



# Exploring Alberta's Independent School Landscape

Diversity, Growth, and Trends

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## Key Points

- Alberta has a plural education model, offering what is perhaps the most diverse approach to K–12 schooling in Canada. Despite the pluralism that exists across Alberta’s fully taxpayer-funded schools, some families still choose to send their children to independent schools.
- This paper applies a typology of independent schools, developed in previous Cardus research, to identify the types of independent schools that exist in Alberta, and the number of schools and enrolment in each type.
- While the enrolment growth in the independent school sector is outpacing the enrolment growth in the province as a whole, only one net new independent school has been created in Alberta since 2013–14. Data suggests that growth in enrolment is due to existing schools becoming larger and more students enrolling as supervised home education or shared-responsibility students. That said, growth has not translated to an increase in pluralism understood as additional school choices and options.
- “Elite” schools are uncommon in the sector. Alberta independent schools tend to be small community-oriented schools: Seventy-five percent of all independent schools in the province enrol fewer than 300 students, and most of these are Religious and Special Emphasis schools.
- Three-quarters of independent schools belong to a school association. Membership within school associations provides an additional layer of accountability beyond that of government regulation, and contributes to robust expressions of educational pluralism.
- The Alberta government should continue to encourage the presence of meaningful pluralism by supporting new and existing independent schools that meet requirements, so that families have access to options that best fit their education needs.

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## Introduction

Alberta has a plural education model, offering what is perhaps the most diverse approach to K–12 schooling in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Across the landscape of fully taxpayer-funded schools, there are district (public) schools, constitutionally protected separate (e.g. Catholic) schools, constitutionally protected Francophone schools, and schools run by First Nations on reserves, among others. Within the district, separate, and Francophone systems, there are schools with particular pedagogical or religious programs, known as alternative schools. In addition, Alberta is the sole jurisdiction in Canada that has charter schools.

Beyond these fully taxpayer-funded options, a variety of independent schools also exist. The enrolment growth in the independent sector is outpacing the enrolment growth in the province as a whole. This paper applies a typology of independent schools, developed in previous Cardus research that is focused on schools in Ontario, to identify the types of independent schools that exist in Alberta, and the number of schools and enrolment in each type.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the paper examines the schools' geographic distribution, how they deliver the education, and other key factors that define Alberta's independent school landscape.

## Research Method

Replicating the earlier Cardus study, a framework-analysis methodology was used to design and apply a typology of schools. Although typically used in the field of health care, this methodology has been used in education research and for assessing website content. It involves a five-stage process: familiarization, thematic-framework identification, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation. The process is both a logical and intuitive one, involving judgements about meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The researchers used the most recent list of schools available at the time of writing (June 27, 2023) from Alberta Education's schools and school authority information reports, along with the most recent enrolment data (October 31, 2022).<sup>4</sup> In the

<sup>1</sup> A. von Heyking, "Alberta, Canada: How Curriculum and Assessments Work in a Plural School System," Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, June 2019, <http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/62962>; A. Berner, "Good Schools, Good Citizens: Do Independent Schools Contribute to Civic Formation?," Cardus, June 2021, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/good-schools-good-citizens/>.

<sup>2</sup> D. Hunt, J. DeJong VanHof, and J. Los, "Naturally Diverse: The Landscape of Independent Schools in Ontario," Cardus, 2022, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/naturally-diverse-the-landscape-of-independent-schools-in-ontario/>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ritchie and L. Spencer, "Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Policy Research," in *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, ed. A. Bryman and R.G. Burgess (London: Routledge, 1994), 173–94, as cited in A. Srivastava and S.B. Thomson, "Framework Analysis: A Qualitative Methodology for Applied Policy Research," *Journal of Administration and Governance* 4, no. 2 (2009): 72–79, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14078/730>.

<sup>4</sup> Alberta Education, "School and Authority Information Reports," Government of Alberta, June 2023, <https://education.alberta.ca/alberta-education/school-authority-index/everyone/school-authority-information-reports/>; Alberta Education, "School and Authority Student Population Data," Government of Alberta, accessed October 2022, <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/educ-school-enrolment-data-2022-2023.xlsx>.



second step, the researchers began identifying and coding for emerging themes, based on information about the schools that was included in the school and school authority information reports. A provisional set of themes and definitions were already in existence from the earlier study, which was used as the starting point for the indexing step of visiting school websites, social-media profiles, publicly accessible school-association membership listings, and performing other search-engine queries to further develop, refine, and test categories and assign schools to them. School addresses were entered into Google Maps (or equivalent) to identify a school's location and confirm its existence. For most of the 221 independent schools in the school and school authority information reports, this process provided sufficient information for the purposes. For twenty-one listings for which no information was available online, the street-address search was the only source of data outside of the entry in the report. Of these, the researchers could confidently identify twenty as parochial or Mennonite schools, but could not make a judgement on one school and therefore typed it as Unclassified.

Prior to the third step, indexing, the researchers agreed on a provisional revised set of categories and definitions specific to the Alberta context. Indexing was then done by each researcher working and coding independently. At stage four, charting, the researchers went back through each type, debating its relevance, attributes, and alignment with the literature, with the goal of seeking intercoder agreement (that is, each coder assigning the same codes to the same items), to gauge and help strengthen the reliability of the typing and coding. The intent was to achieve definitions that are precise and objective enough to be replicable but also flexible enough to capture the diversity of the sector and the uniqueness of individual schools. This fourth stage was done collaboratively, performing data analysis on each type and subtype, and on each school that was assigned multiple types. Where the researchers disagreed, the typology was refined until its coding application resulted in agreement at least 95 percent of the time. For the remaining few schools, the lead author made the final decision.

After coding for the entire data set, the last step was mapping and interpretation. At this stage, the final draft of the typology was written. The schools were then aggregated according to the final set of types and subtypes and the researchers performed data analysis through frequency reporting and cross-tabulation. Crosstab analyses were performed in selected instances to better understand the characteristics and distribution of schools in the sector, such as comparison of school type by school size.

## Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on schools' self-reported information, presented in Alberta Education's school and school authority information reports and on school websites, social media, and elsewhere. These latter media serve an important marketing purpose and, to that end, may express a school's goals and aspirations more than its current reality or may otherwise misrepresent important



elements. The researchers sought to mitigate this limitation in four ways. (1) The framework-analysis approach ensured multiple touchpoints and perspectives of the data. (2) The types and subtypes were written to be as specific and objective as possible. (3) The researchers sought to identify not merely surface characteristics but the underlying evidence for placement in the various types and subtypes (this required deep familiarity with the sector). And (4) the interpretive data analysis was controlled through intercoder reliability, feedback, and subsequent adjustment.

A second limitation is that in visiting each school's website and other online assets, the researchers relied on what accumulates to hundreds of data sources. It is possible that the researchers missed some features of some schools or miscategorized some schools purely due to researcher error.

## Typology

### Defining Independent Schools

For the purpose of this study, an independent school in Alberta is—to use the government's terminology—a private school that is accredited funded, accredited non-funded, or registered. The meaning of these three terms is explained further below. Independent schools are governed by Alberta's *Education Act* and *Private Schools Regulation*.<sup>5</sup>

Following Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, this research views independent schools as distinct from other kinds of schools in four fundamental ways.<sup>6</sup>

- 1. Ownership and Operation.** In Alberta, all independent schools are owned and operated independently of the government.
- 2. Financing.** Independent schools in Alberta are typically non-profit charities. Partial taxpayer funding is available to accredited funded schools, to be used for operating expenses only. Capital expenses, such as buildings and equipment, must be met entirely through tuition or donations.
- 3. Governance.** Whereas district schools have publicly elected or appointed boards, independent schools are governed by boards that are accountable to the schools' parents, donors, and others in its specific community of support.
- 4. Purpose.** District schools exist to provide an education that meets the needs of the province's population as a whole. Within this population, however, some parents and their children have needs or desires that the universal system does not or cannot meet. Most independent schools therefore

<sup>5</sup> *Education Act*, SA 2012, c E-0.3, <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/e00p3>; *Private Schools Regulation*, Alta Reg 127/2022, <https://www.alberta.ca/education-guide-regulations>.

<sup>6</sup> D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt. "A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada," Fraser Institute, June 2016, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/a-diverse-landscape-independent-schools-in-canada>.

provide a more targeted school experience. They offer a particular pedagogy or curriculum, integrate the education with a particular religious identity, or serve a particular type of student.

The sources of school-count data and enrolment data used in this study do not indicate the designation of accredited funded, accredited non-funded, and registered. A Freedom of Information request provided the researchers with the school counts and enrolment counts of the three types of schools for the 2021–22 school year. These counts are given in the following paragraphs in order to reveal the general distribution across the three types. These counts are not used elsewhere in this report as they did not allow for analysis across type or subtype.

The majority of independent schools in the province are accredited funded, with 129 schools (77.7 percent of the independent school sector) in this category, and 36,857 students (98.0 percent of the independent school sector’s reported enrolment).<sup>7</sup> To be eligible for funding, accredited funded schools must have been in operation for at least one year, employ provincially certificated teachers, use the government curriculum, and have a certificated principal, among other requirements. They must be registered as a non-profit or be incorporated under the *Societies Act*, which has specific governance and fiscal requirements. Parents’ participation in the school’s governance must be ensured through positions on an operating board or advisory council.

Based on counts from the 2021–22 school year, thirteen independent schools (7.8 percent of the independent school sector) are accredited non-funded, with 459 students (1.2 percent of the sector’s reported enrolment). They do not receive any taxpayer funding. They are not required to use the government curriculum, and their principals do not need certification, but they must employ provincially certificated teachers.<sup>8</sup>

There are twenty-four (14.5 percent of the sector) registered schools, with 281 students (0.7 percent of the sector’s reported enrolment). These schools do not receive any taxpayer funding and are not authorized to grant credit for senior-high school courses.

Within the accredited funded and accredited non-funded categories, Alberta Education recognizes several further categories: heritage-language schools, early childhood services (ECS) private operators, and designated special education schools.

The present report excludes heritage-language schools from all school-count data and enrolment data. Heritage-language schools are accredited funded or accredited non-funded schools that operate outside of regular school hours and provide language and culture courses only. Students enrolled in them are also enrolled in another school for courses in other subjects.

<sup>7</sup> Some schools do not report enrolment.

<sup>8</sup> Alberta Education, “Establishing an Independent (Private) School: Application Process and Requirements,” Government of Alberta, March 2024, <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/establishing-an-independent-private-school-application-process-and-requirements>.

The present report also excludes ECS private operators from all school-count data and enrolment data. Note, however, that some ECS private operators offer kindergarten and grade 1 in addition to pre-school programs. These students are excluded from the enrolment counts reported in this study, because the researchers did not have a way of disaggregating them from the pre-school enrolments. Further, some K–12 independent schools also offer early childhood education. These ECS students are included in the enrolment counts because the researchers did not have a way of disaggregating them from the K–12 enrolments.

The present report includes designated special education schools in all school-count data and enrolment data. These are accredited funded schools that serve mostly or entirely students with disabilities, and receive additional funding from Alberta Education in support of student needs.

Data on homeschooling is excluded from this study, but it is important to note that Alberta Education recognizes forms of homeschooling in which the student has some involvement with a school (“supervised home education” and “shared responsibility” programs). These students are presumably included in the schools’ enrolment numbers. The researchers did not have a way of disaggregating these students from the data.

## **School Types**

This study uses the typology created for the previous Cardus research on the independent school landscape in Ontario.<sup>9</sup> All schools listed in Alberta’s school and school authority information reports were assigned to distinct types that the researchers believed best described the school’s nature and purpose. Information concerning nature and purpose was collected from each school’s website, from any description provided by a school association to which it belonged, and from other reports and descriptions discovered through web searches. Most of the pertinent information was collected from the website sections titled “Home,” “About,” “Mission,” or similar.

For the large majority, the school type was readily evident. For some, more than one type was identified (as a hypothetical example, Islamic Montessori). These multi-type schools were assigned a primary type and a secondary type. No school was identified as having a tertiary type (unlike in the Ontario study). The schools’ primary purpose was usually readily evident, but in a very small minority of instances, judgment calls were ultimately made. For example, is the purpose of a hypothetical Islamic Montessori school to provide an Islamic education via the Montessori method, or is it a Montessori school that incorporates the Islamic faith (or some aspect of the Islamic religion or culture)? The former would be coded as Religious (primary type), Islamic (subtype), as well as Special Emphasis (secondary type), Montessori (subtype). The latter would be coded as Special Emphasis (primary type), Montessori (subtype), as well as Religious (secondary type), Islamic (subtype). In each instance,

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of the typology in Hunt, DeJong VanHof, Los, “Naturally Diverse,” 13–14.

such judgements took considerable investigation, but using the school's own mission statement, vision statement, core values statement, program and course offerings, history, and other purpose-identifying factors, the researchers attempted to make such distinctions.

Unless otherwise indicated below, the resulting typology is identical to that used in the previous Ontario study.

### **1. Religious**

A religious independent school is defined as one having a primarily religious identity, purpose, or formal affiliation that is clearly stated or emphasized in the school's mission statement, name, or in the About, Educational Philosophy, or similar section of the school's website.

If the school described itself as having a religious connection, founding, or heritage but did not meet the criteria of the paragraph above, it was assigned another type as its primary type, and Religious was assigned as its secondary type.

### **2. Special Emphasis**

Special Emphasis type is defined as a school that serves a specific student population (such as special needs), offers a particular curricular emphasis (such as music), or operates with a distinct educational philosophy or pedagogical approach (such as Waldorf). The special emphasis is clearly stated or emphasized in the school's mission statement, name, or in the About, Educational Philosophy, or similar section of the school's website. The special emphasis is not an optional track or appendage to the school's overall identity but appears to be a core purpose for the school's existence.

If a special emphasis was judged to exist, but not as the school's primary purpose or identity, another type was assigned as primary, and Special Emphasis as secondary.

### **3. Top Tier**

Top Tier is the name chosen for those schools that are commonly thought of as "elite," with competitive admissions policies, high academic standards, excellent facilities, and tuition rates that are significantly higher than that typically found in other independent school types. Although the researchers believe that the "top" school for each student is the one that is the best fit for them, the term Top Tier is used for this type as a better descriptor than "elite."

In the earlier Ontario-based research, membership in one of five independent school associations that are generally viewed as the most prestigious was used as a proxy for inclusion in this type. However, the analysis of Alberta generated very few schools that maintain these memberships. Thus, in this study, Top Tier type was applied, at the researchers' discretion, to schools whose admissions, academic standards, facilities, and tuition rates are as described in the previous paragraph.

#### **4. Preparatory**

Preparatory type are those schools that operate conventional models of schooling but whose primary identity is not Religious, Special Emphasis, Top Tier, or Credit Emphasis. Although “preparatory” language on the school’s website was not a requirement in the coding process, this term is used because all of these schools presented themselves as university preparatory schools. They emphasize academics, preparation for university, or university placement. The researchers recognize that many of the schools placed in these four other categories may be emphasizing and preparing their students for post-secondary education to the same or even greater degree, but a category was needed for preparatory schools that are neither Top Tier nor Credit Emphasis. These schools typically operate in more modest facilities than the typical district schools, but they seek to attract students by the quality of instruction.

#### **5. Credit Emphasis**

In the earlier Ontario-based research, Credit Emphasis were typed as those schools that emphasize offering courses or credits toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) in such a way or to such an extent that this was judged to be the school’s primary purpose or identity. The acquisition of credits toward the OSSD was clearly emphasized on the school’s home page, About, Purpose, or similar section of the school’s website. It was observed that these schools also tended to charge their fees on a by-the-credit basis and focus their recruitment on international students.

Given operators’ low bar to entry into the independent school sector in Ontario, there were numerous such schools in Ontario. There are few such schools in Alberta, likely due to the stricter regulations in this province. However, this type was maintained and its definition was adjusted for the Alberta context. In this study, Credit Emphasis is defined as those schools that exist to market an Alberta high school diploma, either on a by-the-credit basis, or primarily to international students, or both. Note that these are distinct from schools that specialize in providing an internationally based or global curriculum (which is a subtype of Special Emphasis).

#### **6. Other**

Other type was maintained for those schools for which information could be obtained beyond their listing in the school and authority information reports, but that exist for a purpose other than the six purposes described above. Although there were such schools in Ontario, no Alberta independent schools matched this type.

#### **7. Unclassified**

Unclassified type was used for one school listed in the reports but for which the researchers could not obtain any or enough information to place within another type.

## 8. Auxiliary

Auxiliary type was assigned to twenty-four entries in the Reports that did not fit the definition of independent school used in this research. Most of them are school-adjacent programs. Examples include tutoring services, after-school programs, daycares, summer camps, adult education, and heritage-language schools. If a school's website revealed that courses in a heritage language were offered only on Saturdays, the researchers deemed it to be a heritage-language school. The researchers could not be certain that all heritage-language schools were typed as Auxiliary, however, because Alberta Education does not provide a list of schools with this designation.

## Subtypes

Within the Religious and Special Emphasis types, further categorization illuminated a variety of subtypes within them.

### Religious Subtypes

- **Adventist (Christian).** A self-identified or formal association with the Seventh-day Adventist tradition of the Christian faith.
- **Alliance (Christian).** A self-identified or formal association with the Christian and Missionary Alliance tradition of the Christian faith.
- **Islamic.** A self-identified or formal association with the Islamic faith.
- **Jewish.** A self-identified or formal association with the Jewish faith.
- **Mennonite (Christian) and/or Parochial.** Parochial and/or an identity or formal association with the Mennonite, Orthodox Mennonite, Old Colony Christian, Amish, or a similar tradition within the Christian faith. Note that it is possible that a given parochial independent school is not religious. Given limited available information, and since almost all parochial schools were identified as some form of Christian, all parochial independent schools were merged into this subtype with the various Mennonite traditions.
- **Non-denominational Christian.** Self-identified with the Christian faith but without reference to any particular denomination, diocese, or sect. The great majority of these schools are evangelical, and many are members of the Association of Christian Schools International or the Koinonia Christian Education Society.
- **Reformed (Christian).** A self-identified or formal association with the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith.
- **Roman Catholic.** A self-identified or formal association with the Roman Catholic Church.



- **Other Christian.** A self-identified or formal association with a particular denomination, diocese, or sect not included above, within the Christian faith (such as Baptist, Brethren, Lutheran).
- **Sikh.** A self-identified or formal association with the Sikh faith. (In the Ontario study, Sikh schools were included under Other Religion.)
- **Other Religion.** A self-identified or formal association with a religion or faith tradition that is not included above (such as Hindu, Bahá'í, interfaith).

### Special Emphasis Subtypes

Initially, two dozen special emphases were identified. They were then reduced to a smaller set: subtypes that had fewer than four schools were combined into one subtype (Arts, Sports, and STEM) or were coded as Other Special Emphasis.<sup>10</sup> Although the intent was to define the subtypes in such a way that any given school fit only one, some schools are genuinely multi-emphasis and thus fall under more than one subtype (for example, a French Montessori school). The resulting thirteen subtypes are presented below, with reference to the literature used to develop this framework.

In some cases, a Special Emphasis school was judged to belong in more than one subtype equally. Consider the hypothetical case of an all-boys hockey-emphasis school. Would this school be best typed as Sports or as Boys-Only? How about a Distributed-Learning Nature school? These questions could likely be resolved by interviewing principals, for example, but this was beyond the study's methodological scope. In all, multiple Special Emphasis subtypes were coded for eighteen Special Emphasis schools.

- **Advanced Placement (AP).** These schools offer university-level courses through the Advanced Placement program, which is governed by the College Board. Advanced Placement programs offer a head start and increased access to American post-secondary institutions.<sup>11</sup>
- **Arts, Sports, or STEM.** The Ontario study reported three distinct subtypes here, but since each of these groups had fewer than four schools, following Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt they were collapsing into one subtype.<sup>12</sup> Arts schools offer a fine-arts emphasis.<sup>13</sup> Sports schools emphasize sports, physical

<sup>10</sup> The subtypes used in the previous Ontario study that did not meet the four-school threshold in Alberta and were placed in Other Special Emphasis are Boys/Girls, First Nation, Holistic, Micro School, Nature, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf. The Ontario study also grouped Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate schools together. In this Alberta study, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate are two subtypes, since the researchers judged these to be different pedagogical and philosophical approaches to education that should remain distinct types.

<sup>11</sup> College Board, "AP Program," <https://ap.collegeboard.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, "A Diverse Landscape."

<sup>13</sup> C.J. Stufft, "Reading to the Rhythm: Integrating Music into Literacy Instruction," *English in Texas* 45, no. 1 (2015): 21–26; K. Walker, "Fine Arts Education," Education Partnerships, January 3, 2006, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537918.pdf>.



education, or athletic development. Sports schools are not also counted as Individualized or Experiential Learning.<sup>14</sup> STEM schools emphasize science, technology, engineering, and math. Typically, STEM education is directly linked to career preparation and the development of a workforce that is scientifically and technologically literate. It is rooted in a philosophy that places a high value on the ability of science and technology to solve complex, global problems.<sup>15</sup>

- **Classical.** Rooted in the classical liberal arts tradition, these schools focus on the habits of thought through what Dorothy Sayers called “the lost tools of learning,” the trivium (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), or an interdisciplinary study of the great books (the “classics”) through the ages. Latin is typically offered as a core element of the curriculum.<sup>16</sup>
- **Distributed Learning.** These schools offer a non-traditional model of education delivery, such as homeschool partnerships, a hybrid of blended online and in-person offerings, distance learning, or a primarily remote- or home-based learning that is still connected to a teacher and school community. It is likely that distributed-learning schools enrol homeschool students in supervised home education and shared-responsibility programs.<sup>17</sup>
- **Experiential Learning.** These schools adopt a philosophy of education that roots learning within experience, contrasted with traditional models that emphasize concepts and memorization. It focuses on exploratory, play-based, and/or place-based learning, and posits that children benefit from kinesthetic development. In upper elementary and secondary schools, experiential learning can include co-op placements, real-world business and research applications in project-based learning, or travel experiences. This subtype was applied only when other experiential emphases do not apply. For example, it was not applied for Montessori, Waldorf, Nature, Sports, or Arts schools.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> M.A.F. Lounsbury and T.L. McKenzie, “Physically Literate and Physically Educated: A Rose by Any Other Name?,” *Journal of Sport and Health Science* 4, no. 2 (2015): 139–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2015.02.002>.

<sup>15</sup> National Research Council, *Successful STEM Education: A Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.17226/13230>.

<sup>16</sup> D.L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” *Hibbert Journal: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy* 46 (1948); K.W. Clark and R.S. Jain, *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2013); S.W. Bauer, “What Is Classical Education?,” *Well-Trained Mind*, June 3, 2009, <https://welltrainedmind.com/a/classical-education/>.

<sup>17</sup> D.L. Stirling, “Distributed Learning Environments,” December 8, 1997, <http://www.stirlinglaw.com/deborah/DLE.htm>; J.A. Converso, S.P. Schaffer, and I.J. Guerra, “Distributed Learning Environment: Major Functions, Implementation, and Continuous Improvement,” Learning Systems Institute, Florida State University, October 1999, 17.

<sup>18</sup> J.S. Coker et al., “Impacts of Experiential Learning Depth and Breadth on Student Outcomes,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 40, no. 1 (2017): 5–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916678265>; P. Hernández-Ramos and S. De La Paz, “Learning History in Middle School by Designing Multimedia in a Project-Based Learning Experience,” *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 42, no. 2 (2009): 151–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2009.10782545>; H.A. Hadim and S.K. Esche, “Enhancing the Engineering Curriculum through Project-Based Learning” (paper presented at the 32nd Annual Frontiers in Education Conference, Boston, MA: IEEE, November 6–9, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1109/FIE.2002.1158200>.

- **International Baccalaureate (IB).** These schools are accredited for one or more of the IB programmes: Primary Years, Middle Years, Diploma, or Career-related.<sup>19</sup> IB world schools offer internationally recognized academic programs that promote cultural awareness, second-language learning, critical thinking, and global problem solving. If a school was identified as IB-accredited on the association’s website, it was coded both as a Special Emphasis type and as affiliated with a school association.<sup>20</sup> If a school self-reported an IB-integrated curriculum but was not listed as accredited on the association’s website, it was included under the Special Emphasis type only. It is important to note that this subtype includes schools that offer IB as their only program of study and schools that offer it as one of their programs. This is one of the judgment calls made in order to reduce the overall number of subtypes.
- **Individualized.** These schools adhere to a philosophy of personalized education, in which they tailor learning experiences to each student’s needs. They typically develop differentiated learning plans and provide students the opportunity to make personal decisions about their learning. Specific curricular approaches can include Universal Design for Learning, digital management of learning, and others. Most if not all Special Education schools also fit the definition of Individualized, as do some Other Special Emphasis schools. Those subtypes are excluded from the Individualized count.<sup>21</sup>
- **International.** This subtype includes schools with either an international or a global emphasis, and excludes IB and AP schools. International schools are defined primarily in terms of student body and target audience (i.e., enrolling non-domestic students). These schools’ websites typically refer to visa requirements and have portions of their site in a language other than English. Global schools “[aim] to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, and secure societies.”<sup>22</sup> Global schools may provide a globally focused curriculum, and their mission often specifies ideas of “global citizenship” or “world school.”<sup>23</sup> Many independent schools have an international or student-exchange program, and many recruit international students, but

<sup>19</sup> International Baccalaureate, “International Education,” <https://www.ibo.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> International Baccalaureate, “Find an IB School,” <https://www.ibo.org/programmes/find-an-ib-school/>.

<sup>21</sup> S. Patrick, K. Kennedy, and A. Powell, “Mean What You Say: Defining and Integrating Personalized, Blended and Competency Education,” International Association for K–12 Online Learning, 2013, 37, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED561301.pdf>; J.D. Basham et al., “An Operationalized Understanding of Personalized Learning,” *Journal of Special Education Technology* 31, no. 3 (2016): 126–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162643416660835>.

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO, “What Is Global Citizenship Education?” January 9, 2018, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/definition>.

<sup>23</sup> E. Moizumi, “Examining Two Elementary-Intermediate Teachers’ Understandings and Pedagogical Practices About Global Citizenship Education,” Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2010, [https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=MR72914&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc\\_number=1019483268](https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=MR72914&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc_number=1019483268); J. Duarte and C. Robinson-Jones, “Bridging Theory and Practice: Conceptualisations of Global Citizenship Education in Dutch Secondary Education,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (March 6, 2022): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2048800>.

the International special emphasis was applied only if the global focus or international student body was a core emphasis.

- **Language/Culture.** This subtype encompasses language- or culture-immersion (for example, Ukrainian), French-only, and bilingual education. Bilingual schools provide dual-language learning, either offering curriculum taught in two languages (e.g., in a 50-50 ratio) or through immersion in a second language. Alberta has one French independent school, governed by the Agency for French Education Abroad, under France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>24</sup>
- **Montessori.** Rooted in the pedagogy of Maria Montessori, these schools offer an individualized approach to education that encourages children’s innate creativity and curiosity. Typically, Montessori schools focus on early and/or elementary education. While accredited Montessori schools complete a rigorous accreditation process with an accrediting body (for example, the Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators), other schools may self-identify as Montessori without formal accreditation. Schools categorized as Montessori consist of both accredited and self-identified Montessori schools.<sup>25</sup>
- **Self-Directed Learning.** This is a pedagogical approach that centres the student as the primary author of their learning. It involves learning at one’s own pace and emphasizes the use of technology in learning, with educators providing supervisory or tutoring support.<sup>26</sup>
- **Special Education.** While schooling that is inclusive of neurodiverse learning is increasingly becoming the norm within schools generally, some schools exist to provide education that is tailored for students with special needs, neurodiversity, or giftedness. These may include specific curricular approaches such as Arrowsmith programming or the Orton-Gillingham method. Special Education schools were not included under the Individualized subtype, or vice versa.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that all designated Special Education schools were placed in this subtype, but the researchers were not able to confirm this because Alberta Education does not provide a list of schools with this designation.
- **Other Special Emphasis.** Any school that did not fit into one or more of the aforementioned subtypes, but that has an identifiable educational specialty, pedagogical approach, or student demographic that is central to its purpose or identity was given the Other Special Emphasis classification.

<sup>24</sup> R.L. Oxford and C. Gkonou, “Interwoven: Culture, Language, and Learning Strategies,” *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 8, no. 2 (2018): 403–26, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2018.8.2.10>.

<sup>25</sup> Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators, “CCMA Schools,” <https://www.ccma.ca/ccma-schools/>.

<sup>26</sup> T. Timothy et al., “The Self-Directed Learning with Technology Scale (SDLTS) for Young Students: An Initial Development and Validation,” *Computers & Education* 55, no. 4 (2010): 1764–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.08.001>.

<sup>27</sup> K. McCarty, “Full Inclusion: The Benefits and Disadvantages of Inclusive Schooling; An Overview,” Azusa Pacific University, 2006, 11, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496074.pdf>.

# Results

## Number of Schools

Alberta Education maintains publicly available data in separate lists for school information and for student enrolment. These data sets are not reconciled. There are more schools listed in the school and school authority information reports than are present in the separately reported enrolment data.

The school and school authority information reports of June 27, 2023 list 221 independent schools. After excluding closures and schools typed as Auxiliary, 180 independent schools were identified in Alberta.

**Table 1. Independent Schools by School Type, Alberta, 2023**

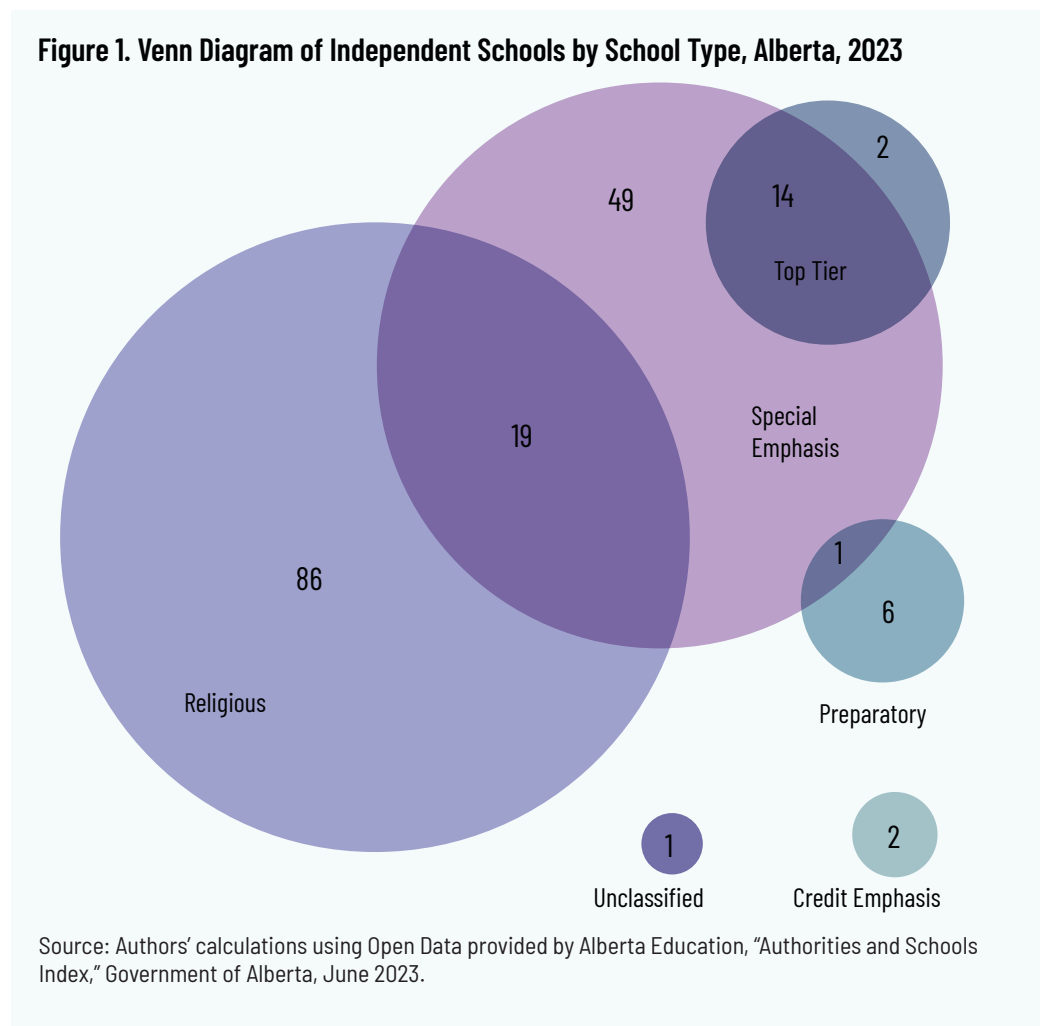
	School Count	Share of Schools (%)
Religious	105	58.3
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>55.6</b>
Secondary type	5	2.8
Special emphasis	83	46.1
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>30.6</b>
Secondary type	28	15.6
Top Tier	16	8.9
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8.3</b>
Secondary type	1	0.6
Preparatory	7	3.9
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3.9</b>
Credit Emphasis	2	1.1
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.1</b>
Secondary type	0	0.0
Unclassified	1	0.6
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.6</b>
<b>Total (Primary type)</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Schools typed as Auxiliary were removed from the data set. Only the primary types (i.e. bold cells) sum to 100 percent, due to schools with more than one type.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023, <https://education.alberta.ca/alberta-education/school-authority-index/everyone/school-authority-information-reports/>.

Of these 180 schools, 105 are Religious, eighty-three are Special Emphasis, sixteen are Top Tier, seven are Preparatory, two are Credit Emphasis, and one is Unclassified. These numbers add up to 214 because thirty-four schools fit more than one type. The remaining 146 are of just one type. Table 1 presents the 180 independent schools by primary and secondary type.

Figure 1 uses a Venn diagram to visualize the overlap of types (that is, the distribution of multi-type schools) and the share of each type in the sector.



## Enrolment

The most recent enrolment data was for the 2022–23 year (dated October 31, 2022). Some independent schools do not report enrolment numbers to Alberta Education. The researchers observed that these are mainly Mennonite/Parochial schools, along with a small number of Special Emphasis and Credit Emphasis schools. After excluding ECS private operators, schools that were closed, or schools typed Auxiliary, 146 schools were left for analysis.

Table 2 presents the enrolment for these 146 schools, by school type. The total enrolment is at least 40,160 students, since some schools do not report enrolments.

**Table 2. Enrolment by Independent School Type, Alberta, 2022–23**

School Type	School Enrolment	Share of Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Religious	25,857	64.4	77	52.7	336	171
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>23,506</b>	<b>58.5</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>171</b>
Secondary type	2,351	5.9	4	2.7	588	225
Special Emphasis	22,982	57.2	75	51.4	306	140
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>10,132</b>	<b>25.2</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>34.9</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>90</b>
Secondary type	12,850	32.0	24	16.4	535	206
Top Tier	5,731	14.3	15	10.3	382	380
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>5,443</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>380</b>
Secondary type	288	0.7	1	0.7	288	288
Preparatory	1,055	2.6	7	4.8	151	128
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>1,055</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>128</b>
Credit Emphasis	-	-	0	0.0	-	-
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
Unclassified	24	0.1	1	0.7	24	24
<b>Primary type</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Total (Primary type)</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>144</b>

Note: Only the primary types (i.e. bold cells) sum to 100 percent, due to schools with more than one type. Additionally, only schools reporting enrolment are included, thus we report only 146 schools and not the full set of 180 independent schools. The authors believe that this difference is mainly explained by all Mennonite/Parochial schools who would fall into the religious school type if their enrolment data was reported. Therefore, the true enrolment percent for religious schools is likely higher, and for other school types is likely lower than what is shown in this table.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022, <https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics>.

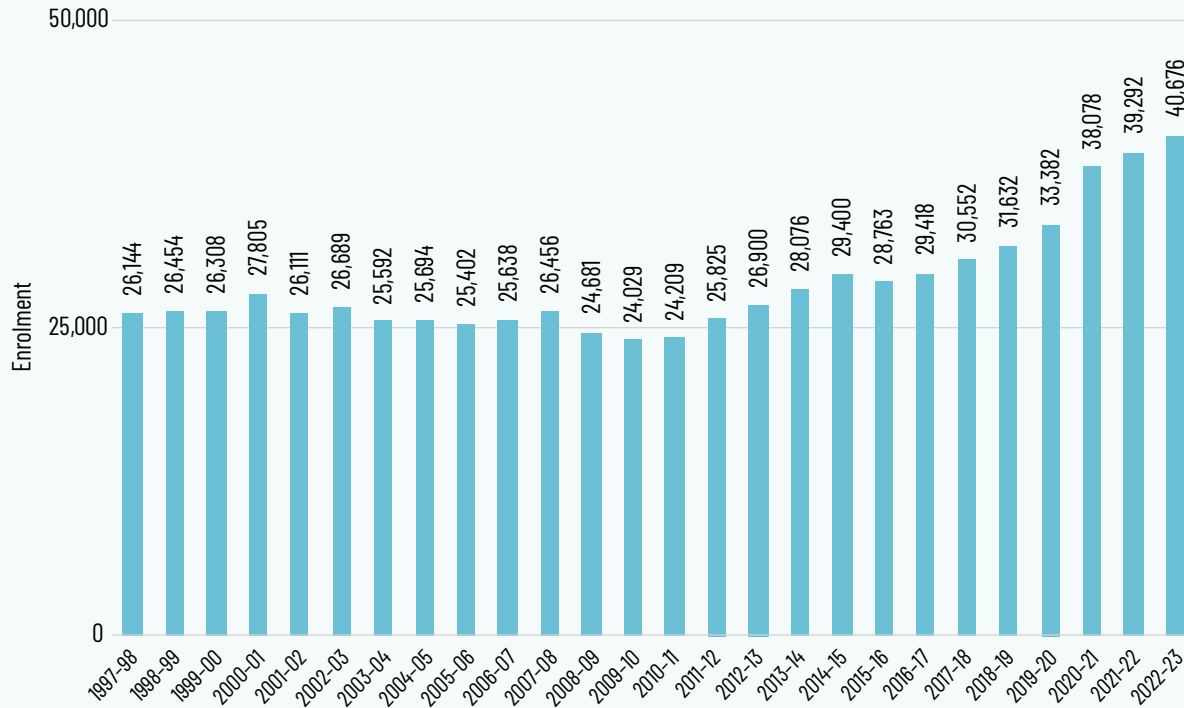
## Growth Trends

The current enrolment of independent students in Alberta can be situated within a context of about ten years of steady growth. Figure 2 shows independent school enrolment over the past twenty-six years. The enrolment increased 55.6 percent between 1997–98 (earliest available data) and 2022–23. The number of students increased from 26,144 to at least 40,676 (the actual count is likely higher).<sup>28</sup> Enrolment

<sup>28</sup> The total enrolment numbers for this figure are slightly higher than the total enrolment for the 146 schools in our final data set. This may be due to the inclusion of heritage-language schools by the government in their total enrolment numbers, whereas these schools were excluded and therefore not included in school enrolment figures.

was relatively flat in the 2000s, dipped below 25,000 students from 2008–09 through 2010–11, and has been trending upward since then, with a particularly large increase in 2020–21, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 2. Independent School Enrolment, Alberta, 1997–98 to 2022–23**



Note: Since archived student population statistics reflect total provincial student population data, researchers were unable to remove ECS and Auxiliary schools from the data.

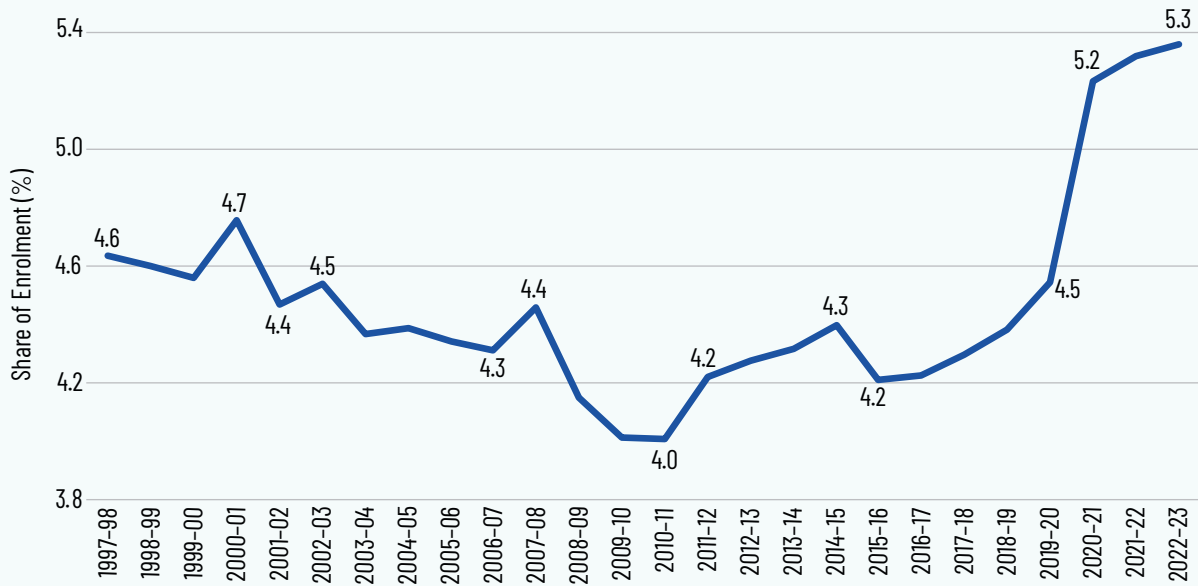
Source: Alberta Education, “Student Population Statistics,” Government of Alberta, accessed 2023, <https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics.aspx>; Alberta Education, “Student Population by Grade, School and Authority, Alberta,” Government of Alberta, accessed 2023, <https://education.alberta.ca/department/stats/students.aspx>.

Enrolment growth has not been specific to independent schools. Enrolment at all other Alberta schools also increased during this period, albeit to a lesser extent (the percent increase was 33.4). Figure 3 shows that in the 2000s (when many large Christian independent schools merged into the district system as fully funded alternative schools), the share of independent schools declined from 4.7 percent of provincial enrolment in 2000–01 to 4.0 percent in 2009–10. Since 2010–11, the independent share of enrolment has risen to 5.3 percent today. The pandemic appears to have accelerated this growth trend.

Figure 4 shows the enrolment growth across independent and non-independent schools. Enrolment in independent schools has grown nearly three times as fast as it has in other schools. Independent school enrolment grew 44.9 percent, compared to 15.2 percent for the other school types. Prior to 2019–20, the growth patterns looked similar, but beginning in 2019–20, the pandemic seems to have generated a surge in enrolment in independent schools.

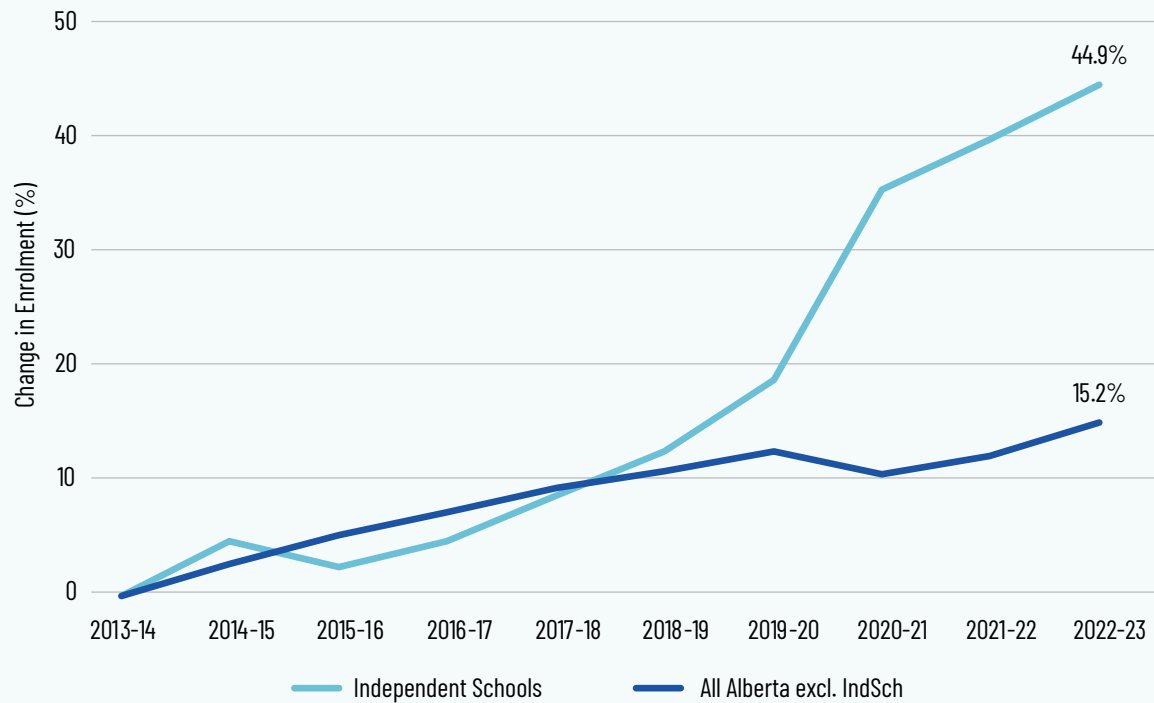


**Figure 3. Independent School Share of Total K-12 Enrolment, Alberta, 1997-98 to 2022-23**



Source: Alberta Education, "Student Population Statistics," Government of Alberta, accessed 2023; Alberta Education, "Student Population by Grade, School and Authority, Alberta," Government of Alberta, accessed 2023.

**Figure 4. Percent Change in Independent School Enrolment, Alberta, 2013-14 to 2022-23**

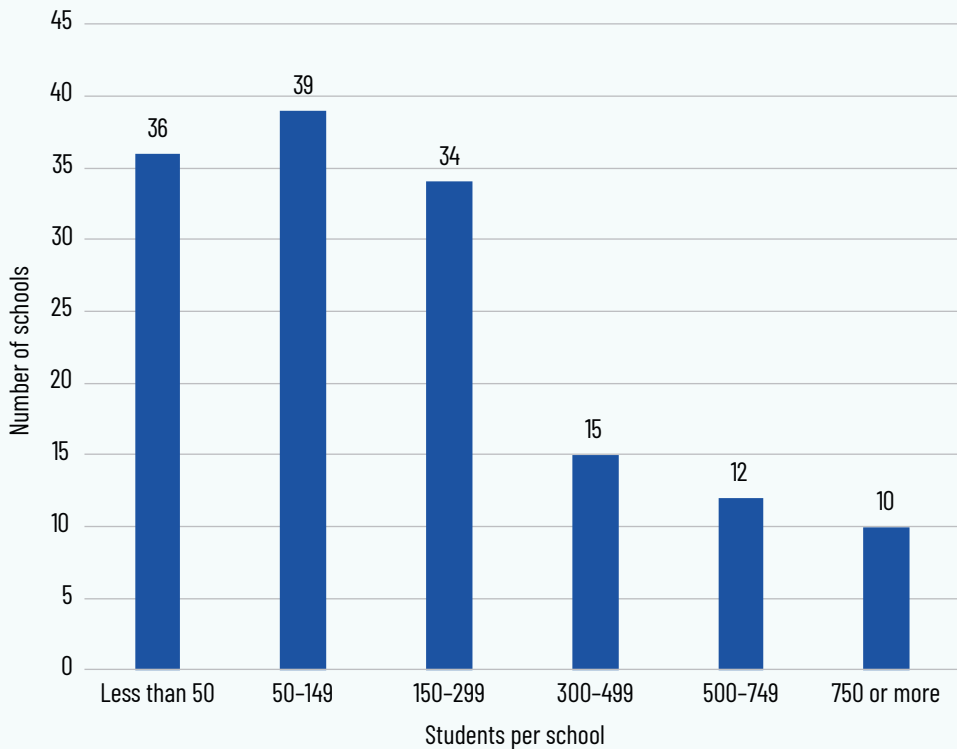


Source: Alberta Education, "Student Population Statistics," Government of Alberta, accessed 2023; Alberta Education, "Student Population by Grade, School and Authority, Alberta," Government of Alberta, accessed 2023.

## Distribution by School Size

Figure 5 demonstrates the distribution of schools by size. Of the 146 schools for which enrolment data are available, 109 schools (75 percent) have fewer than 300 students. These schools are nearly evenly distributed across the first three size categories: 24.7 percent of the schools have fewer than fifty students, 26.7 percent have 50–149 students, 23.3 percent have 150–299 students. The remaining thirty-seven schools (25.3 percent) enrol 300 or more students.

**Figure 5. Distribution of Independent Schools by Enrolment, Alberta, 2022-23**

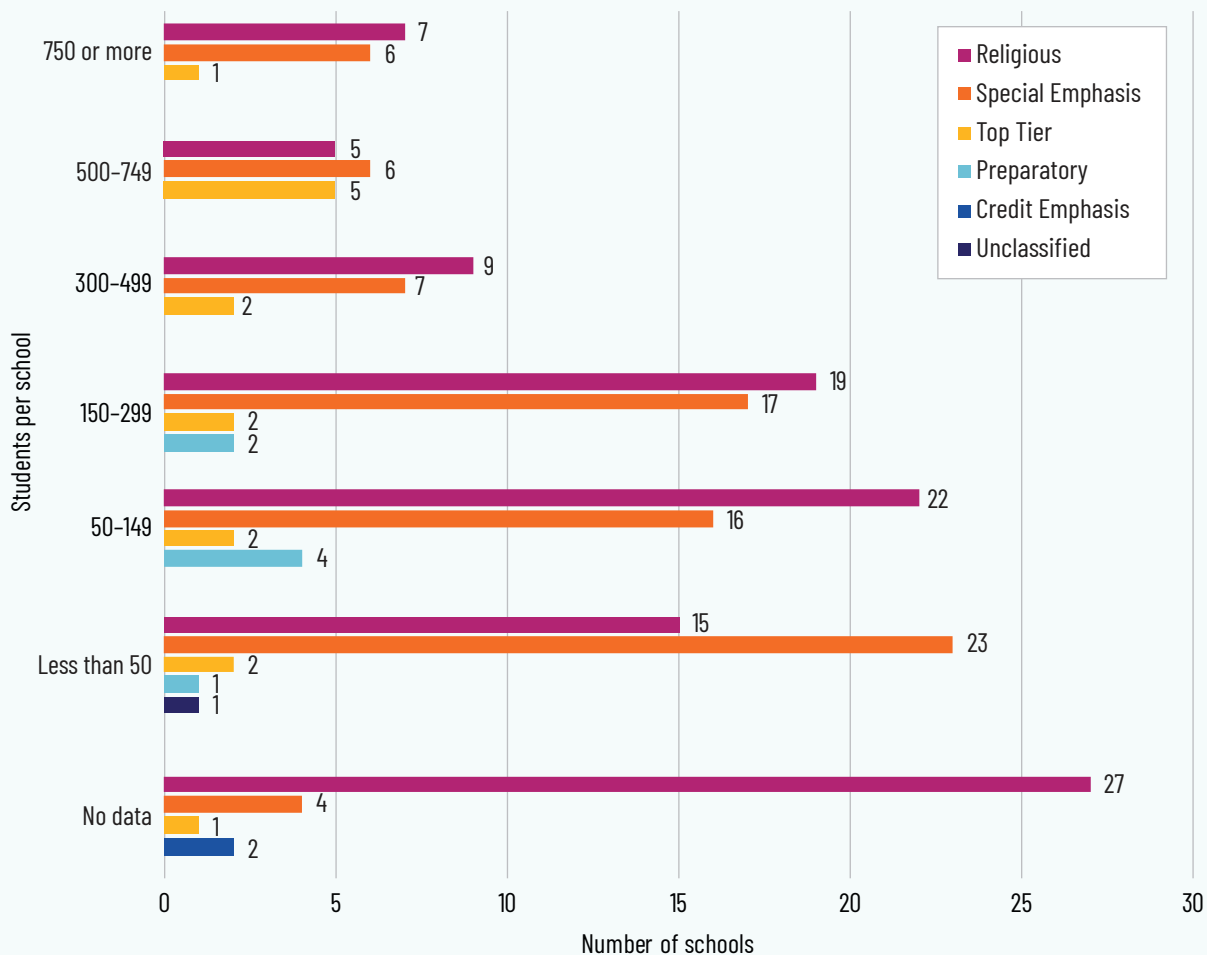


Note: This figure includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

Figure 6 identifies the type of school according to school size. Religious, Special Emphasis, and Top Tier schools are represented in each size level. Of fifteen Top Tier schools, six have more than 500 students, and over half have 300 and more students. The only other types that have schools this large are Religious (at 20 percent) and Special Emphasis (at 21.6 percent). Four of the ten schools with over 750 students are Special Emphasis Distributed Learning schools, three are Religious, and one is Top Tier. There is only a handful of large-campus independent schools in Alberta. Also of note, twenty of the twenty-seven Religious schools with no data are Mennonite and/or Parochial schools, which do not publicly report enrolments.

**Figure 6. Number of Independent Schools by School-Size Categories, Combined School Types, Alberta, 2023**



Note: Total sums to more than 180 schools due to schools with multiple types (e.g. seven of the ten independent schools with 750 or more students are Religious, and six of the ten are Special Emphasis). The school count is current as of June 27, 2023, while the enrolment data is current as of October 31, 2022. No enrolment data is publicly available for schools that opened after the latter date.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

## Distribution by Program Type

Alberta Education's School and Authorities Information Reports include a data point on whether the school provides home-education supervision, shared responsibility, outreach programs, and online learning. The data do not distinguish between partial, blended, and full-time online learning, but hybrid schooling is at least implicitly recognized by the government's differentiation between home education and shared-responsibility programs.<sup>29</sup> In schools that offer shared-responsibility programs, "the school authority is responsible for a minimum of 20 percent to a maximum of 80

<sup>29</sup> E. Wearne, "National Hybrid Schools Project," Kennesaw State University, Georgia, <https://www.kennesaw.edu/coles/centers/education-economics-center/national-hybrid-schools-project/>.

percent of the student’s program in Grades 1 to 12.”<sup>30</sup> Students below this range are enrolled as home-education students (omitted from our analysis), and above this range they are enrolled as regular or online students.

In some cases, outreach programs are offered as an educational alternative for high school students for whom traditional schooling does not meet their needs.<sup>31</sup> Since these programs are not mutually exclusive of online learning, and since the province counts students enrolled in home education and shared-responsibility programs as both homeschool students and students registered at a school, this paper reports on online-learning programs only.

Eighty-one schools (45.0 percent) offer online learning in some capacity, but this count decreases to seventy-seven schools when schools without reported enrolment are excluded (table 3). In total, schools that offer online options enrol about two-thirds of the students with reported enrolments.

**Table 3. Enrolment in Online Learning, Independent Schools, Alberta, 2022-23**

Program Type	Enrolment	Share of Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Offers online learning	26,623	66.3	77	52.7	346	175
Site-based learning only	13,537	33.7	69	47.3	191	95
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>144</b>

Note: This figure includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.

Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta. June 2023; Alberta Education. “2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022.” Government of Alberta. 2022.

When cross-tabulating program type by school type (figure 7), the share of schools offering online learning is nearly the same between Religious, Special Emphasis, and Top Tier schools, at 45.7 percent, 48.2 percent, and 43.8 percent, respectively.

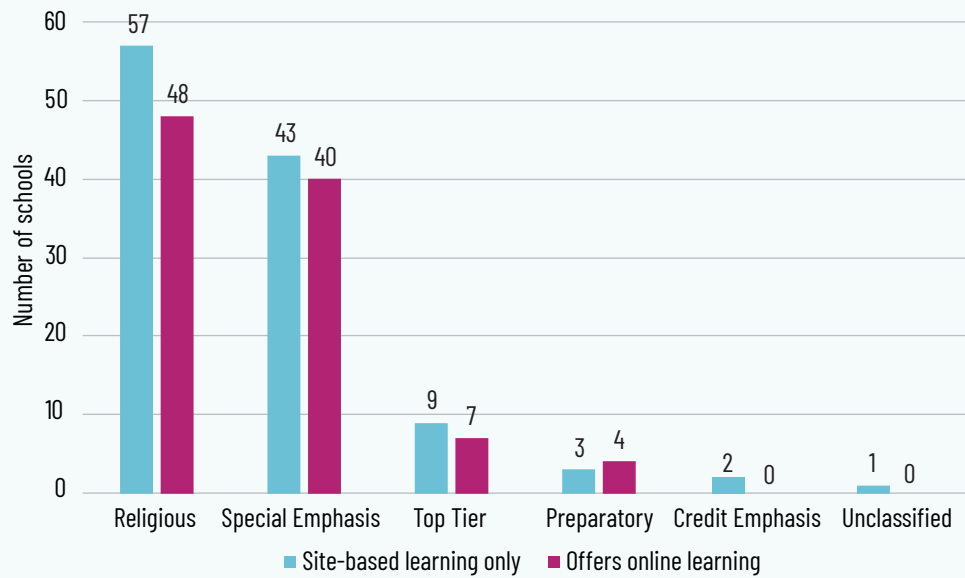
Figure 8 demonstrates the program level for which online learning takes place, whether in kindergarten, elementary, junior high, or senior high. Online-learning programs are slightly more prevalent in schools with junior and senior high program levels.

Crosstab analysis of school size, or enrolment categories, by online learning demonstrates that schools with higher enrolments are slightly more likely to offer online-learning programs (figure 9). Eight of ten schools (80.0 percent) with 750 or more students, and seven of twelve schools (58.3 percent) with 500–749 students, offer online programs. On the other hand, schools with less than fifty students tend to be site-based (twenty-two of thirty-six schools, or 61.1 percent). Schools with no enrolment data (mostly Mennonite/Parochial schools) are likely to be site-based only.

<sup>30</sup> Alberta Education, “Shared Responsibility Program,” Government of Alberta, <https://www.alberta.ca/shared-responsibility-program>.

<sup>31</sup> Alberta Education, “Outreach Programs,” Government of Alberta, <https://www.alberta.ca/outreach-programs>.

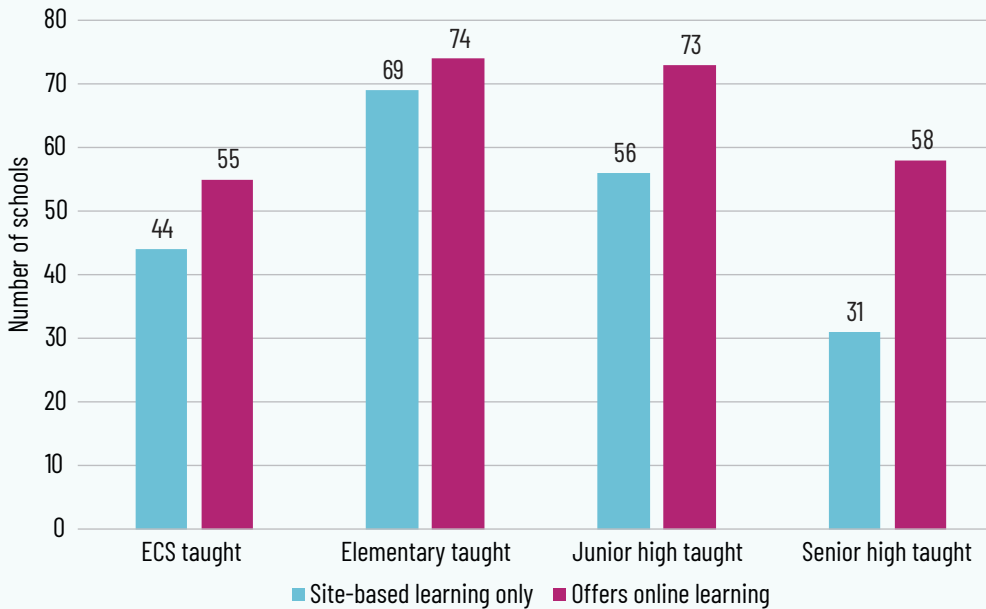
**Figure 7. Independent School Types by Program Type, Alberta, 2023**



Note: Total sums to more than 180 schools due to schools with multiple types.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

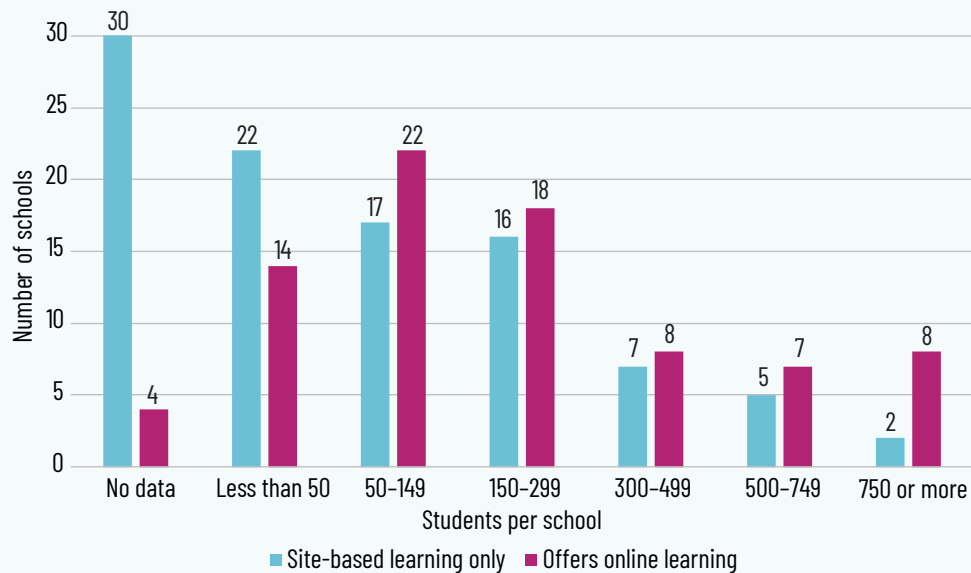
**Figure 8. Program Type by Program Level, Independent Schools, Alberta, 2023**



Note: The total exceeds the 180 school count, as some schools teach multiple program levels.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

**Figure 9. Independent School Enrolment Categories by Program Type, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

**Table 4. Independent Schools by Program Level, Alberta, 2023**

Program Level	School Count	Share of Schools (%)
ECS/Elem	13	7.2
ECS/Elem/Jr. High	32	17.8
ECS/Elem/Jr. High/Sr. High	54	30.0
Elementary only	7	3.9
Elem/Jr. High	13	7.2
Elem/Jr. High/Sr. High	24	13.3
Jr. High only	1	0.6
Jr. High/Sr. High	5	2.8
Sr. High only	6	3.3
Unknown	25	13.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

## Distribution by Program Level

Program level is delineated according to an extensive number of categories, as table 4 shows. Schools that span all program levels (ECS to senior high) are the highest share of schools (fifty-four schools, 29.2 percent). Schools that offer a full elementary and secondary experience make up a combined 43.3 percent (78 schools) of the sector. When excluding schools without reported enrolment, combined elementary and secondary schools are over half the sector (52.7 percent) and enrol 78.1 percent of the sector's students (table 5).

Figures 10 and 11 provide more nuance about the distribution of schools and enrolments by program level. Five of seven Preparatory schools and twelve of sixteen Top Tier schools offer senior high programs, compared to forty-nine of eighty-three (59.0 percent) Special Emphasis and forty-seven of 105 (44.8 percent) Religious schools. Since only accredited schools can offer senior high level courses, these can be assumed to be accredited schools. For Special Emphasis and Religious school types, the most common program levels are elementary, followed by junior high (figure 10). Figure 11 shows that smaller schools have a higher proportion of junior high, elementary, and ECS offerings than do larger schools with more than 300 students. In other words, it is more common for schools without a senior high level program to be smaller in size.

Of the schools with 500 or more students, there is a fairly even distribution across ECS, elementary, junior high, and senior high programs.

**Table 5. Enrolment in Independent Schools by Program Level, Alberta, 2023**

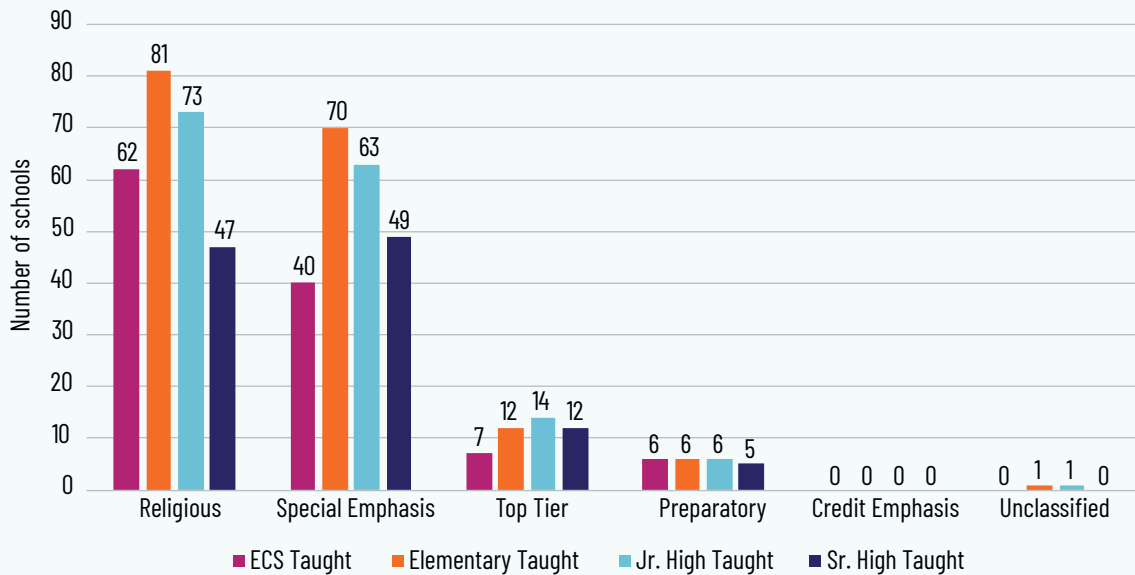
Program Level	Enrolment	Share of Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment
ECS/Elem	1,747	4.4	13	8.9	134
ECS/Elem/Jr. High	4,519	11.3	31	21.2	146
ECS/Elem/Jr. High/Sr. High	20,132	50.1	54	37.0	373
Elementary only	294	0.7	7	4.8	42
Elem/Jr. High	651	1.6	8	5.5	81
Elem/Jr. High/Sr. High	11,226	28.0	23	15.8	488
Jr. High only	26	0.1	1	0.7	26
Jr. High/Sr. High	1,243	3.1	5	3.4	249
Sr. High only	322	0.8	4	2.7	81
Unknown	-	0.0	-	0.0	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.



**Figure 10. Independent School Types by Program Level, Alberta, 2023**



Note: The total exceeds the 180 school count, as some schools are members of more than one association.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

## Distribution by School Subtypes

For two school types, Religious and Special Emphasis, the typology included subtypes.

### Religious

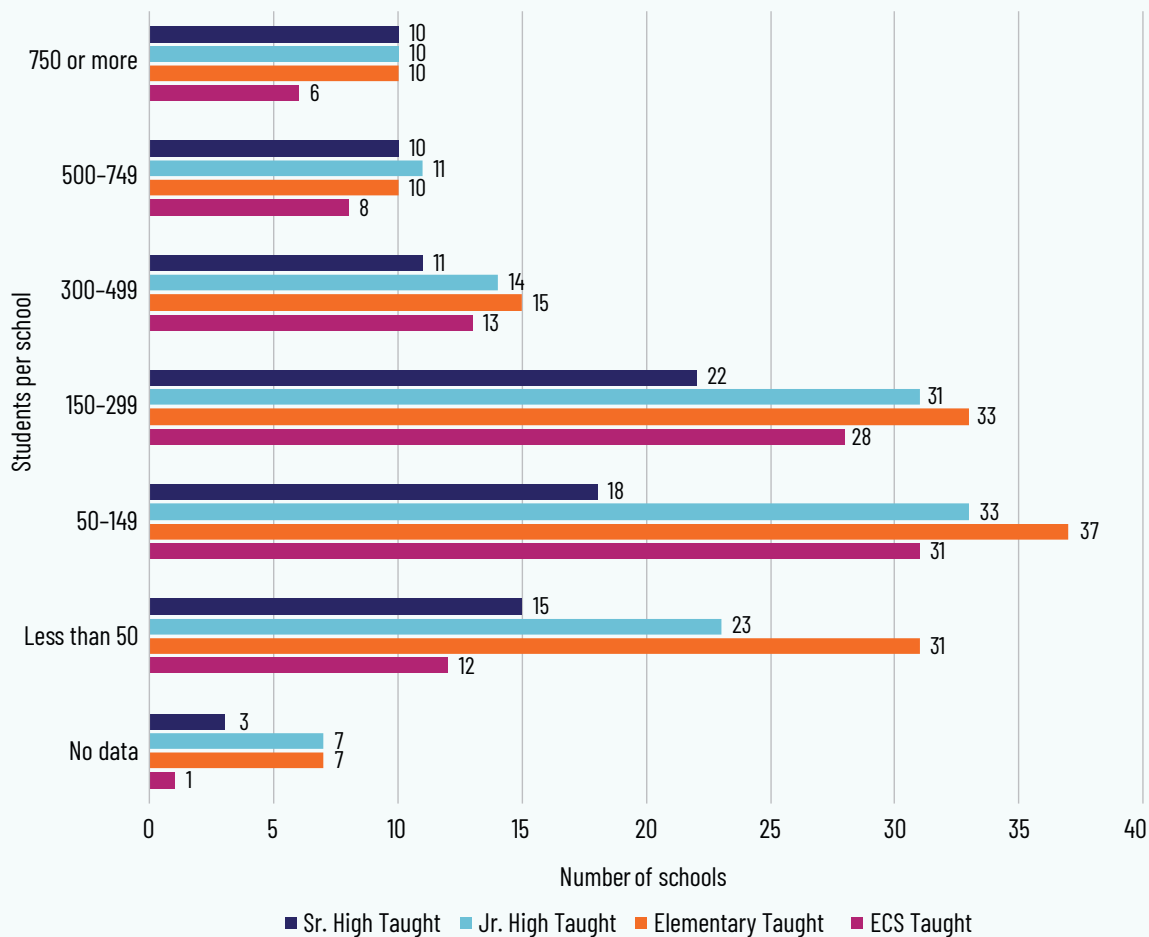
The most common independent school type in the province is Religious, at 105 schools (58.3 percent of the sector). The religious diversity within this type is considerable. There are schools reflecting the faith of six religions and, within Christianity, eleven denominations (including non-denominational and inter-denominational schools). Any religious affiliation or denomination with fewer than four schools was grouped into Other Religion or Other Christian.

Figure 12 and table 6 show the school count and enrolments of the Religious subtypes. The largest subtype is Non-denominational Christian, which encompasses nearly one-third of Religious independent schools (figure 12) and 37.1 percent of the Religious enrolment (table 6). Over 22 percent of Religious school enrolments are in Non-Christian schools, with a majority of these being in Islamic schools.

Three other observations are worth noting. Data are not available for twenty of the twenty-three Mennonite (Christian) and/or Parochial schools, so despite being the second largest in terms of school count, their rank in terms of enrolment is unknown. Second, although there are only four Roman Catholic (Christian) schools in the

independent sector, these schools are also typed as Distributed Learning schools (which offer hybrid programs). It is likely that students enrolled in these schools are also enrolled in shared-responsibility or supervised home-education programs. These four schools enrol more than one in five students in Religious schools. And third, religious subtypes that were prevalent in the previous Ontario study, such as Jewish and Anglican, are minimal or non-existent in Alberta. Three Christian school subtypes were identified in Alberta that are not present in Ontario: Alliance, Lutheran, and Brethren. Since they each had fewer than four schools, they were included in Other Christian.

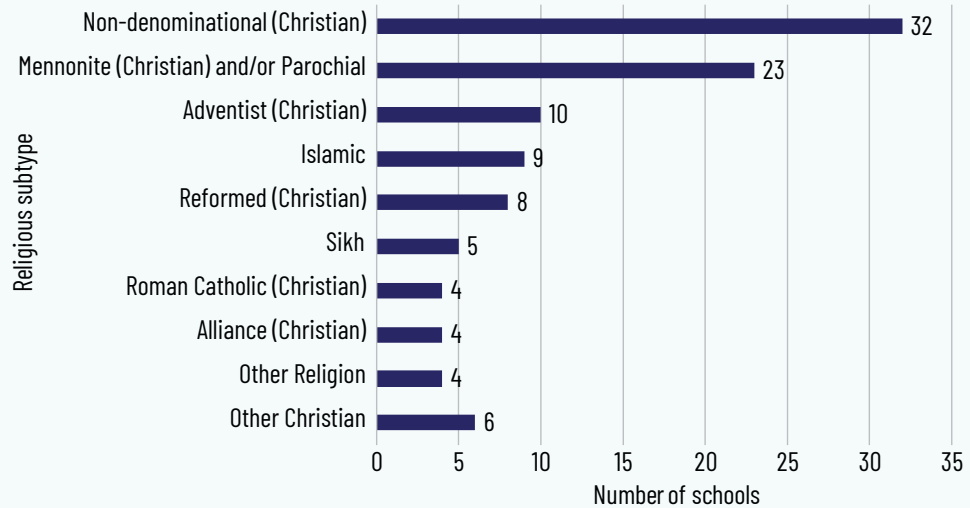
**Figure 11. Independent School Enrolment Categories by Program Level, Alberta, 2023**



Note: The school count is current as of June 27, 2023, while the enrolment data is current as of October 31, 2022. No enrolment data is publicly available for schools that opened after the latter date.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

**Figure 12. Religious Independent Schools by Subtype, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

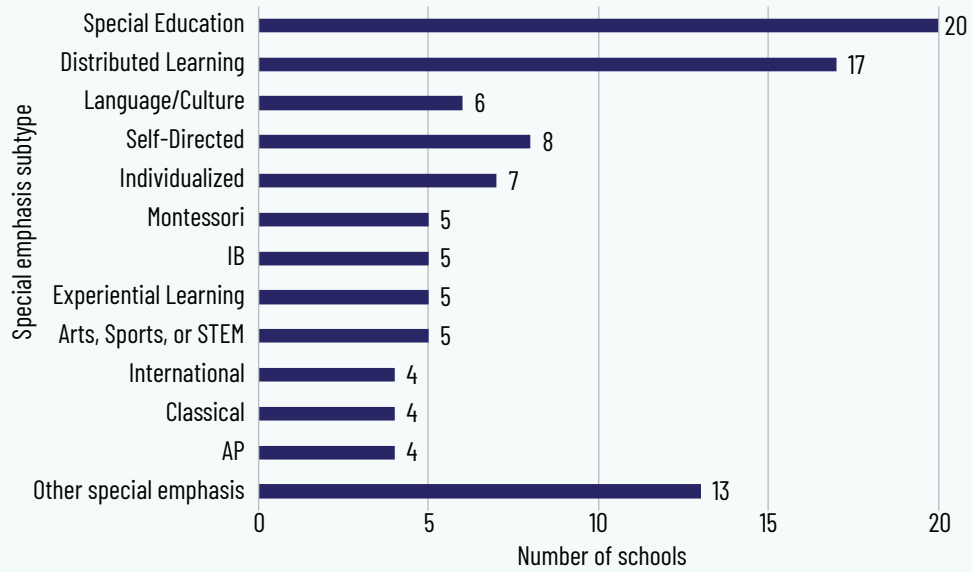
**Table 6. Enrolment in Religious Independent Schools by Subtype, Alberta, 2022-23**

Religion	Enrolment	Share of Religious Enrolment (%)	Share of Independent School Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Religious Schools (%)	Share of Independent Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Non-denominational (Christian)	9,586	37.1	23.9	30	39.0	20.5	320	155
Roman Catholic (Christian)	5,452	21.1	13.6	4	5.2	2.7	1,363	240
Islamic	3,548	13.7	8.8	8	10.4	5.5	444	276
Reformed (Christian)	2,162	8.4	5.4	8	10.4	5.5	270	207
Sikh	1,539	6.0	3.8	4	5.2	2.7	385	381
Adventist (Christian)	1,372	5.3	3.4	10	13.0	6.8	137	105
Alliance (Christian)	1,034	4.0	2.6	3	3.9	2.1	345	374
Mennonite (Christian) and/or Parochial	53	0.2	0.1	3	3.9	2.1	18	9
Other Religion	675	2.6	1.7	3	3.9	2.1	N/A	N/A
Other Christian	436	1.7	1.1	4	5.2	2.7	N/A	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,857</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>64.4</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>171</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools; of these, there are 77 Religious independent schools for which we have October 2022 enrolment data.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education. "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022." Government of Alberta. 2022.

**Figure 13. Special Emphasis Independent Schools by Subtype, Alberta, 2023**



Note: Total sums to more than 83 Special Emphasis schools due to schools with multiple emphases.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

**Table 7. Enrolment in Special Emphasis Independent Schools by Subtype, Alberta, 2022-23**

Specialty	Enrolment	Share of Specialty Enrolment (%)	Share of Independent School Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Specialty Schools (%)	Share of Independent Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Distributed Learning	11,785	51.3	29.3	16	21.3	11.0	737	187
Classical	5,034	21.9	12.5	3	4.0	2.1	1,678	62
AP	2,440	10.6	6.1	4	5.3	2.7	610	565
Individualized	2,133	9.3	5.3	7	9.3	4.8	305	196
Special Education	2,027	8.8	5.0	19	25.3	13.0	107	54
Self-Directed	1,960	8.5	4.9	8	10.7	5.5	245	83
Language/Culture	1,631	7.1	4.1	4	5.3	2.7	408	403
Arts, Sports, or STEM	1,494	6.5	3.7	3	4.0	2.1	374	281
IB	1,789	7.8	4.5	4	5.3	2.7	447	529
Experiential Learning	990	4.3	2.5	4	5.3	2.7	248	226
Montessori	371	1.6	0.9	5	6.7	3.4	74	62
International	43	0.2	0.1	2	2.7	1.4	22	22
Other special emphasis	1,569	6.8	3.9	12	16.0	8.2	121	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>22,982</b>			<b>75</b>		<b>57.2</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>140</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools; of these, there are 75 Special Emphasis independent schools for which we have October 2022 enrolment data. School count total sums to more than 75 Special Emphasis schools and student enrolment exceeds 22,982 students due to schools with multiple emphases.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

## Special Emphasis

At eighty-three schools, 46.1 percent of Alberta's independent schools have a Special Emphasis. Figure 13 ranks by school count the Special Emphasis subtypes that have four or more schools, and table 7 ranks by enrolment all subtypes with four or more schools. By school count, the most common Special Emphasis subtype is Special Education. Over half of Special Emphasis enrolment, and nearly one-third of all independent school enrolment, is in Distributed Learning schools.

## Distribution by Association Memberships

### School Associations

Many independent schools share resources and form bodies of accreditation and accountability to facilitate stability and growth, and to provide a cohesive voice in the public square. There are at least two reasons to categorize by school association. First, such affiliations help reveal shared aspects of identity. Second, examining school communities through the lens of associational affiliation reveals an additional layer of oversight, accountability, and independence beyond that of the individual school's governing board.<sup>32</sup>

In total, fifteen associations were identified with which at least one independent school in Alberta claims a relationship. Some of these associations offer more than one level of relationship ("member," "affiliate," and so on), each of which has its own definition. The present study does not extend to examining this more granular level of relationship. For the five associations that operate a website and that have at least five Alberta member or affiliate schools, school relationship was verified from their web-based directories.

In total, 133 (73.9 percent) of Alberta's 180 independent schools are members of a school association. Eighty-three (46.1 percent) belong to one school association, 50 (27.8 percent) belong to more than one, and forty-seven (26.1 percent) do not belong to any.

The Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA) serves and represents 72.8 percent of all schools in the sector (figure 14), and 86.3 percent of the schools for which enrolment data are available (table 8). For context, of all schools that have membership in an association and for which enrolment data are available, all but two are members of AISCA. Fully 91 percent of the sector's students are enrolled in an AISCA school. Every school that is a member of a non-AISCA association is also a member of AISCA.

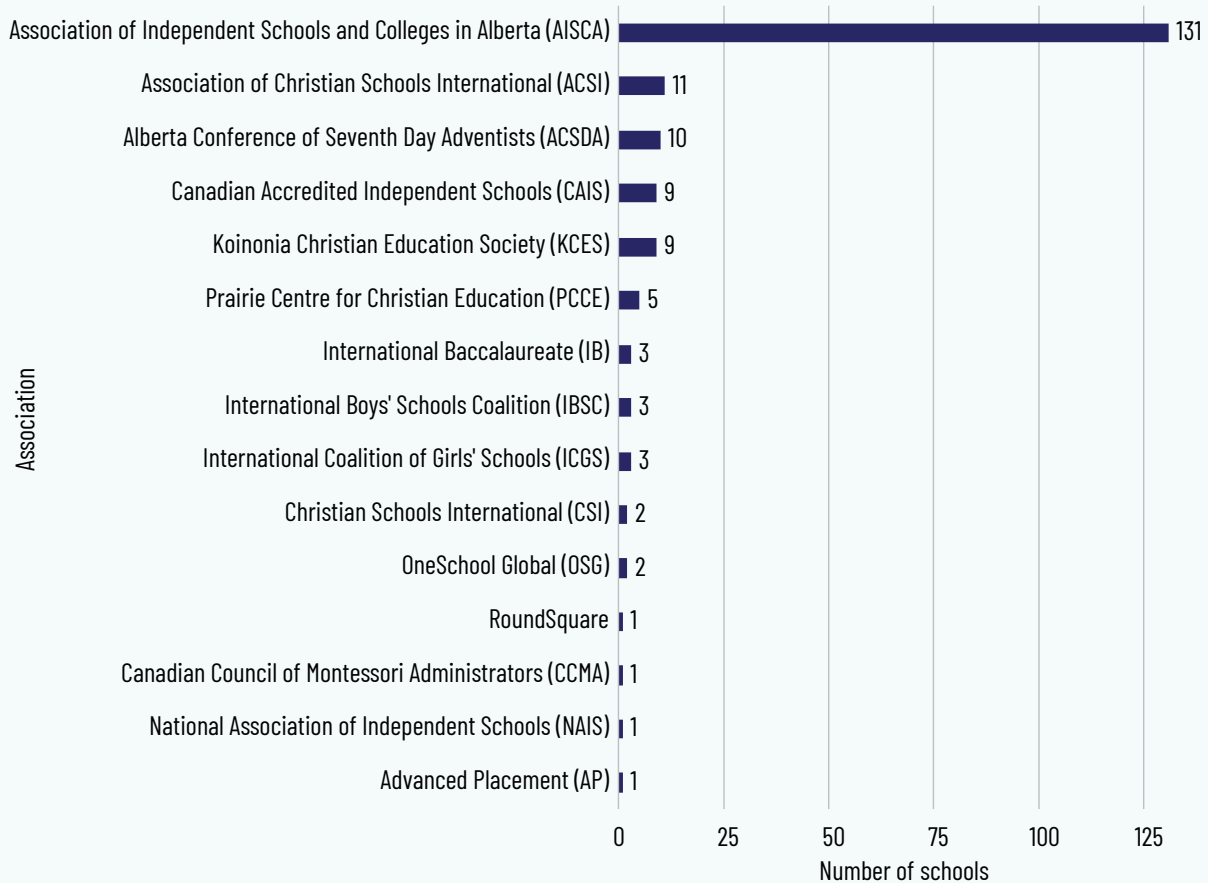
By school type, of associations with at least five schools or 1,000 students, four consist entirely of Religious schools: Association of Christian Schools International, Alberta

<sup>32</sup> The first study of Canada's independent school associations was D. Van Pelt and P.J. Mitchell, "Mapping Independent School Associations in Canada," Cardus, September 2018, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/mapping-independent-school-associations-in-canada/>.

Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, Koinonia Christian Education Society, and the Prairie Centre for Christian Education. Two are exclusively Top Tier schools: Canadian Accredited Independent Schools and International Baccalaureate. The Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta is a mix of school types.

Figures 15 and 16 segment association relationship further, by school program type and program level. About half (54.9 percent) of AISCA schools offer online learning, and seventy-seven AISCA schools offer senior high courses.

**Figure 14. Independent School Associations in Alberta, 2023**



Note: This list only includes schools with verified membership (or affiliation). The total exceeds the 180 school count, as some schools are members of more than one association.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

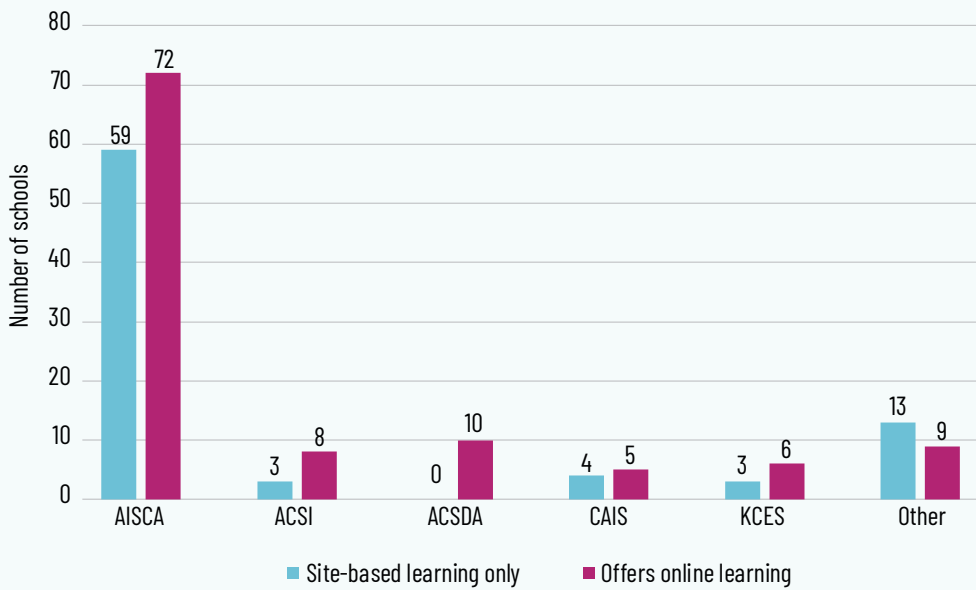
**Table 8. Independent School Enrolment by School Association, Alberta, 2022–23**

School Association	Enrolment	Share of Independent School Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Independent Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
AISCA	36,553	91.0	126	86.3	290	175
ACSI	3,774	9.4	10	6.8	377	325
CAIS	3,586	8.9	8	5.5	448	445
IB	1,400	3.5	2	1.4	700	700
ACSDA	1,372	3.4	10	6.8	137	105
KCES	1,255	3.1	9	6.2	139	90
PCCE	913	2.3	5	3.4	183	144
RoundSquare	677	1.7	1	0.7	677	677
AP	620	1.5	1	0.7	620	620
NAIS	620	1.5	1	0.7	620	620
CSI	601	1.5	2	1.4	301	301
IBSC	161	0.4	3	2.1	54	52
ICGS	161	0.4	3	2.1	54	52
OSG	43	0.1	2	1.4	22	22
CCMA	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	-
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>36,596</b>	<b>91.1</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>87.7</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>173</b>
Unassociated independent schools	3,564	8.9	18	12.3	198	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>144</b>

Note: This list only includes schools with verified membership (or affiliation) and publicly-available enrolment counts (October 2022). The total exceeds the 128 school count and 36,596 enrolment count, as many schools are members of more than one association.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta. June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

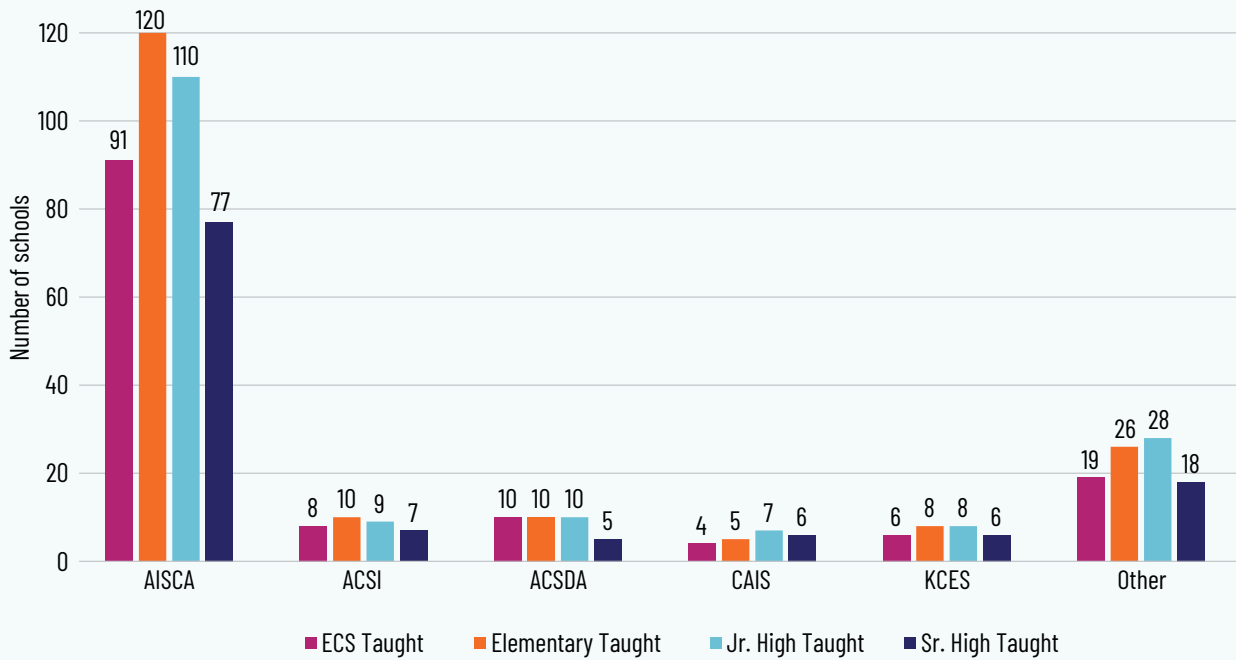
**Figure 15. Independent School Associations in Alberta by Program Type, 2023**



Note: This list includes verified and unverified schools, and the total exceeds 180 schools, as some schools are part of more than one association.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

**Figure 16. Independent School Associations in Alberta by Program Level, 2023**



Note: This list includes verified and unverified schools, and the total exceeds 180 schools, as some schools are part of more than one association and some schools teach multiple program levels.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

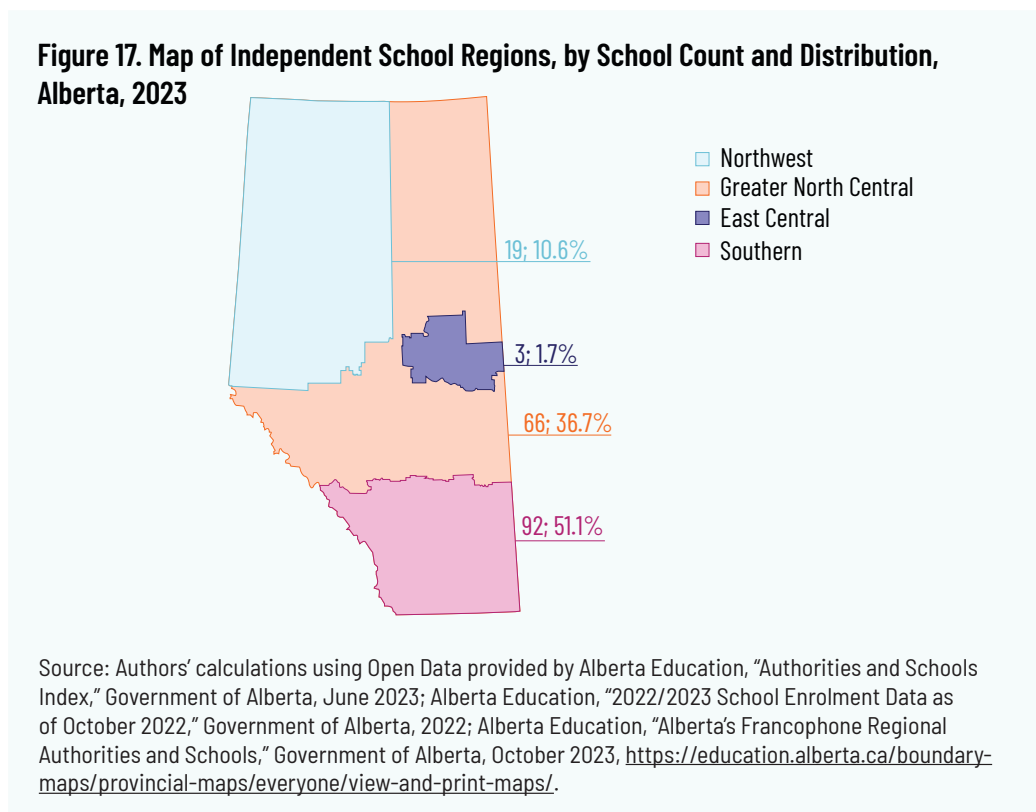


## Distribution by Geographic Location

There are several ways in which schools may be categorized geographically for meaningful distinctions and comparisons. Three methods are used in this study: sub-provincial region, population centre, and urbanicity.

### Region

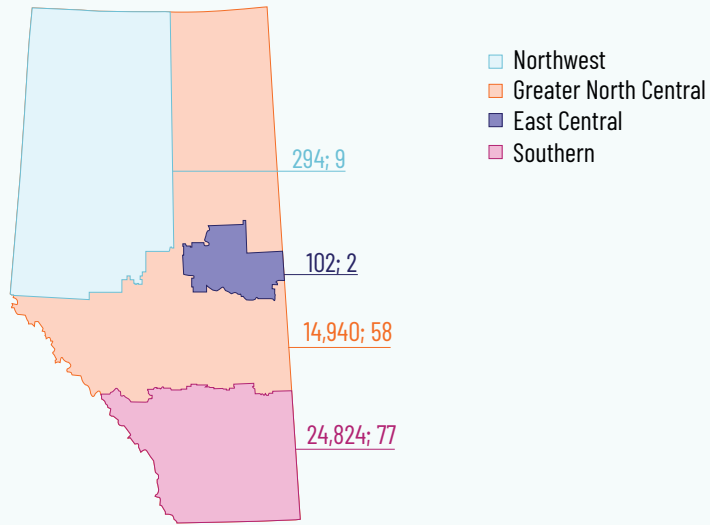
This research applies the four regional boundaries that Alberta Education uses for public (district), Francophone, and charter schools.<sup>33</sup> The June 2023 school count by region is shown in figure 17, and the 2022–23 enrolments are shown in figure 18. The Southern region accounts for roughly half of Alberta’s population, and its ninety-four independent schools reflect this, with 51.1 percent of schools in the sector. Yet Alberta’s largest independent schools are in the Southern region, and its 24,824 students are an outsized share of the sector, at 61.8 percent.



Nineteen schools (10.6 percent) are in the Northwest, despite this region making up only a small percent of the province’s population. Enrolments in the Northwest are underreported, however, as over two-thirds of the nineteen Northwest schools are Mennonite (Christian) and/or Parochial schools that do not report enrolments (figure 19).

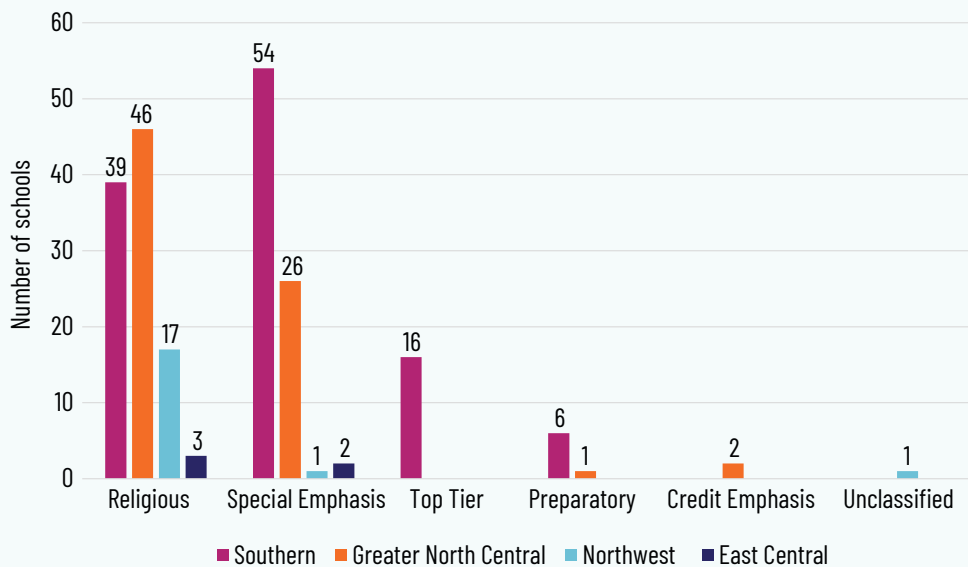
<sup>33</sup> The map is available on the Alberta Education website, “Provincial Maps,” Government of Alberta, <https://education.alberta.ca/boundary-maps/provincial-maps/>.

**Figure 18. Map of Independent School Regions by Enrolment and School Count, Alberta, 2022-23**



Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022; Alberta Education, "Alberta's Francophone Regional Authorities and Schools," Government of Alberta, October 2023.

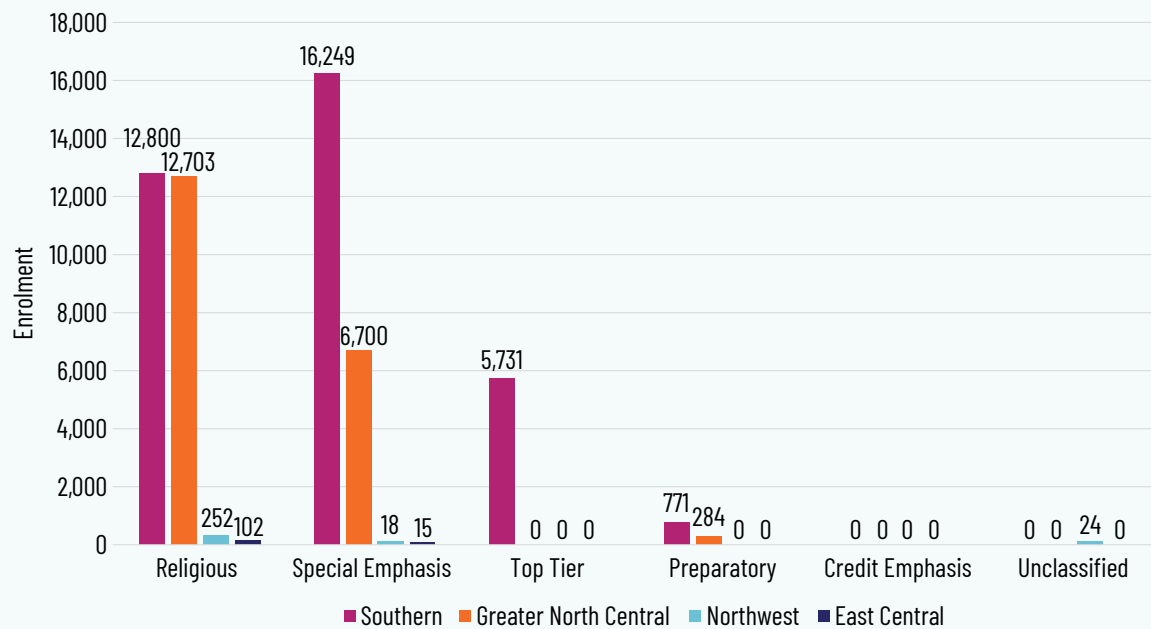
**Figure 19. Independent School Regions by School Type, Alberta, 2023**



Note: Total sums to more than 180 schools due to schools with multiple types.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

The regional distribution by school type is particularly interesting. Forty-six (61.3 percent) of the schools in the Greater North Central region are Religious schools. Similarly, seventeen (89.5 percent) of the schools in the Northwest and three (60 percent) in East Central are Religious. Conversely, just one-third of the schools in the Southern region are Religious. All of the province’s schools typed Top Tier and Preparatory, and nearly two-thirds (65.0 percent) of those typed Special Emphasis, are in the Southern region (figure 20 and 21). The Special Emphasis schools in this region include all of Alberta’s IB, Experiential, and Arts, Sports, or STEM schools (figure 22).

**Figure 20. Independent School Type Enrolment by Region, Alberta, 2022-23**



Note: Total sums to more than 40,160 independent school students due to schools with multiple types.

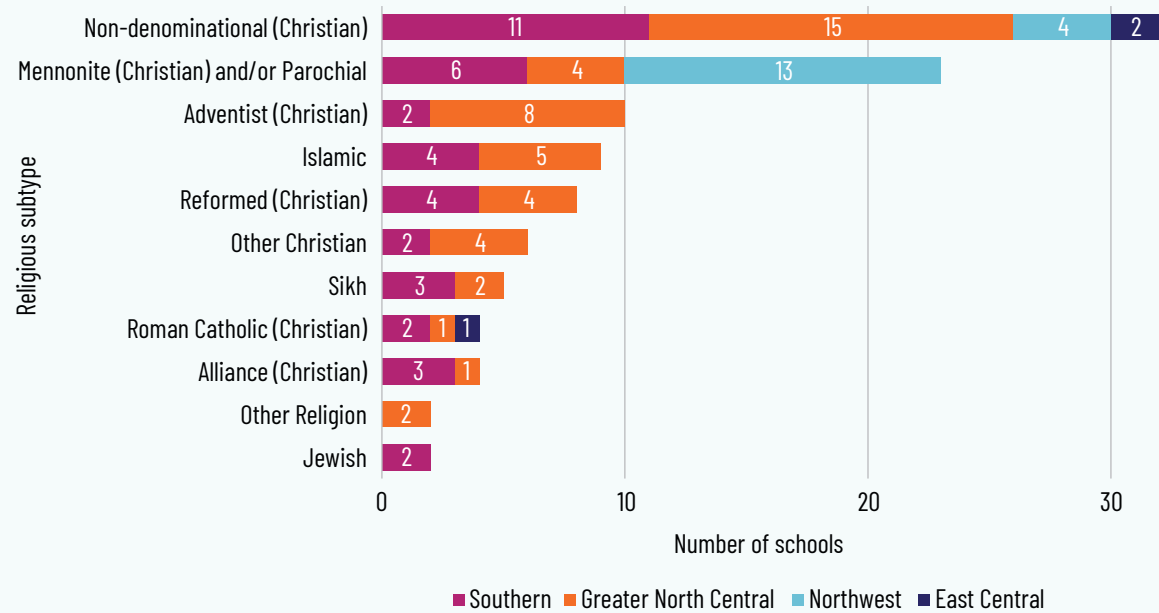
Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, “2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022,” Government of Alberta, 2022.

### Population Centre

Using Statistics Canada data from the 2021 Census, population-centre data were retrieved and matched with the school’s city according to definitions outlined in the Census Dictionary.<sup>34</sup> A “population centre” is defined as having a density of 400 persons or greater per square kilometre and at least 1,000 persons within its boundary. Population centres of 1,000 to 29,999 persons were considered small, those with 30,000 to 99,999 persons were considered medium, and those with 100,000 persons or more were considered large. Regions outside of population centres were categorized as rural.

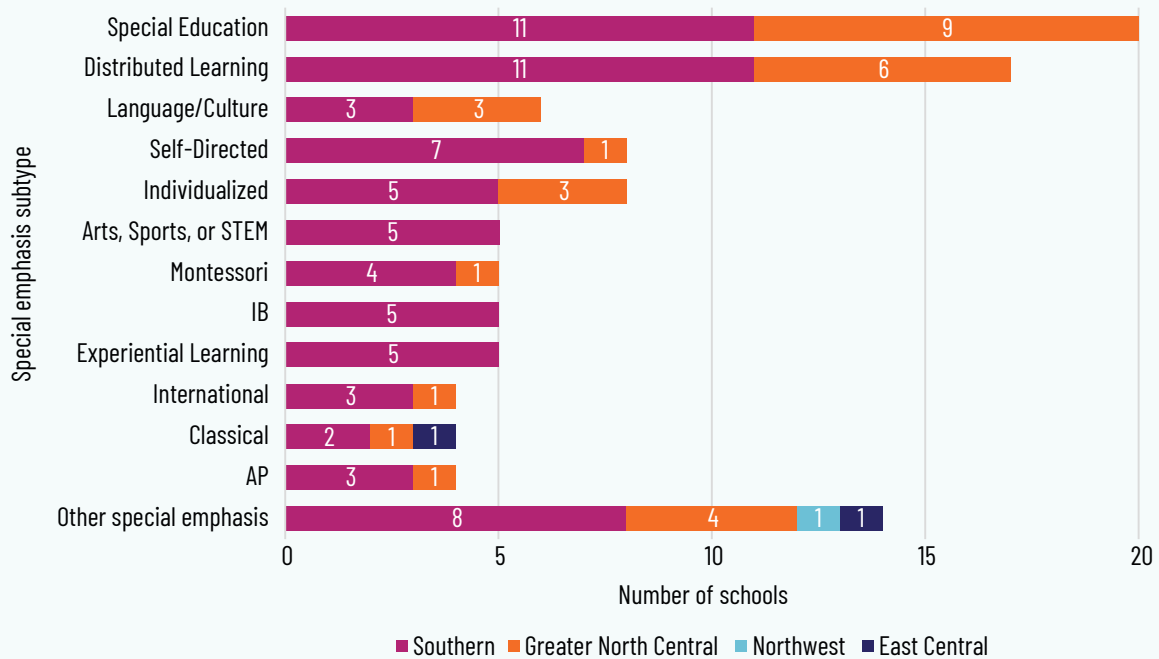
<sup>34</sup> Statistics Canada, “Dictionary, Census Population, 2016,” October 11, 2018, 94, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/98-301-x2016001-eng.pdf>.

**Figure 21. Independent School Regions by Religious Subtype, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

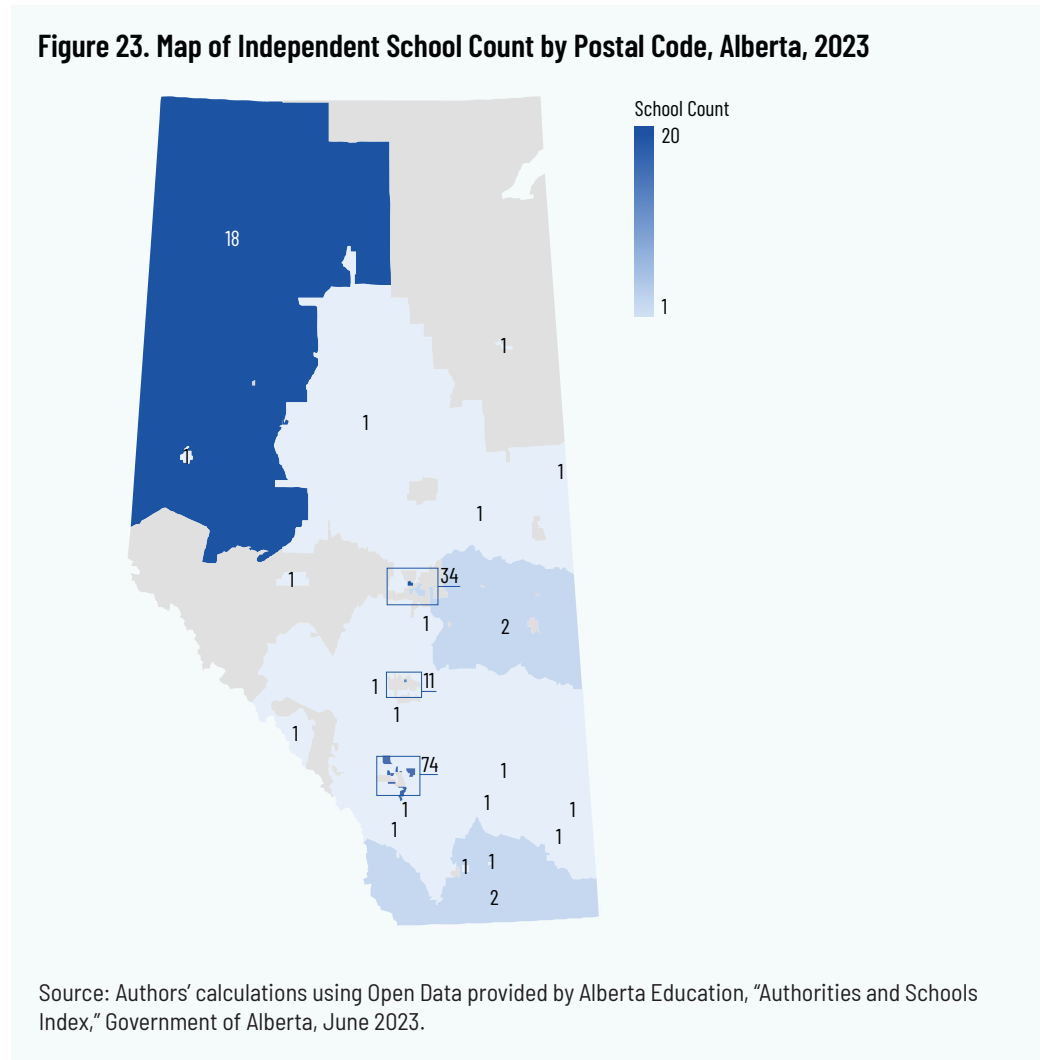
**Figure 22. Independent School Regions by Special Emphasis Subtype, Alberta, 2023**



Note: Total sums to more than 83 Special Emphasis schools due to schools with multiple emphases.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

Figure 23 maps the schools by postal code. It is interesting to see the visual contrast between Alberta’s two major cities. The Calgary metropolitan area (including Airdrie, Cochrane, and Okotoks) has more than double the number of schools as similar-population Edmonton (including Devon, Spruce Grove, and Stony Plain). Many of the rural and small town schools do not show up on the map, but those that are visible reveal distribution across the province.

**Figure 23. Map of Independent School Count by Postal Code, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023.

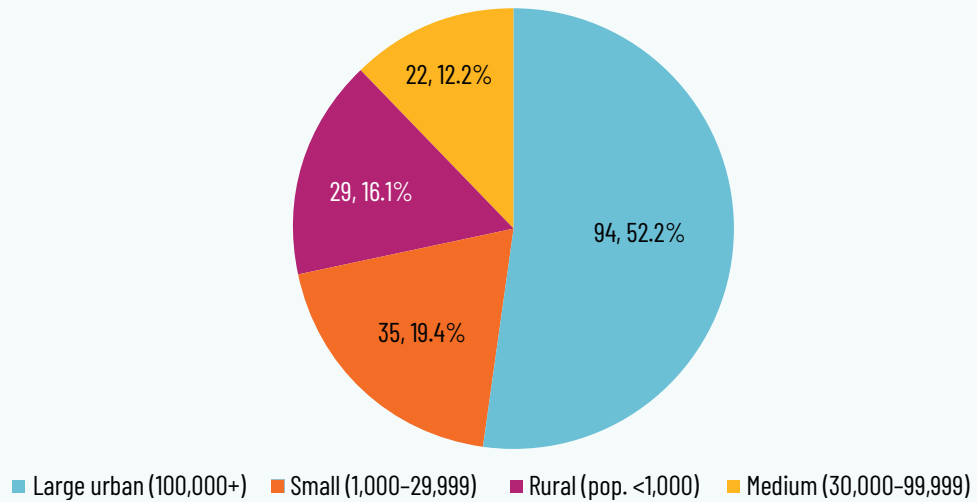
Fully 52 percent of the schools (figure 24) and 65.2 percent of the enrolment (table 9) are in large population centres, compared to 47.8 percent of schools and 34.9 percent of enrolment in rural, small, and medium population centres combined.

### Urbanicity

There are limitations to population-centre classifications. If the purpose of coding schools by geography is to assess whether independent schools serve an urban

elite, surely population-centre classifications alone are insufficient. They tell us little about the kind of neighbourhood in which the schools are located, and the neighbourhood surely affects the nature of schools and who attends them—even if families commute to attend. Moreover, boundaries can and do get redrawn, even in neighbourhoods where the population or nature of its social and economic activity have not substantively changed.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, urbanicity was also studied, that is, the

**Figure 24. Distribution of Independent Schools by Population Centre, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0011-01. Population and Dwelling Counts: Canada and Population Centres," February 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810001101-eng>.

**Table 9. Independent School Enrolment by Population Centre, Alberta, 2022-23**

Population Centre	Enrolment	Share of Total Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Total Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Large urban (100,000+)	26,169	65.2	85	58.2	308	174
Medium (30,000-99,999)	4,348	10.8	19	13.0	229	144
Small (1,000-29,999)	6,097	15.2	25	17.1	244	144
Rural (pop. <1,000)	3,546	8.8	17	11.6	209	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>144</b>

Note: This figure includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> M. Turcotte, "Life in Metropolitan Areas," Statistics Canada, April 2014, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-008-x/2008001/article/10459-eng.htm>.

nature of the urban/suburban environment that the school is located in, taking into account factors such as the degree of density and modes of transportation available.

To code schools by urbanicity, David Gordon and Mark Janzen’s classifications<sup>36</sup> were adopted and then modified, as displayed in table 10. To apply this typology to the entire province, including areas outside census metropolitan areas, schools’ urbanicity was coded by postal code, based on each school’s Aggregate Dissemination Area data.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 10. Urbanicity Categories and Criteria**

Urbanicity Type	Criteria
Active Core	Aggregate Dissemination Area population density greater than 150 per sq km, and at least 10% commute by walking or cycling (i.e. 50% above Canadian average)
Transit Suburb	Aggregate Dissemination Area population density greater than 150 per sq km, and at least 11% commute by public transit (i.e. 50% above Canadian average)
Auto Suburb	Over 50% occupy single-detached, semi-detached, other single-attached and mobile homes (movable dwelling)
Exurban	At least 50% of Aggregate Dissemination Area commute to a different census subdivision (CSD) within census division (CD) of residence
Rural	Aggregate Dissemination Area population density less than 150 per square kilometre, and less than 50% of Aggregate Dissemination Area commute to a different census subdivision (CSD) within census division (CD) of residence
N/A	Doesn't match any of the above.

Source: Based on the aggregate dissemination area data from the 2021 Census.

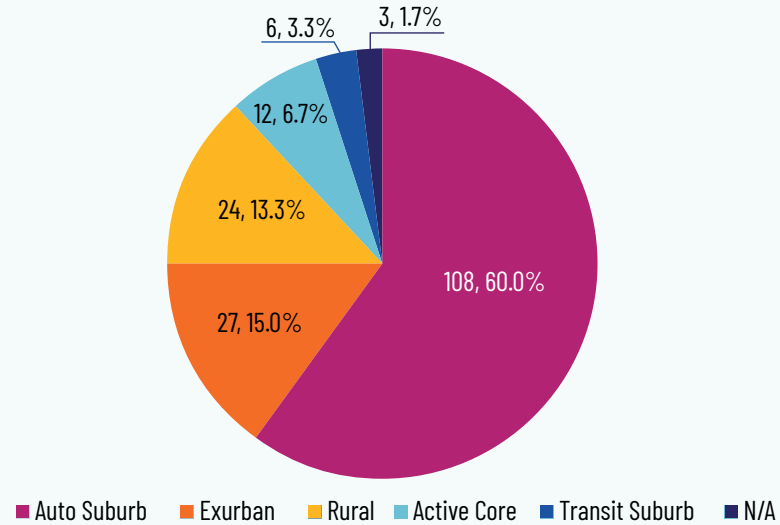
Figure 25 presents an overview of the urbanicity of the sector’s schools. Ninety percent fall into one of two groups: exactly 60 percent are in Auto Suburbs, and nearly 30 percent are in Rural or Exurban areas. Table 11 reveals this distribution by enrolment. Nearly two-thirds of the students attend schools in Auto Suburbs. Despite

<sup>36</sup> D.L.A. Gordon and M. Janzen, “Suburban Nation? Estimating the Size of Canada’s Suburban Population,” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 30, no. 3 (2013): 197–220, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43031005>.

<sup>37</sup> Statistics Canada, “Census of Population, 2021,” September 12, 2023, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>. The postal code of each school was used to find its relevant aggregate dissemination area and then sorted for its “mode of transportation” and “household and dwelling characteristics.” To determine the dwelling type, a combination of each structural type of dwelling was divided by the total occupied dwelling type. Modes of transportation were combined according to their definitions and divided by the total mode of transportation. The outputs of each dwelling type and journey-to-work together were used to calculate the urbanicity. To verify the classification of each school’s neighbourhood and test urbanicity definitions, a qualitative assessment of the schools’ surroundings was completed using Google Maps (or equivalent).

their low count, however, schools in Active Cores are nearly twice the size of the average school in the sector, with 16 percent of the enrolment. (Due to Mennonite/Parochial schools not reporting enrolments, Rural numbers are underrepresented).

**Figure 25. Distribution of Independent Schools by Urbanicity, Alberta, 2023**



Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023.

**Table 11. Independent School Enrolment by Urbanicity, Alberta, 2022-23**

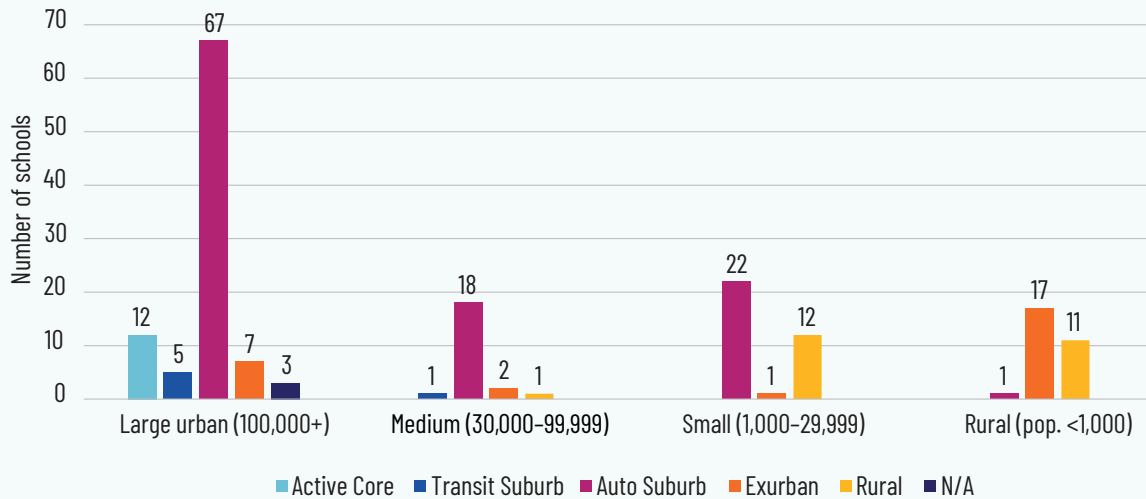
Category	Student Enrolment	Share of Enrolment (%)	School Count	Share of Schools (%)	Mean Enrolment	Median Enrolment
Active Core	6,426	16.0	12	8.2	536	127
Transit Suburb	820	2.0	6	4.1	137	50
Auto Suburb	26,374	65.7	94	64.4	281	197
Exurban	5,357	13.3	22	15.1	244	102
Rural	490	1.2	9	6.2	54	52
N/A	693	1.7	3	2.1	231	175
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>144</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools. Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022." Government of Alberta, 2022.



Cross-tabulating population centres with urbanicity, figure 26 shows that only twelve schools (6.7 percent) are in the Active Cores of large urban centres. Of these, three are Top Tier (figure 27). There are nearly the same number of independent schools in “Rural, Rural” Alberta as there are in the Active Cores of large urban centres. The great majority of Alberta’s independent schools and enrolments are in Auto Suburban neighbourhoods (figures 27 and 28).

**Figure 26. Independent Schools by Urbanicity and Population Centres, Alberta, 2023**



Note: The three “N/A” schools were in industrial areas, without residential populations and, thus, zero population density.  
 Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023.

## Change Over Time

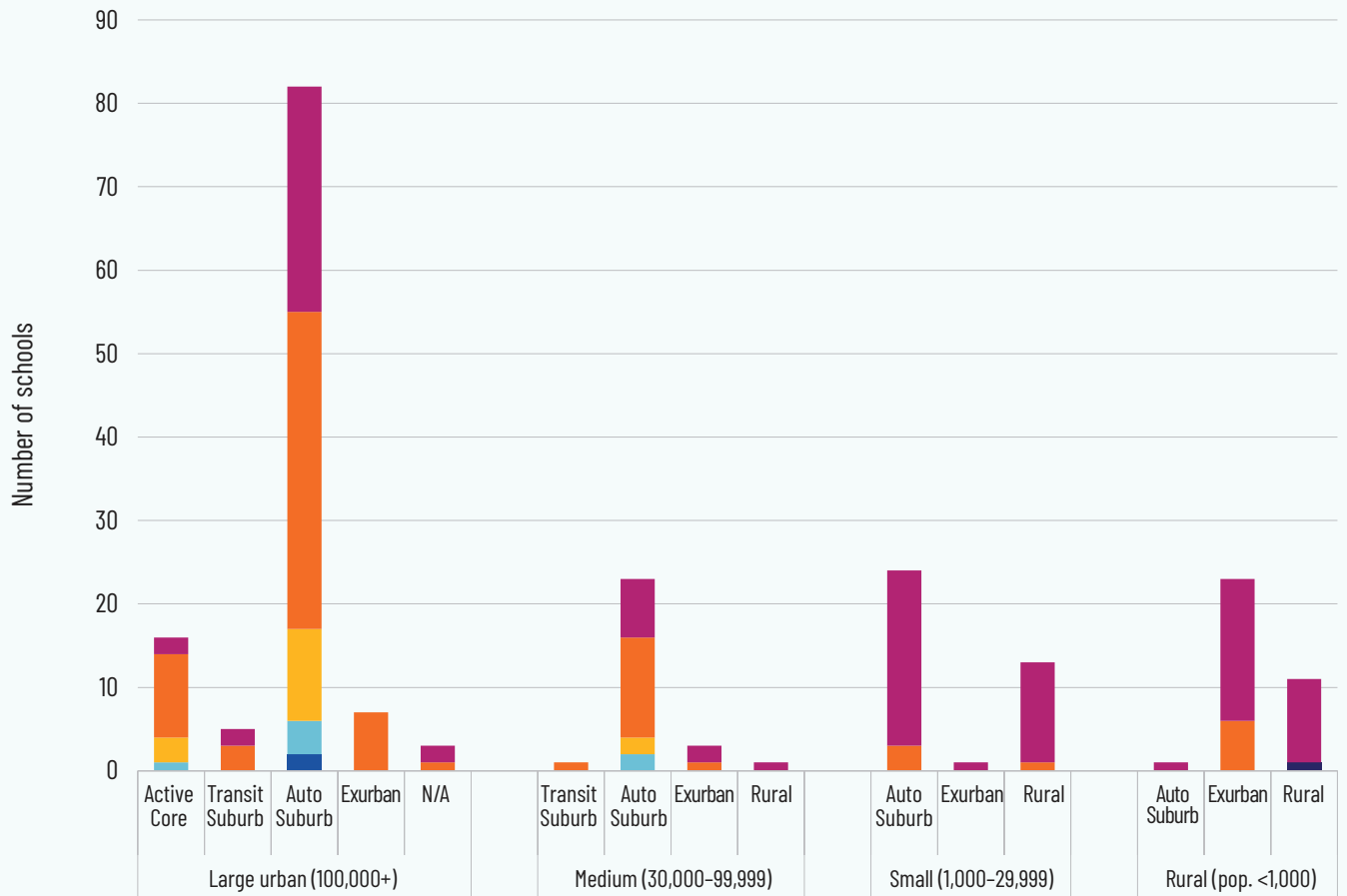
Allison, Hasan, and VanPelt charted the independent school landscape across Canada using data from 2013–14, which was used in the present study to make like-to-like comparisons between then and now. It is worth noting that some of the growth may be because schools in the present study are identified with multiple categories, whereas Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt grouped each schools into just one category. Thus it is possible that the 2013–14 numbers are understated. Also, it is unknown whether heritage-language schools were included or excluded (the present study excludes them).

## Change in School Count and Enrolment by School Size

Table 12 charts the change in school count and enrolment by school size, from 2013–14 to 2022–23. While school count has remained almost unchanged (just one net new school over ten years), enrolment has increased by 43.0 percent. When the breakdown by school size is considered, it can be seen that the number of schools with fewer than fifty students have decreased over time. There were fifty schools

in 2013–14, and thirty-six in 2022–23. Schools with 500 or more student have increased, from three schools in 2013–14 to twelve in 2022–23. There are two additional schools in the over 750 enrolment category. This suggests that the increase in enrolment in the sector is due not to new schools being opened but to existing schools becoming larger.

**Figure 27. Independent School Types by Urbanicity and Population Centres, Alberta, 2023**

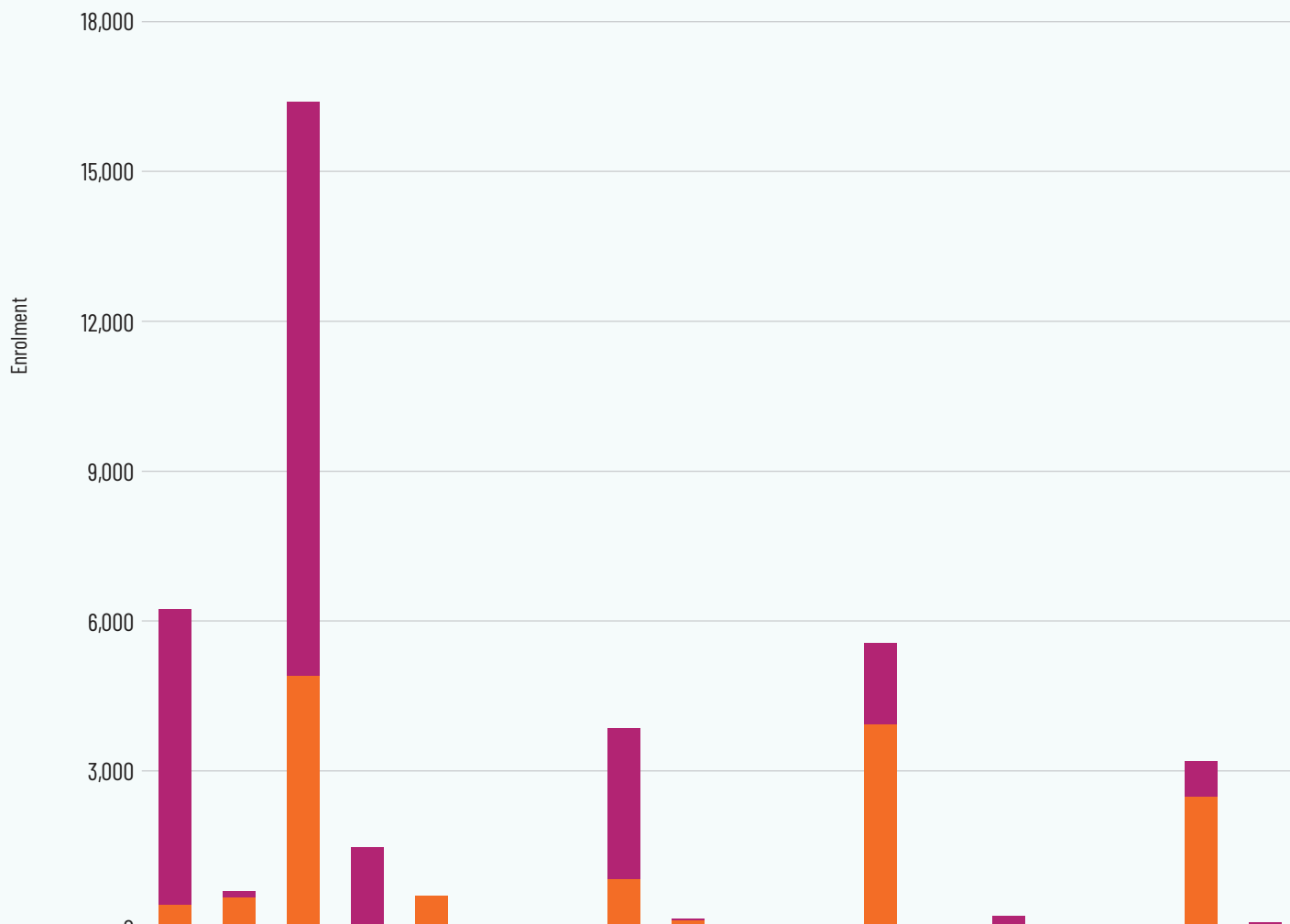


	Large urban (100,000+)					Medium (30,000-99,999)					Small (1,000-29,999)			Rural (pop. <1,000)			
	Active Core	Transit Suburb	Auto Suburb	Exurban	N/A	Transit Suburb	Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural		Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural		Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural
Religious	2	2	27	0	2	0	7	2	1		21	1	12		1	17	10
Special Emphasis	10	3	38	7	1	1	12	1	0		3	0	1		0	6	0
Top Tier	3	0	11	0	0	0	2	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0
Preparatory	1	0	4	0	0	0	2	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0
Credit Emphasis	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0
Unclassified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	1

Note: The total sums to more than 180 schools, due to schools with multiple types. The three “N/A” schools are in industrial areas, without residential populations and, thus, a zero population-density zone.

Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023.

**Figure 28. Regional Enrolment by Urbanicity and Population Centres, Independent Schools, Alberta, 2022-23**



	Active Core	Transit Suburb	Auto Suburb	Exurban	N/A	Transit Suburb	Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural	Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural	Auto Suburb	Exurban	Rural
	Large urban (pop. 100,000+)					Medium (pop. 30,000-99,999)				Small (pop. 1,000-29,999)			Rural (pop. <1,000)		
■ Southern	5,918	129	11,501	1,669	0	0	3,019	16	0	1,619	0	171	0	706	76
■ Greater North Central	508	661	5,090	0	693	30	1,026	199	0	3,981	80	0	0	2672	0
■ Northwest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	58	51	0	108	0	0	77
■ East Central	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	87	0	0	0	15	0

Note: This figure includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022.

### Change in School Count and Enrolment by Program Level

The change in school count and enrolment by program level is collapsed into elementary, secondary, and combined levels in table 13, to enable comparison with 2013-14. The largest change in enrolment is in combined program levels, or

schools that offer a K–12 curriculum, with enrolment increasing 48.7 percent, and school count increasing by 14.9 percent. Over the same period, the number of and enrolment in elementary schools decreased. And while secondary school enrolment increased from 1,100 to almost 1,600 students, the number of secondary schools decreased. The significant increase in combined K–12 programs is another possible indicator of growth within schools rather than new school starts.

**Table 12. Change in Independent School Count and Enrolment by School Size, Alberta, 2013–14 to 2022–23**

Students per School	2013–14 Enrolment	2022–23 Enrolment	%Δ	2013–14 School Count	2022–23 School Count	%Δ
750 or more	10,006	15,523	55.1	8	10	25.0
500–749	1,844	6,930	275.8	3	12	300.0
300–499	4,484	5,882	31.2	12	15	25.0
150–299	7,004	7,520	7.4	32	34	6.3
50–149	3,636	3,465	-4.7	40	39	-2.5
Less than 50	1,102	840	-23.8	50	36	-28.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28,076</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>0.7</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools. Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, “2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022,” Government of Alberta, 2022; D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt, “A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada,” Fraser Institute, June 2016, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/a-diverse-landscape-independent-schools-in-canada.pdf>.

**Table 13. Change in Independent School Count and Enrolment by Program Level, Alberta, 2013–14 to 2022–23**

Program Level	2013–14 Enrolment	2022–23 Enrolment	%Δ	2013–14 School Count	2022–23 School Count	%Δ
Elementary	2,399	2,041	-14.9	25	20	-20.0
Secondary	1,110	1,591	43.3	19	10	-47.4
Combined	24,567	36,542	48.7	101	116	14.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>28,076</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>43.1</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>0.7</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools. Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, “2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022,” Government of Alberta, 2022; D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt, “A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada,” Fraser Institute, June 2016.

## Change in School Count and Enrolment by Religious Subtype

The change in Religious schools is worthy of note (table 14). Without adding any net new schools, Catholic enrolment has increased tenfold, from 541 to 5,452 students, almost entirely through distributed learning. Islamic schools have doubled in count and increased in enrolment by two-thirds. There has also been considerable growth in Sikh schools, which were not observed in Allison and Van Pelt’s study but which have arisen in the intervening years. Jewish schools and enrolments have declined. It is possible that Jewish schools, like many Christian schools, took advantage of policy and funding changes to become part of the district (public) system as alternative schools.

**Table 14. Change in Like-to-Like Subtypes by Religious Affiliation, Independent Schools, 2013-14 to 2022-23**

Religious Affiliation	2013-14 Enrolment	2022-23 Enrolment	%Δ	2013-14 School Count	2022-23 School Count	%Δ
Catholic	541	5,452	907.8	4	4	0.0
Other Christian	13,553	14,643	8.0	58	58	0.0
Islamic	2,132	3,548	66.4	4	8	100.0
Jewish	327	250	-23.5	3	2	-33.3
Other	598	1,964	228.4	2	5	150.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,151</b>	<b>25,857</b>	<b>50.8</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>8.5</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools. Source: Authors’ calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, “Authorities and Schools Index,” Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, “2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022,” Government of Alberta, 2022; D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt, “A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada,” Fraser Institute, June 2016.

## Change in School Count and Enrolment by Special Emphasis Subtype

As a whole, Special Emphasis schools have seen the largest growth in the sector. These schools have more than quadrupled their enrolment, from 5,421 to 22,982 students (table 15). Their number has also more than doubled, from thirty-eight to seventy-five schools. Distributed Learning schools have seen the greatest gains, increasing from two to sixteen schools, with nearly eightfold enrolment gains. Other Special Emphasis and Mixed Specialty schools have also experienced substantial growth, from a combined seven schools enrolling 719 students to forty-three schools enrolling 14,662 students. The increases in these categories suggest that there has been some increase in innovative approaches to education, for example, through Nature schools and Micro schools. The apparent decline in Special Education school enrolment may be due to the fact that it is now more common for schools of all kinds to serve students with special needs or neurodiverse learning styles.

**Table 15. Change in Like-to-Like Subtypes, Special Emphasis Independent Schools, 2013-14 to 2022-23**

	2013-14 Enrolment	2022-23 Enrolment	%Δ	2013-14 School Count	2022-23 School Count	%Δ
Arts, Sports, or STEM	426	1,494	250.7	5	4	-20.0
Distributed Learning	1,321	11,785	792.1	2	16	700.0
Montessori	356	371	4.2	4	5	25.0
Special Education	2,240	2,027	-9.5	18	19	5.6
Waldorf	359	519	44.6	2	2	0.0
Other special emphasis	719	5,580	676.1	7	25	257.1
Mixed Specialty	0	9,082	N/A	0	18	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,421</b>	<b>22,982</b>	<b>323.9</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>97.4</b>

Note: Enrolments and school counts exceed the sum of 22,982 and 75, respectively, due to multiple-type schools. This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools.

Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022; D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt, "A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada," Fraser Institute, June 2016.

### Change in School Count and Enrolment by Urbanicity/Population Centre

A look at the change in school count and enrolment by population centre yields some interesting observations (table 16). Given that there is only one net new school, and that few schools have opened in recent years, it is unlikely that half of rural independent schools have closed and that medium population centres have doubled their count with new schools. What is more likely, given Alberta's growing population, is that the overall population increased in these population centres. For example, a rural community of 800 residents increasing to 1,100 would become a small population centre. A town of 27,000 residents increasing to 32,000 would become a medium population centre. Further investigation is needed to confirm or reject this hypothesis.

**Table 16. Change in Like-to-Like Subtypes by Population Centre, Independent Schools, 2013-14 to 2022-23**

Population Centre	2013-14 Enrolment	2022-23 Enrolment	%Δ	2013-14 School Count	2022-23 School Count	%Δ
Large urban (100,000+)	14,338	26,169	82.5	80	85	6.3
Medium (30,000-99,999)	1,660	4,348	161.9	10	19	90.0
Small (1,000-29,999)	7,022	6,097	-13.2	19	25	31.6
Rural (pop. <1,000)	5,056	3,546	-29.9	36	17	-52.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>28,076</b>	<b>40,160</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>0.7</b>

Note: This table includes the 146 schools reporting enrolment, not the full set of 180 independent schools. Source: Authors' calculations using Open Data provided by Alberta Education, "Authorities and Schools Index," Government of Alberta, June 2023; Alberta Education, "2022/2023 School Enrolment Data as of October 2022," Government of Alberta, 2022; D.J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D. Van Pelt, "A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada," Fraser Institute, June 2016.

## Discussion

Several observations stand out from this research. First, despite the pluralism that exists across Alberta's fully taxpayer-funded schools, some families still choose independent options for their children. The diverse approaches to education evidenced by the high numbers of Religious and Special Emphasis schools suggest that robust educational pluralism requires real options within the district systems as well as real options beyond them.

Second, as was the case in the earlier Ontario-based research, only a small proportion of the independent schools are of the Top Tier type. The view that independent schools tend to be "elite" schools is inaccurate. Seventy-five percent of all independent schools in the province enrol fewer than 300 students, and most of these are Religious and Special Emphasis schools. The small community-oriented school is typical of the sector.

Third, since 2013-14, just one net new independent school has been created in the province. This is in stark contrast to Ontario, where 491 net new independent schools were created during this period. What accounts for this difference? It cannot primarily be a matter of funding, since independent schools in Alberta can apply for public funding after one year of operation, and in Ontario no public funding is available. Perhaps the difference arises from the fact that with funding comes a degree of government regulation. It seems evident that the minimal regulation in Ontario is related to that province's higher proportion of Credit Emphasis schools. Is the level of school regulation in Alberta perceived as too onerous to those who might wish to found Religious or Special Emphasis schools? On the other hand, Alberta Education appears to approve few applications to create new independent schools. For example,

not one of the more than two dozen new-school applications was approved between 2015 to 2019.<sup>38</sup> The reasons deserve further study.

Fourth, enrolment in independent schools has increased not due to new school starts but to existing schools becoming larger. The data presented in this report suggests that schools are becoming larger because schools are expanding their grade level offerings, and because as homeschool is growing, more students are enrolled in schools as supervised home education or shared-responsibility program students. As noted in the report, half of the enrolment in Special Emphasis schools is in the Distributed Learning subtype (where most of these homeschool students presumably are enrolled). To the extent that existing schools become larger, growth in the sector does not translate to an increase in pluralism understood as additional choices and options.

And finally, it is remarkable that close to three-quarters of the independent schools belong to a school association. Membership within school associations, which are an instrument of civil society, provides an additional layer of accountability beyond that of government regulation, and contribute to robust expressions of educational pluralism.

Table 17 summarizes the overall findings. Independent schools in Alberta serve an important and growing segment of its population. Alberta is a province committed to deep choice in its variety of fully funded school types. The government should continue to encourage the presence of meaningful pluralism through support of new and existing independent schools that meet requirements, so that Alberta families have access to options that best fit their education needs.

<sup>38</sup> Personal correspondence with the authors, Association of Independent Schools and Colleges of Alberta.



**Table 17. Summary of Independent School Distribution in Alberta, 2023**

		Schools	
		Count	Distribution (%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>180</b>	
<b>Religious</b>	<i>Affiliated with a religion</i>	105	58.3
	<i>Not affiliated with a religion</i>	75	41.7
<b>Special Emphasis</b>	<i>Emphasizes specialty (e.g., Montessori)</i>	83	46.1
	<i>No special emphasis</i>	97	53.9
<b>Top Tier</b>	<i>Competitive admissions, elite facilities, high tuition</i>	16	8.9
	<i>Not elite</i>	164	91.1
<b>School Size</b> (Year: 2022-23; Count: 146)	<i>750 or more students</i>	10	6.8
	<i>500-749</i>	12	8.2
	<i>300-499</i>	15	10.3
	<i>150-299</i>	34	23.3
	<i>50-149</i>	39	26.7
	<i>Less than 50 students</i>	36	24.7
<b>Program Type</b>	<i>Site based only</i>	91	50.6
	<i>Offers online learning</i>	81	45.0
<b>Program Level</b>	<i>ECS Taught</i>	99	55.0
	<i>Elementary Taught</i>	143	79.4
	<i>Jr. High Taught</i>	129	71.7
	<i>Sr. High Taught</i>	89	49.4
<b>School Associations</b>	<i>Member of more than one school association</i>	51	28.3
	<i>Member of only one school association</i>	82	45.6
	<i>Not a school association member</i>	47	26.1
<b>Location by Region</b>	<i>Southern</i>	92	51.1
	<i>Greater North Central</i>	66	36.7
	<i>Northwest</i>	19	10.6
	<i>East Central</i>	3	1.7
<b>Location by Population</b>	<i>Rural, small, and medium population area</i>	86	47.8
	<i>Large urban population centre</i>	94	52.2
<b>Location by Urbanicity</b>	<i>Rural and exurban</i>	51	28.3
	<i>Auto suburb and transit suburb</i>	114	63.3
	<i>Active core</i>	12	6.7
	<i>N/A</i>	3	1.7

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