



Public school

Independent schools: 91.8% non-elite



Independent Schools in British Columbia: Myths and Realities

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SUMMARY

■ Calls for reductions to or elimination of funding for independent schools in British Columbia are based on misperceptions, specifically, that parents choose independent schools because public schools are underfunded; that independent schools are “elite”; and that government funding of independent schools drain public expenditures.

■ The evidence demonstrates a contrasting reality. First, spending on public schools increased by 19.8% between 2004/05 to 2013/14, from \$5.3 billion to \$6.4 billion (an increase of 7.1% when price changes are considered).

■ Second, when the decline in enrolments in public schools is taken into account, per-pupil spending in public schools increased over the decade (2004/05 to 2013/14) by 18.3% from \$9,971 to \$11,797 (adjusted for inflation, in 2014\$).

■ Third, over the decade (from 2003/04 to 2012/13) the vast majority of the increase in spending (61.3 %) went to staff compensation.

■ Fourth, enrolments in independent schools increased nearly 18% over the decade 2004/05 to 2013/14 and waitlist evidence from 2012 shows that increases may well have been higher had spaces been available. During the same period public school enrolments declined by 8.5%.

■ Fifth, the elitist caricature of independent schools does not hold. Most exist to serve other parental preferences in education. More than 55% are religiously-oriented and 20% have a specialty teaching or learning emphasis.

■ In 2015/16, the government spent an average of \$8,288 per public school student for operational expenditures while it granted an average of \$3,911 per independent school student. If funding were eliminated and more than 37,464 students migrated back to public schools, provincial expenditure on education would increase, further straining finances.

Independent Schools in British Columbia

Introduction

There has been recent public debate about a reduction, and **even possible** elimination, of funding for independent schools in British Columbia.¹ Unfortunately, many of the arguments for reducing or eliminating funding are based on misperceptions rather than an objective, empirical analysis. These include claims that the public system is being “starved,” that parents are choosing independent schools because the public system is underfunded, that independent schools are “elite, ivy-clad schools” for children of the wealthy, and that government funding for independent schools is a drain on public expenditures and ending this support would result in greater resources for the public school system.

This bulletin addresses these misperceptions by presenting data on government public school expenditures, the composition of the independent schools and their enrolments, and an assessment of whether or not independent educational alternatives in fact take money away from the public system.

Expenditure on public schools in British Columbia

In many quarters it is taken as a given that British Columbia’s public schools are underfunded, indeed even being “starved.” For example, British Columbia NDP leader John Horgan recently claimed, “We’ve been starving the public sys-

tem” (Palmer, 2016, June 7). Similarly, Jim Iker, the former president of the BC Teachers’ Federation, remarked that “The under-funding is ... incredibly short-sighted” (Iker, 2016, April 10). Despite these chronic complaints about funding levels, spending on public school education in British Columbia has increased markedly over the last decade.

According to data from Statistics Canada, between 2004/05 to 2013/14 (the most recent 10-year period available), spending on public schools in British Columbia increased from \$5.3 billion to \$6.4 billion—an increase of 19.8% (Clemens, Emes, and Van Pelt, 2016). When price changes (inflation) are considered, the increase is 7.1 percent.²

However, when public student enrolments are taken into account, the increase is even more pronounced. Consider that public school student enrolment in British Columbia decreased from 588,007 students in 2004/05 to 537,765 in 2013/14, an 8.5% decline (see table 1). In a recent study, Clemens, Emes and Van Pelt (2016) found that spending per student had increased by 32.3% between 2004/5 and 2013/14, from \$8,914 to \$11,797.³

It is also important to note that compensation (salaries, pensions, and benefits) for teaching and non-teaching staff accounted for the overwhelming majority of this increase. Specifically, 61.3% of the total increase in education spending over the past 10 years, or \$824 million, has

¹ Independent schools—commonly referred to as private schools—are schools that are run independent of government or government-associated agencies. Unlike public schools they are not state-owned and not governed by elected or appointed public bodies, but rather are established and governed independently and rely more or less extensively on fees paid by parents, fundraising efforts, and philanthropic generosity. (For more detail on their definition, see Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2016: 1–3.)

² Authors’ calculation from Clemens, Emes, and Van Pelt (2016) and CANSIM table 326-0021.

³ After adjusting for inflation, that study found that per-student spending on public schools has increased from \$9,971 to \$11,797, an increase of 18.3% for the 10-year period (Clemens, Emes, and Van Pelt, 2016).

Independent Schools in British Columbia

Table 1: Enrolment in British Columbia Public and Independent Schools

	Enrolment		Percentage change	Percent of total enrolment*	
	2004/05	2013/14	2004/05 to 2013/14	2004/05	2013/14
Public	588,007	537,765	-8.5%	90.1%	87.7%
Independent	64,406	75,753	17.6%	9.9%	12.3%

Source: Federation of Independent School Associations in British Columbia (2016).

*Excludes home-schooled students, who were about 0.03% of total K-12 enrolment in British Columbia in 2012/13.

gone to compensation (Van Pelt, Emes, and Clemens 2015).⁴

While those advocating for a reduction or the elimination of funding for independent schools often make statements about funding levels, the reality is that spending on public school education in British Columbia has increased markedly over the last decade.

Enrolment in independent schools in British Columbia

Given both the total and per-student increase in spending on public schools, the notion that parents are choosing independent schools because the public system is underfunded is clearly false. As the next section explains, parents choose independent schools for many reasons, including because they want faith-based or specialized education for their children.

There is no question, however, that some of the reduction in public school enrolment not-

⁴ The period covered in Van Pelt et al., 2015 differs slightly from the remainder of the data presented in this section. Specifically, Van Pelt et al., 2015 covers from 2003/04 to 2012/13 because 2013/14 data were not available at the time of its publication.

ed above is due to increased enrolment in independent schools. From 2004/05 to 2013/14, enrolment in independent schools in British Columbia increased by nearly 18% from 64,406 to 75,753 students (see table 1). As a share of total enrolments, independent school enrolment has increased from 9.9 to 12.3% in British Columbia over the same period.

While enrolments in independent schools have increased, waiting lists at independent schools in British Columbia's Lower Mainland indicate that enrolments could be even higher. In a 2012 survey of independent schools in the Lower Mainland, 55 schools indicated they had a waiting list, and 2,172 students were on a wait list (Clemens, 2012).

The diversity of independent schools in British Columbia

There is a stereotype that independent schools in British Columbia are elite, urban schools for the wealthy. For example, consider the recent comment from Stephen Quinn, host of "On the Coast" on CBC Radio One:

Why are my tax dollars, which should be directed to public education, instead being

Independent Schools in British Columbia

Table 2: Distribution of independent schools and enrolments in B.C., 2013/14

		Number of schools		Enrolments	
		Count	Distribution	Count	Distribution
Total	British Columbia	340		75,402	
Religious affiliation (Catholic, Other Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Other)	Affiliated with a religion	188	55.3%	53,104	70.4%
	Not affiliated with a religion	152	44.7%	22,298	29.6%
Special emphasis (Montessori, Waldorf, Arts/Sports/STEM, Distributed Learning, Special Education, Other)	Specialty Schools	68	20.0%	10,514	13.9%
	Not a specialty school	272	80.0%	64,888	86.1%
Location	Rural, small and medium population area	146	42.9%	20,342	27.0%
	Large urban population centre	194	57.1%	55,060	73.0%
CAIS and ISABC Schools	Either CAIS or ISABC	28	8.2%	13,045	17.3%
	Neither CAIS nor ISABC	312	91.8%	62,357	82.7%

Sources: Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt (2016); Independent Schools Association of BC (2016).

spent to send students to tony, elite, ivy-clad schools for children of the wealthy? Okay, so they're not all elite nor ivy-clad, and they're not attended only by children of the wealthy, but that image pops into my head without fail every time. (Quinn, 2016, June 24)

A recent Fraser Institute study based on provincial ministry data found that, rather than conforming to the “elite” stereotype, independent schools actually come in a wide variety of types and serve many educational preferences (Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2016). In fact, only a small portion of independent schools in British Columbia conform to the image of the traditional “elite” stereotype.

More than half (55.3%) of British Columbia’s independent schools have a religious orientation. Half of those are non-Catholic, Christian schools, 42.0% are Catholic, and the remainder

serve other religious perspectives (see table 2). All told, religious independent schools enrolled 70.4% of all independent school students in British Columbia.

The other major type of independent school provides a unique approach to teaching (Montessori, Waldorf, arts or sports, etc.). Sixty-eight such schools exist in British Columbia, representing 20.0% of all independent schools and 13.9% of total independent school enrolment in the province.

Independent schools most likely to be viewed as conforming to popular stereotypes of traditional “elite” university-preparatory schools could be those that meet the national external accreditation standards of Canadian Accredited Independent Schools and/or the standards of the Independent Schools Association of British Columbia. If membership in either CAIS or

Independent Schools in British Columbia

ISABC is an indicator of a school being one of the stereotypically elite ones, only 28 of 340 schools (8.2%) in the province qualify.

Contrary to the caricature of private schools being “elitist,” independent schools in British Columbia offer diverse approaches to education, particularly religiously-based education and alternative pedagogies.

Independent schools reduce strain on British Columbia government finances

Funding for British Columbia’s independent schools is administered through a system of tiered grants for different school groups. The value of the grant—0%, 35%, or 50% of the operating grant provided to the local board of education per full-time equivalent (FTE) public school student—is determined by the schools’ adherence to specified criteria (British Columbia, n.d.).⁵ This has led some to claim that the funding of independent schools reduces the resources available to the public system—reasoning that is difficult to follow.

In 2015/16, operating expenditures per FTE public school student were \$8,288.⁶ In the same year, the British Columbia government spent \$310.5 million on students in independent schools (British Columbia, 2016). With 79,382 FTE students in independent schools in 2015/16, this translates

⁵ Please note that Distributed Learning (DL) independent schools can receive up to 63% of the public operating grant. Distributed Learning relies on indirect communication between students and teachers, including internet or other electronic-based delivery.

⁶ Data on operating expenditures per FTE public school student are from the British Columbia government (British Columbia, 2015). They differ from the Statistics Canada data presented elsewhere in this paper as Statistics Canada data include spending on capital—particularly new school construction and renovations to existing schools—as well as contributions to school employee pension plans.

into average government spending of \$3,911 per FTE independent school student. Clearly, independent schools require substantially fewer public dollars per student.

If government discontinued funding for independent schools, parents of defunded independent school students would face increased tuition fees. Some could perhaps no longer afford the higher tuition at the independent school of their choice, and would migrate their children to public schools. For those who moved over, the government would have to incur the full cost of educating each student at 100% of the operating grant rather than the 0% to 50% they currently pay.

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We calculate that if 37,464 FTE students (or 47.2% of FTE independent school students) migrated from an independent to a public school following a discontinuation of funding, the money the government saved by cutting that funding would be “used up” by covering the full cost of those students in the public system. Were any more independent students to migrate back to the public system, overall government spending on education in the province would increase.⁷ And that is only on an oper-

⁷ Currently most parents pay additional tuition fees in order to send their children to an independent school. It is reasonable, given the diversity of schools and needs they serve, to assume that many parents and communities could not bear the entire cost of all students enrolled in independent schools and thus some migration might be expected.

Independent Schools in British Columbia

ating basis. In addition to operating costs, the government would also likely need to incur new capital costs to accommodate the migrating students.

The reality is that independent schools do not take away resources that could be used for public schools. It is highly likely that eliminating government funding for independent schools would result in increased strain on government finances and increased costs for British Columbia taxpayers.

Conclusion

British Columbia's parents are increasingly choosing to send their children to independent schools for their education; the share of students in the province enrolled in independent schools has increased from 9.9% to 12.3% between 2004/05 and 2013/14. The vast majority of these independent schools are not the caricature of elite private schools. Rather, they provide alternative approaches to education that are simply not available in public schools. Contrary to the misperception touted by those advocating the elimination of the partial funding of independent schools, doing so would likely place increased strain on government finances and lead to increased costs for British Columbia's taxpayers.

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Independent Schools in British Columbia

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