

Would the NDP respect free choice in education?

By John Hilton O'Brien, 3 May 2023

The selection of Cathy Hogg as a candidate for the NDP in this year's Alberta elections fills choice-in-education advocates with foreboding.

As head of the Public School Board Association of Alberta (PSBAA), Hogg [campaigned to end all other forms of education](#) other than public education. The NDP government of the day narrowly resisted calls to defund Alberta's private schools, but it may have been a close thing. Her candidacy sends a message: an NDP government will defund private schools — and perhaps more.

The pressure is intense. The Alberta Teachers' Association is currently maxing out their allowance as a third-party advertiser, to push their "Stand for Education" campaign — which explicitly calls for activists to [pressure politicians to support defunding private schools](#). The ATA can — and surely will — spend \$160,000 over the next month on its attack ads. You even see them in theatres before the movie.

There's a lot of disinformation involved in their campaign. Hogg and the ATA claimed independent schools are inefficient, and eliminating them means more money for public education.

The truth is different: a more [steely-eyed survey](#) commissioned by Parents for Choice in Education showed private schools and home education saved the province almost \$2 billion dollars over eight years. Eliminating private schools would cost us all money — and that takes money from public schools.

The claims of the self-proclaimed public school advocates have other

motives. Of course the PSBAA would want to close all schools but their own. While it will cost us all more money, it gives them more power and a fatter budget for their organization. Teachers in private schools, meanwhile, do not pay dues to the ATA: The ATA loses \$1,500 per teacher per year for every teacher not under their organizational umbrella.

If the self-interest was any more naked, it would be parody.

There is a certain element of hypocrisy to the move. The NDP trumpets a call to diversity, but many (perhaps most) of Alberta's private schools are in the hands of immigrants. Islamic schools, for instance, are found from Fort MacMurray to Lethbridge.

This is diversity. Advocates say they play an important role for immigrant communities, allowing integration while keeping the vital cultural connection between one generation and the next. Immigrant families are not wealthy — ending their funding is a blatant assault on the interests of immigrant communities.

Public school advocates may claim such schools can be accommodated within the public system. However, one need look no farther than Rockyview Schools (RVS) to see how special schools may be treated in a public system.

On April 27, RVS announced the Cochrane Christian Academy (CCA) will be moved to an elementary school building built for 320 students, formerly in the hands of the Catholic school district. The problem is CCA currently has 390 students, and its

student body goes up until Grade 8. There is no accommodation for the needs of middle school students, such as athletic facilities or shops.

Parents who attended the announcement say Superintendent Greg Lutenbach told them none of the portables that were promised during the consultation process would be made available. CCA will start by being at 120% of capacity, in a building which is unsuited for many students. It feels like the aim of RVS is to remove their middle school program. For parents who advocated keeping the school together throughout the engagement process, it's very frustrating.

Under an NDP government, this may be the fate of immigrant parents. They can expect their schools to be defunded — which means closure. If they're allowed to exist, it will be at the mercy of a secular board which is hostile to religious traditions in general. And when school boards have "engagement" sessions to decide the future of those schools, it will be even harder for parents with English as a second language to advocate for their schools.

Hopefully, those candidates who are advocates for defunding private schools will be defeated at the polls. However, the ATA's flashy movie theatre ads demonstrate the scope of power and money arrayed behind them. Powerful forces are arrayed against independent schools — and Albertans best hope is they don't win.

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