

Expanding Choice in Ontario's Public Schools

by *Derek J. Allison*

Providing families with greater opportunities to choose between schools has emerged as a powerful way to improve education. In addition to enhancing student achievement, school choice stimulates innovation, encourages efficiencies, promotes diversity, and typically leads to increased satisfaction among parents and the public. For these and related reasons, more than two-thirds of OECD countries have adopted policies increasing the school choices available to their families.

With the exception of Ontario, Canada's larger provinces have been part of this trend, each offering funding to non-public independent schools that make them more affordable to interested parents. Ontario does not do this: Commitment to a strong public system, polarized views on Ontario's Roman Catholic separate schools, and opposition to funding independent faith-based schools have helped keep this way of encouraging school choice off the Ontario policy agenda.

But school choice does not depend entirely on providing government support for independent schools. As demonstrated in many OECD countries and several Canadian provinces, choices within the public system are a possibility. This paper explores how this may be achieved in Ontario by addressing the question, "could school choice be expanded in Ontario's public schools?"

The paper considers three kinds of school choices currently available within Ontario's public school system. The most numerous are the Catholic separate and Francophone schools operated by their own school boards, but only available to eligible families. French immersion schools provide a form

of choice open to all where available. Additional choices, provided locally, are offered through various alternative and specialized schools operated by some school boards.

School choice in Ontario can be extended to more families by expanding locally provided options through two complementary initiatives: (1) open enrolment and (2) school diversity. Open enrolment would give parents the right to enrol their children in any public school they are qualified to attend, replacing school assignment by postal code with realistic school choice. Policies establishing open enrolment in other Canadian provinces such as British Columbia have demonstrated the real world benefits of open enrolment and can provide a framework for reform in Ontario.

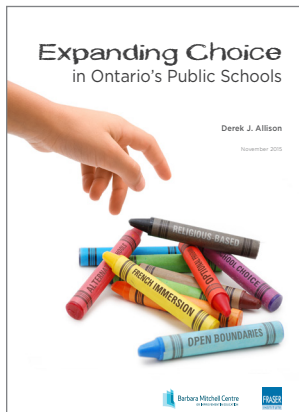
Choice is pointless without meaningful options. Meaningful school choices within Ontario's public system will necessarily be created at the local level by individual school boards. To this end, legislative changes are recommended to empower and encourage boards to establish a wide range of alternative schools and programs in response to requests from parent and community groups. Adoption of



a broad definition of alternative schools similar to that in place in Alberta would allow boards to establish schools using a specific teaching philosophy or emphasizing a particular language, culture, subject-matter, or religion. Any religiously oriented alternative school would necessarily be required to conform to Ontario regulations and jurisprudence.

In such cases and all others, the key point is that the nature of alternative schools would be decided by elected school boards through discussions with parent and community groups. Schools could feature art, music, hockey, or some other activity, emphasize a particular language, embrace Montessori, traditional or progressive educational approaches, be infused with Aboriginal or other cultural values, emphasize math, science, or literature, or take some other acceptable form, subject to provincial curricular and operational requirements.

A rich diversity of such schools would introduce a measure of increased competition into the public system which could be expected to have a positive effect on academic achievement and parental and public satisfaction. Education professionals, especially teachers, could also benefit from opportunities to join more motivating work environments.



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Existing Choice in Ontario's Public Schools

	Types	Access
Across Public Boards	Public elementary and secondary	Assigned, open to all
	French language	} Only if qualified
	Roman Catholic elementary	
	Roman Catholic secondary	Open to all
Within Public Boards	French immersion	Only where provided
	Alternative focus schools:	
	• Art	
	• Instructional philosophy	
	• High school completion	
	• Leadership	
	• Music	
	• Science	
	• Single gender	
	• Sports	
• Technology		
Optional programs:		
• Advanced Placement courses		
• Extended French		
• International Baccalaureate		
• Specialist High Skills Majors		

Ways to Expand Choice

- Open Boundaries**
 - Allow parents the opportunity to enrol children in any public school they are qualified to attend.
 - Replace school assignment by postal code.
 - Consider policies from British Columbia and Manitoba to establish open enrolment.
- Alternative Schools**
 - Encourage individual boards to respond to parent requests by establishing a wide range of alternative schools and optional programs.
 - Broaden the definition of 'alternative school,' perhaps following the Alberta model.
 - Establish schools that use a specific teaching philosophy or emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, or subject-matter.