

# The Alberta Charter School Experience

*LYNN BOSETTI, Ph.D.,  
University of Calgary*

## **The Charter School Debate**

Charter schools are heralded by some policy makers as the great promise for public education (Nathan, 1996). Advocates claim that charter schools will revitalize the system by injecting market forces into an “over-regulated, over-centralized public education monopoly with strong allegiance to the status quo and no institutional incentive to improve student performance” (Buechler 1995, 3). The Little Hoover Commission (1996) concludes that charter schools can leverage change within the public education system by “acting as a wedge for both external and internal forces.” Charter school proponents argue that student and parent demand for the choices charter schools provide will increase and public schools will fight for the flexibility charter schools enjoy (6).

The charter-school concept is founded on competitive-market principles. Proponents believe that if parents select schools which reflect their own values and meet the learning needs of their children, they will withdraw their children from poorly performing or unresponsive schools, resulting in pressure for higher performance and responsiveness in the public school system. Charter schools were never intended to supplant public education but to supplement it through choices for responsive and innovative programs. Their mandates, explicitly defined

in their charter, help to define the choices available to parents. In the eyes of policymakers, the successful programs and practices developed at charter schools would eventually be adopted by other public schools to benefit all children (Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly and Sande 2000, 160). The ultimate goal of choice is to provide the best fit between the educational process and the needs of the learner (Boyer 1994). With charter schools, parents, rather than teachers, determine the best fit between educational programs and their children's learning needs. Parents claim the right to choose schools that will educate and socialize their children, and to take responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Those who argue against parental choice question whether parents are rational or capable of decisions based on clear preferences. They also question whether parents will be able to demand action from local school boards and teachers (Fuller, Elmore and Orfield 1996), or that they can be relied upon to pursue their children's best interests. School choice requires parents to make judgments regarding quality teaching and learning, and to acquire the cultural capital to engage effectively with the market. Real choice also means that when parents decide to remove their children from one school, they will then be able to get their children into a school they prefer (Bosetti, 1998a). These are some of the key issues in debates over charter schools and parental choice.

### **Charter Schools**

Charter schools are autonomous public schools organized by like-minded parents and educators to provide choices in the educational philosophy or mission of schools, in the delivery of education, and in the governance and organization of schools. These parents receive autonomy and flexibility in the governance of their schools in exchange for high levels of accountability in meeting their mandate, for parental satisfaction, and for the enhancement of student learning in some measurable way. Charter schools are non-denominational. They cannot charge tuition fees, exist for-profit, or discriminate in student admission.

Charter school legislation varies considerably from place to place, and the particulars are unique to the province or state that establishes it. In Alberta, Canada's only province with such legislation, charter schools must provide the basic, provincially-mandated curriculum, and students are required to write all Provincial Achievement and Diploma Examinations. They operate on a three- to five-year performance

contract based on the terms of their charter. Their charter is approved by the Minister of Education or by the local school board. At the end of the contract, an external evaluation team reviews the school and determines if it has complied with the legal and financial requirements, has fulfilled its charter objectives, and can demonstrate parental and community support. Based on this assessment, the evaluation team may or may not recommend that the school have its charter renewed (Alberta Education, 1996). There is no appeal process to overrule this final decision.

Charter schools, like other public schools, must hire certified teachers, but the Alberta Teachers' Association will not permit charter-school teachers to be part of the Teachers' Association. Charter schools manage their own funding and are eligible for the same per-pupil grants as public schools.

A total of 12 charters have been approved in Alberta over a 5-year period, and 10 remain in operation. To date, few of these charter schools could be viewed as offering truly innovative programs; however, they do appear to be applying a variety of educational approaches in novel combinations (e.g., differentiated instruction, project-based learning, individual program plans for each student, and instruction in foreign students' first languages). They also provide appropriate programs for students who appear to be under-served within the larger education system (i.e., gifted students, street youth, and students in need of English as a Second Language instruction).

### **The Development of Charter Schools in Alberta**

In 1994, the government of Alberta passed legislation for the establishment of charter schools. The government introduced charter schools as an "addition to the public education system," and as sites of innovation that would "complement the educational services provided by the local public system" and provide the "opportunity for successful educational practices to be recognized and adopted by other public schools for the benefit of more students" (Alberta Education, 1996). Charter school legislation was introduced shortly after a national debate on the role of education in the enhancement of Canada's ability to compete in a global marketplace (Economic Council of Canada 1992; Steering Group on Prosperity 1992; Corporate Higher Learning Forum 1990). The outcome of these debates was a call by various federal agencies for Ministries

of Education across Canada to establish environments that encourage individuals to take greater responsibility for their own learning and that of their children; for schools to define their mission, to articulate their methods for attaining it, and to assume responsibility for results (OECD; Corporate-Higher Learning Forum). These agencies advocated that “clients” should be able to choose the institution that best satisfies their needs and aspirations, and that there be real differences among institutions.

Given this broader context, the Alberta government responded by regarding education as a commodity in the marketplace, and charter schools were celebrated as a vehicle to advance the goals of accountability, efficiency, and performance, and to empower parents and other members of the community to become more directly involved at the school level (Bosetti, 1998b). The government de-politicized the debate over the goals of education by assuming an arms-length approach to the administration and governance of education, while at the same time maintaining a centralist position in terms of funding, mandated curriculum, and accountability. Issues over the goals of education played themselves out at the local level through school choice initiatives.

Along with the introduction of charter school legislation, the Alberta government made other changes to the education system. These changes included more funding to private schools, a reduction by 12 percent to overall education funding, provincial standardized testing programs and grade 12 diploma examinations, the promotion of site-based management as the preferred model of school management, the requirement of school councils, and the consolidation of school boards from 141 to 68 (Bruce and Schwartz 1997). The desired outcome of these changes was the creation of a public education system that is goal-oriented, service-oriented, and responsive to market forces (Bosetti, O’Reilly, and Gereluk 1998, 2).

### **The Alberta Charter School Experience**

This chapter examines the successes and pitfalls of the charter school movement in Alberta. It is based on the findings of an in-depth, two-year study of nine charter schools (Bosetti 1998b; Bosetti, Foulkes, O’Reilly, and Sande 2000). The study used a multi-method case study approach to document each charter school, and a triangulated approach to data collection, including document analysis of charter school legislation, charters, monitoring and evaluation reports, charter school

annual reports, handbooks and brochures, as well as observation in classes, at special school events, at parent and board meetings, and at meetings of the provincial association of charter schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators, and relevant stakeholder groups to determine the problems and obstacles experienced in the establishment of charter schools, the perceived support for charter schools, and the impact of these schools on public education. Questionnaires were distributed to charter school administrators, teachers, charter school board members, and parents to profile the following: who chooses to work in or send their children to charter schools; issues and concerns related to the establishment and governance of charter schools; teacher workload and professional experience; and levels of satisfaction with these schools.

### **The Impact of Charter Schools**

The government's reform efforts, including charter schools, have encouraged public debate about the educational goals, practices, and achievement of schools. Teachers have felt increased public pressure to ensure students score well on provincial achievement examinations. Local newspapers often publish the results of these exams by rank, listing schools based on student performance. There has been a backlash against child-centred, progressive education, and a diminishing trust in the expertise of professional educators. Numerous private schools have emerged that focus on a core academic curriculum, a structured learning environment, preparation for university, and work in a global market. In Calgary, the total enrolment of children in private education has increased from 3,900 students in 1993 to 10,050 in 1999 (Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA), Web Site at [www.aisca.ab.ca](http://www.aisca.ab.ca)).

Provincially, students enrolled in private schools comprise 3.9 percent of the total school population, an increase of nearly 1 percent since 1993 (AISCA).

Initially, there were numerous applications to local boards, particularly in Edmonton and Calgary, to create charter schools. The Edmonton Public School Board responded by converting these charter applications to alternative schools in the system. There were only three proposals that the board could not accommodate, and these became the three charter schools in Edmonton. The Calgary Public School Board, however, did not approve any charter proposals. Instead, it took the

position that neighbourhood schools ought to be able to accommodate the learning needs of all children. Five charter schools are located in Calgary despite the school board's disapproval. Only one charter school, Moberly Hall in Fort McMurray, has had its charter granted by a school board; all the other charter schools operate under the approval of the Minister of Education.

### **A Vehicle for Systemic Educational Reform<sup>1</sup>**

The strength of charter schools as a vehicle for educational reform lies less in fostering innovation in the public education system (although that has happened in Edmonton) than in providing schools of choice for parents and addressing the diverse values and goals of education. This is due largely to the lack of technical support and adequate funding for charter schools, and the reality that local school boards have no incentive to support charter schools, which they perceive as undesirable competition. Current legislation in the School Act permits public schools to accommodate applications for charters as alternative programs. The establishment of a charter school requires near "missionary zeal" on the part of parents and teachers who benefit from little technical or financial support, and face cumbersome provincial regulations and intense public scrutiny. This stands in stark contrast to the ease with which school boards may establish an alternative program. As a result, charter schools have not yet grown to have a large and competitive share of the public education system. They have, however, garnered incredible grassroots support from parents and educators interested in alternative education and addressing the needs of marginalized groups.

Charter schools are still struggling to define their place in the ever-changing regulatory environment that governs public education in Alberta. Legislative and regulatory disadvantages facing charter schools have helped keep the movement small, and while existing schools effectively address the needs of the groups they serve, they are having little impact on the larger educational community. The lack of technical, financial, and moral support from government and school boards has required charter school pioneers to be very committed in their quest to overcome what at times seems like insurmountable obstacles (Bosetti, 1998a). In many cases, these challenges have resulted in a strong sense of community and purpose. They have united people through a common purpose—defined by ideological beliefs, values, or

special needs—to organize and to make their envisioned school of their choice viable.

Charter schools have persisted despite the hostile environment created by some stakeholder groups. For example, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) have denied teachers, administrators, and school board members of charter schools full membership in their associations. The survival of charter schools, despite this hostility, may be attributed to their grassroots support, which has enabled them to operate on shoe-string budgets, to demonstrate acceptable levels of student achievement, and to maintain high levels of parental satisfaction (Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly, and Sande 2000). The experiences of these charter school pioneers provide insight into the conditions necessary for such schools to become viable alternatives within the public education system.

### **Charter School Profiles**

Charter schools in Alberta illustrate how well schools of choice can address the needs of a diverse community within a public education system. They offer a range of educational programs

- Three of the charter schools offer a back-to-basics educational program that emphasizes teacher-directed learning, highly structured learning environments, strict disciplinary policies, and a demand for high commitment from parents for involvement in their children's learning.
- Three other charter schools offer a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing differentiated instruction to meet the diverse learning styles of students and the needs of self-directed or motivated learners. Two of these three schools cater to students identified as being gifted.
- One charter school caters to the needs of street-involved youth who have dropped out of school and have been "shut out" of the public education system. It offers an educational program designed to provide a safe environment for these youth so they can acquire a basic education that is focused on life skills and job readiness.
- One inner-city charter school caters to students from a variety of minority groups, many of whom are recent immigrants who require assistance with learning English. The majority of these students belong to Arab-speaking Muslim communities.

- One school focuses on science and technology.
- Another school is based on the Suzuki method of instruction and emphasizes an arts-enriched program.

### **Reasons for Choosing a Charter School**

Parents at Almadina, the school that caters to the needs of immigrants and second-language learners, say that they were marginalized in the public education system and that the public school did not support their cultural values and beliefs. Their children struggled to become part of the mainstream in their neighbourhood school, were reluctant to reveal their cultural identity, and did not have their educational needs addressed. For these parents, the charter school provides a safe place where their children are among friends, where the school calendar accommodates their religious celebrations, and the discipline policies reflect their values and beliefs. A few of the teachers speak Arabic, which makes the parents feel welcome in the school. It is apparent that for the majority of parents whose children attend this school, who are low-income wage earners and struggle with the English language, the critical factors influencing their decision to send their children to this charter school include cultural familiarity; shared values, customs and beliefs; and a feeling of safety and comfort for their children. For these parents, unfamiliar with the Canadian education system, the school springs out of their social network, and contributes to the social cohesion of their community and the formation of social capital.

Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre, the charter school focusing on the educational needs of street-involved youth is situated in the heart of the community in which the students “hang out.” It is housed in the co-operative multi-service community centre where community workers, teachers, and government agencies work together to address the needs of residents in the community. The community is culturally diverse but has common bonds of “poverty, cultural disruption, and discrimination” (Bosetti 1998b, 61). Students learn about the charter school through their social network and through referral from various community agencies. As part of the community centre, the charter school provides a strong sense of community and support for students and improved social connections. The basic ground rules are that students must treat one another with dignity and respect. The teachers and community workers are strong advocates for the young people who do not have parents willing or able to advocate on their behalf. The program is



designed to encourage students who have dropped out to start studying again and to cope with the burdens of street experience and/or inner city experience. The charter school admits only students who are unable or unprepared to attend a mainstream school.

ABC Charter School, designed for children who are gifted, is another example of a school that addresses the needs of a group that felt marginalized in the regular public education system. Parents argue that at ABC, their children are happier and their needs addressed through superior instructional methods and a challenging peer group. The charter school is closely connected with provincial and local associations for parents with bright children, and serves as an extension of the existing support network.

Parents sending their children to Foundations for the Future charter school—characterized by its structured, sequential approach to the curriculum, teacher-centred instruction, a strict dress code, and discipline policies—are united not only in their resistance to child-centred, progressive education but also in their strong commitment to a particular approach to teaching and to a conception of the skills necessary to participate in society. This school is viewed as a safe haven from the influences of mass culture, corporate interests, and technology, and it brings together parents with a particular vision of quality education and a desire for their children to achieve academic success.

### **Choice in Context**

Amy Stuart Wells argues that charter schools are a reaction against the “common school,” the government’s attempt to provide a uniform education for all students, regardless of their culture, social class, or religious background. The “common school” version of public education assimilates and indoctrinates students into a “narrow understanding of morality, patriotism, and valued knowledge” (4). School boards in Alberta and other provinces vary in their approach to public education: some insist on the common school approach while others tolerate and even encourage a greater diversity of educational alternatives. In school districts that provide a wide range of alternative programs and alternative schools, there is little need for charter or private schools. For example, the Edmonton Public School Board offers 26 programs in 96 schools and has only two charter schools. The school district of Elk Island School, a suburb of Edmonton, has included in its public school system a once-private Christian School as a school of choice. The Calgary Board of

Education, on the other hand, has few programs of choice and has had five charter schools in the area. The city of Calgary also hosts the largest number of private schools in the province of Alberta.

### **The Success Of Alberta Charter Schools<sup>2</sup>**

High levels of satisfaction among teachers, parents, and students, as well as steady levels of student enrolment, provide evidence of the success of charter schools in Alberta. The charter school movement has been slow to grow, but a number of charter schools have had their charters renewed and are maturing. Operationally, this growth means that these schools can shift their focus from establishing the school and its policies and procedures, to the professional development of teachers, curriculum development, and refining their charter mandate.

The nine charter schools included in our study (Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly, and Sande 2000, 163) varied in their stages of development and their success. We found that charter schools that demonstrated acceptable to high standards of student achievement, had filled a niche within the public education system (as evidenced by stable student enrolment, high levels of parent, teacher, and student satisfaction, and low teacher turnover) and were healthy, stable, well-functioning schools. Though our study never claimed to evaluate the schools, our profiles suggest that three charter schools fit the category of well-functioning and stable, five are moderately successful, and two are at-risk or in decline. The following are characteristics of each category.<sup>3</sup>

### **Characteristics of...**

#### *Well-functioning, Stable Charter Schools*

- Experienced school board with members with a range of expertise and experience
- Clear educational vision articulated in its charter with an indication of how goals and objectives are to be achieved
- Strong school leadership
- Value-added improvement demonstrated in student achievement
- Rich social capital and social cohesion
- Ability to draw upon the resources of the school community
- Ability to fill a niche in the public education system
- Supported by a society, foundation, and/or university

### ***Moderately Successful Charter Schools***

- Are able to secure an appropriate school facility
- Report a high level of satisfaction from parents and teachers
- Show slow growth
- Have a narrowly-defined niche and a strong sense of purpose
- Have stable leadership
- Are often former private schools, converted to charter schools
- Were supported by strong advocacy from an external group
- Showed moderately increased value-added student achievement

### ***Charter Schools At Risk Or in Decline***

- Were established without the support of an existing association, foundation or society
- Operated on a shoe-string budget
- Had weak educational leadership
- Had an ambiguous educational vision, or unfulfilled vision
- Experienced conflict among members of the school board and/or with school administration
- Managed financial resources poorly
- Failed to demonstrate value-added achievement for students

### ***Student Achievement***

Performance results on provincial measures of student learning<sup>4</sup> reveal that students at charter schools are generally achieving at least as well as students in other jurisdictions, and/or in accordance with expectations based on their described learner needs. For example, the government reports the Provincial Achievement Test results, which show the proportion of students in each school who attain the acceptable standard for the grade level and the proportion who achieve the standard of excellence. In the two charter schools catering to the learning needs of gifted students, 100 percent of the students achieved the acceptable standard and a significant proportion achieved the standard of excellence (i.e., 71 percent in one school and 50 percent in the other). Four charter schools have student achievement results that are slightly above the average for their related public school board and the provincial average. The charter school catering to the needs of English as a Second

Language (ESL) and immigrant students has results consistently below the provincial average.

In part, these achievement results can be explained by the targeted group of students admitted to charter schools (i.e., gifted, musically talented, at-risk, ESL students) and by socio-economic factors. The majority of students who attend eight of the ten charter schools come from well-educated families of middle- to upper-middle-income.<sup>5</sup> We studied neither the socio-economic characteristics of families at the school for at-risk students, many of whom no longer lived with their families, nor those of students at the school for ESL students. Parents of charter school students are actively seeking alternative education to what is currently being offered by the public education system and are actively involved in their children's education. Charter schools are only in the early stages of developing appropriate "added-value" assessment measures and other measures that address the impact of the charter-specific teaching strategies or the expanded curriculum that students are expected to master. For example, characteristic of all charter schools in Alberta are small class sizes and a consequent low teacher-student ratio, yet none of the charter schools has been investigating the impact of this provision on the enhancement of student learning.

### **Teacher Satisfaction**

The "missionary zeal" demonstrated by charter school pioneers in overcoming daunting obstacles and their perseverance despite limited financial, moral, or technical support from the government or broader educational community is striking. Teachers work long hours with limited resources, and often for less money than they would earn in the regular public education system, yet they remain satisfied with and committed to their charter school. Teachers embrace the challenge of working in a supportive school environment with like-minded individuals in a school where the educational philosophy resonates with their own. In particular, they report that they feel they can make a difference working in such an environment with small groups of children. Many of these teachers are in their first few years of teaching and have developed deep loyalties to their school and community. Some teachers, however, are uncomfortable with the "temporary" status of charter schools, the lack of long-term job stability, and low salaries. Teachers in charter schools remain un-tenured and on term contracts.

## **Parent Satisfaction**

Parents are very enthusiastic about charter schools and in most cases formed the main impetus behind their establishment. Many have contributed substantial volunteer hours to establish these schools. However, their level of involvement diminishes as the schools mature. Eighty-three percent of parents volunteer in their children's charter school, and 82 percent of parents intend to have their children remain in a charter school. Parents express high satisfaction with the quality of teaching, the safe and caring environment, and the academic challenge their children receive. Parents uniformly report that their charter school is better than the previous school their children attended and that their children demonstrate improved academic performance, self-confidence, and satisfaction in their learning.

## **Choice and Competition**

It is apparent that while new or dramatic educational strategies and programs have yet to emerge from these charter schools, parents and teachers deem them a success. What distinguishes charter schools from other public schools in Alberta is that their educational strategies and programs are uniformly applied throughout the school and are not found only in a particular teacher's classroom or subject area. The explicit charter combined with small class sizes, teamwork, collaboration among parents and teachers, and a supportive and caring environment has culminated in a cohesive community and a deep loyalty to the school.

Alberta's charter school movement has not built the critical mass necessary to create widespread choice and competition among schools or to lead to major changes in the public education system. However, despite its modest size, the movement has had an impact on the larger system. Charter schools have increased awareness among parents and the community that students have different needs and that not all parents share the same values or educational goals. Charter schools demonstrate a new way of creating diverse programs and of governing schools, and they have given great satisfaction to the parents and teachers involved in them. In some instances, charter school proponents have challenged local boards to respond to parents' requests for more programs and to provide programs and services that address the needs of particular groups of students. School districts have provided more explicit school choice, particularly in the large urban areas.

**Lesson Learned<sup>6</sup>***Charter school Establishment Issues*

Charter school legislation allows people without formal training or experience in education to create and govern charter schools.<sup>7</sup> These educational entrepreneurs are not constrained by the institutional mindset or by current educational trends in the local public schools. In some cases, their innovations are ill-conceived, in others their innovations do not fit the current view of education by the educational establishment. For one or another reason, other public schools are often unwilling to adopt their practices, despite their popularity among parents and the community.

In the schools we studied, the most successful had their charter developed by people with educational (pedagogical) expertise and a proven track record in operating schools. A strong and well-researched educational mission drives these schools. Those charter schools established by people with little expertise in education encountered more difficulties. For example, in the cases where the rationale for establishing a charter school was to prevent the closure of another school—either a small public school or a faltering private school—the schools were less successful. In these cases it was not the charter or pedagogical vision that was driving the school, but rather the desire of a small community of parents to keep their community or independent school open. Also less successful was the school created for a particular ethnic or cultural community. While the school's charter was to address the needs of second-language learners, problems over governance and administration, together with high teacher, principal, and superintendent turnover, detracted from the original charter. This charter school has suffered because the educational program, integral to the charter, became secondary, and it became unclear what education vision was, in fact, driving the operation of the school.

Many of these problems can be avoided by ensuring that charter plans are based on well-researched, sound pedagogical theory and practice, that charter proponents have access to the guidance and support of administrators, and that they have strong support from their community of prospective student families. Once the charters have been granted, charter board members require access to training and support in school governance. Charter schools also require strong educational leadership from a principal experienced both in school administration

and in the areas of the charter's focus, whether that be pedagogical strategies or learners with special needs.

A second issue for aspiring charter schools is sponsorship. Charters are granted or denied by the district school board and may only otherwise gain sponsorship through an appeal to the Minister of Education. School boards have often proved unwilling to sponsor any charter schools, so many charter proponents have had to appeal to the Minister for charter status. This resistance from local boards has created a tremendous challenge for charter schools. It delays the establishment of such schools, forces charter proponents to shop around for school boards, and creates tension between local boards and charter schools. In recent years, local boards have rejected at least eight new charter proposals. Local boards also report reviewing proposals to be time-consuming and claim the resources they commit to this process could be better spent helping their own schools. Clearly, the necessity for charter schools to be sponsored by a school board presents a conflict of interest for the board.

### **Parent Volunteerism**

Charter schools reflect a new relationship between parents and the school, and redefine the role of the state in the governance of public schools. Charter schools encourage the goals of education to be played out at the local level through parental choice as well as political debate. This increases family responsibility for many parents. The effect is that all the parents who exercise choice devote considerable time to the selection of a school. Yet the day-to-day operation of the school falls upon a small group of committed, able, and available parents. Charter schools in Alberta have not yet realized their potential for appropriate parental involvement.

### **Financial Assistance**

One of the biggest obstacles facing charter schools has been the difficulty of securing appropriate and affordable school facilities. Due to a lack of capital funding, charter schools report that 10 to 15 percent of their operating budgets are devoted to obtaining school facilities, a cost not borne by other public schools. This absence of capital funding has impaired long-term planning for school expansion, and has affected

teachers' salaries and charter schools' commitment to small class sizes. Charter schools do not operate on a level financial playing field with other public schools.

The government has made changes to legislation to provide more financial assistance to charter schools for the lease and renovation of facilities leased from public schools. This new funding has created some incentive for local school boards to cooperate with charter schools by leasing them vacant existing school facilities, which they were reluctant to do in the past. Some charter schools have had to move from one facility to another to accommodate school expansion, to address the increase in lease costs, or to avoid not being able to renew their lease.

### **Documenting and Sharing New Practices**

Charter schools distinguish themselves not only by their structure and governance and the strong commitment of parents, teachers, and students, but also by the originality of their programs. Starting a new school and an innovative program takes time, and often requires additional resources, staff training, and time for planning and reflection. Evaluation is important but it, too, is time-consuming. The government demands that charter schools produce certain documents for accountability, which are intended to help them reflect upon their successes and improve their practices. However, after only three to five years of operation, it may be premature to require that these schools find ways to communicate their success and innovative practices with conventional schools.

Few forums exist for charter schools to share their successes with public schools, since school boards are often hostile to them and do not welcome them either at teacher conventions run by the Alberta Teachers' Association or at functions sponsored by the Alberta School Boards' Association. In addition, the large bureaucracy and limited autonomy of conventional public schools makes the implementation of charter school practices less feasible (Reville 2000).

### **Imperfect Governance**

Legislation for charter schools was introduced in 1994 without a vision of these schools' long-term place in public education and without consideration of the regulatory, technical, and financial support necessary to create an environment for them to flourish. Since 1994 there have been three Ministers and four Deputy Ministers of Education. In 1999,



Alberta Education was amalgamated with Advanced Education into a super-ministry called Alberta Learning. Responsibility for charter schools has moved from being a special assignment, with one person overseeing its development, to becoming 40 percent of another person's assignment, and finally to becoming the responsibility of a regional office response team. In 2000, the response team spent nearly 60 percent of its time on charter schools, devoting the equivalent of one full-time position overseeing nine charter schools.

The continual shifting of responsibility for charter schools within the Ministry has resulted in a loss of focus for the movement as a whole and the failure by the Ministry to create an environment for charter schools to thrive and succeed. Local boards have proven to be the squabbling siblings of charter schools more often than supportive foster parents. Charter schools have been left to create their own support network through a provincial organization, the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (AAPCS). In addition, an independent organization has established the Canadian Charter Schools Centre to offer research and professional development resources to these schools.

If charter schools are to fulfil their potential to leverage change in public education, and if they are to develop innovative practices, the government should assume full responsibility for them: it should appoint a body responsible for granting and renewing charters, for monitoring and evaluating charter schools, and for providing them with technical assistance and support. If charter schools were allowed to compete on a level playing field with other public schools, market forces would rouse school boards from their lethargy and create an incentive for them to adopt practices that have proven to work best, or risk losing students to a growing supply of charter schools.

## **Conclusion<sup>8</sup>**

The Alberta charter school experience has provided insight into the relationship between schools and parents, and redefined the state's role in providing public education.

Parents and teachers identify with their charter schools in ways that they have not done with a public school board or with most public schools. There is a nostalgia surrounding the charter school movement in Alberta, reflected in parents' search for a small school community where their children are safe, known to all, and academically challenged. In their study of parental involvement in magnet schools, Goldring and

Smrekar found that parents who choose actively view themselves as different from other public school parents because their choice represents a significant break from the complacency and compromise of neighbourhood schools. There is a mythology of “specialness” that surrounds each charter school community which teachers, students, and parents draw upon and use to build a culture of sentiment, tradition, and practices. The sense of community, trust, and social cohesion are some of the positive outcomes of charter schools in Alberta.

Public education in Canada differs from province to province and often from school board to school board because Canadian communities are so diverse and because legislation permits public funding, in most jurisdictions, to Catholic, French, and private schools. In a pluralistic society, the ideal of a common, comprehensive school may not be feasible. People want to “decide for themselves the kinds of sub-community they wish to live in, if indeed they wish to live in a community at all” (Holmes, 1992, cited in Gaskell, 1999). There is a clear need for educators and policy makers to engage with each other and the public in debates about the goals of schooling, visions of the good society, and the role of citizen choice. Charter schools are an important experiment in the delivery of education in North America. To date, charter schools in Alberta appear to be less about competition, innovation, and educational efficiency than they are about choice and community. That is, they are examples of alternative schools where parents have a direct voice in the governance of the school and which are driven by an explicit mandate defining educational goals and practices.

Parents, teachers, and students at charter schools must be strongly committed to maintaining their charter school against the opposition of school boards and teachers’ unions and with little support from the government that legislated them. Charter schools encourage a community to discuss not only its educational aspirations for children but also the educational practices most likely to achieve them. Charters are not just about family choice; they are also about democracy in action.

## References

- Alberta Education. 1996. *Charter School Handbook*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Government.
- Alberta Education. 1994. *School Act*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Government. Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA). Internet at: [www.kingsu.ab.ca/~aisca/](http://www.kingsu.ab.ca/~aisca/) <<http://www.kingsu.ab.ca/~aisca/>>

- Bosetti, L. 2000. "Alberta Charter Schools: Paradox and Promises." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, XLVI (2): 179-190.
- Bosetti, L. 1998a. "The Dark Promise of Charter Schools." *Policy Options*, 19(6): 63-67.
- Bosetti, L. 1998b. *Canada's Charter Schools: Initial Report*. SAAE Research Series #3. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. Bosetti, L., E. Foulkes, R. O'Reilly, and D. Sande 2000. *Canadian Charter Schools at the Crossroads: The Final Report of a Two-year In-depth Study of Charter Schools in Alberta*. SAAE Research Series #5. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Bosetti, L., R. O'Reilly, and D. Gereluk. 1998. Public Choice and Public Education: The Impact of Alberta Charter Schools. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Boyer, E. 1994. "Blending the Neighbourhood School Tradition with 'Choice Within Schools.'" In Hakim, S., Seidenstat, P., and Bowman, G. *Privatizing Education and Educational Choice: Concepts, Plans and Experiences*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Bruce, B., and A. Schwartz 1997. "Education: Meeting the Challenge." In C. Bruce, R. Kneebone, and K. Mckenzie, eds. *A Government Reinvented: A Study of Alberta's Deficit Elimination Program*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Buechler, M. 1995. *Charter Schools: Legislation Results After Four Years*. Policy report. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Education Policy Centre, Indiana University.
- Corporate Higher Learning Forum. 1990. *To Be our Best: Learning for the Future*. Montreal: Corporate-Higher Learning Forum.
- Economic Council of Canada. 1992. *A Lot to Learn: Education and Training in Canada*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada.
- Fuller, B., R. Elmore, and G. Orfield. 1996. "Policy-making in the Dark: Illuminating the School Choice Debate." In Fuller, Elmore and Orfield, eds. *Who Chooses? Who Loses?* NY: Teachers College Press.
- Goldring, E. and C. Smrekar. 1997. Community or Anonymity? Patterns of Parental Involvement and Family-School Interactions in Magnet Schools. Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.
- Gaskell, J. 1999. "The Politics of School Choice in British Columbia: Citizenship, Equity and Diversity." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal.
- Holmes, M. 1992. *Educational Policy for the Pluralistic Democracy: The Common School, Choice and Diversity*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- OECD. 1996. *Innovations in Education*. Issue 1. Paris
- LAUSD Charter Evaluation Report. 1998. Cross-Site Report: The Findings and Implications of Increased Flexibility and Accountability: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District. LA: WestEd.
- Little Hover Commission. 1996. *The Charter Movement: Education Reform School by School*. Stanford: State of California.
- Nathan, J. 1996. *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- O'Reilly, R. and L. Bosetti. 2000. "Charter Schools: The Search for Community." *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75(4): 1936.

- Reville, R. 2000. *Charter School Initiative Report*. Education Reform Commission. Mass.: Department of Education.
- Smrekar, C. 1996. *The Impact of School Choice and Community: In the Interest of Families and Schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Steering Group on Prosperity. 1992. *Inventing Our Future: An Action Plan for Canada's Prosperity*. Ottawa: Steering Group on Prosperity.
- Wells, Amy Stuart. 2000. *In Search of Uncommon Schools: Charter School Reform in Historical Perspective*. Internet at: [www.tcrecord.com](http://www.tcrecord.com) <<http://www.tcrecord.com>>.

## Notes

- 1 This section is based on L. Bosetti (2000).
- 2 This section is based on the article by R. O'Reilly and L. Bosetti
- 3 Over time, more of the charter schools are moving into the high-functioning category. However, at the time of the study, three schools fell into this category and three fell into the moderately successful category. The at-risk schools were plagued by financial difficulties, poor management, and an unclear educational vision.
- 4 Provincial standardized achievement tests are administered annually to all students in grades 3, 6, and 9. Diploma examinations are required for all grade 12 students. The achievement results for grades 3, 6, and 9 for each school are ranked and published in local newspapers.
- 5 For example, 77% of both mothers and fathers have at least some post-secondary education. Forty-five percent of mothers have a university degree or a professional certificate, whereas 16 percent have only a high school diploma and 3 percent have not completed high school. Fifty-two percent of fathers have a university degree or professional certificate, 11 percent have only a high school diploma, and 4 percent have not completed high school. Fifty-six percent of all households earn an income greater than \$60,000, including 20.6 percent that have earnings of more than \$100,000. Only 6 percent have earnings of less than \$30,000. Parents of students from Almadina (ESL students) and Boyle Street (at-risk youth) are not included in this sample and would affect these statistics.
- 6 This section is based on Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly, and Sande, pp. 170-175.
- 7 The majority of charter schools were established by parents and parent groups unhappy with their experiences with the public education system. Many felt marginalized or "shut out" of the public education system because their perceived values, voice, or needs were not addressed by that system. Many of these parents came to the realization that what they wanted for their children was not what the majority of parents in their neighbourhood schools wanted for their children, nor what the local school board was prepared to offer for their children.
- 8 This section is based on L. Bosetti, (2000), pp. 188-89.