



# Expanding the Supply of Independent Schools in Alberta

By  
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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Current State of Alberta’s Education System</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Comparing Independent Schools in Ontario and Alberta</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Shortening the Path to Public Funding</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Methods of Funding Independent Schools</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Businesses Can Have a Role to Play</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Boosting the Teacher Supply</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>13</b>

# Introduction

Students who attend alternatives to public schools in Alberta, such as charter schools, have consistently [outperformed](#) their peers within the public school system. Attendance at independent schools in Alberta has skyrocketed since 2012 but there is still considerable untapped demand. Making it easier to open and operate such schools outside the public system should be a government priority.

Although there is a lot of demand for non-traditional education, it is not straightforward to establish an independent school in the province. Even setting aside the government approval process, there are just basic barriers including costs, teacher supply, and so on.

Starting an independent school in Alberta requires that any start-up has the capital to run the school including building or leasing the school facilities themselves. Independent schools can access partial government subsidies but they must operate for a full year before receiving any public funding. Waiving this qualifying period could increase resources for the sector. Another idea would be to permit these schools to access government-backed loans.

Finding enough teachers to fill staff positions is another challenge. Waiving the Bachelor of Education requirement for subject-matter experts would allow individuals with specific certifications, licenses, or doctorates to teach, thereby increasing the diversity and quality of education offered as well as the basic supply. Additionally, implementing in-house training programs for prospective teachers would enable them to become certified while working, addressing the labor shortage without compromising educational quality.

One thing that the government should not change is its standards. Maintaining minimum standards through regulation is necessary to ensure quality education and positive outcomes for children. An unregulated system could lead to detrimental effects, such as instability and compromised educational quality, which education advocates warn is more common in Ontario, with its laxer regulations on independent schools.

The purpose of this policy brief is to better understand Alberta's current education model and put forward recommendations on how to better respond to public demand for independent school options.

# The Current State of Alberta's Education System

Alberta's K-12 public education system currently consists of five types of schools: public, Catholic (separate), Francophone, charter, and independent. Public, Catholic, and Francophone schools are fully funded and operated by the provincial government, and free to attend.

Charter schools in Alberta are publicly funded but operate independently of the local school boards. They offer specialized programs not typically available in regular public schools and focus on innovative teaching methods or specific educational philosophies. Alberta is the only province with the charter school model.

Independent schools in Alberta charge tuition and can operate with varying degrees of government oversight. Accredited funded private schools receive

some government funding and must follow the Alberta curriculum and hire certified teachers. Depending on the circumstances, these schools receive between 60 and 70 percent of the per-student grant funding available to public schools.

There are nearly 720,000 students in public, separate and Francophone schools. There are another 12,807 in charter schools. Independent schools serve roughly 46,000 students in the province.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Alberta's K-12 Students Across Different School Types

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Public	494,053	483,578	492,362	508,220	524,705
Separate	176,128	174,689	173,436	177,588	185,150
Francophone	8,898	8,573	8,765	9,087	9,541
Charter	9,918	10,012	10,575	11,257	12,807
Independent	33,382	38,078	39,292	41,159	45,477

Source: [Government of Alberta](#).

Independent schools have witnessed significant growth in recent years. They have averaged more than 8 percent annual growth over since 2020—and 45 percent total growth over the past ten years. Yet there are only 166 independent schools across the province and just a [single new one](#) over the same decade.

# The Comparing Independent Schools in Ontario and Alberta

Ontario currently hosts [far more](#) independent and private schools than Alberta, both on a total and per-capita basis, with over 1,400 compared to less than 200 in Alberta. However, Ontario’s model is quite a bit different than Alberta’s including, for instance, it does not provide public funding to independent schools.

Joanna VanHof, a PhD student in educational leadership and policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, notes that the Ontario government’s lack of funding for independent schools comes with a more hands-off regulatory approach.

“There are significant differences,” says Vanhof. “Ontario does not provide any funding for its independent schools and kind of coinciding with that, it also does not regulate independent schools very significantly.”

Kelden Formosa, a teacher at the Alberta Classical Academy, an independent school in the province, believes schools should be held to a higher standard, and that the lack of funding means regulations are lax.

“There are certain standards that I would want to maintain, and I worry that in Ontario, because there’s no public money going to any of the independent schools there, that they also have sacrificed any kind of basic kind of regulation,” says Formosa.

According to VanHof, the Ontario independent schools will undergo biannual inspection by the Ministry of Education in order to gain approval, but little else.

“To start a school for example, it requires just a fee, as well as a notice of intent to operate, and a few requirements according to the Education Act here,” says VanHof. “Outside of that, you can start a school. So what that’s produced in Ontario is a lot of schools that will open and close.”

VaHof says there is an appetite for independent schooling in Ontario, but that the quality does not always match the quantity.

“That is a bit of a double-edged sword in Ontario,” says VanHof. “In Alberta, the difference is that there’s significant regulation by the government in terms of quality of education, that is provided by independent schools that do need to comply with a number of different requirements.”

Catharine Kavanagh, Alberta Liaison Officer at the Cardus Institute, says Alberta’s independent schools use the same provincial curriculum as public schools, employ certified teachers, administer provincially-required exams, and complete the same education reports and plans.

“Alberta has very robust oversight requirements for independent schools, especially for those that are accredited and funded, which are essentially held to the same standards as public schools,” says Kavanagh.

The stringent approval and regulatory processes can constrain the supply of independent schools. But they are in some way a trade-off that flows from Alberta's dedicated public funding for independent schools. There are certainly options to streamline approvals and minimize the regulatory burden but as long as the province is providing 70 cent dollars there are limits on how much independent schools can extract themselves from provincial bureaucracy.

Formosa is not opposed to regulation, as minimum standards have to be met. Furthermore, he says having a completely

unregulated system leads to bad outcomes for children beyond compromising their quality of education.

"I think you have a certain degree of quality assurance. Having a completely free market system isn't good for little kids," says Formosa. "To be constantly shuffling from one school to another isn't good for communities that have that much turnover."

As a result of Alberta's high regulatory bar, Kavanagh says independent schools that offer sub-par education are not proliferating in Alberta.

## Shortening the Path to Public Funding

There are steps that the Alberta government should take within its strong regulatory system to enable more independent schools. Spending up the time it takes to get approvals for funding independent schools is a big one.

VanHof notes that independent schools in Alberta are required to have non-profit or charitable status, as well as being operational for a year before accessing public funding, which she says is a heavy burden for school start-ups.

“There’s definitely room for improvement in terms of policy, and the ability to start new schools or to even expand existing schools,” says VanHof.

To increase the number of independent schools, the Alberta government could relax the requirements to operate for a year before receiving public funding. This could be made contingent upon quality and enrolments checks at the Christmas or Spring Break to determine if the school is showing signs of success.

Formosa says that successful schools need to have a good plan and foundation to thrive, and should be enabled to thrive and be supported in getting established.

“It should be challenging to start up a new school, but I think once your school is operating, let’s make operating it as simple as possible,” says Formosa.

Avoiding the possibility of a school’s enrolment and quality of education decreasing after being approved for public funding should be a priority. Quality and enrolment checks should be regular after the approval to ensure the province is making a worthy investment in the school.

# Methods of Funding Independent Schools

Kavanagh says both the government and the private sector have real opportunities to support the capital costs for independent schools. She points out that independent schools currently cannot access loans with preferential rates and terms backed by the Alberta government in the same way that public, Catholic, and Francophone schools can.

Furthermore, Kavanagh says this becomes even more important given that school authorities are not permitted to borrow money to actually build schools. She calls for greater flexibility to be granted to independent schools to level the playing field.

“Giving independent schools the same financial flexibility that public schools have would go a long way,” says Kavanagh. “When it comes to independent schools, they are at a significant disadvantage since they are responsible for their own capital costs & operations themselves...yet they cannot access loans to acquire capital.”

Formosa says funding needs to be structured to meet the needs of families, as well as purchasing buildings and paying staff. He says that spending to increase the number of school bus drivers is a step in the right direction.

“Ensuring choice means that you have the ability to get to a school,” says Formosa. “You need access to transportation to some extent, and I think a lot of people are finding that the parents are having to pay quite a bit of money for busing.”

There is the possibility that parents can pay for some of the costs of new bus drivers for independent schools. Formosa says this is not unfair if they want to attend a school outside their neighbourhood, but that there is still space for subsidizing bussing.

Estimates of the average salary of a school bus driver in Calgary ranges from [\\$42,977](#) to [\\$47,475](#) per year. Supposing a driver making the latter works for an independent school of 200 students, evenly splitting the costs of the driver’s salary with the province would come out to about \$119 per family annually.

There is no need for a single, ironclad arrangement regarding funding for busses, and these could be negotiated on a case-by-case basis depending on the resources and attendance of the independent school in-question.

Formosa says that the supply of available drivers could also be increased by boosting salaries to make them more attractive, or by making it easier to become a driver.

“One thing that provincial governments could do is they could really work to expand the number of people who are

willing to work in bussing, perhaps by increasing the salaries to something like making a smoother pathway for people to get trained and licensed in that,” says Formosa.

Formosa says that independent schools like his have a hard time competing against the public school districts when it comes to bussing and drivers, resulting in long wait times for children at bus stops.

“If we get more people trained and licensed, than when somebody goes on holiday or somebody’s sick, our kids aren’t waiting for 45 minutes to get picked up,” says Formosa.

## Businesses Can Have a Role to Play

Kavanagh says that the nature of independent schools means they often have greater flexibility to offer a wider range of subjects, and more hands-on learning or innovative experiences like visiting local businesses to learn about their work. Furthermore, she says educational choice improves educational quality for every student, in every school – so any business investment in their local independent school will have ripple effects throughout the wider community.

“Businesses have the opportunity to support independent schools in so many ways – whether it’s through direct philanthropic efforts; or partnering with shop classes to offer students dual-credit learning,” says Kavanagh.

When it comes to the private sector, Kavanagh says Cardus envisions independent schools as meeting community needs, and with the entire community’s investment.

“It’s simply good long-term business sense: today’s third graders are tomorrow’s employees,” says Kavanagh. “The primary purpose of education is not to become an employee... it is also the reality that in a well-functioning society, we need contributions from everyone, and so we do need to form students into good, well-rounded citizens.”

Kavanagh says that more practically, many businesses are facing a labour crisis, especially in the trades and hospitality sectors.

“When employers can find workers, they often find that their employees lack basic skills, like showing up on time, counting change, communicating with customers, and following instructions – all things which one would expect to be learned in the K-12 years,” says Kavanagh.

## Boosting the Teacher Supply

Alberta is currently facing a [shortage](#) of available teachers to staff public and independent schools. To help remedy this, Kavanagh says that the Bachelor of Education requirement for teachers should be dropped for subject-matter specific experts as a way to expand independent school faculties.

“By waiving the BEd requirement for subject-matter-expert teachers (those with a specific certification, license, or doctorate, like a PhD in chemistry, or a Red Seal welder), schools would be able to offer increased variety and quality of education in specialized areas, including STEM and the trades, to allow greater knowledge and skills learning for all students,” says Kavanagh.

Formosa says that despite a labour shortage of teachers, there are plenty of people who would like to enter the profession in Alberta.

“We also have plenty of people who would like to be in our schools, but they can’t take two years off mid-career to go get a certification to teach,” says Formosa. “I’m not saying they shouldn’t teach, but I’m wondering if they should be able to do that while getting paid and we’re getting compensated as an actual school process.”

According to Formosa, the accrediting system for teachers needs significant reform, and the system should be opened up for alternative models. He says that in-house training programs should be permitted so that anyone who passes a criminal record and vulnerable sector screening check can be admitted as a tutor or substitute teacher as they learn to become certified teachers.

“Throughout the course of maybe one or two years, you do a gradual release of responsibility, such that that person can be certified to teach at the conclusion of two years,” says Formosa.

As a model for quality assurance, Formosa suggests that in-house trained teachers can be periodically assessed much the same way as plumbers and other blue-collar workers are. He says these assessments can be run overseen by government agencies or another regulatory agency run by teachers.

# Conclusion

The landscape of education in Alberta is evolving, with independent schools demonstrating a notable track record of success and a growing demand from families seeking alternatives to the public school system. The expansion of these schools presents an opportunity for the Alberta government to enhance educational choice and quality. However, several challenges must be addressed to boost the supply of independent schools in order to meet the rising demand.

Key recommendations include:

- ***Reduce the Initial Operational Burden***

Allow new independent schools to access public funds earlier, contingent on quality and enrollment checks, to support their establishment without compromising standards.

This adjustment would alleviate financial strain and accelerate the development of new institutions that adhere to Alberta's high educational standards.

- ***Address the Teacher Shortage***

Waive the Bachelor of Education requirement for subject-matter experts to attract highly qualified professionals into the teaching workforce.

Implement in-house training programs to enable career-switchers to gain certification while working, thus maintaining educational quality and meeting the growing demand for qualified educators.

- ***Grant Financial Flexibility***

Provide independent schools with access to preferential loans backed

by the Alberta government to help manage capital costs more effectively.

This financial support would level the playing field and enable independent schools to focus on delivering high-quality education.

- ***Maintain Robust Regulatory Standards***

Ensure that the proliferation of independent schools does not compromise educational quality by preserving Alberta's high regulatory standards.

Balance regulation with support, learning from other provinces like Ontario, which has a higher number of independent schools but at the possible cost of quality and stability.

- ***Enhance Infrastructure and Communication***

Foster collaboration to support the growth of independent schools while maintaining high educational standards.

Ensure all students have access to quality education, regardless of the type of school they attend.

# ALBERTA 360

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