



The History of Public Funding of Private K-12 Schools in British Columbia

Public funding of private (independent) K-12 schools in British Columbia has evolved over nearly fifty years, from complete exclusion to a structured subsidy model that allocates hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

Early context before public funding

Before 1977, private schools in British Columbia (many of them religious) operated independently without government funding or regulation. The provincial government did not provide oversight, and these schools relied entirely on tuition and private donations to sustain operations.^[1]

The Independent Schools Support Act of 1977

The turning point came in **1977** with the passage of **Bill 33**, the **Independent Schools Support Act**. This legislation, passed on **September 7, 1977**, introduced per-student public grants to eligible independent schools. The law allowed schools that met certain educational standards—such as employing certified teachers and following provincial curriculum—to receive up to **30% of the local public school per-student operating cost** (around **\$500 per student** at the time). This act represented the formal beginning of public funding for private schools in the province and was heavily influenced by lobbying from the **Federation of Independent School Associations of BC (FISA BC)**, which represented religious and independent schools.^[2]

1980s–1990s: Regulation and expansion of eligibility

In the years following 1977, the province refined the funding model. A **1989 law** extended provincial regulation to all non-public schools for the first time, requiring them to register and meet educational quality standards. Funding levels were adjusted into **tiers**—schools that spent less per student than local public schools could receive **50%** of the public per-student rate, while higher-spending institutions qualified for **35%**.^{[3] [1]}

2000s–2010s: Growth and special funding

Public funding to independent schools continued to expand alongside growing enrollment. In **2002**, the province authorized funding for **distance learning programs** in independent schools, and in **2005**, funding for **students with special needs** was increased to **100%** parity with public school rates. Though independent schools remain ineligible for capital (building) funding, they benefit from operational grants and tax exemptions, including property tax relief and charitable donation advantages.^{[4] [5] [2]}

2020s: Scale and current dynamics

Summary of key milestones

Year	Policy event	Funding or change	Legislative/administrative source
Before 1977	No public funding	0% government support	— ^[1]
1977	Independent Schools Support Act	Up to 30% of per-student public cost	Bill 33 ^[2]
1989	Expanded regulation	Tiered funding (35% and 50%)	Ministry oversight law ^[1] ^[3]
2002	Distance learning recognized	Funding allowed for online programs	Ministry decision ^[2]
2005	Special needs funding reform	Increased to 100% of public support	FISA BC ^[2]
2025	Current level	\$491 million annually; formula-based	BC Ministry of Education ^[6] ^[4]

Public funding of private schools in British Columbia remains distinctive among Canadian provinces—today representing nearly **10%** of the K-12 system’s total operating budget and reflecting a decades-long trend toward integrating independent education into the publicly supported system.^[7] ^[6]

1. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/download/2599/1909/9487>
2. <https://fisabc.ca/who-are-we/history/>
3. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/independent-schools/funding>
4. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2022/09/26/Why-Public-Dollars-Private-Schools-Rising/>
5. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/ccpa-bc_Kto12EducationFunding_web.pdf
6. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/bc-private-schools/>
7. <https://instituteforpubliceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/School-Finance-Policy-in-BC-1.pdf>
8. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/grants-to-independent-schools>
9. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1301585.pdf>
10. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/who-chooses-independent-schools-in-british-columbia-and-why/>

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