

Alberta's NDP plan to defund independent schools?

By John Hilton O'Brien, 7 May 2023

The biggest political announcement in years went by us on Friday, and nobody seemed to notice. It was buried deep in a press conference, in answer to a reporter's question. Rachel Notley promised to [cut funding for alternative education options](#), specifically targeting independent schools (charters and privates) and likely home education as well. Here's what she said:

"When we were in government before, we maintained . . . funding to charters and to private schools. However, today's announcement and my priority going forward is to . . . make up for the multiple attacks on the quality of education experienced by 95 percent of Alberta students in our public education, in public schools and Catholic schools [and] in the francophone boards . . . so that more and more families just choose to be part of our public education system."

The impact cannot be overstated. Consider the [student numbers](#): Alberta's charter schools have 10,575 students, private schools have 39,292 students and home education accounts for 19,366, down from a high of 24,198 at the height of the pandemic. That's almost 70,000 students that Notley plans to deprive of support — almost one child in ten will be affected.

It's understandable why nobody noticed. The press conference was full of overheated rhetoric about educational financing. Notley's numbers seemed arbitrary — Education Minister LaGrange even pointed out that Notley's statements [sounded like misinformation](#). Even journalists

asking questions at the presser seemed puzzled, one pointing out that the problem isn't having jobs for new teachers, but in recruiting. All of them missed the point. It's about control, however much Notley tried to frame it as economics.

Notley's characterization of this as an economic matter is laughable. Private schools are only given 70% of instructional funding, and no capital funds for schools, charter schools get only instructional funding, and home education gets around 20% of the tuition grant. In fact, a [2019 study commissioned](#) by Parents for Choice in Education showed that Alberta taxpayers saved an average of \$150 million per year through support for independent schools, and over \$90 million on home education. That was at a time when only 42,000 children were enrolled in those options, rather than the 70,000 today. The savings would be more like \$400 million today.

What is more, the families who send their kids to most independent schools [earn less](#), on average, than families in the public system. Also, a cursory look at Alberta's list of 163 [private school authorities](#) reveals about 40 that visibly cater to people from other countries or non-Christian religions. These include hard-working immigrants who want to send their children to schools that teach their religious and cultural heritage. Despite her stated commitments to equity and diversity, Notley has no room for them — they are apparently the wrong kind of diversity.

Notley's economic case is supported by nothing but air. Her only support

comes from implying that economist Todd Hirsch endorsed it in a report done for the NDP last year. The site on which the NDP had hosted it is now down, but you can find it on the [Wayback Machine](#). Hirsch says nothing of the kind.

The final line — that with other options defunded, people will "just choose" public education — would do credit to Machiavelli. It's a choice in the sense that you can choose to obey the bank robber with the gun, or you can refuse to open the safe. Really, your choice.

The irony of the line makes the motive clear. It's not about education. It's about power. So, who benefits?

The Alberta Teachers' Association benefits, for one. Their ['Stand For Education'](#) ad campaign advocates eliminating funding for alternate education. It's literally in a theatre near you — the ATA is maxing out their \$160,000 Third Party Advertiser budget this election. Their benefit? Private school teachers aren't ATA members. By forcing those roughly 1,600 teachers to pay \$1,500 in dues to the ATA every year for their whole career, the ATA benefits substantially.

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta also benefits. They've campaigned for years to eliminate funding to all options but their own, and the [person who initiated the campaign](#) is now an NDP candidate. They'll be disappointed by the fact that the Catholic schools still have funding, but don't worry — it's only temporary. Their dominance is assured.

Finally, those who want enough control to indoctrinate students in their

worldview will have more power. NDP education critic Sarah Hoffman's "[The Future of Public Education](#)" event advertised a focus on "climate change, gender equality, poverty reduction, anti-racism AND the history of residential schools." Independent schools focus on things like Science, Technology, Mathematics, religion, and the transcendence of objective truth. For those who want to indoctrinate children, they have to go.

If you educate your own children, or send them to a private or independent school, it's time to wake up. Your educational rights are threatened. If you are Catholic you need to understand that the PSBAA campaign was not idle talk. If they can defund independent schools, they can defund Catholic education — and they've been talking about it for years. If you simply value diversity and competition in education, it's time to stand up.

Go out — right now — and ask your local NDP candidate to make a statement. Ask them to choose between rejecting Notley's plan to cut funding for independent and home schools, or affirm it. If they do the former, you've accomplished something. If they choose the latter, then at least you know who to vote for.

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