



4.9 Alberta (AB)

Pop: 4,025,074

K–12 Schools: 2,152

K–12 Students: 616,375

of K–12 DE Programmes: 21

of K–12 DE Students: 63,238

The use of distance education at the K–12 level in Alberta began in 1923, with the introductory experiment of education by mail for 100 students by the Ministry of Education. This experiment was formalized in 1927, when correspondence education became an official part of the Ministry under the Correspondence Branch. The use of online learning at the K–12 level began with district-based initiatives around 1995–96.

Distance Programmes

At present there is a single province-wide programme, the Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC), which offers courses in print, online and blended formats. The ADLC also manages the Vista Virtual School and partners with Centre francophone d'éducation à distance, which provides distance education services to the province's Francophone students. In 2011–12, the ADLC had approximately 43,000 secondary students, 5,000 elementary/junior high and approximately 2,200 fee-paying adult learners enrol in one or more distance courses. Additionally, there are also 23 district-based programmes supported by the various public and separate school districts in the province.

Governance and Regulation

At present, the School Act grants the Minister of Education the authority to make regulations with respect to public and private distance education programmes. The Ministry has yet to exert that authority beyond outlining some specific requirements primarily related to the amount of required instructional time as a part of its their annual Guide to Education. Over the past five years, there have been several consultation initiatives with respect to distance learning in the province. The most recent of these consultations is an external initiative. In April 2012, Alberta Education contracted Schmidt and Carbol Consulting Group to conduct a province-wide review of distance education programmes and services. The review, which was initiated because of a pending renewal of the educational services agreement concerning the ADLC between the Ministry and Pembina Hills Regional Division, will

examine various service, governance and funding models for distance education. Additionally, the review will provide recommendations to ensure that distance education in the future reflects the vision set out in Inspiring Action on Education. The review is scheduled to conclude in January 2014.

Vignette: Coming to Alberta

Heritage Christian Online School is British Columbia's largest distributed learning programme when you count student numbers by full-time equivalent. Over the last ten years we have grown into a full service provider on a number of levels in BC. Our full time enrolment is well over 2,000. Every year we cross-enrol over 3,000 students from nearly every high school. We develop our own online course content and license to schools across Canada, both public and independent—so we assumed that we could easily work in other provinces, particularly our neighbor to the east. We have found in our two provinces greater differences in systems and standards than we first thought.

Alberta is as different from BC in how it approaches education as Canada is to the United States. On the surface we look the same. In terms of representative student enrolment, we are the two western provinces that have been at the top of online education for years in our country. There is the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol that is supposed to be aligning our curriculum. But, alas, we are still so very far from each other. Since we started two years ago we have been on a steep learning curve. Some of the key differences are found below.

Alberta is good at developing a relational leadership approach with its schools and divisions. BC is focused far more on regulation. We have had to look a lot harder to find out the regulations, learning outcomes and management systems in Alberta. In BC everything is spelled out on the Web. Yet, we have found that Alberta Education works more closely with its schools in their budgeting, developing three year plans and providing guidance with much less regulation.

BC has led the way because it has regulated distributed learning so that school districts and independent boards know what to do to get started and follow the rules. Alberta has moved a bit more slowly because of three factors:

- The grandfathering of unique conditions for Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC) has made it difficult for start-up programmes in various school divisions and the private schools. This is changing as those unique conditions for ADLC are being removed.
- ADLC has adopted a much more blended approach to learning than what is found in British Columbia, which has focused more on the total distance learning student.
- Perhaps a third reason that Alberta Education has developed distance learning educational policy more slowly would be the well developed and resourced traditional home schooling movement in Alberta. In British Columbia, many homeschoolers transitioned to distributed learning because that is where the resources were.

Private schools have not aggressively embraced distributed learning, but we believe it will become a new frontier in Alberta. Heritage had to have a campus in Alberta before we were allowed to start online. There is considerable concern that we are just importing a BC programme—this is of course, not the case. We are now working closely with an Alberta based non-profit that is running the campus programme. We have started Alberta Christian Online School and are working with students all over the province. Instead of a programme that has multiple regulations that can almost stifle innovation, we are working closely to shape our distributed learning programmes with Alberta Education to fit them into the organization’s expectations.