
What's Left of Public Education When the Left Starts to Leave

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By Shannon D.M. Moore and Justin Fraser

As public education advocates, we are struck by the increasing number of friends and family in BC sending their children to private schools. These are people that we would otherwise consider “lefties”: proponents of public health care, libraries, public parks, and the common good more broadly. While some are choosing private schools when public schools fail to meet the needs of their children, others never enter the public system and are instead choosing ‘independent’ (their word¹) schools as they offer smaller class sizes, specialized curriculum (athletics, music, or technology), distinct pedagogical approaches (Montessori, Waldorf), or serve specific student populations. We see this as the normalization of education privatization in BC. Peers that we assumed would oppose privatization in any other element of society are unknowingly, defensively, or proudly choosing private options for “their” children. While these options may be attractive to parents who are looking for ways to support their own child’s learning, they will result in the dismantling of public education in the province. And, as Jack Schneider bluntly states, “If we lose it, it’s not coming back.”

Private School Enrolment in BC

Nearly 92% of students across Canada attend public schools ([Statistics Canada, 2025](#)). Yet British Columbia has the lowest rate of public school enrolment at 86.5% ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)). In 9 of 13 provinces and territories, less than 5% of students attend private schools ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)). In contrast, over 13% of the BC student population is enrolled in independent schools, which include elite, specialty, and religious institutions. This number has been steadily growing since the 1970s. While religious schools continue to make up the largest share of independent schools and student enrollment in BC, the province is also home to a significant number of other specialty schools. This includes the second-highest number of Montessori schools in Canada (after Ontario), the vast majority of Waldorf schools (8 out of 11 nationwide), and a growing presence of STEM-focused and arts-based schools. Beyond independent schools, many students in BC are also enrolled in boutique programs within the public system. This can include mini schools, sports academies, and language immersion. Like private schools, these programs are selective, have limited enrollment, and often involve additional costs. Therefore, they do not align with the public school ideal which, in part, requires that public schools are universally accessible and provide equal opportunities for students ([Winton, 2022](#)). Since these boutique programs are exclusive and exclusionary, they undermine the broader goals of public education and equate to privatization. Despite the use of veiling terms (independent) or the physical location of programs within public school buildings

¹ We recognize that the term independent is used to delineate between schools that are regulated by the BC Ministry of Education and receive partial public funding (independent) and those that receive no public funding and do not follow the same curriculum or reporting (private). While this is the official term that is used by FISA and by the Ministry of Education we worry about the ways the term independent sanitizes and veils privatization.

(boutique programs) the result is the same: privatization is increasingly accepted and advanced in BC.

Push & Pull Factors in BC

Simultaneous push and pull factors have contributed to the normalization of privatization in BC education. The BC government has defunded and underfunded public education for decades. According to Statistics Canada, British Columbia spends a smaller share of its Gross Provincial Product (GPP) on public education than any other province except Newfoundland and Labrador ([Bacchus, 2025](#)). This has resulted in overcrowded and under resourced schools that are unable to meet the basic needs of all students, never mind provide enrichment opportunities. When public education is covered in the media, it is often positioned as in crisis due to low test scores, or literacy, or math, or mental health, or (insert moral panic of the day). These factors have also pushed parents who are understandably worried about their children's education and well-being to consider alternative options that will serve the needs of their child.

These push factors follow the [privatization playbook](#): undermine support, exaggerate problems, and spin a narrative that distracts from defunding and divestment. These steps in the playbook are then followed by new forms of privatization, like the increased use of public money to support independent schools. Notably, in BC public funding of private schools has grown steadily since 1977 ([Bacchus, 2025](#)). By funding independent schools at a rate of 35-50% of the per pupil funding granted to public schools, independent schools are able to subsidize tuition costs. As a result, parents who can afford the subsidized tuition are able to buy opportunity and access for *their* children.

Another push/pull combination is particularly relevant to the increased number of parents who are sending their children to Waldorf, Montessori, arts focused, or outdoor/forest schools—schools that offer specialized curricula or alternative pedagogies. The BC Ministry of Education's embrace of the Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) to inform and reform education has resulted in a culture of assessment and accountability in schools and coincident curricular and pedagogical reform that prioritizes economic views of education ([BCTF, 2019](#)). These neoliberal reforms position the purpose of education as a pathway to employment in addition to promoting competition, individualism, and standardization in schools. While these reformers suggest they are improving public education, they are actually making public schools less desirable (a point public education advocates and teachers have been making for years). Parents are looking for schools that fulfill the broader purpose of education, that promote play and creativity, and that do not reduce education to test, job, and university preparation ([Berkshire, 2025](#)).

While public schools are gutted by underfunding and reformed to serve the interests and aims of economic organizations, neoliberal reformers simultaneously promote alternatives to the public system by celebrating *choice* in education. Like the word *independent*, the word *choice* is purposely used to obscure links to privatization. The sanitization of privatization with these terms can make people who would otherwise reject privatization feel better about their choices and to not think more deeply about them. Yet, as Silva ([2022](#)) bluntly states, choice has always been used as a guise for privilege and segregation. Parents are increasingly influenced by the rhetoric of choice, financial subsidies that make private education more accessible, and

systemic changes like open catchment policies. These factors encourage them to tailor and curate their children's education through independent schools or specialized programs within the public system.

Recognizing that there are push and pull factors that motivate parents to divest from public education does not diminish one's responsibility to reflect on the consequences. These choices make people complicit in reproducing inequity, eroding the public good, and dismantling public education.

The Choices You Make Impact Others

Despite the dazzling language of *choice*, the label is disingenuous ([Ganshorn, 2024](#)). The notion of choice is a fallacy because it is not accessible to everyone ([Silva, 2022](#)). After all, the choice to send one's child to a boutique/niche program or to an independent school that requires tuition is only an option for some parents: "Parents who have more social capital will exercise their rights to choose. They are the ones able to pay additional fees, drive across town, or wait in overnight line-ups. Often, they are simply the parents who know about the choices and the ways to access them" ([Ehrcke, 2015](#)). This results in the reproduction of inequities because people that have the cultural and economic capital to make these choices will exercise their right to choose whereas people that do not remain in the under-resourced public system. The label of choice is doubly false as schools are the ones making the choices, not students or parents ([Ganshorn, 2024](#)). Independent schools and boutique programs use application processes and select their students. The use of public funds to support these schools is a choice to support these exclusionary practices.

The motivation to improve the public system diminishes as more people leave. When parents with cultural capital leave, they take their powerful voices with them. These are voices that could be used to advocate for greater investment in public education and to push back against neoliberal reforms that are undermining the integrity of the public system. After all, disillusionment with the public system is why many parents leave in the first place. Leaving does nothing to ensure that public education is improved for everyone.

Eroding the Public Good

When parents choose schools or programs that grant their children a more fulsome and well-resourced education, they are prioritizing individual gain and private benefits over the public good ([Ganshorn, 2022](#)). They are also using public money to secure these individual advantages. The shift of public money to private providers "undermines the principle of education as a public good and contributes to increased inequality and diminished accountability" ([Ganshorn, 2025](#)). Regardless of the savings spin put forth by conservative think tanks, when parents remove per pupil funding from the public system, they are not saving the public money. Instead, they are reducing the shared pool of money that can be used to improve public education more broadly. This year alone, private schools received \$570 million in direct public funding, in addition to tax credits, charitable donation deductions, and property tax exemptions—all of which reduce provincial revenue that could otherwise support public education ([Bacchus, 2025](#)).

Public education was designed to advance the public good, not to secure individual gains. While parents may be ensuring a better education for their child, a society is only as

strong as all of its citizens. The question parents should ask themselves before leaving the public system is “Will my child be better off in the end if the society they grow up in is increasingly divided and inequitable?” To us, the move is akin to saving one’s own house in a wildfire. Although you may have somewhere to live after the fire, the community in which your house exists will be gone—a community that is necessary for the health and resources of your own family and home.

The proliferation of independent schools and boutique programs also results in the segregation of students into homogenous groups: “This siloing of students runs contrary to the premise of public education and prioritizes individual preferences over collective benefits” ([Silva, 2022](#)). As a result, society becomes more polarized and divided. It is important for the public good and democracy to put people in relation to one another rather than in silos of homogeneity.

Beyond creating pockets of privilege that entrench division, independent schools erode community as people increasingly commute outside of their neighbourhoods to attend schools that appeal to their child ([Silva, 2023](#)). As a result, parents and children lose the opportunity to create community within their neighborhood. Coincidentally, it becomes difficult to form bonds with people at school as they live in different areas.

When we abandon the project of public education, which is intended to prioritize collective benefits, provide equal opportunity to benefit, and be universally accessible, we are eroding any sense of the common good.

Dismantling Public Education

As more people choose private options, there is less incentive for governments to increase investments in the public system. Sending your child to independent schools absolves the government of their responsibility to support a strong public education system that advances the public good. As independent options continue to proliferate, and choice continues to be celebrated, parents who can afford to will send their children to boutique programs and independent schools. In turn, the public system will continue to deteriorate and the pressure to increase investments will diminish as more and more people leave. Once the public investment is reduced, there is an increased onus placed on private citizens to make up for these budget shortfalls. While parents are busy celebrating their choice to pay 50% of their child’s tuition, the government will continue to reduce the share of the GPP they allocate to public education. This is not funding that will return once it is reduced in the budget. Parents also need to remember that as the per pupil funding decreases in the public system, the 50% per pupil subsidy granted to independent schools will also decrease. If any parent ever needed to return to the public system because they could no longer afford to send their child to an independent school (nevermind the parents who could never afford it in the first place), the public system they left would no longer exist.

Conclusion

As public education advocates, we recognize that there is much to improve about public education. We are not fighting to maintain the system as is, but rather for a system that is universally accessible, robustly government funded, publicly governed, provides equal opportunities for students, and serves the public’s interest ([Winton, 2022](#)). Many of the elements

that are attractive to parents about independent schools (smaller class sizes, increased curricular choices and varied pedagogical styles, less standardization and testing, and more resources) are precisely those we seek to provide all students in public schools. Public education may not currently meet the needs of all students, but abandoning the public school system will ensure that this continues to be the case.

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