

## Alberta's education wars

By John Hilton O'Brien, 26 December 2022

The education news of the year is confusing.

Cross-dressing teachers and school boards keeping secrets from parents. Critical Race Theory in schools. Ads and 'experts' attacking Alberta's new curriculum. The government removing power over discipline from the teachers' union. Parent organizations rising across the continent to fight school board elections. On this website, I've revealed how teachers' unions in Canada — including our own Alberta Teachers' Association — have been intervening in elections. Is this all random, or is there a common thread beyond them being merely stories related to education?

There is a common thread. We are in a sort of civil war that has been going on for some time. An elite group — The Blob — is attempting to wrest control over a significant part of the state apparatus.

"The Blob" is the name that UK Education Minister Michael Gove gave to the conglomerated interests of teachers unions, education academics, and bureaucrats. It is motivated by power, money, and prestige — not the needs of children and parents. Academics advance Critical Race Theory and gender ideology because it is good for their careers. Unions — such as the Alberta Teachers' Association — and bureaucrats buy into it because it advances theirs.

The Blob's ideal education system is one where parents are forced to send their children to a single school system they control. The culture and religion of the home would be supplanted with

a Marxist-based ideology so total as to be a religion.

The provincial government fights The Blob where it can, but it seems to be a losing battle. In what follows, I am going to briefly explain the motivations of The Blob, and recount an outline of the war over education

### **Here's an outline of the Education Wars in Alberta:**

1. Arguments for and against school choice were being made by academics in Alberta by the early 90's. Economist Bruce Wilkinson called out opponents of school choice for simply repeating claims a single system would be more efficient, even after they had been systematically debunked.

2. School choice was expanded in Alberta in the mid 90s. Charter schools were established, as well as new public-school programs (such as the Logos schools, which Wilkinson helped to found).

3. In 2010, attacks on school choice moved into the serious political realm. Former Education minister David King called for the abolition of Alberta's Catholic schools, rehashing again the old debunked economic arguments. This is the issue my organization, Parents for Choice in Education, first mobilized to fight.

4. Jim Prentice's 2012 Progressive Conservative government sanctioned the "Prism Toolkit" advanced by the ATA, and helped to fund its development. The Prism toolkit includes lessons for children as young as six, and offers legal advice for teachers to the effect they need not

inform parents at all about their activism. In addition, the government made the establishment of gay-straight alliance clubs mandatory. Premier Danielle Smith, who was part of the government that sanctioned it, expresses confusion and concern it came to "push down through the lower grades." It's not what the ATA told Prentice's government — but it was very much part of their plan. Social Conservatives stayed home, and the NDP won its first election in Alberta in 2015.

5. Rachel Notley's NDP government passed a law that required school boards to create incredibly restrictive secrecy policies regarding clubs and events such as gay-straight alliances and religious gatherings. Parents were not to be informed of their children's participation, regardless of circumstances, needs, or express wishes.

6. Notley's government then made a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the ATA, effectively giving the ATA control over the ongoing curriculum design process. It was a tremendous power move for the union: Relegating it to experts effectively precluded any chance that parents or other stakeholders might have a say.

7. Alberta's parents, in part lead by PCE, rebelled. Mass demonstrations contributed to the defeat of the Notley government in 2019.

8. Jason Kenney's government mounted an ambitious education reform program under Minister Adriana LaGrange:

a. Reforming the curriculum to emphasize contents rather than methods, starting with K-6. This required considering what knowledge graduates should be expected to have and working backwards from there. This involved rescinding the MOU that gave the ATA control over the curriculum, and returning it to the public interest

b. Getting control of bloated overall spending with an innovative funding formula. Per-student spending dropped from \$14,000 per student per year to \$12,000, on par with Ontario.

c. Ending government-mandated secrecy laws. The requirement for secrecy policies was dropped: however, only 1/3 of Alberta's school boards have removed the policies. Gay-straight alliance clubs are still mandatory.

d. The government has also removed the power of the ATA to discipline its own members, establishing an independent oversight body.

e. Kenney also increased the number of Charter schools in Alberta.

9. The union fired back. In 2021, the ATA spent more than a million dollars on attack ads, focusing on the curriculum. This resulted in massive public pressure on Kenney, which contributed to his narrow victory margin in a leadership review, prompting his resignation. It also contributed to a \$1.4M increase in NDP fundraising that year.

10. At the same time, allied unions (particularly in the public sector) spent millions of dollars to support slates of candidates in the Edmonton and Calgary councils and public school boards. They were massively successful: almost every member of the union slates were elected.

11. PCE fought back, using its limited resources to train and equip candidates on a non-partisan basis for the first time.

12. The most recent salvo in the Education War was fired by Premier Smith. Under her watch, the Education minister issued a Code of Conduct for Alberta Teachers, incidentally removing that privilege from the ATA. The new code of conduct prohibits "taking ideological advantage" of students.

**The next step in the Education wars** will be 2023's provincial election. Here's how the sides stack up:

#### **Notley's NDP:**

- Have benefitted from ATA attack ads. The attacks on the curriculum have framed the government as incompetent on education in the minds of many voters, and the UCP has not attempted any sort of response.

- In 2021, their fundraising (largely due to the ATA ads) increased by almost as much as they spent in the 2015 election.

- Allies control the Edmonton and Calgary public school boards (at least). If they wish, they can use the legitimacy of their positions to attack the government on education.

- Union allies such as the ATA are able to give as much as \$270,000 to third party political advocacy campaigns this year. They are motivated to do so, and have the money at their disposal.

- Flush with success in school board and municipal campaigns, the NDP base (The Blob) can provide fresh and experienced campaign teams.

#### **Smith's UCP:**

- If they have corporate or non-profit allies, they have seen no third-party spending over the past two years.

- Are recovering from a divisive leadership review.

- Without serious municipal involvement last year, UCP may have to rely on campaigners who have been minimally involved of late, or to import specialists from elsewhere — who have little connection to grassroots activists.

- Social conservatives may feel the government has taken no useful steps to prevent the erosion of parental authority. Kenney's government did not reverse Notley's secrecy policies. Neither he nor Smith have done anything to counter the avalanche of inappropriate sexual and gender material that has been introduced to classrooms under secrecy — indeed, she was part of the Prentice government. Socons may stay home — the same situation that helped ensure Prentice's defeat.

Objectively, it looks like the Blob is in a good position.

Smith needs to find answers to the NDP's threats on education. She also needs to shore up her credibility on the file — and that means taking policy risks that we have already outlined.

It also means finding third-party allies on education and asking her financial supporters to fund them. For the past several weeks, however, Smith seems to have mostly avoided the education issue.

We can only hope that she will change her approach. If she doesn't, the next victory in the Education Wars belongs to the Blob.

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