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As a prominent and vocal Trustee on the Edmonton Catholic School Board, Patricia has demonstrated an incredible aptitude for advocacy. Prior to serving as an elected trustee, Patricia worked as a caseworker in the Edmonton Centre Constituency Office. As a member of the NDP for several years, Patricia was also heavily involved in the 2015 provincial election and served on the constituency association for Edmonton-Glenora. In addition to a robust political career, Patricia also has a Masters of Divinity and a Bachelor of Science, demonstrating a well-rounded understanding of issues that will serve our clients well.



CAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS OFFER CATHOLIC PROGRAMMING?

By Patricia Grell

Trustee Michael Janz recently posed this very question to the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB). Minister of Education David Eggen replied that the EPSB did not need his approval to offer alternative programming. This surprising answer seems to conflict with the School Act, RSA 2000 c S-3, s. 21, which very clearly states that alternative programming that “emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter” using “a particular teaching philosophy” specifically does not include “a program of religious education offered by a separate school board.”

Yet, even in the face of this legislation, some of Alberta's public school divisions have chosen to offer Catholic programming – and it's been working. Nisku's Black Gold School Division has offered optional Roman Catholic catechism classes at all public schools in Beaumont since the town's inception in 1895. They continue to offer these programs today, even though separate Catholic schools have been in place for five years. If the Black Gold School Division can offer an alternative Catholic catechism program in its public schools, why can't Edmonton Public?

Beaumont is just one of many successful public-Catholic collaborations across the province. Sylvan Lake and Innisfail also enjoy joint public-Catholic school facilities. The Rocky View Public and Fort Vermillion Public School Boards also administer Catholic schools. Two Francophone school boards in Alberta include both public and Catholic trustees. And currently, the Edmonton Catholic School Board is working directly with the EPSB to develop a joint Edmonton Schools Transportation Authority (ESTA) that will share yellow bus services between Catholic and public school divisions. According to a 2014 study, these plans will save tax payers \$2.5 million per year and shorten student ride times by 10%. Besides transportation, the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (ACSTA) has proven open to sharing software licensing, bulk purchasing, and facility-sharing arrangements, though the latter requires the express written support of both ACSTA and the local bishop.

Yet in the shadow of every public-Catholic success story, there is a community divided by competition. Where public and Catholic school districts vie for a limited and decreasing number of students, both districts lose out. Often, the desire for more choice in school programming has actually led to less choice, particularly in rural areas. In the Fall of 2016, the Lakeland Catholic School District opened a Catholic school in the former Dr. Swift Public Middle School. This greatly alarmed the Northern Lights Public School Division, whose Francophone Board had opened a public school in Lac La Biche only 3-4 years prior, and had long harbored plans to open a new K-9 public school in Lakeland. The addition of the new Catholic school reduced the number of students available to fill the planned public school and made that project unsustainable.

The ongoing struggle for students continues to widen the rift between competing school districts, causing tensions within their surrounding communities. Such was the case in the village of Theodore, Saskatchewan when low enrolments forced its public school division to close the village's only school. Plans were put in place to bus the village's children to the next closest public school in a nearby town. Local parents wanted to keep a school in their community, so they successfully called upon local Catholics to assert their constitutionally-protected right to publicly-funded Catholic Education. Their plea was successful, and a new Catholic school opened in 2003. The public school division then sued the Catholic school division and the Government of Saskatchewan, arguing that Catholic schools should not be allowed to accept non-Catholic students, and that the Government of Saskatchewan should not be funding non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools. The case has been before the courts since 2005, and the final ruling (due sometime in the next few months) will have serious implications not only for Saskatchewan, but for Alberta as well. Both provinces have historically protected Catholic minority faith rights dating back to Confederation, and Catholic schools in both provinces rely heavily on funding from non-Catholic students in order to be viable and sustainable.

In the end result, cooperation between public and Catholic school districts has historically built bridges and cut costs, while competition between districts has fragmented programs and may even threaten the overall viability of Catholic schools in Saskatchewan and Alberta, the only provinces that still offer 100% taxpayer funded Catholic education. The issue at hand isn't whether Alberta's public schools can offer Catholic programming, since they have been doing so for over 100 years and show no signs of slowing down any time soon. No, the real question for Alberta's public and Catholic school districts is whether cooperation or competition is ultimately the best choice for our students and their communities.