

# If this school neglects you, try that one

Calgary

Calgary's population, now around 800,000, is growing by about 20,000 people a year. The birth rate in Alberta is about 50 per cent higher than in the rest of Canada because the average age in this province is younger. These two facts mean that enrolment in Calgary's public schools should be increasing steadily.

In fact, enrolment is increasing in Catholic, charter and private schools, and in home schooling; but it is stagnant in the public schools, and even decreasing in the lower grades. The main cause of the decline is inaccessibility.

For years, the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) has refused to close and sell off schools in older neighbourhoods with declining enrolment. Instead, it has bused children from newer neighbourhoods to older schools. Today, about a third of the public-school students are bused, and 27 of 33 developing neighbourhoods have no public schools.

Not surprisingly, parents are seeking alternatives. Those who can dedicate the time may turn to home schooling or to experimental charter schools run by parents. Those who can afford the tuition may give private schools a try. Those with a Catholic connection may look to Catholic schools, which are more accessible in newer neighbourhoods because the Calgary Catholic School District has been aggressive in closing inner-city schools and building new ones where they are needed.

The CBE is now in an embarrassing position. Its enrolment will not grow until it builds new schools where children are numerous. But it cannot get provincial grants to build new schools as long as it presides over such a large inventory of underused space in the inner city. (Indeed, it owns a number of buildings in which all the space is rented to charter schools, private schools or day cares.) Selling those schools would provoke the kind of noisy local protests to which the board has yielded in the past.

Meanwhile, the per-pupil expense of running Calgary's public schools mounts every year because the contract with the teachers union provides automatic raises for seniority. The only way to stabilize per-pupil costs is for enrolment growth to make possible the hiring of younger, less well-paid teachers. If unit costs continue to increase, the board will have to make further cuts to programs and risk driving more children out of the system. It will be a downward spiral unless the board acts quickly to reverse long-standing policies.

♦ ♦ ♦  
This situation exemplifies several typical problems in the provision of public services.

First, big monopolies (the CBE runs the largest system of public schools in Canada) tend to show great concern for their own interests but little for those of their clients, consumers or customers. Fortunately, education in Calgary is not entirely monopolistic; so loss of market share, particularly to the Catholic schools, is forcing the CBE to mend its ways. Competition is useful in the public sector, just as it is in the private.

Second, while big monopolies look strong when they ignore the taxpayers they are supposed to serve, they are quite weak in other respects. Any economies of scale they generate are easily appropriated by trade unions and professional associations with the power to strike and thereby inflict severe harm, not on the employer but on great numbers of innocent people held captive by the public-service provider.

A related form of weakness is the tyranny of the visible over the invisible, of the emotional over the rational. A few dozen parents in an inner-city neighbourhood who are willing to shout angry slogans and parade in front of cameras can prevent the closing of their school, even though rational analysis shows they are harming the interests of thousands of people soon to be building new homes on the outskirts of the city. But the new residents are not yet there, and hence not able to exert political pressure at the critical time.

Education, just like telephone service, electric power and many other essential services, could and should be privatized. But for the time being, the ideology of public education is still strong, and that means that government-owned school systems will continue to exist. In those circumstances, the best policy is to introduce as many competitive elements as possible.

The great lesson in the Calgary story is that competition from the Catholic, charter and private schools is starting to force the Calgary Board of Education to stop neglecting the people it is supposed to serve. But such competition could be made even more effective. Calgarians should take no pride in having the largest single system of public schools in Canada. If we had had several smaller, geographically divided systems, the interests of new Calgarians would not have been ignored for so long.

♦ ♦ ♦  
*Tom Flanagan is a professor of political science at the University of Calgary.*

GM  
July 16/98