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MORE CHOICE, BETTER RESULTS: BUILDING ON CHARTER SCHOOL SUCCESS IN ALBERTA

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Alberta stands at the forefront of educational choice in Canada, with a robust and varied landscape of publicly funded K-12 options. There are public schools, separate (Catholic) schools, francophone schools, and charter schools, offering Alberta families a range of educational alternatives.¹ Alberta is the only Canadian province to allow charter schools, which have greater autonomy than traditional public schools and an explicit mandate to deliver innovative, high-quality education tailored to needs not otherwise met within the system.²

Fuelled by surging demand, charter school growth has accelerated in both number and enrolment in recent years. However, supply struggles to keep pace, with long waitlists and lottery systems for admission.³ With more and more Alberta families seeking access to these innovative educational opportunities, the province's education policy needs to catch up.

EDUCATIONAL CHOICE AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

Alberta's education system is grounded in principles that emphasize market-driven approaches. In the preamble to the *Education Act*, there is an explicit affirmation of choice in a pluralistic system and of the importance of fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, adaptability, risk-taking, and bold decision-making.⁴



Deliberately included in the system is the charter school option.⁵

Charter schools are autonomous, operating independently of local school boards.⁶ They are required to deliver the Alberta curriculum, but "in an innovative or enhanced way to improve student learning and contribute to educational choice."⁷ As such, these schools offer unique educational programs, not available in other public schools, that respond to specific learning needs or stem from alternative pedagogical philosophies.⁸

They are increasingly popular in Alberta, with enrolment growth in charter schools across

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the province far outpacing that in other publicly funded schools over the past five years. From 2019-2020 to 2024-2025, public school enrolment grew by 8.8%, separate school enrolment by 8.5%, and francophone school enrolment by 10.6%. Meanwhile, charter schools saw a substantial 55.3% increase in enrolment (see Figure 1). This is admittedly in part an artifact of the small starting point, as the proportion of students who attended charter schools in the province during this period increased from 1.4% to 2.0% overall.⁹

Nonetheless, this modest but real growth in market share does not fully reflect the increased demand for charter school education. Indeed, many schools have adopted lottery-based admissions in an effort to manage oversubscription.¹⁰ As demand continues to exceed available spaces, waitlists have grown in most schools, limiting families' ability to access their preferred educational options.

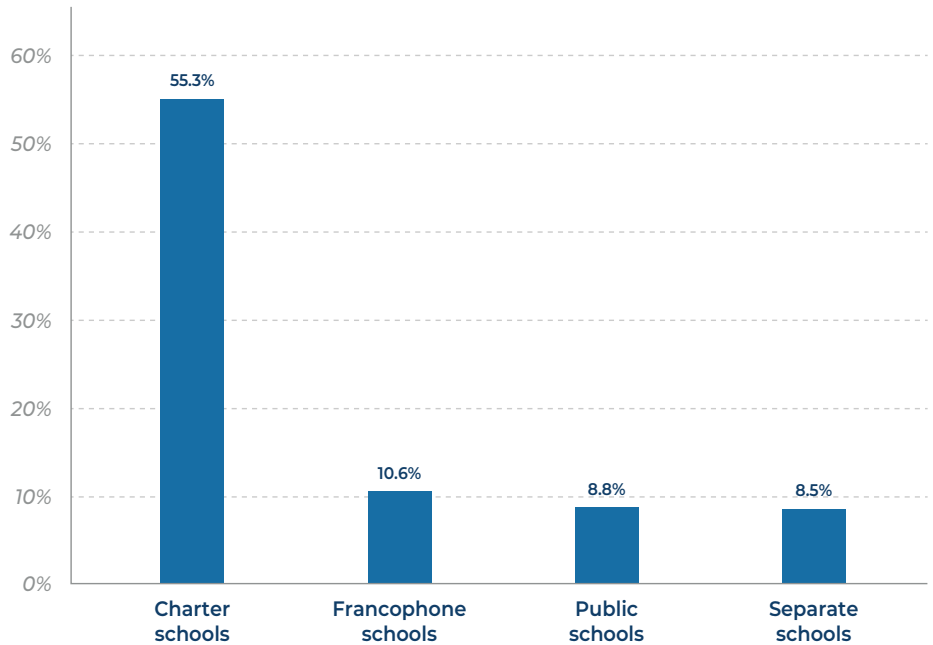
These schools offer unique educational programs not available in other public schools.

In the 2023-2024 school year, there were over 20,000 students on waitlists for admission to charter schools in just three of the 19 charter authorities then operating¹¹ (see Figure 2). Data from the remaining 16 charter authorities was not publicly available or accessible for this period, suggesting that many more students are on waitlists in the province.¹²

The lack of standardized waitlist data for Alberta's charter schools is itself noteworthy. Some schools roll over waitlists year after

Figure 1

Growth in enrolment in publicly funded K-12 Alberta schools, 2019-2020 to 2024-2025



Note: Preliminary data for the 2024-2025 academic year.
Source: Government of Alberta, Student enrolment by authority and grade level, Data tables, April 23, 2025.

year, for instance, while others do not. Some only accept applications once children are school-aged, while others take applications as soon as a child is born.¹³ Without accurate, province-wide waitlist data, families cannot make fully informed decisions, and the scale of unmet demand for charter school seats remains uncertain. This makes it difficult for private entrepreneurs to plan new schools or expansions, and for policymakers to allocate resources efficiently to best serve students and families.

DIRECT BENEFITS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

The increasing popularity of charter schools in Alberta reflects their solid academic outcomes and high levels of parental satisfaction, as well as the specialized programming that meets the needs of diverse student populations.

First of all, charter schools consistently report higher proficiency rates in core subjects compared with traditional public schools.¹⁴

Results from the Provincial Achievement Test (PAT), conducted in grades 6 and 9 to test student learning across the province regardless of school type or location, indicate that on average, charter schools outperform all other types of schools in Alberta.¹⁵ This underscores the effectiveness of charter schools' focused educational models and their ability to meet diverse student needs within Alberta's public education framework.

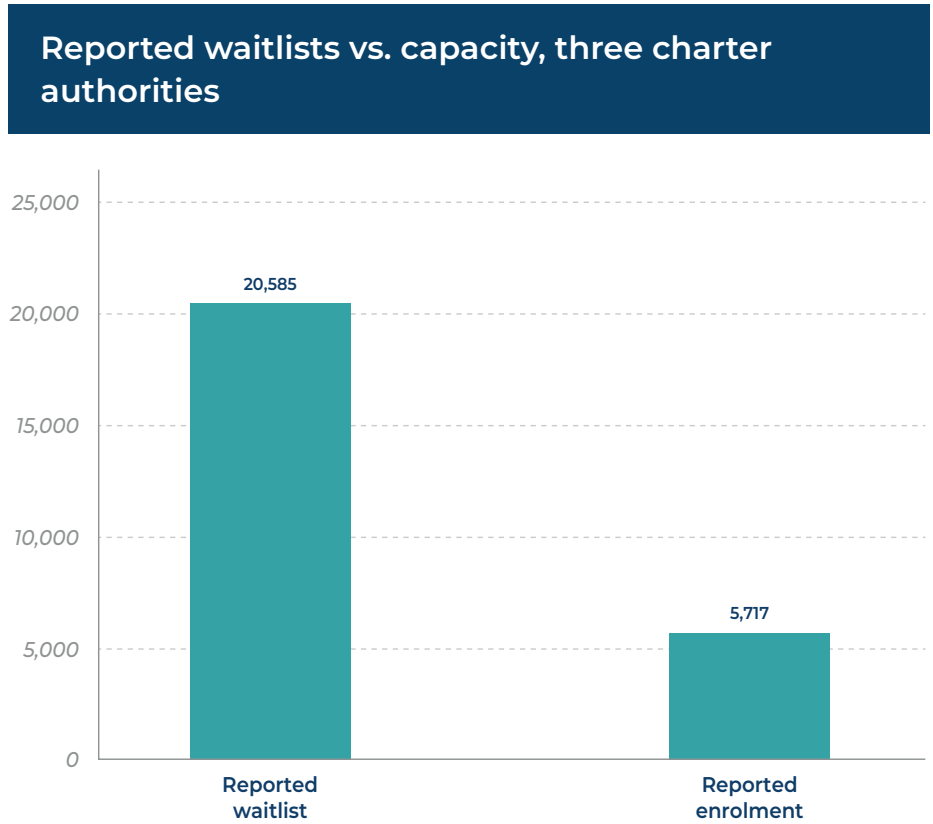
The level of satisfaction of families served by charter schools is also high. In fact, for a charter school to continue operating, it must have its charter renewed by the Minister of Education—a decision that takes into account parental satisfaction, specifically requiring survey results “better than those of the province as a whole.”¹⁶ The continued existence and renewal of charter schools, therefore, serves as clear evidence of consistently strong parental satisfaction and support.

Charter schools are also a response to the unmet needs of marginalized groups, and their pedagogy is designed and delivered to support a specific type of student. For example, the Boyle Street Education Centre serves at-risk and underserved youth, while the Almadina Language Charter Academy specializes in supporting non-anglophone students by helping them learn English.¹⁷ By tailoring their programs to the unique needs of their student populations, these schools provide targeted support that often falls outside the scope of traditional public schools.

INDIRECT BENEFITS FOR THE BROADER PUBLIC SYSTEM

The impact of charter schools in Alberta extends beyond the students enrolled in

Figure 2



Note: Reported enrolment figures are inconsistent between the provincial government data and data from the charter authorities' reports. The provincial data for enrolment is more recent and we assume collected in a standardized way, so for consistency their values are used here rather than those of the charter authorities themselves. It is noteworthy that enrolment numbers reported by the ministry were lower for two of the three authorities.

Sources: Authors' calculations. Government of Alberta, 2023/2024 student enrolment by authority and grade level, April 23, 2025; Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, 2023-2024 Annual Education Results Report, November 27, 2024, p. 5; Alberta Classical Academy, Annual Education Results Report 2023-2024, November 2024, p. 3; Aurora Academic Charter School, Annual Education Results Report 2023-2024, November 21, 2024, p. 40.

their classrooms. By introducing genuine choice into a system where funding follows the student, charter schools create a ripple effect that drives innovation, responsiveness, and improvement in schools across the province.

As demand continues to exceed available spaces, waitlists have grown.

Charter schools are, by design, required to be innovative and to share their successes with others in the broader education community. As part of their charter agreements, these schools must describe and demonstrate how

they have created novel learning environments and how they communicate effective practices to other schools and stakeholders.¹⁸ For example, Connect Charter School in Calgary pioneered the integration of iPads and other technology into daily classroom practice as everyday tools, an innovation which has influenced classrooms across the province.¹⁹

This culture of innovation spurs healthy competition throughout the system. As charter schools provide alternative programs and pedagogies, traditional public schools are motivated to adapt and pursue similar flexibility to attract and retain students. In many cases, alternative and specialty programs pioneered by charter schools have served as models for similar public programs, broadening educational possibilities across the province for all students.

The Valhalla Community School, for example, focused on grouping students based on mastery levels rather than age, which helped pave the way for the Alberta government's *Moving Forward with High School Redesign* initiative. This replaced the traditional credit-based system for graduation with a mastery-based model and was implemented in over 150 high schools in the first two years.²⁰

Charter schools also help raise academic expectations and accountability for all. Their existence sets a higher bar for student outcomes and inspires public schools to adopt best practices. In expanding choices for families, all schools in Alberta, including those in the traditional public system, are encouraged to evolve, improve, and respond more effectively to the needs and preferences of families.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO CHARTER EXPANSION

Recent legislative reforms have aimed to streamline the charter school approval process, support their expansion, and improve access to school facilities.²¹ While these changes have supported growth and increased opportunities for new and existing charter schools, new challenges have also been introduced, highlighting longstanding issues within the sector.

For example, with the government centralization of school facilities in 2024 and 2025, the process is now subject to ministerial discretion.²² This introduces not only new hurdles to overcome, but also the risk of politicization and the potential for bureaucratic inefficiency. This step away from the free market should be reconsidered, with a view to increasing charter schools' access to capital. Instead of centralized ownership, charter schools should be allowed to make major financial decisions, such as taking on debt or independently acquiring facilities, which they are currently unable to do.

Alberta must let capacity meet demand, ensuring all families enjoy meaningful educational options.

Transparent waitlist reporting should also be embraced by all charter authorities as a way to foster greater competition and informed decision-making within Alberta's public education landscape. The lack of standardized waitlist data keeps families, policymakers, and schools from appropriately responding to actual demand. Transparency would empower parents with clear information about available options, drive schools to innovate and expand as needed, and promote accountability without imposing undue regulatory burdens. The Ministry of Education should collaborate with charter authorities to develop flexible, streamlined, non-bureaucratic reporting practices that enhance market responsiveness, support growth, and maintain the operational autonomy that is central to the charter school model.

Alberta's publicly funded education system leads Canada in educational choice, with charter schools playing a pivotal role in delivering innovative, specialized programs that meet various student needs. Their substantial enrolment growth demonstrates strong demand, and their positive academic results show their effectiveness.

However, charter schools have been unable to keep up with the demand for their programs,

resulting in persistent waitlists. To optimize this pluralistic system, Alberta must let capacity meet demand, ensuring all families enjoy meaningful educational options. Supporting charter schools not only enriches opportunities for specific students, but also drives quality and innovation across the entire provincial education system.

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