

POLICY BRIEF: Alberta's Charter School Students Earn Top Marks

Bacchus Barua | October 2025



Executive Summary

Across Canada, parents generally have three choices when it comes to education for their children: government-run public schools (including Catholic and Francophone), independent schools or homeschooling. In Alberta, however, parents have a fourth choice: charter schools.

Charter schools teach the provincial curriculum, and they are funded by government, but they are non-profit organizations run by autonomous boards. Charter schools do not charge tuition, so they are generally accessible to families/students of diverse income levels. Where charter schools often differ from government-run public schools is how they teach subjects (pedagogy) and their focuses. For example, parents in Calgary can send their children to charter schools that focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), the classics and more.

SecondStreet.org decided to examine the performances of different types of public schools in Alberta, with a specific focus on the performance of public charter schools compared to those run by the government (traditional public schools and

Catholic schools). Specifically, SecondStreet.org examined 22 provincial achievement test [PAT] score results written in 2022, 2023 and 2024 (for the 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years, respectively).

Highlights from this research include:

- Students at Alberta's charter schools had higher test results than students at government-run public schools in all 22 tests examined (higher than both government-run traditional public schools and Catholic schools.)
- Students at Alberta's charter schools achieved, on average, test results that were 9.3 percentage points higher than students at government-run public schools and 7.7 percentage points higher than government-run Catholic schools.
- The largest difference in performance was for Grade 9 Mathematics in 2024 – 14.1 percentage points higher in charter schools compared to traditional public schools, whereas the smallest difference was for Grade 6 Science in the same year - 6.2 percentage points higher in charter schools compared to government-run Catholic schools.

Charter schools offer an interesting and innovative alternative to government-run schools within the public school framework. Furthermore, the results of provincial test scores suggest that Alberta's non-profit charter school sector has much to teach the province's government-run public school system. If the goal of the public education system is to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive as adults, other provinces would be wise to replicate Alberta's successful charter school model.

Background: What are Charter Schools?

A little over 30 years ago, the Government of Alberta passed legislation to allow more choice and competition within the public education system. The impetus for this decision came from a 1993 report that found public schools in the province were “failing to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society”.¹ The result was Bill 19 in 1994 (aka the *School Amendment Act*), which introduced the concept of “Charter Public Schools” in the province.²

A charter school (as they are colloquially called) is an “autonomous non-profit public school” that provides education in “an innovative or enhanced way to improve student learning and contribute to educational choice”.^{3,4}

These schools cannot charge tuition fees but are funded by government.^{a,b}

Charter schools must accept students who fit the criteria of the charter, so long as it has the necessary space and resources. If enrollment demand exceeds capacity, the Charter Board may employ a selection process based on a number of factors including location, prior enrollment of a sibling, or even a first-come-first-served basis – so long as the process is transparent and fair. Many schools, such as the Edmonton’s Suzuki Charter School and STEM Innovation Academy, employ a lottery-based system.^{7,8}

Although charter schools must follow the provincial government curriculum for basic education, they are expected to employ educational approaches that differ from what is offered by the board of the local school authority. These differences could include learning and teaching styles and approaches, differences in pedagogy, as well as a focus on vocation-based education (i.e. a particular skill or trade).

Teachers in charter schools must hold a valid teaching certificate and must meet the provincial Teaching Quality Standard. Though not eligible to be active members of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, they can be associate members; they are, however, required to contribute to (and receive benefits from) the Teachers Pension Plan. On the other hand, teachers in charter schools are not subject to the *Teaching Profession Act* for disciplinary procedures.

Finally, and although charter schools may provide some religious instruction (like any public school), they cannot be “affiliated with a religious faith or denomination”.

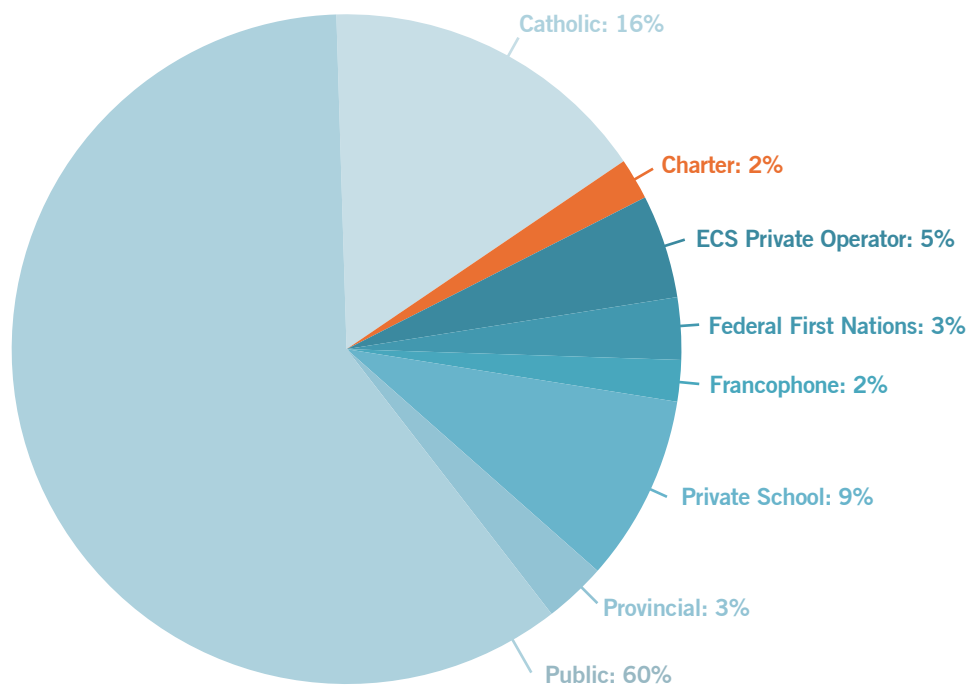
Today, there are 48 charter schools listed on the Alberta government website – about two percent of all schools in the province (Figure 1).⁹ However, many of them were established after the legislation in 2019 removed the previous cap on the number of charter school in the province.¹⁰

a) Like any public school, charter schools can, however, charge fees for instructional material and supplies, as well as fundraise and accept donations and gifts.

b) Charter schools are eligible for the same operational funding per pupil, with the exception of certain grants.⁵ However, in total, charter schools typically cost less on average compared to traditional public schools. For example, one study found that in 2019/20, the average funding for traditional public schools was \$10,460, while it was \$9,407 for charter schools (the difference explained mostly by transportation costs).⁶

Figure 1

Alberta Schools, by Authority Type (2025)



Source: <https://education.alberta.ca/alberta-education/school-authority-index/everyone/alberta-schools/>; calculations by author.

Another way to examine the prevalence of charter schools is by looking at enrollment data. In 2024, about 15,400 students were enrolled in charter schools, representing two percent of the 811,493 students enrolled in the province.^c This represents a 63 percent increase in enrolment from 2016, when an estimated 9,400 (1.4 percent) of students were enrolled in charter schools in Alberta.¹¹

In other words, there are more students waiting to enroll in charter schools than the total number of students enrolled in charter schools in Alberta. One reason for this may relate to differences in performance compared to students in public schools – despite the commonalities in curriculum and funding.

To be clear, current demand for enrollment in charter schools exceeds capacity. A recent study by the Montreal Economic Institute revealed 20,000 students on waitlists for just three charter authorities in 2023/24.¹²

c) Not including federal First Nations school authorities.

Methodology

In order to understand differences in education outcomes between charter and other school authority types in the public system, SecondStreet.org used Provincial Achievement Test [PAT] scores available on the Government of Alberta's website.¹³ A number of organizations, such as the CD Howe Institute and Atlantic Institute of Market Studies, have used PAT scores to compare the performance of charter schools in Alberta in the past.^{14 15} SecondStreet.org examined more recent PAT test scores, divided by subject, to update our understanding of differences in performance.

Introduced in 1983, the PATs are standardized tests administered to all Grade 6 and 9 students in the province to “determine if students are learning what they are expected to learn”.¹⁶ PATs were initially also written by Grade 3 students, but the provincial government eliminated these tests in 2014. Students are tested across a number of subjects including English and French Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies (as well as Knowledge and Employability programs for these subjects in Grade 9 only).

PAT test score data are available for six types of schools: charter, Francophone, private, provincial, public and separate (aka Catholic).^d Provincial schools (such as those that provide distance education) were removed from the comparison due to incomplete data available (and only for a limited number of schools), while Francophone schools were not included because differences in subjects tested do not allow for an apples-to-apples comparison with charter schools.

The school year in Alberta traditionally runs from September to June, while PAT tests are usually administered in January, May and June. In this report, PAT results are reported according to the year in which they were written. For example, for the school year 2023/24, the PATs were written in 2024, and the results are presented accordingly.

Data is published for 22 grade-specific subjects (such as Grade 6 English Language Arts and Grade 9 Mathematics). Because the primary focus of this report is the comparative performance of charter schools, subjects for which charter school data is unavailable were not included (specifically subjects taught primarily in French and Knowledge and Employability programs). In total, eight subjects were identified for comparative analysis based on available data: Grade 6 English Language Arts, Grade 9 English Language Arts, Grade 6 Mathematics, Grade 9 Mathematics, Grade 6 Science, Grade 9 Science, Grade 6 Social Studies and Grade 9 Social Studies.

Simple averages were calculated for each type of school for the years 2022, 2023 and 2024. It should be noted that no data was available for Grade 6 English Language Arts and Grade 6 Mathematics in 2024, as these tests were not administered by the province (presumably due to the rollout of new curriculum).¹⁷

Results

Between 2022-24 (covering school years 2021/22, 2022/2023 and 2023/24), charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public and Catholic schools in all 22 of 22 instances where comparisons could be made.

There was a 9.3 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects and years between charter schools and government-run traditional public schools.^e The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run traditional public schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2024 (14.1 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was Science 6 (6.2 percentage points).

d) The right of Protestants and Roman Catholics to establish a separate school district is legally enshrined; however, all 16 school authorities examined in this report are Catholic and are thus referred to accordingly.

e) Average school test results per year were pooled in order to determine the three-year average.

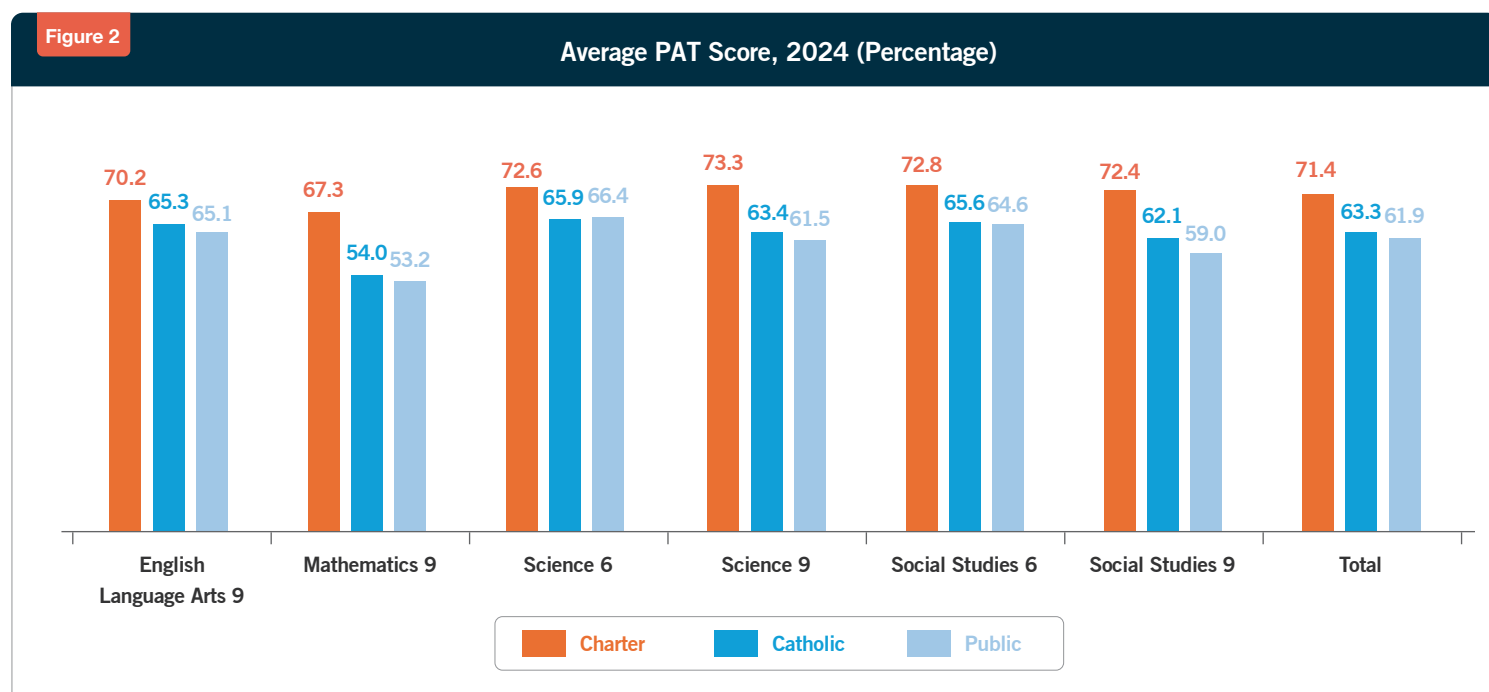
There was a 7.7 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects and years between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools.^f The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run Catholic schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2024 (13.3 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was English Language Arts 9 in 2024 (4.9 percentage points).

Results for individual years are presented in Figures 2-4.

In 2024, charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools in six subjects compared (Figure 2).

There was a 9.5 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run traditional public schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run traditional public schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2024 (14.1 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in Science 6 (6.2 percentage points).

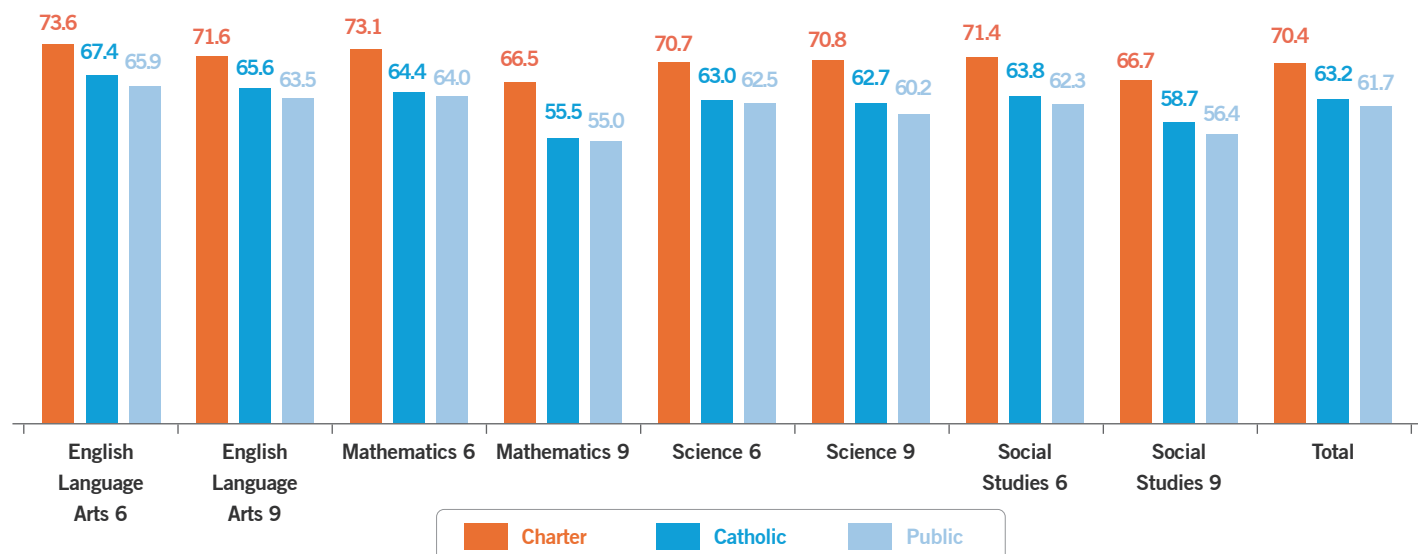
There was an 8.1 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run Catholic schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2024 (13.3 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in English Language Arts 9 (4.9 percentage points).



f) Average school test results per year were pooled to determine the three-year average.

Figure 3

Average PAT Score, 2023 (Percentage)



In 2023, charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools in all eight subjects compared (Figure 2).

There was an 8.7 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run traditional public schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run traditional public schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2023 (11.5 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in English Language Arts 6 (7.8 percentage points).

There was a 7.2 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run Catholic schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2023 (11.0 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in English Language Arts 9 (6.0 percentage points).

In 2022, charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools in all eight subjects compared (Figure 3).

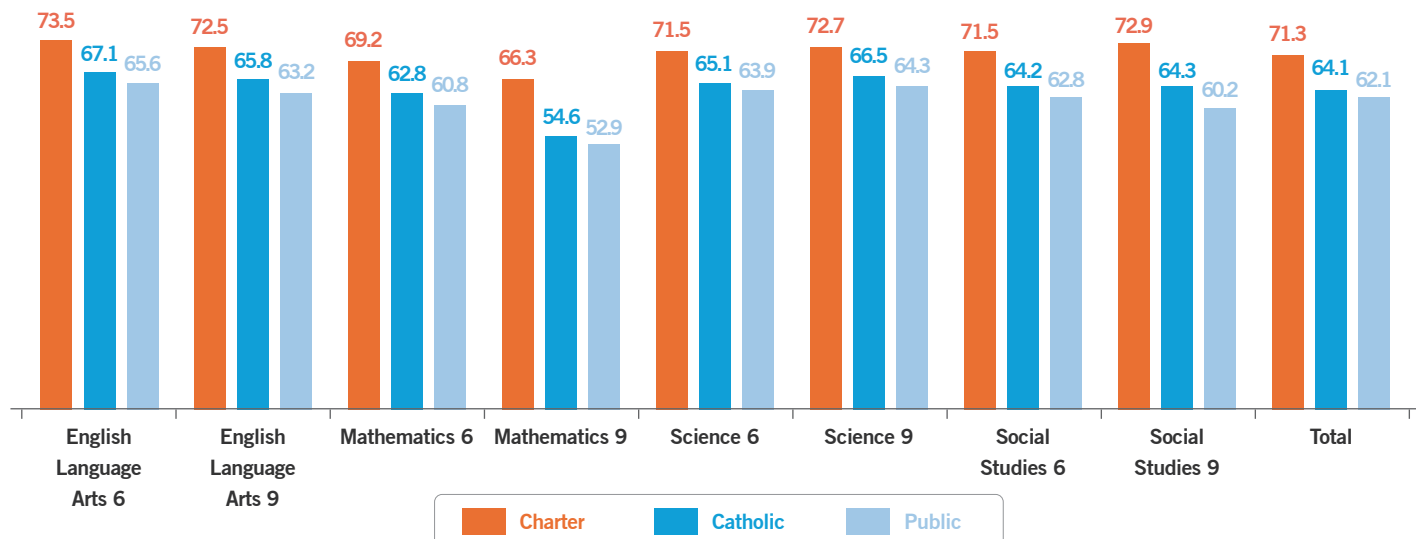
There was a 9.2 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run traditional public schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run traditional public schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2022 (13.4 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in Science 6 (7.6 percentage points).

There was a 7.1 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools. The greatest difference in average performance between charter and government-run Catholic schools was in Mathematics 9 in 2022 (11.7 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in Mathematics 6 (6.4 percentage points).⁹

g) The difference for Mathematics 6 is 6.42, while the difference for English Language Arts 6 is 6.43.

Figure 4

Average PAT Score, 2022 (Percentage)



Considerations

1. As noted previously, data was unavailable for English Language Arts 6 and Mathematics 6 in 2024, as these tests were not administered.
2. This study does not account for a number of factors that may contribute to student performance (such as socioeconomic, gender, and primary language differences). However, this study's findings on student outcomes in charter schools are consistent with previous research on charter school performance, some of which provides a more detailed analysis. For example, previous research by the Atlantic Institute of Market Studies [AIMS] showed that charter schools outperform all other school types in Alberta, including independent schools. Other research by the CD Howe Institute showed charter schools outperformed government public schools even after controlling for socioeconomic status.^{14 15} Additionally, the fact that charter schools do not charge tuition suggests that background may be a factor in the choice of applying to a charter school; it is not a barrier per se.

3. As Alberta Education notes, "achievement test results provide only part of the overall picture of the performance of the province". Additional considerations regarding the data can be found in the province's *Guidelines for Interpreting Provincial Achievement Tests Multiyear Reports* document.¹⁸

Conclusion

Charter schools offer an interesting and innovative alternative to government-run schools within the public school framework. They are non-profit organizations run by autonomous boards, charge no tuition, and they follow the provincial curriculum for basic education. However, they may differ considerably in the delivery of education – particularly with regard to teaching styles and approaches. The PAT data examined in this paper suggest these differences matter. On average, students attending charter schools outperformed students attending government-run traditional public and government-run Catholic schools in all 22 of 22 instances where comparisons could be made between 2022-2024.

All subjects and years being considered, the average test score for charter school students was 9.3 percentage-points higher than the average score for students in government-run public schools and 7.7 percentage-points higher than students in Catholic schools during the period examined.

Clearly, government-run traditional public and Catholic schools would benefit from studying and learning from the experiences of charter schools in order to potentially improve the educational outcomes of their respective student populations. Additionally, other provinces would be wise to replicate Alberta's successful charter school model. Charter schools not only provide parents and students with more choices in terms of the education provided, but the findings from this report also show these schools outperform government-run public schools.

About the Author

Bacchus Barua is Research Director for SecondStreet.org. He is a Canadian economist with over 15 years of experience in the think tank world. As the former Director of Health Policy Studies at the Fraser Institute, Bacchus researched a range of key health care topics and has helped shape public discourse in the field through frequent commentary on radio and television – including appearances on CBC, Global News, CTV, BNN and articles featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Post*, *Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's* and *Forbes*. He was also invited to provide testimony for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (HESA) in 2022. Bacchus currently also serves as an affiliate scholar with the Canadian Health Policy Institute [CHPI].

Acknowledgements

SecondStreet.org would like to acknowledge Harrison Fleming (former Legislative and Policy Director) for his contributions during the initial stages of researching this important policy topic.

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