

# Alberta education minister assures trustees publicly funded Catholic education is 'not negotiable'

Education Minister David Eggen strongly defended Alberta's Catholic school system, even amid attacks against it, saying the provincial NDP has no plans to change that if they are re-elected in an election expected this spring.

"I'd like to state very clearly that we support Catholic education in the province and we know that students are receiving a very high quality education from your schools," Eggen told delegates to the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association annual general meeting Nov. 17.

"That's not negotiable. You can take that to the bank. We're not going to change our commitment to public Catholic education. I believe that diversity of choice is one of the strengths we have in the province of Alberta."

That's welcome news, said Serena Shaw, president of the ACSTA.



ACSTA president Serena Shaw

"We are very happy that the minister continues to support publicly funded Catholic education in Alberta as a clear choice," said Shaw. "Currently we have a good working relationship that enables us to speak freely with the minister as well as his staff. We are able to connect with them easily, at this time there are no concerns."

Eggen's comments come amid ongoing calls to change Alberta's school system from critics within and outside the system.

Last month, the Public School Board Association of Alberta launched its Together For Students campaign advocating for a single education system, saying it would lead to cost savings, more resources in the classroom and greater choice.

The Together for Students campaign will include future town hall meetings to discuss the idea. However, the campaign would also mean the dissolution of the publicly funded Catholic school system. When asked about the campaign, Eggen didn't disavow it.

"I don't think I would characterize it quite in that way. People have a democratic right to debate and talk about things," he said in an interview after he spoke to ACSTA delegates.

While that's true, Shaw said the ACSTA believes "Albertans need to have clear choice in education and that publicly funded Catholic education needs to be one of the choices as the parents of 180,000 children have already done."

Eggen said he does support the continued efforts by Catholic and public school boards to share facilities and services in the province.

"It's important to provide security from a government. We can always look for efficiencies, ways by which we can share facilities and other parts of our education system," Eggen said. "You can have both of those things, I believe, and still maintain the integrity of a faith-based education system."

In earlier interviews, Shaw said Catholic schools have agreements with their public counterparts – and other organizations in the province on purchasing, school financing, and they're open to more.

Eggen added the province will protect the constitutional rights of Catholics to a separate denominational school system in Alberta, even as other provinces are scrapping them.

Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan are the only provinces with publicly funded Catholic schools.

"As we look across the country, in other jurisdictions, where there has been attacks on faith-based schools, we need to learn from those things every step of the way," Eggen told ACSTA delegates.

"Those same sentiments do exist inside this province as well. I said it very clearly and I'll say it again that you have an ally, that we fight and push back against these things."

Earlier this month, Catholic education supporters in Alberta launched GrACE –

Grateful Advocates for Catholic Education, a grassroots alliance to tell the story of Catholic education in Alberta.

GrACE's membership includes representatives of all 16 Catholic school districts in Alberta. Its key stakeholders are the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta and Alberta's bishops.

In his speech to the ACSTA delegates, Eggen praised Alberta's Catholic schools for their academic excellence, as well as their compliance with the government's law to support gay-straight alliances.

"We bit off a lot with this and it's not been easy over the last three years," Eggen acknowledged.

"But I just want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. All of those boards, all of those schools built their own policies. They didn't just do it to comply with the law. They did it to make sure they were looking after the kids in their jurisdictions."

Most schools, including all Catholic, public, francophone and charter schools in the province, have complied with the law by writing policies supporting students who wish to create or join GSAs.

Last week, Eggen identified 28 private schools in Alberta, serving about 4,000 students, that have not complied. Citing religious freedom, the schools risk losing millions of dollars in funding.

Shaw said Alberta Catholic schools have struck the right balance.

"We feel we have been able to comply with the legislation and maintain our ability to permeate fully our Catholic values and teachings," she said. "We continue to operate our schools while seeing all things through our Catholic world view. We have not compromised."

Eggen also cited the achievements of the NDP government including increased funding for a provincewide school nutrition program, hiring 4,000 new teachers in Alberta over the last three years, a draft overhaul of the kindergarten-to-Grade 12 school curriculum and initiating the largest school build program in the province. This fall, 37 school projects were completed.