

Schools of Choice in Alberta

Charter schools have been a topic of controversy in Alberta education since inception in 1995. Two significant elements of this controversy emerge from recurring allegations. One is that charter schools are elite and not available to the general public. The second is that charter schools take away resources from other mainstream public school systems. I would like to address these two areas of controversy.

A summary of the history of Charter Schools in Alberta assists in understanding the nature of controversy that has emerged regarding the charter school movement. In 1994 legislation was passed allowing the implementation of charter schools. There were several societies ready and eager to apply for charter school status. At this time the guidelines were not ready, and would not be ready until a full year later, which meant that these groups were in a holding pattern. In the meantime, Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) hired a new superintendent, Emery Dosdall who was energetic and forward-thinking. He personally contacted representatives from each of the community groups seeking charter school status and sought to find a way to make their programs work within EPS as an alternative program. Superintendent Dosdall was very successful in his bids as EPS introduced 12 new alternative programs over the next few years. Interestingly, from 1987-1994 exactly zero new alternative programs were introduced in EPS which is strong evidence that the introduction of charter school legislation spurred on this rapid growth of alternative programs within EPS, thus strengthening their system. Charter schools are autonomous, non-profit public schools that have a focus not already offered by the school authority in which charter schools are located. This could include unique learning/teaching styles, pedagogies or philosophies. Recently the Alberta Government has renewed their support of charter schools in Edmonton and pledged to give them equal footing in terms of funding, capital investments, and maintenance funds. This has been perceived as a threat to the big public systems and interest groups who believe that only one system of education should prevail in Alberta. The first allegation from charter school critics is that charter schools are elite. Charter schools are public schools with a specific focus and they are available to anyone that may be interested in that particular focus. There are many specialty programs that exist within the public, separate and francophone systems, catering to athletics, language, and the arts among many others. These programs are not considered elite and neither are charter schools. Charter schools do not charge tuition and they abide by all provincial government expectations for public schools. They have the same rules for fees, they follow Alberta's programs of study, they employ certified teachers and they have an elected board. Most programs work on a lottery system meaning that names of interested students are drawn at random. Alberta's charter schools tend to be confused with charter schools in the United States, but they are a completely different system. The second allegation is that charter schools take away resources from other public schools. Charter schools receive the same grants as other public schools (actually lower in some cases). The cost to educate a student attending a charter school is the same as the cost to educate a student attending another public-school setting. Charter schools work in collaboration with public, separate and francophone school boards to lease underused facilities, sometimes moving into communities where other public schools have closed due to declining enrolments thus revitalizing the community. In Alberta charter schools are public and programs are developed and monitored by boards that have a vested interest in a specific focus of charter schools to give added value to the prescribed Alberta Education mandate as defined in the Education Act.

My four children all attend(ed) Suzuki Charter School which has a focus on the Suzuki method of music. When my husband and I started researching schools we had never heard of charter schools and assumed they were similar to private schools. We were surprised to learn that charter schools were indeed public schools and did not charge tuition. We were attracted to the music aspect of Suzuki Charter School and also their stellar academic reputation. No prior music experience was required and entrance to the school was through a lottery system. We were not successful in the lottery for the first year but were drawn the second year. I have seen first-hand the very diverse socio-economic population that exists within the walls of Suzuki Charter School, there are families from all “walks of life”. Our children thrived at school and they gained the tools they needed to be successful. Our children have peers that attend a range of different programs within the public school system: the German program, the Logos program and a French immersion program. The children attending these programs have found much success in their life and have also gained the tools they need to succeed. My point is that charter schools are just one piece of the puzzle that is Alberta’s education system, they are not better or more important but they do have value and deserve to exist for those who choose to take advantage of them. Despite the controversy, charter schools in Alberta have proven, successful outcomes as programs of choice and they have contributed to the diversity of alternative programming presented by other public school systems. Charter schools serve an important purpose and add value to Alberta’s exceptional education system. I think in all the debates we sometimes lose sight of the fact that Alberta has a world-class education system. We are consistently in the top 10 in reading, science and math and we should be celebrating that! I feel very blessed that my children and I have been privileged to attend school in Alberta. Misinformation and myths surrounding charter schools in Alberta serve only to fuel controversy and division in a time when we already face too much of it.

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