctance to challenge the supremacy of the market, and the New Right's strategy of criticizing public services, lies in Ball's (1990) concept of "discourses of derision". This operates to alter the meanings of words in education as well as change the perception of speakers. Thus, a trend described as "progressive" no longer implies a forefront of educational innovation, but rather a misguided fad; equally teachers have

their professional image replaced by the perception of them as simply another special interest group. Usher and Edwards (1994) describe this discourse as "powerful enough to simultaneously constitute and exclude certain possibilities of thought and action" (p.91). As significant questioning occurs about the future governance of state schooling and the principles by which education provision is distributed, attention needs to be paid to privileged speakers, and to the words and meanings which have been reconfigured in the drive towards the provision of wider choice.

In a period of fiscal restraint and deficit reduction, there are understandable demands for greater accountability in the spending of public money. Thus, the view of school administration as "benevolent if stuffy" is being replaced by one that portrays it as haphazard or even incompetent, and by the belief that improved administrative practice will expose schools which allow inconsistencies to go unchecked. Such change does not seem to be pedagogically grounded, but rather is based on a desire to ensure that school budgets receive greater scrutiny, and to increase school accountability by the development of more objective methods of student assessment. Within this emerging view it is also believed that enhanced efficiency will reduce wasteful use of resources and enable the attainment of better student results. This goes some way in explaining a dominant response to uncertainty in education being the demand for schools to become more competitive, to reorient themselves to their clients, and to reap the benefits of individual responsibility. The market-driven metaphors go largely unquestioned.

In spite of the plight of schools becoming more of a central element in election platforms, the electorate still seems particularly vulnerable to rhetoric within educational debate. The potential outcomes of a system based around a

much wider interpretation of school choice merit further investigation. What currently lacks adequate clarification is whether all aspects of school should be malleable and whether the marketplace is the appropriate arbiter for all educational principles. Despite the pervasive nature of such trends, there seems to have been much less in the way of public analysis of the underlying assumptions of such change and the long term implications for education and society in general. Even though the provision of charter or grant-maintained schools may be in its formative stages, now is the time to be wondering about the messages they convey to their students. Some see them as providing an appropriate range of educational choice to meet the needs of a heterogeneous society. Others express concerns about the resulting divisions within communities, or bewail the growing complexity of the educational maze through which only the most articulate and informed can successfully navigate.

In the 1970s education was blamed for economic underperformance and mounting unemployment. Academic circles resounded with the charge of Joseph Schwab in 1969 that the curriculum field was "moribund." Coupled with a crisis of confidence in state and welfare institutions, this led to calls for increased control and for a redefinition of the purposes of education. The new modes of state control that resulted are strategies to recapture and redefine social purposes and outcomes of education: promoting greater differentiation rather than greater equality of opportunity. But efficient use of resources does not necessarily translate into increased levels of pupil motivation and achievement. In other words, improved *educational* outcomes can be correlated with purposive leadership, positive school climate, teacher involvement in decisions, but these factors are not dependent on a high level

of institutional autonomy. This highlights a potential conflict between professional values illustrated by teachers identifying student needs, and the values of efficient management illustrated by the desire for greater productivity. Described by Ball (1993) as a "classic polarization" (p.115), this conflict between pedagogically-grounded needs and market-grounded demands is often overlooked.

### Focus and Organization of the Study

In the transformation being effected within the education systems of many countries, pivotal roles are played by the less restricted operation of market forces, and the process of centralization by which power becomes more concentrated in the hands of the state. Study of specific international experience enables identification of patterns which have influenced Canadian policymakers, it also provides outcomes of such policies which offer bases for both hope and doubt. An understanding of how such dynamics play out in Canada requires studying the changing role of the state in the lives of its citizens. As emphasis on policy planning and social welfare in education is replaced with the operation of market forces, this understanding also requires exploration of the demand side of parental choice. At the core of this study is an account of the evolution of one group of parents in Alberta who sought to employ the new mechanisms available to extend the choice of schooling available for their children. Surrounding this core are various levels of analysis intended to assist identification of positive and negative implications of the trend towards wider variation in the experience of school. Movement between these levels reflects an attempt to maintain a connection between academic debate and local realities.

This study begins by providing an overall context of the ideology of choice and a broad outline of the debate over choice. Chapter Two introduces different models which are based upon the politics of choice: the grant-maintained schools in England and Wales, charter schools in New Zealand, debate about the American charter school movement. Chapter Three looks at Alberta's charter school legislation, the charters that have been granted, and some specific repercussions of these changes within one city in Alberta. Chapter Four includes reasons for the adoption of case study methodology and discussion of some of the ethical issues I encountered in employing this methodology in my research. I then go on to provide an account of the progress of one group of parents and other interested parties which set out to form a charter school.

Chapter Five represents the results of my research into the responses of staff and parents to this instance of extended choice, and an account of interviews with representatives of the various "stakeholder" groups. Chapter Six deals with one issue arising in earlier chapters over whether charter schools result in strengthening or weakening community. This question is approached by applying the work of various theorists who have written about notions of community to this illustration of choice extension. Specific international examples are used in Chapter Seven in order to review how choice legislation can involve implications for such areas as power relations in schools and fostered attitudes towards others in society. Within this process I hope to encompass both generalities about educational choice as well as specifics about the experience of one group operating within one Canadian city.

## Chapter One

### THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

#### Political Culture

At one time the realm of public education would have been sacrosanct, almost an extension of Rupert Brooke's description of Canada as of "unseizable virginity". However, it would seem that recent attempts at seduction are indicating the possibility of conquest! While in the past pedagogical issues may have played a central role in determining the direction of educational change, this direction is currently affected far more by the political affiliations of policy-makers. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to avoid analysis of ideological bias in any study of public policy. A recent illustration of this is the theorist (Dr. Mark Genuis) who preached the dangers of day care and the rich rewards of mothers staying at home with their children. Critics were quick to attack this doctrine as reflecting neoconservative ideology, with academic credentials used to legitimize contentious social theory. The financial backers of the work by Genuis include REAL women (an organization that promotes traditional family values) and the conservative Donner Canadian foundation (Philp, 1996). Therefore, before considering specific educational issues, it is useful to identify broad political trends. That there has been a distinct shift to the right in Anglo-American politics since the beginning of the 1980s has been well documented (King, 1987; Levitas, 1987). While this shift was most marked during the Thatcher, Reagan, and Mulroney regimes, subsequent changes of government have not resulted in a reversal of ideology. Indeed, any change that has occurred has been from pastels of pink and turquoise to the present royal blue.

For a sizable portion of this century, conservatives could be seen to be broadly on the defensive, as the left and centre of the political spectrum developed social policies and programs that came to acquire a taken-for-granted status. And when they gained political control, rather than attempting to go against this prevailing current, conservative governments tried to project themselves as better managers of the welfare state than their opponents on the left. However, by the end of the 1970s the oil crisis, low economic growth, high inflation, and growing unemployment prompted governments to introduce significant change. With the ascendancy of New Right politics, the tables were turned, and the left/centre parties found themselves being the ones on the defensive. In the face of the driving neoconservative ideology, they could only project themselves as more compassionate managers of a fundamentally conservative agenda. As the 1980s wore on, this portrayal of government as both excessive and moreover a root cause of many problems became even more prevalent and consolidated the hold that New Right ideology and politics had taken over the political process.

This trend is evident in Canada (Tupper & Doern, 1988). The long period of postwar power enjoyed by the Liberals was partially based on their being perceived as more in tune with public opinion in providing necessary programs, since private sector alternatives were viewed as inadequate. Canadians raised in countries with a social democratic tradition of a welfare state understandably favoured a large role for the state: the more it spends, the better off society is. Scandinavian living standards, quality of public services, and absence of poverty were cited as proof that big government is good government. But economic stagnation eventually produced more allegiance to a party claiming to be more aggressive and competitive in confronting

different economic challenges (Zussman, 1989). The rising conservative voice stated that the more money a government spends, the worse off society will be as higher taxes reduce freedom of choice. "For those on the left, you can never have too much good government and, for those on the right, it is better to trust society more and tax and spend less" (Rose, 1989). In spite of Canada never having even a social democratic federal government, Marchak (1988) draws attention to the irony in how "the left" is blamed for many negatives in Canadian life.

In many ways the traditional left/right binary is losing its applicability, especially when one tries to locate certain populist movements on the political spectrum. The notion of *neo-conservatism* suggests that concepts of left and right are not locked into particular meaning structures but, rather, are open and dynamic. Inglehart (1990) describes the new value cleavages as not displacing the traditional left/right axis but instead transforming and revitalizing it. The implications of this include a profound generational-specific shift in values. For example, those who were raised in the relatively affluent post-war period place a lower value on economic security. The post-materialist perspective holds that public support for state intervention, as an instrument of social justice in both the economy and society, is in decline.

One illustration of the tension created by such a change is the division between the "old" and "new" ideological left and the resulting dilemma for left-wing parties who hope to hold onto the traditional bases of their support as well as satisfy the new demands. While it raises the possibility that the "non-right" will capitalize on the similarity in profile between left partisans and those with post-materialist leanings, a more probable scenario is



one in which conservatives capitalize on the divisions among their opponents, resulting in policies such as privatization becoming more frequent and widespread. In describing the Chicago convention of the U.S. Democrats in August 1996, *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson aptly describes how the neoconservative perspective has become the hegemonic ideology:

Republicans, or more properly conservatives, have therefore won the political debate in the U.S. about the burden of taxation. Even the Democrats now accept that taxes are too high; they differ from the Republicans only in assessing where and by how much taxes should be reduced. The tax issue is, of course, a surrogate for the broader issue of the role of the state in society, and here too the conservatives have largely routed the liberals. Apart from the most liberal wing of the Democratic Party, Democrats in Congress and the state legislatures agree "governments are too intrusive and often ineffective" (Simpson, 1996).

Thus the political landscape has changed considerably, with the addition of the materialist/postmaterialist dimension offering one means of a more comprehensive understanding of the structure of Canadian political belief systems.

Such a fundamental shift to the right in terms of broadly-held values can be attributed to a structural transformation typical of late industrialism, indicative of weaknesses inherent in the welfare state (Offe, 1984). International comparison can locate Canada in the class debate between end-of-ideology theorists and those who point to growing polarization (for example, Kerr, 1983 for convergence theory, and Goldthorpe, 1987 for changing class distinctions). However, confident generalization is not possible in the light of

the divergence which assumes the form of privatization in different countries, the specific economic and ideological circumstances being key variables in the dynamics. British experiments in privatization and the American push for greater liberalization of the market have affected Canada in subtle ways and not always in the same direction. Analysis of the Canadian experience thus needs to be made in the context of both internal and external pressures.

The degree of applicability of various aspects of such trends can be considered in terms of internal political culture. As Hardin (1974) asserts, since systems exist within a cultural context, any organized activity works only as well as the culture in which it exists is suited to it. Broad support for a government role is attributed to, "that uniquely Canadian amalgam of radical protest against privileged scheming promoters together with counterrevolutionary Tory rejection of uncontrolled acquisitive capitalism" (p.84). Yet, in spite of the large role that government has traditionally played, there has been growing acceptance of privatization. On reviewing recent structural changes in taxation, unemployment insurance, and the pension system, Fraser (1989) notes "a process of transferring responsibilities from producer to consumer, from public to private, from the state to the individual" (p.A7) in each of these areas.

Acceptance of such change is explained in part by the attitudinal study of Nevitte, Bakvis and Gibbins (1989) which explores how traditional ideological contours continue to be reshaped by the advance of the new political agenda (p.488). However, while their work provides an interesting approach to changing perceptions of the appropriate role of the state in society, it also illustrates the weakness of too narrow a view. By portraying the government as simply responding to the new agenda, they fail to consider how

neoconservative governments have played a role in shaping it. In doing so they overlook how the government, in equating public enterprises with bureaucratic lethargy and waste, has been able to shape the debate over the proper size and responsibility of the public sector. It can be argued that the push for privatization will eventually be overtaken by the need for greater centralization in order to contain and control the crises of modern capitalist society, since the frontiers of the welfare state cannot be easily rolled back in the face of such problematic tendencies. Other theorists interpret the same trend as a reflection of the state's determination to maintain significant steering capacity and ideological control over the process of wider choice. As Prince (1989) states in his review of the Canadian government, "resources are being redistributed from social development activities and towards social control measures" (p.29).

Growing acceptance of reduced government spending has gone hand in hand with a shift in attitudes and these have far-reaching implications for the state's traditional obligation to provide services for all regardless of socio-economic status. Various theories can be used to underline the importance of more encompassing analysis:

Privatization is better understood as a political strategy than as an economic adaptation...to alter the electoral landscape. It developed as a campaign promise...as a new way of attracting voters to traditional conservative policies...not only an attempt to change voters' minds, but also voters' interests (Hennig, Hamnet & Feigenbaum, 1988, p.463).

A wider perspective moves beyond the original thrust of privatization in economic spheres, to expose the pervasive belief in deregulation and the

efficacy of private enterprise. It also highlights the role of influential elites who become able to extend their input into non-business areas. Thus, since much more is entailed than simply a pro-business emphasis, "to equate neo-conservatism with narrow, self-interested support for the business community greatly understates both the complexity and the potential impact of this ideology on the direction of Canadian public policy" (Hennig et al., p.463). Privatization, in terms of actions reducing the direct role of government, has come to encompass much more than simply the sale of state-owned assets. It has become clearly established on the global agenda, as illustrated by the World Bank's practice of making market-oriented policies a major condition of its lending and development activities. Opponents of privatization link it with a variety of noxious social attitudes, while proponents link it to democratic values such as freedom and choice. Freedom, competition and choice provide the primary rationale for charter schools, so it is against the backdrop of this type of debate that educational change in general and the movement towards charter schools in particular can productively be seen.

### Education and the Right

The New Right claims that choice and competition will rectify many of the deficiencies of public education. Clearly many voters would find it unacceptable if the quality of education offered to all children varied by their parents' ability to pay; this would be a blatant way to exacerbate inequalities. Therefore, for politicians and policymakers on the right, a less contentious approach is to seek different types of school which will receive funding from the government but will operate to break, or at least weaken, the perceived monopolistic tendencies within public education through the introduction of options. Proponents of school choice portray conventional educational

innovation as limited by such factors as lack of motivation on the part of teachers to invest sufficient time and energy in the creation of real alternatives. One solution they put forward is to franchise other providers of schooling and put them in direct competition with public school systems in "the learning business". On this view, charter schools hold the potential to significantly expand the range of options. Indeed, the charter school and other market models are being advocated with growing intensity as a means of achieving fundamental reform.

To understand the general impetus for the choice movement it is necessary to explore some of the premises held by its proponents. Arguably, the case that Chubb and Moe (1990, 1992) make in favour of school choice is the most widely-cited. It therefore warrants description both here and in later sections concerning developments in the United Kingdom. According to them a genuine system of choice includes: a) granting parents the right to choose their child's school--the right to search out good ones, abandon bad ones, have their preferences/interests/judgments respected; b) liberating the supply of schools so that various alternatives can arise in dynamic response to needs, while those that fail to attract support go out of business; and c) eliminating as far as possible the bureaucratic infrastructure which has provided top-down authority over schools. Together with research sponsored by the right-wing Rand Corporation, these authors explicitly support the position that parental choice creates a climate which encourages schools to develop clarity of focus and purpose, thus making them more effective.

Chubb and Moe as well as other choice advocates point out that the traditional approach to education results in considerable disparities. Assigning families to schools on the basis of area of residence privileges specific social

groups by providing real choice of school only to those parents who are sufficiently affluent to select the neighbourhood where they will live. Indeed, they argue, individuals with resources have always exercised choice of schooling for their children by buying a place in a private school or purchasing a house in a neighbourhood in which a highly regarded school is located. The study of Darling-Hammond & Kirby (1988) found that 53% of their sample considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location. Advocates contend that parental choice will further sever the link between residence and access to educational opportunities, so that geography is no longer destiny (Coons & Sugarman, 1978).

Some commentators complain that those in charge of public schools are reluctant to extend choice much beyond the families of special needs students who cannot be accommodated in conventional schools. Administrators purportedly believe that it is less legitimate to take other characteristics into account in deciding which school would best challenge and support students, a perspective which operates to restrict severely the availability of alternative school programs. Allowing parents the freedom to select a particular school appropriate for their particular child is put forward as a process likely to stimulate more wholehearted support in the school system. Yet, instead of embracing such an approach, educators are paradoxically portrayed as lamenting the lack of parental support at the same time as resisting proposals which would facilitate this. Other educational administrators are described as being patronizing in their belief that ordinary parents are either incapable of making wise judgments about the quality offered by different schools, or not interested in doing so. Glenn (1994) contends that elitist reformers accept a degree of inequality as inevitable,

perhaps even desirable, with some objecting to the very idea of educational alternatives for children of ordinary people (p.134). He goes on to suggest that restrictions on public funding for such alternatives in many American states stems from elite disapproval of non-government schools for ordinary students.

Opposition by educators to wider parental choice is claimed to derive from anxieties about the consequences of poor school performance. More specifically, it is a type of union defensiveness against anyone passing negative judgment about a school or teacher, a reflection of the declining status of teachers. Suspicion is expressed of tendencies, typical within monopolistic systems, to protect weaker providers from the consequences of their own incompetence. Some critics go even further and charge that opposition to choice on the part of educators goes beyond self interest to reflect an ideological conviction that public schools have a virtually sacrosanct mission to shape future citizens by creating common attitudes, loyalties, and values under the guardianship of the state. Glenn (1994), for instance, alleges that this opposition promotes the "myth of the common school". As he puts it, "Resistance to judgments by parents, fear of job insecurity, and the possession of a *mission civilisatrice* do not make for good public rhetoric in relation to a reform for which so much support exists" (p.132).

Chubb and Moe warn of the superficial nature of some establishment leaders who are quick to claim that they "support choice" when they recognize the popularity of the idea among ordinary citizens. However, Glenn is more optimistic in pointing to the converts to choice and the growing evidence that more and more members of the public believe that parents should have the right to decide where their children will be schooled. He then bewails the

minimal impact of this movement on the actual thinking of most educators and the actual practice of most school systems. While they are quick to embrace other fads, he notes, resistance by educators to parental choice is deep rooted (1994, p.130). He goes on to attack the National Education Association for its resistance to choice, an attack that is supported by Chubb and Moe who suggest that choice as the "ultimate threat" to the US teacher unions since it would destroy an educational system that grants them power and prestige. In their view, the same criticism applies to school boards, administrators, superintendents, education faculties. As they put it, "Right down the line, the people who speak 'with authority' on education are against choice. It is the reform they fear the most, the worst nightmare" (1992, p.14). Indeed, Chubb and Moe see the most brutal and deeply rooted conflicts in American education reform as centring on choice, as vested interests prepare for battle, unleashing formidable political weapons.

Proponents of parental choice see the challenge for public policy as implementing choice so that, over time, all schools will improve and all students will benefit. A critical stage in such implementation is the development of governance structures that will enhance the variety and quality of schools. Glenn (1994) claims that parental choice demonstrably works, and does so without seriously undermining either individual interests or those of the "commonweal" (p.134). His work is representative of those who see the benefits of choice, implemented through the introduction of market forces, as manifold. Among these are the enhancement of teacher professionalism, increased parental satisfaction, parental engagement in their children's schooling, provision of more equal access to education opportunities for poor and minority children, reduction of conflict over goals



and methods of education, and removal of the heavy hand of government from the classroom.

### Responses to the Right

While there is a growing embrace of the general application of market philosophy, there is less consensus with respect to the additional criteria introduced when market choice is applied to education. Supporters of public education like Maude Barlow and Heather-jane Robertson question both the premises and the strategies used by New Right reformers. They point out that the constant focus upon the shortcomings of the system is not based on fact. They charge that this relentless criticism is a tactic to deliberately produce destabilization through introducing fear into the public perception of education. Toxic myths are disseminated as evidence of educational inadequacies, for example the assertion that 38% of Canadians cannot meet everyday learning demands (1995, p.26)<sup>1</sup>. This assertion echoes the work of Berliner (1993) who attempts to debunk such myths as the apparent gross inadequacies in the performance of American students on standardized achievement tests. In similar vein, Whitaker (1987) alleges that the manipulation of public opinion by neoconservative critics of public schooling is a way of diverting public opinion away from socioeconomic issues, and as a means of justifying coercive measures.

Barlow (1995) charges that the neoconservative agenda is to transform schools into businesses, so that market considerations take precedence over those of a pedagogical nature. She quotes the head of Xerox as saying: "it is time for business to take over education." (Alberta Social Studies Teachers'

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<sup>1</sup> Barlow and Robertson argue that this represents distortion of statistics in order to imply that schools are graduating non-literates.

Convention--keynote speech: Edmonton, October 20, 1995), and she describes a principal who introduces himself as the school's Chief Executive Officer. (One Chicago principal goes further and describes himself as being in the business of "developing minds to meet market demands"<sup>2</sup>). Education represents a large area of non-profit organization, but there is growing acceptance of corporate involvement in areas hitherto relatively untouched, like exam papers in New Zealand having corporate logos. American corporations pay up to \$200,000 for a thirty second commercial on Edutainment which teachers are obligated to show in entirety in order to gain equipment for their school. This is how the market can define children as tomorrow's consumers and "get past the parental gate-keepers" by the promotion of early brand identification.

Barlow goes beyond simply identifying this trend, to warn that it represents an ideological desire to prevent corporate values from being challenged. She cites how in one high school in Colorado, McDonald's supplies not only the food but also the curriculum, including McDonald's menu plans for Home Economics. She describes seminars which are promoted on the basis of "they're ready to spend and we can reach them...how to grow your customers from childhood". Barlow opposes the notion that business self interest is in the public interest. She maintains that education is being targeted as a potentially significant part of the economy in which many parents could be persuaded to pay for what is currently being provided for their children by the state. Thus, in the name of choice some American states favour the establishment of for-profit schools, thus fulfilling the warnings of those observers (Kozol, 1993) who increasingly see education as prey for profit-oriented development--the growing belief that many parents are prepared to

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<sup>2</sup> A principal of a corporate sponsored school quoted by J. Kozol, "Whittle and the Privateers", *Nation*, (September 21, 1993), p.277.

pay for what they hope will be better results. Barlow underlines the fact that schools were established to promote collective goals and had little in common with the corporate environment: the fact that a marketplace has winners and losers is antithetical to the values of public education.

Barlow suggests various ways of countering the right-wing backlash against public services, including increasing political literacy so that people are made more aware of who promotes the new economy and who benefits from it. In the wake of extensive cuts to the education budget, she stresses the need for wider public awareness that the deficit was not caused by economically burdensome social programs, but rather by policies that led to immoderately high interest rates and lower corporate taxes. While she recognizes that public education cannot ignore the sea of privatization, she argues for the need for specific guidelines for school-business partnerships. Although this is a time when unions and the collective bargaining process come to be seen as an impediment that many would prefer to remove, Barlow argues that teachers' associations need to become vocal advocates for what they believe in; this is not the time for false modesty. She points to Chomsky's belief that the culture of a country is changed once you reach the teachers and priests.

Exercise of choice depends upon possession of appropriate financial capital (to cover transportation costs to a more distant school) and cultural capital (to build an informed understanding of options available within the system). Thus the upwardly mobile are provided with the widest opportunity, while for many other families the ability to choose is nominal. In the words of Smith & Meier (1995), "Much public-choice literature takes for granted that all parents will become knowledgeable, informed consumers in an educational marketplace and will make a cost-benefit decision centred around the better

educational product. Little empirical evidence supports this assumption."(p.464). Therefore, the power to choose is associated with acquiring a socially advantageous education, the means to which is not distributed equally. As Hargreaves (1989) points out, this is likely to have "adverse consequences for those pupils whose parents have not 'chosen' or not been able to exercise their choice and who must remain in the underresourced and undervalued schools that serve their locality and from which many of the most able pupils and their articulate parents will have been creamed"(p.5).

While it is unlikely that education is to be left to free market forces exclusively, choice is a means of " booking passage for their children on ships of opportunity sailing under flags of religion and cultural convenience" (Hargreaves, 1989, p.7). Moreover, some opponents of wider choice are convinced that those with the fewest advantages will be hindered more than helped as more informed parents and their more academically able students take advantage of choice and thus abandon local schools. For those who are left behind, their education will become as impoverished as other parts of their lives, and this will only increase inequities in opportunity. Thus, the authors of *Public Schools of Choice* (1990) describe choice as a major assault on the educational opportunities of the most vulnerable children who become victims of a new improved sorting machine. As Smith and Meier conclude, "Choice is more Pandora's box than panacea" (1995b, p.316).

Assessing the results of deregulation, Hurl (1984) examined the dynamics of one privatized social service and concluded: "little attention is being given to the impact...in terms of integration, comprehensiveness, accessibility and the equitable distribution of services" (p.395). Along with

various market freedoms, school choice would seem to be more geared towards those with money. It is possible for choice to be actually limited by the pressure on schools to provide a standard fare in order to appeal to prevailing tastes. But this would reduce the ability to depart from the norm and results in safe and bland content rather than content concerned with quality. Devolved power through school-based budgeting ensures that decisions are quicker and more relevant; however, it can also operate to shift the blame for inadequate finance from the government to the school. Financial freedom can also be a smoke screen for reduced financial support. The fact that a very high proportion of the budget goes to staff salaries provides an impetus to employ younger, cheaper teachers; yet dispensing with talented senior teachers in the name of cost reduction hardly enables a school to employ whom they prefer.

#### "Customer Satisfaction" in Education

Further illustration of claims concerning the growing business ethos in education is provided by a developing emphasis within North America. In October 1994 the *Globe and Mail* had a special supplement concerning the awards of the National Quality Institute. Since these awards aim to promote the principles and practices of total quality in the Canadian workplace, it would appear that they have little or nothing to do with education. However, NQI 's mission is:

to stimulate and support quality-driven innovation within all Canadian enterprises and institutions. It's more than a management tool applied to a manufacturing assembly line. It's an absolute dedication to customer service at all levels, from a customer being happy with a particular product, to someone being pleased with a service, to a business being

pleased with a supplier, to employee satisfaction, to an investor being satisfied.<sup>3</sup>

The article goes on to specify public education along with health as sectors into which their role is expanding. This is clearly an attempt to define quality in education in entrepreneurial terms, and its focus is on Total Quality Management (TQM). However, this emphasis can also be interpreted as one which reduces teachers and students to the level of dependent variables—with the pivotal role being the organization, co-ordination, and administration of such variables. What also needs to be clarified is whether students are to be considered as clients too. It is noteworthy that those behind this reform movement never mention how choices are opened up to "children"; it is always more respectable-sounding "students" who are increasingly involved.

Numerous metaphors organize our view of education, each illuminating certain aspects while eclipsing others. Johnson (1993) points out how the application of business and organizational approaches serve to emphasize *how* to do things in education rather than *why*. In this process, distinctions between running a company and running a school come to play a marginal role. Acknowledgment of the metaphor can even be disregarded: schools need not be operated as if they were a business, they are indeed a business. Some supporters of TQM imply that it is the failure to recognize this maxim that has contributed to educational problems both past and present. Fields (1993) notes how most teachers would oppose a business comparison, then goes on to identify similarities between education and the "business of health care" (p.3). Yet applying a specific philosophy regardless of its

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<sup>3</sup> Advertising supplement: Canadian awards for business excellence. *Globe and Mail*, October 14, 1994, C1.

appropriateness to a specific class of students can produce ritualism and an inability to respond with the adaptation necessary in a changing classroom/world. Critics of Madeline Hunter's techniques, for example, have been highly critical of adherence to a formulaic classroom methodology since it serves almost to eliminate from teaching the vital ingredient of personal interaction (Garman & Hazi, 1988). Moreover, when standardization requires the unbendingly application of rules, a vicious circle can be produced whereby the resulting apathy and alienation require the introduction of further rules. Therefore, if schools are becoming geared to detached, mass treatment of students, policy makers need to beware the demotivating impact of reliance on structure, and the exclusion of the individuality that is so crucial to effective teaching.

While Horine (1993) talks of "great strides" being made by American schools using TQM, considerable caution is required in dealing with theorists who would reduce virtually all educational issues to a bar chart. One hundred and five school districts are named at the end of Horine's article, but the author does not make it clear how involved a school must be before it is described as a TQM school. Nor is any reference made to unconverted schools. So we are left to draw our own conclusions about whether their non-adaptation reflects ignorance, caution or rejection. The fact that implementation of TQM is often carried out by state departments of education, and administrators are the group most actively involved, underlines the extent to which this is bureaucratically-led and far from a grass roots movement. This movement, moreover, does not seem to reflect a desire for change that is prompted by educational theorists or practitioners. Rather it rests on a belief that efficiency experts should be given wider powers. While school

board liaison and supervision of attendance should be conducted efficiently, such alterations should not be carried out under the name of educational reform since classroom activities could potentially continue unchanged.

It would appear that those who occupy top levels of the TQM hierarchy do not feel that lower levels will be convinced voluntarily by what the approach has to offer:

State mandates, such as the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, require schools to use participatory management and involve all customer groups in the improvement process. One of Massachusetts' comprehensive laws requires the establishment of school councils at each school site that consists of teachers, parents, business, and other constituent groups (Horine, 1993, p. 32).

Perhaps justified on the grounds of uniformity, such mandates rest upon the assumption that there is one organizational mode that is appropriate in all circumstances. The belief that one formula for schooling is best for every student has been used to illustrate how the burden of some reforms can be borne by their intended beneficiaries. The term "customer groups" used to describe concerned parties, is indicative of the whole movement. It seems to be no accident that business ranks, along with teachers and parents, as the significant constituent groups. Few would argue against the need for schools to prepare students for future employment; but this need not lead to the view that curriculum is simply a preparation for the workforce. If this perspective were given over-riding priority, it would be only a short step further before other broad or liberal notions of education could be dismissed as irrelevant, dysfunctional or wasteful. Considering the conservatism and power of right-



wing American lobby groups who echo the call to go "back to basics," this is not entirely fanciful.

It is easy to empathize with teachers reacting with professional disquiet when teaching methods and student achievement are mentioned in the same breath as food services and school maintenance: as aspects of one reform package. Can the tools of TQM really be so versatile as to bring about a reduction of misbehaviour in the classroom at the same time as reducing the flow of paper? School-based issues are referred to as the "building site level," terminology which serves to depersonalize the notion of school and rid it of wider connotations. There is also a strong inference that schools that do not adopt these techniques are stagnating in traditional muddles. The approach is also prescriptive: student government should exist and take on a specified form. While a cloned copy of administratively efficient procedures might be appropriate for some organizational issues, student government should reflect local tradition and respond to local needs. Since the imposition of the British and American models of governance on other nations has proved to be problematic, why should imposing the level of student politics be any different?

Supporters of the TQM approach almost seem to believe that it can be all things to all people--the wonder ingredient for which society has been impatiently awaiting. But further reflection is necessary before there is a whole-hearted embrace of such a nostrum. Real world problems impinging upon the classroom, such as family breakup or drug abuse, seem to be conveniently ignored by those who advocate the TQM approach. The wider community is exhorted to collaborate together to ensure the success of their mutual "stake" in the school; which is almost a plea to adopt a systems

perspective in order to prevent taxpayers being short-changed from their investment. A further indication of the commercial orientation of TQM is the lament about the slow nature of its implementation. Few people connected with education at a "deeper" level would bewail lack of immediate results, or depend so completely upon institutional restructuring as the springboard for meaningful progress.

That the total quality approach is gaining momentum can be seen within industry, as witnessed by the bevy of advanced seminars aimed at top executives in various American cities, expounding the ideas of the late Edward Deming, a guru of TQM. He insisted upon co-operation among the top levels of a company on the basis of the assumption that notions of quality would filter down or be imposed upon lower echelons. It would seem that TQM has most appeal to educational policy-makers, with teachers sometimes having little more than technical input (Fields, 1993). At the end of the day, while the system of schooling may become more efficient, whether the quality of education is improved is another matter. One implication of the TQM approach includes the development of a more results-oriented system. Poor results would require systematic analysis to identify the responsible variable, followed by corrective action to ensure that the situation does not recur. Yet, in education this amounts to inhuman descriptors of an essentially human activity. Too much of this approach rests on the premise that, if something works efficiently in the management of industry, it will work well in the management of education. There are clearly parallels, but--given the marked distinction between educational and industrial processes--what seems totally lacking is recognition of where such parallels end.

Though the discourse with respect to "quality" in schools used to be centred on classroom interaction, this focus is conspicuously absent in TQM. Positive aspects of TQM include the encouragement of a broader contextual view, the promotion of wider participation, and avoiding the tunnel vision which typifies some areas of educational discussion. The problem is the doctrinaire stance adopted, namely, that all situations should be tackled in a specific way. Furthermore, many of the processes identified are not innovative but have long been in existence, albeit under another name. At the outset such initiative may seem to have little to do with curriculum, but in terms of the wider context of classroom learning and how education in general is perceived, its curricular implications are immense. Also, no educational system that purports to be comprehensive ignores the plight of the non-academic student, whose family unit chooses not to "network" with the school, and who sees little purpose in becoming involved in a recommended "quality council".

A sophisticated, pedagogically-oriented variation of this approach is offered by Hugh Sockett (1996). He questions the basis of the oft-cited gulf between the worlds of corporations and education. He begins with the Motorola card which promises "total customer satisfaction" and wonders why educators respond to such an emphasis with so much cynicism and distrust, dismissing the promise as motivated entirely by profits--a transparent public relations ploy. He goes on to suggest that education is confronting a similarly cynical public response, and is experiencing comparable adjustments with new technologies and changing authorities. He feels that it is safe to conclude that all stakeholders are not satisfied with the state of education, and wider satisfaction still represents an ideal state. His assertion is that moral language in education is primitive, compared with discourses in technical, psychological

or bureaucratic areas. This crudity prevents necessary advance in moral conversations. He claims that how educators relate to students and parents is a moral issue, and that certain obstacles could be overcome with the perception of them as customers and clients.

In contrast to the disrespect that universities typically show to undergraduates, Sockett (1996) suggests that the concept of "customer" offers an intriguing avenue for educational progress. His focus is on how parent and child are there to be served not managed--the significance to the individual, not the category--with trust playing a pivotal role; a customized education conducive to moral welfare which requires new and more appropriate means of interaction. He defines trust as a necessary condition for customer satisfaction and the core of partnership. Trust is described as resting upon the ability to understand/predict the behaviour of others; Sockett notes that mutual lack of personal knowledge often undermines trust in the relationship between teacher and parent; suspicion leads to ignorance of how best to assist the child, while trust enables mutual benefits within a framework of predictability. The other central condition is agreement upon ends, and the need to move away from the belief that one-size-fits-all which Sockett sees as central in many conceptions of a liberal education, reflecting a lack of curriculum which has an individualized element. The trust process is aided by dialogue which can only contribute to reducing misunderstandings--for example, over testing, how many parents underestimate a child's ability to decide for themselves, or the conflict within families over educational progress<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> One illustration of this is the British work by Jackson and Marsden (1986) who studied the impact on working-class children attending middle-class dominated grammar schools.

However, while Sockett's argument about trust holds much appeal, his Motorola analogy can be questioned. The company seeks to give customers what they want as long as it is legal; it is predatory and competitive. This prompts reservations about using the market model as an agency for introducing moral dialogue since it would be a shallow way to deal with moral issues if faith in the broad mass of the parent body led to the lowest common denominator determining the level; a Henry Ford approach to education involves considerable risks. Such an ideology has extensive implications for education if the narrow ends of many parents are to hold greater sway; it could potentially call into question the inclusion of art and music in the curriculum, or the funding of Special Education. The corporate sector can also be seen as a "consumer" of the educational "product" so a confluence of interest cannot be taken for granted; nor can it be assumed that the interests of child and parent are the same. The distinction between being trusted as an educator and being trustworthy is an important one in terms of determining educational emphasis. The concept of customer does indeed have moral significance.

#### Promotion of Limited Choice

At times it can be hard to maintain a critical eye to the discursive practices of both the New Right and their opponents since both provide persuasive rhetoric which seeks to articulate *and construct* particular notions of public education. On one level there is much that is attractive in terms of educational benefits arising from certain choice policies. Competition and choice can encourage positive steps such as stimulating schools to become more effective, and prompting staff to clarify their shared mission. However, whatever the gains involved, what is achieved from unquestioned acceptance of any strategy? It is not sufficient to brush over potential negatives including

the implications for students in a district facing significant decline in funding. Choice promotion is premised on the fact that a variety of schools is desirable, so a more fundamental issue is the degree to which distinctiveness is beneficial; education cannot be compared with flavours of ice-cream because certain types of diversity impact upon the type of society in which we co-exist. It is advantageous to encourage a level of education that is not based upon the lowest common denominator; but there are repercussions with a system in which schools serve only specifically targeted parents and students.

One method of approaching the rhetoric produced by both sides is to consider the discursive practices of the middle ground between the position taken by Barlow on one side and Chubb and Moe on the other. The work of Glenn provides an example of advocacy of choice while at the same time recognizing certain fallibility within the emphasis. He does not see choice as a miracle cure, but rather as one way of holding schools more accountable by virtue of the consequences they would face if parents are not satisfied. He argues in favour of making opportunities available for groups of parents, staff or others to initiate additional alternatives within or outside existing structures. This would provide the framework and incentive for smaller, less formal schools operating within the public system free of usual constraints provided that a sufficient number of parents want what they offer. He acknowledges that choice can result in a "winner-takes-all" form of competition among schools, but he claims that choice need not produce such inequity.

Glenn agrees that it is not enough to point to the successes of specific schools if they have been won at the expense of other schools. To illustrate this cautionary note, he points to how American magnet schools often produce

highly committed staff and parents, yet have had negative side-effects when they attracted more applicants than they could accommodate. What resulted when this occurred were disappointed hopes and more students assigned to schools involuntarily. Since magnet schools are limited in their capacity, they cannot deliver choice for all. Some of these schools force parents to wait all night to register their children. By definition they were intended to be more attractive than other schools and often receive additional resources and a freedom to be distinctive that other schools did not enjoy. As a result they siphon off energetic and motivated staff and parents, as well as funds, from non-magnet schools. In many places they have been allowed to select among applicants, thus leaving the responsibility of trying to teach the more troublesome and less academically able students to other schools. Hence, while they may serve the function of keeping middle-class students in the urban system, it is at the price of creating a dual school system. Significantly, Glenn concedes that poorly designed choice programs do operate to exacerbate disparities in educational opportunities between poor and middle class children.

Glenn admits that controlled choice may not go far enough to shake up what he sees as a culture of mediocrity and low expectations which dominate many schools. The pace of change is often slow with some reassertion of systemic tendencies towards inertia. However, he also feels that support should exist for program development so that initially unpopular schools have a chance to make significant changes including, if necessary, a change of leadership. Glenn recognizes that parental choice does not function by itself to produce the benefits frequently claimed; the "invisible hand" is not enough. He does not hold with the argument that the very principle of the free

market should be unfettered from any control in the name of equity. Rather, he puts forward what he sees as an ideal policy strategy which includes equal access, the involvement of all parents in making informed decisions, and a move towards ending guaranteed enrolment based on residence. He asserts that choice programs should confront specific questions including: Does the program serve only a highly self-selected group of families? How inclusive is the distribution of information? Does the system reduce resources for others in order to reward the successes? Is the supply of schools stimulated by support for the development of new educational models? He notes that a typically unanswered question is whether sanctions will be imposed on the staffs of schools that fail to attract applicants.

This might represent an admirable framework produced by a less radical theorist, but it still remains distant from the bulk of experience with actual policy implementation. Glenn's argument is that, if choice is to gain acceptance as a strategy for fundamental educational reform, it must be shown to have a positive effect on the quality of education available to all students. Glenn's optimistic position is that those who have actually implemented reform plans based upon the principle of parental choice have not accepted inequities, but rather have taken care to protect equal access (p.133). He expresses confidence that monitoring by a public body would assure standards, yet does not question whether his confidence is warranted.

#### Private Choices and the Public Interest

A system of parental choice needs to explore the dialogue between the "public" good and individual development. Labaree (1997) identifies how the conflicts produced by competing visions of education have resulted in a



contradictory structure for the educational system that has served to impair its effectiveness. These visions involve the goal of democratic equality (preparation of citizens), social efficiency (training of workers), and social mobility (enabling competition for social positions). Wider parental choice is one reflection of the growing domination of the latter goal. However, in seeking an inclusive discourse and practice of public education one needs to go considerably beyond the work of theorists such as Glenn who offers little in the way of guidelines for distinguishing between the constraints of conventions which need to be eliminated and those fundamental elements of public schooling which are not negotiable.

This is a time when the traditional in education is no longer taken for granted, and potential for change therefore increases. In certain instances politicians or policy-makers with a particular political agenda are the ones who are exploiting such opportunities for expedient, utilitarian motivations. The myth of the apolitical educator has been largely denounced by the work of such theorists as Freire (1985). This is a productive development if it results in concerned citizens giving greater scrutiny to school changes. It is less positive, however, if the academic gown is traded for the business "power suit" and inquiries are met with smooth answers, worthy of a public relations officer. Some proponents of reform expect school heads to be entrepreneurial, implying a preference for those with a MBA rather than MEd. However, "because education is a social practice, its techniques are not socially neutral. They produce, reproduce, and transform people's abilities, attitudes, and ideas" (Tripp, 1990, p. 165). This is a major responsibility, and one demanding greater recognition. The industrial metaphor is one of teachers as workers, students as raw materials, and testing as quality control. Much of business organizational

theory seems predicated upon a less blatant form of this metaphor. But, it is hard to accept that this is really what parents want or what is needed of public schools. Thus, the specific implications of extending the profit orientation of the private sector to public education--from school inspection to teacher training--need to be more clearly spelled out and thought through, as do the implications of the rising tide of neo-conservative ideas in general. Otherwise, Canadians will get a type of "Contract with America" that Republicans in the United States seek, and may not be so thrilled with its translation into reality. But by then it will be too late.

Issues concerned with methods of application of choice policies, however, can serve to absorb the attention of theorists and obscure the macro level of broader policy analysis. Carl (1994) notes how choice literature assumes that markets exclude political bias, and that the character and standards of educational provision will increasingly come to reflect the public will. With no controls on admission, schools will flourish or flounder according to market dictates of parental choice rendering schools competitive enterprises that bid for parental custom. This has the potential of enabling promotion of sectional interests: rejecting welfarism as interventionist, while prescribing sets of moral characteristics as desirable. Bottery (1992), for instance, insists that many issues transcend the free market code. Modern society involves injustices which must be addressed, since, to opt out represents moral abnegation. His deliberately emotive example is of customers wanting to hang or burn members of a minority group, and whether the store manager should sell noose or kindling! On this view, if society consists of little more than the marketplace and the home, there is no common interest in the good of the community or empathy for the plight of others.

As Bottery contends, morality becomes part of the private sector as the state is de-emphasized and family duty is stressed. As economic growth becomes the over-riding value, there will be less child allowance and minimal public health-care. Therefore, while recognizing a place for free market theory, he argues convincingly that it must not be over-extended as it has the potential for encouraging destructive behaviour and attitudes. He rejects the fiction of "economic man" and maintains that the role of government is to provide balance between short-term rational strategies of individuals and long-term social costs and social values. "Educationally, the possibility of a disinterested pursuit of knowledge, or personal, social, and political development in a non-material sense are concepts given little or no attention". (Bottery, 1992, p. 93). He considers the wider concerns of public enterprise, and challenges those in power who seek to impose a narrow definition of "the public good". His acid test is whether or not a reform involves a social vision. This is more than a matter of supply and demand since education forms an integral part of the social fabric.

New Right initiatives portray the existence of too much equality as a cultural crisis, so commitment to competitiveness is favoured in order to prevent egalitarianism from stifling initiative and enterprise. This would seem to reflect a political ideology deliberately constructed to challenge such central ideals of the so-called postwar consensus as social justice. Yet acceptance of this perspective has not been unmitigated, as Whitaker (1987) notes, "the stubborn tenacity of established social security programs is a continuing irritant to the 'revolutionaries' of the Right" (p.4). Trends such as privatization involve much more than account book transactions. Rather, in Hardin's (1989) words, "it undermines community-centred entrepreneurship--Canadian's

sense of being in the economy together--by giving what belongs to all of us to financial gameplayers with loyalty to no one but themselves" (p.123). Various programs of the welfare state, it would seem, cannot be dispensed with lightly.

New Right ideology within education is reflected in the belief in excellence over equity, the intent to reduce the role of the state, and the subjection of schools to more extensive free market influences. Many of their arguments place the blame for educational deficiencies on the pervasive influence of "trendy" ideas. It is suggested that the child is placed at the centre of the educational universe with disdain expressed for formality in instructional style, curriculum, and evaluation. Time will tell whether this is promotion of a moral panic designed to stall specific types of reform while fostering others. Imagery of educational crisis is used to characterize public schools promoting permissive programs at the neglect of traditional academic studies, and there have been subsequent calls for a return to traditional values and more narrowly defined expressions of educational objectives like the 3Rs. One vehicle for this trend is privatization: to make more options available to parents who wish to choose which values the school will transmit to their children and challenge the power of the educational establishment

In his description of the influential role of think tanks and intellectuals, Carl (1994) asserts that choice reforms do not reflect grass-root demands, but rather the interests of specific groups who use populism as political rhetoric to legitimize policies that were decided upon other grounds. Carl points out that choice does not reduce state control but rather reconstitutes it at different levels. His assertion is that the parental choice discourse surrounding national policy can superficially be viewed as either neoliberal or neoconservative, but that there is a more covert agenda to restructure the state

in ways to enhance the power of interests represented by the New Right at the expense of other groups (such as the "new" middle-class or historically disenfranchised groups who have come to wield influence through welfare reforms). There is significant ideological advantage in refocusing attention away from the restricted opportunities within the economy towards a focus on teachers and students. Elements of this refocus can be identified in the calls for "back to basics". Along similar lines is the warning of Apple (1995) about the world becoming a vast supermarket in which the retrogressive redefinition of educational debate occurs as politics becomes contained within discussions of choice and consumption. He outlines the success of the political right in mobilizing support against the educational system, "'Public' now is the center of all evil; 'private' is the center of all that is good" (p.ix).

The relationship between private and public interests is at issue here. Notions of "public interest" pervade much of these discussions, yet few attempts at defining how this is constituted have achieved widespread attention. However, it is preferable to aim towards a rational and impartial definition, rather than concede that the public domain should do little more than serve an amalgamation of private interests. Advocates of privatization extol the virtues of eliminating the influence of the state; and, indeed, the degree of state intervention needs to be questioned. The terms according to which parents can exercise choice (the criteria of choosing) rarely emerge spontaneously from the private domain, so the criteria used by the state to prescribe these terms need examination. How far does government ideology shape discourse on education, and its more direct legislative intervention in education provision set the terms of market competition and influence patterns of parental choice? In other words, just how private is privatization?

Some light can be obtained by reviewing how many of the points raised by theorists discussed in this chapter are borne out in the practices of different countries.

## Chapter Two

### MODELS BASED ON THE POLITICS OF CHOICE

The quest for comprehensive reform of the compulsory, public system of education has come to absorb the efforts of a growing number of educators, politicians, and bureaucrats, as the conventional school governing structure has drawn increasing criticism as being ineffective, outdated and thus in need of significant restructuring. While these reformers feel that a variety of measures could serve to modify the system considerably, there is less certainty among them about which measures to apply. Many influential reformers are beginning to view the charter school option as providing a means of challenging what they see as the totalitarianism of public education, offering part of the answer by integrating various reform ideas, in particular the principles of autonomy and accountability. In his introduction to a major review of charter schools in the United States, Mauhs-Pugh (1995) comments: "Support for charter school legislation is high. As a school reform movement it has momentum" (p.2).

Parental choice provides a consistent focal point within the discussions, introduced in the last chapter, of balancing private interests against public interests. This chapter begins with an outline of comparable educational developments in the United Kingdom and New Zealand which have extended greater choice to parents. It then examines varying commitment to this direction of reform in the United States by considering the range of legislation in different states, together with some of the justifications employed by charter school proponents and the types of opposition they have

encountered. This offers important background through which to understand the arrival of Canada's first charter schools.

### The United Kingdom

"The jewel in the crown of parental power" is how the Education Secretary in 1991, John McGregor, described grant maintained (GM) schools in the United Kingdom--one reflection of how enamoured the British Government is with this approach. Britain's 1988 Education Reform Act made provision for parents to vote for a school to opt out of the control of the local education authority (LEA) in favour of obtaining GM status, thus becoming an autonomously incorporated institution. It is insightful to gain an understanding of the politics of choice as manifested in GM schools as they are similarly grounded in a philosophy of the education marketplace in which they compete for students and will be forced to close if unsuccessful. Comparison of charter and GM schools enables identification of many issues that are relevant to Canada.

GM schools represent the British strategy of implementing market-directed management and delivery of public services. This development has a somewhat longer history than the parallel charter school movement in the United States. Hence, there has been more time for British responses to be formulated, both in terms of schools reacting to the legislation, and in the arguments employed by GM proponents and those who are critics of this form of market-based schooling. They provide experience from which lessons can be drawn about self-governing school in the 1990s, and which can contribute towards the answering of some of the following questions. Do the changes represent an attempt to return to selective education "by the backdoor"? What



have been the effects on district administration in terms of planning and financing? Have inequalities between different groups of parents and schools been exacerbated? Have some groups had their choices restricted? It is also interesting to consider reasons for the apparent ambivalence in parental support for the change, and why various types of school indicate concerns, such as those in rural areas.

Education is a central agency of socialization and cultural transmission so the impact of this reorganization necessitates examination of the ideologies and structural conditions that enable it to occur. While the education of any country is the product of contending interests and philosophies, it can be argued that the UK illustrates such conflicts with particular clarity since the ideological battles have been sharper than either Canada or the United States. Elliott and MacLennan (1994) note the similarities in perceptions of the deficiencies of schools in the pronouncements of right-wing opinion-makers, also the direct contacts between key ideologues in London and certain Canadian provinces. The 1988 Act is described as the first to implement the favoured measures but, "there is little doubt that the process on which it has embarked is about to be followed (or has already been followed in part) in North America" (p. 165).

Because of its fundamental nature to this analysis, it is important to reiterate the link between choice and the saliency of New Right ideas. Common to both Britain and Canada are public anxieties about the supposed malaise of education today. There is heightened belief that academic achievement is declining, that students are not adequately prepared for employment, and that schools are to blame for problems such as increasing drug use and juvenile violence. In a trans-Atlantic comparison of parental

choice as national policy, Carl (1994) notes how New Right agendas are both rooted within, and contribute to the shaping of, such anxieties. This perspective suggests a fertile ground for those who wish to promote a return to "grammar school values" in the UK, paralleled by the call to go "back-to-basics" in North America. There is little doubt that for many parents and some employers such phrases indicate retreat from the vague promises of a progressive education to more useful skills and more concrete forms of knowledge.

The benefits purported to be gained by opting out are several: GM schools act as an mechanism to meet market demands and thus raise general standards; they are said to increase choice and competition, thus diversifying and regenerating the local provision of education, and locating key decisions at the local level. This reform also endeavours to highlight objections of LEAs (the equivalent of school boards) which are portrayed as creaking bureaucracies that siphon off resources and often lean to the political left. Implicit in the reform is that it will lead to exemplary schools (what Alberta's former Minister of Education, Halvar Jonson, has called "lighthouses") that will serve as models of excellence for the wider state system. Released from bureaucratic restraints, schools would be able to make innovative decisions, so that in the long run student performance will increase as schools strive to respond to competitive pressures.

The rationale of the British reform can be located within such elements as the negative assessment of the education profession, partially developed by a broadly anti-progressive lobby active in the media and government. By giving more recognition to the desire--especially prevalent within the middle class--to return to selection, and the populist demand for

the "3Rs," the British government recognized an opportunity to capitalize electorally on parental anxieties. Moreover, by stressing parental choice reforms as part of their electoral platform, the Conservatives were able to consolidate their own basis of support while implying the inferiority of their competitors. Although vouchers were discussed as a means of diversifying local education markets in Britain, considerable scepticism was still expressed even within the right wing think tanks concerning the political fallout of such a policy. As Elliott and Maclennan (1994) put it:

Since 1979 successive Conservative governments in the UK have sought to create a market in education with autonomous consumers (parents and pupils) exercising choice in an increasingly diversified system. Having failed to introduce vouchers, the New Right is pursuing the privatization of education in more piecemeal ways (p.173).

Employed in a variety of other areas, privatization became an important lever for change, one way in which education could be subjected to the "discipline" of the marketplace.

The opting out provision receives the wholehearted praise of Chubb and Moe (1992) for attacking the inefficiencies of the education system head-on. GM schools are described as pioneers facing daunting uncertainties and formidable political pressures, but fast serving as models for other schools to emulate (p.28). They characterize political opposition as the major impediment to reform since the supposedly left-leaning teachers' associations are said to view the very discussion of opting-out as a dangerous political act. Thus, in analyzing the impact of events in England, the political nature of the changes and the hostile nature of the debate soon become apparent. Even passage of the

1988 legislation through parliament has been described as rushed to ensure that opposing pressure groups had little time to formulate objections and mount an opposition (Simon & Chitty, 1993). Subsequently, the reluctance of many schools to follow the opt-out path has been attributed to political uncertainty arising from the growing likelihood of a Labour government (a belief which was confirmed in the general election on May 1, 1997).

Chubb and Moe (1992) make no attempt to conceal their political bias. Britain's Labour Party and America's Democrats are described as "lost causes" (p.49) when it comes to educational reform because they are committed to an ideology of social engineering, now more conservative than radical. While promotion of market choice has been criticized as having elitist tendencies, Chubb and Moe identify an irony in the conventional system of public education since it can result in the victimhood of the common man. They suggest a potential political opportunity for the Conservatives/Republicans to pursue choice-based reforms more aggressively. This would serve to forge a winning alliance with the large important constituency of the urban poor, constructed on a shared belief that choice is the key to better schools in the inner city. Anglo-American governments have moved to the right, and education, along with other sectors of state responsibility, has been affected dramatically. Some of the broad connections mentioned above can contribute to an understanding of why right-wing theorists in North America have been so enthusiastic in endorsing the British government's attempt to transform the educational landscape.

In a way similar to Canada, the postwar development of public education in Britain was based on the principle of availability for all according to "age, aptitude and ability" (1944 Education Act) as part of a range of measures

which collectively formed the pillars of a welfare state—which enjoyed cross party support. Fifty years later, no such consensus exists. Commentators in the *Times Educational Supplement* describe better-paid but demoralized teachers forced to confront the bureaucratic mandates of the National Curriculum and the political demands of more powerful sectarian groups of governors. This suggests a loss of a sense of community in policy-making, arguably at a time when the student body presents greater needs than ever before, due to social ills spawned by unemployment, drugs, family breakdown, and declining respect for authority that inexorably find their way into the classroom (Cashdan and Harris, 1993). Again, the response of many groups led by articulate and affluent parents has been to demand choice as a way of seeking insulation from such social problems. This is partially illustrated by sustained interest in private schooling (Walford, 1994), together with the vigorous promotion of schools opting out from local authority control in order to gain more autonomy over selection and curricular emphasis. What remains unclear is whether such demands for choice have covert results such as representing the significant erosion of inclusive notions of community.

#### Charter Schools in New Zealand

Further parallels can be identified within New Zealand's extensive and rapid restructuring of education implemented in 1989 as part of a general drive for efficiency and accountability in the public sector (Douglas, 1993). Impetus for the reform was provided by broad criticism that the welfare state was contributing to economic malaise. A sense of crisis seems to have developed, as Barrington (1991) puts it, "Concerns also surfaced about New Zealand's ability to compete economically in the world economy and the adequacy of standards of education and training in relation to other countries"

(p.295). The promotion of egalitarian social goals were represented as an invasion of individual rights, serving to promote dependence rather than liberation. Consequently, government emphasis shifted from equality of opportunity to reduction of state intervention. Education was attacked as having become controlled by certain interest groups for their own advantage, resulting in falling standards. Teachers were portrayed as being part of the problem. As Marshall and Peters (1990) succinctly express it:

The solution to this alleged problem of capture, and concomitant set of problems, is to wrest 'power' from the educators and return it to the *community* so that individuals are 'free' to choose the education they really desire for their children (p.147).

Part of the answer was seen to lie in shifting the responsibility for day-to-day decision making to the level of individual schools. The chief aspects of this devolution of power are described by Gordon (1992) as,

the development of a school charter to provide links between national and local policies and operations; the devolution of the bulk funding of schools to individual schools...and the formation of Boards of Trustees, largely composed of parents, and elected by the parents, to run the school, hire staff and act as the direct employer of the principal (p.188).

It was claimed that the reforms would increase efficiency and equity by making each school self-managing, a charter serving as a contract between a Board of Trustees and the Ministry of Education. The Education Review Office of the Ministry negotiates draft charters and is responsible for measuring the performance of a school against the terms of its charter. Unlike most other examples, this was no "clip on" approach to extending parental choice through

restructuring. Rather, it has been described as an "earthquake method" of change (Holdaway, 1989), with all schools being affected within months rather than years. Lawton (1995) uses the term "cold turkey" to describe this mode of implementation in his account of this change. Supportive of the direction of the reform, he describes this speed tactic as consistent with, "a style recommended by economists in implementing fiscal reforms to prevent a system from evolving modes of circumventing change, a phenomenon that occurs when change is introduced slowly"(p.76).

As part of this comprehensive reform in New Zealand, the intermediate level of regional agencies was abolished in response to the common complaint that the system was too bureaucratic. For example, it was alleged that the ten regional boards for primary schools were contributing to the duplication of services, inefficiency, and slow response to educational needs at the local level (Taskforce to Review Educational Administration, 1988, p.xii). Corresponding changes in power relationships have had repercussions in the nature and location of struggles over education. In return for fulfilling roles previously played by central and regional state agencies in a volunteer capacity, parents were supposed to receive more choice and influence. Gordon (1992) mentions a promotional campaign for the changes in education as including a television advertisement which claimed, "If you can manage one of these (showing a child), you can manage one of these (showing a school)".

### Charter Schools in the USA

Since an overall objective of charter school reform in the United States is to avoid imposing a singular type of public education, a range of both legislation and practice has occurred. A broad definition of the charter school is

offered by Bierlein and Mulholland (1994a, 1994b). A charter school entails a negotiated contract between a group which manages the school and a sponsor (such as a local school board or department of education) who oversees the provisions of the charter. The contract covers such factors as curriculum content, methods of measuring outcomes, financing, and governance. Funding is based upon student enrolment. The advantage of charter schools is that, compared to most schools in the public sector, they enjoy freedom from many district regulations (including curriculum, teaching methods, contracting for services and facilities, and the hiring of personnel) which are often perceived as restrictive. But this greater degree of autonomy is gained at the cost of greater accountability (Willis, 1995). Specifically, failure to attract students, or meet specified outcomes, will result in a school's charter being terminated or not renewed upon expiry of its term.

The first American state to pass charter legislation was Minnesota in 1991. Subsequent development of legislation in other states indicates distinctly different commitments to this reform, with disparities in such areas as the degree of autonomy enjoyed and the maximum number of charters that can be granted. A variety of compromises is linked with the belief of politicians that this is a politically radical trend. This situation has prompted some analysts, for example Ted Kolderie of St. Paul's Center for Policy Studies, to compare different models. He identifies specific legal elements which contribute to a "stronger" charter school legislation more likely to stimulate an effective response (quoted by Bierlein and Mulholland, 1994a). Weaker legislation is seen to merely make the option available, whereas stronger legislation is the least restrictive and may provide inducements or at least assistance to overcome such obstacles as start-up funding.



Kolderie believes that such schools should reflect democratic ideals, and that a wide variety of groups should be free to apply. Teachers should have the option to be organizers, employees, or subcontractors, and should retain certain protections if they choose to return to district employment within a designated time frame. He underlines the need for full operating funding to be automatic, based on enrolments, but agrees with the principle of holding charter schools accountable for their performance and ensuring that they meet the provisions of the contract if they are to continue their operation. Kolderie (1995) feels that the schools should only be restricted by district regulations and employee agreements pertaining to health and safety, non-discrimination and civil rights, and fiscal and outcome accountability. The voluntary nature of enrolment should be a selling point. He recommends that, besides the local school board, at least one other authority should be able to sponsor a charter school such as a state board of education, university, or new entity created for this purpose.

While no state has all the elements mentioned above, certain states are described as having stronger laws if they stimulate charter activity. Bierlein (1996) argues that the significance of whether a law is strong or weak lies in the correlation between the granting of more freedom in legal and fiscal affairs, and greater charter school activity. In other words, as long as the legislation is not restrictive, a considerable number of charter schools will open. She describes how the six initial charter school states with strong laws (Minnesota, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan and Arizona) have 222 charter schools that are known to be operating. In contrast, there are only 14 charter schools in the five initial states with weak laws (Georgia, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Hawaii and Kansas).

Given the recent nature of the laws, definite conclusions cannot be drawn. However, Bierlein sees such requirements as charter schools having to remain under the legal authority of the district, or teachers having to continue as state employees, as overly restrictive. Bierlein points to Arizona as a "strong" example. There, in June 1994, a State Board for Charter Schools was created as one of the sponsoring bodies; no limit exists on the number of charters a school board can grant; charter schools have fiscal and legal autonomy; and the initial charter is good for five years and renewable at seven year intervals thereafter. A feature unique to the Arizona model is the establishment of a \$1 million stimulus fund to support start-up costs, a school being eligible to receive grants up to \$100,000 for each of two years.

A fundamental claim made by charter school advocates in the U.S. is that charter schools will initiate competition among schools, and this will lead to improvements in education generally. Since these schools will compete with existing public schools for students, and hence for funding, a greater degree of accountability will result and pressure to break inertia in public schools will increase. As Mulholland and Amsler (1992) point out, education lags well behind other public sectors, such as health care, in terms of alternative means of provision. Competition acts to provide incentive for the entire system to improve the service it provides as school boards endeavour to prevent loss of revenue by attending to the needs of students and the desires of parents. Public schools that fail to address client concerns and interests will ultimately lose both students and funding. Eventually they will have to close, and the result will be improved education provision for all students. Pihho (1993) stresses how this idea has attracted bipartisan support as evident by legislation coming from states controlled by both Republicans and Democrats.

Bierlein (1996) contends that charter schools have considerable potential, and implies that delaying the development of such schools could reduce the quality of education for all students.

In contrast, opponents of the reform point to the strong risk that public schools, which in many cases already face budget-cuts, will have their situation exacerbated as the emergence of charter schools further depletes their revenue. As Astrup (1992) warns, "The pattern of supporting private schools and sustaining schools that are too small to thrive on their own does not bode well for the majority of students in our state" (p.29). The additional budget reductions may require the cutting of teachers, programs and events, and this can significantly lower the quality of the typical educational experience. Since charter schools receive little or no start-up funds and lower per pupil funding, they operate to create pressure for reductions in overall education spending across the system. As well questions can be raised about whether selective admission to charter schools will lead to a situation in which regular public schools will have a disproportionate number of students who are more difficult or expensive to educate because of behaviour/learning disorders or physical handicaps.

The argument that enhanced efficiency in education can be attained through competition does not enjoy unqualified support. Critics suggest that the competitive emphasis within charter schools increases the pressure to reduce financial expenditure, and that this could result in cutbacks in the scope of an academic program or even in safety levels within a school. However, advocates are confident that, because charter schools are accountable to the government, these schools will not cut corners with regard to matters of academic standards and safety. Charter schools are claimed to be cost-saving

since they are able to operate effectively with less money because they are released from the inefficiencies of public schools. As well, by having the ability to contract out services, charter schools can avoid inflated administrative costs. If inappropriate elements were pruned, then either the state would withdraw its charter or parents would withdraw their children, causing the school to close.

A belief that is gaining widespread acceptance is that those who are closest to the students must have more control over their actions and be more responsible for them. On this view, by reducing the constraints of central authority (big government) local control is increased so that schools can become more closely matched with client needs (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Supporters of the charter school also argue that it serves to decentralize education more effectively than site-based management approaches, where the district continues to exercise considerable control and remains the legally liable entity rather than the school itself. They argue further that, as a result of increased autonomy, the very existence of charter schools will prompt the public to question many established management and instructional practices. As Bierlein & Mulholland (1994a) assert, "Educators have long operated under a system of rules and regulations that have not rewarded deep change...Charter schools address decentralization and empowerment issues in a way that current site-based management may not" (p.38).

Thus, it is claimed that the removal of regulations will free charter schools to innovate--perhaps enabling the adoption of more radical models of pedagogy--so that they can create learning environments more appropriate to the needs of specific groups of students. These schools have the opportunity to adopt teaching philosophies which are not favoured within the conventional

system, and in this way act as laboratories for change. This will place pressure on public schools to also change and improve curriculum content and approach, what Kolderie calls "second order effects" (1994, p.103). The counter argument is that charter schools often do not provide the stimulus for innovation that their proponents assume, since in many cases their distinctiveness is based upon the extension of a practice already in existence in the public system (Astrup, 1992). Moreover, while charter schools may be welcomed as laboratories for non-traditional philosophies, they may also be rejected for offering variable quality--a quick fix to current problems in public education (Mauhs-Pugh, 1995).

Therefore, defenders of public schools see charter schools as destabilizing rather than enhancing the public system. They claim that a more positive move would be to focus upon the improvement of existing schools rather than diluting on-going public school reform. Doubt is also raised about the desirability of the increased freedom from regulations since many restrictions have a functional basis, such as preventing practices deemed illegal, immoral, or inappropriate for fiscal or educational reasons. Furthermore, if specific procedures can be shown to be restrictive, superfluous, inefficient or outdated, then they should be removed from all schools. Other bureaucratic requirements relate to demands of the system such as prescribed curriculum, benchmarks of achievement, permissible punishment, retention in a grade. Thus, it is argued, many public school regulations will be replicated. As well, at the local level charter schools do not enjoy the same level of technical assistance, while at a wider level they face erratic government commitment.

In support of charter reform, Chubb and Moe's (1992) promotion of the democratic virtues of having different types of school is widely quoted. These authors would like more groups to set up schools so that "there would be lots more schools of all different shapes and sizes and specialties--all playing by the same democratic rules of the game" (1992, p.43). Charter schools are seen to educate students of diverse backgrounds and multiple needs--many serving low-income and/or at-risk students--since the schools are required to be tuition-free, non-sectarian, non-selective in student admissions, and non-discriminatory on the basis of race, religion or disability. Snow (1996) goes further in arguing that charter schools embody democratic ideals. She enthuses, "Fears that charter schools cater only to elites are groundless. The opposite is true. Charter schools provide minority groups and the poor with extraordinary alternatives to a moribund public education system" (p.66). Such arguments are considerably less precise when it comes to providing a definition of the notions of democracy employed.

Decreasing local input in terms of voter control over the operation of such schools can be seen to reinforce undemocratic tendencies as elected school boards become replaced by more remote agencies. Considerably more discussion is needed before democracy can be defined simply in terms of meeting the wishes of parents and students. For example, does allowing a charter school to meet a specific localized demand, that might receive condemnation within a wider sphere, represent the operation of democracy? (This brings into question how lines are drawn around a citizenry which is explored in Chapter 6.) If the content or style of programs become more specialized, charter schools could lead to greater divisiveness along

socioeconomic lines, ethnic background, religious belief, or intellectual and physical ability. Bastian (1992) warns that charter schools:

are promoted as models for innovation, but in the context of fiscal crisis and polarized resources, they are more likely to end up as isolated refuges for the lucky, the adamant, or the privileged. Unless our commitments to equity and adequate funding are universal, we are building more lifeboats, not better ships (p.97).

This view leads to the conclusion that an already fractured society needs to come together rather than have elitist or disconnected tendencies promoted.

There is widespread agreement that a school's chances of success are significantly improved when it operates with the overt support of participants. Tracy (1992) and others see teachers as being empowered by charter schools as they are released from the shackles of required procedures and become able to adopt new methods and develop their own style, no longer technicians of a prescribed curriculum. This higher level of autonomy will enhance teacher motivation and stimulate a higher quality of personnel to the profession. Yet, an alternative view is that charter schools will lead to teacher impoverishment and dissension within teacher associations. The departure of good teachers--perhaps attracted by more autonomy and being able to teach only selected students--will have a detrimental impact on public schools.

Mauhs-Pugh (1995) notes that charter school legislation is difficult to pass without the support of teachers, and gives the example of Illinois where the Chicago Teachers' Union prevented passage of a charter school bill (p.23). Also, teacher unions have cautioned policy-makers to resist efforts to allow charter schools to reduce teacher pay as a money-saving technique. As staff are

directly hired by the school, there is flexibility over employment policies, which means that they are not required to pay unionized teachers on fixed pay scales. Such a situation obviously thwarts the bargaining efforts of unions (Mulholland and Amsler, 1992). One concern is that the profession is harmed by such leeway since the existing relative disparity which exists in teachers' pay could be exacerbated.

Tracy (1992) presents charter schools as having a more distinct mission as they are run by teachers and parents committed to a particular educational vision, able to avoid the continual conflict produced when public schools feel obliged to be all things to all people (this viewpoint is echoed in Canada by Freedman, 1993). As the emphasis in the definition of an educational community becomes changed from one of geography to one of commonalty of interest, the resulting group cohesion will reduce the level of adversarial politics. The provision of charter schools enables parents to exercise choice about where to send their children to school, making it possible for them to employ their knowledge of what will be most appropriate for their child's education. Since enrolment is voluntary, such schools must work to attract customers. Without clear student outcomes the charter will be revoked, if parents have not already used their freedom to move their child elsewhere.

Even advocates admit that it is too early to determine whether charter schools will help students reach higher outcomes. Wohlstetter and Anderson (1994) encourage parents not to be disheartened at the apparent lack of real progress that charter schools have so far produced. As they put it,

Because the problems faced in education are interconnected, reforms aimed at ameliorating discrete elements of the education system have



been disappointing. Thus observers of education reform have noted the importance of maintaining a system orientation in which reform is systemic and ongoing (p.491).

They point to the UK as an example of systemic reform. They also present charter reform as a dual reform strategy that unites state initiated reform with local flexibility. Leadership from the top dictates instructional goals and content for the entire system, while bottom-up reform occurs as schools are given flexibility to design their own strategies for achieving these goals. However, given severe restrictions on grass-roots freedom, ways in which policy-makers and practitioners can collaborate to institutionalize innovative strategies for systemic change may be a token challenge. <sup>5</sup>

### Examples from Abroad

Issues of curriculum policy can be approached purely from a provincial context or seen from a national or international perspective. While comprehensive comparison of the United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand would be a dissertation in itself, it is important to note such parallel developments. As Barrington (1991) asserts:

Aspects of the New Zealand reforms undoubtedly link to wider school reforms in an international context. Indeed, features such as decentralization of greater responsibility to the governing bodies of individual schools in areas such as priority setting and financial management, greater parental involvement in school governance, and

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<sup>5</sup> Considerable information about US charter schools is available on the World Wide Web, although critical discussion is harder to find. A start would be to try the Center for Education Reform and the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools at:- <http://edreform.com/charters.html> and <http://charter.ehhs.cmich.edu/html/chart.html>

measures to increase the accountability of schools to parents and local communities are remarkably similar to changes in England, the United States, Australia, and Canada (p.285).

Accordingly, the purpose here has been confined to an examination of certain aspects which may be salient to Canada in order to provide a basis for seeing how the outcomes of charter school legislation in Alberta compare and contrast with this experience. The models all promise increased parental choice and raised standards but, equally, they all raise a variety of concerns. This brief investigation into international developments is based on the belief that many key elements of the Canadian political and educational scene have distinct parallels elsewhere. What must be considered is the extent to which developments abroad are salient to the socio-political culture in Canada. Or do current educational trends--for example, the amended Education 2000 in British Columbia, or the change which the provincial government in Ontario is in the process of implementing--reflect different responses to specifically *Canadian* concerns? If an idea is borrowed from elsewhere, can it simply be transplanted?

The growing potency of New Right perspectives is not indicative of some conspiracy whereby right-wing parties came to power armed with precise plans for educational reform. More realistically it can be seen as a critique which, together with certain economic and political circumstances of electoral success, largely determined the particular policies pursued. The educational policies of the New Right can be described as reflecting what Elliott and MacLennan (1994) call an "uneasy coalition" of disparate interests (p.174). A broad spectrum of ideas is covered, ranging from more-or-less radical conservatives who seek a return to order and authority, to neo-liberals who

seek individual freedom, diversity, and minimal government regulations with a free market as the ultimate solution. Keeping this alliance of different strands of ideology together produces diverse critiques of schooling.

Significant internal conflict among Britain's right-wing educational policy makers is predicted by Jones (1989), arising from authoritarian elements within conservative philosophies and competing influences within the hegemony exercised in political and cultural life by non-industrial influences. Even in their salutary treatment of the British Conservative Government, Chubb and Moe (1992) concede that one ideological faction of neoconservatives within the party endorses only markets which support "a return to traditional values and institutions including a more selective (and perhaps more elitist) education system" (p. 48). They also warn of the destructive influence on party thinking caused by business managerialists who advocate top-down solutions to all social problems. Given such internecine elements, it remains to be seen whether charter school reform represents a positive step forward for education or a political gesture attempting to appease a specific and vocal section of the electorate.

There is some evidence from the United States of a growing acceptance of choice reform, such as the National Education Association (a powerful American lobby group, considerably more influential than its equivalent in Canada, the Canadian Teachers' Federation) no longer opposing the idea of charter schools, perhaps through a wish to influence the development of practice and legislation (Dobbin, 1996). However, others continue to warn that increased parent control can result in more exclusionary schooling since there is considerable potential for interest groups to create charter schools that promote narrow philosophies. For example, Kuehn (1995) points to the charter

school in the U.S. is being promoted to parents with the promise that creationism will be taught through the school's distance education program. This illustrates a trend likely to result in less public trust in educational agencies.

Some parents can make choices inappropriate for their child because they have limited information or misinformation. Many parents maintain an arms' length contact with any school, while others will misconstrue the aims of a charter school and invest it with unfounded expectations. There is a long way to go before even a majority of parents are sufficiently informed to make wise decisions about where to send their child to school. It cannot be assumed that all parents will take an active interest in their children's education. And even among those who do, Evans (1991) questions whether parents make decisions about matching the learning style of their child with the broad array of options available. His conclusion is that school choice is more likely a factor of marketing, packaging and advertising. Such work provides substance to the argument that charter schools contribute to a growing educational maze which operates to benefit the more informed and articulate.

Part of the impetus for charter legislation reflects the mixed reception which other routes for extending public school choice have received, for example, the lack of consistent support for voucher proposals. Some Canadian right-wing activists promote charter schools because they view vouchers as still too politically unpalatable<sup>6</sup>. Like their GM equivalent, charter schools are receiving a range of response but several policy battles will become clearer as further charters are granted and different practices are implemented rather

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Joe Freedman's speech in a panel debate "School Choice-What are the Limits?" at the Edmonton Public Teachers' Convention. February 29, 1996.

than just discussed by theorists. Greater experience will also provide the information needed to address the pivotal question of whether allowing parents choice of a wider range of schools will help students reach higher outcomes. Despite it being premature to respond to this question, many policy makers still maintain that charter schools represent a bold reform attempt holding great promise. The following chapter sets the scene for an assessment of whether such promise holds true for Canada.

### Chapter Three

#### RESPONSES TO ALBERTA'S CHARTER LEGISLATION

Such international experience provides the context for the arrival of the charter school idea in Canada as a means of extending choice within the provision of public education. This chapter describes the types of program established by the first charter schools in Canada. It then focuses upon one city at the forefront of introducing wider options for students, including the establishment of a program based on Christian principles, a development prohibited by current charter school statute. The question is then raised whether the most significant changes are the direct results of charter school legislation or the indirect repercussions of school boards broadening their own spectrum of choice in response to competitive challenge from charter school groups.

In June 1993 the province of Alberta elected a Conservative government headed by Ralph Klein whose promises included a thorough review of the way in which government services were provided as part of a broad strategy for reducing the provincial debt. When during the fall of 1993 two education "Roundtables" were held, the charter school idea was included in the discussion booklet as a reform option. In Freedman's (1995) words, "Alberta's legislators, newly alerted to the idea and vigorously lobbied at the highest level, picked up on the idea within weeks" (p.73). In May 1994 Bill 19 was passed which amended the School Act and put in place the first Canadian charter legislation. This Bill made provision for groups to apply for a charter and, once approved, to be responsible for operating a charter school within the public school system.

### Alberta's charter school process

Alberta's former Minister of Education, Halvar Jonson, did not follow the voucher path. Perhaps he sought to distance himself and his Department from the neoliberal rationale for choice and privatization, and make the case purely on educational grounds. He justified the introduction of charter schools as a modest addition to the public system, similar to niche schools that fill a current gap in public school provision, rather than invoking the devastating critique of the public system employed by Chubb and Moe and other neoliberal marketeers. In his words:

Our government chose to encourage charter schools not for philosophical reasons, but because they fit the principles for restructuring and the two major educational reasons: improved student learning, and an improved education system...I am confident that over time charter schools will meet their full potential and be an important piece of our plan to provide the best possible education for all Alberta students (Jonson, 1995, p.6/14-15).

In November 1994 a Draft Handbook was issued which laid out the application process for charter status. Due in February, the authorized Handbook was finally published in April 1995, indicating that even the bureaucratic aspects were far from plain sailing. The Draft version required a minimum opening enrolment of 125, which was subsequently reduced to 75 students. The original version of the Handbook stated that the Minister could approve up to fifteen charter schools for start-up in September 1995 and additional ones in subsequent years; the revised version of February 1996 simply states that up to fifteen charter schools may be approved.

The Handbook outlines how a group considering the formation of a charter school is required to propose a program which is unique, or at least not available within the local district. Given the aim to broaden the range of educational opportunities by implementing innovative or enhanced educational services, charter organizers are likely to specialize in providing for the specific needs of students with similar learning requirements. Supportive research must be cited to show how the proposed program will improve student learning. (A summary of the steps which lead to the establishment of a charter school is given in Appendix A.)

The group must then seek incorporation (under the Societies Act, Companies Act, or Financial Administration Act) and hold public meetings to gauge whether sufficient support is forthcoming for their program to be viable. A charter must define the method of selection of the charter board and the responsibilities of members in governing the school. A charter school may be accommodated within an existing school or may lease its own facility. Charter boards must maintain a balanced budget, and submit this annually together with an audited financial statement. Charter schools cannot charge tuition fees but are free to raise funds in the same manner as other public schools. Only certified teachers can be employed.

The organizers have greater flexibility in making school-based decisions, such autonomy being balanced with greater accountability to ensure that it is delivering the promised results. All charters are term specific ranging from three to five years, renewal of a charter being dependent upon demonstration of success. Charter organizers are required to put forward an assessment model to show how well students are achieving learning expectations. A charter school is not expected to meet the needs of every



student, though any student may attempt the program offered since access cannot be denied to any student if space and resources are available. A charter must outline procedure that would be used to select students if enrolment exceeds capacity. The school must have a discipline policy applied equally to all students, so students with behavioural problems may not be denied access.

In the preamble to the draft Handbook, Jonson (1994) provides typical assurances that greater choice will indeed improve student learning. The Minister maintains that innovation is often stifled by school boards, or is adopted and then dropped after considerable expense. Such ideas can be tried in the contained setting of charter schools, which are accountable, accessible, democratic, and more flexible than the schools under a district system. The new approach was seen to need little justification since the parent community was its driving force. When asked about the possibility of elitism, Jonson pointed to disparities in the present system, such as special education classes not being treated in the same way as others (Gzowski, 1995).

### The Granting of Charters

Of fourteen applications received by the summer of 1995, only five charters were granted, and, of these, only three began operation in the 1995-6 school year.

- New Horizons, Sherwood Park. This was the first charter granted (on June 27, 1995). The school opened at the end of August 1995 with 80 students. It aims "to enable gifted students to strive for excellence in an environment which is low-anxiety, positive, and supportive of the individual" (charter summary of the Education for the Gifted Society). The monitoring authority is Elk Island Public School Division. A major impetus behind its formation was the

district's lack of a program to meet the needs of gifted children. Current enrolment is 102 students.

- Boyle Street Education Centre is operated by the Boyle Street Community Services Cooperative, with Edmonton Public as the monitoring authority. This charter school was approved July 18, 1995 but did not open until September 1996 when the site was ready. The school is directed towards meeting the needs of disadvantaged students, "street kids," aged 12-19 years, who have been unable to succeed in the mainstream education system. The teaching staff is comprised of four learning facilitators and two co-principals; two terms are ten weeks on/two weeks off with a longer third term. Though the program involves higher expenses as a result of the low staff/student ratio, this school has been able to hire staff at salary levels below the ATA rate. The group actively canvassed students through child welfare and other social services, both to ensure that the target population of 75 was met and out of concern that the open access requirement could potentially mean that students for whom the program is designed would not be able to gain entry. Current enrolment is 76; though this is a steady number, student turnover is high.

- Action for Bright Children, Calgary. Approved July 18, 1995 this charter school opened in September 1996. The monitoring authority, Calgary Public School Board, hires the staff and seconds them to the school. The charter group also rents their facility from the Board. This school targets the education of gifted students in Grades 1-3. It is based on a belief that early identification of such children is important. Its class size is no greater than twenty students. The Calgary Public Board does not offer such a program until grade 4. Current enrolment is 180.

- Suzuki Elementary School, Edmonton. This charter was approved August 2, 1995 and the school opened with 64 students in September 1995 after eight years as a private school. Because the school had already established itself as a financially and educationally viable concern, the requirement that the school obtain 75 students was waived for its first year. Though the monitoring authority was initially Alberta Education, subsequently it has become Edmonton Public School Board. This charter school integrates a basic education with a music curriculum centered on the Suzuki methodology. Serving kindergarten to Grade 6, the current enrolment is 80.

- Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence, Medicine Hat. Approved September 15, 1995 this charter school opened straight away. The monitoring authority is Medicine Hat Public School Division. The focus of CAPE is academic and personal excellence for students in Grades 1-9. Currently it has 108 students.

Charter schools could provide a means of extending the interests of social justice within a community, for example the Boyle Street School has this potential and could operate to make the education system more inclusive by reaching out to those it currently does not serve effectively, thus reflecting the expectation stated by the Minister of Education. Alternatively, charter schools could operate to the advantage of the well-informed. The Boyle Street School by its nature requires a small scale operation and the specialized music program of the Suzuki charter school seems likely to remain around the minimum enrolment. Therefore, of the first batch of charters granted, the schools with the most potential to expand are those which cater to the children of above average intelligence. Though assurance is provided in the Handbook that selective admission would not be permitted, Robertson et al., (1995) warn:

We believe there is still considerable scope for what could amount to legitimate discrimination to emerge within the current guidelines. Take for example a charter school which decides to focus its curriculum upon the needs of exceptionally gifted children. While the school might not explicitly screen a child's eligibility on the basis of race, gender, religion or socio-economic background, it has been extensively documented in the sociological literature that there is a high correlation between social class and educational performance (p.91/2).

In a telephone conversation with me, a representative of Alberta Education noted that part of the pre-application inquiries about charter schools in 1995 reflected curiosity in the reform; interest in 1996 was less extensive but was more informed. I took this as suggesting that the success rate of applications would be higher during 1996. In the end three further charters were granted.

- Global Learning Academy, Calgary. This charter school was granted in Spring 1996 and opened in September 1996 for grades 1 to 8. The school is focused upon meeting the individual learning needs of students by immersing them in a critical thinking and problem solving environment, and by increasing their opportunities to undertake independent learning. This school's monitoring authority is Calgary Public School Board. It currently has 380 students.

- Aurora Charter School, Edmonton. The Aurora group was granted a charter in Spring 1996 and they opened their school in September 1996. Serving students in grades 1 to 8, the school provides a program based on high academic expectations, with an enriched curriculum and an orderly

environment. The monitoring authority is Alberta Education. The school currently has 240 students, with an additional 36 in kindergarten.

- Almadina Charter School, Calgary. Granted a charter in Spring 1996, this school opened in September 1996 for grades 1 to 9. The school aims to increase the academic success of students for whom English is a second language by actively involving their parents. The monitoring authority is Alberta Education. Current enrolment is 301 students.

By September 1997 three further charter schools opened, bringing the total to eleven:

- Foundations for the Future Charter School, Calgary. This school offers Kindergarten to grade 7, with plans for subsequent expansion. The application was initially turned down by the Calgary Public Board on philosophical grounds, so Alberta Education will be the monitoring authority. The school's focus is on providing a structured environment, direct teaching, and sequential mastery of concepts and skills.

- Mundare Charter School. Created to avoid being closed by Elk Island School Board. Emphasis on community of learners. Just opened with approximately 65 students (minimum required enrolment waived for one year).

- Moberly Hall, Fort McMurray. Previously a private school. The first sponsored by a Catholic school board. Emphasis on individual learning styles.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The brief detail on the last three schools reflects their recent opening. In September 1997 there are no applications pending with Alberta Education, but one group is in the process of providing Calgary Catholic School Board with more information (with the expectation of rejection, in which case they are likely to then apply direct to Alberta Education).

Edmonton's climate of debate

Considering the process of the extension of educational choice as experienced in one Canadian city provides illuminating insight into some of the repercussions of this trend. Three of the first batch of five charter school applications granted in Alberta are within the greater Edmonton area. A few years ago Edmonton Public School Board was pioneering site-based management as budgeting decisions were devolved to the school level. Now it prides itself as being the vanguard of choice reform as it claims to have "one of the greatest range of programs for students in North America"<sup>8</sup>, going beyond the provision of open boundaries in order to meet a growing range of parental demands by making distinctly different alternative programs available.

All sorts of issues are raised by this trend. Should there be specific restrictions on the range of choice made available? Will these changes result in a more satisfied parent body, or in fragmented and segregated educational experiences? When does the range of alternatives undermine fundamental principles of public education? Due to the wide range of programs available, Edmonton is perhaps an atypical environment, but it has a variety of features which suggest that it could be perceived as a laboratory for educational change in Canada. Thus it merits close examination since many of the changes experienced in the city are instructive for other school jurisdictions across the country.

Given the educational climate in Edmonton, I was provided with an opportunity to undertake first-hand observation of the realization of some of the arguments over charter schools examined above. In late April 1995 I

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.epsb.edmonton.ab.ca/district/choices.htm>

attended two meetings that focused on educational change<sup>9</sup>. Since these meetings occurred before any Canadian charter school had started, the timing is significant because it reflects a period during which some people were pinning their hopes on extended choice as the solution to a range of educational problems. The following brief account of these meetings is intended to help connect the abstract and the concrete in this dissertation, the important "rooting" of general debate within an actual context.

During one of these two meetings, the Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, Emery Dosdall, asserted that charter schools are not necessary if public education was adequate. He was happy to face competition as long as the playing field was level and no unfair advantages were given to some players. His role was to ensure a healthy education for all children. This included giving recognition to public expectation that certain choices should be available. He boasted that his Board offered as much choice as any in North America through such specialized programs as holistic learning, Hebrew, fine arts, and business. He believed that a school board must not be complacent but admitted that he would not welcome a growing tide of charter schools. Dosdall received praise from the second speaker, Dr. Joe Freedman, a vocal educational activist, who claimed that if such goals had been in place earlier, he would not have spent six years of his life campaigning for educational change. He claimed that charter schools did not represent a threat to community since they would be led by teachers, they would be closely scrutinized, and those which fail to meet expectations would lose their charter. He felt that most teachers did as good a job as possible within a system that operated in less-than-optimal ways.

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<sup>9</sup> On April 24, 1995 an Edmonton chapter of the Canadian College of Teachers had a panel debate on the topic: Charter Schools: Are They Necessary?  
April 25, 1995 Edmonton Public Schools, Board of Trustees Meeting.

Freedman believed schools are prevented from going strongly in one direction due to gridlock resulting from the contradictory desires of parents, school board, faculties of education, and the teachers' association. He argued that charter schools would by-pass this gridlock by providing opportunities for like-minded parents to join together, resulting in consensus within a pluralistic democracy. In stark contrast, a representative of the Alberta Teachers' Association, Fran Savage, wondered whether charter schools would be a further example of a tendency to copy trends from the United States, just about the time when Americans realize that they didn't work. She suggested that the Klein government was in the process of centralizing control, in part through testing, so charter schools would not have the expected amount of autonomy. She also warned of the potential of some parents appearing circumspect at the outset but then changing direction to suit their own agenda. Her argument is that some charter school applications represented the desire for public money to fund what was essentially a private school; she maintained that charter schools would harm the public system by leading to separation and segregation. Instead of this type of reform, the system should be concentrating on early intervention and support for the disadvantaged. Choice and competition imply winners and losers, which should not be the aim of public education.

A final perspective on charter schools was provided by the president of the Cogito group, Jane Walker. In response to concerns about public education, her group had submitted a charter application to Edmonton Public School District in February 1995, but had subsequently begun negotiations towards establishing an alternative program. Though the latter route did not offer the originally required degree of autonomy, she had positive expectations about



the accommodation of their beliefs within the public system. If such expectations prove unfounded, they could always return to the charter school route. Therefore, her position was that charter schools were necessary, but this need not always be the case. Walker applauded the response of Edmonton Public, but noted that not every school board was as flexible. She felt that special interest groups were everywhere, but this was a positive phenomenon since diversity was advantageous. She described herself as not politically or ideologically motivated, and she denied the charge of elitism since such reform was a demonstration of the need for flexibility and choice.

The following evening the Trustees of Edmonton Public School District considered the Cogito proposal. Matters that were raised included the extent of non-instructional costs (since this held the danger rather than the intent of a two-tier system), assurance that district policies for issues such as corporal punishment would apply to every program, and clarification of the role of a parent body seeking the transfer of a teacher. A parent commitment form was described as advantageous for all schools since it suggested a moral responsibility on the part of parents to support the school. The Trustees also discussed the potential problem of alternative programs attracting more academic students, with regular schools getting a disproportionate number of lower ability students. On hearing that the Cogito focus was on the "average child," and a receptive mind being the only thing required, reservations were expressed about parents of children with less receptive minds. However, the mission statement of the Edmonton Board as a district of choice was emphasized, and the application received unanimous approval, as did the applications for an all girls' and a ballet alternative program.

There was less unanimity about a proposal for approval-in-concept of a Traditional school, along the lines of the model in Surrey, B.C. Proponents of this idea seek a school based on values such as respect, integrity, self-discipline, and responsibility. As well they extol the virtues of children speaking to neighbours more formally rather than by their first name, and of the time when doors did not have to be locked. Yet the exact nature of the tradition to be reinstated was not clarified, and one Trustee wondered whether it was the way women were treated sixty years ago. It was pointed out that labelling Traditional schools implied other schools in the district did not possess such values. The response was that while such values may already exist in the public system, the aim was for more consistency in their promotion. Entire schools already in existence could make a commitment to this concept.

The Chairman summarized the application as parents "asking us to take back the schools" because of inconsistencies in the system. He believed that such values were not found widely, and parents were no longer prepared to tolerate half-hearted gestures; he warned that the application had to be addressed because it represented the beginning of a backlash by society. There was a need to enforce rules, to endorse notions, even to insulate from the mainstream. Further alternatives for others students could be considered once this type of school was established. The superintendent mentioned his experience with fundamental schools in Langley, B.C. as the basis of his belief that the ideas could work in Edmonton. The proposal was passed but not unanimously. My impression from this meeting was that the notion of parental choice was attaining virtually unchallengeable status; few Trustees liked to speak against it, at least certainly not in an election year.

### The Expansion of Alternative Programs

In looking at the extension of choice, it is important to do more than study Alberta's early charter schools since the impact of this movement has far wider repercussions, and dynamics have begun which are in the process of causing systemic change. According to the guidelines, application for charter status must first be submitted to a school board, a process which places the board in an ambiguous position. The policy of choice is well-established as a matter of district policy within Edmonton Public. The Superintendent has a "pro-choice" background in terms of his experience in British Columbia, this is likely to have been one of the important criteria in his selection in 1995. Nevertheless, the district seems to have responded to charter groups with trepidation. It has been able to successfully negotiate with several groups seeking charter status, going to considerable lengths to accommodate them as alternative programs.

Superintendent Dosdall does not look at this as a pre-emptive strike in order to keep the funding that goes with the size of the student body. He believes that parents will stay with the Board because they have the choice; he is not worried about competition since it forces the Board to keep on its toes. Dosdall believes that parents know what's best for their children and that changes in education are needed to reflect changes in society. He feels that diversity and choice hold the answer since not everyone has to have the same educational diet. His aim is as follows:

to be service oriented and consumer driven. I hope it changes our schools dramatically from where we are today. There's an old saying that if Rip van Winkle woke up today after a hundred years of sleep, the only

institution he'd recognize is our schools. It's time to break down walls, it's time to break down myths, it's time to look at a philosophy of delivering education anywhere, anyplace, anytime (Cardinal, 1995).

Thus, the generalities about choice are gaining concrete illustration in Edmonton. Certain parents support the intrusion of the market into public schools, and are only too keen to open gates they see as having been locked for too long. In an interview concerning the establishment of an all girls' program in Edmonton, John Masson stated that his aim was to provide his daughter with the tools needed to survive in the competitive world, including time management and risk taking. Masson feels that competition creates choice, especially where there is money at stake:

In Edmonton the principal is a salesperson, they're out there to sell their school, whatever their program or particular strengths are. It keeps all schools sharp, it's very competitive. I guess students are money, and money is budgets, and budgets allow you to do the little extras or pull back in certain areas. I guess you could say that students are commodities, aren't we all, commodities or consumers (Cardinal, 1995).

It is necessary to question whether this viewpoint is widely-held, and the extent to which people within a community are interested in public education beyond the aim of ensuring that their children are successful. It would seem that Masson lives in the appropriate city for realizing his philosophy. By using economic metaphors to describe education, Masson and Dosdall seem to concur about goals for city schools.

Various groups in the city have now accepted an offer of alternative program status, the first three having originally applied to a school board for charter status:-

- the Cogito group: a K-6 "back to basics" program began in September 1995 with 118 students based in Mount Pleasant School.
- Nellie McClung Program for Girls: grades 7 and 8, began in September 1995 with 76 students based in Oliver School, expanding to grade 9 in the following year.
- the Ballet School: grades 7 to 12, began in September 1995 with 68 students based in Bonnie Doon School.
- In February 1996 the Board approved a sports alternative program to provide the city's top athletes with flexible school hours and equipment for distance learning. To qualify, students must have a provincial ranking in their sport. This opened in September 1996 with 20 students in grades 5-9 at Donnan School (with pre-registration suggesting a doubling of this number in September 1997), and 50 students in grades 10-12 at Ross Sheppard School.
- Logos Program: K to 9 program based around Christian principles (see below).
- The Heritage School. This was operating as a private school in Edmonton for special needs students. Its operators suspended the application process for charter status while the amount of funding for the categories of special need student was clarified with Alberta Education. Their concern was about losing power to control access to their program, and to adopt non-

conventional approaches with their students. Although staying private or reapplying for charter status were options, Edmonton Public School Board wooed them to become a further addition to the city's alternative programs.

It is not clear whether the Superintendent's commitment to choice is based on ideology or pragmatism. Asked how many choices his board could offer before the system became too fractured, he responded that, in spite of offering more choice programs than most school districts in North America, the Board only had nine-and-a-half percent of their school population in such programs. "So, how far can we go? I don't think we have come anywhere close to that limit as yet...I don't know what the answer is, but I know we have a long way to go"(CBC Morningside, Hour 1: Funding Religious Schools, March 4, 1996).

#### Public education and religion

Religion presents a difficult issue for public schooling. It is the reason for many parents wishing to choose schools for their children. However, religious affiliation is explicitly forbidden for charter school in Alberta. As the Charter School Handbook clearly states:

Charter schools may not be affiliated with a religious faith or denomination, except when the charter school is established by a separate school board, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. A charter school may provide religious instruction and exercises under section 33 of the Act, as may any other public school. Charter schools are not private religious schools nor are they intended to replace the services offered by private religious schools (1996, p.3)

Cognizant of this restriction, a Christian school group within Edmonton opted to avoid the charter route by aiming directly at gaining approval to set up a K to 9 alternative school. This would provide a non-denominational Christian environment based on traditional Christian principles such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed. In January 1996 the Trustees of Edmonton Public approved their application. At the meeting one Trustee argued that since the Board had accommodated a variety of other requests, it should continue to be inclusive in its offerings to the public by reaching out to all groups. Another Trustee counter-argued that Christianity had been downplayed by efforts to be non-partisan, and that this was causing the transfer of students out of the public system.

Approval of this proposal involved suspending the Board's policy on religious instruction which states that, "The Board will not support the development of alternative religious schools because of its conviction that our system of universal public education can only be weakened by fragmentation on the basis of religious belief" (Edmonton School District #7 Board Policies Manual, April, 1965). One speaker<sup>10</sup> stated that he felt that this policy had served the district well for many years. He felt that the proposal for a Logos program implied that other schools do not serve similar needs, perhaps representing the thin edge of a divisive element: Christians/non-Christians. However, vice-chair Woodrow argued that times had changed since this policy was established. She felt that there was a district mission, and stated, "Our district has chosen to focus on choice and we may be leading Canada". Woodrow believed that the Board must not impose their own beliefs, "parents are the primary educators of children, our responsibility is to recognize this".

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Marshall, President of the Alberta Teachers' Association Local at Edmonton School District No. 7 Board Meeting on January 23, 1996.

She suggested that public education had taken too secular a route, "the whole child involves body, mind and spirit".<sup>11</sup> Non church goers were described as also supportive of explicit moral direction.

Logos representative Wilkinson reminded the Trustees that a native school operated within the public system with allowances to cover spirituality, wondering, "why are natives more privileged than Christians?"<sup>12</sup> He pointed out that the business communities which prosper are those which are flexible and satisfy the needs of groups of society: strength through diversity. He went on to read an extract from the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the legal requirement to respect families' wishes to ensure a religious and moral education in accordance with their conviction. He reminded one Trustee that his election position advocated choice. He warned that the consequence of denying the application would be the transfer of students; Edmonton Public was described as losing millions due to its current policy.

One Trustee responded that the decision had to be made in principle not because of dollars. The exclusion of religion within the charter school legislation was noted, and a repeated concern was that the program would introduce a particularism which could undermine public education. Another Board member asked what there was in this proposal that does not exist already in schools. Wilkinson responded that a desire in a public system to be neutral can breed non-neutrality. He used the example of condoms in school: neutrality could be claimed since the condoms might only be made available not promoted; however this sent a message of no absolutes. The Logos curriculum was described as stating a belief in God and absolutes: that God, not

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<sup>11</sup> Joan Woodrow, vice chair Edmonton Public Trustees, January 23, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Wilkinson, a director of the Edmonton Logos Society, January 23, 1996.



the child, is the centre of the universe. This would make the world a better place since such freedom does not exist in schools at the moment; this would strengthen our society.

The Logos group denies the charge of being exclusive, insisting that the program will be open to all district students whose parents are willing to sign a commitment of their support for the objectives of the program. Asked about parents reluctant to sign, the Superintendent commented that the program would be a human endeavour, so workable agreement should be possible. The Logos group was asked since they included specific denominations, whether they foresaw a day that each of these groups would want their own school. They responded that their meetings so far had shown support and unity from a broad spectrum of religious groups. However, concern was expressed over the broad policy implications: since the proposal was substantially different from existing alternative programs, there would be an obligation to accommodate comparable groups.

Approval of the Logos program could pave the way for fundamentalist Christian schools in the province to seek full funding: a trend either perceived as enabling greater openness, or as fragmenting the community and causing objection from those who do not wish to pay towards religious instruction. The president of the Alberta Teachers' Association commented, "The more we provide for breakoff groups, the more we are encouraging people not to get along" (Laghi, 1996, A1-2). However, one response to this position is that it would require the closure of a host of programs since virtually all require some segregation. A pivotal question concerns how a greater number of specialized programs will change a public education system which has a traditional mandate to serve the greater community.

Michael Valpy describes three cases launched in October 1995 by Jewish, Christian and Sikh parents seeking to require the Ontario government to make tax dollar support available to religious schools in addition to Roman Catholic ones, which are guaranteed by the Constitution. Valpy comments:

Logically, they're right. In multicultural Canada, there is no acceptable rationale for funding schools of one religious persuasion and not of others. Sociologically, they're wrong. The government's reluctance to pay for schools that inculcate specific religious values and teachings does not compromise the right of Canadians to practice their faiths or raise their children in their faiths. Religion in a liberal society belongs in private culture, in the family and the house of faith. It does not belong in the public school system, which is our most important instrument, our essential instrument, of socialization, citizenship and community for all (October 1995, A25).

Valpy sees such cases as fracturing the public school system along religious lines, evidence that Canadians increasingly do not want to walk along the same road. However, religious schooling may be a concept which people embrace more in theory than in practice. Edmonton's Logos group had provisional enrolment in excess of 800, and negotiated five sites in different sections of the city<sup>13</sup>. Initial optimism faltered as actual enrolment reached only 200 in early May 1996. The program started with approximately 400 students. The initial protests seem to have largely died down, although some concern has been expressed over how the religious aspects of the program have received over-emphasis to the neglect of the academic-based philosophy which

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<sup>13</sup> In the southeast, Fulton Place School: K to 3, and Hardisty School: 4-9. In the north, Kensington School: K to 6. In the west, Youngstown School: K to 6, and Winterburn School: 7-9.

was part of the approved proposal. There has been subsequent speculation about who will be the next religious group of parents who will endeavour to follow the Logos example to form their own alternative program within the public system.

### Progress or Regression?

The introduction of charter school legislation by the provincial government of Alberta has set a Canadian precedent. In keeping with patterns described earlier, it is a reform introduced by a right-wing government, which has heralded charter schools as a catalyst for necessary change within the system of public education. These schools also have the potential of cutting public spending and of appeasing vocal elements of the electorate. The fiscal policies of the current governments of Alberta and Ontario present the most overt illustrations of the neoconservative agenda in Canada, and suggests one reason why Ontario is actively considering similar charter legislation. However, it is essential to go beyond the level of economics. These provinces are taking the most active steps to reduce the reliance of the people on the traditional provisions of government. In the analysis of one writer:

Most Canadians view Alberta's welfare reforms simply as a component of Ralph Klein's drive to cut spending and balance the province's deficit--and that is indeed how they have been packaged and sold to Albertans. But they are in fact an excellent illustration of how many of the changes being made by the Klein government, while cloaked in the urgency of subduing the deficit, actually go far beyond the bottom line...the government is remaking the system to meet an ideological end (Feschuk, October 1994).

Such change in education perhaps needs to be seen as part of what Lisac (1995) gives as the title of his book *The Klein Revolution*. He warns of fiscal arguments being used to obscure abuses of the process of consultation, a position which is given graphic reinforcement by Taft (1997). It is one thing to discuss down-sizing government when it comes to liquor stores in Alberta; it is something very different when it comes to the education of the young which is essential to the well-being of community. Furthermore, unlike fiscal matters, the full effects of educational change can only be seen in the long-term. As one union organizer commented about the impact of budget cuts imposed by the Klein administration:

Let's face it, health care is our best shot at showing people what kind of havoc these cuts are causing. This province's education system may be going down the tubes, but it's going to be years to prove Johnny can't read when he graduates. With health care, the examples are in droves right now (Feschuk, September 1994).

By the time the full implications of current changes are experienced, the current government in Alberta will not be held to the accountability that they are fond of applying to others.

Given that only a small percentage of Alberta's students attend one of the new charter schools, some of the most significant changes do seem to be occurring at the level of school boards. This gives substance to Wilkinson's (1994) claim that Edmonton Public School Board is a leader (p.35). He feels that charter school legislation does not add anything to existing possibilities since equal potential exists within Section 16 of the School Act. Wilkinson endorses the concept of subsidiarity--the making of decisions at the smallest unit

possible--but does not explain how this can be balanced when the unit is also part of a large district organization. He is dismissive of arguments that charge that greater choice increases inequality or weakens the public system, alleging that they are employed by school boards anxious to maintain the status quo.

As parents are provided with opportunities to decide where and how to educate their children, Albertans such as Wilkinson and Freedman seem anxious to ensure that competition and choice become the new hallmarks of public education. Yet, though widened choice is welcomed as overdue by some parents, others are bewildered about how best to take advantage of this apparent proliferation of possibilities. The problems may not be insurmountable but need greater recognition than many advocates are willing to give them. Given the central role played by parent control in the operation of charter schools, it is doubtful that such schools would be teacher-led, as Freedman suggests when he addresses teachers<sup>14</sup>. Wilkinson's claim is that just because people are not equally adept at choosing a doctor, this shouldn't prevent choices from existing<sup>15</sup>. Yet to me this is both a false analogy and an insubstantive basis for educational choice given the central role played by the institution of school within a community.

As the debate continues to centre on potential fragmentation and the mandate to serve equitably, the need for further investigation into this issue is highlighted by those groups in Alberta who already are lobbying for additional steps beyond the current reform. As Stolee (1996) writes:

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Edmonton Public Teachers' Convention. February 29, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> May 2, 1995 Edmonton Public Schools, Education Committee. "Choices for Students: What are the Limits?".

Alberta Education should be reorganized to assume an even-handed attitude towards all accredited schools in the province. It should ensure that parents have the widest practical choice of school and leave the survival of each school to its own merits and the market. Until we have a level playing field, Alberta will always have educational unrest. Until "education protectionism" is dissolved by variety, efficiency, competition and choice, Albertans will never get a satisfactory bang for their buck (p.33).

This expectation is echoed by the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges of Alberta in its campaign to reverse the regulation that excludes religion as a basis for forming a charter school. Gary Duthler, Executive Director of this Association, wants tax dollars so that private schools would not have to charge tuition, as long as the instruction meets the standards set by the province. He believes that the government cannot make the public/private distinction for long, and that such change is likely due to the support of the strong right wing element in Klein's government. As he puts it, "the whole movement is going in this direction, it's inevitable" (Cardinal, 1995). If Duthler is correct, then the lines between private and public will be further blurred. His organization has advanced a fair funding formula which would increase private school government funding to \$3686 per student, which is the instructional portion of the regular provincial student grant of \$5485. In April 1997 Private Members Bill 208 had its first reading in its quest to amend the School Act so that students attending accredited private schools would receive 75% of the amount per student received by a school board.

My concerns about this direction of educational change are not based upon a wish to protect the status quo, but rather the need to consider

fundamental issues being swept aside in the change process. Provincial politicians claim that they want to reach parents who feel that the public system is not working for them; however, consideration of the proposals needs to go well beyond the economic cost of such schools. Whether the current drive towards greater parental choice in education should be opposed or welcomed is a matter which must be considered from the point of view of its impact on the democratic community. The recent nature of charter school legislation, and the consequent limited number of charter schools, might make definitive answers difficult. But, such difficulty must not deter significantly more investigation into the repercussions of this development.

In observing events unfold, I have found that the motives behind the extension of programs of choice within Edmonton Public School District are unclear. It could be a demonstration of insightful flexibility, a politically shrewd move which will retain the vast majority of students and their tax dollars within their auspices. Alternatively, it could be a short-sighted response which will result in establishing and strengthening fledgling groups that will ultimately make strong charter school applications since they have been assisted in becoming an up-and-running concern. The latter view suggests that the district will lose larger numbers of students through attempts to keep them under their control. To address this question one would have to look at the fate of newly established programs, with a view to assessing their satisfaction with, and impact upon, the local provision of public education.

Gathering the children of like-minded parents together in one charter school can create a greater degree of consensus than is commonly found within a pluralistic society. But there are inherent dangers with this given the greater ease with which a narrow set of values could gain predominance. This is one

example of areas of ambiguity hard to access by conventional appraisals of a school. Effective assessment of charter schools must encompass much more than simply measured performance on standardized tests. As Feintuck (1994) warns about the experience in Britain:

Choice, such as it is, will be informed by a partial and potentially misleading set of statistics reflecting only one aspect of the outcome of schools' performances, that is pupils' performances in public tests and examinations, without even the correction for value added" (p.56).

But, whether the issue is the means by which the operational effectiveness of a fledgling charter school can be assessed or the dangers of such schools being exclusive, it is now necessary to move to a more specific level. The objective of the following chapter is to acquire more grounded responses through focus upon a case study of one group of parents who set out to form a charter school. While no definitive answers can be gained from such an approach, it does provide insight into such areas as motivations for parent activism in the pursuit of choice for their children, and the variety of response such pursuit received.



## Chapter Four

### THE ROAD TO CHARTER STATUS: A CASE STUDY

The objective of my research is to consider one example of a group hoping to form a charter school in order to situate abstract debate within the current context of a highly politically-charged province in which school choice has broadened to encompass charter schools. In this chapter I explain this choice of research method and discuss the role of personal influences within it. This provides an essential background to bear in mind when reading the following account and interpretation of the experiences of the group as they responded to charter school legislation.

My interest all along has been in the *process* through which a group was able to realize its educational objectives. In the course of my research I received a variety of invitations to visit classrooms within charter schools and alternative programs. Yet, while this may have represented the realization of a group's aspirations, the day-to-day life in a classroom belongs to another study. My intent is not reduce the students to the level of pawns of their parents' whim; however, my focus is upon the actions and level of satisfaction of the parents not their children.

#### Case Selection and Entry

In December 1994, I began trying to identify a group hoping to form a charter school. I consulted the Education Correspondent of a local newspaper, who agreed to ask a member of one group to contact me. Early in the new year a representative of the group interviewed me to clarify my intentions. The group was led by a parent dissatisfied with what she regarded as the erratic

quality of teaching which her children often received. She decided a charter school would present the best solution if it were to emphasize an academic curriculum, enforce specific rules of student conduct, and employed a committed teaching staff. This parent was joined by a small group of other parents (a local branch of Albertans for Quality Education) who, during the previous year, had taken part in a failed attempt to set up an alternative school. They too saw Alberta's charter legislation as providing a new lease on life and the vehicle by which they could gain the autonomy they sought to shape and influence their children's schooling.

I then attended the first public meeting which was held to provide details around the broad aim of the group and a timeline for achieving it; there was a relatively large attendance of about sixteen people. This meeting was followed by an extensive series of meetings of a steering committee established by the larger group and charged with the responsibility of developing a proposal for a charter school. Appendix B provides an outline of the timeframe for the developments of this group. The members of this steering committee were very cooperative about my presence as an observer from the university; perhaps they were pleased to have their beliefs given coverage as such observation could be taken as an indication of promising prospects.

#### Developing a methodology

As Bosk (1979) points out, "All field work done by a single field-worker invites the question, Why should we believe it?" (cited by Maxwell, 1992, p.279). Moreover, "one-shot case studies" have been attacked on the grounds that observation of one group with no control group or prior measures, provides no way of discriminating among numerous possible alternative

explanations for the observed behaviour (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). However, this overlooks ways in which qualitative researchers can productively deal with the issue of validity. Since all accounts of the activities of a group cannot be equally useful, discrimination of their credibility rests on the relationship between an account and the phenomenon in question--an area that Maxwell (1992) tries to clarify by distinguishing between different categories of validity (descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, and evaluative).

A case study involves the attempt to gain an awareness of the focus of interest through a detailed examination of a single case, albeit embedded within a highly specific context. Some qualitative researchers who adopt this approach deliberately select an unusual case in order to highlight anomalies for theorists to subsequently explain. Others select cases which they have reason to believe will yield findings that are generalizable, hoping that their work will contribute to establishing representative characteristics (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Since in Alberta every group that applies for charter status is required to establish a distinctive basis for the charter, it would not be possible for any case study to yield findings that encompass all the implications of the charter movement. Notwithstanding this, a case study can provide considerable insight into central elements of this development.

Field research holds the potential for exposing results of public policy, whether intended or not, and can move discussion beyond the level of opinions. One focus of my interest is how the claims of school choice work out in practice. The methodology was a means to develop a basis from which general theoretical statements could be drawn about structural regularities within the process, and a means to generate new hypotheses which can then be tested against other data. While my research began out of an interest in

ascertaining the support and obstacles which the charter applicants encountered in the formative stages, it was not long before more fundamental issues became apparent. Stake (1995) draws attention to this development by distinguishing between issues brought in from the outside, and ones arising from within. It would have been impossible to have charted the course of my research in advance, rather the issues were redefined as events unfolded. As necessary preparation, I had certain open-ended preliminary questions to provide structure to my initial focus. As I became more familiar with the group dynamics and how they dealt with constraints, some of these issues became redundant while new ones emerged.

At the outset my questions concerned the ways in which the group was dissatisfied with the existing system of education, and how their proposed charter school would address these. As time went on I questioned whether the group was sufficiently cohesive to pull in a singular direction, and whether the disaffected nature which united parents in seeking an alternative form of schooling would ultimately prove to be detrimental to the emerging program. Still later I reflected on more general issues such as whether the expectations of reform of different parties were compatible, and to what extent the proposed reform really represented progress. Few of my questions were to result in straight-forward responses; as Stake (1995) writes, "Issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historic and especially personal contexts. All these meanings are important in studying cases" (p.17). Thus my research started with base questions but was open to progressive redefinition in light of developments which could not be anticipated.

Particularly at the beginning, my focus on open-ended questions caused me to overlook details which should have been more central within

my early descriptions. It was only later that I recorded my impressions of the age range of the group, the degree of their technical sophistication in confronting educational problems, the political orientations. Stake's description of qualitative research includes development of an empathetic understanding: a re-creation in the mind of the researcher of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts, feelings, motivations of the group. Seeking less to provide causal explanation of why things were the way they were, but rather detail on how things were at a particular time and place. Reading this description gave me more confidence in noting the physical settings of most of the group meetings: the spacious house in a desirable neighbourhood, the large dining room table scattered with evidence of the tutoring of the host's children and those of parents paying for such extra tuition; the frequent telephone calls being screened from interrupting the proceedings.

My fieldwork techniques require some elaboration. My account is based upon observations made during the life-span of the group. This resulted in a fairly extensive log of topics discussed by the people present. I made notes openly during all the meetings as if I were taking Minutes. This log provided the basis for the account that follows. In almost every meeting a range of opinions was expressed on every issue that was raised. But in my account the opinion introduced by the phrase "the group felt that..." represents the conclusion that was agreed upon at the time. The name of the group under study is fictitious since my focus is on content and process not identity. My initial worry that I would not obtain sufficient data, was replaced with concern about the basis of "winnowing" the excess of data that was to accumulate. I became conscious of working with what Wolcott (1988) calls "a heavy hand" in excerpting and reorganizing the material according to specific themes. The

events that took place are related through my impressions over the months of meetings and informal conversations and, later, hours of formal interviews. My aim is to provide sufficient information both to illustrate the basis of my interpretation and to provide readers with a basis for reaching independent interpretations of their own. I am aware of several problems within such an aim, including the difficulty of adequately defining boundaries between description and interpretation.

### Reliability and Validity

Not surprisingly, my research has entailed considerable personal reflection as the process brought my personal beliefs into sharp relief. This is an aspect that was not emphasized in positivist research, but it has proved to be a vital exercise for me by virtue of the fact that it has forced me to articulate more precisely the basis of my sceptical reaction to extended choice. How have my personal views regarding programs of choice been affected by my family and cultural background, and my own experience in education? Is my account tainted by unresolved issues in my personal biography, or a belief that limited choice served me well so should be good enough for others? What taken-for-granted assumptions shape my perspective? What has been the impact of my having worked as a teacher in the public system? Is my present contact with public school teachers and a faculty of education a further factor to be taken into account? This was the beginning of my concern to provide an account of proceedings that entails critical scrutiny while still possessing a subjective awareness.

In what follows I provide an account of some of the experiences I encountered in my role as observer when I joined one group in Alberta that

was aiming to establish a charter school. Observing their meetings and hearing their stories provided an opportunity to acquire rich understanding and insights. Though on joining the group I had personal reservations about their goals, this did not detract from my interest in learning how they functioned. Indeed, if anything, this element of scepticism enhanced my interest. I felt that they were attacking the concept of public education which I favoured due to connections with it as student, teacher, spouse and parent. However, an account of such a process that is little more than a polemic has limited use, and I was to find how easy it is to condemn from a distance. However, it was not long into the process that I came to recognize the honest-held beliefs of many members of the group, to see the legitimacy of several of their criticisms of the public system, and to realize the appeal of a group of parents who claimed simply to be seeking the best education for their children.

Knowledge of the human factor behind various developments also became a consideration that I confronted in writing up some of my notes. Because the meetings covered wide ranging issues, my write-up proved to be a time-consuming endeavour. But analysis of the data proved to be the more difficult task. Personally-held political beliefs affect what I see as being significant and influence even the words I use to describe events. As my write-up continued, I found less difficulty making many comments, partly because certain developments in the group's evolution need only be stated since they will be seen as praiseworthy or condemnatory according to the reader's perspective. However, selections must be made and aspects to emphasize must be chosen, so I have an ethical responsibility to remain conscious of the bases of selection.

While sensitive to the risks of human science research, Stake (1995) does not see subjectivity as problematic. In his words, "Given the intense interaction of the researcher...however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view" (p.42). "Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding" (p.45). "Phenomena need accurate description, but even observational descriptions of these phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, the intention of the researcher...The qualitative researcher...recognizes that invalidities and advocacies are ever present and turns away from the goal as well as the presumption of sanitization" (p.95). Stake goes on to outline the constant nature of decisions concerning how much emphasis should be given to each of the various roles played by the researcher, ranging from teacher and participant observer, to biographer and evaluator. Some decisions can be made intuitively, such as to what extent one should be oneself. I am not a sufficiently good actor to be able to feign detachment over an extended period, but I did recognize the virtue of maintaining a low profile role during a typical meeting.

It is generally accepted that, because a researcher is not a neutral outsider, his/her values should be made explicit. Thus, as Kelly (1989) states, "Many politically committed researchers now make a point of stating their own position in their reports so that the reader can take this into account when assessing the findings" (p.102). However, it is necessary to go beyond simply stating one's values, and then feeling absolved of responsibility, or conversely becoming so caught up within the quest for objectivity that little progress takes place. Usher and Edwards (1994) correctly regard this concern about subjectivity as a major epistemological problem. The notion of reflexivity means that the activity of the knower always influences what is known, thus casting doubt



upon the possibility of truthful representation. They suggest a path towards a solution:

by foregrounding how we construct what we research, reflexivity is no longer a problem but a resource. It helps us to recognize that we are a part of rather than apart from the world constructed through research. More than this, however, by becoming aware of the operation of reflexivity in the practice of research, the place of power, discourse and text, that which goes 'beyond' the purely personal, is revealed (p.148).

Getting to the root of fundamental questions requires sharp awareness of many matters ranging from the macro level of power inequalities, to the micro level of what will be affected by my research.

By writing a dissertation on the subject, am I indirectly seeking to privilege my own participation in the charter school debate? What do I gain from involvement in such research? What are the implications of being wrong in my assessment of particular policies? Does the need for research outweigh harm to an individual? How do I ensure recognition of the legitimacy of alternative views? To what extent must opposing viewpoints be explored to enable my work to be insightful rather than dogmatic? My aim is to increase awareness of issues, and avoid value complacency, but I need to face the possibility that what I produce could operate to muddy the waters and be self-serving. As well, ethical issues arise out of the process of formally writing about a group of people who made me very welcome, and who are now functioning as an organization that is under considerable scrutiny by virtue of breaking new ground. These are the ethics of relationships.

I started off as a totally passive observer, my presence being allowed in the first place as a "fly on the wall". But the question that persisted in my mind was the extent to which I had the informed consent of participants. It was not my place to be overt in my personal observations. And if I had been openly critical, my presence would not have been tolerated and thus I would have missed out on a valuable experience. My initial direct contribution to the group's discussions and meetings amounted to providing some bibliographic references to strengthen one section of their proposal. Then slowly I increased my comments during their meetings. Especially in smaller meetings, silence can make one more conspicuous. Part of this can be attributed to my inability to keep quiet for extended periods of time, part to the fact that this was a group who made me feel very welcome.

At times it was difficult to remain suitably detached, despite my lack of sympathy with their general aims. I was sceptical about the motivation of certain members, and I was censorious of their penchant to provide "horror stories" about what seemed to be every other classroom in the public schools. But, perhaps everyone has distinct agendas; by developing as they did, the group certainly assisted my research! I found implicit sympathy creeping in as I become critical of the provincial government's intent to be the first province with charter schools, yet doing little to assist in any practical way. I also could not fail to respect how much work was achieved during the fairly short time frame that this group had to develop and submit their proposal to the sponsoring school board.

### Questions of Ethics

At the outset I felt that a clear distinction was made between the committed members of the group and me as the observer from the university. Such clarity became blurred, however, as I came to know quite well a small group of the active participants. These individuals went out of their way to be open and hospitable, and I felt very accepted by them. At one point I was even asked to be on their board since I was such a regular attender at meetings! Yet, because the group includes people who hold significantly different views from my own, this presented ethical concerns. I never claimed to be anything other than a graduate student doing research. However, another person who was there in an observer capacity was very supportive of the group's aims, and I was aware that members of the group assumed that I too was sympathetic to their case. This presents the dilemma of whether to be loyal to the group or loyal to my own integrity and the integrity of my research. There seems to be a fine line between "calling it as I see it," and being able to keep a clear conscience when I bump into members of the group.

Trying to be explicit about certain criticisms (both general and personal) raises the concern of giving offence to those who have helped me, leaving me with the feeling that I have betrayed their hospitality. An example can serve to explain this. Members of the group used a phrase which I personally find quite distasteful: that the school should be geared around "the severely normal" student. While I understand what they wish to convey by this slogan--that mainstreaming can be taken too far, and the interests of the bulk of students in a class can become secondary to the needs of those requiring considerable attention--I feel that this is not the way to go about causing positive change. At best it suggests an indifference to students who have

special needs. Though the Alberta Teachers' Association's paper *Trying to Teach* was cited in support of their opposition to mainstreaming, what was lacking was consideration of the resulting marginalization of those who are not severely normal. Yet is it being dismissive of my "hosts" to have remained silent on this matter then, while stating my opinion now?

As time went on I gained information about some members of the group, including certain personal crises, which is another factor to take into account in writing about their activities. A detached positivist would have had a more straight-forward time, not having to confront the impact of such emotions. Another situation illustrates this dilemma. In this instance a school board official asked "my" group to attend a working meeting with a representative of a group having similar aims. One member was especially annoyed at being linked with this parallel group since the latter appeared to have done little preparation. This member felt this was a potential set-up aimed at diluting fundamental beliefs. I appreciated being privy to some of the "behind-the scenes" discussions, and it was flattering to be asked for an opinion. I did not think the concern was entirely unfounded; but if I had, was I in an ethical position to say so?

A further project that I hope will arise from involvement with this group is that of analyzing the motivation and understanding the stereotypes held by parents who are unhappy with the current state of public education. For example, one group member was eager to share collected articles from right-wing periodicals and organizations. This was part of an "outrage file" which included newspaper clippings reporting on less-than-desirable occurrences within public education throughout North America. It seemed to be almost an archive of justification gathered by someone who is unlikely to

have to justify his actions as being anything beyond those of a concerned parent. In future analyses, I hope to use copies of various articles to gain insight into how people can be influenced by a limited number of questionable or biased sources. I did not have this possibility in mind when I borrowed the materials, the situation leaves me with the worry that I am somehow exploiting this person's openness, for purposes of which he was unaware.

Differing ethical considerations have to be weighed. In researching reasons for girls' under-involvement in science and technology, Kelly (1989) made the tactical decision to de-emphasize personal ramifications of her hypotheses: though she made no attempt to disguise the wider intent of the project, nor did she go to great lengths to explain it. The evolving nature of my research could be seen to require regular negotiation. But any group of people are going to be guarded in its comments if they are conscious that anything said might be taken down and used in evidence against them. Is this spying? A dual role is difficult to maintain. Feeding back all my notes would only serve to make me more circumspect/less honest, so I have made some notes for my own exclusive use. Suppression of knowledge can be unethical: yet how much does research destroy privacy, and how much does protection of privacy threaten to impede research? To give full attention to the rights and interests of all parties would produce innocuous research, so the question must be posed concerning whose interests would be protected by suppression of knowledge.

The individuals concerned naturally remain anonymous, and could well be satisfied to see some of their beliefs in print. But, the reaction of some of the group is still an issue. I have shown a copy of the remainder of this chapter to certain members of the group, but I find it difficult to judge the degree to which doing this may, consciously or unconsciously, have influenced

what I wrote. What needs further examination are the means by which one can join a group of committed people, accept their hospitality, and retain a critical capacity without becoming unscrupulous. Direction for this may lie in the distinctions offered by Usher and Edwards (1994) between con-text (situating the researcher in terms of biography), pre-text (interpretative strategies) and sub-text (power-knowledge formations). Armed with their "epistemic reflexivity" I may be able to reconsider my guest-host relationship, and thus avoid biting the hand that has fed my research.

### The Acorn Program

#### Critical assessment of public education

This parent group started out with a common goal which they saw as comparable to parents seeking to establish a German bi-lingual program. The "opting in" nature of the group produced a community of shared interests. Despite differing agendas, members of the group were united in their distrust of large government structures which they viewed as unwieldy and unresponsive to client wishes. The influence of a prominent educational reform activist was evident in the group's penchant of portraying schooling in the past as being much less complex than in the present system where a gridlock between union/school board/ministry often leads to unresponsiveness and inertia. Members of the group seemed to believe that their activity (or indeed any internal dissent within the public school system) would be opposed by the establishment zealots who would fight to the death to pursue the prevailing "orthodoxy" in education. The Acorn group stated a preference for the old-fashioned "tried and true" approach, rather than the prevailing politically correct "progressive" perspective seen to eschew it.

Some members admitted to a lack of familiarity with curriculum and with educational philosophy, and were therefore willing to leave such aspects to others within their group, concentrating instead on enrolment and other organizational matters. However, an activity which provided unity to the whole group was the exchange of stories that pointed out the public system's purported lack of rigor. Displeasure was expressed at the practice of ignoring mis-spelling which was often described by their children's teachers as "creative spelling" but to these parents was just one illustration of the dearth of standards. In particular, they criticized the "liberal" desire to prevent children from failing at anything and the avoidance of blame in the interests of bolstering self-esteem regardless of actual success. Superficial compliments were seen to represent a means of avoiding blame and consequences.

To address these and other purported weaknesses, the school they proposed would pay close corrective attention to error, and institute effective communication among teachers to ensure that information was shared. Traditional moral values were to be promoted as a way of providing broad appeal to a spectrum of religious beliefs. They touched on the possibility of a religious milieu for their future program. However, it was felt that a specific Christian flavour was best avoided since this would make it very difficult to achieve consensus. Hence, while many parents may wish for the Lord's Prayer, this might lead to the need to recognize the prayers of other denominations and faiths.

It is interesting to note how this process reflects some of the literature dealing with the development sequence in small groups. Tuckman (1970) suggests a model beginning with orientation to the task by identifying relevant parameters. This is followed by intragroup conflict as members "jockey" for

position, before group cohesion is established as the idiosyncrasies of members become accepted and the group becomes an entity. Norms are then generated and the group is able to proceed as a problem-solving instrument.

### Challenge for the status quo

The group's initial task was to formulate a plan which clearly set out the ways in which their proposed "Acorn School" would be distinct from existing schools within the district. They wanted to provide an orderly and educationally rich K to 6 setting which required a firm commitment from both students and parents. What they sought was termed "traditional" in the sense that it would have a strong academic base, large group instruction, consistent homework, regular testing and systematic reporting. Collectively they recognized that terms like "academic ethos", "leadership potential" and "good citizenship" were so widely bandied about that they contributed little to a distinctive school flavour. Accordingly, their proposed school would gain its distinctiveness from its emphasis on phonics rather than whole language, a knowledge-based rather than child-centred approach to learning and the use of a sequential rather than spiral curriculum.

At one school board meeting, trustees expressed amazement that these parents could not find an existing school that would satisfy their needs within the wide selection of open-boundary schools in the district. While the group conceded that varied elements of their proposed school could be found in other existing schools, they wanted "all parts" of it under one roof. In the words of one member, "We cannot send our children to one school for Math, and another for Reading." Though they claimed a preference for working within the existing system, that may not have been such a valid claim. The



group rejected the view that they were opponents of public education. Instead they preferred their efforts at educational change to be seen as analogous to the first Toyotas on North American roads challenging Chrysler into a more competitive mode.

They felt that the public system had not learned from the experience of schools which had waiting lists for registration. They wondered why educators did not see the correlation between the type of education offered at such schools and the fact that they were oversubscribed. In the opinion of one group member, "If I cannot enrol my child in School Z (of good academic reputation), it might as well not exist". Group members felt that the public system too often enjoyed the benefit of the doubt with complacent acceptance of the status quo. As one member commented, "We can't wait a generation for the public system to get around to changing". Such observations do not convey an optimism or any real preference for working within the existing system.

#### Curricular and Instructional Emphasis

Next, the group began to consider curricular matters. In particular, several organizers worried that they did not have the expertise necessary to develop a cohesive, integrated curriculum with detailed content description within the short time frame. Therefore curricular overviews at selected grade levels would have to suffice. The core subjects of Language, Math, Science and Social Studies received most attention, while subjects like Physical Education, Music and Art had rather skimpy treatment.

Too many classroom techniques were seen as reflecting untried and untested "fads". Acorn planners believed that individualized instruction should be reserved for out-of-class help, rather than be the prevailing method

of instruction. Instead they preferred large group instruction, drill and memorization of fundamentals. Again, the influence of the prominent educational activist is clearly evident in their emphasis on phonics and their concern over the comparatively poor performance of Alberta students on international tests. In the areas of science and math they wished for a curriculum aimed at developing "student mastery comparable to that of the best international standards"; moreover, they wanted references to such standards to be included as an appendix to their proposal. One member commented that "Literature should be based on analysis, not pleasure". Rote learning of geographical and historical facts was seen as preferable to "the wishy-washy liberalism" of the current Social Studies programs. They also debated the appropriate time to introduce foreign language instruction in elementary grades.

One of the recurrent themes in the group's discussions and planning sessions was entrepreneurship in education: a system unrestricted by regulations, determining such matters as designated textbooks. Some group members were especially critical of parts of the reading series *Journeys* and *Impressions*. They were vocal in their disapproval of the Whole Language philosophy (though agreed that some selections could intrigue student interest). They favoured one particular series of texts published by Open Court because it stressed phonemic (as distinct from phonic) awareness; although undeniably American in flavour, it was seen as superior to the other Reading series in use. Also circulated among the group were *Core Knowledge* books. In an attempt to address cultural illiteracy—the major gaps in student knowledge—this series specifies information that a student in any particular grade should know; for example, the ability to converse easily requires familiarity with such

idiomatic expressions as "a rolling stone". The appeal of such texts reflects their perception that many of today's students were grossly lacking in terms of solid general knowledge, a view confirmed by Allan Bloom's work *The Closing of the American Mind*.

### Accountability in Discipline

Considerable time was spent "word-smithing" the Acorn proposal, for example, discussing the positive and negative connotations of "discipline". Should the term be replaced with "orderly" or "productive"? Should it be qualified and linked with creativity, or should the desired no-nonsense approach be emphasized? The school environment proposed by the group was based on the assumption that classroom management would be unproblematic since a policy of zero tolerance for misbehaviour was to be implemented. These parents were critical of the apparently endless steps followed by school boards before misbehaving students would be expelled. In their proposed school, following a short period of review, a student who continually failed to meet the school's behavioural expectations would be transferred "to a more congenial environment". This discipline approach would be laid out in initial communiqués and explained at the organizational meetings for parents prior to school opening. Eventually, upon enrolment of their children, parents would be asked to sign a commitment form regarding their children's behaviour and work habits.

All Acorn members favoured teaching to "the norm" in terms of instructional approach, and believed that special education should be left to specialists so that regular classroom teachers could focus on the needs of the majority of students. Some of the parents felt that their children just might be

"more able" and they failed to acknowledge any contradiction in philosophy as they insisted that the learning needs of capable students be given greater attention in the choice of literature and assignments. Their rationale centred around the view that their children had not previously been sufficiently "stretched" or challenged in order to actualize their potential.

This orderly picture was somewhat shaken when one member suggested a hypothetical scenario of many public school children with learning problems flocking to their newly-founded school, with parents who sought an easy solution. One immediate suggestion was to advertise this school's program as being open only to "those who would benefit". Although vague, this could serve to exclude students whose ability fell outside the favoured range which existed in the minds of the Acorn group. A less controversial response was that the program be open to "any student who could keep up and not be disruptive". Thus it came to be recognized that an explicit policy for student selection would be essential.

#### Political aspects and accountability

Several positive articles about the proposed Acorn school appeared in the local media. These prompted an interest among parents from different parts of the city and suburbs in registering their children. It was felt that, as the Acorn proposal was refined, the ideas of the group would become more focused and the credibility of the program would increase. However, an early aim of the Acorn group was to obtain provisional enrolment of the required quota of students. While numbers would strengthen their cause, some cautioned about the danger of inflating these numbers. Members of Albertans for Quality Education had failed in their earlier attempt to form an alternative

program in part because adequate numbers of interested, committed parents did not materialize. While recognizing that their first priority was to "get off the ground," some members of the Acorn group were convinced that there would be no problem in obtaining prospective students. Instead they cautioned about necessary room for expansion! They hoped the school board would "let them give it a try".

There was a high level of anxiety over school district cutbacks at that time, not to mention the political sensitivity of starting a new venture while the provincial government was reducing kindergarten funding. Nevertheless, these parents continued to hope that their charter might be granted. They were cognizant that this school district had already accommodated various alternative programs and choices. The "wild card" however was the arrival of a new superintendent. After learning his identity and checking his earlier work and jurisdiction, these parents gained confidence that he would work towards an even larger degree of parental choice. Conjecture now turned to the role of the Board of Trustees in this matter. One trustee was described as being ATA "friendly," but all trustees would have to be answerable to the voting public. Further discussion led to an optimistic feeling of forthcoming support from the key players. After all, programs emphasizing a high academic approach had been created at higher grade levels so why not expect the same provision at the elementary level.

Not unexpectedly, there was a concern about the public scrutiny which would necessarily occur in the process of establishing one of the early charter schools. They would be held to account and have to satisfy the public that excellence was being achieved. How would they assess the levels of excellence to which they aspired? How different would this assessment be from that of

other district schools? In what precise ways was their curricular emphasis and instructional approach superior to that of other schools? Would the approach be copied by others? This questioning resounded in the parent group, many members wondering if their fellow committee members could gauge the outcome or if they should call up the opinions of "experienced personnel". However, the work and determination of the group was not undermined by these times of doubt and questioning.

### Regulations

Their proposal still lacked sufficient detail with respect to such matters as appeals, charter dissolution where necessary, and students' expulsion. Details such as the number of school days and hours of operation could follow other schools in the district in the initial year but could be changed subsequently if, after they had polled parents, a change was felt to be needed. Providing parents with a questionnaire concerning such options would send out a strong message about commitment to local input as opposed to top-down decree.

### Governance

The group recognized that lines of accountability in governance were going to have to be clearly established so that the structure could contend with the conflicting parental demands that were expected. Ironically, they seemed to believe that restricting access to significant power within the school would prevent such conflict from becoming destructive. In short, a strong Board of Governors and a professional staff would be the solution. At this stage the legal requirements for a school council were not clear, but it was believed that it would be possible to select from a menu of roles and responsibilities. It was

hoped that this council would filter parental involvement. Given the nature of the parent body, there would be no shortage of volunteers for school committees, and one member saw this as a way of "keeping the busybodies busy" since it was seen as preferable to discourage "meddling parents".

Parents with time could assist with co-operative learning or fund-raising, but they should not expect to micro-manage the school. The partially-expedient argument was made that most parents want only to have the initial choice of school to which to send their child. Beyond that they have neither the time nor inclination to be extensively involved. One member said that a parent council would "be democratic after a year". This comment reflects both a pragmatic need to get things up and running before wider parental participation could be formalized, as well as a strong desire on the part of these founding members to implement their own specific agenda and ensure the continuity of their own ideas so that their investment would prove worthwhile.

### Finance

Choice of appropriate instructional texts provides one illustration of the costs the group faced. The reading series produced by Open Court was expensive, but the publishers were hoping to make greater inroads into the Canadian market so there was a possibility of splitting the costs with pilot sites. Budgetary issues now became an on-going concern, even matters such as the relatively incidental costs of mailing a newsletter and preliminary advertising. There was apprehension that this could prove to be just the tip of an iceberg of expenses to be incurred. The school board's budgeting outline, which included estimates of everything from library and custodial services to lunchroom aides,

was being used as a basis for calculating start-up costs. One group member was daunted by the amount of detail required, from the benefits package for staff, to having the furnace checked. While one member held out hope that the school board would be persuaded to give assistance, another felt that this need not be an over-riding concern since they were about to "tap" the local corporations for funds. A grant or loan from the Donner Foundation was a further possibility since they believed that it supported deregulation and schools with a right wing flavour. Since the group did not have charitable status, it was using Revenue Canada's charitable registration number of the Society for Advancing Educational Research, courtesy of Dr. Freedman.

Alberta Education's *Charter School Handbook* (1995) stipulated in no uncertain terms the amount of grant money that would be available to a charter school. However, not surprisingly, the question of money proved to be critical to the group. Given that no start up funds or loans were available, even small initial costs such as advertising had to be met through fund-raising. As one member put it, "We believe in this scheme, but are not prepared to take another mortgage on our houses in order to subsidize the launch". The uncertainty of fund raising soon became apparent and confidence began to waver. "Students are not the problem, it's the cash," bemoaned a member. Significantly the group lacked the funds to retain a prospective principal. A brief discussion concerning the cost of computers also served to underline their financial insecurity.

### Location

The planning committee also wrestled with the fundamental issue of where their proposed charter school would be located. It was felt that the



location needed to be selected as early as possible since it was likely to determine the participation of at least some parents, especially those with younger children. Here they were presented with a Catch 22 situation, the need for adequate numbers to reinforce the proposal, yet the inability to even estimate numbers until the proposal and site had been confirmed. All members were taken aback when inquiries revealed that \$2000 was a monthly rent for the physical plant of one potential site for the school. Some of the more confident group members were certain that the need to recruit a sufficient number of students would not be a problem. Most, however, were less confident that they could recruit the 125 students needed to fulfil the charter school requirements. In the event of a shortfall in enrolment, would approval still be given? Other schools had started off with fewer students than this to give fair trial to their viability; so could the minimum number be pruned? (In fact, the minimum enrolment was reduced to 75 in the revised April 1996 *Handbook*).

Each solution in turn seemed to raise an attendant concern. With under a hundred students and disproportionate grade enrolment, would there be a necessity for combined ("split") grades? While such divisions made economic sense in certain situations, many parents strongly oppose such arrangements. The fact that this new school would have to operate with split grades would require careful selling to the total parent body (although the school board had previously been criticized for using similar tactics).

#### Suspicion of professional educators

Part of the impetus of the group came from their criticism that teachers were too prone to "entertain" students and be involved in "social

work activities". An emphatic feeling was that "what should be done by the family, should be done by the family...we are not there to brush children's teeth for them". Members stressed that the school needed the courage to say that it would not be all things to all people; it was to be a centre for learning with a focus on academic success rather than on field trips and clubs. The group believed as well that teachers were not substitute parents but rather experts involved in the process of instilling information in students. Most of the Programs of Study were described as "fine on paper," but it was the group's feeling that they could go considerably beyond provincial requirements in augmenting the curriculum.

Several members of the group seemed to have a fundamental distrust of educators. For example, one member described a visit to an American school which had to operate an open-door policy for classrooms because "some teachers had not given up child-centred teaching. I even saw one child lying on the classroom floor to do her reading". Consequently, the Acorn group sought to "teacher-proof" the curriculum, primarily by designing a year's supply of lesson plans that were so well structured and detailed that they would need only fine-tuning by the teacher. The prospect of horrifying recent Education graduates with their belief in teachers rehearsing lessons and anticipating specific responses was found highly amusing. Much current pedagogy was dismissed with an almost pioneering spirit, "the experts have screwed it up, now it's our turn to have a go". Yet, there was a tendency to defer to selective "experts". For example, the view that students who had not mastered appropriate work should be prevented from passing the grade was quickly revised when it was reported that Dr. Freedman believed that remediation was preferable to student retention.

Further ambivalence was evident in their approach to teacher contracts. One of the key members had held a part-time teaching position but was reluctantly "let go" by a principal who was required to keep staff members who had full-time contracts. This type of experience engendered criticism of the security of employment that teachers enjoy because it resulted in too much "deadwood" within the system. Consequently, the group favoured contracts which clearly laid out conditions of employment and mechanisms for terminating the contract of any teacher not meeting their expectations. This would avoid a school having to endure a weaker teacher until that individual chose to move elsewhere. The steering committee predicted that their desire for one year contracts would face opposition, but as one member asserted, "this is a business and must be run well". Some members of the group seemed indifferent to the argument that teachers should have considerable autonomy, believing rather that they should be dismissed if they did not follow directions. Others upheld the need for fair practice and emphasized the committee's responsibility to ensure that those who were hired worked out well.

Along lines similar to those of independent schools, teachers employed by a charter school cannot be active members of the Alberta Teachers' Association<sup>16</sup> (*Charter School Handbook*, 1995, p.14). The Acorn group certainly was not supportive of unions. A degree of hostility was predictable given the nature of the enterprise, although the suspicion of one of the organizing members was somewhat surprising since she had played an active role within the ATA. They attributed Dr. Freedman's previous lack of success in attempting to set up a charter school in Red Deer to the opposition expressed

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<sup>16</sup> Charter school teachers may seek associate membership of the ATA. They can only be active members if the teacher is seconded, is on a leave of absence, or if the school board makes it a condition of their approval to establish a charter school.

at a public meeting supposedly packed by ATA members. While some felt that charter school teachers should receive salaries comparable to their district counterparts, others believed in flat rate pay scales--which would not recognize extra increments for additional qualifications. They cited the example of Minneapolis where charter schools pay teachers significantly less than their public counterparts due to the provision of more attractive conditions in which to work. It was argued that, since good discipline and high standards would be just as satisfying to a teacher as they are a parent, quality staff would apply because these desirable working conditions would compensate for employment insecurity.

Since the ATA did not have an official position with regard to its members seeking employment in a charter school, the group realized the need to clarify the degree of separation from the ATA before any hiring of teachers took place. What would be the relationship between charter schools and the ATA's Collective Agreement? How many of the guidelines are negotiable? What would be the position of an ATA member offered a job by the group? Would it be the individual teacher's option to pay union dues while working for the group? It was hoped that several of these issues would be resolved by discussions between the ATA and the provincial government. The group also deliberated over the extent of pressure that the ATA can place on a school board to prevent charters from being granted. Grievance procedures regarding contracts and unjust dismissal were also discussed. The labour relations applicable to private schools were to be researched to determine which of these practices would also apply to charter schools. Someone was also designated to seek a response from the Board of Labour. Generally, the belief was that the

first loyalty of teachers had to be to the charter school's ideals, with no strings attached.

### Negotiations over the proposal

Initially, the group was wary about entering into informal discussions with the school board on the grounds that it gave the Board unfair advantage by "showing our hand early". However, the first meeting with a school board official was in some ways a watershed. The curricular issues seemed marginal and were dispensed with quickly. Control over staffing was an increasingly pivotal issue. If the group opted for alternative, rather than charter status, it could choose among applicants from an extensive pool of teachers provided by the Board, a decided advantage if enrolments fluctuate. The board official agreed that contract terminations might be a long, drawn-out process, but argued that principals could speed up this process by counseling the teacher to move. The Labour Standards Act prevented employers from being capricious. And furthermore, since total parental consensus was rare, any staff member could receive the full range of responses. However, guaranteed employment was seen as the root of many of the problems the group sought to address, and they repeated their belief that it took far too long to get rid of an ineffective teacher. It was argued as well that school boards commonly avoided the issue of a weak teacher in spite of parental concern. They assured the board official that they were not trying to be harsh to teachers; rather they were moderate parents merely wanting safeguards for their children.

The other central issue was student access. The group was warned that some parents might see this school as a saviour, expecting it to succeed where others had failed. Who would not benefit from the program, and how

would this be determined? Group members responded that student misbehaviour would lead to a short probationary period before transfer to a more congenial environment. Such dispatch was contrasted with the fifteen steps local schools were expected to go through. Questions were raised as to what would constitute misbehaviour, and whether a student would be excluded for not completing homework. Furthermore, it was quickly pointed out that a charter school would have to expel students rather than transfer them to another school within the district since they would not be in the same system. Hence, the Agreement they would require parents to sign would circumvent some but not all discipline problems.

Having gone this far in the deliberations and planning, it was felt that there was a degree of political pressure on Alberta Education to follow through with this initiative. Granting at least a few charters by September 1995 would demonstrate government sincerity and deflect the criticism that their posture was all talk and no action. The group speculated that, since the premier was glowing over American praise of his budgetary measures, he could be anxious to preside over other "cutting edge" change. Therefore the co-operation of Alberta Education in seeing the group through some of the bureaucratic hurdles could be reasonably anticipated. However, one American outline suggested a two-year lead-up to the establishment of a charter school (Riley, 1995). The tardy publication of Alberta Education's *Handbook* outlining the requirements for application, obliged the group to work under pressure of inflexible deadlines, restricting what could be achieved if they were to succeed in opening a school. Also, given that the concept of the charter school was in the embryonic stage in Canada, it must be kept in mind that few government officials were adequately knowledgeable in this field.

The provisional regulations stipulated that groups submit their application for charter status to the local school board, which then had sixty days to approve or reject it (*Draft Charter School Handbook*, p.6). The very nature of this process could restrict the number of charter schools likely to be created. At first the Acorn group believed that the public board would facilitate their charter request rather than aggravate parents and politicians alike. But when the Board was confronted with the reality that it would lose several thousand dollars for every student who moved to a charter school, it became clear that the Board had little to gain from being unduly co-operative since this would be akin to assisting the competition. The Acorn group then recognized the strong likelihood that many school board members would want to prevent parent groups from following the charter path since they would not wish to set a precedent that many others could follow in the future. While an "opening of the floodgates," with a charter school run in every neighbourhood, seemed to be an overstatement, the eventual uptake of this reform would very much depend upon how the early ones were received.

Therefore, the Board could well be inclined to take every one of the sixty days allowed by the legislation, such a stall serving to prevent the group from being able to establish a charter school in September 1995. Another "game-playing scenario" suggested was that the group's proposal might not be rejected outright but sent back for amendments, again preventing a September start. The possibility of a meeting with the Minister for Education was raised, during which the group would emphasize the pragmatic need for Alberta Education to consider the proposal concurrently with the school board so that, in the event of being turned down by the latter, a Ministry decision could be forthcoming without a further administrative delay which would be fatal.

Such a meeting seemed all the more reasonable in light of the fact that a copy had to be sent to the Ministry at the same time anyway. How could any group conduct the essential planning while having to wait sixty days for the school board's decision, followed by a thirty day wait for the Ministry's decision? Since the group felt that they were relatively organized, in their view if they did not succeed, others were even less likely to do so.

The group was united in its opposition to money being "skimmed off to pay towards a cumbersome infrastructure...we don't want to contribute towards trustees, psychologists, or curriculum specialists". It was also concerned about the frequency of "loose" professional development activities such as Teachers' Convention to which they were clearly opposed. However, when the meeting with the school board took place, the conversation turned directly to the group's two options. The first approach was to apply to the Board for charter school status: all requirements mentioned in the *Draft Handbook* would have to be met, and the Board would only provide services on a financial basis.

A second approach was to set up an alternative program under the auspices of the Board, thus gaining use of services and clear input into specified areas. One member then asked the pivotal question concerning board assistance in the form of either a site or start up funds if the group decided to embark on the charter route. The official's answer was predictable, but worth receiving for its clarification: "There would not be a penny from government for charter school students so why would we give you anything? At present all sites are leased, you would be treated as a private school and we could not be expected to assist the opposition"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> January 30, 1996 meeting at the Board's offices.



Understandably the Acorn group wondered if their proposed school remained within the system, how different could it be from existing schools? Could it be an independent unit with a different governance structure? Would the district deliver on its promises of distinctiveness? Regarding location, could the program operate as a school-within-a-school without producing competition and tension between administrators for their respective programs? The board official requested informal contact during the negotiations since this was a trial role for all concerned. The submission would be considered in consultation with various departments before the official made recommendation to the Trustees. For example, officials assigned to the school board's curriculum division would need to peruse any textbooks that were not within the current list of approved texts for the required tolerance and understanding test. If it were an alternative program, this Board official believed, Acorn would be accommodated if at all possible since it would serve to widen the range of choice within the district, and attract many parents to consider it for their children.

After that meeting the planning group expressed fears that the charter proposal would not gain favour with the Board, such delay making a September start unlikely. They further wondered if their desired academic standards would be met as an alternative program. After all, they had identified the shortcomings of the Board's educational delivery and results. Thus it was that they decided on independence and submitted their charter application in mid-February 1996. Yet by early March the alternative route was being treated more seriously. Organizers were clearly worried about losing interested parents who would not wait another year. As well, necessary funds

were unavailable for a September beginning. Now discussions centred on the hiring of teachers who would reflect the school ethos.

At the next meeting the Superintendent suggested that the group join forces with another group interested in starting a traditional school, since the two sets of goals seemed so similar. This might add momentum and a consequent increase in numbers which would have implications for the selection of a site. Acting on his suggestion, in early April 1995 the Acorn group met with a representative of a group espousing traditional education. But since the latter group had only adopted a philosophical statement from a British Columbian counterpart, it was at a much earlier stage of development. Hence, there was little enthusiasm about merging with this group.

Eventually on April 25, 1995 Trustees of the school district approved the proposal for the Acorn alternative program. The site would be determined by the number and distribution of student enrolment. Birchwood School was suggested, although this had only four classrooms available. Work was started on the organizational structure, with the existing Acorn executive providing initial direction. Detail on the methodological emphasis would be provided for four core curriculum areas. Work would begin on a program handbook and on advertising the program. A selection committee would have "significant input" in interviewing and short listing teaching staff. A public information meeting was planned, with parents on the list being encouraged to bring their friends. Since it was thought that many parents would be hesitant about committing their children to the untried first year of a program, the group made preparations to reassure parents about the level of expertise within the program. On the other hand, enrolment was to be encouraged by pointing out

to the parents that the alternative would be to have their children spend another year "learning one month's work!"

### Attracting enrolment

Next a public information meeting took place at Birchwood School, where the principal introduced the program as being compatible with the existing one. The teaching staff was described as happy, and the problems raised by some of the existing parents as being addressed. An Acorn leader then stressed how excellence was not to be restricted to gifted children. The Acorn program would have a solid foundation for all levels with no floating standards. Though the first year would be tough slogging because of the varied educational background of students, the group was undaunted. Strong discipline and close communications with parents would assist the transition. Immediately afterwards the group felt that the meeting had gone badly since there was a lack of specific information, especially about location. The site for this program was a particular problem for parents concentrated in one part of the city who were reluctant to transport their children.

A second information meeting, held in a smaller, crowded room rather than a larger half-filled gym, was shorter and much more upbeat. The school board official assured parents that the Acorn program was well conceived and moderate, and that the Board too wanted it to be successful. This official also met that same week with the Birchwood parents, who were concerned about the conservative nature of this new program and the possible segregation of students. Although the official attempted to reassure them by comparisons with the French Immersion program, these parents believed that

confrontation of one form or another would probably be inevitable in this instance.

### Program launch

The new program opened in September 1995, attracting 119 students from 18 different schools, 40 more students than the regular program of the host school. Tensions arose from this disparity reflected in things like lack of cooperation and discussions of "take-over". Acceptance of the program by the host school seemed to have been a unilateral decision of the principal, perhaps due to fear of school closure. Existing teaching staff felt excluded, aggrieved by an initial impression that new staff members perceived themselves as superior teachers. New organizational problems also began to develop. One parent, for instance, began to document situations where the principal appeared indifferent to Acorn's concerns. There were looming problems over the budget, as no clear formula was available concerning allocation of funds to both programs. Since the Acorn group was already making plans to expand, parents were anxious to know the new location that would be needed for such expansion. Then, in November 1995, the principal unexpectedly took early retirement and a new administrator was appointed as acting principal for the balance of the school year.

In a telephone interview in early January 1996, one parent informed me that the situation had improved since the new principal had arrived, but that the Acorn group still felt over-controlled. Though the Acorn executive had been told that they were over budget, they did not know what the budget was. The curriculum co-ordinator position was still unconfirmed. Though there was a waiting list of 300 students, the executive had been told that the

maximum enrolment would be held at 150, a limit presumably based on the physical size of Birchwood School. The Acorn group intended to expand to the junior high grades but this had never been explained to the Birchwood parents. The latter sought to veto the idea, apparently with the support of a school board official who indicated that such change would require community approval before it could take place. "Everything is still a fight," bewailed one Acorn member.

Later that month at a Birchwood Parents' Meeting district officials recommended that the two groups work together as one parent council. But Birchwood parents felt certain that Acorn activists would dominate. At a similar meeting Acorn parents agreed to one school council as long as matters pertaining to staffing and budget were kept separate. At this time Acorn parents were also informed that the principal held overall responsibility for staffing all positions, and that future vacancies would have to be filled by district staff<sup>18</sup>. Acorn parents felt this represented the beginning of a power struggle with the Board's bureaucracy. The need for extra administrative time for the Acorn program added to budgetary concerns. The curriculum coordinator was on a one-year contract and maintained that she had not been given the time required to adequately carry out her duties. Some parents at the meeting wanted to discuss the matter of an International Baccalaureate middle school program for the grade 7 students starting in September. Others pointed out that questions relating to Acorn expansion or the provision of a Baccalaureate program were still "up in the air" and could not yet be answered.

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<sup>18</sup> In late August the Acorn group had received permission by the Superintendent to hire teachers from outside the district pool in order to fill two vacancies.

### The charter route revisited

At least one Acorn member had never let go of the idea of a charter school. Sufficiently intimidated by the cost of renting premises, this individual felt that a further year as an alternative program would be useful to consolidate their position. However, as indicated by comments at the January meeting, a subgroup of Acorn parents was unhappy with the program being run under the auspices of the school board. One executive member noted how the meeting had cast doubt on the whole notion of the parent-controlled nature of the program. Another stated that the group would get nowhere under the auspices of the school board, especially when important decisions concerning the hiring and firing of staff could be vetoed. This point of view helped revive their quest for charter school status.

Fractures now appeared in the Acorn group. Instead of "significant input" some parents felt that their role and span of influence were considerably restricted. An offshoot group made moves to begin anew the quest for real parent power. Thus, the Vista Charter School began with an idea to be "captain of its own destiny" and to gain consistency of staff, philosophy and curriculum<sup>19</sup>. The aim was to provide an academic education to children of average ability since this reflected the spirit of charter legislation. The proposed emphasis included a knowledge-based curriculum, frequent reporting of achievement, and accountable teachers. In contrast to Acorn, which still had not received approval for Grade 7, the Vista Charter School would begin as a K to 8 school and expand one grade each year. The organizers wanted a "seamless program instilling a culture into children at an early

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<sup>19</sup> A Vista representative speaking at a public meeting, February 28, 1996.

age"<sup>20</sup>. A Vista leader also mentioned that they had a full complement of teachers ready to go.

In April 1996, with the break-away of the Vista group, a new Acorn board was elected at Birchwood School. Members of this Board were guaranteed significant involvement in short listing junior high teachers. A junior high Acorn curriculum was prepared for implementation at a nearby school beginning in September 1996 with the grade 7 program. The new Acorn board was more satisfied. Revision of agreements, such as the initial vision of a single site, had been made in good faith. Moreover, they could continue to use the vast resources of the sponsoring school district. There had also been inquiries from other principals interested in adopting aspects of the Acorn program.

Indicative of a less desirable aspect of parent politics were concerns that the Acorn parent mailing list and telephone numbers had been used for invitations to Vista meetings. This contradicted Vista promises of not "poaching" parents for the new school. Then, in late May 1996, an Acorn newsletter informed parents of the departure of the curriculum coordinator. Reasons for this were never made public, although many people I spoke to assumed that she had been dismissed.

Initially, the Vista charter application was rejected in April 1996 by another school board in the district, but subsequently it was approved by Alberta Education. By having the opportunity to rent a former nurses' residence at a cost of \$1 per year, the Vista group was able to secure premises for their school. Clearly this freed up funds for the considerable start-up costs.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Even when their targeted number of registrations had been achieved, the group still held a public information meeting during the summer of 1996 in order to sustain the interest of other families on the waiting list. Since their plan was based on a specific amount of funding, they could not afford to be a few students short. Once the charter was granted, the problem over lack of start-up funds was circumvented by a system which allowed them to receive their allocated money in fourteen equal installments beginning in July 1996. This, together with 60-90 day payment periods on certain bills and a budget of nearly \$1 million, meant that they were in business. In a telephone conversation with a Vista staff member in July 1996, I learned that a principal had been appointed and a superintendent hired. On September 9, 1996 the school opened with a staff of 12 teachers, administered by a principal and vice-principal.

### Critical Issues

Results of a case study are open to a range of interpretation but do provide a focus which enables debate to move beyond abstract concepts. Yet, as Stake (1995) suggested, the issues are not "clean and simple" but involve the messy intricacies of group dynamics and political maneuvering. For example, an assessment of charter school reform could productively include the factors which motivate participation in such a process. The Acorn group's claim that they wish simply to improve the quality of education provides only part of the picture. Some actions were tinged with varying degrees of self-interest: whether it was a cause into which to throw oneself, prospects of employment, or the saving of private school fees. This is a sensitive area and I am conscious of avoiding the further pursuit of this issue; all of us act, at least in part, out of self-interest. However, I now have a keener appreciation of the attraction of



approaching extended choice through abstract discussion of parallel examples--perhaps the debate over Proposition 13 in California or the promotion of middle class tax cuts--which could relate to my later discussion of conceptions of community without involving the same degree of value judgment.

In part, the account serves to expose contradictions inherent within the reform. Few cases of implementation may reflect consistent translation of the theoretical underpinnings. However, there are degrees of inconsistency, and one only has to look a little beyond the seemingly straight-forward description--that charter schools aim to provide private choice within a public system--to encounter considerable complexity. It is perhaps obvious that the beliefs held by the original Acorn members were going to be of major significance in shaping the pattern of events. The members of the group were distinctly middle-class, and the speed with which they acted in response to charter legislation is indicative of the greater social efficacy that members of this class have when it comes to political mobilization.

The group held firmly to conservative views with respect to schooling, some expressing more traditional attitudes than others: "When I was in school, girls didn't wear pants regardless of the weather; they knew who was in control." In one sense they were to find out that it is easier to be in opposition than in government, easier to be critical of mixed grades or bullying policy from the outside until confronted with the reality of dealing with such issues directly. Similarly, once teachers have been hired by a program there is a responsibility for ensuring things work out from an administrative as well as parental perspective.

Meetings of this group could involve a curious mixture of informed debate, personal opinions and aggressive dogmatism. When I first joined this group it became evident that it was not a particularly cohesive one in the sense that almost all members brought with them a variety of personal agendas. One wanted a school that was conveniently located as well as relatively homogeneous in terms of the composition of the student body. One sought flexibility from hide-bound, imposed conventions, while another advocated "tried and tested" teaching methodology and insisted that the proposed school adopt only that which could be supported by research. One was not prepared even to debate or defend the respective merits of alternative approaches, exclaiming that, "those not sharing these basic beliefs should leave the group." One came to feel that the group was not giving sufficient weight in its planning and deliberations to his/her personal concerns and point of view. Notwithstanding this diversity, they were united by a shared sense of dissatisfaction with the public school system and by a common determination to establish an alternative school for their children.

At times the group displayed a defensive disapproval of people who adhered to alternative curricular approaches. For instance, academics who believe in phonics were hailed as prominent educators, while those who defend whole language were "lackeys" of an oppressive orthodoxy. I sometimes questioned the extent to which members of this group considered wider ramifications of their actions since occasional comments suggested an indifference to others who did not place the same value on education as they did. Listening to certain of their discussions made me wonder about possible outcomes of the grass-roots activism encouraged by charter school legislation. Typically, parents want their children to be "above average." The Acorn

proposal had the potential of translating this desire to a whole school context. The parent body attracted to such a school would also be atypical through sharing some degree of antipathy towards the public system.

However, my hypothesis concerning the potentially detrimental effect of combining a group of disaffected parents proved incorrect in many ways. Rather than a destructive attraction, discontent for the existing system resulted in greater cohesion developing, perhaps adding to the determination to make the venture a success. (Nevertheless, disaffection continued to be directed at the school board which, rightly or wrongly, became the scapegoat for a range of concerns.) In many ways the group was exceptionally committed, more prepared than most to devote a considerable numbers of hours during the evenings and weekends to a project which was, by no means, a foregone conclusion. The first meeting I joined as an observer (January 7, 1995) ran from 9 am to 3 p.m. without a lunch-break.

The experience of the Acorn group presents an interesting judgment call: should they have opted for the more immediately viable alternative program in order to implement specific educational principles, or should they have insisted on the autonomy which is provided by charter school status? Financial constraints and the tightness of the timeline meant that the alternative program route had its attractions; one member preferred describing this as negotiating a quasi-charter school, with the prospect of more independence when the new school flourished. This person reasoned that, had the group taken on responsibilities such as salaries, insurance and health coverage, they would have become bogged down in minutiae, and thus would never have got off the ground. Conversely, others discussed the option of contracting a company to carry out such functions and went on to question the

basis of the concern since, with only a small staff, the jobs would not be too arduous.

Several of the fundamental aims of the charter proposal were defeated when the group became absorbed within the district system. Strings are inevitably attached to such arrangements, and these represent a significant loss of autonomy and independence: outsiders become privy to hiring and firing, and there is less control over such matters as salaries. The Acorn group eventually achieved many of its aims as an alternative program within the public system, and the fact that the Superintendent expressed interest in extending the provision of alternative programs strongly suggests that more such programs will be offered in the near future. However, questions remain about this strategy. Can such programs be easily accommodated within a "school-within-a-school" model, and how different can an alternative program be from the conventional program?

Conflicts among the key stake-holders seem almost inevitable. The Government's overall approach to the charter application process operated to stymie the early efforts of the Acorn group. Effective advertising of a potential school was more than difficult when the group had no money, principal, or location. As one group member commented, "we can't run a curriculum from a mobile home". At best, a school board's position within the charter application process is ambiguous. A district which goes to considerable lengths to accommodate groups of parents in order to keep students within their jurisdiction may be short-sighted. If such actions contribute to a growth of "stronger" charter applications such as the Vista application--this could result in the district's loss of larger numbers of students. It is worth questioning whether the reaction of the local school district to the Acorn proposal was

motivated by concern over pedagogical matters or simply tax dollars leaving the district.

As well, there is the question of whether parents who are more satisfied with the status quo will accept the use of public tax dollars as funding for quasi-independent separate schools established to meet the interests of those who are dissatisfied. This question underlines the contradictions which seem so pervasive. A further example is the paradox of devolution while centralization of control is occurring. Does the one arm of government, which is promoting greater autonomy through the introduction of charter schools, know what the other arm is doing in terms of centralizing controls? In several ways, such as testing, governments in favour of extending school choice appear also to be centralizing control, with the result that charter schools may not attain the autonomy they seek. Current experience seems to suggest almost a schizophrenia<sup>21</sup> which is far from the "single minded" coherence claimed by advocates of the charter school movement.

My involvement with the Acorn group has left me with mixed feelings; I now recognize the commendable nature of some of the group's beliefs, but some of my initial reservations and opposition also remain. This case study of their evolution serves to provide insight into the "road" followed by one group as it responded to charter school legislation in order to increase the choice of schooling available. It proved to be a road with bumps and unexpected turns. Travelling this road represented a major commitment of time and effort by the participants of the group. Indeed, (before I abandon the

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<sup>21</sup> I am working on the "split mind" interpretation of this term: the same body possessing contradictory elements.

metaphor) these early travellers along this road faced a rougher journey than subsequent ones who benefited from several potholes having been identified!

This chapter has described some of the experiences encountered by a group of parents who started a quest for a charter school predicated on discipline, homework, and a knowledge-based curriculum. Critics of the back-to-basics trend such as Aronowitz and Giroux (1988) complain that "learning is defined primarily through a pedagogy of transmission, and knowledge is reduced to a culture of great books or unrelated catalogues of shared information" (p.182). Personal familiarity with the traditional teacher-led approach to teaching must be among the nostalgic attractions to parents of a pedagogy of transmission. The Acorn group was clearly successful at addressing a vein of parental angst with the existing system of education and the appeal of the ideas they promoted is evident in the numbers of students enrolled with the Acorn and Vista programs.

I would speculate that Vista may not follow through with its plans to expand beyond grade 9 in view of the fewer number of complaints I have heard levelled at the programs offered by senior high schools in the city, together with the number of students that can be accommodated on the current site. Constraints on charter school development can be physical as well as institutional. The next chapter goes into more detail in exploring the impact of enacting these choice-extending alternatives to regular district programs, including whether or not they have raised parental expectations beyond a level that they can be realized. Does the act of moving a child into a new program entail a greater degree of commitment to the success of the program than would typically would be the case? A common concern of parents considering new programs is whether their child is being used in a "guinea pig" role

within a venture which has yet to be proven. Such parents might feel more secure keeping their child in a school board program unless their antipathy towards the public system is such that any move is perceived as a good one. Chapter 5 places such questions within an arena of competing emphases and interpretations.

## Chapter Five

### ACTIVATION OF PARENTAL CHOICE

In September 1995 Birchwood Elementary School became host school for the Acorn Alternative Program. In May 1996 I conducted a survey of the school to gauge the opinions of parents and staff as the program neared the end of its first year of operation. My hope was this would suggest some of the issues raised by the expansion of educational choice. The survey required brief presentations to meetings of the regular staff, Acorn staff, and the advisory councils of the two parent bodies. Copies of the questionnaire (see Appendix C) were distributed through the classroom teachers and returned to them in sealed envelopes.

Although aware of non-response rates, I still hoped for a greater number of responses to my questionnaire than I received, a hope partly based on the high level of involvement I had observed among the Acorn organizers. Some of the non-response can be attributed to the timing of the questionnaire. The application for the Vista charter school was waiting for approval by Alberta Education, so considerable amounts of parent politics were taking place and some parents may well have decided not to commit their views to paper during such a transitory phase. I obtained 20 responses from Acorn parents (a 25% return from the 80 families in the Acorn program) and 10 responses from the regular program. However, I was able to establish useful contacts as a result of attending the meetings of the parent advisory boards.

The purpose of questioning the Acorn parents was to gain a sense of the process by which a parent decides to enrol a child in a program of choice: in



this case, deciding against a regular public school and in favour of the Acorn Alternative Program. I was also interested in the extent to which parents' expectations of an alternative program had been realized. I had a few questions for the Acorn teaching staff to gain an impression about their experience of delivering the program, and how they would like to see it develop. Thirdly, I conducted a short survey of staff and parents of students in the regular program at Birchwood to obtain an idea of their reaction to their school being host to an alternative program, and how they would like to see the program develop. The following description provides a flavour of the results I obtained.

After an account of the results of this survey, there is a more detailed description of the dilemma faced by one set of parents who had planned for their son to continue in the Acorn program but during the summer decided to transfer him to the Vista Charter School. The chapter continues with accounts of interviews with other "stakeholders" including the Birchwood principal, and representatives from Vista Charter School, Alberta Teachers' Association, the school board, and Alberta Education. In an attempt to ensure the authenticity of these accounts, I sent a copy to each of the people concerned and asked them to confirm that it represented a reasonable summary of their position.

### Responses of Acorn parents

The first part of the questionnaire concerned the push factors, central determinants of the parent deciding against a regular program in a public school; the pull factors, central factors that attracted the parent to the Acorn program; and whether the parent felt that the push or the pull factors had played the stronger role in their decision to move their child. Predictably, this

group was disaffected with the previous public school their child attended. Their criticisms centred around their shared perception that the public schools had failed both to sufficiently challenge their child academically and foster sufficient discipline. They also commented repeatedly that these schools lacked rigorous standards. They felt as well that adequate emphasis on core elements of math and language arts was often lacking, with the result that students made slow progress either because the curriculum was geared to the lowest common denominator, or because the instructional approach employed was ineffective. Members of this group called for more structured teaching, less group work, and attention paid to "the basics" such as grammar.

They wanted teachers who would not accept a passable effort from a student who is capable of more, ensure that consequences would follow from inappropriate behaviour, prevent disruptive students from creating chaos, and motivate students to excel. They sought teachers who set regular homework and returned work which had been thoroughly marked. An implicit hope was that their child could improve his/her performance and realize his/her potential within a different environment. For these parents the private school option was viewed as too costly. Other factors that were raised included the need to move beyond superficial reporting systems, so that frequent information was made available to parents regarding their child's progress and that contact initiated with them was not confined to only when a problem had become serious. These parents were critical of what they saw as the excessive amount of time in a school day "wasted on entertainment" such as films, fillers and field-trips that did not enhance the curriculum. They also complained that there was insufficient recognition of parental input and that

when teachers or principals had been approached regarding a suggested change, the response was arrogant, complacent, or simply defensive.

Understandably, the pull factors towards the Acorn program parallel these push factors away from the existing system. One parent was relieved to see recognition given to the ills of the public system by the Acorn leaders, together with ideas to remedy them: clearly defined goals, emphasis on regular communication between teachers and parents, and "no-nonsense reporting". The academic curriculum which motivated average students to excel was welcomed by virtue of being strong on basics at the same time as demanding and challenging. As one parent put it, what was offered "seemed familiar, just like when I was at school": structure, high expectations, teacher direction, students sitting in rows, a clear philosophy towards discipline with behaviour problems dealt with appropriately, a dress code, homework books and no fieldtrips. They also pointed to the explicit expectations and values regarding respect, honesty, and responsibility. One parent appreciated the opportunity of having genuine involvement, for example by providing input in the hiring of teachers. Another felt that the risks of trying an alternative were minimized because the program was within the public school system.

Many responses suggested that the push factor played the stronger role in providing impetus for the move. Given their impressions of overcrowded classrooms with too many disruptions, little consistency, and frivolous activities such as parties, these parents were "ripe" for an alternative. Such factors contributed to the eagerness with which these parents were to move their child to an environment which offered an atmosphere more conducive to learning and well-prepared, organized teachers. Other responses gave greater weight to the pull factors; although dissatisfied with the regular program, they

would not have moved their child if they had not heard of the Acorn alternative. Some of these parents assessed the push and pull factors as having equal importance with the latter providing the solution to the former.

I hoped that responses to the question concerning how parents first heard of the Acorn program might illustrate how a community of like-minded parents was attracted to a new program initiative. However, a wide cross-section of methods were offered: radio, flyer in mailbox, flyer at a centre specializing in math tutoring, signs in the area, local newspaper. A strong factor was word of mouth whereby parents heard about Acorn from friends, relatives, neighbours, parents who had children attending the same school as theirs. Knowing someone who had already enrolled her child in the program seemed to be the best advertisement.

A question about whether they felt more involved with their child's education received very positive responses. Acorn parents were pleased that the amount of communication in this school was considerably greater than their previous experience. As one parent puts it, "homework books and proactive communication by the teachers and the principal have made all the difference". Another stated, "I feel more involved, since the children need help with their homework every night; I have more chances to see what they are doing in class, and I have helped out in the classroom". One parent was relieved of having to pay for their child to receive extra tuition now that they knew exactly what was being taught and how. Another parent was satisfied with simply checking that work had been done, rather than having to spend considerable time going over content. Only one response was negative with respect to the extra parental involvement, with the respondent stating that it was the teachers' job to teach.

The opportunity to sit on the advisory board was welcomed, especially since it involved decisions that impacted on curricula and standards in a school rather than merely fundraising. In the words of one parent, "I feel much more encouraged to participate, welcomed too; I'm listened to". Others praised the teachers for being approachable and willing "to let us know how our children are doing". The addition of interim report cards--resulting in each child receiving six report cards a year--obtained a favourable response for the consequent frequent feedback and fewer "surprises". In terms of home-school communication, regular parent meetings and the program's newsletter were seen as advantageous, contact from the teacher being particularly well-received. One parent stated that the reason she was more involved was "because I'm participating within a system now that grew out of my (and other like-minded parents') concerns and dissatisfactions with the status quo public system."

Asked about the central factor in determining their degree of satisfaction with the Acorn program, the answers emphasized academic achievement, like the one who enthused, "I have seen my children challenged this year". Another parent identified the establishment of clearly defined standards which had resulted in "improvement in my child's basic skills in math, spelling, handwriting". Other parents noted progress in their children's knowledge and ability in core areas as well as in behaviour and politeness. It was felt that considerable learning was taking place providing the basis of increased self-esteem, greater enjoyment, enthusiasm, and the development of a positive attitude towards school.

One parent noted his/her child's increased awareness of the link between consistent work habits and high achievement. Another described

his/her previous experience where the capacities of his/her child were underestimated, but now he/she was thriving and no longer disruptive. Homework books enabled everyone to stay organized, as they increased communication between parent, student and teacher. Others praised detentions for inappropriate behaviour, teacher accountability to the parents, and the dedication of the teachers. The only negative comment expressed satisfaction with the program, but felt the year had been a terrible one for parents due to the "betrayal" of the spin-off group to Vista Charter School.

The third question noted that wider school choice was to be made available to city parents from September 1996, and asked whether the potential transfer of their child to another school was being considered. One parent noted that the program might need fine-tuning but stated that, "it has been a great year for my children and we are pleased to be working with the professional educators at the school board". Many parents simply said that no change was being considered, a few added a proviso such as: "unless expectations of the Acorn program, particularly regarding teachers, are dashed because of the changes". The year was described by one respondent as a "rocky" one, and greater assurance was sought that the full development of the Acorn philosophy would be allowed.

The Birchwood principal was described by one parent as being there to administer the school, but as not knowing or sharing the Acorn vision. Political power games had caused the program to suffer and become less attractive. One respondent stated they intended to transfer their child to the Christian alternative program which they welcomed as being an overdue development. Five respondents stated that they were considering transfer to Vista charter school. A further one commented on the attraction of Vista's

continuity of kindergarten to grade 12 being under one roof, and the knowledge that the school board would not be able to dilute the philosophy.

Asked about whether they welcomed the opportunity to have greater choice in their child's schooling, there was no surprise in the vehemently favourable answers. One parent demanded, "As long as Alberta curriculum is being met as a bottom line, why on earth wouldn't everyone welcome greater choice?" The opportunity for children to be educated by adults reflecting similar moral views to the home was seen as a positive move. The flexibility provided by alternative programs was described as the key to a successful public school system. Choice would ensure that a high quality education was maintained due to the introduction of competition for students. It would also require teachers and administrators to listen, respect and consider valid points made by parents. There was one simple statement that education had to be a partnership. One parent criticized how seniority rather than merit carried weight in the public system, and bewailed the inadequate process for dealing with incompetent teachers. Another parent described the public system as involving wide diversity in the quality of instruction, claiming that he/she was appreciative of the option of obtaining a program offering a solid education. Children had different needs, talents and desires which were overlooked in an exclusively mainstream situation. It was argued that every parent should have a choice of the kind of education received by their child since they knew the way of learning most appropriate for their child.

#### Responses of Acorn staff

Factors which had attracted them to become Acorn teachers included the structured environment, teacher-directed learning, the discipline

philosophy, the consistency from K to 6, and the daily homework requirements. Also attractive were the high expectations for students and staff, the high level of parental commitment, and the curriculum emphasis based on research that had shown the success of such methods as the phonics based language arts program. Teachers were asked about their experience of delivering the program. Positive reactions showed that teachers were pleased with the freedom to adopt teaching methods which they believed in, the extraordinary parental support, mostly good students, and a high level of staff dedication and principal support. One felt that parents were always concerned about their children's progress but that Acorn's commitment form gave "legitimacy" to parental interest, and channeled it through such things as ensuring homework was completed.

One felt that the program worked for the clientele for which it was intended, that it did what it said it would do. Things had improved as the year progressed, but the difficulties of the beginning of the year had not been forgotten with erratic administration, general disorganization, and no supplies. As one teacher wrote, " You have to really believe in this approach to stick with it". One commented that involvement with the program had been good "as long as one is able to stay out of the tremendous amount of politicizing that went on this year". Negative responses about the program included the charter school faction, and the program being expected to "fix" students who were attention deficit.

One teacher felt that the Acorn program had been allowed sufficient flexibility, illustrated by the ability to adopt a strict phonics approach in contrast with most other schools where phonics were mixed with whole language. A very different response described minimal flexibility since initial program



beliefs were in the process of being modified in order to accommodate school board requirements; report cards were used to illustrate this. A final question asked how they would like to see the program develop. Factors identified included more defined areas of independence from school board jurisdiction, and more physical space to grow so that the size of the program would not be determined by the amount of classrooms that Birchwood had available. There was a need for a greater degree of continuity from grade to grade, and more developed extensions of the curriculum. Also mentioned was the need to go beyond the district's grading system to look at ways of recognizing high levels of achievement, and--given the amount of change in its first year--the need for continuity offered by the present principal.

#### Responses of the Birchwood parents

My first question asked about their original reaction to the proposal of the Acorn program being attached to Birchwood School. Several parents described their initial reaction as very positive. They were curious, and liked the idea of wider choice being available in their own school. Some considered switching their children into the program, like the parent who noted, "it sounded like the type of education I might want for my child". One parent had felt that the majority of the Acorn objectives were not in conflict with those held by the regular program so did not expect any philosophical differences. Another welcomed the growth that the additional students represented, and the ending of doubts about possible closure.

One respondent admitted to having reservations about how the Acorn program had fitted into "the community of our school"; it had been a learning experience for all concerned, but misinformation was common. The lack of

clear information, even the propagation of incorrect information, seemed to have created various problems. A parent summed up her concerns by stating, "key spokespeople for the program gave inconsistent answers. Depending on the audience, each group heard what they wanted to hear. Maybe I wasn't exactly lied to, but I was confused as to what was the truth". Another respondent described the proposal as catching everyone "off guard"; she had voted against acceptance until further information was forthcoming since "the way everything transpired was very unprofessional". An example of expedient vagueness was the space needed to accommodate the extra students which turned out to be significantly greater than anticipated. One respondent described rumours of an exclusive uniform, and the intention for the program to take over the school, and evict facilities such as the daycare.

Once the program had been in operation for nearly a year, some of these suspicions appeared to have been allayed. Acorn was described as a great addition to the school. The benefits mentioned included stronger after-school care and daycare now that they received support from both programs, and the painting of the school which had made it a brighter place for all students. One parent expressed a belief that Acorn received preferential treatment at times, but that many such situations had been rectified. Another respondent felt differences were overstated, both approaches being fairly traditional: however, she went on to criticize some Acorn parents who believed themselves to be superior. One parent described the change from optimism about the program to a feeling of negativity because of trouble caused by certain Acorn parents. A conciliatory comment stated that the content of the two programs was not better nor worse, simply different.

In answer to a question about how the introduction of the alternative program could have been improved, more advance information was a common plea. The program was seen by some parents as having been thrust upon them in order to save the school from closure. One respondent stated that he/she would have liked "less ' behind the back' information being relayed, and more 'upfrontness' by Acorn founders and the school board". Another parent argued that "more information on a more informal and informative way would have helped several community oriented meetings. The logistics and financial side of the whole alternative program should have been laid out truthfully at the start". Too much seemed to happen at the very end of the summer term complained one parent. It was believed that earlier meetings with the Acorn parents would have avoided some problems, so that, in the words of one parent, "both groups could see each other at a human, even cooperative, level instead of as adversaries".

Asked about how the introduction of the Acorn program had affected Birchwood School, several negative effects were described. One parent wrote about bickering at the beginning of the year which subsequently calmed down. Another went further to suggest that the two groups became polarized and inflexible, a process which had transformed Birchwood from a happy, vibrant place into a battleground. One parent believed that a positive result had been greater unity within the regular program which was more committed to a community school and to family-oriented extra-curricular activities. It had heightened awareness of how lucky their children were to be in such a caring atmosphere, which was not necessarily the norm at other schools. The stress of increased numbers on the physical plant and school services like the office, library and computers was noted.

The final question concerned how they would like to see the Acorn program develop. One group of parents wanted slow side-by-side development, so that choice of schooling would be available. Acorn should stay within the school but not increase beyond its present classroom allocation; given its community support, the original program should not be pushed out. More integration in non-academic, extra-curricular activities was thought desirable. A smaller number would have been happy to see Acorn move, or at least the change of some staff and parents who had caused many hard feelings. One response expressed opposition to the wasteful duplication involved in having two programs within the same school, since all students were required to follow the same provincial curriculum. There was speculation whether all students needed something from both approaches in order to get a rounded education. One suggestion was that the regular program should modify its approach to a more academic emphasis, and that the Acorn program should be modified to include school spirit-building activities.

#### Interview with the principal

In April 1996 I interviewed the principal of Birchwood School. At the time she was acting-principal, the application deadline for the position had just closed, and the school was piloting a system whereby parents and staff had input into the selection process: one staff member and one parent from each program (an interesting illustration of the general extension of parental influence). I asked her to describe her perception of the juxtaposition of the Acorn and regular programs.

Her belief was that the first year of any program is rarely easy because of the lack of a strong foundation; difficulties in this program had arisen from

differing expectations of what it should look like. An Acorn vision had been developed yet no-one was clear how it would work out in reality, say five years down the road. Some of the Acorn board were determined that the original notions should not be diluted, but this was not always realistic. The parents of the regular program students still operated effectively without a singular vision. The principal described being aware of a lack of unity in the Acorn board from the first meeting she attended, partly caused by the inflexibility of some of members. She believed that the parents had adopted informed positions, but they were not always aware of factors such as contractual obligations, and sometimes were driven by one way of doing something regardless of other considerations. As an alternative program they were required by the school board to meet certain district policies and regulations.

The principal would advise a parent who was unsure of where to send his/her child amid increasing choice to visit the school to discover if it was most appropriate. Choice of school was an individual decision; her role would be only to inform, but there were grey areas in talking about a program still in its first year. As the Acorn program had become more established, she described considerable improvement resulting from the staff and community no longer feeling threatened by it. Various obstacles had been overcome, and there were now two families originally opposed to the Acorn idea who were planning to move their children from the regular program into Acorn. She recognized the possibility of some Acorn parents moving their children in September 1996 as further school choices became available, but she expressed concern about the appropriateness of moving certain types of student after only one year in the program.

There were various uncertainties. After significant progress achieved by the Acorn program in its first year, the question now arose whether the program could continue to deliver. Would some students outgrow the approach and come to require a less rigorous program or a more challenging one? Although an alternative program could not easily turn a student away, it did not have the same mandate to provide something for everybody. Signing the Acorn parental agreement operated as a screening device, acknowledging parents' acceptance of whole-group instruction. Ironically, when children did make progress, some parents responded by wanting a more individualized program; yet this was not an approach designed for students requiring special attention.

She suggested that the commitment of Acorn parents was not significantly different. They were more often in the school partly as a result of living outside the neighbourhood and needing to drive their children to school every day. There was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of fund-raising. Mixing of the two groups of students seemed limited, although this was difficult to determine given the tendency to play with classmates. The Acorn board had several projects, including the development of a report card since they preferred percentages and ways of recognizing high standards rather than the broad performance standards of the district. The curriculum development on the horizon was for more emphasis on Science. She hoped that the same lesson times would apply to the whole school in the following year, and that the intramural program would improve.

The principal had no plans to make the whole school reflect the Acorn approach because of district policy that a school must reflect the neighbourhood, so this would only come about as a community decision.

Homework was more consistently administered in the Acorn program. Acorn staff phoned homes more often. Acorn parents felt that the expectations for their children were higher. The mainstream students were more scattered along a continuum. She described how the students did respond differently in class; she would know straight away whether she was entering an Acorn or regular classroom as the former were generally more aware of expectations and more likely to meet them. She speculated whether this was due to the congruence of the parents, teachers, and program.

#### Parent Interview

Following the questionnaire, a few Acorn parents were willing to be interviewed. I talked informally with these potential interviewees who could broadly be divided into those who were content to remain with the Acorn program and those who were anxious to join Vista. The couple whose views are now described did not fit entirely into either "camp". It was an unstructured interview. I simply asked them to talk me through the previous twelve months in terms of their son's schooling.

Their child had previously attended a regular public school. They felt that there was nothing wrong with the school per se, and they had had no problems with the teachers. However, there was early dismissal once a week, and part of every day was devoted to non-academic activities. Their son came home with plasticine pictures rather than school work. No homework was set, and nothing was done to instill in the students any responsibility for their own learning. It was good that he thought that school was fun, but more than this was needed. Invented spelling was accepted and not corrected; little was marked. There was good emphasis on self-esteem but he was rarely told that

anything he did was wrong. The communications with the home were good, although the report cards were brief and too general: "'meets the curriculum standard'. What does this mean?" The teachers did not approve of the decision to move their son to the Acorn program.

Having seen advertisements in the neighbourhood for Acorn, they had spoken to neighbours who had enrolled their children, phoned one of the organizers, and been able to gain late entry into the program. They liked the emphasis on phonics, also the promise of percentages and an outline of the program of studies. The beginning was a little worrying. There was resentment from parents in the regular program who were concerned about a two-tier school. They believed that there had been little cooperation between Acorn and regular program teachers. Their son started in a split grade class but a new teacher was hired later in September so it became a straight grade. The classes were held in the gym until a mobile classroom finally arrived. There were no supplies in the classroom and texts were late in arriving. The teacher's desk was a card table. These parents believed that when the school board had the numbers enrolled in the program, they should have taken action more quickly to facilitate the start.

However, from day one they had been pleased with the homework books, good discipline, teachers modeling the beliefs, all work being marked. They received a telephone call every 4 to 6 weeks, together with full and interim report cards. The program of studies was followed closely, with additional work being added. Their son had not been reading as well as he should. As a result of a phonics approach, he had improved considerably; he was still an average student but was now one with good work habits. Sometimes they felt that the homework was too much; one hour was a



minimum, and it was often more. They had communicated this concern to the teacher, but the homework continued to be expected; they admitted that the work set was useful and was not done for the sake of doing it.

They wondered whether the arrival of a new acting-principal at Birchwood would operate to strengthen or weaken the alternative program. They speculated that the school board had a specific intent in mind when this person was selected: had she been parachuted in to merge the program to a greater extent with the regular program now that the school's low enrolment had been bolstered? It had not been easy to hire a new Acorn teacher with the appropriate phonics background, so was the apparent dilution of the program to enable easier transfer of surplus teachers? They believed that it was inevitable for the new principal to be indifferent towards the Acorn program. Leadership changes were soon evident. Initially, the Acorn lead-teacher wrote the newsletter with a message from the principal; subsequently, all communications came via the principal. It was no longer the Acorn program, but rather the Acorn program at Birchwood School.

One positive change introduced by the new principal was the ending of the segregation of library resources, when students could only borrow specific Acorn-only books. However, the parents being interviewed experienced declining comfort. They were not happy when the lunch-hour was extended from 45 minutes to one hour, supposedly due to a collective agreement for teachers. In January, lunch-hour fees were introduced, although they had been told that the teachers would supervise the students while they were eating their lunch. New report cards were brought in apparently reflecting district opposition to percentages; an "A" was changed from 90-100 to 80-100 on the advice of consultants. The original promise was to allow Acorn to expand its

operation under one roof, even if it meant moving from Birchwood; this changed to having the grade 7 at a nearby school.

They felt that the teachers were completely open on issues concerning students, but that they sensed a tension, and felt that they received responses which were politically correct. Then, with less than a month left to go before the end of the school year, the lead-teacher was removed from the program. The parents felt that there had been a power struggle between the principal and the lead-teacher that neither had been good at hiding. They felt that the conflict should not have become so public, especially since children are a product of their environment. Whatever the reason, little concern was evident for the children's best interests. The reason had to have been serious, but the new principal had said it was school board policy she was unable to discuss. A newsletter simply stated that due to a staff change there would be a new teacher for the rest of term. This served to heighten awareness of dissension, and it did not make anyone look good.

The parents felt that students could gain easy access to areas such as art or music outside school, so they preferred concentration on core areas. However, the last newsletter before the summer stated that more emphasis would be given to computer technology. They interpreted this as meaning that less time would be given to phonics and grammar. After a uniform had been rejected, a dress code was expected, but this became diluted during the year. Field-trips would be left to the teacher's discretion. It had been agreed that there would be no concerts, but a spring concert was held. A track and field day was due to have taken place but was rained out. They explained that they could have lived with small changes but began to question how many more there would be; the changes represented the erosion of promises. They gained some

comfort from the fact that it would not be hard for their son to return to his previous school if necessary.

They had not made plans to move their son, but became disconcerted at the impending departure of four out of the six members of Acorn staff, three of whom were moving to Vista. With this turnover, they were concerned to know who would articulate the original vision, who had the vision, who was left with a leadership role to take the program on? They heard about the formation of Vista, and received a mailing, but did not have any intentions at the time of joining them. They had received some reassurance after speaking with the Acorn chairperson, but the meeting introducing the new staff and the final newsletter tipped the balance. The final straw was early dismissal. Beginning in September 1996, the school would close early on one day a week (the school day being lengthened on the other four days).

Though they were not leaving Acorn in anger, the mother admitted that "it bothers me politically". They had decided to move their son to Vista but had some concern over how Vista would sustain itself on a per pupil grant; the promise was that there would be no user fee, only a \$20 registration fee. They did not know the cost paid for renting the facility, nor who was paying for the renovation. They explained that a lot of parents were very gung-ho and that the organizers were professional. A uniform had already been selected and was to be optional only for the first year. Their belief was that Vista would make or break in the first year; however, they were pleased that they were able to enrol their child. He had been uncertain about the change because of friends, but the reasons had been discussed with him. They worried that they could be sheltering their son too much, "what happens to him after he leaves Vista, what is the purpose?" They felt it was necessary to give children as many

options as possible, but wondered whether they were teaching him what he needed to know. The parents were concerned about school-hopping, the amount of change their child had encountered being already very different from their own experience.

The parents explained that the school board wanted to be the district of choice, but the proper implementation of this involved a lot of work. The Board, they felt, did not work collaboratively but rather insisted on retaining control. It was similar to the promises made about Schools' Councils: when decisions were put forward, they were "taken under advisement." Their feeling was that all the school board had to do was leave the program alone. If the philosophy had been adhered to, they would not have been moving their son. The parents wondered whether similar things might happen to the Christian program; did the board want to avoid a bunch of successful alternative programs springing up? They noted that no one had asked them why they had left the original school in the summer of 1995. The school board did not seem to care. This time the board might care more as they would be losing tax dollars; it would no longer be able to have the same sense of monopoly; it should sit up, take notice, and recognize that the parent is the consumer.

#### Views of a Vista board member

In January 1997 I interviewed a member of the Vista board who had formerly been part of the Acorn steering committee. He identified a need for variety in schooling, explaining that it was a question of how you dealt with the market. The Vista board was portrayed as having a clear notion of the clientele to whom they delivered. It was not a "boutique" school only offering

a specialism, but was open to a wide cross-section of students. At the same time, it did not try to please everyone. A specific approach to core curriculum and teaching delivery had been declared in all public information meetings with the assurance that there would be little deviation from this emphasis. Vista was described as encompassing a more nurturing element than many schools having a traditional academic orientation. Since the school attracted only those who wanted to be part of it, there was considerable common ground between teachers and parents, shared goals engendering team work and broad consensus within a cohesive environment.

He thought that Vista probably had a typical range of parents, some of whom were in school everyday, and others who were rarely seen. However, he suggested that the parent body was more likely to feel that the school was parent-driven, even if they did not take advantage of such power. Power was much more accessible. Vista's board was a known quantity, parents could at least attach faces to board members. They had the advantage of proximity, so that when problems surfaced, a speedy response would be forthcoming, given the weekly nature of the board meetings. All the board members had a professional background which he considered a significant asset because a strong, competent board was essential for a charter school.

Moreover, the continuity provided by a stable board of directors was vital. They currently faced election on a yearly basis, although this bylaw might be reviewed given the importance of getting the school established on a firm foundation. Based on his experience, the process of applying for a charter school required parents with a sophisticated understanding of political process, otherwise it was likely to stumble. Developing a focus for Vista's charter school proposal had not been that difficult, but implementation was another matter

given the reality of having to establish an operating enterprise with overhead expenses and the like. Since charter schools exist independently of the district infrastructure, he believed that their small scale provided the ability to be more economic, flexible and efficient.

He described the uncertainty of a centralized system in times of growing demand for decentralized decision-making, explaining that one indication of this was debate within the provincial caucus over whether school boards were necessary. He believed that insufficient change was arising from within the public system, a result of the "nature of the beast". His argument was that the school board could be much more flexible and experimental if it loosened up its monolithic structure, reduced its unwieldy nature, and improved delegation of authority by getting beyond superior-subordinate relationships. The Board might pride itself as giving away up to 49% of effective decision-making, keeping the rest for reasons of accountability, yet he maintained that this underestimated the expertise of parent groups. He speculated that the Acorn program could have been more successful if the school board had accepted the concept of a parent-directed program with an empowered board working alongside the principal. Even if there was a risk of empowering some groups of parents beyond their level of competence, he saw this as comparable to the situation of certain existing principals.

He believed that the Acorn outcome was inevitable. He identified elements of truth in both views: that the district had used the group in attempting to absorb their ideas hoping to avoid charter school competition, and that the group had used the district since Acorn had provided a springboard for Vista. He saw Acorn's acceptance of alternative program status as attractive due to the deadline of the charter school application process; but,

in retrospect, he felt that it had been naive to believe the official who had told the Acorn group that anything which was possible as a charter school was possible within their district. He commented, "We learned a lot with Acorn and it crystallized many of our perceptions".

He mentioned Dr. Freedman's prediction that Acorn would be diluted by becoming part of the school board. The Acorn proposal was described as having clearcut aims which were passed by the Trustees, yet the Board was not prepared to follow through; part of this was attributed to the role of the superintendent being primarily a political one. He felt that Acorn's fate was one result of the ambivalence over boundaries of parental influence. Acorn met with initial cooperation, but he believed that the intent was to submerge them within the system so there was little effective interest in their aims by the third month of its operation. The group seeking an all girls' program was seen to have achieved their objective simply with the setting up of a single-sex environment; attaching this junior high program to an elementary school detracted from suspicion between the two programs within one school. The all girls' program was also presented as less of a threat to the rest of the system since there was not the radical difference in teaching methods.

Asked whether Vista was simply offering traditional schooling, he responded by describing ground-breaking areas included a shadowing program with a nearby hospital, development of a Canadian History curriculum (run as a separate entity not in Social Studies) which was to be piloted and potentially sold, and developing objective standards on which to evaluate curriculum and delivery. The school had successfully applied to the Donner Foundation for assistance with some of these projects; it would receive \$300,000 over four years, which would allow the purchase of hard and software for the library, and

the advice of consultants. He felt that this illustrated a type of flexibility that was strangled within an alternative program. Yes, the Donner Foundation was right-wing but the board was happy to apply for a grant to pursue the projects defined by themselves. One question concerned how conscious he was about being part of a conservative movement of back-to-basics. He responded that he was appalled by parts of the American right-wing agenda, but that he saw Vista taking more middle ground. Asked whether he thought that Vista had attracted an elitist group of families, he described the student body as having a significant proportion of professionals, but a more diverse mix than the Acorn program partly as a result of location within the city.

The teachers who had left Acorn in order to teach at Vista had been given five year contracts (the length of the charter) as compensation for the security they were leaving. Other appointments were one year contracts, but this had not proved to be a deterrent since they had received over a thousand job applications. In order to attract quality staff, salaries had been set at 10% over the district grid, although he admitted that this may not have been necessary. The intention was to review the compensation system and perhaps to introduce performance-related pay. Any complaint about a teacher would be followed up using a specified procedure: teacher, principal, then in writing to the board. The Vista proposal included explicit guidelines concerning expectations of teachers, who would be supported as long as these were followed.

Charter school legislation provided choice in the type of emphasis adopted, but equally it allowed flexibility in the direction taken by a school. The legislation could be refined in terms of the applicability of some of the elements of the School Act, for example, the role of a charter school's



superintendent. However, Vista's primary problem was that their funding was based on an operating grant. Vista had been greatly aided by the deal giving them effectively free rent, and without it would be facing considerable budget difficulties typically encountered by charter schools, but they were still looking to make arrangements within their lease. They were financially viable and would not be running a deficit, but more flexibility was needed over the funding formula to allow an adjusted allocation of dollars. They were happy to have a healthy waiting list of approximately 450 students. In September 1997 they planned to expand by 100 students, with acceptance on a first-come basis unless siblings were involved. There had been considerable interest in the development of Vista, with nothing produced that was not reasonably favourable. He was confident about future prospects.

#### A last visit to Birchwood

In 1996-97 Birchwood has 139 students in the Acorn program, and 95 in the regular program. The Acorn program had not met the growth targets spoken about in January 1996, but had done commendably well in increasing enrolment by twenty students after the departure of 70 students in the summer of 1996. Classes at grades 7 and 8 had begun at a nearby school. Regular links had become established between the two sites and they plan to share a curriculum coordinator from September 1997.

The principal said that she had been honest with prospective parents about the program having a bumpy first year. Certain parents who become involved in Acorn program in the later stages had expressed opposition to the charter school idea, and would not have moved their children if the group had followed this path. Belonging to a big district provided certain advantages such

as a variety of available expertise, and some parents felt more secure with a program under the auspices of the school board. She described considerable work done by the School Council in defining roles for the two parent bodies. Occasionally there were still "ruffled feathers," for example over how fundraising money is spent; however, there had been several successful joint events held at the school. She felt that certain personalities within last year's Acorn parent body would never have been satisfied to work within the school board structure, and that their attitudes had produced alienation. Previously, there had been a strong sense of what the program was not, whereas she suggested that a more positive approach had subsequently been more evident. She explained that the Acorn program continued to emphasize rigor and challenge, but certain myths about the program had to be dispelled.

Selection of resources provided one example of conflict between staff and parents; the parent board could make recommendations but the ultimate decision lay with the principal. The back-to-basics slogan was no longer stressed; the program had moved beyond this in giving central place to skill-mastery and challenging standards. The potential of the program to attract problematic students still existed. Some staff suggested that they had both ends of the continuum in terms of academic ability and behaviour but little in the middle: not the severely normal child that had once been boasted! It was necessary for the program to be clear about its expectations and suitability for a child, it was not a program for everyone, and she would counsel some parents to consider alternatives if they were (say) looking for less teacher-directed learning. The student profile that had been developed was helpful in such situations. She felt that the district had learned some lessons from problems resulting from the placing of the Acorn program. For example, much more

groundwork in the schools and communities was done before the introduction of the Christian program.

One perspective from the Alberta Teachers' Association

In February 1997 I interviewed a senior representative of the ATA who presented charter school reform as reflecting a politically-driven agenda. He did not accept the statement of the former Minister of Education that such schools were to enable experimentation into which educational approaches achieved the best results. Rather, they were a product of the demands of Joe Freedman and his ilk who sought an equivalent to British grammar schools which had successfully sustained the class system by preserving an avenue of mobility predominantly for the white middle class. The official went on to describe a meeting of Albertans for Quality Education<sup>22</sup> which had about five hundred attending, but with a marked absence of visible minorities.

Alberta Education was seen to follow political guidelines set outside the department, illustrated by the vow of former Provincial Treasurer, Jim Dinning, "to break the monopoly of public education"<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the premier addressed Calgary's Chamber of Commerce in November 1996 without even mentioning how Alberta students had just achieved third place in the world in Science education. The official saw this as reflecting ideological agendas, not simply oversight. He then noted a speech made by former British prime minister, Jim Callaghan, twenty years after his Ruskin College speech. Callaghan<sup>24</sup> stated that education had improved very little in spite of all the reform imposed upon it and that there was still a real need for the system to

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<sup>22</sup> May 1, 1993 in Calgary.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in an editorial of the *ATA News*, February 21, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> *Times Educational Supplement* October 18, 1996.

raise the achievement of those of average ability by means which enlisted the cooperation of teachers as full partners.

Even having reduced the initial minimum enrolment of 125 students by fifty, the response to charter school legislation had been lower than anticipated. It was predictable that the number of students enrolled at charter schools would depend upon the performance of the first ones. Given evidence of elitism, the official predicted that good results should only be expected. He felt that the charter school facing the most precarious future was the non-elitist Boyle Street Charter School. He speculated that the next political step could be towards the elimination of school boards which would effectively make every school a charter school in that they would receive the funding directly and a School Council would decide how it was spent. This would result in choice being imposed upon Alberta in a similar way to the New Zealand's government experiment with market economics.

He felt that the media both created and sustained an anti-educational prejudice. This was exemplified by a newspaper article which recently asserted, "The problem in Britain is not more money for schools, as Labour claims, but the teachers' unions and associations who, just like Canada, threw their weight behind progressive 'child-centred' education some 25 years ago. This soft-left initiative got rid of proper exams, league tables and tough curricula" (Amiel, 1997). He believed that there were sections of the Canadian electorate who perceived teachers as overpaid, arrogant, and needing cutting down to size. This section would welcome the freedom of charter schools to pay their teaching staff at lower rates--a view exemplified by Link Byfield's comment<sup>25</sup> that elementary teachers were worth about \$30,000 a year--and the notion of

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<sup>25</sup> *Alberta Report*, Editorial May 17, 1993.

"teacher-proofing" the curriculum. The official described how one charter school is paying their kindergarten teacher significantly below the standard rate.

He was not surprised that certain charter school groups had received many applications for teaching positions since there would always be people wanting to teach. However, he maintained that notions held by certain charter school groups concerning the right to get rid of teachers were ill-conceived. Although the ATA was often criticized for its protection of teachers, the official pointed out that it was the school boards who hired and fired<sup>26</sup>. There was a system of periodic evaluation after a person had been passed by a faculty of education and received a certificate from Alberta Education; the ATA had always been denied a part in the competency assessment. He noted that the Council on Alberta Teaching Standards had received only 14 cases since it was set up in June 1985<sup>27</sup>. Interestingly, he mentioned that there were currently seven grievances on the ATA books from charter school teachers who had associate membership of the ATA, one of which concerned a charter school board member trying to procure the dismissal of a teacher.

He expressed general concern about trends requiring greater conformity such as the Western Canadian Protocol on Science which could operate to dilute the success of Alberta Science teachers. He was not opposed to choice but preferred alternative programs within the public system where there is a more explicit awareness of being part of wider society. He thought that there was a potential that the ATA could work more closely with charter

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<sup>26</sup> The case of James Keegstra was used to illustrate a tardy school board response, whereas the ATA was obliged to proceed on the basis that teacher was innocent until proven guilty.

<sup>27</sup> When I telephoned the Teacher Certification Department of Alberta Education, I was told by a current manager that he had received five written complaints in the last three and a half years.

school reform along the lines of America's National Education Association, as long as the direction was pedagogically sound. If certain businesses in Alberta were to be used as examples, he was thankful that--until recently at least--schools were not run like businesses. He questioned whether charter school reform really was indicative of a populist movement. What was it that was sought? He felt that the monolithic bureaucracy was merely an excuse. The historic responsibility for education had been devolved to the provinces; it was now being devolved to parents. As yet he could not identify any gains of charter school legislation in Alberta.

#### Interview with a representative of the school board

This official believed that charter school legislation was partially a reflection that certain right-wing educational reformers had "the ear of government" (or at least caucus)--this element was represented by the views of such individuals as Andrew Nikiforuk, Ted Byfield, and Joe Freedman--who argued that parents were dissatisfied with the status quo. One result of their influence was the initial School Council framework in which parents wielded considerable power; this role was later reduced to an advisory capacity since most parents did not seek this degree of input. She indicated that superintendents had been opposed to the concept of charter schools given the provision of full provincial funding to create what amounted to one-school school boards at a time when other boards in the province had been forced to amalgamate. She noted how the abandonment of school boards in New Zealand and the United Kingdom had resulted in the development of local consortiums to replace the services. She believed that any suggestion of start-up funding for charter schools would have met extensive opposition from

districts due to the extent of existing demands within the province for scarce funds.

From the school board's point of view, she suggested the charter school legislation could be eliminated if it was replaced by mechanisms to ensure that boards were more responsive to alternative program requests. Although school boards had not contributed to the making of charter school rules, she felt that the present regulations required them to do Alberta Education's work for them in terms of evaluating and monitoring applications. The Board had devoted a lot of time in this area as it was incumbent upon them to assist groups who had a concept but little idea of how to complete the charter school application. This was not completely selfless since the Board appreciated the opportunity to meet with groups and see whether possibilities existed for creating an alternative program. She saw the latter as having the potential of the best of both worlds in the sense that the group could achieve their specific aim yet still enjoy access to all the facilities of the district.

She did not identify any expedience within the reaction of the board; rather, she felt that it had behaved with integrity in continuing to be interested in new ideas. She pointed out that the board did not possess the "magic bullet" in the sense of having all the educational answers, therefore was open to consideration of different strategies. On the basis of her experience she knew that the view of a dollar sign on students' heads was a simplistic one. The time and money spent on research and resources for an alternative program was not an economic question but was a matter of public trust, "by having the program within our district, we are saying that it is okay for your children". A group would be expected to provide research in support of their emphasis. Approval

as an alternative program required a group to meet district regulations, be sustainable financially, and be pedagogically sound. Furthermore, there was a range of factors--such as the larger numbers staying longer in schools, and the changing population mix extending the cultural variety--which required the district to work differently to meet the needs of the community.

She explained that charter school applications were not always a response to parental lobbying, for example the impetus for the Boyle Street Charter School came from the cooperative board, which submitted one of the best applications. (While she saw this as reflecting a genuine desire to better serve the disadvantaged, she believed that the government was pleased that there was an application of this nature given the number of charter schools for the gifted or other advantaged groups.) She pointed out that the amount of governance that a group expected was a typical stumbling block. She believed that the Vista group would have stayed with the Board only if it could have had full governance rights over the program, the staff and the principal. She noted that charter schools still had to respect the School Act which required them to issue a continuing contract--in other words give tenure--after one year. Some parent groups might find it hard to accept the potential of no staff turnover after the first year.

She felt that certain groups of parents could become zealous reformers in the sense of being unable to comprehend why a certain philosophy would not be imposed on the whole system. Their commitment to a specific idea caused them to be amazed that a diametrically opposite idea could also produce successful results (for example, a pro-phonics group being stunned to hear of the success of a program with a holistic emphasis). The school board was described as not a reformer in this sense, but rather as seeing the solution in



diversity. Having granted the Christian alternative, the official predicted other religious-based requests such as a non-denominational Muslim program. (There had been an application for Punjabi as a second language courses, but it was not religiously based and only envisaged a series of courses not a program.) The introduction of French Immersion programs had not given rise to concerns about potential fragmentation.

She viewed alternative programs as enabling diversity within a common community: when successful they enabled the recognition of different needs at the same time as reflecting the core of what society holds in common. She suggested that it could take at least a year to define what a program would look like and how it could be distinguished; after all they were still required to follow the same curriculum base as other schools, and their students still had to sit common tests. The question needed to be asked how such groups knew if they were achieving their aims; for example, how did the all-girls' program assess whether their students were becoming risk-takers? The official pointed out that the Acorn program was clearly meeting a need within the system and had attracted a healthy number of new students.

She provided another example of positive repercussions from alternative programs in describing an emotional telephone call from a parent who wanted assurance that their daughter could really attend an all-girls' program. This was something that they had always wanted but they lacked the financial resources to be able to send their daughter to a private school, and the social resources to be part of an organizing group. They were thrilled to be able to access such a program through the public system. In this light, the work of parent groups could be seen to represent community initiatives. In September 1997 two complete schools were adopting a Traditional School focus (rather

than being a school-within-a-school) after a process involving considerable input from administrators, staff and parents. People in the city were accustomed to choice of schools in terms of open boundaries, but the limits were further extended with charter schools and alternative programs.

#### Interview with a representative of Alberta Education

Revisions to the School Act were described as not imposed from above, but as actively sought by the Department as one link in a long process reflecting the international trend towards parental choice. The Alberta Education representative did not feel that right-wingers had been unduly influential, but rather that the Department had been bombarded by a variety of strong positions. The idea was spawned by the Curriculum Branch and passed up to the executive level; the legislation reflected a marriage between the Minnesota and California groups. She believed that there had been some disappointment at the low level of early response to charter legislation. However, she pointed to the expansion of alternative programs by Edmonton Public as an example of the "wonderful impact" of the legislation. Some Boards had been opposed to the whole idea of charter schools and were only now coming to realize that there were a lot of parents with concerns and ideas.

The application process of other charter school models did not have school boards in a "middleman" role; this was an idea parachuted in by the Albertan policy makers with the hope that it would result in valuable learning and transference. Mandating charter schools into existence was not the answer since parental pressure was preferable to ministerial. Simply legislating something into place would mean that there was no learning or assimilation since groups would never get together. The intent of the initiative was for

carry-over into the broader system, otherwise charter schools would need to exist forever. Districts tended to be resistant--cautious to the extent of causing frustration--but this was not untypical for a "birthing year". The hesitancy was not malicious but rather an indication of fear of the unknown, often reflected in sticking closely to policies and philosophies; this prevented massaging the fringes of initiatives so that some of the problems could be eased. At the outset she had believed that if an application which met all the regulations was turned down, then a board could be directed to accept it. However, she now recognized that forcing school boards into an intermediary position does not necessarily foster positive relationships.

She felt that misunderstandings had arisen from lack of clarity of how the system works; the legislation provided loose boundaries but many districts were reluctant to provide the delimitations expected of them. Some boards seemed to support the idea of the legislation but had refused to provide recommendations regarding charter school applications, thus effectively rejecting the initiative. Other boards had been more overt in their opposition with their specific beliefs reflected in the rejection statement to a charter application. Some charter school groups had regretted sections of the agreement they had made with a school board which operated to cripple them. School boards had introduced road blocks such as commitments which operated to disable the charter school group, perhaps preventing them from switching to an alternative approach even if this was found to be more efficient. Certain charter schools had been stymied by districts which agreed to their existence only to retain control; effectively they would like to see them fail, for instance giving them low priority in terms of transportation. One

agreement had required a charter school to take children who were directed there, regardless of their suitability!

Initially she had felt that school boards could operate the whole of the charter process, with Alberta Education playing more of an overseeing role. Subsequently, she had questioned the whole role of school boards in the process, and could never foresee the time when boards would be given charter-granting powers. Nevertheless, she felt that it was premature to abandon the potentially positive role played by school boards. Discussion between Alberta Education and school boards over charter schools was described as still in its early stages and as requiring more mediation. In May 1997 the Edmonton and Calgary charter school groups were to meet and put forward suggestions for legislation amendments. Meetings were also necessary between charter school groups and district representatives so that issues could be brought into the open. She hoped to have school board involvement and she wanted to encourage reflection on how certain relationships occur, and to show the success of particular ways of doing things. Charter schools could still provide a lesson to the public system in having to be accommodating to parents.

She wondered how charter schools could fail when the degree of commitment which they engendered was taken into account, she cited examples of parent volunteers who had done everything from fundraising for computers to complete redecoration of classrooms. Some charter schools had been able to tap into private funding but such access was permitted throughout the public system. One school's relationship with IBM resulted in certain students getting things that others did not. However, Alberta Education promoted such partnerships which so far had been positive and low key; there were not Pepsi logos everywhere. She felt that charter schools were educational

even if not always experimental, since a traditional approach could be seen as innovative if it was no longer commonly found. As the Department had open criteria, it was incumbent upon a group to demonstrate that children would benefit from their emphasis.

She agreed that the number one issue was funding (capital and start-up), but suggested that the regulations regarding capital were likely to remain unchanged largely because charters were time-specific. Furthermore, she did not see a need to build new schools since several renovations had been successful. However, the Department might consider some assistance with lease costs since it was partly responsible for the high level of these costs: the Operation and Maintenance formula meant that school boards received little from Alberta Education for unused parts of their facilities, resulting in empty space coming at a higher cost. In terms of student transfer, a district would be required to "pick up the pieces" without funding for those students who left charter schools after 30th September. However, she pointed out that only three children from the eight charter schools in existence had left for reasons of disenchantment, and also that there was a potential for changing this funding practice to allow for such movement.

Regarding salaries, the charter schools could be divided into those who felt that their teachers should be paid according to the ATA scale to avoid them being seen as second class, and those who saw this as a financial impossibility if their goals were to be achieved. She felt that all charter schools were perceived in a dubious light in this area which was unfair given that only two charter schools paid their teachers significantly below the standard rate. There had been one request from a charter school to be freed from the employment

restrictions within the School Act, which had been rejected. She was not aware of any liaison between Alberta Education and the ATA on this matter.

One question involved the Global Learning Academy and their interest in expanding to an additional site. The Minister had been approached and had ruled that location was part of the charter statement. She described how this development would require the group to return to Calgary School Board and seek an amendment to their charter to operate on two sites. She anticipated an unfavourable response to this request since the district was there to allow limited experimentation in terms of educational emphasis, not to set up mini-systems. Nor did she feel that their idea should be propagated before it could show results. The developer perhaps failed to realize that offering a site for a charter school in a particular neighbourhood did not automatically result in the school being accessed by neighbourhood children.

There had been an increase in parental calls wanting directives from the Minister due to frustration about a variety of obstacles. I asked about the ministerial review of one charter school, but all she could tell me was that this would arise from section 104 of the School Act which deals with access, expulsions, fees and costs, and special education. She felt that charter school groups were truly focused on children, but she was aware of some concerns regarding the existence of a blacklist of children seen as inappropriate for certain schools; there had also been problems resulting from aggressive marketing, but felt time would help to sort out such things. Alberta Education would follow up concerns about a school being exclusionary, but some concerns arose from parents not having a clear understanding of a program. She described one concern with a group who wanted to avoid the use of technology. The Department felt that computers should be part of learning;

however, the Program of Studies simply required "preparation for the future" which left considerable scope for interpretation.

Some groups were aggressive in promoting their specific orientation, but they had a right to do things their way since charter schools could not be all things to all people. For example, schools could have a policy of accepting only those special needs students who could be integrated into a regular classroom; parents would have to be asked whether they could accept this, and some families may have to be counselled towards an alternative. Charter groups were not necessarily seeking isolation from the rest of the system. One example of this was the Action for Bright Children school in Calgary which only dealt with the first three grades; students could then apply for the district's GATE (Gifted And Talented Education) program which started in grade 4. The group welcomed this link with the school board and there was the possibility that GATE could expand to absorb these early grades.

The Superintendent function had been developed as an attempt to mirror the rest of the system, partly because this was a first step in chartering. In a similar way to school boards, charter school groups make recommendations to the Minister for this position. She pointed out that the ABC and Global schools in Calgary used the Calgary Public Superintendent for their Superintendent. But this was causing problems since this name goes on financial documentation. This presented a dual role of ensuring compliance with a charter at the same time as being involved with the management. She felt that this was an area needing to be dealt with, but she expected useful direction arising from the meeting with the charter school groups. Alberta Education had the monitoring role for three of the schools (Aurora, Almedina, and Foundations for the Future); they would have to ensure adherence with

the charter and for results to show that learning had been enhanced. This presented an intimidating task since such a question was difficult to answer. (She was shortly to be attending a conference in Sacramento about evaluation, monitoring and results.)

There had been interest in charter schools from other provinces, and she believed that Ontario was looking at enabling legislation. She believed that the clause excluding religion as a distinctive criterion for a charter school would remain in place, otherwise such schools would not be open to all members of the public and would be self-selected. Although she noted decisions had been made with funding following the child, she did not think that a voucher system was likely unless the policy makers took an unexpected turn. There were frustrations at both the district and the school level, but she felt that an important part of her job was simply to explain the system and how it works since this was an area often not addressed sufficiently. Charter schools would be no different than previous initiatives which had had an infancy but had become recognized, like the decision to provide some funding for private schools. It had taken a year and a half to realize the range of influence of School Councils, but time made things easier and more accepted. The process of education was becoming more focused.

Having visited all eight schools in the province, her impressions were that the groups were passionate, genuine, and took what they were doing very seriously. She described the schools as being split between those initiated by an educational concept not found elsewhere, and those who came to the charter idea through discontent. This was a significant difference within the process of concept realization; she suggested that the discontented group was, unfortunately, always likely to be in contention with the local school board.



Parents had become more powerful and she explained that people were going to have to listen; however, she recognized that charter schools faced the big task of having to prove themselves more than other schools. She felt that beyond the actual achievements of individual charter schools much had happened in a short time within public education in Alberta.

### Choice implementation

The developments arising from the work of the Acorn parents provides one response to Alberta's charter school legislation. I am grateful for the initial recommendation that I received when I was looking for a group to observe. The program they sought to establish had "mainstream" appeal, that is, offered a choice to a wider variety of parents than a charter school offering a specialized program. Moreover, they were exceptionally dedicated to pursuing their goal and proved to be adept in dealing with a variety of obstacles. Even as I conclude my study of this group I am struck by additional questions such as whether the impetus for both Acorn and Vista would have been sustained without the leadership of one individual. Pursuit of such a question need not be simply speculative, rather it exposes the area of contribution of different individuals which is not covered within this account.

In spite of the quantity of replies to my questionnaire being lower than I hoped, their quality was encouraging in raising many topics pertinent to my research. The survey achieved the objectives of its design. It revealed a significant element of parental dissatisfaction with regular schools. This was due to perception of erratic standards in schools and/or the employment of teaching strategies to which their child was not responding. Equally, the notion of a back-to-basics type of education possessed a pulling power to a significant

number of parents who were attracted to the traditional emphasis which was more familiar and perceived as more effective. Without such program choice, dissatisfied parents could have considered taking advantage of the city's open boundaries and switched their children to another school in the district, or they could have explored the varying cost of private schools. However, many parents had translated their frustration into helping their child with additional work at home, or paying for extra tutoring.

Joining a program in its first year did represent something of a gamble, which would explain why someone who had already registered their child would provide the most effective form of advertising. In terms of attracting parents to enrol their children in the first place, some parents felt more secure because the Acorn Alternative Program came under the "umbrella" of the school board (this also resulted in the program having the provision of district transportation from September 1996). The placing of the Acorn program in Birchwood School did not go as smoothly as it might have done, partly due to the tight timeline. The school gained significant extra students and corresponding resources, yet parents of students in the regular program at Birchwood seemed aggrieved at inadequate information which fuelled their suspicions. More has been done in the 1996-7 school year to engender a wider community feeling, something that is easier to accomplish with Acorn in its second year of operation, and with fewer divisions between the two parent bodies.

As more options become available, increasing numbers of schools are recognizing the need to supply far more information about what is happening in the classrooms than was traditionally the case. This suggests that "choice" schools are having an effect upon the whole district. However, it would seem

that alternative programs, which owe their conception to a group of committed parents, must go further. The parent commitment form which accompanied Acorn registration required some involvement, but such a program must be open to much more input from activist parents than is typically found elsewhere. Recognition of some of this need was demonstrated by some of the Acorn parents becoming part of the interview process for staff appointments, and even piloting parent input into principal selection. Further steps in this direction are likely to be taken.

The events of the first year of the program's operation were far from predictable. In the spring of 1995 several factors contributed to the Acorn group being unable to form a charter school that September which made the school board's offer to form an alternative program an attractive one. In retrospect, the alternative status was sufficient to appease many parents but not all. A danger of a program of choice is that it can raise parental expectations to artificially high levels so that little less than a miraculous transformation in a student's achievement comes to be expected. While this did not seem to have been the case with the Acorn program, problems arose from parents who became resentful of district requirements or, indeed, restrictions from anyone outside the program, even the principal of the host school. Distrust of the school board was a constant factor within the part of the Acorn group that broke away to form Vista. This prompts the question whether any degree of latitude offered by the school board would have been sufficient given the amount of autonomy they desired. Time has not allowed me to pursue my interest in researching the situation of Vista staff and students as they complete their first year of operation. I assume that the Vista principal is likely to contend with a more determined parent body in general and parent board in

particular than most of his district counterparts. (The situation of principals in schools of choice is given some discussion in chapter 7.)

The doubts about their local school held by Acorn parents reflects the position of Barlow (1994) that the anxieties of many parents have been appropriated by critiques of education portraying the prevalence of non-academic goals such as building self-esteem (p.9). The Acorn program was set up directly to address these concerns and seems to have been broadly successful in doing so. However, the extension of parental choice does seem to hold the potential of increasing divisions between different sets of parents, especially where a school-within-a-school exists. Alternative programs face uncertainty over the degree to which they are allowed to be different. Some parents seem to believe that an uncompromising pursuit of specific goals was the only way to ensure adherence to the original ideas, while others expressed greater belief in collaborating with the school board. It has to be an advantage when parents, staff and program are all heading in the same direction. But this is a situation more difficult to create within a regular school where an existing staff are likely to have varying educational philosophies and without the ability to require any agreement of parental support.

The issues at the core of these developments may often be pedagogical but these can become obscured by the parent "manœuvring" that is engendered. If school boards were previously indifferent towards--or at least complacent about--the voice of parents, such reaction is less likely today as they are required to recognize growing expectation of parents playing a more active part. Although comparable offshoot developments do not seem to be occurring in the school board's other newly formed alternative programs, the development of the Vista charter school owes its impetus to the Acorn

alternative program. Several boards may hope to harness many of the new expectations but, for those parents who do not achieve satisfaction, charter schools offer an alternative outlet for their realization.

It is instructive to assess the validity of positioning the charter school movement, as distinct from the provision of wider educational choice in general, on the right-wing of educational reform. This positioning receives support from some of the literature reviewed within this dissertation, also from the level of certain practice within Alberta. For instance, Vista charter school's successful application for a Donner Canadian Foundation grant is an aspect of the movement towards wider choice in education that requires considerably more investigation. Rau (1996) describes the Donner Foundation as funding a variety of neoconservative projects, one of which is the quarterly magazine *Next City* whose editor admits to input from the Foundation on every issue. (This magazine included an article by Snow, 1996, on the merits of charter schools.) Rau sees this as one example of how, "a private foundation bred of the culture of U.S. conservatism is endeavouring to engineer the evolution of Canadian political culture" (p.12).

The Foundation gives grants to right-wing think tanks such as the Fraser Institute to attack various forms of government intervention and to support privatization. Empowering the consumer to make market choices is a constant theme. The Vista Board member expressed confidence that the school was in control of the project design and implementation. However, while there is no longer novelty in the situation of business-school partnerships, grants from organizations with such an explicit ideological agenda merit some regulation whatever the shade of politics advanced.

The overture from one property developer to build an additional facility for a Calgary charter school illustrates a further dilemma. The Global Learning Academy has a two-year lease on a school from the Calgary school board with possibility of renewal to cover the five years of charter. However, the concern that the "rug could be pulled from under our feet"<sup>28</sup> still exists. Consequently, the school organizers were attracted by this offer of free premises in a different part of the city. It looks unlikely that this additional facility will occur, but it serves to raise the question of the degree of private involvement appropriate in a public school; in this case providing a facility to entice parents to buy in a developing area. The offer led to debate about one aspect of the definition of a charter school relating to a specific site, but this will not be the last of the grey areas.

In spite of considerable achievements, all has not been plain sailing for charter schools in Alberta. Teething troubles are suggested by one school facing Ministerial Review, also by the significant comment that the ATA has seven grievance complaints from the province's charter schools. The focus of the following chapter is on how schools which create a community of parents can have repercussions for an education system supposed to serve the greater community.

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication of March 3, 1997.

## Chapter Six

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

Parts of the platform of the Acorn group clearly struck a chord with many parents in the city, attracting their interest and a healthy enrolment for the program. Reading various media stories about social problems in schools, and viewing non-traditional teaching methods with a degree of apprehension, contributed towards this welcome given to a back-to-the-basics emphasis. Indeed, it seems likely that many parents with children in regular programs within the district would respond favourably to such an emphasis. Education will only evolve when there are people who feel sufficiently strongly about classroom routines to take action in order to change them or provide alternatives.

However, I felt that diverging attitudes toward the rest of the parent body within the city existed among those people who were sufficiently dissatisfied with the public system to have joined steering committees of groups dedicated to providing wider choice. Some expressed the need for all parents to enjoy the advantages stemming from the existence of a wider selection of possible schools for their child to attend. The actions of other members of these groups suggested either an indifference towards the plight of those who did not share their way of looking at education, or at least a preoccupation with the progress of their own child. Concern with how one's own child is doing in school seems to me a natural motivation for interest in educational developments. But various remarks caused me to consider the implications of having this as an exclusive motivation.

Charter schools in Alberta are required to be designed around a particular approach to education that is not locally available. A situation in which staff and students would be attracted to a particular approach conjures up positive images of a more cohesive environment than is typically found. However, what must also be considered is the type of attitude that exists towards the rest of the community. I was disturbed by the idea that parents who did not look beyond the neighbourhood school were simply lazy, or the comment that teachers were not there to brush children's teeth for them. It might be desirable for teachers not to be "social workers" but what happens to children who do not get their needs provided by other agencies?

I had a similar reaction when one Trustee spoke in favour of a traditional alternative program by describing the need to insulate children from mainstream values. Or, when the leader of the Vista group talked about having a "seamless" program to instill a specific culture. While none of these programs represented any threat to community in themselves, they did represent a direction of educational development that implied more exclusion than inclusion. This type of questioning led me to consider the implications for a citizenship if certain schools were to promote an insular ethos. In following this line of reasoning I do not intend to imply that the existing public system offers an ideal approach for encouraging a generation of involved and active citizens working devotedly for the good of the community. Rather, the intent is to signal possible hazards of some forms of educational choice.



### Consumers and citizens

Extending this line of thought, this chapter explores whether more consideration must be given to the tension between individual choice and community responsibility if the notion of democratic citizenship is to hold any meaning beyond lip service. That tension is increasingly pertinent to the realm of public education as choice becomes the preferred solution to a variety of problems in schools. There are growing numbers of parents who are prepared to pay for better chances of success, or considering home schooling. There is growing evidence of educational entrepreneurs who seek to exploit a lucrative potential which has traditionally gone untapped (see, for example, Kozol, 1993). Gone are the times when the neighbourhood elementary school was the first school considered by most parents. Gone as well are the times when most parents left educational concerns to educators. While positive trends can be identified such as high rates of youth literacy<sup>29</sup>, schools are still facing daunting societal inequalities and demands incompatible by nature and number. It will take much more than a strategy of extending choice to respond to such problems.

"To extol the consumer is to deny the citizen" is the assertion of social philosopher Borgmann (1992, p.114). Yet, consumer choice seems to be gaining virtually daily acclaim as the solution to many of the perceived ailments of society. In an article in which Valpy (1995) discusses impending cuts to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, William Fore is quoted as saying:

Public broadcasting at its best seeks to meet the diverse needs and interests of the entire citizenry. Commercial broadcasting's sole object is to deliver

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<sup>29</sup> As documented by Statistics Canada and reported by the Canadian Council on Social Development in November 1996.

potential consumers to the sponsor, and 'programming' is anything that can attract the greatest number of them at any given time. Public and commercial broadcasting are two different businesses (A19).

Valpy describes how Newt Gingrich's opposition to public broadcasting confuses the public with the market, and equates citizens with consumers. Gingrich is not alone in this confusion. Though drastic cuts to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the sale of franchises may help improve its budgetary situation, these measures will not necessarily improve the delivery of its mandate.

The development of charter schools provides a lucid illustration of choice promotion as a current strategy for addressing educational problems in North America. Yet, advocates of such wider choice do not acknowledge that parental desire and market forces are insufficient in themselves to constitute the basis for educational decisions. In view of this, what is needed is a more encompassing rationale to ensure that the current trend towards choice in education will produce long term societal benefit. Positioning such a trend on a larger stage enables the examination of its ideological underpinnings, especially if it includes the work of theorists who consider the implications of choice for the community. Specifically, do charter school groups reinforce or weaken community cohesion? Are they indicative of a trend which contributes to the erosion of equality between citizens?

#### Conception of citizenship among the New Right

A contention endorsed by many theorists who can loosely be grouped under the designation "the New Right" is that growing numbers of people perceive the public sector as corrupt, at best illustrating excessive bureaucracy

(Lawton, 1995). They fear falling standards of public service (perceived as government ineptness) and resent taxes (perceived as supporting government largesse). The New Right feed on this growing fear and resentment, providing one of the most politically powerful critiques of traditional notions of citizenship (the latter are well outlined by Marshall, 1964). This critique fuels hostility toward welfare measures by charging that they promote passivity and foster a culture of dependency.

The New Right seek to restore our sense of personal initiative by reversing the trend towards bigger government and by transferring a variety of functions traditionally fulfilled by governments to the supposedly self-regulated market. Established notions of civility are dislodged by a new conception of the responsible citizen which centres upon the ability to be economically self-supporting in the marketplace, thus providing for one's own retirement, well-being, and children's education. That this new notion of citizenship is becoming accepted by the public at large is evident in the United States by bi-partisan support for "workfare" (Kymlicka, 1992) which involves cutting back the safety net and requiring welfare recipients to work for their benefits. In this country, Ontario's "common sense revolution" provides another example of the right wing's assault on the welfare state.

### Educational Repercussions

Growing acceptance of a different notion of citizenship has implications for most social institutions. Within education, popular concerns can be described as an expression of what Papadakis and Taylor-Gooby (1987) call "the new consensus of disenchantment" with the postwar welfare settlement. To explain the key elements of this disenchantment, these writers

expand upon the concept of legitimation crisis discussed by Habermas (1975). One such crisis pertains to general loss of confidence in the efficacy of public sector education, especially with respect to "standards" and "discipline". Another is the widespread recognition that state intervention has failed to achieve a progressive redistribution of social and educational opportunities. A third legitimation crisis has to do with a growing sense among the most economically disadvantaged that public sector education can operate in paternalistic, oppressive, and manipulative ways.

Such crises have fostered a mounting sense of disillusionment which has been exploited by variations of Thatcherite populism. As Allen and Martin (1992) put it, "The political ascendancy of the New Right ensured that retrenchment became the commonsense response to fiscal crisis and into this was woven the ideological onslaught on 'dependency'" (p. 2). In the process, as David (1989) shows, the strongholds of traditional community education were under siege in Britain by a narrow and particularistic sense of individuality whereby the parent-teacher partnership became translated into parent power, communal solidarity into competitive self-interest, and equal opportunity into individual choice.

### Competing values

The circumstances produced by choice extension begs the question of moral foundations. While one side sees the shift of educational power from public to private hands as a means of returning effective decision-making back into the hands of the people, an alternative view perceives this shift as debilitating community. Certain attributes of self sufficiency commonly espoused by the New Right serve to define "good citizenship" in a way that is

exclusive to the economically successful. This would not distinguish the citizens of a democracy from the subjects of a dictatorship. As well, several strands of current change within schools seem to illustrate a process which operates to exclude the *public* nature of public education. This fits with Borgmann's (1992) description of "self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action" (p.3) and his warning of the rule of the vanguard who encourage tolerance for the dismantling of egalitarian structures (p.14). This is the process by which notions of universalism become replaced by a pluralism which places little constraint on the actions of the individual.

Certain aspects emphasized by the New Right are not working out as planned (Kymlicka, 1992). This situation has extensive implications given the prevalence of this agenda. In many cases economic deregulation has not led to self-restraint but rather to unprecedented greed<sup>30</sup>; while restricted welfare has exacerbated poverty rather than reduced it. Barber (1995) attributes the continued attractiveness of the New Right to:

a disastrous confusion between the moderate and well-founded claim that flexibly regulated markets remain the most efficient instruments of economic productivity and wealth accumulation, and the zany, overblown claim that naked, wholly unregulated markets are the sole means by which we can produce and fairly distribute everything human beings care about (p.239).

Yet, this confusion allows those on the radical Right to insist that services as traditionally public as education be handed over to the private sector for arbitration and disposal. Slower economic growth seems to assist this tendency

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<sup>30</sup> The failure in the 1980s of the attempts by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations at "trickle-down economics" provide examples of this.

by strengthening resistance to redistribution, whether economic or educational. Far from promoting a new fairness, the victory of private interests over public ones seems to engender indifference to the plight of one's fellow citizen.

Local community would be eroded if welfare measures were significantly undone. The long term costs of such a process would eventually devolve to the public sector, a fact which makes some analysts remain optimistic that a government of the New Right would not follow this path (Taylor, 1993). Current disputes over the funding of health care in Canada suggest that this optimism needs to be questioned as the economic benefits of aspects of the U.S. system are given greater priority than the social costs of such an approach (Taft, 1997). Borgmann (1992) suggests that a growing part of the economy is becoming privatized in order to "disavow public responsibility" (p.47) for certain undesirable outcomes that result from reform, such as the widening disparities between socio-economic groups. In considering children in adverse social and economic circumstances, Valpy (1996) notes:

What we have here is the inevitable outcome of modernity's celebration of the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of the human soul and the fashionable liberation of the self—and of the activities of the marketplace—from the constraints of the community. Noble notions, but the pendulum has swung too far in their favour (p.A22).

For Valpy, the issue is whether it is valid to have a value system in Canada that protects individual parental rights over community obligations. In channeling energy towards promotion of parental choice, the potential for creating divisions which undermine civic membership needs recognition.

Since there is no such thing as a neutral stance, a government must decide to take an active or passive role with regard to the nurture of a common order. However, the responses of the Left merit similar reappraisal as these can equate sameness with equality, that is, striving to improve the lot of the many by diluting distinctiveness. The answer will not be found within one formula for public education since this could serve to hinder efforts to revitalize more democratic tendencies. Education systems have suffered from a surfeit of sameness, and there is considerable cynicism about remote, unresponsive administrations. Nevertheless, the reform needed does not seem achievable by extending the right of parents to shop for schools, and by viewing students as passive recipients of the service.

One approach extolled by the New Right is devolving the impetus for change to the level of small groups. This provides interesting convergence with the small unit size and flexibility which are trademarks of the postmodernist view of the future of community, although this perspective is emphatic in its rejection of ideological individualism. Just as policy development leaning towards a communitarian approach runs the risk of being condemned as dictatorial social engineering, so opponents of postmodernism charge that the vagueness of the proposals conceals the oppression intrinsic within any notion of community. If certain radicals on either end of the political spectrum had their way, schools would be based around one perspective representing the fundamental core of the society, with any dissident seen as reflecting dysfunctional socialization and requiring re-education or counselling. What a brave new world this would be! This charge is recognized by Borgmann (1992):

There are good reasons, of course, to be wary of the exclusive and oppressive tendencies of community. The liberal apprehensions need to be answered, but they should not prevail as a peremptory challenge to a communal order (p.127).

Borgmann continues to argue that any enforced aggressive design will be resented, and "only a shared understanding will encourage the individual to endure and society to agree on explicit and reasoned limits to intervention" (p.125). Postmodernism has a potential contribution to this debate in its location of the solution within a more highly developed sense of community. The question then becomes not whether but how the government should involve itself in shaping schools. This would be no mean achievement, and Borgmann describes the sustained determination necessary for a society to become a community, and the individual to become a member of that community.

The general public's slowness to react to political/social change is an important factor in the choice debate. Adopting an optimistic wait-and-see attitude towards charter schools is how the majority of people can easily become implicated in an individual rather than a social perspective. Borgmann (1992) draws attention to the political weakness of consumers since, by the time they act, fundamental decisions have already been made, so they can only send ambiguous signals to the authorities about the common order. He is concerned with the expedient assumption that lack of sustained protest infers general approval. As he states, "Between wholehearted approval and strenuous rejection lies something like implication in a course of events, the half-knowing and half-hearted going along and even pushing ahead with a certain sort of development" (p.115). With school choice it is difficult to "vote



with one's feet" in a meaningful way since there is doubt whether selection of a school signals approval, thoughtlessness, or lack of a better alternative. Does avoidance of a particular program reflect uncertainty about an aspect of it, or rejection of its whole concept? In the face of doubt, expedient conclusions must often be drawn by all sides.

### Tension of globalization and community

In certain ways charter schools do involve the establishment of a community in that they encourage groups of parents holding similar beliefs to band together and give the support and coherence so many schools crave. However, this can be an internal consensus based upon exclusion of others. It is illuminating to apply the global tendencies identified by Barber (1995) to this dichotomy manifested at the local level. He puts forward two scenarios. Jihad describes the balkanization of people into narrowly-conceived sects opposed to any kind of integration; McWorld stresses the homogenization of culture as uniformity is extended. He sums up the paradox created by the simultaneous action of both scenarios as placing the world "between Babel and Disneyland" (p.4).

This perspective suggests that there are social costs associated with individualism that proponents of choice do not recognize. What Barber characterizes as Jihad creates an identity by contrasting it with an alien "other" and makes politics an exercise in exclusion and resentment. It promotes community but usually at the expense of tolerance and mutuality, thus leading to a more selfish world in which aspirations have narrowed. In his words,

As modernity has created institutions on a scale too large to sustain face-to-face deliberation and community interaction, the antimodern forces

associated with Jihad hold out the promise of a scale of communal life more conducive to democracy. Yet in facilitating a reduced scale for political life, Jihad simultaneously destroys the mindset that allows democracy to function (pp 232-3).

Applied to charter schools, this perspective would highlight their exclusivity from mainstream programs within the public system--increasing the potential for them to become an enclave intolerant of outside diversity.

Individual parents who feel that a particular charter school would really suit their child are not trying to destroy public education; however, the consequences of all those choices are seen as holding the potential to do just that. As Barber (1995) cautions, innocent choices today can come to have dangerous consequences: "What ends as Jihad may begin as a simple search for a local identity, some set of common personal attributes to hold out against the numbing and neutering uniformities" (p.9). He asserts that even under ideal conditions markets have a limited capacity to generate what society needs; market relations are simply not a surrogate for social relations let alone democratic social relations (p. 7). He deplors the tendency for governments to capitulate to the tide of market ideology at the very time when the state ought to be aggressively intervening to protect the common good. What he calls the McWorld route suggests an anomie and a crisis of allegiance for society characterized by disinvolvement and the leading of self-contained lives. A loss of legitimacy would arise from growing adversarial negotiations which would threaten the justifying principles of society.

### Public education and individual rights

Dewey (1929) wrote that: "the community's duty to education is...its paramount moral duty" (p.16). Along similar lines Tyack (1982) conceives public education as a community of commitment linking the people and their schools, articulated by leaders but with a strong voice for citizens. However, he acknowledges that it is not hard to imagine a future in which this community atrophies as competition for scarce resources increases and public schools endure a slow death, especially in predominantly poor communities. Tyack compares the public school system as "probably the closest Americans have come toward creating an established church" (p.249), going on to describe how various reformation challenges have undermined the authority of established leaders, demystified beliefs, and splintered allegiances. He describes a process of institutionalization that developed from the early concept of public education which drew upon belief systems that were powerful in larger society. This development provided continuity but served to erode a broader basis of support. He recognizes the problems in attempting to recreate coherence in governance and program within a fragmenting educational system. "The subtle but powerful erosion of the traditional faith in public education" (p.249) making it even more difficult to reformulate a new social contract between the people and their public schools.

Public education should represent an aspect of society representing accommodation, compromise and empathy rather than absolutism, intolerance and exclusion. However, it can be used to evoke unrealistic or utopian expectations, for example Kiziltan, Bain and Canizares (1990) warn against attempts to make it a framework for "the nostalgic modernist's 'lost organic whole'" (p.368). The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation

produced a report (1993) based around the assertion that education is fundamentally a public good not a commodity for individual consumption. They identify four principles upon which public education is based: universality, comprehensiveness, proficiency, and accountability; these ensure access, opportunity, achievement, and value for all Canadians. Suspicion is expressed over some extensions of parental power in view of the potential for schools to become captives of singular special interest groups. Thus, the argument of the OSSTF is that any educational reform needs to demonstrate how it strengthens or extends each of the four principles.

Since many recent public policy developments serve to define the notion of a citizen's identity in terms of the possession of rights, a view of the citizen as a private rather than public actor has come to predominate (Bellah, Madsen, Swindler & Tipton, 1985). Such focus on rights is conducive to the fostering of an atomistic consciousness since it disregards public spiritedness and makes a community prone to selfishness. Either community members do not actively participate, or they do so on the basis of self-interest rather than concern with the public good. This trend is illustrated by a survey conducted by Glendon (1991) who found that young Americans define citizenship as freedom to do as they please. She reports that "The current cohort knows less, cares less, votes less, and is less critical of its leaders and institutions than young people have been at any time over the past five decades"(p.129). In this way, members of a community become less willing to assume certain disciplines and burdens traditionally entailed by their membership, and institutions decay as a result of losing the allegiance of participants. Glendon's study echoes the results of comparable work in Canada by Osbourne (1991) who suggests that even the passive form of citizenship which promotes obedience

and conformity is giving way to the present emphasis on competitiveness (pp3-4). Extension of school choice holds the potential to exacerbate this trend since democratic community would be adversely affected if a parent's concern becomes restricted to those families who share similar values.

Public responsibilities are important to democracy since, without them, the role of citizen is abandoned in favour of thinking of oneself in exclusive terms. Borgmann (1992) views individualism as having become "cancerous," indicative of a lack of common life when cold and impersonal design is what holds us together. The general insistence on individual equality promises an overload of subjective demands so that the tasks of education escalate beyond its means of achieving them, such as teachers being expected to be all things to all parents. Borgmann talks of a hyperactive society characterized by a narrow focus on the world, intolerance, incivility, and a decline in social programs. Thus, individual autonomy can be stressed to the point that the necessity of social mediation has been lost; pleas for a social order that encompasses more than just individual wishes come to be resented as judgmental intrusions which restrict freedom. Individual choice is demanded as a pivotal inalienable right, with little concern for any idea of wider obligation. This type of development has every likelihood of producing a generation sceptical about having allegiance and obligations to a wider group.

Living beyond the reach of public emotions and never getting beyond instrumental motivation results in such outcomes as a lack of collective responsibility for injustice. The robust involvement that does occur can be focused upon the promotion of the special interest of a group rather than the polity as a whole. Thus, compassion becomes restricted to people like oneself, to specifics rather than symptoms of larger problems in society; injustice

becomes a distant concept. From this perspective, the concept of state-ensured social justice which used to be reflected in public education becomes distorted by loss of collective purpose engendered by the ideology of choice.

What has come apart is what Ignatieff (1984) calls "people's willingness to pay the way for strangers". If citizens start to think about whether they get value for their money out of the civic bargain entirely on their own terms, logic will lead them to opt out eventually, because in fact they pay for weapons systems, schools, welfare that they do not want. The embrace of school choice does seem to be partly based on the ambition of some parents for their children to gain an advantage over the children of their neighbours. It seems to have become more acceptable to ignore the needs of wider communities, and to be more openly resentful about the cost of measures to help the children of the poor and powerless. Yet a sense of reality is lost when the most marginal groups become burdened with the responsibility of their own plight. Does choice simply mean that individuals can wash their hands of wider community responsibility with the sentiment: "if the parents do not care, we can do nothing for the children"?

Access to a wider choice in education does seem to enable a trend towards the survival of children of the fittest. Education becomes more overtly politicized with factions of parents anxiously manoeuvring to promote their own agenda. There is disdain for any notions of the obligations of public education, or the interests of their children's peers. Barlow (1994) uses the public system of Chicago to illustrate unbelievable disparities as the well-educated withdraw into comfortable enclaves while the hopelessness of the children of others comes to be taken for granted. Equally, she notes that a complaint made with increasing frequency about public schools in Canada is

that they have to accept all who walk through the door. This type of attitude seems to have produced the search for schools which set out to be homogeneous and therefore filter the admission of students in order to get rid of diversity.

This is a central reason why Heather-jane Robinson of the Canadian Teachers' Federation is troubled about the trend towards choice<sup>31</sup>. She doesn't support schools that attempt consciously to become more homogeneous since, in her view, a basic principle of public education is that it exists for all. Schools of choice--be they private, charter, or voucher--operate on the market model and compete for children and funding. For some to win, others must lose. Here the system appears to be premised upon promoting the interests of activists, with choice seeming to contribute more to the fragmentation of society than to its reinforcement. Initially liberating ideas of individual freedom are then carried well beyond their optimum level, as Taylor (1993) warns: "the modern exhortation of individual freedom ends up eroding the loyalties and allegiances to the wider community which any society needs to survive" (p.61).

Not that long ago education seemed to enjoy broadly consensual approval, whereas today such implicit acceptance is less common. There is more confrontation, more grievances, more demands that are indifferent to the consequences for others. Litigation is more often threatened by parents determined to "get mine" regardless of wider implications, a trend that seems stimulated by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982. As MacKay (1991) concludes, "Rights discourse in the school has probably made the educational environment more adversarial than it has been in the past" (p.212). This seems

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<sup>31</sup> ATA meeting, Edmonton, March 15, 1995.

to provide additional evidence that the notion of citizen is being largely abandoned in favour of viewing oneself in exclusive terms, indications of an increasingly atomistic society. Authentic civil rights become trivialized when the private desire of a parent for her son to attend a single sex elementary school is equated with the broad political right of access to free education. Equally, education should do more than reflect passing enthusiasms of politics or pedagogy which would replace plurality with conformity to the "group think" approach. Defenders of public schools are also prey to this type of narrow dogmatism: if you are not for public schools, you become perceived as an outcast. A point made by Elshtain (1993) is that in certain circumstances choice can enable a healthy pluralism, but not when there is lack of any spirit of democratic compromise. In her terms, charter schools could contribute to the "politics of displacement" which blurs the public/private distinction that has been so important to democracy.

#### A new social covenant

In confronting uncertainties produced by the failing nature of traditional structures, the picture is not without positive possibilities. In her book, *Democracy on Trial*, Elshtain suggests the need for a new social covenant which promotes a civic identity emphasizing what we hold in common even when we disagree. The liberal needs to put aside suspicion over the pursuit of stable values just as the libertarian must forgo constant insistence on individual rights. In this way the downward spiral of delegitimation, cynicism and anomie can be reversed. She stresses how education is never outside the world of politics but argues that it need not be over-politicized; rather it holds the key to teaching us to live with and among one another. It need not serve the imposed ends of militant groups. Rather, it should reflect what is worthy,



necessary, and excellent--not static entities but ones being democratically contested and redefined. It should avoid cultural imperialism which fails to prepare for the world of ambiguity, and instead should help us to engage in debate and explore alternative conceptions through which to apprehend our world (see, for example, Osbourne, 1991).

Several educational analyses engender cynicism, such as suspecting every school reform as having the motive of solidifying narrow political support (Weiler, 1989). Elshtain provides a glimmer of hope by combining an articulation of modern debilities together with a future vision. She suggests it is necessary to go further than simply thinking that we deserve better than what is provided by present structures. If such belief is to be translated into positive developments, change needs to be fueled with something other than a desire to make idealism more fashionable. Elshtain's concern is with the type of fuel that will reverse the decline of democracy and will prevent the verdict of "found wanting". Her book offers an inspiring, community-based foundation for education and other social institutions.

One possibility which Elshtain put forward is of schools becoming communities which celebrate coherence in society, a development which would eliminate the public anonymity which makes it easy for one group to ignore another. This approach prompts discussions of how education can contribute to the forging of a more inclusive communal order. This is the plea made by Elshtain in her stress on mutual inter-dependence, her criticism of the trend towards a more atomistic society, and her promotion of a civic identity. Elshtain holds that schools can be democratic communities where children of different beliefs can come together for an education which is inclusive. Such an education would not force the sharing of another's values, but rather

promote a cultural dialogue cognizant of both our distinctiveness and commonalities; it would open up our diverse world, not confine it within such categories as race or gender.

### Choice and conceptions of democracy

Doubts about education seem to contribute to a growth of populism where political legitimacy resides with "the people" and the mediating role of many political institutions is rejected. This involves a distinctly different notion of democracy in its desire to abandon debate in favour of calculus of opinion (the opinion of private individuals not public citizens) where the majority--or a vocal minority--can easily swamp less articulate concerns. While some theorists extol the virtues of pluralism reflected by the charter school option, Callan (1994) illustrates two ways of interpreting the egalitarian spirit of democracy by employing the mottos: "you're as good as I, let us help one another" and "I am as good as you, get out of my way" (p.209). When charter schools reflect the latter response, they can represent the eclipse of civic value attachments by individual and group interests.

Charter schools are indicative of a more chequered path that is becoming available, reflecting the growing Western preoccupation with choice and populist approaches. Lagging behind such change is the development of grounds by which to assess the relative merits and drawbacks of such alternatives. Parents whose own experience of school was a largely directed one, now seek to negotiate a "better deal" for their children, often armed with little more than hearsay rather than complete knowledge of "market options". Traditional principles of pedagogy seem increasingly redundant in debates about the moral legitimacy of public education, or the extent of exclusion

involved in specifying "stakeholders". Consensus politics which emphasized popular acceptance of public institutions (Rose, 1984) may have papered over various cracks, but the politics of choice seem to create as much potential for conflict as for unity.

Schools are potentially open spaces where notions of community can be kindled, yet to do so would require much more than traditional courses in civics which emphasize an understanding of rights without any active exercise of responsibilities. Callan (1994) argues for the need to go beyond a sentimental civic education which may evoke warm public emotions but does not root such emotions within the individual, since this superficial education threatens the virtues which underpin representative institutions. Even minimal participation in community affairs requires discerning faculties and loyalty to liberal democratic ideas such as abiding by the law.

Any genuine notion of a common life must be defined in terms of participation, and laws must serve to unite a community so that members sense a bond of common allegiance and are not simply informed of their democratic potential. Krishna's (1994) analysis of identity highlights how community can be the product of deliberate social and political strategy. He comments that "the production of national identity is a contested process everywhere and the struggle to produce citizens out of recalcitrant peoples accounts for much of what passes for history in modern times"(p.508). Development of this point could raise the provocative question of whether proponents of choice are struggling to make consumers out of recalcitrant citizens! This question suggests a different focus from conventional approaches, and is useful in suggesting that schools could take a more proactive role.

Type of community with which to identify

Promotion of parental rights can involve a pervasive privatism rooted in the refusal to consider the existence and meaningfulness of any form of collective identity beyond that entailed in belonging to a family system. Running counter to this is the approach which stresses that power accrues to individuals through a process of conscious and deliberate organization around collective identities (Hoggett, 1990). But whatever the ambivalence in the context of national policy, notions of collective identity and community appears to have construct validity at the local level of policy development. These notions articulate a renewed commitment to certain core social and educational values which have become increasingly beleaguered in the period of conservative restoration.

Growth in the public's disenchantment with education is portrayed by Barlow (1994) as a product of a competitive-corporate ideology of the right wing, but it can also be seen as a symptom of the failure in significant respects of social democratic welfare policies. The failure has been in the provision of a service genuinely accessible, equitably distributed and perceived as relevant to local people's lives. Such failure must be addressed by local education policy. More coherent strategies of collaboration are required at the local level if people are to engage constructively with the educational implications of the changing realities of community as well as such structural factors as long term unemployment and growing economic inequalities.

During this time of relatively rapid change in education a dichotomy has been identified between the values of self-interest and those of social solidarity, with the suggestion that the former threaten to overwhelm the

latter. Hargreaves (1989) warns that, while there may be enhanced responsiveness to the position of particular communities of interest, educational privatization does not satisfactorily resolve resulting conflicts of interests between particular public wills and the will of the public as a whole. If schools were to preserve their individual market position by responding to particular communities of interest, this could offend wider public will and threaten the moral order of society in general. For example, some more homogeneous communities may have no wish to see their local school divert energies and attention towards preparing its pupils to live in a multicultural society. This view offers some support to the analysis of Habermas concerning a confusion of direction indicative of late modernity, whereas Apple (1986) suggests a more deliberate strategy of the state responding to the failure of other reform approaches by attempting to "export" the crisis into the domain of private, individual choice.

Elliott and Maclennan (1994) warn of a trend towards individuals obtaining more autonomy at the same time as developing a more restricted perception. Their fear is that the role of the polity is being changed in a way that focuses on protection of negative liberties. These writers extend the distinction made by Habermas between the New Right's acceptance of social modernity and denigration of cultural modernity. Resistance towards cultural modernity is seen in the recurrent criticism that schooling is failing in its duty to maintain standards. The Right's embrace of social modernity can be illustrated by their enthusiasm for extending market relations to more areas of social life. In this way the New Right is portrayed as seeking to change society, with education as a potential key to establishing a new hegemony by enabling neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideas to become assimilated as "common

sense". The writers argue that two very different visions of the world are at stake: one which will encourage competitive egotism, and one where the importance of a broader sense of community is recognized.

Social resonance is lost when we share no commonality, and greater recognition is needed of the results of trends which serve to disconnect us from one another. Yet trends in educational philosophy and the priorities of policy makers appear to become more polarized as many of the features on the educational landscape are shifting. As choice of school increases in recognition of such polarization, one area which needs far greater attention is the degree to which school boards take into consideration pedagogical considerations when assessing the value of a proposal. Institutional inertia may indeed be daunting, but many of those who seek to improve existing systems have to deal with the powerful and attractive nature of impatient simplicities. If you separate the races, you cannot claim that racism doesn't exist. Equally, girls being segregated in order to achieve equality can be seen as inappropriate. Perhaps teachers need to more readily adapt their teaching styles to get the best effort out of both sexes.

It is thus possible for the apparent widening of individual consumer choices to shrink the field of social choices and force infrastructural changes that no public community ever consciously either selects or rejects. Such a view makes the charter school phenomenon worrisome to all who believe in the principle of universal public education. These are some of the wider implications of the strategies employed by a society trying to give free expression to diversity which demand greater recognition. Pinar (1995) describes how the construct of identity provides an intersection between private and public experience, but warns that "the American cultural identity

has been predicated upon exclusions" (p.357). Identity politics may have innocent beginnings but different conclusions.

### Is parental choice a solution?

Support of charter schools offers one route for those who wish to take constructive action due to their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Some groups of parents are pinning their hopes on the still-unknown long-term outcomes of this initiative, while others lobby for the widest possible selection of alternative programs. Such action is predicated on the assumption that choice and competition are the solution for society's ills. Yet, does a fragmented system offer adequate preparation for our diverse society? Only comprehensive investigation into both the implications of such "solutions" will provide the foundation of a system of education of which all can be proud; and which can justifiably describe itself as public. In Borgmann's terms, the problematic is whether charter schools evacuate the public space or whether they offer a space for meaningful community action. His concern is that education may lose its soul when expectation of communal cooperation comes to be seen as an outdated burden, posing an obstacle in the way of the unencumbered freedom of individual pursuit.

The pivotal role being given to parental choice in current educational change is not the only way of addressing the problems that undeniably exist in many schools. Choice assumes that all parents possess the necessary time and experience needed to investigate alternatives and gain equality of information to exercise their choices in a fully informed manner. This is not the case. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) offer a class related typology of parents choosing a school for their children. Privileged choosers place a high value on the idea

of having choice, and are predominantly middle class. They are able to take advantage of the possibilities presented by choice due to their ability to discriminate between schools in terms of policies and practices, to question staff, and interpret various sources of information. They often have direct contacts to assist in their child gaining entry to the chosen school. Possession of financial resources provides further advantages. They seek to find a school that will match the perceived proclivities of their child. Interestingly, one characteristic associated with this type is the ambivalence and confusion that can accompany greater knowledge of options, which sometimes result in compromise decisions.

The second category of semi-skilled choosers have more limited capacity to engage effectively with the market, "their cultural capital is in the wrong currency" (p.40). They do not possess the same social contacts or inside knowledge of the school system. Schools are portrayed in less complex ways so these parents depend more upon the comments of others. Some had difficulty making sense of information like examination results. The process of choice is abstract "more a matter of finding a 'good' school, rather than the 'right' one" (p.44). Characteristics of children are more rarely taken into account, and there is a greater degree of fatalism about the outcomes of education. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe's (1995) final category of parents are labelled disconnected choosers, who are not inclined to engage with the market. They have concerns about schools but "do not see their children's enjoyment of school or their educational success as being facilitated in any way by a consumerist approach to school choice (p.45). They typically limit themselves to a choice of two schools which are close to their home and part of their social community. These parents are described as working "on the surface structure of choice" given



their lack of familiarity with the system; consequently, they are more often impressed with a school's material facilities.

Although the work of these writers is based upon metropolitan England, they believe that it has wider relevance, "The class nature of the market as a mode of social engagement, and the advantages it thereby offers to the middle classes, are likely to be replicated whatever the particular market form adopted" (p.189). These authors do not take a rosy view of the past by implying that previous approaches to education were more equitable. They put forward the three categories as ideal types, and recognize that any classifications involving social class have become more difficult to apply given the involvement of a network of secondary characteristics. The central point is that the choice process is significantly informed by the position of a parent within a social network which makes certain parents more skillful choosers. Therefore they see choice as emerging as a major new factor in maintaining or even reinforcing class divisions and inequities.

Such work provides a critical challenge to the notion of public education engendering a broad sense of belonging to a wider community. Instead, policies which increase the amount of school choice within public education hold the potential for engendering greater divisions. Similarly, neither of the scenarios suggested by the implication of Barber's analysis holds out too much hope for the future. It would seem that we face a prospect of schools for the supporters of a Jihad, which are inward looking, and exclusive. Concurrently, there could be a McWorld education which surrenders judgment to the market and leaves public goods to private interests. This represents a choice between belonging to a fiercely protective community which is intolerant or indifferent towards others, or a community which loses

recognition of the individual who becomes submerged within a faceless commonality.

Almost all of the parents I have observed in their endeavours to establish a charter school are motivated by intentions that would be shared by most people. I would hypothesize that the belief that a child benefits from a structured environment, with aspects such as homework or dress code reflecting such structure, is very widely held. Drawing attention to how the wider implications of such actions reflect aspects of philosophies associated with the New Right is not to imply either that the New Right has a unitary nature (see the discussion above, p.66) or that parents who favour choice in education would endorse such socio-political standpoints (indeed, many would be opposed to them). Reality is more complex. Rather, the intent of considering this more extreme end of a continuum is to call for policy makers to give greater focus to these matters. There are no easy answers to such broad issues concerning community and democracy, but the experience of other countries can be used as an indication of what extended choice could bring to Canada. Thus, the next chapter returns to the international scene.

## Chapter Seven

### SCHOOL CHOICE, SOCIAL COHESION, AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Seen in the broader context of late modernity, the issue of school choice might be regarded as a response to a crisis of community and to the nature of democratic participation in that community. This chapter examines the experiences of schools of choice in other countries with a view to discerning the nature of this response. Though this chapter includes some issues arising from New Zealand's experience, it focuses primarily on some central questions raised by recent school reform in England. There are a variety of parallels between the situation of grant maintained (GM) and charter schools, the more established nature of the former providing some lessons for a better understanding of the latter. Such exploration of empirical examples of extended school choice assists identification and awareness of concerns that could apply to Canada.

To what extent is the professional autonomy of teachers eroded by extensions of parental choice? Are parents beginning to ask more broadly defined questions that go beyond their immediate interests, such as whether it is desirable for assessment of a school's quality to be based exclusively upon test results. In what sense does school choice allow for the local autonomy of schools? To what extent are these schools a reflection of the desires of citizens for meaningful participation in the community? What is the nature of that participation? What is the vision of community that is being shaped by this extension of choice? These are the types of question that demand greater consideration, for they redirect attention away from a preoccupation with techniques pertaining to how school choice should be implemented or how

self-governing schools should be managed, and towards identifying the values judged to be important in the provision of education.

Pre-dating public education is the right of parents to send their children to distinctive schools at their own expense, a choice limited by willingness and ability to pay. But how does one reach conclusions about "healthy" and "fair" education markets? Is it possible that publicly supported parental choice will lead to the establishment of schools dedicated to bizarre or unhealthy missions? Are the changes promoting more and better choices for all families? Is it ethical for schools to make decisions concerning their future without reference to the likely negative impact these may have on neighbouring institutions? Are they providing a mode of educational involvement that contributes to social cohesion?

The inclusion of selected literature is supplemented by extracts from three interviews I conducted in July 1995 during a research project I carried out in England as a means of obtaining another level of insight into the choice debate. These three people held distinctly different perceptions of opting out. The first was the principal of a comprehensive school in the Midlands whose attempt to obtain GM status had been defeated by the staff. The second was a principal of an elementary school in the Midlands who was strongly opposed to the whole GM process. The third was the principal of a GM junior school in the north of England which had been among the first in the area to achieve GM status<sup>32</sup>. The numerous short quotations I include in what follows are taken from taped interviews.

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<sup>32</sup> For consistency I refer to all in this position as "principal", although they held the titles of Principal, Head Teacher, and Headmistress.

### School--District Relationships

Provision of extra resources provided the strongest motivation for many schools to opt out of the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to become grant maintained (GM). In reviewing successful choice promotion strategies, Wohletter and Anderson (1994) list the types of grant available and emphasize how important the start-up resources were to GM schools in Britain. While the first school to opt out did so in September 1989, only a small number followed suit until the British Government offered financial incentives and reduced the minimum pupil enrolment required.

The financial advantages were, as Feintuck (1994) notes, "principally in the area of capital grants, though significant gains are also to be found in terms of Special Purpose Grants, and grants for restructuring, made available to GM schools in the first year after opting-out" (p.70). Such disproportionate funding served as an attractive inducement to opt out of LEAs early in the process. Those who defend this strategy argue that greater operating funds were the trade-off for no longer receiving LEA services such as curriculum development and psychological counselling, unless such services were paid for by the new GM school (Clayton, 1994). But the preferential funding that the first wave of GM schools enjoyed raises the question of whether they faced any real test of parental comparison.

When a school is freed from district bureaucracy, relationships are changed significantly (Lawton, 1995). For one, the emphasis on financial incentives available for GM schools indicates a shift away from a principal's sense of being part of a larger public enterprise to that of seeking the best possible deal for his/her own institution, regardless of the consequences for

other schools. By contrast, a spirit of cooperation received more emphasis in a survey of principals not opting out (Fitz, Halpin and Powers, 1993). In the interviews I conducted, the principal of the comprehensive school could not understand why her staff opposed GM status on the basis that the school would be isolated and thus unable to collaborate with other schools. She believed that an incredible opportunity had been lost due to the staff's naiveté and misplaced trust in the LEA. She did not relate to other schools because the LEA told her to; moreover, she resented going "cap in hand" to the LEA in order to obtain resources. In terms of curriculum advice, though she would not go anywhere but to the LEA for Science, for other subjects she stated that, "I don't want to be dependent upon the LEA Mummy saying that you have got to have this useless advice".

A contrasting perception was provided by the principal of the elementary school who described an almost exclusively positive relationship with the LEA. She relied upon the support of LEA people who were specialists. Whether it was a legal, personnel or financial issue, support was just a telephone call away, so she did not feel isolated. In general it might be expected that heads of GM schools would dismiss LEA services as an unnecessary tier of bureaucracy that absorbs a disproportionate share of resources. Surprisingly, the principal of a GM school was the one who obtained the most curriculum advice from the LEA on the rationale that most of her students progressed into LEA schools. She described a relationship that was initially awkward but became more accepting as the LEA realized it was going to have to work with GM schools, since they were "businesses whom it could benefit by selling services."

Parts of charter school legislation operate to reduce the role of school boards from that of policy-making to one of monitoring, a change which serves to redefine the relationship between central and local government. It is clear that a major aim behind the British reform was to undermine LEAs, especially those which had a different political philosophy from the Conservative government (Walford, 1994). Examination of the geographic distribution of GM applications reveals that the majority are schools in Conservative dominated LEAs, suggesting a domino effect. The lack of interest on the part of schools in Labour dominated areas can be seen to reflect either a lack of independence, or satisfaction with collaborative relationships.

Chubb and Moe (1992) explain the disproportionate number of GM schools in Conservative LEAs as being a reflection of a less hostile political climate which permitted the change to "arise more naturally" (p. 33/4). A contrasting view put forward by Simon and Chitty (1993) is that dissatisfaction from under-funding or "penny-pinching" by Conservative authorities is a central reason for the desire for more independence. They cite the example of the London borough of Hillingdon where the local Conservative council's commitment to holding down local taxes led to the exodus of over half of the secondary schools to the GM sector and the rest to consider making this move.

Another central motivation for a school opting out in England was to avoid being closed down by a school board, even though such action operates to preserve the status quo rather than extend choice. Wohletter and Anderson (1994) acknowledge that some Minnesota charter schools have followed a similar line of reasoning. However, they feel that decentralization represents an opportunity for a school to do far more than survive, and should be the means by which it can fundamentally reappraise its organization and

distinctiveness. Chubb and Moe (1992) defend schools' attempts to avoid closure as being a means to flee the oppressive political decisions of bureaucracy, while still being required to face the "real test" of having to attract parents. They proceed to note the subsequent decline in this motivation, but fail to consider the fact that LEAs were far less likely to suggest any closures when such action was likely to prompt schools to opt out.

Bureaucracy plays a paradoxical role in education. On the one hand it helps co-ordinate the planning process and ensures a degree of impartiality. However, too much structure holds the potential of destroying meaningful education by making it too standardized and inflexible. For example, as schools in England have opted out, certain LEAs have expressed regret that this has undermined their strategic ability to plan and coordinate the distribution of school places (Feintuck, 1994). When closure plans have to be shelved and/or LEAs come to deal with fewer schools in a district, the degree of congruity in the provision of education services inevitably decreases. The LEAs have been further weakened as schools can purchase more of their services--from inspections to payroll--from private sector suppliers. Even if they reorganize services along lines similar to Total Quality Management to make themselves more responsive to "customer schools," the future of LEAs is still jeopardized by pressures to reduce public sector expenditure.

Perhaps as a step closer towards their demise, it is possible to envisage LEAs doing little more than ensuring the provision of a minimalist education service. It is worth considering whether a similar trend could result from resentment of the education tax in parts of Canada. However, while their influence on the education service is in decline, LEAs have not been passively accepting all of these challenges. As Fitz et al. (1993) state, "it is in their interest



to discourage as many of their schools as possible from opting out in order to retain some control over their central budget" (p. 110). This situation in England has clear parallels with the situation in Alberta when school boards are required to consider granting charters to schools when to do so goes against their interests. Even where a school board is the monitoring authority for a charter school in Alberta, one board's official I spoke with was quite open about having an "arms' length" relationship. Such distance can result in the relationship becoming little more than symbolic.

In terms of offering incentives for charter schools to break away from district control, the Alberta government was also quick to lower the minimum number of students required to begin a charter school from 125 to 75. It has yet to offer additional financial incentive; although, given the comments made by the Alberta Education official reported in Chapter 5, a change in capital funding seems to be a possibility. While until recently avoidance to closure has not been a significant factor among charter school applications in Alberta, it is noteworthy that a group of parents in the town of Mundare are currently considering this option as a means of opposing a board decision to close their local school<sup>33</sup>. Canadians could also learn useful lessons from the experience of underfunding education in order to hold down local taxes. Awareness of the role of partisan politics provides an important element to bring to an analysis of provinces where there are general moves against the existence of school boards, as well as specific moves by charter school groups seeking separation from school board control.

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<sup>33</sup> CBC Radio Active, May 22, 1997.

### School and Community

Some of the broader issues considered in the last chapter received concrete illustration in the interview comments I recorded. The comprehensive school principal described her wish to gain independence from the LEA because it planned to close her school. She felt that this displayed a complete lack of educational vision and understanding of the nature of a community. She saw little evidence that the authority had made alternative plans for the multicultural groups in the town who were currently served by the school, suggesting that all they could expect was a "runt" school. "I felt that, given we were not serving the middle class community that can fend for itself much better, I actually had to fight for my catchment area and my students...This is not a self-confident, educated community, and it was just being used". Equally, she felt that teachers were thinking more of their jobs than the school's role in the community.

She argued that it was vital for principals to be able to relate school activities to what was important within their specific community since different communities require different sorts of schools in order to meet their needs. In terms of the balance between standardization and autonomy, this principal agreed that there was a need to have a basic outline of a child's entitlement, so that those who moved to a different part of the country would not be confronted with vast differences, and schools would not get away with giving children a limited diet. However, she was "still of the view that the curriculum we offer has to make sense in terms of the community we serve, and you then check it out to see if it is legal; I just refuse to be a robot which does A, B and C because the National Curriculum tells us we must".

A distinctly different perception of community was held by the elementary school principal. She resented the protected share of central budget received by GM schools which gave them additional resources at the expense of adjacent schools. As LEA schools received a smaller share of "the pie," in her view the reform operated against her belief that every child should have equal right to a decent education. Also, she was conscious of having to compete with the neighbouring school to ensure healthy enrolments, and she believed that this was a major problem connected with choice because parents could then take umbrage at one issue and withdraw their child, resulting in the school losing money from its budget. She described her catchment area as being lower working class, with many single parents. She felt that the school was essential to those families, but worried that the school would end up with less money because it was not seen as *the* school to come to, due to such factors as all children not being smartly dressed.

Many of her parents were not interested in such maneuvering, so simply sent their children to the school because it was the nearest one to their homes. She resented having to pay undue attention to public relations: "We should be part of the community, serving those people, not worrying about drawing children in to keep our budget. Some of these competitive aspects are counter productive". This is consistent with what Hargreaves (1989) describes as the changing role of principals: "From being primarily and directly responsible for the development and improvement of teaching and learning in their schools, their role will shift to interpreting and manipulating local parental markets" (p. 5).

Comparable issues brought about by charter schools in New Zealand have also been raised by Alcorn (1993) who concludes, "It is easy to be

expedient and respond to community pressure; it can be hard to maintain longer-term professional goals" (p.3-4). For example, how should a teaching staff respond to pressure to establish a highly competitive atmosphere within a school? Alcorn goes on to warn that, "Concentrating on the needs of a particular school community can be a healthy exercise. It can also lead to parochialism and narrowness of vision, a lack of awareness of what is happening in the system as a whole" (p.4). She expresses concern about the demands on principals for measured evidence of children's learning performance, with dangers of a rigid schemes which could narrow the curriculum and inhibit learning. Similar community-related issues seem to recur in the literature and practice of countries where educational choice has been extended (as a start, see the discussion of reform and community by Jones, 1994, in the U.S. and Allen & Martin, 1992, in the U.K.). So these experiences provide valuable background for any assessment of whether charter schools operate to reinforce or weaken communities in Alberta.

### Changing Power Relations in Schools

Charter schools entail a devolution of power from the provincial government to the local school, thus effectively by-passing the middle layer represented by school boards. Without this middle layer involved in policy mediation, the school administrators become more directly responsible for the delivery of government policy, thus forming a new "producer interest" approved by government. In England, the elementary school principal I interviewed saw most principals as coming from a classroom rather than managerial background, and felt that she did not have the time to be trained to carry out the administrative tasks--from calculation of benefits during maternity leave to conducting a security check on a prospective employee--

currently fulfilled by her LEA. Such a position would be dismissed by Chubb and Moe (1992) as reflecting a lack of innovation among LEA principals who have risen to their jobs under the existing system, "not, by and large, a revolutionary lot"(p.31). In contrast, they talk admiringly of a newly appointed principal who believes that formal certification for teachers is unnecessary and prefers those who break conventions. The writers identify no concerns with such a stance, only benefits.

As schools have moved to self-governance, a pivotal issue has been the division of responsibility between the principal and the board of governors (Williams et al., 1997). When a school acquires greater autonomy, a lot more power goes to governing bodies. Inexperienced parents come to make decisions previously taken by professionals, a situation which has positive as well as negative potential. The governing body of GM schools assumes ownership of the physical plant and the land, it gains total control over budget and staffing, and receives its operating funds directly from central government. The official recommendation is that the parent board should adopt a strategic role and leave tactical management to senior staff.

However, determining an appropriate division of labour between those who govern and those who manage has produced difficulties. There are boards who rubber stamp the principal's decisions, or are even unaware of them. But a graphic illustration of the other extreme is provided by Wohlstetter and Anderson (1994) who describe the situation at Stratford School in East London where members of the governing body claimed that they had a right to know what was going on in the school at any time, making frequent visits to see how lessons were being taught and how the school was being run. The writers describe how the principal saw this as excessive

interference and even sought a court order to ban board members from the premises during school hours. Resolution involved the intervention of the Education Secretary who appointed members of his own choosing to the board. As various demarcation issues arise in Alberta, further clarity would seem to be needed over what is entailed in managing and governing an autonomously incorporated school.

Referring to New Zealand, Alcorn (1993) talks of ambiguity over school policy making and implementation, noting that a number of principals "query the way in which prospective trustees were led to expect they would have substantial control over what happened in schools" (p.3). She describes examples of inappropriate expectations by trustees who lack real knowledge of what happens in schools. At the same time as adjusting to this less-defined power allocation, she observes that the paramount task of principals in that country was to avoid disruption of pupils' learning during a time of uncertainty and rapid change. One source of stress was the additional workload of principals which did not stabilize once the changes were in place. Similarly, the research of Wylie (1991) found that about two-thirds of members of Boards of Trustees did not intend to stand at the next election, citing in particular the enormous workload that has to be undertaken by these volunteer boards.

In Britain the comprehensive school principal whom I interviewed had very firm ideas about lines of authority. In her words, "The governors have taken advisement, have treated me as the chief executive. There are some governing bodies--I'm fortunate that I have not had them, or when I have I have challenged it--who do not know the difference between governance and executive authority". She would keep them informed of everything, but she believed that a governing body had to be helped to prevent

them from being simply a naive group of parents. The GM principal felt that the governing body had to undertake considerable amounts of work, and she described how "one or two resigned because they ran out of steam. But now things are flowing and in place. The worst is over. When you get into a routine, things go much better. Fortunately we all want to go in the same direction".

Significantly, for those in Canada following British developments, the change that GM schools renders to the role played by the majority of parents who are not governors is not nearly as notable. Indeed, if reform is not accompanied by commitment to greater openness or to new forms of democratic control of education, parents could be reduced almost to the level of passive "ballot fodder". Fitz et al. (1993) see the reform as more of a principal's charter, giving greater executive control without increased liability to parents. Their survey of a sample of GM schools reveals little difference before and after a school opted out. Among GM schools there was no apparent feeling of liberation, ownership, or evidence of greater participation. Moreover, some of the governors saw GM policy as enabling enhanced management but not greater parental involvement; for example, fewer GM parents knew the name of one governor. Given the extensive changes in the composition of the governing bodies of schools, these researchers warn of the consequences of governing bodies that lack accountability to any democratically elected level of government.

Although choice reform can be represented as a way of handing school boards back to the people, parents and local community, this can give it a more populist cast than it merits. Elliott and MacLennan (1994) express such misgivings:

Populist rhetoric about decentralization, about returning control to the community or to the consumers barely conceals the actual extension of state control. Power has been lost by local authorities and Canadian school boards: most important, perhaps, power has been lost by the teachers. The neo-conservatives have used popular misgivings about 'bureaucracy', criticisms of a 'bureaucratized intelligentsia' and easily excited antipathy towards 'progressive' teachers to legitimate actions that undermine the freedom of educators, that de-professionalize them (pp 179-180).

In this way New Right policies are seen to intensify challenges to the professional autonomy of teachers. A kind of "proletarianization" of teachers results from greater centralization which enables the state to prescribe and monitor teachers' actions (for example, through the National Curriculum and national testing), in conjunction with privatization which enables parents to hold more sway over the content and methods of teaching. More powerful Boards of Governors also have the potential to move beyond a supportive role and become another agent of surveillance, "as they are invited by government to assess how well their school is doing against a series of government-devised 'performance indicators'" (Elliott and Maclennan 1994, p. 179).

The comprehensive school principal would probably approve of the section in Alberta's charter school legislation which permits teachers of these schools to not be members of the ATA. In her opinion teacher unions in Britain were partly "Luddite" in their opposition to change and development. She felt that they respond inappropriately towards incompetent or unprofessional teachers by always seeking to defend them. "There are some, not many, very weak teachers, and children deserve better than that. You'll be really furious when your son has a really useless teacher and you know...there



is nothing you can do about it because the union is going to back that teacher not your son". (However, she rejected the idea of employing teachers with one year contracts--even with higher salaries--since this was less likely to attract high quality staff.) She described her teaching staff as being opposed to the GM idea on ideological grounds, but that they were "politically very naive--as young teachers are, as a breed--I suppose it is because they are idealists, and one understands that as part and parcel of the person going into teaching. Teachers and fear is a big problem".

However, little teacher empowerment seems to derive from greater school autonomy; if anything a tighter demarcation and increased scrutiny of teachers can occur as principals become more distant from the mainstream classroom and have their power consolidated. Accordingly, motivation can become the "carrot and stick" kind, with a sense of collegiality reduced by virtue of the principal exercising greater power over teachers' employment prospects. GM status does seem to introduce new divisions between teachers and those with any managerial role, as the goals of the latter increasingly diverge from the goals typically held by teachers. As Elliott and MacLennan (1994) suggest, "The financial squeeze, the deliberate use of short-term budgeting, the reduction of monies for permanent positions and the corresponding casualization of much work in schools...all contribute to a significant weakening of the professional autonomy of educators" (p.179).

### The Power of the State

Parents in Alberta who seek more control over schools need to be aware that the degree of autonomy resulting from the purported flexibility provided by systems which have extended choice is open to debate. One

dispute centres on the extent to which the site-level management of the budget actually results in any significant freedom in view of the bulk of a school's budget preassigned to fixed costs. Indeed, the acclaimed autonomy of GM schools is described by Fitz et al. (1993) as enormously restrained and regulated by a central government that steers at a distance. In this way, they argue, government can claim credit for the success of the overall policy, but avoid blame for any problems at the local level. These writers suggest that, while opting out may be perceived as a reform undertaken by schools, in reality it is reform "done" to them. Though principals may have a sense of having gained financial advantage, the role they play is marginal to the government's strategy. More significant is the transfer of power that has occurred from the periphery to the centre, from locally elected representatives to government appointed executive agencies.

Similarly, Dobbin (1997) questions whether New Zealand parents have gained any real influence on substantive educational issues. He points to how the promise of decentralized control is contradicted by continuing centralized control over areas such as curriculum and accountability. This is the paradox wherein the state apparently sheds its educational responsibilities through the privatization process, while at the same time tightening its own centralized grip on the education policy-making process. Privatization and centralization operating side by side may seem to make unlikely bedfellows, but Offe's (1984) work focusing on the rolling back of the state suggests that this pattern has predominated elsewhere.

Hargreaves and Reynolds (1989) extend this line of thinking by calling attention to how the centralized power of the British government is further reinforced by the focus on institutional competitiveness around its own

examination-based academic criteria of achievement. Ideological control over the means of mobility is achieved by virtue of schools having to publish their examination results, a requirement which narrowly circumscribes the terms of parental choice and market competition. As these writers state, "Through the combined use of privatization and centralization, the state in fact enhances its control over education, while at the same time divesting itself of some of the financial responsibility for achieving this" (p.7).

Furthermore, the growth of centralized control over teachers, curriculum, and the examination system have far reaching implications, all three having seen a very substantial shift in the locus of control towards the centre since the mid 1970s. Illustrative of a "discourse of derision" (Ball, 1990), the government can be seen to have the power to define the parameters of educational discourse through its ability to legislate, to provide funding incentives, and even to gain ideological influence by promotion of such things as discussion documents. As Hargreaves and Reynolds (1989) put it:

The DES<sup>34</sup> decides the policies, the shape and the texture of the educational products that are to be made and even the style and standard of service by which those products are to be delivered. Head teachers, paid directly by central government and placed in independent control of their school budgets, then manage their individual educational enterprises on competitive market principles. The rhetoric is consumer choice and diversity. The reality is product standardization. Kentucky Fried Schooling! (p.10).

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<sup>34</sup> This is the Department of Education and Science, now called the Department for Education or DfE.

The discourse of quality and standards replaces one of equality and opportunity.

Kolderie's definition of "strong" charter school legislation (quoted by Bierlein and Mulholland, 1994a) includes the formation of a separate government agency to sponsor the new schools. Although this seems an unlikely development in Alberta, awareness of the resulting power dynamics is worthwhile. Significantly, much of the impetus for the British reform arose outside the Department for Education. To avoid potential conflict of interests in the Education Secretary, a separate Grant Maintained Schools' Centre was funded to promote the policy and assist with administrative and financial systems at the school site. As the Centre's experience grew, its input contributed to a significant reduction in the transition time of a school going through the GM process. Initially, the Centre was to have a five year life-span, but subsequently it received more funds and responsibilities after the 1992 election victory. The Centre expanded to disseminate information, run workshops, issue a newsletter, provide legal advice, and negotiate terms for various services and products. Far from eliminating the services provided by the LEAs, the GMSC--together with the Funding Agency for Schools<sup>35</sup>--seem to be duplicating them.

However, the development of an additional agency does not pre-empt broader questions concerning the principles on which education is governed when the LEA's role in providing a link between communities and schools, and between schools and central government, is eroded. Since 1944 specific checks and balances have articulated the role of central and local government. The absence of a mediating authority to take responsibility for balancing

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<sup>35</sup> See Feintuck (1994) for an outline of the role of these agencies.

parental rights with community needs conjures up such possibilities as schools becoming ghettos based on class or race. While Whitehall is still held broadly responsible for deficiencies, it is unclear to whom parents should turn if they are dissatisfied with a GM school.

Because LEAs enjoy economies of scale, they are able to obtain goods and offer specialized services, such as a school psychologist and health insurance to employees, at a reduced cost. They also circulate new ideas and effective teaching practices to their schools. To overcome the economic inefficiencies and intellectual isolation of individual GM schools, mechanisms such as regional networks have been set up to provide mutual support. Wohlstetter and Anderson (1994) see the challenge as taking advantage of certain group negotiations without losing individual autonomy. This is a further example of why claims concerning the elimination of the so-called cumbersome layer of bureaucracy represented by the LEA need to be questioned. Moreover, the extra funding associated with transition to GM status was often spent on the employment of senior managers for budget and entrepreneurial activities. This does not seem to indicate cost-cutting.

The 1992 White Paper entitled *Choice and Diversity: a New Framework for Schools* illustrates the Conservative Government's wish to expand GM schools. With that policy document the powers assigned to the Education Secretary to regulate further aspects of school service were strikingly increased. The creation of the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) made such tasks as school closure even more difficult. However, Fitz et al. (1993) question whether this Agency has the staff or expertise to reach informed judgments with respect to educational planning. It is responsible for local governance without being accountable to local populations. Indeed, the Agency had no

obligation even to ascertain the declared needs of local communities. The Agency's position gives it considerable power to promote specific preferences. For example, it could promote a return to selection or determine the pace at which religious bodies will receive support to establish their own schools. These authors feel that the lack of accountability of the FAS and its possible role in restructuring education tend to be overlooked in the rush to support the positive attributes of opting out.

Promoters of choice such as Chubb and Moe assert that it is the government's job to design an institutional framework that can deal effectively with the concerns of uninformed parents, the provision of necessary transportation, discriminatory admission, and the tendency to push the poor into second class schools. They believe that choice reform requires a certain foundation if it is to do its best work, and that this would include situating choice offices in each locality to collect information on each school and provide it to every family. This position sends a rather mixed message since such a framework implies considerable top-down rules. Schools could be expected to vigorously pursue their own interests, while the funding policy would only define what constitutes good governance in narrow efficiency terms. As Fitz et al. (1993) put it, "In effect, planning and democratic accountability will be replaced by a model based on efficiency and atomization, structured around loosely coupled institutions overseen from the centre" (p.111).

Various interconnections between privatization and authoritarianism can be identified. Carl (1994), for example, describes the erosion of the collective power of teachers and community groups such as school boards, and the consequent enhancement of the power of principals and the state bureaucracy.

Thus, authority and control exist very much alongside the proclaimed freedom to choose. He feels that the supposed generating of freedom overlooks how markets can be authoritarian, for example, by disciplining teachers through the threat of redundancy. His proposition is that choice legislation often contains aspects which serve to limit the extension of parental choice to the promotion of "forms of schooling inimical to neoconservative values" (p.305). He sees the central force behind the parental choice movement in England as being New Right reformers at the national level, with local groups making the best they can out of the legislation.

Britain's Conservative government was confronted with the growing dilemma of having to maintain financial incentives sufficient to encourage further opt-outs, while reigning in the overall costs of the policy. That the government was also apparently frustrated because its message was not convincing parents to opt out, was evident in its requirement that the governing bodies of all LEA schools must have an annual debate about opting out, and provide an explanation in their annual report to parents should they decide to stay with the LEA. Wastell (1997) describes how a later attempt by the government to introduce annual compulsory ballots in all LEA schools was defeated. Such an attempt serves to confirm Fitz et al.'s (1993) concern that, "the prescriptive nature of these proposals undermines considerably the original enabling character of the GM schools policy" (p.108).

#### Has Choice been Extended?

Choice reform is predicated on the assumption that encouraging schools to break away from district control will result in parents enjoying a wider range of schools to which to send their children. However, as schools in

a system of more open choice become exposed to the winds of competition supposedly in the name of liberty and efficiency, the greatest impact is likely to be felt by the best and worst of these schools. If the former becomes over-subscribed, it will have to decide upon a selective admissions policy that will have obvious implications for neighbouring schools. Conversely, the latter may have to close, a decision that will both restrict parental choice and further complicate any overall strategy for adjusting to changing student numbers.

Success is claimed where schools of choice have increased their student numbers, but Dobbin (1997) points to less obvious costs as part of his case that inequalities have been exacerbated in New Zealand by competition between schools for students. His position is that a two-tier system is created due to a self-fulfilling prophecy which enables over-subscribed "good schools" to covertly select their intake. He provides research to show that schools within the new system suffer the loss of middle class families who are more able to take advantage of choice, more able to pay a higher school fee, and more likely to be active within the school. This means that some schools face a relative lack of resources and a disproportionate number of children in need of more attention.

Within a framework where choice and diversity translate into competition for survival, schools are likely to be involved in activities designed to ensure their continued existence. Survival of public schooling then comes to be dependent upon their ability to recruit and retain pupils within a local education market which is premised upon having losers. Appropriate information assumes a central position. Some schools work incredibly hard only to achieve results that look unimpressive when one does not know the full story. The GM principal's approval of the majority of the



changes was not extended to the national league table of schools (an annual listing of all schools based on their performance in national tests) because of the disparities that were hidden within it. It was her opinion that schools enjoying a high position in this annual league table based on test results usually had students who were relatively easy to teach.

However, concerns about a two-tiered system arising from extended ability to select are rejected by the GM principal. She talked about those who bought houses in specific catchment areas as representing selection based on parental income, and asserted that it was healthy that people had to fight for what they believe: "if you are saying GM schools are *the* thing, then you've got to prove it". She also saw competition as improving LEA schools since they wanted to be seen as better than GM ones. Even the elementary school principal speculated that a positive aspect of GM change has been to "sharpen up" the LEA considerably since it had to vie for custom from schools. The comprehensive school principal believed that, while GM reform was brought about by a right wing government based on a market forces philosophy, such forces were already operating. It had always been the case that middle class, educated parents would move house or do whatever was necessary to send their child to a school of which they approve. Thus she was dismissive of those on the left wing of the political spectrum who thought that market forces should not operate. "I've worked with market forces all my working life in education".

The British experience suggests that GM schools are anxious to foster an image of better quality by stressing how they are different from adjacent LEA schools by virtue of uniforms, tougher discipline, and superior facilities. And in this way they do seem to have been more vigorous in their efforts at

reputation management. Any new school on either side of the Atlantic is likely to follow a comparable pattern in attracting parents. However, short term distinctiveness may diminish as others begin to give greater attention to such factors. Also, unless the change goes beyond reputation management and practices aimed at resurrecting traditional images, such practices could represent superficial rather than substantive changes in the quality of educational provision.

Thus reform can serve to consolidate existing patterns if schools heralded as a means of providing new choices represent a way of holding onto an old approach. There has been a strong propensity for GM schools to adopt traditional modes of education, as evident in the high proportion of secondary schools applying to opt out which are either single sex, selective in admission, or voluntary aided/controlled. Some similarities are also evident between charter schools and the new City Technology Colleges which were created following the 1988 Act (Whitty, 1993). While Chubb and Moe (1992) feel that these have been too few in number to make a difference, they still deny the charge that the new system enables greater selectivity over admission. They concede only that, since everyone cannot be admitted, these colleges want motivated students and committed parents. In their view, this preference for establishing a more homogeneous community produces institutions that have an ethos of hard work and high expectations; it "has nothing to do with class, ethnicity, or other bases of social stratification" (p. 22). The fact is, however, that such a selective admissions policy can even mean that these schools could restrict choice rather than extend it, as those who support such schools would have us believe.

During the interview the elementary school principal commented on the typical GM school's emphasis on formal traditional academic education as evidence of middle-class desires; since they were unable to afford to send their child to a private school, they endeavored to change the local one into an equivalent. She did not know of many schools like her's that had opted out. It is significant that, just before the recent general election in May 1997, John Major was explicit about wanting to return to greater selection by promising extra powers to parents wanting to turn their children's school into a grammar school<sup>36</sup>. Commenting on this, Wastell (1997) states that:

The move, aimed at putting education at the centre of the election agenda, would allow groups of parents to petition governors to seek grammar-school status, forcing them to begin a formal consultation process. The Prime Minister will announce a new, publicly-funded Grammar Schools Trust to offer support and information to parents and schools wanting to switch status.

This development supports Fitz et al.'s (1993) thesis that GM reform represents preservation, not innovation--what they refer to as "reinvigorated traditionalism". Furthermore, they have found little evidence to support the initial claim that GM legislation would help areas of disadvantage since only 18 schools of the first 225 (i.e. 8 per cent) that opted for GM status came into this category.

Opponents of the GM reform in Britain--for example, the group--Keep Our Schools Local--advised governors and parents to question whether GM

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<sup>36</sup> While most grammar schools disappeared with the reorganization associated with comprehensive school reform, they still enjoy a reputation of high standards. This reputation rested on their ability to select the top 25% of students based on the results of the Eleven Plus examination which was introduced by the 1944 Education Act.

status was a necessary condition for school improvement. This lobby group was set up by a group of parents who had found it difficult to obtain information about the disadvantages of GM status. In 1993 the group joined a national association called Parents Opposed to Opting-Out (see Appendix D). In particular, this association questioned whether schools run on principles of self-governance were more likely to promote higher standards of attainment. For example, the GM pupils surveyed by Fitz et al. (1993) about their impressions of the change recently experienced by their school emphasized changes in school buildings or in the uniform, but mentioned few qualitative differences. Indeed, many pupils were unaware that their school had become a GM school, or if so, mentioned only the need for more sponsored fundraising. While such lack of awareness over a school's change in status might be possible in California where a whole school can opt to become a charter school, this result is unlikely in Alberta where charter schools are only formed as new entities.

Fitz et al.'s study found that many parents saw little real change in terms of availability of choice. The study showed some parents were reluctant to send their child to a school having an uncertain future, and therefore gained reassurance from GM status. However, the writers report that GM status alone did not seem to stimulate parental interest or participation, nor did it seem to be a major factor influencing parents' choice of school. LEA pupils often perceived GM schools as being selective on the basis of sex or ability, or as receiving additional money. Yet, the study found that, while GM parents indicated higher levels of satisfaction with their schools, this trend was equally reflected in LEA schools.

Chubb and Moe (1992) argue that earlier attempts at extending choice have sought political acceptability, consequently they have not produced change since they have not addressed such underlying causes of ineffective education as the top-down organization of schools. They portray Britain's 1988 Education Reform Act as radical in that it removes most existing political controls from schools, overthrows established interests, and renders many educational administrators redundant. By reducing the power of bureaucrats to intervene, choice is made meaningful since schools become obliged to respond above all else to the needs and interests of parents.

Prospective charter school organizers might be heartened to read the breezy optimism in Chubb and Moe's contention that real choice can be extended by new schools set up in what is now empty space within existing schools, since in the words of a member of the House of Lords they quote, such schools could be run "on faith and a shoestring" (p.44). The writers also argue that a GM school should be able to change its character as it sees fit; regulation preventing this "apparently, was a protection against a school becoming elitist. But there is nothing to fear in this regard"(p.44). On this view endless possibilities arise when people are given a chance to seek out educational options, implying that the supply of programs will always be limited in relation to the demand.

However, such extension of choice can occur without a delineation of appropriate parameters. Chubb and Moe speculate that part of the expansion of the GM sector could include private schools opting *in* to GM status, but they do no more than state a preference against fees being charged. This implicit view within choice reform that the welfare of each individual can be unproblematically aggregated to result in the welfare of all is highly

questionable. By privileging piecemeal rationality, a government could perpetuate, or even exacerbate, the very inequalities across parent groups that are manifest in existing patterns. Consequently, there needs to be more vigorous debate over the issue of whether choice has been significantly extended for most parents. And what forms of choice lead to greater inequities?

### Lessons for Alberta

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine how the experiences of choice extension in other countries can contribute to analysis of the introduction of charter schools in Canada. Although the establishment of charter schools in Alberta will be on a much smaller scale in the foreseeable future, elements of the British experience with GM schools provide useful insights with respect to North American developments that are underway<sup>37</sup>. A prevailing theme that emerges from the issues that have been included here is the change to a variety of relationships that occur as choice is extended. Applying this to Alberta raises questions about how the role of the charter school principal is different from one working for the local school board, and how the contract of a charter school teacher affects his/her working conditions.

In terms of parental power, there seems to be a range of outcome falling between the central input that some parents come to expect and the perception of them as little more than ballot fodder. One of the many fine lines occurs when parental involvement stops being valuable and starts encroaching on the professional responsibilities of educators. Another such line would determine how far the accountability of a charter school board should extend beyond the immediate body of parents they serve. Again, perception of

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<sup>37</sup> Some of the differences in the educational scene in the U.K. and the U.S. summarized by Boyd (1993) can be usefully applied to Canadian comparisons.

"community" plays an important role in determining obligation to a narrowly- or broadly-defined group. The redistribution of power in British education also raises the question of whether charter school legislation creates extensive parent involvement in areas of marginal significance while being designed to render school board authority to competitive challenge.

It is not difficult to draw broad comparisons between situations offering wider choices of school. Coleman's (1994) work with respect to British Columbia is one study that has found that parents who investigate educational options show consistency in their search for order and discipline, and academic achievement and proximity. In other words, the best possible school is sought close to home. Ideally, various types of information should be equally available to all, including the visiting of schools, comparing prospectuses, talking to friends, and paying attention to reputation.

While it can be argued that parents are likely to become bewildered when confronting a maze of educational options for their children, Chubb and Moe (1992) dismiss this as being an unwarranted, patronizing view of parents. They maintain that choosing between schools is not at all a complex process. However, while they hold that the success of education is now crucially dependent upon pleasing parents, they go on to emphasize the need for strong leaders who are able to take charge and confront political conflict. Yet they concede that, "While on paper the governing boards and the parents are supposed to be the prime movers in all this, the reality is that they lack expertise and experience and are often easily intimidated by the establishment"(p. 35/6). This is a somewhat contradictory stance, given their portrayal of parents as being informed and cognizant of the opportunities that

have potential within this reform. Now, it seems, parents need a strong leader to take them along the appropriate path.

The lack of attention given to disadvantaged social groups in Britain provides substantiation for the concerns of some critics of charter school legislation in Alberta who see them as catering far more to the advantaged sections of society (see, for example, Robertson et al., 1995). In spite of its earlier start, the move to GM schools in Britain provides no irrefutable evidence to Canadians that there is a notable correlation between increased emphasis on intra-school competition and increased academic standards or student achievement. Yet both increased educational opportunity and improved achievement are assumed to follow automatically from opting for GM status. The evidence is far from conclusive.

If anything, opting out seems to be a policy which confirms rather than challenges the assumption that extra resources equal better schooling. It seems that principals enthused about enhanced resources while, paradoxically, the government attempted to deny any link between increased school expenditure and educational benefits in order to stem the flow of funds to these schools. Moreover, this benefit had declining attraction as new entrants into the GM sector enjoyed less in the way of additional funds. It will be interesting to observe the nature of the changes brought about by the newly elected Labour government. Though it was elected May 1, 1997 as "New Labour," with many policies similar to those of the Conservatives, education was nevertheless given the number one ranking in their policy platform.

Some commentators on this direction of educational reform adopt a definitely positive slant towards choice extension. To use Lawton's (1995)



words about New Zealand, "It will probably be a decade or more before results can be fairly evaluated, yet visits to two large schools in the Wellington area in 1990, I found all concerned delighted with the changes" (p.70-71). Marshall and Peters (1990) fall into the less optimistic category who warn that in spite of the claims of greater efficiency arising from such reforms, the latter represent "the insertion of new right thinking in education....Education has been commodified in the guise of administrative change" (p.143). These writers offer no evidence for the hopes of improved quality in learning.

In reviewing the repercussions of the Education Reform Act in Britain, critics have emphasized such elements as the legislative boosts to the flagging fortunes of the movement, the lack of any significant mould-breaking, the inhibiting of LEA planning, the minimal improvement in parental participation or pupil experience, the increased power of principals, and the creation of new "producer interests" as evidence that other countries should be cautious before following a similar path. Greater choice has also been criticized for making the decision to opt-out by one set of parents binding on future generations of families. This process permits a transitory body of parents to decide the future form of education and type of school since there is no legislative provision for a GM school to opt back into local authority control. Perhaps the "width of focus" used in analyzing GM schools determines the basis upon which they can be compared with LEA schools by providing clarity for certain factors while relegating other factors to the fuzzy margins.

The GM principal whom I interviewed believes that handling one's own finances gives a feeling of ownership, and that GM status offers a certain amount of freedom to develop one's school in a particular direction without waiting for permission from above. She concluded the interview by pointing

to the fact that the new firm of caterers they had hired offer students and staff a choice of menus: "Another positive thing, we can choose our food!". Since her small school was one of the first to opt-out in northeast England, some of her experiences could well sound familiar to those involved in leading early charter schools in Alberta. Initially she felt very isolated. Much of the opposition she faced was based on political grounds, and there was also the fear from local schools that they would lose students.

At one point she was worried by the prospect of a Labour government, but subsequently felt that the latter would be unlikely to try and undo all the various changes. She described how parents had to fight to keep the school open, resulting in fantastic parental enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the school. The unqualified nature of this enthusiasm was due in large measure to the fact that those who didn't agree with the change had moved their children and, moreover, there was now a waiting list. She was uncertain about the particular basis of her school's success: "Now is it because it is GM, or is because it is a church school or is it because it is a small school, or is it because it is a good school and friendly staff?" Indeed, many people in Alberta would be curious to know the answer to such a question.

Parental expectation of greater involvement in education is clearly an international trend that is here to stay, and if harnessed correctly can provide the basis for extremely positive outcomes. Lessons from abroad should assist analysis of aspects of this development such as parent contracts promising support of a school's aims; these can alternatively be seen as a quick fix or a reflection of a strong partnership. Parents everywhere seem to have to undergo considerable contortions in order to become well-informed about school alternatives. One intriguing area would be to explore ways in which teacher

education and professional development could assist teachers to work more effectively with parents. This attention could be extended well beyond the school level given certain European countries where widely-based parent associations have input into government policy development.

As in so many cases, we seem left with an uncertain balance. Charter schools hold potential to stimulate Alberta's public system to recognize parents as having a vital voice, and to avoid the complacent attitude of taking the parent body for granted as a captive audience. Moreover, examples of parents volunteering to decorate classrooms or assist with activities exhibit one way of tapping into the vastly under-utilized reserve of parent commitment. On the other side are stories of parents expecting to have constant access to the classroom, suggesting notions of teaching no longer predicated upon a relationship of professional trust. I continue to hold the position that assessment of policy requires more definite parameters of choice based around a working definition of public education.

## Chapter Eight

### LEVELS OF RESPONSE

#### The International Level

Several different levels of analysis can be used to approach the question of wider choice in public schooling. Public discussion of turning education into a market commodity would have found little political acceptability in neither the United Kingdom or Canada of the 1970s due to a highly developed welfare state and substantial social democratic elements within the political culture of those two nations. Subsequently, however, as described in Chapter One, certain neoconservative trends have enjoyed far more currency and public discourse has moved significantly to the right. There is some recent evidence that more centrist views are gaining public favour. Clinton's success at winning re-election in November 1996 has been attributed in part to increasing public doubt concerning the appropriateness of the approach taken by the Gingrich element in the American Congress, which aims to undo much of the New Deal. Similarly, British Conservatives were defeated in 1997 in spite of Britain's vibrant economy. Nevertheless, the trend towards deregulation has become well established, and calls for greater social conscience or interventionist government action are widely viewed with suspicion.

Reform in education is a product of struggles and compromises among parents, politicians and bureaucrats, different sections and levels of public service, professional educators, opinion-makers at large, and ideological factions of governing parties. The "constellations" of these groups may vary

but, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, the resulting patterns of change are remarkably similar. The call for increased competition and wider choice reflect the growing conviction that marketplace conditions enhance all aspects of our society by creating greater opportunities for the consumer. However, additional considerations are introduced when market choice is applied to education; for example, most people would find it unacceptable if the quality of education provided for children reflected the price paid by their parents, since societal divisions would be considerably strengthened by such a system. Nevertheless, considerable dissatisfaction can be avoided by providing alternative types of school that receive similar levels of funding from the government in an attempt to break, or at least weaken, the quasi-monopoly of public education. This is the basic rationale behind grant-maintained and charter schools.

However, similar international ideological thrusts are filtered by national structural and cultural differences so it is important to recognize differences along with similarities between Canada and other countries. At one level British schools were more prepared for the increased responsibility involved with greater autonomy by virtue of widespread experience with school-based budgeting (called local management of schools or LMS). As well, the pivotal role played by the Department for Education has enabled the Thatcher/Major administrations to go much further with reforms than would be possible in Canada where education is a provincial rather than federal responsibility. At another level, Canada is perhaps more proudly multicultural and less class based. There remains broad Canadian support for a common state-provided and "fair" system of neighbourhood schools to which the overwhelming majority of students will go. Consequently, while the New

Right agenda is realized in different ways in Canada, it still faces considerable resistance.

Dissatisfaction with the public system in North America has been reflected in the move to home schooling, private schools and now in an increase in applications for charter schools. Advocates see the latter as paving a way to greater diversity. As the Assistant Secretary for Education under President Reagan, Chester Finn, asserts:

"Education is the only place in American life where there is no choice. We don't tell poor people what to eat; we give them food stamps. We don't tell them which doctor to go to; they have Medicaid cards" (quoted by Wallis, 1994, p.44-5).

Compared to the voucher system which allows parents to spend their allotted education voucher as they see fit, charter schools are described as, "a kinder, gentler, more politically palatable way to provide parents with some measure of choice, albeit in the public system" (Wallis, 1994, p.45). The last phrase, almost an apology for the fact that charter schools remain within the public system, reinforces the conviction of those who see such schools as heralding further extension of right-wing philosophy that they are correct in their suspicion. Critical appraisal of this movement is conspicuously lacking. This article by Wallis (1994) provides another example of the considerable literature on this topic which adopts an almost exclusively positive orientation towards charter school reform. Too few assessments go further in the negative direction than to reserve judgment until such schools have become more established.

The present state of public education in the United States is at best problematic. In spite of having only a brief history, charter schools offer hope for positive outcomes, such as improvement in the plight of disadvantaged students to which Nathan (1996) draws attention. But what must be given much greater examination is whether negative aspects of the charter school movement are being expediently overlooked. Even allowing for the fact that strong charter school laws that enable effective implementation are unlikely to be passed by legislatures which are not strongly committed to the idea, the legalities of implementation have been far from plain sailing. An example is Michigan which was different from most other states in allowing private schools to apply for charter status. When most of the first charters were granted to former private schools, the Michigan Education Association along with the American Civil Liberties Union took legal action to overturn the state's charter law. The MEA's argument was that, since these schools are not truly public, they should not receive public funds. In October 1994 a judge passed a holding order on a disbursement of \$11 million in state funding until the matter was resolved. The Senate passed another law to allow funds to reach the new schools, then a further lawsuit, filed in August 1995, declared the charter school law unconstitutional. This is the type of lengthy litigation that could deter states from adopting charter school legislation.

### The National Layer

The considerable debate provoked by the promotion of charter schools in Canada heightens what is often essentially an ideological struggle. Dobbin (1997) asserts that it is no coincidence that Alberta is the first province to introduce charter legislation, given its open embrace of New Right ideas in almost all areas of public policy. He describes British Columbia as having the

most intense campaign for charter schools funded by right-wing think tanks and corporations. He sees the Ontario government as also being motivated by similar ideology in its move to eliminate school boards. Moreover, he suggests that ideology-driven reform has achieved the desired results:

Relentless attack on public education by right-wing politicians, business spokesmen, right-wing think tanks and media commentators has had the desired effect. Many parents have been convinced that the public education system is no longer serving their children's interests (pp25-26).

Dobbin sees Canadian culture as influenced by New Right federal policies causing it to become "more Americanized, more individualistic, and as such more vulnerable to 'free market' solutions to public policy issues" (p.27). Thus, he portrays Canadian public education, particularly its role in nurturing democracy, as under threat.

Other Canadians have welcomed the arrival of charter schools and await with anticipation the benefits they believe will follow. For example, Raham (1996) describes the evolving discussion about school choice as beginning with a growing acceptance of the concept of wider school choice. This evolution developed from the stage of initial doubt to current discussions of the kind of choice that is most appropriate within a local context. She outlines different points on the continuum of autonomy and accountability, and argues that charter schools occupy the most advantageous position since they maximize both of these conditions under which schools operate. She believes that the charter school approach is the "tool to force the existing system to accommodate the demands of parents for broader choice...Charter school legislation offers the Canadian public school system the greatest hope



for change" (p.18). In spite of the complexity of the issues involved and the entrenched nature of certain practices, she asserts that bureaucracy and resistance to sharing power must be overcome. She encourages the provinces to follow Alberta's lead, set up task forces to examine the possibilities of charter schools, and prepare draft legislation.

Raham charges that opposition to charter schools in Canada is being led by teacher unions borrowing "the earlier rhetoric of their American colleagues, relying on fears and misapprehensions which to a large degree have proven unfounded. These centre around equity, access, elitism, and the evils of competition" (p.26). This prompts the question of whether or not opposition to charter schools in Canada represents a "knee-jerk" reaction from those who have a stake in the status quo. One opponent is Larry Kuehn (1995) who, in a report for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, argues that:

Charter schools encourage social fragmentation rather than common experiences. An important historic role of the public school has been to provide a meeting place and common experiences for students from a variety of cultures and homes. With the increasing diversity in our society, it is more important than ever to have students from different backgrounds in classrooms and playgrounds together. Charter schools lead to balkanization as groups create schools to reflect their special interests (p.1).

This view is reiterated by others who defend the public nature of education. Among these, the Executive Secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association warns that "The charter school phenomenon should be worrisome to all who believe in the principle of universal public education. Indeed, charter schools

hold the grim prospect of feeding on, and destroying, the very system they promise to reform" (Buski, 1995, p.30).

Similarly, a report produced by Canadian Union of Public Employees (1995) describes charter schools as publicly funded private schools and as involving, "a real threat to the infrastructure of public education in Alberta" (p.3). It begins with traditional union concerns, describing the legislation as a political move towards union-busting through promotion of contracting-out services and privatization of jobs. The report goes on to raise broader questions, such as why charter groups are able to use any type of building for their school, presumably not constrained by conventional expectations of a playground, gym or library. It also questions the educational rationale for permitting parental volunteers to replace trained support staff. The argument expressed in the report is that, though typical parents want more communication and input, they do not wish to directly manage the school because they typically do not have the time or are not sufficiently conversant with school issues. The report is also sceptical about the variation that can be expected from charter schools given that their accountability is usually defined in terms of annual standardized test results. The report also notes the irony of a government talking about deregulation while exploring provincial methods of testing and teacher appraisal.

Opposition to the charter movement has also been expressed by a former Minister for Education in British Columbia, Art Charbonneau, who describes the idea of charter schools as reflecting a philosophy based on the view that, if we cannot save all children, we should save some (Gzowski, 1995). He sees the charter school movement in Canada as one imported from the United States which has an education system facing a downward spiral.

Charbonneau notes that the first charter school opened in Alberta is for the gifted, withdrawing students who could be strong role models in the public system. Though this school would almost automatically get good results, this would be at the expense of the public system which would lose the valuable input of activist parents. Public schools have no special criteria for entry, and no need of activist parents willing to transport their child. The Minister holds that society has a responsibility to provide as even a playing field as possible, and feels that we should be just as concerned with the child of the non-activist parent.

For Charbonneau there is a real risk that a non-representative group of parents could gain control of a charter school, a situation exacerbated by difficulties in monitoring classroom developments. He uses the potential promotion of creationism to illustrate this. While the legislation contains a clause excluding religion as a basis for a charter school, this becomes more difficult to enforce when there is an additional level of governance. The Minister points to the larger challenge of improving education by creating high expectations and a high degree of parental involvement in all schools in the public sector. The question was raised of the hypothetical parent in Surrey who is anxious to improve the educational environment for her child today, not wait until the whole system is improved. In the view of Charbonneau there is already considerable choice within British Columbia's existing educational system, ranging from traditional schools to Mandarin immersion, to meet parental wishes. Charter schools are not in line with the goals and policy of his Ministry because the NDP Government perceives them as representing the thin end of a wedge of a two-tier system.

If charter schools offer a solution, it is not without all sorts of political implications. Heather-jane Robinson sees schools of choice as resulting in a selection process which filters student admissions (ATA meeting, Edmonton, March 15, 1995). Contracts which require a minimum number of hours of parental volunteer work can be one way of excluding parents--for example, single parents or families where both parents work. There is also the issue of the impact on public schools of the withdrawal of money and talent of those who do have the opportunity. It seems self-evident to Robinson that such schools of choice can only prosper if they use every cent wisely. She asserts that this emphasis results in little interest in the child who is more costly to serve through need of a teacher's aide or through need of an elevator. Standardized test results will be a major means by which charter schools will compete against the rest of the public system, so Robinson raises the question of who is going to want the child who brings down the class average? Who is going to want the child who takes two years to do what the average child can do in one?

Such conflicting views illustrate how some people welcome charter school reform because it enables greater cohesion, self-confidence, and self-management, while others see it as leading to a scramble for advantage and a resulting decline of confidence in the overall system with increasing inner tension and alienation. The latter viewpoint raises issues and questions which paints charter schools as bastions of inequality. Yet, given the apparent popularity of extended choice among parents, most politicians will not wish to be perceived as opposing it. And even those favouring the status quo may support weaker versions of such laws. It is not difficult to find support for the claim that entrenched bureaucratic and professional structures provide major

obstacles to reform, but it does not follow from this that all opposition is motivated by self-interest.

### The Provincial Level

While charter school legislation is often claimed to be a direct response to parents wanting more "say" in the education of their children, it is also possible to see it as a means by which policymakers reduce the power of school boards. The roundtable discussions in Alberta concerning the regulations for provisional Schools Councils suggest that many parents saw a need for significantly greater input into school policies without seeking the full commitment of decision-making power. The vast majority of students in the province are still educated within conventional public schools and, according to a poll of 800 Albertans conducted by the Angus Reid Group in January 1997, considerable satisfaction is expressed with the workings of public education with two-thirds stating that they felt it was working well or very well. Also, 65% stated that the government is spending too little money on public education, a percentage that has more than doubled in the last three years. 44% of respondents believed that it was likely that educational reforms would lead to a two-tiered system. The role played by government can be crucial to understanding a variety of educational developments. For example, rather than Alberta having the largest number of people in Canada wanting to home-school their children, it is legislation and funding that play a critical role in promoting this trend.

It is worth exploring the accusation that deliberate underfunding of public education has taken place since class size has increased at the same time as teachers face more difficult situations brought about by such policies as

inclusion (Robertson et al., 1995). This standpoint makes it possible to understand the middle class--without being unhappy with public education per se--are concerned, and see the attraction of a better deal elsewhere. Reinforcement of this view can be found by within a recent newspaper article,

Edmonton Public School Board was forced to lift a 30-student ceiling on class sizes in an effort to cope with...education cuts...In a survey of Alberta teachers last spring, almost 68 per cent of those surveyed said average class sizes are increasing. One attraction of charter schools for many parents has been smaller class sizes"(Arnold, 1997, p.A4).

Interprovincial comparison of expenditure per student provided by Alberta Education's own *2nd Annual Results Report 1995-6* shows how Alberta has dropped from 5th place in 1993-4 (with \$5,981) to 7th place in 1995-6 (with \$5,515). Furthermore, in the provincial budget which was announced just before the election was called, the planned increase in per student instructional grant was to be \$15 million effective April 1, 1998 (from \$3686 to \$3716<sup>38</sup>) which does not even keep up with an inflation rate of 2%. Playing politics with school funding cannot be good for students in these schools. In parallel criticisms of the United Kingdom, Simon and Chitty (1993) suggest that a policy of underfunding schools contributes towards the perception that the system is not functioning adequately.

To indulge briefly in speculation concerning potential development scenarios of charter school policy in Alberta, three paths seem possible. Firstly, trail-blazing, which would involve full commitment to the charter school program. It would keep the province on "the leading edge of educational

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<sup>38</sup> Alberta Provincial Budget of February 11, 1997, p.172.

reform in Canada" and provide an additional dimension to the "Klein revolution". This aspect could be all the more important with Klein, having supposedly conquered fiscal dragons, now needing to be seen as giving greater focus to public concerns about health and education. Provision could be made for existing schools to opt out of school board control, along the lines of GM schools in Britain. Alternatively, the "stronger" American legislation of states like Arizona could be appraised for their selective application in Alberta.

Political pressure could be placed on school boards to expedite the passage of charter applications, or a different charter granting agency could be established. The possibility of start-up funding, or at least interest-free loans, could be entertained. The clause excluding religion as a basis for a charter school could be removed, as this could effectively end the public/private distinction in education. The more vigorous development of charter schools would have the added political bonus of weakening the Alberta Teachers' Association, a policy which would find favour with much of the caucus. The next step towards the greater privatization of education could be taken by an incremental introduction of a voucher system as it became more politically palatable.

A second route would be a more half-hearted policy in order to avoid risks associated with charter schools. The policy could be placed on the "back-burner" in order to focus on issues less likely to cause electoral friction. Promotion of charter schools requires a large investment of time and energy by officials at various levels dealing with parental expectations which can be inflated. Therefore, there is some merit in the policy of letting local politics take their course, and granting only a few additional charters. The relative inaction by the government could be justified on the grounds that educational

initiatives have to be based upon solid preparation, learning from the experience of a small number of pilot studies. This would serve to avoid the criticism of being all talk and no action. If the new schools prove to be successful, it is possible to have paved the way likely to be followed by other provinces with suitable caution for the well-being of students. If the new schools do not prove to be successful, the claim can be made that the rest of the public system responded appropriately to the competitive challenge presented, causing charter schools to become redundant.

Finally, charter school reform could be abandoned as insufficiently suited to the Canadian political culture. Instead, more broadly-based reform could be stimulated by demonstrating support both symbolically and financially for the existing system, thus providing clear recognition of the key role played in society by public education. To reflect the improved financial position of the province, additional funds could be made available to school boards to boost salaries and reward teachers for their commitment during times of restraint. But this option seems the one most unlikely to be adopted since the present political climate suggests that debt reduction continues to have sufficient electoral appeal to prevent the diversion of extra revenues to education. Since the third course would not complement the present policy direction of the Klein administration, the likely direction lies between the first and second options.

Charter school policy is in line with other dimensions of the New Right agenda which have been adopted by the province, following such examples as offered by New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The first option may offer more flair, but it equally holds more risk. Therefore, while charter school reform would seem to be in keeping with the policy direction of



the Klein government, the extent of enthusiasm with which to pursue this reform remains in question. It is politically expedient at least be seen to be offering parents more choice. Charter schools offer a type of safety valve function for discontent with the public system. Furthermore, they open up far more possibilities for business funding and involvement than has hitherto been the case, as illustrated by the token rent offer made available to a charter school in Alberta.

### The School Board Level

In creating a situation which provides for greater parental choice the Alberta Government has moved towards the educational marketplace with a view of parents as consumers. A strong justification for this development is that charter schools inject competition and subsequently put pressure on the entire system to improve the service they provide, as school boards endeavour to prevent loss of students and revenue. In this way, the very existence of charter schools many established practices of management and instruction to be questioned. In the words of Bierlein & Mulholland (1994), "The overall goal of charter schools is not simply to develop a few new schools, but to create dynamics that will cause changes within the entire system" (p.1). Consider the example of parents who sought an all girls' environment in Edmonton. Initially they were met with cool disinterest by their local school board, but charter school legislation gave them the political leverage to get what they wanted. The Board offered the program alternative status, and now additional change is occurring within mainstream schools. Westminster Junior High, for example, conducted a one year trial of an all girls' class in response to the widening appeal of the Nellie McClung program.

In several ways Edmonton's alternative programs present the more serious challenge to the status quo. Time will tell whether disaffection with regular schools and the attraction of a different approach can generate sufficient impetus to sustain these new arrivals on the educational landscape. In the meantime, as a leader in extending program choice, I believe that the Edmonton Public System needs to establish more explicit parameters around the spectrum of choice and thus contribute toward a clearer definition of the appropriate role of public education. Otherwise they will be seen as wanting to be all things to all people, willing to promote an alternative program for any parent group that takes the trouble to organize. After attending several Trustee meetings my impression is that the notion of parental choice is attaining virtually unchallengeable status, and that few School Board Trustees like to speak against it. Having pointed out a variety of problems with a particular application, one trustee said that he didn't want to stand in the way of parental choice, and that therefore he felt obligated to vote in support of the proposal.

While there is much positive change that choice can bring about, there is also an implicit tone that it has become politically incorrect to call for limits on the nature and range of school choice. Some proponents of choice exhibit a self-righteous impatience with the less articulate and disadvantaged groups in society. In this light, some school board activities can be seen to revolve around the promotion of prosperous inequality. Listening to the Chair of the Edmonton Trustees in April 1995, it would appear that public education must involve *insulation* from the mainstream for the children of parents who are unhappy with it. My position is that such a reaction to parental complaint is not an isolated one, but nor are the implications well thought-out. Edmonton provides an interesting case study of a situation where competition for

students and dollars is intensifying. One matter which needs considerably more attention is the degree to which pedagogical considerations are employed in assessing the value of proposals for either a charter school or alternative program. Underpinning this debate are broad issues such as identifying the elements of public education which are worthy of defending and preserving. A more inclusive action than the approval of Christian or traditional values in specific programs would be for the Trustees to produce a code of ethics for the district, so that "the good of all" had more central and explicit emphasis. Surely more stringent principles need to be developed.

#### The Family Level

A final level to consider is that of the individual family. One journalist describes today's parents as the most anxious and guilty parents in the history of the human race (Wente, 1996) as parents focus more intensely on nurturing a smaller number of children. Perhaps it is no accident that this is the generation that invented parenting as a verb; it used to be something you were, not something you do. This offers an important contribution to an understanding of current demands for choice. The story of a parent lining up at 2 a.m. in order to ensure the registration of his child in the morning class of junior kindergarten (Gilmore, 1996), serves as a graphic illustration of how much parental competitiveness has increased and of the desire for parents to obtain advantage for their children.

More explicit questions need to be asked about the child of a single parent who has no transportation to access a school in another part of town; or about parents who, due to being indifferent to educational aims, have children who therefore rely upon an implemented notion of the common good. It is

simply not good enough to cater to parents who wish to insulate their children from those who are not "like" them. This smacks of ghettoization, with factions of society moving away from students with whom they don't want to associate. It is a move which is reminiscent of the emphasis on middle class values observed by Bernstein (1975) as early as the 1960s. How much respect is there for other people's values? Even if the charge that charter schools are elitist proves to be unfounded, it needs to be repeated to ensure that it is addressed. Otherwise the disadvantaged will be left further behind and, along with them, notions of an education system which at least endeavoured to bind us together.

Amid changing notions of what is considered normal practice for parents in schools, constraints on the behaviour of parents seem frequently overlooked or ignored. Consequently, research on parental choice fails to capture what Bowe et al. (1994) portray as, "the messy, multi-dimensional, intuitive and seemingly irrational or non-rational elements of choice"(p.74). The process of school selection for many parents is not straight forward, but rather involves elements of compromise, doubt, mind-changing and chance. Therefore, parental choice needs to be understood in the context of local issues (such as the reputation of different programs, or their geographic distribution) and social relations (such as material inequities). Downplaying such aspects results in a misleading picture of simple certainties which omit what Reay (1996) calls "a complex web of inequalities which infuse processes of choice-making" (p.593) leading her to the conclusion that many analyses of choice are constructed within elitist paradigms.

Since individuals act within specific circumstances rather than in a vacuum, Reay seeks to describe a more complete picture of choice which includes a:

cocktail of teachers' expectations of children, parental expectations of schools, differential relationships of power between parents, teachers and children, and the intricate layering of discourses informing both parents' and teachers' understandings of the relationship between culture and educational achievement (p.586).

Reay's study of British mothers is centred around class divisions which do not play so obvious a role in Canadian society. However, this does not mean that these divisions should be discounted, since parallels can be drawn from the contrast she provides between the confident, sometimes pushy middle class parent and the working class parent whose dissatisfaction may never be known to the school administration. Indeed it is worth considering her portrayal of working class parents who experience ambivalence over what is best for their children, whose assessment of alternatives is more tentative, who often do not go even as far as visiting different schools.

Reay's study found that all parents want an educational environment in which their children can succeed academically. Some identify gaps in their children's education and go earnestly about remedying the situation, while other parents see intervention as placing too heavy a burden on parent-child relations. Interestingly, the mothers she interviewed talked of having "no choice": for the middle class this meant that there was only one state school in the area seen as acceptable; while for the working class parent it meant that they saw their child following a path which was virtually inevitable--partially

due to their perception of any negotiation process as a nightmare. Reay notes the on-going nature of choice with parents,

balancing the efficacy of different responses to difficulties children experience in schools, making judgments about whether to intervene or simply weighing up the pros and cons of investing scarce time and energy in various aspects of involvement on a regular basis (p.581).

Choice seems undeniably a positive ingredient in any education process, but analysis of choice should not ignore how the experience of different parents is qualitatively different. For some it means additional doors are opened, while to other parents it serves to underline their insecurity or lack of procedural knowledge.

### Concluding Questions

The schooling experienced by the majority of Canadian parents was one involving relatively little choice. A child attended the neighbourhood elementary school and proceeded along with his/her cohort to the nearby junior and senior high. Such a simplistic scenario may be justified when it is set against the growing variation which currently faces parents. Given well-publicized examples of mismanagement, it is hardly surprising that people indicate only a qualified trust in governments for the education of their children. Charter schools and alternative programs offer one means of countering the perceived totalitarianism of public education.

These additions to the educational scene are illustrations of the extension of choice which hold the potential of extensive repercussions for public policy in the next generation. Their introduction represents a victory for

parents wanting more control over the education of their children. Such groups feel that choice represents the future of educational provision, and they gain inspiration from examples of determination to get away from the restrictions of a school board. Some lobby groups pressing for privatization identify the additional potential in choice reform as a means through which private schools could access additional public funds. But opening up such new enterprises results in a loss of students and exerts great fiscal pressure on regular programs. Though this can be dismissed as transitional pain, more open debate is needed about the kind of society we are fashioning by this delegation of responsibility, about what role models are being provided for the young, and about to what extent the school reflects the community.

As politicians in various parts of North America exhibit a desire to go beyond fiscal policies in pursuing a free choice agenda, these are the type of questions which must be posed. Otherwise communities will be ill-prepared to respond to groups in their own jurisdiction who will be seeking to establish a charter school or its equivalent. Thus, the near future holds significant challenges, ranging from curriculum content to the very shape of the school system as a whole. Choice is claimed to represent a bold experiment that holds a wealth of promise for improving the quality of life in school and the achievement of the young. But comparing performance in district exams will not begin to suffice in terms of what is required in the way of assessing the desirability of such reform. To ensure a solid foundation for the future, we must go beyond populist responses to eliminate flaws in the existing system.

I am inclined to agree with Joe Freedman when he states that one cannot escape choice<sup>39</sup>. There is little to be gained from any blind opposition to choice-extending reforms. However, this position should not entail an equally blind acceptance of all the reforms that come along under the banner of choice. Recognition of problems within the existing system of education need not entail acceptance of every cure that is put forward. Institutional inertia may indeed be daunting, but many of those who seek to improve existing systems have to recognize the powerful and attractive nature of short-term solutions. Embrace of choice may be a route which will lead to positive developments for publicly funded education, but the decision to follow such a route must be based upon more than faith, since too passionate an embrace may have unintended consequences.

Response to choice promotion which is based upon little more than dogmatic resistance will reinforce the determination of its advocates to have choice thrust upon schools. Resistance also leads to the educational community being perceived as complacent, unresponsive to demands for change, and hostile to the new accountability. To avoid such impasse, it is essential to recognize the various promising repercussions stemming from choice legislation, at the same time as drawing attention to the fact that the picture is not a completely rosy one. More people need to be encouraged to engage in constructive debate about educational reform since educators who adopt a "hands off education" attitude can serve only to confirm the view that education requires outside intervention.

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<sup>39</sup> In a panel debate "School Choice-What are the Limits?" at the Edmonton Public Teachers' Convention. February 29, 1996.



A student's learning is enhanced when parents are involved and complement the work of the school. Thankfully, the days of parents being shut out of the process by teachers anxious to preserve their exclusive turf are numbered, and parents are now taking unprecedented steps in the direction of providing input into educational decision-making at a variety of levels. However, consumerist approaches to education can be seductive and charter schools provide a potential example of how choice offers a seductive response to perceived ailments in school systems. Some concerns arise from the impetus of educational change coming from the agendas of specific groups of parents. Individual motivation may be exemplary but there is the potential for such interest to be as transitory as the passage of their children through the school. Choice in education may function as a safety valve for dissatisfied parents, but it has to represent more than the giving of priority to those who shout loudest or who have the greatest political clout.

Chapter Six dealt with the issue of schools that give priority to the private benefit determined by parents, rather than balancing and accommodating both the individual and public good. To ensure this balance schools need to strengthen themselves as institutions, partly through more explicit recognition of the mutual nature of relationships within a locality. Education is a central agency for addressing the decline in attitudinal resources available to build civil society, otherwise we will deserve the outcome that results from our indifference toward public concerns. To adapt the words of Saul (1995) we must avoid unconsciousness that can be made up of self-delusion and romanticism. His book provides an additional impetus for the rejection of educational reforms which are culturally exclusive and socially unjust. The alternative is to give up on democratic citizenship, thus making

victims of those who are most disadvantaged through a process which enables individual gain at the expense of collective loss.

Many attempts to gauge the impact of change in the school system on community cohesion have failed, not least because of the chameleon nature of the concept of community. There is nothing new about the notion of public education drawing some boundaries around the school population. What is of concern here is the claim that the provision of education will be improved through addressing parental expectations. Among others Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) have attacked this assumption. They make the point that choice-making is a thoroughly social process, powerfully informed by the parent's position within a social network. It is not that certain parents being more responsible choosers, rather it is the particular cultural capacities which are unevenly distributed across the population and which the authors see as valorized by the operation of the education market. Far from increasing cohesion within society, the operation of choice could actually exacerbate existing divisions within society. In their words, "Success in the marketplace is not primarily a function of family motivation but rather of parental skill, social and material advantages, the perceived raw-score potential of the child, and, to some extent, pure chance" (p.189).

Charter school reform can serve as a means of introducing a market emphasis into education without employing vouchers, which often elicit public uncertainty. Yet, in reviewing the impact of recent British policy change in the direction of greater choice, Ball (1993) comments, "the unleashing of market forces in education...is a massive social experiment based on dubious social and economic theorizing" (p.118). He sees the promotion of market principles as constituting "a class strategy" (p.3) which will widen inequalities.

Market reform encourages the development of written mandates, or more explicit contracts between supplier and customer, a trend which accords priority to individual rather than civil relationships. Schools come to compete with one another and are strongly induced to specialize because they are required to allow the market to tailor their programs and shape their recruitment strategies. Customers come to shop for the education they prefer, and this results in widening the variation of programs and the disparities between schools in the same district. Everyday relations in schools are altered.

The uptake of legislation enabling charter schools is based on appeal to parents' self-interest. Indeed it is in the interests of any specific parent to seize available opportunities without regard for its effects on other schools. Simon and Chitty (1993) draw attention to how "Parents as a whole are naturally specifically concerned with their own children, with *their* educational opportunities and *their* future. They are not concerned in this way with the children in the community as a whole, with *their* equitable treatment and *their* future" (p.54). A situation of autonomous schools, each competing with one another for students and resources, is a far cry from the traditional provision of education which has been based around a system of overall planning and organization. What needs to be researched is the extent to which this change excludes cooperative endeavours and restricts any vision of education from being extended beyond the boundaries of an individual school.

As school boards are weakened in terms of their ability to mediate between local and central needs, it becomes necessary to clearly identify the implications of the shift in educational decision-making away from educators towards public policy analysts. Adoption of certain changes initiated outside education, such as TQM, can have application to the profession of teaching.

But such changes should occur only after critical review by practitioners rather than by default. For example, Chitty and Simon (1993) describe how British educational reform was imposed upon teachers without any real dialogue with them. Dobbin (1997) maintains that the advocates of charter schools who dismiss the concerns of educators are being cavalier, excluding those with a great deal of expertise simply as having a vested interest. He worries about how the influence of educators is being replaced by policy analysts who are largely disinterested about pedagogical considerations, but instead often place high value on business principles. It is fitting then, that he describes charter schools as, "the Trojan horse of those who would transform public education into a commercialized, or even privatized system" (p.5).

There is little surprise in the nature of the ingredients which seem crucial for charter school success. A high tolerance for ambiguity is required in dealing with uncharted waters. The charter school phenomenon is primarily an urban/suburban one since few rural areas could produce the number of students necessary to sustain a new school. It seems inevitable that charter schools will be middle-class-driven, since the process requires the wherewithal to deal with a fairly complex bureaucratic procedure and a major commitment of time and effort once the charter has been granted. Given the current lack of capital start-up funds, the possession of business connections that can assist the school to become established also seems necessary to avoid having the instructional grant being spent on the rental of a facility at commercial rates. The limited number of charter schools established so far, and the small number of current applications, suggest that most parent groups are daunted by the commitment required by the process.

Along with their international counterparts, Canadians are increasingly anxious about education, and about the appropriate nature of its development, distribution, and financial support. In other countries schools of choice have enjoyed a choppy momentum; hence, the first Canadian charter schools warrant close observation. Groups in other provinces are monitoring this development in Alberta, to see how it deals with the implementation of this reform. (An example is the charter school conference that was held in Vancouver in November 1995 by Teachers for Excellence, which was addressed by Alberta's Minister for Education.) The extent of interest lends support to the position that many of these changes are on the horizon for many school districts throughout Canada.

Many of the features of today's educational landscape are in flux. Much is happening at the present which will have an extensive impact on public education and public policy in the next generation. In order to make informed decisions, it is important for Canadians to investigate the implications of choice: from the effect such change will have on how they will relate to their neighbours, to the way in which the language used in debate can limit their thought patterns and shape their values. While policymakers continue to debate over definitions of choice and which forms of choice are most appropriate, these deliberations have rested largely upon theoretical and ideological grounds rather than on empirical grounds. This dissertation has endeavoured to make a contribution towards bridging this gap. It offers an analysis of the ramifications of one attempt in Canada to extend choice in public education.

There is no one general education in Canada. Education "markets" are localized, thus requiring analysis and understanding in terms of a complex set

of dynamics which mediate and contextualize the impact and effects of government policy. My aim has been to distinguish between the formal properties of educational provision, in this case established by Alberta's Bill 19, and the various responses at the local level. A true reform must be based on considerably more than political expediency. Hence, if Alberta is to set a precedent, it should do so only with the greatest possible awareness of the implications of such policy change. Yet, in attempting any assessment, the lack of sufficient common ground between proponents and opponents seems striking. Many arguments on both sides require the stronger substantiation that only more time will provide. While choice schools are seen by some policy makers as a window of opportunity to implement right-wing educational reform that should not be missed, an alternative response is that there are many unanswered questions.

#### Personal reflections

I believe that the study of educational choice can productively be made at a variety of levels. One such level is that of broad cultural values. Consider the aftermath of the death of the Princess of Wales which has prompted extensive analysis to be devoted to the future of constitutional monarchy. Discussion has included the decline of deference as one manifestation of value changes supposedly sweeping across Western culture. These changes are seen to celebrate greater individual autonomy and to challenge various authorities and traditions. Margaret Thatcher can be portrayed as representing political players who have fatally wounded the social philosophy upon which the monarchy rested. Her goal was to turn Britain into a free-enterprise society in which the obligations of one group to another would be replaced by the dictates of the market. Her famous statement "there is no such thing as society" can be

seen to point towards a far more individualistic social order which is perhaps incompatible with the survival of the British monarchy.

Perhaps traditional conceptions of public education can be placed alongside the concept of monarchy in terms of no longer enjoying the widespread deference they, arguably, once did. Support would also seem to have softened for conventional forms of education with political challenge from those who want an end to the obligations of the postwar welfare state. But can an education system which rests upon notions of collective interest co-exist with the growth in individual autonomy, one indication of which is the expectation that parents be able to choose the school their children will attend. Are politicians abandoning the social philosophy on which public education rested? As royal commentators speculate about the end of the British monarchy or at least its reduction to the status of the "bicycle riding" Scandinavian model, perhaps more educators should wonder about the future of public education as they have known it.

At a totally different level are the responses of parents. The phenomenon of parents agonizing over which educational institution their child should attend is nothing new, but what is very recent is the extent of choice. Edmonton offers almost a North American laboratory in that parents currently confront a number of alternatives which is expanding at a faster rate than most other places. Even with comparable programs parents are faced with the choice of keeping their child within the neighbourhood or moving outside to a school which may currently enjoy a better reputation or standing in provincial test results. If public education was ever uni-dimensional, it certainly is no longer.

As far as Alberta's charter schools are concerned, I question the extent to which they are stimulating educational experimentation. While this may not be to the extent of "reinvigorated traditionalism", it seems closer to this end of the continuum than that of cutting-edge technique. Consider the number of charters granted to formerly private schools or to those catering to the student with an above average intelligence. Take away the example of Boyle Street and ask what the others do for students likely to perform poorly in testing. I appreciate that implied accusations of elitism are keenly resented among some charter school groups, but the motivation behind raising such issues is not to imply that charter school parents are careless of community. It would be a weak foundation that could not withstand challenges presented by the growing diversity to be found in so many aspects of community, and education is no exception in responding to the calls for an ever greater range of options. The motivation behind raising such issues is connected with concern about the impact that institutionalized exclusion could have on the future of students' perception of community.

Every researcher holds biases, and the process of conducting my research required me to examine my own in greater detail than I could have anticipated. Sustained contact with a group of parent activists, together with having my own child attending public school, has given me a considerably more sophisticated awareness than the simple black and white picture that "coloured" my views at the outset. However, I still react against the aggressive way in which educational choice can be promoted. I still believe that such changes hold the potential for adversely affecting relationships.

Thinking back to the British school where I last taught, I would still vote against the application for grant maintained status because of the wider



ramifications of such a change. For me it held the dangers of parents viewing the school as an isolated entity, administrators making a greater number of decisions based on the financial implications rather than pedagogical ones, and neighbouring schools becoming competitors rather than "fellow travellers." At one meeting I made the parallel whether one should vote for the MP who would be best for the constituency or the party one felt would be best running the country. If I was uncertain before, my answer today would be to vote for the party not the person, thereby taking more into account than just the immediate, local issues but also including the broader implications entailed by such a move.

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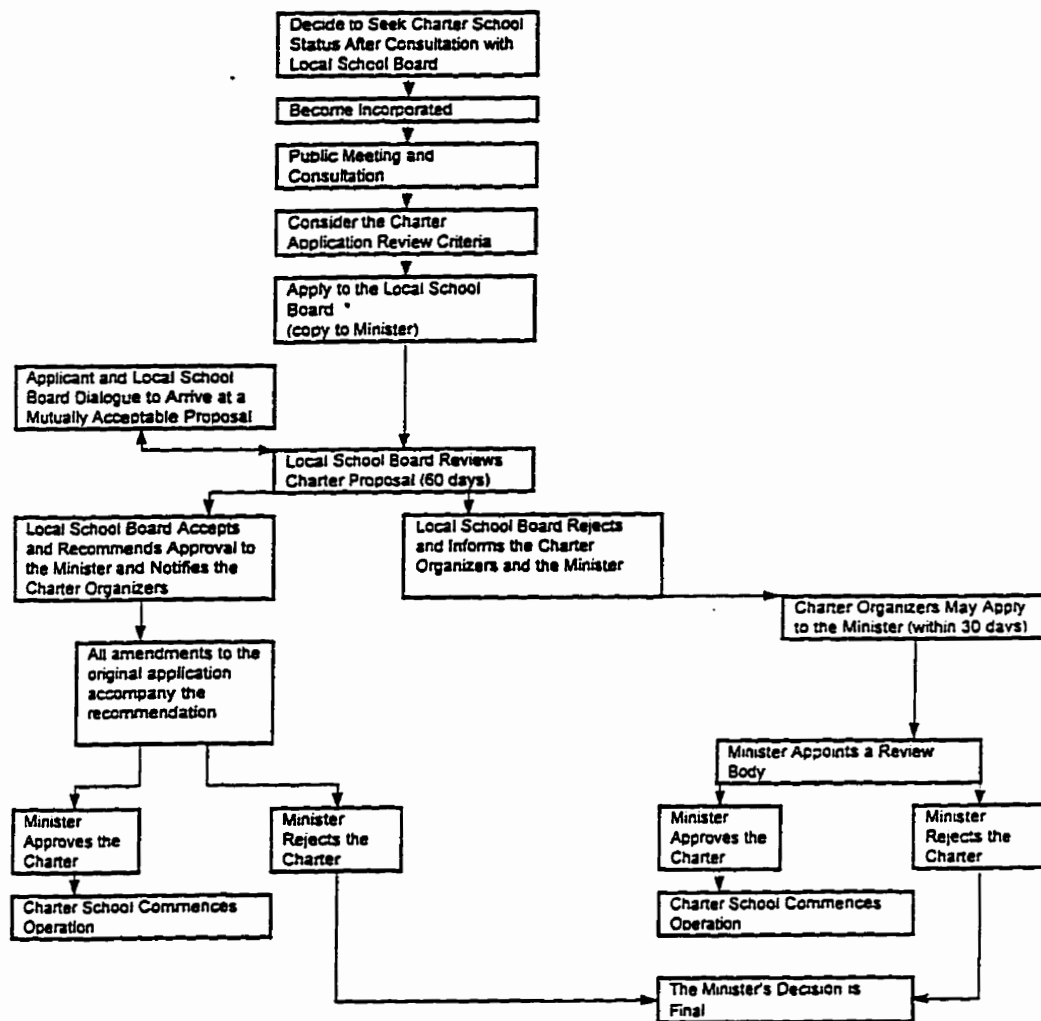
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## Appendix A: Steps towards establishing a charter school



\*The application is to be submitted six(6) months prior to intended school opening date.

### Appendix B: A Time-Line

May 25, 1994. The passing of Bill 19 made Alberta the first province in Canada to have charter school legislation.

November 22, 1994. Draft Charter School Handbook issued.

December 1994. I contact a group said to have a good chance of forming a charter school.

January 6, 1995. First interview with one of the leaders of the Acorn group. Interesting early impressions of one of the main forces behind such a group.

January 7, 1995. A general meeting from 9am to 3pm! The initial concern is the formulation of the proposal which must clarify the basis of the distinctiveness from existing schools. Topics covered include teachers' contracts. Delegation of curriculum work.

January 12, 1995. Smaller committee meeting. Governance structure was discussed, and issues like parental concerns about mixed grades.

January 15, 1995. Catch 22 of needing provisional registrations for reinforcement of the proposal, yet needing confirmation of proposal and site to attract parent interest. Discussion of fund raising, and concern over such costs as textbooks. A Parents Support Agreement was reviewed.

January 21, 1995. Presentation by a possible consultant who offered input into curriculum content and delivery, and diagnostic information. Agreement that the focus of the proposal being knowledge-based not child-centred, and sequential instruction not spiral.

January 22, 1995. For comparison purposes I attend a public meeting of the Nellie McClung group hoping to form an all girls' charter school. They already have the status of a registered charity. A future boys' school is proposed to avoid accusations of elitism.

January 28, 1995. No time available for the group to provide more than an overview of curriculum. Possible role of a School Council discussed. School board official has requested a meeting. Some members daunted by impending expenses.

January 30, 1995. Meeting at Board offices: alternative program status suggested, with the group having clear input into specified areas.

February 3, 1995. Work continues on detail of the proposal. Could Alberta Education consider the proposal concurrently with the Board?

February 16, 1995. Charter school application submitted to the Board.

February 21, 1995. A public debate on charter schools with the head of the ATA and a Acorn spokesperson. The former stressed historical background of public education in its endeavour to reduce inequities; the latter emphasized the need for choice.

March 5, 1995. Alternative program route treated more seriously, otherwise momentum might be lost.

March 6, 1995. The group would have to have direct input into such areas as staffing selection.

March 7, 1995. Meeting with Board official. Areas of the charter proposal with insufficient detail were specified. More congenial discussion of alternative program route.

March 24, 1995. Meeting with Superintendent. Board to retain overall responsibility. Possibility of joining forces with a Traditional group.

April 3, 1995. Meeting with the leader of the Traditional School group who were felt to be still at the conceptual stage.

April 5, 1995. Information meeting for the Traditional School group. Some similar concerns raised, but joining forces seems unlikely.

April 21, 1995. Full Handbook finally issued by Alberta Education.

April 24, 1995. Panel debate hosted by the Canadian College of Teachers on the implications and necessity of charter schools. Edmonton Public's superintendent saw his district as offering diverse choice. Joe Freedman saw charter schools as inevitable. An ATA representative argued that charter schools represented private schools paid for with public money. An Acorn leader believed that the present system might be able to accommodate the necessary change.

April 25, 1995. Trustees Meeting gave unanimous approval to the Acorn alternative program.

April 30, 1995. Acorn meeting on possible site of program, to be determined by number of students. Existing executive would provide the initial direction for program with curriculum detail provided in four core areas. Immediate concerns with advertising and producing a handbook.

May 2, 1995. School board Education Committee presentation on "Choices for students: what are the limits?" by Economics professor Wilkinson extolled the virtues of School board as a leader in choice provision in North America.

May 4, 1995. Information meeting of Acorn Alternative Program stressed how excellence was not restricted to gifted children. Strong discipline was stressed along with the belief in close communications. Concerns over lack of a confirmed location.

May 10, 1995. Birchwood School Parents' meeting. An Board official apologized for lack of consultation reflecting the tight time-line. Concerns raised over a Acorn-only uniform being a recipe for division and confrontation.

May 15, 1995. Second information meeting for Acorn; shorter and more upbeat. Birchwood location was confirmed. Emphasis given to how the school board wanted the program to be successful.

September 1995. The Acorn program opens with 118 students, coming from 18 different schools. This compares with 79 in the regular program, and some perceive it as a takeover bid.

October 1995. Favourable reactions from parents; only one student had transferred. Homework books particularly successful. Expensive texts had been purchased, but there were looming problems over budget.

November 1995. Birchwood principal took early retirement, and acting principal appointed.

January 1996. There was a waiting list for September enrolment, but expansion was restricted by the present site. The Board seemed to prefer more limited

growth? Birchwood parents resisted the idea of junior high students on site. The program still did not have a curriculum coordinator with time for administration.

January 15, 1996. Birchwood Parents' Meeting. Formation of a School Council: there could be two separate bodies but this was not recommendation of the Board. Advisory role while respecting the distinctiveness of the two programs.

January 22, 1996. Acorn Parents' Meeting. Representatives had met with Superintendent and Chairman of Trustees. It had been stressed that the school board was delivering the program and at the end of the day the principal was responsible for things such as hiring. This was not well received. Discussion centred around the boundaries placed upon the program, and doubt was expressed about the parent-run nature of the program. The possibility of reapplying for charter school status was raised.

February 28, 1996. First public information meeting for Vista Charter School. The aim was to be "captain of our own destiny" and gain consistency of staff, philosophy and curriculum. The application was virtually complete, and would be submitted to another board within the district.

April 1996. The Vista application was rejected by a school board on the grounds that it did not concur with their policies and regulations. They then applied directly to Alberta Education. A new Acorn board was elected. A junior high Acorn curriculum was prepared, to be delivered at a nearby school. Concerns that the Acorn parent mailing list been used for unsigned invitations to Vista meetings.

May 14, 1996 Trustees Meeting with Acorn as the week's "focus on student achievement". Students described as demonstrating considerable growth. The school had been transformed into "a going concern".

Late May 1996. Acorn lead-teacher asked to resign.

July 31, 1996. Vista gained its charter from Alberta Education.

September 9, 1996 Vista Charter School opened with 240 students in grades 1-8.



Appendix C: The questions administered in my survey of the Acorn and  
Birchwood staff and parents

Questionnaire for Acorn Parents

1a) "Push factors" What was a central cause of you deciding against a regular program in a public school?

1b) "Pull factors" What was the central factor that attracted you to the Acorn alternative program offered by the school board?

1c) Do you feel that the "push factors" or the "pull factors" played a stronger role in your decision to enrol your child in the Acorn program?

2a) How did you first hear of the Acorn program?

2b) Do you feel more involved with your child's education than was previously the case; and, if so, how has this been achieved?

2c) What has been the central factor in determining your degree of satisfaction with the Acorn program?

3] In September 1996 further choices will be available to parents. Are you currently considering the potential transfer of your child to another school? Yes/No. Please name the school(s) you are considering:

4] Do you welcome the opportunity to have greater choice in your child's schooling? Please explain your answer.

Questionnaire for Acorn staff

Past 1] What was it that attracted you to apply to become a Acorn teacher?

Present 2] Has your experience of delivering the program been generally positive? Please explain your answer.

3) Has the level of parental interest been different from your previous experience, if so how?

4) An alternative program, by definition, is different from the regular offering of the school board. Do you feel that the program has been allowed sufficient flexibility? Please use examples if possible.

Future 5) How would you like to see the program develop?

Questionnaire for Birchwood parents and staff

Past 1] What was your original reaction to the proposal of the Acorn program being attached to Birchwood School?

Present 2] Now that the Acorn program has been in operation for nearly a year, how are you feeling about the program?

3] Can you suggest ways in which the introduction of the alternative program could have been done differently? It would have been easier if ....

4] How do you think the introduction of the Acorn program has affected Birchwood School?

Future 5] How would you like to see the Acorn program develop at Birchwood?

Appendix D: Personal Communication Extract

July 22, 1995

Dear Mr. Benton-Evans,

I was interested to receive your letter. I would like to explain the circumstances behind my name appearing in the Fitz, Halpin and Power book. The comprehensive school which my daughters attend held an opt-out ballot in March 1993. I and a group of other parents fought a successful "anti" campaign achieving a "No" vote. The experience was salutary. It was extremely difficult to find information on the disadvantages of grant-maintained status. The "pro" side have all the government funded glossy booklets. To discover "anti" information meant going to various sources: the teacher unions, political parties, press reports and so on.

Parents are at a tremendous disadvantage when a ballot is called. On their decision rests the whole future of the school, and all too often they are denied the full range of information on which to base that decision. In most schools where a ballot is held the Head and/or Governors decided that they wish to opt out and are only prepared to send out "pro" information.

One of the most useful sources of information to me during our ballot was Local Schools Information, the independent body funded by Local Authorities. When we had achieved our successful result I felt that I would like to assist other parents faced with a ballot and so asked LSI to pass my name on to anyone interested. From that I was contacted by Sally Power who was interested in my experiences, subsequently she kindly included by name in their information list with the name we had chosen for our campaign "Keep

Our Schools Local". I have since learned that other groups have used the same name quite independently.

After my contact with Sally Power I then saw a letter in the Times Educational Supplement from a like-minded parent from Cambridge, keen to set up a national group of parents to assist other parents faced with an op-out ballot. Other parents responded and a meeting was held in July 1993 at which it was decided to set up a national launch in September 1993 and have gone from strength to strength.

Our main aim is to ensure parents receive full information on the anti side. I enclose a copy of our information pack for governors and others interested in the issue.