



BETTER IS POSSIBLE

A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE SCHOOLING FOR ALL

November 2018 | **MICHAEL VAN PELT**

CARDUS

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The provision of education provides innumerable benefits for our society, ranging from the building of skills needed for work to helping establish social norms and interactions that underpin a flourishing and free society. Such benefits, animated by a desire for all children to be educated, led to a general acceptance of and demand for government to have an active role in the delivery of education. Indeed, almost 92 percent of primary and secondary school students in Canadian provinces attended publicly run schools in 2014–2015.

However, as the percentage above indicates, government's heavy involvement in Canadian K–12 education has created a monolithic and monopoly situation. It struggles to embrace diverse educational approaches animated by social and market forces (such as competition, innovation, and cultural traditions) that push communities to continually offer better goods and services to consumers. This monopoly limits creative approaches to pedagogy and curricular innovations. It struggles to leverage online learning opportunities, gamifications trends, and other innovative forms of educational delivery. It also limits the use of pedagogical approaches rooted in the educational traditions of Montessori, Jewish, Jesuit, or the great books tradition that have a long history of offering quality education to students. A more diverse education system would also be more attentive to both parent and student needs. All this invites the question of whether Canadian students are receiving the best education possible.

Evidence both from Canada and internationally suggests that this may not be the case and that greater school choice and higher levels of student enrollment in independent schools could provide better educational outcomes for Canadian students. For example, one large meta-study that reviewed the results of fifty-five international studies found that overall, more market-based school systems, as compared to government monopolies, had higher levels of student academic achievement, better budget efficiency (achievement per dollar spent per pupil), higher levels of parental satisfaction, and higher levels of student attainment (Coulson 2008). A more recent study that examined test scores in fifty-two countries found that higher levels of enrolment in independent schools resulted in better student achievement in math, reading, and science (DeAngelis 2018). Another recent study based on data from British Columbia found that non-elite independent-school students scored much higher than their public-school counterparts on standardised tests (MacLeod and Emes 2018).¹

In addition to better academic performance, a greater level of school choice would have other benefits as well.² For example, it would provide more options for parents to have their children educated in faith-based settings, providing a religious character to academic education. More choice in the provision of education could also help provide more options for parents with special-needs children to find educational institutions that can best address their child's needs.

1. One common response to such results is that independent schools are educating children from families with relatively higher socioeconomic status compared to children in the public-school system and that this explains the differences in student performance. However, this view is indicative of a misunderstanding of the types of families that send their children to independent schools. In fact, when elite independent schools are excluded, the average family incomes of children in independent schools are roughly equivalent to the average family incomes of those in public schools. Even when elite independent schools are included, average family incomes of students in independent schools are not dramatically higher than those of families with children in public schools (see Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison 2007; Clemens, Parvani, and Emes 2017; MacLeod, Parvani, and Emes, 2017).

2. For example, on academic performance, see Green et al. 2016.

POLICY PROPOSAL

IN THIS ESSAY I ARGUE THAT provinces across Canada should aspire to increase independent-school enrolment in the amount of an additional 5–10 percentage points of the present share of K–12 children. Further, I suggest this shift represents the most effective short- to medium-term change that will provide the least education disruption with the most educational benefit to all public education. Additionally, with the above premise, there will be minimal pressure on provincial budgets and on the taxpayer. The beneficiaries of this policy change are families who are seeking educational options for their children and families who desire higher levels of performance in state-owned education monopolies.

To achieve the goal of increasing enrolment in independent schools, provincial governments can use a series of policy tools including but not limited to increased funding levels, allowing more curricular diversity, altering regulations, changing funding criteria for special needs, and purchasing arrangements.

It is time to get beyond the discussion that support of independent schools somehow is a strike against state schools. There simply is no evidence in any of the provinces that do provide funding to non-state schools that state schools have suffered as a result.³ Moreover, it is time to recognize that public education includes the education provided by community-based and independent schools across Canada. In

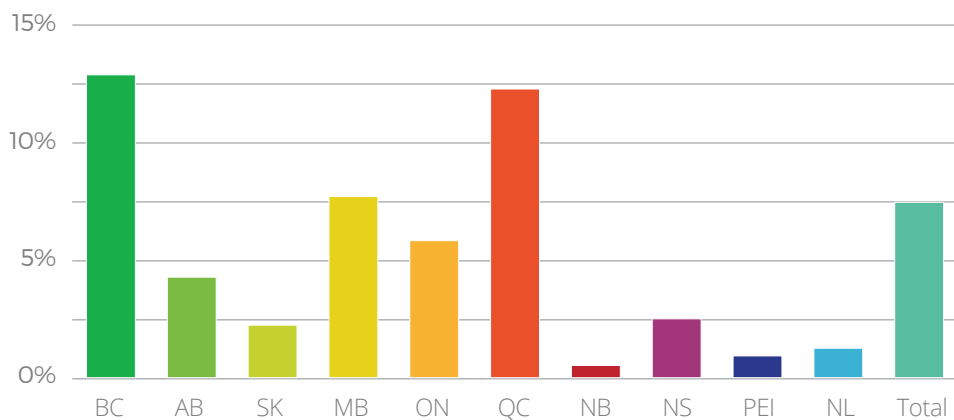
2014–2015, these schools educated almost one out of every ten K–12 students in the Canadian public, making them an important part of Canadian public education.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND ENROLMENT IN CANADA

INDEPENDENT-SCHOOL REGULATION and funding varies widely across Canada. As documented in a recent report on the subject, five out of ten provinces offer some level of funding for independent schools, although not all independent schools in those provinces qualify for the same level of funding. Receiving or not receiving funding typically revolves around whether an independent school meets a set of provincial regulations. These regulations commonly include employing provincially sanctioned teachers and following the provincial curriculum (see Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison 2017). The wide diversity in independent-school funding and regulations by province contributes to an equally wide range of independent-school utilization by parents.

As seen in Figure 1, in most provinces, enrolment in independent schools remains quite low. Only two provinces, British Columbia and Quebec, have independent-school enrolments of over 10 percent and only four provinces have independent-school enrolment levels over 5 percent (**FIGURE 1**).

FIGURE 1: Share of students enrolled in independent schools by province, 2014–2015



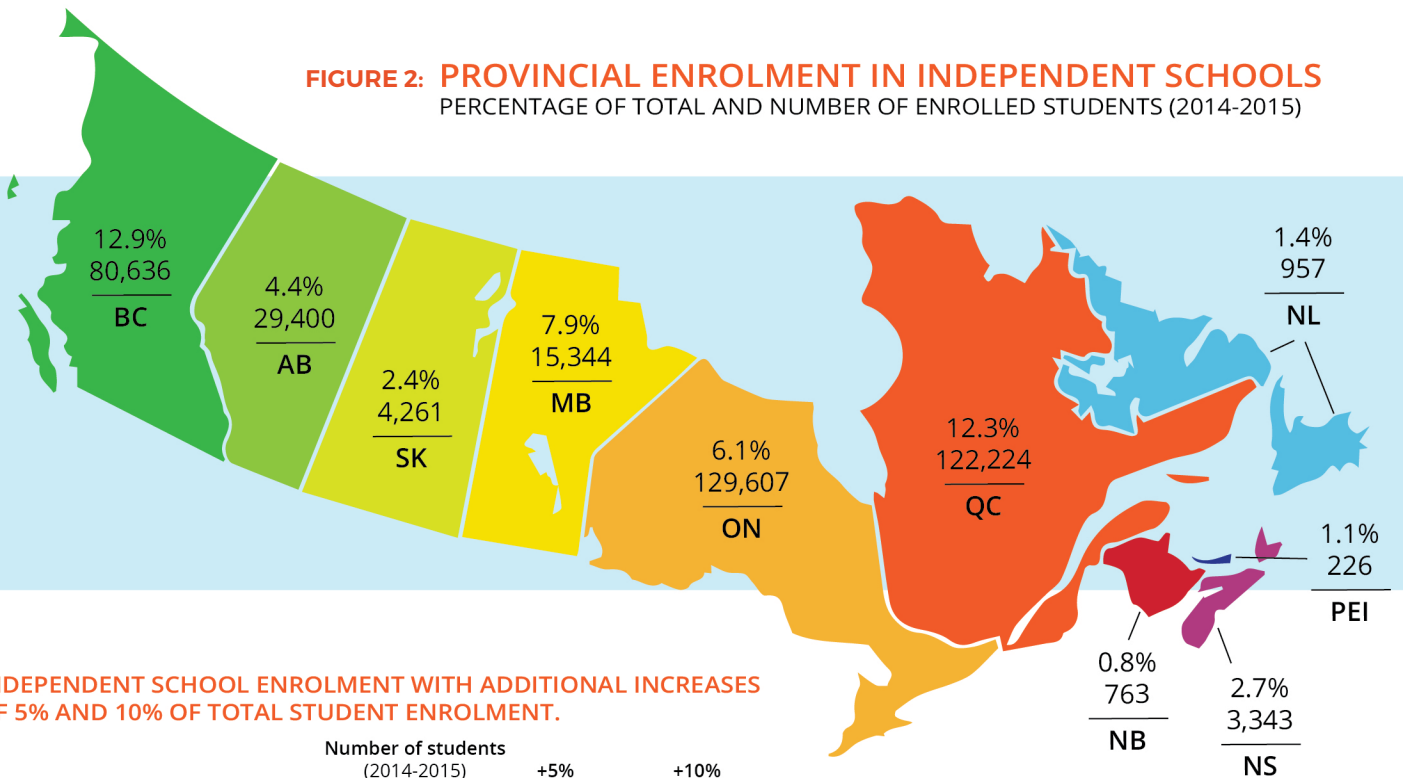
3. In the case of British Columbia, the province with the highest levels of enrolment in independent schools, per-student spending on public schools adjusted for inflation actually increased by 14 percent from 2005–2006 to 2014–2015, even as enrolment in public schools was declining due to demographic trends and parents increasingly choosing to have their children educated in the independent-school sector (MacLeod and Emes 2017).



The relatively low level of independent-school enrolment in many provinces suggests that there is much room for improvement when it comes to establishing greater school options across the country. As stated above, provinces should commit to an attainable, incremental goal of increasing independent-school enrolment to an additional 5 to 10 percentage points of total enrolment (FIGURE 2).

Figure 2 shows by how much each province would have to increase their independent-school enrolments in order to attain independent-school enrolment shares equal to an additional either 5 or 10 percentage points based on 2014–2015 enrolment data.

FIGURE 2: PROVINCIAL ENROLMENT IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL AND NUMBER OF ENROLLED STUDENTS (2014-2015)



INDEPENDENT SCHOOL ENROLMENT WITH ADDITIONAL INCREASES OF 5% AND 10% OF TOTAL STUDENT ENROLMENT.

	Number of students (2014-2015)	+5%	+10%
British Columbia	80,636	97,202	124,420
Alberta	29,400	59,046	90,414
Saskatchewan	4,261	12,563	21,021
Manitoba	15,344	22,714	31,528
Ontario	129,607	221,527	321,692
Quebec	122,224	150,691	194,313
New Brunswick	763	5,697	10,643
Nova Scotia	3,343	9,166	15,106
Prince Edward Island	226	1,219	2,216
Newfoundland & Labrador	957	4,307	7,671

Independent schools encourage **competition**, **innovation**, and **diverse educational approaches** to Canada’s education landscape.

All education is public education.

WHY AN INCREMENTAL APPROACH?

INCREASING PROVINCIAL independent-school enrolments to an additional 5 or 10 percentage points of total enrolment represents an incremental as opposed to a radical change to Canadian public education. It does not call for a dismantling of Canada's public education system but rather seeks to augment the public system in a non-disruptive manner, with gradual increases in the levels of choice to parents who are seeking alternative education options to the state system. The gradual increase in independent-school enrolment will also begin to place some community choice and market competition on the state-school system that would hopefully provide some incentives for improvements in the public system.

One reason that an incremental change is more desirable is that such a change constitutes the least disruption to parents and children. Parents are not required to act on any new incentives and many may choose to leave their children in the public system. Control over education is put in the hands of families. Furthermore, this is a gradual systemic change, which will have limited impact on teachers and school boards and would thus hopefully make strikes and other disruptions in service unnecessary.

An incremental approach to independent-school enrolment expansion also allows for experimentation with various policy approaches based on domestic or international policy models allowing governments and schools to make course corrections as they try to reach a higher level of independent-school enrolment. As an example, provinces such as Ontario may wish to use British Columbia's model of providing up to 50 percent of pupil funding to independent schools if these schools meet certain regulatory criteria (hiring certified teachers, following provincial curriculum, etc.).

It is important to ensure that changes to the delivery of education come with minimal disruption. Public education is still a cherished institution in Canada despite growing angst about performance scores. Yet it is also important to recognize that there is strong support among Canadian parents for increased school choice. Indeed, in a recent poll conducted by Cardus and Angus Reid, 61 percent of Canadians said that religious and faith-based independent schools should receive some level of government funding, showing a strong openness to independent-school options (Cardus 2017).

SMALL ADJUSTMENTS TO A DUAL MONOPOLY

ANOTHER BENEFIT of expanding independent-school enrolment by an additional 5 to 10 percentage points is that these increases would begin to place some pressure on the dual monopoly that currently governs Canadian education. This dual monopoly refers to the fact that the state is the supplier of over 90 percent of K–12 education in Canada. The largest “supplier of services” to state-delivered education is represented by teachers' federations made up of a few unions that lack constraining competition. The result of this dual monopoly is an education system that struggles to provide innovation, flexible and creative educational services, and that generally overlooks the role of the parents in the educational direction of the children. Unfortunately, we also experience lower levels of academic achievement at a higher cost as a result of such a dual monopoly.

There are credible economic arguments that a monopoly in the provision of a good or service will generate fewer, lower-quality services as compared to markets that have competition. In addition, monopolies face less incentive to improve and innovate. They are also oriented to produce more uniform services as compared to a more diverse offering of services that arise in more community-driven models or competitive markets (Guillemette 2007).

More directly, teacher-union monopolies over the delivery of education services mixed with the monopoly provision of education can produce inflated costs compared to where there may be local community contextualization or market discipline. In this sense, the state has no forces like any other employer would (competitive service comparisons, technology, new emerging sectors, market size and geography, etc.) to use in negotiating agreements with the teachers' union. Its most powerful tool is to effectively act outside a healthy collective bargaining engagement and force arbitration or back-to-work legislation. A small increase in enrolment in non-state schools may have the effect of creating limited comparison or competitive options for parents that will create a form of accountability in the collective-bargaining process. This may partially right the collective-bargaining balance, reducing the need for governments to use the blunt instrument of legislative power to interfere to ensure continuity and quality of services.

Another consequence of large monolithic control over the delivery of education by teachers' unions is that



great teachers are often overlooked. When the unions negotiate contracts with governments, the result is a rigid compensation system that does not reward high-performing teachers, while protecting failing teachers. Not only do high-performing teachers not get the recognition they deserve in terms of higher levels of compensation, but students also tend to suffer from lower-quality education (Alger 2014). By reducing some of the monopoly control over educational delivery, more qualified teachers would likely have more power to gain recognition for their services.

CRITICAL MASS IN NON-STATE SCHOOLING WILL BENEFIT ALL

IN THE CONTEXT of education, the independent-school sector in most provinces is so small that they have little if any effect on the dual monopoly that governs the public-school system. This causes the public-school system to be absent from service-delivery options and the benefits they bring. British Columbia is one province where the independent-school system—due to its critical mass—may be able to provide benefits to the larger state-funded system. For example, when teachers went on strike there in 2015, pressures on enrolment at independent schools increased significantly. It would be natural for this situation to act as a check on both the province and teachers' association deliberations during the strike (Givetash 2015). It is interesting that both the CBC and *Globe and Mail* covered and reported on increased pressures on independent-school enrollment during the strike (CBC 2015; Givetash 2015). My point is this: When there is critical mass—the independent school sector recognized as a viable and public educational option—it helps to create accountability for other educational services that in turn contributes to overall higher educational performance.

It is worth reminding ourselves that discussions regarding the manner of delivery of education services is a different question than priorities in funding education. Additionally, it should be clear that the need to moderate public education's dual monopoly does not mean that the regulation of schools be eliminated. Indeed, evidence from Canada (British Columbia) and around the world demonstrates that you can both expand independent-school enrolment while also ensuring that the sector is well regulated in order to ensure quality education and that there is some level of curricular standardization (see Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison 2017; Donnelly 2017).

BUILDING ASSOCIATION STRENGTH IN THE INDEPENDENT-SCHOOL SECTOR: A REQUIREMENT FOR EXCELLENCE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

AS ENROLMENT IN independent schools increases, independent-school associations will be better resourced to ensure the sector is properly represented. Indeed, as these associations grow in strength and sophistication, they will be better able to engage political leadership and with government departments ensuring that a diverse independent-school sector will flourish.

It is in the public interest for industry school associations to be strong. They perform important education and professional services to individual schools, administrators, and teachers. They also provide opportunities to conduct research on changing educational approaches, curriculum, and pedagogy. They provide platforms to collaborate on performance standards. They encourage networking and mentoring.

In addition, independent-school associations can challenge schools within their sector to perform to the best of their abilities while also assisting schools in meeting governmental regulatory requirements. Furthermore, these associations should provide outlets for parental involvement in schooling, ensure that faith-based schools are equally represented, and try to increase charitable giving to the sector that could help fund more schools or spaces. The importance of independent-school associations should not be understated. It is unlikely that educational diversity will be able to flourish in Canada without a strong, representative advocate for independent schools (Van Pelt and Mitchell 2018).

POLICY MODELS FOR INCREASING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL ENROLMENT

ONE WAY BY which governments can increase enrolment in independent schools is to offset the costs of student tuition by granting independent schools per-pupil funding. For example, this model is currently used in British Columbia and Alberta. In both cases for independent schools to receive funding they need to meet certain sets of criteria, such as

employing provincially certified teachers, following provincial curriculum, and meeting other accountability requirements. If independent schools can meet the outset criteria, they can receive funding in the order of 35 or 50 percent of per-student operational funding allocated for public-school students in British Columbia.⁴ In Alberta, independent schools can receive 60 or 70 percent of per-student operational funding allocated for public school students (Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison 2017). These programs can help increase enrolment in independent schools by reducing the tuition costs to parents. They can also help governments save money by reducing governmental per-student education expenses.

Another way that governments could stimulate independent-school enrolments would be to reduce the financial pressures placed on independent schools by governments. Allison (2014) discusses this issue with regard to Ontario, where independent schools are required to pay three separate fees, including a one-time registration fee accompanying the Notice of Intention to Operate, a recurring inspection fee, and per-student fees for individuals sitting in Education Quality and Accountability Office tests. As Allison highlights, these fees can reduce student enrolments due to the fact that the majority of independent schools are “are not-for-profit organizations, and any fees will necessarily be paid out of operating revenues, which increases the cost of a privately financed enterprise” (Allison 2014, 16). As operating costs increase, independent schools may respond by passing on costs to parents, resulting in higher tuition costs or by offering fewer enrolment slots to students. In both cases the end result would be lower enrolment levels, and if governments are seeking to increase independent-school enrolments they should consider eliminating these types of fees.

As governments seek to incrementally increase independent-school enrolments, they should also consider international examples of independent-school financing and regulation. For instance, Australia has higher independent-school enrolment levels and offers an innovative funding scheme for independent schools. Australia has a financing program whereby

the government adjusts the value of the payment made to independent schools depending on the socioeconomic status of the area that the various students live in. Specifically, students from the highest socioeconomic-status areas are only eligible for 20 percent funding grants, but students from the lowest socioeconomic-status areas can receive grants that are up to 90 percent of tuition costs, thereby helping to comparatively lower the costs of independent-school education to low-income parents (Donnelly 2017). Australia offers but one example of other jurisdictions whose public policies have contributed to higher enrolment levels in independent schools that Canadian policy makers may wish to study.

Finally, provinces should also consider providing (or increasing) funding for special-needs educational institutions that operate in the independent-school system. This funding would help reduce some of the financial pressures placed on parents of special-needs children who wish to have their children educated in alternative independent schools. It could provide the parents of special-needs children a greater diversity in educational choice that is often only enjoyed by parents without special needs children.

CONCLUSION

IT IS CLEAR THAT Canadian parents have a desire for a more diverse educational system. Parents want educational choices that are more attentive to both their needs and those of their children, including those with special needs. Given these desires and the fact that a more diverse and competitive education system would offer better outcomes for students, Canadian governments should set goals of increasing independent-school enrolments to an additional 5 or 10 percentage points of total enrolment. There is a wide variety of policy levers that could help provinces attain these goals, and each province should craft policies that best address their diverse populations. Such an approach is one that is incremental, placing the least disruption possible on the existing public-school system, while also working toward the goal of expanding educational diversity. ^

4. Whether a school receives 35 or 50 percent funding depends on the independent school’s per-pupil costs. If an independent school has per-student costs equal to or less than the per-student costs in the public-school sector, they are eligible to receive the 50 percent grant. If the per-student costs are higher than in the public sector, independent schools can receive the 35 percent grant (Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison 2017).

APPENDIX: AN ALBERTA CASE STUDY

ALBERTA HAS A DIVERSE and innovative history in the provision of education. The first public school district in what would become Alberta was established in 1884. At this time the governing body for the public system—the board of education—composed of two sections, one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant. The primarily ecumenical nature of all education in the province would continue until around the turn of the twentieth century, when the secularization of public education would gradually begin to take hold (Cormack 1949). During the rest of the first half of the twentieth century, secular public education continued to expand throughout the province, as more and more school districts were created, until eventually the entire province had access to secular public education. This slow move can be viewed as an early retreat away from educational diversity.

Educational diversity in Alberta was expanded in 1967, when the province recognized the importance of educational choice by beginning to provide funding for private and independent schools. This program has continued until today. Currently, there are four categories of independent schools in the province: registered private schools (non-funded), accredited private schools (non-funded), level 1 accredited private schools (partially funded), and level 2 accredited private schools (partially funded).⁵ Only level 1 and 2 accredited private schools receive government funding in the order of 60 or 70 percent of the per-pupil grant to public schools, respectively (Alberta, n.d.).⁶

Beginning in the middle of the 1970s, a movement began in Alberta to move religious schools into the public-school system. The religious schools in the public system are to this day known as alternative schools. The Calgary and Edmonton school districts were the first in the province during the mid-1970s to accept alternative religious-based schools into the public system. This move proved quite contentious at the time, but in 1988 the Alberta government introduced a general policy whereby local school boards could establish religious alternative schools

if there were sufficient student numbers (Hiemstra 2006). A long-term effect of this policy is that many faith-based schools that would operate as independent schools in other provinces are considered part of the public-school system, resulting in a relatively lower share of Alberta students being enrolled in independent schools compared to other provinces. I have not found any comparative research that considers whether the “alternative school program” of the state schools have maintained their distinctive character as they integrated into the state-owned school boards.

Education choice was further expanded in Alberta in 1994, when the government passed legislation creating a limited number of charter schools. More than twenty years after the Alberta government first introduced charter schools, the maximum number allowed has never been expanded beyond fifteen, making charter schools a relatively small sector of Alberta’s educational landscape (Bosetti et al. 2015).

Alberta has a diverse history with educational choice, particularly in the case of faith-based schools, which at various times throughout the province’s history have been in both the public- and independent-school sectors. However, one result of instituting alternative programs within the state school boards is that Alberta’s independent-school sector has not been able to attract similar shares of students compared to many of its provincial peers, leaving some of the benefits of a robust independent-school sector out of the grasp of Alberta parents and children.

In 2014–2015, only 4.4 percent of student enrolment in Alberta was in independent schools. This relatively low level of independent-school enrolment compared to other provinces means there is considerable room for the province to expand educational diversity. Table 2 shows how many students will need to be added to independent schools in order to attain independent-school enrolment levels of 5, 10, or 15 percentage points above current levels. The 10 and 15 percentage-point enrolment-increase goals represent ambitious targets that ought to be part of a long-term incremental strategy that will offer as little disruption as

5. In order to become a level 1 or 2 accredited private school and receive funding, schools must conform to a set of government educational standards that include the following: being non-profit, employing provincially accredited teachers, teaching the provincial curriculum (schools can add to the curriculum), participating in provincial assessments, following mandated reporting procedures (Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison 2017).

6. Level 2 funded schools can also receive additional funding by participating in the provincial accountability program. They can also receive a plant operations and maintenance grant (Van Pelt, Hasan, and Allison, 2017).

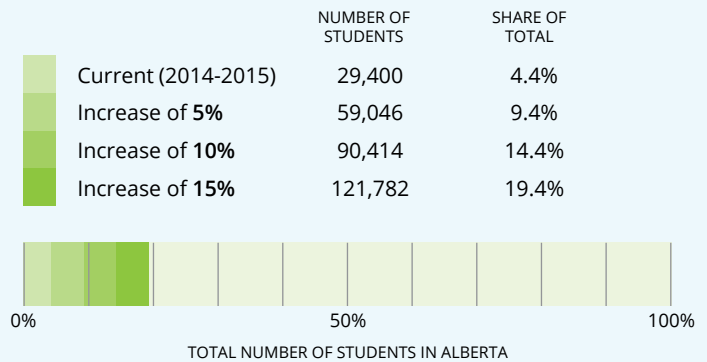
possible to the education status quo, while offering Alberta parents more education options for their children (FIGURE 3).⁷

There are a number of policy levers spanning both financing and regulation through which Alberta could expand independent-school enrolment in a non-disruptive manner. On the financing side, Alberta could increase the per-student funding available to independent schools, thereby further reducing tuition costs for parents.

The Alberta government could increase access to various grants for independent schools or mitigate some of the financial uncertainty that independent schools face. This uncertainty is the product of the yearly approvals that independent schools are subject to, combined with the policy uncertainty that stems from ever-changing budget allocations. To mitigate some of the uncertainty, the Alberta government could offer independent-schools approval on a five-year basis that would guarantee their status and funding over that period.

The Alberta government could also expand access to independent schools and therefore enrolment by reforming some of the regulations governing independent schools. Independent schools currently face a long bureaucratic process to register, even though the regulatory requirements for establishing a school are relatively minimal. More independent schools would likely be started if the bureaucratic process was streamlined. Another regulatory burden placed on Alberta independent schools is the process surrounding the approval of additional programs. For example, if a school currently offering K–9 education wanted to add new programs for grades 10–12, that school would have to go through a whole new approval process. This has the effect of constraining the supply of independent-school spots available to Alberta parents.

FIGURE 3: Alberta independent school enrolment, 2014-15, with increases of 5%, 10%, and 15%.



The Alberta government could also offer a mobility subsidy to Alberta families in order to help ensure that transportation costs are not an overwhelming burden on parents wishing to have their children educated in an independent school. These types of subsidies could be particularly important for rural families that might have to travel long distances for their children to attend an independent school. Another policy lever that should be looked at by the Alberta government would be to target additional financial resources toward expanding independent-school options for special-needs children. An expansion of special-needs school choice could help ensure that special-needs children receive a high-quality education, while also ensuring that their needs are addressed in the best manner possible.

Finally, the Alberta government may wish to reevaluate the existing alternative schools program.

Overall, there are a number of different policy levers that the Alberta government could use to increase independent-school enrolments in an incremental and non-invasive manner.

7. Any strategy to increase independent-school enrolments will by necessity be medium- to long-term in nature given the lead time that will be necessary to either expand existing independent schools or create new ones.

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