

HILTON-O'BRIEN: Parents need to fight for openness in coming school board elections

"Presenting sexualized material to children without parents even knowing about it is clearly in violation of a parent's right to decide their children's education."

Alberta's UCP government has made some progress in putting parents back in the driver's seat of their children's education, but there is still a major NDP elephant in the room that needs to be addressed.

During its term in government, the NDP passed a law that made it illegal for teachers to inform parents if a child joined a gay-straight alliance (GSA). While this was ostensibly to protect vulnerable kids from being outed to potentially unaccepting or abusive parents, the bill was put forward mostly to create a "wedge issue" against the opposition UCP.

They argued *some* parents (meaning you) might abuse their kids if they came out, hence the need to outlaw telling parents.

But children who belong to sexual minorities already had protections under Alberta law. A teacher who has reason to fear a child might be abused has an obligation to report this to child welfare. Resources are available and used where needed.

For the sake of political gamesmanship, the government saw fit to trample on the fundamental rights of parents, playing on fears of distant hypotheticals. Whatever the political merits of the issue, our children's safety and education should not be a political game.

Teachers are legally forbidden to tell parents if their children are attending these groups and being exposed to their sometimes-questionable materials, often at a very young age.

Some sanctioned [GSA materials](#) contain highly sexualized – and sometimes graphic – content. The delivery of those materials can also be [worrisome](#). Some of the rhetoric borders on [creepy](#) given these groups are provided for kids as young as five years of age. But this isn't a debate about whether or not GSAs are a good thing or not. That should be up to parents to decide for themselves.

Parents for Choice in Education know [parental consent is key](#). Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education their children will receive. It's at the centre of human rights, and part of the [UN Declaration of Human Rights](#). Presenting sexualized material to children without parents even knowing about it is clearly in violation of this principle.

You may be thinking to yourself we're using the wrong tense. The NDP were defeated, and Kenney's UCP government was elected with a mandate to fix the problem. You're partly right, but the issue is far from resolved.

The NDP's legislation forced trustees to pass policies at the school board level which had to include very specific wording that enforced secrecy between school staff and parents. The UCP government changed the law and removed that requirement, but the damage was already done. The policies at the school board level have been left in place, and almost no public, Catholic or francophone school board has since removed them.

Children as young as five may still be exposed to heavily sexualized material in school through clubs and activities, and teachers are still not allowed to inform the parents. This isn't provincial law anymore; school board trustees are choosing to continue this policy.

Don't bother sending off an angry post to your MLA; they can't solve the problem. It's not the provincial government's business to bully their way into dictating local school board policies. That's what got us into this problem in the first place.

The issue is now a local one. Your local trustees have the power to remove this policy, but so far, they've chosen not to. If trustees won't change these policies, then parents need to change our local school trustees.

Part of the problem is nobody knows who the school board trustees are.

Sure, we elect them every four years. But who votes for them? The last provincial election saw over a million votes cast, but fewer than 186,000 votes were cast in school board elections. That is only about four times as many votes as there are members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). A tiny number of people are deciding the fate of all our children. With so few people voting, you can have a real, direct impact.

Parents for Choice in Education is running seminars on how to be a candidate and how to campaign. We'll also be publicly

asking which candidates support this policy of secrecy, and which ones will stand with parents for the safety of their children. We'll be speaking out at public events.

There are a few practical things that parents can do, starting with signing PCE's [Parental Choice Is Key](#) open letter. Parents can [donate](#) to help provide training seminars for candidates and campaign teams and conduct valuable interviews to equip voters with an understanding of where candidates stand on important issues.

For those parents really willing to get off the bench, they can [run for](#)

[trustee](#) on their local school board. Supports are available to those willing to step up.

The trustee elections this October 18th will be a battle. Well-funded special interest groups and government unions fueled by mandatory dues will use their resources to push an agenda that undermines school choice and parental authority. Only by standing together can we protect our children and elect trustees who will prioritize safety, not secrets.

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