

November 13, 2017

ACSTA's Review of Bill 24

Edmonton AB – The Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) believes that the overall goal of Bill 24 in protecting vulnerable students is commendable and we are in full support of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. However, after careful consultation, we believe there are two areas of Bill 24 which could have unintended consequences and require clarification.

1) Erosion of Local School Board Autonomy

One of our main concerns with Bill 24 is the diminishment of the role of school governing bodies, particularly the elected school boards and school superintendents. We feel that Bill 24 puts undo pressure on the school principal to be, in effect, the sole decision maker who is only accountable to the Minister of Education bypassing long entrenched best practices and chains of authority as outlined in the *School Act*. The unintended consequence of eroding local board autonomy is that it could give the Education Minister the power to change or rewrite any school board policy without consultation with that Board or the local community which is being served. Should Section 16.1 be amended to force school principals to *(a) immediately grant permission for the establishment of the student organization or the holding of the activity at the school*, it is felt that the unintended consequences in this wording erodes, degrades and removes the school principal's ability to perform their role in an effective and responsible manner at the school and community level. It would also make him or her the sole decision maker in this situation, bypassing both superintendents and trustees. While Inclusion Clubs are welcome in all Catholic schools, the requirement to immediately approve of any activity without the opportunity for a principal to evaluate the broader context in which the activity is held and its potential impact on a school culture and community unduly transfers decision making to students. We seek clarification on this and urge the government to respect the vital role played in local decision-making by boards and superintendents.

2) Parent - School Relationship

Given that research indicates the more involved and active parents are in the education of their children the greater the chance for success and that ACSTA has repeatedly advocated that parents/guardians are the most important educators of their children, a blanket refusal to communicate information to parents without some assessment of the child's best interest in a particular circumstance should be avoided. Further, we have been advised by Alberta Education that the FOIPP legislation will supersede the Bill 24 amendments and that if a child is at risk of imminent harm or danger for whatever reason, a parent will be notified in accordance with the teacher's professional and legal obligations. However, it is not clear what the threshold will be for releasing the information and whether certain information can still be withheld from a parent. We are asking for clarification and assurance on this matter.

ACSTA therefore proposes that changes to Bill 24 are needed to clarify the above concerns. We will continue to work with the Government of Alberta and all of our educational stakeholders to ensure this Bill, and all education policy, respects the autonomy of local school boards and our denominational rights while achieving our mutually shared goals of protecting all students entrusted to our care.

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