

POLICY BRIEF:

Education Choice Matters: Evidence from Charter Schools in Alberta 2026 Report

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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, they must accept all students (if they have space and resources), 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 focusses. For example, parents in Calgary can send their children to charter schools that focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), the Classics (classic literature, art, Latin, history) 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, this report examines results from 29 provincial achievement test [PAT] scores written in 2022-2025 (for the 2021/22- 2024/25 school years, respectively).

Highlights from this research include:

- In 2025 (school year 2024/25) charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools in all seven subjects where comparisons could be made. Students at Alberta's charter schools achieved, on average, test results that were 10.5 percentage points higher than students at government-run public schools and 9.2 percentage points higher than government-run Catholic schools.
- The largest difference in performance for that year was for Grade 6 Social Studies (12.3 points higher in charter schools compared to traditional public schools), whereas the smallest difference was for Grade 9 English Language Arts (5.5 percentage points higher in charter schools compared to government-run Catholic schools).
- Comparing performance across each subject across all four years where data are available, students at Alberta's charter schools had higher test results than students at government-run public schools in all 29 tests examined (higher than both government-run traditional public schools and Catholic schools).
- Over the four-year period 2022-2025, students at Alberta's charter schools achieved, on average, test results that were 9.2 percentage points higher than students at government-run public schools and 7.6 percentage points higher than government-run Catholic schools.

- The largest difference in performance between schools during the period 2022-2025 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 9 English in the same year (4.8 percentage points higher in charter schools compared to government-run Catholic schools).
- Though year-to-year comparisons are cautioned as tests in certain subjects were not administered in some years, overall, government-funded schools performed 5.3 percentage points worse in 2025 compared to the 3-year average between 2022-2024. Charter schools experienced the smallest drop (4.1) while Catholic schools experienced the largest (5.7). These differences were primarily driven by lower PAT scores for Mathematics 6 though lower scores were reported across several subjects compared to the previous 3-year average.

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^a but are funded by government^b.

Charter schools are intended to focus on specific learning styles that may not be a fit for every student, however, they cannot deny access to potential applicants so long they have the necessary space and resources. If enrollment demand exceeds capacity, the Charter Board may employ a selection process based on 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 Edmonton's Suzuki Charter School and STEM Innovation Academy, employ a lottery-based system.^{7,8} Similar to some traditional public schools, which screen students before accepting them into gifted programs, some charter schools offer those courses as well.⁹ For example, schools like New Horizons School and Westmont Charter School are specifically for gifted children and require a cognitive assessment for applicants.¹⁰ However, you will find the opposite in Alberta's charter school community as well – schools that cater to groups that are historically disadvantaged (e.g. new Canadians, Aboriginal students, etc.).

Although charter schools must follow the provincial government curriculum for basic education, they are expected to employ educational approaches that differ from what is

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 per student while it was \$9,407 for charter schools (the difference explained mostly by transportation costs).⁶

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).

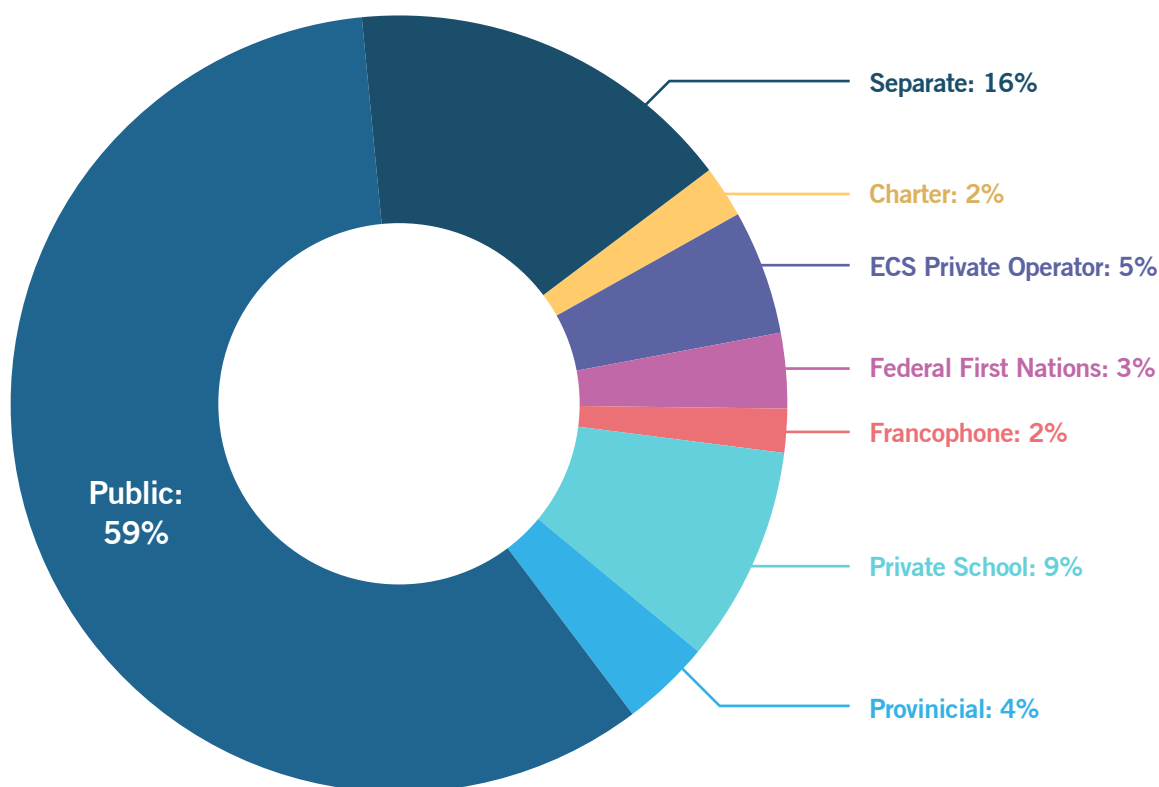
Teachers in charter schools must hold a valid teaching certificate and must meet the provincial Teaching Quality Standard. Though not eligible to be active members of the Alberta Teachers' Association, they can be associate members; they are, however, required to contribute to (and receive benefits from)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

Finally, 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 58 charter schools listed on the Alberta government website – about two percent of all schools in the province (Figure 1).¹¹ However, many of them were established after the legislation in 2019 removed the previous cap on the number of charter school in the province.¹²

Figure 1

Alberta Schools, by Authority Type (2026)



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 2025, about 17,909 students were enrolled in charter schools, representing 2.2 percent of the 820,248 students enrolled in the province.^c This represents a 91 percent increase in enrolment from 2016, when an estimated 9,400 (1.4 percent) of students were enrolled in charter schools in Alberta.

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 2023/24.¹³

In other words, there are more students waiting to enrol 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.

Methodology

A number of organizations, such as the C.D. Howe Institute and Atlantic Institute of Market Studies, have used Provincial Achievement Test [PAT] scores to compare the performance of charter schools in Alberta in the past.^{14 15} In order to update our understanding of differences in education outcomes between charter and other school authority types in the public system, SecondStreet.org published a new policy brief in 2025 that used more recent PAT scores available on the Government of Alberta's website for the years 2022-2024, by subject.¹⁶ This report updates that analysis with data for 2025.¹⁷

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”.¹⁸ 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 (i.e. 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 2024/25, the PATs were written in 2025, and the results are presented accordingly.

Government data is published online for 22 grade-specific subjects (such as Grade 6 English Language Arts and Grade 9 Mathematics). However, 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.

c) Not including federal First Nations school authorities

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.

Simple averages were calculated for each type of school for the years analysed. It should be noted that no data was available for Grade 6 English Language Arts and Grade 6 Mathematics in 2024, and Grade 6 Science in 2025, as these tests were not administered by the province (presumably due to the rollout of new curriculum).^{19 20}

Results

In 2025 (school year 2024/25), charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools in all seven subjects where comparisons could be made (Figure 2).

There was a 10.5 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 Social Studies 6 in 2025 (12.3 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in English Language Arts 9 (7.7 percentage points).

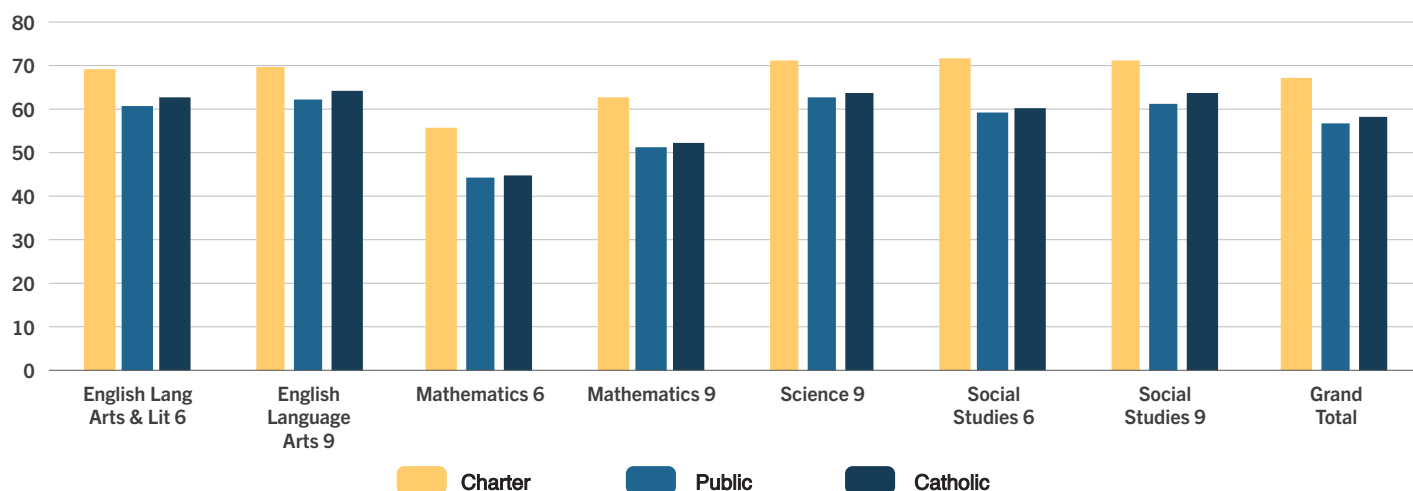
There was a 9.2 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools. The greatest difference in average performance between Charter and government-run Catholic schools was in Social Studies 6 in 2025 (11.6 percentage points), whereas the smallest difference was in English Language Arts 9 (5.5 percentage points).

Between 2022-25 (covering school years 2021/22- 2024/25), charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public and Catholic schools in all 29 of 29 instances where comparisons could be made.

During that same period, there was a 9.2 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).

Figure 2

Average PAT Score, 2025 (Percentage)



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

There was a 7.6 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 (4.8 percentage points).

Though year-to-year comparisons are cautioned as tests in certain subjects were not administered in some years, overall, government-funded schools performed 5.3 percentage points worse in 2025 compared to the 3-year average between 2022-2024. Charter schools experienced the smallest drop (-4.1) while Catholic schools experienced the largest (-5.7). These differences were primarily driven by lower PAT scores for Mathematics 6, ranging from -13.3 (charter Schools) to -18.2 (Catholic Schools) percentage points lower compared to the previous 3-year average, though lower scores were reported across several subjects.

This drop in performance for Mathematics coincides with the introduction of new curriculum in the province. Indeed, across every school compared, students performed worse on the 2025 Mathematics 6 PAT score compared to 2023, the last time it was administered. Further, a recent article by the CBC reports that while 72 percent of students achieved an “acceptable” score in the 2019 Mathematics 6 PAT, only 53 percent achieved a similar score in 2025.²¹

Detailed results by subject and school type for 2022-2024 are available in Barua, 2025.

Considerations

1. As noted previously, data was unavailable for English Language Arts 6 and Mathematics 6 in 2024, and Science 6 in 2025, 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 C.D. Howe Institute showed charter schools outperformed government public schools even after controlling for socioeconomic status. Additionally, the fact that charter schools do not charge tuition and are required to accept all applicants (if there is space and resources), suggests that socioeconomic background may be a factor in the choice of applying to a charter school rather than 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.²²

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

Conclusion

Charter schools offer an interesting and innovative alternative to government-run schools within the public school framework. They charge no tuition, they must accept all applicants (so long as space and resources are available), 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. In 2025 (school year 2024/25), charter schools outperformed government-run traditional public schools and Catholic (separate) schools in all seven subjects where comparisons could be made, with an average 10.5 and 9.2 percentage point difference respectively.

In fact, students attending charter schools outperformed students attending government-run traditional public and government-run Catholic schools in all 29 of 29 instances where comparisons could be made between 2022-2025. All subjects and years being considered, there was a 9.2 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects and years between charter schools and government-run traditional public schools, and a 7.6 percentage-point difference between the average score across all subjects and years between charter schools and government-run Catholic schools during this period.

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. A recent survey found 56% of respondents support the introduction of public charter schools in their province (modelled on the Albertan approach).²³ This should not come as a surprise though, considering that same poll found 53% of Canadians believe the public school system has gone in the wrong direction

over the previous 20 years. 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].

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