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Distributed Learning enrolment in BC private schools grows rapidly—and public funding for private DL schools is boosted

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The number of students in private (independent) distributed learning (DL) schools has increased while the number in public DL schools has fallen. This has happened for several reasons:

- Students are allowed to cross-enrol—a student in a public school can get a public school Dogwood diploma using DL courses from an independent school.
- The Heritage Christian Online School, the province’s largest independent DL school, is heavily promoted. It calls itself “BCOnlineschool.ca” and has a picture of the BC flag on its website, implying that it is the official program of the province (<http://bc.onlineschool.ca/>).
- Students can take independent-school DL courses with no tuition—courses are paid for entirely by public funds. The Heritage Christian Online School limits costs by using non-union teachers, paying students to work on course development, and outsourcing graphic design work to India.
- Public funding for students in a DL independent school has changed to 62% of the funding for a DL student in a public school—public funding for face-to-face independent schools programs is at 50% of the cost of a student in a public school. This funding decision implemented for the 2012–13 school year was never announced publicly.

Private school DL programs are growing while public programs decline in enrolment

While about 11% of students in K–12 are funded at independent schools, BC students in independent-school DL programs make up 25% of the total number of BC students in DL. The private DL schools continue on a growth trend, but the number of students registered in public DL programs reached a plateau and then actually decreased last year (2011–12), according to ministry reports.

The charts and table at the end of the document show the trend in enrolments in BC public and independent schools over the past several years.

Funding of independent, mostly religious, schools

While the Heritage Christian Online School is the largest, 17 other independent schools have DL programs. These schools receive 62% of the per-student funding in the public system for DL students. In a response to an earlier version of this report (February, 2013), Greg Bitgood from the Heritage Christian Online School has described the change in the DL funding for independent schools:

This new 62% benchmark was actually a decrease for all independent DL schools except for two in the Surrey district (Traditional Learning Academy [TLA] & iLearn DL). In the past seven years, independent DL schools were funded at 50% of their local school district, like all other independent schools in the province. This created two issues: first, the funding was much higher than 50% of public DL. The provincial government acted on this by reducing the funding amounts to the lowest-funded-school amount in the province, which was at the aforementioned two schools located in Surrey. The second issue was that independent DL schools were being funded at different rates around the province, thus creating an unfair funding situation for the various DL independent schools. The realignment to the public DL funding instead of the regional district funding resulted in a significant funding cut last year, not an increase.

As with the recent grant of \$2 million for independent schools to offer adult education, no public announcements were made about these policy changes. The public would only know about the adult education funding increase because one of the BC Liberal MLAs tweeted about it.

Development and content of DL courses at the Heritage Christian Online School

Greg Bitgood, Superintendent of the Heritage Christian schools, told the audience at a DL conference held in Vancouver on February 15 and 16, 2013, about the development process and the content of the courses offered through the Heritage Christian program.

Courses are developed by engaging people with three roles. One is the contracted course developer who creates the particular course. Then it is reviewed by a peer reviewer who has expertise in the area. Then it goes to “enhancers”—people who work on presentation and graphics. The “enhancers” include students in the Heritage Christian face-to-face school, who are paid \$12 an hour, as well as animators outsourced to India.

Developers are paid on a split basis—some funds for completing the course, then a royalty based on the number of students who use the course.

Heritage Christian spends \$25,000 to \$50,000 on the development of a course. The courses are owned by a non-profit society, which sells the courses both in other provinces and internationally, including to some BC School District Business Companies. They are particularly interested in selling to Christian communities globally.

When asked about whether they would sell courses to the public DL schools, Bitgood said that most of their courses would not be suitable because Christian content is woven through the materials. They said the science courses could be used in a public school if some sections were removed—presumably units with alternatives to evolution. The Christian content is so integrated into the English and Social Studies courses that it could not be removed for use in a public school. However, students in the public schools in Grades 10 to 12 can take these courses and receive credit toward their public-school Dogwood diploma.

Teachers at the Heritage Christian Online School

Teachers at the Heritage Christian Online School have BC teaching certificates, but they are not employees of the school. They work as “independent contractors” on a course by course basis, paid on a per-student basis. By having the teachers be independent contractors, the school doesn’t have to pay EI, CPP, holiday pay or Workers’ Compensation, or any severance. They can simply not be given a new contract if the school doesn’t like their work.

The school went through various appeals to get agreement that teachers are individual contractors, not employees. To qualify for this status, the school requires that the teachers work from home, supply all their own tools, including internet access, and are not solely employed by the school. About 130 teachers have worked for the school. A number of them, Bitgood said, are “girls” who want to do some work from home while on maternity leave.

The teacher teaches the course as it has been designed. Bitgood said that the school is encouraging teachers to get certificates from Alberta so courses can be offered in both provinces.

Having teachers be contractors also ensures that they cannot unionize, and the school does not have to be limited by any union influence.

Branding and marketing the Heritage Christian school

The Heritage Christian school has branded itself as “BCOnlineschool.ca.” If you do a Google search for “BC online school”, an ad for the school comes up. It is in the top area of the Google search, where the links that get priority are actually ads, although many users probably do not realize that. Bitgood told the workshop that about half the public-school students who cross-enrolled in the Heritage Christian courses came through the Google ads. He said that students may even find their way to the Heritage Christian courses through Google ads that appear on the websites of public schools if the websites run Google ads.

Bitgood’s enthusiasm for the marketing approach was reflected in the book recommendation he made to participants—*To Sell is Human*.

Implications for public schools

The competition model that the government has created for Distributed Learning has a number of serious problems.

Private schools and public schools are in a market competition for DL students. One private school, as mentioned above, uses a branding and marketing approach that gives it an advantage by implying in its url that it is the official online school in BC.

In addition to being in competition with private DL schools, public-school DL programs are also in competition with one another. This competition limits the kind of co-operation that formerly existed when there were nine regional distance education schools. They worked as a consortium in course development and in professional development. This could work because they were not in competition—each served a distinct area of the province.

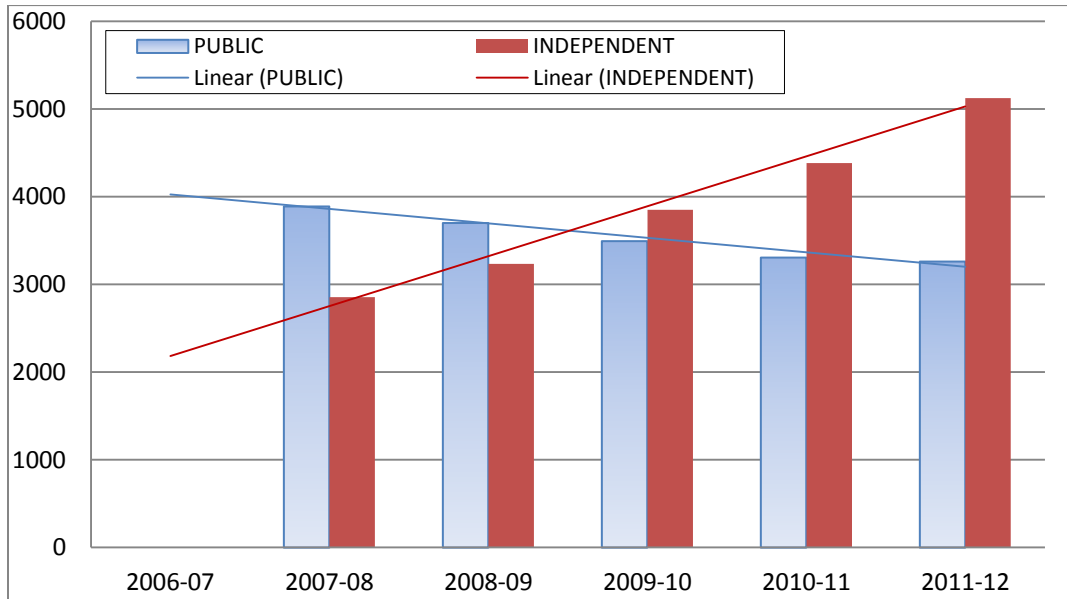
Having about 60 public DL schools and 18 private DL schools all in competition means that the province is not able to produce high-quality online programs that take advantage of the various tools that are now available to enhance online resources. Competition for students and a major focus on compliance audits means that the public-school DL courses do not take full advantage of technological tools and developments.

In addition, the very nature of the public school-certification through the Dogwood secondary-school graduation certificate is also undermined by the fact that some of the courses the student may have taken include religious content that is contrary to the secular mandate of the public schools.

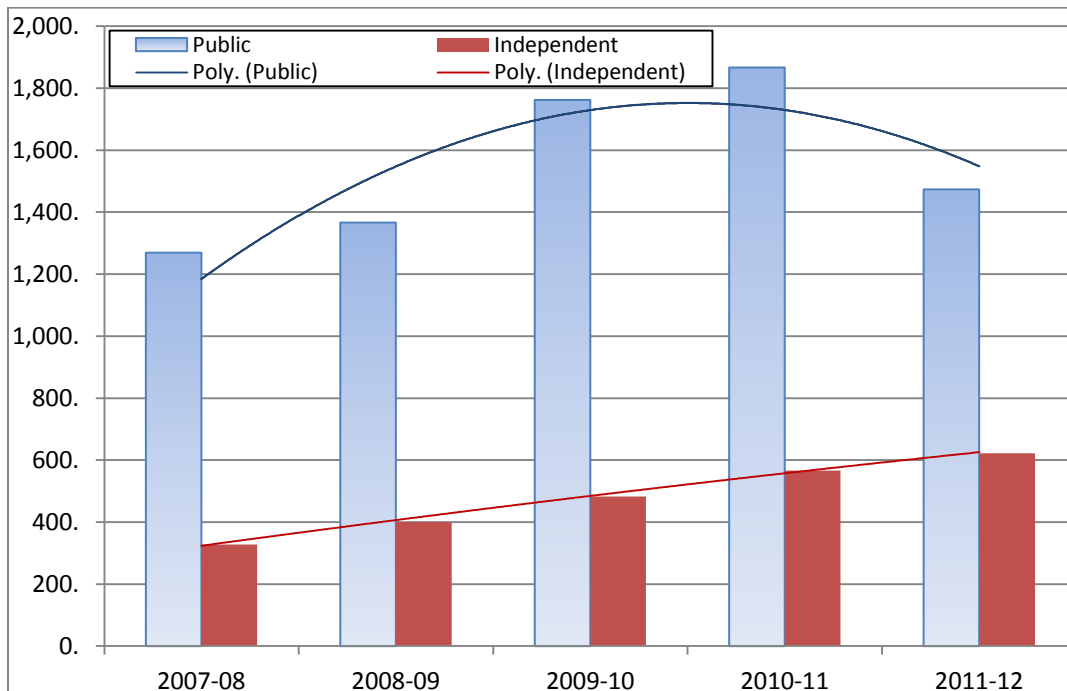
DL enrolment in public and independent schools

The following charts are from a PowerPoint presentation by Tim Winkelmanns, *BC Ministry of Education Update, February 2013* (tim.winkelmanns@gov.bc.ca).

K-9 DL FTE counts

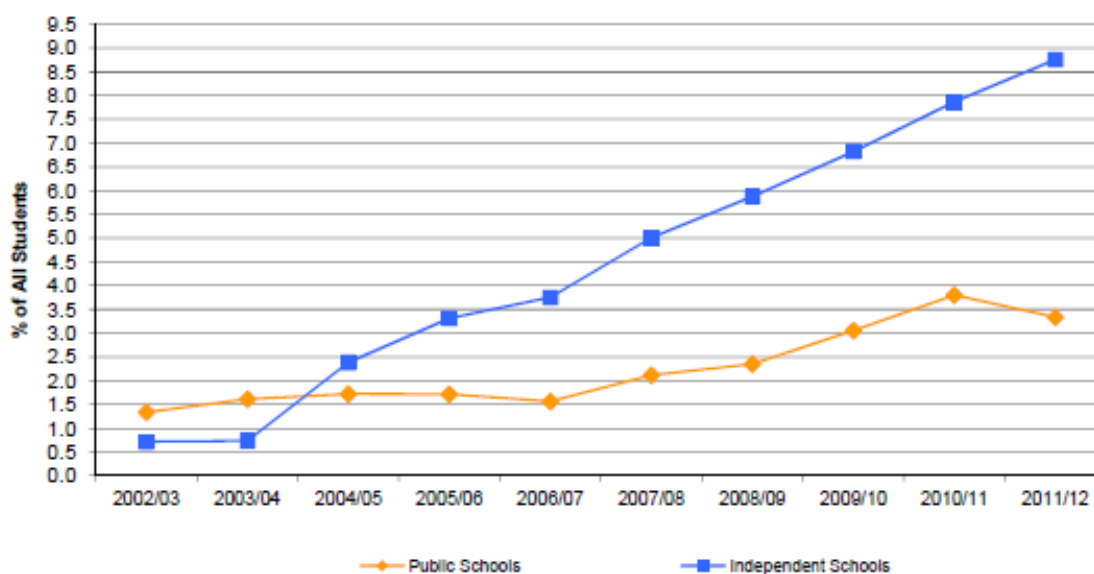


Grades 10-12 DL FTE counts



The DL enrolment data below is excerpted from *Ministry of Education 2011/12 Summary of Key Information*, p. 20, produced by Research and Data Analysis, April 2012.

Distributed Learning (DL) Students, 2002/03 - 2011/12 (Public and Independent)



School Year	Public Schools		Independent Schools		Total # of DL Students
	# of Students	% of All Students	# of Students	% of All Students	
2002/03	8,316	1.3	448	0.7	8,764
2003/04	9,911	1.6	466	0.7	10,377
2004/05	10,429	1.7	1,546	2.4	11,975
2005/06	10,281	1.7	2,190	3.3	12,471
2006/07	9,190	1.6	2,548	3.8	11,738
2007/08	12,353	2.1	3,453	5.0	15,806
2008/09	13,611	2.3	4,060	5.9	17,671
2009/10	17,740	3.1	4,739	6.8	22,479
2010/11	22,011	3.8	5,527	7.9	27,538
2011/12	18,993	3.3	6,293	8.8	25,286

Notes:

- 1) Reflects enrolment at September 30th, including only those students who are taking most of their educational program by distributed learning (the DL program is considered the school of authority).
- 2) The numbers reported exclude cross-enrolment. (In 2006/07, changes in distributed learning legislation permitted cross-enrolment in Grades 10, 11 and 12.)
- 3) As students can enrol in DL courses at any time, this will under-represent the actual number of students taking courses by distributed learning in a year. The annual total DL enrolment was 33,022 for 2006/07 and 48,491 for 2007/08. The projected enrolment for 2008/09 is 56,000.