

GUEST COLUMN

Evidence shows charter schools work

DEANI VAN PELT AND LYNN BOSETTI

FIRST POSTED: SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2016 04:00 PM MST



(Fotolia)

Alberta Education Minister David Eggen recently rejected two applications for new charter schools—a school for special needs students and a Spanish-language school with an emphasis on science. That is unfortunate.

There is room and demand for more charter schools in Alberta, the only province in Canada to allow such schools, and the research is clear about the achievement gaps charter schools fill. In light of Eggen’s own ministry’s finding that “overall, charter schools appear to have provided enhanced student learning outcomes as compared to similar schools and similar students enrolled in other jurisdiction types,” these two rejections should raise eyebrows among parents and taxpayers.

The idea of public schools being independently operated and held accountable for meeting particular goals is relatively new and perhaps even more successful than anticipated. Since being proposed in 1988 by then president of the American Federation of Teachers, charter schools have been introduced in 42 U.S. states and Washington D.C., enrolling roughly 4.5% of students in those jurisdictions.

Charter schools have become increasingly popular with parents in Alberta since their introduction in 1994. The percentage of Alberta students enrolled in charter schools has more than tripled to 1.4% since 1999. Yet, despite long wait lists, only 15 charter schools are allowed in Alberta at any one time (13 currently operate in the province).

Because charter schools operate outside of the local school district and are governed by their own board of trustees, it might appear that they are not public schools. But unlike private schools, the province will shut them down if they don’t achieve the goals of their charter.

Charter school funding is also unique. Unlike private schools, they may not charge tuition. They typically receive provincial funding for their operating expenses but not for their capital (building, etc.) expenses as they often lease unused space from the local school district. This means enterprising educators and community members collaborate to deliver innovative education programs without direct cost to parents and with lower cost to the taxpayer.

SUN+ Charter schools cost less on a per pupil basis and are closed down if they aren't effective at meeting student achievement goals. Low performing schools don't continue as drains on the system. Just what exactly is lost by granting a charter, especially when all the legal provisions for their existence are in place?

The question becomes even more mindboggling when you stack the cost efficiencies alongside the research on the outcomes of charter schools.

Charter schools are particularly well-equipped and effective at serving the needs of students of disadvantaged population. While many studies show strong positive effects of charter schools on student achievement in general, the literature is clear that charter school gains are particularly large for disadvantaged groups such as students with special needs, second language learners, and at-risk youth.

Charter schools serve families and students who are not well-served by the traditional public schools, and are effective and efficient in serving educational preferences not met elsewhere.

Moreover, if the presence of charter schools exerts pressure on surrounding schools and school districts to improve, as literature on school choice demonstrates, they benefit not only those who attend charter schools but also students who do not.

For the sake of all students and taxpayers, Minister Eggen should be cautious about thwarting innovative and enterprising approaches to designing and delivering education in Alberta.

- Deani Van Pelt is Director of the Barbara Mitchell Centre for Improvement in Education at the Fraser Institute and Lynn Bosetti is Professor of Education at UBC, Kelowna.

