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Parental rights under attack

Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. This fundamental principle of our free society is enshrined in *Alberta's Education Act* and also the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Albertans who cherish freedom and tolerance understand the importance of diversity within the education system. Our freedom is threatened when politicians and bureaucrats try to use education funding as a tool to impose their own beliefs on every child.

Unfortunately, the diversity of Alberta's education system is under continual attack by those who want to impose a "one size fits all" model on every school. The latest attacks are directed at Christian schools accused of (you guessed it!) "discrimination" for wanting to honour their own mission, values, and principles.

There is no evidence that any Christian school in Alberta has condoned bullying or other mistreatment of any student or staff member.

Yet Christian schools in Alberta are facing hostility and criticism from MLAs Kent Hehr and Danielle Smith over their moral expectations of staff and students, particularly those pertaining to sexual behaviour.

Alberta's education system is the best in Canada because it provides authentic diversity, and genuine choice for parents. Diversity means that government funding goes to different kinds of schools: public, Catholic, private, charter, and homeschooling.

Every school has an underlying belief system, and imparts knowledge from a particular set of assumptions or worldview. Public schools promote values as much as religious schools do, and have their own teachings about what they consider to be "sin". A diversity of belief systems, expressed by different schools, ensures that Alberta parents have real choice in the kinds of education available to their children.

Rather than celebrating diversity, politicians like Hehr and Smith are attacking parental choice in education by calling for an end to government funding of Christian schools, unless these schools repudiate their own codes of conduct for students and teachers. Politicians from all four parties are claiming that religious beliefs about sexual behaviour are "discrimination", so the schools must therefore conform their codes of conduct to popular and fashionable notions about sexuality.

This creates a harmful and artificial distinction between the school's curriculum and the character of its teachers. This distinction was rejected by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Caldwell v. Stuart*. The Court ruled that government-funded religious schools have a legal right to demand that teachers comply with the school's standards of behaviour outside of the classroom. The off-duty conduct of teachers impacts upon the educational environment, because school teachers assume a position of influence and trust over their students. By their conduct outside the classroom, teachers are a "medium" of the the values, beliefs and knowledge sought to be transmitted by the school system.

The Court's ruling boils down to common sense and integrity, because you cannot divorce beliefs from conduct. Consider how ridiculous it would be for a Catholic school teacher to serve as president of the local atheist association, and publicly repudiate what he teaches his children inside the classroom.

It's a sad day for freedom when all four parties in Alberta's Legislature argue that religious schools cannot insist on integrity by staying true to their own mission, principles, and codes of conduct.

Worse yet, some politicians are trying to kill debate on this issue entirely, by falsely claiming that the *Charter* and human rights legislation actually require religious schools to repudiate their own beliefs and codes of conduct. These folks obviously have not read the Supreme Court's *Caldwell* decision. Their claim is false because the *Charter* requires governments to accommodate religious belief in public life, including school settings. Alberta's laws expressly support government funding for alternative programs that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, or subject-matter.

If Albertans don't speak up for parents' freedom, politicians will take us towards a "one size fits all" education system, step by gradual step, collecting taxes and returning the money to parents for education on the condition that parents raise their children in a way chosen by the state.

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