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## Minister favours 24% boost for Alberta private schools

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EDMONTON - Alberta's private schools could reap a massive injection of extra public dollars under changes proposed by Education Minister Ron Liepert, The Journal has learned.

Liepert's proposed increase would amount to \$13 million more next year, roughly a 24-per-cent increase in the existing basic grants to tuition-driven schools -- funding that is already "generous" compared to standards in the rest of Canada, an internal government report boasts.

People in the private-school sector say the boost would be a much-needed alternative to cutting corners, steady tuition hikes or absorption by the public system.

But advocates of stronger public education warn that a big top-up for private schools would deprive public and Catholic schools of the dollars they deserve.

"This would simply be an attack on public education that we just could not support," said Frank Bruseker, president of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

The initiative was endorsed this fall by the Tories' cabinet policy committee. Under it, current instructional grants for non-profit, accredited private schools -- currently set at 60 per cent of the public boards' level -- would rise to 70 per cent, according to a copy of Liepert's committee report obtained by The Journal.

Public funding of infrastructure operations and maintenance -- currently zero -- would also go to the 70-per-cent rate. But private schools would continue to receive no money to build new facilities.

Based on figures from Alberta Education and the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges of Alberta (AISCA), it all amounts to 24 per cent more than the schools currently get for students in grades 1 to 12.

But the extra money would be contingent on acceptance of some new accountability rules, possibly including limits on how private institutions refuse access to certain students and how public their documents are.

Liepert said he hasn't asked cabinet or Treasury Board yet to approve the \$13-million boost to next year's budget. While he wouldn't discuss his proposal in an interview this week, Liepert expressed concern that some private schools have had to close over the years because of government underfunding.

"It happens on a fairly regular basis, and every time they do, they tell us it's not because they want to," he said. "It's because they have no choice. The current funding model doesn't allow them to function."

He added that he's also looking to revise funding formulas for the public and charter systems, but offered no details.

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said the proposals would pander to special interest groups, mainly religious fundamentalists.

"Private education emphasizes differences. Public education brings people together," Taft said.

"This is a dangerous trend that should be stopped in its tracks. If we begin to see a serious fragmenting of public education, then we will see a serious fragmenting of Alberta society."

Duane Plantinga, executive director of Alberta private schools' group, is already wary of the controversy this proposal could unleash.

"There's always a lot of political posturing because there's often the assumption that any increase means a drain of (public) funds, which is a misconception," he said Thursday.

Plantinga said support for private schools actually helps Alberta spend less on public education.

The Edmonton region has about 25 private schools that qualify for public dollars, including prep-style schools, special-needs facilities and several faith-based schools for Christians, Jews and Muslims.

"We'll take any funding that we can get, thank you very much," said Rainier Van Delft, principal of the 191-student Parkland Immanuel Christian School in west Edmonton, which serves the evangelical Canadian Reformed Church community.

He said Liepert's proposed boost would result in less corner-cutting on building maintenance, teacher salaries and textbooks.

The proposed funding hike alarms the Alberta School Boards Association, which said the province's public schools badly need roof repairs, new boilers and other upgrades.

"We believe that public taxpayer dollars should go to public education systems first and foremost," said Heather Welwood, the group's president and a public school trustee in northeast Alberta.

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