



# Show me the money

## Canada's K-12 education funding landscape

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Canada's schools are funded through 13 different provincial and territorial funding formulas, which are highly structured grants for operating and capital costs. While all formulas address similar core costs, grant structures and allocation methods vary significantly, allowing for uniquely progressive or regressive funding approaches.

Education has been referred to as the “great equalizer”, opening the door of opportunity wide to everyone in society regardless of their race or ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, this promise of public education is dependent on the adequacy of the funding formulas. Without this, the best education policies, action plans, and strategies won't be worth the paper they're printed on (especially in a climate crisis where we need to save every tree we can).

This article sets out the basic structure of the funding formulas in each province and territory and, unless otherwise specified, uses estimates based on the most recently-available territorial

and provincial budget and fiscal framework documents. (Please refer to them for additional information and explanation.) It does not, for the most part, provide commentary on funding formula adequacy or effectiveness in supporting student need or ensuring equity.

Also unaddressed in this analysis is the way in which COVID-19 has impacted education during the cross-Canada shutdown, or what recovery means for schools and students across the country. The scope of the impact, and the scale to which inequity has been revealed, will necessitate heavy investment in emotional and mental health supports. Physical distancing and other health and safety measures will require smaller classes — at a time when class sizes have become a contentious issue at the bargaining table — and significantly increased cleaning and decontamination of schools. All of this will have tremendous implications for education funding going forward — both the amount of funding allocated, but also whether the structure of each jurisdiction's funding formula ensures that student needs are met.



### **British Columbia**

British Columbia's \$6 billion education system is funded through an Operating Grant Allocation Formula oriented around four categories.\*

The province spends 2.6% of GDP on education<sup>1</sup>, 78% of which flows through the Basic Allocation for foundational per-pupil funding. Additionally, 15% of funding is provided via Unique Student grants, which provide per-pupil top-ups to support diverse student populations such as socio-economically challenged and Indigenous students. A further 7% comes through Unique District grants, which support the specific realities of individual boards such as low enrollment, sparseness, and density. The remaining allocation is funding protection for declining enrollment<sup>2</sup>. On the capital side, BC funds boards via a \$115 million Annual Facility Grant for maintenance and repairs<sup>3</sup>.

After close to 30 years of no review, when elected the NDP government launched a Funding Model Review Panel which tabled 22 recommendations in late 2018. They found significant issues in funding and assessment for students with special needs, approaches to differing cost pressures of urban, rural, and remote boards, and level of support for Indigenous and vulnerable students<sup>4</sup>. This comes after two decades of deep underfunding; the BC Teachers Federation estimated 2018-19 per-pupil spending in BC to be \$1,800 below the national average<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, public education has gone from comprising 20.3% of the BC budget in 2000-01 to 11.3% in 2019-20, forcing boards to increasingly rely on international student tuition revenue, which quadrupled to nearly \$250 million by 2018. One board, West Vancouver School District, saw a whopping 13% of its budget come from tuition fees<sup>6</sup>.

Underfunding has produced a school repair backlog, estimated in July 2017 by the Ministry of Education at over \$5 billion in deferred maintenance<sup>7</sup>. The Vancouver School Board, with its \$740 million backlog, by 2019 had 87 out of its 110 schools being in "poor" or "very poor" condition<sup>8</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province begins implementing 12 of the 22 funding model review recommendations in 2020-21, focusing on supports for children's mental health and vulnerable and Indigenous students<sup>9</sup>. Acting on the remaining*

*recommendations may produce a huge shake-up in inclusive education funding.*



### **Alberta**

Alberta's \$8.2 billion education system is funded through its Funding Manual, which is structured around six different allocation categories.

The province spends 3.3% of GDP on education<sup>10</sup>, and the bulk of funding flows through the Base Instruction allocation, which funds all boards on a per-pupil basis until Grade 9 and on a credit enrollment basis for Grades 10-12. The manual also allocates 15 Additional Funding for Differential Factor grants, which finance cost-factors such as operating northern schools and supporting unique student populations like socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. Other grants include Targeted Funding for Provincial Initiatives, such as the former NDP government's School Nutrition Program, and First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Funding<sup>11</sup>.

The new UCP government has made reducing education costs a top priority; its first budget in 2019 eliminated \$428 million in class size and school fee reduction grants, replacing them with a one-time transition grant of \$153 million. FOIs by the Alberta Teachers' Association found these reductions cut education spending by \$136 million in 2019 alone while enrollment climbed 13,000, reducing per-pupil funding from \$10,917 in 2018/19 to \$10,476 in 2020<sup>12</sup>.

This, combined with a freeze in education spending at 2018-19 levels until 2023, projected enrollment growth of over 60,000<sup>13</sup> and annual cost growth of 2.2%<sup>14</sup> through to 2023 has put enormous pressure on boards. This year the Calgary Board of Education cut 150 support staff<sup>15</sup> and nearly eliminated 317 teachers mid-year before the province allowed capital dollars to be spent on operating costs<sup>16</sup>. Boards are using capital dollars for operating shortfalls amid a growing school repair backlog, as the 2019 budget committed only \$1.8 billion in capital dollars to Alberta schools (the Calgary and Edmonton boards alone face a \$2 billion+ repair backlog)<sup>17</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province is introducing a new "Weighted Moving Average" funding model for 2020-21. It no longer funds based on verified fall enrollment, but 20% on last year's enrollment*

+ 30% current year's enrollment + 50% upcoming year's forecasted enrollment, an approach Support Our Students Alberta calculates will underfund 75% of boards and reduce the value of per-pupil spending 17% by 2023<sup>18</sup>.



### **Saskatchewan**

Saskatchewan funds its \$1.9 billion education system through its Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 Funding Distribution Model, which consists of nine expense components.

The province spends 4.1% of GDP on education<sup>19</sup>, and 78% of funding flows through its Instruction Allocation. It consists of a Base Instruction amount for core activities like teacher compensation and supplements for special education and school supplies. It also provides for School Operations and Maintenance, Transportation, Governance, Administration, and Language allocations. The model employs a variety of allocation methods, from the per-pupil approach for base instruction to the socioeconomic factor-based model of special education to the combination of base funding, per-pupil funding, per-school funding, and geographic funding for governance and administration<sup>20</sup>. On the capital side, the province provides a Preventative Maintenance and Renewal program, which provides \$50.4 million for proactive maintenance and repairs<sup>21</sup>. However, the province's schools face a \$1.3 billion repair backlog<sup>22</sup>.

The province recently reached an agreement with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation; class size was the largest funding issue at the bargaining table. The STF favoured collective agreement provisions mandating resources for lowering class sizes, while the government preferred an arrangement away from the bargaining table<sup>23</sup>. With a lack of a class size policy or real tracking, the government and federation have disputed class size, with the former saying the provincial average is 19 and the STF says it's anywhere between 22–40<sup>24</sup>.

**Of note:** As part of bargaining, the government has struck a "Provincial Committee on Class Size and Composition", comprised of stakeholders with a mandate to develop recommendations for a framework on class size and composition for potential implementation for 2020-21.<sup>25</sup>



### **Manitoba**

Manitoba funds its \$1.3 billion education system through its Funding for Schools Program, oriented around two types of grants: Base Support and Categorical Support.

The province spends 4.7% of GDP on education<sup>26</sup> through a system where the province funds around 60% of education and boards fund 40% through the education property tax (Manitoba boards are among the last in the country to still wield control over the mill rate)<sup>27</sup>. Base Support covers foundational needs for all boards using 11 different allocations, providing basic per-pupil funding via Instructional Support, socio-economic supplements via Student Services Grants, and rural school supports via Sparsity Supports. Categorical Supports provide more targeted resources, like special education resources, Indigenous and International Languages funding, and small/northern school allowances<sup>28</sup>. In all, provincial government documents put funding at \$13,284 per pupil<sup>29</sup>.

The Pallister government has adopted a cost-reduction focus for education, increasing funding for 2019-20 by just 0.5% (compared to 2% inflation and 1% enrollment growth)<sup>30</sup>. According to the Manitoba Teachers' Society this represents the third consecutive year funding has dropped in real terms. Additionally, the province downloaded costs to school boards, as the provincial share of operating funding declined from 63% in 2016-17 to 59% in 2018/19<sup>31</sup>. As a re-election promise the government committed to begin phasing out education property tax at a cost of \$830 million, pledging to fill the gap in the education budget with general revenues but not specifying how<sup>32</sup>.

On the capital side, the province invests \$24 million annually in school repairs<sup>33</sup>, leading to a growing school repair backlog; the province's largest board, Winnipeg School Division reported a 2018 repair backlog of \$261 million<sup>34</sup>.

**Of note:** The province has launched a "Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12", a review co-chaired by former Saskatchewan and Manitoba politicians who were strong proponents of their respective province's 1990s austerity drives. The Commission may recommend sweeping amalgamations, education property tax and funding overhauls, and curriculum changes<sup>35</sup>.



### **Ontario**

Ontario's \$31.6 billion education system operates under the complex Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding formula.

The province spends 3.7% of GDP<sup>36</sup> on education. School boards receive 85% of funding via the GSNs<sup>37</sup>, which has two types of grants: Foundation and Special Purpose Grants. The Pupil and School Foundation Grants go to every school board to cover costs common to all schools, such as educator salaries. The 13 Special Purpose Grants support needs unique to particular students, schools, and boards<sup>38</sup>, such as rural education via the Geographic Circumstance Grant, and breaking down socio-economic barriers via the Learning Opportunities Grant. Ontario's funding formula is heavily predicated on enrollment, with 75% of the GSNs being linked to headcounts and the remainder being provided on a per-board or demographic basis<sup>39</sup>.

The province's Financial Accountability Office found over the next five years the Ontario government intends to maintain education spending at 1% growth annually while core cost drivers of inflation and enrollment are projected to increase by 2.7% annually. The FAO projected that the government's original cost-cutting demands of increasing class sizes and mandatory e-learning would remove over 10,000 teachers and \$2.8 billion from the system over five years<sup>40</sup>. (Note that the original demands were scaled back during negotiations but still resulted in an increase in class size and two mandatory e-learning credits.)

These measures reduced per-pupil spending to \$12,246 for 2019-20<sup>41</sup> and these cuts come to a system which as of 2017 ranked 18th out of 18th in the Great Lakes and 45th across all 61 U.S. and Canadian jurisdictions in terms of per-pupil funding<sup>42</sup>. This history of underfunding has produced a school repair backlog of \$16.3 billion<sup>43</sup>, and while Ontario is investing \$1.4 billion<sup>44</sup> in repairs via the School Renewal Allocation and School Condition Improvement program, the backlog is still projected to climb. The province's largest board, Toronto District School Board, projects its backlog could hit \$5.2 billion by 2023.<sup>45</sup>

**Of note:** *With intermediate and secondary class sizes still set to increase, and back-door mandatory e-learning still on the table through a murky*

*opt-out, the full impact of cuts to education continues to unfold in Ontario's schools.*



### **Quebec**

Quebec funds its \$11.3 billion education system through grants from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education that account for 78% of funding<sup>46</sup> and education property taxes controlled by school boards<sup>47</sup>/service centres. This funding is allocated through a framework of annual budgetary rules, which provide for two types of allocations: Basic Allocations for foundational services and Additional Allocations for enveloped grants to enact ministry priorities. (Note that Grades 10-12 in Quebec are part of the CEGEP/college system, but would be considered secondary school in other provinces and territories.)

There are four types of Basic Allocations: Organization of Services, and Education Activities in Youth, Adult, and Vocational sectors<sup>48</sup>. The former allocation funds office administration, facilities maintenance, and support for geographic realities, while the other three grants fund teacher and support worker compensation. Youth sector funding is allocated with a standard base amount plus per-pupil allocations plus allocations specific to each board's circumstances<sup>49</sup>.

Quebec invests 3.7% of GDP in education,<sup>50</sup> however this is lower than in 2009-10 when the province was investing 3.9%.<sup>51</sup> This reflects the toll of the Couillard Liberal government's austerity measures; Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS) found in 2018 that after four years the government had cut \$337 million from the province's schools<sup>52</sup>. Underfunding has produced a \$5.3 billion capital repair backlog where 54% of schools are in a "poor" or "very poor" condition; consequently, the 2020-2030 Quebec Infrastructure Plan allocates \$19.2 billion for maintenance and repairs<sup>53</sup>.

**Of note:** *In their 2020 budget the CAQ government under Premier Legault announced new investments in education for 2020-2021. It will be interesting to see if this level of commitment is maintained or if it changes as the full impact of the COVID-19 economic downturn hits...and how the public responds to the reopening of schools and daycares.*<sup>54</sup>



### **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia funds its \$1.4 billion education system through a funding framework and a number of funding envelopes outside the formula.

The province invests 4% of its GDP in education<sup>55</sup>, approximately \$1 billion of which flows through a formula of seven operating grants. The largest grant is Instruction and School Services, which covers core classroom costs like teacher compensation and school supplies on an enrollment basis. There are also allocations for School Management and Support for school operations, Student Support for special education, Student Transportation, and Property Services for school maintenance<sup>56</sup>. There also are some unique envelopes outside of the formula, such as African Canadian Services which provides \$6 million to a directorate that works with African Nova Scotian communities to ensure the system is equitable and culturally responsive to Black histories and traditions. The province also provides \$74 million in capital dollars for school purchases and repair<sup>57</sup>.

Nova Scotia's education system has recently undergone some significant reforms as the government implements recommendations from "Raise the Bar", a sweeping 22 recommendation report that has led to the abolition of all but francophone school boards and removal of 1,000 principals and vice principals from the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union<sup>58</sup>. One of the biggest reforms has been the introduction of a needs-based education funding model where non-formula program grants, which account for 10% of funding, are now allocated by the regional centre of education according to the number of Individual Education Plans and standardized test results. However, stakeholders like the NSTU have voiced concern at the use of standardized test results, which miss other crucial factors like child poverty rates and youth mental health challenges.<sup>59</sup>

**Of note:** *The province continues to implement the recommendations of the Glaze report and the first full year of needs-based funding; further funding adjustments and other major changes could be possible. [Editor's note: For more information about education in NS and NB, please see Pamela Rogers' article in this issue of OS/OS.]*



### **New Brunswick**

New Brunswick funds its \$1.3 billion education system through a funding formula with three main funding envelopes and several smaller allocations.

The province invests 3.9% of GDP<sup>60</sup> (\$10,837 per pupil<sup>61</sup>) into education, and the bulk of funding flows through the \$1.1 billion School Districts grant. This allocation funds board office operations, classroom instruction, and school facilities management. The Corporate and Other Education Services grant supports curriculum development, standardized testing, and specialized services for special needs, and the Early Childhood Development grant supports early years programming. Other allocations include the First Nations Educational Fund for Indigenous education and Computers for Schools grant for technology acquisitions<sup>62</sup>. On the capital side, the province invests \$23.5 million in school repairs<sup>63</sup>, compared to a provincial school renewal backlog of \$245 million as of 2016-17, and 274 out of 300 schools needing repairs<sup>64</sup>.

New Brunswick's framework for education funding operates in a unique education context; Canada's only officially bilingual province operates parallel anglophone and francophone school systems with four english boards, 3 French boards, 43,000 anglophone students, 29,000 francophone pupils, and 25,000 French immersion student<sup>65</sup>. The system also operates under an incredible degree of policy turnover, as the province has seen five different governments since 2005, each of a different party than its predecessor. Thus, "a student starting school in September 2004 would have experienced five education strategies, each with different priorities, by the time they graduated<sup>66</sup>."

**Of note:** *The province's new Progressive Conservative government has proposed major education reforms for 2020-21, phasing out age-based grades in kindergarten-Grade 2 to be replaced by "flexible learning environments" where students are grouped based on "readiness, interests, and learning profiles". Additionally, the province is launching a "Red Tape Challenge in Public Education" and evaluating using artificial intelligence for student assessments.<sup>67</sup>*



### **Prince Edward Island**

Prince Edward Island's \$300 million education system operates under an Education Authority Funding and Staffing Program.

The province invests 3.8% of GDP in education into education<sup>68</sup>, which flows via two grants: a Salaries Wages and Benefits allocation and an Operations allocation. The Salaries, Wages, and Benefits grant covers all teacher, administrator, and supervisory staff compensation. The Operations grant breaks down into six sub-allocations for school board administration, school maintenance and operations, school supplies (funded at \$119 per student), student transportation and professional development<sup>69</sup>. On the capital side, the province has a \$3.2 million School Capital Repair program, which received a \$1.2 million increase from the new Progressive Conservative government<sup>70</sup>. However, government also cancelled the former Liberal government's \$500,000 school infrastructure review assessing long-term school renewal and replacement needs, choosing instead to use boards' existing capital priority lists<sup>71</sup>.

The province has moved to fund a number of new education programs, such as a universal school lunch program launching in fall 2020. This aims to increase student achievement by reducing health inequities through school-served healthy lunches using a pay-what-you-can model, with a maximum price of \$5<sup>72</sup>. Additionally, the government has also committed to introducing a universal half-day pre-kindergarten program for 4 year-olds by fall 2020<sup>73</sup>.

**Of note:** *In addition to universal school lunches and pre-kindergarten, the government has outlined a broad agenda for education with commitments to reviewing education funding, program and standardized testing models, reinstating elected school boards, and applying a climate lens to the Education department<sup>74</sup>.*

### **Newfoundland and Labrador**



Newfoundland and Labrador's \$823 million education system operates with a funding model of six different envelopes.

The province invests 3% of GDP into education<sup>75</sup>, \$747 million of which flows through the Financial Assistance grant to cover teacher compensation, school board operations, and school supplies. Additionally, there is a Program Development grant for curriculum development, Student Support Services grant for special needs and inclusive education supports, Educational Programs grant for policy research and evaluation, and a Child and Family Development grant for early years programming.<sup>76</sup>

Much of the province's recent investments into education funding emanate from the 2018 Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes. The review produced a five year Education Action Plan, launched in 2018, with 82 recommendations in nine areas from mental health to mathematics and multicultural education<sup>77</sup>. The fall 2019 Budget allocated \$13 million towards the plan's recommendations which have led to hundreds of new reading specialists and EAs and teacher-librarians in schools, a social and emotional development curriculum, and a framework for enhanced multicultural education in every grade<sup>78</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province continues to implement the balance of its Education Action Plan recommendations, with reforms to special education funding, the role of guidance counsellors, math assessment frameworks, and supports for newcomer students on the docket<sup>79</sup>.*



### **Yukon**

Yukon's \$218 million public education system operates under a funding formula with three main funding envelopes.

The territory invests 5.8% of GDP into education<sup>80</sup>, the bulk of which flows through the \$127 million Schools and Student Services grant for administration, staffing, special needs supports, and student transportation. The Policy and Partnerships grant supports collaboration with First Nations and other stakeholders on program standards, curriculum, and research. The First Nations Initiatives grant facilitates Indigenous education through First Nations curriculum development and language initiatives. On the capital side, the territory funds \$25 million in education capital spending for school repairs and infrastructure replacements<sup>81</sup>.

**Of note:** *The Department of Education has agreed to the Auditor General's*

recommendations for educational outcomes, inclusive education, and First Nations culture and languages, committing an array of reviews, consultations and policy revisions.



### **Northwest Territories**

The Northwest Territories funds its \$155 million education system through a School Funding Framework comprised of four funding envelopes.

The territory invests 4.8% of GDP into education<sup>82</sup>, with much of the funding flowing through the Territorial Schools grant, which finances classroom staffing, school operations and maintenance, student transportation, over-enrollment top-ups. The Administration and School Services grant supports school board administration and staffing, the Inclusive Schooling grant funds specialized teacher and professional development, and the Indigenous Languages and Education grant for Indigenous language instruction staff and Indigenous learning centres. The territory identifies base, enrollment-linked, geographic, CPI-linked and targeted funding as main education funding vehicles<sup>83</sup>.

**Of note:** In response to years of accumulating reports pointing to a deterioration in the territory's education system, new Premier and past Education Minister Catherine Cochrane has said "It's time that our whole system is looked at," because "We're failing our children<sup>84</sup>." Thus, education reform may become a centerpiece of her new government's agenda.



### **Nunavut**

Nunavut's \$250 million education system is funded via a funding formula with five main envelopes.

The territory invests 5.8% of GDP into education<sup>85</sup>, with 78% of funding flowing via the K-12 School Operations grant which funds staffing, operations, and instructional support. The Early Learning and Childcare grant funds early childhood development, Curriculum Resources and French Education grant supports development of curriculum and teaching standards, the Student Achievement

grant supports student assessment and special education, and Educator Development supports educators' professional development. The territory also invests \$8.3 million in education capital dollars<sup>86</sup>.

**Of note:** The Department of Education accepted the Auditor General's recommendations, and committed to developing a 10-year strategic plan focus on enhanced high school graduation rates and the transition to post-secondary.

### **Conclusion**

While policies and programming form the fabric of an education system, funding is the thread that binds everything together. However, this thread has become greatly frayed in recent years, with education funding not keeping pace with inflation and enrollment growth in many provinces. P3 schools have been promoted as a cost-saving initiative, and bizarre money-saving schemes like mandatory e-learning and a "Red Tape Challenge in Public Education" were becoming an increasingly popular tactic prior to COVID-19.

In the midst of a historic pandemic poised to result in the largest societal upheaval since the Great Depression, how we talk about and support public education as places of work and places of learning is undergoing a major overhaul. There is a real and rare window of opportunity to make transformative and enduring change to the core pillars of our world. And with entire swaths of the economy being utterly remade overnight, education — a central vehicle for the knowledge acquisition and skill development required for human capital formation as well as an unparalleled force for social transformation — must be a core part of any rebuilding agenda.

As we begin to re-imagine public schools for post-pandemic life, it has perhaps never been clearer that student well-being, equity in student opportunity and achievement, and student need must be at the heart of all education funding formulas. ●

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\* Unless otherwise specified, all references to dollar amounts have been obtained from the most recently-available territorial and provincial budget and fiscal framework documents. Please refer to them for additional information and explanation. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, but because of system complexities and recent economic disruptions, there may be some variation in the final figures.

## Notes

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**Annual expenditure by educational institutions per student, on core services, Canadian dollars, Canada, provinces and territories, 2016/2017**  
(Table B.1.2.1, page 91)

Canada	13,058
Newfoundland and Labrador	13,385
Prince Edward Island	11,509
Nova Scotia	12,801
New Brunswick	13,196
Quebec	12,159
Ontario	13,155
Manitoba	15,077
Saskatchewan	15,943
Alberta	14,851
British Columbia	10,724
Yukon	29,726
Northwest Territories	26,546
Nunavut	-

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