



DATE: November 1, 2010

TO: CUPE and other support staff unions in K-12

SUBJECT: Private school enrolment & funding: BC's experience

Introduction

The issue of private school funding is once again gaining higher prominence. At its annual conference this year, the BCSTA passed a resolution calling on the BC government to end its longstanding practice of providing financial support to private schools. Unions like CUPE and BCTF, along with some districts and parent groups, have echoed the call. There is however, no indication of the province moving away from its policy of providing funding support.

Officially, BC private schools are labeled "independent schools" to denote the fact they are able to operate independently of government in key respects. Provisions of the province's *Independent School Act* map school rights, obligations and responsibilities. Currently there are four categories of schools, two of which qualify for public funding support.

Group	Descriptions	Funding level	Students	Schools
1	Group 1 schools employ B.C. certified teachers, have educational programs consistent with ministerial orders, provide a program that meets the learning outcomes of the British Columbia curriculum.	50% of the per student cost in the school district where they are located	77.6% of total	252
2	Group 2 schools meet the same requirements as Group 1 schools but, because the school's per-student operating costs exceed the ministry grants paid to the local boards of education, they receive less support.	35% of the per student cost in the school district where they are located	20.7% of total	66
3	Group 3 schools are non-funding and are not required to employ B.C. certified teachers or have educational programs consistent with ministerial orders.	0%	.8% of total	19
4	Group 4 schools are non-funded schools that cater mainly to non-provincial students.	0%	1.4% of total	10

Internal groupings of private schools

There are different informal sub-groupings under the auspices of the Federation of Independent Schools Associations, a provincial umbrella body established in 1966 to represent the interests of BC's private school system. The most prominent of these groupings are:

- Those patterned after British “public schools” – These are schools that cater to an affluent demographic although many offer scholarship support to students. In the past they have tended to be white Anglo-Saxon in ethnic nature but more recently have taken on a more cosmopolitan character with the enrolment of higher numbers of students from various ethno-cultural backgrounds.
- Evangelical and other Christian – This is a fast growing sector on the private school continuum, catering to those seeking an explicitly religious alternative to the secularism of the public system.
- Catholic – In other provinces, these schools form a part of the public system as “separate” schools. Owing to the terms of BC's entry into Canadian Confederation in 1870, no separate school system was created. Students in this sub-grouping come from all echelons of society and fees tend to be moderate in size.
- Alternate philosophy – Students attend schools that advertise curriculum based upon distinct educational philosophies or pedagogies such as Waldorf or Montessori.
- Other religious – There are a growing number of schools for students of Islamic, Sikh, Jewish and other religious backgrounds that receive monetary subsidy from the province.

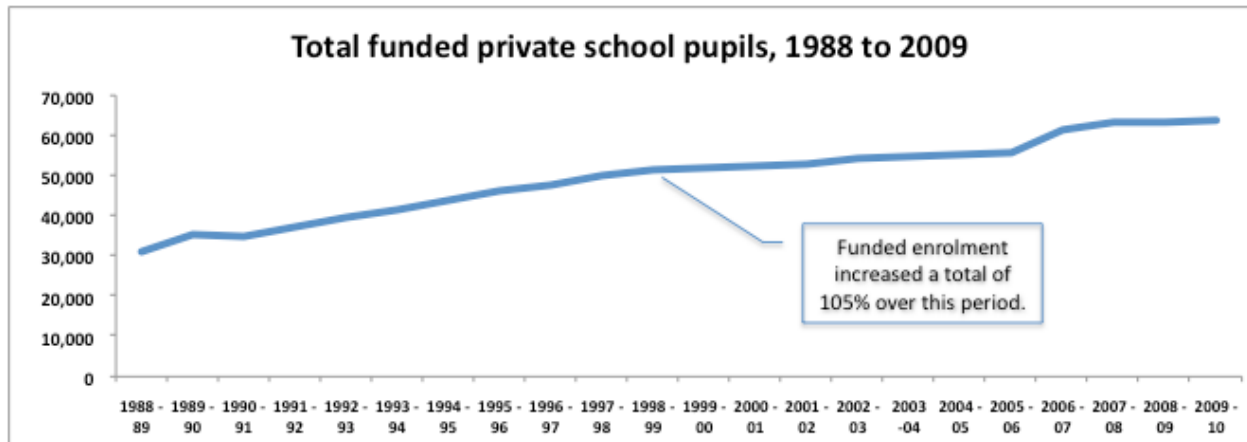
There is no precise data concerning the relative size of these sub-groupings. Available information suggests that the religious schools (Catholic + other Christian + other religious) together account for about 60% of all private school enrolment and funding in the province.

Growth in private school funding support

BC's support for private school education began in the late 1970s when Social Credit premier Bill Bennett reversed his father WAC Bennett's longstanding aversion to the practice. From an initial \$8.7 million given to subsidize 16,817 qualifying students in 1978, funded private school enrolments grew at a steady pace over the following decade. By 1988, there were almost twice as many subsidized students receiving subsidies that totaled \$46 million.

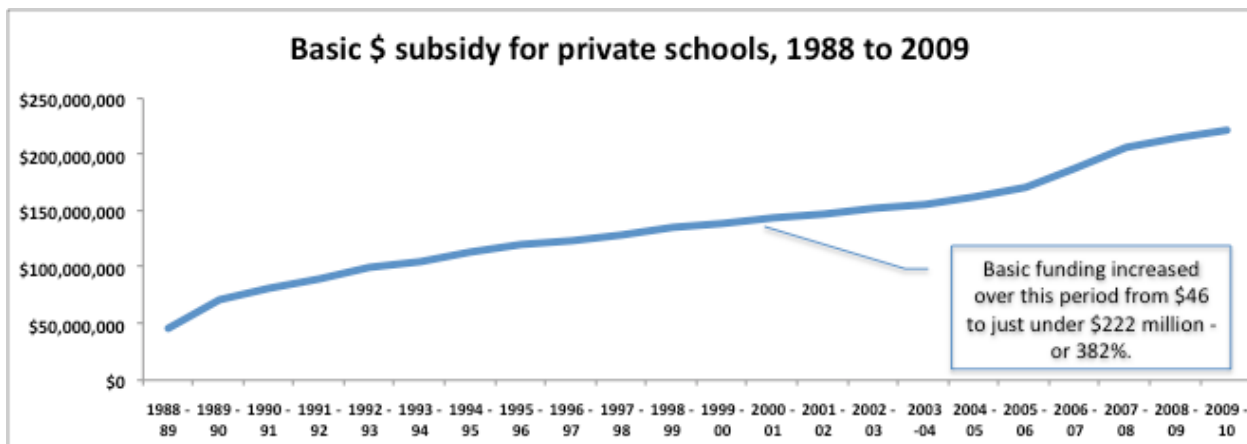
In 1989, a provincial Royal Commission on public school education chaired by Barry Sullivan released its report titled *A Legacy for Learners*. The report recommended continuance of public funding support directed into three distinct streams offering 10%, 35% and 50% funding support. Calculation of grant subsidies was to be based on the degree to which school operation came under governmental scrutiny as well as public operating costs in the school district where each private school was located. With the provincial Social Credit government moving to implement these Royal Commission recommendations later that year, overall levels of funding support jumped to reach almost \$72 million.

The following chart shows annual growth in funded private school enrolments:



After 1993, the three funded groups were reduced to two. Currently these two categories remain – one group receives per student subsidies equivalent to 50% of per student operating costs and a second group receives 35% of per student costs. The latter group is intended to provide a lower level of support for schools that can afford operating costs higher than those found in the public system.

Since that time, private school subsidies have risen steadily, given both rising enrolment and the percentage indexation to public school spending levels. The following chart shows annual levels of overall spending.



When additional grant amounts for distributed learning and special education are factored in, \$250 million in total funding was provided to private schools in 2009-10. These funds help support the education of more than 70,000 students, approximately 12% of the province's school-attending population. This compares with \$4.978 billion in 2009/10 revenue for BC's public school system which enrolled 542,000 FTE students that year.¹

¹ BC Ministry of Education, *Revenue & Expenditure Information*, Tables 1 & 13, 2009-10. About 93 per cent of public system revenue came in the form of provincial grant payments.

Debates surrounding private school funding

The provision of public funds for the support of private school education has long been a controversial policy stance. The following summarizes the nature of debates that have grown up around this topic.

Pro: Diversity and choice – This is the official position of the government of BC.² It is also an argument long favoured by the Federation of Independent Schools Associations. It has also been an argument drawn on by the Fraser Institute in the latter’s efforts to conduct annual rankings of school “performance” thereby fostering greater public acceptance of the need for market-oriented “reforms” in public school education.

Pro: Private school subsidies save the public system money – As the argument goes, paying 50 or 35 cents on the dollar is better than paying the whole shot. This is a more pragmatic argument and one typically favoured by many in government, including former Premier Glen Clark. Partly as a result, the provincial NDP has never had a policy or platform commitment to terminating public financial subsidies for private schools.

Con: Providing public money to private schools is an expensive folly that undermines public education – This is a position held by unions, parent groups and others seeking to uphold the integrity of the public school system. With current cuts to school programs and services undermining confidence in the public system, continued provision of private school subsidies is seen to offer generous incentive for parents to pull their children out of public schools in favour of private sector alternatives. And, given that the overall size of private subsidies now approach current estimates of the “structural funding shortfall” facing public schools, the demand that private subsidies be terminated is increasingly linked to the call for freed-up monies to be re-directed to offset the financial predicament faced by public K-12 education.

Conclusion

Private school subsidization has been and will remain a controversial issue in BC. Of late, however, concern over impending K-12 privatization has shifted to focus more on early learning options and the provincial government’s 2010 Throne Speech suggestion that programs for three and four-year olds be made available in concert with “private sector partners” so as to accommodate parents’ need for “choice.” Given that early learning is the largest future growth area of public school programming, debate regarding private sector involvement in this type of model is also set to increase in the months and years ahead.

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² “Government strongly supports a public system of education that provides a publicly funded quality education for all. However, parents have a right to choose from various educational alternatives for the education of their children, such as distributed learning, home schooling and independent schools.” BC Ministry of Education, *Overview of Independent Schools in British Columbia*, (May, 2010).