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## School surprise

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Education Minister Ron Liepert must think that making education policy is a bit like wrapping presents. It's all done quietly away from the kids, and then you hope they like the surprise on Christmas morning.

Liepert's proposal to increase funding for the province's private schools is the most recent surprise package, and one unlikely to generate universal jumping for joy.

Liepert is calling for a 24-per-cent increase in public support for private schools, a startling \$13-million increase. The package would raise per-pupil operating grants from 60 to 70 per cent of the public system and provide new cash for building maintenance, also to 70 per cent of the public system. With no public consultation, Liepert got a Tory policy committee to endorse the idea eight months ago, but there hadn't been a peep about it until last week.

Now that it's public, the minister should start with the most obvious question: what's his rationale? Alberta already provides one of the highest levels of support for private schools in Canada. Why should taxpayers spend more on religious-based schools and private academies for the wealthy?

Liepert says no private school has lobbied him. If that's the case, this policy proposal must be a statement of the ministers' own desire to promote private schools: a curious position for the minister of education in a province with an excellent existing publicly funded system.

The current formula was settled in 1996 after the work of a task force and lots of debate. If Liepert wants to change that formula, he should build his case the same way and be prepared for a fierce and testy discussion.

The support for public education, based on democratic principles of equal opportunity for all, runs deep in Alberta. The existing system produces students at the top of the class on international tests.

Rural and city boards are still short of schools, and many trustees and parents will be wondering why even more money should be diverted to private schools. "It's very, very concerning to all boards across the province," said veteran trustee Don Fleming.

There's plenty of room for private schools in Alberta, but there are limits on how much taxpayers should be obliged to support the special choices of small groups, especially considering the efforts of public boards such as

Edmonton's to cater to a wide range of educational interests.

Liepert's idea takes the government into a political minefield. If Premier Ed Stelmach knew it was coming, you have to wonder why he didn't tuck this unasked-for gift box back behind the tree.

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