

CALGARY SINCE 1883 HERALD

SATURDAY, APRIL 26, 2014

Protect diversity in Alberta's education system

The greatest strength of Alberta's education system is its commitment to authentic diversity and maximum choice for parents. That strength is now under vociferous attack.

Christian schools in Alberta are facing criticism over their statements of faith, their codes of conduct, and their moral expectations of staff and students, particularly as it relates to sexual behaviour. Some are demanding that the Alberta government stop funding to Christian schools unless these schools repudiate their own mission, vision, beliefs and principles.

Every school in Alberta, whether public, Catholic, private, or charter, has an underlying belief system. Every school imparts knowledge from a particular set of assumptions or worldview. Adherence to specific beliefs is not limited to Christian schools. Public schools adhere to assumptions and values as much as religious schools do, and have their own teachings about what they consider to be "sin."

Those who demand an end to government funding for religious schools see their own beliefs as neutral and objective (and therefore worthy of public funding), and see others' beliefs as somehow biased or prejudiced (and therefore not worthy of public funding).

This intolerance is especially pronounced when it comes to beliefs about sexuality and sexual behaviour. Self-styled progressives, who divorce sex from marriage and accept all consensual sexual behaviour as legitimate, adhere to one particular opinion or belief. Traditionalists, who see sex as sacred and is inextricably

bound to the marriage of one man and one woman, adhere to a different opinion or belief.

In a free society, and in the context of government funding for education, neither progressives nor traditionalists have the right to impose their views about sex on others. Government funding comes from all taxpayers, who adhere to a broad range of differing worldviews. Suggesting that tax dollars should flow only to schools that espouse a post-modern ideology about sexual behaviour is intolerant.

Tolerance does not consist of using "diversity" and "respect" as slogans to attack parental choice in education, or to censor disagreements about sex. Rather, tolerance means accepting the authentic diversity expressed by a wide range of different schools. Parents are not compelled to send their children to a school that has a belief system or code of conduct with which parents disagree. This freedom of choice, to be meaningful, must extend to more than just one worldview.

The charter describes freedom of religion and conscience as a "fundamental freedom" because it lies at the heart of Canada's free and democratic society. The Supreme Court of Canada has held that the charter requires government to accommodate religious belief. In harmony with the charter, the Alberta government funds alternative programs in order to nurture diversity, and support maximum choice for parents and students.

As the Alternative Programs Handbook puts it: Alberta's learning

system respects the right and responsibility of parents to make decisions that best suit the needs of their children. By supporting programs of choice, the province strengthens the public school system and promotes the availability of diverse educational experiences for Alberta students."

Parental choice in education is rendered meaningless if religious schools cannot define and live out their own mission and purpose. Catholics, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Evangelical Christians are subject to the same taxes as those who reject any or all of these religions. All parents enjoy the same right to send their children to a school that teaches a worldview consistent with what parents teach at home.

Diversity in education should not extend to the teaching of racism, or the violent destruction of our democracy by terrorism. But nobody is arguing that parental rights to choice in education should include these things.

Rather, the intolerant argument of self-styled progressives is that religious schools are not entitled to transmit the parents' beliefs about sexuality and sexual behaviour. This argument is based on a type of arrogance: progressives perceive their own opinions about sex to be absolute truth, which should be imposed on fellow citizens, taxpayers and parents who disagree.

If religious schools in Alberta cannot develop, express, maintain and live out their own beliefs, without being disqualified from government funding, then Alberta's education system will lose the authentic diversity which is its greatest strength.

Calgary lawyer John Carpay is president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (JCCF.ca)