

# HILTON-O'BRIEN: Move the match away from the educational powder keg

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It's been a year of increasing tension about education.

We've seen the stories.

- [Protests and counterprotests](#).
- Drama on school boards.
- [Court cases](#) over pronouns.

As we review the year's education news, it's hard to escape the feeling that education is a powder keg.

There's good reason for this: education *is* a powder keg right now and all it needs is a spark.

The issue isn't simply driven by a few bad actors. Rather, it is driven by two opposing social movements, which grind together with the inevitability of glaciers. A variety of issues have provided scope for the conflict, which has largely blindsided provincial governments and observers alike.

On the one side, we have the convergence of interests among education bureaucrats, teachers' unions and contractors that former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove once dubbed "[The Blob](#)," after the movie monster. Part of the root cause is that we've overproduced elites — all of whom expect a job consistent with their perceived dignity.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough elite positions available in the education system to accommodate them all, so individual members of The Blob are locked into a [desperate battle for advancement](#).

The results are [sometimes tragic](#).

On the other hand, we have the parents of the children in The Blob's care. For generations, a variety of programs made promises of better education, creating expectations of improvement — only to frustrate them with declining scores on standardized tests.

The steady uptick in home education is a measure of the expectation that "factory education" would end and parents would be closely involved with their children's education. That's why parents have been flooding to home education in record numbers — but the expectation still exists in public-school settings.

COVID-19 accentuated this: with students home from school and working remotely, many parents got a clear view of what they were learning — or not learning. Some parents were unhappy — but more of them got the notion that it was acceptable for them to be supervising their children's education more closely.

The elephant in the room is the Education budget. In Alberta, the education ministry spends \$9.4 billion dollars — about \$320,000 per classroom. On average, Alberta teachers are paid \$80,000 — about a quarter of the total spending. In other words, most of the money is not going to improve the actual education of real students. Part of this is the result of attempts to

tame the beast, which have resulted in a complex funding manual, more than 200 pages long, that still tends to punish growing schools.

Schools and boards have to employ grant-writing consultants and legions of accountants to ensure compliance. The net result is a system in which the administration is absolute master and in which parents are at best a distraction. In light of this, the government's attempt to [expand funding for growing schools will](#) probably not answer the issue — it becomes just another grant, that schools need a grant writer to access. The whole funding model [needs an overhaul](#).

In the meantime, however, The Blob has certainly tried to bend the system to its own interests. During the summer's provincial election, Rachel Notley's New Democratic Party promised to [eliminate funding](#) for private and charter schools. (It is notable that one of her candidates was Cathy Hogg, who as president of the Public School Boards Association of Alberta had led a campaign to [defund all forms of education other than theirs](#).)

The move was certainly in the best interests of the leaders of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) as teachers in the private and charter schools do not need to tithe the \$1,575 annual dues to the ATA that are required of teachers in the Public and Catholic systems.

Curriculum provides another flashpoint.

Kenney's 2021 curriculum reform stirred vociferous opposition, which [reflected The Blob's underlying power dynamics](#).

Premier Notley had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the ATA that would have seen the ATA's management in charge of curriculum development and of the dollars allocated for that development. Premier Kenney rightly saw this as a blatant conflict of interest and refused to honour it.

In retaliation, the ATA spent over a million dollars on ads attacking the curriculum — and through it, attacking Kenney personally.

Underlying this massive conflict of interest however, is a real ideological difference.

There are [two ideas about curriculum](#).

The traditional "skills-based" curriculum developed by John Dewey in the nineteenth century is popular with The Blob, as it tends to justify the existence of hyper-expensive Faculties of Education.

However, Kenney favoured modern "content-based" reformers informed by cognitive science such as [E.D. Hirsch](#), which promise to arrest the decline of standardized test scores at the same time that they help to increase social cohesion. As Kenney's curriculum reform was not fully implemented, we can expect a replay soon.

In the meantime, The Blob — through local NDP candidates — lost no time in telling us [their real priorities for the curriculum](#). Apparently, a "proper" curriculum that "actually prepares

[students] for their future" is "one that teaches them about climate change, gender equality, poverty reduction, anti-racism and the history of residential schools."

A third flashpoint has been the result of school board elections. Simply put, public service unions across the country have been stacking school boards with their own selections. Alberta — where local election turnout is very low — is no exception. In recent local elections, a consortium of public-sector unions spent the better part of \$2 million to control the Calgary municipal election — along with the Calgary public school board race.

Parents for Choice in Education has begun [training parents](#) to participate in school board races — a move that has drawn intense and somewhat ironic — complaints from progressive activists.

All of these pale in comparison to The Blob's attempts to circumvent the legal protections of parents and children. The ATA claims teachers are no longer agents of the parents, but [agents of the state](#).

At the same time, (sexual minority community) activists insist children have a right to privacy from their parents. The implication is clear: the ATA and the radicals in The Blob intend that they should exercise the rights of children *against the parents*.

[We disapprove](#) — this is a dystopian attempt to seize power from parents. Unfortunately, the conflict does not stay at the level of theory: elements of The Blob have been implementing this viewpoint for years. It is part of the reason why parents are so angry.

Some years ago, the ATA put out a pair of books. Coming in Grades K-6 and 7-12 editions, the *Prism Toolkits* provide the ATA's helpful suggestions on how to meet the needs of children from sexual and gender minorities.

Significantly, they argue that all privacy laws support keeping secrets from parents. They observe that while you have to inform parents if sexuality or gender is the primary and stated subject of the lesson, you don't need to inform them if the stated purpose is something else.

The rest of the book is a set of lesson plans in which the stated purpose is something else, but the content is all about gender and sexuality. It makes a mockery of the current minister's assurance that the law protects parental rights, which is why parents brought a motion regarding a [Bill of Parental Rights](#) to the floor of the United Conservative Party's Annual General Meeting.

Mandatory student clubs evade even those flimsy protections.

Alberta still has a law in place (Section 35.1 of the Education Act) that requires every school to have a Gay-Straight Alliance club if a single student asks for one. No discretion is allowed — not even the suggestion that it could be named something else. That's true even if it violates the faith of the school.

It's a problem for Catholics.

It's a problem for Christian private schools.

It is also a problem for Muslims, whose imams issued a careful statement this year explaining why it was [not compatible with Islam](#).

Most importantly, Notley made every school in Alberta adopt a policy enjoining strict secrecy about membership and activities in such clubs.

While Kenney got rid of the law requiring that schools adopt such a policy, he did not ask them to remove the policy: to this day, most Alberta public and Catholic schools [still have them](#) in place.

In effect, the policy allows radicals to do an end-run on parental consent: they can draw your children into a club that teaches them about gender and sexuality, using the most graphic materials possible and nobody is allowed to tell their parents. It is hard to imagine a more radical overstep of authority.

Secrecy goes even farther than that. In January of 2023, we discovered evidence that the Alberta Children's Hospital's Metta clinic — a paediatric gender identity clinic — was accepting referrals from schools [without parents being informed](#).

The Metta clinic has the capacity to make permanent changes to its patients: along with "affirming" psychotherapy, it dispenses puberty blockers and even has surgeons on staff.

In short, at the same time parents expect a larger say in their children's education, The Blob is trying to remove what seems to be all say parents have in their children's upbringing. It's a recipe for conflict.

However, Canada was largely founded on a compromise in education. Where Germany and France had trampled — violently — on the educational rights of their minorities, the *British North America Act* secured them. Catholics in English Canada and Protestants in French Canada were guaranteed their own schools. In that tradition, there are some solutions we can implement.

In the first place, we need to secure parental authority. It isn't appropriate for agents of the state to try to exercise the rights of children against their parents — certainly not without due process. *The Prism Toolkit* is simply offside in its advice to teachers.

A Bill of Parental Rights could clarify this: it could recognize the existing rights parents have by natural law and insist that no statute can be interpreted in a way that makes it okay to pit children against their parents.

Providing a clear limit to the powers of the Blob would prevent it from acting like the movie monster and reassure parents who are concerned about its power.

In the second place, we can reform local politics.

Right now, local candidates don't have access to the sort of voters' list that is used by successful political campaigns to get their message out. This provides a massive advantage to incumbents and to power groups such as unions.

We should also prohibit unions from endorsing candidates for local office — it isn't right that they control the very positions with which they must negotiate pay raises later. It may be possible to implement this through a sort of municipal party option such as BC now has. Some conflict is inevitable — and desirable. However, we need to reinforce the rules of the game.

Finally, we need to fund educational pluralism. We also need to reduce the administrative burden on schools resulting from our complex funding manual.

Adoption of "child-centred funding" is a possible solution. Every child accepted by a school has funding pre-attached for every program they are eligible for. The school doesn't need to apply and compliance can be simplified. It removes the temptation to play games with grant applications and makes it easy to evaluate the funding available for a growing school.

This will also make it easier for our elites to find scope for their ambition by starting new and unique schools.

Letting [funding follow the student](#) is a win for both parents and elites.

These proposals are no panacea, and they will take real work.

However, if implemented, they can help us move the match a little way from the powder keg. And after a year like this, that would be no small feat.

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