

Charter schools offer a promising way forward

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Students in class. (David Bloom/Edmonton Sun file photo)

A common Canadian value is the equal opportunity for success that basic education offers young people. It is the reason why citizens accept and support the vast amount of resources spent on K-12 education across the country. Yet disadvantaged students continue to fall through the cracks. Charter schools, almost entirely absent from the Canadian education landscape, offer a real-world solution to improving education for disadvantaged students.

Charter schools are public schools that operate autonomously from their local school boards and are governed by independent boards of trustees.

Typically charter schools are exempt from many statutes and regulations that govern traditional public schools. That means teachers are not part of a teachers' union and schools are free to adopt nontraditional approaches to teaching or curriculum.

Charter schools aim to provide innovative or enhanced education programs designed to improve student learning. Since charter schools are public, they don't charge tuition and are fully funded for their operating expenses by government.

A recent study reviewed the large body of research on charter schools in the United States and found that they're particularly effective at educating students disadvantaged by poverty, minority status, poor baseline academic performance, and low parental education.

Leading research of several New York charter schools found, for example, that racial achievement gaps in math and reading were entirely closed by third grade for students who entered in early elementary school, and by ninth grade for those who entered in middle school. Another major study of urban Massachusetts charter schools found significant improvement in math and reading scores relative to the local public schools for poor students who entered charter schools with low baseline achievement scores.

Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991. Growth in the numbers of states allowing charter schools has been strong. In 1994, 11 states had charter school legislation. By 2015, that number grew to 43 states (including D.C.).

Student enrollments also grew dramatically-almost seven-fold from 1999-00 to 2012-13, from about 340,000 students to nearly 2.3 million. On average, 4.4% of the student population (in states that allow charter schools) attend a charter school. In a short period, parents without access to the more expensive alternatives suddenly had new options for their children's education.

Currently, Alberta is the only Canadian jurisdiction to permit charter schools and, even then, not many exist. Alberta introduced charter school legislation in 1994 and allowed only 15 charters. Despite the observed demand for charter



analyses have shown lengthy wait lists-the number of charter schools in the province is still capped at 15. Enrollment in charter schools (8,418) as of 2012-13 still only represents 1.4% of total enrollment in Alberta.

If we care about disadvantaged students in this country and giving them a better chance at success, charter schools provide an opportunity for a promising way forward.

With credible evidence from the U.S. of enhanced student outcomes for disadvantaged students poorly served by traditional public schools, education policy-makers in Canada can no longer ignore the advantages offered by these autonomous public schools.

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