

Débat / Discussion

The Unknown Consequence of Public Support for Private Schools

Anne L. Jefferson
university of windsor

Our society tolerates and occasionally encourages diversity. Tolerance has led to the establishment and operation of private schools alongside public schools.

Early private schools were founded mainly on religious grounds, but received public funds. As the preservation of citizens' rights became central to our way of life, the finance of private schools became a point of debate among parents, government, school boards, and other advocacy groups. Each sought either increased or decreased public funding of private schools. Arguments came primarily from a philosophical base. However, both supporters and opponents also relied upon theories. We now have a double system of education, public and private.

This well-rooted double educational system should no longer be challenged primarily on philosophical grounds. Furthermore, the philosophical arguments should no longer be central to the debate. Whether we should or should not support a double educational system is not in question. The dominant issue now must become the extent and form of government financial support. From this frame of reference, the extent of public funding of idiosyncratic schools must be debated. The debate is largely economic. Funding, student enrolment shifts, staffing patterns, and programs available to students were factors shaping this debate. These factors should be regarded as interlinking variables.

I here describe the factors that must constitute contemporary debate on public support of private schooling, and to situate these factors and my description in two national settings, Canada and Australia.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Popular support for not only the public but also the private school sector has risen in Canada and Australia. Support for private schools usually implies

government regulation of programs, facilities, staffing, and, in some cases, tuition fees and admission policies.

Specific provincial arrangements for public support of Canadian private schools demonstrate at once both considerable variations of provincial commitment, and a firm financial recognition and accommodation of private schools. For example, in 1984–1985 private schools in Quebec declared worthy of “public interest” were supported on a per-pupil basis from \$1,057 at the pre-school level to \$2,222 at the secondary level. These amounts approximated 85% of public school allocations. Private schools not so recognized received funding ranging from \$774 per pre-school pupil to \$1,628 per secondary school pupil. Saskatchewan’s public funding for eligible private schools in 1985, by comparison, was \$1,074 per pupil or approximately 59% of the per pupil grant to public schools. Public funding of private schools in Manitoba consists of annually revised per pupil grants for instruction and textbooks. For 1984–1985, these grants amounted to \$622 and \$40 respectively, approximately 20% of the province’s per pupil instructional grant to public schools. In Alberta qualified private schools receive 75% of the per-pupil instructional grant to public schools.

Public support of private schools in Australia is similarly strong. Between 1975 and 1983 public funds for private schools grew by 87.2%, whereas public schools experienced a 24.2% decrease. In 1984 the government recategorized schools that received funding. Grants to the wealthiest private schools were indexed, but not those of other private schools. Public schools were given a real funding increase of 50% over eight years.

ENROLMENT SHIFT

The total pupil population of Canada enrolled at the elementary-secondary level has steadily declined since the mid-1970s. From 1975 to 1984, total pupil population decreased by 13.5%; public school enrolment declined 15.4%, while private school enrolment increased 23.6%. The percentage is significant. Although only a small proportion of Canadian elementary and secondary school children are in private schools, their numbers are substantial: 182,001 in 1975; 209,399 in 1980; 238,300 in 1984.

By contrast, Australia’s total pupil enrolment has increased steadily. Enrolment rose by 3.5% between 1975 and 1984, although public school enrolment dropped slightly less than 1%. Private school enrolments increased 15.6% and now account for at least one quarter of the total number of pupils in the school system.

STAFFING PATTERNS

The number of full-time equivalent teachers employed in Canadian public schools dropped from 264,408 in 1976 to 256,655 in 1984 (3.0%), while the

private school teaching complement rose from 9,281 to 11,860 (21.7%). Approximately one-third of the teachers who left the public system will have entered the private system.

During the same period, the number of full-time equivalent teachers in both the public and private school sectors in Australia has risen steadily (22.4% and 24.4% respectively). From 1976 to 1982, the full-time equivalent teaching complement of the private sector increased by 24.4% but only 8.8% in the public sector.

PROGRAMS

Data on the quality of programs in public and private schools are scarce or non-existent. Although performance records of students on government-set examinations and achievement tests are available, they yield little information. The results nevertheless have been used by teachers, school administrators, and government personnel to make curricular policy and program decisions. Government has used the same information in a much more limited way to determine annual allocations to public and private schools. The quality of students' programs has yet to become a dominating criterion in the allocation process.

CONCLUSION

Public support for private schools will be affected by programmatic factors, particularly by various theories and practices of private schooling. Three factors, namely source of funds, stability of funds, and established spending patterns, influence the way in which total expenditures will have their impact on program operation. The stability of a program's income sources determines its crisis threshold and the amount of staff time that must be diverted from daily operation to survival. The support of a public as well as a private school system from a limited—and of late diminishing—pool of funds has the potential to move both systems to spend toward survival. Thus tolerance and public support of parental choice, grounded in many instances in philosophical arguments, potentially places the educational requirements of all students in jeopardy.

The degree to which our students' education is jeopardized has for too long been second to the right of parents to choose. Program quality and accessibility ought not to be considered solely from the point of view of morality and justice, but also from the standpoint of availability of resources.

Canadian and Australian government policy demonstrates a strong moral commitment to a publicly supported double education system. This commitment has produced a not unexpected erosion in student enrolment and staffing. The cost to the student, in terms of program breadth and depth, has

not been placed on the table for thorough examination. Unless we are willing to move beyond issues of debate and argument long since past, we risk permanently harming those we so self-righteously claim we are out to help, the students and future citizens of our society.