



How educational choice saved Alberta taxpayers \$1.9 billion and supports student success

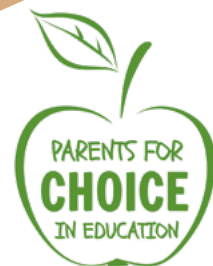
Parents for Choice in Education and
the Canadian Taxpayers Federation

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Executive Summary

Education choice in Alberta saves taxpayers money. Over the eight years analyzed in this report, the existence of education options outside of government schools in Alberta saved taxpayers over \$1.9 billion.

In Alberta, parents have a plethora of choices on how to educate their children: public/government, separate/Catholic, francophone, charter, independent/private, home education and depending on circumstances, e.g., if one is on a reserve, education funded by the federal government for an on-reserve education (Alberta 2015a). The enrollment numbers in the province show that Alberta students and families are increasingly choosing education options outside of government public schools.

In 2017/18, Alberta schools of every variety, including public, separate, charter, independent and home education served over 719,000 children. The figures included:

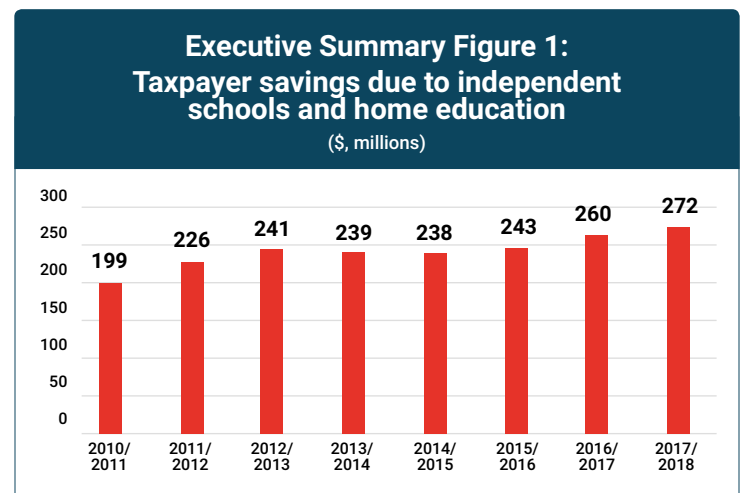
- 671,853 in public schools^a—483,661 in the main “public” system, 168,687 public separate (Catholic), along with 8,398 public-francophone and 9,530 in charter schools.
- 11,766 students enrolled in home education.
- 30,552 students enrolled in independent/private schools.

In 2017/18, a conservative estimate of the public system cost to taxpayers—including instruction, operations and transportation but excluding governance, program support and basic education program costs—amounted to \$10,801 per student. In contrast, because independent/private schools receive less funding per student relative to the public system, and charge school enrollment fees to parents to compensate for the shortfall, the cost to taxpayers for students in independent schools was \$5,404 per student, or about half the

public-school cost. The cost to taxpayers per home-schooled student was even less, at just \$1,671.

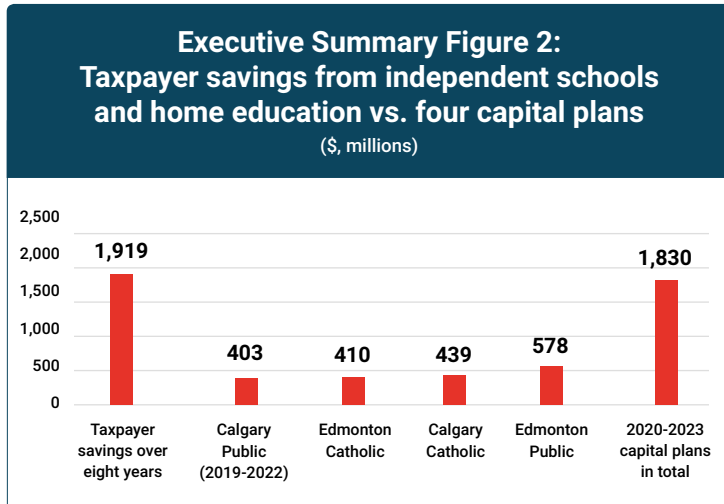
In 2017/18, if all students enrolled in independent and home education instead attended government public schools, the extra cost to taxpayers—and the provincial education budget—would have been \$272 million (\$165 million for students in independent schools and \$107 million for home educated students). Over the eight years analyzed in this report (2010/11 to 2017/18 inclusive), the existence of independent and home education has saved taxpayers over \$1.9 billion.

To put that \$1.9 billion into context, the existing approved three-year capital (infrastructure) plans for the four largest school divisions (Edmonton Public, Edmonton Catholic, Calgary Public, and Calgary Catholic) amount to \$1.83 billion. Thus, the \$1.9 billion saved over eight years due to the existence of independent schools and home education is greater than the money needed for all requested capital projects by those four school divisions over the next three years.



Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

^aFor the purposes of this report, the overarching category of “public” includes the categories of public, separate, francophone, and charter schools. This also parallels how the province of Alberta categorizes such students when categorized by enrolment.



Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; Calgary Catholic School District 2019; Calgary Board of Education (2018); Edmonton Catholic Schools (2019); Edmonton Public Schools (undated); calculations by Joel Emes and Mark Milke.

The benefits of education choice extend well beyond the significant financial savings to taxpayers. Funding support for education choice makes it possible for students from lower and middle-income families to access a range of education options outside of government public schools. Expanding access to educational choice also honours the diversity of students and taxpayers in the province, allowing more children access to an education that meets their unique needs. Empirical evidence shows that education choice improves student performance, supporting Alberta students toward future success. By pursuing education choice policies, the Alberta government is fostering the development of independent minds and supporting the basic parental right to as much choice as is sensible and possible in their children’s education.

Introduction and purpose of this report

Does equitable funding for education choice outside of government schools save taxpayer dollars?^b The short answer is yes, funding education choice in Alberta saves taxpayers money. The existence of funding support for independent schools and home education in the province has saved the government \$1.9 billion over eight years.

It is often asserted that the presence of private/independent schools “cost” the government public-school system money. This assertion recognizes that government payments are already made to independent schools at only a portion of the government public school base instruction rate (60 per cent to 70 per cent depending on the private school type) (Alberta undated). The conclusion from some is that these funds are “diversions” from government schools. The implied policy end, at least from selected critics, is that education choice should not exist, or at least, should not be funded with tax dollars.

For example, the Alberta Teachers’ Association has long opposed any funding for private schools. In 1998 the ATA demanded that the province terminate funding for independent schools (ATA 1998). In 2015, the ATA’s president, Mark Ramsankar argued against any taxpayer funding for independent/private schools, arguing that the government shouldn’t be “supplementing private education for a select few” (Metro News, 2015). Former New Democrat Education Critic Deron Bilous said in March 2014 that private schools shouldn’t receive public funding because “You know, we’re draining money from the public system to feed the private system” (Metro News, 2015).

The activism against independent school funding continued under the province’s New Democratic Party government

between 2015 and 2019. In 2017, a coalition of 13 education and union groups, including the ATA, the Edmonton Public School Board and other unions and labour councils, launched a campaign to urge the NDP government to eliminate public funding for independent schools. They argued for the funds to be redirected to government schools (Dhariwal 2017). In 2018, the Alberta Teachers Association argued that “private schools create two-tiered education,” (ATA 2018). The Edmonton Public School Board twice passed motions calling for the NDP government to stop funding independent schools, once in 2016 and again in 2018 (Ramsay 2018). Beyond these campaigns, interest groups in Alberta continued to advocate against the funding of independent schools. That included Public Interest Alberta, which argued that independent school funding should drop to zero (French 2018) and Progress Alberta, which argued that increased funding to private schools “would come at the direct expense of public education” (Progress Alberta 2018). It is noteworthy, however, that even with such public pressure from unions and NDP-friendly organizations, the previous Alberta NDP government still did not eliminate or reduce funding for education choice.^c This may indicate the strong parental (voter) support for the success of these policies and the financial reality that Alberta simply cannot afford shifts to the education funding model that would result in more students entering the public system at a higher cost to taxpayers.

As this report will demonstrate, the benefits of education choice extend well beyond the significant cost savings. Alberta is a diverse province of taxpayers and students with a diverse range of needs, preferences and incomes – and education funding should reflect that reality.

^bThis paper will use the terms government and/or public schools along with independent and/or private schools and alternate the use of each term for two reasons: First, a repetitive use of one term is tiring to the reader. Second, schools owned by governments and mostly run by governments, even at arms-length, are government schools so that term is accurate. Likewise, “independent school” reflects a degree of independence even if some receive government funding.

^cAs of mid-2019, Alberta’s new United Conservative Party government committed to continuing partial funding for independent schools and home education. As noted on the Alberta Education website, “The Government of Alberta recognizes that parents have the right to choose a private school for their children and has provided financial support for private schools since 1967” (Alberta undated). Still, given past positions by some New Democrat opposition critics, its position in government, and the Alberta Teachers’ Association and some school boards, parents in Alberta who value choice in education should not assume a future policy change will never happen, including a reduction in equitable funding for education choice.

Section I

How Alberta's taxpayers saved \$1.9 billion: Independent and home education enrollment

This analysis separates student populations into six main categories: public-government, public-separate, private (K-12), home education, private (ECS)^d and excluded (federal). Only four of these categories, the public (government and separate) and private non-ECS and home education, will be compared on enrollment and funding. A calculation is then made to identify the savings that resulted to the province, given the number of students enrolled in independent schools.

Of note, home education numbers have been separated out from the forthcoming calculations. Home-schooled students and their parents are legally required to coordinate the child's education with an associate public or private school board under the Education Act (Alberta 2012, Section 20(1) (b)). However, their breakout numbers (from other enrolled students) are in Figure 2.

The enrollment numbers

In Alberta, between 2010/11 and 2017/18, the eight-year period analyzed in this report, the province's total student population has increased from 612,226 to 719,889. This is an increase of 107,663 students over eight years (Figure 1). Of note, school enrolment has risen by:

- 14% in public-government
- 22.7% in public-separate
- 21.4% in charter
- 28.9% in independent
- 48.1% in home education
- 49.2% in public-francophone

Thus, of the six options, public-government saw the slowest enrollment growth. Whether fully funded or partially funded, parents are not choosing to enrol their children in public-government schools at the same rate as other schools.

Figure 1: Alberta Student Population by Authority System

	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Public	422,493	424,006	434,424	443,713	455,028	464,519	473,174	483,661
Separate	137,511	140,840	145,663	152,628	158,094	162,654	166,215	168,687
Francophone	5,630	5,945	6,286	6,801	7,353	8,066	8,143	8,398
Charter	7,852	7,847	8,418	8,732	9,131	9,277	9,400	9,530
ECS Private Operator	3,739	4,147	4,617	5,062	5,291	5,689	6,189	6,563
Independent School	23,705	24,937	26,937	28,076	29,400	28,763	29,418	30,552
Provincial	1,367	1,542	1,799	1,742	1,483	1,565	1,670	1,577
Federal - First Nations	9,526	9,631	10,007	10,266	9,836	10,253	9,916	10,314
Federal	403	333	617	791	716	862	765	607
All School & Authorities	612,226	619,228	638,768	657,811	676,332	691,648	704,890	719,889

Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

^dEarly Childhood Services (ECS).



In creating an enrolment summary with three main categories of note—Public, Independent and Home—the enrollment numbers were as follows in 2017/18: 671,853 students enrolled in public/government schools, 30,552 students in private/independent schools and 11,766 in home education (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Alberta Student Population by Enrolment Summary

Enrolment Summary	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Public	574,853	580,180	596,590	613,616	631,089	646,081	658,602	671,853
Independent: non-ECS	23,705	24,937	26,937	28,076	29,400	28,763	29,418	30,552
Independent: ECS	3,739	4,147	4,617	5,062	5,291	5,689	6,189	6,563
Excluded (federal)	9,929	9,964	10,624	11,057	10,552	11,115	10,681	10,921
Home (included in Public and Independent enrolment)	7,946	8,577	9,030	9,257	9,544	10,015	11,246	11,766

Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

Allocating system costs

In order to properly compare per-student funding of public/government and private/independent schools, some defensible allocation of costs must be made. To produce a conservative cost estimate per student—this so as to not overestimate the effect of the hypothetical scenario whereby a private school student enrolls in the public system—just three categories are allocated to public system costs: Instruction (ECS to Grade 12), Operations and Maintenance, and Student Transportation.

Those three categories accounted for just under \$7.3 billion in education spending in the public system, out of a total of just under \$7.7 billion in consolidated allocated costs in 2017/18. (2018/19 data was not yet available at the time this report was written).

An additional five categories—governance and system administration, program support services, basic education programs, debt servicing costs, and the 2013 Alberta flooding—are *not included* in the summaries of public education spending or per student calculations of the same. The reason for excluding the costs in these five categories is as follows: if a student now in the independent or home system moves to the public-school system, it should not be assumed that debt servicing costs or governance costs (to use two examples) will necessarily rise. They may rise, but to create conservative cost estimates of the effect of a student moving from one system to another, it is preferable to assume some expenses will remain constant.



Costs in each system: A conservative estimate

Figure 3: Costs by service: A conservative estimate								
	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
	(\$,000)							
Ministry Support Services					34,906	31,650	30,949	30,358
Instruction - ECS to Grade 12	4,974,945	5,263,608	5,400,750	5,402,667	5,617,872	5,816,794	6,011,128	6,092,409
Operations and Maintenance	820,736	873,957	886,070	882,252	604,104	749,416	755,681	802,699
Student Transportation	309,316	315,636	324,571	323,464	345,920	338,598	348,160	361,278
School Facilities - Amortization					301,009	325,096	333,790	374,738
Governance and System Administration	250,062	270,440	287,455	286,956	253,165	242,679	248,519	255,974
Program Support Services	143,816	151,399	173,858	173,877	173,088	201,976	208,770	196,242
Basic Education Programs	62,782	55,504	53,023	57,557	48,073			
Accredited Private Schools & ECS	177,796	191,567	209,165	222,285	233,772	245,782	260,711	272,275
Accredited Private Schools	124,830	133,113	142,583	147,832	151,402	154,223	160,465	165,104
Early Childhood	52,966	58,454	66,582	74,453	82,370	91,559	100,246	107,171
Debt Servicing Costs	34,451	44,485	53,807	45,154	46,741	45,916	44,030	44,172
2013 Alberta Flooding	0	0	0	2,060	2,570	0	17	14
Pension Provision					-6,224	-22,513	-97,952	-66,521
Total costs	6,773,904	7,166,596	7,388,699	7,396,272	7,654,996	7,975,394	8,143,803	8,363,638

Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

In 2017/18, just under \$8.4 billion in provincial costs are allocated to student-specific costs in the public system, with \$165 million allocated to private school costs (Figure 4). The other costs (Public-General and Private-ECS) are excluded

from both the subsequent public and private school cost calculations.



Figure 4: Allocated costs: Spending Summary

	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Spending Summary	(\$,000)							
Public: Student-specific	6,104,997	6,453,201	6,611,391	6,608,383	6,567,896	6,904,808	7,114,969	7,256,386
Public: General	491,111	521,828	568,143	565,604	853,328	824,804	768,123	834,977
Private: Accredited independent schools	124,830	133,113	142,583	147,832	151,402	154,223	160,465	165,104
Private: Early childhood (ECS)	52,966	58,454	66,582	74,453	82,370	91,559	100,246	107,171
Total costs	6,773,904	7,166,596	7,388,699	7,396,272	7,654,996	7,975,394	8,143,803	8,363,638

Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

Taxpayer costs per student: \$10,801 in public; \$5,404 in independent; \$1,671 in home education

The next set of calculations simply divides the cost in the two main categories noted in Figure 4 (Public and Private) by the number of students in each to arrive at the per-student cost in each system. The reader should recall that the assumptions are conservative, i.e., that not all costs which would have increased in the public school per-student cost are included.

The results are displayed in Figure 5. In 2017/18, the public-school cost per-student amounted to \$10,801; the cost to taxpayers of students in the independent/private school system was \$5,404 and \$1,671 for each home education student (Figure 5).

Expressed differently, the per-student cost to taxpayers for those enrolled in home education is \$1,671 and enrolled in independent schools is \$5,404, or 85% and 50% savings, respectively, from the cost per-student enrolled in public schools (\$10,801) (Figure 5).

Summary conclusions: \$1.9 billion in savings over eight years through current education choice funding model

Now consider the total savings to the provincial treasury of student enrollment in private/independent schools. In the most recent year analyzed, had private school and home-educated students been enrolled in Alberta’s public-school system, the extra cost would have totaled \$272 million (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

In total, over eight years, the existence of between 31,651 students (2010/11) and 42,318 students (2017/18) enrolled in independent schools and home education translated into \$1.9 billion in saved tax dollars—tax dollars available for the public system, provincial infrastructure, hospital construction, ongoing health care costs, allocations for tax relief, or any number of other provincial budget items.



Figure 5: Estimated Cost of Moving Independent and Home Students to Public System

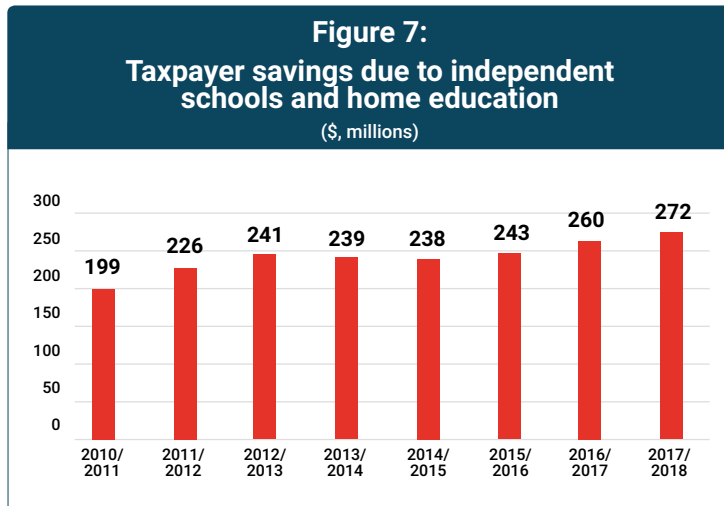
	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Independent school - analysis								
Public: cost per student, \$	10,620	11,123	11,082	10,770	10,407	10,687	10,803	10,801
Independent: cost per student, \$	5,266	5,338	5,293	5,265	5,150	5,362	5,455	5,404
Difference: public less independent, \$	5,354	5,785	5,789	5,504	5,258	5,325	5,348	5,397
Additional cost to move to public, \$ millions	127	144	156	155	155	153	157	165
Home education - analysis								
Public: cost per student, \$	10,620	11,123	11,082	10,770	10,407	10,687	10,803	10,801
Home education: cost per student, \$	1,554	1,625	1,641	1,641	1,641	1,671	1,671	1,671
Difference: public less home education, \$	9,066	9,498	9,441	9,128	8,766	9,016	9,132	9,130
Additional cost to move to public, \$ millions	72	81	85	85	84	90	103	107

Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

Figure 6: Estimated Cost, Combined Analysis

	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Combined analysis								
Additional cost to move to public (independent & home education), \$ millions	199	226	241	239	238	243	260	272
Additional cost to move to public, % budget	2.9%	3.1%	3.3%	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.3%

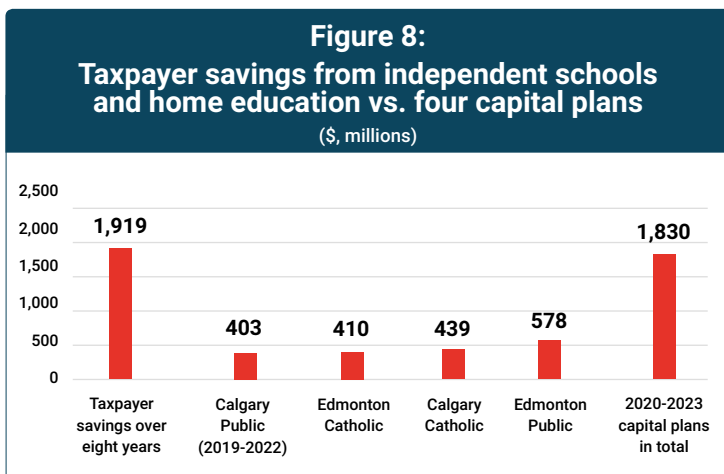
Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.



Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

\$1.9 billion in savings would cover more than three years of capital projects for Alberta’s four largest school divisions

To put that \$1.9 billion in context, the capital plans for the four public and separate school divisions in Calgary and Edmonton (Edmonton Public, Edmonton Catholic, Calgary Public and Calgary Catholic) for 2020-2023 amount to \$1.83 billion (Figure 8). The existence of independent schools and home education and the \$1.9 billion saved over eight years is more than the combined funds needed for all requested capital projects by these four school districts over the next three years. Thus, education choice actually offers substantial financial savings which can be re-directed to public education, contrary to critics who claim the opposite.



Source: Calgary Catholic School District (2019); Calgary Board of Education (2018); Edmonton Catholic Schools (2019); Edmonton Public Schools (undated)

Considerations

One could assert that even if provincial funding for independent schools and home education did not exist, such savings might still materialize because parents may still choose to enroll their children in independent schools albeit with higher school fees that would result from an absence of provincial funding.

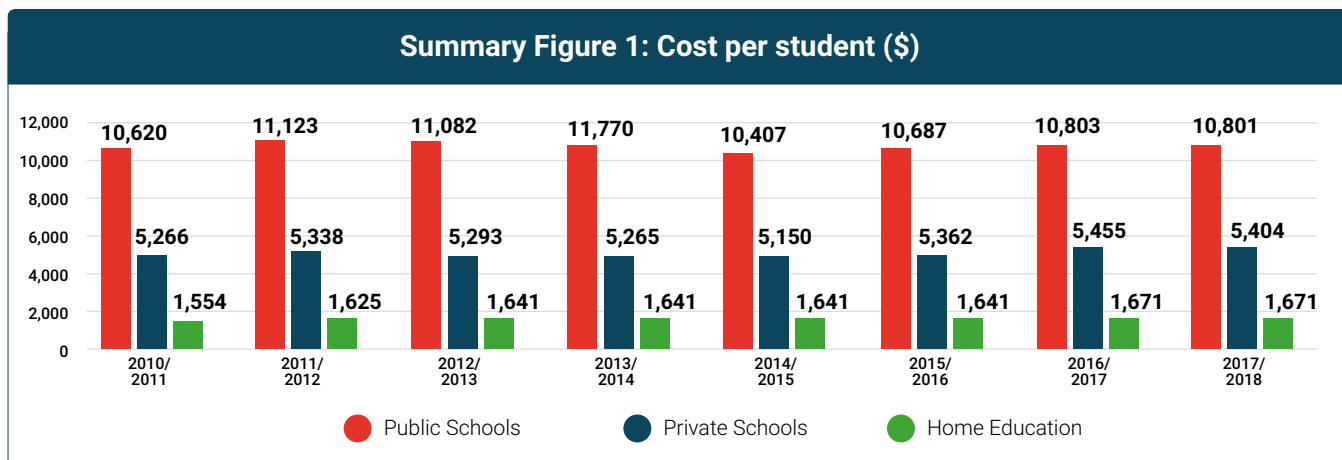
However, this argument omits five useful observations:

- First, there is value in independent schools for the reason that any departure from a monolithic, one-size-fits-all structure allows for diversity of thought, diversity of possibilities yet unknown, collaboration and innovation;
- Second, flexibility in service delivery—in this case, in education—is enhanced by funding a variety of schools and not just those owned and operated by the government;
- Third, the constructed objection—not every single student now in private schools will necessarily move to the public system—ignores that some inevitably will, and that will add extra costs into the public system and for taxpayers;
- Fourth, provincial funding allows lower- and middle-income families who choose to make the financial sacrifice (for the still necessary enrollment fees) to access independent/private schools that otherwise could not do so. To eliminate such funding would in fact increase the “two-tiered” education paradigm claimed by those opposed to private schooling, as only the wealthiest would then have access to private schools, creating a significant issue for lower-income students seeking unique education options to meet their needs;
- Fifth, and often overlooked, is that given how private/independent schools charge enrollment fees to parents, who thus cover a portion of education costs directly, the province ought to encourage—not discourage—additional independent/private school attendance. After all, for every student in the private system, the province saves \$5,397 and \$9,130 per independent and home-educated student respectively.

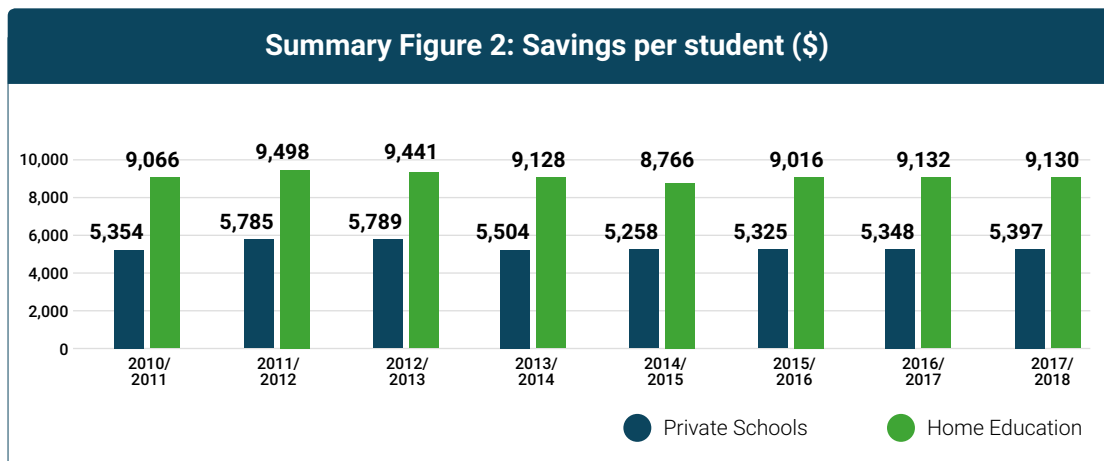


In summary, student costs amount to:

- \$10,801 per student in the public system.
 - \$5,404 per student in the independent/private system.
 - \$1,671 per student when home-educated.
 - The savings to the public system because of student enrollment in independent schools and home education is thus \$5,397 and \$9,130 respectively.
 - The cost-savings in 2017/18 because of independent and home education enrollment were \$165 million and \$107 million, respectively, or \$272 million in total.
- The province of Alberta has saved \$1.9 billion over eight years in taxpayer costs due to the current funding model supporting independent schools and home education. If additional enrollment in such schools was encouraged, additional savings would accrue.
 - At a minimum, any notion that such schools “cost” taxpayers extra money, or divert money from public schools, does not stand up to an analysis of the numbers.



Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.



Source: Alberta 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2019b; calculations by Joel Emes.

Section II

Beyond the numbers: The importance of education choice

The benefits of funding independent schools and home education extend well beyond the significant cost savings. Diverse students have different learning styles and unique interests which may be channeled to engage them in classroom learning. Providing a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to education does not align with the goals of achieving the best educational experiences for every child and the best academic performance results across the board. As such, the Alberta government is correct to foster an education system focused on diversity – making the most school options available to the most children, not just those in a certain school catchment area or those whose parents can afford to fully fund independent school tuition.

In Alberta, parents can access varying degrees of funding to attend a variety of educational settings, including government public schools, separate (Catholic) schools, Francophone schools, independent schools, home education, provincial schools, and uniquely, public charter schools. In Alberta, the higher level of funding for independent schools (relative to other provinces) is accompanied by a higher level of regulation relative to most other provinces (Allison and Van Pelt, 2017). Because a diverse range of educational options are funded in Alberta, these options are more accessible to Alberta families across the income spectrum than families in provinces with no funding for independent schools or home education, such as Ontario and Atlantic Canada.^e

In a liberal democracy, critical thinking is often touted as an end goal in education, yet some criticize parental choice in education as “dividing” people by wealth and religion (Hehr 2014). However, such arguments ignore the benefits

of education choice and the underlying reality about how men, women and children function and thus why choice is invaluable in education—because it leads to students thriving. The very point of a free society is to ensure diverse viewpoints and approaches are protected and encouraged. This is especially useful in the education system, in which critical thinking is paramount.

1. Education choice improves student achievement

Maximizing success for our kids means a stronger future for them and for the province as a whole. An education system that funds multiple educational options supports this goal by motivating all educational settings to innovate and strengthen their best practices, ultimately benefitting students. To best prepare Alberta students for success, it is necessary to ensure they are receiving academic experiences to help them perform as well as, or better than, their peers across Canada and the world.

Standardized tests are used by governments to assess academic performance and are the best tool we have available for measuring student performance. These tests are exceptionally valuable in a system which offers a range of funded educational options to students, so taxpayers and parents alike can have an informed view of how schools measure up and how tax dollars are being spent.

An analysis of Alberta’s Provincial Achievement Test scores released in 2018 found positive outcomes for students in independent/private schools. The analysis examined test scores in grades six and nine, between the 1997/98 and

2016/17 school years, breaking down the results by school types: government public, independent/private, Francophone, separate and charter.

The data show that on average, government public schools performed worst of all school types. Charter schools, of which there are fewer than 15 authorities and fewer than 30 school campuses in the province, almost always outperformed all other schools, and were followed most closely by independent/private schools. At times, independent schools outperformed charter schools. On average, independent and charter schools significantly outperformed all other school types measured (MacPherson, 2018). The report noted that eight per cent of Alberta's independent schools are special education schools, which may impact the results. While charter schools in the province offer a diverse range of options and do target some vulnerable student populations, none currently focus on special needs programming.

Independent schools are sometimes criticized by activists for being 'elite' (a criticism that will be addressed in the following section), and this has been used to explain away the strong performance results from independent schools. But non-elite private schools produce better results than government public schools, too. Like Alberta, British Columbia offers funding to independent schools. While some of these schools are 'elite', 90 per cent are not (McLeod and Parvani, 2017).

The Fraser Institute conducted an analysis of test scores from government public schools and both elite and non-elite independent schools in BC. Their research drew results from two standardized tests in the province: five-year averages between 2011/12 and 2015/16 of the Foundation Skills Assessment in grades 4 and 7, and five-year averages between 2011/12 and 2015/16 of the Provincial Required Exams in grades 10, 11 and 12. The results were broken down by school type.

For the Foundation Skills Assessments, the Fraser Institute found:

Both categories of independent schools performed better than public schools for each of the six FSA exams, in amounts that are statistically significant.

The largest difference between non-elite independent schools and public schools was in Writing, where the non-elite schools scored 18.0% higher on grade-4 exams and 18.9% higher on grade-7 exams. The second highest difference was in Numeracy, where the non-elite schools performed 14.4% higher on grade-4 exams and 14.2% higher on grade-7 exams. The smallest difference was in Reading, with the non-elite schools performing 10.2% higher on grade-4 exams, and 10.3% higher on grade-7 exams (McLeod and Emes, 2018).

For the Provincial Required Exams, the Institute had similar findings:

As with the FSA exams, non-elite independent schools performed better than public schools on all the PRE exams. The range of scores was from 0.5% on English 12, which is not statistically significant, to 5.4% for English 10. Science 10 had the second largest difference at 4.8%, followed by Foundations of Math and Pre-Calculus 10 at 4.6% and then Social Studies 11 at 2.9%, all of which are statistically significant differences (McLeod and Emes, 2018).

In short, the strong performance of independent/private school students cannot be explained away by critics pretending that all of these kids come from wealthy families. That is simply untrue. Government funding for independent schools and home education ensures kids from all income levels have greater access to these schools, with the research-supported goal of maximizing student success.

*Nova Scotia does have a limited program that funds some private schools for severely learning-disabled children, the Tuition Support Program.



2. Supporting education choice improves access for lower and middle-income families

Wealthier families will always have education choice. Equitable funding for a diverse range of educational options is about ensuring that all Alberta kids, of any income level, have greater access to the schools that best fit their learning needs.

Alberta's model of allowing at least a portion of parents' education tax dollars to follow their child(ren) to their chosen school further fuels the unfounded criticism that all independent/private schools are 'elite'. (Activists contend that because these schools are elite, they are not worthy of being funded.) The reality is that in any province, the wealthiest families can already afford independent schooling or home education regardless of the cost. It is *only* in the provinces which offer equitable funding for education choice, like Alberta, that families across a broader income spectrum have this option.

Of course, elite independent schools exist and some families will choose this option. However, as noted above, recent research shows that the criticism that all independent schools are elite is based on a false premise: the assumption that the wealthy are the largest cohort of parents who send their children to independent schools.

As the Fraser Institute noted in 2017:

A recent study found that only 17 of Alberta's 96 independent schools are "elite" (schools that charge more than 10 per cent of the average after-tax family income in Alberta—\$11,190).

In other words, the remaining 82 per cent of independent schools have tuition within reach of the average family. Of course, Alberta families who choose independent schools may need to reprioritize or juggle the family budget, but thanks to partial government funding (either 60 or 70 per cent of the per-student operating grant provided to public

schools), and financial assistance provided by the schools themselves, lower- and middle-income families have a choice.

Subsequently, Alberta families who choose non-elite independent schools closely resemble families who choose public schools. In fact, the average after-tax family income for non-elite independent school families is 1.8 per cent less than families with children in public schools (McLeod and Parvini, 2017).

Removing equitable funding for education choice in Alberta would create exactly the two-tier system that critics of education choice bemoan, where only the wealthy could attend the schools they choose, and no one else could. Supporting a system of equitable funding opens up access for Albertan families across the income spectrum, supporting the success of these students.

3. Education choice honours student diversity

Children do not arrive in the world in a one-size-fits-all "package" and education should not either. Alberta students have a diverse range of needs and interests and maximizing genuine diversity in the education system supports that reality. The desirable societal goals of fostering independent minds, combined with the empirical evidence of improved student performance, are reasons enough for government to support the choice for a wide range of students to attend independent schools and home education.

Exemplary academic performance may be attributed to a number of factors. As parents and taxpayers, we want Alberta students to be engaged in classroom learning and feel positively about attending school every day. Independent schools, charter schools or home education may prove a better academic fit for many students' individual learning needs than their neighbourhood government-public school. Academic lessons are not what drives every child to attend



and enjoy school. Other factors, such as a focus on sports, music or culture, could drive school attendance and engagement, and in turn, improve students' academic results. In other cases, severely learning-disabled students may benefit from an independent school or home education setting with small class sizes and individualized education tailored to their specific learning needs. Supporting educational diversity is all about finding the best educational fit for every student to maximize their educational experience and success.

4. Education choice maximizes quality

Funding non-government educational options for students may also have the added benefit of improving all educational settings, including government public schools, because of the inherent ability for competition to drive innovation and improved performance. When various school types are competing for student enrollment, they are driven to improve. One example within the province is the creation of alternative programs within Alberta's government public schools in Calgary and Edmonton. MacPherson's 2018 report noted that:

The Alberta government's Alternative Program Resource Manual characterizes these programs as somewhat of a response to the charter schools. The manual explains that boundaries were removed between school boards and charter schools were introduced in 1994. Then, in 2000 the School Act was revised to allow for alternative programs, engaging school boards, staff, school councils, and societies to support them. In this way, the introduction of charter schools may have caused traditional public schools to innovate. For example, the 1990s reformation of Edmonton Public Schools to incorporate choice programs within its system received international attention. Former Edmonton Public School Board Superintendent Angus McBeath oversaw the changes, citing competition from independent and charter schools as a positive, motivating factor (MacPherson, 2018).

Research from the United States supports these findings. A Heritage Foundation report found that government public school student performance improved following the introduction of education choice policies, particularly targeting lower income students. Researchers found that following the implementation of a tax credit scholarship program for low income students in Florida to attend independent schools, "the threat of competition alone" improved performance specifically in government public schools which risked losing students to these schools. Similar improved student performance results were found in Milwaukee government public schools which faced competition from independent schools thanks to a voucher program in that state (Burke, 2014).

In some cases, education choice can also produce secondary benefits for society as a whole. The research evidence shows that non-government schools provide solid, and in some cases exemplary, academic, social and cultural results for individuals and for society. As Dr. Deani Van Pelt, a former teacher herself, has noted:

A 2013 OECD analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) math performance scores found that Canadian 15-year-olds from private schools significantly outperformed their peers from public schools. This was true even after controlling for economic, social and cultural status.

A 2012 study by Cardus compared graduate outcomes for Canadian adults from different school systems - public, separate Catholic, and various independent school systems. The findings were clear. Graduates from independent schools are significantly more likely than their peers to contribute to civic society - to vote, volunteer, and donate (all again, after controlling for a variety of socio-economic factors that might otherwise explain the differences).



Furthermore, when families seek options outside of government public schools, parents don't just "feel" ... that the public system isn't good enough for them. In a 2007 Ontario survey on why parents choose private schools and in a 2009 analysis of stories told by parents about choosing private schools, many reported that they have tried public schools for their children, but were forced to look elsewhere.

They leave government public schools for a variety of reasons: bullying, lack of teacher care or availability, concerns with the curriculum, neglect of their child's special needs, or poor academic results. And many stay with a private school once they arrive because of caring and attentive teachers, positive academic performance, safety, and improvements in their child's social life (Milke and Van Pelt 2014).

As Van Pelt and one author of this report also noted, governments must think carefully about how governments can create educational equity and it thus makes sense to recognize the results achieved in independent schools:

When local communities are given more control - whether independent or charter schools, home-based educational programs or public schools given more local authority - administrators, parents and teachers can achieve excellent results, results that benefit individuals and society (Milke and Van Pelt 2014).

Conclusion

In Alberta, parents have a plethora of choices on how to educate their children: public/government, separate/Catholic, francophone, charter, independent/private, and home education (Alberta 2015a). The result has been student success and \$1.9 billion in savings to the education system over eight years.

The benefits of genuine education choice make it clear that a diverse selection of educational options should be accessible to all Alberta students, regardless of income level. The enrollment numbers in the province show that Alberta students and families are increasingly choosing education options outside of government public schools. Supporting parents in the choices they are already making for their own children's education, by allowing their tax dollars to follow their children to the educational option of their choice, is a sensible policy goal that should continue.

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Mark Milke is a political scientist, policy analyst, author and columnist with six books and dozens of studies published by policy institutes in Canada, the United States and Europe. Mark's policy work has touched on everything from taxes, civil rights, and private property to airline competition, insurance, aboriginal policy, government monopolies and the folly of corporate welfare.

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