

Private Schools Funding in Alberta: Scaling-Up Privatization

Curtis Riep, Ph.D.

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Executive Summary

Private schools in Alberta are recognized as schools of choice for parents to educate their children outside of the public, separate, Francophone, home education, or charter school systems. Over the years, legislation in Alberta indicates a gradual development from mere recognition of private schools to an acceptance of private schools as equals in status to public schools in many aspects. In 2020, the Government of Alberta passed legislation to “protect the status of independent (private) schools” as integral providers of school “choice” (LaGrange, 2020). In terms of provincial funding, Alberta Education grants are provided to accredited funded private schools at a rate of 70 percent, which makes private school funding in Alberta the highest in Canada. For the 2021/22 school year, more than 43,000 students in Alberta were enrolled in private schools and ECS (Early Childhood Service) programs—representing 5.9 percent of the K-12 student population (Alberta Education, 2022a).

The aim of this report is to provide an up-to-date account of private school funding and provisions in Alberta. In doing so, private school funding and provisions are analyzed in relation to privatization processes. The key policy moments ushering in increased provincial funding to private schools in Alberta since the 1990s are evaluated, including the *Private Schools Funding Task Force* (1997/98) and the *Cabinet Policy Committee Recommendation to Increase Private School Funding* (2007/08). In addition to provincial funding, this paper analyzes the fee levels charged by Alberta’s private schools in order to evaluate their impacts on student access and equity.

The findings of this research indicate that, on average, the instructional fees charged by private schools in Alberta are: \$7,248 for Grades 1-6; \$7,922 for Grades 7-9; and \$9,764 for Grades 10-12 (per student, per year as of 2021/22). Furthermore, this study finds that approximately 20 percent of the private schools in Alberta charge more than \$15,000 per student, per year, with some selective programs costing upwards of \$35,000 or more for admission. (These findings are based on the fee rates of nearly 60 percent of 160 private school authorities in Alberta that publicly disclose such information). Without a statutory limit on tuition fees, funded private schools can charge any amount of fee they wish and then collect provincial funding on top of that—resulting in public funds that could give private schools a significant financial advantage over public schools.

This study reveals that the eighteen most expensive private schools in Alberta – that charge cost-prohibitive rates ranging from \$12,000 to \$35,000 or more, per year – received more than \$43 million in provincial funding last year, alone. A funding regime whereby affluent private schools are provincially-funded, systematically diverts essential public funds into “elite” educational enclaves which instead of serving the common good, further entrenches inequality. Based on the findings of this research, it is the recommendation of this report that public financial support for private schools (exclusive of ECS and designated special education private schools) be phased out over a period of time.

Private Schools in Alberta: An Introduction

Private (independent) schools are an important part of the school “choice” landscape in Alberta. They are recognized by the Government of Alberta as an integral option for parents that choose to educate their children outside of the public, separate, Francophone, home education, or charter school systems. The history of private schools in Alberta dates back to the early 1900s, and since 1967 the provincial government has provided them with financial support. Over the years, provincial funding to private schools has steadily increased, while student enrolment has remained stable around 4–5 percent. Currently, there are 160 private school authorities in the province that operate 197 private schools, serving nearly 38,000 students. In addition, there are also private ECS operators, which served more than 5,750 children in 2021. At this rate, private schools and ECS programs enrol 5.9 percent of the K-12 student population in Alberta (public—67.2 percent; separate—24.2 percent; Francophone—1.2 percent; charter—1.4 percent) (Alberta Education, 2022a).

In Alberta, three types of private schools are authorized to operate. These include (1) registered, (2) accredited (non-funded), and (3) accredited funded private schools (Alberta Education, 2022b). A registered private school is registered as such under the *Education Act*, but they are not required to use certificated teachers or teach the provincial curriculum. An accredited (non-funded) private school is a registered private school that must meet additional regulatory requirements, including employing certificated teachers. However, they are not required to teach the provincial curriculum. Accredited funded private schools are the most common type of private schools in Alberta, which receive provincial funding in the form of various grants (rates of provincial funding will be discussed later in this report). To be eligible for funding, accredited schools must meet additional requirements and accountability measures in accordance with the [Private Schools Regulation](#), as well as operate without funding for at least one year in compliance with all requirements that a funded private school must meet (AISCA, 2021). They must employ certificated teachers, use the Alberta programs of study, and have a principal who is a certificated teacher (Alberta Education, 2022b). Accredited funded private schools are also permitted to supervise homeschooling programs and offer shared responsibility programs, for which they receive provincial funding.

There are two special designations of private schools in Alberta. These include Designated Special Education Private Schools (DSEPS) that “are funded private schools that have been given special approval and funding by the Minister of Education, where the sole purpose of the school is to serve students who are identified with a mild, moderate or severe disability” (Alberta Education, 2022b). Private schools are not required to enrol students with disabilities, but there are designated special education private schools in Alberta that receive funding grants to support individual program costs and required services (Alberta Education, 2022b). These schools contribute significantly to special education provisions in the province in terms of adequacy and accessibility. There are also Heritage Language Schools that can either be funded or non-funded, which offer approved courses in language and culture outside regular school hours for students who receive their basic education program at another school.

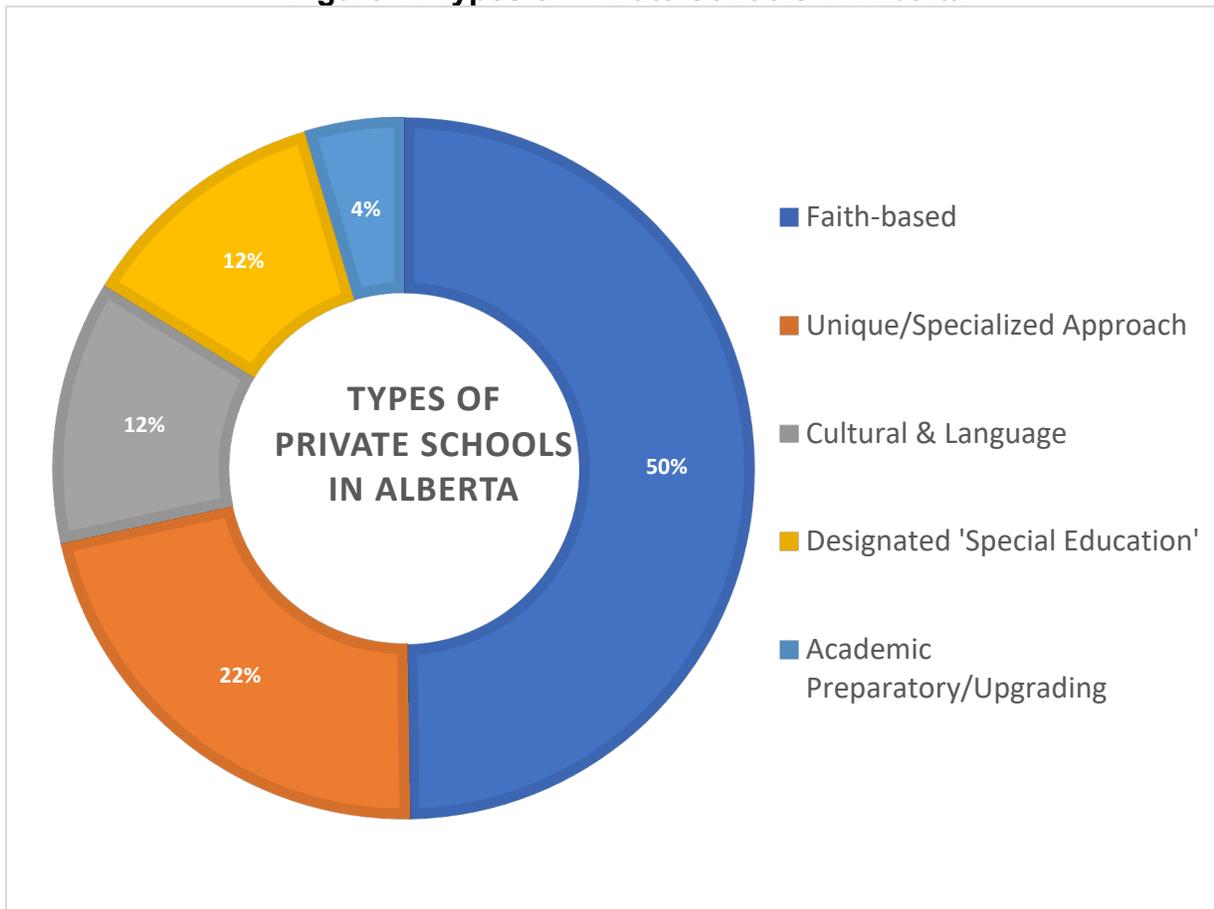
Table 1: Private Schools in Alberta 2021/22

Type of Private School	Number of schools
Accredited Funded*	129 (65%)
Accredited Non-Funded	13 (7%)
Heritage Language	24 (12%)
Registered	24 (12%)
Total	197

*Includes accredited funded designated special education private schools
Source: Alberta Education

Parents chose to send their children to private schools for a variety of reasons. The different kinds of programs offered by Alberta’s private schools are portrayed in Figure 1 below. The most widespread type of private school in Alberta are religious or faith-based, of which the vast majority are Christian. Other religious schools cater to Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh faiths. Independent schools are also established to offer a unique educational approach such as Montessori or Waldorf, or programs that focus on STEM or athletics, for example. Other categories include designated special education private schools, cultural and language schools, and academic preparatory and high school upgrading programs.

Figure 1: Types of Private Schools in Alberta



Source: Alberta Education (2021).

There are a number of key differences between private and public schools in Alberta. Unlike public schools, private schools are not accountable to the public through elected trustees who are accountable to the Minister of Education. Instead, private schools are incorporated as a society under the *Societies Act* or registered as a non-profit company under the *Companies Act*, which then receive their authority to operate directly from the Minister of Education. Therefore, accredited private schools, some of which receive several million dollars per year in public funding, lack the sort of public governance mandated within public education. In terms of access, private schools can pick and choose students, whereas public schools are required to accept all students. Private schools can charge tuition fees at any level they deem appropriate for the price of admission, whereas public schools do not so they remain universally accessible. Private schools are not subject to the same conflict of interest as public schools with regard to restrictions on familial and business relationships. For example, members of the same family can sit on the board and act as the secretary-treasurer, principal, and teacher of a private school. In turn, private schools are private precisely because they operate according to private purposes, mandates, and associations.

In the remaining sections of this paper, the focus will be on accredited funded private schools that receive funding from Alberta Education. In particular, the key policy moments in Alberta ushering in increased government funding to private schools since the 1990s will be evaluated. In addition to provincial funding, this paper will analyze the fee levels charged by Alberta's private schools in order to evaluate their impacts on student access and equity. In particular, special attention will be given to the "elite" funded private schools in Alberta that charge high prices for admission. But first, private schools should be understood in relation to privatization processes.

Understanding Privatization

Privatization is a multi-faceted issue that can take on a variety of forms in education. Belfield and Levin (2002) provide a helpful description, stating that:

The term 'privatization' is an umbrella term referring to many different educational programmes and policies. As an overall definition, 'privatization is the transfer of activities, assets and responsibilities from government/public institutions and organizations to private individuals and agencies.' Also, privatization is often thought of as 'liberalization' – where agents are freed from government regulations, or as 'marketization' – where new markets are created as alternatives to government services or state allocation systems. (p. 19)

Education privatization is therefore generally understood as a range of policies and programs that result in a movement away from public funding and/or provision towards private or individual control (Klees, 2008; Lubienski, 2013; Whitty & Power, 2000).

Table 2: Basic dynamics of privatization

		Provision	
		Public	Private
Funding	Public	1	2
	Private	3	4

Source: Whitty & Power, 2000

As illustrated in Figure 2, public services that are produced or paid for by the public sector are depicted in quadrant 1. For example, universal systems of education have typically been offered in this way, as are other public goods. Privatization processes involve policies and initiatives that transfer matters of provision or the funding of goods or services away from public control to quadrants 2, 3 or 4. Although it offers a rather basic approach to a complex issue, the figure above illustrates that there are different possibilities for privatization to occur based on the relationship between public and private sources of funding and provision. In Alberta, for example, public funding and control is transferred, at varying levels, to private providers in the form of provincial grants and subsidies (quadrant 2). Another example is the way in which private forms of provision are typically funded through ever-growing levels of private or individual finance such as school fees (quadrant 4). In Alberta, levels of provincial funding allocated to private schools has increased in a deregulated context in which there are no restrictions on the amount of fees funded private schools can charge. Privatization processes, therefore, involve deregulating the private sector and liberalizing arrangements that previously prevented the private sector from competing with publicly-provided services (i.e. marketization).

The key device ushering in privatization in Alberta is the institutionalization of “school choice” facilitated by weakening or altering policies and regulations concerning school funding, school enrollment, and creating policy conditions that support student movement within and between school systems (Ball & Youdell, 2008; Hogan & Thompson, 2019). The rationale for school choice is linked to a belief that competition between schools will raise standards across the system as schools compete for students in market-like environments that are assumed to be more efficient and responsive. Privatization agendas, therefore, “have sought to dismantle centralized bureaucracies and create in their place devolved systems of schooling with increased emphasis on parental choice and competition between increasingly diversified types of school” (Whitty & Power, 2000, p. 93). In Alberta, privatization processes are aligned with school choice models in which different, yet overlapping school systems compete for provincial funding via student enrolment.

In the next section, this paper will focus on the increasing levels of provincial funding allocated to private schools in Alberta.

Scaling Up Privatization

Over the years, legislation in Alberta indicates a gradual development from mere recognition of private schools—that is, upholding their operation under law—to an acceptance of private schools as equals in status to public schools in many aspects. Although provincial funding to private schools is not equal to public school funding, private schools in Alberta are subsidized more than in any other province in Canada. In 1967, the provincial government began to fund private schools at a rate of \$100 per student per year. By 1974, it was decided that private school funding would be tied to the basic per student instructional grant provided to public schools, which started at 30 percent then steadily climbed over the years (Private Schools Funding Task Force, 1997). Increasing rates of public funding to private schools, therefore, signals the encroaching privatization of schooling in Alberta.

During the “Klein Revolution” that began in 1993, cuts were made across the public sector, including education funding which was reduced by 12.4 percent.¹ At the same time, school boards lost their authority to set education property tax rates to raise funds for local public schools. During these years, private school funding would continue to increase, however. In 1994/95, private schools became eligible for a number of additional grants, including special education grants and grants for supervising home education. In 1995/96, a new funding framework for K-12 was implemented whereby private school funding was no longer directly tied to public school funding. Instead, private school funding was independently set as a rate that would increase at the same level as increases in grants to public schools. Hence, at a time when public school budgets were being cut due to fiscal restrictions placed upon local school boards, new opportunities for provincial funding were opening-up to private school operators within an increasingly marketized model of education based on school choice and competition.

The Private Schools Funding Task Force (1997/98)

The *Private Schools Funding Task Force* was announced in June, 1997, by Alberta’s former Minister of Education, Gary Mar. It was launched in response to Bill 209, a contentious piece of legislation that called for increased funding to private schools, which sparked considerable debate including within the government caucus. The goal of the *Private Schools Funding Task Force* was twofold: (1) gather views from Albertans on “how private schools should be funded” and (2) “recommend a funding framework for Alberta’s accredited private schools” (Private Schools Task Force, 1997, p. 1).

Findings from the Task Force showed that public opinion was “divided on whether or not private schools should receive public funding” (Private Schools Funding Task Force,

¹ In addition to the cuts to education, other Klein-era reforms included the establishment of charter schools, increased provincial testing, performance-based funding measures, school-based budgeting, the redefinition of roles and responsibilities, and a quasi-voucher system whereby funding follows the child.

1998, p. 20).² Supporters of private school funding claimed that provincial funding was too low and should be increased to expand choice and competition in educational programming. On the other hand, critics of private school funding said that it could systematically undermine the effectiveness of the public system by redirecting money to fund a private alternative to public education. It was also declared that private school funding “gives an unfair advantage to private schools and promotes inequities” since private schools “can choose their students, and also raise additional money through tuition fees, that puts them at a distinct advantage over the public system” (Private Schools Task Force, 1997, p. 17). Despite public opposition, the Task Force made it clear in their Final Report that: “While some have suggested private schools should receive no public funding whatsoever, the Task Force also understands that, for many years, private schools in Alberta have received some public funding – and there’s no going back” (Private Schools Task Force, 1998, p. 3). In turn, the Task Force had a clear mandate from the start to pacify calls for public consultation on the topic of provincial funding to private schools, with a policy goal already in mind.

As a result of the Task Force, it was determined that provincial funding for private schools would be set as a proportion of the instructional funding provided to public schools, which would increase to 60 percent.

The Task Force believes that 60 percent of the basic instruction grant is an appropriate balance. It is a significant proportion of the funding provided to public schools, although it less than 50 percent of the total per student funding public schools receive. It reflects our view that public schools must be the first priority for government funding but also recognizes the public good provided by accredited private schools and the importance of providing choice for parents. (Private Schools Task Force, 1998, p. 32)

In addition to the basic instruction grant, private schools received 60 percent of funding provided to public schools for a range of supplementary grants. They also received full funding for ECS programs, students with disabilities, and grants for home education. It should be noted that Alberta is the only province that provides full funding to private ECS operators in an effort to afford more supports to the youngest and most vulnerable learners in the province.

The *Private Schools Funding Task Force* revealed that “respondents strongly supported the idea of parents paying for choices outside the public education system, but were divided on the amount” (1998, p. 17). In their submission to the Task Force, the Alberta School Boards Association, for example, wrote: “Just as those who opt out of our public

² The Final Report of the Task Force points out that several prominent education organizations (responsible for the mass provision of schooling in Alberta) voiced their opinion to oppose public funding of private schools or at least oppose any additional funding to private schools (including the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers’ Association, and the Public School Boards’ Association). On the other hand, organizations in favour of private schools receiving the same funding as public schools, in the form of full instructional grants, included the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta and various associations representing private Christian schools in the province.

Medicare system bear all or a portion of the costs associated with that choice, so to should those who opt out of our public education system.” Many shared the opinion that “parents should assume responsibility for the full costs while others said that any cost to parents acts as a barrier to choice of education programs” (Private Schools Task Force, 1998, p. 17). In the end, the final recommendation, and current policy, was to set no limits on the tuition fees that funded private schools can charge. It was the view of the Task Force that continues to this day “that private schools should be able to charge whatever levels of tuition they think are appropriate” (Private Schools Task Force, 1998, p. 39)—signalling the unregulated, market-driven approach to private school fees in Alberta that are supplemented with provincial subsidies.

Cabinet Policy Committee Recommendation to Increase Private School Funding (2007/08)

In 2003, the provincial government appointed the Alberta Commission on Learning to review the province’s education system and provide a blueprint for future planning. In the final report and recommendations, the Commission wrote,

The availability of choice has had many benefits, including encouraging the public system to be more responsive to the expectations of parents. This is reinforced by the fact that provincial grants follow the students to the schools of their choice. At the same time, the Commission shares concerns about the impact too much choice can have on the public system. In terms of private schools, the Commission heard arguments for and against their current funding arrangements. Alberta’s current support for private schools is amongst the most generous in the country and the Commission does not recommend any changes to the current funding arrangements. (Alberta Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 79).

Despite this recommendation, in 2008, the provincial government increased the grant rate to funded private schools from 60 percent to 70 percent for all applicable grants; without any public consultation. Additionally, private schools became eligible for public grants for operations and maintenance, worth \$530 per pupil per year (at the time), in order to upgrade privately owned facilities. As a result of these changes, funding for private schools increased by approximately 22 percent, which was about five times more than increases in public school funding at the same time (4.5 percent) (ATA, 2008)—despite the fact that enrolments in public schools were growing at a greater rate than private school enrolments.

In September, 2007, a ministerial report by then Education Minister, Ron Liepert, and the Cabinet Policy Committee on Community Services claimed that “a logical and defensible argument for providing private school funding based on the proportion of education spending funded by the GRF [General Revenues Fund] or 70 percent can be made as, by law, they are not eligible to receive property tax funding.” Moreover, this “would eliminate one of the current criticisms of the current funding structure which is that funding

is based on an arbitrary figure (60 percent)” (Cabinet Policy Committee, 2007, p. 2). Hence, the grant rate adjustment to 70 percent was based on the rationale that approximately 30 percent of total education spending is supported by education property tax revenues, of which only public and separate schools are eligible to receive, by law. By raising the grant rate that private schools could receive up to 70 percent, private schools are effectively eligible for the same proportion of the general revenue funds as public schools. It should be noted that the provincial government has controlled, and subsequently reduced, education property tax rates since 1994, which current policy suggests is the benchmark by which private school funding is determined. If the prevailing logic is to continue to tie public and private school funding equally to general revenue allocations, then a reduction in education property taxes could result in an increase to private school funding.

At current rates, funded private schools in Alberta are subsidized by the provincial government more than any other province in the country (details of which are highlighted in Table 3 below). According to the Ministry of Education’s 2021 budget, the province estimates to spend \$314 million on accredited private schools and ECS operators in 2021/22, which is just under 4 percent of total provincial spending on K-12 education (Government of Alberta, 2021a, p. 103). Although Alberta ranks first, nationally, for the highest level of funding to private schools, it ranks seventh in spending to public schools. Only three provinces spent less per student on public schools than Alberta according to the most recent figures (Hill, Li & Emes, 2021), whereas no other province spent more on private schools. This comparative discrepancy illustrates the priority afforded to funded private schools in Alberta compared to their public school counterparts.

Table 3: Provincial Funding to Private Schools in Canada

	Provision for Funding to Private/Independent Schools
Alberta	Accredited funded private schools are the most common type of private school in Alberta, which receive 70 percent of the public rate for all applicable grants.
British Columbia	Independent schools are categorized into four groups. Only Group 1 and 2 independent schools are eligible to receive government grants. Group 1 schools receive 50 percent of the per-student operating costs of the local public school district, and Group 2 schools receives 35 percent of the local district’s per-student operating costs. Schools classified into Group 1 or 2 have met certain criteria for facilities and curriculum that qualify them for provincial funding. Group designation is based on the school’s average per student operating costs in relation to the local school district’s average per student operating grant. If the independent school’s per student operating costs exceeds the district’s per student grant amount, then the school is designated Group 2. (Government of BC, 2020)
Saskatchewan	Independent schools that meet certain legal and curricular conditions may apply to become Qualified Independent Schools, which are eligible for 50 percent of the per student average operating grants

	based on the actual number of eligible school-aged pupils registered in the school. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2021)
Manitoba	Independent schools that meet provincial curriculum standards and employ certified teachers are eligible for government funding for expenditures related to operations (e.g., salaries, learning resources), but not for capital expenditures (e.g., building new facilities, upkeep of existing facilities). The amount that each funded independent school receives is based on the number of eligible pupils enrolled at the school. Funding is set at 50 percent of public school net operating expenditures from two years previous to the current funding year. (Manitoba Education, 2021)
Ontario	Private schools operate as businesses or non-profit organizations independently of the Ministry of Education and in accordance with the legal requirements established by the <i>Education Act</i> . In Ontario, private schools do not receive any funding or financial support from the government. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022)
Québec	The majority of private schools in Québec are partially subsidized, but there are also some that are not subsidized. Funded private schools receive subsidies from the government for each student which accounts for 60 percent of what is paid to public schools , for educational services only. Private schools do not receive additional funding when they enrol a student with specific difficulties nor do they receive funding for building or maintenance of facilities. (Écoles Privées du Québec, 2021)
Atlantic Provinces	In Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia, these provincial governments provide no financial support for private schools.

Sidebar 1:

Integrating private Christian schools as “alternative” public schools

In Alberta, there has been a trend of private religious – predominantly, Christian – schools signing agreements with various public school boards in the province to become “alternative” public schools. Changes to the *School Act* in 1988 allowed private schools to sign agreements with public school boards to become “alternative” public schools within the public system. This transfer in title from a private school to an “alternative” public school enables such schools to receive the full amount of provincial funding as do all other public schools. The first private Christian school in Alberta to become incorporated as an “alternative” public school was in 1992/93. Since then, more than thirty other private Christian schools in the province have signed agreements with sixteen different public school boards to operate as “alternative” public schools. In addition to Christian schools, other faith-based private schools have also been incorporated as “alternative” public schools in Alberta.

The main impetus driving private religious schools to join the public system is financial. “Alternative” Christian schools making the shift from the private to public sector gain access to the full share of provincial funding that public schools receive, and most other benefits that come to these schools are directly related to this increase in funding. There are also non-financial benefits such as professional development opportunities, better supervision and evaluation, and additional technical and administrative supports. For private Christian schools, the downside of joining the public system as an “alternative” school is the loss of independent governance and parental control over the school, and the implications that accompany this loss of control such as the hiring of staff and control over admissions. Upon signing an “alternative” agreement, the private Christian school board that once operated the school is no longer the governing authority, as that responsibility shifts to the public school board. Instead, the private Christian school board functions as an advisory committee. For their part, public school boards may be interested in partnering with private schools to increase their own student enrolment and provincial funding, and at the same time, control and integrate independent Christian schools into the broader system of public schools.

The two largest public school boards in the province have taken different approaches on the matter. The Edmonton School Division has signed agreements to absorb six private Christian schools as “alternative” public schools. Whereas the Calgary Board of Education has not signed any agreement with a private Christian school to enlist them as an “alternative” public school. Thus, independent Christian schools in Calgary wishing to become a part of the public system have pursued agreements with public school boards outside their jurisdiction. For example, the Calgary Christian Schools, Heritage Christian Academy, Master’s Academy, and Menno Simons Christian School – all private Christian schools located in Calgary – have signed “alternative” school agreements with the Palliser School Division. Hence, private Christian schools seeking inclusion in the public system as “alternative” schools are free to sign interjurisdictional agreements with any public school board it chooses. In some cases, these “alternative” public schools charge additional fees for admission, such as Master’s Academy (part of the Palliser School Division) which charges a “Society Profound Learning Fee” ranging from \$7,040 to \$7,525 (for Grades 1 to 12).

Many private Christian schools in Alberta have initiated their own reviews to determine whether or not it is in their best interest to join the public system as an “alternative” school. In a report prepared for the Board of Directors of the Airdrie Koinonia Christian School – which was considering becoming an “alternative” public school – it was noted that:

...if a large Christian school — or even a group of Christian schools — were to enter into an “alternative” agreement with a relatively small public board, the Christian school(s) may be able to negotiate more favourable terms and also win a measure of protection simply because they comprise a relatively large part of the public board’s total student population. A certain measure of control can also be exercised by the fact

that an agreement can be cancelled with one public board and an agreement signed with another board. (Vander Ploeg, 2007, p. 4)

For example, the agreement between Olds Koinonia Christian School and Chinook's Edge School Division was the first "alternative" agreement requiring teachers to subscribe to a "statement of faith" policy (Vander Ploeg, 2007, p. 7). Furthermore, Heritage Christian Academy and Olds Koinonia Christian School have signed "discipleship alternative" agreements with public school boards to maintain an enrolment policy based on faith (Vander Ploeg, 2007, p. 8). An admissions policy that is in any way restricted by faith is in contravention of public school legislation. Such provisions contravene the *School Act*, and if challenged in a court of law would most certainly be declared null and void since no public school – by law – can dictate who can or cannot attend a public school. Yet, these types of public-private partnerships do open-up the possibility for private intrusions in public school provisions.

Ultimately, there are both advantages and disadvantages – for faith-based private schools and accommodating public school boards – that sign onto "alternative" public school agreements. For private schools, it provides a way to gain full access to public funding although with a loss of autonomy. For public school boards, it provides an avenue to more funding via increased enrollments as well as the ability to directly manage and control these "alternative" Christian schools. Although the private Christian school board is no longer responsible for the operation of the school, its influence is still present. Such processes, therefore, represent the return of religious persuasion into areas of public life. Moreover, with the expansion of "alternative" Christian schools within the public system, some observers suggest "the province's traditional arguments for limiting the amount of public funding for private schools has begun to crumble" (Vander Ploeg, 2007, p. 14).

Private School Fees

Fees levied by independent schools are another aspect to further examine issues related to accessibility and the privatization of schooling. School fees charged by Alberta's private schools are set by individual school boards and vary significantly. While a very small proportion of Alberta's private schools do not charge any tuition, most do. Private schools typically charge tuition on a per-student basis or they may provide discounts for families that enrol more than one student. The Alberta government does not regulate or limit the amount of tuition fees that can be charged by accredited private schools. Nor does the provincial government monitor or report the fees levied by any private schools.

Research conducted by Alberta's *Private Schools Funding Task Force* in the mid-1990s revealed that:

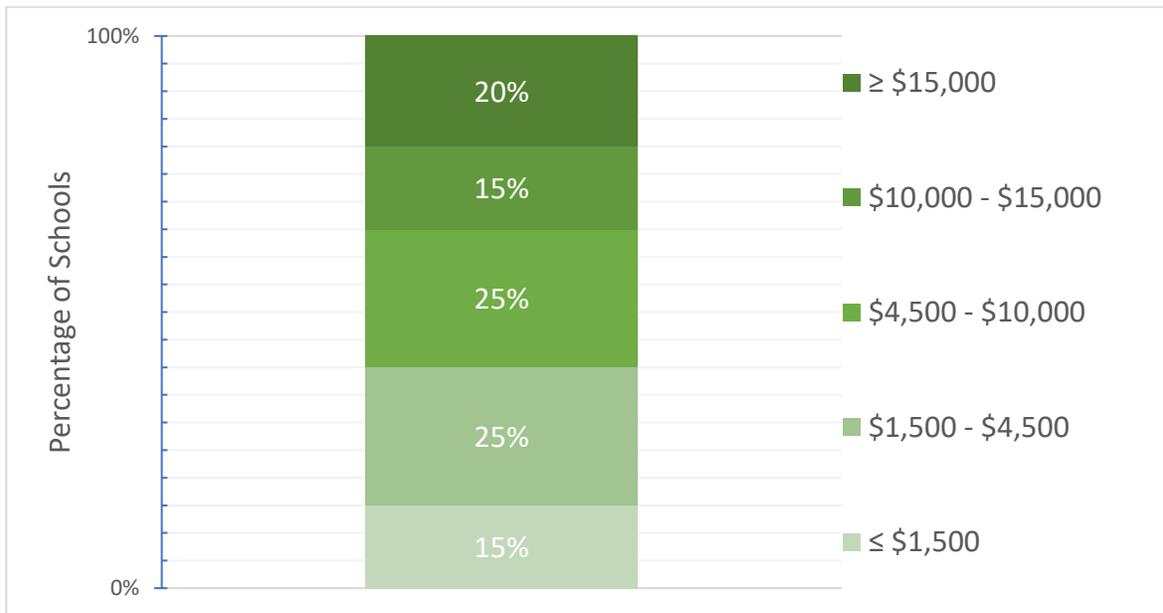
...tuition fees charged by private schools range from a low of less than \$1,000 per year to over \$6,000 per year. In 1995, just over half the parents

paid between \$2,000 and \$4,000 each year. Just under 25 percent of parents pay less than \$2,000 in tuition fees and almost 23 percent pay more than \$4,000. (1998, p. 17)

Over the past twenty-five years, however, the amount of school fees charged by private schools in Alberta has increased markedly.

Although detailed information regarding private school fees are not monitored or reported by the provincial government, most accredited funded private schools do disclose this information on their websites as part of their marketing practices. Based on this research, 92 private school authorities in Alberta (or nearly 60 per cent) release this information publicly. With this data, representative estimates can be calculated.³ Accordingly, the average fees charged by private schools in Alberta (per student each year) are: \$7,248 for Grades 1-6; \$7,922 for Grades 7-9; and \$9,764 for Grades 10-12. On average, private school-goers pay more than \$8,080 per student each year. In turn, tuition fees are a barrier to access and an impediment to real “choice.” Figure 3 below shows the range of fees charged by Alberta’s private schools, and the proportion of school programs that fall into each price range. All figures are based on the most recent available data as of January 2022.

Figure 3: Instructional Fees Per Student Charged by Private Schools in Alberta



³ It is important to note the following figures are based on: fee rates for a single child; fee rates for Alberta residents (not international students); they do not include tuition assistance programs (where applicable); they do not include discounts for early payments in full (where applicable); they do not include costs for busing/transportation; they do not include costs for elective programming or extra-curricular activities; they do not include school uniform costs (where applicable); they do not include financing fees when parents choose to pay in multiple instalments; they do not include one-time “new family membership” fees or one-time fees for capital projects or building expenses (where applicable); they do not include fundraising commitments (where applicable); they do not include course-based fees for Language classes or high school upgrading.

Alberta’s “Elite” Private Schools

Without a statutory limit on tuition fees, private schools in Alberta can charge any amount of fees they wish. As a result, an exclusive market is developing in the province for high-priced, private school provisions. There are nineteen private schools in Alberta that charge more than \$12,000 per student, per year (with several more private school authorities charging between \$10,000 to \$12,000 annually). This group of nineteen private schools that charge anywhere from \$12,000 per student, per year to more than \$35,000 per year for selective programs can be described as Alberta’s “elite” private schools.⁴ They are “elite” because of the exclusionary levels of fees they charge that are cost-prohibitive for the vast majority of Alberta’s population. They may also be considered “elite” because of certain curricular or pedagogical approaches, their physical character and location, or because of the elite social networks and leading alumni they represent.

[West Island College](#) (WIC), for example, is “a premier, independent, university preparatory school located in the southeast quadrant of the City of Calgary” (WIC, 2021, p. 2). Alberta students attending WIC pay \$19,688 per student, per year in tuition (or more, for flexible payment plans), on top of a one-time “Family Membership Fee” of \$3,500, a one-time “Capital Improvement Fee” of \$3,500, \$800 to \$1,000 for school uniforms, \$2,400 for return busing, among other fees for school supplies and optional activities. In total, it costs more than \$30,000 for a new student to attend WIC (excluding fees for supplies and optional activities). Families choosing to send their child to upscale independent schools such as WIC do so for the elite programs and facilities they offer, including smaller class sizes, international studies, athletics departments, fine arts, and exclusive field trip opportunities. Although WIC is an “elite” school of choice restricted to wealthy families who can afford to pay exorbitant fees – in addition to the fact that “students are selected to attend WIC on the basis of their performance on standardized entrance tests” (WIC, 2021, p. 2) – this independent institution received more than \$3.26 million in provincial funding for the 2020/21 school year, alone. At the same time, nearby public schools in the southeast quadrant of the City of Calgary have been coping with over-crowded classrooms and a dire need for retrofitting for years.

Another example of an “elite” private school in Alberta is the [Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School](#) (STS). It is located on the southern outskirts of Calgary near Okotoks on a 220-acre campus with “state-of-the-art facilities” and amenities (STS, 2022). It is a “premier” independent school that offers a full International Baccalaureate (IB) programme for Kindergarten through Grade 12 students. Students wishing to attend STS undergo a rigorous review process based on “each applicant’s application, interview, report cards, recommendations, and assessment scores” (STS, 2022). Tuition fees and ancillary costs charged by STS range by grade level. For example, a new student in Grade 4 would pay approximately \$33,180 whereas a new Grade 10 student would pay about \$34,938 (both estimates include optional bussing fees). In addition to revenues accrued from student fees, STS received \$3.49 million in government grants from Alberta Education for the

⁴ School fees calculated for Alberta’s “elite” private schools are inclusive of all fees that a new student would typically pay, including fees for bussing, uniforms, registration, family membership, and/or capital improvement fees (where applicable).

2021/22 school year (STS, 2021, p. 95). With competitive admissions procedures and selection-recruitment processes, unparalleled facilities and amenities, and costs that are a *real* impediment to “choice” and access, Strathcona-Tweedsmuir is a particularly privileged space that is inaccessible for most. To enhance access and affordability, financial assistance is provided by STS (as is the case with most elite private schools) in the form of merit-based scholarships and needs-based bursaries. However, the amount of financial assistance offered by “elite” private schools only accounts for about 1–2 percent of organizational expenses. As a result, these financial assistance programs are severely limited in their capacity to improve accessibility, and in turn, largely function for marketing and recruitment purposes.

High-priced schools such as West Island College and Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School are out-of-reach for most Albertans. In Calgary, where all of the “elite” private schools are located in the province, the median household income in 2019 was \$105,060 (Government of Alberta, 2021b). At rates upwards of \$30,000, the average-earning family in Calgary cannot afford to spend almost 30 percent of their income on private school fees. Alberta is the most unequal province in Canada, and Calgary is the most unequal city in the country in terms of income disparity (Chartered Professional Accountants Canada, 2017). Hence, the high level of income disparity in Calgary parallels the high density of “elite” private schools in the city, and this correlation should not be viewed as mere coincidence but as mutually-reinforcing.

Alberta’s provincially-subsidized “elite” private schools are entitled to 70 percent of the public rate for all applicable operating grants provided by Alberta Education. Based on a review of financial statements posted on the websites for eighteen of nineteen “elite” private schools, the provincial government granted more than \$43.2 million in total to these schools in their most recently reported school year (although it should be noted that two of these schools receive a portion of their funding through DSEPS supports). The revenue highlights for this exclusive market of independent schools, including provincial funding and student fees, are detailed in Table 4 on the next page. The amount of provincial funding allocated to these “elite” private schools, on a yearly basis, could afford the hiring of nearly 600 additional teachers or the construction of two new Elementary schools in the province (serving approximately 650 students each)—this misaligned public investment could help to lower student-teacher ratios and/or rebuild public schools overloaded with facility concerns. Instead, a system in which “elite” private schools are provincially-funded, at substantial rates, results in a systematic process whereby essential public funds are diverted into elite educational enclaves that are inaccessible to 99 percent of Albertans—and thus, it is a social policy and funding arrangement that entrenches inequalities and inequities in Alberta.

Table 4: Revenue Highlights for Alberta’s Elite Private Schools

Private School	Revenues		Year
	Alberta Education Grants	Tuition & Student Fees	
Calgary Changemaker School	\$412,000 (27%)	\$858,000 (57%)	2021/22 (budget)
Calgary French & International School	\$435,840 (27%)	\$11,209,601 (69%)	2020/21 (actual)
Calgary Waldorf School	\$1,221,632 (30%)	\$1,995,231 (49%)	2020/21 (actual)
Capstone Engineering Academy	Not available	Not available	
Clear Water Academy	\$2,107,451 (26%)	\$5,432,898 (66%)	2020/21 (actual)
Calgary Jewish Academy	\$2,044,667 (40%)	\$2,246,011 (44%)	2020/21 (actual)
Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School	\$3,588,007 (16%)	\$16,223,523 (71%)	2020/21 (actual)
Calgary Academy*	\$7,265,198 (37%)	11,079,599 (56%)	2020/21 (actual)
Delta West Academy	\$448,156 (21%)	\$1,520,243 (70%)	2020/21 (actual)
Edge School	\$1,738,294 (15%)	\$5,542,733 (49%)	2020/21 (budget)
Lycée Louis Pasteur	\$1,969,253 (16%)	\$5,620,386 (46%)	2020/21 (budget)
North Point School for Boys	\$822,000 (40%)	\$1,048,050 (51%)	2020/21 (budget)
Renert School	\$2,630,000 (23%)	\$8,485,000 (73%)	2020/21 (budget)
Rundle College Society*	\$8,319,627 (25%)	\$21,617,171 (66%)	2021/22 (budget)
River Valley School	\$1,281,271 (18%)	\$4,109,173 (57%)	2020/21 (actual)
Tanbridge Academy	\$708,225 (28%)	\$1,668,665 (67%)	2021/22 (projected)
Weber Academy	\$5,026,000 (21%)	\$17,519,000 (74%)	2021/22 (projected)
West Island College	\$3,262,285 (22%)	\$11,113,822 (74%)	2020/21 (actual)

Source: Compiled from Annual Education Results Report (AERR), Education Plan documents, and/or Audited Financial Statements posted on each school’s website.

*Receives a portion of funding as a DSEPS

Conclusion

Alberta Education subsidizes accredited private schools more than any other province in Canada. During public consultations for the *Private Schools Funding Task Force* in 1997, the Vice Chairman of the Grande Prairie Public School District, Clyde Blackburn, reasoned that:

To choose to circumvent the system and fund a private alternative to public education may be a choice for individuals, but it is not for the common good.

To expect to be handed the financial freedom to undermine the effectiveness of the public system by using its money is an affront to the basic premise of public education.

More than \$314 million of provincial funding was allocated to private education in 2021, of which about \$43 million was diverted to eighteen “elite” private schools. While it is worth noting that the private sector can make valuable contributions to public education, these contributions can only be considered valuable to the extent that they are freely accessible, equitable, and represent non-discriminatory forms of school delivery. Most private schools in Alberta, however, employ explicit or implicit discriminatory restrictions based on tuition fees, screening or philosophical grounds, or specific religious affiliations. Restrictive institutions that are the private choice of a select few ought to be funded accordingly—that is, by their private users. It is the public’s responsibility to fund a *public* education system that is universally accessible and accountable to the public.

Despite what private school proponents may suggest, the system does not “save” taxpayers money, but instead it redirects necessary public funds to private schools that can, and oftentimes do, generate substantial revenues through tuition fees—resulting in the inequitable allocation of public funds. A policy solution focused on equity may involve a statutory limitation placed on tuition fees charged by funded private schools whereby the amount cannot exceed the average cost per student in Alberta, including all factors (i.e., capital, operational, transportation, administration, etc.). Government funding, therefore, would be reduced to private schools that charge tuition above a certain level. Such a limit on tuition fees may not apply to non-funded private school operators. However, the recommendation of this report is that:

- *Public financial support for private schools (excluding ECS operators and DSEPS) be phased out over a period of time.*

The argument that independent schools will cease to operate if they lose public funding has not been shown historically within Canada. Private schools continue to operate in provinces such as Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Princes Edward Island, and Nova Scotia where no provincial financial support is offered to private schools. Indeed, private schools in Ontario receive no provincial funding, yet enrol a higher percentage of the total student population than Alberta (Van Pelt, Clemens, Brown & Palacios, 2015). Private schools, therefore, would continue to operate and offer a choice for families in Alberta (where there is demand) but without diverting significant levels of public investment in order to finance an exclusionary system.

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