

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Critical Policy Analysis in Education:**  
**Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts**

education policy analysis  
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 30 Number 15

February 8, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341

## **Shifting Meanings: The Struggle Over Public Funding of Private Schools in Alberta, Canada**

*Sue Winton*

York University  
Canada



*Steven Staples*

York University  
Canada

**Citation:** Winton, S., & Staples, S. (2022). Shifting meanings: The struggle over public funding of private schools in Alberta, Canada. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30(15).

<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7002> This article is part of the special issue: *Critical Policy Analysis in Education: Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts*, guest edited by Sarah Diem and Jeffrey S. Brooks.

**Abstract:** The government of Alberta, Canada, has provided public funding to eligible private schools since 1967. This policy has always been contested, and in this article, we explain how we applied concepts from argumentative discourse theory and its attendant methodology, argumentative discourse analysis (ADA), to trace the debate over the policy since 1990. Argumentative discourse theory posits that policymaking involves struggles for discursive dominance wherein actors try to convince others to view the policy issue in a particular way. Drawing on 158 media articles, interviews, and secondary sources, we show that although some of the actors in the dispute have changed – and changed sides – their arguments have remained fairly consistent. However, their

Journal website: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>

Facebook: /EPAAA

Twitter: @epaa\_aape

Manuscript received: 5/31/2021

Revisions received: 10/5/2021

Accepted: 11/30/2021

arguments' meanings – and of the policy itself – have changed as the dominant discourse in the province shifted. Specifically, in response to the rise and predominance of neoliberalism in Alberta, supporters redefined the policy to fund private schools with public money as one that promoted choice and competition that would improve schooling. Opponents, on the other hand, recast the policy as part of a larger government effort to privatize public education. We demonstrate that argumentative discourse theory and ADA can be used to support the goals of critical policy analysis.

**Keywords:** critical policy analysis; private schools; critical discourse analysis; education policy; funding

### **Significados cambiantes: El debate sobre la financiación pública de las escuelas privadas en Alberta, Canadá**

**Resumen:** El gobierno de Alberta, Canadá, ha asignado fondos públicos a escuelas privadas elegibles desde 1967. Esta política siempre ha sido cuestionada, y en este artículo explicamos cómo aplicamos conceptos de la teoría del discurso argumentativo y su metodología concomitante, el análisis del discurso argumentativo. (ADA), para rastrear el debate sobre la política desde 1990. La teoría del discurso argumentativo postula que la formulación de políticas implica luchas por el dominio discursivo en las que los actores intentan convencer a otros para que vean el tema de la política de una manera particular. Basándonos en 158 artículos de los medios, entrevistas y fuentes secundarias, mostramos que aunque algunos de los actores en la disputa han cambiado, y cambiado de lado, sus argumentos se han mantenido bastante consistentes. Sin embargo, los significados de sus argumentos, y de la política misma, han cambiado a medida que cambiaba el discurso dominante en la provincia. Específicamente, en respuesta al auge y predominio del neoliberalismo en Alberta, los partidarios redefinieron la política de financiar escuelas privadas con dinero público como una política que promoviera la elección y la competencia que mejoraría la educación. Los opositores, por otro lado, reformulan la política como parte de un esfuerzo mayor del gobierno para privatizar la educación pública. Demostramos que la teoría del discurso argumentativo y la ADA se pueden utilizar para respaldar los objetivos del análisis crítico de políticas.

**Palabras-clave:** análisis crítico de políticas; escuelas privadas; análisis crítico del discurso; política educativa; fondos

### **Mudando significados: O debate sobre o financiamento público de escolas particulares em Alberta, Canadá**

**Resumo:** O governo de Alberta, Canadá, tem alocado recursos públicos para escolas particulares elegíveis desde 1967. Essa política sempre foi contestada e, neste artigo, explicamos como aplicamos conceitos da teoria do discurso argumentativo e sua metodologia associada, a análise argumentativa do discurso (ADA), para traçar o debate sobre a política desde 1990. A teoria do discurso argumentativo postula que a formulação de políticas envolve lutas pelo domínio discursivo em que os atores tentam convencer os outros a ver a questão política de uma maneira particular. Com base em 158 artigos da mídia, entrevistas e fontes secundárias, mostramos que, embora alguns dos atores da disputa tenham mudado – e mudado de lado – seus argumentos permaneceram bastante consistentes. No entanto, os significados de seus argumentos – e da própria política – mudaram à medida que o discurso dominante na província mudou. Especificamente, em resposta à ascensão e predominância do neoliberalismo em Alberta, os defensores redefiniram a política de financiar escolas privadas com dinheiro público como uma que

promovia a escolha e a competição que melhorariam a escolaridade. Os opositores, por outro lado, reformulam a política como parte de um esforço maior do governo para privatizar a educação pública. Demonstramos que a teoria do discurso argumentativo e a ADA podem ser usadas para apoiar os objetivos da análise crítica de políticas.

**Palavras-chave:** análise crítica de políticas; escolas particulares; análise crítica do discurso; política educacional; financiamento

## **Shifting Meanings: The Struggle Over Public Funding of Private Schools in Alberta, Canada**

Is the public funding of private schools in Alberta part of a market agenda in education designed to undermine the public system? A means of enabling parents<sup>1</sup> to select the best education for their children, or perhaps even a policy that undermines private schools' autonomy? The meaning of Alberta's policy to provide public funds to private schools varies according to whom you ask and when you ask them. In this article we explain how we drew on Maarten Hajer's (1997) argumentative discourse theory and its attendant methodology, argumentative discourse analysis (ADA; Hajer, 2006), to trace the debate over public funding of private schools in Alberta over time. While the policy to give public funding to private schools was first adopted in 1967, this paper focusses on actors' efforts to change and/or uphold the policy to fund private schools with public money in Alberta between 1990 and 2020. Our findings show that while some of the actors in the debate have changed and, in some cases changed sides, their arguments and the discourses that underlie them have remained fairly consistent. However, the meanings of these arguments and discourses – and of the policy itself – have changed as the dominant discourse in the province shifted.

We begin with an overview of private schools in the province and review existing knowledge about the debate over public funding of private schools. Next, we introduce our critical orientation to policy and Hajer's argumentative discourse theory and explain how it supports the aims of critical policy analysis. We then turn to an explanation of how we used ADA to identify story lines and their supporting arguments, the members of discourse coalitions that mobilize them, and how shifting socio-historical context influenced struggles over the meaning of public funding of private schools in Alberta. A discussion of our findings follows. Finally, we end with a discussion of the utility of ADA in critical policy analysis.

### **Private Schools in Alberta**

Alberta is located in the western part of Canada, and, with 4,436,258 residents, it is the country's fourth most populous province (Alberta, 2021a). Like all Canadian provinces and territories, Alberta's government is responsible for providing education to its school-aged residents. The provincial government oversees – and funds to some extent – a variety of education options, including English public, Catholic, Francophone, and charter schools in publicly-funded school systems; private schools; and homeschooling. Public funds for education are raised through municipal education property taxes (the tax rate is set by the provincial government and is uniform across the province), income tax, royalties, federal transfers, gaming and income from investments (Riep, 2021). The amounts schools receive is tied to enrollment. English public, Catholic, and

---

<sup>1</sup> While we recognize that parents are not the only caregivers and guardians of children, we use the word “parents” throughout the article in recognition of how policy actors use it rhetorically in policy debates.

Francophone schools are governed by democratically-elected school boards who determine how funds will be spent. Private schools may charge tuition, and English public, Catholic, Francophone, and charter schools may raise additional funds through fundraising or charging families voluntary fees.

In the 2019-2020 school year, 33 382 students – just under 4.5% of Alberta’s pupils – attended a private school (Alberta, 2021c). While this is only a small percentage of school-age children in the province overall, the share has increased from under 2% in the 1970s (Bergen, 1982) and 4% in 1999 (Kachur, 1999). Most families that send their children to private schools do so because they want their children to receive a faith-based education (Hunt & Leistra, 2020). In fact, Alberta is unique in the country in its multiple arrangements that allow faith-based schools to operate within public school systems (Hiemstra & Brink, 2006).

Alberta’s (2021b) Private Schools website explains that “there are 3 types of private schools and 2 specialized designations for private schools in Alberta” (para. 3). The three types are registered private schools, accredited private schools (funded), and accredited private schools (unfunded). Registered private schools do not have to follow the provincial curriculum or hire provincially-certified teachers. They do not receive any public funds. Non funded accredited private schools must use Alberta-certified teachers but do not have to follow the Alberta curriculum. Like the registered private schools, this kind of accredited school does not receive provincial funding. Accredited funded private schools follow the Alberta curriculum, use provincially-certified teachers, have principals that are certified teachers, and as of 2021 receives 70% of the per pupil funding given to public schools. This type of private school is the main focus of debates over public funding of private schools. Private schools with special designations include those approved and publicly-funded to offer education to students with disabilities and heritage language private schools that offer classes outside of the regular school day (Alberta, 2021b). Heritage schools may or may not receive public funds. In 2021 there were 208 private schools operated by 162 school authorities (Alberta Education, 2021).

## **Histories of the Debate over Public Funding of Alberta’s Private Schools**

While our study is the first to focus on debates over this policy between 1990-2020, a number of scholars have examined actors and arguments instrumental in securing initial and subsequent increases in public funding to private schools prior to 1990. Hiemstra (2005) and Prinsen (2000) demonstrate that Dutch neo-Calvinist immigrants in Alberta played a pivotal role in the introduction of the policy in 1967. This small minority of Albertans advocated for “a pluriform public order” (Hiemstra, 2005, p. 157) that would equitably integrate and fund all school types in Alberta. As members of organizations such as the Christian Action Foundation and the Societies for Christian Education, these advocates argued that Alberta’s government was overstepping its role by providing a preferred educational philosophy in its schools. As they saw it, the state was responsible for ensuring justice and funding for all schools that met state-determined educational standards and minimum enrolment requirements, but it was up to communities to determine what and how their schools should teach students. The neo-Calvinists lobbied politicians, submitted briefs to government bodies, formed strategic alliances with other groups, notably the Association of Private Schools and Colleges in Alberta (APSCA), and attempted to create a united Christian community (Hiemstra, 2005).

Although the introduction of private school funding was not preceded by a formal or public debate, the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) expressed opposition to the policy when it was adopted in 1967, and the Alberta School Trustees’ Association (ASTA) did the same shortly

thereafter (Bergen, 1982). The Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, on the other hand, expressed its support (Bergen, 1982). Both the ATA and the ASTA continued to publicly oppose the policy throughout the 1970s and 1980s, although the ATA supported public funding of private schools operated by organizations serving children with special education needs and that met government standards (Bergen, 1982). Bergen's (1982) survey of Alberta school board members revealed about half of respondents opposed the policy. Their reasons included the fact that private schools could select their students while public schools had to accept everyone and their belief that private schools were elitist and fragmented society. Indeed, the idea that the policy promoted segregation and, ultimately, "future social division" were arguments mobilized by the leader of the group Save Public Education and later Liberal MLA, Sheldon Chumir, in the mid-1980s (Wagner, 1999, p. 61). In 1988, New Democratic Party (NDP) and Liberal party members characterized the funding of private schools as a means of privatizing education in legislative debates over the Progressive Conservative government's proposed School Act (Wagner, 1999).

Accounts of the history of private school funding in Alberta also trace the increases in the amounts allocated. According to Bergen (1982), when the policy was introduced in 1967, private schools received \$100 for every student served. This amount eventually increased to \$172 in 1973 before the change to receiving a proportion of the amount received by public schools was made in 1974 (Bergen, 1982). At that time, the percentage was 33.3% of the per pupil instructional amount received by public schools. Private schools were ineligible for other grants. The amount private schools received increased to 40% in 1976, to 60% in 1997 and eventually to 70% in 2008 (Wagner, 1999). It is important to note that the same party, the Progressive Conservatives (PCs), formed the government continuously between 1971 and 2015. As these increases to private school funding indicate (along with policies to introduce alternative schools, registered private schools, and charter schools), the PCs have long supported funding alternatives to public education (Wagner, 1999).

Previous research, then, has documented actors involved in debates over public funding of private schools up to the closing years of the 1980s. These studies detail who said what to whom, their advocacy strategies, and the outcomes of their efforts to influence formal government decisions. Our study picks up where other scholars left off by examining the debate since 1990. Importantly, it also differs from previous work in terms its critical orientation towards policy and its discursive theory of policy change.

### **Critical Policy Analysis and Argumentative Discourse Theory**

Our study reflects our critical orientation towards policy (Simons et al., 2009). Like other critical policy scholars, we recognize that policies are not value neutral and thus benefit some groups while disadvantaging others. We also share their interests in understanding the roots and developments of policy over time and the nature of actors' engagement and resistance to it (Diem et al., 2014). We combine concepts from Maarten Hajer's (1993, 1997, 2006) argumentative discourse theory with insights from critical policy scholars to help us explain why public funding for private schools in Alberta has continued to grow over the past thirty years despite opponents' efforts to overturn the funding policy.

Sharing critical policy scholars' rejection of positivist approaches to policy analysis, Hajer's (1997) argumentative discourse theory posits that policymaking involves struggles for discursive dominance in which actors try to persuade others to view the policy issue in a particular way. That is, it involves a struggle over policy meanings constructed through discourse. Hajer (2006) defines discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set

of practices” (p. 67). Some discourses operate at the everyday level of communication and may be associated with particular disciplines (e.g., medicine, economics) while other discourses circulate in and organize society more broadly (Fischer, 2003). Drawing on and adapting Gale’s (1999) view of policy as text, discourse, and ideology, we understand that arguments mobilized in policy debates take their meanings from discourses which are themselves informed by – and appeal to – ideologies. Further, arguments may be influenced by multiple and competing discourses, and a single discourse may be informed by more than one ideology (Gale, 1999). Struggles over policy are thus impacted by the discursive as well as social and geographical contexts at a particular moment in time (Fischer, 2003; Gale, 1999).

Policy actors mobilize story lines in their persuasive efforts (Hajer, 1997). Policy actors include individuals and representatives from organizations engaged in policy processes, and “[s]tory lines are the medium through which [they] try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternate social arrangements” (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). Story lines summarize and simplify ideas about what the world is like and should be like (Hajer, 2006). Actors mobilizing the same story lines form discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1997). Members of discourse coalitions may or may not know each other or share interests, and they do not act together according to a particular plan or strategy. Their story lines disguise both the complexity of policy issues as well as differences in discourse coalition members’ interpretations of their meanings. Hajer (1997) points to the example of the destruction of rainforests in environmental politics: some actors express concern over its impact on the Earth’s biosphere, others over its impact on indigenous people’s homes and cultures, while others view it as a moral issue. While they all agree that the declining rainforest cover is an issue of concern, the arguments they offer for why it is a problem vary. Nevertheless, they mobilize the same story line – that the destruction of rainforests is harmful – in their efforts to change policy.

Story lines construct policy problems, position actors, create coalitions, and contribute to the production of a moral and social order (Hajer, 1997). Story lines appeal to actors because they “sound right” (Hajer, 1997, p. 63). Whether a story line sounds right depends on its plausibility, the confidence actors have in others mobilizing the story line, the practices in which the story line is formed, and the tolerability of the story line for actors’ discursive identities (Hajer, 1997). Importantly, argumentative discourse theory suggests that actors’ beliefs are constituted in part by both contexts and discourses and if one or both changes, actors’ views and values may change as well.

A discourse coalition (and its story lines) may be said to be dominant if two conditions are met. The first condition is discourse structuration, which is evident when the coalition “dominates the discursive space” (Hajer, 1993, p. 48). Structuration is apparent in the second condition, discourse institutionalization, where the coalition’s discourse translates into institutional arrangements and concrete policies (Hajer, 1993). As critical scholar Stephen Ball (1993) explains, policies are both text and discourse simultaneously and, as such, “exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’” (p.14, emphasis in original). Policy ‘truths’, including the subjectivities and social relations they construct, advantage some groups of people while disadvantaging others.

Hajer’s argumentative discourse theory, while not grounded in commitments to equality and social change (Simons et al., 2009), is nevertheless useful for achieving goals of critical policy analysis. In addition to helping scholars understand a policy’s roots and developments over time and the nature of actors’ engagement and resistance to it, argumentative discourse theory can help explain why policies known to produce inequities can be difficult to challenge. For example, this article’s first author used argumentative discourse theory to explain why school fundraising, a policy

that reproduces inequality within and between public schools, has grown in Ontario, Canada, despite decades-long efforts to challenge this practice (Winton, 2016). They demonstrated that in a neoliberal context of reduced funding of public schools, increasing education privatization, and a view of parents as responsible for their children's success, fundraising makes sense, especially for middle-class families who have historically depended on public schools to reproduce their children's class status (Winton, 2006).

## Methodology

In this section we explain how we used argumentative discourse analysis (ADA; Hajer, 2006) to identify story lines and their supporting arguments, the members of discourse coalitions that mobilize them, and how the shifting socio-historical context influenced struggles over the meaning of public funding of private schools in Alberta. While ADA is not inherently critical, like other such methodologies including case studies (e.g., Diem, 2016) and various quantitative approaches (e.g., Parekh & Brown, 2019), it can be used to achieve goals of critical policy analysis. Our application of ADA incorporates many components suggested by Hajer (2006); however, since he does not address a study that examines arguments over a long period of time nor one that is comparative in design, we modified his approach. Notably, our study of the debate over public funding of private schools in Alberta is one of multiple cases in a comparative case study of this debate across Canada. For this case we used ADA to answer the following three research questions: (1) What are the story lines and their supporting arguments in the debate over public funding of private schools in Alberta?; (2) Who are the actors that mobilized the story lines and their supporting arguments as members of discourse coalitions?; and (3) How has the shifting socio-historical context influenced struggles over the meaning of public funding of private schools in Alberta?

Prior to collecting data, we began with desk research as advised by Hajer (2006). This step involved surveying documents, news articles, academic articles, grey literature (i.e., literature that is unpublished or published non-commercially or informally; Monash University, n.d.), and government and organization websites in order to develop preliminary understanding of historical and contemporary policy actors and their arguments.

### Data Sources and Collection

Data for our Alberta case study were collected from two main sources: news media articles and interviews with five actors involved in the debate. Each source constituted a distinct dataset. We gathered the news articles from two newspapers: *The Globe and Mail* and the *Calgary Herald*. The newspapers were accessed through two online databases, ProQuest and Newspapers.com. A standard Boolean search command was employed to identify articles where "public funding" was associated with "private schools" in the article. The command was adjusted to substitute "funding" with the more colloquial "grant" for media searches of the mid-20th century. Likewise, "private" was substituted with "independent" schools as is more commonly used by public funding proponents. Using this process, we identified 290 potential articles. We then reviewed them to ensure they contained arguments that directly address the public funding of private schools rather than other questions raised in the public debate, such as the intrinsic value of private schools or advantages for students in the different systems. We also ensured the arguments were directly attributed to an actor as a direct quote or written by someone directly engaging in the debate (e.g., through a letter to the editor or in an Editorial). If arguments in the articles were summarized or otherwise interpreted by the journalist, even if the arguments were attributed to an actor, they were left out of the dataset. We made this decision to help ensure the authenticity of arguments made by



participants in the debate. Through this process, 158 articles were selected to serve as data. Each of these articles was uploaded to Dedoose, an online application designed to facilitate data analysis.

Data were also collected through interviews with five actors involved in the debate between 1990 and 2020. As described by Hajer (2006), the purpose of these interviews was to understand how they interpreted the debate and why they engaged in the debate in the ways they did. They also provided information about “causal chains (‘what led to what’)” (Hajer, 2006, p. 73). We identified the participants through references to their organizations in the media articles and recommendations from others we interviewed. Each interviewee was active in one or more of the following group types between 1990 and 2020: the Alberta government, provincial teachers’ association, and non-governmental organizations. The semi-structured interviews were carried out via video conference and were recorded and transcribed.

Finally, to identify the contexts within which the argumentative struggles over public funding of private schools have taken place and determine how the dominant story line has maintained its dominance over time, we read a wide variety of academic articles and books detailing the changing cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts of Alberta, Canada, and other Western, English-speaking countries since the 1950s. Some of these texts were ones we read as part of our desk research earlier in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to beginning the analysis, the research team members participated in an exercise designed to improve consistency in the analysis. Following Lichtman’s (2013) generic approach to coding, we began by individually reading several selected articles and highlighting phrases containing arguments and the actors mobilizing them based on knowledge gleaned from our desk research. Then, we compared our highlighted phrases and created code names that described the meaning of the arguments, such as “Funding private schools will damage public schools” which is an argument against the public funding of private schools. We also created code names for the actor (an individual or group member) who mobilized each argument. As the exercise progressed, we developed a common understanding of the codes and checked to ensure team members were coding arguments consistently when used by different actors. The codes were added to Dedoose. This exercise was important for consistency across the various cases’ datasets coded by different team members to allow a comparative analysis. A follow-up meeting was held during the early stages of data analysis to confirm the codes were applied consistently by researchers.

The ADA formally began with a close reading of each media data source by one or more team members. Then, during a second reading, we highlighted phrases containing arguments mobilized in support of or in opposition to public funding of private schools and assigned them codes. The highlighted arguments were also assigned a code named for the organizational actor that mobilized them. Some of the codes were identified during our initial team coding exercise and others were added as they were encountered. A code book was maintained containing the codes and explanations of their meanings when needed. Examples of the codes include: “Private schools promote segregation” and “Competition improves public schools”. In some cases, more than one argument and actor were identified in a single news article. The media dataset was segmented by decade, allowing researchers to trace actors and their arguments over time.

The next step was to determine changes and continuances over time. We grouped similar or related codes according to the discourses that they represented, such as “fairness” or “choice”. We created a table using Excel to keep track of arguments and discourses mobilized by decade and the actors that mobilized them, assigning a colour to each discourse to make its presence at each point visible. We also noted changes from the previous decade and included a column that identified



political shifts through provincial elections and new policies, and other significant details about the social context suggested by our desk research and gleaned from a subsequent review of secondary sources. We referred to this table to produce the discussion of our findings.

## Findings

Our ADA shows there have been two discourse coalitions in the policy debate since the 1960s: the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition (policy supporters) and the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition (policy opponents). Our analysis also clearly demonstrates that the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition has been dominant since 1967 when Alberta's government agreed to give \$100 per student to private schools. Since then, not only has funding continued to flow to private schools, but the amount they receive has increased to 70% of the per-pupil funding allocated to public schools. Furthermore, our analysis shows that both discourse coalitions have mobilized many of the same arguments in support of their story lines since the beginnings of the debate. For example, supporters have consistently argued the policy ensures children can be educated as desired by their parents, promotes fairness between schools of different kinds (especially faith-based and secular schools) and between private and public school parents, and saves taxpayers money. Opponents, on the other hand, have argued that funding private schools with public money takes money away from public schools, promotes elitism and segregation, and undermines democracy. What has changed, however, is the meaning of some of these arguments. We attribute these shifting meanings to coalition members' engagement of discourses informed by neoliberal and liberal ideologies that themselves have become more and less predominant over time.

In the discussion below we focus on new and shifting story lines mobilized by the publicly-fund-private-schools and the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalitions in response to the rise and dominance of neoliberal ideology, discourses and policies in Alberta, Canada, and internationally throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Evans & Smith, 2015; Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Porter, 2012). A central neoliberal idea is that the social world should be organized according to the principles of the free market. In such a place, people, businesses, and organizations compete for success with minimal government involvement; the government's main role is to create conditions that enable markets thrive (Larner, 2000). Governments around the world have taken up this responsibility in part by selling public assets, transferring some of the costs of public services to individuals, contracting with private companies to manage public services, and introducing policies that reorganize the public sector to become more private-like, both in terms of structure and management techniques (Lubienski, 2006). Competition within markets is celebrated as it is purported to lead to innovation and greater efficiency. Their consumers, envisioned as rational subjects, are responsible for choosing the product best-suited to meet their needs.

Advocates of creating markets in education claim the arrangement stimulates innovation and competition among schools which improves them and ultimately produces better outcomes (i.e., higher student achievement). Parents, as the education market's consumers, assume responsibility for ensuring they select the best education option for their children's success. A child's failure, then, is the fault of their parents' poor choices. Governments have introduced a range of policies to create markets including: open boundary policies to enable children to attend school outside their neighbourhoods; providing families with publicly-funded vouchers that would go to the schools of their choosing; charter schools that were publicly-funded but not governed by elected school boards; online learning programs; specialized programs offered by school boards; and public funding of private schools. Some of these policies predate the ascendancy of neoliberalism.

In 1994, the Alberta PC government of Ralph Klein introduced a number of education reforms that reflected neoliberalism in its 3-year business plan (Taylor, 2001). The plan included reductions in funding, a new centralized role for the government in collecting and allocating funds, enhanced school council legislation, school board amalgamations, more standardized testing, site-based management, and a greater emphasis on preparing students to meet the needs of the corporate and industrial sectors. The plan also introduced charter schools, signalling a commitment to expanding public school alternatives and choice in the province. The various components of the plan demonstrated the government's support of neoliberal ideals.

In response to the rise and predominance of neoliberalism in Alberta, members of the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition redefined the policy to fund private schools with public money as one that promoted choice and competition that would improve schooling. This reframing was evident in 1998 when Ralph Klein announced an increase in private school funding for eligible schools from 50% to 60% of public schools' per-student instruction grant. The Premier explained the increase was "a matter of providing choice and a matter of competition" (Ferguson & Seskus, 1998, p. B1).

Publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition members also linked the province's school choice policy to students' academic success and global competitiveness. For example, Preston Manning (2007), founder of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy and former leader of the Reform Party of Canada, wrote in 2007 that:

Alberta excels in Canadian and international education comparisons because the province provides parents with a greater range of educational choices and more resources to support those choices. Alberta ensures equity and choice in K-12 education by funding independent schools and home schooling, as well as the public system. (Manning, 2007, p. A16)

Education Minister Ed Stelmach also linked school choice to achievement when announcing that funding to private schools would increase from 60% to 70% in 2008: "I am a tremendous supporter of choice in the education system. Our achievement levels compared to other provinces is simply outstanding – in fact to other countries" (McGinnis, 2008, p. A3).

The idea that school choice and competition lead to better outcomes in education continued to be mobilized in the next decade. In response to a letter by Liberal MLA Kent Hehr (2014) calling for an end to public funding of private schools in 2014, Mark Milke and Deanie van Pelt (2014) of the Fraser Institute, a Canadian think tank advocating the creation of markets in education, argued that school choice "leads to human flourishing" (p. A13) and, furthermore, that monopolies like public education result in "little innovation, sub-par service, few reasons to improve and the misallocation of resources" (p. A13). They asserted further that "when local communities are given more control – whether independent or charter schools, home-based educational programs or public schools given more local authority – administrators, parents and teachers can achieve excellent results, results that benefit individuals and society" (Milke & van Pelt, 2014, p.A13).

In 2015, the Conservative party was defeated after 44 years in government. Observers attribute this loss to a struggling economy, turmoil within the party, and missteps by the Premier during the election campaign (Bratt, 2019). For the first time in its history, the NDP, a long-time public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition member, was elected into office. NDP leader, Rachel Notley, had said in 2014: "Government dollars should not be going into private schools. They should be going into public schools. We would restructure funding that way, because we need to encourage more participation in our public education system, not less" (French, 2018, p.

A7). However, the party had not actually included such a commitment in its election platform, and once in office, the government did not change the policy.

Instead, while professing a continued ideological commitment to public schools, according to Wood (2017), NDP Education Minister David Eggen reported that he had “inherited an education system that has other models that delivers [sic] education” (p. A4) and “for the sake of security, for the sake of stability in our education at this point, [he had] no plans to change that landscape” (p. A4). And while the NDP government did not characterize funding private schools as a means to improve public schools through competition, Minister Eggen continued to discuss the policy as a means of providing choice. In 2018, he stated: “We continue to support the critical role parents play in their children's education which includes their ability to choose the school they feel will best ensure their child's success” (French, 2018, p. A7). This statement references the neoliberal idea that parents are responsible for ensuring their children's success through their choices.

The NDP's maintenance of the policy to fund private schools with public money is evidence of the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition's continued dominance in Alberta. One of our interview participants explained that while the NDP did not support the policy, it judged it too risky politically to change it. The continued dominance of neoliberal ideals in Alberta also benefited the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition. This continuance is evident in part by the choice of voters to replace the NDP in 2019 with the United Conservative Party, a party that had promised to remove the cap on the number of charter schools and introduce legislation to secure provincial funding of private schools among other policies reflecting neoliberal ideals (United Conservative Party, 2019). The NDP's predicament shows that an actor's discourse coalition membership may change when their interests change. The NDP's switch to the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition for reasons other than shared interests with other members is also explained by Hajer's discourse coalition theory. Members of the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition also varied in their support for other market mechanisms, such as vouchers (“Have Voucher, Will Learn”, 2003; Manning, 2007).

While the advocates began redefining the meaning and significance of the private school funding policy in the 1990s, so, too, did the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition. Beginning at least as early as 1988, members reconceptualized the policy as part of a larger government effort to privatize public education (Wagner, 1999), and this new policy meaning would be widely circulated over the next few decades.

Members of the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition viewed the Klein government's 3-year-business plan, which included cuts to public education, as an effort to undermine public schools in order to privatize education. Linking the reforms, private school funding, and privatization, the President of the Calgary Public Teachers branch of the ATA explained in 1994:

If money is eliminated from public schools through cutbacks in funding and through the diversion of some funds to private schools, there is a danger that the quality of education will be eroded. When this situation occurred in some areas of the United States, more and more parents chose private schooling. (Nishimura, 1994, p. A5)

This point was similarly expressed by one of our interview participants from a non-government organization: “If you underfund [public services], then they can't meet the needs and then people lose confidence and then they start turning to private alternatives.”

Some members of the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition, including some of our participants, pointed to the introduction of charter schools as part of the 3-year-plan as further evidence of this effort. Two participants even described charter schools as the ultimate

means of publicly funding private schools since they are fully funded by the public but not governed by elected school boards. In their words, “they get 100% public funding, but they do not have to abide by the same rules as a public school, they can limit their, their intake of students and the number of students they take and what students they take.” And while the number of charter schools allowed in province was initially capped at 15, this limit was removed in 2020 as part of the province’s Choice in Education Act, 2020. The 2020 changes to the legislation prompted one of our participants to muse: “Why would a private school not become a charter and get full funding?”

Connections between the 3-year plan, the policy to fund private schools, and privatization were not only mobilized by their opponents, but even some members of the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition also picked up on this new meaning. For example, a member argued in a *Calgary Herald* editorial: “When the province established its per-student funding formula, charter schools and partial funding of private schools, it began taking steps toward a customer-based approach to education” (“Have Voucher, Will Learn”, 2003, p. A20).

In response to changes prompted by the Klein government in 1994, the ATA, a long-time member of the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition, launched a campaign in the following year to convince Albertans that its public education system was working well but was under threat due to inadequate funding. While the campaign itself did not directly link the funding of private schools to the underfunding of public schools, a former ATA leader involved with the “Public Education Works” campaign told us: “if you’re going to defend public education in a broadly based, multifaceted way, you have to take some of your time, and put that into the private school question”.

In 2009, the PC government announced plans to consider changing the laws governing education in Alberta. In response, Liberal critic Harry Chase promised: “If part of the changes to the School Act are to encourage more privatization (of education), then [the Liberals] would vociferously defend the public system” (McGinnis, 2009, p. B1). As this quote and our participant’s reference to the “private school question” suggest, members of the public-funds-are-for-public-schools coalition viewed themselves as not only challenging education privatization but also as defenders of public education. As an Edmonton school board trustee expressed this view again in 2018 when introducing a motion directing the board to lobby the government to remove public funding of private schools: “Our role, in my mind, is to be a leader and defend public education” (French, 2018, p. A7). This role is not new for some members of the public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition. Indeed, many have extolled the virtues of public schooling in debates over private funding of public schools since the policy was first introduced. What has changed since then, however, is what many members see themselves as defending it against: privatization.

### **ADA and Critical Policy Analysis**

Among many interests, critical policy analysts share the desire to understand the origins and development of policy as well as how context influences policy processes (Diem et al., 2014). With its close attention to the arguments mobilized in policy debates, ADA can help researchers achieve these goals. Our findings show that while the actors involved in the struggle over the meaning of the policy to fund private schools in Alberta have expressed similar arguments since the 1960s, their meanings have changed as the dominant discourse shifted in the province. In the early decades of the debate, advocates and opponents of the policy drew on dominant liberal ideals in Canada, including equality of opportunity, as well as subordinate ideas espoused by a pluriform public order (Hiemstra, 2005). However, as neoliberalism ascended in Alberta, across Canada, and around the world, the meaning of their arguments, and of the very policy itself, changed in response.

ADA is also useful for critical scholars who study policy historically in part to reveal complexities in otherwise coherent accounts of policy change over time (Gale, 2001). This methodology directed our attention to differences within discourse coalitions and between policy actors in the same organization. For example, while public-funds-are-for-public-schools discourse coalition members opposed public funding for private schools in principle, some members have been willing to make exceptions for schools that serve students with special education needs while others have opposed public funds going to private schools of any type. As discussed above, some members of the the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition would like to see vouchers in Alberta, while others are content with only partial funding of private schools. The NDP government's unexpected membership in this coalition is yet another case. The variation within coalitions is explained by Hajer's (1997) argumentative discourse theory, of course. This theory posits that policy actors form coalitions based on shared story lines, not on the basis of shared interests and values as suggested by many other policy theories, such the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Fischer, 2003; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

Our study also revealed that members of different discourse coalitions may be in the same organization. For example, while PC governments have long been members of the publicly-fund-private-schools discourse coalition, members of the party passed a resolution at its 1997 convention to end public funding of private schools (Chase & Marshall, 1998). Instead, Premier Klein struck a task force to study the issue and ultimately increased funding from 50% to 60% in 1998. Similarly, in 2013, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) passed a policy resolution calling on the government to end public funding of private schools (except for those that provided special services to children with special needs). The ASBA is made up of members from public, Catholic, and Francophone school boards in the province. Notably, the resolution was not supported by all of its Catholic school board members (Howell, 2013).

Finally, as critical policy scholars, our work is motivated by a commitment to understanding the effect policies have on relationships of privilege and inequality (Young & Diem, 2016). Our ADA demonstrates that the policy to fund private schools with public money remains dominant in the province of Alberta. Bosetti and Pyryt's (2007) study of parents in Alberta's largest cities found parents choosing private schools reported the highest level of income when compared with parents choosing alternative schools and public schools. A 2020 study by Hunt and Leistra (2020) shows there is a difference between those whose children attend elite private schools and those who attend non-elite ones. Hunt and Leistra found that parents of students in elite private schools earn almost \$100,000 more than the average Alberta family choosing public schools, while parents of kids in non-elite private schools earn \$2,000-\$6,000 less than their public school peers. Both studies (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Hunt & Liestra, 2020) show private school parents have higher levels of education than parents of other school types. Also, since private schools normally charge tuition, there may be families that could not afford to send their children to one even though the overall cost to do so may be lower due to the public funds the schools receive. Thus, while the policy to fund private schools may enable some families to select the kinds of school they desire for their children, there is little reason to believe it challenges existing patterns of social inequality.

## References

- Alberta. (2021a). *Population statistics*. <https://www.alberta.ca/population-statistics.aspx>
- Alberta. (2021b). *Private schools*. <https://www.alberta.ca/private-schools.aspx>
- Alberta. (2021c). *Student population statistics*. <https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics.aspx>

- Alberta Education. (2021). *School & authority index*. School & Authority Information Reports. <https://education.alberta.ca/alberta-education/school-authority-index/everyone/school-authority-information-reports/>
- Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse*, 13(2), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630930130203>
- Bergen, J. J. (1982). The private school movement in Alberta. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, XXVIII(4), 315–336.
- Bosetti, L., & Pyryt, M. C. (2007). Parental motivation in school choice. *Journal of School Choice*, 1(4), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1300/15582150802098795>
- Bratt, D. (2019). Death of a dynasty: The Tories and the 2015 election. In D. Bratt, K. Brownsey, R. Sutherland, & D. Taras (Eds.), *Orange Chinook: Politics in the new Alberta* (pp. 35–56). University of Calgary Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbqs3w2.6>
- Chase, S., & Marshall, A. (1998, March 4). More money proposed for private schools. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, B1 / FRONT.
- Diem, S. (2016). A critical policy analysis of the politics, design, and implementation of student assignment policies. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Critical approaches to education policy analysis: Moving beyond tradition* (pp. 43–62). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9_3)
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., Welton, A. D., Mansfield, K. C., & Lee, P.-L. (2014). The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1068–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916007>
- Editor. (2003, January 2). Have voucher, will learn. *Calgary Herald*, A20.
- Evans, B. M., & Smith, C. W. (2015). Introduction: Transforming provincial politics: The political economy of Canada's provinces and territories in a neoliberal era. In B. M. Evans & C. W. Smith (Eds.), *Transforming provincial politics: The political economy of Canada's provinces and territories in the neoliberal era* (pp. 3–18). University of Toronto Press.
- Ferguson, E., & Seskus, T. (1998, March 6). New private school funding assailed. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, B1.
- Fischer, F. (2003). *Reframing public policy: Discursive politics and deliberative practices*. Oxford University Press.
- French, J. (2018, February 21). Public board wants private-school funding phased out; Edmonton trustees vote to lobby NDP in an effort to 'defend public education'. *Calgary Herald*. Canadian Major Dailies.
- Gale, T. (1999). Policy trajectories: Treading the discursive path of policy analysis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 20(3), 393–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630990200304>
- Gale, T. (2001). Critical policy sociology: Historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(5), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110071002>
- Hajer, M., A. (1993). Discourse coalitions and the institutionalization of practice: The case of acid rain in Britain. In F. Fischer & J. Forester (Eds.), *The argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning* (pp. 52–85). Duke University Press.
- Hajer, M., A. (1997). *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernization and the policy process*. Clarendon Press.
- Hajer, M., A. (2006). Doing discourse analysis: Coalitions, practices, meaning. In M. Van den Brink & T. Metzke (Eds.), *Words matter in policy and planning: Discourse theory and methods in the social sciences* (pp. 65–76). Netherlands Graduate School of Urban and Regional Research.
- Hehr, K. (2014, July 26). Private schools divide pupils by wealth and religion. *Calgary Herald*, A10.



- Hiemstra, J. L. (2005). Calvinist pluriformity challenges liberal assimilation: A novel case for publicly funding Alberta's private schools, 1953-1967. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 39(3), 146–173. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jcs.2006.0026>
- Hiemstra, J. L., & Brink, R. A. (2006). The advent of a public pluriformity model: Faith-based school choice in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(4), 1157–1190. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20054214>
- Howell, T. (2013, November 21). Stop funding private schools, boards urge. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, A.3.
- Hunt, D., & Leistra, R. (2020). *AISCA's new principals' retreat!* Cardus. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/who-chooses-alberta-independent-schools-and-why/>
- Hunt, D., & Liestra, R. (2020). *Who chooses Alberta independent schools and why.* Cardus. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/who-chooses-alberta-independent-schools-and-why/>
- Hursh, D. W., & Henderson, J. A. (2011). Contesting global neoliberalism and creating alternative futures. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(2), 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.562665>
- Kachur, J. L. (1999). Privatizing public choice: The rise of charter schooling in Alberta. In T. Harrison & J. L. Kachur (Eds.), *Contested classrooms: Education, globalization, and democracy in Alberta* (pp. 107–122). University of Alberta Press and Parkland Institute.
- Larner, W. (2000). Neo-liberalism: Policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy*, 63, 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2000.11675231>.
- Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Lubienski, C. (2006). School choice and privatization in education: An alternative analytical framework. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 4(1). <http://www.jceps.com/?pageID=article&articleID=57>
- Manning, P. (2007, October 18). More choice makes for better quality. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, A16.
- McGinnis, S. (2008, July 31). Provincial funding for private schools draws public ire. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, A.3.
- McGinnis, S. (2009, February 6). Education overhaul in works; Critics fear for public schools. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, B.1.
- Milke, M., & Pelt, D. V. (2014, August 2). Why private schools should receive equal funding. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, A.13.
- Monash University. (n.d.). *Grey literature: What is grey literature*. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from <https://guides.lib.monash.edu/grey-literature/whatisgreyliterature>
- Nishimura, L. (1994, January 3). Parents should pay full cost of kids' private schooling. *Calgary Herald*, A5.
- Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (2019). Changing lanes: The relationship between special education placement and students' academic futures. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 111–135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818812772>
- Porter, A. (2012). Neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism and Canadian social policy: Challenges for feminism. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 29(3), 19–31.
- Prinsen, P. C. (2000). *"That old Dutch disease": The roots of Dutch Calvinist education in Alberta*. University of Alberta.
- Riep, C. (2021). *A review of K-12 education funding in Alberta*. Public School Boards' Association of Alberta. <https://public-schools.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/A-Review-of-K-12-Education-Funding-in-Alberta.pdf>

- Sabatier, P. A., & Jenkins-Smith, H. C. (1999). The advocacy coalition framework: An assessment. In P. A. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process* (pp. 117–166). Westview Press.
- Simons, M., Olssen, M., & Peters, M. (2009). Part 1: The critical education policy orientation. In M. Simons, M. Olssen, & M. Peters (Eds.), *Re-reading education policies: A handbook studying the policy agenda of the 21st century* (pp. 1–35). Sense Publishers.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087908317\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087908317_002)
- Taylor, A. (2001). *The politics of educational reform in Alberta*. University of Toronto Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442682085>
- United Conservative Party. (2019). *UCP platform: Getting Alberta back to work*. United Conservatives; Alberta Strong and Free. <https://albertastrongandfree.ca/policy/>
- Wagner, M. (1999). Charter schools in Alberta: Change or continuity in progressive conservative education policy? *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 45(1), 52–66.
- Winton, S. (2016). The normalization of school fundraising in Ontario: An argumentative discourse analysis. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 180, 202–233.
- Wood, J. (2017, February 25). NDP resists call to end funding for private schools; “No plans to make any changes to funding model at this time,” minister’s office says. *Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.*, A.4.
- Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (2016). Introduction: Critical approaches to education policy analysis. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Critical approaches to education policy analysis: Moving beyond tradition* (pp. 1–18). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9>

## About the Authors

### **Sue Winton**

York University

[swinton@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:swinton@edu.yorku.ca)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4074-0068>

Sue Winton is a critical educational policy researcher, associate professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and Co-Director of the World Educational Research Association’s International Research Network on Families, Educators, and Communities as Educational Advocates. Her research examines policy advocacy, influences, and enactment.

### **Steve Staples**

York University

[ss Staples@yorku.ca](mailto:ss Staples@yorku.ca)

Steven Staples is a recent graduate of the Master’s in Leadership and Community Engagement Program at York University and a policy researcher and advocate with interests in public education, health care, international relations and labour. He is the former Director of Research and Education for the Ontario Federation of Labour and is founder of the Rideau Institute on International Affairs. Currently he serves as the National Director of Policy and Advocacy for the Canadian Health Coalition.

## About the Editors

### **Sarah Diem**

University of Missouri

diems@missouri.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0798-5220>

Sarah Diem is a professor of educational policy and leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. Her research focuses on the sociopolitical and geographic contexts of education, paying particular attention to how politics, leadership, and implementation of educational policies affect outcomes related to equity, opportunity, and racial diversity within public schools.

### **Jeffrey S. Brooks**

Curtin University

[jeffrey.brooks@curtin.edu.au](mailto:jeffrey.brooks@curtin.edu.au)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5742-3958>

Jeffrey S. Brooks is a professor of education and head of school of the School of Education at Curtin University. His research focuses on how leadership influences (and is influenced by) dynamics related to social justice, racism, and globalisation.

## SPECIAL ISSUE Critical Policy Analysis in Education: Exploring and Interrogating (In)Equity Across Contexts

## education policy analysis archives

Volume 30 Number 15

February 8, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341



Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and **Education Policy Analysis Archives**, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>. **EPAA** is published by the Mary Lou Fulton Institute and Graduate School of Education at Arizona State University. Articles are indexed in CIRC (Clasificación Integrada de Revistas Científicas, Spain), DIALNET (Spain), [Directory of Open Access Journals](#), EBSCO Education Research Complete, ERIC, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), QUALIS A1 (Brazil), SCImago Journal Rank, SCOPUS, Socolar (China).

About the Editorial Team: <https://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/epaa/about/editorialTeam>

Please send errata notes to Audrey Amrein-Beardsley at [audrey.beardsley@asu.edu](mailto:audrey.beardsley@asu.edu)

Join **EPAA's Facebook community** at <https://www.facebook.com/EPAAAPE> and **Twitter feed** @epaa\_aape.