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PROVINCIAL

PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC: A FIGHT FOR FUNDS

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education,



While the U.S. Senate's appointment of wealthy businesswoman Betsy DeVos as education secretary has raised alarm among public education advocates – who say she lacks experience with public schools and may divert funds to private options – here in

Government funding for private K-12 education in Saskatchewan has increased over the past few years, but not everyone supports the idea of public money going towards privately owned schools. Photo by Jennifer Ackerman.

Saskatchewan, debates over education funding and public-private models are nothing

new.

In January the provincial government asked school divisions and other publicly funded bodies to impose wage freezes across all sectors, in response to a then-\$1 billion deficit, which has now increased to \$1.2 billion. Additionally, the government urged school divisions to explore further cost cutting measures.

The announcement raised concerns and speculation about looming provincial budget cuts. Education minister Don Morgan is also proposing a possible amalgamation of Saskatchewan school boards. Meant to improve efficiency, critics believe it's really just a cost-cutting measure in disguise.

In response, the Canadian Union of Public Employees – the largest union in Saskatchewan, with over 30,000 members – submitted a report to a government review panel that outlined the union's opposition to the amalgamation in light of, among other items, increased funding for private schools.

"It is unacceptable for the provincial government to force consolidation of school divisions and reduce their funding in the name of efficiency when it has increased funding to small, independent religious schools that are not accountable to the public," stated the report.

In 2011, public funding for associate schools was increased from 70 to 80 per cent of per-pupil costs. Independent schools went from zero to 50 per cent public funding.

An independent school is a school owned by a person or organization other than the government. An associate school is independent school operated by a non-profit corporation based on a specific religious perspective. They are two different streams of private schools in Saskatchewan.

Larry Steeves, a University of Regina educational administration professor, has worked as a teacher, principal and school board director in the public school system in Saskatchewan. He was also associate deputy minister of the Department of Learning for the Saskatchewan government from 2005-2006. When asked if the increase in public funding to private schools hurts the public school system, Steeves said he doesn't think so.

"At this point, not particularly ... Now, do I think (schools) should be funded better? Probably but, on the other hand, in a province right now that's undergoing some fiscal hard times, not likely gonna happen, you know, and I mean, hey, everybody gets that. So it could be a lot worse, let me put it that way," said Steeves.

But Jackie Christianson, chair of the CUPE's education workers steering committee, feels Saskatchewan could do better.

"There's one pot where the education funding comes from," said Christianson. She said private schools have ways of making up for lost government funds, such as raising tuition or limiting enrollment, options that aren't available to public schools.

"You can't just walk off the street and say, 'Hey, I want to go to Luther.' They get to pick and choose, but you can't do that in the 28 schools divisions (in Saskatchewan). You don't have a choice. You must educate that child," said Christianson.

Christianson is also a structured learning classroom assistant with the Regina Public school division and has seen how funding cuts are impacting teachers and students on the frontlines.

"I have worked in education for 16 years and I have never felt this kind of pressure in the classroom," said Christianson, who works at Campus Regina Public. She used to use some of her classroom budget to buy food for her students who couldn't afford it. She said cuts in the last few years means she is buying that food with her own money now.

Christianson feels strongly that funding for private schools should be rolled back and re-allocated to the public school system. Putting your child in a private school is a parents' choice, she said, and should not take away from public school funding.

But not everyone feels that way. Steeves believes that private schools have a right to public funding.

"There is, I think, an appropriate role (for private schools), given the Canadian and Saskatchewan context and our constitutional, legal and cultural context to be respectful of communities that really want to have some of their own additional focus in terms of what their kids get for schooling," he said.

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I do believe there is a place for both public and private schools in Canada however until underfunding overall is addressed it's a moot point one is just underfunded more than the other the challenges arising from that and lack of opportunities derived from a stressed school system needs to be considered from both sides.

Then we can fight over what's left

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