



Toward a More Diverse and Resilient Education Sector:

Balancing Charter Reforms with Independent School Deregulation

Alberta Education
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Executive Summary

As the Alberta government looks to reform K–12 education in the province, this brief makes the case for expanding the government’s conception of what public education is, and for emphasizing non-government-run school sector expansion in forthcoming legislation, regulation, and possible funding changes, as key to strengthening Alberta’s public-education system.

Independent schools, and in particular those with a religious affiliation, have a record of producing graduates who are above the Alberta average in terms of their civic-mindedness, commitment to personal growth, and contribution to the public good. Such a positive contribution bears serious policy consideration, and where an emphasis on expanding charter schools exists, an equal or greater emphasis should be placed on expanding the volume of and enrolment at independent schools, including religious independent schools. The high-level policy goal for education in Alberta should be openness to a plurality of educational institutions that can produce the graduates it seeks.

In OECD countries where independent schools receive greater proportions of taxpayer funding, the socioeconomic disparities between government and non-government schools disappears. In other words, when there is a greater quantity and variety of highly-taxpayer-funded non-government-managed K–12 education options, the differences between “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” populations narrows. Europe has many examples of this, like the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, and the Slovak Republic.

Accordingly, in school-reform discussions, any changes to the charter legislation should be balanced with equally beneficial reforms for the independent-school sector.

A number of incremental, non-disruptive policy options are recommended, but the common theme is opening the door to innovation in Alberta education through structural pluralism and diversity. The fact that only seven new independent schools were approved between 2016 and the summer of 2019, despite at least twenty-four application submissions, suggests that government policy is inhibiting the independent-school sector. (For comparison, 261 new independent schools have opened in Ontario since 2016.)

Here is a quick highlight of the key recommendations:

1. Remove barriers to enrolment by:
 - a. Offering a mobility benefit to low-income families
 - b. Targeting additional financial resources to expanding independent-school options for special-needs students
2. Remove barriers to school start-ups and expansions by:
 - a. Streamlining the process for establishing a new independent school
 - b. Streamlining the process for expanding an existing independent school
 - c. Creating financial certainty for budgeting
3. Move away from the language of (1) parental rights and (2) choice and markets, and instead use focus-group-tested new language that invokes new imagination.

Introduction

This brief makes the case for expanding the government’s conception of public education, and emphasizing private (hereafter, independent) school-sector expansion in forthcoming reforms. Where an emphasis on expanding secular charter schools exists, an equal or greater emphasis should be placed on expanding the volume of and enrolment at religious independent schools in Alberta.

Context

Alberta is a province that is ripe to push for an incremental shift toward more independent schooling. The province has an innovative and diverse history in the provision of education; it was an early adopter of providing government funding to independent schools and to this day is the only province with charter schools. Despite some of the most generous funding of independent schools in Canada, however, Alberta independent schools’ share of provincial K–12 enrolment, at approximately 4 percent, is about half the average of other funded provinces (7.7%), and less than one-third that of neighbouring province British Columbia (13.2%). This means that the vast majority of Alberta children are not receiving the additional benefits that come with attaining an education in an independent school setting. These meagre results are at least partially due to structural barriers to independent schooling in Alberta. This brief makes the case for removing those barriers and enabling Alberta’s educational sector to benefit from pluralism in the same way that leading jurisdictions around the world have benefited.

Adding Value

Cardus is a social policy think tank, committed to a flourishing society for the common good. Our education research, in particular, is used by experts in the non-government school sector throughout North America. Two of our datasets—the Cardus Education Survey (CES) and Who Chooses Independent Schools and Why (hereafter, Who Chooses)—are the primary sources informing this brief.

Prior to 2011, there was very little quantitative measurement to prove or disprove any claims made about religious-independent-school-graduate outcomes in Canada and the United States, so we launched the CES. Now, with nearly a decade’s worth of data (the largest dataset of its kind), we are proud that our education measurements have become the benchmark study of non-government-religious-school outcomes in North America. Similarly, the Who Chooses data is the first of its kind, comparing representative findings in the three provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario.

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Part 1: Dispelling Myths About Independent Education with Evidence

Characteristics of High-School Graduates from North America’s Benchmark Study

The following are some of the characteristics that differentiate graduates of independent schools from public schools, based on the findings of the CES (Pennings et al. 2012; 2014; Green et al. 2016; 2018a; 2018b):

- **Stronger families:** Graduates of independent schools are less likely to be divorced or separated. This is particularly important for the future of education in Alberta, as children from intact homes perform significantly better in school, regardless of socioeconomic background (Jeynes 2015).
- **More engaged:** Independent-school graduates participate in more neighbourhood and community groups as well as in arts and culture initiatives.
- **More generous:** They volunteer and give more of their financial resources than their public-school peers, for a variety of causes.
- **More focused on neighbour:** Evangelical Protestant school graduates, in particular, contribute to the common good in a culture in which they express feeling unwelcome. They are committed to engaging with the culture and contributing to it.
- **Express their identity through their work:** Graduates of independent non-religious schools are more likely to hold higher-status employment positions, and they have a wide variety of fulfillment expectations of their jobs such as for being helpful, creative, worthwhile, and relational. Graduates of evangelical Protestant schools and of religious homeschooling have a strong sense of vocational calling and seek jobs that fulfill that calling and pay well.
- **Graduates are highly satisfied with the independent schools they attended.** Even with fifteen or so years of hindsight, independent-school graduates evaluate their school cultures positively, claiming them to be close-knit and expressing a high regard for teachers, students, and administrators. They reflect that they offered good preparation for post-secondary education as well as for later life.

Why Parents Choose Religious Independent Schools

Based on representative surveys of independent-school parents in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, we derive the following conclusions (Hunt and Van Pelt 2019; Van Pelt, Hunt, and Wolfert

2019; Hunt, Van Pelt, and Leistra 2020):

- The variety of reasons parents choose their independent school are seemingly endless and reflect the diversity of the parents choosing them.
- Yet the top two reasons are identical in the three provinces for which we have representative data. Parents choose their independent school because they believe:
 1. This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students.
 2. This is a safe school.
- In Alberta specifically, the following wrap up the top five reasons for choosing an independent school:
 3. This school supports our family's values.
 4. We trust the curriculum at this school.
 5. This school teaches right from wrong.
- Perhaps most importantly, 83.5 percent of Alberta-independent-school parents are very likely to recommend their school.

Learning from Europe: Educational Pluralism Is the Norm

It is valuable to reflect on Alberta education in a global context. Diverse learning and educational pluralism are the democratic norm around the world, and for good reason. Using PISA data, the OECD (2017b) finds the following:

- In the advanced countries where non-government-managed schools receive greater proportions of taxpayer funding, the socioeconomic disparities between government and non-government schools disappears. Contrary to public belief, a robust, pluralist educational system in which non-government-run schools are present is a driver of economic equality.
- In other words, when there is a greater quantity and variety of fully-taxpayer-funded, non-government-managed K–12 education options, the differences between “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” populations narrows.
- Europe has many examples of this, including countries like the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, and the Slovak Republic, which are considered highly progressive. Over 90 percent of their “private” school funding comes from taxpayers, and these schools are not only highly heterogeneous—in terms of pedagogy, curriculum, and family background—but the difference in socioeconomic profiles between them and government-run schools is practically nonexistent.
- The difference in socioeconomic profiles is increasingly pronounced in OECD nations with less taxpayer funding for non-government schools, like Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Slovenia.
- True to this relationship, in Mexico, where non-government schools receive less than 1 percent taxpayer funding, socioeconomic disparities between school sectors is extreme.

The Netherlands is probably the best example for summarizing the aforementioned findings. There, schooling is primarily a function of civil society rather than of the state, even though non-government

schools are nearly fully funded (Casagrande, Pennings, and Sikkink 2019). Educational pluralism is the unchallenged norm, and Dutch students are not only high performers, they are also some of the world's happiest (OECD 2017a; World Health Organization 2017; 2012; UNICEF 2013).

In summary, despite myths that non-government schooling threatens civic formation, independent schools—and religious independent schools, in particular—form thoughtful graduates who are civically minded, committed to personal growth, and contributors to the public good. An educational system in which independent schools and robust parental choice are structurally embedded in government policy is a key tool for the reduction of inequality.

Part 2: Policies for a Robust Pluralistic Educational Ecosystem

Given the evidence, how might the Alberta government make more space for graduates of this sort to emerge, and for increased diversity in the Alberta education system? This section provides a suite of recommended incremental, non-disruptive policy options, as well as strategic rhetoric for forward-facing communications.

Removing Barriers to Enrolment

Despite “open enrolment,” school choices for many Alberta families—in particular, those on the lower end of the income spectrum—are very practically limited to their postal code. The following can be done to remedy this and remove barriers to independent-school enrolment:

- **Offer a mobility benefit to low-income families** to help alleviate transportation costs and ensure such costs do not stand in the way of families' ability to choose an independent school. These types of benefits would be particularly important for **rural families** that might have to travel long distances for their children to attend an independent school.
- **Target additional financial resources to expanding independent-school options for special-needs students.** In 2018–2019, we identified seventeen schools as offering grades 1–12 education to special-needs children. All but one of these schools, however, were located in Edmonton or Calgary. Many families with special-needs children throughout the province thus do not necessarily have access to high-quality education that also ensures their needs are addressed in the best possible manner (Van Pelt 2018).

Removing Barriers to School Start-Ups and Expansions

The straightforward and enabling language of the *School Act* has been hijacked by the byzantine *Private Schools Regulation*. The latter should be refined to be an enabling, rather than a restrictive, policy tool. Regulation should aim at the original intent of the *School Act*—to empower schools to innovate, flourish, and expand. This should include but not be limited to the following:

- **Streamlining the process for establishing a new independent school**, by requiring simply what is legislated in the *School Act*. The current onerous process is reducing the supply of much-needed independent schools.
- Similarly, **streamlining the process for expanding an existing independent school**. Presently, both adding another physical location and altering programming (e.g., expanding from K–9 to include new programs for grades 10–12) are treated as new school approvals. This stifles the

ability of independent schools to expand and innovate, placing further downward pressure on how many students independent schools can enrol.

- **Creating financial certainty for budgeting**, by offering independent schools approval over a five-year period, thereby guaranteeing their status and funding in the near future. This is important for facilitating sustainable growth. The current yearly approvals that independent schools are subject to, along with facing ever-changing budget allocations, create great uncertainty and make it extraordinarily difficult for independent-school boards and administrations to plan—let alone grow.

Implementing the above will result in an increased supply of independent schools and independent-school enrolment. For context, since 2016, at least twenty-four applications have been submitted for launching new accredited independent schools in Alberta, and as of June 2019, only seven had been approved. By comparison, 261 new independent schools have opened in Ontario since 2016.

Ensuring Balanced Treatment of Education Reforms

In other jurisdictions, charter-school growth has been a direct substitute for independent-school growth, as government policy has favoured charters over independents. Similarly, Alberta's *Alternative Education Program* has been detrimental to Alberta's independent-school sector. Clearly agreed on terms between schools and school boards have not always been honoured, and in many ways the alternative program has had a crowding-out effect in expanding the government-school sector at the expense of the vibrancy of the independent-school sector. Ensuring that the government structure its educational system with a sound mix of government schools (whether charter or otherwise) and independent schools will reduce the fragility of its educational system, and build structural resilience. Accordingly,

1. In school-reform discussions, **any changes to the charter legislation should be balanced with equally beneficial reforms for the independent-school sector**, mirroring its benefits.
2. **The government should re-evaluate the Alternative Program in Alberta**, with the possibility of integrating alternative schools into the non-government sector.
3. **Alberta should also consider other models to facilitate the creation of culturally sensitive oversight of the independent-school sector within the Ministry of Education.** For example, in neighbouring British Columbia, independent-school inspectors are often former independent-school principals. Not only does their first-hand sector knowledge help them monitor more effectively, but they are also sensitive to school-level cultural nuances that an inspector from outside the sector is not. Similarly, British Columbia's bureaucratic structure houses an independent-schools division within the Ministry of Education, with a commissioner of independent schools, which not only improves efficiency but also helps ensure a consistency and expertise in oversight for accreditation and monitoring.
4. **Alberta should ensure that regulation respects the autonomy and integrity of the independent-school sector.** Regulatory oversight should ensure that a robust pluralism that recognizes the independent character of schools is seen as a public good. The goal is not only to increase the supply of or access to religious and other independent options but also to preserve their ability to remain robust in their missions and offer distinct choices, within the broader public system (Glenn 2000).

New Language, New Imagination

- **Instead of “public” school, use “government” school:** “Public schooling” is not the same thing as “public education.” All K–12 education is public education, as it is (1) compulsory, (2) taxpayer funded, (3) regulated by and accountable to the ministry, and (4) for society’s good. Now, within public education, there are two types of schools: government and non-government schools. Accordingly, the former should be called just that: “government” schools, not “public” schools.
- **Instead of “private” school, use “independent” school:** The term “private” school not only connotes negative stereotypes but is also inaccurate. Nothing about Alberta’s independent schools is “private.” There are at least two additional reasons to the four mentioned above:
 1. Alberta independent schools may have selection criteria, but they are not exclusive. Preliminary data from our active survey “Who Chooses Alberta Independent Schools and Why” indicates the overwhelming majority of Alberta parents find it easy to discover (78%) and enrol (91%) in their preferred independent school. (These percentage points are identical to our Ontario findings, based on a representative sample.) And even religious independent schools welcome non-religious students.
 2. Decades of research shows that independent school (and homeschool) families are consistently and significantly more active and engaged than other families in their local community and in a wide variety of civic activities—from volunteering to charitable giving to voting to visiting the local library. The most public, least privatized Albertans are independent-school students, parents, and graduates.
- **Instead of education “market,” use education “ecosystem”:** Although discussions around efficiency, competition, and measurement are important, focus-group research reveals that Canadians have a hard time relating to education as a “market.” K–12 students are not nameless consumers; they are our children. And the school experience is not one of mere inputs and outputs; it is a complex ecosystem of living people. Accordingly, rather than “market,” the term “ecosystem” is more appropriate.
- **Instead of “subsidies,” use “benefits”:** One of the most commonly held myths is that taxpayers “subsidize” independent schools, depriving the public system of much-needed resources. This is incorrect on two counts. First, a government expenditure is not synonymous with a government subsidy. A subsidy is when governments overpay or disperse tax dollars without a product or service in return (Milke 2014). Second, so long as independent schools are less than 100 percent government funded, every independent-school student saves taxpayers money. Currently, this works out to at least \$5,397 in taxpayer savings per independent-school student in Alberta (Milke and MacPherson 2019). As Mark Milke puts it, taxpayers are not subsidizing independent schools; “they’re getting a bargain” (Milke 2014). Accordingly, it is important to insist on referring to government funds allocated to independent schools as “benefits,” not “subsidies.”
- **Instead of “choice in education,” use “diversity of education”:** Diverse social needs require diverse delivery systems, and many parents—especially single parents—do not feel that they have a “choice,” even if options do in fact exist.

- **Instead of “schools that reflect parents’ values,” use “schools that respect families and are responsive to their concerns”:** When critics hear that parents are choosing the school that supports the “parent’s values,” the assumption is that these values are contrary to the mainstream. In part, this is why, despite the evidence, the myth persists that school choice undermines the cultivation of shared civic norms and values. The parental-rights narrative has dominated much of the school-choice movement, but when the general public hears “parental rights,” they think of withdrawal from society and making place for radical (read: dangerous) minority values. Moreover, the term “family values” is associated with social conservatism.

If There is Openness to More Significant, Long-term Change . . .

The most valid criticism one can raise against independent schools is that they are a middle-class institution. So long as they do not receive full government funding this will likely remain the case, as lower-income families cannot afford the expense of even minimal tuition. To address this, without touching the public purse, the Alberta government can introduce Equal Opportunity Scholarships (EOS). Below is a quick overview.

- EOSs give students from low-income households the opportunity to access Alberta’s independent schools, without costing taxpayers anything extra.
- EOSs allow businesses (and individual donors and couples) to make dollar-for-dollar tax-deductible contributions to independently operated, non-profit scholarship-granting organizations.
- Where similar programs have been tried, EOSs yield \$1.44 in private funding for every dollar of forgone corporate income-tax revenue.

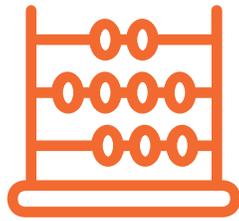
Conclusion

Not all students learn the same way, and not all kids fit in. This is why it is critical to have a robust education ecosystem of diverse delivery systems. And, in particular, greater emphasis should be placed on expanding the volume of and enrolment at religious independent schools in Alberta. Not only do they produce graduates who are more civically minded and committed to personal growth and contributing to the public good, but both independent-school graduates and parents of current students are overwhelmingly likely to recommend their independent school. On average, they are highly satisfied with their independent-school experience. More Albertans should have the opportunity to share in this positive experience.

This can happen by removing barriers to school start-ups and expansions, and removing barriers to enrolment. Specifically, the volume of independent schools can be increased by streamlining the processes for (1) establishing a new independent school and (2) expanding an existing school (whether by adding a new location or altering programming), as well as (3) extending yearly approvals to five years, to allow schools to plan and budget with certainty. Likewise, independent-school enrolment will increase with (1) mobility benefits for low-income students (particularly in rural communities) and (2) targeting additional financial resources to expanding independent-school options for special-needs students.

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