

Fact-Checking the Alberta Teachers' Association on Canadian Education Budgets

By Maria Cameron and John Hilton-O'Brien, March 31, 2024

Introduction

In March 2024, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) announced another campaign to save public education. As part of their campaign, they [used a dramatic graph](#), showing that Alberta spent radically less per student on education than any other province. Not to be left outdone in whipping the government, shrill headlines ensued by [CityNews](#), [CTV News](#), and local news outlets such as [Medicine Hat News](#).

Not everybody got excited though. There were two things about the announcement that created quiet suspicion about the accuracy of their figures. First, the ATA's numbers pertained only to *public* education, in which they have a financial stake – and nothing creates an apprehension of bias in the way that money does. Secondly, they chose to make their claims based on 2020/21 numbers, when the StatsCan data set they referenced went up to the 2021/22 school year.

This paper examines a small set of questions. First, were the ATA's numbers sensationalized, and was there a difference between 2020 and 2021? Secondly, does their comparison hold up if we ask about the money that is actually spent on instructional expenses? Finally, is there a way to measure the efficiency of government and school board spending?

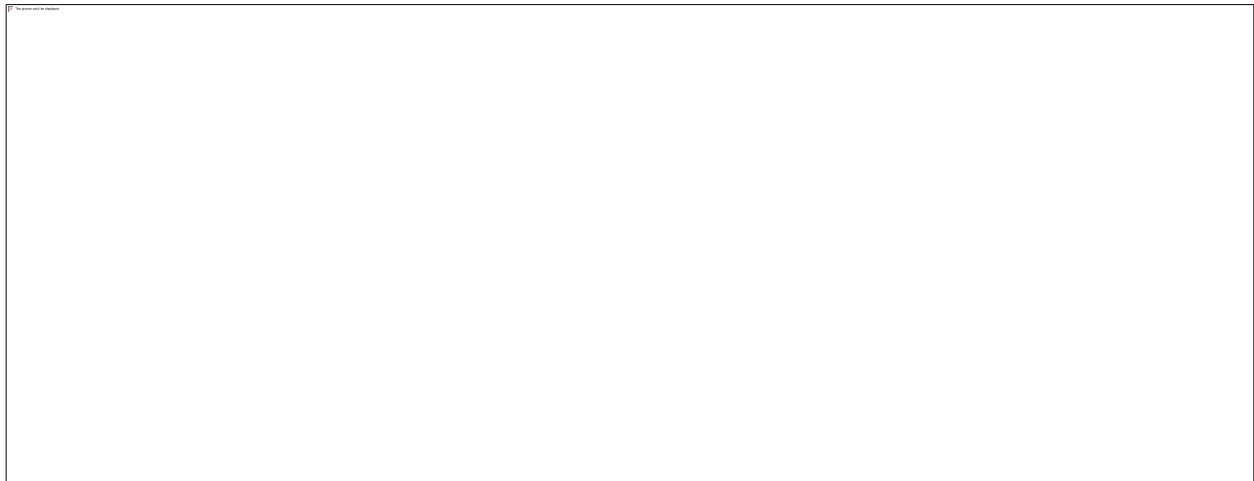
Are the ATA's Numbers Sensationalized?

Here's the ATA's graph:

Before we checked the ATA numbers on operating expenses we decided to look at overall expenses by going to two Statscan tables from this data set, [Table 37-10-0064-01 School board](#)

[expenditures, by function and economic classification \(x 1,000\)](#), and [Table 37-10-0109-01 Number of students in elementary and secondary schools, by school type and program type](#).

Pulling the numbers from those tables generated slightly different results seen in Table 1.



Comparing over all expenditures showed a slightly different picture than looking only at operating expenses. While Alberta's spending in this chart is close to the ATA's claim, the chart is not quite so dramatic. Manitoba, not Quebec, was the top 2020 spender. New Brunswick, not Alberta, was the lowest, and there were several provinces close to Alberta in spending.

Alberta's spending in 2021 was the lowest, so there is nothing to be noted about why the ATA chose to use 2020 instead of 2021. It just seemed odd. We will continue focusing our discussion on the year 2020 to be fair.

To broaden our examination regarding overall public expenditures, in hope of getting closer to the ATA's results we looked at [Table 37-10-0067-01 Public and private elementary and secondary education expenditures, by direct source of funds \(x 1,000\)](#). As the ATA is very concerned about the amount that Alberta puts into private schools and Charters (at a lower rate) we presumed that this would show a more dramatic figure.

The results in Table 2 are not significantly more dramatic. We see three bands of 2020 funding: BC and Alberta in the low \$13,000s, four provinces in the \$14,000 range, and four in the \$15,000 to \$16,000 range. On examination, it appears that BC and Alberta are unique in their reporting, in that they also record Early Childhood Education (child care) as part of their budget. This form of education is done with significantly less capital expense, and staff are paid much less. This would tend to push Alberta and BC's numbers significantly down.



Finally when looking at total operating expenses (of which teachers' salaries is only a portion) in Table 3, we have Alberta spending the least of all the provinces just as the ATA's chart found. It is a mystery why numbers are not exactly the same.



Apart from teachers' salaries and instructional supplies, total operating expenses includes administration, transportation, school facilities services, and a category called "Other".

While we are not clear on the source the ATA numbers, we can nonetheless take their point: Alberta at least appears to spend less per student than many other provinces when it comes to the expenses listed above.

Does the picture change at all if we look at the money that is actually spent on instructional expenses?



Looking at only what was spent on teacher's salaries and instructional supplies by the public school boards, we see a different picture yet again in Table 4. We see that Alberta spends a bit above average amount on these expenses. The Maritime provinces seem to pay their teachers the most, with PEI paying 16% more than the average. If we look at expenditures on teachers' salaries and instructional supplies Alberta is not dead last.

In the past Alberta spent quite a few years spending [more per student](#) than most provinces and having [the greatest jumps in spending](#). We think that is not a good idea to take a look at one year's spending to get an accurate picture of the investment of a province into education. As we will see later even this is a very narrow view.

There is an excellent [Fraser Institute study](#) that examines education spending in Public Schools in Canada. It examines the changes in spending from the year 2012/13 to 2019/20. The study did see a decline in Alberta's spending in general. However, there are a lot of useful comparisons that show that education spending cannot simply be reduced to per student spending.

For example, it shows that from the 2012/13 school year to 2019/20 Alberta had the biggest growth in capital spending over all in Canada, while maintaining the second highest rate of growth in spending over the same time period. So, Alberta was not a big spender in terms of absolute dollars spent over that time period, but it certainly increased how much it was spending. Which leads us to the next important question:

Is there a way to measure the efficiency of government and school board spending?

Apart from the fact that it is general knowledge that throwing more money at a project does not always guarantee better outcomes, it has been shown conclusively by yet another [Fraser institute study](#) “that higher levels of school spending among high-income OECD countries are not associated with higher levels of academic achievement.” In the analysis of 2018 numbers, Alberta was found to be top scoring, while it was merely in the middle range in spending compared to OECD countries.

Canada does quite well on the world stage and Alberta performs very well within Canada according to the [PISA outcomes](#). To be noted, that success has been marred by [the decline](#) in Math outcomes ever since Discovery Math was introduced.

But there is yet another way to measure efficiency and that is to look at what proportion of Education expenditures are put towards Instructional expenditures. As we have been commenting, taking a snap shot of Alberta’s overall education expenditures or even operational expenditures is not a fair assessment of how much the Government values public education.

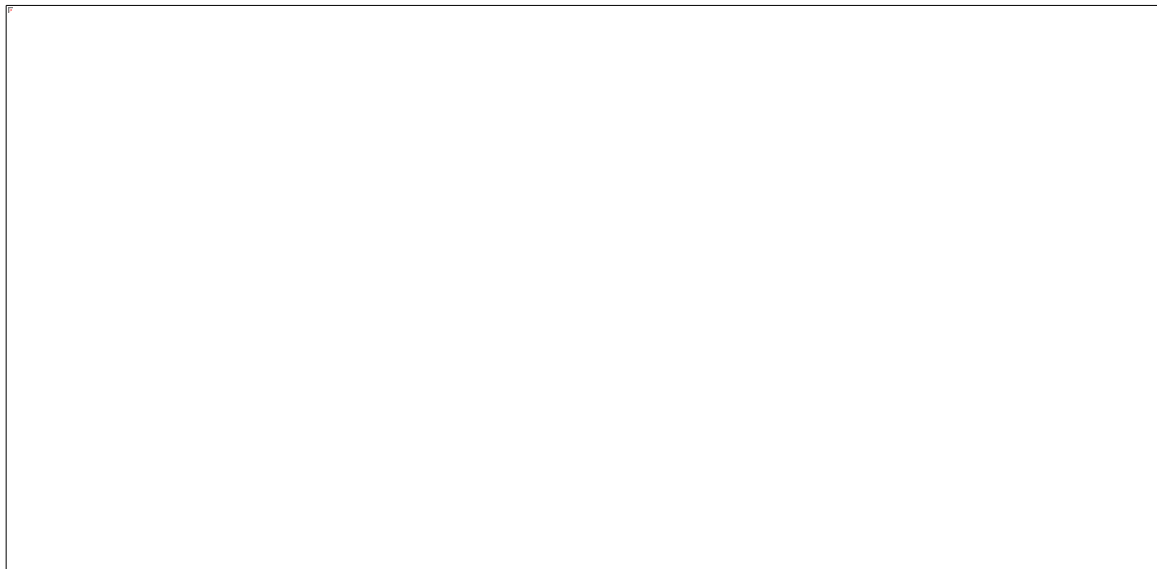


Table 5 compares how much the Public Boards spend on ‘instruction and educational services’ versus total educational spending by the public boards. Alberta’s public boards seem to leverage their expenditures on instruction to the highest among the top four provinces. Quebec, the most “generous” spender on the ATA’s chart is the least efficient using this measure. New Brunswick also spent very little when it comes to per student spending, but its efficiency in spending on actual teaching is the second highest among the provinces. Prince Edward Island is a big spender when it comes to per student operational spending and ranks highest in the portion it spends on instruction. This goes to show that there is no correlation between per student spending and how much of that actually goes to pay for instruction.

As the public boards make up only a part of the schools that the Albertan government funds, it would be good to know how Alberta compares to the rest of the provinces in terms of the

money the government spends on funding instruction in all public and private schools. As that data is not readily available on StatsCan, we will look at how all educational institutions (public, funded private and unfunded private) distribute their spending in Alberta relative to the distribution in the rest of the country.



Most interesting is to look what the ATA is paid to care about and that is how much of the total Albertan spending is on teachers' compensation highlighted in the table above.

Mind you this is not only the government spending, it includes the spending of all private and public institutions on primary and secondary education. But since we know that the unfunded and less-funded educational institutions [save Albertan](#) taxpayers money, it should be good for Albertan teachers know that the money being saved does not translate into skimping on their wages.

Conclusion

Alberta did have relatively low spending on public school boards in 2020-2021.

The ATA clearly cherry picked the data to make Alberta look worse than it is.

Remarkably, however, Alberta is ahead of the curve when it comes to getting dollars *into actual classrooms*. And when it comes to the proportion of those dollars getting into classrooms, Alberta not only led, but was the only province that increased its efficiency.

Most surprising of all, however, is that Alberta's Primary and Secondary Educational institutions lead the country in terms of what proportion of education dollars are actually paid to teachers. It's not just a little, either – the gap is far wider than the ATA's original graph, just in the opposite direction.

While ATA leadership may wish that there was a little more fat at the top for them, and that all teachers in the province were forced to be ATA members, Alberta's teachers can be grateful that their province assigns them a higher priority than any other province.