



## **Private schools foster independent thought - and save money**

Calgary Herald  
Sat Sep 19 2015  
Page: A25  
Section: Editorial  
Mark Milke

Western countries have long been attached to the notion that independence of thought, belief and action are a desirable end. It is why, with only rare and unfortunate exceptions, western laws and government policies are designed to protect the individual as an individual.

The Reformation and the Enlightenment both furthered the notion that people should be looked at first as individuals, and only second, if at all, as members of some collective. John Stuart Mill's 1859 classic, *On Liberty*, cemented the argument in the western mind.

The benefits have been legion. One example: The suffragette movement in the early 20th century was animated by the conviction that women should be treated as individuals and not as appendages of nearby males.

The presumption that individuals matter - and ought to be protected and promoted as such - is thus a necessary, core ingredient to actualized freedom in western societies.

But that presumption of independence is not valued by everyone, especially by status-quo types in the education sphere. Think about how often teachers' unions reflexively demand that even partial funding for any non-government schools - e.g., independent or private schools (pick your favourite term) - be halted.

The demand is unfortunate. It assumes the best education system is centralized, top down and heavily influenced by those who swim in the similar educational, academic and political assumptions.

Problem: One is not likely to produce critical thought and independent minds in such settings, in a one-size-fits-all education system.

Beyond the intellectual usefulness of encouraging schools not run by government, there is another, more functional, but still critical, reason for independent schools: In Alberta, they save the province money. That's because per-student taxpayer funding for private schools (for the base instruction rate) ranges from 60 to 70 per cent of the money available to public schools.

Here's the math in Alberta. In 2014-15, 631,089 students were enrolled in the public school system, with another 29,400 students in independent schools. To figure out how much the latter saved the province, one must first calculate costs in the public system.

Here, I include instruction, operations and maintenance and student transportation expenses. Add those up and divide by the number of students and the per-student cost last year was \$10,874.

In contrast, the per-student cost (to taxpayers) for independent schools was just \$5,150 because parents pay school instruction fees to have their kids in those alternative schools.

If all the children enrolled in independent schools last year instead attended public schools, the extra cost to the province's education budget would have been \$168 million. Add in the previous four years of savings (2010-11 to 2014-15 inclusive) and the total is \$750 million.

That's the money the provincial government saved by having tens of thousands of students enrolled in something other than public schools.

This is a conservative estimate of the savings to the education budget. In reaching the per-student cost for public schools, I deliberately excluded other expenses that are not necessarily boosted by extra students in the public system: costs incurred for governance and system administration, program support services and basic education programs.

The usual response to such number crunching is that in the absence of taxpayer funding for independent schools, not every one of the 29,400 students in private schools would be enrolled in public schools last year.

Fair argument, except it misses the critical point that any extra student enrolled in public schools instead of private schools costs the public education system extra money.

Alberta's NDP government has promised to retain funding for independent schools. That's the right move. In addition to preserving room for independent thought, the existence of independent schools saves the province a massive amount of money: three-quarters of a billion dollars over the last five years alone.

~

Mark Milke is a Calgary columnist and independent author of the report, [Alberta's Independent Schools: Taxpayers Saved \\$750 Million](#), published by Parents for Choice in Education.

My event speaker's profile is available at the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers:  
<http://bit.ly/1z6SSGK>