

Faith-based Alternative School Choice in Alberta: Conservative Revival, Post-Modern Fragmentation, or Principled Pluralism?[†]

*John L. Hiemstra**

Introduction

Faith-based school choice in Alberta, Canada has grown significantly in recent years. Edmonton Public Schools, for example, contain a surprisingly wide range of alternative programs, including faith-based alternatives. Other school districts in the province have also introduced faith-based alternative schooling. On one level, this blossoming of faith-based school choice is not surprising since Alberta's school system has always contained elements of religious schooling. The public school systems in the province were initially based on the faith of the majority in the school district. Most public schools became non-sectarian Protestant schools while most separate school systems turned out to be Roman Catholic. On another level, however, the growth of faith-based school choice is astonishing since it is taking place in a public school system that was expressly structured to eliminate religious choice and to assimilate newcomers into a common Anglo-Protestant mindset. Faith-based school choice beyond these initial bifurcated options was totally discouraged by the governing ideas of the overall system and policies. Moreover, as the Protestant public schools gradually embraced secularism, the systemic assumption that public schools should maintain assimilating structures in order to ensure social cohesion was steadfastly maintained.

The key to the paradoxical development of faith-based choice within an assimilating public school system is partly found in Alberta's history. This study explores the recent increase in faith-based alternative schools in Alberta's public school systems, against the backdrop of the historical roots of faith-based school choice. The paper examines the reasons why school choice was opposed strongly by the original public school founders while ironically they tolerated Catholic school choice to develop alongside their systems. Several 20th century movements that challenged Alberta's assimilationist public school system are analysed for how they influenced the thinking and structure of this overall system. Finally, this article examines the growth of faith-based alternative programs within the public school systems of Alberta. Against this historical backdrop, this article assesses whether the rise of faith-based school choice in the form of alternative programs is the result of a conservative revival, post-modern fragmentation, or a new form of principled pluralism?

Models of Relating Schools to Religious and Philosophical Ideas

The history of religious school choice in Alberta is marked by a series of conflicts that dynamically interact with developments in other provinces. Section 93 of the Constitution Act 1867 gave each provincial government exclusive jurisdiction over schooling, providing them with the latitude to develop their own unique school systems and policies. This freedom was limited only by the requirement that the *existing* rights and privileges of denominational schools in the original federating provinces be respected. Ronald A. Manzer's typology of the relationship of schooling to religious and other philosophical ideas over

[†] This article is based on a paper presented at the conference 'School Choice: Public Education at a Crossroads', on May 9-11, 2002, at the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

* Professor of Political Science at The King's University College (9125 - 50 Street, Edmonton, AB, Canada, T5N 1K1). He can be contacted at john.hiemstra@kingsu.ca.

Canada's history provides a helpful tool for navigating and understanding Alberta's history.¹ Manzer outlines four basic types of school system that capture the variety of ways that colonial and provincial governments resolved the relationship of schooling to religion and other philosophical ideas. During Alberta's school history, at least one group or another actively promoted each of Manzer's four types.

(1) *Concurrent endowment of confessional systems*

The central feature of concurrent endowment of confessional school systems, according to Manzer, is that churches or religious bodies play the central role in directing the various schools' administration and curriculum. While the state may eventually involve itself in schooling through public funding, effective control of schooling is left directly in the hands of ecclesiastical hierarchies or other religious bodies. In Quebec after confederation, for example, the cities of Montreal and Quebec City developed a *dual confessional school system*. The Protestant and Roman Catholic systems co-existed on an equal footing.² The roots of this model go back to the conquest of New France when the British allow the *Canadiens* to retain their church, language, civil law and system of land tenure. These rights logically implied a right to control schools as they were developed. English-speaking Protestants were eventually granted the same educational privileges as the French Roman Catholics.

Isidore Goresky describes the respective roles of the state and churches in Quebec's dual confessional system, as it functioned during the 19th and the major part of the 20th century, as follows:

In Quebec the government interferes in educational matters only to the extent of allocating grants to the two committees. The entire administrative machinery is under the control of the Department of Public Instruction, headed not by a responsible minister, but by a superintendent who is safe-guarded from political influences. This Superintendent is the president of the Council of Education which is divided into Protestant and Catholic Committees. Each Committee is supreme in the control of the money allotted to it towards education and in the administration of schools under its control. The local schools must be kept up by local effort, but again, the control is denominational. There is no fear of dispute between the two bodies as they have no contact.³

Manitoba also adopted a *dual confessional school system* in 1871, but abolished it in 1890. In 1884, the Northwest Territories, the precursor to the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, patterned its school ordinance on this system up to 1901. This system was also used in early Nova Scotia.

The *dual confessional school system* offers a significant level of religious school choice to the major Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, although real choice depended on the actual availability of schools in local communities. Since churches or other religious bodies exercise primary control over their schools in this model, religious communities have genuine governance power in schooling. Religious or other minorities who reject these two school choices, however, are obliged either to assimilate into one of these two systems or to withdraw into isolated, non-publicly funded, private schools.

When Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, it brought with it a *multi-denominational school system*. Manzer groups this model along with the dual confessional school system within the larger category of concurrent endowment of confessional systems. The Newfoundland school system was distinctive in that historically emerging religious groups in the colony were also permitted to run their own schools. The system ultimately included Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal Assemblies, and others. The schools were placed on an equal legal footing with one another, and religious bodies maintained authoritative governance over significant aspects of their school system. Recently, however, the Newfoundland dramatically transformed its school system into a *non-sectarian public school* model, a move greatly reducing religious school choice and abolishing the existing rights of those religious minorities that still wanted faith-based schooling.

The *multi-denominational school system* offers the widest range of religious school choice, although the same range of choice is understandably not available in all small communities. Small population centres may also make it impossible for people who reject a local faith-based school to choose another ideological or philosophical school.

¹ Ronald Manzer develops his typology of 'regimes of church and state in nineteenth century education' in *Public Schools and Political Ideas: Canadian Educational Policy in Historical Perspective*, U of Toronto Press, Toronto 1994, pp. 51-67.

² Outside of Montreal and Quebec City, a system of common schools was developed based on the dominant of the two religions in the area, with the possibility of 'separate' schools for members of the other religion. This is closer to Manzer's second model.

³ Goresky, Isidore (1944). *The Beginning and Growth of the Alberta School System*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Alberta, p. 36.

(2) *Non-sectarian public schooling with minority denominational districts*

Educational reformers in 19th century Upper Canada, renamed Ontario after Confederation in 1867, developed this type of school system. Manzer identifies its three central features as 'secular central governance, non-denominational common schools, and separate schools for denominational minorities'. The characteristic that most clearly distinguishes this from the first type is that schooling is state-directed. While Catholic separate schools are allowed, the majority-controlled state through its Department of Education exercises significant control over all schools. This system still operates in Ontario, although it has evolved so that public school systems no longer offer non-denominational Protestant schooling but a version of secular schooling. The provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, when they were created in 1905, also adopted the *non-sectarian public schooling with minority denominational districts* system.

While this model offers a measure of religious school choice to a limited range of faith communities, state control of the governance and identity of minority schools weakens the degree of choice and control available in particular schools. Furthermore, religious minorities that reject both available school choices are forced either to assimilate into one of two mainstream systems or else to separate into non-funded private schools.

(3) *De jure non-sectarian, de facto reserved public schools*

The *de jure* non-sectarian, *de facto* reserved public schools model was developed in each of the three Maritime Provinces, Manzer argues, after they initially forbade 'sectarian practices such as teaching denominational doctrines and using denominational prayers and books'. Non-sectarian Christianity was openly permitted in the public schools. In practice, however, a compromise was worked out that allowed some schools to be reserved for Roman Catholic minorities where the concentration of students was large enough. In these schools, Catholics were permitted to engage in explicitly sectarian practices, e.g. to employ members of religious orders, to wear their religious garb, and to hold Catholic religious exercises before or after regular school hours.

This type of school system allows a minimal range of religious school choice. While historically the Protestant majority could freely choose non-sectarian Christian public schools, Catholics could exercise school choice only if they were fortunate enough to live in geographically concentrated Roman Catholic communities. Even so, Catholic school choice was severely limited by the weak legal support given to these schools and by the fact that the political majority that elected the provincial government in turn controlled most aspects of the *de facto reserved public schools*. Any religious community that refused to assimilate in these schools, however, was *de facto* required to isolate in a non-funded private school.

(4) *Non-sectarian public schools*

In non-sectarian public schools, Manzer argues, a state department indirectly administers the schools. Churches and clergy may not play an authoritative role in the system, e.g. as teachers, trustees, or inspectors, and they were prevented from any sectarian engagement with the schools, such as instruction in religious dogma or creeds. Non-sectarian public schools, however, were assumed originally to support and encourage a general version of Christian morality. A philosophically liberal view of the strict separation of church and state motivated this model. British Columbia adopted this model in 1872. Manitoba abolished its *dual confessional school system* in 1890 and replaced it with this system.

The *non-sectarian public school system* offered a minimal level of religious school choice to those who accepted its non-sectarian version of Christianity. Those who rejected this religious view, however, were again required to attend these schools or else isolate in private schools without public funding.

Shaping Alberta's School System (1870-1905)

The main contours of Alberta's school system were forged in 19th century conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the former Northwest Territories. The initial practice and legal framework of the Territories set out a *dual confessional school system*. By the creation of Alberta in 1905, however, Territorial leaders had transformed this system into a unique version of the *non-sectarian public schooling with minority denominational districts system*. The clear intention of these school founders was to devise a school structure and policy that limited faith-based school choice and thereby forced religious, ideological, and philosophical minority communities into the majority-controlled school systems.

Initially, a dual confessional system (up to 1884)

In 1670, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was given an economic monopoly over Rupert's Land, all territory draining into the Hudson's Bay. The HBC and its competitor the North West Company were united into one company in 1821, with their territory now including all British lands to the north-west of the colony of Canada. The HBC functioned as *de facto* government of this territory. It made minor efforts to establish schools but the first successful schools were essentially private schools⁴ run by Roman Catholic and Methodist missionaries working among the Indians and HBC employees. The HBC actively promoted missionary work and schooling after 1840. The HBC gradually adopted an educational policy that assumed the government ought to support schooling but that 'education is best administered by religious, not secular, authorities',⁵ a policy compatible with the dual confessional model.

The Hudson's Bay Company surrendered its monopoly to the British Government in 1869 and the newly created Confederation of Canada was given Rupert's Land. In the interim, Louis Riel and his followers established a provisional government over the area of present southern Manitoba. In response, the Canadian Parliament passed the Manitoba Act on May 12, 1870 officially creating the Province of Manitoba. Section 22 of this Act recognised the existing *dual confessional school system* in the territory and guaranteed its continued existence.

A structure for the first Canadian government in the Northwest Territories (NWT), beyond the province of Manitoba, was provided by Parliament in the Northwest Territories Act 1871. The federal Parliament passed another act in 1875, giving the Northwest Territories 'the primary institutions of government', although the newly created Territorial Council would neither be democratically elected nor function with 'responsible government'. The Governor and five members of the Council were to be appointed by Ottawa. Section 11 of the 1875 Act provided for 'a dissentient or separate system of schools in the territories'. This section was unclear, however, as to whether the Council preferred a *dual confessional system* or a *non-sectarian public school system with minority denominational districts*.⁶

In 1884, the Territorial Council passed 'An Ordinance Providing for the Organization of Schools in the Northwest Territories' which called for the establishment of a Board of Education that was independent of government and composed of 6 Roman Catholic members and 6 Protestant members, as well as a secretary. The Board would 'resolve itself into two sections, a Protestant and a Roman Catholic section. Each section was to have full control over education of its own constituents – curriculum, training and qualifications of teachers, appointment of school inspectors.'⁷ The Northwest Territories, thereby, practically established a *dual confessional school model* that allowed parents the choice between Catholic-run and non-sectarian Protestant schools, although with significant local variations within these two types of schools.

Incremental restructuring of the system (1884-1892)

The rapid growth of the Anglo-Protestant segment of the population in the Northwest Territories, along side increasing numbers of other non-English and non-French minorities, produced a situation in which a majoritarian, assimilatory approach to schooling was increasingly attractive to Protestants. Not even a year had passed under the new school legislation, and English Protestant leaders began to challenge the dual confessional school model. The growing Protestant *majority* controlled the Territorial Council and passed a series of amendments to the school laws that aimed to remake the dual confessional system into a *non-sectarian public school model*. F.W.G. Haultain became Premier of the Northwest Territories in 1888 and led the drive for this new model.

In order to properly understand this Protestant initiative, it is important to note what 'non-sectarian Christianity' meant for the school reformers. In short, non-sectarian Christianity was the outcome of a synthesis of Protestant and liberal-Enlightenment beliefs. The notion of 'non-sectarian Christianity' posited the existence of a common rational-moral terrain, largely in agreement with Christian morality, above the petty disputes of sectarian theology and denominationalism. This common, rational, Christian ethos would provide a universally accessible foundation for a divided, multi-denominational Canadian

⁴ The public/private distinction raises many problematic issues. The term 'independent' better captures the intentions of many 'private' schools relative to government control. For the sake of convenience, however, I use the terms private and independent interchangeably.

⁵ Chalmers, John W. (1967), *Schools of the Foothills Province: The Story of Public Education in Alberta*, U of Toronto Press, Toronto, p. 9.

⁶ See Carney, Robert (1992), 'Hostility Unmasked: Catholic School Teaching in Territorial Alberta', in: Kach, Nick and Mazurek, Kas (eds), *Exploring Our Educational Past*, Detselig Enterprises Ltd., Calgary, p. 23.

⁷ Chalmers (1967), pp. 13-14.

society. This notion assumed, thereby, that Protestant politicians could successfully distinguish ‘moral and non-doctrinal religion’ from ‘sectarian religion.’ The former could be taught in everyday schooling, while the latter could be set aside in a voluntary, half-hour slot after school hours.⁸ In keeping with this notion, the Ordinance of 1884 severely limited religious practices in all schools. Section 83 limited opening prayers to those ‘adopted by the board of trustees’. Section 84 said ‘No religious instruction, such as Bible reading or reciting, or reading or reciting of prayers, or asking questions or giving answers from any catechism, shall be permitted in any public or separate Protestant or Catholic school’ during regular school hours. ‘Sectarian’ religion was permitted only if officially approved by school trustees, if restricted to the last half hour of school, and if children from other religious faiths were allowed to leave the room. While this view of non-sectarian religion still offered a form of religious school choice to those who accepted this concept and distinction, it severely limited school choice for anyone who rejected them, for example, minority Protestant communities, most Catholics, and adherents of some non-Christian religions.

Imposing a state-dominated school system (1892)

Encouraged by Manitoba’s abolition of its *dual confessional school model* in 1890, the Anglo-Protestant majority in the Northwest Territories finally imposed a state-dominated school system on the entire population in 1892. Under Premier Haultain’s leadership, the Territorial Council decisively reformed the *dual confessional school system* into a *non-sectarian public school system with minority denominational districts*.

The Ordinance of 1892 replaced the former, confessionally bifurcated Board of Education with a unitary Council of Public Instruction that functioned as one body instead of two distinct Catholic and Protestant sections. The new Council of Public Instruction was designed ‘to achieve a common inspectorate, common examinations, uniform qualifications for teachers, one approved list of texts’.⁹ The Ordinance put the overall administration of schools in the hands of a new ‘Superintendent of Education’. The new school structure placed authority to prescribe the central ingredients of both Protestant and Roman Catholic schools into the hands of one, presumably neutral, Council of Public Instruction and one, again, presumably neutral Superintendent. The task of interpreting the meaning of the school’s vision of life for the fundamental components of schooling – teachers, curriculum, inspection, testing and texts – was given to this unitary Council and single administrator, both directly accountable to the political majority. These changes introduced a school system that featured state control, centralisation, and uniformity and thereby minimised school choice.

In 1893, Premier Haultain was himself appointed as Chair of the Council of Public Instruction (1893-1901) and he hired David J. Goggin as the Superintendent for all schools. Together, they continued to dramatically reshape schooling in the Territories. Their intention, however, was to secure a fully *non-sectarian public school system*. Premier Haultain publicly campaigned against any kind of dual confessional system. He was ‘thoroughly opposed to two systems of schools and promised that he would work and vote against it as hard as possible. His concern was for national unity and he believed that a national school system was one of the most effective agencies in the achievement of his goal.’¹⁰ The *Regina Standard* reported on a speech in Yorkton in which ‘Haultain concluded by asking them [his audience] to assist in abolishing Protestant and Catholic antagonism in politics, education, and social life, and endeavor to unite people in one bond of national ideas.’¹¹ Haultain’s intention to assimilate Catholic, French and other minorities was amply demonstrated by his declaration in 1901 that increased state control of Catholic schooling meant the Territorial Assembly had ‘administered the separateness out of the separate schools’.¹²

The push for a single non-sectarian system fails (1892-1905)

As the Northwest Territories came closer to being granted provincial status by the federal government, the Anglo-Protestant Territorial leadership continued to push for a *non-sectarian public school system*.

⁸ These 1884 provisions for religious teaching were dropped for Catholic schools in the Ordinance of 1885, but restored for all schools with the Ordinance of 1892, Goresky (1944), p. 83.

⁹ Chalmers (1967), pp. 15-16.

¹⁰ McDonald, Neil G. (1979), ‘David J. Goggin: Promoter of National Schools’, in: Jones, David C., Sheehan, Nancy M. and Stamp, Robert M. (eds), *Shaping the Schools of the Canadian West*, Detselig, Calgary, p. 17.

¹¹ McDonald (1979), p. 17.

¹² Child, Alan H. (1978), ‘The Ryerson Tradition in Western Canada’, in: McDonald, Neil and Chaiton, Alf (eds), *Egerton Ryerson and His Times*, Macmillan, Toronto, p. 293.

Catholics should not be allowed to undermine the progress of the West and escape the enlightening influence of Anglo-Protestant nationalism in the separate schools permitted by the *minority denominational districts* provision of the 1901 legislation. In Manitoba, the Laurier-Greenway compromise of 1896 had allowed the province to implement a *non-sectarian public school system*. The 'compromise' element in this agreement was that the teaching of religion would be permitted in class between 3:30 and 4:00, so long as parents were allowed to excuse their children from such classes if they so wished. The compromise further allowed bilingual teaching in French or a language other than English if ten or more students spoke that language. The Territorial leaders took note of these developments and concluded that if Manitoba was no longer required to accommodate minority school choice for French Catholics, why should the new provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The 'autonomy bills' introduced in Parliament by Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier to create Alberta and Saskatchewan initially incorporated the school clause from the old Northwest Territories Act of 1875. This vague clause had allowed the Territorial Council to initially develop a *dual confessional school system* with Catholic and Protestant sections and control. This clause, however, had also allowed later Territorial Councils to transform the system into a *non-sectarian public school system with minority denominational districts*. When a heated public controversy broke out over this clause in the federal bills, Laurier eventually introduced a compromise clause that instead referred to the Northwest Territories' 1901 *non-sectarian public schools with minority denominational districts system*.

Alberta's assimilate/isolate school system

The Anglo-Protestant push for a *non-sectarian common school system* that would assimilate all newcomers failed, but Roman Catholic hopes of retaining the wide powers of school choice enabled by a *dual confessional school model* were also dashed. From the point of view of the Catholic Church, the school provisions of the Alberta Act 1905 were partly positive because they did not abolish Catholic schools in favour of a uniform, non-sectarian public school system as occurred in Manitoba in 1890 and British Columbia in 1872. A measure of Catholic school choice had been preserved alongside majoritarian Protestant school choice. The school system affirmed some elements of Catholic choice in the following ways:

There were two Catholic representatives on the Educational Council; taxes from Catholic rate-payers were used to support Catholic separate schools; Catholic trustees of a separate school district could choose their own teachers provided that the teachers had their diplomas and the last half-hour of the school day could be used for religious instruction. In addition, separate school districts could be formed within the boundaries of existing public school districts and in French-Catholic schools the primary course could be taught in French.¹³

The loss of school choice from the earlier *dual confessional school system*, however, was quite considerable. The 1884 dual confessional school system had allowed both Catholic and Protestant communities to directly control equal sections of the Board of Education and thereby administer their own curriculum, inspection, textbooks and teacher certification. The 1905 Alberta Act was far more restrictive. Catholic parents lost the right to choose Church-defined schooling for their children. They were also prevented from running Catholic 'normal schools' to train teachers in their educational perspectives. Although Catholics considered teacher training essential, the Province continued to require all teachers to attend state-run training programs. Restrictions on religious practices in schools also reduced the opportunities for Catholic perspectives to permeate the entire curriculum. Catholics also lost the authority to design a curriculum that balanced academic and religious training in ways consistent with their faith. Catholic schools were required to use textbooks and curriculum that were designed or chosen by the Protestant-controlled Education Department officials. Catholic schools were inspected by officials hired by this Department, officials who may or may not have understood or sympathised with a Catholic vision of life and schooling.

Ultimately, Alberta's *minority denominational districts* were so strongly controlled by the province that in many respects they functioned like mainstream *non-sectarian common schools*. Catholic school choice was constrained by the Anglo-Protestant majority that harboured the intention of gradually assimilating Catholic students into the majority's social and political vision.

¹³ Ramrattan, Annette (1982), *The Theory of Catholic Schooling in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, 1884-1960*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Alberta, p. 105.

The Catholic minority was not alone in feeling their school choice had been severely constrained. Older aboriginal and smaller Protestant communities, as well as newer faith groups and ethnic and linguistic communities, faced far more constrained school choice than the Catholics. Many of these communities arrived in Alberta with their own faith and expectations, e.g. Ukrainians of the Greek Catholic rite, Russian Jews, Hungarians, German Lutherans, American Mormons, Lebanese Muslims, Calvinists from Holland, and so on. Some succumbed to state pressure and entered the common school system only to face pressures to *assimilate* into the majority culture.¹⁴ The only other option available to these communities was to resist assimilation and *isolate* in private schools that lacked a proper legal support and public funding.

Early Challenges to Alberta's Assimilation-Isolation School System (1905-1975)

The school system that was affirmed in the 1905 Alberta Act has retained its basic structural character to the present day. The government continued to require newcomers to choose between the assimilating provincial school system and isolating in private schools. In spite of this pressure, however, some minorities challenged this system and sought to implement reforms. Over the next century, three significant movements joined the Roman Catholics in attaining a measure of public space for educational pluralism in the provincial school system: the Hutterite colonies, independent/private school communities, and alternative school movements. This section briefly examines the two precursor movements to alternative schools.

The Hutterite challenge

The Hutterite communities directly challenged the school system's assimilation/isolation structure and ultimately forced the government to accommodate their needs. Hutterites are followers of the European Anabaptist reformer, Jakob Hutter, who started a form of communal Christian living in 1528. They are pacifist and non-violent, reject most contemporary fashions, deny private property, live on communal farms where all things are held in common, and believe in the full separation of church and state. The Hutterites moved to Canada in 1918 at the invitation of the Canadian government, after the United States had harassed them for refusing to participate in military service. Faced with the requirement to attend public schools, Hutterites sought freedom to exercise faith-based school choice.

Hutterites reached a compromise with the state by agreeing to meet the minimum standards of the School Act if this could be achieved in ways consistent with their way of life. In some locations, the Hutterites were forced into private schools, but in many locations a solution was achieved by creating special public schools on the colonies. The development of these schools fit with the Hutterite worldview but clashed with the assimilation purposes of the public system on three scores. First, since Hutterite schools are located on colonies and non-Hutterite students rarely attend these schools; they failed to mix Hutterite with non-Hutterite children in common schools. Second, Hutterites continued to teach their minority language, religion and history in classes held directly after public school classes. Third, although these schools were public and received public funding they were designed to achieve what the majority defined as private ends.

The failure of public schools to assimilate the Hutterite children into the mainstream culture, language and religion challenged the central purposes of the public school system. In essence, Michael Wagner concludes, these schools constituted a form of alternative school that was reserved 'exclusively for the Hutterites'.¹⁵ In terms of the four models of relating religion and schooling in Canada, this constituted a form of *de jure non-sectarian, de facto reserved public schools*, when seen against the backdrop of the mainstream public system. While the public school system forbade sectarian practices, in practice it allowed a sectarian-type of minority to segregate within its own public school. Thus, Hutterites won a measure of school choice, but only as an exception to the system since they were a unique, geographically concentrated minority.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Palmer, Howard and Palmer, Tamara (1990), *Alberta: A New History*, Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton.

¹⁵ Wagner, Michael Garry (1998), *The Progressive Conservative Government and Educational Policy in Alberta: Leadership and Continuity*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, pp. 192-193.

¹⁶ The practice of allowing alternative-type schools for persistent, geographically concentrated religious minorities was not, in fact, exclusive to the Hutterites. Dutch Calvinist immigrants in Neerlandia, also maintained a significant level of control over their public school since 1917. To this day, 'Neerlandia School provides Christian education under the auspices of the public system'. Since 1996, the Neerlandia School officially operates as an alternative school under the School Act. Navis, Elsie and Siebring-Wierenga, Joy (eds) (1985), *A Furrow Laid Bare: Neerlandia District History*, Neerlandia Historical Society, Neerlandia, pp. 709-766.

The challenge of public funding for private schools

In the post-World War II era, the government initiated three changes for private schools that challenged the assimilation/isolation goals of the public system. The government legally recognised private schools in 1946, extended initial public funding to them in 1967, and acknowledged freedom of parents to educate their children in 1978. While the first and last of these changes significantly adjusted the margins of the assimilation/isolation school system, granting public funding to private schools directly challenged the ideological underpinnings of this model.

At the outset of this debate, the government still adhered strongly to the ideas behind the dominant school model. In response to a Legislative motion suggesting the Government extend separate school status to private schools in 1962, Education Minister Anders Aalborg offered the traditional defence of the existing school model.¹⁷ He argued that minorities did not need to fear a majoritarian controlled public school because nothing offensive would be taught. He also reaffirmed the isolation side of the assimilation-isolation model by concluding 'the right is still there for parents to send their children to private schools', but 'it is the general rule in Canada that private schools are not supported by public funds'.

The wave of Dutch Calvinist immigrants arriving in Alberta during the 1940s and 1950s refused to accept the province's assimilation/isolation school system. They felt this system forced them to open private schools for their children.¹⁸ They argued that all properly functioning schools – whether based on religious, ethnic, ideological or linguistic bases – served the public purpose and therefore ought to receive equitable public funding.¹⁹ This position was based on their distinctive understanding of the role of the state in relationship to all schools, whether public, separate, or 'free schools'.

After years of lobbying, the Association of Private Schools and Colleges of Alberta (A.P.S.C.A.) gained the ear of government and secured improved private school regulations and a degree of public funding for independent schools in 1967.²⁰ By extending public funding to private schools, however, the government fundamentally contradicted key elements of the assimilation/isolation thinking behind its school system. The government now funded private schools even though it did not control them nor did these schools intend to assimilate minorities into the majority's vision.

Religious Alternative Schools within Public Systems (1975-present)

The development of alternative programs within public school systems in the mid-1970s, and especially faith-based alternative schools, directly challenged the foundational assumption of the provincial school system, namely, that the state uses mandatory public schooling to develop a common vision of life that serves to unify society.

Early alternative schools

In 1974, Calgary Public Schools introduced a policy allowing programs of choice and in 1976 it adopted a general policy for alternative schools.²¹ An Alternative High School and a Saturday School were accepted in 1975. In 1976, two existing private Jewish schools, the Calgary Hebrew School and the I.L. Peretz School, were accepted as alternative schools within the Calgary Public School Board. Both were understood to be Hebrew 'culture and language' schools, not religious schools.

In 1978, the Calgary Public School Board accepted proposals to establish an alternative Logos Christian School and an alternative Plains Indian Cultural Survival School (PICCS). Although Alberta had Catho-

¹⁷ 'Private Schools Refused Subsidies', *The Calgary Herald*, Wed. March 21, 1962. See the discussion of Mr. Ansley's 1962 motion that government extend separate school privileges to private schools, in 'No Tax Relief Given to Private Schools', *The Calgary Herald*, Friday, April 16, 1962.

¹⁸ Hop, Dennis Jay (1982), *The Development of Private Schools in Alberta*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Calgary, pp. 71-72. In the 1940s, Dutch Calvinists started two independent schools in Lacombe (1945) and Edmonton (1949) and by 1968 they operated five schools.

¹⁹ See the Edmonton Society for Christian Education, Brief 'To the Royal Commission on Education in Alberta', Sept. 1958.

²⁰ On the struggle to achieve publicly funding for independent/private schools in Alberta, see Hiemstra, John L. (Fall 2005), 'Calvinist Pluriformity Challenges Liberal Assimilation: A novel case for publicly funding Alberta's private schools, 1953-1967', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 39, 3, pp. 146-173, and Digout, Stanislaus Lawrence (Fall 1969), *Public Aid for Private Schools in Alberta: The Making of a Decision*, Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alberta. A.P.S.C.A. changed its name to the Association for Independent Schools and Colleges of Alberta (AISCA) in the mid-1960s. On the current status of independent schools in Alberta, see Plantinga, Duane, 'About AISCA', www.aisca.ab.ca, accessed Feb. 15, 2006.

²¹ Hop (1982), p. 172.

lic Separate Schools and some public school boards maintained minor Protestant elements, the Logos Christian School was the first *alternative* Christian public school established in the province. Members of the Lutheran, Anglican and United Churches who responded to the secularisation of the Calgary Public School System formed the Logos Christian Education Society in 1977. The Logos School embodied a specifically Protestant focus. It eventually expanded to two school campuses but only with major public conflict, suspicion, and debate.²² Debate did not lessen with time, however, and in the face of public criticism from organisations such as Save Public Education (SPE), a newly elected Board of Trustees voted to terminate its contracts with the two Jewish and two Logos Christian schools in 1983.²³

The Edmonton Public School's early experience with faith-based alternative schools was less heated and conflictual than Calgary's, but it also ended up prohibiting religious alternative schools. In 1975, Edmonton Public Schools opened its first alternative school, the Caraway program. In October 1975, the Talmud Torah school entered the Edmonton system as a 'language school'. According to Lois Sweet, however, the Talmud Torah School was 'a Hebrew language school with a religious component'.²⁴ In the following years, Edmonton Public added a number of non-religious alternative schools, including a fine arts program (1977), the Alpha School (1977), a school for Cree Indian Children (1977), and a Waldorf school (1979).²⁵

Public debate over the role of religion in public schools erupted in 1981 when the Edmonton Board began considering applications from two Christian alternative programs. This debate occurred during the widely publicised conflict over religious alternative schools in Calgary. In April 1982, the Edmonton Public School Board rejected the applications of the two religious alternative schools. In a 7-2 decision, it adopted a new policy that explicitly excluded religiously based alternative schools. It offered the reason that 'our system of universal public education can only be weakened by fragmentation on the basis of religious belief'.²⁶

From the point of view of minority religious communities, the fate of the religious alternative schools in Calgary and Edmonton confirmed just how fragile faith-based school choice was under a majority-controlled public school board and a majority-controlled provincial education department.²⁷ In 1988, the Alberta Government partially addressed this weakness by revising Section 16 (1a) of the School Act to specifically enable local boards to establish religious alternative schools and programs where numbers warrant. The Government placed further pressure on public school boards to create alternative schools when, in 1994, it passed legislation allowing a limited number of charter schools to be established. Although this provision expressly excludes religious schools, it pressured public boards to consider starting a variety of new types of alternative programs. Section 24.3(4) of the School Act defines charter schools as 'autonomous public schools' which 'provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education to improve student learning'.²⁸ In 1997, the government-commissioned 'Private Schools Funding Taskforce' recommended that public funding be marginally increased for independent schools, placing increased pressure on public schools to retain students.²⁹ Finally, the rapid growth of home schooling also encouraged public schools to develop responsive new alternative programs in order to retain students.³⁰

The second wave of alternative schools

In 1995, Emery Dossdall was hired as Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools. In response to the changed policy context, Dossdall encouraged the Edmonton Public School Board to start or adopt a wide variety of alternative schools, including faith-based alternatives. In addition to the existing alternative academic, fine arts or athletics programs, Dossdall also wanted to start school programs that cater to di-

²² See Wagner, Michael Garry (1995), *Private Versus Public Education: The Alberta Debate*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Calgary, pp. 17-21.

²³ The Plains Indian Cultural Survival School survived unscathed because, as SPE argued, it 'considered aboriginals to deserve special treatment as a result of past injuries', Wagner (1998), p. 198. Ironically, the Calgary Catholic School system rescued the two Jewish schools, although constitutional provisions relating to the rights of Protestant and Catholic parents prevented it from stepping in to also save the two Logos schools.

²⁴ Sweet, Lois (1997), *God in the Classroom: The Controversial issue of Religion in Canada's Schools*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, p. 241. She further describes Talmud Torah alternative school at pp. 68-71.

²⁵ See Hop (1982), p. 169.

²⁶ The rationale for Edmonton Public School Board's policy excluding religious alternative schools is reported in 'Decisions by Edmonton trustees put lid on matter', *Calgary Herald*, May 15, 1982, E2, cited in Hop (1982), p. 170.

²⁷ The Edmonton Public School Board, for example, still publicly made very strong assimilation arguments in 1997. See 'Edmonton Public Schools' Position on Funding of Private Schools', a submission to the Private Schools Funding Taskforce, Nov. 1997.

²⁸ Cited in Wagner (1998), p. 229.

²⁹ *Funding Private Schools in Alberta: Part 2: Addressing the Questions: Private Schools Funding Taskforce*, 1997, 3.

³⁰ See Wagner (1995), pp. 8-9, 12, 15, 32-34, 45; Taylor (1999), pp. 21, 25; Wagner (1998), pp. 218-222; Kachur (1999), p. 109.

verse ethnic, religious and linguistic communities. He emphasised that ethnicity, language and religion can be important elements in providing an appropriate education to different kinds of students:

For me, public education is about providing every child with an opportunity to reach his or her potential. It's not about providing the same menu for every child. Equity in public education should be about equity of outcomes, not of inputs or processes.³¹

In the May 2001 *School Administrator*, Dosdall states that he aimed to use alternative schools to include as many students as possible in the public system. He claimed that Edmonton Public was now *competing* directly with independent and charter schools.

A particularly important move in the 'competition' with independent and charter schools occurred when Edmonton Public opened 8 Logos Christian schools and adopted 2 long-established independent Christian schools into the public system. The system also opened many other new alternatives to compete with other independent and charter schools.³² Public schooling in Edmonton was rapidly opening up to choice, but notably a form of choice understood within the conceptual framework of the market.³³

Assessment

Alberta's school history suggests the development of faith-based alternative school choice was not driven primarily by a *conservative revival*. A conservative revival would require evidence that social movements sought to consolidate or re-establish older ideals and systems. While some Christian schools played an important role in the rise of faith-based alternative school choice, this clearly did not constitute a conservative revival. First, supporters of faith-based alternative school choice were not intent on hegemonically re-imposing the Christian narrative on all. A few supporters of faith-based alternative schools wanted a return to system of public schools that imposed Christian faith, but the vast majority of faith-based alternative school supporters rejected using coercive schooling to shape Christian or any other type of citizens. Second, those seeking a return to Christian schools often did not want a revival of the superficial non-sectarian Christianity that dominated early Protestant public schools. Third, supporters of faith-based alternative schools actively supported choice for other non-Christian faith groups and openly accepted contemporary pluralistic society. Fourth, the history of alternative schools in both Calgary and Edmonton shows that while faith-based alternatives tended to attract fiery headlines, the alternative school movement was generally spearheaded by non-religious alternatives. Even today, the vast majority of alternative programs in public schools are not religious.

The deep influence of post-modernism on contemporary society suggests the rise of faith-based alternative school choice as a reflection of the *post-modern fragmentation* of society. The evidence supports this hypothesis more strongly than the idea of a conservative revival. First, many public school leaders who actively supported alternative programs openly opposed using public schools to impose a totalitarian metanarrative – whether based on a religious or secular ideology – on the entire school population. Second, the majority of Albertans affirmed pluralism and accepted a fragmented society, even if they did so based on a commitment to relativism. Thirdly, in line with the post-modern aversion to totalizing institutions, alternative school supporters did not demand a uniform public school system nor the right to coerce others into accepting their values. Typically, alternative school supporters only asked for the public space to practice their distinctive form of schooling alongside and in co-operation with other schools. While growing individualism in society reflects post-modern fragmentation, a point contradicting the post-modern argument is that alternative school supporters often formed coherent communities within the larger society and voluntarily practiced their beliefs within these communities.

While it is evident that post-modernism influenced faith-based alternatives, was the rise of school choice in public systems also influenced by a commitment to *principled public pluralism in schooling*? In order to be a principled approach to pluralism, contemporary alternative school practices must enable and protect the development of faith-based schools that fully accommodates the plurality of groups in the public that want alternative programs; limited by the needs of a free and democratic society.

³¹ *School Administrator*, 2001.

³² See Dosdall, Emery (May 2001), 'Edmonton's Enterprise', *The School Administrator*, pp. 6-9. This magazine is also available online at <www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2001_5/2001_dosdall.htm>.

³³ Some go further and argue that the overarching ideology of the public school system is now the market. See, for example, Kachur, Jerrold L. (1999), 'Privatizing Public Choice: The Rise of Charter Schooling in Alberta', in: Harrison, Trevor W. and Kachur, Jerrold L. (eds), *Contested Classrooms: Education, Globalisation and Democracy in Alberta*, University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, pp. 107-122.

In fact, alternative programs constitute a *de facto reservation of public schools* and lack *de jure* recognition of alternative school rights. This is not unusual, since the Alberta government has pragmatically accommodated faith-based schooling on a number of fronts. Its public education system currently contains not one but four equal types of fully-funded school authorities. They are listed on the Alberta Learning website as: Public, Separate, Charter, and Francophone school authorities.³⁴ This challenges the historic belief that a single public system is essential for producing tolerant citizens and ensuring national unity. In addition to these four types of public authorities, Alberta Learning officially recognises three other categories of schooling: partially-funded private (or independent) schools, partially-funded home schooling, and federally-funded aboriginal schools run by First Nations on reserves. Furthermore, there are explicit faith-based³⁵ programs or schools operating within all of these authorities except the charter schools in which religion is explicitly forbidden by law. All told, 159,038 Alberta students, or 26.9% of the total student population in 2001-2002, were enrolled in programs that are, to some degree, faith-based. The reason for this pragmatic accommodation of religion is difficult pinpoint, although it is clearly not the result of Alberta being Canada's 'Bible belt', since Albertans are second most likely in the country to say on surveys that they have 'no religion' and they attend religious services at among the lowest rates in Canada.³⁶

In spite of the pragmatic basis of current faith-based alternative school choice, several principled commitments are evident. First, school choice is now widely accepted and promoted by the government. In guiding concepts supplied to respondents to the Private Schools Funding Taskforce in 1997, for example, the Alberta Government states: 'Parents are entitled to choice within the public system, including alternate programs and charter schools, the choice of a private school, or the choice of home education.'³⁷ Second, in some public school systems, not all faith groups are required to privatise their faith, although some faith groups are overlooked and not all public school jurisdictions accept this principle. Third, a principled acceptance of religion in some public school systems is evident in their openness to religions other than the majority religion. Edmonton Public Schools, for example, offers faith-based alternative programs that appeal to Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities.

The consequence of using a *de facto reservation of public schools* approach to establish school choice, however, exhibits a number of structural weaknesses. First, the current alternative school arrangements fail to support choice in a principled way, e.g. the structure enables minorities to choose alternative programs but does not allow them to significantly control their operation once chosen. Second, while minorities typically choose the faith-based alternative schools, these programs exist only at the good will of the majority. Minority schooling is subject to majority control at both the public school board and Alberta Learning levels. Legal structures are required to protect alternative school identities from interference by the majority. This principle was affirmed in 1990 for minority French-language parents in the Supreme Court of Canada decision, *Mahe v. Alberta*.³⁸ The Court sets out a number of principles and correlating practices that must be met in order to ensure that minority French-language parents genuinely control their children's schooling. These principles and practices constitute an excellent basis for advancing a principled framework for religious forms of alternative school choice. In 1994, Ontario's Royal Commission on Education also recommended a number of provisions for securing minority schools, including pluralising the provincial educational bureaucracy.³⁹

Conclusion

Alberta's school system has always promoted one 'faith' or another, whether the religion of Christ, humanity, secularism, or progress. Each 'faith' has functioned within the same school structure, however, a structure explicitly designed to generate and dispense values among the population and in so doing assimilate newcomers into the majority's views. As a consequence, religious minorities have historically

³⁴ See <http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/ei/statistics/qf_1.asp>, accessed summer 2004.

³⁵ While all schools have a religious foundation of some type, we focus on schools that explicitly acknowledge their religious identity or programs.

³⁶ Bibby, Reginald W. (2002), *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, Stoddart, Toronto, p. 47. 'Religions in Canada, 2001 Census (Analysis series)', Statistics Canada, Ottawa, May 13, 2003, 2001 Census of Canada. Catalogue no. 96F0030XIE200101. Clark, Warren (Spring 2003), 'Pockets of belief: Religious attendance patterns in Canada', *Canadian Social Trends*, Data source: General Social Survey, 1999-2001.

³⁷ One of the eight guiding concepts supplied to respondents to the Private Schools Funding Taskforce, 1997, by the Government of Alberta, in *Funding Private Schools in Alberta: Part 2: Addressing the Questions: Private Schools Funding Taskforce*, 1997, 3.

³⁸ *Mahe v. Alberta*, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 342; or *Mahé et. al. v. Her Majesty the Queen in Right of the Province of Alberta*, 15 March 1990.

³⁹ Ontario's Royal Commission on Education (1994), appointed by Premier Bob Rae's New Democratic Government, also endorsed the same types of principles and practices. See Royal Commission on Education, Béginand, Monique and Caplan, Gerald L., Co-chair (1994), *For the Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning*, Vol. IV, Queen's Printer for Ontario, Toronto. On pluralising the bureaucracy, also see the chapter on 'Organising Education: Power and Decision-making' and Recommendation 158.

only had the choice either to assimilate in majoritarian public schools or isolate in private schools without public funding. When Alberta's school system allowed Roman Catholic schools to co-exist with public schools, it did so only under the controlling oversight of the majority-dominated Department of Education. The same has been true for Hutterite schools. Private schools have had to suffer funding inequities as the consequence of choosing non-state forms of governance. In this light, the creation of faith-based alternative school choice in public systems constituted a major crack in the foundations of Alberta's assimilating public school model. The development of faith-based alternatives cannot be attributed to a conservative revival. Nor does a principled commitment to public pluralism in schooling seem to have influenced the rise of faith-based alternative school choice. The rise of a post-modern ethos, however, does seem to have influenced the rise of alternatives. In order to further advance faith-based school choice, Alberta will need to break with the older assimilation ideals and structures of public schooling and develop a more-principled policy framework for alternative schooling that does justice to all and discriminates against none. These changes, however, will have to be undertaken with caution so that other important principles, such as, equity for the poor and universal accessibility to quality education, are properly respected.