

PCE Statement-Bill 10

Parents for Choice in Education is a non-partisan, non-profit that advocates for excellence in education through maximum parental choice. Our work includes advocating for increased choice in public education through such options as Charter schools, as well as defending the choice of Alberta parents to use alternatives like Catholic and independent schools, as well as home-schooling. We oppose the overreach of the Alberta Government in areas of school funding and school curriculum, such as 'Discovery Math' and 'Inspiring Education'.

Maximum choice is not only the singular way that the rights of parents from across Alberta's diverse society will be protected, but it has the important secondary benefit of creating a healthy competition in the education marketplace-especially important in public education as a tax based institution, with guaranteed funding, that does not otherwise compete for students. Such 'choice' induced competition results in a wide variety of top quality public schools which offer a great selection of educational enrichment options for parents to choose from, to the benefit of students. To allow the heavy hand of government 'innovation' to mandate any universal activity, curriculum, or methodology on all public schools has the opposite effect; reducing options, stifling choice, diminishing competition in the education marketplace, and resulting in uniform, poor-quality, public education.

In recent months the issue of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in schools has become a controversial political topic in Alberta. To date, PCE has refrained from becoming involved in this debate because we do not oppose or support GSAs in schools. Rather, we stand simply in support of educational choice, as protected by the Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "*Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children*".

We have been watching and waiting in the hopes that the Alberta Government will define a policy around GSAs that prioritizes maximum parent choice-respecting the ultimate authority of adult stakeholders in education-educators and parents- to determine not only the school's educational direction via curriculum and teaching methodology, but also its culture and environment.

On March 10th, 2015, the first day of the spring sitting of the Alberta Legislature, the first order of business was to reintroduce Bill 10 and rapidly push it through final third reading and committee. In four short hours, with almost unanimous support, the legislation was passed-two brave Progressive Conservatives, Ian Donovan and Bruce Howe, voted against. Bill 10 enforces GSAs across all publicly funded schools including Catholic, charter, private and independent schools, at the request of one child. In consultation with the principal a title may be chosen by the child, including "Gay-Straight Alliance" and "Queer-Straight Alliance". If the principal is unable or unwilling to place an adult 'liaison' in support of this new club-that must meet only the most vague and subjective criteria-the minister will appoint an adult 'liaison'. This legislation does not preclude the requests for any number of other clubs that students may deem necessary around any number of discriminatory grounds, such as religious belief, socio economic status, race and the like. A veritable Pandora's box of clubs that may conflict with one another in one school, or conflict with the core cultural view of any particular school, will result in negative unforeseen circumstances. Finally, this bill removes the rights of parents to be informed of, or remove children from, lessons around sexual orientation.

Those that have claimed that students should be able to request GSAs in schools have won. PCE believes that students should have been invited to continue to share their ideas for improvement within their schools – and opportunities should be offered that allow students to do so both publicly and under the protection of anonymity- PCE also respects the law that states that children are under the protection of adult guardians until such a time as they reach the age of majority. Therefore,

adults in our society are responsible for the safety, security and development of Alberta children and adult stakeholders must retain the ultimate decision making role with regards to changes in schools.

PCE is made up of concerned citizens who care deeply for Alberta students and all education stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, principals, aides, etc. We understand that some people believe that GSAs must be mandated for a variety of reasons. Some parents may not be accepting of their children's sexual identity or orientation, and the argument goes that GSAs are the only way to protect these children. This perspective, while compassionate, is short-sighted. As with any problem or challenge, there are a multitude of solutions available, and all options need to be explored and considered. Further, in situations when outside intervention is deemed necessary, child protection services are in place for a child who might need to be protected from a parent.

To enforce mandated GSAs in every Alberta school at the request of minors, is a gross overreach into the lives of Alberta parents, the majority of whom care deeply for their children, and will do all they can to explore and define the best educational setting for their child's particular needs. Children do not come one-size-fits all, and education should not do so either. When a government decides for parents and all stakeholders in education, what such education will look like in schools, this is not progress towards a freer, healthier, more inclusive society, but entirely the opposite.

We have heard in recent days that the majority of Alberta citizens are in support of mandated GSAs in schools. The assumption is that this majority of public opinion was enough to allow for the universal implementation of GSAs across all public schools, by government. While it is easy to turn a blind eye to the overreach of government policy when the policy being enforced is in alignment with our deepest wishes, we are ignoring the fact that political tides turn, and this overreach may one day play against our deepest held beliefs. Then what? The winds of popular opinion and political convenience will change, and future governments are bound to attempt to initiate reforms that are not in alignment with our convictions. Now that Alberta parents have had their right to determine the culture and environment of their children's schools removed with Bill 10, a precedent has been set that such overreach is acceptable in relation to other issues. The result is a system where parents no longer have any real say in the "*kind of education that shall be given to their children*".

The only way to avoid such loss of personal freedom, of which parental rights are an important component, is to allow freedom of choice, even if we may not entirely agree with the choices that others in our society may make. If choice is returned to the hands of parents then Alberta will continue to bloom with a wide variety of public schools, some with full-fledged Gay-Straight Alliances (there were already 94 across the province) that engage in focus groups and educational forums, some with anti-bullying clubs of a variety of titles (which already were in place in some religious schools), others that offer private support groups that are not advertised to the school at large and are invitation only, when a need arises for particular students, and a wide range of others that would continue to evolve containing options that vary in scope and measure between all of the above.

This is what education looks like when it is based on a foundation of choice, respect, inclusiveness and freedom. The final choice must begin in families, with parents, and with their autonomy over the direction of their children's education. With these considerations in mind Parents for Choice in Education cannot support the mandating of any directive that would restrict parent choice, and stands in opposition to Bill 10.