

True Educational Choice Requires Adequate Funding

AHA Position Statement

Alberta home education funding does not adequately cover a child's basic education costs. Children who are home educated have access to fewer resources than their counterparts who attend private, charter or public schools. This is a limiting factor for many families in choosing home education and meeting their children's needs. PEC proposes that Home Education funding be increased to the same Base Funding amount that is currently provided to children in public schools.

2017/18 Annual Funding per Student

Type of Education	Current Funding	Proposed Funding
Public School	\$6679	\$6679
Private School	\$4676	\$4676
Home Education	\$1670 with 50/50 split (\$835 to school authority, \$835 to child)	\$6679 with 25/75 split (\$1670 to school authority, \$5009 to child resources)

The following facts about home education refute commonly-held beliefs and support the imperative to equitably fund home-educated students.

1. Home Education is not adequately funded.

Funding for traditional home education is insufficient to cover the basic cost of an education.

As of 2017/18, the annual base funding for public and private schools in Alberta is \$4676 to \$6679 respectively per student. This funds teacher salaries and resource materials, with infrastructure funded separately.

The annual base funding for home education is 25% of public school funding, or \$1670. The supervising school authority receives half of that amount (\$835) to provide administrative support to the family. The parent is eligible to receive the other half (\$835) as reimbursement for qualified educational expenses. Thus, the parent has only \$835 to fully educate a child with adequate resources for the year. This doesn't even cover the 12 month cost of most Internet Service Providers Invoices of \$85 per month with no funds left over for tutors, textbooks or curriculum.

One parent spent \$2481.00 to cover 5 core subjects and 2 options as required for her grade 12 son in 2016. These were bare bones expenses, and didn't include additional beneficial educational activities like museum visits and physical education. Expenses for younger children can be equally high.

In choosing to home educate, parents do not expect to be compensated for their time and effort, nor their infrastructure costs such as home heating and electricity. However, every student deserves access to necessary resources, expertise, programs and travel opportunities to pursue their education. The parents are providing "the school" and are in the best position to define what resources are needed according to their unique learning plan.

The School Act, Section 7(4)(a)(i) says that "a parent must use the funding only to *defray* the costs incurred by the parent..." This statement indicates that the government already understands that home education is not an adequately funded choice. It is time for government to address this acknowledged shortfall in supporting all children.

2. The choice of home education is not available to everyone.

Only families that can afford to provide necessary unfunded resources can home educate. Insufficient funding creates a barrier to access. Some families are able to get by with little to no funding, but this should be a choice of the family, not forced upon them.

The costs are even higher for children with special needs, and again parents bear the brunt of expenses. This is ironic because children with special needs are more likely to be home educated since their unique needs are often not addressed in a public or private school. And although schools are provided with additional funding to address special needs, this funding does not follow the child when they home educate. Resources such as psycho-educational testing are no longer available from the government to the parent who home educates. Children who are kinesthetic learners benefit from hands-on learning experiences, yet manipulatives, teaching tools, tutors, field trips and travel are much more expensive than textbooks and workbooks.

Home education must be available to every child, regardless of household income and the parent's ability to subsidize it. Families who select home education as the best approach for their child should not have to limit the resources for their child or pay for resources on their own, when most children in the province have their needs met by the government.

3. Home education, including Kindergarten, is a program within the system and needs to be adequately funded under the Alberta School Act.

One myth is that home educators opt out of the system and therefore don't deserve funding. Home education is within the system and regulated under Home Education Regulations within the Alberta School Act and the Guide to Education. All education choices are funded except for home education Kindergarten which should be included as well.

4. With more funding, comes more regulation? Not True!

There is a commonly held belief home educators will only receive more funding if they accept more regulation of the education that they provide to their children. This is not true based on historical evidence. Although increased funding could draw increased scrutiny to how public funding is spent, it does not follow that increased funding would lead to increased regulation of any pedagogical aspects of home education, such as program planning, evaluation, curriculum choices and reporting.

Alberta is already one of the most heavily regulated provinces (Fraser Institute, 2015) and jurisdictions compared to other countries, in regards to monitoring home education. Alberta regulations require an education plan to be approved by a supervising authority as well as two supervisory visits from a certified teacher every year. Parents must follow a Schedule of Outcomes that no other province requires.

A variation of this myth has been true, however. Home education has been affected by two concurrent years of increased regulation, yet with no increased funding provided.

Historically, all children were funded equally. Homeschooling regulation in Alberta originated in 1988 with *equal funding* for home education and public/separate schooled children. Parents were given the same instructional funding as certified teachers. In 1994, the funding was cut to 1/4 of the original amount due to mismanagement by school authorities, not due to any fault of the parents.

In 2006, regulation increased unaccompanied by a funding increase. The Home Education Regulations were reviewed by stakeholders. The government discovered that "blended" (part home education, part teacher-led) families rarely saw a teacher to deliver the blended portion and made changes to allow only online and correspondence classes to suffice for delivery of the school portion of the blend. As well, the Home Education Regulations were amended to require additional administrative work on the part of parents. For example, Section 4(1)(a)(i) states that, "...a parent must conduct an evaluation of the progress of the student by maintaining dated samples of student work." Funding was not increased.

In 2016, scrutiny over reimbursed receipts increased, causing additional administrative work for both parents and supervising school authorities, without any

increase in funding. The School Act, Section 7(4)(a)(i) states that funding may be used for "other resources related to the home education program." The School Act, Section 7(4)(b)(ii) states that funding must not be used "to pay for expenses usually required to be paid by a parent of a student who is enrolled in a school." Receipts have now been required to explicitly tie into the Home Education program plan and even then the Alberta Government finance committee can reject them.

To protect themselves from having to absorb the cost of items rejected by Alberta Education, some small school authorities have implemented even more restrictions on what may be reimbursed. The administration is onerous, and if it becomes too expensive for school authorities, they may shut down their home education program support. This was especially evident in 2017 where some boards simply do not support home education as it is not funded enough. This hurts families. If the number of authorities offering home education decreases, choice decreases. We are already seeing this occur in high school home education. School authorities who previously supervised student-directed home education high school for marks and credits are no longer offering this option under Section 6 of the home education regulations. If schools don't support or offer section 6, due to lack of funding for the administration of it, student choice and personal learning is removed.

Program planning remains the right of parents. Parents, as declared by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have the right to decide what kind of education is given to their child. In no way shall the government intrude on parent's professional judgement; they may make recommendations, but must not enforce requirements, on the content of the home education plan, curriculum and delivery. The government's concern is to recommend outcomes, but must not dictate pedagogy, delivery, or teaching methods.

As Minister of Education, David Eggen, said on June 12, 2016, "Alberta Education provides school authorities with the maximum flexibility and support to make local policy decisions and commitments, including programming. Teachers have considerable influence on overall student success, and it is their responsibility to use their professional judgement to develop learning experiences that are in the best interest of their students." Minister Eggen suggests that teachers are the best persons to decide on curriculum and teaching methods and resources to ensure the outcomes are met. In home education, the parent is the primary educator and they take the responsibilities of the teacher. Parents use their own judgement based on their intimate knowledge of their child to develop learning experiences that are in the best interests of their child. If the parents determine that the best resource is a video game, then it should be funded. Biases of society and the education profession should not limit the choices that are available to the parent when educating their child. This

flexibility must include choice of learning environment, structure, and choice of media.

Student performance is not tied to funding. Funding has never been tied to student performance in the Alberta public, private, or charter systems, nor is it in home education. The government doesn't tie a school authority's base funding rate per enrolled student to the school's Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results and should not tie home education funding to test results either. Government cannot hold home educators to a higher standard than public and private schools.

Evaluation and assessment is already mandated in the form of grade 12 core course diploma exams. Home educated students are required to write the same grade 12 diploma exams as all other students do, if marks and credits are desired. Increased funding could provide home education students with more resources that would help in preparation to write the exams and could result in higher achievement.

Reporting is already mandated and increasing without the benefit of a funding increase. Home educators must submit an annual education plan to have the child meet the 22 outcomes of the *Schedule of Learning Outcomes for Students Receiving Home Education Programs That Do Not Follow the Alberta Programs of Study* (SOLO). The plan must include topics covered, resources used, delivery method and assessment methods. A certified teacher from the supervising school authority reviews the plan at the beginning of the year, and certifies to the government that outcomes have been met at the end of the year. This activity is the primary administrative activity of the school authority for which the government provides half of the home education funding.

Increased funding equals increased regulation is not evidence-based.

Although one often hears that increased funding will result in increased regulation, there is no evidence that this has happened in the past. A good example of education that is fully funded, yet has no testing for outcomes, and a good argument that home educators need not be under greater academic scrutiny for increased funding, is Kindergarten. Kindergarten is voluntary, just like home education, but is fully government funded. There is no testing of outcomes being met, nor mandatory attendance in Kindergarten, yet, it is fully funded, except in home education.

5. Many school authorities don't support home education because of inadequate administrative funding.

Some school authorities pressure parents to switch from home education to school-provided-in-the-home (or home-based, distance learning, online, distributed learning, correspondence, virtual school, blended, "aligned", teacher-directed,) so that they can access the higher funding that schools get for providing instruction. When school

authorities only get \$835 to supervise, support, administer, and now scrutinize receipts and learning plans with an even greater vigour in the home education program, they have an even greater incentive to only offer virtual or correspondence school because of the increased funding to support their institution. In 2016/17 many school authorities capped their supervision of home education students, thereby reducing choice for parents.

If school authorities get increased funding for administration of home education, more entities will offer home education supervision, which increases choice for students. With increased funding, school authorities could offer their home education students access to a gym, musical instruments, clubs, tutoring, sports teams, welding shops, food studies kitchens, textbooks and other resources that are now unavailable or expensive to children who home educate. Parents could use the increased funding to provide an adequate education.

In summary, there are many benefits to increasing funding for home education to a level that currently supports public school education. When all children have access to more educational resources, Alberta benefits from an increasingly educated future.

Judy Arnall

Alberta Homeschooling Association