

HILTON-O'BRIEN: Activists stage walkouts – families just leave

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Small walkouts by students happened at some Alberta public and Catholic schools on Wednesday, amid vigorous promotion by the media.

At least one [school board administration](#) weighed in in favour of the protests, saying they would not be preventing students from participating. If you kept your children home as part of a counterprotest, however, they will be “marked as an unexcused absence.” Parents were warned: don’t take your kids out of class.

This leads us to two important observations.

The first is that it is risky to counterprotest. The protests involve peer pressure, as in: “Why aren’t you walking out with us? Are you a dirty transphobe?” They also involve official support — which suggests that a student who disagrees may find their grades are harder to come by and options harder to access. If you want to counterprotest, be aware of the risks.

These people are demonstrating why we need the very protections that they are protesting against.

The second observation is that the real counterprotest is already on.

Parents have been pulling their kids from the government-run schools (“public” and “separate”) partly because of stunts like this for quite some time. The difference is that parents have been pulling their kids out permanently.

It’s worth exploring how big this phenomenon is.

Big is an understatement. In 2004, there were 5,485 funded students in charter schools, 18,762 in private schools and 6,650 in home education.

Today? There are 11,263 students in charter schools, 40,676 students in private schools and 21,131 in home education. That’s 73,070 students, a 136% increase, and more than 10% of the enrolment of government-run schools.

What’s more, there’s a lot more people who want to get out of the public schools than the independent systems can accommodate. Early last year, [Cardus](#) reported that there were 20,000 students on [waitlists for charter schools alone](#).

Caylan Ford, from [Calgary Classical Academy](#), puts it in perspective.

“It’s quite devastating, actually. We tripled in size between our first and second year. Our current size is 860 students across three campuses. And we have 2,600 families — not children — on our waiting list.”

If Ford’s experience is common, doubling in size was the pattern two years ago — it’s accelerated since then.

Private schools also report being at more than capacity, though their waiting lists aren’t tracked. If the charter school proportions are similar, we may have as many as 120,000 more students wanting in. And these aren’t rich schools: most private schools have average family incomes below the provincial average. They’re just willing to pay more — to get out of the government system.

If you add it together, almost 200,000 students have either left the

government-run schools, or want to do so. That’s more than a quarter of the children in our educational system. That’s . . . big, even if we discount the number of people who may be wanting to enter the private schools.

It’s no wonder the Public Schools Association of Alberta [wants these options removed](#).

To them, it isn’t coercive enough that we deprive every child leaving the government system of many thousands of dollars in education funding. They’re sort of like Cuba, using ever more coercive measures to prevent their citizens from fleeing to freedom. It may be hyperbole, but we could almost say that the only thing keeping our public systems intact is that parents literally can’t leave it fast enough.

While the radical activists may be able to arrange stunts like school walkouts, it pales in comparison to what parents have been doing.

Parents have permanently pulled more than 73,000 students from schools so far, in response to the environment woke activists have created. Tens of thousands more are poised to go.

Now that’s a heck of a counterprotest.

It’s the parents who matter here — and Premier Smith must regain their trust. If she wants to preserve Alberta’s public and Catholic schools, she has to stand against the activists — and with the parents.

John Hilton-O’Brien is the Executive Director of Parents for Choice in Education, www.parentchoice.ca