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END FUNDING OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Brief to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

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The BC Humanist Association supports the principle of public funds for public education and calls for a phase out of public funding to faith-based and private independent schools.¹

Every child has the right to an education “on the basis of equal opportunity” under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That education should further promote a respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Private and faith-based education streams are antithetical to these aspirations as children are segregated by class and religion. The \$425 million the Province of BC used to subsidize over 87,000 students to attend private schools in 2018/19 could be better-spent promoting innovation and accommodating students with special needs within the public system.

Earlier this year, we showed that the overwhelming majority of BC’s independent schools were faith-based.² We see the Government as having a constitutional duty not to privilege or inhibit any belief or non-belief. By funding these religious schools, the government is actively promoting certain beliefs above others. It’s not the business of the state to be funding religious education or to be certifying some religions as more legitimate for public funding. With just a little bit of investigation, we were able to find numerous examples of independent schools that promote creationism in science classrooms, thereby undermining the provincial curriculum.³

The public funding of independent schools further entangles the government in discrimination. The so-called “elite” Group 2 independent schools are only available to families that are able to afford the tuition fees and even applying to Group 1 schools is

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https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/bchumanist/pages/472/attachments/original/1536087204/independent_schools_2018_Apr.pdf?1536087204

² https://www.bchumanist.ca/who_reaps_the_most_rewards

³ https://www.bchumanist.ca/bc_subsidizes_the_teaching_of_creationism_in_science_class

beyond the capacity of many lower income families. Faith-based schools further often explicitly discriminate in the admission of students and hiring of staff along religious lines. What is less discussed is how many of these schools include mandatory statements akin to Trinity Western University's infamous Community Covenant that effectively exclude LGBTQ+ families through a definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. Finally, research from the UK has shown that faith schools also tend to be more segregated by ethnicity and socioeconomic status than secular schools.⁴

Beyond the direct subsidy to these schools, many also receive numerous other tax benefits, including property tax exemptions. We have raised the question of whether municipalities are getting a fair return for the various property taxes granted to religious institutions that provide no broader public benefit and the question is worth raising with regard to private schools.⁵

The public funding for independent schools could be phased out over several years, following suggestions of the BC Teachers' Federation and others. This would not affect the freedom of parents to choose to send their children to private schools; it would just mean the end of the public subsidy for that choice.

It's time to end the two-tiered approach to education in British Columbia and support one secular public school system.

⁴ <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/03/22/new-report-faith-schools-more-ethnically-segregated-more-likely-to-cater-to-more-advantaged-students/>

⁵ https://www.bchumanist.ca/property_taxes