



WHO CHOOSES INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND WHY?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Who chooses independent schools and why? A number of studies have explored this research question, but it has been over a decade in Canada and four decades in British Columbia (BC) since extensive parent surveys were conducted to answer these questions. This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison (2007), while being heavily informed by the most recent literature. With 608 representative independent school parents, using an online questionnaire with the same research question and comparable methodology, this study examines whether the Ontario findings from 2007 hold true in BC twelve years later.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Most “private” schools in BC are not bastions of privileged posterity. The overwhelming majority of independent school parents attended public school and, of families currently enrolled in independent schools, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from a public school. Over 50 percent of independent school parents have made major financial and life changes to afford the cost of school, even though tuition for about one-third of families is approximately the same cost as the average out-of-school kids’ ice hockey program. However, independent school parents are nearly 1.4 times more likely to have post-secondary education, and are far more likely to be school teachers, senior managers, accountants and auditors, doctors, computer and IT professionals, engineers, entrepreneurs, and public administration managers. Particularly with religious schools, it is the well-educated, more than the wealthy, who choose independent education.

Diversity is also a defining characteristic of independent school parents in BC. Their mother tongue is 1.5 times more likely to be foreign, and they are 2.4 times more likely to speak a foreign language most often at home. Nearly half of independent school parents were born outside Canada; yet, very interestingly, the Canadian-born are nearly three times more likely to describe their ethnicity as “Canadian.” Fully 92 percent are active in their community, in an average two groups, associations, or organizations. They are 1.7 times more likely to vote but are neither more nor less likely to be political activists or members of a political party. A large majority reported a religious affiliation—primarily Christian (non-Catholic) and Christian (Catholic)—with only 15 percent stating no religion, which mirrors a recent Angus Reid Institute study of general population demographics. Interestingly, the majority of non-religious school families are in fact religious, and religious schools are not exclusive but welcome many non-religious students.



PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Parents choose independent schools for a multitude of diverse reasons, but virtually all independent school parents have the following in common: Their independent school offers a supportive and nurturing environment that is motivating for and instills confidence in students, thanks to outstanding teachers and excellent administration. This is especially true of non-religious independent school families, as the aforementioned are their specific top five priorities. Those who choose religious schools would agree, but they also emphasize the importance of faith, school safety, character development, trustworthy curriculum, morals, and values; whereas, for non-religious school parents, additional priorities are frequent, detailed, and open reporting of student progress to parents, the happiness of students, character development, critical thinking, and whole-child education. They are also more likely to have tried public school. However, both expressed considerable dissatisfaction with public schools. Fully 91 percent are so satisfied with their school that they are strongly likely to recommend it. Both non-religious and religious independent schools offer high-quality education by adding value in different ways. Accurately echoing Van Pelt et al. (2007), religious schools provide “specific enculturation functions” and non-religious independent schools emphasize individualized enrichment.

IMPLICATIONS

BC’s independent schools serve diverse religious, cultural, and regional communities, as well as meet demand for pedagogical variations and emphases unmet by public schools. Each student, family, and school is different, and students’ needs and parents’ preferences are better met at independent schools than public schools. The purpose of the BC K–12 school system is stated in the School Act (Legislative Assembly of the Province of British Columbia 1996): “to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.” This goal is best realized in a democratic and pluralistic fashion, where individual potential, knowledge, skills, and healthy attitudes are best nurtured—namely, in a diverse education system, one that includes both government schools and independent schools.

INTRODUCTION

Who chooses independent schools and why? A number of recent studies have explored this research question (Erickson 2017), but it has been over a decade in Canada and four decades in British Columbia (BC) since extensive parent surveys were conducted. Bosetti (2004) and Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) explored this question, surveying Alberta elementary school parents, and Ontario independent school parents were surveyed in Van Pelt et al. (2007). This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt et al. (2007) and, using the same research question and comparable methodology, examine whether Van Pelt et al.'s Ontario findings hold true in BC twelve years later.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the remarkable growth and distinctive structure of independent schooling in British Columbia. Then we

outline the research question and analyze the survey responses and results. After examining both the characteristics of independent school families and the reasons parents choose independent schools, we present conclusions and summarize new findings.

ENROLMENT IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

BC independent school enrolment has increased annually for over 40 consecutive years, tripling in volume from 23,691 in 1977/78 to 85,696 in 2018/19. At 13 percent of the province's total K-12 student population, BC has the highest share of independent school enrolment in Canada, nearly double the national average. However, given lengthy waitlists at most BC independent schools, enrolment could be higher.

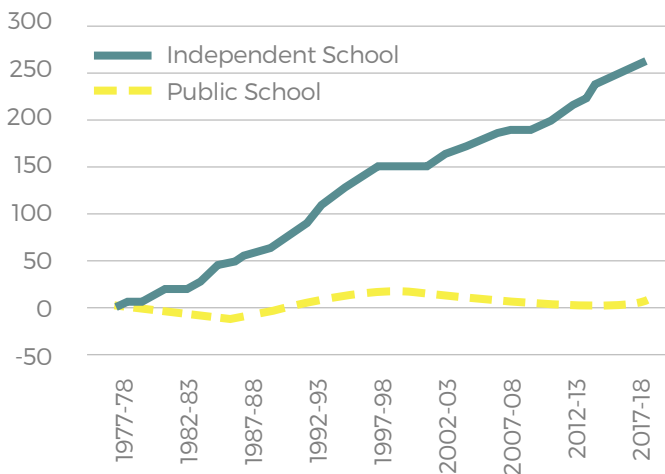
TABLE 1: Students in Canada, by education type, 2016/2017

	Public Schools		Independent Schools		Homeschool		Total
	Enrolment	%	Enrolment	%	Enrolment	%	
Canada	5,117,328	92.1	401,784	7.2	34,413	0.6	5,553,525
British Columbia	557,625	86.7	83,469	13.0	2,316	0.4	643,410
Alberta	652,272	94.2	27,534	4.0	12,729	1.8	692,535
Saskatchewan	180,696	96.3	4,575	2.4	2,379	1.3	187,650
Manitoba	183,015	91.4	13,815	6.9	3,393	1.7	200,223
Ontario	2,006,703	93.2	138,324	6.4	8,754	0.4	2,153,781
Quebec	1,210,698	90.3	128,043	9.5	2,565	0.2	1,341,306
New Brunswick	97,842	98.1	1,134	1.1	759	0.8	99,735
Nova Scotia	118,566	96.3	3,603	2.9	948	0.8	123,117
Prince Edward Island	20,007	97.7	276	1.3	189	0.9	20,472
Nfld. and Labrador	66,183	98.3	1,005	1.5	138	0.2	67,326
Yukon	5,343	97.2	...	...	153	2.8	5,496
Northwest Territories	8,337	99.0	...	...	84	1.0	8,421
Nunavut	10,041	100	...	...	...	...	10,041

Source: Statistics Canada (2018a)

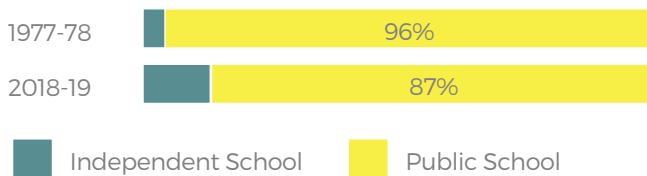
Table 1 presents the volume and proportion of students across Canada by education type, for the most recent year national data is available. The vast majority are in public schools, followed by independent schools. At 13 percent, BC has the highest share of independent school enrolment in Canada, which is almost double the average in Canada, at more than double that of the largest jurisdiction, Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2018a). In this regard, enrolment trends are strikingly divergent (TABLE 1).

FIGURE 1: Change in BC School Enrolment (%), 1977/1978 to 2018/2019



Sources: FISA-BC (2018a 2018b), MoE (2019a)

FIGURE 2: Share of total BC school enrolment, 1977/1978 and 2018/2019



Sources: FISA-BC (2018a 2018b), MoE (2019a)

In BC, independent school enrolment has grown every year since 1977, when access to partial government funding for qualifying independent schools began (MoE, 2011).¹ From 1977/78 to 2018/19, enrolment more than tripled from 23,691 to 85,696.² Concurrently, the number of BC public school students has remained relatively unchanged across this period, with a decline in the past two decades (FIGURE 1). As a share of total enrolment, public school enrolment has declined nine percentage points, from 95.7% in 1977/78 to 86.7 percent in 2018/19 (MoE, 2019a; FISA-BC, 2018a) (FIGURE 2).

Independent school enrolment would be even larger if lower-income families had better access. Parents value the opportunity and autonomy to select a school that they believe is the right fit for their child(ren). This is especially important for lower-income households (Catt & Rhinesmith, 2017). For example, the Children First School Trust Fund in Ontario, received 34,000 applications to place 1,494 children from lower-income households in the independent school of their choice (Hepburn, 2008). Amongst rich and poor families, demand for independent schooling greatly exceeds supply.

In addition, this increase in independent school enrolment could be even greater, as the majority of BC independent schools are over-capacity. On average, the “normal” waitlist – particularly in the Lower Mainland – is equivalent to 14 percent of a school’s total student population (Clemens, 2012), even though the number and size of independent schools have considerably increased over the last four decades (FISA-BC, 2018b; FISA-BC, 2018c).

1. Before 1977, independent schools were unfunded and unregulated, although in existence since 1858 (MoE, 2011).
 2. Sources: 1977/78 to 2016/17 data is compiled, with sources and notes, by FISA-BC (2018a; 2018b). Following their approach, 2017/18 to 2018/19 data is the enrolment head-count, not FTE, for all facility type and all grades for school-age students (not adults) from the MoE (2019a).

STRUCTURE, FUNDING, AND NUMBERS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Independent schools in BC are highly heterogeneous. Each school fits into one of three academically defined school types, one of four government-defined regulatory and funding groups, and at least one of thirteen school associations. Considerable diversity exists within these categories, as each individual school’s emphasis, funding, and school size can vary considerably.

SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS AND SCHOOL TYPES

British Columbia independent schools broadly fit into three school types: elite, specialty, and religious (Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2016). These school types are primarily defined by their respective school associations, so the latter is presented first. Of BC’s 367 independent schools, 297 are members of the Federation of Independent School Associations British Columbia (FISABC).³ All FISABC schools are members of at least one of six other associations, with some schools affiliated with multiple associations. All 29 FISABC elite schools belong to the Independent Schools Association of British Columbia (ISABC); 134 independent schools are specialty or religious schools with the Associate Member Group (AMG); 27 are religious schools with the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSIBC); 76 are religious schools with Catholic Independent Schools of British Columbia (CISBC); 14 are religious schools with Seventh Day Adventist British Columbia (SDABC); and 37 are religious schools with the Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia (SCSBC).

Some BC schools are also members of one or more associations outside of the province. A total of 22 elite schools are also members of Canadian Accredited Independent Schools (CAIS); eight elite schools

are with the Association of Boarding Schools (TABS); three elite schools belong to the National Coalition of Girls Schools (NCGS); one elite school is a member of the prestigious National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS); 23 religious schools are members of Christian Schools International (CSI); and a total of 16 schools from all three school types—elite, specialty, religious—are International Baccalaureate (IB).

Elite schools, defined as university preparatory schools with membership in at least ISABC, CAIS, TABS, NCGS, or NAIS, account for 29 of BC’s 367 independent schools, or 7.9 percent. Eight of these are boarding schools. Even though elite schools resemble the prevailing “private school” stereotype, they make up just 16 percent of BC’s total independent school student population (TABLE 2).

TABLE 2: Number of BC independent schools and students, 2018/2019

	Number of Schools		Number of Students	
Elite	29	7.9%	14,032	16.0%
Non-boarding	21	5.7%		11.7%
Boarding	8	2.2%		4.4%
Specialty	143	39.0%	15,285	17.5%
Distinct emphasis or curriculum	40	10.9%		3.4%
Montessori or Waldorf	32	8.7%		3.0%
Special needs	10	2.7%		0.5%
Other (e.g., International-oriented, for-profit)	25	6.8%		3.0%
Distributed learning (non-religious)	6	1.6%		4.2%
First Nation	30	8.2%		3.4%
Religious	196	53.4%	58,266	66.5%

Source: Author’s calculations based on Ministry of Education (2018/2019) data and school-by-school exploratory research.)

3. Independent schools and membership data are from the Ministry of Education (2018/2019), as of November 2018.

Specialty schools are more complex. Allison et al. (2016) define specialty schools as having either a special curriculum emphasis (e.g., athletics, music, technology), distinct pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf), or serving specific student populations (e.g., special-needs students). When including First Nation independent schools, BC has 143 schools (38.9%) that meet this definition and enrol 15,285 students (17.5%). This count falls to 72 specialty schools (19.6%) enrolling 5,607 students (6.4%) when excluding for-profit, international student-oriented, special education, distributed learning (e.g., online schools), and First Nations schools.

Religious schools are the simplest to define, but they may be the least understood. They constitute the majority of BC independent schools and enrol two-thirds of the province's independent school students, as they typically attract families from both inside and outside their faith. Religious school enrolment is driven by both a desire to preserve a religious identity and to reap the secular benefits of a religiously oriented education, and thus, even in jurisdictions outside of Canada, where overall independent school enrolment is falling, there is strong demand for religious schooling (Pelz and den Dulk 2018). In terms of socioeconomic status, the after-tax household income of religious school families is comparable to the average public school family (Cle-

mens et al. 2017; MacLeod et al. 2017; Van Pelt et al. 2007). This is typical of religious schools across North America (Bulman 2015, 108). However, not all religious school families are middle-class. British Columbia has a few notable exceptions of religious schools that are truly elite in every way—academic and athletic performance, extracurricular activities, facilities, quality of staff and instruction—and accordingly attract many elite families. However, if their emphasis is foremost religious in nature and they are not members of ISABC or CAIS, in table 1 they are counted as religious. Accordingly, there are 186 religious schools and 10 distributed learning religious schools in BC, combining for 53.3 percent of independent schools and 66.5 percent of BC's independent school student population (58,266 of 87,583).

FUNDING CLASSIFICATION AND REGULATION

Of Canadian provinces, BC arguably has the most balanced and robust approach to independent school funding and regulation. There are very few limitations to opening and operating an independent school in the province, unless government funding is desired. Regulations increase in number and specificity in proportion to funds received from the provincial government, but the basic requirements are straightforward and common-sense. At a minimum, all BC independent schools are subject to the provincial Independent School Act of 1989 and its basic Section 1 certification requirements. Namely, schools cannot practice, promote, or foster racism, religious intolerance, violence, or sedition, and they must abide by the laws of the land (Independent School Act, 2018, H-18).

There are four official designations of BC independent schools, defined by their funding formula and corresponding regulatory structure. Group 1 and Group 2 receive government funding for operating costs and must be non-profits. Group 3 and Group 4 do not receive government funding and can be for-profit. No designations receive capital funding (e.g., funding for building projects).



Group 1 schools receive up to 50 percent taxpayer funding for per-student operating costs. Distributed learning schools⁴ can fit into the Group 1 designation, receiving up to 63 percent taxpayer funding. To classify as a Group 1 school, an independent school's per-student operating costs cannot exceed that of local public schools, and they must meet the extensive additional requirements imposed on taxpayer-funded schools. A few of these additional requirements include incorporating a wide range of government-mandated curriculum, hiring only government-certified teachers, participating in government assessments (both for students and the school as a whole), and at least half the students enrolled must be "eligible students" (i.e., BC residents of school age whose parents are either Canadian citizens or permanent residents). Most religious schools are Group 1 schools, as shown in table 2. As of September 30, 2018, there are 66,789 students enrolled in 244 Group 1 schools, with a median school size of 193 students (TABLES 3 + 4).

Group 2 schools' per-student operating expenses can exceed that of local public schools, but Group 2 schools only receive up to 35 percent operating-cost funding and up to 44.1 percent for Group 2 distributed learning. Other than that, Group 2 schools must meet all the requirements of Group 1 schools. Most elite schools—25 of 29—are Group 2 schools; albeit, specialty schools are the most prevalent Group 2 schools. First Nation schools can fit into either the Group 1 or Group 2 designation, but receive 100 percent government funding. One First Nation school is in Group 1, with the remaining 29 in Group 2. In total, there are 17,628 students enrolled in 77 Group 2 schools, with a median enrolment of 101 students per school.

Group 3 schools receive no taxpayer funding and are only required to meet the most basic Section 1 requirements for all independent schools. To qualify as a Group 3 school, at least half the students enrolled must be eligible students, and the school must under-

TABLE 3: Number of BC independent schools, by school type and funding group, 2018/2019

	Elite	Specialty	Religious	Total
Group 1	4	64	177	245 ¹
Group 2	25	47	5	77
Group 3	0	8	11 ²	19
Group 4	0	24	0	24
Total	29	143	193	365

TABLE 4: Number of BC independent schools and students, by funding group, 2018/2019

	Number of Schools	Number of Students	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Group 1	244 ¹	66,789	274	193
Group 2	77	17,628	229	101
Group 3	19 ²	544	29	25
Group 4	24	2,622	109	78
Total	364	87,583	241	151

Source: Authors tabulation from Ministry of Education (2018/2019).

1. The ministry of education's Group 1 total is 244, but here one school is double-counted, as it perfectly matches both the elite and religious school definition. For sample data, either stratum is appropriate.

2. Three Group 3 religious schools have been subtracted from both table 2 and table 3, due to zero enrolment as of September 30, 2018.

go a government inspection every two years. Group 3 schools can be for-profit companies. Twenty-two Group 3 schools—14 religious and 8 specialty—are on the BC Ministry of Education list, but three Group 3 religious schools have been subtracted from both table 2 and table 3, due to zero enrolment as of September 30, 2018. With 544 students in 19 schools, Group 3 median enrolment is 25 students per school.

Group 4 schools can also be for-profit companies and do not receive taxpayer funding, but they differ from Group 3 schools in three ways. First, they are

4. Distributed learning refers to homeschooling through a supervising school authority. This is also known as "distance learning" or "distance ed."

primarily composed of international or interprovincial students. Second, they must be bonded: \$5,000 per student or \$100,000, whichever is greater (Ministry of Education 2018a). Third, Group 4 schools have additional regulatory requirements similar to, although not quite as extensive as, Group 1 and 2 schools (Independent School Act 2018). The overwhelming majority of Group 4 schools are for-profit, international student oriented, university preparatory schools. However, they do not meet the literature's "elite" definition, as none are members of an elite school association. As they match the specialty school definition, all 24 are categorized as specialty in table 2. There are 2,622 Group 4 students, and median school enrolment is 78.

FUNDING BUDGET, ALLOCATION, AND TAX-PAYER SAVINGS

The basic allocation public school operating grant is \$7,423 per student (\$7,468 for 2019–2020), plus additional supplements that can reach up to \$38,800 (\$42,400 in 2019–2020) for physically dependent or deaf/blind students.⁵ Schools receive per-pupil operating grants for students in grade 9 and under, but for grade 10 through grade 12 funding is on a per-course basis, ranging from \$212 (\$215 in 2019–2020) for partial-credit courses to \$423 (\$430 in 2019–2020) for full four-credit courses (Ministry of Education 2018c; Ministry of Education 2019b). The total Ministry of Education operating budget is over \$5.3 billion, which averages out to \$10,678 per student (Ministry of Education 2019b). Adding capital expenditures, the total Ministry of Education budget is over \$6.3 billion, accounting for nearly 12 percent of the provincial budget (Ministry of Finance 2019, 100). When adding in all BC government expenses for elementary and secondary education, it reaches nearly \$7.3

billion forecasted for 2018–2019 (Ministry of Finance 2019, 101). When including all expenses, per-student spending in public schools is \$11,656, as of 2015–2016 (the most recent estimation) (MacLeod and Emes 2019, 9, 11).

On average, independent schools receive one dollar in taxpayer operating grants for every \$2.31 of public school operating grants. Put differently, independent school students save taxpayers 57 cents on the dollar. February's Ministry of Education Service Plan estimates a total \$426.3 million in independent school operating grants for 2018–2019 (Ministry of Education 2019c, 8); which, given that up to 84,417 students (all Group 1 and 2 enrolment, including distributed learning) may be eligible for funding (Ministry of Education 2018/2019), independent school operating grants average about \$5,050 per student.⁶ However, the median grant is likely considerably lower, as the tens of thousands needed for each special-needs student skews the mean. Thus, at a minimum, every independent school student saves BC taxpayers at least \$6,606 per year.⁷

In summary, BC's 367 independent schools are highly heterogenous, broadly fitting into three school types that are themselves highly diverse: elite, specialty, and religious. Elite schools most closely resemble "private school" stereotypes, but they only form 8 percent of independent schools and 16 percent of the independent school student population in BC. On the other hand, religious schools constitute over half of BC's independent schools and precisely two-thirds of BC's independent school student population. For funding purposes, schools are officially classified into one of four regulated groups, receiving up to 50 percent of taxpayer funding for operating expenses. These lower costs, in relation to public school, save taxpayers at least \$6,606 per student annually.

5. In 2018–2019, special-needs level 1, 2, and 3 funding was \$9,800, \$19,400, and \$38,800, respectively (Ministry of Education 2018b, 3). This will increase to \$10,250, \$20,200, and \$42,200 in 2019–2020, respectively (Ministry of Education 2019a, 3).

6. \$426.3 million (Ministry of Education estimated total independent school operating grants 2018–2019) divided by 84,417 (all Group 1 and 2 enrolment incl. DL) = \$5,049.93.

7. \$11,656 (average public school cost) minus \$5,050 (average independent school cost) = \$6,606. These savings do not apply to special education, as it is fully funded, regardless of school choice.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND APPROACH

Rather than begin with a problem, the research approach starts with a question: Who chooses BC independent schools and why? Given the large volume and continued growth of independent schools in BC, it is time to discover and understand the determinants of school choice in the province. This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt et al. (2007), while being heavily informed by the most current research on why parents choose independent schools. Using the same research question and comparable methodology, the paper examines whether Ontario findings hold true in BC twelve years later.

METHODOLOGY

Following Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison's (2007) approach, many questions are based on the 2016 Census and 2013 General Social Survey to understand participating families' demographic information, so that the results can be readily compared for analysis (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 14). This tells us the "who." To know "why" parents choose, Van Pelt identified 61 independent school characteristics from examining the North American literature—specifically, "Bell (2005), Bosetti (2000), Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (2004), Davies and Quirke (2005a, 2005b), Erickson (1986), Mirski (2005), Paquette (2000) . . . [and] Ungerleider (2003)," among others. On a four-point scale for each, the questionnaire asked parents two questions: the extent they agreed or disagreed each characteristic influenced their school choice, and whether it was a feature in their independent school (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 23). Accordingly, a pilot questionnaire was created and updated the list of independent school characteristics to reflect the most recent literature. The pilot found no distinction between the reasons for choosing a school and its features. Some terminology was problematic too. Pilot respondents were uncomfortable identifying as "elite," so "university preparatory" is used in the survey. The pilot respondents also found too much sim-

ilarity between the questions, so a second and third test survey were conducted to further refine the list. The pilot took respondents close to sixty minutes to complete and was refined to eighteen minutes without losing its essence, before outreach.



"Distributed online, the questionnaire collected data from self-selected parents of a representative stratified sample of randomly selected K-12 BC independent schools. The selection process began with an extensive categorization of all 367 BC independent schools into their respective school associations (many schools are members of multiple associations) and one of three broad categories—university preparatory, specialty, or religious. Preparatory schools are divided into boarding and non-boarding. Specialty schools are categorized into Montessori, Waldorf, performance-oriented (e.g., accelerated learning, schools for the gifted), distributed learning (non-religious), special education, other (as many specialty schools are truly unique), and First Nation schools. The latter is excluded from the sample, due to a prohibitively time-intensive additional ethics approval process. Religious schools are further stratified by religion, denomination, and distributed learning (religious). All distributed learning schools are exclud-

ed, as a previously secured school (large enough to be representative) withdrew last minute. Of note, many schools do not easily fit into one category, either because they are unique or match the description of multiple categories (e.g., Islamic Montessori, non-CAIS preparatory). Each school is also labelled by region and neighbourhood type, and a balance of grades offered is also accounted for (e.g., K–12, elementary only, secondary only). Given the aforementioned parameters, 37 schools of a combined 9,899 students were randomly selected that, assuming a similar response rate, is proportionately representative of the BC independent school and student populations. Each randomly selected school was contacted and invited to participate in the online survey. If the head of school or governing agency agreed, they were emailed an online package to electronically distribute to the parents in their school(s). When a school declined to participate, another school was randomly selected from the respective stratum and approached. However, it took considerable outreach to confirm participation or rejection.

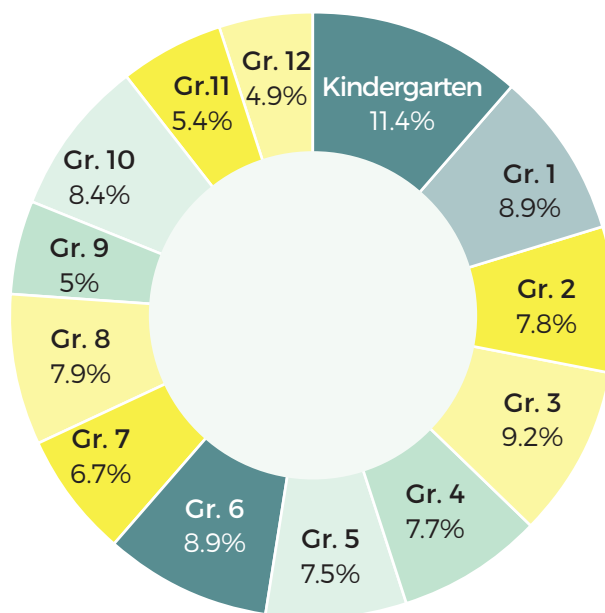
Securing participation proved formidable for three reasons. First, several phone and email attempts over many weeks were required to make contact with almost all the schools, and in some cases, up to an additional three months of communication to secure participation. The survey was first distributed November 22, 2018, and closed March 11, 2019. Second, many of the schools regularly distribute their own in-house surveys, so they were reluctant to participate. Third, the questionnaire required an average eighteen-minute commitment from parents, which many considered too long. Throughout this process, it became increasingly apparent how inundated people are with online survey requests today, compared to 2007. For future research, incentives for parents and heads of schools should be considered.

A total of 42 schools were contacted, and 19 agreed to participate in the study. For anonymity, respondents self-identify as parents of either university preparatory, specialty, or religious school students. Although only one school in the sample matches the literature’s strict “elite” definition, it and at least

three other schools can naturally identify as “university preparatory.” Assuming consistent participation across all school types, potentially 15 percent of the sample could identify as university preparatory, 21 percent could identify as specialty—with 3 percentage points and 2 percentage points of that being Group 4 international student-oriented and special education school families, respectively—and 79 percent could identify as religious school families. This sum exceeds 100 percent, as multiple schools fall under multiple categories. Nearly half (8) of schools that agreed to participate are located in the Lower Mainland, over one-fifth (4) are on the coast—north of West Vancouver to Alaska or Vancouver Island—and almost three-eighths (7) are in the rest of BC, with a mix of urban, suburban, small town, and rural throughout.

The online survey was administered, and the data collected, securely through <https://sfufas.ca1.qualtrics.com>. This is a secure Simon Fraser University (SFU) website, using the industry-leading Qualtrics survey research platform. Completed surveys and the data taken from them are electronically preserved for future use in an open access online repository,

FIGURE 3: Survey representation, by child(ren)’s grade (K-12)



stripped of any information that could identify participants to ensure confidentiality. All participating parents and schools remain private, confidential, and anonymous.

Supporting qualitative analysis began with a review of the existing literature from academic journals, think tanks, government resources, and media. Informal interviews with independent school experts, principals, parents, and former students (who are now adults) were conducted to inform the survey creation and policy options.

SAMPLE DATA

From the 19 participating schools, 608 parents started the survey and 466 completed it, representing 919 and 776 students, respectively. At least 1,025 parents are represented. The median size of participating schools is 151 students, identical to the 151 median size of all BC independent schools. All school types are represented in the sample, except First Nation and distributed learning schools, but as only 23 and 48 respondents self-identified as university preparatory and specialty school families, respectively, the two were combined—13 percent of respondents—into “non-religious” schools. Fully 87 percent of respondents self-describe their schools as religious schools. A total of 83 percent (381/458) of respondents live in a self-described urban or suburban neighbourhood, which is close to the 81 percent and 86 percent of Canadians and British Columbians, respectively (Statistics Canada 2018a). Figure 3 shows the distribution by grade. Over 11 percent of participants have a child in kindergarten, ranging to under 5 percent with a grade 12 student, for a mean and median of 7.7 percent and 7.8 percent representation per grade, respectively (FIGURE 3).

In summary, following a similar research question and methodological approach as Van Pelt et al. (2007), this study includes 608 respondents from 19 BC independent schools, representing all grades, BC regions, and the average BC school size and neighbourhood.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FAMILIES

The online parent questionnaire attempted to replicate Van Pelt et al.’s (2007) Ontario study. Following that approach, many questions are based on Statistics Canada’s 2016 Census and 2013 General Social Survey to collect and compare demographic information on the 608 families surveyed (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 14). The findings and analysis of who chooses BC independent schools are presented in this section.

PARENTS’ EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

To begin, the first characteristic explored is independent school parents’ own educational background. The research of Van Pelt (2007, 15) reflected the decades-long macrotrend in Ontario schooling, away from public to independent schools. The findings confirm this shift. Fully 84 percent of parents spent some time in public school themselves in elementary and/or secondary school, with 65 percent only having attended public school. While 34 percent attended some independent school, exactly 15 percent only attended independent school. Literally only one person was exclusively homeschooled (0.22%), with 12 (2.6%) having experienced some homeschooling as a student. The minimal homeschool background is not surprising but, in fact, representative. Homeschoolers constitute less than half a percent of both British Columbia’s and Canada’s respective student populations (Van Pelt 2015, 23), and less than 2 percent of homeschooling parents were themselves homeschoolers (Van Pelt 2003, 34). In both these findings and Van Pelt’s (2007), religious school parents are considerably more likely to have attended independent school themselves. In this sample, religious school parents were more than twice as likely as other independent school parents to have only attended independent school or attended at some point, 16 percent (versus 8%) and 37 percent (versus 17%), respectively. However, 92 percent of non-religious independent school parents attended some public and nearly 80 percent only attended public school. This is important. In

other words, only 8 percent of non-religious school parents did not attend public school. This one-generation transition from public to independent school challenges the notion that “private” schools are bastions of privileged posterity.

Further countering this misconception of exclusivity, for over 68 percent and nearly 66 percent of parents, respectively, finding and enrolling in their preferred school was easy. Only 15 percent expressed difficulty, with less than 2 percent finding it “very difficult” to enroll and attend their preferred school, which may speak more to excess demand and short supply rather than elitism.

Notwithstanding, independent school parents are better educated. They are nearly 1.4 times more likely than the average adult British Columbian to have post-secondary education, at 88 percent versus 64 percent, respectively (Statistics Canada 2017a). Respondents are twice as likely to have a bachelor’s degree (41 percent of independent school parents compared to 20 percent of British Columbian adults), nearly six times as likely to have a below-bachelor’s-level college or university certificate or diploma (23% versus 4%), three times as likely to have a master’s degree (19% versus 6%), and nearly four times as likely to have a medical field degree (3.5% versus < 1%). They are 9 times more likely to have completed high school (or equivalent), 2.5 times less likely to only have a high school diploma (or equivalent), and half as likely to have a trade certificate or diploma as their highest credential. Interestingly, independent school parents are a third less likely to have earned a doctorate degree. Over 10 percent of independent school parents hold a professional degree (e.g., LLB/JD, CA/CPA), 3 percent a post-baccalaureate diploma, and nearly 6 percent selected “Other non-university certificate or diploma (from community college, technical institute, etc.).”

A bachelor’s degree was the most commonly selected highest credential for both non-religious (31%)

and religious school parents (43%). Interestingly, non-religious school parents were the least likely to have post-secondary education (19% without formal education beyond high school or equivalent), but they were the most likely to have a master’s (22%), medical field degree (8%), or earned doctorate (3%). Religious school parents were the most likely overall to have a post-secondary education and the most likely to have a professional degree, at 89 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

EMPLOYMENT

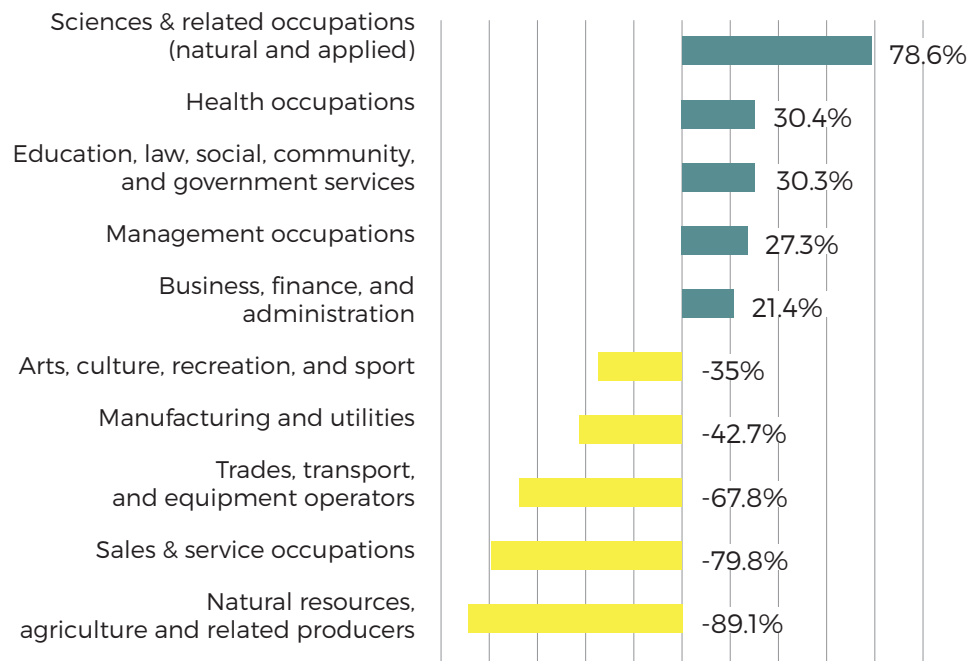
The occupations of independent school parents vary considerably from the BC average, and for clarity, both the broad and specific occupational categories using Statistics Canada’s (2016a) National Occupation Classifications (NOCs) are presented. Controlling for sex,⁸ independent school parents are 1.8 times more likely to work in natural and applied science and related occupations (7.7% of respondents compared to 4.3% of British Columbians); 1.3 times more likely to work in health occupations (11.6% versus 8.9%) and education, law, and social, community, and government services occupations (17.8% versus 13.6%); nearly 1.3 times more likely to work in management (12.3% versus 9.7%); and 1.2 times more likely to work in business, finance, and administration. The latter is the largest occupation category in the sample (23.7% versus 19.5%). Independent school parents are less likely to work in the remaining NOCs. Most notably, they are 9 times less likely to work in natural resources, agriculture, and related production occupations (0.23% versus 2.08%), and 5 times less likely to work in sales and service occupations—BC’s largest occupation category (5.7% versus 28.2%). A total of 64 respondents (14.6%) selected “Unclassified”; which, given their accompanying comments, is not directly comparable with Statistics Canada’s definition. Figure 2 illustrates the greater and lesser propensity for independent

8. Survey respondents were approximately 80 percent female and 20 percent male, so the BC average was weighted to reflect this distribution.

school parents to work in each of the ten broad NOC categories (FIGURE 4).

Table 5 presents the top twenty specific occupations, by NOC, for independent school parents.⁹ After unclassified occupations, the most common independent school parent occupation is secondary and elementary school teachers and educational counsellors, at 9.8 percent of respondents compared to 2.7 percent of British Columbians (Statistics Canada 2016a). Teachers are followed closely by auditors, accountants, and investment professionals at 8.2 percent, which is four times the BC average of 2 percent. Of the remaining most-prevalent occupations, a few are particularly disproportionate. Independent school parents are 6 times more likely to be civil, mechanical, electrical, and chemical engineers (2.7% versus 0.4%) and managers in engineering, architecture, science, and information services (1.8% versus 0.3%); over 5 times more likely to be administrative services supervisors (2.3% versus 0.4%); nearly 5 times more likely to be physicians, dentists, and veterinarians (3.2% versus 0.67%); and 4.5 times more likely to be pharmacists, dietitians, and nutritionists (1.4% versus 0.3%). Conversely, rounding out the top twenty, independent school parents are one-third as likely to be general office workers (1.4% versus 4.1%) and slightly less than three-fifths as likely to work in assisting occupations in support of health services (1.4% versus 2.5%). Another notable finding, just outside the top twenty, is that independent school parents are over eleven times more likely to be public administration managers (1.14% versus 0.10%) (TABLE 5).

FIGURE 4: Propensity (percent more or less likely) for independent school parents to work in occupation, by NOC broad category



PAYING FOR SCHOOL

Tuition is charged in one of three primary ways—per student (51.5%), per family (28%), and sliding scale (19.5%)—and tuition costs vary considerably. Nearly 33 percent of parents (149) pay below \$4,000 annually per child for independent school tuition; 43 percent (196) pay between \$4,000 to \$8,000; and 21 percent (97) pay \$8,000 to \$16,000. Nearly 3 percent (13) pay between \$16,000 to \$28,000, and one respondent each pays \$28,000 to \$56,000 and over \$56,000, respectively. Of the 28 respondents who pay residence fees in addition to tuition, residence costs below \$4,000 annually per student for 37.5 percent (9), between \$4,000 to \$8,000 for one-third (8), \$8,000 to \$16,000 for nearly 17 percent (4), and over \$16,000 and up to \$56,000 for the remainder. In addition to tuition and residence, 66 percent (299) spend under \$1,000 annually per child on extra costs (such as uniforms, instruments, tutors, school trips, activity fees), 20.5 percent (93) spend

9. Again, all BC averages are gender-adjusted to ensure like-to-like comparisons.

an extra \$1,000 to \$2,500, 9 percent (42) spend an extra \$2,500 to \$5,000, nearly 4 percent (17) spend \$5,000 to \$10,000, and the remaining two respondents spend over \$10,000 in extras. For perspective, the average Canadian parent with a child in hockey spends nearly \$3,000 per child per season. This average increases to \$3,700 per season for children over ten years old (Mirtle 2013). An Ipsos survey found 32 percent of Canadian parents go into debt to pay for their children’s extracurricular activities, averaging \$1,160 annually (Alini 2018). Although

independent school parents may pay for the same extracurriculars, the context of these price points show that independent schooling is likely within reach of more families than often assumed.

However, affording tuition can be a challenge. Over half of parents have made major financial changes. Over 18 percent (90 of 491) have taken on a part-time job for additional income, 9.6 percent (47) changed jobs, 8.6 percent (42) budget differently and make sacrifices, over 2 percent (11) take out loans,

TABLE 5: Top twenty occupations for independent school parents, by specific NOC

Specific NOC	Ind. School Parents (%)	BC Average (%)	General NOC Category
— Other	14.58	—	Unclassified
1 Secondary and elementary school teachers, and edu. counsellors	9.79	2.73	Education, law, and social, community, and gov’t services
2 Auditors, accountants, and investment professionals	8.20	2.03	Business, finance, and administration
3 Senior management	3.42	0.82	Management occupations
4 Physicians, dentists, and veterinarians	3.19	0.67	Health occupations
4 Computer and information systems professionals	3.19	1.22	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
4 Administrative and regulatory occupations	3.19	3.50	Business, finance, and administration
7 Human resources and business service professionals	2.96	1.38	Business, finance, and administration
8 Engineers—civil, mechanical, electrical, or chemical	2.73	0.44	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
8 Finance, insurance, and related business administration	2.73	1.78	Business, finance, and administration
8 Home care providers and educational support occupations	2.73	2.91	Education, law, and social, community, and gov’t services
11 Administrative services supervisors	2.28	0.44	Business, finance, and administration
11 Professional occupations in nursing	2.28	2.48	Health occupations
13 Office administrative assistants (general, legal, and medical)	2.05	2.40	Business, finance, and administration
14 Managers in engineering, architect., sci., and info. systems	1.82	0.30	Management occupations
15 Therapy and assessment professionals	1.59	0.47	Health occupations
16 Pharmacists, dietitians, and nutritionists	1.37	0.30	Health occupations
16 Social and community service professional	1.37	1.07	Education, law, and social, community, and gov’t services
16 Other technical occupations in health care	1.37	1.08	Health occupations
16 Assisting occupations in support of health services	1.37	2.46	Health occupations
16 General office workers	1.37	4.05	Business, finance, and administration

and nearly 12 percent (57) find other creative ways to financially support their children's education. Others rely on the help of others. Some 5.4 percent (24 of 447) of families receive a bursary, ranging from \$500 to \$9,000, and 6.4 percent (29 of 452) receive financial support from another source, like grandparents. Interestingly, many parents referred to the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), which is a government direct deposit of up to \$456.75 per month per child (Canada Revenue Agency 2018). For many parents, the CCB is around the cost of tuition, so from their perspective, CCB assists in their ability to pay for it.

Interestingly, when asked at the end of the parent questionnaire if there is a particular story, experience, or reason for choosing and staying with their independent school, to help others better understand their choice, many parents wrote about paying for tuition. This was surprising, as tuition prices were expected to be relatively inelastic, and therefore not front of mind. However, the opposite is likely true. Because BC independent school parents are quite price sensitive and would be forced to migrate to public school if tuition increased even moderately (Kamin & Erickson, 1981), they are keenly aware of their independent school's value and are motivated to sacrifice to afford it. The fact that multiple respondents wrote, "worth every penny," is likely because multiple other parents wrote, "I would never trade [my children's independent schooling] with anything else." This study did not measure willingness to pay, but the survey results clearly reveal that independent school parents are willing to make almost any sacrifice to ensure their children receive such an education. For example, other parents wrote the following:

"While in the beginning we were quite concerned about cost versus benefit, it's no longer even a remote concern. We just make it work."

"The personal financial sacrifice and challenges the school faces with transportation, volunteer support, and funding are far outweighed by the value we receive from our Independent School."



"Despite having to make several changes and cut backs to our life style, it is well worth it."

"While the tuition isn't always easy to pay, we have always felt it was worth it to have a school for our children that teaches our family and faith based values and creates a positive learning environment where they feel safe, loved and respected."

"I felt that I went to public school and turned out just fine, so I would NEVER pay for schooling, but in seeing my child attend her first year of school in a public school in a K/1 split class, I learned public school has changed a lot in 20+ yrs

and within 5 months put her on the waitlist for one of the private schools in town.”

“It seems like every independent school is simply better to educate my kids than public school. I will happily spend \$250/mo to ensure that happens.”

FAMILY

Of independent school households, 91 percent are two-parent families compared to 73 percent of BC households with children (Statistics Canada 2017a). In the sample, 75 percent and 89 percent of parents with children in non-religious and religious independent schools, respectively, are married compared to 66 percent of BC families with children (Statistics Canada 2011).¹⁰ Fully 6 percent and 4 percent of respective non-religious and religious school parents are common-law, compared to 8 percent of BC families with children (Statistics Canada 2011). Lone-parent households are well below the 27 percent provincial average (Statistics Canada 2017a), at 19 percent and 7 percent of non-religious and religious school families, respectively. However, of the combined 46 lone-parent families in this sample, 38 (83%) were female parents, which mirrors the 80 percent of female lone-parents in the BC Census (Statistics Canada 2017a).

CULTURAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity are defining characteristics of independent school families. Multiple parent respondents took the time to write at the end of the questionnaire about how their independent school’s inclusiveness and diversity were major draws. For example, one parent wrote, “This school supports and role-models diversity, cultural understanding, and positive relationships while achieving among the highest ranked educational standards for the community.” And another stated, “We sought an

environment that would uphold our family’s values for manners, respect and inclusion.”

Independent school families are far more diverse than typical British Columbians. Beginning with linguistic diversity, independent school parents’ first language is 1.5 times more likely to be foreign, and they are 2.4 times more likely to speak a foreign language most often at home (Statistics Canada 2017b). Forty-one percent of independent school parents have a mother tongue other than English compared to 27.5 of British Columbians. Of the twenty-three first languages represented in the sample, Chinese-Cantonese and Chinese-Mandarin are the most common after English, at 19 percent and 9 percent, respectively. The other first languages are each less than 3 percent of the sample. Of language most often spoken at home, 28 percent speak a foreign language compared to less than 12 percent of British Columbians. Again, led by Chinese-Cantonese (15%) and Chinese-Mandarin (8%), the remaining are each 1 percent or less of respondents, for a survey total of thirteen languages spoken at home most often.

The diverse languages reflect a rich mosaic of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Nearly half (48%) of British Columbia independent school parents were born outside Canada, compared to less than a third (31%) of British Columbians (Statistics Canada 2017a). Thirty-seven percent compared to 30 percent are visible minorities, respectively. Twenty-six percent of independent school parents are Chinese (18% Cantonese, 8% Mandarin) compared to less than 12 percent of British Columbians overall, and over 4 percent are Filipino compared to less than 3.5 percent. Of the thirty-three ethnicities reported in the sample, the remaining are well below 2 percent of respondents, with one exception. Strikingly, independent school parents are nearly three times more likely to describe their ethnicity as “Canadian.” Over 52 percent selected “Canadian” as the ethnicity they most closely identify with, compared to 19 percent of British Columbians in the 2016 Census. Could this

10. In the 2011 and 2016 Censuses, 73.28 percent and 73.02 percent of BC families with children are parented by couples, respectively. The 2011 Census further categorizes into 65.55 percent married and 7.73 percent common-law.

be indicative of national pride? It would be interesting to follow up with questions that further gauge whether this is correlated with a deeper sense of Canadian patriotism.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Of all Canadians, British Columbians are the most active in their community, and yet independent school families have even greater civic engagement. Fully 92 percent of respondents (427 of the 466 that finished the survey) are active in a group, organization, or association compared to 73 percent of British Columbians (Turcotte 2015), and on average, independent school parents are members of at least two groups, organizations, or associations. The most common involvement, at 59 percent of independent school parents and over four times the national average (14%), is with a religious-affiliate group. However, when excluding religious school families, religious-affiliate group membership nearly mirrors the Canadian average, at 13 percent.¹¹ Involvement in a sports or recreation organization was the second highest response in this survey and identical to Statistics Canada's 31 percent (the highest of any group, organization, or association in the General Social Survey). Political party or activist membership was the only other comparable finding, with identical results to Statistics Canada's 4 percent. The remaining categories vary considerably from the General Social Survey. The greatest difference is in youth organizations where independent school parents, at 10 percent of respondents, are twice as active as other Canadians. Fully 27 percent of independent school parents are members of non-union professional organizations, and 22 percent belong to a union for a combined 49 percent, well above the 28 percent in the General Social Survey. Exactly one-quarter of independent school parents are members of a school group, neighbourhood, civic, or community association (e.g., parent-teacher association, alumni association, block parents), compared to 17 percent of Canadians. BC indepen-

dent school parents are almost one-third less likely to be members of cultural, educational, or hobby organizations (14% in this sample, 20% Statistics Canada) and service club, fraternity, or sorority organizations (4% in this sample, 6% Statistics Canada). The latter is likely reflective of the fact seniors are overrepresented in service clubs, like the Legion (e.g., seniors aged 75 and older [11%] are three times more likely than those aged 25–34 years [4%] to be service club members).

In terms of voting, 61 percent (280) of independent school parents participate in every municipal, provincial, and federal election, compared to 36 percent of British Columbians (Slepian 2018; CivicInfo BC 2018). Fully 87 percent (400) vote at least somewhat often. Only 5 percent (25) never vote, which is at least a quarter less than the national average. For context, the highest voter turnout for any federal or BC provincial election was 79.4 percent in the 1958 federal election, and average voter turnout in the last five federal and BC provincial elections was 62.8 percent and 55.5 percent, respectively (Archer 2018; Elections BC n.d.; Elections Canada 2015; 2018). Municipal turnout is rarely over 40 percent (Slepian 2018). Non-religious school parents are slightly more likely than religious school parents to vote in every election, at 63 percent to 61 percent, respectively. This order reverses when including “very often” and “somewhat often” responses. A total of 88 percent of religious school parents vote at least somewhat often, compared to 81.5 percent of non-religious school parents.

The greater likelihood for independent school parents to participate in community organizations and elections is a critical finding. The family culture of independent school households indicates a considerably greater propensity toward a wide variety of active civic engagement. This refutes a common argument made against independents schools, especially religious schools, that adverse social outcomes will result if all students do not receive the same “common school” education, and thus inflict a dangerous and unnecessary risk to our society and democratic

11. Detailed provincial data unavailable.

institutions. Further calming such fears, despite their substantially higher voting participation, independent school parents are neither more nor less likely to be political activists or members of a political party. They are not a political threat to anyone. Not surprisingly, this greater civic engagement confirms a growing body of evidence from North America's largest sample of Christian school graduates and administrators, the Cardus Education Survey (Pennings et al. 2012; 2014; Green et al. 2016; 2018). The latest edition finds that BC independent school graduates are 2.2 times more likely than public schoolers to volunteer, are far more financially generous, and are just as politically active, except for non-religious independent school graduates, who are 3 times more likely to canvass door to door and 1.6 times more likely to vote in municipal elections (Green et al. 2018).

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND PARTICIPATION

A recent study by the Angus Reid Institute (2018) found that only 16 percent of Canadians identify as non-religious. Although this is much lower than the 2011 National Household Survey, it is almost identical to the survey results. A total of 85 percent (390) of our survey participants reported a religious

affiliation and 15 percent (69) selected "None." Fully 68 percent (313) of respondents selected Christian (non-Catholic) as their religious affiliation, which by school category is 36 percent and 73 percent of respective non-religious and religious school families. More specifically, 15 percent of independent school parents identify as Catholic, identical to the BC average in the National Household Survey. By school category this is 14 percent and 15.4 percent of non-religious and religious school survey families, respectively. The share of practicing Jews, at 1 percent, exactly matches the national average and is representative of the BC independent school population. However, this sample contains only one Sikh, one Hindu, and no Muslim or Buddhist families, despite multiple outreaches to secure participation from a representative base. Interestingly, 51.6 percent of non-religious independent school families are religious, and 9.6 percent of religious school families are non-religious. These are two surprising findings. In other words, the majority of non-religious school families are in fact religious, and religious schools are not exclusive but welcome non-religious students.

This is further echoed in open-ended responses. A parent participant wrote, "Our [Catholic] school community includes approximately 50 percent non-Catholic families. One of the best lessons our kids learn is to treat people with love and respect regardless of differences, and this is possible because they are shown love and respect even though they are different." The feeling of being "welcome," "accepted," "cared for," and a "part of the community" regardless of background was one of parent respondents' most commonly expressed sentiments. For example, one parent wrote, "We have never felt judged or unwelcome." Here are a few more examples of parents' praising this tolerance in their independent schools:

"We are not religious . . . [but] we heard about [this Catholic school] and how accepting they are of non-religious families."

"We appreciate the compassion and empathy that our [Catholic] school teaches and the sense



of community that they foster, [as] we are not a practicing Catholic family.”

“We are not an actively religious family, but I have no problem with [my children] learning about religion and they seem to enjoy it as well.”

“It was important for us to have our kids in a school with a variety of different family backgrounds, beliefs.”

“Our school educates on other faiths and cultural beliefs but allows the children to remain unbiased in their exploration through them, making it ok to keep their Christian roots.”

In terms of commitment, the intensity of religious belief is strongest among Christian (non-Catholic) respondents and those with children in a religious school. A total of 85 percent of Christians (non-Catholic) state that their religious beliefs are very important to the way they live their lives, compared to 33 percent and 40 percent among Catholics and Jews, respectively. Adding “very” and “somewhat important” responses together, 96 percent of Christian (non-Catholic), 77 percent of Catholic, and 100 percent of Jewish participants indicate that their religious beliefs are at least somewhat important to the way they live their lives. Comparing school types, 76.4 percent of religious school families and 51.5 percent of non-religious school families report that their religious beliefs are very important to the way they live their lives. Within both school types, Christian (non-Catholic) respondents are the most likely to state that their religious beliefs are very important to the way they live their lives, at 56.5 percent and 87 percent of non-religious and religious school families.

This religious commitment is evident in how often one attends religious services and participates in religious activities at home. Fully 78 percent of Christian (non-Catholic) participants attend religious services at least once a week (excluding special

occasions like weddings, funerals, and baptisms), compared to 26 percent of Catholics. None of the parents with another religious affiliation attend weekly. Christians (non-Catholic) in this sample attend religious services most frequently for both non-religious and religious schools, at 47.8 percent and 80 percent, respectively. Similarly, 81 percent of Christian (non-Catholic) respondents participate in religious activities at home at least once a week (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, worship), compared to 51 percent and 40 percent of Catholic and Jewish respondents, respectively. Interestingly, exactly two-thirds of Catholic respondents enrolled at non-religious schools participate at least weekly in religious activities at home, compared to 56.5 percent of non-Catholic Christians and 49 percent of Catholics at religious schools. The Sikh and Hindu participants reported participating once or twice in religious activities at home in the past twelve months, and Catholics were the most likely to report not at all participating in religious activities in the past twelve months, at 21 percent. As alluded to, this rises by two percentage points among those who attend religious school, with 23 percent of Catholic respondents with children in religious school having not participated in religious activities at home in the past twelve months, compared to 4 percent of Christian (non-Catholic) and none from the other religious respondents at religious schools.

SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL MOBILITY

Of 537 participating families, 47 percent (253) previously enrolled in another school. Of the total, 35 percent (186) have had at least one child attend public school at some point (compared to 32% in Van Pelt et al.’s 2007 sample), 6 percent (31) have homeschooled, and the remaining 60 percent (320) have only attended independent schools (versus Van Pelt et al.’s 68%).¹² Non-religious school families are the most likely to have had children previously attend another school, at 68.6 percent (36 out of 48

12. Due to rounding, the sum exceeds 100 percent.

families) compared to 44 percent of religious school families (205 of 467). Fully 60 percent of non-religious school families (48) have had a child attend public school, accounting for 87.5 percent of non-religious school mobility. Of religious school families who switched schools, 70 percent (144) did so from the public system. Combined, of the 253 total families who previously enrolled elsewhere, 73.5 percent (186) have had children attend public school. This is critically important. Of families currently enrolled in independent school, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from public school.

In summary, the findings reveal interesting contrasts between independent school parents and other British Columbians. The overwhelming majority of independent school parents attended public school, so their children are “first generation” independent schoolers. And of families currently enrolled in independent school, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from public school. Moreover, British Columbia independent schools, more than public schools, emulate the Canadian mosaic of belonging, tolerance, and diversity.



PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Van Pelt et al.’s surveying of the North American literature revealed sixty-one independent school characteristics (Van Pelt et al. 2007) that through testing were refined for this study to forty-seven. The questionnaire asks respondents, on a four-point scale for each, the extent to which they agree or disagree that it influenced their school choice. Additionally, we ask about external influencers, the most important reason (which can be outside the forty-seven), and how satisfied parents are with their school. This section presents the findings with the analysis of why parents choose BC independent schools.

RANKING FORTY-SEVEN REASONS WHY PARENTS CHOOSE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

Van Pelt et al. (2007) ranked Ontario independent school parents’ top ten reasons based solely on “Very Important” responses. However, the rankings vary greatly—overall and by school type—when “Somewhat Important,” “Somewhat Unimportant,” and “Not Important” responses are factored in. For example, when ranking based solely on very important responses, “This school has outstanding quality teachers” ranks a low seventeenth, even though 98 percent reported it as at least somewhat important and only 1 percent believe it was not important to their decision. Similarly, “This school teaches right from wrong” has the fifth most “Very Important” responses but is only very important to 61.5 percent of non-religious school parents and has the most “Not Important” or “Somewhat Unimportant” responses of all but one of the top twenty (when ranking by “Very Important”). These are two of many examples. Thus, to better reflect the full spectrum the responses of “Very” and “Somewhat Important” were added together and the combined responses of “Somewhat Unimportant” and “Not Important” were subtracted, giving double weight to the strong-intensity sentiment of “Very Important” and

“Not Important.” In table 6, further weighting is shown by the provincial distribution of each school type (31 percent weighting for the share of non-religious school students [when excluding First Nation and distributed learning students], 69 percent religious). After applying these weights, “outstanding quality teachers” moves up the rankings from seventeenth to tenth, and “teaches right from wrong” falls from fifth to fourteenth.

Using this weighting, table 6 presents the overall top twenty, and table 7 and table 8 present the top ten for non-religious and religious school respon-

dents, respectively. Ranking first overall, “This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students” is the only response ranked in the top five across school type. “This is a safe school” ranks second overall and first for religious school families. Ranking third both overall and for religious schools, as well as eighth for non-religious schools, “This school emphasizes character development.” Fourth overall, second for non-religious schools, and tenth for religious schools, “This school instills confidence in the students.” And rounding off the overall top five is “We trust the curriculum at this school” (TABLES 6 + 7 + 8).

TABLE 6: Top twenty ranking of important characteristics in choosing current independent school

	Question: “This school . . .”	Weighted	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	offers a supportive, nurturing environment	93.3%	412	89.0%	46	9.9%	2	0.4%	3	0.7%	463
2	is a safe school	90.5%	412	89.4%	40	8.7%	5	1.1%	4	0.9%	461
3	emphasizes character development	89.7%	394	85.7%	57	12.4%	5	1.1%	4	0.9%	460
4	instills confidence in the students	87.6%	359	78.6%	87	19.0%	6	1.3%	5	1.1%	457
5	has curriculum we trust	87.1%	382	82.7%	67	14.5%	7	1.5%	6	1.3%	462
6	educates the whole child	86.8%	371	81.0%	74	16.2%	7	1.5%	6	1.3%	458
7	motivates students	86.6%	358	78.0%	87	19.0%	10	2.2%	4	0.9%	459
8	is well administered	86.4%	357	77.4%	94	20.4%	5	1.1%	5	1.1%	461
9	students seem happy	85.1%	347	75.6%	99	21.6%	10	2.2%	3	0.7%	459
10	has outstanding quality teachers	84.9%	336	73.0%	114	24.8%	5	1.1%	5	1.1%	460
11	encourages understanding and tolerance	84.0%	348	75.8%	94	20.5%	13	2.8%	4	0.9%	459
12	teaches students to think critically and independently	83.9%	338	73.6%	108	23.5%	9	2.0%	4	0.9%	459
13	values parent-teacher collaboration	81.7%	345	75.0%	98	21.3%	11	2.4%	6	1.3%	460
14	teaches right from wrong	81.5%	374	81.1%	68	14.8%	10	2.2%	9	2.0%	461
15	supports our family’s values	81.1%	374	81.0%	70	15.2%	8	1.7%	10	2.2%	462
16	offers frequent, detailed, and open reporting of student progress to parents	79.9%	303	65.7%	139	30.2%	11	2.4%	8	1.7%	461
17	has a good, long-standing reputation	79.1%	354	76.6%	90	19.5%	10	2.2%	8	1.7%	462
18	emphasizes academic quality	77.2%	293	63.7%	147	32.0%	13	2.8%	7	1.5%	460
19	has good student discipline	76.2%	326	70.7%	111	24.1%	13	2.8%	11	2.4%	461
20	principal provides strong leadership	76.0%	297	65.0%	133	29.1%	16	3.5%	11	2.4%	457

Academic emphasis ranks lower than expected (eighteenth overall, seventeenth non-religious, eighteenth religious), as in Van Pelt et al. (2007): “This school emphasizes academic quality” ranked second and sixth for academically defined and religiously defined schools, respectively. Moreover, it is the underlying assumption in countless studies comparing school results that improving academic performance is the purpose of school choice. Not that academic quality is unimportant, as it ranks in

the top half for both school types, but clearly it is not a primary factor in most BC parents’ independent school choice.

School Safety Also Means Trusting the Curriculum and Staff

School safety and curriculum trust are also interesting findings. “This is a safe school” ranks second

TABLE 7: Non-religious school parents’ top ten ranking of important characteristics

	Question: “This school ...”	Weighted	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	offers a supportive, nurturing environment	93.8%	57	87.7%	8	12.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	65
2	instills confidence in the students	92.3%	57	87.7%	7	10.8%	1	1.5%	0	0.0%	65
3	motivates students	90.8%	53	81.5%	12	18.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	65
4	has outstanding quality teachers	89.2%	51	78.5%	14	21.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	65
5	is well administered	87.7%	52	80.0%	12	18.5%	0	0.0%	1	1.5%	65
5	offers frequent, detailed, and open reporting of student progress to parents	87.7%	52	80.0%	12	18.5%	0	0.0%	1	1.5%	65
7	students seem happy	86.9%	50	76.9%	14	21.5%	1	1.5%	0	0.0%	65
8	emphasizes character development	86.2%	50	76.9%	14	21.5%	0	0.0%	1	1.5%	65
9	teaches students to think critically and independently	85.4%	48	73.8%	16	24.6%	1	1.5%	0	0.0%	65
9	educates the whole child	85.4%	50	76.9%	13	20.0%	2	3.1%	0	0.0%	65

TABLE 8: Religious school parents’ top ten ranking of important characteristics

	Question: “This school ...”	% Weight	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	is a safe school	93.8%	358	90.6%	32	8.1%	3	0.8%	2	0.5%	395
2	offers a supportive, nurturing environment	93.1%	355	89.4%	37	9.3%	2	0.5%	3	0.8%	397
3	emphasizes character development	91.2%	344	87.3%	42	10.7%	5	1.3%	3	0.8%	394
4	supports our family’s values	89.1%	334	84.3%	53	13.4%	3	0.8%	6	1.5%	396
5	teaches right from wrong	88.7%	333	84.3%	51	12.9%	6	1.5%	5	1.3%	395
6	We trust the curriculum at this school	88.5%	330	83.3%	56	14.1%	5	1.3%	5	1.3%	396
7	has a good, long-standing reputation	87.4%	315	79.5%	73	18.4%	5	1.3%	3	0.8%	396
8	educates the whole child	87.4%	321	81.9%	60	15.3%	5	1.3%	6	1.5%	392
9	is well administered	85.8%	305	77.2%	81	20.5%	5	1.3%	4	1.0%	395
10	instills confidence in the students	85.4%	302	77.2%	79	20.2%	5	1.3%	5	1.3%	391

overall and first for religious school parents, while ranking thirteenth for non-religious school parents, respectively. In Van Pelt et al. (2007) it ranked fourth for both academically defined and religiously defined schools. “We trust the curriculum at this school” ranks fifth overall in this sample. Unlike today, curriculum concerns may well have not been front of mind in 2007 Ontario, so although curriculum trust was included in Van Pelt’s questionnaire, its importance ranked comparatively low.

Based on the literature and Van Pelt et al.’s findings, school safety could be generally understood to refer to a lack of bullying, but safety means much more. Of the 207 families who changed schools and have “safe school” as a very important (88%) or somewhat important (12%) consideration in their decision, 58 percent (120) have concerns with both the curriculum and the teachers or administration at their last school, while only 47 percent (98) have concerns with bullying. Of the 381 overall respondents with trusting the curriculum as a very important factor in choosing their independent school, 99 percent (378) also have “safe school” as a very important (360) or somewhat important (18) consideration. Conversely, 98.5 percent (406) of those who believe “safe school” is a very important factor also have “We trust the curriculum at this school” as either very important (360) or somewhat important (46) in choosing their independent school.

Reviewing parents’ open-ended responses throughout the questionnaire confirms this relationship between safety and curriculum. Many parents raised curriculum concerns, ranging from its being too boring and unchallenging to the inappropriateness of sexual education lessons asking elementary students to role-play. The content and manner in which the sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) teacher resources were introduced was the most frequently mentioned curriculum issue. One parent wrote, “Lots of people do not agree with the current curriculum. Feels like whoever is mandating the public school curriculum is out of touch on what the student needs in order to learn and succeed.” Another wrote,

We always supported the public school system and had absolutely no intention of switching to an independent school until last year. I volunteered my time and served on the PAC executive team at our local elementary school for all the years that my kids were there. It was important for us to have our kids in a school with a variety of different family backgrounds, beliefs etc. However, I was so shocked and saddened when I saw the new SOGI curriculum teacher resources on the BCTF website and felt it was very sneaky how it appeared there without any open discussions or information sent home to parents about it. So we lost the trust that we once held in the public school system, unfortunately. . . . We appreciated many aspects of it, such as being inclusive, awareness and history, but were so disturbed by much of the actual content and lesson plans in the resources.

Many parents also raised safety concerns around public school teachers and administration. One family attends their independent school because of “a poor experience with a veteran teacher in the public system that the principal of the school could not or would not deal with because of the seniority of the teacher and the teachers’ union.” Another wrote, “In the public school they attended, my children were fearful of their teachers and this affected their ability to learn.” Similarly, another stated,

Our son has learning disabilities and was falling farther and farther behind in the public school system. By the end of Grade 5 he was still unable to read and was rapidly losing interest in learning altogether. His Grade 5 teacher was awful, punishing him regularly for his inability to work and keep up, even though he was not disruptive.

Even worse, one sadly wrote, “While in public school in K and Gr 1 our child was subjected to abuse by the teacher and principal.” Another said, “Too many teachers turned a blind eye to bad behaviour in school or on the playground. I want my child to feel safe in school.” This survey recorded many more stories like this.

Disappointment with Public Schools

Of the 157 survey families who left public school, 72 percent (113) identified curriculum concerns as very important (79) or somewhat important (34) in choosing their current independent school. More generally, 80 percent (125) of parents who have had a child in public school express disappointment with public schools as either a very important (87) or somewhat important (38) reason for choosing their current independent school. Forty-one percent (65) of them would not go back to the public system, if their child was not enrolled in their current independent school.

Parents wrote at length about their disappointment with the public school system, much more so than most other topics. The issues range from practical ones—“Our child was struggling in the public system and did not have access to assistances or speciality tools to help them succeed at school”—to deeply personal ones—“Our daughter was very disappointed with how her public school dealt with . . . bullying [and] mental health issues.” One parent’s story was so graphic it is inappropriate to repeat, but after detailing the most troubling of experiences, she concludes, “No daughter of mine will ever attend a public school again!!!” Another parent wrote, “My youngest daughter was bullied so severely at public school,” and another simply stated, “public school was horrible for my son.” One shared, “At the public school where we started out, my then primary aged children frequently came home expressing very negative feelings about how they were being treated by other children.” And further illustrating this point,

My son attended public school K, 1, and 2. He was miserable. Hated going to school and often cried in the morning before going. He came home with his sleeve soaked because he would suck on it from anxiety. When speaking to the teachers, they said he was doing “fine,” was never a behavioural problem, and they had no concerns. They did not care that he was miserable. He was becoming a smaller person, less confident, and more anxious. Fine is not my goal for him—I want him to

thrive. So we went on a quest to find an alternative school . . . within three months at [our independent school] he was a different child—thriving, finding his confidence. His anxiety went away. I don’t even want to think where he would be had we kept him in the same setting. Six years later he is a confident, happy, well adjusted teen who is thriving at school.

For others, it is not that public school was “horrible” or “miserable” but rather that it simply failed to meet parents’ and students’ basic education expectations. For example,

In a large public school, we had almost no communication with teachers (unless we initiated it). [My daughter] was bored, and teachers were uninspiring, ill-informed or in one case, inappropriate and bullying. She became increasingly anxious, depressed, and school avoidant in grade nine. The academic standards were minimal, and despite her low attendance, she still got straight As. No one at school seemed to notice what was going on with her. [By the way,] this is the most highly regarded high school in our district! That is when/why we started looking at alternatives.

But the final example speaks to the contrast between the culture toward parents at public and independent schools.

At the public school, we parents were not allowed to enter the classrooms and were encouraged to leave right away after the bell rang. My daughter was not allowed a long list of items to bring for lunch including yogurt and anything else that may be messy. She could not bring in a pencil case and did not have a desk. Parents were kept at arms-length and rarely did the teacher have time to talk, nor did we have access to the teacher by telephone or email. The Principal and Vice Principal were not visible. I didn’t even know what they looked like.

Then we were interviewed to start at the independent school. It was the complete opposite. It was

inviting, my daughter not only was allowed to bring her own pencil case but had her own desk with her name on it. The parents were encouraged to stay in the classrooms for 5–15 minutes to let their children settle in and to meet the other parents. The teachers had blogs, and we were encouraged to meet with teachers and email them. The Principal and Vice Principals supervised student drop-off and pick-up in the parking lots and knew the names of all the [hundreds of] children in the school. They were also regularly found walking the halls and talking to the parents.

Basically we went from being a number to having a name. We felt welcomed and part of a community at the independent school. What a huge difference and well worth the extra drive and every penny!

What Was Not Important

Some of the forty-seven factors have little importance to parents. Of the bottom five, knowing other families at the school or having relatives attend it rank forty-third and last (forty-seventh), respectively, and are not important or somewhat unimportant to 45 percent and 61 percent of independent school parents, respectively. “This school is less expensive than others we considered” ranks forty-fifth, as it is not important or somewhat unimportant to 55 percent of parents and only very important to 17 percent. Finally, the school being geographically close to home or having convenient transportation options rank forty-fourth and forty-sixth, respectively, at 54 percent and 62 percent combined not important and somewhat unimportant sentiment. Having convenient transportation options is very important to less than 16 percent of parents.

THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR CHOOSING AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

When asked open-endedly the most important consideration in choosing their independent school, 43 percent (176) gave a single reason. For the remaining 57 percent (237), it was a combination of factors, so the data needed to be organized before analysis could occur. Of 413 responses, 883 different reasons were given, which were collapsed into 62 categories before scoring.¹³

Of the sixty-two open-ended categories, table 9 shows a ranking of the top twenty. Excluding responses with religious references, the top “most important” reason is identical to the top ranking characteristic in table 6: “This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students.” Including all responses, by far the most common “most important” reason parents choose their independent school is because it “reinforces our faith or religious beliefs.” With a score of 69, this is the top consideration for exactly one out of six respondents (16.7%) and represents 7.8 percent of the 883 different responses. Ranking second, forty-nine responses state that their most important consideration is that the education is religious or faith-based. This is a separate category from the former, as wanting a religious education is very different from an education that “reinforces” one’s religious beliefs. Similarly, forty-eight responses (third) make specific reference to the fact the school is Christian. Again, this is a separate category, as the reason for choosing a Christian school is not necessarily to reinforce parents’ faith or to receive a religious education. Other “Christian” factors—like the sense of community, atmosphere, caring teachers, safety—may be the priority. From one-word responses to lengthy paragraphs, the rationales for choosing a “Christian” school vary heavily, so it is its own category. “Supports our

13. Explicit reasons were given a score of 1, and implicit reasons a half score. For example, one parent wrote the most important thing was, “[The] safety of my children’s spiritual, emotional and physical well being so that they can flourish in their strengths and grow in their weaknesses.” Explicitly, “safe school” and “educates the whole child” were each given a score of 1. Implicitly, three things were alluded to and, therefore, given a half point each: “recognizes/encourages/fosters student success,” “individualized attention/recognizes uniqueness,” and “character development.” The average respondent gave two reasons, with a median and mean score per respondent of 2.0 and 2.1, respectively, and a max and min of 9.0 and 0, respectively (if respondents said “everything,” they scored 0).

family’s values” (fifth) and “Values” (seventh) are also different and, thus, counted separately, with scores of 41 and 39, respectively. A final example of this is respondents who include both values and religious references in the same response; the two are counted separately as they are different things. This approach applies to all 883 responses and the entire list of sixty-two categories. The one exception is small class size and small school, as most responses including either allude to both (TABLE 9).

It is interesting to note the difference in rank between a large list of important characteristics (table 6) and “the most important” characteristic (table 9). The top two table 6 rankings—“This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students” and “This is a safe school,” respectively—fall to fourth and ninth in table 9. They are important to almost everyone, but

not necessarily the most important. Similarly, 98 percent of parents believe it is important that the school is well administered, ranking eighth in table 6, but less than 1 percent consider it most important. There are many examples of this, most notably student motivation and reporting student progress to parents, which rank seventh and sixteenth in table 6, respectively. But “this school motivates students” is most important to only 1 percent of parents, and no parent’s top reason is related to reporting. Conversely, “This school reinforces our faith or religious beliefs” ranks thirty-ninth in the table 6 dataset (too low to even appear in the table) but rises to first in table 9. Even in religious schools, this is not a high-ranking consideration, but it is the single most important factor by a considerable margin. Likewise, “This school emphasizes academic quality” climbs from eighteenth in table 6 to sixth in table 9. Although it

TABLE 9: Top twenty “most important” considerations in choosing current independent school

	Summary of Specific Response	Score	Share of Responses	Share of Respondents
1	“Reinforces” our faith or religious beliefs	69	7.8%	16.7%
2	Religious, or faith-based, education	49	5.5%	11.9%
3	“Christian”	48	5.4%	11.6%
4	Supportive, nurturing environment for students / “Atmosphere”	42	4.8%	10.2%
5	Supports our family’s values	41	4.6%	9.9%
6	Academics	39	4.4%	9.4%
7	“Values”	39	4.4%	9.4%
8	Individualized attention / “Treated as an individual” / “Recognizes uniqueness”	37	4.2%	9.0%
9	Safe school / “Safety” / “trust”	29.5	3.3%	7.1%
10	“Quality education” / “Excellence” / “Good, strong education”	29	3.3%	7.0%
11	Accommodates particular needs of our child(ren)	27	3.1%	6.5%
12	Community / sense of belonging / “good peers”	25.5	2.9%	6.2%
13	Small class sizes / “Small school” / “No class splits”	25	2.8%	6.1%
14	Issues with public school	24	2.7%	5.8%
15	Curriculum	21	2.4%	5.1%
16	Educates the whole child / “well-rounded”	17.5	2.0%	4.2%
17	Teaches right from wrong / “Morals”	16.5	1.9%	4.0%
18	Character development	16	1.8%	3.9%
19	Teachers care / “responsible,” “genuine”	15.5	1.8%	3.8%
20	Religion / Religious reasons	15	1.7%	3.6%

is overall less important than expected, it is still the top priority for over 9 percent of parents. To those who believe academics or the family faith are very important, it is more likely than other preferences to be the most important consideration in their school choice.

However, although the distinctiveness in table 9 provides interesting and critical insights, many of the sixty-two most important reasons can naturally be grouped together for a more generalized analysis. Table 10 ranks a curated short list of general reasons. Here, the four religious-reference categories and three values-reference categories are combined (and controlled for double-counting). This process applies to the entire list of sixty-two, resulting in five like-to-like combinations. The remaining categories are under “Other.” The most important general reason for choosing an independent school is the family’s values or religion (23.7% of reasons given, and reported by 50.5% of respondents), followed by student experience (20.4% of reasons, mentioned in 43.5% of responses), academics or “quality/good education” third (7.5%, 15.9%), then teachers (6.1%, 12.9%), and finally, public school issues (4.0%, 8.5%) (TABLE 10).

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON PARENTS’ CHOICE

Another reason why parents choose a particular independent school is the sources that influence their decision. As shown in table 11, “Friends or relatives” is by far the most common response to both how parents first heard about the school and what source(s) strongly influenced their choice, at 42 percent (194 of 461) and 26 percent (243 out of 936), respectively. Second most common for both is “Other word-of-mouth,” at 18 percent (82) and 17 percent (163), respectively. The fifth most common way of hearing about a school and third strongest influence are school ranking or review websites (e.g., CompareSchoolRankings.org), at under 7 percent (31) and 15 percent (141), respectively. In fifty-seven families, at least one parent attended the school

TABLE 10: Five “most important” general reasons in choosing current independent school

	Most Important Reason	Score	Share of Reasons	Share of Responses
1	Values or religion	209.0	23.7%	50.5%
2	Student experience	180.0	20.4%	43.5%
3	Academics	66.0	7.5%	15.9%
4	Teachers	53.5	6.1%	12.9%
5	Public school reference (negative)	35.0	4.0%	8.5%
–	Other	339.5	38.4%	82.0%
–	Total	883.0	100.0%	213.3%

as a youth, accounting for 9 percent (40) of initial discovery and 6 percent of strong influences (57). Ranked fourth for both is a house of worship (e.g., church, temple, synagogue), at over 8 percent (39) and under 12 percent, respectively. Google search is the sixth most common method of discovery, and the school’s official website is the fifth strongest influence, at under 7 percent (30) and over 6 percent (58), respectively (TABLE 11).

SATISFACTION

On a scale from one to ten, 59 percent (264 of 446) are “10/10” extremely likely to recommend their children’s independent school to a friend, neighbour, or colleague. And 17.5 percent (78) and 14.6 percent (65) selected 9/10 and 8/10, respectively. Combined, over 91 percent (407) are likely to promote their school. Only 8 percent (36) are passive (5/10 to 7/10), with less than 1 percent (3) unlikely to recommend their independent school. The lowest response was 2/10 (1).

This high parent-satisfaction rate is reflected in how parents’ involvement with their children’s education has changed. Since switching from public to independent school, 54 percent communicate more often with teachers (94 more often minus 7 less often, of

160), 47 percent participate in or attend school activities more often (85 more often minus 10 less often, of 159), 35.6 percent volunteer at the school or in community service more (74 more often minus 17 less often, of 160), and 22 percent make use of on-line educational resources more often (54 more often minus 19 less often, of 159).

Open-endedly, here are a few of the parent respondents' comments relating their independent school satisfaction:

“On a drive home, my son said, ‘I really love my school, daddy. I didn’t think I could like school like I do now.’”

“I don’t think I deserve such well mannered kids. It’s all because of the wonderful teachers that pour their love out into these youngsters. You bet I am going to recommend this school to anyone who has kids.”

“After six years of frustration in schooling, we feel like we finally have a place where partnership between parents, teachers and administrators is a reality, not just an ideal.”

“We have so appreciated willingness of the teachers to really communicate and work side by side with us to problem solve hard things while still holding standards of excellence.”

TABLE 11: How parents discovered the school and what influenced their choice

External Influence	First heard about school through ...		Source(s) that strongly influenced choice	
Friends or relatives	194	42.1%	243	26.0%
Other word-of-mouth	82	17.8%	163	17.4%
A school ranking or review site (e.g. CompareSchoolRankings.org, etc.)	31	6.7%	141	15.1%
Church / temple / synagogue / etc.	39	8.5%	108	11.5%
The school's official website	0	0.0%	58	6.2%
Parent attended school	40	8.7%	57	6.1%
Visited the school (e.g. Open house, tour, school orientation, met with principal, etc.)	0	0.0%	34	3.6%
Other educational institution (e.g. Pre-school, daycare, other independent school, etc.)	12	2.6%	30	3.2%
Other	8	1.7%	26	2.8%
Google search	30	6.5%	15	1.6%
Community event	2	0.4%	12	1.3%
Other internet source	8	1.7%	10	1.1%
Issues with public school	0	0.0%	9	1.0%
A school association website (e.g. CAIS, FISA, etc.)	2	0.4%	7	0.7%
Other community organization	1	0.2%	7	0.7%
Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	1	0.2%	5	0.5%
Newspaper/magazine	1	0.2%	5	0.5%
Location / we (or caregiver) live nearby	2	0.4%	3	0.3%
Parent works/worked at or near the school	8	1.7%	2	0.2%
Flyer/brochure or direct mail	0	0.0%	1	0.1%
Total	461	100%	936	100%

“We are so grateful to have such a stellar team caring for the interests of our child.”

“We are very, very happy there.”

“The school has changed our lives and our whole family is less stressed and happier.”

“The transformation since starting at the independent school part way through grade six has been amazing.”

“My daughter spent one day at the school. She is a school non-liker. After the one day there, she asked if she could finish her school year at the independent school. I then interviewed as many parents from that school who were willing to talk with me. We relocated, left friends and my job, so my daughter could attend this school.”

“I credit everything to this school!”

OTHER NOTEWORTHY OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

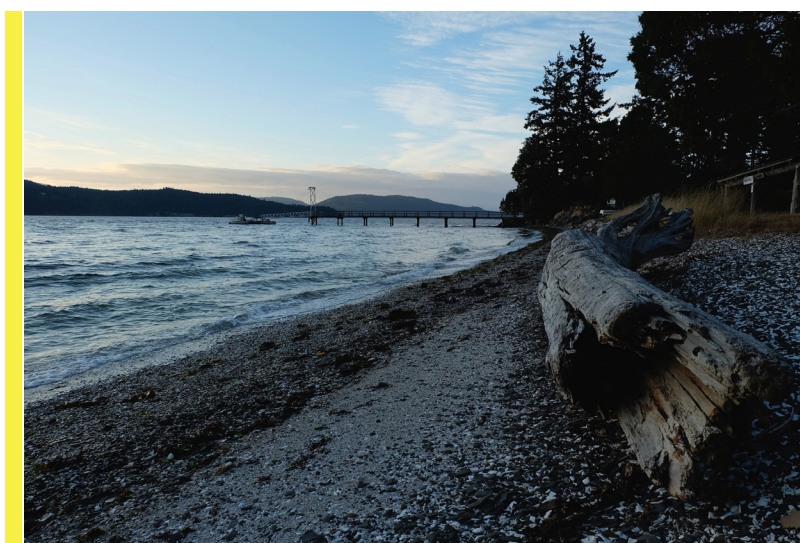
Additionally, it is worth noting that when, at the end of the survey, parents were asked, “Is there a particular story about your family’s experience with this school, or reasons for choosing and staying with this school, that you would like to share with us?” praise for independent school teachers dominated these open-ended responses, followed by “a sense of community / feels like family / it’s a home away from home.” But perhaps most uniquely, parents revealed, “It is also an environment where all of the kids play together, no matter what age they are. I grew up being scared of the older kids in school, but it is not like that at this school.” At least three more parents specifically articulated this:

“What school do you see grade 8 students lowering a basketball hoop at recess so a kindergartener can take a shot? This sort of mentorship of older kids happens organically all of the time.”

“A sense of community. You see it in the playground everyday. The big kids take care of and play with the little kids.”

“My children are well supported and loved by the schoolmates.”

In summary, parents first heard about their school and were influenced in their decision primarily through friends, relatives, and various other word-of-mouth, and they chose their independent school for a multitude of diverse reasons. However, virtually all independent school parents have the following in common: Their independent school offers a supportive and nurturing environment that is motivating for and instills confidence in students, thanks to outstanding teachers and excellent administration. This is especially true of non-religious independent school families, as the aforementioned are their specific top five priorities. Those who choose religious schools would agree, but they also emphasize the importance of faith, school safety, character development, trustworthy curriculum, morals, and values. Whereas, non-religious school parents’ additional priorities are frequent, detailed, and open reporting of student progress to parents; the happiness of students; character development; critical thinking; and whole-child education. Non-religious independent school families are also more likely to have tried public school. However, both expressed considerable dissatisfaction with public schools. Conversely, 91 percent are so



satisfied with their independent school that they are strongly likely to recommend it. In conclusion, both non-religious and religious independent schools offer high-quality education by adding value in different ways. Accurately echoing Van Pelt et al. (2007), religious schools provide “specific enculturation functions” and non-religious independent schools emphasize individualized enrichment.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

British Columbia’s independent schools serve diverse religious, cultural, and regional communities, as well as meet the demand for pedagogical variety and emphases unmet by public schools. Consequently, independent schools meet more than just students’ educational needs. If “diversity is our strength,” independent schools are an integral element of the Canadian social fabric. This is why educational choice is so important. Every student, family, and school is different, and students’ needs and parents’ preferences are better met at independent schools than public

schools. Put differently: Too few public schools meet the diverse needs, values, and preferences of students and parents.

The experience of one of the parent-survey respondents best summarizes the need for school choice and independently managed education:

The transformation in my kids was almost instantaneous. Comments like “the teachers actually want to help you” and “no one ever gets mad at me or yells at me anymore” was proof of what we were getting. In the public school they attended my children were fearful of their teachers and this affected their ability to learn. My older son who was told he was weak at math is suddenly able to participate in an advance placement math program because of the nurturing environment. My younger son is still struggling to catch up to where he should be in both math and English writing, but at least he is on his way and receiving the support he needs to get there.

The purpose of the British Columbia K–12 school system is stated in the School Act (Legislative Assembly of the Province of British Columbia 1996): “to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.” This goal is best realized in a democratic and pluralistic fashion, where individual potential, knowledge, skills, and healthy attitudes are best nurtured—namely, in an education system that includes a diversity of participants and providers including independent schools. The 91 percent of highly satisfied independent school parents agree: Their independent school offers a supportive and nurturing environment that is motivating for and instills confidence in students, thanks to outstanding teachers and excellent administration.



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