

## Charter Schools in the United States and Alberta, a Comparison

I have been the Superintendent of the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) in Medicine Hat since January 2006 and am also the founder and past principal of the school. CAPE is one of the first three charter schools in Alberta, and I have been involved with charter schools since their inception in 1995. Alberta charter schools have been viewed by some as an offshoot of the American charter school system. This could not be further from the truth. This paper aims to compare the charter school systems in Alberta and the United States, emphasizing their significant differences and similarities and, hopefully, dispelling some common misconceptions.

Charter schools, as autonomous, publicly funded institutions, offer unique innovative educational programs and operate under contracts with granting entities. Despite this general definition, notable differences exist between charter schools in Alberta and the United States. One primary distinction is that in Alberta, a charter school must engage in active research in collaboration with post secondary institutions with the intent of sharing practices and findings with the education field, ultimately aiming to improve the education system as a whole.

A key difference between Albertan and American charter schools lies in the level of autonomy each school maintains. In the United States, charter schools operate with more freedom, making decisions about their educational programs, staffing, and policies. However, this autonomy also poses challenges, including concerns about

accountability and quality. In contrast, charter schools in Alberta are subject to greater government regulation and must adhere to their charter mandate providing families and students with a better understanding of the quality of education they can expect.

Another significant difference is the level of government control and regulation. In the United States, chartering authorizers vary, leading to diverse entities legally entitled to issue charters. Authorizers can be individuals or teacher-parent groups, corporations, religious entities, charitable organizations, local school districts, for-profit organizations, and nonprofit agencies and more. Some of the best-known charter schools are part of networks. Charters are run as either non-profit or for-profit institutions. Management by private for-profit organizations can lead to issues with accountability. In addition, this link with for-profit entities often causes concerns about public dollars migrating to the private sector. In Alberta, the Minister of Education is the sole granter of a charter, ensuring high levels of accountability and transparency. The Minister can withdraw a charter if a school does not meet the terms of their charter. The charter length for most charter schools is for a term of 15 years. New charters are issued for a 5 year period. Charter schools are public schools and as such are subject to government regulation. All charter schools are required to adhere to the same standards and guidelines as traditional public schools. They must provide a unique program for a target population that is not readily accessible in other public

schools. In addition, they cannot be faith-based schools.

Funding differs as well. In the United States, charter schools often receive less funding than traditional public schools, leading to limitations in providing quality educational programs and services and impacting the ability of charter schools to attract and retain high-quality teachers. In addition, funding varies from state to state. In Alberta, charter schools receive equal funding to traditional public schools, enabling them to offer tailored programs while ensuring access to high-quality education for all students.

Diversity within student populations also varies between the two countries. In the United States, charter schools often cater to specific populations, potentially limiting diversity. In Alberta, charter schools are required to provide inclusive educational programs, resulting in more diverse student populations. This diversity can provide students with a more well-rounded education as they are exposed to a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

Support from the government and community differs too. While charter schools in the United States face opposition from within the community and limited support from government, those in Alberta receive government funding and resources, aiding

their success, and support from the community. This support ensures that charter schools are able to provide high-quality education to their students, to grow and expand to meet the needs of more families and students. This said, in spite of an increase in awareness and in the number of Alberta charter schools within the last few years, the public still views charter schools either as a positive addition to the education system or as a drain on the public system.

The position of teachers' unions in the two countries are somewhat aligned voicing support for charter schools but also questioning their enrolment practices and their level of accountability.

Educational programs offered by charter schools show similarities and variations. In the United States, charter schools design their own programs, while in Alberta, they follow the same curriculum as traditional public schools but offer unique programs designed to meet the needs of specific student populations.

In conclusion, while charter schools in Alberta and the United States share some similarities, key differences set them apart. Despite these disparities, both countries have seen growing interest in charter schools as alternative education options.

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