

Better Way Alberta: K-12 EDUCATION

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Context

Every child in Alberta has the right to access well-funded, high-quality public schools that are staffed by highly-trained teachers, school leaders, and other educational workers. Public education should allow children to become enthusiastic learners who thrive and succeed to their full potential so that as adults they may participate in democratic society as informed citizens. Public education is an investment in society, one that allows for the improvement of outcomes for children, families, and communities. Building great schools that are accessible to all students requires deep commitment on the part of education stakeholders including the Government of Alberta and our elected Members of the Legislative Assembly. In recent years, the Government of Alberta has destabilized and cut education funding, refused to support schools properly during a world-wide pandemic, forced through wildly unpopular curriculum unsupported by experts in the teaching profession, and made decisions regarding charter schools to encourage their growth and expansion. In the upcoming Alberta election, it will be important to examine party platforms to determine who supports the principles of a public education system and who does not.

In this section, we propose evidence-based solutions for a better way:

- A. The Government of Alberta should invest in high-quality public schools for all Alberta students.
- B. The Government of Alberta should rescind its policies that support privatization of education and fragmenting our education system.
- C. The Government of Alberta should scrap the draft K-6 curricula and listen to the expert advice of teachers, school leaders and other educational experts to create a curriculum that is high quality and continues the long tradition of world-class education for students in Alberta.
- D. The Government of Alberta should reduce class sizes and provide proper support for students with diverse learning needs.
- E. The Government of Alberta should provide more mental health resources for students and families.

Recommendation One: The Government of Alberta should invest in high-quality public schools for all Alberta students.

In 2019, the newly elected United Conservative Party established a panel to examine Alberta’s annual expenditures in relation to other provinces and make recommendations based upon those findings. The result of the work of this panel is known as the [McKinnon Report](#). After reviewing provincial education budgets from the 2018/19 school year, as well as provincial expenditures from the 2017/2018 school year, the panel asserted that “the total amount of funding the [provincial] government spends on education is not out of line with comparable provinces” (Alberta Government, August 2019, p 36). However, differences in how public education is funded across Canada make comparisons based on government budget figures difficult. Focusing only on revenue from provincial governments gives a misleading picture of citizen contributions to public education.

Rather than looking at total expenditure numbers by province, as the McKinnon Report did, it is helpful to examine operating expenditures on a per student basis. This type of analysis reflects the spending that directly affects school services to children. Operating expenditures include all activities related to services to students: instruction, building operations, and transportation. Using data from Statistics Canada in the 2018–19 school year, the most recent year for which this data is available, we find that operating expenditures per student in Alberta are the lowest among the ten Canadian provinces. This paints a more accurate picture of education funding than the McKinnon Report.

Table 1: Operating Expenditures Per Student in 2018–19 (Analysis by Neil Hepburn ATA Economist)

Province	Operating Expenditures Per Student	Difference from 10 Province Average
10 province average	\$12,266.16	
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$14,033.17	\$1,767.02
Quebec	\$13,545.85	\$1,279.70
Nova Scotia	\$12,846.60	\$580.45
Manitoba	\$12,743.57	\$477.42
Prince Edward Island	\$12,372.58	\$106.43
Ontario	\$11,887.40	-\$378.75
British Columbia	\$11,724.87	-\$541.28
New Brunswick	\$11,364.03	-\$902.12
Saskatchewan	\$11,247.02	-\$1,019.14
Alberta	\$10,896.46	-\$1,369.70

Source: Statistics Canada tables 37-10-0109 and 37-10-0065

Given that education funding in Alberta has remained flat in the four years after 2018/19, and given that there are growing student numbers, a worldwide pandemic, and inflationary pressure, it is reasonable to conclude that the funding of public schools has been eroded. Undoubtedly, this impacts the learning experience of Alberta students because of the impact to class size and the diminished ability to provide for the unique needs of each student.

Recommendation Two: The Government of Alberta should rescind its policies supporting privatization of education and fragmenting our education system.

Alberta's education system consists of public schools, charter schools, and private schools. The fragmented nature of Alberta's education system is unusual in Canada. Alberta is the only province to permit and fund charter schools. Alberta, as is the case with a few other provinces, provides partial funding of accredited [private schools](#) (Bosetti, Van Pelt & Alison, 2018). The creation of so many different types of school systems means that education in Alberta may be viewed by citizens as a matter of individual choice without regard to the impact private and charter systems have on schools and communities. As [Ball and Youdell](#) (2008) pointed out, "privatization tendencies are at the center of the shift from education being seen as a public good that serves the whole community, to education being seen as a private good that serves the interest of the educated individual, the employer and the economy" (p. 15-16). Education becomes viewed as a commodity which is narrowly defined through standardization and competition between schools. This market-driven approach is contrary to the fundamental beliefs of Alberta's teaching staff body, the Alberta Teachers Association.

The differences between public schools, charter schools, and private schools also require examination. Some of the differences include transparency of reporting, whether the schools must accept all students, different governance structures, and different regulatory structures. Even though [91%](#) of Alberta students attend public schools, in 2022 the current government took steps to make charter schools easier to open, providing financial incentive for new charter schools to be established as well as changing the regulations and subsidizing [charter schools](#) to allow them to own land and buildings.

In the United States, the prominence of charter schools and the trend toward the privatization of public education is a concerning lesson for Alberta. [Levin](#) (2021) wrote, "The concept of charter schools is one that combines the public sponsorship and the promotion of private differences that correspond to family preferences and perceived educational needs" (p. 197). However, with the lax regulatory environment surrounding many American charter schools, there have been many scandals associated with charter schools. There have been so many scandals at charter schools that the Network for Public Education has begun tracking them under the title "[Another Day Another Charter Scandal](#)." Regulations in Alberta continue to be loosened, and Alberta may find itself in similar circumstances.

Recommendation Three: The Government of Alberta should scrap the draft K-6 curriculum and listen to the expert advice of teachers, school leaders, and other educational experts to create a curriculum that is high quality and continues the long tradition of world-class education for students in Alberta.

Curriculum development in Alberta has long been a collegial endeavor involving a range of education stakeholders including the teaching profession, school superintendents, Alberta Education, business owners, professors, and community members. For example, in 2008, then Premier Ed Stelmach mandated the Minister of Education, Dave Hancock, to embark on an extensive process of consultation to capture what Albertans believed the long-term vision for education should be. A steering committee was struck and its final report, [Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans](#), was released. Inspiring Education became the basis upon which curriculum in Alberta was to be rewritten and updated. The resulting draft curriculum, completed after the Conservatives had left office following the election of the New Democratic Party in 2015, was written with the involvement of the usual stakeholders. It received extensive input from subject area experts, education professors, teachers, and superintendents.

The resulting draft, while not perfect, was ready to be piloted at the time the United Conservative Party came to office and, instead, '[put the curriculum in the shredder](#)'. As such, the curriculum development process was started anew. This time, the Alberta Teachers' Association, practicing teachers, and school leaders were shut out of the process. The resulting draft curriculum released in 2021 has been roundly rejected as substandard by Alberta parents, university professors, [teachers, school leaders](#), and students. Very few school jurisdictions agreed to pilot the draft curriculum in light of its poor quality and within the context of managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the UCP has refused to listen to the concerns of community stakeholders and some portions of the UCP draft curriculum have already moved into Alberta classrooms with very little time for teachers to prepare.

The Alberta Teachers Association calls for a reversal of this decision so the teaching profession, along with other education stakeholders, can re-engage and produce a draft curriculum worthy of our students and an international reputation.

Recommendation Four: The Government of Alberta should reduce class sizes and provide support for students with diverse learning needs.

In 2003, Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL) made significant policy recommendations regarding class sizes: K–3 classes should, on average, have 17 students or fewer; Grades 4–6 classes should have 23 students or fewer; Grades 7–9 classes should have 25 students or fewer; and high school classes should have 27 students or fewer.

Alberta class size data released by Alberta Education shows that the education system in Alberta has failed to achieve those targets. In Alberta in 2017/18, 80.39% of Division I (K–3) classes were larger than their ACOL targets. On average, Division I classes were 29.41% over their target, with the effects especially pronounced in large urban boards.

In addition to failing to meet the ACOL targets, [Teghtmeyer \(2022\)](#) wrote that “between 2018 and 2021, we lost about 850 teaching positions across the province. Since 2009, the student population has increased by about 22%, while the teaching population has only increased by about 10%.”

It's plain to see that class sizes have ballooned in Alberta. As the Alberta Government no longer collects class size data, throughout the pandemic the Alberta Teachers' Association surveyed its membership and in a [November 2021](#) report over 1200 teachers and school leaders, in a sample highly representative of the teaching profession, reported that “over 30% of teachers are managing class sizes well above 30 students, particularly in the primary grades (4 to 6), English Language Arts (7 to 12) and Mathematics (10 to 12)” (p. 1 and pp. 38 – 41). In addition, “85% of teacher respondents report that their class complexity and the diversity of student needs (e.g., socio-economic, linguistic, behavioural, cognitive, social/emotional) has significantly increased (52%) and somewhat increased (33%) over last year” (p. 1). Alberta classrooms are large, and the needs within classrooms are complex. More teachers, education assistants, and building infrastructure will be needed to remedy this situation and there are good reasons to do so. American economist [Schazzenbach's](#) (2014) review of major class size research revealed:

- Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes, and one that can be directly determined by policy. All else being equal, increasing class size will harm student outcomes.
- The evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children's test scores in the short run, but also their long-run human capital formation. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will result in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.
- The payoff from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.
- Policymakers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class-size policy against other potential uses of funds. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost-effective policy overall.

Investing in education now to support students through reasonable class sizes and to support students with exceptional needs will pay dividends for Alberta's society in the future.

Recommendation Five: The Government of Alberta should provide more mental health resources for students and families.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an already serious mental health crisis. Prior to the pandemic, the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) reported that an estimated 1.2 million children and youth in Canada are affected by mental illness—yet, less than 20% will receive appropriate treatment. Further, the Mental Health Commission of Canada indicates that by age 25, approximately 20% of Canadians will have developed a mental illness.

Following the declaration of a world-wide pandemic in March 2020, scholars and research institutions have tracked the mental health of Canadians as protective health measures were introduced. The health measures included social distancing, working from home, learning virtually, and the loss of social connection because of cohorting and loss of extra-curricular and community activities. Life changed for all Canadians during this time and the pandemic has had lasting impacts on students and their families, particularly those who were in vulnerable situations already.

Statistics Canada (2020) reported on the state of Canada's mental health in late 2020. Statistics Canada found that all Canadians were experiencing a decline in mental health, but the decline was most notable in youth ages 15 – 24 years old, its youngest age bracket analyzed. In addition, Global News (February 2, 2021) reported that in 2020 the number of calls and texts received by the Kids Help Line had more than doubled compared to the number of calls and texts received in 2019.

There is also significant concern regarding the mental health of children, youth, and teachers. The Alberta Teachers' Association has been actively surveying teachers throughout the pandemic and in its [fourth pulse survey](#) which focused on wellbeing, 98% of teachers surveyed had some level of concern about student mental health.

While the Alberta government has recognized there are mental health issues that will need to be addressed as we recover from the pandemic and adjust to living with COVID-19, the \$87 million dollars allocated over three years works out to about \$42.99 per public school student for this year based on [2021-2022](#) preliminary student numbers. More targeted mental health support will be needed for families that are struggling.

Schools should be positioned as hubs to access services from trained mental health professionals. Investing in our schools and the mental health of students, teachers, and families should be considered an investment in the future of Alberta.

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Additional Resources:

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