

## HILTON O'BRIEN: Why Alberta's school choice opponents lost and how to make it permanent

*Follow the money, then follow the target. Defunding would hammer faith-based schools*

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An [Alberta Teachers Association \(ATA\) petition to defund independent schools](#) failed last week, falling 54,000 signatures short. Champagne corks popped in independent school offices across the province.

They're celebrating too soon.

Unless the province acts decisively now, we'll be fighting this battle every five years until the bureaucrats win through attrition. Here's why they lost and why they'll keep trying.

### The \$3 Million Question

Why the move to defund independent schools? It starts with naked self-interest. There are over 2,000 teachers in Alberta's independent schools, none forced to join the ATA. At \$1,422 per member, the ATA sees \$3 million in foregone revenue. The ATA diverted \$16 million from its strike fund into political advocacy in 2022. They're flush with cash and motivated by simple arithmetic: every teacher forced into the public system is \$1,422 in ATA coffers.

But what is good for the ATA is not good for Alberta, and it isn't good for public schools. Two reports released this week show why — and why the ATA will keep trying.

### The 38-Point Problem

Yesterday's [Cardus/Angus Reid](#) poll reveals the problem: 65% of Albertans believe independent schools "take resources" from public schools. Only 27% know they save money. That 38-point gap between perception and reality drives the anti-choice activists.

The [Hunt and Venkatachalam](#) report from Aristotle Foundation, released on February 18th, quantifies those savings: \$306 million annually, \$1.35 billion over five years. Every independent school student saves taxpayers \$3,198. Every homeschooler saves \$9,423.

Why doesn't the public know? In part, public finance is opaque. But the people who should make it clear benefit from the false narrative — in union dues and expansion of bureaucratic empires.

The Cardus polling shows something else: 40% of Albertans can't assess most alternative school options. They literally don't know what exists. Yet they have strong opinions anyway — shaped entirely by union propaganda.

Against that uninformed mob now stand 52,588 families: independent enrollment is up 93% since 2011, and homeschooling nearly tripled. These are people

backing their convictions with their own money. Their informed choices carry more weight than poll responses from people who can't even name the alternatives.

### The Decisive Argument No One Can Counter

Here's where the Aristotle report delivers the knockout punch: Even if you believed the union's nonsense about "taking resources," you physically cannot eliminate independent school funding in the short or medium term.

Why? The hard mathematics of school capacity.

Calgary and Edmonton schools are already at 88-91% utilization. Calgary high schools are at 108%: they're overcrowded now. If you eliminated independent schools tomorrow, you'd need to absorb 45,762 students into an already maxed-out system.

That demands 54 new schools beyond the 37 already planned — 2.5 times the current construction rate. The capital cost? \$1.76 billion. That's \$1,519 per Alberta homeowner.

The timeline? Thirteen plus years from identifying a need to completing a school. "Around the time Susie starts kindergarten, we identify she won't have a high school seat. The seat isn't ready until after she graduates."

This isn't a political argument. It's a logistical fact. You cannot close independent schools without building dozens of new public schools first. And that takes over a decade.

Even the previous NDP government — under union pressure — wouldn't touch independent school funding. They understood the math.

The Cardus poll shows 67% support choice in principle — "all students should have government-funded access to education that suits their needs." They just don't understand that Alberta delivers that choice through independent schools.

That's why the argument of self-proclaimed "public school advocates" abandons facts. Mathematics, logistics, and law are not on their side. So they claim that funding independent schools is *morally* wrong.

### **The Discrimination They Won't Name**

Beneath the moral posturing lurks religious discrimination. According to Cardus, 105 of Alberta's 180 independent schools are religious — Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Sikh denominations. Defund independent schools, and you're specifically targeting

minority religions. Defund independent schools, and you're specifically targeting minority religions.

The ATA's petition was a [Blaine Amendment](#), a maneuver of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American Nativist political movement. Blaine Amendments, [encouraged by the Ku Klux Klan](#), denied funding for "sectarian" schools to deny education rights to Catholics. The last of them have recently been struck down as violations of religious freedom.

As part of the reaction to the Blaine Amendments, Canada ratified [international treaties](#) in the 1960s, committing us to respect the educational rights of minorities and to prohibit discrimination in funding by school type. We never implemented them domestically because education falls under provincial jurisdiction.

### **How to End the Attacks Permanently**

Those treaties will let us permanently end attacks on school choice.

First, nothing prevents the province from implementing these international obligations into provincial law. Make

funding discrimination illegal — a legal obligation, not a political football.

Second, the province must explain the mathematics publicly. The 13-year timeline is visceral enough for anyone to understand. Use it relentlessly.

Third, reframe the debate entirely. Alberta doesn't have 'public vs. private' schools. It has only got publicly funded education delivered through multiple providers. Whether it is the Calgary Islamic School or an independent school, they both receive public funds. The binary is merely a way to divide Albertans.

### **It's Time to End This**

The current attack on school choice has been defeated — for now. But the motives for the attack still stand, and so does the ATA's political fund. It will be back with better messaging, exploiting the same knowledge gap again and again until they win.

The mathematics is clear. The logic is decisive. The legal tools are available.

It's time to end the school choice debate in Alberta — permanently.

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