

WHO CHOOSES INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO AND WHY?

FAST FACTS

- ▶ Ontario independent schools educate 138,000 students—an increase of **21%** over the last decade. **It is a growing sector.**
- ▶ The top 3 reasons parents choose their kids' independent school in Ontario:
 1. It is a **safe** school
 2. It offers a **supportive** and **motivating** environment
 3. It emphasizes **character** development
- ▶ **FINANCIAL SACRIFICE** | 54% of families with kids in Ontario independent schools pay more than **\$8,000** in annual tuition per child.
- ▶ **LIFESTYLE CHANGE** | More than **two-thirds of parents** with kids in Ontario independent schools have made major financial changes to afford the cost:

28% took a part-time job	7% changed jobs
13% made budget sacrifices	7% took out a loan
9% depended on a bursary	3% received help from family
- ▶ 75% of parents with kids in Ontario independent school **attended public schools** themselves (and 6 in 10 did so **exclusively**).
- ▶ 93% of parents with children in independent schools are **highly satisfied** with their child's school.
- ▶ The parents of Ontario independent school students are more than twice as likely as average Ontarians to be **teachers** or **nurses**.
- ▶ 66% of independent school parents **participate regularly** in each municipal, provincial, and federal election, compared to 38% of Ontarians in general.
- ▶ A diverse and growing independent and religious school sector in Ontario is helping educate the public by **preparing future citizens and leaders** in the province as envisioned by the Education Act of Ontario.



NEW REPORT: WHO CHOOSES INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO AND WHY?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ontario's independent school sector is growing at a remarkable pace. Since 2007, the share of the province's students attending an independent school has increased by more than a fifth, surpassing 6.4 percent of enrolment with over 138,000 students. It is important to understand the parents driving this shift from government to independent education. Given that families who choose non-government schools receive no financial support from the province, the decision to enroll in an independent school is not taken lightly. Who chooses independent schools and why? Our study aims to provide updated answers to this key question posed by Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison (2007) twelve years ago, testing whether these findings continue to hold true in Ontario.

Following Van Pelt et al.'s (2007) approach, our study is based on a survey of Ontario parent respondents (524) with children enrolled in religious (30) and non-religious (15) independent schools across the province. At least 838 parents are represented in this survey; they have children of all grade levels, come from all regions of Ontario, and live in all types of neighbourhoods. These families are diverse, but they have many characteristics in common as well.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

As in Van Pelt et al.'s (2007) study, information from Statistics Canada's most recent Census and General Social Survey was used to identify differences between the average independent school parent and the average Ontario parent of school-aged children. We find that the characteristics of independent school families do not match the common (mis)conception of "private" schools as an elite and exclusive sector. A large majority (over 75 percent) of independent school parents attended public schools, and more than half (57 percent) of all survey participants were educated only in the public system. While household incomes for independent school families are higher overall than the Ontario average—intuitively consistent with their higher marriage rates, levels of education, and higher-status occupations—this is significantly more pronounced for families at non-religious independent schools. Parents choosing independent schools are much more likely to be self-employed than the average Ontarian. They are at least twice as likely to be entrepreneurs working primarily as independent contractors and small business owners. Parents in religious schools are three times as likely as those in non-religious independent schools to have certifications or diplomas in the trades. As for occupation, religious independent school parents are twice more likely to be teachers or educational counsellors and nurses than Ontarians in their age category. Taken together, independent school families also have higher levels of civic engagement, countering the stereotype of independent schools as insular communities. Over 90 percent of survey participants identify with a religion, including seven of every ten parents in a non-religious independent school.

PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING

The top-ranked reasons why parents chose an independent school for their children include school safety—concerns about bullying being less important than trust in the curriculum and staff—as well as a supportive and motivating educational environment that matches their families' values. When responses from religious and non-religious independent school parents are considered together, the five most cited characteristics for parents are that their chosen independent school (1) is safe, (2) offers a supportive, nurturing environment, (3) emphasizes character development, (4) has trustworthy curriculum, and (5) has outstanding teachers. Conversely, the least important factors for parents include having family and friends at the school, transportation, cost, and geographic proximity.

Religious and non-religious independent school families cite different sets of reasons for choosing their school—no single characteristic ranks in the top five for both sets of parents. Parents who sent their children to non-religious independent schools chose their school because it is safe, instills confidence in students, and teaches students to think critically and independently. Families who chose a religious independent school, meanwhile, cite their school's support for their values, teaching right from wrong, and reinforcement of their faith or religious beliefs.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that Ontario families want choice when it comes to their children's education. Yet Ontario—unlike every other province outside of Atlantic Canada—offers no funding for independent schools, making real educational choice a significant financial challenge for parents.

Despite the financial barriers, more and more Ontario parents are choosing independent schools for their children. These parents are largely middle-class, ordinary Ontarians. These parents also differ from each other in many ways: These parents differ from each other in many ways: they work in a wide variety of occupations, have distinct educational backgrounds, take home a range of incomes, and pay tuition in various ways; they cite different reasons for enrolling their children in non-government schools as well. Contrary to the myth that independent schools are reserved for an elite few, it is clear that this sector serves all types of Ontarians who seek to follow their own strong convictions regarding the education of their children.

To read or download the full report, visit
cardus.ca/research/education/reports





WHAT DOES ACCESS TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS MEAN FOR AVERAGE FOLKS IN ONTARIO?

Read what Ontario parents of children in independent schools had to say:

“The kids love their school...The teachers care about each student and **encourage gifts and talents** that they see are in each student.”

“We dug and dug until we could find a school to help our boys. They both now **read very confidently** thanks to the angels at our independent school.”

“We love this school! So do our children. It warms my heart to be able to send our children to a school that we all love and know with confidence that they are learning so much—**academically and character qualities.**”

“Well worth the money and time commitment. The newest iPhone and comforts at home are nothing compared with the satisfaction of seeing your child grow into the kind of adult **most needed in a hurting world.**”

“Best decision **ever.**”

THE CARDUS EDUCATION PROGRAM addresses the benefits and value of diverse learning systems so that parents can make informed choices on the education that is best suited for their children. This is a great resource for the media, educators, parents and graduates.

— Dr. Peter Froese
former Executive Director, FISA BC

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