

WHO CHOOSES INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND WHY?

FAST FACTS

The top 3 reasons BC parents choose their kids' independent school:

1. It offers a **supportive, nurturing** environment
2. It is a **safe** school
3. It emphasizes **character** development

Over half of parents have made major financial changes in order to put their kids in a BC independent school:

- 18%** have taken on a **part-time job** for additional income
- 10%** have **changed jobs**
- 9%** budget differently and **make sacrifices**
- 2%** take out **loans**
- 12%** find other **creative ways** to financially support their children's education

- ▶ 65% of parents with kids in a BC independent school **attended only public schools** growing up.
- ▶ Nearly half (48%) of British Columbia independent school parents were **born outside Canada**, compared to less than a third (31%) of British Columbians.
- ▶ BC parents with kids in independent schools are more than twice as likely as the average British Columbian to **speak mostly a foreign language** at home and their first language is 1.5 times more likely to be neither English nor French.
- ▶ Religious schools in BC are not exclusive but **welcome** many non-religious students who choose to attend independent religious schools.
- ▶ 91% of BC independent school parents are **highly satisfied** with their kids' school.
- ▶ 61% of independent school parents **participate** regularly in each municipal, provincial, and federal election, compared to 36% of British Columbians.
- ▶ Independent school students in BC **save taxpayers 57 cents** on the dollar.
- ▶ A diverse and growing independent and religious school sector in BC is helping to fulfill the stated mission of publicly-funded education according to the BC School Act by educating the public and **preparing future citizens and leaders** in the province.



NEW REPORT: WHO CHOOSES INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND WHY?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Who chooses independent schools and why? A number of studies have explored this research question, but it has been over a decade in Canada and four decades in British Columbia (BC) since extensive parent surveys were conducted to answer these questions. This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison (2007), while being heavily informed by the most recent literature. With 608 representative independent school parents, using an online questionnaire with the same research question and comparable methodology, this study examines whether the Ontario findings from 2007 hold true in BC twelve years later.

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Most “private” schools in BC are not bastions of privileged posterity. The overwhelming majority of independent school parents attended public school and, of families currently enrolled in independent school, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from a public school. Over 50 percent of independent school parents have made major financial and life changes to afford the cost of school, even though tuition for about one-third of families is approximately the same cost as the average out-of-school kids’ ice hockey program. However, independent school parents are nearly 1.4 times more likely to have post-secondary education, and are far more likely to be school teachers, senior managers, accountants and auditors, doctors, computer and IT professionals, engineers, entrepreneurs, and public administration managers. Particularly with religious schools, it is the well-educated, more than the wealthy, who choose independent education.

Diversity is also a defining characteristic of independent school parents in BC. Their mother tongue is 1.5 times more likely to be foreign, and they are 2.4 times more likely to speak a foreign language most often at home. Nearly half of independent school parents were born outside Canada; yet, very interestingly, the Canadian-born are nearly three times more likely to describe their ethnicity as “Canadian.” Fully 92 percent are active in their community, in an average two groups, associations, or organizations. They are 1.7 times more likely to vote but are neither more nor less likely to be political activists or members of a political party. A large majority reported a religious affiliation—primarily Christian (non-Catholic) and Christian (Catholic)—with only 15 percent stating no religion, which mirrors a recent Angus Reid Institute study of general population demographics. Interestingly, the majority of non-religious school families are in fact religious, and religious schools are not exclusive but welcome many non-religious students.

PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Parents choose independent schools for a multitude of diverse reasons, but virtually all independent school parents have the following in common: Their independent school offers a supportive and nurturing environment that is motivating for and instills confidence in students, thanks to outstanding teachers and excellent administration. This is especially true of non-religious independent school families, as the aforementioned are their specific top five priorities. Those who choose religious schools would agree, but they also emphasize the importance of faith, school safety, character development, trustworthy curriculum, morals, and values; whereas, for non-religious school parents, additional priorities are frequent, detailed, and open reporting of student progress to parents, the happiness of students, character development, critical thinking, and whole-child education. They are also more likely to have tried public school. However, both expressed considerable dissatisfaction with public schools. Fully 91 percent are so satisfied with their school that they are strongly likely to recommend it. Both non-religious and religious independent schools offer high-quality education by adding value in different ways. Accurately echoing Van Pelt et al. (2007), religious schools provide “specific enculturation functions” and non-religious independent schools emphasize individualized enrichment.

IMPLICATIONS

BC’s independent schools serve diverse religious, cultural, and regional communities, as well as meet demand for pedagogical variations and emphases unmet by public schools. Each student, family, and school is different, and students’ needs and parents’ preferences are better met at independent schools than public schools. The purpose of the BC K–12 school system is stated in the School Act (Legislative Assembly of the Province of British Columbia 1996): “to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.” This goal is best realized in a democratic and pluralistic fashion, where individual potential, knowledge, skills, and healthy attitudes are best nurtured—namely, in a diverse education system, one that includes both government schools and independent schools.

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WHAT DOES ACCESS TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS MEAN FOR AVERAGE FOLKS IN BC?

Read what these BC parents of children in independent schools had to say:

"We appreciate the **compassion and empathy** that our [Catholic] school teaches and the sense of **community that they foster**, [as] we are not a practicing Catholic family."

"After six years of frustration in schooling, we feel like we finally have a place where partnership between parents, teachers and administrators is a reality, **not just an ideal**."

"We went from being a number to **having a name**. We felt welcomed and a part of a community at the independent school. What a huge difference and well worth the drive and every penny."

"The school has **changed our lives** and our whole family is less stressed and happier."

"The personal financial sacrifice and challenges the school faces with transportation, volunteer support, and funding are far outweighed by the **value we receive** from our independent school."

THE CARDUS EDUCATION PROGRAM addresses the benefits and value of diverse learning systems so that parents can make informed choices on the education that is best suited for their children. This is a great resource for the media, educators, parents and graduates.

— Dr. Peter Froese
former Executive Director, FISA BC

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