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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Independent school enrolment in Ontario is increasing, in spite of declining numbers of young people in general, while the public school enrolment levels have been shrinking and are predicted to do so until at least 2012. Public school enrolment trends across the country are similar, but this study focuses on Ontario.

- Between 1960 and 2005, the public education system had a gross increase in enrolment of 52.5 per cent. In the same period, independent school enrolment grew at a rate of almost 357 per cent.¹
- Between 2000 and 2005, independent school enrolment increased by 8.8 per cent.²
- Between 2000 and 2005 Ontario public schools saw an enrolment decrease of 1.1 per cent.³ Between 2008 and 2013, projections show another 3.8 per cent decrease.⁴
- From 2002-2003 to 2009-2010 public (elementary and secondary) school funding increased from \$14.4 billion to a projected \$19.5 billion.⁵ While this funding includes special funding for things like ESL training and French Immersion, this is a 36 per cent increase, despite declining enrolment.⁶

By comparison with other major Canadian provinces, Ontario's school system is the least adaptable, and offers parents the least choice. The current political climate casts independent schools as standing in opposition to unity and equity goals for Ontario. These schools are simultaneously portrayed as being exclusively for the wealthy. This is far from the truth, upon examining the long list of independent schools across Ontario. Parents are seeking out independent schools in greater numbers for the variety, opportunity and better quality education they provide. Ontario should follow the example of British Columbia or Alberta to help parents find and pay for educational options suitable for their families.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND PARENTAL CHOICE

Enrolment trends in Ontario schools

Independent school enrolment in Ontario is increasing, in spite of declining numbers of young people in general, while the public school enrolment levels have been shrinking for the past seven years and are predicted to do so until at least 2012. Public school enrolment trends across the country are similar, but this study focuses on Ontario.

The independent school movement is a growing sector of education in this province. Yet parents who choose to educate their children outside the public system effectively pay twice: once in their provincial taxes, and again for the costs of educating their child in an independent school. The size of this double dip is far from inconsequential. In 2005 alone, independent schools should have saved the Ontario Ministry of Education approximately 1.1 billion dollars by virtue of taking students out of the public school system.⁷

- Between 1960 and 2005, the public education system had a gross increase in enrolment of 52.5 per cent. In the same period, independent school enrolment grew at a rate of almost 357 per cent.⁸
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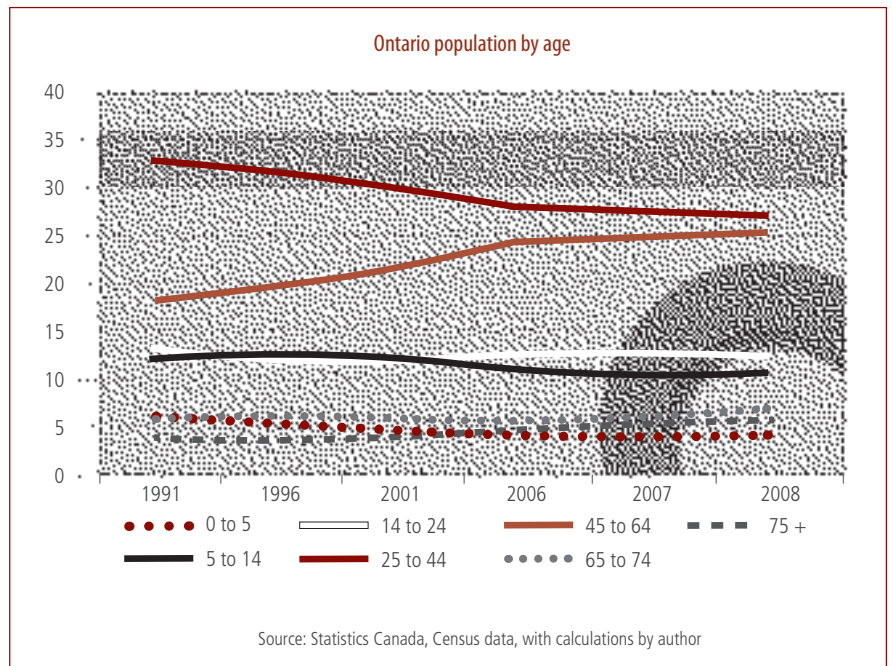
If independent schools ceased to exist and all their students entered the public school system, the Ontario government would face substantial increases in the magnitude of \$1 billion in per student funding requirements, because of the influx of students. The public school system, however, is not responsive to the lack of students. As the above funding numbers show: even as enrolment declines, funding is sharply increasing.

DEMOGRAPHICS IN ONTARIO

Fewer children are being born annually in Ontario than in years past. This is starting to pinch Ontario’s public school system. Enrolment decline started in 2002-2003 in the elementary system and this will soon begin to pinch the secondary school system.¹⁴ In the public school system, enrolment is falling and budgets are increasing.

International and interprovincial migration, not births, has been the largest source of our overall population increase. The Ontario public school system is a microcosm of Canadian demographics—we are having fewer children. Senior citizens are set to reshape retirement and elder care by virtue of their numbers.¹⁵ And the declining number of children will change education in Ontario.

Across Ontario, declining enrolment has at its root the declining number of children born. This trend is visible in the following graph, which shows that between 1991 and 2008, only the 45 to 64 and 75 plus age groups increased as a percentage of population in Ontario.



The Ontario Ministry of Finance notes in their 2007 population revisions that this decrease is not only visible as a percentage of population: “Overall, the number of children age 0-14 fell by 62,000 or 2.8 per cent over the past decade.”¹⁶ The Declining Enrolment Working Group predicts that “Ontario’s school-aged population” will begin to grow again “sometime between 2012 and 2020.”¹⁷

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WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE ALTERNATIVES TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

One study published by the Fraser Institute addressed this particular question. The study found parents choose alternatives for:

- Teacher dedication - 91 per cent
- Academic quality - more than 80 per cent
- School safety¹⁸

The authors further clarify:

Parents from both kinds of school, religiously-defined and academically-defined, were equally likely to select as “very important” features such as educating the whole child, setting high expectations for students, being well administered, offering frequent, detailed and open reporting to parents, preparing graduates who are typically accepted at the universities of their choice, catering to the particular needs of children, and having teachers who regularly assign homework.¹⁹

Another portion of students in Ontario is being schooled at home. Paul Faris, Executive Director of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, estimates that approximately 25,000 students are homeschooled across the province.²⁰ A national poll by the Canadian Centre for Home Education found that:

Most parents do not choose to home-school in response to a negative situation, but rather to proactively achieve some combination of moral, social, familial and academic goals (such as teaching certain beliefs and values, encouraging enhanced family interaction and individualizing curriculum). Many, however, do report avoiding such negative aspects of classroom attendance as wasted time, perceived lack of discipline and safety concerns.²²

The public system simply could not afford to house all the students whose parents have chosen alternatives. If more than 140,000 new students from independent schools (120,000+) and homeschools (20-25,000) suddenly entered the public system, they would be impossible to accommodate, both spatially and financially.

FEWER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

This decline in the actual number of children aged 14 and under is the root cause of declining enrolment. However, as the numbers show, parents are also choosing alternative forms of education in greater numbers, such that demographic decline is not affecting independent schools. Publicly funded schools in Ontario are struggling with fewer students, which means, for example, the inability to maintain staffing levels and, in some cases, the closing of schools.²²

The Ontario government, like other governments across Canada, is seeking solutions to this problem. One particularly simplistic solution involves opening school doors to younger and younger “students” through the push for all-day kindergarten and the Pascal plan for early learning.²³ This expansion of the authority of the Ministry of Education increases student rosters. A member of the educational establishment confirms anonymously that at an education meeting in downtown Toronto discussions turned to one reason for implementing all-day kindergarten—to fill empty classrooms due to declining enrolment.²⁴

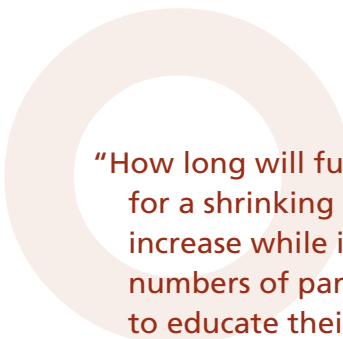
The Government of Ontario has sought other approaches to address declining enrolment by establishing the Declining Enrolment Working Group in May 2008. The goal of the Working Group was to help the elementary and secondary school communities by “provid(ing) advice and recommendations on strategies to advance the province’s priority goals for student achievement while addressing the impact of declining enrolment.”²⁵

The Working Group found the following:

Enrolment in Ontario’s publicly funded elementary and secondary schools peaked in the school year 2002-03.

Between 2002-03 and 2007-08, enrolment in Ontario’s schools declined by 68,000, or 3.4 per cent. The Ministry of Education expects a similar trend over the next five years, anticipating that the number of students in the public education system will further decrease by a projected 72,000, or 3.8 per cent.²⁶

Enrolment decline of 3.4 per cent may not at first glance seem large, when viewed across the entire Ontario school system. But when we begin to focus in on local school boards and individual schools, we find this decline is causing staffing and course choices to decrease and schools to close, causing students to either bus further away or take courses by remote video link.



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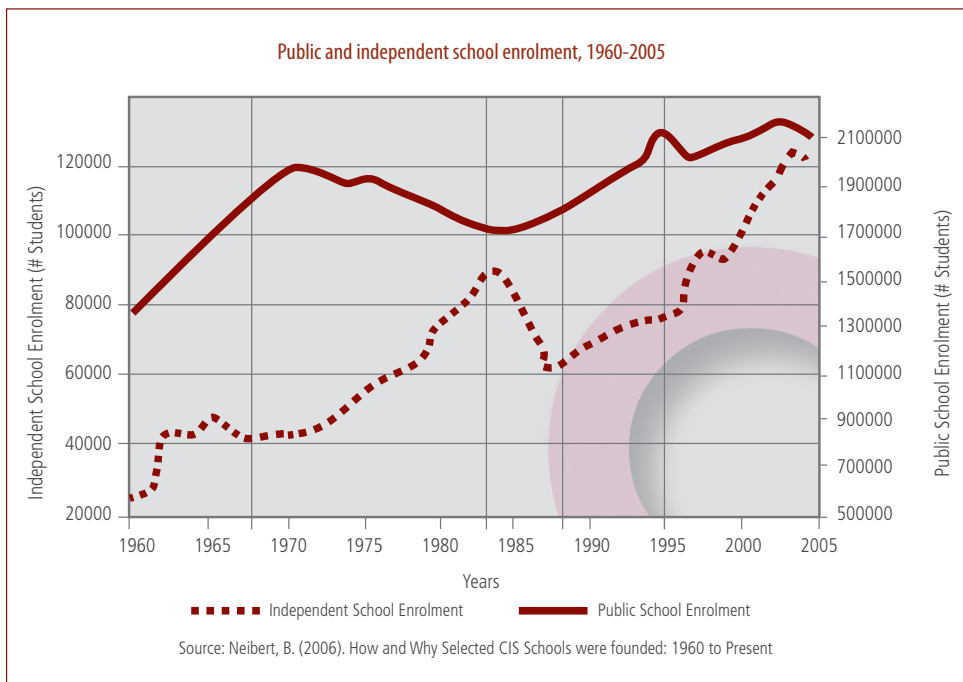
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In fact, People for Education, in their 2009 report, note that

Across the province, 172 elementary and secondary schools are closing or recommended to close between 2009 and 2012 — up from 145 in May. A further 163 schools are under review.²⁷

Newspaper reports confirm the trend: “We are a declining board,” said June Rogers, Superintendent of Education, Aboriginal Education and Schools for the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board. “Between 2007-2008 and the 2008-2009 school years, Rogers says the board saw a 327 student drop in enrolment numbers for the whole board.”²⁸ Other stories show that the problem is indeed province wide.²⁹



Yet, as enrolments decrease, government expenditures for public elementary and secondary education continue to increase: from 2002-2003 to 2009-2010 public elementary and secondary school funding increased from \$14.4 billion to a projected \$19.5 billion.³⁰

This 36 per cent increase does include more than per student funding (eg.: costs of classroom aids for students with special needs, of French Immersion or English as a Second Language). Yet the unresponsive nature

of the Ministry of Education and ever increasing budgets in spite of declining enrolment remains the main point.

While public school funding increases as enrolment decreases, the independent school system in Ontario continues to receive no government funding, even as enrolment continues to increase.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Whereas the public (including Roman Catholic) school system in Ontario has seen consistent enrolment decline since 2003, the independent school system has seen an overall percentage increase of more than seven per cent in 2001-2002 and 1.4 per cent in 2004-2005.³¹

Consider the following:

Between 1960 and 2005, the public education system had a gross increase in enrolment of 52.5 per cent. In the same period, independent school enrolment grew at a rate of almost 357 per cent.³² During this same period, independent school enrolment as a percentage of total student enrolment increased from 1.85 to 5.34 per cent.³³

The increase in independent school enrolment cannot account for the total decline in enrolment in the public system. And the very fact that students are leaving the public school environment raises questions as to why this might be. Again, the Declining Enrolment Working Group predicts that enrolment levels will begin to rise again "sometime between 2012 and 2020," however they give no reason for this predicted increase. How long will funding for a shrinking system increase while increasing numbers of parents choose to educate their children elsewhere?

WHAT DO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO LOOK LIKE?

Ontario Ministry of Education numbers show that there are almost 1000 independent schools in the province. They are found in towns and cities both small and large, rural and urban, and serve a variety of socio-economic groups.³⁷ To give a few examples:

- New Beginnings Christian School is relatively new to Newmarket, Ontario, starting in 1998, and has tuition costs ranging from \$2600 for junior kindergarten to \$6200 for senior high.³⁸
- South Simcoe Montessori and Elementary School was founded in 1997 and has an annual tuition of approximately \$7300 per student in grade 1-8.³⁹
- An-Noor School was established in 1995 and has an enrolment of between 250 and 300 students with a sliding scale of tuition giving deductions to families with more than one child enrolled, beginning at tuition levels of approximately \$2800 annually.⁴⁰
- Colin MacDonald Community School was founded in 1993 with an enrolment of eight students and by 2003 had a student population of 110.⁴¹ Tuition cost for one year of elementary school is \$8000 with 10 per cent reductions for each subsequent child from the same family.⁴²

Independent schools vary in size and tuition levels and are situated all across the province of Ontario.

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WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OTHER PROVINCES?

Alberta

Alberta allows for government funding of a variety of types of schools: charter, independent and special education. Registered private schools receive no funding. They meet the basic registration requirements established by the Minister of Education, are not required to teach the *Alberta Programs of Study* but are required to have outcomes consistent with *The Goals and Standards Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta*. Their instructors are not required to have Alberta Teaching Certificates.

On the other hand, some Accredited Private Schools are funded. There are three categories of accredited private schools.

- Accredited non-funded are mostly language and culture schools but some focus on adult education.
- Accredited funded are entitled to partial provincial funding for meeting educational standards. Students write the provincial tests and are taught the Alberta Programs of Study by Alberta certificated teachers. Schools receive either Level 1 (60 per cent) or Level 2 (70 per cent) funding.
- Designated Special Education Private Schools (DSEPS) serve only students with special needs. These schools provide education services and receive special education funding at rates equal to those provided to the public system. These schools meet the same accountability requirements for this special education funding as public schools.

THE FINANCES

Ontario Ministry of Education numbers state that independent elementary and secondary school enrolment in 2005 was 119,584.³⁴ Statistics Canada states that the average expenditure per public school student in Ontario in 2004 was \$9,200.³⁵ In 2005 alone, independent schools should have saved the Ontario Ministry of Education \$1,100,172,800.³⁶

Parents who send their children to independent schools pay the same tax rates as their neighbours whose children attend public schools. Yet parents of independent school students must also shoulder the costs of tuition for that school. These parents are paying twice for choosing a non-public education for their children.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OTHER PROVINCES?

British Columbia

British Columbia also allows funding for independent schools. There are four categories of independent schools:

Group 1 schools

Group 1 schools are independent schools which receive 50 per cent of their local school district's per student operating grant on a per full time equivalent student basis. They meet the same standards as other public schools in British Columbia—they employ certified teachers and follow the same program standards.

Group 2 schools

Group 2 schools are independent schools which meet the same requirements as Group 1 schools, and receive per-student operating grants at the 35 per cent level, because the school's per-student operating costs exceed those of the local school district.

Group 3 schools

Group 3 schools are independent schools which receive no funding and are not required to employ BC certified teachers or follow British Columbia curriculum.

Group 4 schools

Group 4 schools are independent schools which are also unfunded. They cater mainly to non-provincial students. They meet the same educational program requirements as Group 1.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current political climate casts independent schools as standing in opposition to unity and equity goals for Ontario. These schools are simultaneously portrayed as being exclusively for the wealthy. This is far from the truth, upon examining the long list of independent schools across Ontario. Meanwhile, the quality of education in Ontario is consistently ranked lower than other provinces.⁴³ Parents are seeking out independent schools in greater numbers for the variety, opportunity and better quality education they provide. Ontario should follow the example of British Columbia or Alberta to help parents find and pay for educational options suitable for their families. It is in this way the Ontario government will serve the choices families are already making.

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 "In most comparisons of student achievement over the past 25 years, Ontario students have performed poorly relative to students in Alberta, BC, and Quebec."



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