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Report says Albertans should be wary of cyber charter schools

Model sees private corporations using public dollars to deliver on-line education

EDMONTON – A new report by the Parkland Institute looks into the growth of for-profit cyber charter schools in the United States, and identifies it as a disturbing North American trend that Albertans should be wary of.

Cyber charter schools in the US deliver K-12 curriculum to students through electronic media. They involve little to no face-to-face instruction, rely heavily on on-line tutors rather than licensed teachers, and typically involve the student accessing self-directed off-the-shelf lessons alone in front of a computer screen.

The report, part of the Institute's *Delivery Matters* series, points out that cyber charter schools in the US have a significant risk of poorer education outcomes and very high rates of withdrawal. It also raises concerns about the schools' inability to incorporate basic citizenship skills into their practice, things like how to get along with others, how to reason and deliberate, and how to accept differences and diversity.

“Our research shows that the entire model seems to encourage profiteering and mismanagement by large corporations at public expense and at significant risk to students,” says the report's co-author Diana Gibson.

The sector is currently dominated by corporations K12 Inc and Pearson's Connections Academy in the US, but corporate giants like Apple, Dell, Google, Intel, and Microsoft are also vying to corner the virtual education market, expected to grow by 43% between 2010 and 2015.

“There is ample reason for Albertans to be concerned about this,” says Gibson. “Alberta was the first province to introduce charter schools, and continues to face pressure from corporate lobbyists and right-wing think tanks to privatize education and cut costs. The government frequently uses words like ‘choice’ and ‘efficiency’ to justify their current funding of charter and private schools—this is the same language used by lobbyists in the US to promote cyber charter schools.”

The report concludes that this is not a model that Alberta should seek to replicate. The authors point to extensive research done by the Parkland Institute to demonstrate that the private delivery of public services serves neither the province's economic bottom line nor the public interest. Adopting a cyber charter schools model would only serve to divert further funds from our public education system and send it directly to the profits of large corporations.

The Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The report is available for download on the Parkland website at parklandinstitute.ca

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