

MEMORANDUM

TO: Hon. Nate Horner, MLA for Drumheller-Stettler, Minister of Treasury Board and Finance
Hon. Demetrios Nicolaides, MLA for Calgary-Bow, Minister of Education

FROM: Andreea Sennyah, Director of Policy
Catharine Kavanagh, Western Stakeholder Director

DATE: January 15, 2026

SUBJECT: Alberta's Budget 2026 Consultation

WHO WE ARE

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which society's institutions can work together for the common good.

ISSUE

As part of the consultation for Budget 2026, our recommendation is for the Government of Alberta to deliver on their commitment to provide independent schools with capital funding under the School Construction Accelerator Program. When announcing the program in September 2024, the Government of Alberta stated that they "will continue to explore opportunities for a school capital pilot program for non-profit independent schools to broaden learning options for Alberta families."¹ However, no details for a pilot program have been released to date.

BACKGROUND

The Government of Alberta has faced significant classroom pressures in K-12 education due to a growing population. The School Construction Accelerator Program aims to create or modernize 200,000 student spaces by allowing public and charter schools to receive funding for new projects at any point during the year. This is in contrast to the previous policy where construction projects were only able to move ahead at the next budget cycle.

POSITION

As Cardus has argued elsewhere, educational pluralism requires: "(1) a commitment to the availability of educational options, (2) broad access to these options, and (3) accountability to families, civil society, and government for educational quality and student outcomes."² Within this framework, independent schools should be seen as partners to address the needs of students and families in Alberta.

RECOMMENDATION

The Government of Alberta previously signalled an intention to provide \$600 million of the \$8.6 billion School Construction Accelerator Program to independent and charter schools.³ Budget 2026 should include a clear funding commitment for this independent school capital.

¹ "Fast-tracking new schools for Alberta students," Government of Alberta, September 18, 2024 <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=91006381D7AE8-B05F-6310-465F3FE7EA529356>.

² DeJong VanHof, Joanna. "The Three Pillars of Educational Pluralism: Availability, Access, and Accountability." Cardus, 2025. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/the-three-pillars-of-educational-pluralism/>.

³ Braid, Don. "Braid: Smith breaks open the public piggy bank to solve school shortage, blames Trudeau," Calgary Herald, Sept 17, 2024. <https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/braid-danielle-smith-public-piggy-bank-solve-school-shortage-trudeau>.

RATIONALE

Enrolment in independent schooling continues to rise – with a ten thousand student increase from the 2020/2021 school year compared to 2024/2025, according to the government’s public reporting, in addition to the thousands of students who remain on waitlists.⁴ These schools have the capacity to grow even further, very rapidly and at a lower per-student cost. Members of the Association of Independent Schools & Colleges in Alberta report that 95 schools or programs were looking to grow in 2025, potentially creating up to 15,000 new spaces. Further, the Association estimates that independent schools saved the Government of Alberta \$825 million in per-student funding from 2019 to 2024, given that independent school students only receive 70% of per-student funds compared to public (or district) school students.⁵

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

As Cardus has outlined in detail in our memo “Considerations for Independent Schools in Alberta’s School Construction Accelerator Program,” capital funding for independent schools should ensure that schools can retain ownership of their capital, potentially with matched funds from the government. Grants should be conditional on schools’ capacity to meet space creation targets, with varying tracks for eligibility and should be administered in close collaboration with the independent school sector. Crucially, the independent school sector should be guaranteed a portion of the \$8.6 billion in funding to give schools predictability as they plan for capital development in the coming years.⁶

CONTACT

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and assist with future considerations on this issue. Please do not hesitate to contact us at ckavanagh@cardus.ca.

⁴ “Student population statistics,” Government of Alberta, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics>.

⁵ Educated Choices. “Why Parents Choose Independent Schools,” June 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWSu2pZtGN8>.

⁶ Kavanagh, Catharine and Andreea Sennyah. “Considerations for Independent Schools in Alberta’s School Construction Accelerator Program.” Cardus, 2024. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/policy-memo/memo-considerations-for-independent-schools-in-albertas-school-construction-accelerator-program/>.