

Pride and protest, leave the kids alone

By John Hilton O'Brien, 18 June 2023

An event in Lethbridge this past week summed up a big controversy.

A tightly-controlled school board event to “convey information” about its Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) policies was swarmed by angry parents, whose concerns the board continues to ignore.

It's a microcosm of how SOGI education is received across Canada.

This past month has seen massive, peaceful protests. They have been poorly reported. But they're real.

Some schools in Ontario are reported to have had as many as a third of students staying home on “Rainbow Day” and May 17, when a local board celebrated the “International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.”

It's been happening in Alberta, too, though unreported in mainstream media — a local teacher in Edmonton was recorded lecturing her Muslim students that it was wrong for them to be absent from Pride celebrations.

The Lethbridge event was a “Division School Council” meeting to “provide information” on the division's new Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity (SOGI) guidelines on June 12.

Administration was keeping tight control — comments or questions from parents would not be allowed. By all accounts, the meeting was flooded. In-person attendance alone flowed out of the allocated room, and into hallways. Challenges were shouted in by concerned (and upset) parents, and

administration refused to respond or engage.

The conflict is simple to understand and you need no deep background or special interest in the culture wars to see it as inevitable. Activists convince administrations to pass a policy. Parents note the policy involves offering sex education to their children without parental consent, and they object.

Administrators at the school board and provincial level patronize parents and students, telling them it's “for their own good,” and to “protect their rights.” The prime minister of Canada claims that concerned parents are “far-right radicals.”

It is hard to understate how offensive the process is. The Muslim students referenced above have religious reasons for wanting to be absent from Pride events. The teacher tells them they should support Pride because Pride supports them: in effect telling them what their religion should be.

The provincial government does the same thing, forcing Catholic schools and private Christian schools to have gay-straight alliances, in spite of the fact it's contrary to their faith. In both cases, the insult is direct and absolute. The prime minister's insult is of course, beyond the pale.

Parents have good reason to fear activist teachers are showing their children inappropriate materials. The government sometimes takes steps to placate us: Alberta now has an independent disciplinary process.

But the government does not get to regulate the “resources” the ATA recommends or teachers may keep on classroom shelves. One activist/trustee hopeful in Lethbridge, promoting the June 12 event, shared a picture of “Pride” materials brought home from a GSA visit that included the graphic novel “Gender Queer,” which contains highly explicit sexual images.

In this context, the offence offered to parents is very real. You don't need to be religious to be concerned that Gender Queer presents children with an explicit, graphic depiction of a sex scene. And you don't need to be religious to be offended by the authorities' patronizing response. Having students absent themselves from Pride celebrations is a very restrained response on the part of parents.

The point of a good protest is, of course, authorities overreact in response. This is part of what is happening in Lethbridge: their very elaborate 'guidelines' which encourage teachers to push SOGI in every subject comes after years of parents expressing outrage — sometimes in the political arena. And the turnout and anger expressed at the June 12 event is a small part of parental response to those guidelines — a response which will only become angrier as the board clamps down on dissent within and without its ivory tower.

In the meantime, parents have been voting with their feet: almost a tenth of Alberta's students are now in private and charter schools, or in home education. Whether or not Lethbridge Public Schools are willing to face

reality, their board lost students — and revenue — by ignoring their concerns. Parents are going to continue showing their preference. If the Lethbridge board continues to ignore parents' concerns, they will desert in droves.

There is a lesson for Alberta's new Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides in there, too. Section 35.1 of the Education Act currently mandates Gay-Straight Alliances, from which kids are coming home with sexually

explicit books this month, as we saw above. It's happening without parental consent or notification, in most Alberta school districts.

Meanwhile, New Brunswick's government is not just doing something about it — they're indicating it's ready to fight an election on it — and expect to win. It remains to be seen whether Nicolaides will find a way to respond to parental concerns in any authentic way — or face their increasing anger.

Will he choose New Brunswick Premier Blaine Higg's way — or Trudeau's? His response may well determine Nicolaides' future.

And that of his boss, Premier Danielle Smith.

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