

LESSONS FOR ONTARIO: EDUCATION DIVERSITY ACROSS CANADA

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 **CARDUS**
EDUCATION

*Toward
a Warmer
Climate*

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Cardus (root: cardo) is a think tank dedicated to the renewal of North American social architecture. Drawing on more than 2,000 years of Christian social thought, we work to enrich and challenge public debate through research, events, and publications, for the common good.

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INTRODUCTION

On November 5th, 2015 Cardus convened a group of senior-level stakeholders in education from across Canada. These stakeholders represented both public and independent school sectors. They were asked to consider this question: Would a warmer climate for school sector diversity improve education in Ontario?

This question was last examined in Ontario in 1985 when Dr. Bernard Shapiro led a commission on private schools. The Shapiro Commission recommended that improving diversity within public and independent sectors would improve the overall education in Ontario, providing such schools met minimum standards for education set by the Ministry. For a 2014 report revisiting the Shapiro recommendations, visit cardus.ca/education.

In the past thirty years, the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Québec and Saskatchewan have cultivated a landscape where educational diversity continues to emerge and grow. However, Ontario's landscape has remained frozen in stasis. And thirty years is a long time for the ground to lay barren.

The following paper summarizes the discussion convened by Cardus and explores the lessons that Ontario can learn about “warming the climate” for educational diversity from across Canada thirty years after Shapiro.

TOWARD PARENTAL CHOICE

The belief that all children are entitled to a good neighbourhood school is fundamental to Ontario's policy rhetoric. Premier Wynne recently encouraged all elected officials to see it as part of their duty to encourage parents to enroll their children in government schools (Brennan, 2015). While equal access to education is important, it does not *necessarily* have to be set in opposition to parental choice. In fact, policies from Canada's other provinces offer some examples of how to achieve a better balance between access and choice.

In Alberta there are many options for schooling. The majority are fully or partially publicly funded, including First Nations, Metis and Inuit Schooling, home schooling, distance learning, francophone schooling, alternative programs, charter schools, Hutterite Colony schools, independent schooling, public, and English separate and French separate (mostly Roman Catholic) systems. All of these options are recognized in Alberta's School Act and depending on compliance may offer the Alberta graduation diploma. Dr. John Hiemstra, of the Kings University in Edmonton, argued that this is a system where room is created for certain types of plurality to form and where parents can choose from a large roster of diverse schools.

Ontario also has a large public school sector that includes not only English public, but also French public, English separate and French separate boards. But given that restricted access to some of these options, is this enough ground to foster flourishing for all the province's children?

In Saskatchewan, forty-three out of sixty independent schools receive financial assistance. Like Ontario, Saskatchewan limits its definition of “public education” to those schools fully funded by the province (public, separate, and French language boards) and yet recognizes that funding for independent schools includes not just accountability but partly removes the financial barrier to attendance. Cardus’s keynote speaker Kevin Gabel, Executive Director, Ministry of Education Saskatchewan, said: “A [Saskatchewan] parent who is paying a high level of tuition has certain expectations. The same is true for government. Government funding may also allow independent schools to become more accessible” (Gabel, 2015).

These two policy narratives from Alberta and Saskatchewan model more diverse ways of delivering education as a public good that enhances parental choice and equality of access. Such narratives require a shift away from a monopolistic system, a shift that Ontario might adopt if it is to become a province where education flourishes.

TOWARD BETTER SPENDING

In recent years, provincial spending on public schools has increased in all provinces across Canada. Enrolment rates, however, do not proportionately match the spending increase, given that total enrolment in public schools in Canada declined by 4.9% between 2003-04 and 2012-13 (Van Pelt, Clemens, and Emes, 2014). According to a recent Fraser Institute study, “[I]n aggregate, Canada increased education spending in public schools by \$13.8 billion from 2003-04 to 2012-13 more than was necessary to account for enrolment and price changes” (ibid). Not just in Ontario, but all of Canada seems to be slow responding to the changing enrolment trends; provincial budgets across Canada have yet to adapt to the overall decline in public school registration.

Independent schools in Ontario are not united in a desire for funding. While some recognize that partial funding can strengthen overall parental agency and educational accessibility, others wish to remain financially autonomous. For independent schools in Saskatchewan, partial provincial funding has resulted in collaborative resource sharing, such as joint teacher conventions and shared school space (Gabel, 2015). In British Columbia, provincial funding ensures that independent schools are considered stakeholders in the overall system, bolstering the independent school voice in the shaping of education (Froese, 2015). Our speakers noted that provincial spending on independent schools can offer mutual benefits to schools, governments, and parents that will enhance the diversity of education.

Public high school teacher Michael Zwaagstra aptly described what’s at stake in their province: “If each of the 14,000 independent school students in Manitoba chose to enroll in a public school, this would result in about an \$84 million increase to the operating expenses for the provincial government each year” (Zwaagstra, 2015). As of now, Ontarians who choose independent schools are essentially bearing the entire cost of the education of 5.6 percent of the student population. Despite this, independent schools and the parents who choose them are barely recognized as stakeholders in Ontario policy discussions. From a purely fiscal perspective, their choice reduces some of the burden on taxpayers. As noted in Manitoba, if they are spending, on average, more than \$12,000 per student in a public school (as of 2013), the money from 14,000 students educated outside of the public school system is not inconsequential (Zwaagstra 2015; Manitoba Education,

2015). What could Ontario learn from the posture of other provinces towards parental choice in education? Recognizing independent schools as a significant stakeholder in public education in Ontario would considerably warm up the temperature of the current policy climate.

TOWARD MORE NUANCED REGULATION

Regardless of whether the definition of public education is broadened to include independent schools, or whether a public and independent school designation is kept, the regulation of independent schools remains a critical piece of the policy conversation for Canada's provinces. Furthermore, according to Derek Allison, Emeritus professor in the education faculty at Western University, independent schools in Ontario face an expanding regulatory environment with less opportunity than some to join the conversation about how this regulation is framed (Allison, 2014).

Canada's other provinces however have not simply exchanged funding for regulation. What the policy narratives demonstrate is that full funding and regulation or independence and minimal public accountability are not the only two policy options. Canada's broader provincial story is of a more collaborative and nuanced approach than this.

For example, provincial funding of 50 percent of operations costs in Manitoba is accompanied by the requirement to follow the Manitoba curriculum, employ certified teachers, enter students for public examinations, and comply with provincial government directives. The 45 schools in Manitoba that do not follow the provincial curriculum are not entitled to funding but may request a \$60 per student grant. In Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Alberta, various independent school classifications exist dependent on curriculum implementation, teacher certification, and testing participation. This independent sector regulation more than keeps schools connected to the policy conversation, particularly with respect to equivalencies, to teacher professional development, and to educational outcomes. Independent schools achieving such connections in Ontario is also possible.

TOWARD BETTER EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Undoubtedly one of the reasons that provinces across Canada are beginning to recognize the value of education diversity is due to the perception that independent schools deliver impressive outcomes on educational attainment. It is common to dismiss this as an outcome of social capital rather than as an actual school effect. However, such a dismissal might mean that too little attention is being paid to how that capital might best be fostered for all students whether in public or independent schools.

Historically, Ontario's students have boasted an impressive record on the international PISA tests and this has supported the internal provincial rhetoric that Ontario is a leader in public education (Allison, 2015). But the conversation needs to be much more nuanced than this because in the last round of PISA testing, Ontario's scores only held in English and science, while they declined in Math (Brochu, Deussing, Houme, and Chuy, 2013). And this decline comes against a backdrop of increased provincial spending and decreased public school enrolment (Van Pelt, Clemens, and Emes 2014).

Many of our speakers pointed out that in addition to good educational attainment many independent schools allow children to nurture core religious or philosophical beliefs transcending the realm of educational and vocational achievement and building social capital (Froese, Zwagstra). This is borne out by research. The Cardus Education Survey collected data on the academic, vocational, social, and civic outcomes of graduates of independent schools. It concluded that graduates of independent schools are at least as likely to be involved in society and working toward the common good as their public school counterparts; and they are more likely than their public school peers to look back favourably on their high school education and its role in preparing them for adult life (Cardus, 2011, 2012, 2014).

To take a provincial example, most funded independent schools in Manitoba are faith-based and come from a variety of religious perspectives, including Roman Catholic, Christian Reformed, Seventh Day Adventist, Islamic, Lutheran, Mennonite, and Jewish, and they cooperate on matters of common interest (Zwaagstra, 2015). This demonstrates that it is quite possible to have a plurality of communities working together for the common good of education within a province. Indeed broadening the definition of educational outcomes might support a more vibrant educational landscape within Ontario.

DIVERSITY IN 21ST CENTURY ONTARIO

Our guests recommended that a warmer climate in Ontario would be one in which:

- *Students come first.* Securing strong educational outcomes would be central to provincial education policies regardless of the sector in which students are educated.
- *The public good is served.* The independent school sector sought not merely to gain from greater recognition as a sector but to serve the public good through increased partnership with public schools.
- *Mutual support is developed between government and independent schools.* A renewed relationship will help foster and create recognition, support, and regulation for each sector.
- *All levels are addressed.* There needs to be a partnership between public and independent sectors at all levels in order to share best practices, improve educational outcomes, increase efficiencies, and promote access to genuine parental choice.

This climate could foster an enormous variety of policy initiatives for the benefit of public education. The following policies from Professor Allison's (2014) review might be implemented easily today, and would represent significant steps: 1) increased but professional, supportive, enlightened Ministry supervision; 2) greater inclusion in Ontario's educational project opening doors to assessment and expertise and the reduction of non-education financial burdens such as eliminating the fees charged for ministry inspections and provincial testing.

The independent school sector has been left out of Ontario's education policy conversations for too long. By providing leading educational stakeholders the opportunity to talk about a climate in which school sector diversity could continue to evolve and grow and flourish, we can begin warming up that climate to recognize the strengths of the independent sector and to include them in the policy discussions that will benefit all of Ontario's students.

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