

Alberta's Independent Schools Initiative Could Lead the Way in Reversing the Decline in Canada's Educational Standards

By Conrad Black

The recent announcement that the Alberta government intends to [provide funding](#) in its education budget for new independent schools is entirely welcome news in every respect.



The deteriorating educational system is in a more profound crisis than is immediately apparent, writes Conrad Black. Shutterstock

g coming from such a sensible and often innovative government. Premier Danielle Smith has a strong claim to the title of the most capable and successful leader of the government of any

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large jurisdiction in Canada.

In her policy message, she expressed the desire to put all of the education options on the same level playing field. This is an admirable formulation and is entirely just, given the decades of massive funding and excessive indulgence that the public school system and the teachers' unions have received.

It is one of the great ironies of all of Western civilization that for 80 years we have spent more and more on education to get less and less well-educated graduates. Part of this deterioration can be explained by the otherwise welcome fact that the career opportunities for women have expanded so widely that they are much less attracted to the occupation of the schoolteacher, where for a century or more women had been one of the strongest pillars of our education system.

But the principal problem has been the slovenly and often completely irresponsible behaviour of the teachers' unions. All of this has been enabled by the unfortunate decision of the provincial governments and the educational authorities subordinate to them to accept the unionization of elementary and secondary school teachers and to be comparatively indulgent of deteriorating results and of strikes by teachers.

In practice, these strikes have only occurred during the school year. Especially in an era when there are a great many single-parent households, such a strike is a particularly nasty recourse to blackmail of the parents of the students that the teachers are paid to teach. We saw one of the worst imaginable demonstrations of this mindset during the COVID pandemic. Many teachers' unions—though not as egregiously as in some parts of the United States—invoked completely spurious notions of the medical risks they were running if the schools were reopened, in order to maintain the school shutdown tenaciously and long after there was any excuse for it.

Of course, we now know that all such shutdowns of schools were

completely unnecessary and [inflicted serious damage](#) on the development of a huge number of school students, though the teachers can share the responsibility for this with our public health officials and political leaders.

The private and charter schools that are not unionized [generally remained open](#) with no terrible results to the health of their teachers or students. In general, their results are [consistently better](#) than the comparable state schools, and all tests indicate that the levels of proficiency in the basic school disciplines of our matriculating graduates are not only appreciably lower in state than in independent schools, but that they have steadily declined in the public system for many years. We are paying the teachers more all the time to produce poorer results. No other profession or occupation knowingly engages in such a compensation policy.

This is a more profound crisis than is apparent. People even less venerable than I am frequently refer to the deterioration in the integrity and reliability of our media and the gradually declining quality of our elected public officials. There is naturally a widespread and increasingly urgent curiosity about how these trends could be reversed. As the media are a service industry and respond to the tastes of the public, and the public elects our legislators at every level, the only way to address this problem is to do the necessary to have a better-informed electorate and a more culturally perceptive and sophisticated population generally. Such a formidable objective must ultimately depend on the education system.

If we want better politicians (we don't need better politicians than Danielle Smith), and if we want more trustworthy and enterprising media, we must have better-educated people that the media must satisfy, and better-educated politicians to give the electors a higher comfort level that the responsibilities of government are being more satisfactorily performed. All of this must start in the

schools.

My impression as a parent and a reasonably informed and well-educated person is that our public schools are now more of the character of daycare centres than of schools. Most recent graduates of secondary school in this country of my acquaintance have learned no history whatsoever, apart from an extremely bowdlerized, hair-raising, and shaming (and largely fictitious) tale of the mistreatment of indigenous peoples. They know nothing of geography, rely on handheld devices to deal with arithmetic, their handwriting is unreadable, and their grammar is unsteady.

They graduate into universities where most of them pursue studies which, even if they gain a degree, do not equip them to earn a living. All Western societies spend astounding amounts of money on higher education, much of which is, in economic terms, a complete and profligate waste.

What the Alberta premier is doing is only what she calls a "pilot study," and it is presumably downplayed slightly to avoid too alarmed a reaction from the province's teachers. But even if it is only a pilot study, if conducted accurately it will confirm the shambles of our unionized state school systems. In these circumstances, the pilot study will be noticed by all Canadian jurisdictions, and the policy prescriptions for reversing the long decline in educational standards, and the resulting standards in public information, will certainly yield the conclusion that unless the state systems can be de-unionized and held to a higher performance standard, the successful future of our societies will require steadily more private but carefully monitored education.

In all likelihood, the recent initiative of the Smith government will be closely watched and its conclusions will ramify widely and constructively throughout this country.

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