

# Parents are already involved in education

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IN Manitoba, back-to-school considerations for many school boards have increasingly become marked by a collision between the rights of the individual and our collective values as a society.

Issues surrounding race, culture, religion, historical memory, identity and personal characteristics (including politics and sexual orientation) therefore can and do enter the conversation about what schools ought to be and what they should or shouldn't do.

When answering these questions, the too often regrettable result is a concerning increase in propaganda, disunity, and discord. For the sake of all children, we believe that our school divisions must remain free of such social divisions. They must remain safe and caring places for all.

Since spring of this year, matters relating to how our schools create such spaces according to sexual and gender diversity and LGBTQ+ communities have come to the forefront. So too have matters regarding religious instruction in schools. Both have become subject to misinformation campaigns, some supported by well-organized movements espousing the "fight for parental rights."

We want to assure every parent, guardian and community member that we respect you. The Manitoba Human Rights Code, Safe and Inclusive Schools legislation and Responding to Religious Diversity guidance, as developed by Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, guides our practice. Each promotes schools as safe, respectful, and equitable places for all students.

How do school boards best support human diversity among our students?

By having strong and relevant policies, protocols and practices that ensure safe and respectful working and learning environments. Very early, Manitoba protected rights to instruction in schools. Evolving over time, parents now choose if their child participates and if they do not — there is no room for confusion.

In 2004, with the passing of the Safe Schools Charter, the need for schools to be safer and more inclusive from the perspective of diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity was equally affirmed.

In 2013, amendments to The Public Schools Act furthered the requirement for school boards to implement a 'respect for human diversity policy', underscoring the value of statements and indices of respect and acceptance, ensuring students feel they belong in their school community, and providing accommodation for students who wanted to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance. By supporting the varied diversities of all students, it wasn't about promoting one culture or set of values over another. It was about teaching kids what is needed for a society affirming of everyone's identity. And here again, it is the parent who chooses. No confusion.

Those responsible for education have been very prudent not to make the topics of religion, sexual orientation and gender "either" or "neither" — for the sake of all students.

In 2016, this is why Manitoba Education supported schools and school boards in promoting student dignity, respect, and equity with "Responding to Religious Diversity in Manitoba Schools", followed in 2017 with "Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba Schools." Both guides specifically reference human rights and freedoms, the role of parents and families, considerations when developing policy and practice, and increasing support capacity within school communities.

This year will see local school boards continue these commitments to safe and inclusive schools for everyone. Courageous conversations among boards and their communities will occur at times, places and paces that are appropriate for everyone. Student, parent and community voice will inform this process. No two boards will have the same approach because no two communities are the same.

Local voice, decision making and conversation between trustees, who represent community at the board table — and their electors — are key to gaining accurate understandings related to curriculum content, under the long-established right of parents to participate and have a role in their children's education.

In many communities, this may mean contentious conversations.

Yet contentions are healthy for democracy, when brought forward through informed dialogue rather than disinformed debate. Seeking first to understand rather than be understood and respecting our values — both of the individual and the collective — must guide this important relationship.

As already demonstrated in several communities this year, when local constituents seek to engage in this complex dialogue about what it means to offer safe and inclusive learning environments for all, the locally elected school board will seek to lead the way with constructive communication.

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