

## **The Two Sides to Alberta's Home Education Funding**

by Léo Gaumont

Usually when we discuss two sides we are referring to a coin and we make one side the good side and the other the bad, with the head usually winning over the tail. In this case it is hard to determine exactly which side is which, so rather than use a head/tail coin, we will ascribe a side one and a side two to an issue. The coin is real money, prescribed by government for the training of children, and each side represents a perspective on how this money should be used. Side one describes this money from the government perspective while side two represents the biblical perspective.

### **First, A Bit of History**

Knowing the history of a matter is important, as it provides some insight as to how we got to the present situation. Funding for home education in Alberta was not always available, but after the enactment of the 1988 School Act, an environment was created where funding came into play. The new act decreed that home educators had to register their children, but did not stipulate that it had to be with the resident school board. This allowed parents to go school boards that were more home education friendly and allowed school boards access to students outside their jurisdiction. With home education gaining popularity in the province, boards were poised to make a lot of money simply by offering parents a small portion of what was being available for each student as incentive for registering with them. As a consequence, more resourceful boards started competing for home educated students, not so much because they had a heart for parent-directed education, but for the associated funds. The competition grew to embarrassing proportions until the government stepped in and reduced funding for home education to 25% of basic public school funding and mandated that half of this funding be made available to parents to help them with costs associated with conducting an educational program at home.

Once the limited home education funding was instituted, school boards had to invent a way to recover the losses brought about by the reduction in funding. Learning that funding for students increased with the amount of public programming delivered, they soon began offering increased levels of public programming as part of a home education. Blended programming, as the new initiative was called, created a new environment based on avarice on the part of school boards and ignorance on the part of families. This, in itself, caused much damage to the home educating community, but not as much as the slow compromising of professing Christian schools towards the delivery of more, better funded, blended programming, or the buying of parents with their own money to increase the overall population of students and corresponding income.

It is not only school boards who saw the funding of home education as potentially lucrative. Parents, also quickly learned how to play the game and started shopping for boards based on who would provide the most money or who would purchase items that were completely disconnected from the home education program. A list of these items is provided at the end of this essay as a reminder of how corrupt people and institutions can become when money becomes the focus.

Today, there are families who have determined to stay completely away from the funding available to home educators so that they are not tempted by it. They see the money as a trap that can only result in less power for parents and more for government. The proper use of home education funding is critical, if it desired that it remain in place.

## Side One: Government Funding of Education

Every province funds education but Alberta is unique in that it funds a variety of options under the banner of choice. Funding amounts are determined by the choice of programming. Public institutions, including separate, charter, alternative and online schools, get the full per student basic grant plus other moneys through a host of additional programs. Some “private” schools also get full funding but that is generally because these “private” institutions are actually part of the public system with no real discernible differences. Let’s just say that the full funding of 100% basic grant is connected to a complete program of state curriculum, using state approved resources, delivered by state certificated teachers, usually within the confines of a school. For the sake of brevity, we will not discuss the rather innovative and resourceful ways this can be “accomplished” outside of the school building. It can be safely stated that any real freedom from these parameters means a reduction in the amount of funding.

Private schools essentially do the same thing as a public school but receive 70% of the public school basic grant (actually much less if additional programs available to public schools are taken into consideration), for the privilege of being able to determine who can come to the school and to be able to put a particular “twist” or perspective to the program. This is usually accomplished through the use of alternative curriculum from kindergarten to grade 9. High school level programming usually creates a different set of issues, mostly resulting in the advancement of state programming. Here again it is safe to say that the amount of funding is directly proportional to the amount of state programming offered. It should also be noted that since private schools receive less funding, they often charge a tuition to attend.

Alberta is one of very few jurisdictions to offer funding for home education. Based on a simple formula of 25% of the basic funding received by a public school, home education programs can be anything the parents choose to do. Once again, there is increased levels of funding for increased levels of state programming, which should, but not always, follow the same expectations as in public schools. To keep things simple, we will discuss a parent-directed program, unencumbered by the variation of offerings that ultimately benefit the providers more than the students.

Before we proceed with what happens in the delivery of a home education program, let’s discuss what a school does and does not do. In spite of the fact that public schools receive 100% of the basic grant and private schools receive 70%, both usually charge additional fees for the privilege of using the services and resources of the school. Students are also generally expected to pay for field trips, music programs, materials used in computer labs, home economics and shop materials as well as any additional physical education related activities. On top of that, students are often required to engage in fundraising activities to cover the shortfalls almost always incurred over and above the grant received. Schools do not provide students or families with personal items such as clothing, backpacks, lunch kits, not to mention computers, internet, household furnishings, shop equipment, kitchen accessories, toys, games, craft supplies and a myriad of extra curricular items, too numerous to mention. Clearly, items like boats, ATV’s, private household renovations and landscaping are never paid for by a school. Public and private school students pay the school, not the other way around. It should be obvious, therefore, that moneys paid to the school belongs to the school and is to be spent by the school. Parents have no claim to any of this funding. If parents are unhappy with anything that happens within the school, they are free to complain and may even have the option to change schools, or leave altogether, but are generally disqualified from making any meaningful decisions regarding the education of their children and most certainly, not in how the school’s money is to be spent.

Now, let’s take a closer look at the basic (lowest) level of funding associated with a “traditional” home education program. Schools providing for home education receive 25% of the basic grant that goes to a

public school. This may seem like a lot, considering that they do not have to supply a physical space within a school or bussing or other programs, but this is not what schools actually end up with. When considering that the basic public school grant equals approximately 50% of total money granted the average public school, the total amount of funding provided for home education is actually 12.5% of what a public school gets, with half of this money mandated to be made available to parents towards the purchasing of educational supplies and services. This means that any school offering to provide for home education: the complicated registration procedures; endless administration; record keeping; dealing with department bureaucrats; paying teachers to supervise the programs of the home educated students; all while fulfilling the requirements of the home education regulations and keeping constantly vigilant of protecting the right to home educate; must be able to do so with 12.5% of the basic grant the local school gets which is in actuality more approximately 6.25% of funds available to educate the same child in a public school! It is amazing, therefore that parents should think the school gets enriched by their registering their students with them. Only if the school can convince the parents to follow state programming does the school get more than the 6.25%, which is likely the reason the government makes home education funding available in the first place and also, likely the ultimate motivation behind most school's registering of home educated students.

The one thing that must be made abundantly clear, is that the money made available to the parents to offset costs incurred by them in the delivery of a home education, is actually the school's money. In fact, this money is to be spent in the same fashion as if the child was in school. Funding is provided to the school and it is the school which is ultimately responsible for how it is spent in enabling the parents to educate their children at home. Parents who view this provision as some kind of reward for choosing to home educate often see this money as their money and believe they are entitled to find a way, indeed any way, to spend that money on whatever can be creatively justified as part of the home education program. However, how this money is spent is actually not a determination to be made by the parent, as much as by the school, whose money it is and for which the school must account. It should also be noted that all purchases made by the school with the school's money belongs to the school and so everything purchased by the school for use in a home education program, from pencils to computers, belongs to the school, who can (and some schools do!) claim any or all of it to be returned in due time.

It should, therefore, be obvious that anything purchased that advances anything other than the education of the child is not supported by the purpose with which this money is made available.

## **Side Two: A Biblical Perspective Of Funding**

If there is anything that can be used as a measure of where a person's heart is, just observe how they deal with money. As is often mis-stated, money is not the root of all evil, but rather the love of it is. This is best explained as money simply being the stuff that people abuse. The problem is how people deal with money, not money itself. The Bible is full of examples of the proper use and misuse of money.

As a matter of fact, Jesus addressed this issue often and in a multitude of applications. Proverbs is full of wisdom respecting money. What is the major lesson to be learned from all this? It is best summarized by Matthew 6:24. "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

It is God or money. The minute we take control of the money, it starts to control us. The only way to properly deal with money such that it will not enslave us is to disown it in the first place. Like when schools provide the money, the money is theirs, if we see God as providing the money, it is His. And when it is His, it is not ours. When it is not ours, we get to enjoy it without taking possession and when we do not possess money, it cannot possess us. When it does not possess us, we are more likely to be making decisions as stewards rather than as consumers. Freedom! Simple, but not easy.

I believe money causes more damage to mankind than alcohol, drugs and sex combined. Money is the single, most powerful method of control there is. Just take a look at what it has done to Christian and home education. There are precious few Christian schools in Alberta today, that are not following state prescribed programming. In spite of the fact that this programming is Godless, unbiblical, if not anti-Christian, it is used by Christian schools because it pays more money. Home education used to be on a united front, but today it is divided along sectarian lines which has everything to do with money. Providers of home education are providing more and more state programming because it pays more money, all the while saying they are offering a service, even if, without leadership. Parents are accepting this compromise for the same reason. Money has come to rule the Christian home education community. Mammon has become god and God is forsaken for the money!

I am of the opinion that the government knew the power money would have over the Christians when they agreed to fund private and later, home education. Tying greater amounts of money to the increased delivery of state programming was no accident and it has had its desired effect in that, as mentioned before, the majority of private schools and home based education are now using the very state programming and/or philosophies that compelled the escape from the public schools in the first place. It should also be noted that, the fact that government gave no clear directive as to how parent resources money should be spent gives me reason to believe it was meant to ensnare us.

### **How We Should View Home Education Funding**

It has been an honour to have been a part of the home education community since the late 1980s. We have met a great number of wonderful people who have clearly demonstrated their love and commitment to the Lord and it has been a pleasure to have been of service to them. However, no job is without it's negatives and there are two negatives that have plagued us all along. The first is home educators capitulating to state programming as the standard. The second and most discouraging has been how easily people can forsake all Christian virtues over money. We have seen a few people go from exemplary Christian citizens to diabolical money grubbers, at times even more than willing to sacrifice long standing relationships on the alter of money. Most providers know this and buy people with their own money, effectively creating a situation where parents "sell" their children to the highest bidder. The scene is usually the same and starts with a personal claim to the money, now referred to as "my" money! This sense of entitlement can, and often does, lead people to behave irresponsibly in a self serving fashion rather than as stewards of the school's, government's, taxpayer's and ultimately God's resources. They have taken ownership and with it comes the bondage.

So how should we view this home education money? The best way to avoid the many possible pitfalls awaiting those who would accept the money is to decline it in the first place. I didn't always feel this way, but after years of seeing the negative effect money can have on people, I have come to believe that many are ill-equipped to properly handle it. Refusing the money eliminates its potential power over us.

If the money is accepted, spend it as though it was the taxpayer money, that it is. Nothing other than what can be legitimately claimed as truly educational in nature and without the excuses that justify what you know is wrong. Considering that the money belongs to the school and that our school is uncompromising in its commitment to Christian education provides us all with an opportunity to support a ministry worth supporting when we do not accept or spend all the money. It is all God's money, so let us honour Him as good stewards of what He has entrusted to us. If we stop focussing on money it ceases being a problem, and that is meant in two ways. We are no longer enslaved by it and therefore, God can entrust us with more.

To give you a bit of an idea of what has transpired through the improper understanding for and use of home education funding, a list of inappropriate claims is provided here for your information. The following have been submitted and rejected by Education Unlimited as inappropriate. They are included here to emphasize the reason why we have had to impose reasonable guidelines on what constitutes a legitimate educational expense.

- Household furnishings, obviously unreasonable, such as a \$1000.00 oak desk, \$1800.00 shelving unit and handcrafted kitchen table that was used for the home education program!
- Sports equipment, including: skates, hockey equipment, playground equipment, trampolines, bicycles, snowmobiles, quads and boats!
- Shop tools, including: welders, plasma cutters, table saws, band saws, hand power tools of all description and professional tool sets.
- Household equipment, including: sewing machines and sergers costing thousands of dollars, bread makers, noodle makers, and food processors.
- Hobby supplies, including remote control toys, professional SLR cameras, expensive professional "musical instruments, and extensive scrapbooking and stamping supplies.

Funding provided by the government is much appreciated, but we must ask ourselves if taxpayers would generally agree with some of the questionable items being paid for by home education providers. Parents have left Education Unlimited and gone to boards willing (or promising) to purchase questionable items to entice parents into joining their organization. One must understand that talk can create interesting stories, but we have heard of ridiculous things being reimbursed as educational supplies and services, including the following:

- Personal items such as clothing, shoes, smartphones, phone plans and cosmetic supplies;
- Intensive sports programs; hunting, fishing and boating licenses; weapons
- Travel and vacation expenses; graduations supplies and professional photographs;
- Building materials or packages for sheds, skating rinks, tree houses and garages; materials for household renovations and landscaping projects; and shop and kitchen supplies and accessories;
- Outdoor furniture, swimming pools, playground equipment, trampolines, playhouses;
- Tractors, quads, other garden equipment.
- DVD, CD, video games, game consoles and devices, admission to amusement and entertainment.
- Pet purchases, food, grooming, pens, cages, terrariums, aquariums, veterinary fees, training and husbandry costs.
- Household furnishings (this is the most common reason for parents leaving us for another board.)

We believe such things are outside what the government would allow. Since some folks are very adept at finding justification for the expenditure of this funding, we have had to clearly outline what will or will not be constituted as appropriate expenses on behalf of the government, the school and parents. This is not to be restrictive, but to serve as a guideline when appropriating home education funds.

(Go to Funding Issues in My Education Unlimited after logging in to our web site to access the list). You will notice that some things which were occasionally accepted in the past will no longer be deemed appropriate as they were seriously abused. It should also be noted that any supplies purchased with parent resource funding is actually the property of the school and not of the parents, but the Olds Mountain View Christian School waives the right to reclaim purchased items.

In conclusion, we are not advocating that everybody stop accessing home education funding, as much as encouraging an appropriate, biblical approach to how this money should be spent. View this money as a blessing that it is and treat it as though it came from God, which it did.