

## Opinion: Setting the record straight on Alberta's independent school funding

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The Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta says there are misconceptions around funding in the province. Photo by Jocelyne Lloyd /Facebook

Don Braid's Oct. 7 column claims the Alberta government is showering private schools with money while public education falls behind.

That's not what's happening. Let me explain.

In Alberta, these schools are called independent schools, and any independent school that receives even a single dollar of public funding must, by legislation, be a not-for-profit organization. They provide audited financial statements to the government, employ Alberta-certified teachers and teach the Alberta curriculum.

The claim that independent schools are getting larger funding increases than public schools can be quickly corrected. Alberta's Education Funding Manual, publicly available online, ties independent school grants directly to public funding rates at 70 per cent of the public per-student amount. When public funding went up six per cent in 2023-24, independent schools received the exact same six per cent increase. Identical. The 70 per cent ratio didn't change, and it hasn't changed in many years.

The supposed "spike" in total independent-school funding is, in fact, largely driven by enrolment growth — more families choosing these schools for their kids. It's quite straightforward — when more students enrol, more funding follows. And every student educated in an independent school costs the province 30 per cent less than a student in a public school. Independent schools save Alberta taxpayers millions while relieving enrolment pressure on the public system.

That's not a problem, it's good policy.

Transportation is the only funding grant added in recent years. In the past, independent schools received nothing for busing. This was rectified in recent years, still at the same 70 per cent ratio. Ironically, when a public board buses a student to an independent school, it receives 100 per cent of the transportation funding. That's hardly special treatment.

Perhaps the most cynical phrase used is “transfer of funds from public to private schools.” Alberta funds students, not systems. When a family chooses an independent school, a portion of funding follows the student because the school assumes the responsibility and cost of educating that child. What's transferred is responsibility — not dollars siphoned from somewhere else. The public system no longer bears that expense, freeing resources for other students.

The misrepresentation of independent schools as havens for the wealthy doesn't match Alberta's reality. According to a 2017 Fraser Institute report, the average after-tax income for a significant majority of independent school families is comparable to, or even slightly less than, the average income for public school families. The fastest-growing group among them are new Canadians seeking stability, language continuity and a sense of belonging. Another expanding subset of schools focuses on students with special learning needs.

The hyperbole around accelerated capital funding initiatives is also lacking context. The numbers Braid references represent barely one per cent of Alberta's recent \$8.6-billion investment in public school infrastructure. Including independent schools in this initiative, even in a small way, is an innovative, cost-effective approach to add classroom space at a fraction of what new public construction would cost. Leveraging matching funds and requiring long-term operational viability helps meet demand while easing overcrowding in the overall system. Leveraging community investment to expand capacity is effective governance.

Beyond the numbers, this isn't a partisan issue — it's a matter of fundamental rights. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that parents have the right to choose the kind of education their children receive. Nor is Alberta unique: according to OIDEAL, 78 per cent of 157 countries studied provide some level of public support for non-state schools. Alberta's model — partial funding tied to accountability — isn't radical. It's mainstream.

Alberta's education system has always valued choice, with public, separate, francophone, charter, independent and home-education options working side by side. These sectors are not adversaries; they're partners serving Alberta families in different ways.

When parents can find the right fit for their children, every student and the entire province benefits.

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