



WHO CHOOSES ONTARIO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND WHY?

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CARDUS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ontario's independent school sector is growing at a remarkable pace. Since 2007, the share of the province's students attending an independent school has increased by more than a fifth, surpassing 6.4 percent of enrolment with over 138,000 students. It is important to understand the parents driving this shift from government to independent education. Given that families who choose non-government schools receive no financial support from the province, the decision to enroll in an independent school is not taken lightly. Who chooses independent schools and why? Our study aims to provide updated answers to this key question posed by Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison (2007) twelve years ago, testing whether these findings continue to hold true in Ontario.

Following Van Pelt et al.'s (2007) approach, our study is based on a survey of Ontario parent respondents (524) with children enrolled in religious (30) and non-religious (15) independent schools across the province. At least 838 parents are represented in this survey; they have children of all grade levels, come from all regions of Ontario, and live in all types of neighbourhoods. These families are diverse, but they have many characteristics in common as well.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

As in Van Pelt et al.'s (2007) study, information from Statistics Canada's most recent Census and General Social Survey was used to identify differences between the average independent school parent and the average Ontario parent of school-aged children. We find that the characteristics of independent school families do not match the common (mis)conception of "private" schools as an elite and exclusive sector. A large majority (over 75 percent) of independent school parents attended public schools, and more than half (57 percent) of all survey participants were educated only in the public system. While household incomes for independent school families are higher overall than the Ontario average—intuitively consistent with their higher marriage rates, levels of education, and higher-status occupations—this is significantly more pronounced for families at non-religious independent schools. Parents choosing independent schools are much more likely to be self-employed than the average Ontarian. They are at least twice as likely to be entrepreneurs working primarily as independent contractors and small business owners. Parents in religious schools are three times as likely as those in non-religious independent schools to have certifications or diplomas in the trades. As for occupation, religious independent school parents are twice more likely to be teachers or educational counsellors and nurses than Ontarians in their age category. Taken together, independent school families also have higher levels of civic engagement, countering



the stereotype of independent schools as insular communities. Over 90 percent of survey participants identify with a religion, including seven of every ten parents in a non-religious independent school.

PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING

The top-ranked reasons why parents chose an independent school for their children include school safety—concerns about bullying being less important than trust in the curriculum and staff—as well as a supportive and motivating educational environment that matches their families’ values. When responses from religious and non-religious independent school parents are considered together, the five most cited characteristics for parents are that their chosen independent school (1) is safe, (2) offers a supportive, nurturing environment, (3) emphasizes character development, (4) has trustworthy curriculum, and (5) has outstanding teachers. Conversely, the least important factors for parents include having family and friends at the school, transportation, cost, and geographic proximity.

Religious and non-religious independent school families cite different sets of reasons for choosing their school—no single characteristic ranks in the top five for both sets of parents. Parents who sent their children to non-religious independent schools chose their school because it is safe, instills confidence in students, and teaches students to think critically and independently. Families who chose a religious independent school, meanwhile, cite their school’s support for their values, teaching right from wrong, and reinforcement of their faith or religious beliefs.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that Ontario families want choice when it comes to their children’s education. Yet Ontario—unlike every other province outside of Atlantic Canada—offers no funding for independent schools, making real educational choice a significant financial challenge for parents.

Despite the financial barriers, more and more Ontario parents are choosing independent schools for their children. These parents are largely middle-class, ordinary Ontarians. These parents also differ from each other in many ways: These parents differ from each other in many ways: they work in a wide variety of occupations, have distinct educational backgrounds, take home a range of incomes, and pay tuition in various ways; they cite different reasons for enrolling their children in non-government schools as well. Contrary to the myth that independent schools are reserved for an elite few, it is clear that this sector serves all types of Ontarians who seek to follow their own strong convictions regarding the education of their children.

INTRODUCTION

“Who Chooses Ontario Independent Schools and Why?” It has been over a decade since Van Pelt et al. (2007) surveyed Ontario independent school parents. This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt et al. (2007) and, using the same research question and comparable methodology, examine whether Van Pelt et al.’s Ontario findings hold true twelve years later.

The paper begins with an overview of Ontario’s independent school sector, followed by the sample description of the 2019 Ontario survey of independent school parents, and a presentation and analysis of the survey results. The presentation of the findings begins with the characteristics of independent school families, to answer the question: Who chooses Ontario independent schools? The second part of the analysis explores the reasons why parents choose independent schools.

OVERVIEW OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

In Ontario, an independent school is defined as an institution that provides daytime instruction in elementary or secondary school courses to five or more school-age students and that operates independently of the Ministry of Education. These schools—which can operate as non-profit organizations or as businesses—are required to comply with the legal requirements established by the *Education Act* and other relevant statutes, but can set their own policies and procedures (Ministry of Education 2018).

NUMBERS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

According to open data published by the Ministry of Education, there were 1,345 independent schools operating in Ontario as of June 2019 (Ministry of Education 2019a). This sector is expanding quickly—the number of non-government schools in the

province has grown from 771 in the 2006–2007 school year to 1,125 in 2016–2017 (Ministry of Education 2019b), an increase of 46 percent over eleven years.

ENROLMENTS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

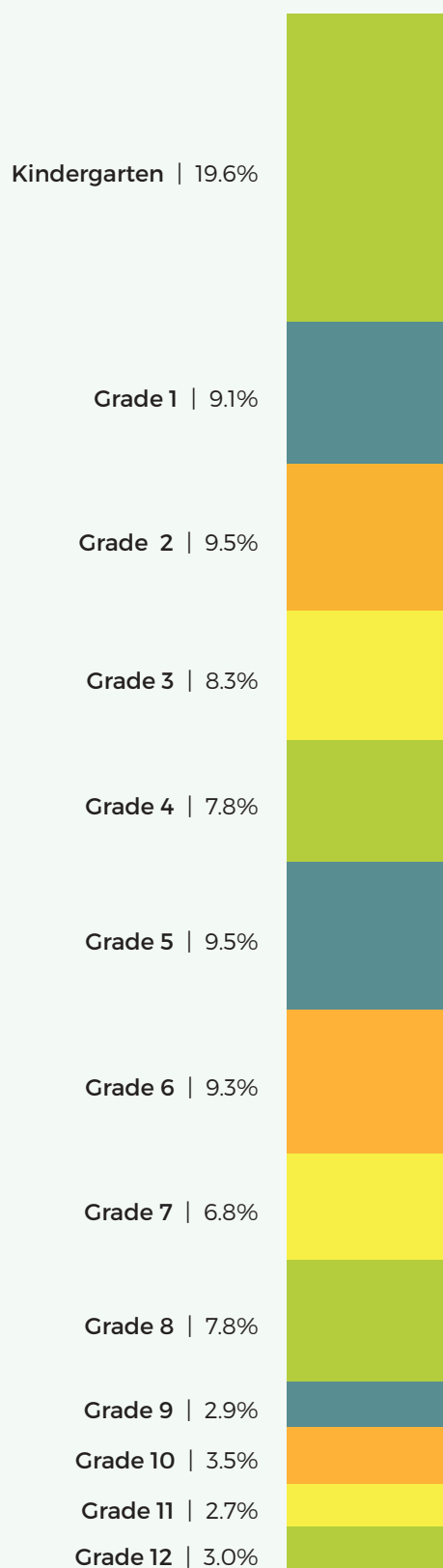
Enrolment in Ontario’s independent schools has been increasing as well, both in absolute numbers and as a share of the province’s total enrolment. For the 2016–2017 school year, 138,412 students were enrolled in independent schools in Ontario, 21 percent more than a decade earlier. The proportion of students enrolled in non-government schools, meanwhile, increased by 25 percent in the same period, from 5.2 percent in 2006–2007 to 6.5 percent in 2016–2017 (Ministry of Education 2019b).

TYPES OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Ontario’s independent school landscape is characterized by rich diversity. Data collected in 2013–2014 showed that nearly half of independent schools (48 percent) were affiliated with a religion. Of the 48 percent of students enrolled in these schools, the majority (60 percent) attended Christian schools (6 percent



FIGURE 1: Survey representation, by child(ren)'s grade
(share of distribution, out of 100%)



Catholic and 54 percent other Christian), with smaller numbers of students attending Jewish (20 percent), Islamic (18 percent), or other (2 percent) schools. One-third of Ontario's independent schools, representing a quarter of the sector's enrolment, offered a special pedagogical emphasis, including Montessori (54 percent of specialty enrolments), Waldorf (4 percent), special education (8 percent), distributed learning (4 percent), and various others (Allison et al., 2016).

FUNDING AND REGULATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Ontario legislation and policy refers to independent schools as “private schools” (Government of Ontario 1990, s. 16; Ministry of Education 2013). Independent schools offering the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) are inspected by the Ministry of Education for compliance with ministry credit-granting requirements, while non-inspected schools, mostly elementary schools, operate with few regulatory constraints (Ministry of Education 2018).

Ontario independent schools receive no provincial funding, unlike their counterparts in the other five largest—and economically competitive—provinces in Canada. British Columbia (BC), Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec all provide qualifying independent schools with partial funding equivalent to, on average, 50 percent of the public system's annual per-student operating costs (Van Pelt et al., 2017).

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

From 45 participating Ontario independent schools, 524 parent respondents started an online survey and 369 completed it, representing 820 and 724 independent school students, respectively. At least 838 parents are represented, from one-third and two-thirds non-religious and religious independent school families, respectively. Geographically, Northern Ontario and all five subregions of Southern Ontario—Southwestern Ontario, the Georgian Triangle, Central Ontario, Eastern Ontario, and the Golden Horseshoe—are represented, as well as at least 15 percent participant representation from urban, suburban, small town, and rural communities. Fully 22 percent of respondents (83) live in a self-described rural neighbourhood, compared to 19 percent and 14 percent of Canadians and Ontarians, respectively (Statistics Canada 2018a). See the appendix for a description of the research approach and its limitations.

Figure 1 shows the survey representation by school grade. Fully 19.6 percent of participants have a child in kindergarten, and 87.8 percent have a child in elementary school. Ontario's independent school landscape has a high concentration of kindergarten-only or kindergarten to grade 1 schools (e.g., Montessori schools). This is reflected in the sample (FIGURE 1).

In summary, following a similar research question and methodological approach as Van Pelt et al. (2007), 524 respondents from 45 Ontario independent schools were secured, representing all grades, Ontario regions, and neighbourhood types from one-third and two-thirds non-religious and religious school families, respectively.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FAMILIES

Following Van Pelt et al.'s (2007) approach, many questions are based on Statistics Canada's 2016 Census and 2013 General Social Survey to collect and compare demographic information on the 524 families surveyed (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 14). The findings and analysis of who chooses Ontario independent schools are presented in this section.

PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

To begin, the first characteristic explored is independent school parents' own educational background. Van Pelt et al.'s (2007, 15) research reflected the decades-long macrotrend in Ontario schooling, away from public to independent schools. Our latest findings confirm this shift. Three-quarters of parents, or 75.3 percent (283/376), at some point in their own education attended a public school, with 56.6 percent of the total (213) only public school educated. While 41.5 percent of parents (156) attended some independent school, only 23.4 percent of the total (88) only attended independent school. Fully 3.7

percent (14) had some homeschool experience as a student, and less than 1 percent were exclusively homeschooled (3). Combined, 80.9 percent (304) only attended one of the three sectors—public school, independent school, or homeschool—with the remaining 19 percent switching between at least two of them, to enrol in multiple sectors. The minimal homeschool background is expected. Homeschoolers constitute just 0.2 percent of Ontario's and 0.4 percent of Canada's respective student populations (Van Pelt 2015, 23), and less than 2 percent of homeschooling parents were themselves homeschoolers (Van Pelt 2003, 34). Religious school parents are considerably more likely to have attended independent school themselves. Specifically, Ontario religious school parents are more than twice as likely as other independent school parents to have only attended independent school (28% vs. 13%) or attended at some point (49.6% vs. 23.5%). These ratios are similar for BC today (Hunt 2019b) and Ontario twelve years ago (Van Pelt et al. 2007). However, 87 percent of non-religious independent school parents (100) attended some public and 76.5 percent (88) only attended public school. This is important. In other words, only 13 percent of non-religious school parents did not attend public school. This one-generation transition from public to independent school challenges the notion that “private” schools are bastions of privileged posterity.

Further countering this misconception of exclusivity, for over 78 percent (295) and 91 percent (343) of parents, respectively, finding and enrolling in their preferred school was easy. Only 9.5 percent expressed difficulty finding their school, with 1 percent of total respondents selecting “very difficult.” Just 2 percent had difficulty enrolling, with a single respondent (0.3%) finding it “very difficult” to enroll in their preferred school.

Notwithstanding, independent school parents are better educated. Controlling for sex,¹ they are over 1.3 times more likely than the average Ontarian aged twenty-five to sixty-four years old to have

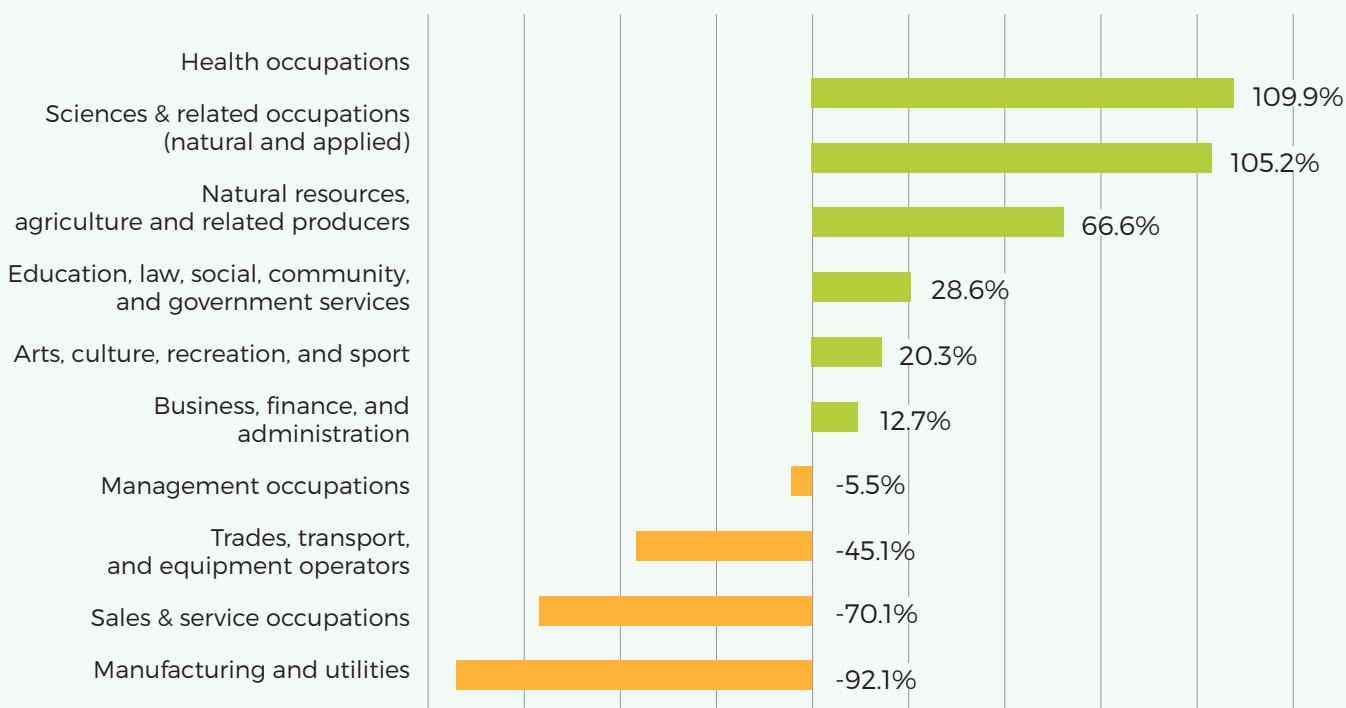
1. Survey respondents were approximately 75 percent female and 25 percent male, so the Ontario 25 to 64 year-olds average is weighted to reflect this distribution.

post-secondary education, at 86.6 percent versus 66 percent, respectively (Statistics Canada 2017a). Independent school parents are twice as likely to have a master's degree (14% compared to 7% of Ontarians between twenty-five to sixty-four years old), four times as likely to have a medical field degree (3.5% vs. 0.9%), nearly twice as likely to have a post-baccalaureate diploma (4% vs. 2%), and 1.5 times more likely to have an earned doctorate degree (1.4% vs. 0.9%). Independent school parents are seven times more likely to have completed high school (or equivalent), half as likely to only have a high school diploma (or equivalent), and one-third less likely to have a trade certificate or diploma as their highest credential.

There are also post-secondary educational differences between non-religious and religious independent school parents. A bachelor's degree is the most common credential for 24.7 percent of non-religious

school parents, compared to 23.6 of religious school parents and 22 percent of Ontarians. Most prevalent among religious school parents is a below-bachelor-level college or university certificate or diploma, at 30.4 percent, which is double non-religious school parents' 15 percent and narrowly above Ontarians' 28.5 percent. Religious school parents are also over three times more likely to have a trade certificate or diploma, and nearly twice as likely to only have high school or less, than non-religious school parents. Whereas non-religious school parents are nearly 8 times more likely to have a medical field degree, nearly 4 times more likely to have an earned doctorate, twice as likely to have a master's degree, and nearly 1.8 times more likely to have a professional degree (e.g., LLB/JD, CA/CPA) than religious school parents. All in all, 91 percent of non-religious and 84 percent of religious school parents, respectively, have some post-secondary education.

FIGURE 2: Propensity (percent more or less likely) for independent school parents to work in occupation, by NOC broad category



EMPLOYMENT

The occupations of independent school parents vary considerably from the Ontario average, and for clarity, both the broad and specific Statistic Canada (2016a) National Occupation Classifications (NOCs) are presented. Controlling for sex, independent school parents are more than twice as likely to work in health occupations (19.2% vs. 9.2%) and natural and applied science occupations (12.1% vs. 5.9%), compared to twenty-five- to sixty-four-year-old Ontarians in the labour force. Independent school parents are 1.7 times more likely to work in natural resources, agriculture, and related production occupations (1.4% vs. 0.85%); 1.3 times more likely to work in education, law, and social, community, and government-services occupations (19.6% vs. 15.2%); and slightly more likely to work in arts, culture, recreation, and sport occupations (3.6% vs. 3%) and business, finance, and administration occupations (22.8% vs. 20.2%)—the latter being Ontario’s largest occupation category. Independent school parents are less likely to work in the remaining NOCs. Most notably, they are nearly 13 times less likely to work in manufacturing and utilities occupations, over 3 times less likely to work in sales and service occupations, and half as likely to work in trades, transport, and equipment operators and related occupations. A total of 73 respondents (26%) selected “Unclassified,” which, given their accompanying comments, is not directly comparable with Statistics Canada’s definition. Figure 2 illustrates the greater and lesser propensity for independent school parents to work in each of the ten broad NOC categories.

Table 1 presents the top twenty specific occupations, by NOC, for independent school parents.² The most common independent school parent occupation is secondary and elementary school teachers and educational counsellors, at 9.6 percent of independent school parents compared to 4.1 percent of twenty-five- to sixty-four-year-old Ontarians in the labour force (Statistics Canada 2016a). Professional

occupations in nursing is the second most common occupation, at 5.1 percent of respondents compared to 2.5 percent of Ontarians. In other words, Ontario independent school parents are more than twice as likely to be school teachers and nurses. This propensity is even stronger when excluding non-religious schools. Religious independent school parents are three times more likely to be secondary or elementary school teachers or educational counsellors and 2.4 times more likely to be nurses than twenty-five- to sixty-four-year-old Ontarians.

There are nine other occupations in which independent school parents are particularly overrepresented. In order of greatest propensity: independent school parents are over 7 times more likely to be optometrists, chiropractors, or other health diagnosing and treating professionals (1.69% vs. 0.24%); over 5 times more likely to be therapists or assessment professionals in health occupations (2.54% vs. 0.48%); nearly 5 times more likely to be physicians, dentists, or veterinarians (3.67% vs. 0.78%); over 4 times more likely to work in technical occupations in computer and information systems (2.54% vs. 0.59%); over 3 times more likely



2. Again, all Ontario averages are gender-adjusted to ensure like-to-like comparisons.

TABLE 1: Top twenty occupations for independent school parents, by specific NOC

	Specific NOC	Ind. School Parents (%)	Ontario Average (%)	General NOC Category
-	Other, not self-employed/entrepreneur	12.71	-	Unclassified
1	Secondary or elementary school teacher, or educational counsellor	9.60	4.10	Education, law, and social, community and government services occupations
-	Other, self-employed/entrepreneur	7.91	-	Unclassified
2	Nurse	5.08	2.49	Health occupations
3	Physician, dentist, or veterinarian	3.67	0.78	Health occupations
4	Finance, insurance, or related business administration	3.39	1.38	Business, finance, and administration occupations
5	Auditor, accountant, or investment professional	3.11	2.50	Business, finance, and administration occupations
6	Administrative or regulatory occupation	2.82	3.91	Business, finance, and administration occupations
6	Computer and information systems professional	2.82	2.18	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
8	Therapy or assessment professional	2.54	0.48	Health occupations
8	Technical occupation in computer and information systems	2.54	0.59	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
10	Human resources or business service professional	2.26	1.92	Business, finance, and administration occupations
10	Office administrative assistant (general, legal, or medical)	2.26	2.53	Business, finance, and administration occupations
12	General office worker	1.98	2.97	Business, finance, and administration occupations
13	Administrative services supervisor	1.69	0.55	Business, finance, and administration occupations
13	Home care provider or educational support occupation	1.69	2.58	Education, law, and social, community, and government services occupations
13	Optometrist, chiropractor, or other health diagnosing and treating professional	1.69	0.24	Health occupations
13	Engineer—civil, mechanical, electrical, or chemical	1.69	0.68	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
17	Writing, translating, or related communications professional	1.41	0.49	Arts, culture, recreation, and sport occupations
17	Manager in engineering, architecture, science, or info. systems	1.41	0.54	Management occupations
19	University professor or post-secondary assistant	1.13	0.71	Education, law, and social, community, and government services occupations
19	Other technical occupation in health care	1.13	1.09	Health occupations
19	Manager in financial and business services	1.13	1.51	Management occupations

to be administrative service supervisors (1.69% vs. 0.55%); and nearly 3 times more likely to be writers, translators, or related communications professionals (1.41% vs. 0.49%). Independent school parents are also approximately 2.5 times more likely to be managers in engineering, architecture, science, or information systems (1.41% vs. 0.54%); civil, mechanical, electrical, or chemical engineers (1.69% vs. 0.68%); and work in finance, insurance, or related business administration occupations (3.39% vs. 1.38%) (TABLE 1).

On the other hand, independent school parents are less likely to work in five of the top twenty occupations. They are one-third less likely to be home care providers or educational support occupations (1.69% vs. 2.58%) and general office workers (1.98% vs. 2.97%). They are 28 percent less likely to work in administrative or regulatory occupations (2.82% vs. 3.91%), exactly one-quarter less likely to be managers in financial and business services (1.13% vs. 1.51%), and around 11 percent less likely to be office

administrative assistants (general, legal, or medical) (2.26% vs. 2.53%).

It is also interesting to compare these results to Hunt and Van Pelt's (2019) recent BC survey. Five of the top twenty findings are nearly identical. Independent school parents in Ontario and BC are just as likely to be (1) school teachers or educational counselors (9.6% of Ontario independent school parents vs. 9.8% of BC independent school parents); (2) physicians, dentists, or veterinarians (3.7% ON vs. 3.2% BC); (3) administrative or regulatory occupations as well as (4) computer and information systems professionals (both categories 2.8% ON vs. 3.2% BC); and (5) managers in financial and business services (1.1% ON vs. 1.1% BC). On the other hand, seven of Ontario's top twenty findings are quite different from BC. Three of Ontario's top twenty occupations only had a single respondent each in BC: technical occupations in computer and information systems (2.54% ON vs. 0.23% BC); optometrists, chiropractors, or other health diagnosing

TABLE 2: Independent school parent occupations, by broad NOC and self-employment

Broad NOC	Count	Share	Specific NOCs Represented	Number of Self-Employed	Self-Employed Share of Broad NOC	Specific NOCs with Self-Employed Respondents
Unclassified	73	20.6%	1	28	38.4%	1
Business, finance, and admin. occupations	64	18.1%	9	19	29.7%	7
Education, law, and social, community, and gov't services	55	15.5%	8	9	16.4%	5
Health occupations	54	15.3%	7	19	35.2%	5
Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)	34	9.6%	9	8	23.5%	6
Management occupations	30	8.5%	14	10	33.3%	8
Sales and service occupations	17	4.8%	9	11	64.7%	8
Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related	12	3.4%	11	7	58.3%	7
Arts, culture, recreation, and sport occupations	10	2.8%	4	8	80.0%	4
Natural resources, agriculture, and related production	4	1.1%	2	4	100.0%	2
Manufacturing and utilities occupations	1	0.3%	1	0	0.0%	0
Total	354	100%	75	123	34.7%	53

TABLE 3: Specific NOCs with at least 50 percent respondent self-employment

Specific NOC	Self-employed	Total Count	% Self-employed	Broad NOC
Agriculture or horticulture worker	3	3	100%	Natural resources, agriculture and related production
Creative and performing artist	2	2	100%	Arts, culture, recreation and sport occupations
Creative designer or craftsperson	2	2	100%	Arts, culture, recreation and sport occupations
Manufacturing or utilities manager	2	2	100%	Management occupations
Other occupation in personal service	2	2	100%	Sales and service occupations
Agriculture, horticulture, or aquaculture manager	1	1	100%	Management occupations
Contractor or supervisor in industrial, electrical, or construction trades	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Crane operator, driller, or blaster	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Customer or personal services manager	1	1	100%	Management occupations
Harvesting, landscaping, or natural resources labourer	1	1	100%	Natural resources, agriculture, and related production
Insurance, real estate, or financial sales	1	1	100%	Sales and service occupations
Masonry or plastering trades	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Other construction trades	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Other transport equipment operator or related maintenance worker	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Photographer, graphic arts technician, or technical or coordinating occupation in motion pictures, broadcasting, or the performing arts	1	1	100%	Arts, culture, recreation, and sport occupations
Plumber, pipefitter, or gas fitter	1	1	100%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Technical occupation in architecture, drafting, surveying, geomatics, or meteorology	1	1	100%	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
Technical occupation in physical science	1	1	100%	Sciences and related occupations (natural and applied)
Transportation manager	1	1	100%	Management occupations
Travel and accommodation occupation	1	1	100%	Sales and service occupations
Optometrist, chiropractor, or other health diagnosing and treating professional	5	6	83%	Health occupations
Physician, dentist, or veterinarian	10	13	77%	Health occupations
Cleaner	2	3	67%	Sales and service occupations
Other sales support or related occupation	2	3	67%	Sales and service occupations
Writing, translating, or related communications professional	3	5	60%	Arts, culture, recreation, and sport occupations
Administrative services supervisor	3	6	50%	Business, finance, and admin. occupations
Financial and business services manager	2	4	50%	Management occupations
Assisting occupation in support of health services	1	2	50%	Health occupations
Automotive service technician	1	2	50%	Trades, transport and equipment operators, and related
Butcher or baker	1	2	50%	Sales and service occupations
College or other vocational instructor	1	2	50%	Education, law, and social, community, and gov't services
Corporate sales manager	1	2	50%	Management occupations
Food and beverage service occupation	1	2	50%	Sales and service occupations
Technical sales specialist in wholesale trade or retail or wholesale buyer	1	2	50%	Sales and service occupations

and treating professionals (1.69% vs. 0.23%); and university professors or post-secondary assistants (1.13% vs. 0.23%). Similarly, 1.4 percent of Ontario respondents are writers, translators, or related communications professionals, compared to just two BC respondents (0.46%). Conversely, Ontario independent school parents are nearly two-thirds less likely to be auditors, accountants, or investment professionals compared to BC independent school parents (3.1% vs. 8.2%), and over one-third less likely to be home care providers or educational support occupations and engineers (civil, mechanical, electrical, or chemical), at 1.7 percent versus 2.7 percent for both. Outside of the top twenty, it is worth noting that only two Ontario respondents are in senior management, compared to 3.4 percent of BC respondents (ranked third for BC independent school parent occupations).

The distinction between non-religious and religious independent school parents is important. Religious independent school parents are more likely to work in “middle-class” occupations, compared to non-religious school parents. For example, school teachers and nurses are by far the top two professions for religious independent schools, at 12 percent and 6 percent of parents, respectively (five occupations are tied for third rank, at 3.2 percent of religious independent school parents), compared to fifth and sixth rank among non-religious school parents (3.8% are school teachers and 2.8% are nurses). The top profession for non-religious independent school parents is physician, dentist, or veterinarian (10.4%), while it is not even a top-twenty occupation for religious independent school parents (0.8%).

Independent school parents are also more likely to be entrepreneurs (e.g., business owners, self-employed), especially in Ontario. Respondents are more than twice as likely to display entrepreneurial characteristics as fully 35.3 of respondents are self-employed, compared to 15.5 percent of Ontarians and 15.3 percent of Canadians (Statistics Canada 2018c). Nearly 44 percent of non-religious and 31.6 percent of religious independent school parents are entrepreneurs. Interestingly, Ontario independent school parents

are 44 percent more likely to be entrepreneurs than their BC counterparts (Hunt and Van Pelt 2019), despite British Columbians’ greater propensity to be self-employed (Statistics Canada 2018c). Notably, of independent school parents identifying their occupation as “Other” or “Unclassified,” Ontario respondents are more than twice as likely as BC respondents to be self-employed.

Self-employed respondents work in fifty-three (70.7%) of the seventy-five specific NOCs, and they are a majority in four broad NOCs, as shown in table 2. All four independent school respondents working in two natural resources, agriculture, and related production occupations are self-employed, as are 80 percent of respondents working in the four represented occupations in arts, culture, recreation, and sports; 64.7 percent of sales and service occupations (representing eight specific NOCs); and 58.3 percent of trades, transport and equipment operators, and related occupations (representing seven specific NOCs) (TABLE 2).

Independent school parents are not the “big business” or corporate type. Their entrepreneurship is primarily as independent contractors and small business owners. Table 3 presents all specific NOCs where at least 50 percent of respondents are self-employed. As can be seen, it is an extensive and diverse list, with few “elite” professions and many blue-collar occupations represented (TABLE 3).

INCOME AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

As independent school parents are far more likely to be well educated, it is not surprising that they occupy professions that require higher education and, therefore, command higher incomes. However, differences in non-elite independent school household income compared to that of public school households is likely better explained by family structure. Of Ontario independent school households, 92 percent are two-parent families compared to 72.6 percent of Ontario households with children (Statistics Canada 2017a). This is almost identical to the findings in BC (Hunt and Van Pelt 2019). Similarly, household income data is also

quite similar between the Ontario and BC surveys. In both samples, couple families have statistically significant higher household incomes.³ For the Ontario sample specifically, 72.5 percent (242/334) of married respondents self-report a household income above \$90,000—approximately the average couple-family household income for Canada and Ontario (Statistics Canada 2016b)—while 75 percent (15/20) of lone-parent respondents self-report a household income below \$90,000. Intuitively, couple-family households naturally have twice the earning potential through two incomes and other gains from specialization (e.g., the division of labour from one parent potentially working longer hours, while one parent concentrates more heavily on child-rearing and domestic responsibilities).



ties). But this is also confirmed in the causes-of-poverty literature, which reveals lone-parent households have disproportionately lower income (see Haskins and Sawhill 2003; Murray 2013; Wang and Wilcox 2017; Chetty and Hendren 2018a; 2018b; and Sarlo 2019). In Canada, female lone-parent households are over twelve times more likely to live in poverty than a married, working two-parent household (Sarlo 2019). In terms of independent compared to public school families' household income, Clemens et al. (2017)

and MacLeod et al. (2017) find for BC and Alberta, respectively, that non-elite independent school household income is comparable to public school families.

Regarding family structure more specifically, 85 percent (121) and 95.6 percent (279) of parents with children in Ontario non-religious and religious independent schools, respectively, are married compared to 66.6 percent of Ontario families with children (Statistics Canada 2011). Just 4 percent (6) and one-third of a percent (1) of respective non-religious and religious school parents are common-law, compared to 7 percent of Ontario families with children (Statistics Canada 2011). Lone-parent households are well below the 27.4 percent provincial average (Statistics Canada 2017a), at 10.6 percent and 4 percent of non-religious and religious school families, respectively. However, of the combined twenty-seven lone-parent families in the sample, 85 percent (23) are female parents, which is slightly higher than the 80.5 percent of female lone parents in the Ontario Census (Statistics Canada 2017a).

PAYING FOR SCHOOL

Tuition is charged in one of three primary ways—by family (45%), per student (38.3%), and sliding scale (15.7%)—and tuition costs vary considerably. Less than 10 percent (36) of parents pay below \$4,000 annually per child for independent school tuition; 27 percent (100) pay between \$4,000 to \$8,000; and the majority, at 54 percent (201), pay \$8,000 to \$16,000. This accounts for over 90 percent of families. By comparison, nearly 97 percent of BC independent school families pay less than \$16,000 in tuition, and over 75 percent of BC independent school families pay less than \$8,000 in tuition compared to less than half that—36.5 percent—in Ontario. Of the remaining share of Ontario respondents, over 8 percent (31) pay between \$16,000 to \$28,000, and five respondents pay \$28,000 to \$56,000. Only

3. The correlation between household income and marital status at a 95 percent confidence level has a p-value of 0.001 in Ontario and < 0.0000 in BC (meaning, the odds that the results occurred by chance is less than 1 in 1,000 in Ontario and less than 1 in 100,000 chance in BC, 95 times out of 100).

twelve respondents pay residence fees in addition to tuition, at less than \$4,000 annually per student for five respondents, between \$4,000 to \$8,000 for four respondents, and between \$8,000 to \$28,000 for the remaining two respondents. (By comparison, residence fees are much higher in BC.) In addition to tuition and residence, 75 percent (280) spend under \$1,000 annually per child on extra costs (such as uniforms, instruments, tutors, school trips, and activity fees); 16 percent (60) spend an extra \$1,000 to \$2,500; 6.5 percent (24) spend an extra \$2,500 to \$5,000; just three respondents spend \$5,000 to \$10,000; and the remaining five respondents spend over \$10,000 in extras. For perspective, the average Canadian parent with a child in hockey, spends nearly \$3,000 per child per season. This average increases to \$3,700 per season for children over ten years old (Mirtle 2013). Moreover, an Ipsos survey found 32 percent of Canadian parents go into debt to pay for their children's extracurricular activities, averaging \$1,160 annually (Alini 2018). Although independent school parents may pay for the same extracurriculars, the context of these price points shows that independent schooling is likely within reach of more families than often assumed.

However, affording tuition can be a challenge. Over two-thirds of parents have made major financial changes to afford the cost of independent schooling. Nearly 28 percent (117/419) have taken on a part-time job for additional income, 13 percent (55) budget differently or make sacrifices, 7 percent (29) changed jobs, and 7 percent (29) took out a loan. Others rely on the help of others. Nearly 9.4 percent receive a bursary or tuition assistance from the school, ranging from \$1,000 to \$20,000, and over 3 percent (13) of families receive financial support from family or friends (e.g., grandparents paying grandchild's tuition).

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Independent school families are also more civically engaged. Fully 84 percent of respondents (310

of the 369 that finished the survey) are active in a group, organization, or association compared to 66 percent of Ontarians (Turcotte 2015), and on average, independent school parents are members of at least two groups, organizations, or associations. The most common involvement is with a religious-affiliate group, at 67.4 percent of independent school parents and nearly 5 times the national average (14%).⁴ Even when excluding religious school families, religious-affiliate group membership—at nearly 22 percent—is over 1.5 times the Canadian average of 14 percent. Involvement in a sports or recreation organization is the second highest, at nearly 35 percent, slightly higher than Statistics Canada's 31 percent (the highest of any group, organization, or association in the General Social Survey). Over 22 percent of independent school parents are members of non-union professional organizations, and nearly 17 percent belong to a union for a combined 39 percent, well above the combined 28 percent in the General Social Survey. Fully 25.5 percent of independent school parents—and 29 percent of non-religious school parents—are members of a school group, neighbourhood, civic, or community association (e.g., parent-teacher association, alumni association, block parents), compared to 17 percent of Canadians. Ontario independent school parents are less likely to be members of cultural, educational, or hobby organizations (15% of sample compared to 20% Statistics Canada) and service club, fraternity, or sorority organizations (2% sample, 6% Statistics Canada). The aforementioned results are relatively comparable to Hunt and Van Pelt's (2019) findings of BC independent school parents. However, the two final categories vary considerably. Political party or activist membership for BC independent school parents is identical to Statistics Canada's 4 percent, but rises nearly threefold for Ontario independent school parents—to 11 percent. Conversely, Ontario independent school parents, at 6.5 percent, are only one and a half percentage points more likely than the Canadian average (5%) to be involved in youth organizations (e.g., Scouts, YMCA); whereas BC independent school parents are twice as likely.

4. Detailed provincial data unavailable.



In terms of voting, nearly two-thirds (246/375) of independent school parents participate in every municipal, provincial, and federal election, compared to 38 percent of Ontarians. Over 92 percent (346) vote at least somewhat often. Only 4 percent (15) never vote, which is at least a quarter less than the national average. For context, the highest voter turnout for any federal or Ontario provincial election since 1919 was 79.4 percent in the 1958 federal election, and average voter turnout in the last five federal and Ontario provincial elections was 62.8 percent and 53 percent, respectively (Elections Ontario 2019; Elections Canada 2015; 2018). There is little difference between non-religious and religious independent school parents' voting participation.

The greater likelihood for independent school parents to participate in community organizations and elections is a critical finding. The family culture of independent school households indicates a considerably greater propensity toward a wide variety of active civic engagement. This refutes a common argument made against independent schools, especially religious schools, that adverse social outcomes will result if all students do not receive the same “common school” education, and thus inflict a dangerous and unnecessary risk to our society and democratic institutions. Not surprisingly, this greater civic engagement confirms a growing body of evidence from North America’s largest sample of Christian school graduates and administrators, the Cardus Education Survey (Pennings et al. 2012; 2014; Green et al. 2016; 2018). The latest Ontario edition finds that “graduates from independent religious schools (evangelical Protestant and independent Catholic) were more likely to participate in almost every category of volunteering laid out by Statistics Canada than public school graduates. This includes but is not limited to fundraising, door-to-door canvassing, mentoring, teaching, coaching, and refereeing” (Green et al. 2018, 12).

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND PARTICIPATION

An Angus Reid Institute (2018) study found only 16 percent of Canadians identify as non-religious, and the 2011 National Household Survey found 23 percent of all Ontarians have no religious affiliation (Statistics Canada 2013). In other words, the overwhelming majority identify with a religion of some kind. This is even more pronounced in independent schools—both religious and non-religious schools.

A total of 90.6 percent (337/372) of Ontario survey participants report a religious affiliation, with only 9.4 percent (35) selecting “None.” Even in non-religious independent schools the overwhelming majority, 69.4 percent, self-identify as religious. Of the overall total, 76.5 percent (284) of respondents selected Christian (non-Catholic) as their religious

affiliation, which by school category is 32.4 percent and 95.4 percent of respective non-religious and religious school families. The share of non-Catholic Christian families in non-religious independent schools closely resembles the 33.9 percent of the total Ontario population (after controlling for sex), as reported in the 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada 2013).

The sample included respondents of seven different faiths, with Christianity further differentiated by non-Catholic and Catholic adherents. When excluding religious independent schools, the representation of religious affiliation nearly mirrors that of Ontario generally, with the exception of Catholics and “None”—who are under- and overrepresented, respectively. At non-religious independent schools, 32.4 percent identify as Christian (non-Catholic) compared to 33.9 percent of Ontarians, 6.3 percent versus 4.5 percent identify as Muslim, 4.5 percent versus 2.9 percent Hindu, 1.8 versus 1.5 percent Jewish, 1.8 percent versus 1.4 percent Sikh, and 1.8 percent versus 1.3 percent Buddhist. Only 19.8 percent of non-religious independent school parents identify as Catholic versus 31.8 of Ontarians; 30.6 percent do not identify with a religion (or are atheist, humanist, or agnostic) versus 22 percent of Ontarians; and one respondent selected “Other, non-Christian.”

In terms of commitment, the intensity of religious belief is strongest among non-Catholic Christian respondents and those with children in a religious school. A total of 92.6 percent of non-Catholic Christians state their religious beliefs are very important to the way they live their lives, compared to 46.9 percent of Catholic Christians and 42.9 percent of all other combined religious affiliations. When including “somewhat important” responses, religious beliefs are important to the way 96.5 percent of non-Catholic Christians, 75 percent of Catholic Christians, and 90.5 percent of adherents of other religions live their lives. Comparing school types, 98 percent of religious school families and exactly 40 percent of non-religious school families report their religious beliefs are very important to the way they live their lives.

This religious commitment is evident in how often one attends religious services and participates in religious activities at home. Christian (non-Catholic) independent school families are particularly devout: 80.6 percent attend religious services at least once a week, and exactly 90 percent participate in religious activities at home at least once a week. When excluding non-religious school families, the aforementioned rise by 8.5 and 6 percentage points, respectively. Only 28 percent and 19 percent of Catholic and other religious participants, respectively, attend religious services at least once a week (excluding special occasions like weddings, funerals, and baptisms), and they are three times and five times more likely than non-Catholic Christians to never attend at all, respectively. However, nearly half of Catholics (46.9%) and 42.9 percent of combined other religious respondents participate in religious activities at home at least once a week (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, worship). This increases to 65.6 percent and 71.4 percent, respectively, when the timeframe is extended to religious activities at home at least once a month. By comparison, 93.2 percent of non-Catholic Christians participate in religious activities at home at least once a month, and Catholics and other (combined) are over six times and nearly two times more likely than non-Catholic Christians to never participate in religious activities at home.

SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL MOBILITY

Of 435 participating families, 47 percent (204) previously enrolled in another school. This percentage is identical to Hunt and Van Pelt’s (2019) BC survey. Of the overall total, 35.6 percent (155) have had at least one child attend public school at some point (again, nearly identical to Hunt and Van Pelt’s 35% in BC [2019], compared to 32% in Van Pelt et al.’s [2007] Ontario sample), 4.8 percent (21) have homeschooled, and identical to BC, the remaining 59.5 percent (259) have only attended independent schools (vs. Van Pelt et al.’s [2007] 68%). There is minimal difference between non-religious and religious independent schools in propensity to

switch schools or previously attend public school. Combined, of the 204 families who previously enrolled elsewhere, 76 percent (155) have had children attend public school. This is critically important. Of families currently enrolled in independent school, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from public school. (Again, same as BC.)

In summary, the findings reveal interesting contrasts between independent school parents and other Ontarians. The overwhelming majority of independent school parents attended public school, so their children are “first-generation” independent schoolers. And of families currently enrolled in independent school, for every one that switched from another independent school, three came from public school. Moreover, independent school families are more active in their communities and civically engaged.

PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Van Pelt et al.’s review of the North American literature revealed sixty-one independent school characteristics (Van Pelt et al. 2007), which, through testing, Hunt (2019) refined to forty-seven. For this study, Ontario parents were asked, on a four-point scale for each, the extent to which they agree or disagree each of the forty-seven characteristics influenced their choice of independent school. Additionally, the questionnaire asked about the most important reason (possibly outside the forty-seven), external influencers, and parental satisfaction. This section presents the findings and an analysis of why parents choose Ontario independent schools.

RANKING FORTY-SEVEN REASONS WHY PARENTS CHOOSE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

Van Pelt et al. (2007) ranked Ontario independent school parents’ top ten reasons based solely on “Very Important” responses. However, the rankings

vary greatly—overall and by school type—when “Somewhat Important,” “Somewhat Unimportant,” and “Not Important” responses are factored in. For example, when ranking based solely on very important responses, “This school supports our family’s values” ranks fifth overall, even though only 64.9 percent of non-religious independent school parents believe it is very important. Thus, to better reflect the full spectrum the responses of “Very Important” and “Somewhat Important” were added together and the combined responses of “Somewhat Unimportant” and “Not Important” were subtracted, with double weight given to the strong-intensity sentiment of “Very Important” and “Not Important.” In table 4, further weighting is shown by the provincial distribution of each school type (50% weighting for the share of non-religious school students [when excluding First Nation, international-oriented, special education, and tutor-based schools] and 50% religious). After applying these weights, “supports our family’s values” moves down the rankings from fifth to sixteenth.

Using this weighting, table 4 presents the overall top twenty, and table 5 and table 6 present the top ten for non-religious and religious school respondents, respectively. No characteristic ranks in the top five for both non-religious and religious independent school parents. Ranking first overall, “This is a safe school” ranks first for non-religious and seventh for religious school parents. Second overall, “This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students” ranks seventh and fourth for non-religious and religious, respectively. In third, “This school emphasizes character development” ranks eighth for non-religious and fifth for religious. “We trust the curriculum at this school” ranks fourth overall, ninth for non-religious, and sixth for religious. Rounding off the overall top five is “This school has outstanding teachers,” at fourth and tenth for non-religious and religious independent school parents, respectively (TABLES 4 – 6).

The top five overall results in table 4 are similar to the findings in BC (Hunt and Van Pelt 2019). School safety and “supportive, nurturing environment for students” are reversed, with the latter in first and the

former ranked second overall in the BC rankings. Character development ranks third for both provinces, and curriculum trust is one placement lower in BC, at fifth overall. Only one of the overall top five characteristics is different between BC and Ontario. “This school instills confidence in the students” ranks fourth in BC but sixth in Ontario, and “This school has outstanding teachers” ranks fifth in Ontario but tenth in BC (TABLE 4).

As in BC, academic emphasis ranks lower in Ontario than what might be expected (13th overall, 9th non-religious, 16th religious) (albeit, academic emphasis is even less important to BC independent school parents). This appears to be a decades-long

trend. In a 1978 survey of BC independent school parents, Kamin and Erickson (1981) found strict discipline then academics were by far the most important reasons for parents choosing non-religious independent schools. By 2002, Bosetti’s survey of Alberta independent school parents found smaller class size, shared values and beliefs, and teaching style were all more important to non-religious independent school parents than academic reputation (Bosetti 2004). A few years later, Bosetti and Pyryt’s (2007) Alberta survey and Van Pelt et al.’s (2007) Ontario survey of independent school parents—administered in 2006—found academics were important to nearly all parents but not the most important reason for selecting a school (for any independent school type). In

TABLE 4: Top twenty ranking of important characteristics in choosing current independent school

	Question: “This school . . .”	Weighted		Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	is a safe school	94.3%	337	90.1%	34	9.1%	1	0.3%	2	0.5%		374
2	offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students	93.1%	346	92.0%	24	6.4%	2	0.5%	4	1.1%		376
3	emphasizes character development	92.6%	333	89.3%	37	9.9%	1	0.3%	2	0.5%		373
4	has curriculum we trust	92.0%	330	88.5%	39	10.5%	1	0.3%	3	0.8%		373
5	has outstanding teachers	90.8%	300	80.2%	73	19.5%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%		374
6	instills confidence in the students	88.7%	295	78.7%	72	19.2%	5	1.3%	3	0.8%		375
7	motivates students	88.4%	293	78.1%	74	19.7%	6	1.6%	2	0.5%		375
8	educates the whole child	88.3%	311	83.2%	54	14.4%	5	1.3%	4	1.1%		374
9	teaches students to think critically and independently	88.1%	291	77.4%	76	20.2%	7	1.9%	2	0.5%		376
10	teaches right from wrong	87.3%	326	87.2%	39	10.4%	7	1.9%	2	0.5%		374
11	is well administered	86.0%	280	75.1%	85	22.8%	7	1.9%	1	0.3%		373
12	values parent-teacher collaboration	85.5%	297	79.4%	69	18.4%	4	1.1%	4	1.1%		374
13	emphasizes academic quality	85.5%	271	72.3%	96	25.6%	6	1.6%	2	0.5%		375
14	students seem happy	85.4%	276	73.6%	87	23.2%	7	1.9%	5	1.3%		375
15	sets high expectations for students	84.8%	270	71.8%	96	25.5%	10	2.7%	0	0.0%		376
16	supports our family’s values	83.8%	326	87.4%	34	9.1%	7	1.9%	6	1.6%		373
17	has good student discipline	83.4%	276	74.0%	85	22.8%	8	2.1%	4	1.1%		373
18	has a good, long-standing reputation	81.2%	259	69.1%	101	26.9%	9	2.4%	6	1.6%		375
19	offers individualized attention	79.7%	248	66.1%	106	28.3%	14	3.7%	7	1.9%		375
20	encourages understanding and tolerance	78.7%	247	66.2%	101	27.1%	17	4.6%	8	2.1%		373

the latter study, “This school emphasizes academic quality” ranked second and sixth for academically defined and religiously defined schools, respectively. More recently, Kelly and Scafidi’s (2013) and Bedrick and Burke’s (2018) surveys of Georgia and Florida independent school parents, respectively, confirm the decrease of academic emphasis in importance in parents’ school choice. In the latter, student performance on standardized tests was the least important

factor for parents. This challenges the underlying assumption—in countless studies comparing school results—that improving academic performance is the purpose of school choice. Not that academic quality is unimportant. For a nation and economy, it is vitally important (as it is a key explanatory variable of economic growth [see Hunt 2019]). But, at present, clearly academics is not a primary factor in most Ontario parents’ independent school choice.

TABLE 5: Non-religious school parents’ top ten ranking of important characteristics

Question: “This school . . .”		Weighted	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	is a safe school	95.2%	103	90.4%	11	9.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	114
2	instills confidence in the students	93.4%	102	89.5%	11	9.6%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	114
2	teaches students to think critically and independently	93.4%	104	91.2%	8	7.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	114
4	has outstanding teachers	93.3%	97	86.6%	15	13.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	112
5	motivates students	92.9%	102	90.3%	9	8.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	113
6	students seem happy	91.7%	98	86.0%	15	13.2%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	114
7	offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students	91.2%	103	90.4%	8	7.0%	0	0.0%	3	2.6%	114
8	emphasizes character development	90.3%	99	87.6%	11	9.7%	1	0.9%	2	1.8%	113
9	has curriculum we trust	89.9%	100	87.7%	11	9.6%	0	0.0%	3	2.6%	114
9	class sizes are small	89.9%	95	83.3%	17	14.9%	2	1.8%	0	0.0%	114
9	emphasizes academic quality	89.9%	96	84.2%	16	14.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	114

TABLE 6: Religious school parents’ top ten ranking of important characteristics

Question: “This school . . .”		Weighted	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Somewhat Unimportant		Not Important		Total
1	supports our family’s values	98.3%	252	97.3%	6	2.3%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	259
2	teaches right from wrong	96.5%	246	94.6%	12	4.6%	2	0.8%	0	0.0%	260
3	reinforces our faith or religious beliefs	95.4%	249	95.4%	8	3.1%	0	0.0%	4	1.5%	261
4	offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students	95.0%	243	92.7%	16	6.1%	2	0.8%	1	0.4%	262
5	emphasizes character development	95.0%	234	90.0%	26	10.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	260
6	has curriculum we trust	94.0%	230	88.8%	28	10.8%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	259
7	is a safe school	93.5%	234	90.0%	23	8.8%	1	0.4%	2	0.8%	260
8	values parent-teacher collaboration	89.4%	212	81.5%	45	17.3%	2	0.8%	1	0.4%	260
9	educates the whole child	89.2%	217	83.5%	38	14.6%	2	0.8%	3	1.2%	260
10	has outstanding teachers	88.4%	203	77.5%	58	22.1%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	262

School Safety Also Means Trusting the Curriculum and Staff

School safety and curriculum trust are also interesting findings. “This is a safe school” ranks first overall and first for non-religious independent school parents, while ranking seventh for religious independent school parents. In Van Pelt et al. (2007) it ranked fourth for both academically defined and religiously defined schools. “We trust the curriculum at this school” ranks fourth overall in this sample. Unlike today, curriculum concerns may well have not been front of mind in 2007 Ontario, so although curriculum trust was included in Van Pelt’s questionnaire, its importance ranked comparatively low.

Based on the literature and Van Pelt et al.’s findings, school safety could be generally understood to refer to a lack of bullying, but safety means much more. Fully 175 (98.9%) of the 177 families who changed schools have “safe school” as a very important (91%) or somewhat important (7.9%) consideration in their decision. Of those 175 families, 61.7 percent (108) had concerns with the curriculum, 58.3 percent (102) had concerns with the teachers or administration, while only 44.6 percent (78) had concerns with bullying at their last school. Similarly, of the 330 overall respondents with trusting the curriculum as a very important factor in choosing their independent school, 99 percent (327) also have “safe school” as a very important (309) or somewhat important (18) consideration. Conversely, 99 percent (334/337) of those who believe “safe school” is a very important factor also have “We trust the curriculum at this school” as either very important (309) or somewhat important (25) in choosing their independent school.

As in Hunt and Van Pelt’s (2019) BC study, reviewing parents’ open-ended responses throughout the questionnaire confirms this relationship between safety and curriculum. Many parents raised curriculum concerns, ranging from its being too boring and unchallenging to the inappropriateness of explicit sexual content being taught to young students without parent approval, robbing children of their innocence. Specifically, the new sexual education (or

“sex-ed”) curriculum and parents and students experiencing hostility towards them for holding to their faith and traditional values—in other words, for being nonconformists—was frequently mentioned as a deep concern motivating parents to switch schools. Summarizing the views of many respondents, one parent wrote:

In [our] public school [experience], any difference between the majority world view shared between administrators, teachers, and students



(overwhelmingly Atheists) was judged harshly... Switching to a Christian school changed [our daughter’s] educational experience greatly. She felt like she was a valuable part of the school’s community, she felt safe each day, she was excited to share her faith with others and not be mistreated, and she loved that the curriculum was more challenging and she would be better prepared for high school and post secondary choices.

“All views are acceptable except Christian views” was a common theme in parents’ open-ended responses, but perhaps the following quote summarizes independent school parents’ perspective best:

We could have a great public school system if we actually had an inclusive system, but we don't. We don't have an inclusive system that values friendly debate and discussion. We have a system that promotes one world view.

Many parents also raised safety concerns around public school teachers and administration. For example, one parent wrote:

Our first child was in Grade 7 when she told us that she was feeling worn down by constantly saying to her friends and to her teachers that she did not want to do the things they were encouraging. In class and in her friends' homes she was being asked to watch crass or violent movies that frequently used offensive language... The messages that were being given to her, both implicitly and explicitly, by the teachers and students, were encouragement for sexual promiscuity or sexual experimentation... The concept of inclusion seemed to mean you will be included only if you share our views.

Another wrote:

Our son started in public school. He had delayed speech and was told in [Junior Kindergarten] (JK), by his teacher in front of his class, she could not understand him. He was bullied in JK and [Senior Kindergarten] (SK) and was sent home for screaming at his bullies to stop. By the end of SK, more than three quarters of the class could not read, print their name, or count. No homework was ever sent home. Our son was told (and we were) by his teacher that he wasn't allowed to talk about church or God/Jesus in school at all, and the list goes on... He cried every day [and] shut down emotionally... Now in Grade 2 at [his independent school] he is caught up, excelling and LOVES school. Our son doesn't like to miss a single day. I have never seen so many wonderful, caring, outgoing teachers as I have in this Christian school. I have never ever witnessed a more dedicated, hard working, positive principal as I have witnessed [here]. We have endured

a horrible public school with judgement on our faith, and our son has been judged, ridiculed, and left without education or support in public school. We are truly blessed to have the opportunity to have our children in Christian school. They will continue to love school, learning and gain so much confidence surrounded by caring, strong faith-minded people.

This survey recorded many more stories like this.

Disappointment with Public Schools

Specifically regarding the public system, of the 155 survey families who have had a child attend public school, 62.6 percent (97) identified curriculum concerns as very important (76) or somewhat important (21) in choosing their current independent school. More generally, 72.9 percent (113) of parents who have had a child in public school express disappointment with public schools as either a very important (79) or somewhat important (37) reason for choosing their current independent school. Of those who have had a child in public school and were disappointed with public school, 81.4 percent (92) had curriculum concerns at their last school. Over 54 percent (71/131) of parents who have had a child in public school would not go back to the public system, if their child was not enrolled in their current independent school.

Again, as in Hunt and Van Pelt's (2019) BC study, Ontario independent school parent respondents wrote at length about their disappointment with the public school system. Other than praise for their independent school, disappointment with public schools—for a variety of reasons—was the most common open-ended response, when parents gave a particular story, experience, or reason for choosing and staying with their independent school. The public school issues range from practical ones – “One of our children was struggling in [public] school...it was mentioned but nothing ever done.” – to deeply personal ones – “After significant bullying at a public school, our children were afraid to attend school.”

Many parents expressed how at public school their child was “just a number” and there was a lack of interest in what was best for them: “[At public school] we were made to feel as though we would have to fight the administration to get what we thought would be best for our child.” Three parent testimonials, in particular, further illustrate this point. One parent wrote:

We were unhappy with the way the public school taught to “the lowest common denominator.” Our kids were bored and not reaching their academic potential...The contrast—in curriculum, quality of teaching, communication to parents, promotion of growth mindset, etc.—is astonishing. It’s obvious that the Christian school environment was better for learning. We are grateful for the years our boys attended a Christian independent school.

Even in the earliest years, another parent observed:

Moving from a public school to an independent school changed my son’s outlook on school and education. He went from feeling isolated and bored to being engaged and excited about his school life. He has built positive relationships with both teachers and peers. When he first made the move to an independent school in Grade 1 and you asked him about his previous public school experience he would always say, “Well those weren’t the learning years, just the playing years.” Which is true. He started SK with bad printing, he ended SK with worse printing. Now he is in Grade 3 and does cursive writing!

In terms of addressing learning challenges and best meeting students’ needs, another parent wrote:

Our son struggled in the public school system despite having the help of a private tutor after school. He had an assessment and was categorized as having a learning disability. The school’s solution to this was to offer “accommodations” such as a computer that read out questions so he would not have to read. We were concerned that

this was a crutch that didn’t help the underlying problem. He had low self esteem academically but confidence in other aspects of his life. We knew he was smart. We did not like to hear him call himself dumb or state that he hates school.

The experience moving to [our independent school] was positive from day one. The teacher, with a smaller class to manage, gave him the attention he needed. She praised his efforts. She kept us informed of his progression. He has been at the school almost 6 months now. He is getting ‘A’s on all his tests and assignments. He understands the concepts. Most importantly he is confident and happy at school. This was 100% the best decision we have ever made.

But parents’ disappointment with public school goes well beyond the quality of education and individualized attention. The experience for many has had deeply negative consequences, as this parent attests:

The school our children attended was soul-crushing. I am so thankful for [our independent school]. I only wish we had enrolled our kids sooner; as it is, they need a lot of healing.

With more detail, another parent wrote:

I was told by the principal of my daughter’s previous public school, where she was regularly the victim of physical bullying, that she was not capable of achieving at grade level and would be placed in a special education classroom. After moving her to a private school environment she is now meeting grade level expectation, her self esteem has improved greatly and she is no longer the victim of bullying. Moving my daughter from public to private school has completely changed the trajectory of her entire life.

Yet, this last story perhaps best articulates parents’ and students’ disappointment with public school—its impractical and impersonal nature—and how strikingly it contrasts with independent schools:

Our youngest son was diagnosed as dyslexic with a reading accuracy rate in the 0.1 percentile. Profound dyslexia. I am the product of two public school teachers and was a firm believer in public school. I NEVER thought I would send my child(ren) to private school. When he was diagnosed, everything changed. We were told at our public school that “It’s okay, some kids are illiterate.”

Nope. That’s not okay with me. We dug and dug until we could find a school to help our boys (turns out the eldest is slightly dyslexic too). They both now read very confidently thanks to the angels at our independent school.

Reading is a fundamental right. I feel guilty every day that our children can read because we can afford private school.

I offered to pay for the dyslexia program at our local public school so that all of the kids there could learn to read...and we were denied. So we left. I have never looked back.

I have no regrets and neither do our kids. We are so very fortunate to have this independent school near us with a program that specializes in dyslexia.

What Was Not Important

Some of the forty-seven factors have little importance to parents. The seven lowest ranked in Ontario are identical and in identical order to the bottom seven in BC (Hunt and Van Pelt 2019). The least important factor, “Other members of our family typically attend this school or one like it,” ranked forty-seventh and is not important or somewhat unimportant to 61.5 percent of Ontario independent school parents and only very important to 18.3 percent. Ranked second to last, at forty-sixth, convenient transportation options are not important or somewhat unimportant to 54.4 percent and are very important to 24.8 percent of respondents. “This school is less expensive than others we considered” ranks forty-fifth, as it is very important to the fewest parents (12.4%) and is the least important for religious independent school families. Geographic proximity to home (ranked 44th), knowing other families with children at the school (43rd), additional activities before and/or after school (42nd), and regularly assigned homework (41st) round out the bottom seven rankings.

THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR CHOOSING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

When asked open-endedly the most important consideration in choosing their independent school, 27 percent (91) gave a single reason. For the remaining 73 percent (244), it was a combination of factors, so the data needed to be organized before analysis could occur. Of 335 responses, 832 different reasons were given, which were collapsed into fifty-five categories before scoring.⁵



5. Explicit reasons were given a score of 1, and implicit reasons a half score. For example, one parent in Hunt and Van Pelt’s (2019) BC survey wrote the most important thing was, “[The] safety of my children’s spiritual, emotional and physical well-being so that they can flourish in their strengths and grow in their weaknesses.” Explicitly, “safe school” and “educates the whole child” were

TABLE 7: Top twenty “most important” considerations in choosing current independent school

	Summary of Specific Response	Score	Share of Responses	Share of Respondents
1	Christian	95.5	11.5%	28.5%
2	Religious / Faith-based education	85	10.2%	25.4%
3	Reinforces our faith or religious beliefs	79.5	9.6%	23.7%
4	Supportive, nurturing environment for students / Atmosphere / Emotional/social/spiritual development	60.5	7.3%	18.1%
5	Supports our family's values	46.5	5.6%	13.9%
6	Quality education / Excellence / Good/strong education	36.5	4.4%	10.9%
7	Educates the whole child / Well-rounded/holistic education / Integrates world-view	33.5	4.0%	10.0%
8	Individualized attention / Treated as an individual / Recognizes uniqueness	33	4.0%	9.9%
9	Curriculum	31	3.7%	9.3%
10	Small class sizes / Small school / No class splits	27	3.2%	8.1%
11	Values	23	2.8%	6.9%
12	Teachers care/are responsible/genuine	21.5	2.6%	6.4%
13	Community / Sense of belonging / Good peers	19.5	2.3%	5.8%
14	Academics	18.5	2.2%	5.5%
15	Unique educational focus / Specialized programs	18	2.2%	5.4%
16	Issues with public school	16.5	2.0%	4.9%
17	Accommodates particular needs of our child(ren)	15.5	1.9%	4.6%
17	Safe school / Safety / Trust	15.5	1.9%	4.6%
19	Recognizes (“encourages,” “fosters”) student success	13.5	1.6%	4.0%
20	Respectful / Taught respect/kindness / Prepares good people/citizens	12	1.4%	3.6%

Of the fifty-five open-ended categories, table 7 shows a ranking of the top twenty. Excluding responses with religious references, the top “most important” reason is the second-highest ranking characteristic in table 4: “This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students.” Including all responses, the most common “most important” reason parents choose their independent school is because it is a Christian school. With a score of 95.5, this is the top consideration for 28.5 percent of respondents and represents 11.5 percent of the

832 different responses. Ranking second, 85 responses state their most important consideration is that the education is religious or faith-based. This is a separate category from the former, as wanting a religious education is different from wanting a “Christian” education. Although the two could be synonymous, other “Christian” factors—like the sense of community, atmosphere, caring teachers, safety—may be the priority. Similarly, ranked third, 79.5 responses make specific reference to the fact the school “reinforces our faith or religious beliefs.”

each given a score of 1. Implicitly, three things were alluded to and, therefore, given a half point each: “recognizes/encourages/fosters student success,” “individualized attention/recognizes uniqueness,” and “character development.” The average respondent gave two reasons, with a median and mean score per respondent of 2.0 and 2.5, respectively, and a max and min of 11 and 1, respectively.

With this approach, “Supports our family’s values” (fifth) and “Values” (eleventh) are also different and, thus, counted separately, with scores of 46.5 and 23, respectively. A final example of this is respondents who include both values and religious references in the same response; the two are counted separately as they are different things. This approach applies to all 832 responses and the entire list of fifty-five categories. The one exception is small class size and small school, as most responses including either use them interchangeably (TABLE 7).

It is interesting to note the difference in rank between a large list of important characteristics (table 4) and “the most important” characteristic (table 7). The top two table 4 rankings—“This is a safe school” and “This school offers a supportive, nurturing environment for students,” respectively—fall to seventeenth

and fourth in table 7. Similarly, 97.9 percent of parents believe it is important the school is well administered, ranking eleventh in table 4, but only 1 percent consider it most important. There are many examples of this, most notably character development and student motivation, which rank third and seventh in table 4, respectively. But “This school emphasizes character development” is most important to less than 3 percent of parents, and “This school motivates students” is most important to less than half a percent of parents. They are important to almost everyone, but the most important to very few. Conversely, “This school reinforces our faith or religious beliefs” ranks fortieth in the table 4 dataset (too low to even appear in the table) but rises to third in table 7.

However, although the distinctiveness in table 7 provides interesting and critical insights, many of the fifty-five most important reasons can naturally be grouped together for a more generalized analysis. Table 8 ranks a curated short list of general reasons. Here, all the religious-reference categories and values-reference categories are combined (and controlled for double-counting). This process applies to the entire list of fifty-five, resulting in five like-to-like combinations. The remaining categories are under “Other.” The most important general reason for choosing an independent school is values or religion (40.6%), followed by student experience (33.2%), academics or “quality/good education” third (6.6%), then teachers (4.2%), and finally, public school issues (2.5%) (TABLE 8).

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON PARENTS’ CHOICE

Another reason why parents choose a particular independent school is the sources that influence their decision. “Friends or relatives” is by far the most common response to how parents first heard about the school (table 9), as well as the leading source strongly influencing their choice (table 10), at 29.7 percent (111/374) and 24.8 percent (166/669), respectively. Second most common for both is other word of mouth, at 16.6 percent (62) and



TABLE 8: Five “most important” general reasons in choosing current independent school

	Most Important Reason	Score	Share of Total
1	Values or religion	337.5	40.6%
2	Student experience	276.0	33.2%
3	Academics	55.0	6.6%
4	Teachers	35	4.2%
5	Public school issues	21.0	2.5%
-	Other	107.5	12.9%
-	Total	832	100%

16.4 percent (110), respectively. Combined, 46.3 percent of independent school parents first heard about their school and 41.6 percent were most strongly influenced in their school choice by word of mouth. Including “Other,” respondents gave a total of eighteen different answers to how they first heard of their school, as shown in table 9, and the twenty-four influencing sources are given in table 10 (TABLES 9 + 10).

SATISFACTION

On a scale from one to ten, 66.4 percent (245/369) are “10/10” extremely likely to recommend their child’s independent school to a friend, neighbour,

or colleague. And 16.3 percent (60) and 10.6 percent (39) selected 9/10 and 8/10, respectively. Combined, over 93 percent (344) of independent school parents are likely to promote their independent school. Only 5.4 percent (20) are passive (5/10 to 7/10), with 1.4 percent (5) unlikely to recommend their school. The lowest response was 0/10 (2).

This high parent satisfaction rate is reflected in how parents’ involvement with their children’s education has changed. Since switching from public to independent school, 68 percent communicate more often with teachers (91 more often minus 1 less often, of 132), nearly 62 percent participate in or attend school activities more often (87 more often minus

TABLE 9: How parents first heard about their child(ren)’s school

External Influence		Count	Share of Respondents
1	Friends or relatives	111	29.7%
2	Other word of mouth	62	16.6%
3	Parent attended school or one like it	57	15.2%
4	Google search	39	10.4%
5	Church / temple / synagogue / etc.	38	10.2%
6	Other educational institution (e.g., pre-school, daycare, other independent school, etc.)	12	3.2%
7	Other internet source	11	2.9%
8	A school ranking or review site (e.g., CompareSchoolRankings.org, RateMyTeachers.com, OurKids.net, etc.)	10	2.7%
9	Drive-by / street signage / billboard ad	9	2.4%
10	Other	7	1.9%
11	Location / we live nearby	4	1.1%
12	Community event	3	0.8%
12	A school association or its website (e.g., CAIS, FISA, etc.)	3	0.8%
12	Radio	3	0.8%
15	Newspaper/magazine	2	0.5%
16	Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	1	0.3%
16	Parent works/worked at or near the school	1	0.3%
16	Only school of this type in the area	1	0.3%
19	Other community organization	0	0.0%
19	Flyer/brochure or direct mail	0	0.0%
Total		374	100%

6 less often, of 131), and nearly 46 percent volunteer at the school or in community service more (77 more often minus 17 less often, of 131).

Open-endedly, here are a few of the parent respondents' comments relaying their independent school satisfaction:

- ▶ You know it is a great school when your kids can't wait to get to school each morning.
- ▶ The education and care offered by the teachers and parents at the school is nothing short of amazing. I can't think of a better place to send my children.
- ▶ The kids love their school...The teachers care about each student and encourage gifts and talents that they see are in each student.
- ▶ We were very dissatisfied with the high school public system. We made the change to private

TABLE 10: Source(s) that strongly influenced parents' choice of school

External Influence		Count	Share of Responses
1	Friends or relatives	166	24.8%
2	Other word of mouth	110	16.4%
3	The school's official website	79	11.8%
4	Parent attended school or one like it	70	10.5%
5	Church / temple / synagogue / etc.	64	9.6%
6	Visited the school (e.g., Open house, tour, school orientation) or met with principal / teacher(s)	43	6.4%
7	Other educational institution (e.g., pre-school, daycare, other independent school, etc.)	21	3.1%
8	A school ranking or review site (e.g., CompareSchoolRankings.org, RateMyTeachers.com, OurKids.net, etc.)	19	2.8%
9	Other	15	2.2%
10	Google search	14	2.1%
11	Other internet source	12	1.8%
11	Pedagogy or values/worldview taught	12	1.8%
13	Community event	9	1.3%
14	A school association or its website (e.g., CAIS, FISA, etc.)	7	1.0%
15	Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	5	0.7%
15	Other community organization	5	0.7%
17	Issues with public school	4	0.6%
17	My/our own research	4	0.6%
19	Reputation	2	0.3%
19	Flyer/brochure or direct mail	2	0.3%
19	Parent works/worked at or near the school	2	0.3%
19	Only school of this type in the area	2	0.3%
23	Location / we (or caregiver) live nearby	1	0.1%
23	Tuition cost or discount	1	0.1%
25	Newspaper/magazine	0	0.0%
Total		669	100%

school even though the tuition payment was more than our mortgage payment. We have never regretted this decision.

- ▶ Our children love their school! They look forward to going every day and feel valued and cared for. We feel they are challenged academically and helped if necessary, not left to fend for themselves if they are struggling.
- ▶ Best decision ever.
- ▶ We love this school! So do our children. It warms my heart to be able to send our children to a school that we all love and know with confidence that they are learning so much—academically and character qualities.
- ▶ We have no regrets about our decision.
- ▶ Well worth the money and time commitment. The newest iPhone and comforts at home are nothing compared with the satisfaction of seeing your child grow into the kind of adult most needed in a hurting world.
- ▶ We were very unhappy with the inconsistency of the quality of teaching in the public school. Our switch to the independent school was one of the best decisions we ever made. A very easy transition for our children, and a welcoming community for us. The only regret we have is not switching sooner.
- ▶ I wish I could have done this with all of my children.

In summary, parents first heard about their school and were influenced in their decision primarily through friends, relatives, and various other word of mouth, and they chose their independent school for a multitude of diverse reasons. However, virtually all independent school parents have the following in common: Their independent school offers a supportive and nurturing environment that is motivating for and instills confidence in students, thanks to outstanding teachers and excellent administration.

Fully 93 percent are so satisfied with their school they are strongly likely to recommend it.

CONCLUSION

Nearly one in every fifteen Ontario students is educated outside of a government-run school, a figure that is increasing every year. Ontario is unique among the six largest—and economically competitive—provinces in Canada, in that it is the only one where the provincial government offers no funding for these students. The four western provinces and Quebec all provide funding to independent schools of, on average, about 50 percent of the per-pupil operating expenses allocated for students in government schools (with a funding range of 35 percent to 80 percent on a per-pupil basis). Yet in spite of the financial challenges posed by having to cover the cost of education out of their own pockets, more and more Ontario parents are choosing independent schools for their children. Ontario's independent school sector continues to expand, having grown by more than 350 schools and 24,000 students from 2007 to 2017.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The parents who send their children to non-government schools come from a variety of different backgrounds, countering the perception that independent schooling is reserved for a homogenous group of elite families. It is the case that independent school parents overall are better educated and work in higher-status occupations. Yet they are also more likely to be self-employed or business owners, and their entrepreneurship spans a wide range of professions of which only a few would be considered “elite.” Independent school families have higher household incomes than the Ontario average, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the significant financial commitment required to cover the costs of non-government education in Ontario. Their willingness to pay these costs, however, does not mean they conform to the wealthy-parent stereotype associated with independent schools. Indeed, more than two-thirds

of families made major adjustments to their finances in order to afford tuition payments.

There are important demographic differences that distinguish religious independent school families from their counterparts at non-religious independent schools as well. Parents who send their children to religious schools are more likely to have “middle-class” occupations—they are overrepresented among nurses and school teachers, for example. In addition, their levels of post-secondary education are notably lower than those of non-religious independent school parents. The higher-than-average household incomes of non-elite independent school parents is explained by family structure: over 95 percent of parents whose children attend religious independent schools are married, compared to 66.6 percent of Ontario families with children.

Independent school families do not conform to the common misconception that private schools are insular and exclusive communities. Fully three-quarters (over 75 percent) of parents who chose independent schooling for their children were students in the public school system, with over half (57 percent) attending only public elementary and secondary schools. The overwhelming majority experienced no difficulty finding (78 percent) and enrolling (91 percent) in their preferred independent school. These families have higher levels of civic engagement and are more active in their communities than the provincial average, undercutting the claim that all students must receive the same government-run education if they are to become publicly engaged citizens.

REASONS

The most commonly cited reasons (and respondents could select as many as applied) for choosing to send children to an independent school are safety, confidence in the curriculum, and trusting the school’s teachers and administration—concerns about safety from bullying were less important. Surprisingly, cost,

proximity, and transportation ranked low in the list as important to their choice. Even the presence of friends and family in the school had little importance in the school choice compared to dozens of other more important reasons. Indeed, the single most important reasons for at least a third of respondents is the values and religion of the school or the student experience at the school. Conversely, less than 10 percent of parents cited academics and teachers as the most important factor in their choice of school.

SATISFACTION

Parents who choose independent schooling for their children are highly satisfied with their decision. Over 93 percent are strongly likely to recommend their school to a friend, neighbour, or colleague. Given the positive experiences, it is unsurprising that more and more families are choosing independent schools for their children. The majority (57 percent) of these parents did not attend an independent school themselves, reflecting a decades-long trend in parental choice away from government schools and toward independent education: the strong growth in the independent school sector is fuelled in large part by families leaving the public sector. Indeed, for every family that switched from one independent school to another, three families switched from public to independent schooling.

In summary, independent schools provide a place where parents can follow their deepest religious, philosophical, and pedagogical convictions for the education of their children. Independent school parents are educated, contributing, sacrificing, mostly middle-class, and mostly public school graduates who seek a safe, supportive, and nurturing educational environment that matches their values and/or religion, offers quality education by good teachers and excellent administrators, and is motivating and instills confidence in students. As these diverse families—and the dynamic expansion of the independent school sector—make clear, they are overwhelmingly satisfied with their decision. ▲

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to replicate Van Pelt et al. (2007), while being heavily informed by the most current research on why parents choose independent schools. Using the same research question—Who chooses Ontario independent schools and why?—and comparable methodology, we test whether the Ontario findings hold true twelve years later.

SURVEY DESIGN

Following Van Pelt et al.'s approach, many questions are based on the 2016 Census and 2013 General Social Survey to understand participating families' demographic information, so that the results can be readily compared for analysis (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 14). This tells us the “who.” To know “why” parents choose, Van Pelt identified sixty-one independent school characteristics from examining the North American literature—specifically: Bell (2005), Bosetti (2000), Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (2004), Davies and Quirke (2005a, 2005b), Erickson (1986), Mirski (2005), Paquette (2000), and Ungerleider (2003), among others. On a four-point scale for each, Van Pelt's questionnaire asked parents two questions: the extent to which they agreed or disagreed each characteristic influenced their school choice, and whether it was a feature in their independent school (Van Pelt et al. 2007, 23). Based on the original, a pilot questionnaire was created with an updated list of independent school characteristics to reflect the most recent literature. The pilot found no distinction between the reasons for choosing a school and its features. Some terminology was problematic too. Pilot respondents were uncomfortable identifying as “elite,” so “university preparatory” is substituted in the survey. The pilot respondents also found too much similarity between the questions, so a second and third test survey were conducted to further refine the list. The pilot took respondents close to sixty minutes to complete and was refined to an average completion time of eighteen minutes, without losing its essence, before outreach.



SAMPLING

To ensure a representative sample of Ontario K–12 independent school students, the process began with an extensive stratification of all 1,275 Ontario independent schools into their respective school associations (many schools are members of multiple associations) and one of three broad categories—university preparatory, specialty, or religious. Preparatory schools are divided into boarding and non-boarding. Specialty schools are categorized into Montessori, Waldorf, performance-oriented (arts, sports, or STEM), language-focus, online, outdoor-focus, other (as many specialty schools are truly unique), special education, and First Nation schools. The latter two are excluded from the sample (see Van Pelt et al., 2007). Religious schools are further stratified by religion and denomination. Of note, many schools do not easily fit into one category, because they are either unique or match the description of multiple categories (e.g., Islamic Montessori,

non-CAIS preparatory). Each school is also labelled by region, neighbourhood type, and grades offered (e.g., K–12, elementary only, secondary only).

DATA COLLECTION

Given the aforementioned parameters, initially 54 schools were randomly selected that, assuming a similar response rate, were proportionately reflective of the Ontario independent school and estimated student populations. Each randomly selected school was contacted via email then phone, and asked to invite its entire school-parent population to participate in the online survey. If the head of school or governing agency agreed, they were emailed an online package to electronically distribute to the parents in their school(s). When a school declined to participate, an additional comparable school was randomly selected from the respective stratum and approached. However, it took considerable outreach to confirm participation or rejection. It was necessary to contact an additional 177 schools to secure a sample that collectively mirrors the Ontario independent school landscape. Of a total 231 schools contacted, 45 agreed to participate in the study. The online questionnaire was first distributed December 11, 2018, and closed June 17, 2019.

The online survey was administered, and the data collected, securely through <https://sfufas.ca1.qualtrics.com>. This is a secure Simon Fraser University (SFU) website, using the industry-leading Qualtrics survey research platform. Completed surveys and the data taken from them will be electronically preserved for future use in an open-access online repository, stripped of any information that could identify participants to ensure confidentiality. All participating parents and schools remain private, confidential, and anonymous.

LIMITATIONS

The major limitation of the survey is potential response bias in three areas. Although the schools are randomly selected, parents within the invited school population are self-selected. Thus self-selection bias is an unavoidable limitation, as parents with stronger views may be more compelled to respond than others. Second, demographics may bias results, as parents of greater and lesser means may have more or less time or willingness to complete the questionnaire. Last, four school groups are not included. Parochial schools' lack of email and online technology disqualified them. First Nation schools required additional ethic approvals. CAIS schools were participating in a major internal survey project, so none were available, severely limiting university preparatory school parent responses. And no public school parents are surveyed, only current independent school parents, so movement from independent to public school is unaccounted for and possible negative views from former independent school families missed.

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former Executive Director, FISA BC

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