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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of charter schools would suggest that there is evidence of their effectiveness, but this is not the case. The lack of objective evidence of their success reinforces the claim that charter school reforms are political and ideological rather than educational reforms. The arguments in favor of charter schools have exploited some myths, and these myths have swayed some people whose goals are to strengthen the quality of public education. The following myths are addressed and countered: (1) there is a crisis in public education; (2) the charter school movement invented school choice; (3) charter schools make choice equally available to all; (4) the competition of market forces improves the quality of education; (5) charter schools improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement; (6) charter schools promote equity; (7) results from charter schools have been favorable; (8) charter schools break the "gridlock" of bureaucracy; (9) teachers support charter schools; and (10) charter schools are an innovative educational reform. (Contains 67 references.) (SLD)

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Research Paper

prepared for the
National Issues in
Education Initiative

September 1997

Canadian Teachers' Federation

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Preface

How schools should be structured and governed are contentious topics whenever education reform is addressed. As part of its National Issues in Education Initiative, the Canadian Teachers' Federation published a brief background document, "Ten Charter School Myths" in early 1997. The materials that were assembled for that project have been used to prepare this research paper, which takes a more thorough look at the arguments of those in favour and those opposed to charter schools and the relevant research. It is hoped that *Behind the Charter School Myths* will be a valuable resource to those developing policy positions on charter schools and related issues.

Copies of *Behind the Charter School Myths* are available from the Canadian Teachers' Federation at a cost of $5.00 each. The shorter backgrounder on charter schools can be downloaded from the CTF web site at: http://www.ctf-fce.ca/ctf/ni/charter.htm

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The Canadian Teachers' Federation is the national voice of teachers in promoting quality education, the status of teachers and equality of opportunity through education.

Why charter schools?

School choice has been controversial ever since conservative economist Milton Friedman began promoting it in the 1950s (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. vii). Within current debates about education, particularly south of the border, school choice has become a politically-loaded expression, having more to do with free market ideology than with educational quality or equity. The school choice movement is best understood as a political force rather than a strategy for education reform.

Despite what has been described as "the lack of any real agreement on what school choice is" (Smith & Meier, 1995, p. 313), the school choice umbrella generally subsumes a broad range of education-related policies, among them vouchers, home schooling, magnet schools, open boundaries (within and across school districts), decentralized decision-making (site-based management), and charter schools.

Charter schools have a longer history in countries that have entrenched neo-conservative governments. Britain's grant-maintained schools allow regular public schools to "opt out" of local education authorities. The New Zealand version of charter schools is the result of a number of major reforms, including the elimination of school boards, the introduction of legislation mandating a site-based management model of school governance, and the elimination of legislated "home zones" – school zones in which children attend the school in their neighbourhood (Dobbin, 1997, pp. 14-15). All of New Zealand's 2600 schools are charter schools.

The rapid expansion of charter schools would suggest there is evidence of their effectiveness, but this is not the case. Indeed, the lack of objective evidence of their success reinforces the claim that these are political and ideological rather than educational reforms. In the United States, for example, American researchers trying to gather empirical evidence about the effects of school choice face major obstacles in what Smith and Meier (1995) describe as a "largely ideological debate" – these obstacles include lack of "agreement on what should be analyzed" or "what policy or experiment actually represents a real test of school choice"; and lack of any "comprehensive systems of school choice to test" (p. 313). Nonetheless, they attempt (but abandon) an objective analysis of whether school choice 'works' as proponents claim, and instead assess the validity of the assumptions school choice proponents adopt. Smith and Meier cite empirical evidence to refute these assumptions. Schools have not failed; parents are not dissatisfied; and private school enrolment is not a measure of parental dissatisfaction with poorly performing public schools. These familiar claims are not supported by the available evidence.

American public opinion on various school choice issues was surveyed in a comprehensive 1992 study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (*School Choice: A Special Report*). It found that, when the general public was offered two options for improving public education, a majority of respondents (82%) favoured strengthening existing neighbourhood public schools by providing them with the necessary resources – only 15% of respondents favoured competition among schools for students as the best means of improving education (Olson, 1992). Among parents with children in the public school system, 70% of those surveyed "said there was no other public or private school to which they currently wanted to send their children." (Olson).

Charter schools are becoming increasingly popular within the school choice movement. During the past decade, they have been established in Britain, New Zealand and, to a lesser (but growing) extent, the United States. They are a very recent phenomenon in Canada, one of a number of education reforms being debated (or implemented) that involve fundamental changes to governance – including site-based management, parent councils, the elimination of school boards, and the establishment of colleges of teachers. Alberta, with eight charter schools, is the only province with charter school legislation – but other provinces may be considering enabling legislation. Charter schools may take different forms, but essentially they have the characteristics of privately-operated and governed schools, although they receive full public funding. They are exempt from many of the regulations and oversight that apply to other publicly-funded schools. As well as being deregulated, charter schools apply the principles of "the market", since they compete with all other schools for students and funding.

According to Barlow and Robertson (1994), despite their various manifestations, schools of choice, while varying in degree, "vary little in kind" (p. 189). They identify a number of explicit and implicit characteristics of such schools:

- they are disengaged from any central authority, with decision-making concentrated at the school level, where parent-run boards wield much authority
- at least some of the regulations regarding program, staffing, budget, etc., ordinarily under centralized authority, are in the hands of each school
- pupils are selected from among those who put themselves forward as candidates
- schools compete openly for enrolment

- funding is tied to the number of students each school can attract
- to be financially successful, each school must adhere to the rules of the marketplace which dictate that, "for some schools to succeed, others must fail; for some students to succeed, others must fail."
- their goal is to be homogenous, using various filtering devices to sort their clientele, whether by socio-economic level, religious values or academic proficiency
- school choice advocates view some combination of teachers/ bureaucracies/unions as the agents of educational folly (pp. 188-189)

Bierlein and Mulholland (1994) emphasize the contractual and autonomous features of charter schools:

> In its purest form, a charter school is an autonomous educational entity operating under a contract negotiated between the *organizers* who manage the school (teachers, parents, or others from the public or private sector), and the *sponsors* who oversee the provisions of the charter (local school boards, state education boards, or some other public authority). [emphasis in original] (p. 34)

American charter advocates often distinguish between "strong" and "weak" laws. "Stronger laws" are considered to be those that provide charter schools with greater autonomy – Arizona[1], California, Michigan, Massachusetts, Colorado and Minnesota are among the "stronger" charter law states. Important elements of their legislation allow:

- any individual or group, including private schools and for-profit corporations, to apply for a charter
- authorities other than local school boards to approve charter applications (such as state school boards, other state agencies, colleges, universities)
- an appeals process for denied charters
- no limits (or high limits) on the number of charter schools that can be established, despite their experimental nature
- existing public schools to "convert" to charter schools (as in California)
- automatic exemptions from most state and district laws and regulations

- uncertified teachers to work in charter schools
- exemption from collective bargaining agreements
- fewer restrictions on school admission policies
- financial autonomy – so that the school has complete control over funds generated by their student count, including funds for salaries
- legal autonomy – so that teachers are employees of the school rather than the local school district (Bierlein, 1996, Table 6; see also Buechler, 1996)

While characterizing charter laws as either strong or weak is a subjective exercise, Alex Molnar, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, observes that "an important rhetorical battle already has been won by those who would use such laws for their own profit when laws that loosen regulation and oversight are characterized as 'strong.' " (1996a, p. 155)

Charter schools in Canada

Alberta's eight charter schools enrol an average of 160 students. The first three opened in September 1995, the remainder in September 1996. Four are located in Edmonton, three in Calgary, and one in Medicine Hat (Dobbin, 1997, pp. 2, 26). Alberta charter school legislation (Bill 19 passed in 1994, explained in Alberta Education's *Charter School Handbook*) structures these and future charter schools accordingly:

- parents, teachers or other citizens can apply for a charter through a local school board – if they are turned down by the board, they can appeal directly to the minister of education (as was the case for the Almadina Charter School in Calgary)
- no special start-up, capital or transportation funds are available; once approved, the school is entitled to the same per pupil funding as a regular school
- while schools cannot charge tuition fees, "voluntary" fees can be charged for fund-raising purposes
- schools must be non-profit or run by non-profit groups, and they cannot be affiliated with a religious faith or denomination
- schools must be open to all students as stipulated in the Alberta School Act; however, "if student enrolment exceeds program capacity, the school

will select students in accordance with the selection process outlined in the charter." (Alberta Education, 1995, p. 14) – selection criteria must be included in any proposed charter

- teachers must hold a valid Alberta Teachers Certificate, but teachers are not "active members of the [Alberta Teachers' Association]."; they can hold associate membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association and are eligible to contribute to the teachers' pension fund

- the curriculum "must be structured around the requirement of a basic education as defined by Alberta Education", and students are required to write provincial exams

- the governing structure of the school, its board of directors, must be approved by the ministry; in addition, each school must have (as is the case for all Alberta public schools) an advisory school council, the majority of whose members must be parents with children in the school

- a charter school may have its charter revoked if it does not follow the requirements of the legislation, or if the school is not succeeding according to its own goals (excerpted from Dobbin, 1997, pp. 26-27)

Some advocates of charter schools in Canada, such as Joe Freedman (Society for Advancing Educational Research) and Maureen Somers (Ontario Coalition for Education Reform), believe that Alberta's legislation doesn't go far enough. They are lobbying for some of the features of "strong" charter laws for Ontario, including allowing private organizations to be charter school sponsors in addition to colleges, universities and teachers' unions; the hiring of a percentage of uncertified teachers; the conversion of existing public schools into charter schools; and no cap (or allowing for a larger cap) on the number of schools that can be established (Alberta has a current cap of 15 schools) (Freedman, 1996, pp. 32-33).

Charter schools are promoted enthusiastically by many of the same groups that have championed the weakening of other public institutions: right-wing think-tanks, governments, media and public figures. The idea of "boutique" education for a few children and leftovers for the rest seems to appeal to those prepared to divide society between "the rich" and "the rest". Charter schools are proposed as a "cure" for a multitude of education's challenges, from controlling costs and limiting bureaucracy to dealing with diversity and "empowering teachers". Occasionally, a more sinister agenda is actually spoken aloud – the agenda of dismantling publicly-governed, democratically-accountable schools that employ certified professionals and other staff.

Often the arguments in favour of charter schools exploit a number of myths that are challenged in this paper, and these myths have swayed some people whose genuine goals are to strengthen the quality of public education. These individuals, in particular, need accurate information about the schools we have, about choice, and about charter schools and their consequences.

The ten myths are addressed in the following order:

1. There is a crisis in public education.
2. The charter school movement invented choice.
3. Charter schools make choice equally available to all.
4. The competition of market forces improves the quality of education.
5. Charter schools improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.
6. Charter schools promote equity.
7. The results of charter schools internationally have been favourable.
8. Charter schools will break the "gridlock" of bureaucracy, freeing innovation and reducing costs.
9. Teachers – at least in the U.S. – support charter schools.
10. Charter schools are an innovative education reform.

Myth #1: There is a crisis in public education.

Reality: There are accomplishments, challenges and problems in public education, but the only crisis is "the manufactured crisis".

Canadians have been bombarded by exaggerated criticism of their schools, such as the following from Stephen B. Lawton, professor of education, advisor to the Ontario government and charter school supporter:

> If one is to judge from recent criticisms, the effectiveness of Canadian educational systems is being seriously questioned. High dropout rates, students leaving school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills and violence in schools all raise questions as to the quality of service being provided. (Lawton, 1995, p. 26)

Note that Lawton bases his criticism on other "recent criticisms", not fact. Critics claim that charter schools are necessary because the public school system isn't working. Persistent myths with respect to high dropout rates and levels of youth illiteracy, as well as poor performance on international tests, are cited as evidence of a broken system. The facts, however, tell a different story about Canadian public education (the foregoing is drawn from the following sources: Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1996a, 1996c; Crompton, 1996; Frank, 1996; Ireland, 1995, 1997; Meaghan & Casas, 1995; Nagy, 1996; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1995; United Nations Development Programme, 1995):

- **Dropouts** – In May 1993, Statistics Canada released revised figures on school leavers. This study estimated the 1991 national dropout rate to be 18%. The greatest percentage of those dropouts included students who were disabled, had dependent children, had fathers who had not completed high school, had changed schools a number of times, lived with friends or alone, or worked while attending school, factors which are hardly within the direct control of schools. A recent Statistics Canada follow-up survey on school leavers, which tracked the same population of students from an earlier survey (the *1991 School Leavers Survey*), has placed the national dropout rate at 14.2% for young people aged 22-24. This analysis reveals that many students complete high school, for various reasons, outside of the "normal" time frame. While reducing the dropout rate even further is an ongoing challenge for schools, the rate is lower than it has ever been. Viewed another way, more than 80% of students stay in high school until they graduate, compared to fewer than 50% only a generation ago.

- **Youth literacy** – The results of a major international literacy survey released in 1995 reinforce what we already know through Canadian literacy surveys – that younger Canadians have higher literacy skills than older Canadians. While education is only one of a number of factors contributing to an individual's level of literacy, in Canada educational attainment is the best predictor of literacy. Ironically, the majority of adults who score poorly in tests of literacy and numeracy are quite satisfied with their ability to read and write and do not see their levels of literacy as a problem related to their employment.

- **International testing** – International comparisons of educational achievement are extremely complex and their analyses need to take into consideration a number of factors. Reports of "mediocrity" rarely consider statistical limitations or sample variations. For example, some countries participate in some studies, but not in others; participating countries have different ways of choosing the students who will write the tests (some choose only their highest achievers); and participating countries are not rated against their own curriculum and there is no effort to adjust test scores to reflect circumstances in different countries. Despite these difficulties, the data we have suggests that Canada is near the average for comparable countries.

- **Instructional time** – Another popular myth is that countries such as Japan and Germany have longer school years (243 and 240 days respectively), while Canadian students attend a mere 180-185 days annually. In fact, Canadian students are exposed to more hours of instruction annually than Japanese students. At the high school level, Canadian students receive on average 952 hours of instruction compared to 933 in Japan.

- **Education costs** – Internationally, Canada's education costs are in line with other industrialized countries. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that using the most trusted measure of "national effort", which is the expenditure per student relative to the wealth of each country as measured by GDP, Canada ranks ninth among twenty countries for spending at elementary and secondary levels, and tenth at the post-secondary level. Claims that Canadians spend "the most" on education include post-secondary education, which is largely publicly- rather than privately-funded.

- **Participation in higher education** – Canada has one of the highest rates of participation in post-secondary education in the world, although rising tuition rates may put this achievement in jeopardy.

- **Public support for teachers and schools** – Far from having lost faith in our schools, the public, especially recent graduates and parents, gives our education system high marks. Blanket statements that the public is "dissatisfied" are patently false. In particular, when compared with public confidence in other institutions, support for public education is remarkably stable.

Charter school advocates and other critics of public education also ignore the fact that Canada's economic accomplishments, such as our relative prosperity as a nation, and our UN-bestowed status of "best country in the world in which to live" could not have been achieved without an effective system of education.

None of this means there is no room for improvement. Schools face enormous challenges – many of them caused by our transformed social, political and economic context. But myths about school "failure", and magical ideas about charter schools distract us from improving the schools we have. We don't need "break the mould" schools – we need to roll up our sleeves and apply what we know about healthy child development, effective schools and school-community co-operation.

Myth #2: The charter school movement invented choice.

Reality: Choices within the public system are long-standing, multiplying, and need to be examined carefully.

Charter school advocates like to claim they alone will bring "choice" to public education, but many choices already exist. Historically, parents and students have had a number of options, including choice among private schools, choice between public and private schools, and choice among publicly-funded schools as well as choice among different programs within schools. Choices based on language of instruction and denomination are part of our history. Even in the U.S., schools are not as monolithic as critics suggest. According to Elmore and Fuller (1996), "choice is everywhere, yet for some critics of American education there is not nearly enough, or not nearly enough of the right kind of choice for the right sort of people." (pp. 187-188)

"Lack of choice" is a manufactured criticism. The Exemplary Schools project, a major Canadian study of public high schools across the country, found that most parents in the schools studied felt they already had "some choice about which school their children will attend" (Gaskell, 1995, p. 14). In addition to our parallel systems of education based on language and religion, many opportunities for choice are currently available within the existing publicly-funded school system. These include a variety of programs geared toward a diversity of students such as at-risk students, talented students, older students, and Native students (Gaskell, p. 14). A survey of the diversity of options available in British Columbia public schools was recently published by the B.C. Teachers' Federation. Described as "a tiny window on the larger picture of choice available in public education", it features schools that offer:

- French immersion
- distance education to meet the needs of isolated students
- teen parent programs or schools with on-site daycare
- alternate programs for youth in custody
- pre-employment programs in secondary schools
- the International Baccalaureate program
- Montessori programs at both the elementary and secondary level
- heritage and First Nations languages programs
- the integration of students with special needs into regular classes

Other options include an outdoor school, traditional and fundamental schools, and storefront schools (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 1996).

The Coalition for Public Education (1995a) notes that such options "recognize the variety of ways students learn, and reflect the diversity that makes our society rich." We don't need charter schools to have variety.

Certainly, "more choice" could be provided – but at what cost? Choice can lead to fragmentation. The question of whether society is better served when classrooms are diverse in language, culture, ability and program must be discussed each time a new "niche" program – for the musically talented, for example, or for learning disabled students – is established. These difficult questions are best decided in a public forum, open to wide debate, decided by democratically-elected officials – not by small, self-appointed charter school "boards" with only their own interests to consider.

Myth #3: Charter schools make choice equally available to all.

Reality: Those with more "cultural capital" will always have more "choice".

Charter school advocates claim that charter schools will democratize choice, extending it beyond those who can afford private schools or those who are very able:

> Charter schools are prohibited by law from screening students, excluding special needs children, or charging tuition. This means that wealth or ability are no longer deciding factors. Charters do not favour the rich and most capable, but take the opportunities presently enjoyed only by the rich and extend them to low and middle income families. (Raham, 1996, p. 28)

Current research on school choice indicates that it increases educational inequities, because the better-educated, higher-income, more involved parents are more likely to take advantage of school choice initiatives (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). Gaskell (1995) notes that "choice only increases relative advantage" (and, by extension, relative disadvantage) and that "many who are opposed argue that 'choice' streams better students into 'elite' schools, draws families who might argue for better public schooling into alternatives that satisfy and quiet them, and ultimately increases the disparity in educational provision." (pp. 6-7)

Elmore and Fuller (1996), who have assembled the most comprehensive empirical data on school choice in the U.S., observe that

> market theories, for the most part, assume that consumers' preferences can be described and aggregated in relatively simple ways and that all consumers are more or less engaged in the same process of rational search for value-maximizing choices, operating with similar information and few practical constraints. (pp. 197-198)

They note that the research on " market theory" as it pertains to school choice "cast[s] considerable doubt on this simplistic view." (p. 198) The education marketplace is like all others: choice is not equally distributed among any market's "customers".

When it comes to selling refrigerators, not every potential customer can afford every model. Even more importantly, while every potential customer for a particular refrigerator is equally valuable to the merchant – not every "customer" of a chosen school is equally desirable from a bottom-line point of

view. The education of some children requires more resources than that of others. The "payoffs" – in mechanistic terms – that some children can offer as a return on this investment may seem limited. In this market, not all customers can be considered equal. Despite legislation that technically prohibits "skimming", there are direct and indirect disincentives at work:

1. **The use of selection criteria by charter schools (including academic standards) for choosing students** – In its recent analysis of U.S. charter school laws, the American Federation of Teachers (1996) notes that "three states permit the targeting of students based on academic ability, and two states are either vague or silent on this matter. To date there is no evidence of discrimination based on high academic performance requirements, but this bears watching as the number of charter schools expands." (p. 24) According to Dobbin (1997), schools in Britain can seek permission to use performance measures as a means of selecting students. He also states that "30% of comprehensive schools [in Britain] are estimated to be using 'covert selection.' " (p. 10)[2] It is not surprising that three of Alberta's eight charter schools are for "gifted" students. Their legislation requires a student to be accepted without discrimination only if the student is one "for whom the program is designed" – i.e. non-gifted students need not be accepted. The elitism inherent in this approach may be denied, but when a school is called "ABC" (for All the Best Children), the message is quite clear.

2. **The use of "voluntary" fees and other disincentives** – While U.S. charter laws currently prohibit the use of tuition fees, legislative limitations on other types of fees (in the form of such things as donations and gifts) are lacking. "Voluntary" fees are problematic because, while

> states have rightly recognized that charter schools should be able to accept gifts, grants, and donations ... some charter schools are aggressively seeking quarterly donations from parents. These parental donations are supposed to be voluntary, but there is a danger that contributing on a quarterly basis will become a selection tool. Parents who cannot contribute may be intimidated and feel that their children will not be welcome in the charter school, or these parents will view the donations as a thinly veiled tuition." (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 1996, p. 15)

Since transportation costs are not ordinarily included, only families with means and cars can consider particular schools.

New Zealand charter schools have imposed fees for each student that are based on the ability of parents in a particular area to pay. Because parents in wealthier areas are obviously able to afford more than those in poorer

areas, this practice has led to increased inequality in the educational system (Dobbin, p. 16). (see also *Myth #6: Charter schools promote equity.*) Other costs can add up, making the price of admission unattainable. A charter school based on music may "strongly encourage" additional private lessons; high-tech-high can promote the value of school-to-home e-mail communications, and thus subtly discourage poorer families from applying. Transportation can become a logistical and a financial problem. Inner-city parents aren't too likely to apply to a suburban school that's an hour (and several bus rides) away.

3. **The increasing use of parent involvement contracts** – Obligating parents to maintain "a certain level of participation at the school" favours those parents who are already actively involved in their children's education; single parent families or those without a stay-at-home parent would find it difficult or impossible to put in the "recommended" amount of volunteer time in the classroom. Parents uncomfortable with the language of instruction, anxious about their own academic ability, lacking transportation, or who may feel in other ways less willing or able to volunteer cannot be said to have "equal choice". The AFT (1996) states that "parental involvement should not be used as a proxy for race or class-based screening." (p. 15) Parents with limited skills in the language of the classroom, or limited education, may well feel less comfortable in the role of classroom assistant.[3]

4. **Implicit cultural values** – Schools transmit their cultural values in many ways. A new charter school may claim to be non-religious, but if it advertises only in Arabic, it conveys a particular message. A school that promotes a curriculum based on "the Great Books" says something about its openness to other voices; "Family Values High" may accept single teen mothers, but it probably won't have to.

   Parents' and students' own cultural and social values and assumptions seem to play an important role, both in their propensity to choose and in the types of choices they make. Cultural minorities that value having young children nearby in neighbourhood schools will be wary of sending a child to a school farther away (Petronio, 1996, p. 35). In her report on the response of inner-city black youths to a school choice program in St. Louis, Wells (1996) finds that, "while 'objective measures' of school quality do play a role [in decisions about school choice], choices can be more powerfully shaped by feelings of familiarity, ethnic solidarity, and school proximity." (p. 23)

Barlow and Robertson (1994) note that "although technically every charter school must 'select any eligible student,' [the] powers granted to the school" permit many intended and unintended filtering devices, from the right to shape philosophy and curriculum to the right to expel "unsuitable" students (p. 203).

School choice undermines our collective responsibility for ensuring that *every* school succeeds and *every* student receives a high quality education. It does this by downloading the responsibility for finding the best school onto the individual parent and student (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1996b, p. 27). As Jonathan Kozol (1996) has remarked,

> people can only choose among the things they've heard of .... But it is no less true that they can only choose the things they think they have a right to and the things they have some reason to believe they will receive .... Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair. (p. 63)

The link between choice and access to resources – whether those resources are money, influence or time – is so fundamental that it hardly bears repeating. Maynes (1996) notes that school choice is available to those who "have the resources to take advantage of the possible choices. For most poor families, the only choice is the school within walking distance." (p. 17) The Coalition for Public Education (1995b) states it simply and bluntly: "As it is with any consumer choice, those with more money have more choices."

Myth #4: ***The competition of market forces improves the quality of education.***

Reality: ***Using a charter schools' approach, some schools may "improve", but only at the expense of others.***

The Fraser Institute claims that "... school choice provides ... marketplace incentive to generate improved educational services for all students." (Raham, 1996, pp. 10-11)

Charter schools apply the principle of market competition to education – schools compete with each other to attract and enrol students; enrolment numbers determine funding. In theory, failure to enrol enough students would result in school closure. Parents and students "shop around" for the school of their choice, marketed to them enthusiastically. Because tax dollars follow individual students, charter schools siphon funding from the public system, siphon the attention of school reformers, and siphon the most concerned and articulate parents. School-by-school competition creates high demand for the students who already have the greatest chance of success in our schools, and creates incentives to avoid serving harder-to-teach kids and kids with disabilities who may consume more than their "share" of resources, yet not increase the school's profile in key marketing areas such as standardized test scores. Competition among schools leads to sorting or filtering mechanisms that ensure only the "best" students are chosen. Charter and other choice schools that select students based on prior academic performance cream the strongest students – high achievers would be concentrated in charter and other "choice" schools, while lower-achieving students remain in neighbourhood public schools (Fuller, 1996, p. 38). Left with fewer students, these neighbourhood schools would end up receiving less public funding to educate the higher-risk, harder-to-teach, higher-cost students. This ultimately weakens the public system and erodes the quality of education.

According to an OECD study on school choice (as quoted in Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1996b, p. 27), the loss of funding doesn't have to be extensive to have a major impact on public schools:

> An important consideration to emerge from experience of school choice in practice is that *the proportion of "active choosers" does not have to be large to have a significant impact on school systems*. This is particularly true where schools' resources are directly linked to enrolment. If a public school loses 10 per cent of its pupil intake and therefore 10 per cent of its revenue, the impact is usually severe, as a class with 27 pupils does not cost less to teach than one with 30. The incentive for schools to

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> compete for pupils under open enrolment rules is therefore usually great. (emphasis in original)

In other words, what is left of the public system will be contaminated eventually by the values of the charter system.

The market metaphor that underlies school choice explains why increasing parental choice leads to increased social stratification of schools. It's in the very nature of markets to do this:

> Markets create product differentiation and segmentation of consumers by providing for the free play of preferences around alternatives. Among the distinctions that markets make are those based simply on consumers' propensity or ability to choose. It should hardly be surprising, then, that some parents are at a relative disadvantage in understanding whether they have choices, or what those choices might be if they should choose to exercise them. (Elmore & Fuller, 1996, p. 191)

Many institutions that have the legal authority to grant charters lack both the expertise and resources "to monitor and enforce those charters." Molnar cites the case of a California charter school that went bankrupt when school funding was horribly mismanaged, to highlight the important distinction between an educational "market" and a financial one. He states that,

> to some charter school supporters, the failure of Edutrain is an example of the educational market imposing its discipline. The only problem with this logic is that an educational "market" did not punish the people who set up Edutrain the way a financial market punishes investors in stocks and bonds when share prices plummet or a bond issuer defaults. The people punished in the Edutrain fiasco were the children who attended the school and had their education disrupted, and the taxpayers and students in the Los Angeles Unified School District who were out the [education] money and received nothing in return. The charter school market feeds on the revenue provided by taxpayers even in failure. It is a market in which the financial risks are socialized and the financial gains are privatized. (1996a, p. 160)

The difference between the failure of a product or a company and that of a school "is that it is much easier to write off a lost investment than a lost educational opportunity for children." (Fuller, 1996, p. 38)

Henig (1994) cautions that "Americans' experience with market forces in their everyday lives" has left them "wary of exaggerated theoretical claims about

both the wonders and the dangers of markets." (p. 100) We should be equally wary of viewing these forces as the route to improving our schools. Molnar (1996a) reminds us that

> no amount of entrepreneurial zeal will make up for a lack of resources to provide for [America's poorest children]. Indeed, it is the market that has destroyed the neighborhoods where these children live and knocked the pins out from under the adults on whom they rely. Unleashing the market on the public schools will only compound the harm (p. 167),

thereby adding insult to injury.

The notion that market competition will improve the quality of education by providing greater choice is based on flawed premises. This approach views education as a product, and parents and students as the only consumers of this product. It forgets that others have a legitimate civic and monetary investment in the nature and quality of our schools. Charter school advocates assume that everyone has the same information, opportunities and constraints to make the best choices for our children's education. This is either naiveté or willful ignorance. Increased choice and access to resources (financial or otherwise) go hand in hand. If market forces improve the quality of education, they do so only for a select few at the expense of the vast majority.

Myth #5: Charter schools improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.

Reality: Not according to the research evidence.

The mythmakers promise improved results and careful monitoring:

> Charter schools must demonstrate the potential to improve the learning of students .... Charter schools are expected to provide a different educational environment to improve student learning. (Alberta Education, 1995, pp. 1-2)
>
> Educational results have been more than satisfactory, charter schools often obtaining very good outcomes on state assessments or standardized tests. (Freedman, 1996, p. 27)
>
> The rigorous assessment protocol for charters means the results of these innovations will be available so they can be studied and replicated or, if necessary, abandoned as unsuccessful before being adopted on a larger scale. (Raham, 1996, p. 24)

To date, these promises are unkept.

In their analysis of existing empirical evidence from several studies of school choice experiments, Fuller and Elmore conclude that there is a "troubling ... lack of any compelling evidence that entry into a choice school actually results in measurable achievement gains." (Fuller, p. 38) Their project stems from a three-year-long seminar series for researchers evaluating choice programs sponsored by the Harvard University School of Education. Similarly, Molnar (1996c) notes that Whitty's review of the research on school choice in the U.S., Britain and New Zealand "finds little evidence to support the contention that the creation of educational markets will increase student achievement"; however the available evidence does suggest "that educational markets are likely to make existing inequalities in the provision of education worse." (p. 6)

Private corporations, such as Education Alternatives Inc. (EAI), that have gained a foothold through charter schools legislation have failed to show the promised gains in student achievement (although they have spent more public dollars per pupil, slashed teacher salaries, and been charged with several legal violations).

Buechler's recent study for the Indiana Education Policy Center "found little in the way of systematic evidence that suggested charter schools increased student achievement." (Molnar, 1996a, p. 156) In her research on New Zealand charter schools (which have been in existence since 1989), Wylie (1995/1996, 1995) found that, of the 239 schools she studied, only one had

made fundamental changes to either curriculum or instructional methods. In addition, she notes that "there are no definitive answers" as to whether there has been any impact on student learning, although there is more testing, assessment and reporting (1995/1996, p. 56). The promise of curriculum change in Britain's grant-maintained schools has also been unfulfilled – rather, the trend has been in the direction of "a reinvented traditionalism" (Dobbin, 1997, p. 10) – back-to-basics in a post-modern disguise. Citing the OECD report, *School: A Matter of Choice*, Berthelot (1995) notes that "the most widespread change has been the adoption of a dress code and the requirement to wear a uniform" (p. 6). According to Bierlein (1996), lack of funding has been identified as a major reason (or excuse) that U.S. charter schools "are not supporting a large array of electives or athletic programs that often pull funds from core academic classes." (p. 3) Rather than providing more choices, this can only result in a narrowing of curriculum.

Equally important is the lack of direct evidence of the impact of choice on the performance of those students who remain behind in neighbourhood schools – although earlier research suggests that "when low performers are concentrated in the same classroom, they tend to suppress one another's achievement" (Fuller, 1996, p. 39).

This lack of empirical evidence – and an abundance of rhetoric – make comprehensive assessment of charter schools' effects difficult, but perhaps this is intentional. According to a recent U.S. General Accounting Office report, "no state laws required the collection of baseline data that would be essential to determining whether charter schools are more effective [than regular public schools] in educating students." (AFT, 1996, p. 25) In addition, charter advocates Finn, Bierlein and Manno (as quoted in Bracey, 1996, p. 129) state that they " 'have yet to see a single state with a thoughtful and well-formed plan for evaluating its charter school program.' " This is particularly problematic given the claim that " 'the whole point [of charter schools] is to deliver better results in return for greater freedom.' "

Moreover, it is difficult to envision how allowing uncertificated teachers to work in charter schools (as is now possible in some U.S. states) for lower wages will lead to improvements in instruction or student achievement. Rather, this is a reflection of what Molnar (1996a) describes as "hostility toward teacher unions and the teacher certification requirements they have achieved" and "is, in some ways, analogous to trying to solve the problem of access to health care by allowing anyone who can attract patients to practice medicine." (p. 162) Not surprisingly, a recent meta-analysis of sixty primary research studies found that student achievement is positively impacted by the existence of a variety of school resources, including investment in teacher-related resources. Specifically, it concluded that

> school resources are systematically related to student achievement and that these relations are large enough to be educationally important. Global resource variables such as PPE [per-pupil expenditure] show strong and consistent relations with achievement. Smaller schools and smaller classes are also positively related to student achievement. In addition, resource variables that attempt to describe the quality of teachers (teacher ability, teacher education, and teacher experience) show very strong relations with student achievement. (Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996, p. 384)

We know how to improve student achievement – and it's not through charter schools.

Myth #6: Charter schools promote equity.

Reality: There is growing evidence that charter schools promote inequity everywhere they have appeared.

Despite their genesis in the political Right, charter school advocates have appropriated the language of the Left: "[The affluent] do not need charter schools. The poor and the disadvantaged, however, have never had such choices. It is they and their children in poor schools and programs who need charter schools." (Freedman, 1996, p. 34)

Yet scratch the surface, and it becomes clear that for some proponents of charter schools and other schools of choice, equity is the problem, not the goal. According to John Chubb, the problem with public schools is that they " 'must take whoever walks in the door.' " (Kozol, 1993, p. 18)

Charter schools, by intent or effect, don't respond to the diversity of needs and values, as their advocates claim, but segregate that diversity, serving to ensure that children within a charter school are more like each other by race and class than the wider community. A number of researchers have come to this conclusion, among them Fuller and Elmore (1996). In *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*, the available empirical research concludes that "increasing educational choice is likely to increase separation of students by race, social class, and cultural background." (p. 189) The authors found this to be true even when choice programs are designed specifically to reduce inequities (Henig, 1996; Lee, Croninger & Smith, 1996; Martinez, Godwin & Kemerer, 1996; Waterman & Murnane, 1992; Wells, 1996; Witte, 1996) – suggesting that good intentions cannot overcome the gravitational forces of competition applied to schools.

A report by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (as quoted in AFT, 1996, p. 24) notes that,

> although charter schools have often been touted as a choice strategy to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, the vast majority of existing schools do not target low-achieving student populations. This is true in Colorado, where only a few of the state's sixteen charter schools are designed to attract at-risk students, and in California, where charter schools are often clustered in wealthier communities serving more advantaged student populations (Insights, 1995, p. 5).

In Alberta, four of the eight charter schools now operating are designed for high-achieving students, including the ABC school (All the Best Children). A survey of Arizona's charter schools reveals that only 4% of approximately

7,000 enrolled students were special education students and that fewer than a third of the 46 schools in operation were meeting the needs of disabled children. A principal at one Arizona charter school is quoted as saying: " 'We tell parents that the public schools provide the special education. We can't be set up for everything.' " (McKinney, 1996, p. 22)

These findings are consistent with a survey conducted by the Education Commission for the States and the University of Minnesota's Center for School Change. It looked at 110 charter schools in seven states, inquiring about the nature of the student population the school was designed to serve. While half the schools said they could serve at-risk students, two-thirds "were not designed to serve children with learning disabilities" and only 19 of 110 were able to address the needs of students with physical disabilities (Medler & Nathan, 1995, pp. 23, 9). It should be noted that the legislation does not always clearly define the term "at-risk", thereby leaving its meaning potentially open to interpretation (AFT, 1996, p. 15).

Because of their competitive nature, the tendency for charter schools to exclude students with special needs is very real. Citing research on grant-maintained schools, Kuehn (1995) notes that

> in a system based on an educational marketplace, students with special needs may detract from the marketability of the school. Research in Britain indicates that the "most effective strategies are (1) to recruit more students who are likely to perform well academically, and (2) exclude students who are likely not to do well academically." There is concern in Britain over the trend away from integrating children with special needs into the regular classroom. These students are seen as impediments to achieving test scores that can be used to comparison-market the school. (p. 16)

With the growing trend towards publishing school performance on standardized tests, scores can be used as a marketing tool to attract parents "shopping around" for a school for their children (Berthelot, 1995, p. 4).[4] Students with special needs and other students risk bringing down the test scores and hence, the school's appeal.

The authors of a British report published by the Child Poverty Action Group (*Education Divides: Poverty and Schooling in the 1990s*) found that "grant-maintained schools have done little to help the poorest children, judging by one survey of 55 LEAs [Local Education Authorities] which revealed that only about 8 per cent of such schools served disadvantaged areas." (Budge, 1995, p. 4) The survey represents more than half of the country's LEAs.

In New Zealand, education reforms resulting in the creation of charter schools have "created the conditions for a rapidly developing two-tier system of education based on social class." (Dobbin, 1997, p. 15) Dobbin notes that the elimination of home zones

> reflects the free-market philosophy of the reforms. Parents are to have unlimited choice to "shop" for the best school for their child, and the resulting consumer sovereignty is designed to force schools to compete for parent interest. The school gets a set grant for each student registered and, if the student is "moved" to another school, that grant moves with the student. (p. 15)

With respect to equity, research on New Zealand charter schools (summarized from Dobbin, 1997) indicates that:

- the so-called "good" schools, predominantly white and middle class, are identified and chosen mainly "because they were rumoured to be 'good' ", rather than on the basis of curriculum or other academic reasons (p. 15).

- the imposition of fees is an important factor contributing to inequality – these fees, established by the local board of trustees, are geared to parents' income level ("Boards of schools in poor areas naturally set fees appropriate for the income levels of the parents. Those in wealthier areas set higher fees."). A study by the Anglican Church's Social Responsibility Commission found that such fees resulted in large disparities in funding between poorer and wealthier schools, such that "the difference in funding for the average 1,200 pupil school amounted to more than $180,000." (p. 16)

- those schools losing students to "good" schools are left with reduced resources and "a disproportionate number of learning disabled students or those from poorer families who need more attention" – the resultant anxiety and stress on the part of teachers has led to large numbers of teachers quitting the profession; the New Zealand government also allows for the hiring of uncertified teachers (pp. 16-17).

Dobbin concludes that charter schools in New Zealand are contributing to creating class divisions in that country:

> The marketing of schools has resulted in parents' identifying less with their neighbourhoods and communities and more with their social class .... Whether by design or due to the fact that many Maori and Pacific islanders are poor, the change in [school] rolls has been characterized by "white flight," with white students

> fleeing mixed-race schools to exclusively white middle-class schools. (pp. 18, 16)

A 1994 OECD study on school choice has also found that relatively affluent families are more likely to participate in school choice than those which are disadvantaged. The OECD (as quoted in Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1996b, p. 27) states that

> choice potentially makes it hard to pursue certain kinds of system-wide education policies .... There is strong evidence in a number of countries that choice can increase social segregation. Sometimes this is because more privileged groups are more active in choosing "desired" schools. Sometimes it is because such schools are in more prosperous neighbourhoods, whose residents continue to get privileged access to them once they are full.

For groups like the Fraser Institute to suddenly seize on equity to sell charter schools is remarkably cynical. The promise that choice schools will enhance equity rings hollow when these same voices have often been raised in opposition to adequate funding for public schools, and have argued that child poverty, for example, is highly exaggerated.

Myth #7: ***The results of charter schools internationally have been favourable.***

Reality: ***According to the research, international experience with charter schools shows that they have not lived up to their promise.***

Freedman (1996) claims that "[charter schools] have already proved themselves by vastly improving the delivery of public [education] services in a number of western democracies." (p. 12)

He is wrong. It is true that the American charter school movement is growing (and may well continue, given President Clinton is an ardent supporter). Since charter school legislation was first passed in Minnesota in 1991, 25 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws allowing for charter schools (up from 11 states in late 1994), with legislation varying from jurisdiction to jurisdiction – of the 246 schools that have been approved, 110 schools are in operation with an average of about 250 students each (Molnar, 1996b, p. 11).[5] In his 1997 State of the Union address, the President stressed the importance of states providing parents with the right to choose their school in order to "foster competition and innovation". Charter schools were specifically highlighted as a means of doing this, the plan being to increase their numbers to 3,000 "by the next century". But neither growth nor enthusiasm prove Freedman's claims of "vast improvement".

No national evaluation of U.S. charter school effectiveness has been conducted to date[6] although a number of studies have been done which give us a preliminary picture of their impact. As noted earlier, there is far more evidence of their negative effects than of their success. However, it would come as no great surprise if a future empirical study was to find evidence of higher performance in charter schools than other schools, given their clear advantage of serving a selected population. If and when that evidence arrives, the question must not be "how did they do it?" but rather, "at what cost to their communities? Who chooses? Who loses?"

Other countries are experimenting with charter schools. Under Britain's Education Reform Act, passed in 1988 by the Thatcher government, regular public schools became free to "opt out" of Local Education Authorities and be funded directly by the national government. In addition to creating these grant-maintained schools, the legislation mandated national curriculum, national testing, open attendance areas, and school-based management (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 201). School trustees (or governors) or a petition by parents can start the opting out process – "a secret ballot of parents determines whether the school opts out or not. The school is then run by a governing body of trustees to whom the principal is responsible." (Dobbin,

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1997, p. 9) The first such school opened in 1989. There are now over 1200 grant-maintained schools – representing 2% and 16% of the total number of primary schools and secondary schools respectively (Dobbin, p. 9).

The Conservative government in Britain has made it advantageous for schools to opt out – for example, Wohlstetter and Anderson have found that grant-maintained schools receive more money than public schools for capital development. They also receive financial incentives in the form of seed grants to assist them in the transition period after they make the decision to "opt out"; in addition, "a consulting service, originally intended to provide educational advice, has now, with fewer schools applying to opt out, taken on the role of promoting GMs [grant-maintained schools] and offering administrative and financial services." (Dobbin, p. 9)

The promise that grant-maintained schools would increase the choices available to parents and students is very much in doubt. In a strange twist on parental and student choice, education researchers have found that it is "the schools [which] choose students, not the other way around." Power, Halpin and Fitz (as quoted in Dobbin, p. 10) at the University of London note that

> in Bromley, a district in London where 75% of schools have opted out, hundreds of local children cannot get into the school because the places are being claimed by applicants outside the area. [In 1995] nearly one-fifth of local children failed to get the place of their choice because popular schools had picked the pupils *they* wanted. [emphasis in original]

The Child Poverty Action Group's study reinforces this finding. Its authors (Teresa Smith and Michael Noble at Oxford University) note that

> the Government's much-vaunted policy of giving parents a wider choice has primarily benefited the middle class. "The most popular schools are increasingly able to select their intake, rather than the other way round .... The 'flip-side' is the rejected 'sink' school with declining numbers and resources, often located in a disadvantaged area." (Budge, 1995, p. 4)

Grant-maintained schools also promised broad curriculum change, increased parental involvement, increased participation of teachers in decision-making, and reduced bureaucracy – but they have not delivered (Dobbin, pp. 10-13). Instead, research has found that "inequalities in schooling and segregation by social class have increased in Britain since the system of grant-maintained schools was introduced. Most of the people who choose the alternatives have high socio-economic status." (Kuehn, 1995, p. 16)

In New Zealand, charter schools are mandatory. Cathy Wylie, Senior Researcher with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, has tracked the charter experiences of New Zealand teachers, administrators and parents since 1989. Her assessment of the impact of turning schools into "stand-alone units" run by parent trustees, following the dismantling of school boards and districts, is not encouraging. She concludes that few, if any, of the promised benefits have materialized, and that many critics' worst fears have been realized. Specifically, her research indicates:

- the majority of parent boards focus on property and financing decisions, not learning
- the number of teachers feeling "professionally isolated" has increased significantly
- principals' workload has increased from an average of 48 hours a week in 1989 to 60 hours in 1994. Principal turnover is close to 40% annually. Senior staff are losing interest in becoming a school principal. Principals' role as instructional leader and teacher 'coach' has been replaced with boosting the school in the community and fund-raising.
- teacher workload has also risen and teacher morale has declined
- after initial enthusiasm, many schools had difficulty finding enough parent candidates to take office as trustees, especially in low-income areas
- most schools have raised their "voluntary" school fees
- the reliance on site-based fund-raising has increased the gap between rich and poor schools
- 35% of elementary schools and 61% of high schools were in a budget deficit in 1993 according to Ministry of Education data
- "when site-based management occurs in a vacuum, ... it will not encourage school improvement or innovation" and it increases the resource gap between schools in low-income and high-income areas. Cuts achieved by eliminating school boards did not result in more money to schools or classrooms (Wylie, 1995/1996, pp. 54-59; see also Wylie, 1995).

Myth #8: Charter schools will break the "gridlock" of bureaucracy, freeing innovation and reducing costs.

Reality: A new "adhocracy" would be required to oversee charter schools.

According to Lawton (1995), one of the principles underlying the need to "embrace the ideal of charter schools without delay" is that "bureaucratic oversight must be reduced to a minimum, with government limited to steering, not rowing." (p. 99)

The Fraser Institute claims that, "by making budget decisions on site, [charter schools] are saving money which can be redirected to instruction." (Raham, 1996, p. 24)

Charter school proponents such as these argue that school boards and teachers' unions form a bureaucratic "gridlock" (described by Lawton as "bureaucratic bondage" (p. 15)) that stifles educational innovation and prevents greater control by parents. Charter schools promise to eliminate this bureaucracy, provide accountability, and spread innovation. How these promises could be kept and monitored without an "infrastructure" – in other words, a bureaucracy – is not explained. Charter schools may promise to adhere to provincial curriculum, not to discriminate against students, to employ certified teachers, and to be fiscally responsible – but without democratic governance and oversight, how can this be assured?

Robertson (1996) notes that because of their autonomous nature, "monitoring and holding accountable any substantial number of charter schools" would be a "bureaucratic nightmare" (p. 6). Given the evidence linking school choice with racial and social stratification, Elmore and Fuller (1996) point out "that if public funds are used in ways that foreseeably increase racial segregation and inequality, they may violate the [U.S.] Constitution. Rectifying the tendency of choice programs to increase social stratification will likely require more governmental intervention than less." (p. 192)

In Britain, rather than reducing the level of bureaucracy, a number of new government agencies have been established for grant-maintained schools. These include the Grant Maintained Schools Centre, the Funding Agency for Schools, and the Schools Funding Council for Wales (Dobbin, p. 12).

Some observers suggest that conservatives are not really objecting to the bureaucratic regulation of public schools per se but rather to the "rules" the bureaucrats monitor. Lowe (1993) states that hard-won measures in the U.S. to promote such reforms as desegregation, bilingual education and education for students with disabilities have institutionalized "a modicum of equity in

public schools as a response to the demands of those traditionally denied power. That such regulations cannot adequately secure equality of educational opportunity does not mean that the market can do any better." In addition, placing the blame on public sector bureaucracy ignores the level of bureaucratization that exists within the private sector where "intricately bureaucratized corporations produce a high percentage of the nation's wealth." (p. 27)

The claim that charter schools will be innovative and thus stimulate the change in public schools that will ultimately transform public education is unlikely at best. The American Federation of Teachers (1996) notes that most of the approaches favoured by charter schools "are or have been implemented in regular public schools. Indeed, back-to-basics is a popular charter school program, hardly what one imagines when one talks about innovation." (p. 25) The traditional "back-to-the-50's" charter school exploits parents' yearnings for simpler times, but it is far from innovative. In a 1995 survey by the Education Commission of the States and the Center for School Change, Medler and Nathan found that "integrated interdisciplinary curriculum" was the most popular academic focus of charter schools followed by "technology" and "back to basics" (p. 13).

There is little evidence that successful innovation, should it occur, would spread from one school to others. In his review of the charter school experiment to date, Buechler (as quoted in AFT, 1996, p. 25) reports that

> the effect of charter schools on the system as a whole appears to have been rather limited thus far. Only 24 percent of the charter schools surveyed in California reported that their districts had liberalized restructuring policies in response to charter schools, and 27 percent that the districts planned to disseminate practices used by charter schools (Corwin and Dianda, 1994). Likewise, Urahn and Stewart (1994) report that, in Minnesota [where they were first implemented], 'Most charter schools have had little effect on their sponsoring district (p. 41)' (Buechler, 1996, p. 35).

This makes sense, given the isolation of schools, teachers and governance. While proponents argue that the legal autonomy of charter schools will provide them with greater freedom, their stand-alone nature (i.e. disconnection from school districts) minimizes any potential impact they might have on the broader public education system.

The promise that charter schools will save money has also come into question. Research by Bierlein has identified some of the financial difficulties facing charter schools including the following:

- an inability to take advantage of economies of scale available to schools in a large school district; the small size of schools – on average 140 students (excluding California's schools) – also makes this difficult
- no access to financial and technical assistance
- no access to state capital funds for most charter schools – this results in capital costs coming out of per-pupil operating grants
- they add costs to the public education system because they draw students from home-schooling and private schools (Dobbin, p. 21)

In their survey of over 100 charter schools, Medler and Nathan (1995) identify lack of start-up funds, finances and problems obtaining facilities as the primary barriers to establishing and operating a charter school (p. 28). In other words, a functioning charter school system would require more resources, not fewer.

Research by Urahn and Stewart (1994) on the Minnesota experience with charter schools also identified financing as a major problem. Smaller class sizes were achieved at the expense of reduced salaries and additional administrative responsibilities for experienced teachers as well as the near elimination of school administrators. The authors make the observation that "these may not be effective long-term strategies for developing high quality, stable schools." (p. 51)

Given the financial difficulties facing charter schools, the temptation to lower costs by reducing the number of qualified staff (and their salaries as noted above), increasing class sizes and avoiding harder-to-serve (and more expensive) students will be considerable. The temptation to barter access to children for corporate dollars, or to let the private sector run for-profit charter schools will be unavoidable.

Myth #9: ***Teachers – at least in the U.S. – support charter schools.***

Reality: ***Other people's solutions may – or may not – suit other people's situations.***

Freedman (1996) claims that

> America's largest teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have both endorsed the idea of chartering .... In Canada, it is only a matter of time until the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the various provincial federations reverse themselves and come on board. (pp. 35, 22)

The growth of charter schools in the U.S., and the qualified support of American teachers' unions, cannot be understood without examining the larger American social, political and educational contexts – contexts that are remarkably different from those in Canada. Dobbin notes that Canada's school systems

> tend to distribute funds more equally than the U.S. system does, we are more committed to principles of equality and community, and we do not (yet) have anything like the inner city ghettoes and urban decay that have characterized the U.S. for almost two decades. Our education system still demands certified teachers, and teacher remuneration is not marked by the permanent crisis that seems to plague the U.S. (p. 25)

The U.S charter school movement should be viewed in the context of growing racial and class divisions in a society in which people with the financial means are abandoning public schools as part of their general abandonment of civil society in pursuit of individual success. Under such unhappy circumstances, it is true that many educators perceive charter schools as an emergency measure to address the crisis in education, "a last hope for education in the inner city or areas with high populations of Afro-American and Hispanic students." (Dobbin, p. 19) In Canada – despite the assault on schools – no such emergency exists.

U.S. charter school legislation has also been described as a political alternative, a compromise response to the strong right-wing lobby for a voucher system.[7] Yet charter schools are viewed by some as a transitional phase towards a voucher system, in which public money is used to fund private schools. Dilorenzo (1996) states that "moving to a system of students carrying public school dollars with them as they do through most charter

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[school] set-ups greases the wheels of the move toward making publicly-funded vouchers for private and religious schools a potential reality." (p. 4) It remains to be seen whether charter schools are an alternative to, or a step towards, vouchers and privatization.

"Reluctant supporters" like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are unfairly characterized as cheerleaders for charter schools. Their support is qualified, and it is limited to schools with certain characteristics. The NEA and the AFT became involved "to ensure that charter schools adhere to sound public-education principles ... insisting on accountability, genuine improvements in education, and a guarantee that they do not undermine the public system." (Dobbin, pp. 20-21) The NEA (1995) believes that charter schools must comply with an extensive list of conditions including the following:

- no negative impact on the regular public school program
- no diversion of current funds from public schools
- voluntary staff and student assignment to charter schools
- direct involvement of all affected school employees in the charter school's design, implementation, and governance
- adequate safeguards covering contract and employment provisions for all employees
- appropriate procedures for assessment and evaluation at pre-established periods within the term of the charter
- licensed professional staff
- health and safety standards for all students and employees
- nondiscrimination and equal educational opportunities
- adequate safeguards to ensure fiscal accountability
- adequate and equitable funding, including start-up monies
- equitable procedures on student admission and retention
- appropriate safeguards to ensure against racial and ethnic segregation (excerpted from National Education Association [NEA], section on Charter Schools, p. 2)

Despite its conditional support for charter schools, the NEA (1995) also recognizes their pitfalls, including the potential loss of collective bargaining rights for teachers and other school employees, and the potential for charter schools to "be used by voucher proponents and for-profit corporate interests as a stepping stone toward privatization of the public schools." (section on Charter Schools, pp. 8, 1)

Myth #10: Charter schools are an innovative education reform.

Reality: Charter schools are a political reform of a public institution.

Charter school advocates, it seems, have something to offer everyone. Tom Watkins of the Detroit Center for Charter Schools and a self-described "moderate", places advocates into three general categories:

- zealots who, in addition to being anti-union, believe that the " 'market system is inherently superior to the public system' ";
- private entrepreneurs who see the profit-making potential of charter school legislation; and
- child-, parent-, and teacher-centered reformers described as being more moderate (Molnar, 1996a, pp. 152-153).

According to Molnar (1996a), this accounts for the wide variation in U.S. charter school laws which is a reflection of the "political struggle between charter school advocates with different agendas" (p. 154). While the child/parent/teacher-centered reformers "have given the charter school movement its air of mainstream respectability", it is the entrepreneurs and zealots who are providing the funding and political influence (Molnar, 1996a, p. 153).

Charter schools have been described as the "thin edge of the wedge" to privatization and "privatization's way through the back door". In addition to introducing market-driven competition into the education system, "the danger exists that the charter school movement may be used by those corporate groups seeking to privatize the public schools." (NEA, 1995, section on Charter Schools, p. 8) It is unwise to consider the directions in which charter schools take us without reflecting on the current political context of downsizing government, downloading responsibilities, demonizing public employees, and turning over public institutions to the for-profit sector.

Provisions currently exist within some U.S. state legislation that allow for-profit corporations to establish charter schools. Under the Massachusetts charter school law, "education entrepreneur" Christopher Whittle's Edison Project has been granted several charters (NEA, 1995, section on Charter Schools, p. 15). Alternative Public Schools Inc., a new player among for-profit education corporations "founded in 1992 by two businessmen with no experience in education", has also opened a charter school in Massachusetts (AFT, 1997). The Massachusetts Teachers Association notes that "private companies receiving charters are allowed to trademark materials developed by

their staffs, thus expressly forbidding sharing with other educators." (DiLorenzo, 1996, p. 4) Of the 46 charter schools which began operation in the 1995-96 school year in Arizona, 13 were being run by for-profit organizations (McKinney, 1996, p. 24). According to the NEA (1995), "unless state laws explicitly identify who may or may not create charters, for-profit companies could do so." (section on Charter Schools, p. 15)

Molnar describes school choice efforts including vouchers as "avenues 'for corporate America to draw down public dollars for education' " (Lewis, 1995, p. 267) – in other words, business opportunities, not education reforms. The privatization agenda and the role of charter schools and other so-called "education reforms" in advancing it are made explicit in a 1996 report by Lehman Brothers, a global investment bank whose clients include corporations and governments. This report describes the vast entrepreneurial opportunities awaiting companies such as EAI and the Edison Project (known in the education industry as Education Management Organizations or EMOs) in the multi-billion dollar U.S. education marketplace. According to the report, "the timing for entry into [this] market has never been better", given what it describes as "the problems with American education" which have served to make education reform an important political priority (Lehman Brothers, 1996, p. 5). It goes on to state that, "despite their differences, ... *almost every [education] reform movement shares a common trait: they promote the notion that students will benefit from a more competitive marketplace.*" [emphasis in original] (p. 38) Hence, the stronger such reforms including charter schools become, the more the private sector stands to benefit.

But corporate profit is not the only motive. Dobbin notes that, while in some ways the U.S. context parallels that of Britain and New Zealand with respect to free market ideology as the major driving force behind charter schools, what distinguishes the U.S. charter movement is its association with Christian fundamentalism (p. 19). In Canada, Freedman (1996) states emphatically that charter schools are independent public schools, not private schools in disguise, and that what distinguishes a public school from a private school is that the latter is "able to select (or exclude) students, charge tuition fees and frame a school within a religious or sectarian point of view" (p. 7). Yet he also makes it clear that he is open to the idea of religious charter schools in the longer term, noting that insisting on them from the start would be strategically unwise for charter advocates:

> Chartering is far too important for education reform in Canada to risk it from the beginning by insisting on religious charter schools .... Over time, as experience with chartering builds and the enormous advantage of strong consensus at the school site becomes apparent, it would not be inappropriate to revisit the

> issue, perhaps by testing some pilot schools to assess their effect on the community. (pp. 33-34)

Dobbin points out that,

> because the majority of parents and the public are satisfied with the education system, and funding for it has been more or less maintained, the drive for charter schools is almost entirely ideological. It is not a coincidence that the first such schools have been opened in Alberta, where the government of Ralph Klein has openly embraced new-right, free-market policies in every area of public policy. (p. 25)

McConaghy (1996) describes Alberta as being

> ripe for the introduction of charter schools. The neo-conservative ideology of the Klein government, the savage cutbacks to social services, and experiments in privatization, coupled with the pressure exerted on the ministry of education by the vocal critics of the public school system, were among the reasons for Alberta's legislation establishing charter schools. (p. 580)

It is not accidental that the political and religious right have suddenly "discovered" that education is key strategic territory.

Principles

When something so essential as public education is threatened, it is natural to defend vigorously what we value. But this defense must not be a defense of the status quo. Teachers have decades of history behind them; hundreds of ideas for school improvement; and a keen vision of how things could be better. We can say no to charter schools and still say yes to new ways of thinking about improving the quality of education and the quality of children's lives. Jane Gaskell, Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia and the principal author of *Secondary Schools in Canada: The National Report of the Exemplary Schools Project*, says

> calls for school choice must not be met with a passionate defense of the status quo, but with an inquiring, open stance and a willingness to look for alternatives that can work within a public and democratic system. If school choice means turning decision making over to a minimally regulated market, we all have cause to be concerned. Active, democratic processes are essential as we search for ways to make learning more engaging, and to provide more opportunities for those who find the existing system inhospitable. (1995, p. 18)

The Canadian Teachers' Federation believes that:

- Active student, parent, community and teacher participation in debate and decision-making are essential to strengthening public education.
- Society reinforces public education's importance in a democracy by *publicly governing* schools, in addition to *publicly financing* them. Rather than diminishing parents' responsibility for their children, this underlines our collective responsibility for everyone's children.
- The agenda for educational reform must be based on improving access to high quality education, not fiscal fundamentalism or ideological conviction.
- While the public education system must continue to offer a variety of program options to meet the diverse needs of all students, variety is no substitute for quality.
- A publicly-funded, democratically-governed system of education with a mandate to provide quality education for *all* children must not be undermined by charter schools.

- True choice in education must enhance educational equity, making pedagogically-sound choices equally available to all.

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Endnotes

[1] Chris Pipho, research professor at the University of Colorado and a senior fellow at the Education Commission of the States, observes that "Arizona's two-year-old charter law is judged by some to be the most liberal in the nation." In addition to having no limit on the number of charter schools, Arizona charters "are good for 15 years, private schools can easily convert to charter status, districts can approve charters outside their district, and charter owners may keep any property bought with state funds, may hire family members, may pay any salaries they wish, and may keep any funds left at the end of the school year." (Pipho, 1997, p. 489)

[2] Ron Glatter (Director of the Centre for Educational Policy and Management (CEPAM), School of Education at the Open University in the U.K.) cites the use of "selection tests" for students applying to grant-maintained schools as a means of gaining "competitive advantage over nearby schools." (1994, p. 7)

[3] On the use of parent involvement contracts, see also Henry J. Becker et al., *Parent Involvement Contracts in California's Charter Schools: Strategy for Educational Improvement or Method of Exclusion? Occasional Paper Series*, Southwest Regional Lab., Los Alamitos, CA, April 1995.

[4] For an example of the impact on schools of using examination results to compete for students, see Glatter, 1994, pp. 7-10.

[5] Most of these schools are elementary schools or serve elementary students as well as other students (American Federation of Teachers, 1996, p. 23). Four quite different charter school models have emerged out of existing state legislation: newly created schools outside existing school buildings; self-governed schools within schools; conversions of existing individual public schools into charter schools; and conversion of the majority of public schools in a district or conversion of the entire district itself (National Education Association, 1995, section on Charter Schools, p. 7).

[6] A major study currently underway in the U.S. (described as "the most definitive look at charter schools to date") aims to "compare the achievement of charter school students against national norms and with that of comparable students in traditional public schools." Criticized for involving a number of charter school advocates such as Joe Nathan and Eric Premack as researchers on the project, the study is being conducted by RPP International, a for-profit research firm, as well as the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston. The $2.6 million research contract is from the U.S. Department of Education (Jacobson, 1996).

[7] The National Education Association defines vouchers as "a manner of funding private and often religious schools with public dollars ... Several different variations of private school voucher systems are being proposed. The most common model permits tax vouchers to be granted by the state to the parents of a school age child, to be paid to any school willing to admit the child. Depending on the individual plan, the admitting school could be a public school or a private school, secular or sectarian." (NEA, 1995, section on Vouchers, p. 2)

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