

Opinion: Let parents, educators choose what's best

BY DONNA TRIMBLE, EDMONTON JOURNAL MARCH 18, 2015 7:04

Parents, teachers and taxpayers must demand the provincial government “stop its overreach into Alberta classrooms,” writes Donna Trimble of Parents for Choice in Education.

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Welcome to Alberta public education, where minors have now been given the adult responsibility of determining the beliefs, culture and environment of taxpayer-funded schools. The government cares more about political expediency than finding common ground among mature adults. Self-appointed “experts” and government officials ignore adult electors and taxpayers, and instead relinquish heavy responsibilities over to our most vulnerable citizens, our children.

Earlier this month, Bill 10 — which puts children in charge of school clubs — was hurriedly passed the first day of the spring sitting of the legislature. Instead of teaching the important lesson of compromise, which is an essential skill if we are to maintain a healthy, welcoming, democratic population, the government has set an example for Alberta children that force and government coercion is the most expedient way to get one's way.

Schools in Alberta already contain 94 gay-straight alliances and more than double that of “diversity” and “anti-bullying” clubs that have naturally grown, within diverse schools across the public system. Through healthy community interaction between all stakeholders—students, parent, educators and school boards, respect for different world views had allowed for the development of anti-discrimination programs in all public schools — the separate included. Though the pace is slower, this natural, democratic transformation is what a healthy, free society is capable of.

Instead of standing in support of this continued community-based development, the Alberta legislature passed a polarizing, poorly written law that allows children to inform those in the highest offices of their public schools and government itself, just what the culture and environment of their schools will look like. Want a club? Any club? In any school? Just go to the principal and request it. If the principal refuses, the government has the power to appoint another adult to serve as “liaison” (not leader) to “facilitate the establishment” of whatever club some students — or even one student — may want. This legislation expressly strips parents of any right to have any say in the culture, beliefs or environment of the schools their children attend. This new law applies to all schools in Alberta: public, Catholic, private and charter.

This is not about whether one supports or opposes certain clubs. The issue is that in an attempt to avoid a politically sensitive debate, the Alberta government has opened a veritable Pandora's box of club requests around issues for which children may feel they are being discriminated—race, religious belief, colour, family status — you name it. The conflicts between any number of clubs within the same school, or contradictions between clubs and the central culture of the schools themselves, will result in unforeseen negative consequences across the system. While this may not have been the

intention, and this law offers up words like “gay/straight” as possible names — among others — the legislation does not preclude other clubs that meet vague and subjective criteria.

This is not the only arena in education where parent choice is being usurped by government mandate.

Overreach is also exemplified by Inspiring Education, set to be imposed on every Alberta school by 2016. Like its predecessor, the failed Discovery Math debacle that saw Alberta math outcomes plummet over the past decade, Inspiring Education forces teachers to use child-centric teaching methods that are based on “discovery.” This demotes teachers from masters of knowledge, who directly instruct students, to mere companions in a child’s educational journey. Core outcomes are reduced, standardized testing minimized, and reporting systems constructed so obscurely that parents have no concrete measure of the educational success (or failure) of their children. This transformation of core curriculum will result in a “one-size-fits-all” public education system that no longer offers meaningful, quality choice to parents.

It is time for parents, teachers and taxpayers to demand the government stop its overreach into Alberta classrooms. Let parents and educators, who know the children, choose what is best. Maximum choice creates real accountability, resulting in authentic, high-quality education which benefits students. To allow the heavy hand of government “innovation” to mandate teaching methods, clubs and student activities on all Alberta schools has the opposite effect: reducing options, stifling choice, diminishing competition in the education marketplace, and creating unnecessary ideological conflicts. Putting children in charge of school clubs, and mandating child-centric Inspiring Education teaching methods, are both measures which restrict parent choice. The government must restore the right of parents to be the primary decision-makers when it comes to the culture and learning environment of their children’s schools.

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