

The union takeover of Alberta's schools

By John Hilton O'Brien, 16 November 2022

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) spent at least \$1.1 million on political advertising last year. That's more than any other third-party advertiser. Its current influence isn't limited to political spending — and it is in a position to expand its influence. This is a game-changer for Alberta politics.

This is in spite of the fact the ATA isn't supposed to be spending money on politics. Its terms of reference prohibit it.

However, the current leadership discovered there's a loophole: it's forbidden from endorsing candidates, but it can denounce and run attack ads.

In Alberta's current environment, an ad against the United Conservative Party (UCP) is effectively an ad for the New Democratic Party (NDP). Election oversight is lacking: there are no effective restrictions outside provincial writ periods. ATA leadership adhered to the letter of the law, while crushing its spirit.

The ATA is at the centre of a web of influence. In space provided by the ATA, the Alberta School Councils Association provides the appearance of public support to remove funding from Charter and independent schools, and has joint press conferences with the NDP at the same time that it trumpets its independence.

The ATA holds rallies with the NDP and radical groups such as "Support Our Students"(SOS,) which also demands an end to school choice.

The ATA also hosts the famous Prism Toolkit developed by ARC

Foundation's SOGI123 program, which provides legal arguments why teachers should keep secrets from parents. The network also includes Sandy Hudson, the controversial founder of Toronto's Black Lives Matter chapter, who's a keynote speaker in next spring's Edmonton Convention.

The web expands nationally, as Hudson is also keynote speaker at the National Staff Convention of the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). The CTF's web page equates support for public education with "strong unionism in all sectors." The broad network of active partnerships the ATA participates in through the CTF includes domestic and international left-wing NGOs, and most significantly, labour councils.

While nobody is saying 'collusion,' the Edmonton Labour Council did endorse candidates for eight of Edmonton's nine school board seats. Five of them won.

During the writ period, the Calgary Labour Council's group 'Calgary's Future' reported revenues of \$1.7 million dollars from Calgary unions. It's spending was defended by Press Progress, the media wing of Alberta's left. Apart from endorsements for municipal council, Calgary's Future endorsed a slate of seven public school trustee candidates — six of whom were elected. These results amount to control of both the Calgary and Edmonton Boards — a combined budget of over \$2.5 billion dollars.

The heft of the ATA could give it effective control over the Ministry of

Education. The union itself will likely spend at least \$270,000 on third-party advertising, as it did in the 2019 election. The Calgary and Edmonton boards could be used to bankroll research papers supporting union positions, create "earned media" stories through public statements against the UCP party, and even fund third-party advertising. Labour councils can also spend up to \$270,000 — and one can expect the public service unions to do so as well. Victory would bring a grateful government.

Political control benefits the ATA more than any other union.

Under the NDP government, it had the right to be equal partners in developing the curriculum, a status they resent the UCP for taking away.

The current government expanded school choice, while the ATA campaigns against it. The cynical may be forgiven for thinking the antipathy is related to the fact independent and charter school teachers don't have to be ATA members. In championing the Prism Toolkit, the ATA demonstrates its intention to transfer control from parents to teachers.

The ATA even muses teachers should no longer be agents of the parents, but as agents of the state.

Parents need to act. Independent, charter and home-education systems may cease to exist — they won't be available long if the ATA controls education.

There are two things that parents can do: the first is to demand the province act immediately to reduce the ATA's

participation in the electoral process. A teachers' union should be just that — a teacher's union — and its influence limited to representing teachers' interests, not setting education policy in Alberta. Existing third-party rules need limitations on spending, and teeth to enforce the rules — currently sorely lacking.

The second is to get involved, especially at the school board level.

That means learning about politics, helping candidates, and giving money to advocacy organizations. It also means considering public service. Parents for Choice in Education has been doing its best to lower the barriers to entry into public office. It provided training and education for several successful candidates in the last school board election, and hopes to equip people to start organizing for the next one.

If we don't support advocacy organizations like PCE and demand change, we may be handing our right to educate our children over to the union.

And we won't like the result.

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