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**The Changing Landscape of School Choice in Canada:  
From Pluralism to Parental Preference?**

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2685> This article is part of the Special Issue on *School Diversification and Dilemmas Across Canada*, guest edited by Ee-Seul Yoon & Christopher Lubienski.

**Abstract:** This paper provides a descriptive account of the growing landscape of school choice in Canada through a comparative analysis of funding and student enrolment in the public, independent and home-based education sectors in each province. Given that the provinces have responsibility for

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K-12 education, the mixture of public, independent and home school education varies rather widely by province, as does the level of funding and regulation. Delivery and funding of public education in Canada has long prioritized limited linguistic and religious pluralism, providing various options for English or French, and Catholic or Protestant alternatives to qualified parents. More recently growing numbers of parents have been seeking more options for their children's education. This has fueled slow but steady growth in independent schools and home schooling.

**Keywords:** school choice; Canada; student enrolment; funding; independent schools; home-based education; home schooling

### **El panorama cambiante de la opción escolar en Canadá: ¿Del pluralismo a la preferencia de los padres?**

**Resumen:** Este artículo proporciona una descripción del escenario de la elección de las escuelas en Canadá, a través de una evaluación comparativa de la financiación y de la matrícula de los estudiantes K-12, una mezcla de educación pública, independiente y doméstica, es muy importante para la población, como el nivel de financiación y la regulación. A distribuir y financiar la educación pública en Canadá con prioridad en el pluralismo limitado lingüístico y religioso, ofrecer diversas opciones para el inglés o el francés y las alternativas católicas o protestantes a los paisificados. Más recientemente, un número cada vez mayor de los países buscado más opciones para una educación de sus hijos. Esto ha impulsado el crecimiento lento pero constante en las escuelas independientes y la educación en casa.

**Palavras-chave:** opción escolar; Canadá; matrícula de alumnos; financiamiento; escuelas independientes; educación doméstica; educación escolar en casa

### **A paisagem em mudança de escolha da escola no Canadá: O pluralismo a preferência parental?**

**Resumo:** Este artigo fornece uma descrição descritiva do cenário crescente da escolha de escolas no Canadá através de uma análise comparativa do financiamento e da matrícula de estudantes nos setores de educação pública, independente e domiciliar em cada província. Dado que as províncias têm a responsabilidade pela educação K-12, a mistura de educação pública, independente e home escolar varia muito amplamente por província, assim como o nível de financiamento e regulação. A distribuição e o financiamento da educação pública no Canadá tem priorizado muito o limitado pluralismo linguístico e religioso, oferecendo várias opções para o inglês ou o francês e alternativas católicas ou protestantes aos pais qualificados. Mais recentemente, um número cada vez maior de pais tem buscado mais opções para a educação de seus filhos. Isto tem alimentado o crescimento lento mas constante nas escolas independentes e no home schooling.

**Palavras-chave:** escolha da escola; Canadá; matrícula de alunos; financiamento; escolas independentes; educação domiciliar; educação escolar em casa

### **The Changing Landscape of School Choice in Canada: From Pluralism to Parental Preference?**

Provision, regulation and motivation for school choice vary among western nations making international comparisons challenging. School choice policy can serve different aims of education and the sorts of provisions depend on the nations' social, political and economic milieu, which can also vary through time. This is significant in terms of educational reform and policy borrowing among countries because context and political motivation matter. For example, the education system in Canada, unlike its American neighbour, is not as highly stratified in terms of socio-economic

status, nor as racially segregated, and the majority of students are educated within the public systems in their province of residence. Canada has neither a culture of high stakes standardized testing nor standardized examinations for university admission. School choice is not hailed as a mechanism to boost test scores or to improve failing inner city schools. Instead, provincial equalization policies have been primarily aimed at lessening disparities between schools in different neighbourhoods or regions. As a heterogeneous nation with vast regional differences and multiple large linguistic and ethnic minorities, provisions for school choice have historically been motivated by accommodation of national minority groups<sup>1</sup> by providing provincial, regionally-based options for families to choose publicly-funded religious schools, and minority official language schools. In recent decades, Aboriginal peoples have also gained increased access to band-operated schools for their children. Yet, it is still valid to ask—what can be learned about school choice from Canada?

The central aim of this paper is to describe the landscape of school choice in Canada, providing interprovincial comparisons in terms of the provisions, funding and enrolment patterns in the three predominant forms of school choice common to Canada and the United States: public, independent and home schooling. We argue that historically provision for school choice in Canada has been motivated less by the creation of competitive education markets with the intent of improving the quality of education and enhancing student achievement, than by the need to accommodate pressing political issues in each region. Typically, school choice has been limited, conditional, state-managed and provided by local public authorities. In recent decades, however, Canada has not been immune from the global wave of neo-liberal inspired education policy reform agendas, with most provinces pursuing forms of market efficiency through various measures supporting expanded choice both within and beyond the public school sector. Parents increasingly have responded by accessing educational options beyond their neighborhood school, re-imagining educational/school communities on the basis of curriculum, identity and individual interests rather than locality (Yoon, 2011; Yoon & Gulson, 2010). Policy makers are challenged to strike a balance between equal access to education and parental choice in pursuing the public and private aims of education in a liberal democracy (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Green & Woodfinden, 2016).

We begin by describing the Canadian context including the constitutional provisions for schooling and provide a brief historical overview of provisions and motivations for school choice that together reflect a distinct Canadian ethos. Then, drawing upon recent empirical data (Allison, 2015a; Allison, 2015b; Allison, Hasan & Van Pelt, 2016; Bosetti, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2015; Clemens, Palacios, Loyer & Frazier, 2014) Van Pelt, Clemens, Palacios, & Brown, 2015) we turn to an analysis of the current context of school choice in Canada, examining enrolments, and changes in enrolments in various choice options. We also provide an overview of the differences in levels of funding and support for choice in various provinces. We conclude with the observation that while public schools—fully-funded, government-operated schools—are highly valued by Canadians, there is evidence of an emerging preference for more variety in education delivery and discuss implications of these trends for the future of the design and delivery of education in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Kymlicka (1998) defines a national minority group as a “historical society, with its own language, and institutions, whose territory has been incorporated (often involuntarily, as is the case with Quebec) into a larger country” (p. 2). In Canada national minority groups include Aboriginal peoples and the Quebecois, who are the largest French-speaking population in Canada (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 33).

## The Canadian Context

Canada is known for its diversity that is supported by a decentralized governance structure with a strong regional focus, distinctive cultures, an egalitarian impulse, and commitment to a free and equal citizenry (Trudeau, 2015). The country's two official languages (French and English), its settlement patterns, with over 50% of Canadians living in the 17 largest cities, 10 of which are located in Ontario and Quebec, and legacies of historical accommodations have shaped the policies and provisions for education differently within the 10 provinces and three territories<sup>2</sup> (Allison, 2015a).

Canada was created as a confederation by the Constitution Act 1867 (formerly the British North American Act, 1867). A central concern of French and British colonialists was to create a federal structure that would ensure each could preserve their unique cultural heritage and identity expressed by and through language (French and English) and religion (Roman Catholic and Protestant). Consequently, the United Province of Canada was divided into the provinces of Quebec and Ontario with Anglophone Protestants constituting a majority in Ontario and Roman Catholic Francophones in Quebec. Provincial legislatures were given sovereign authority over education through section 93 of the Constitution Act 1867, which also protected the then existing legal education rights of the Protestant minority in Quebec and the Catholic minority in Ontario. This entrenched dual religiously based, publicly funded education systems in those provinces. Similar dual systems were established in Alberta and Saskatchewan when they joined confederation in 1905, and are also present in the three territories. While these dual systems became increasingly secular over time, the public Catholic schools in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan have retained their identity and, to varying degrees, their Catholicity.

In 1997 Quebec obtained a constitutional amendment exempting the province from the religious protections in section 93, which allowed the province to implement its current linguistically-based system of public education which provides universal access to French language schools and conditionally limited access to English language schools. In 1998 the province of Newfoundland and Labrador also obtained a constitutional amendment that allowed its unique, historically derived multi-sectarian public school system to be replaced with a fully secular system similar to the North American norm.

Passage of Canada's Official Languages Act in 1968 established English and French as the nation's two official languages. In an effort to correct the progressive erosion of minority official languages groups integral to the preservation of minority culture and identity, section 23 of the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms provided constitutional protection for minority French and English language education. Provincial governments are obligated to provide minority official language schools and governing boards. Canada's commitment to bilingualism encouraged the growth of French immersion schools in the Anglophone provinces, which have provided increasingly popular school choice options for many families. English immersion programs are available in some Quebec public schools, but are not nearly as prevalent.

Unlike other federal countries, Canada's national government does not exercise significant authority or influence over K-12 education. Canada does not have a national department of education; there is no comprehensive national education policy, no national curriculum, no national

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<sup>2</sup> Because the combined populations of three territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut account for less than 0.4 percent of the total Canadian population and the territorial governments provide very limited school choice opportunities they are not specifically considered in the following discussion. Brief accounts of school choices in the territories are included in Allison and Van Pelt (2012).

achievement standards and no system of countrywide achievement testing. The federal government retains constitutional authority for First Nations education and enters into agreements with the provinces to provide financial support for minority and second language instructional programs, but provincial legislatures exercise exclusive jurisdiction over all aspects of elementary and secondary education, subject only to conditions imposed by constitutional protections, judicial rulings, resources, and the outcomes of elections. This has resulted in considerable diversity across provincial education systems and wide variations in school choice policies and practices.

School boards establish, operate and close public schools within defined geographical districts, usually coterminous with city or other municipal boundaries. These local districts are usually governed by a board of locally elected trustees and administered by a professional staff. Consistent with the Canadian commitment to equity, city boards often span broader metropolitan and suburban areas allowing property tax yields to be pooled across richer and poorer neighbourhoods.

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) has had a significant impact on education. The broad impact has been seen in the increased secularization of public schools and the emergence of policies, programs and alternative schools accommodating identity needs of minority groups, particularly in larger urban centers where there are sufficient numbers of students to warrant alternative programs. Examples include heritage language programs, LGBTQ programs, single gender schools, off-reserve (non-band run) schools for Aboriginal students, and specialized programs for students with special needs. The Toronto District School Board established an Africentric alternative school (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Gulson & Webb, 2012; Kymlicka, 1998), and some Alberta school boards have formally incorporated religious independent schools into their systems as alternative schools (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Taylor, 2001).

Among other factors, the global recession and instability of international markets over recent decades have fueled anxiety among middle class parents in western democracies that current models of education may not be adequately preparing their children for an increasingly competitive global economy. In a knowledge-based, rather than resource-based economy, intellectual capital has currency. Parents are concerned that effort and ability alone are insufficient to ensure advancement in a globally competitive labor market. This is evidenced in increased demand for post-secondary education and credentials, and parents seeking enhanced educational opportunities for their children through specialist or independent schools and private tutorial services (Bosetti, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Davies & Aurini, 2003, 2008, 2011; Taylor & Mackay, 2008). Think tanks and special interest groups such as the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, the Fraser Institute, Canada West Foundation and the C.D. Howe Institute, argue that overly bureaucratic forms of administration and powerful teacher unions have created a public education system that has become increasingly unresponsive to the demands of parents, employers and the global economy. To make the system more responsive, effective and efficient, these organizations and other voices have been calling for more market-oriented education reforms based on greater accountability, choice, and competition to eliminate barriers to parental choice and expand competition among schools (Guillemette, 2007; Hepburn, 2001; Holmes, 1998; Lawton, Freedman & Robertson, 1995; Robson, 2001). These pressures have contributed to some provinces adopting more evidence-based educational reform agendas with accountability measures included in quality assurance frameworks, and support for parental school choice through funding for independent schools, support for home schooling and, in the province of Alberta, the introduction of a limited number of charter schools.

These recommendations have not gone unchallenged with various provincial task forces and national interest groups<sup>3</sup> producing reports urging a renewal of established public systems that would refocus on individualized instruction, engaging learners, and competency-based educational outcomes. Common to these renewal frameworks is a focus on foundational learning in literacy, numeracy and science, as well as core competencies including critical thinking, innovation, digital literacy and creativity. Educators are called upon to personalize and tailor courses to suit students' learning preferences and to engage them in more self-directed learning, collaboration and teamwork. They advocate for a movement away from any large scale standardized assessments and grading towards exclusively localized (often non-comparable) "authentic" forms of assessment. Broader structural reforms are strikingly absent from this renewal agenda.

Two dominating issues in recent times are declining enrolments and escalating costs. Enrolment declines have led to school closures and consolidations in many areas, but also school crowding in regional areas of economic growth, most of which have been located in Alberta which has been struggling to build sufficient new schools to accommodate increasing enrolments. Despite the shrinking size of the school age population, public school spending has continued to increase, placing growing strains on provincial treasuries which are also required to fund Canada's public health care systems and meet other increasing costs. For example, in the last decade for which comparable data are available from Statistics Canada, spending on education in Canada (adjusted for inflation) has increased on average by 25.8%, from \$9,876 per student to \$12,427 (in 2014) for the decade from 2004/05 to 2013/14 (Clemens, Emes & Van Pelt, forthcoming). Increases on a per student basis have ranged from 18.3% in one province to as high as 39% in another province over that decade. Changes in spending allocations, moreover, have fueled increased militancy by teacher unions leading to disruptions in school operations, restrictions in extra-curricular activities and depressed morale. Arguably these developments have contributed to parent and student dissatisfaction with public schools and encouraged more families to consider school choice options.

## The Contemporary School Choice Landscape

Each province has established different policies regarding school choice, however, public, independent and home schooling provisions are common to all provinces. Public schools are tuition-free schools open to all children residing in a provincially determined school jurisdiction catchment zone, supported by taxes and administered by a locally elected school board. Public schools may provide school choice options such as alternative schools, sometimes referred to as magnet, specialist or alternative schools that offer specialized programs that attract students from within the school district, as well as on-line learning programs. Some school districts have inter and intra-district enrolment policies that give parents the option of choosing a public school other than the one assigned to their child within their designated school board. In such cases provincial funding follows the child to the other school district.

Independent schools are private schools that charge tuition, allow for selective admission of students, and are governed by an elected or appointed governing board and offer a variety of approaches in pedagogical orientation, program focus and religious affiliation. In Canada regulatory frameworks and funding for independent schools vary among provinces.

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<sup>3</sup> Alberta Education, 2010; Boudreault et al., 2013; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015; Canadians for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning & Innovation, 2012; Fullan, 2013; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Quebec Ministry of Education, 2001, 2004; Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, n.d.

Home schooling is an option for all parents in Canada. While variously referred to as un-schooling, de-schooling and elective learning, the essential feature of home schooling is “that parents take the final responsibility for the selection, management, provision and supervision of their child’s education program, and that education occurs largely outside of an institutional setting” (Van Pelt, 2015, p.3).

Drawing upon recent empirical data this section takes a closer look at these various forms of school choice to provide a comparative analysis of choices and enrolment patterns.

Table 1

*School Enrolments and Changes in Enrolments, By Province, for Public Schools (2000-2012), Independent Schools (2000-2012), and Home schools (2007-2012)*

Province	School Type	Enrolments			% Change	% of Total Enrolments	
		2000	2007	2012	2000 or 2007 to 2012	2000 or 2007 to 2012	2012
British Columbia	English Public	629,516		559,729	-11.1%	90.4%	87.3%
	French Immersion			47,849			
	French Public	2,769		4,744	71.3%	0.4%	0.7%
	Total Public	632,285		564,473	-10.3%	90.8%	88.1%
	Total Independent	59,734		74,307	24.4%	8.6%	11.6%
	Total Home school		2,789	2,062	-26.1%	0.4%	0.3%
	Total Enrolments			640,842			100.0%
Alberta	English Public	421,765		433,611	2.8%	72.7%	69.2%
	French Immersion			38,245			6.1%
	French Public	2,544		5,325	109.3%	0.4%	0.9%
	English Catholic	125,845		144,862	15.1%	21.7%	23.1%
	French Catholic	590		952	61.4%	0.1%	0.2%
	Charter	2,558		8,418	229.1%	0.4%	1.3%
	Total Public	553,302		593,168	7.2%	95.4%	94.7%
	Total Independent	18,491		24,149	30.6%	3.2%	3.9%
	Total Home school		7,752	9,028	16.5%	1.3%	1.4%
	Total Enrolments			626,345			100.0%
Saskatchewan	English Public	145,062		125,350	-13.6%	77.2%	73.7%
	French Immersion			11,518			6.8%
	French Public	1,007		1,460	45%	0.5%	0.9%
	English Catholic	37,225		37,189	-0.1%	19.8%	21.9%
	Total Public	183,294		163,999	-10.5%	97.4%	96.4%
	Total Independent	3,052		4,096	34.2%	1.6%	2.4%
	Total Home school		1,838	1,986	8.1%	1.1%	1.2%
	Total Enrolments			170,081			100.0%
Manitoba	English Public	184,066		171,056	-7.1%	90.5%	88.6%
	French Immersion			21,214			11.0%
	French Public	4,470		5,092	13.9%	2.2%	2.6%
	Total Public	188,536		176,148	-6.6%	92.7%	91.2%
	Total Independent	13,855		14,622	5.5%	6.8%	7.6%
	Total Home school		1,235	2,387	93.3%	0.6%	1.2%
	Total Enrolments			193,157			100.0%
Ontario	English Public	1,446,255		1,361,134	-5.9%	64.2%	63.1%
	French Immersion			174,895			8.1%



	French Public	20,000	26,740	33.7%	0.9%	1.2%
	English Catholic	603,902	571,364	-5.4%	26.8%	26.5%
	French Catholic	73,442	71,957	-2.0%	3.3%	3.3%
	Total Public	2,143,599	2,031,195	-5.2%	95.2%	94.1%
	Total Independent	109,904	120,198	9.4%	4.9%	5.6%
	Total Home school	3,711	5,680	53.1%	0.2%	0.3%
	Total Enrolments		2,157,073			100.0%
Quebec	English Public	105,575	87,850	-16.8%	9.5%	8.9%
	French Immersion		36,489			3.6%
	French Public	903,246	772,165	-14.5%	81.1%	78.4%
	Total Public	1,008,821	860,015	-14.8%	90.6%	87.3%
	Total Independent	105,245	124,281	18.1%	9.4%	12.6%
	Total Home school	774	1,114	43.9%	0.1%	0.1%
	Total Enrolments		985,410			100%
New Brunswick	English Public	86,555	71,955	-16.9%	68.5%	70.2%
	French Immersion		18,111			17.7%
	French Public	38,387	29,124	-24.1%	30.4%	28.4%
	Total Public	124,942	101,079	-19.1%	98.8%	98.7%
	Total Independent	874	752	-14.0%	0.7%	0.7%
	Total Home school	561	631	12.5%	0.5%	0.6%
	Total Enrolments		102,462			100.0%
Nova Scotia	English Public	151,445	117,606	-22.3%	95.4%	93.2%
	French Immersion		15,310			12.1%
	French Public	3,976	4,547	14.4%	2.5%	3.6%
	Total Public	155,420	122,153	-21.4%	97.9%	96.8%
	Total Independent	2,608	3,110	19.3%	1.6%	2.5%
	Total Home school	683	895	31.0%	0.5%	0.7%
	Total Enrolments		126,158			100.0%
Prince Edward Island	English Public	23,089	19,577	-15.2%	96.6%	94.6%
	French Immersion		4,391			21.2%
	French Public	603	829	37.5%	2.5%	4.0%
	Total Public	23,692	20,406	-13.9%	99.1%	98.6%
	Total Independent	216	211	-2.3%	0.9%	1.0%
	Total Home school	54	83	53.7%	0.3%	0.4%
	Total Enrolments		20,700			100.0%
Newfoundland and Labrador	English Public	90,031	67,280	-25.3%	98.9%	98.0%
	French Immersion		9,118			13.3%
	French Public	256	348	35.9%	0.3%	0.5%
	Total Public	90,287	67,628	-25.1%	99.2%	98.5%
	Total Independent	734	910	24.0%	0.8%	1.3%
	Total Home school	107	126	17.8%	0.1%	0.2%
	Total Enrolments		68,664			100%
Canada	Total Public	5,104,178	4,700,264	-7.9%		92.3%
	Total Independent	314,713	366,636	16.5%		7.2%
	Total Home school	19,504	23,992	23.0%		0.5%
	Total Enrolments		5,090,892			100.0%

*Note.* French Immersion is an alternative within Anglophone Public School Districts, open to all, dependent on availability. For brevity, Anglophone has been replaced by English and Francophone by French. From Canadian Parents for French, 2009-10 to 2013-14, p. 2, 3; Van Pelt et al. 2015, p. 13, 14, 18, 21.

Table 1 summarizes major school choice options in Canada showing headcount enrolments for public schools, home schooling and independent schools for each province for 2012/13, together with changing participation since 2000/01. Because of data limitations home schooling enrolments are shown only for 2007/08 and 2012/13.

The table partitions public school enrolments in each province into Anglophone and Francophone components. Anglophone schools provide instruction in English, Francophone schools in French. In all provinces except Quebec, where the situation is reversed, English is the majority official language and French the minority official language. As noted earlier and discussed further below, where numbers warrant qualified minority language speakers are legally entitled to be educated in publicly financed, governed and managed schools providing instruction in their language. As shown in the table, 87.3% of total enrolments in British Columbia in 2012/13 were in Anglophone public schools, the minority language Francophone public schools enrolling only 4,744 (0.7%) of students. The magnitude of this difference is roughly similar across the country with the exceptions of New Brunswick and Quebec. From Table 1 it appears that New Brunswick has the highest minority language enrolment, but this is not fully correct, as this is Canada's only official bilingual province. In Quebec, the majority Francophone public schools enrolled 78.4% of all students in 2012/13, the minority language Anglophone public schools just 8.9%.

Where applicable, additional public school choice options are listed in Table 1 above the "Total Public Schools" headings. These include French immersion options available within Anglophone schools, Anglophone and Francophone Catholic separate schools in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan, and charter schools in Alberta. Alternative schools operated by public boards are another choice option discussed below, but are not included in Table 1 due to a lack of consolidated statistics.

Overall, 2012/13 public school enrolments exceeded 90% of total enrolments in all types of schools in all provinces except British Columbia and Quebec, which have the highest proportions of independent school enrolments. In British Columbia, total public school enrolments a dozen years earlier stood at 90.8% of all enrolments. The 10.7% decline in public enrolments is partially attributable to the 8.6% increase in independent school enrolments over this time period, even though school enrolments overall were depressed by a decline in the 5-17 year old age cohort (Van Pelt, Clemens, Brown & Palacios, 2015, Figure 1). A similar pattern holds for Quebec, although the decline in public school enrolments (-14.8%), the increase in independent school enrolments (18.1%) and the shrinkage of the 5-17 year cohort were all more severe. Three of Canada's eastern provinces (New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador) each enrolled more than 98% of their school students in their public schools in 2012/13, with only virtual handfuls of students attending independent schools or receiving home instruction. Alone among Canada's provinces Alberta experienced student enrolment growth, 7.2% in public school enrolments from 2000/01 to 2012/13, with independent school enrolment growth increasing by a substantial 30.6%.

Every province shows a decline over the 12-year period in the share of students attending public schools. Simultaneously nine of 10 provinces showed an increased in the share of students attending independent schools. Similarly, eight of 10 provinces showed an increase in the share of students enrolled as home schooled.

The remainder of this section considers the school choice options in more detail, beginning with school choices within public systems, followed by a review of the independent school sector, and concluding with a brief overview of home schooling in Canada.

## Choice Within the Public Sector

As outlined in above, there are two major forms of publicly funded and governed school choice options in Canada: the Catholic separate schools in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan,<sup>4</sup> and the section 23 minority official language schools in all provinces. These schools are not open to all students.

**Catholic separate schools.** Admittance to Catholic separate schools is subject to differing requirements in each of the three provinces concerned. Ontario officially restricts enrolment in Roman Catholic (RC) elementary (JK–8) separate schools to children from Catholic families, but boards have discretion to admit non-RC children on a case-by-case basis. Anecdotal and media reports (e.g. Brown, 2014) suggest Ontario's separate boards have been admitting increasing numbers of non-RC students in recent years in response to declining enrolments. No information is publicly available on the extent of non-eligible student enrolment in Ontario separate schools, but the numbers are likely quite small as boards are unlikely to admit students from non-Christian families and those admitted will be required to participate in Catholic instruction and religious exercises. There is nonetheless clear evidence of RC parents actively opting for this school choice option. Card, Dooley, and Payne (2008) found the opening of new separate elementary schools in Ontario residential areas with high proportions of Catholics to be associated with an almost 10% decline in public school enrolment in the neighbourhood (p. 4).

Ontario's separate secondary schools (grades 9–12) have been required to admit non-Catholic students since receiving equivalent funding to public high schools in 1985. Consistent with Alberta's open enrolment legislation as discussed later, Alberta's separate boards admit non-Catholic pupils throughout K–12, subject to parental and student agreements to respect their religious character. Saskatchewan enacted legislation in 1995 giving parents the choice of enrolling their children in either a separate or public high school regardless of religious affiliation. Eidsness, Steeves, and Dolmage (2008) report that Saskatchewan's separate boards have been admitting non-Catholic students to their elementary grades for some time.

Overall, 21% of Saskatchewan students were enrolled in Anglophone or Francophone Catholic separate schools in 2012/13, as were 23% of all Alberta students, and almost a third (30%) of Ontario students. In all three provinces, Francophone separate enrolments are considerably smaller than Anglophone separate enrolments, falling below 1% of enrolments in Alberta and Saskatchewan and standing at 3.3% of all enrolments in Ontario. Separate school enrolments in Alberta increased by 15.3% over the 2000/01 – 2012/13 period, but this was a smaller than the 7.2% increase in total public enrolments (Van Pelt, Clemens, Brown & Palacios, 2015, p. 11). Separate school enrolments in Saskatchewan and Ontario both decreased over this period, the downturn in Ontario (by 5.0%) being similar to the overall decline in public enrolments (5.2%), that in Saskatchewan markedly less so.

**Minority language public schools.** Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees minority education rights for French-speaking parents outside Quebec where numbers warrant, and Quebec's *Charter of the French Language* extends similar, but more limited, rights to eligible English speakers in Quebec.

In all provinces except Quebec, a child has the right to access public education in French if a parent or sibling was educated in French, or a parent has French as his or her first language, and it is

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<sup>4</sup> There are also two small Protestant separate schools in majority Catholic settlements, the JK-8 Protestant Separate School in Penetanguishene, Ontario and the K-12 Englefeld Protestant Separate School in Saskatchewan.

still understood. When introduced in 1982, this new entitlement led to the gradual establishment of Francophone public schools for qualified French speakers in all English-speaking provinces, although availability varies. Autonomous boards operate these schools with trustees elected by French language supporters. To fully discharge its constitutional responsibilities Ontario has established four secular French public and eight French Catholic boards in addition to its 31 English public and 38 English separate boards. Neither Alberta nor Saskatchewan have French language Catholic separate boards, but at least one Albertan French language board (Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord) serves to operate both French Catholic separate schools and French secular public schools.

In Quebec, public school students are required to attend French language schools unless they are Canadian citizens with at least one parent or sibling who was educated in Canada in English. This effectively means that immigrant children will be educated in French schools, unless they enrol in an independent school. This has encouraged the emergence of independent *écoles passerelles* (bridging schools) which allow otherwise ineligible Francophone or Allophone parents (other language speakers) to enrol their children in public English language schools after at least one child has completed three years English language instruction at the independent school. Less strict entry criteria apply in the dual language school system in the province of officially bi-lingual New Brunswick, where admission to French or English public schools is available to all with “sufficient linguistic proficiency” in either, both, or neither of the two official languages (New Brunswick, 2004). In practice this accords New Brunswick parents choice to enrol children in either French or English programs, regardless of their home language. The number of non-Francophone parents choosing French kindergarten for their children jumped substantially when the government announced the elimination of primary level French immersion programs, providing an intriguing illustration of parental interest in school choice. In all cases, minority language schools are limited to areas where there are sufficient numbers of students to warrant their establishment.

Table 1 shows minority language enrolments on the lines for Francophone schools in all provinces except Quebec, where the appropriate statistics are for the Anglophone entry. Enrolments in minority language schools are substantially lower than those in schools for the majority official language, falling below one% of total enrolments in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador, and below 5% in all other provinces except Quebec (8.9%), where the minority language is English, and New Brunswick (28.4%), which is Canada’s only official bilingual province. Overall, total enrolment in minority language public schools, including Anglophone schools in Quebec, but excluding any schools in New Brunswick where there is no official linguistic minority, accounted for less than 4.5% of enrolments in 2012/13.

**Summary.** It is important to stress that the Catholic separate and minority language school options discussed in the previous paragraphs are conditional entitlements, available only to minority segments of the population. Moreover, while the minority language entitlements are available across the country, Catholic separate schools are only available in three provinces—which nonetheless accommodate 53% of the national population. Still, official and practical limitations ensure that entry to Catholic separate schools is only available to an appreciable minority, while the eligibility requirements for minority language schools limit access to an even greater degree. Most Canadian families are thus denied these school choice options. Even so, these schools can offer multiple choices to the qualified few, who may, for example, be able to choose between a secular or Catholic, French language or English language school.

To these could be added the special case of First Nation (Aboriginal) families with access to either a Band administered on-reserve school or a nearby off-reserve public school. The number of families in such a situation is unknown and difficult to ascertain, and only a small proportion of the

170,000<sup>5</sup> or so school aged First Nations children would be candidates, as the only communities where this would be feasible will necessarily be located in relatively more densely populated regions. Even so, this is another form of entitlement-driven, publicly funded school choice.

**French immersion.** To support Canada's bilingual policy, the Federal government negotiates partial financial aid agreements with each English speaking province to support two French as a second language (FSL) programs: core French, where French is taught as a regular school subject, and French immersion, in which French is the language of instruction for half or more of each school day. Depending on numbers, accommodation options, and board policy, immersion programs either operate as dual track programs alongside the regular instructional program within host schools, or as single-track programs in a dedicated school. Bussing is usually available in accord with district policy, offering an attractive, affordable choice for parents seeking alternatives to their local public school.

As illustrated in Table 1, French immersion programs have been increasing in popularity in recent years and demand has outstripped capacity in many districts. Some districts have capped immersion enrolments and instituted registration lotteries. Although something of a curiosity when initially established in the 1970s, national enrolment in French immersion programs has increased substantially, exceeding 375,000 in 2012–2013, representing 8% of total Canadian enrolments. Table 1 shows French Immersion enrolments are above the national average in all four Atlantic Provinces, where other non-government school choice options are almost non-existent, and in Manitoba.

Although there are normally multiple sites within urban and suburban districts, these immersion programs function as magnet schools by attracting students from across wider areas. Immersion schools appear to attract upwardly mobile parents from primarily higher social-economic echelons who take an active interest in their children's education. In contrast with many other public schools, French immersion classes usually contain fewer students on individual special education plans or with behavioural issues. As Holmes (2008) observed "French immersion usually requires travel out of zone, and it is seen by many as a private education without tuition" (p. 200). The social reproduction critique of French immersion programs is not new, an early Canadian study by Olson and Burns (1983) documenting significantly higher family incomes for students in immersion programs in a northern Ontario community, leading them to argue that entry into and success in the program are geared to social class.

**Alternative schools.**<sup>6</sup> Three provinces have adopted legislative frameworks enabling local districts to provide education choices beyond the regular authorized curriculum. Alberta is the unchallenged jewel in Canada's school choice crown in this—and other—regards. At the heart of Alberta's approach is a comprehensive open enrolment policy that allows parents to enrol children in any suitable program at any public school in the province, other than s.23 French language schools, subject to first accommodating local residents. Funding follows the student. As touched on earlier, this sweeping policy applies to the province's separate schools, with enrolment priority naturally being given to Catholic students.

Alberta's (2000) *School Act* further authorizes school boards to offer alternate programs to satisfy local demand. An alternate program is defined as "an education program that (a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or (b) uses a particular teaching philosophy," but is not a special education program, a s.23 French language program, or program of religious education in a separate school (s.21(1)). If a school board rejects a proposal to establish an

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada (2011, Table 4) reported 167,800 4–15 year First Nations children 2011, which represented 4.5% of the total Canadian 4–15 year cohort.

<sup>6</sup> This section draws heavily on Allison (2015a).

alternate program, s.31 of the *Act* allows the applicants to seek charter school status from the Minister of Education, subject to the restriction that charter schools cannot be “affiliated with a religious faith or denomination” (s. 34(4)). As discussed further below, Alberta is the only province that allows charter schools. More consequentially, it is also the only province with a legislative mechanism to actively promote intra-district and inter-district choice by requiring boards to vote on proposals for new programs.

Many school district Web sites—as well as the Alberta Education site—prominently proclaim a commitment to school choice, some providing forms to submit proposals for new programs. Even so, there appear to be no consolidated statistics summarizing Alberta’s alternate schools and programs. Dosdall (2001), an influential leader in Alberta’s adoption of school choice policies, reported that in 2000, 41% of elementary, 48% of junior high, and 58% of high school students were attending out of zone schools in Edmonton. Visits to school district Web sites found there to be 50 or so distinct alternate schools or programs listed for each of Alberta’s larger districts (Edmonton Public School Board and Calgary Board of Education), with many suburban and midsized districts listing several choices or more. Among the options available are aboriginal language and culture programs, academic programs such as Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate, arts programs, sports and athletic programs, bilingual and immersion language programs (Arabic, Chinese, German, and others), faith-based programs, instructional philosophy programs, all girl programs, all boy programs, and more. Multiple smaller programs are typically grouped together in a single school building, often alongside a French immersion program, illustrating the inherent variety promoted by intra-district choice policies. Even so, choices are markedly curtailed or nonexistent in rural and far northern districts. Moreover, boards usually charge additional bussing fees for students enrolled in choice programs.

British Columbia followed Alberta’s lead and adopted open enrolment legislation in 2002. The legislation protects students’ rights to enrol in their designated neighbourhood school while according them the right to enrol in an educational program provided by any public school district in the province with sufficient space. The legislation also explicitly permits students to simultaneously enrol in a distributed, on-line learning program offered by a second board, allowing schools and students to take advantage of internet technologies to provide enriched learning opportunities. Subject to community consultation, the *School Act* authorizes a board to offer “specialty academies” which emphasize particular sports, activities, or subject areas, and specifically permits a board to offer an International Baccalaureate program. Boards are allowed to charge fees for these specialty programs to cover direct costs in excess of the cost of providing a standard instructional program, and out-of-area transportation costs are not usually covered.

Brown’s (2004) analysis of British Columbia’s adoption of this policy and its early effects found “clear differences” in the “choice climate” in the 20 districts studied, a few being enthusiastic, a few confused and divided, with most remaining committed to their established neighbourhood schools. Since then there appears to have been a warming to the choice opportunities created by the legislated permeability of school and district boundaries. Findings from a study of the Vancouver region by Friesen, Cerf Harris and Woodcock (2013) found the proportion of Kindergarten and Grade 4 students attending schools other than their designated school increased by 5.5 and 4.4 percentage points respectively between 2003 and 2006.

Visits to a selection of school district Web sites reveal a similar if less rich pattern to that observable in Alberta. One noticeable and potentially confusing difference concerns nomenclature. Whereas in Alberta, “alternate programs” commonly refers to all kinds of choice programs, in British Columbia—and some other provinces—this term is used to designate programs intended to specifically cater to needs of secondary level students with attendance or engagement challenges.



Manitoba also has legislation giving students the right to attend any public school in the province but lacks accompanying provisions requiring or authorizing boards to establish programs beyond the four official programs established by the province, one of which is French immersion. The Web site of the province's largest district (Winnipeg School Division) lists twenty or so optional education programs as well as six "alternative program schools." Many of the listed programs appear quite small and targeted at specific populations, such as the Aboriginal education, adolescent parenting, reading recovery, and special education programs, but more conventional choice focused programs are also listed, including a multi-age, student-centered, parent-involved alternate elementary program available in five schools, as well as the more conventional Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. Notable alternate programs include the English-Ukrainian and English-Hebrew immersion programs, which are also offered in other districts.

Other provinces have not adopted legislation explicitly encouraging public school choice. Saskatchewan is a partial exception. Provincial legislation authorizes school boards to enter into joint operating agreements with non-profit corporations to host and administer religiously defined associate schools. Associate schools receive per-pupil funding at 80% of the public schools operational grant, but are also permitted to charge tuition and other fees. They must comply with provincial curriculum and staffing policies and participate in provincial accountability activities, but retain their freedom to educate from a philosophical or religious perspective different from the secular public schools. There were ten such associated schools in 2010—eight Christian and two Islamic—accounting for around 1% of total K–12 enrolments, but almost half of independent non-public school enrolments.

While none of the remaining provinces actively encourage choice beyond that required by their constitutional obligations or as embodied in the French immersion option, their school boards are able to establish alternate programs or schools as they see fit. As shown in the last column of Table 2 (included in a later section), districts typically retain attendance zones for elementary schools, with some boards allowing more permeability than others, and most allowing some choice between secondary schools where feasible. Still, sometimes sharp differences between the policies of neighbouring or even contiguous boards exist. Pertinent examples are found in and around Canada's largest city of Toronto, where the Toronto Catholic District Board (TCDB) operates an open boundary policy for its secondary schools, but the public Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) has adopted a more restrictive policy. As noted earlier, Ontario legislation requires separate boards to allow non-Catholics to enrol in secondary grades, thus creating enhanced opportunities for both inter-district and intra-district choice within Catholic districts and inter-district choice between Catholic and other public boards.

The web sites of these two school boards list various specialized secondary level program choices as well as a large range of alternate learning regimes to welcome students experiencing difficulties in regular high schools. Both Web sites also list various elementary programs and alternate schools including, in the TDSB, an Africentric school, the Triangle LGBT program, and the Da Vinci School, which offers a Waldorf inspired program.<sup>7</sup>

**Charter schools.** Alberta is the only province with legislation providing for charter schools. Charter schools are autonomous public schools that provide innovative or enhanced education programs designed to improve student learning (Alberta Education, 2016). Operating outside of local school boards and governed by their own board of trustees, they are accountable for pursuing and meeting their charter. They are typically exempt from many statutes and regulations that govern traditional public schools, are not required to hire unionized teachers, and may use non-traditional

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<sup>7</sup> See Allison (2015b) for a more details on alternative schools in Ontario's public school system.

pedagogy or curriculum. They do not charge tuition and are typically fully funded for operational expenses (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan & Van Pelt, 2015).

Alberta's charter school legislation was introduced in 1994 with the aim to provide choice and competition in the public sector and inject more diversification in the education market. With a cap of 15 schools the government has carefully monitored and constrained the expansion of charter schools in the province. Currently there are 13 charter schools operating across 20 campuses. Six charter schools are located in the city of Calgary representing 83% of the total charter school enrolment, three in the capital city of Edmonton representing 11% of enrolment, and the remaining 6% are the four charter schools located in smaller communities in rural areas (Bosetti & Butterfield, 2016). While student enrolment in charter schools has quadrupled since their inception (2,073 students enrolled in 1999/00 and 8,418 in 2012/13) and indicators suggest wait lists for some charter schools are substantial, only 1.4% of Alberta students are enrolled in these schools (Bosetti et al., 2015).

Research (Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly, & Sande, 2000; Bosetti et al, 2015; Ritchie, 2010) indicates charter schools in Alberta are innovative in their delivery of education, demonstrate enhanced learning outcomes, particularly for some disadvantaged groups of students (i.e., immigrant second language learners, at-risk youth, aboriginal youth), and have more benchmarked achievements than their counterparts in the public system after controlling for socio-economic differences (Johnson, 2013). They have exerted positive competitive pressure in the larger urban school districts, with those districts responding by creating expanded school choice options for parents.

Recent changes to legislation indicate the government's continued commitment to charter schools as vehicles of educational reform; however, the official view of their role and purpose has shifted from infusing competition and diversification in the education market to serving as pilot sites and incubators to research and fine-tune innovative practices (Alberta Education, 2010). Teachers, as scholar practitioners, are expected to engage with researchers in universities and polytechnic institutes to design robust investigations into effective practices that improve student success (Bosetti & Butterfield, 2016).

With a cap of 15 charter school this not only restricts their expansion and limits access for parents and families, but it also prevents them from becoming a viable competitive force within the public school system.

### **Independent Schools**

Every province in Canada is also home to independent schools that operate as distinct entities outside of the public systems. They are established and governed independently, usually by a non-profit board of governors who are accountable to parents and school supporters, and all are required to register with the relevant authorities in their jurisdictions. They are subject to statutory requirements and regulations that vary from province to province, often substantially. The provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec provide limited funding for registered independent schools<sup>8</sup> that conform to specified requirements, including employment of provincially certificated teachers, using provincial curriculum, participating in large scale provincial assessments, and meeting inspection and reporting requirements. Funding levels range from a low in British Columbia of 35% to 50% of the per pupil operating grant given to public schools in the same locality to a high of 80% in

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<sup>8</sup> Canada is not alone in this. "The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, and Australia are among the many nations in which governments fund, but do not necessarily operate, a wide spectrum of schools" (Berner, 2016, para. 2).



Saskatchewan<sup>9</sup> (see Table 2). Quebec has the most stringent regulations and Ontario the fewest. For example, elementary independent schools in Ontario are unfunded and largely unregulated, but inspection and approval are mandatory at the secondary level if a school wishes to offer secondary level diploma credits. Ontario independent schools are not required to hire certificated teachers or follow the provincial program of studies, but receive no public funds even if they do. Many of the newer independent schools serve niche markets that provide low enrolments, focus on specialized pedagogy, and provide intimate, personalized learning environments for their students (Davies & Quirke, 2005).

Table 2

*Independent School, Home School Funding and Open Enrolment Options, by Province, 2015*

Province	Independent school	Home school	Open enrolment options in public system
British Columbia	35% to 50% funded	No funding support for parents	Province-wide open enrolment.
Alberta	60% to 70% funded	Province funds \$1,641 per student/year, half of which goes to parent	Open enrolment permitted although precise rules are determined at the school board level. Usually transportation costs not covered.
Saskatchewan	50% to 80% funded	Up to \$1,000 per student annually depending on board	No open enrolment policy.
Manitoba	50% funded	No funding support	Provincial authorization for open enrolment, some conditions apply.
Ontario		No funding support	Province offers conditional open enrolment for distance considerations. Additional considerations at school board level.
Quebec	Up to 60% funded	No funding support	Provincially authorized open enrolment within school districts.
New Brunswick	No provincial funding	No funding support	No open enrolment; student placement determined by school district with appeal process.
Nova Scotia	No provincial funding	No funding support	No provincial open enrolment policy. Issue is determined at board level.
Prince Edward Island	No provincial funding	No funding support	No open enrolment. Student placement determined at board level.
Newfoundland and Labrador	No provincial funding	No funding support	No open enrolment.

*Note.* Funding for independent schools is on a per student basis and amount awarded is a percentage of the allotment given for operational expenses for a student in attendance at a local public school. Adapted from Bosetti and Gereluk, 2016, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that each funding province has a number of funding categories, with higher grant percentages often contingent on compliance with increasing regulatory restrictions.

A recent inventory identified 1,935 independent schools operating in Canada during 2013/14, of which 33.4% were in Quebec, 31.4% in Ontario, 20.4% in British Columbia and 7% in Alberta. In all, they accounted for 6.8% of total student enrolments in K-12 schools in Canada (Allison et al 2016). In 2012/13 the proportion of the total student population attending independent schools was highest in Quebec (12.6%) and British Columbia (11.6%) and lowest in New Brunswick (0.7%) and Prince Edward Island (1.0%) (Van Pelt et al., 2015, p. 18).

Canada has a long history of traditional (academically focused, university-preparatory) and religious private schools, mainly in the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec—some of which are boarding schools and single gender schools that serve affluent families who can afford the tuition and expenses. A recent study of independent schools (Allison et al. 2016) revealed that only 4.7%<sup>10</sup> of independent schools—90 schools in total—would fall into the stereotypical elite school category. Instead, the majority of independent schools in Canada cater to middle class preferences with 48.6% of all independent schools having a religious orientation and 30% being specialty schools that serve students with programming to accommodate the pursuit of special subjects or activities, such as arts or sports, special learning needs, or particular approaches to teaching and learning, such as Waldorf or Montessori. There has also been an increase in the number of independent schools in Canada that supply online learning to supplement or replace traditional school-based instruction and home schooling. It is noteworthy that although 80% of Canadians live in large urban centres, 37% of independent schools are located outside of large urban areas, with 22% in rural areas, and 15% in small to mid-sized centres (Allison et al., 2016, p. iii).

While the provincial government does not provide any funding for independent schools in Ontario, that province, as shown in Table 1, has a higher percentage of students enrolled in these schools (5.6%) than Alberta (3.9%) and Saskatchewan (2.4%), both of which provide funding to independent schools (Van Pelt et al., 2015, p. 18). One might expect the provinces providing funding would have higher independent school enrolments because they would be more accessible to middle and lower income families. However, Alberta and Saskatchewan offer more extensive school choice options in their public systems than does Ontario. As shown in Table 2, these three provinces are the only ones that also provide parents with the choice of publicly funded Catholic separate schools, but admission policies in Alberta and Saskatchewan are more open. As noted earlier, Alberta also allows religious alternative schools in its public school boards and offers charter schools, which further reduce the need for parents to turn to the independent school sector. The higher independent school enrolments in Ontario could also be attributed to Ontarians being more religious. More Ontarians claim the importance of religion to their daily lives than citizens of any other province, and can thus be reasonably expected to sacrifice more for a religiously-oriented education for their children (Allison et al. 2016). Additionally, Saskatchewan adopted a new, expanded funding policy for independent schools in 2012 after which enrolments grew from 1.0% to 2.4% over the subsequent two years (Clemens et al. 2014, p. 26; Van Pelt et al., 2015, p. 18).

It is important to recognize that less than half of the independent schools in Canada receive government funding, but that more than half of the students who attend independent schools are in schools that receive funding. More precisely, while only 39.4% of independent schools in Canada receive government funding, these schools enrol 58.6% of students attending independent schools (Allison et al, 2016).

Independent schools contribute to the opportunity for parents to choose how their children are educated. These schools are attractive for many reasons: some because they provide students

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<sup>10</sup> The study used membership in Canadian Accredited Independent Schools as a proxy for traditional private schools.

with access to social networks; some because of the enriched curriculum focused on the cultivation of dispositions, knowledge, and skills for success in life; some for enhanced consideration for admission to particular postsecondary institutions; some provide for socialization in homogeneous communities of like-minded parents, supported by educators who, at least in principle, believe in the culture, pedagogical orientation, and overall mission of the school (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). The recent influx of wealthy immigrants who can afford, and are accustomed to sending their children to private school is a factor in large metropolitan centers (Yoon & Gulson, 2010). As noted earlier, and as indicated in Table 3, almost half of all independent schools in Canada have a religious orientation (Allison, et al., 2016). They appeal to parents for the religious perspectives they provide, the emphasis on character, values, and morals. A study a decade ago found that they attract parents because of the frequent and strong collaboration with the home and the reinforcement of the family's values they offer. The same study found that parents were attracted to independent schools—regardless of type—because of the quality of the teachers, the curriculum, and the safety of the school environment (Van Pelt, Allison, & Allison, 2007; Van Pelt, 2009).

Table 3

*Distribution of Independent Schools and Enrolments in Canada, by Type and Features, 2013/14*

		Schools		Enrolments	
		Count	Distribution	Count	Distribution
Total in All Provinces		1935	100%	368,717	100%
Religiously-Oriented Catholic, Other Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Other	Affiliated with a religion	940	48.6%	178,119	48.3%
	Not affiliated with a religion	995	51.4%	190,598	51.7%
Specialty Emphasis Montessori, Waldorf, Arts/Sports/STEM, Distributed Learning, Special Education, etc.	Specialty school	581	30.0%	99,614	27%
	Not a Specialty School	1,354	70%	269,103	73%
Location					
Size of population centre	Rural, small, medium	717	37.1%	88,923	24.1%
	Large urban	1,218	62.9%	279,794	75.9%
Grade Levels					
	Elementary only	857	44.3%	104,014	28.2%
	Secondary only	357	18.4%	86,745	23.5%
	Combined Elementary and Secondary	721	37.3%	177,958	48.3%
Government Funding	Does not receive government funding	1,172	60.6%	151,678	41.1%

	Receives partial government funding	738	38.1%	211,374	57.4%
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School Size					
Number of enroled students	Fewer than 50	737	38.1%	17,068	4.6%
	50 to 499	1,007	52.0%	177,627	48.2%
	500 or more students	191	9.9%	174,022	47.2%

*Note.* From Allison, Hasan and Van Pelt, 2016, p. v.

## Home Schooling

Perhaps the most contentious domain of school choice is when parents exercise their rights and express preferences by removing their children from school to educate them at home. The issue here is the degree of freedom parents have regarding the education of their children, which stands in relation to the responsibility of the state in defining terms for the provision and supervision of education. In this sense, for some home schooling raises questions concerning the right of the state to protect the interests of children and their right to develop independent judgment, self-determination, and competency for liberal citizenship balanced with the right of parents to provide alternative, and possibly more satisfactory, perhaps even more successful, approaches for their children's education (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016).

Home schooling is legal in all provinces, but only in Alberta and Saskatchewan is some funding provided to support the educational activities of home schooling families. To comply with compulsory attendance requirements all provinces require home schooled students to be registered with local provincial authorities (Van Pelt, 2015). Alberta has the most restrictive regulations for home schooling and provides the most funding, supervision and support. Parents are required to notify a school board or accredited private school of their intent to home school. School authorities with whom they register are responsible for the supervision and evaluation of the performance of their children based on the education program parents provide and at least two home visits. On the other end of the spectrum, Ontario provides no funding, support or supervision of families who choose to home school. Parents determine the educational experiences appropriate for their children, and need only to notify the local school board of their intent to home school (Davies & Aurini, 2008, p. 66).

Historically, poor accesses to education facilities because of geographic distance, a child's physical or mental disability, or religious conviction were the central reasons Canadian parents educated their children at home. More recently, new subgroups of home schoolers have emerged with different goals, ranging from "nurturing minority identities to meeting special educational needs, to simply seeking a superior form of education" (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p. 462). Today, Canadian parents largely choose to home school their children because of dissatisfaction with the public education system, often because of a perceived lack of focus on academic performance and discipline, and concern regarding a physically and emotionally safe learning environment (Basham & Hepburn, 2001). Aspirations for specific social, moral and academic goals also motivate many Canadian parents to choose home schooling for their children (Van Pelt, 2003). Most recently, parents are choosing home education because it is a practical solution to lifestyle choices parents are making for their families, including telecommuting and active involvement in arts or athletics (Gaither, 2009, quoted in Van Pelt,

2015, p.9). Not only is it an increasingly practical choice for some, the opportunities are expanding. Online resources and courses, public virtual schools, and independent education services are increasingly available to provide support for students and families choosing blended approaches to home education. The growth in distributed learning options in British Columbia, for example—where the student learns largely from home but is enrolled in a school, supervised by a certified teacher, uses provincial curriculum, and participates in large scale assessments—suggests that as digital technology continues to facilitate more options for education delivery, home-based education may well continue to grow in appeal (British Columbia, 2016).

According to the data in Table 1, home schooling enrolls only a very small 0.5% of all students in Canada. (Table 1 indicates 23,992 home school students if all provinces are totaled). But, and perhaps this is of more interest, enrolments have continued to increase over the last period for which comparable data are available. From 2006/07 to 2011/12 enrolments in Canada increased by 29.1%, an annual average increase of 5.3% (Van Pelt, 2015, p. 23-24). As in other countries, home schooling in Canada is “no longer the realm of a radical few parents and researchers. It is embracing new educational possibilities and adapting to new educational opportunities. It matches changing lifestyles and employs opportunities technology provides” (p. 30-31). As also shown in Table 1, the share of students enrolled as home schooled grew in eight of ten provinces over the period 2007/08 to 2012/13. Although modest, the increases give further evidence of the rise in parental attraction to seeking alternative options for educating their children.

## Conclusion

The central aim of this paper was to provide a descriptive account of the landscape of school choice in Canada by examining the enabling legislation, funding and student enrolment patterns in the public, independent and home school sectors. We have argued that while Canada’s constitutional framework with its accommodations for linguistic and religious pluralism, its regional focus with provincial responsibility for education, and a unique dual system of funded public education makes international comparisons challenging, there are elements worth noting.

First, it is important to recognize the unique features of the Canadian context. Canada is distinguished by its commitment to pluralism and respect for the right of parents to have a voice in the education of their children, which has contributed to an ethos of tolerance for diversity and choice (Milkie, 2010). The Canadian education system has a strong regional focus, with provinces having sovereign authority over education and the ability to make policy decisions about schooling independent of a centralized national education policy. The variance in the economic, political and demographic context of each province; however, makes policy borrowing challenging even among provinces.

Second, there is evidence of the pervasive impact of neoliberal policy reform agendas across the nation that have gradually increased financial assistance to non-public school in most provinces, and expanded opportunities within the public sector for parents to choose schools that resonate with their values, beliefs, identities and aspirations for their children. Research (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Gulson & Webb, 2012; Yoon, 2011; Yoon & Gulson, 2010) has highlighted the impact of parental choice on the re-imaging of the common school, historically situated in neighborhoods, creation of speciality schools of choice, sometimes located within existing neighborhood schools, and the consequent creation of stratified enclaves variously defined by curriculum, race, ethnicity, religion and values. This brings to light a need for policy makers to address issues of access and equity in educational markets, and the increased surveillance by the state in establishing conditions

for all schools receiving public funds to be publically accountable for observance of curriculum policy and student outcomes in learning.

Third, Canadian's strong commitment to public education is important. Evidence of increased levels of public funding and support for expanded provision for choice within the public system is an indicator of Canadian's value and support for public institutions. With the exception of two provinces, over 90% of students are enrolled in the public school system.

Fourth, an important feature of the choices available within Canadian education is that most are state managed and provided by local authorities (school districts) through the public education system. The most widely used of these options are those provided by the religious separate schools, which are only available in three provinces. Qualified families can also choose a public school using the language of the French or English linguistic minority in all provinces where numbers warrant, although access is more tightly limited in Quebec. French immersion schools operated by public boards offer particularly popular choices. While the four smallest provinces and the largest (Ontario) provide no financial support for independent (private) schools, the remainder offer partial funding and other support, ensuring varying degrees of state supervision. A similar pattern is evident with regard to home schooling.

Fifth, the share of students enrolled in public schools, including Roman Catholic Separate Schools and section 23 minority language public schools, are in decline. In contrast, the share of students enrolled in non-government sector schools—independent schools and home schools—has been steadily, if slowly, increasing over the past three decades (Allison, 2015a, Table 2). Such increases are not currently being encouraged by government policy. Indeed, even the provinces that are financially supportive of independent schools are under pressure to withdraw or reduce support for options outside of the traditional public school sectors. Given declining school age enrolments and increasing government debt, Canada could well be at a crossroads on the issue of choice in education.

Finally, increasing parental preference for school choice in Canada is not being driven by either the reality or a fear about failing public schools. There's little if any evidence that the public schools are failing, at least to any degree akin to those in parts of the USA. Other concerns and interests are driving the move toward greater school choice in Canada, such as the influx of immigrants who can afford and are accustomed to private schools, changing parenting practices where home schooling is an option that accommodates emergent lifestyles (Van Pelt, 2015) as do the enriched before and after school programs offered by some independent schools, a desire to find schools that address special interests or aptitudes of children (Bosetti, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2008) a desire to avoid disruptions caused by employee strikes (Van Pelt, et al., 2007). Another important factor may well be an increasing emphasis on government sponsored political correctness in curriculum and school operations and what is seen as growing self-complacency and inward-looking attitude by teachers and administrators. Recent research on why parents choose private schools (Van Pelt, Allison, & Allison, 2007) confirms an increasing desire among the middle class to escape such developments in search of a 'good', safe, responsive and secure school for their children. They perceive and experience independent schools as places where their children and families are known, heard and respected, and where quality academics and caring, responsive teachers can be found.

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