

Challenging 'Parental Rights'

A Primer for Parents, Students, Educators, and Advocates

Heather Ganshorn



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Executive Summary

Alberta's education system is at the centre of a growing political and ideological struggle, in which the concept of “parental rights” is being deployed to justify legislative changes that restrict inclusive practices, particularly around gender identity, sexuality, and public health. These developments mirror a wider North American trend that seeks to move education policy in a more socially conservative direction.

These policy changes disproportionately harm marginalized students while advancing a broader agenda of privatization. Recent legislation in Alberta reflects this shift, requiring parental opt-in for instruction on gender and sexuality, limiting local authority in public health matters, and curtailing access to gender-affirming care for transgender children and youth. These measures are framed as protecting parental authority but often override children's rights and ignore the perspectives of supportive parents, particularly those in LGBTQ+ families.

“Alberta has redefined parental choice as the right to redirect public funds toward private education providers.”

Closely linked to these trends is the expansion of privatization in Alberta's education system. Through extensive public funding of private schools, growth in charter schools, and subsidies for homeschooling, Alberta has redefined parental choice as the right to redirect public funds toward private education providers. This shift undermines the principle of education as a public good and contributes to increased inequality and diminished accountability.

Conservative advocacy groups and politically motivated organizations have exploited cultural tensions to promote privatization and reshape public education governance. As the province approaches trustee elections in the fall of 2025, public education supporters must critically evaluate candidates and policies to safeguard an inclusive, equitable, and truly public education system for all students.

1. Introduction

Alberta's education landscape can seem like a turbulent space, as fiscal and social tensions play out in legislation, politics, and in debates about policies, curriculum, and the rights of different groups.

Both the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Fraser Institute agree that public education in Alberta receives the lowest per-student funding in Canada (Alberta Teachers' Association 2025; Fraser Institute 2024), while Alberta's private schools receive some of the highest funding of any Canadian province, at 70 per cent of the per-student allocation that public schools receive (Alberta Teachers' Association 2024b).

The current provincial government has moved aggressively to expand privatization and "school choice" through encouraging the growth of charter schools and moving to become the first province in Canada to fund the construction of private schools (Johnson 2024).

At the same time, American culture war narratives around "critical race theory," "gender ideology," and "parental rights" are creating conflict within Canada and Alberta, leading to legislation that limits the delivery of sex education and targets transgender students.

This backgrounder discusses how political polarization, particularly around "parental rights," is creating stresses within our education system, potentially undermining public education, harming vulnerable students, and advancing a privatization agenda.

2. Parental Rights — An Overview

The idea of “parental rights” is often discussed in relation to children’s education, so it’s worth looking at a bit of history around this concept. Most experts agree that under the democratic rights set out in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, parents have the right to raise their children according to their own values, subject to reasonable limits. However, the law also recognizes children as a category of rights-holding individuals, and does not give parents the right to override their children’s rights (Dalwood 2024).

Conservatives generally disagree with this stance and have often expressed opposition to the concept that children may have rights independent of what their parents may decide is best for them. For example, there is a long history of right-wing opposition to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly in the USA, which remains the only country that has not ratified the Convention.

Conservative concerns often focus on the articles of the Convention stating that children have the right to freedom of thought and expression, as well as to privacy. Regarding education, conservatives have expressed concern that Article 29’s language around children’s rights to education might prevent parents from educating their children in accordance with their religious beliefs (Renteln 1996).

In an interview with the *CBC*, UBC education professor Jason Ellis noted that in Canada, “parental rights” advocacy can be traced back over a century, usually related to issues like language and religion in education. Whatever the specific issues sparking concern at a given point in time, Prof. Ellis notes that parents generally view education as being a social contract in which schools will educate children following parental wishes and values, and that things “tend to become very contentious” when some parents perceive that this unwritten contract is being violated (Benchetrit 2023). Keeping this unwritten contract in mind, it is not surprising

“In recent years, conservative governments across North America have moved to enshrine a conservative view of ‘parental rights’ in law.”

to see that parental rights are often asserted concerning how schools navigate contentious social issues such as race, gender identity, sex education, or, recently, COVID-19 public health restrictions.

In recent years, conservative governments across North America have moved to enshrine a conservative view of “parental rights” in law. The FutureEd think-tank at Georgetown University has identified dozens of parental-rights bills that have been introduced in state legislatures in 2022 and 2023. Many of these bills deal with transparency around what is taught on certain subjects, usually related to race, gender, or sexuality; some allow parents to opt their children out of certain content, and some even prohibit certain content. Others stipulate that schools may not use a name or gender pronouns for children other than the ones that they were given at birth (DiMarco 2023).

Conservative provincial governments in Canada have followed in their American counterparts’ footsteps by passing similar bills or policies. In 2023, New Brunswick’s Conservative government amended the province’s sexual orientation and gender policy to require parental consent for schools to use preferred names and pronouns that differ from a student’s registered gender and name for students under 16 (Ibrahim 2023). This amendment was later reversed by the incoming Liberal government. The Progressive Conservative government in Saskatchewan amended its Education Act in 2023 with a “Parents’ Bill of Rights” that stipulated similar changes (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan 2023).

In Alberta, Danielle Smith’s United Conservative Party government introduced similar legislation in 2024. In Alberta’s case, the government also added restrictions on school authorities’ ability to implement public health measures (a move that appeared to pander to those opposed to COVID-19 measures) and requirements that the government must approve curriculum materials related to sex education. The bill also included a change in policy from allowing parents to opt their children out of instruction related to gender and sexuality, to a requirement that all students must be opted in by their parents (Fluker and JD

“Such framing of parental rights is not inclusive of all parents and is a clear threat to the rights of vulnerable children.”

Students in the Public Interest Law Clinic 2024). At the same time, the government has passed legislation that would ban many gender-affirming health care interventions for children under 16, even when their parents are supportive of such care (Tran 2024).

Such framing of parental rights is not inclusive of all parents and is a clear threat to the rights of vulnerable children. There is emerging research indicating that in jurisdictions where measures like those described above have been implemented in schools, LGBTQ+ students are at increased risk of bullying, mental distress, and self-harm (Abreu et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2024).

An article in the *Tyee* (Mason and Hamilton 2024) reports on a focus group held with parents from LGBTQ+ families in Calgary, who expressed concern about the mental health impacts of Alberta’s legislation on their children. They were also angered by the government overriding their right to support their children’s access to gender-affirming health care.

In another incident that echoes parental-rights advocacy in the US, Alberta announced in May 2025 that the province would be formulating a new policy around school library books, supposedly in response to concerns raised by parents who contacted the education minister over “inappropriate” materials that included several graphic novels with LGBTQ+ themes.

However, an article by the Investigative Journalism Foundation indicates that these complaints actually came from Parents for Choice in Education, a group that advocates for “parental rights” and education privatization; and Action4Canada, a Christian group that embraces anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracy theories (McKay 2025). Such tactics are familiar to anyone who has been following the American parental rights group Moms for Liberty’s attacks on books, schools, and libraries (McKay 2025).

3. Privatization and School Choice Through the Lens of Parental Rights

Privatization is not simply the existence of private schools that parents can choose to pay to send their children to. Rather, it is about shifting funding and governance of public education to private control. Most often, this entails funding for private school operators. In Alberta, private schools receive 70% of the per-student funding that public schools do — on top of charging tuition and fees. Less often, privatization involves subsidies for service users. For example, some U.S. states provide families with vouchers that they can use toward private school tuition, or even to cover homeschooling expenses.

“The connection between privatization and the parental rights movement may not seem obvious at first, but the two are closely linked.”

In Alberta, privatization in K-12 education includes a diverse array of practices, from elite private schools that charge thousands of dollars in tuition, to religious or cultural schools that charge fairly modest tuition, to homeschooling, which receives a modest government subsidy. Alberta Education has [rebranded charter schools](#) as “public charter schools”, but these institutions are also private; while they are funded at the same level as public schools and are not allowed to charge tuition, they are not governed by elected public boards, nor are they required to serve all students. They may do things that public school authorities may not, such as capping enrollments, having admissions criteria, or requiring parental involvement.

The connection between privatization and the parental rights movement may not seem obvious at first, but the two are closely linked, both in North American debates over public education generally and specifically in Alberta’s historical context.

At the core of privatization or “school choice” arguments lies the proposition that parents are best positioned to decide the direction of their children’s education. This is alluded to in

the Alberta Bill of Rights, which lists among other rights, “[t]he right of parents to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children” (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2000).

This echoes language from Article 26, paragraph 3 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (United Nations 1948). Advocates of directing public funds to private education often quote this passage, while ignoring other statements in Article 26 to the effect that education should be free and compulsory, and “directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations 1948).

In Alberta, the efforts of conservative groups invoking parental rights to secure public funding for private education date back to the 1960s. These efforts were led primarily by Dutch immigrants who arrived in Alberta in the mid-20th century. These immigrants belonged to the Dutch Reformed branch of Protestantism and did not feel that either the public or Catholic school options met their needs. Accordingly, they founded private religious schools for their children, and lobbied the government to fund these schools through groups such as the Christian Action Foundation (CAF), which sought to create, as phrased in a CAF press release, “a growing understanding in [provincial MLAs] with respect to *parental rights* in education [emphasis added], different philosophies of education, and injustices with respect to the present system of Government financing of Education” (CAF 1967 as cited by Hiemstra 2005, 164).

The Dutch Reformed community was also a key player in the foundation of the Association of Private Schools and Colleges of Alberta (known today as the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta). At first, this group only lobbied the province for legal recognition of private schools, but in time, they also lobbied for public funding for them. As a result of these advocacy efforts, Alberta became the first province in Canada to offer some level of funding to private schools, beginning in 1967 (Hiemstra 2005).

Though its roots were rural and religious, Alberta's school choice movement shifted over time. As neoliberal ideas about the purpose of education gained broad acceptance beginning in the 1990s, the view of education as a private good where individual choices should be publicly funded also became increasingly common. Neoliberalism, broadly speaking, positions individual self-interest above the public good and posits that the private sector can do a better job than the public sector of delivering programs such as health care and education.

According to education scholar Sue Winton,

A central neoliberal idea is that the economic and social world should be organized according to the principles of the free market. That is, individuals, organizations, and businesses should be able to compete for success with minimal government involvement. (Winton 2022, 17)

In education, this means fostering an environment of choice and competition, in which schools compete for students and where families are “customers” directing “their” share of public funds to their chosen provider.

“The public funding of private education options is seen as a parental rights issue in and of itself.”

Offering individuals an array of choices becomes more important than ensuring equity for all, despite the fact that individuals with greater socioeconomic privilege obviously have more options and therefore benefit most from the “choices” offered by privatization.

Under such a system, parents are encouraged to think first and foremost about their own children's success, and, as Winton notes, “many [parents] embrace, if not outright demand, privatization of public education as a means of securing advantages for their children” (Winton 2022, 19). Thus, the public funding of private education options is seen as a parental rights issue in and of itself.

4. Polarization, Extremism, and the Weaponization of Parental Rights and School Choice

Politicians and thinkers on the right have long accused the public education system of indoctrinating children with liberal or leftist ideas. In a 2016 interview with Rebel Media’s Ezra Levant, then-federal MP Jason Kenney said that young adults had “come through a schooling system where many of them have been hard-wired with collectivist ideas ... with identity politics from their primary and secondary schools to universities. That’s kind of a cultural challenge for any conservative party ... and we’ve got to figure out how to break that nut” (Levant 2016).

After assuming leadership of Alberta’s United Conservative Party, Kenney continued to bring American-style culture-war rhetoric to discussions of education, claiming that his government stopped a curriculum update (which he falsely attributed to the NDP, despite it being initiated by a previous Conservative government) because it promoted “woke ideology,” “critical race theory,” and “age inappropriate sexual education.” He announced, “We are putting kids and the authority of parents back in charge of the education system” (Magusiak 2022). In a foreshadowing of later UCP policies around parental rights, Kenney’s government passed legislation to remove the prohibition on parental notification in cases where students join gay-straight alliances (Bellefontaine 2019).

Opposition to LGBTQ+ rights under the guise of “parental rights” is not new, and tends to happen in waves of backlash to the expansion of civil rights to these groups. As Corinne Mason and Leah Hamilton note in their overview of this movement’s history in North America, there is a direct line from the anti-LGBTQ+ activists who invoked “parental rights” in the 1970s, stoking fears that gay and lesbian

“In recent years, public education has been beset by moral panics and wedge issues that drive polarization.”

teachers might “recruit” students, to the modern Moms for Liberty organization, which opposes inclusive education for gender and sexual minorities (Mason and Hamilton 2023).

In recent years, public education has been beset by moral panics and wedge issues that drive polarization and lead certain voices to argue both for increased control over public education and for more access to funding to pursue education choices outside the public system. These hot-button issues are diverse and often seem unrelated — critical race theory, COVID-19 restrictions, and the current moral panic around so-called “gender ideology.” Yet, in the minds of some of the more extreme voices speaking out on these issues, they are all very much intertwined.

On the far right, conspiracy theories about pedophilia and the sexual grooming of children are widely disseminated, especially among QAnon believers, who claim that a “deep state” is enabling the widespread abuse of children (Farivar 2021). In Canada, the convoy movement, while initially galvanized by opposition to COVID-19 measures, also had undertones of these types of conspiracy theories, with some members of the original Ottawa convoy participating in the 2023 “1 Million March 4 Children” demonstrations against sexual orientation and gender identity instruction in schools (Smith 2023).

In Alberta, many of the people and groups pushing for privatization are also stoking these culture war issues, and in some cases, attempting to influence the very public education system they want to opt out of. Two groups exist in Alberta specifically to advocate for greater school choice and privatization. Both have disseminated misinformation about “gender ideology” and sex education in schools.

The oldest group is [Parents for Choice in Education](#), which has been active since at least 2012. Its executive director, John Hilton-O’Brien, is a frequent contributor to the right-wing online outlet *Western Standard*, where he advocates for private and religious education, and against public school boards and supposed “wokeness” in education. Many of his

columns focus on his vision of parental rights. In one column about gender-affirming care, Hilton-O'Brien made the clearly untruthful claim that the gender clinic at the Alberta Children's Hospital "is accepting referrals of children as young as five years old, from teachers. Parents don't need to be in the loop" (Hilton-O'Brien 2023).

Hilton-O'Brien's group appears to have influence over the current UCP government. In 2022, they launched a petition calling for the Education Act to be amended to require opt-in for sex education, instead of the opt-out system that was in place at the time (Hilton-O'Brien 2022). These changes were later enacted by the UCP government, despite objections from school boards and the Alberta Teachers' Association (Alberta Teachers' Association 2024a). While Parents for Choice in Education advocates for private education, they also seek to influence public education by electing pro-school-choice trustees. In preparation for the 2025 municipal elections, the group has [developed training workshops](#) for trustee candidates. As noted in section 2 of this report, this group also claimed credit for influencing the education minister to investigate school libraries for "inappropriate" materials.

A newer parent group, the [Alberta Parents' Union](#), was founded in 2022. On its website, the group claims to advocate "for the best possible education for all Alberta students — whether that be public, separate, francophone, alternative, charter, independent, or home education." However, their many online petitions include one advocating for school vouchers, and another scare-mongering about "what kids are learning" that suggests schools are indoctrinating students with critical race theory, LGBTQ+ content, climate change, and "an ideological spin on the events at the United States Capitol Building on January 6th, 2021" (Alberta Parents' Union *n.d.*).

In 2023, the Alberta Parents' Union's executive director, Jeff Park, gave an interview to Rebel News in which he relayed an anecdote about a 13-year-old boy who he claimed had been removed from school without his parents' knowledge, taken to a conference at a hotel, and "given a 50-page flip book about how to have sex and 153 condoms" (Dhaliwal

2023). The original source for this story appears to be an unsubstantiated claim by a lawyer with the right-wing organization Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (Corbella 2018).

Another key group in Alberta that has been active in the debates around parental rights and K-12 education is Take Back Alberta. Founded by David Parker, a former Conservative staffer, Take Back Alberta is widely credited with harnessing popular anger around COVID-19 mandates to take over the United Conservative Party board, forcing Jason Kenney out and replacing him with Danielle Smith. Parker, who grew up in rural Alberta and was homeschooled, has often expressed hostility to public education. He has advocated for his group's supporters to take over public school boards, citing a belief that public schools operate under "the tyranny of the rainbow guard and the green guard" (Appel 2024).

Parker has also been a speaker at anti-LGBTQ+ rallies and has posted inflammatory content about this community, as well as about schools "indoctrinating" children on the X platform (Magusiak 2024). He has been somewhat less vocal about these issues in recent months, likely due to the need to focus on a large fine levied against his group by Elections Alberta for a range of fundraising violations. However, the *Breakdown* podcast shared a video on X in March 2025 of Parker addressing an online meeting, where he reiterated his commitment to recruit school board candidates aligned with his views of parental rights (@TheBreakdownAB 2025).

5. Looking Ahead

What does all this mean for education politics in Alberta in the near future?

Public education advocates should be watching the fall 2025 municipal elections closely. There will likely be candidates running on platforms that include “parental rights” and “school choice.” It’s also quite possible that quasi-slates of candidates will emerge, as was the case with the “Take Back the CBE” group in the 2021 elections for the Calgary Board of Education. Trustee elections are attractive targets for groups with extreme beliefs, in part because they have low voter numbers and are often won by small margins. Some positions may even be filled by acclamation.

In light of the increased targeting of school board races by groups seeking to push for privatization and limit inclusive education, public education advocates may consider the following practical ways to engage with the upcoming trustee elections in an informed and constructive manner:

- Research who is running in your ward and look beyond slogans — seek out candidate statements, past affiliations, and endorsements.
- Encourage those in your circle to consider getting informed and voting for trustees even if they don’t have children in the school system.
- Consider attending trustee forums, debates, or community meetings. Municipal and school board websites are good places to find information about upcoming events.
- Watch for trustee candidates using coded language such as “fund students not systems” or who seem lacklustre in their commitment to public education.
- Ask your trustee candidates where they stand on privatization, increased funding for non-public options, and the question of school vouchers.

- If candidates invoke parental rights, ask them what they mean by that, and consider whether the responses truly embrace the rights of all parents, or only certain groups. The concern of trustees should be for the well-being of all students, and particularly vulnerable groups, within the education system, rather than conceptions of “parental rights” that do not represent all parents or serve the interests of all students.
- Share information through community networks, social media, and local groups to increase awareness of what’s at stake in the election.
- If you have the capacity, volunteer for a candidate who supports inclusive, accountable public education—or consider running yourself in the future.

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