LANDMARK STUDY SERIES

More Choice, More Savings:

How educational choice saves Alberta taxpayers billions

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Executive Summary

This report examines the financial impact on taxpayers of partially funding independent and home education in Alberta—and finds that school choice saves Albertans money.

There is considerable demand for independent and home education in Alberta. From 2011 to 2024, independent enrolment increased annually in all but one year, growing from 23,705 to 45,762 students—a 93 percent increase (not including Early Childhood Services). Homeschooling is growing even faster, nearly tripling enrolment since 2011. By comparison, the rest of Alberta's K–12 enrolment increased by 28.6 percent in the same period.

Given such a contrast, we expect these alternative educational choices have offerings that are not only unique but of considerable value to the families enrolled in their communities. Yet, they are much too small a share of enrolment to be seen as a competitive threat, making up a combined 6.7 percent of all Alberta K–12 students. Independent enrolment is 5.7 percent and home education 3.1 percent of Alberta students. (Note: There is considerable overlap between the categories, as 98 percent of home education programs are supervised by a school—two-thirds of which are independent. In other words, one-third of independent students are in home education programs.)

Key findings:

- Fully funded schools (i.e., public, separate, francophone, etc.) cost taxpayers $11,225 per student, compared to $8,027 for independent and $1,802 for home-education students.
- In other words, each student in an independent school saves Alberta taxpayers 28 cents on the dollar, while each home-education student saves 84 cents to the dollar.
- Combined, this amounts to annual taxpayer savings of $306.4 million in the most recent year, and $1.35 billion over the last five years.

Independent and home education do not receive capital funding, so the above are only the savings on operating expenses. Accordingly, from 2011 to 2024, the budget for independent schools rose 95 percent, in tandem with a 93 percent rise in independent enrolment. Conversely, the cost of fully funded students rose by 37.3 percent, while fully funded enrolment increased by only 27.7 percent. In other words, public and separate school costs climbed nearly 10 points or 34.8 percent faster than enrolment, since 2011, despite their per-student costs remaining essentially unchanged.

It is important to put all of the above into context, by considering the opportunity cost of these savings. In the five Alberta cities with the largest school capacity—Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Grande Prairie—their combined three-year capital plans amount to $1.149 billion. Thus, four-years' worth of savings from independent and home enrolment pays for all the new schools needed in these cities. For perspective, the entire Ministry of Education's capital plan for 2025–2028 is $3.29 billion—about 10 to 11 years' worth of taxpayer savings.

Another way of looking at it is to consider what would happen if independent and home education programs were defunded and all those students migrated to public schools. That would require at least 54 additional public schools. Presently, the aforementioned five cities enrol 60 percent of the province's students and have budgeted for 37 new schools (Calgary and Edmonton are already overcrowded). Thus, these cities would need to nearly triple capacity overnight, to 91 new schools—with a capital cost of at least $3 billion—to accommodate such an influx.

Bottom line: In Alberta, independent schools and home education save taxpayers money. The Alberta government is right to promote an education system that values a diversity of approaches, offering a wide range of school options to as many children as possible—not to mention, the advantages of funding independent schools and home education go far beyond the substantial cost savings.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to estimate the financial impact, for Alberta taxpayers, of students that choose to enrol in independent or home education. The report begins with essential context on what independent schools and home education are in Alberta and how they fit within the province's education system. Next, enrolment trends and annual reports are examined, in order to calculate whether these alternative educational choices are a fiscal burden or blessing to Albertans. With total and per-student costs, we also estimate the cost of these students migrating to public schools, the impact on capacity constraints, and the costs of building out new capacity to accommodate such a migration if independent schools and funded home education programs did not exist.

Essential context: Alberta's plural education system

Many ways to school

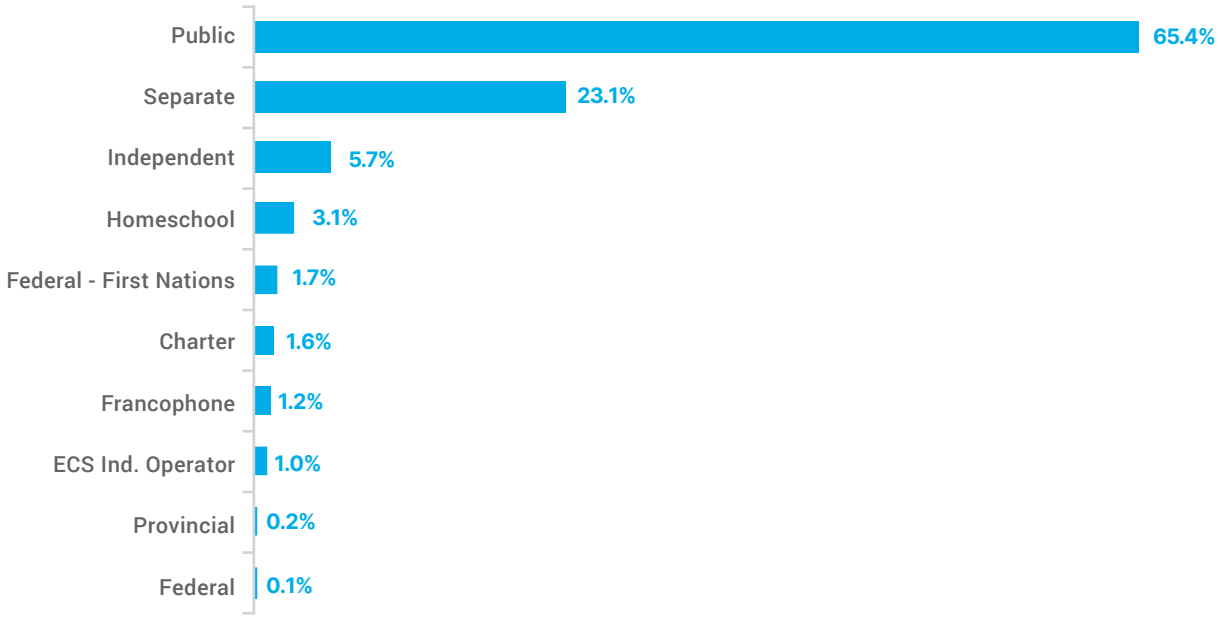
Alberta has long had the most pluralistic education system in North America. Up until 2012, there were at least 19 ways for Albertan children to school—15 of which were fully or partially taxpayer funded (see Exhibit A1 and Figure A1 in the Appendix). Today, there remain at least 17 ways for Albertans to school: 13 are at least partially funded (see Exhibit A1, Figure A2, and Figure A3 in the Appendix).

Of all the 802,336 K–12 students in Alberta, two-thirds were enrolled in public school board schools in 2024—the year of analysis (Figure 1). The large majority of this is in what are colloquially known as "public schools"; these are the common schools in almost every neighbourhood—the cultural norm throughout North America. But given such a lengthy list of publicly overseen, taxpayer-funded educational options, referring to just one option as "public" is a misnomer at best. For example, within public school boards, many Albertans opt into alternative programs—examples include Calgary Islamic School and Edmonton Christian Schools—which hardly match "public school" stereotypes but are nonetheless public school board schools. Likewise, there are Mennonite, former separate, and (not separate) Protestant public schools in rural Alberta (e.g., all of the aforementioned are in the county of Saint Paul). And, until 2012, there was at least one Catholic public (not separate) school (e.g., Greater Saint Albert Catholic).

Figure 1

General distribution of Alberta K–12 enrolment

2024



Source: Government of Alberta (2026).[1] **Note:** Home-educated students (3.1%) are included in the school authorities' count, as—exceptions notwithstanding—students register and are counted with a school authority (e.g., an independent, public, or separate school).

This report focuses primarily on just two of the 17 ways to school in Alberta: accredited funded independent and home education supervised by a school authority.

Defining home education

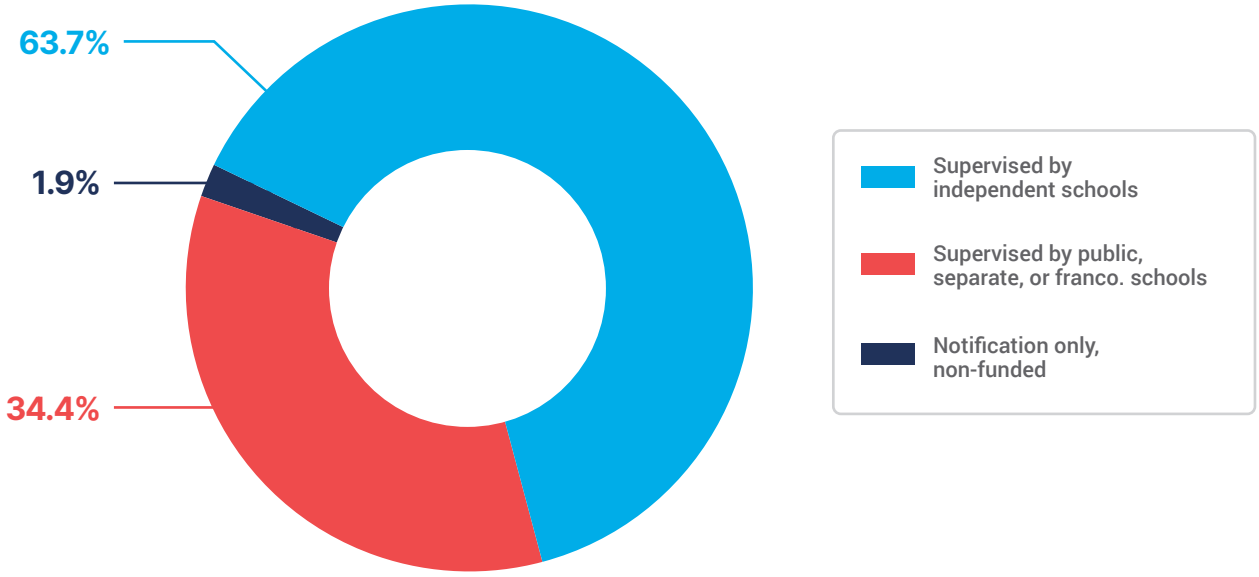
Alberta Education delineates between "Shared Responsibility" programs, "Home Education supervised by [a] school authority," and "Notification only, non-funded." Shared responsibility programs tend to be synonymous with distributed learning, distance education, online programs, and/or hybrid schooling. As they are a complex category with a unique and varying funding rate but only constitute one-quarter of 1 percent (0.26%) of Alberta students—more than half of which are supervised by public, separate, or francophone schools—they are excluded from our analysis.

Home education has less to do with location than with authority. Parents are the primary educators, but education can and does happen beyond just the home. Over 98 percent of Alberta home-educated students are registered with a school authority; of these registrations, nearly two-thirds are with independent schools (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Distribution of Alberta home education enrolment

2024



Source: Alberta Education (2025).[2] **Note:** This excludes the 2,057 students in shared responsibility programs (thus, the denominator is 22,653).

Recognizing that parents are, by nature, the natural custodians and first educators of their child,[3] Alberta does not require students to register with a school. However, compulsory education remains in effect through notification requirements. One-twentieth of 1 percent (0.05%) of Albertan students are notification-only homeschoolers. They do not receive any taxpayer funding.

Regulatory categories aside, "What is a homeschooler?" is a central research question at present in education policy globally. A growing community of scholars—including but not limited to Angela Watson,[4] Eric Wearne,[5] Michael McShane,[6] Albert Cheng,[7] Matthew Lee,[8] and Catherine Sunshine[9] (not to mention the many scholars in Continental Europe and Latin America)—have published robust research on this since 2020, distinguishing between homeschool, home-educated, hybrid-school, micro-school, learning pods, etc.

Homeschooling is remarkably fluid in two ways. First, many if not most homeschoolers do not match conventional stereotypes. Of all school types, homeschoolers are the hardest—i.e., near impossible—to define, once the definition moves beyond education authority. Intuitively, this makes sense, as the whole premise of homeschooling is its heterogeneity; it is a bespoke educational experience. Second, students move in and out of homeschooling; 80 percent of homeschoolers are only educated at home for some of their K–12 schooling. In other words, only one in five home-educated students completes all of K–12 as a homeschooler.

The exact same share—20 percent—of all graduates who at some point homeschooled, did so for only one year. Around one-third of all homeschoolers only homeschool for two years or less of their entire K–12 education.[10]

Defining independent schools

Alberta Education reports that there are 237 independent schools in the province, as of January 2026.[11] Although sometimes referred to as "private" schools,[a] these schools are heavily regulated and must annually submit operating plans to the Ministry of Education. But they have independence in their day-to-day operations, governance, and purpose, and, thus, shall be referred to as independent schools in this report. Of note, "three-quarters of independent schools belong to a school association…[providing] an additional layer of accountability beyond that of government regulation".[12]

Three regulatory categories of independent schools

There are three regulated categories of Alberta independent schools. In addition to the aforementioned, all independent schools must meet the basic requirements set out in the *Independent Schools Regulation* subsection of the *Education Act* and follow municipal bylaws. Those who meet only these requirements are simply "registered" independent schools. Those who also employ provincially certified teachers are "accredited" independent schools. Neither of these two categories receives funding. To receive 70 percent of the per-student public grant for operating expenses, "accredited funded" independent schools must be a charity or nonprofit, teach the province's programs of study, and have a provincially certificated principal, in addition to certified teachers. No independent school receives capital grants.

Figure 3 shows that, of reported enrolment, 97.6 percent of independent school students attend accredited funded schools.

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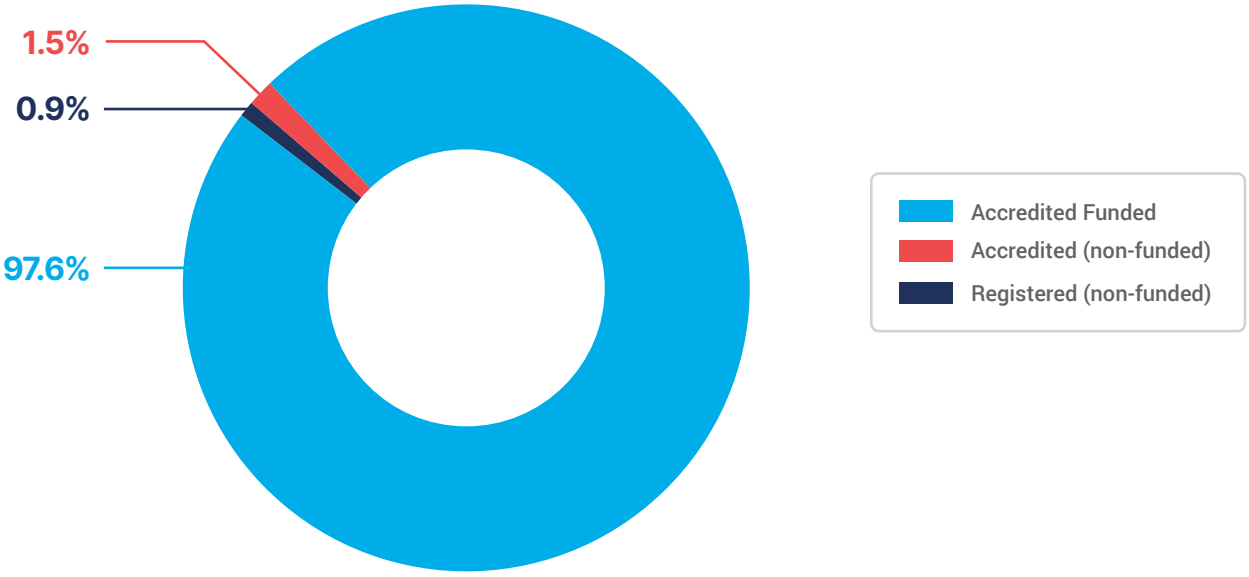
[a] Until fairly recently, the Ministry of Education used the label "private school," but this was updated to the more accurate term, "independent school."

Figure 3

Distribution of Alberta independent school enrolment

By funding category, 2019



Source: Hunt et al. (2021).[13]

Understanding independent schools

Types of independent schools

Independent schools are a naturally diverse ecosystem. Nearly 60 percent of Alberta's independent schools are religious—mostly non-Catholic Christian, but also Jewish, Sikh, Islamic, and other religions. Nearly half have a special emphasis, such as classical (i.e., the liberal arts tradition), special education, Montessori, etc. Only 9 percent of Alberta's independent schools are "those schools that are commonly thought of as 'elite,' with competitive admissions policies, high academic standards, excellent facilities, and [high] tuition."[14]

Seventy-five percent of Alberta independent schools enrol fewer than 300 students.[15]

Why parents choose independent schools

In Alberta, the top five reasons parents give for choosing a non-religious independent school are that the school:[16]

1. Instills confidence in students
2. Has happy students
3. Offers a supportive and nurturing environment
4. Has small class sizes
5. Teaches students to think critically and independently

For religious independent schools, the top five reasons are that the school:[17]

1. Supports their family's values
2. Teaches right from wrong
3. Is a safe school
4. Offers a supportive and nurturing environment
5. Uses curriculum that parents trust

Regardless of the type of independent school—whether religious or special emphasis or top tier (or all of the above)—parents are nearly unanimous in that they "chose the school for its supportive, nurturing, and safe environment that instills confidence and character in students."[18]

Who chooses independent schools?

Alberta independent schools are middle-class institutions. Their students are much more likely to hail from two-parent households who work in middle-class occupations, but "when comparing like-to-like family structures, independent-school families have a lower household income than their Albertan peers."[19]

In 2020, median per-student tuition was $4,000 a year—only slightly more than the average hockey family spends per child on their out-of-school sport of choice.[20] Yet, 88 percent of parents make financial sacrifices to afford independent schooling.[21]

Enrolment trends

Table 1 presents the distribution of Alberta's 802,336 K–12 students. Nearly two-thirds (65.4%) are enrolled within public school boards, whether their local-catchment boundary school or an alternative program. Nearly one-quarter (23%) are enrolled in public Catholic separate schools. In total, 91.5 percent of Alberta students receive full taxpayer funding towards their school's operational expenses. Less than 2 percent are under federal jurisdiction and, thus, do not receive provincial funding. And 6.7 percent receive substantial partial funding. The 3.1 percent enrolled in home education receive minimal funding.

Table 1

K–12 student population by authority system

Alberta

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Share in 2024	Growth since 2011
Full taxpayer-funded operations	**574,853**	**580,180**	**596,590**	**613,616**	**631,089**	**646,081**	**658,602**	**671,853**	**679,903**	**690,831**	**678,474**	**686,763**	**707,723**	**734,000**	**91.5%**	**27.7%**
Public	422,493	424,006	434,424	443,713	455,028	464,519	473,174	483,661	487,454	494,053	483,578	492,362	508,220	524,754	65.4%	24.2%
Separate	137,511	140,840	145,663	152,628	158,094	162,654	166,215	168,687	173,164	176,128	174,689	173,436	177,588	185,318	23.1%	34.8%
Francophone	5,630	5,945	6,286	6,801	7,353	8,066	8,143	8,398	8,560	8,898	8,573	8,765	9,087	9,526	1.2%	69.2%
Charter	7,852	7,847	8,418	8,732	9,131	9,277	9,400	9,530	9,573	9,918	10,012	10,575	11,257	12,780	1.6%	62.8%
Provincial	1,367	1,542	1,799	1,742	1,483	1,565	1,670	1,577	1,152	1,834	1,622	1,625	1,571	1,622	0.2%	18.7%
No provincial funding	**9,929**	**9,964**	**10,624**	**11,057**	**10,552**	**11,115**	**10,681**	**10,921**	**8,912**	**11,585**	**12,492**	**12,654**	**13,329**	**14,317**	**1.8%**	**44.2%**
Federal (First Nations)	9,526	9,631	10,007	10,266	9,836	10,253	9,916	10,314	8,299	10,903	11,926	12,017	12,588	13,485	1.7%	41.6%
Federal (Other)	403	333	617	791	716	862	765	607	613	682	566	637	741	832	0.1%	106.5%
Potential partial ops. funding	**27,444**	**29,084**	**31,554**	**33,138**	**34,691**	**34,452**	**35,607**	**37,115**	**38,407**	**40,514**	**43,828**	**46,353**	**49,366**	**54,019**	**6.7%**	**96.8%**
Early Childhood Services (ECS)	3,739	4,147	4,617	5,062	5,291	5,689	6,189	6,563	6,968	7,132	5,750	7,061	7,847	8,257	1.0%	120.8%
Independent	23,705	24,937	26,937	28,076	29,400	28,763	29,418	30,552	31,439	33,382	38,078	39,292	41,519	45,762	5.7%	93.0%
Total: All school & authorities	**612,226**	**619,228**	**638,768**	**657,811**	**676,332**	**691,648**	**704,890**	**719,889**	**727,222**	**742,930**	**734,794**	**745,770**	**770,058**	**802,336**	**100.0%**	**31.1%**
Home Education & Shared Responsibility (incl. above under various authorities)	9,969	10,386	10,785	11,136	11,487	11,322	12,899	13,193	13,691	14,730	25,360	22,696	21,206	24,710	3.1%	147.9%

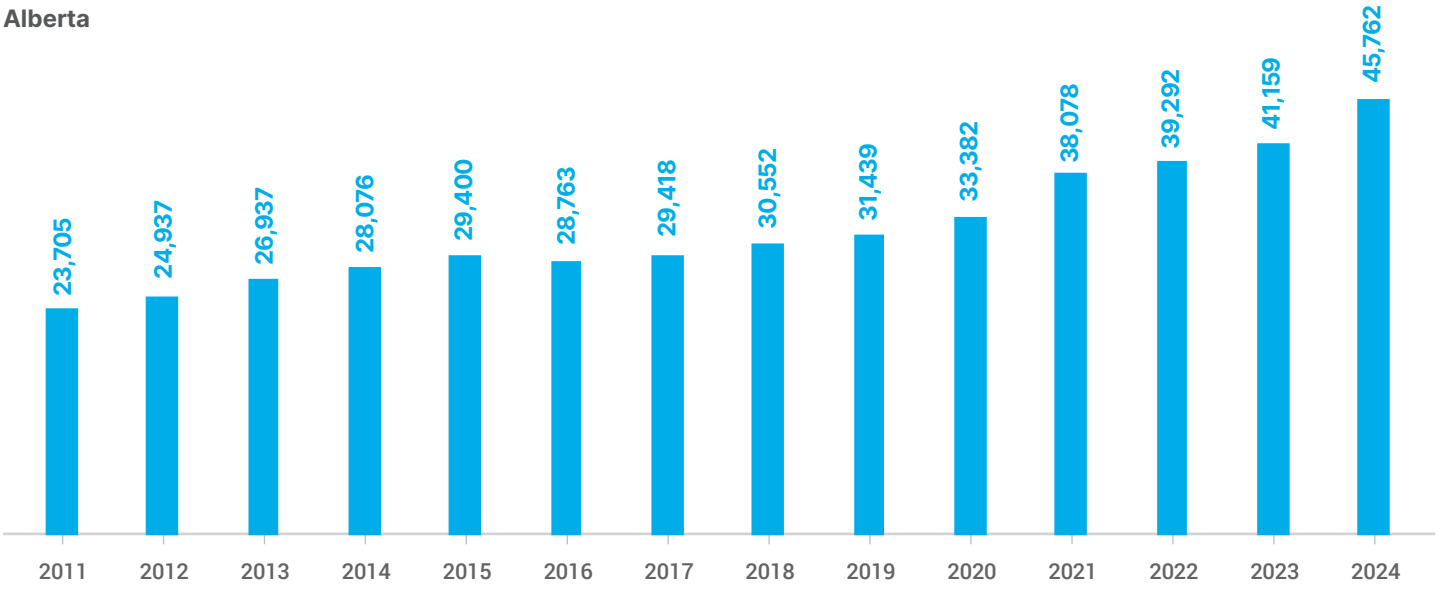
Source: Authors' sorting of Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education (2015)[22]

Of school categories above 1 percent of total K–12 enrolment, independent and home education are growing the fastest. Independent school enrolment has doubled since 2011,[b] increasing at three times the rate of growth outside the independent sector. From 2011 to 2024, independent enrolment increased annually in all but one year, growing from 23,705 to 45,762 students (Figure 4)—a 93 percent increase. By comparison, excluding independent schools and Early Childhood Services (ECS) independent operators,[c] Figure 5 shows Alberta's K–12 enrolment rose 27.7 percent in the same period. Figure 6 breaks this down in more detail, showing that independent growth even outpaces francophone and charter enrolment growth, which are 69 percent and 63 percent, respectively, across the same period. Home education is growing the fastest, with enrolment nearly doubling-and-a-half since 2011 (Figure 7).

Figure 4

Independent School K–12 Enrolment

Alberta



Source: Government of Alberta (2026), Alberta Education (2015).[23]

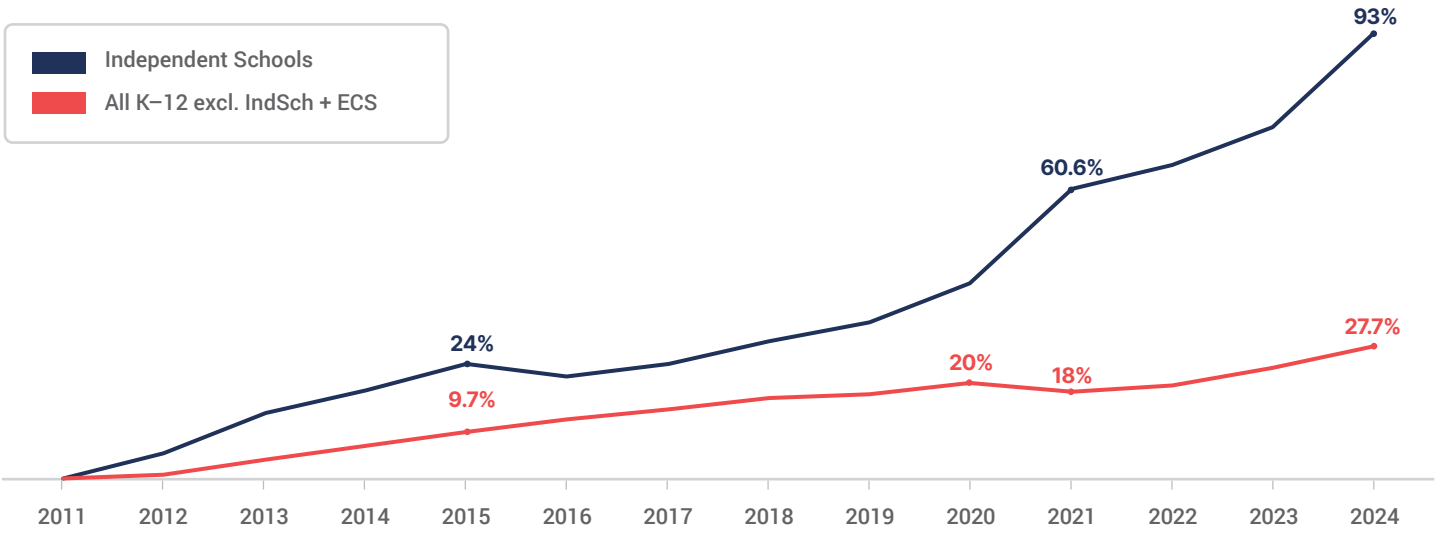
[b] Relevant amendments were made to Alberta's *Education Act* in 2012, so 2011 is used as the initial baseline.

[c] ECS independent operators offer early education up to and including Kindergarten.

Figure 5

Change in Alberta K–12 enrolment

Independent vs. all

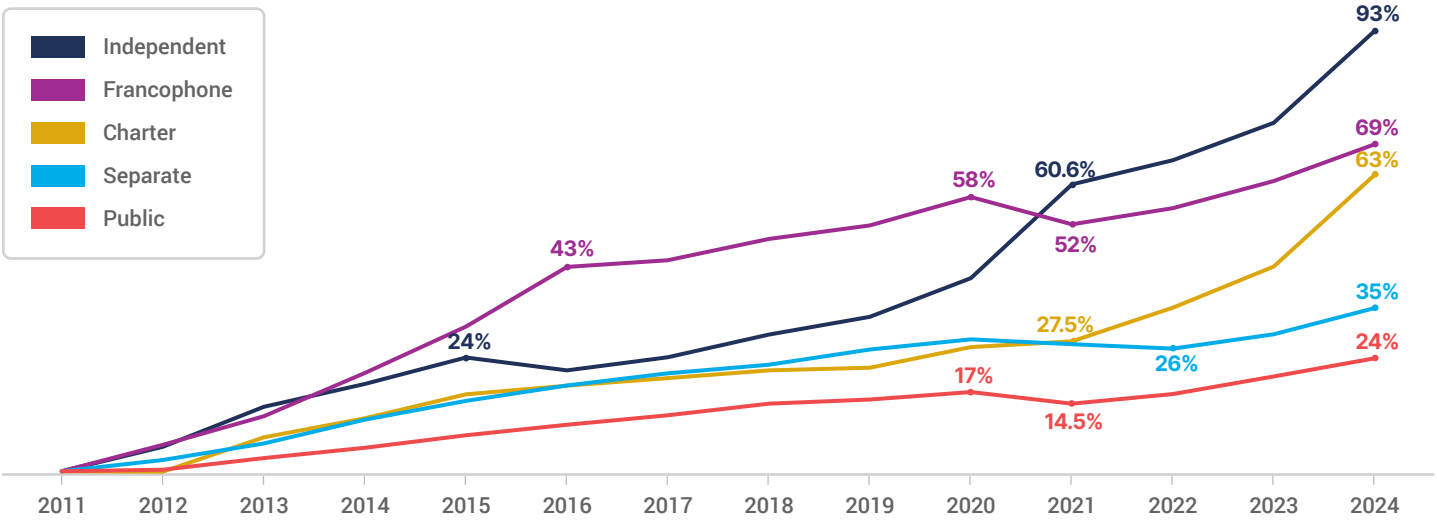


Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education (2015).[24]

Figure 6

Change in Alberta K–12 enrolment

Select categories

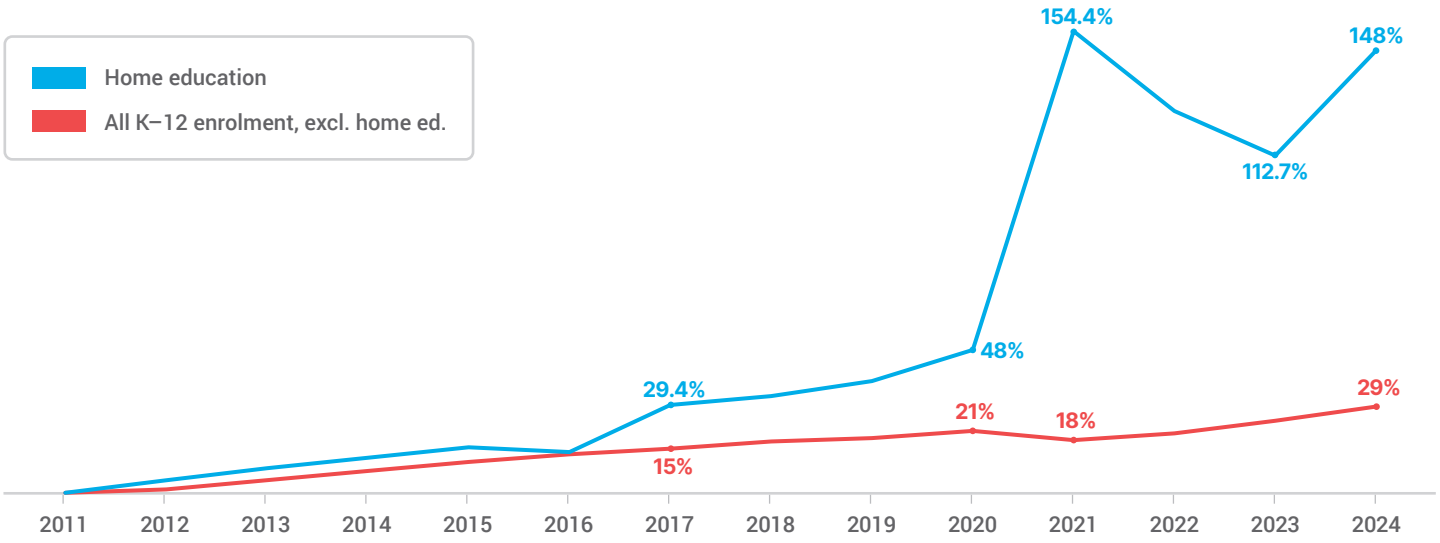


Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education (2015).[25]

Figure 7

Change in Alberta K–12 enrolment

Home education vs. all



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education (2015).[26]

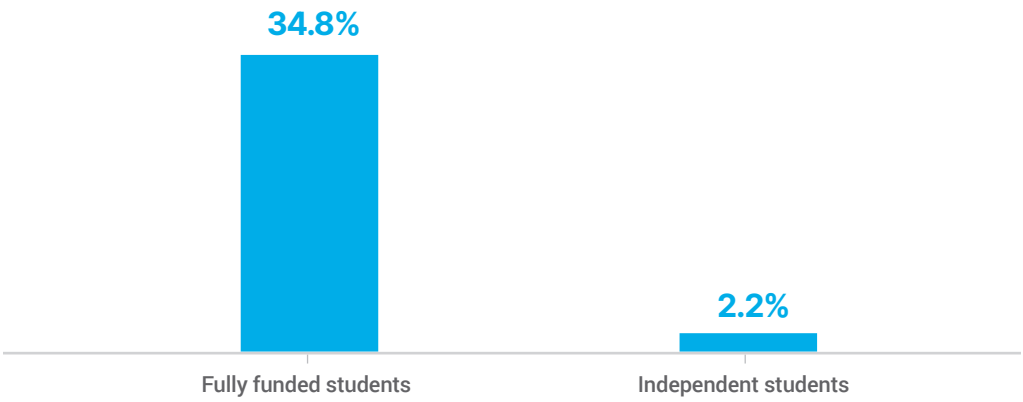
Public costs increasing faster than enrolment growth

As enrolment has expanded across all school types, so too has Alberta's total education spending. But the distribution has not been even. From 2011 to 2024, the budget for independent schools rose 95 percent, in tandem with a 93 percent rise in independent enrolment. Conversely, the student-specific and general cost of fully funded students rose 37.3 percent, while fully funded enrolment increased by 27.7 percent. In other words, public school and separate school costs climbed nearly 10 points or 34.8 percent faster than enrolment, since 2011, as shown in Figure 8 (see Appendix Table A1 for further details on costs).

Figure 8

Difference between growth in taxpayer-funded education costs versus K–12 enrolment growth

2011 to 2024, Alberta



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026), Alberta Education (2015), and Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[27]

But as presented in the next section, per-student costs remained relatively flat. Applying the enrolment and costing data, we can calculate the per-student costs.

Calculating the burden or benefit of independent enrolment

The first step in estimating the cost or savings of independent and home education enrolment is to differentiate students based on the level of taxpayer funding they receive towards their school's operating expenses.

Clarifying enrolment counts and accounting for overlap

Table 2 summarizes the last five years of Alberta Education enrolment data. Of note, one-third of independent students are in a shared responsibility (2.2%) or home education program (31.5%); two-thirds (66.3%) are in "brick-and-mortar" schools. The latter necessarily receives considerably more funding than homeschoolers, due to operational expenses that home-based programs lack; this must be accounted for in calculations. Thus, 30,334 of 45,762 independent students are included as independents in our calculations, and the others are treated according to their respective funding category.

Accordingly, Table 2 clarifies the distribution of home education programs. Since 98 percent of home education and all shared responsibility enrolment is supervised and the former receives substantially less funds than "brick-and-mortar" students, they need to be subtracted from their supervising school in the calculations. Nearly two-thirds (62.4%) are registered with independent schools, either in shared responsibility (4%) or home education programs (58.4%). Over one-third (35.8%) are registered with public, separate, francophone, or other fully funded schools, in shared responsibility (4.3%) or home education programs (31.5%). In total, 8.3 percent of the total home education count are in shared responsibility programs, and 1.7 percent are notification-only homeschoolers. As the latter do not receive any funding and shared responsibility students have a different funding formula (and over half are public or separate students)—and, combined, they are merely 10 percent of home education enrolment—both are excluded from our costing analysis.[d] In other words, we include 22,224 of 24,710 (90%) home-based students in our calculations.

In Table 2, fully funded[e] students—public, separate, francophone, charter, and provincial students—are grouped together in one category, federal students[f] are excluded (as their funding is outside Alberta Education), and potentially partially funded students are divided by authority category: "ECS Independent Operators," "Independent," and "Home Education." As ECS independent operators only serve Kindergarten and lower, they are excluded. Our analysis focuses solely on independent schools and home education.

[d.] Note that in most public-facing student population statistics on Government of Alberta webpages, shared responsibility students are often triple counted; the same students are counted in the "Shared Responsibility" category, in the "Home Education" category, and with their registered school authority.

[e.] Full funding refers to fully taxpayer-funded operating expenses. Charter schools do not receive any capital funding, and all schools fundraise within their school communities for various non-operating costs; hence, even within residentially-assigned public schools, there are extreme disparities between "fully funded" schools (e.g., in Calgary: Elbow Park vs. Falconridge).

[f.] Federal students are primarily, although not exclusively, indigenous students at on-reserve schools, which are funded by the federal government.

Table 2

Enrolment summary for calculating cost vs. savings

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Public, Separate, Franco., Charter, Prov.	690,831	678,474	686,763	707,723	734,000
Less supervised home education	4,621	11,078	8,672	7,018	7,795
Less shared responsibility	1,096	864	962	1,044	1,058
Fully funded students	**685,114**	**666,532**	**677,129**	**699,661**	**725,147**
Independent + ECS	40,514	43,828	46,353	49,366	54,019
Less ECS	7,132	5,750	7,061	7,847	8,257
Less supervised home education	8,902	13,064	12,469	12,092	14,429
Less shared responsibility	111	298	438	713	999
Independent students (partially funded)	**24,369**	**24,716**	**26,385**	**28,714**	**30,334**
Home Education	14,730	25,360	22,696	21,206	24,710
Less shared responsibility	1,207	1,162	1,400	1,757	2,057
Less notification-only	0	56	155	339	429
Home-education students (partially funded)	**13,523**	**24,142**	**21,141**	**19,110**	**22,224**
Federal (excluded)	11,585	12,492	12,654	13,329	14,317

Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026).[28]

Identifying costs and formulating estimates

Tables 3 and 4 itemize the service costs of Alberta Education's budget. To ensure we do not overestimate the impact of a hypothetical scenario where an independent or homeschool student enrols in a fully funded school, only three categories are considered for public system costs: "Instruction - ECS to Grade 12," "Operations and Maintenance," and "Student Transportation." In 2024, the most recent data at the time of writing, these three student-specific costs accounted for $8.14 billion, as shown in the first line of Table 4. Five additional categories in Table 3—governance and system administration, program support services, basic education programs, debt servicing costs, and the 2013 Alberta flooding—are excluded from the summaries of education spending (Table 4) and per-student calculations. The rationale for excluding these costs is that if a student moves from an independent or home authority to a fully funded school, it should not be assumed that costs like debt servicing or governance will necessarily increase. While they may rise, our conservative estimates assume some expenses will remain constant.[9]

[9] It is important to note that our approach and assumptions deliberately and significantly differ from those used in reports by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), Fraser Institute, and Statistics Canada on per-student education costs. Others include broader categories and different allocation methods. We exclude costs that *may not necessarily* increase with student enrolment shifts. This ensures a more precise comparison of the actual per-student fiscal burden or savings between schools.

Table 3

Alberta K–12 costs by service: a conservative estimate

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	In thousands				
Ministry Support Services	$6,273	$6,738	$6,663	$5,822	$6,013
Instruction - ECS to Grade 12	**$6,287,687**	**$6,192,622**	**$6,267,489**	**$6,461,108**	**$6,927,642**
Operations and Maintenance	**$757,898**	**$757,018**	**$785,803**	**$807,648**	**$765,679**
Student Transportation	**$369,824**	**$314,829**	**$358,839**	**$393,019**	**$446,098**
School Facilities - Amortization	$428,386	$438,298	$470,207	$524,532	$543,753
Governance and System Administration	$274,979	$264,903	$251,874	$255,807	$263,400
Program Support Services	$172,453	$91,829	$95,322	$103,443	$105,282
Independent & ECS	$306,814	$338,221	$334,730	$353,257	$383,733
Accredited Funded Ind. Schools	$180,695	$203,547	$204,718	$220,439	$243,486
ECS Independent Operators	$126,119	$134,674	$130,012	$132,818	$140,247
Debt Servicing Costs	$44,172	$38,696	$36,122	$44,542	$0
Pension Provision	-$125,031	-$118,651	-$95,586	$0	$0
Total costs	**$8,523,455**	**$8,324,503**	**$8,511,463**	**$8,949,178**	**$9,441,600**

Source: Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[29]

Table 4

Allocated costs: spending summary

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Spending summary	In thousands				
Fully funded schools: Student-specific costs	$7,415,409	$7,264,469	$7,412,131	$7,661,775	$8,139,419
Fully funded schools: General costs	$801,232	$721,813	$764,602	$934,146	$918,448
Independent (Accredited Funded)	$180,695	$203,547	$204,718	$220,439	$243,486
ECS Independent Operators	$126,119	$134,674	$130,012	$132,818	$140,247
Total costs	**$8,523,455**	**$8,324,503**	**$8,511,463**	**$8,949,178**	**$9,441,600**

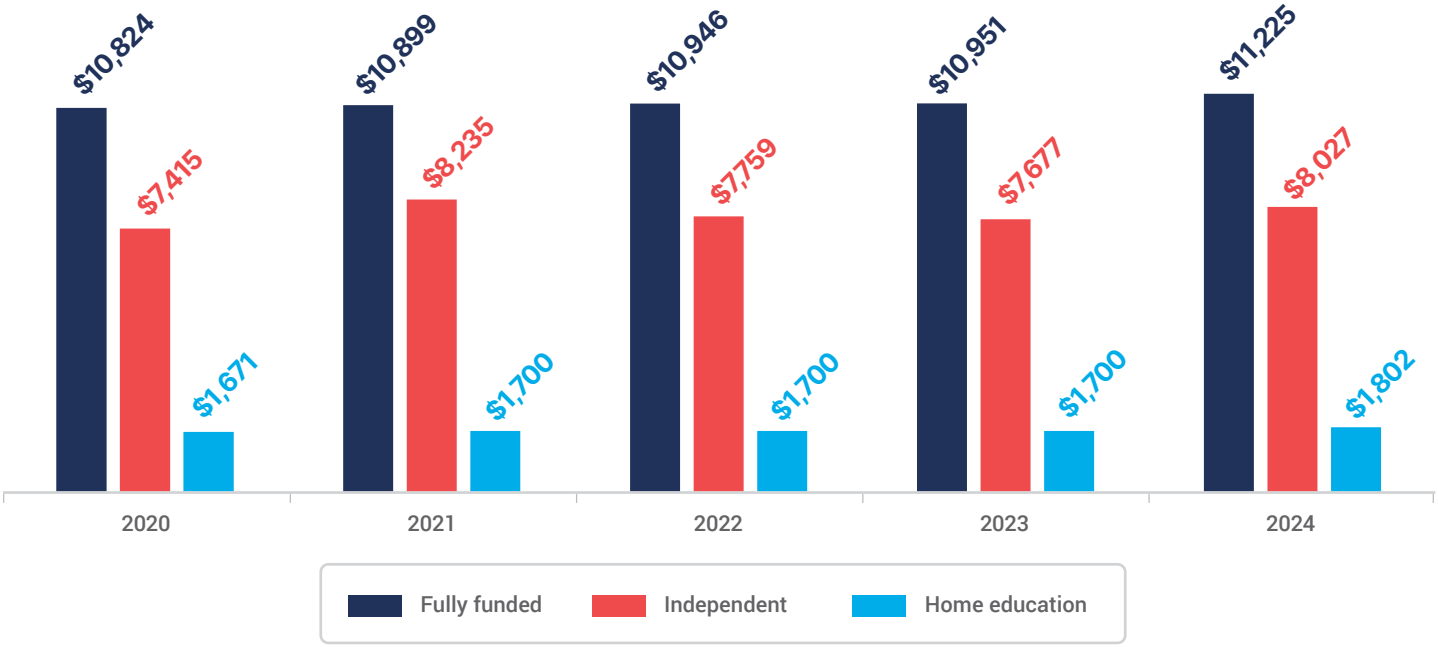
Source: Authors' calculations based on Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[30]

Figure 9 excludes the general costs of fully funded students and ECS independent operators (and shared responsibility) to narrow in on and compare the annual per-student cost of fully funded, independent, and home-education students. Annually, fully funded schools' per-student operating expenses cost taxpayers $11,225, compared to $8,027 for independent and $1,802 for home-educated students. It is important to note that this average per-student, per-year cost is only the base grant for home education. Included in the fully funded and independent cost are other grants—e.g., maintenance, transportation, etc.—that can and should be allocated on a per-student basis. Funding rates also vary by grade. Most significantly, for both fully funded and independent students, additional tiered funding exists for various special needs, such as mild, moderate, and severe disabilities. And with fully funded students, there are cost differences between rural and urban/suburban schooling.[31] All of this is captured in the average. Hence, the independent per-student share is not a clean 70 percent of the fully funded rate; it has varied from 68.5 percent to 75.6 percent over the last five years.

Figure 9

Estimated taxpayer cost per K–12 student

Alberta



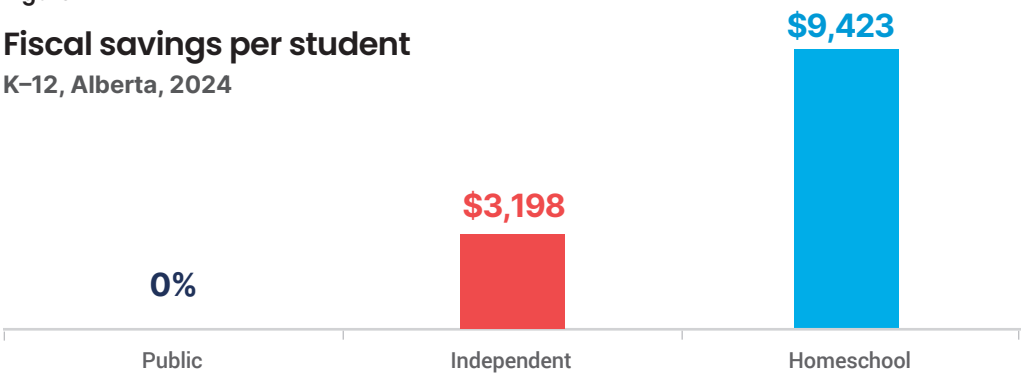
Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual reports (various years)[32]

Therefore, on average, Albertans realize per-student annual savings of $9,423 and $3,198 for every home-educated and independent school student, respectively (Figure 10). In other words, each student in an independent school saves Alberta taxpayers 28 cents on the dollar, while each homeschool student saves 84 cents to the dollar.

Figure 10

Fiscal savings per student

K–12, Alberta, 2024



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[33]

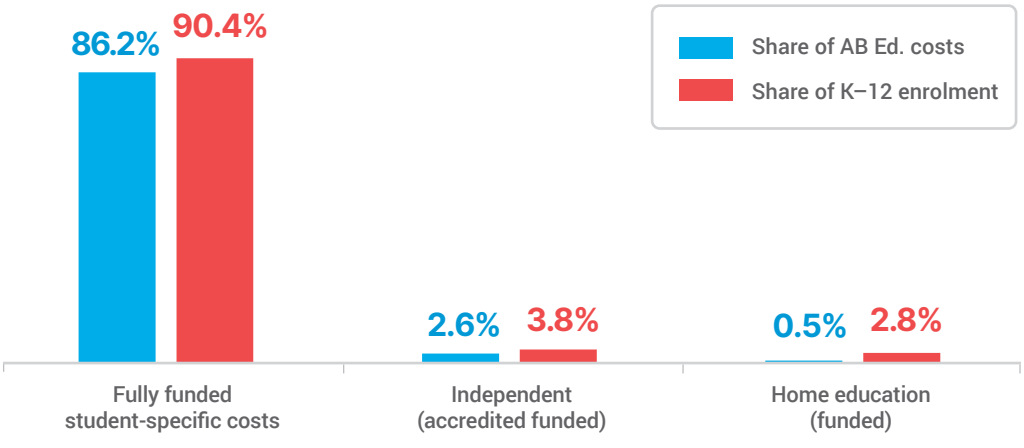
Bringing it all together—enrolments and allocated costs—reveals a fresh perspective. Fully funded enrolment is essentially in line with student-specific costs; the former is 90.4 percent of all Alberta K–12 enrolment and the latter constitute 86.2 percent of Alberta Education costs (Figure 11). Naturally, this parallel relationship does not exist with partially funded students.

But the size of the gap is staggering—and helps to demonstrate what taxpayers gain with independent and home enrolment. Figure 11 shows that funded home-education students make up 2.8 percent of total K–12 enrolment but only 0.5 percent of total K–12 costs. In other words, homeschoolers' enrolment share is nearly six times greater than their share of the Alberta Education budget. Likewise, funded independent school students' share of enrolment is 46.6 percent greater than their share of total province-wide education costs.

Figure 11

Comparing share of enrolment to share of costs

Alberta, 2024



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual report (2025).[34]

What if independents and homeschoolers didn't exist?

What if independent and home education ended overnight? In other words, what if there was a radical policy change and all at once—today—every independent and homeschool student had to enrol as a regular, full-time student at their local catchment's government-run school? There are two ramifications that need to be closely examined: cost and capacity.

The fiscal burden of migrating all students to public schools

Table 5 estimates the fiscal impact on Albertan taxpayers if every partially funded student had to be fully funded. Families that have chosen to be unfunded independent schoolers and unfunded homeschoolers, we can safely assume, would be unaffected by cuts to funding. But the same cannot be assumed of their peers. If funding to independents and home education was completely cut, it is possible—even likely—that many, if not most, of those partially funded students would opt into a funded authority and, thus, become fully funded. It is beyond the scope of this report to model out a sensitivity analysis; suffice it to state that funded students account for 98 percent of the independent and home-educated students in Alberta Education's enrolment counts.[35] Thus, an estimate that assumes 100 percent migration is not unreasonable (i.e., statistically, it is within an acceptable margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent).

Table 5

Estimated cost of moving independent & homeschool students to public system

Independent schools - analysis	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Savings per ind. student	$3,409	$2,663	$3,188	$3,274	$3,198
Independent enrolment	24,369	24,716	26,385	28,714	30,334
Additional cost to move ind. students to public	**$83,065,632**	**$65,830,338**	**$84,103,002**	**$93,999,288**	**$96,998,255**
Home education - analysis	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Savings per home ed. student	$9,153	$9,199	$9,246	$9,251	$9,423
Home education enrolment	13,523	24,142	21,141	19,110	22,224
Additional cost to move to public	**$123,770,790**	**$222,079,966**	**$195,478,333**	**$176,780,803**	**$209,405,839**

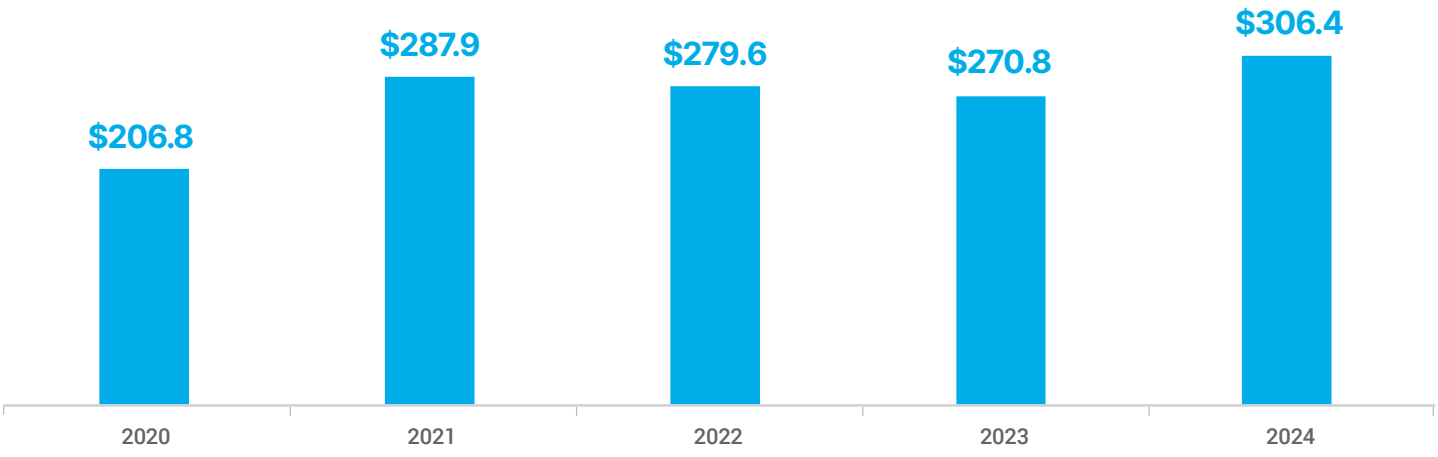
Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[36]

Such a migration is equivalent to 3.2 percent of the entire Alberta Education budget, just to cover the operating expenses—let alone significant, necessary additional capital expenditures. These added operational expenses would cost Albertans an extra $306 million per year (Figure 12). Over the last five years, that would have cost taxpayers an additional $1.35 billion.

Figure 12

Annual cost of moving independent & homeschool students to public system

In millions



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[37]

Capacity utilization constraints

If all independent schools were shuttered tomorrow, could public school boards accommodate the mass influx of students? Presently, there is not the capacity; it would take many years—and billions of extra taxpayer dollars—to build the basic facilities needed to accommodate such an enrolment surge.

The Calgary Board of Education (CBE), Alberta's largest school division—accounting for 143,373 students—reports:

> Currently, 175 schools (approximately 73%) are full or over capacity based on Alberta Education's criteria. The system utilization rate is 95% and is expected to exceed 100% in the next two years. High schools are already at 108% capacity.[38]

For context, the CBE—and presumably other Alberta school districts—has a utilization target of 85 percent.[39] In production-operations management, the cardinal rule is that the optimal utilization rate is 80 percent. More than 10 percentage points lower is economically inefficient, and more than 10 percentage points higher is not sustainable and does not allow for sufficient operational flexibility.

Remarkably, the Alberta Education system—if assessed as a whole—is operating at a near-perfect utilization rate of 80.5 percent, with 726,546 school-division students enrolled in schools with a combined capacity of 902,099 seats. However, this overarching view does not necessarily reflect school-level realities. Some schools are overcrowded; some are underutilized.

Table 6 presents the school capacity utilization rates by school location. The combined utilization rate for the 12 municipalities with more than 10,000 students is 87 percent. Excluding them, the province's schools are grossly underutilized, operating at only 67.6 percent of capacity, on average. Conversely, Calgary and Edmonton districts—home to 53 percent of all fully funded students—are at full capacity or overcrowded, whether public or separate. Table 7 presents utilization rates for the largest two school districts in each of Alberta's five highest-capacity cities.[h]

Table 6

School capacity utilization

Alberta, 2024

School Location	Net Capacity	Adjusted Total Enrolment	Utilization Rate
Calgary	238,792	214,847	90.0%
Edmonton	193,805	171,443	88.5%
Red Deer	22,777	18,554	81.5%
Lethbridge	22,517	16,526	73.4%
Grande Prairie	21,019	15,809	75.2%
Sherwood Park	19,225	14,706	76.5%
Fort McMurray	19,103	15,668	82.0%
St. Albert	17,606	14,608	83.0%
Airdrie	16,860	16,105	95.5%
Medicine Hat	13,572	9,985	73.6%
Spruce Grove	10,998	9,793	89.0%
Okotoks	10,396	8,925	85.8%
Largest 12 school locations (Net Capacity>10,000)	***606,670***	***526,965***	***86.9%***
Other	295,429	199,581	67.6%
Total	**902,099**	**726,546**	**80.5%**

Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Canada (2024).[40]

[h.] The total number of non-independent, funded school authorities ranges from 4–13 per city.

Table 7

School capacity utilization, two largest school authorities in Alberta's five highest-capacity cities

In order of city population, 2024

City	School Authority Name	Net Capacity	Adjusted Total Enrolment	Utilization Rate
Calgary	Calgary School Division	156,627	143,373	91.5%
Calgary	Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School Division	65,826	57,885	87.9%
Edmonton	Edmonton School Division	136,244	117,184	86.0%
Edmonton	Edmonton Catholic Separate School Division	50,360	49,395	98.1%
Red Deer	Red Deer School Division	13,911	11,273	81.0%
Red Deer	Red Deer Catholic Separate School Division	8,391	6,944	82.7%
Lethbridge	Lethbridge School Division	16,461	12,096	73.5%
Lethbridge	Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Separate School Division	5,480	4,069	74.3%
Grande Prairie	Grande Prairie School Division	11,408	8,992	78.8%
Grande Prairie	Grande Prairie Roman Catholic Separate School Division	6,956	4,850	69.7%

Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Canada (2024).[41]

Simply building out more capacity is more complex than might be imagined. Take the modernization of Calgary's John Diefenbaker high school—just one of many illustrative examples. The school board identified the need for upgrades more than 13 years before those essential upgrades were realized:

> In other words, around the time Susie is ready for kindergarten, we identify that there won't be a seat for her in high school. Good start. But unfortunately, the seat isn't ready for her until she's graduated and off to college.[42]

Commissioning and completing school expansions, let alone building new schools, is a remarkably slow undertaking. But assuming new capacity *could* be built in a timely manner, despite the unlikeliness, what would it cost?

The cost of building new schools

In the five Alberta cities with the most potential capacity for students—Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Grande Prairie—their capital plans call for a combined 37 new schools (Table 8) in the immediate future.[43] The average cost works out to around $32.8 million per school, to house an average 981 students. In other words, each seat costs roughly $33,471. Accommodating even 20,000 new students—less than half of all independent and home education enrolment—would require $669 million in immediate construction spending, which is the equivalent of one-fifth of Alberta's entire education capital plan for 2025–28.[44]

Table 8

Capital plan comparison in Alberta's five highest-capacity cities

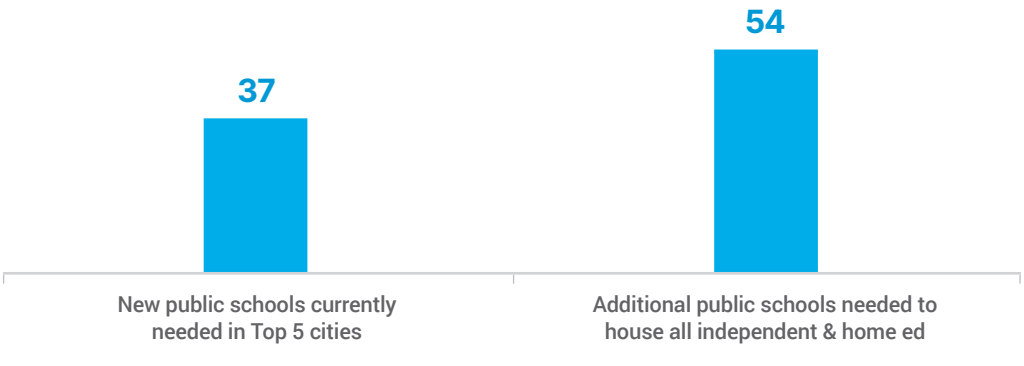
School Division	Source Document	New Schools Planned	New Schools' Estimated Student Capacity	Estimated Capital Cost (millions)
Calgary (CBE)	Three-Year School Capital Plan: 2026–2029	16	16,655	$459
Edmonton (EPSB)	Capital Planning	16	16,085	$600
Red Deer (RDPSD)	Three-Year Capital Plan 2025–2027	2	1,600	N/A
Lethbridge (LSD)	Three-Year Capital Plan: 2025–2028	2	1,200	$60
Grande Prairie (GPPSD)	2026–2029 Three-Year Capital Plan	1	750	$30

Source: Three-year capital plan (various school divisions): Calgary Board of Education (2025), Edmonton Public Schools (2025), Red Deer Public School Division (2024), Lethbridge School Division (2025), and Grande Prairie Public School Division (2025).[45]

A simple estimate, plugging in these assumptions, suggests that roughly 54 additional schools (Figure 13)—costing an estimated $1.76 billion—would be necessary to accommodate all 52,558 students migrating to public schools from independent and home education. For context, that works out to about $1,519 per Alberta homeowner. Given that the overwhelming majority of independent enrolment is in these five geographic areas[46]—i.e., Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Grande Prairie—it is safe to suggest that between double to triple the number of planned new schools would need to be built immediately to accommodate the influx (i.e., 91 not 37 new schools), especially in the already overcrowded Calgary and Edmonton school districts.

Figure 13

Contextualizing the opportunity cost of independent school savings



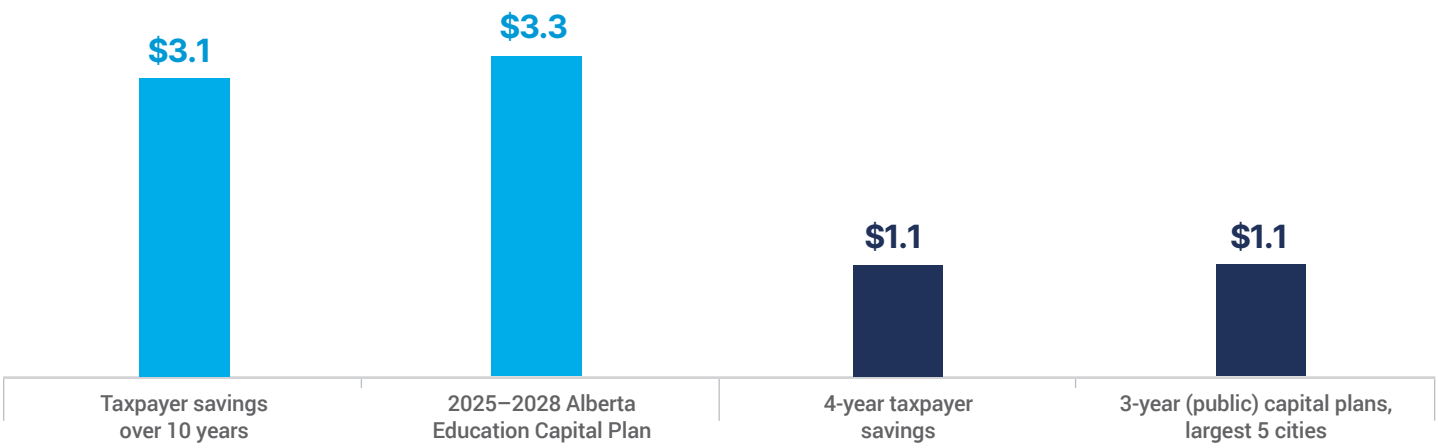
Source: Authors' calculations based on Alberta Education annual reports (various years), Government of Alberta (2026), Calgary Board of Education (2025), Edmonton Public Schools (2025), Red Deer Public School Division (2024), Lethbridge School Division (2025), Grande Prairie Public School Division (2025), and Government of Canada (2024).[47]

Another way to look at this is in terms of the opportunity cost of the taxpayer savings. What Albertans save on independent schools and homeschoolers over four years is what is budgeted for in the (combined) three-year capital plans of the public school boards in Alberta's five largest school-capacity cities, as shown in Figure 14. Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Grande Prairie's respective public school boards have a combined $1.15 billion budgeted for new schools in their three-year capital plans. This can be paid for by the $1.15 billion Alberta taxpayers have saved in the last four years alone, 2021 to 2024, thanks to independent school and home education enrolment. The entire Alberta Education three-year capital budget (2025-2028) of $3.29 billion can be more than paid for by 11 years of independent and homeschool savings ($3.37 billion).

Figure 14

Taxpayer savings from independent schools & home education vs. public capital plans

In billions



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2025), Alberta Education annual reports (various years), Government of Alberta (2026), Calgary Board of Education (2025), Edmonton Public Schools (2025), Red Deer Public School Division (2024), Lethbridge School Division (2025), Grande Prairie Public School Division (2025), and Government of Canada (2024).[48]

A final consideration

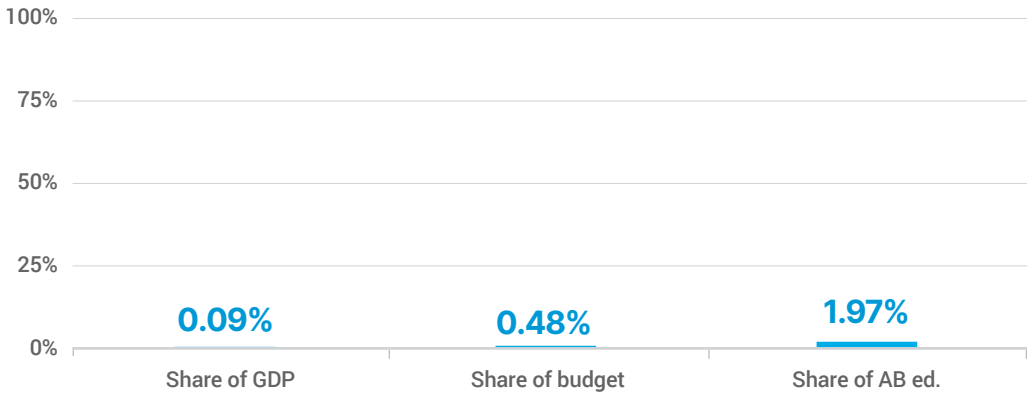
Even with the aforementioned savings and the impossibility of accommodating a mass exodus of independent schoolers, self-interested organizations may decry any taxpayer funding outside their control, implying that public funding is for their public-sector union employees—not students and the public interest.

What if we blindly ignore all the above calculations and prejudicially judge the independent sector—*a priori*—as a burden? Rather than appreciate the fact that it more efficiently allocates taxpayer resources for the public interest, what if we hold it in contempt for the crime of bypassing public sector union dues? Even if we grant such an absurd assumption, how consequential would such a "burden" be?

Figure 15 shows that Alberta independent schools are 0.09 percent of Alberta's economy, less than half of 1 percent of the provincial budget, and less than 2 percent of the Ministry of Education's budget. This is an infinitesimal cost, in light of the benefits. In other words, independent schools are an extraordinary "bang-for-buck" in Alberta. Moreover, the share of students enrolled in Alberta's independent schools and home education is increasing at a faster rate than their share of the provincial budget (Figure 16). Given how many independent school students have exhausted all other options and have found educational success at these schools,[49] it is nothing short of self-serving to call for the sector's defunding.

Figure 15

Independent schools as a share of the Alberta economy & provincial budget

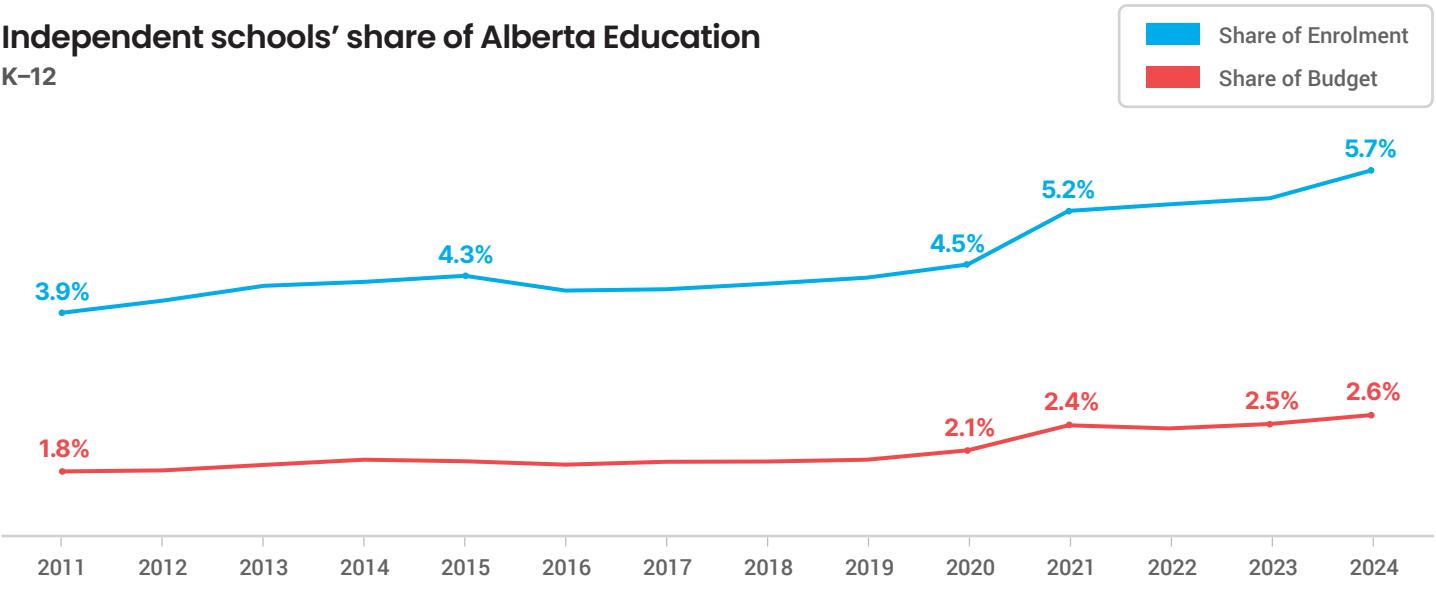


Source: Hunt, Momoh, and Van Pelt (2021).[50]

Figure 16

Independent schools' share of Alberta Education

K–12



Source: Authors' calculations based on Government of Alberta (2026) and Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[51]

The advantages of funding independent schools and home education go far beyond the substantial cost savings. Students with diverse learning styles and unique interests can be better engaged through varied educational approaches. A top-down, one-size-fits-all education model does not support the goal of providing the best educational experiences and academic outcomes for every child. Therefore, the Alberta government is right to promote an education system that values a diversity of approaches, offering a wide range of school options to as many children as possible—not just those in specific school districts or those whose parents can afford to pay full tuition for independent schools.

Conclusion

In Alberta, independent schools and home education programs save taxpayers money. Fully funded schools (i.e., public, separate, francophone, etc.) cost taxpayers $11,225 per student, compared to $8,027 for independent and $1,802 for home-education students. In other words, each student in an independent school saves Alberta taxpayers 28 cents on the dollar, while each home-education student saves 84 cents to the dollar. Combined, this amounts to annual taxpayer savings of $306.4 million, in the most recent year, and $1.35 billion over the last five years.

It is important to put this into context, by considering the opportunity cost of these savings. In the five Alberta cities with the largest school capacity—Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Grande Prairie—their combined three-year capital plans amount to $1.149 billion. Thus, four-years' worth of savings from independent and home enrolment pays for all the new schools needed in these cities. For perspective, the entire Ministry of Education's capital plan for 2025–2028 is $3.29 billion—about 10 to 11 years' worth of taxpayer savings.

Another way of looking at it is to consider what would happen if independent and home education programs were defunded and all those students migrated to public schools. That would require at least 54 additional public schools. Presently, the aforementioned five cities enrol 60 percent of the province's students and have budgeted for 37 new schools (Calgary and Edmonton are already overcrowded). Thus, these cities would need to nearly triple capacity overnight, to 91 new schools—with a capital cost of at least $3 billion—to accommodate such an influx.

The Alberta government is right to promote an education system that values a diversity of approaches, offering a wide range of school options to as many children as possible. The advantages of funding independent schools and home education greatly exceed the significant cost savings.

Appendix

Exhibit A1: The myriad ways to school in Alberta

Funded

1. common "public" schools
2. alternative public programs (e.g. Calgary Islamic School)
3. Mennonite public schools (e.g. Two Hills Mennonite School)
4. separate Catholic schools
5. Catholic francophone schools (e.g. Ecole Notre-Dame)
6. secular francophone schools (e.g. Ecole La Mosaique)
7. charter schools
8. provincial schools (typically within penitentiaries)
9. federal on-reserve schools
10. federal (not reserve) schools
11. partially funded independent schools
12. partially funded home school
13. partially funded Early Childhood Services (ECS) independent operators (for Kindergarten)

Unfunded

14. colony schools (e.g. Plain Lake Colony School)
15. unfunded but accredited independent schools
16. unfunded, unaccredited independent schools
17. unfunded homeschool

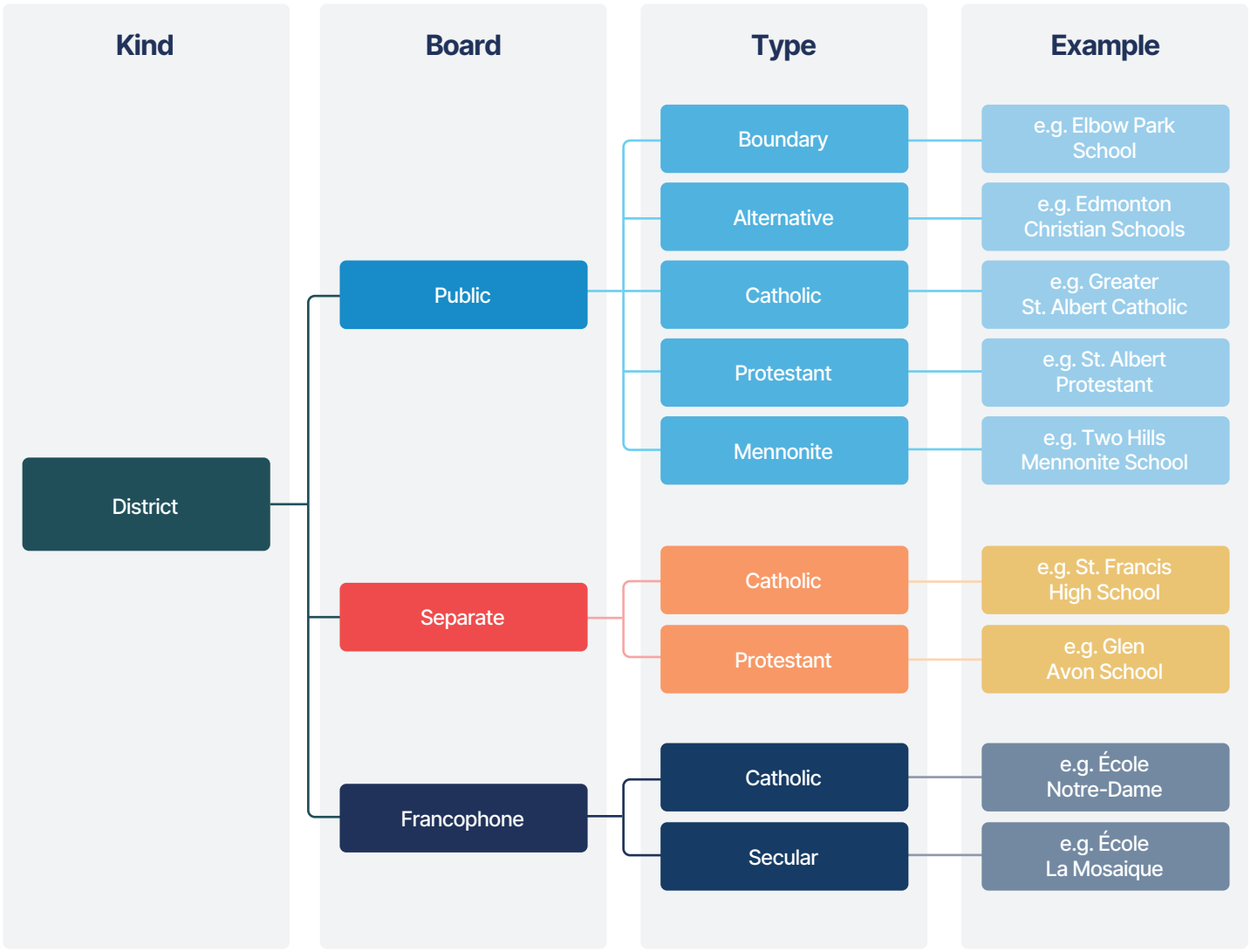
Pre-2012 (no longer in existence)

18. Catholic public schools (e.g. Greater St. Albert Catholic)
19. separate Protestant schools

Figure A1

Historic taxonomy of district schools

Alberta

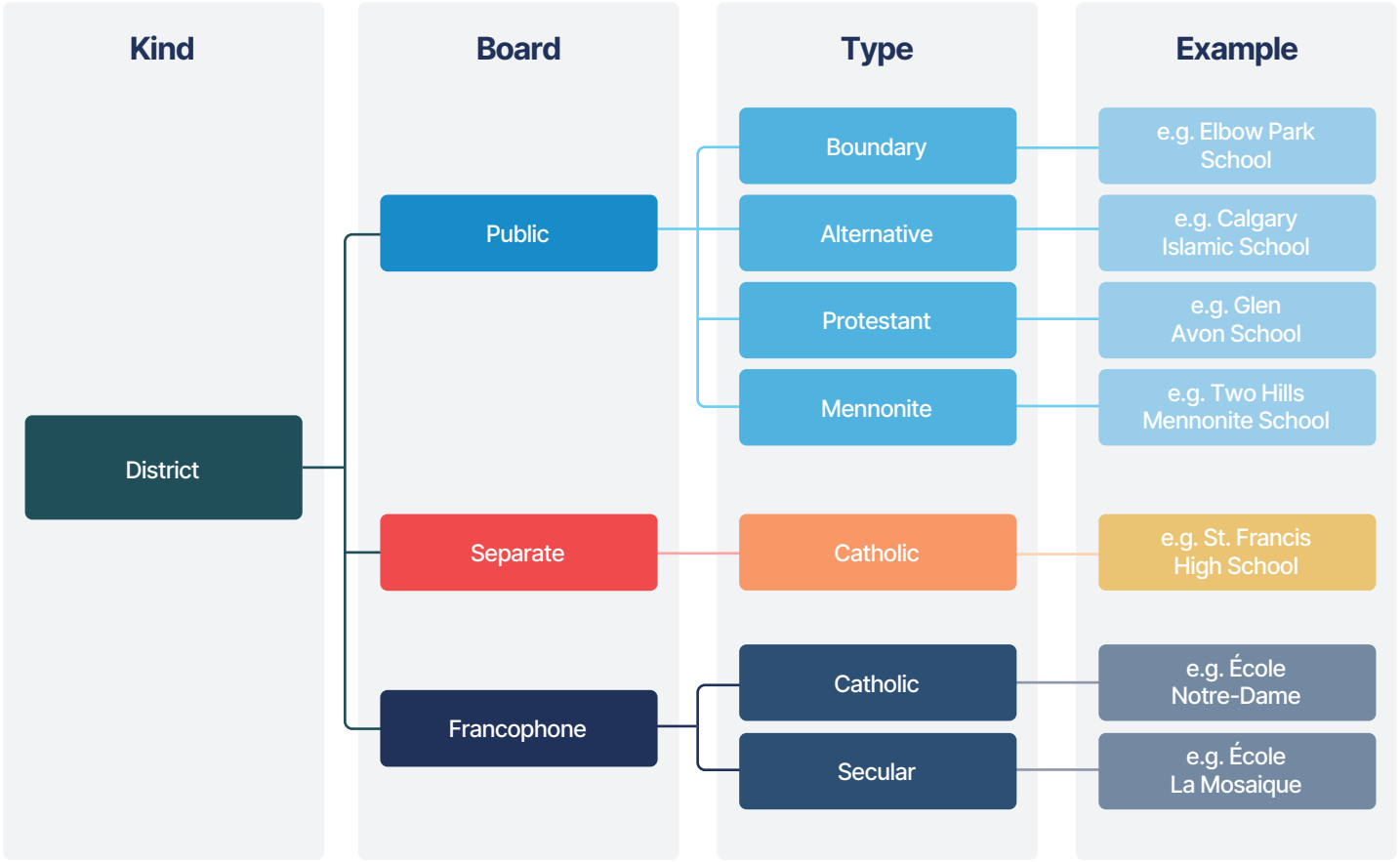


Note: This taxonomy follows the same approach as Hunt, VanHof, & Los (2022),[52] and was inspired by the findings of Hunt & VanHof (2024).[53]

Figure A2

General taxonomy of district schools

Alberta, 2026

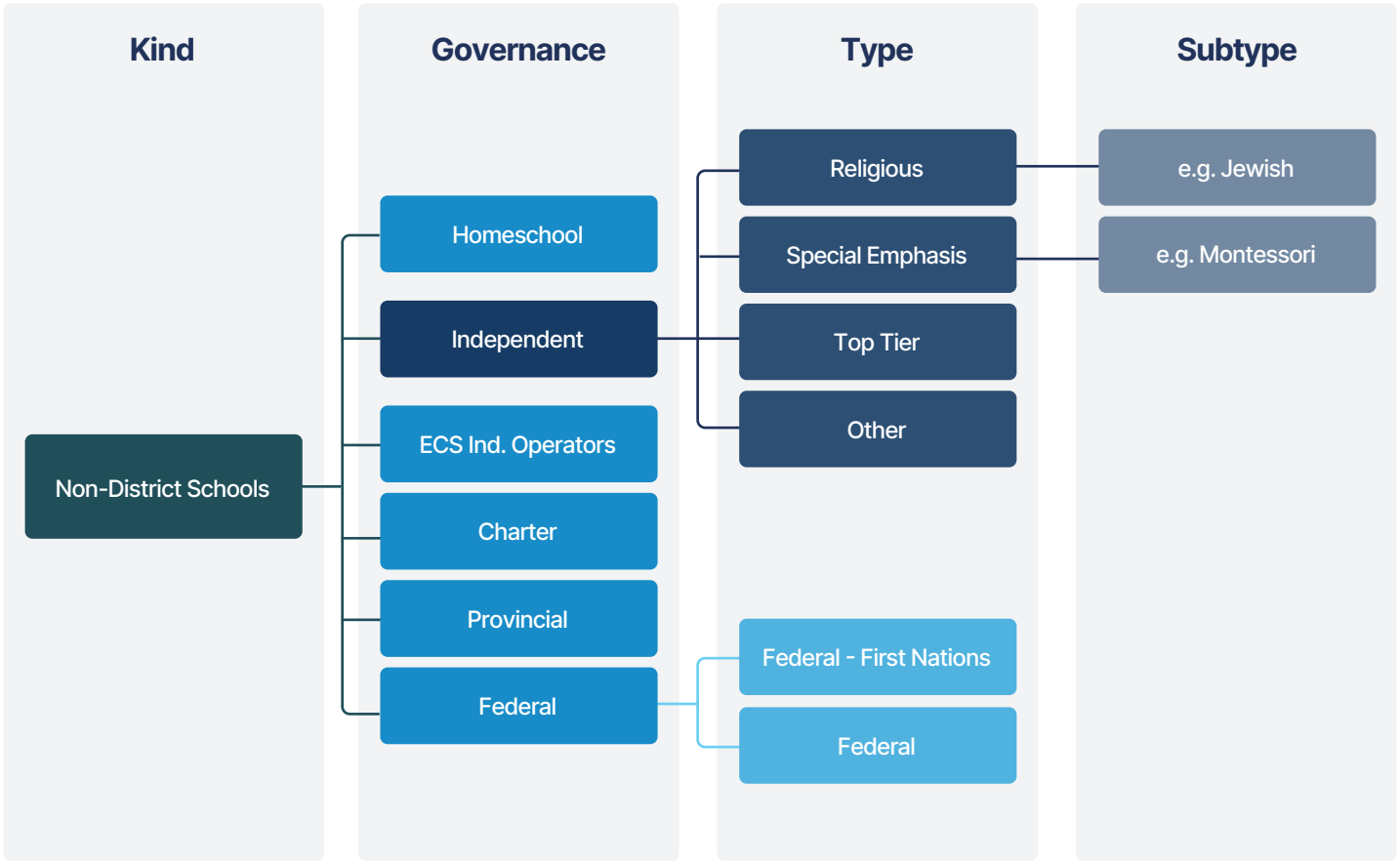


Note: This taxonomy follows the same approach as Hunt, VanHof, & Los (2022),[52] and was inspired by the findings of Hunt & VanHof (2024).[53]

Figure A3

General taxonomy of non-district schools

Alberta, 2026



Note: This taxonomy follows the same approach as Hunt, VanHof, & Los (2022),[52] and was inspired by the findings of Hunt & VanHof (2024).[53]

Table A1

Alberta K–12 costs by service (conservative estimate)

2011-2024

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	In thousands													
Ministry Support Services	$0	$0	$0	$0	$34,906	$31,650	$30,949	$30,358	$7,957	$6,273	$6,738	$6,663	$5,822	$6,013
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	$6,380,724	$6,287,687	$6,192,622	$6,267,489	$6,461,108	$6,927,642
Operations and Maintenance	$820,736	$873,957	$886,070	$882,252	$604,104	$749,416	$755,681	$802,699	$745,930	$757,898	$757,018	$785,803	$807,648	$765,679
Student Transportation	$309,316	$315,636	$324,571	$323,464	$345,920	$338,598	$348,160	$361,278	$375,309	$369,824	$314,829	$358,839	$393,019	$446,098
School Facilities - Amortization	$0	$0	$0	$0	$301,009	$325,096	$333,790	$374,738	$413,616	$428,386	$438,298	$470,207	$524,532	$543,753
Governance and System Administration	$250,062	$270,440	$287,455	$286,956	$253,165	$242,679	$248,519	$255,974	$278,678	$274,979	$264,903	$251,874	$255,807	$263,400
Program Support Services	$143,816	$151,399	$173,858	$173,877	$173,088	$201,976	$208,770	$196,242	$197,769	$172,453	$91,829	$95,322	$103,443	$105,282
Basic Education Programs	$62,782	$55,504	$53,023	$57,557	$48,073	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0
Independent & ECS	$177,796	$191,567	$209,165	$222,285	$233,772	$245,782	$260,711	$272,275	$286,406	$306,814	$338,221	$334,730	$353,257	$383,733
Accredited Funded Ind. Schools	$124,830	$133,113	$142,583	$147,832	$151,402	$154,223	$160,465	$165,104	$172,075	$180,695	$203,547	$204,718	$220,439	$243,486
ECS Independent Operators	$52,966	$58,454	$66,582	$74,453	$82,370	$91,559	$100,246	$107,171	$114,333	$126,119	$134,674	$130,012	$132,818	$140,247
Debt Servicing Costs	$34,451	$44,485	$53,807	$45,154	$46,741	$45,916	$44,030	$44,172	$45,182	$44,172	$38,696	$36,122	$44,542	$0
2013 Alberta Flooding	$0	$0	$0	$2,060	$2,570	$0	$17	$14	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0
Pension Provision	$0	$0	$0	$0	-$6,224	-$22,513	-$97,952	-$66,521	-$110,537	-$125,031	-$118,651	-$95,586	$0	$0
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**	**$8,621,036**	**$8,523,455**	**$8,324,503**	**$8,511,463**	**$8,949,178**	**$9,441,600**

Source: Authors' calculations based on Alberta Education annual reports (various years).[54]

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