

Apathy the greatest threat to Catholic education, parents and educators warned

The future of Catholic education in Alberta hinges not any external threat, but on the strength of the faith of parents, teachers, students and administrators, experts told a public forum on the future of the school system.

“There have been Catholic divisions throughout the country that we’ve lost largely because of apathetic Catholics,” said Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith. “There were parents that could no longer see the difference between a Catholic and public school, Catholics who couldn’t see the value in the faith formation it provided.

“We have to encourage everyone to be resolute because so much is at stake,” Archbishop Smith said. “We can never grow apathetic where we’re delivering authentic Catholic formation to our children. That’s first and foremost where we cannot afford to be complacent.”

Complacency had not set in for the more than 80 parents, teachers and administrators who gathered for a Nov. 4 public forum on the future of publicly funded Catholic education. The event was held at [Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish](#) in Sherwood Park.

The forum was held a day after Catholic Education Sunday, an annual opportunity to celebrate Catholic schools in the province.

Currently, Alberta is one of only three provinces that have publicly funded Catholic schools.



Connie Asp

“I think whenever we have an opportunity to talk about Catholic education and say how important it is for us, we really need to be out there,” said Connie Asp, a Sherwood Park parent whose children attended Catholic schools. Her two granddaughters attend Catholic schools in Grande Prairie.

“I feel a little more relaxed with the new government, but there are still issues we have to worry about. I don’t think our public system understands the importance of faith-based education, why we feel it is important and why we need to have it.”

Education advocates say the threats Alberta’s Catholic schools once faced have largely diminished since the election of the United Conservative Party last month. However, campaigns such as Together for Students continue to advocate for amalgamating public and Catholic schools into a single system.

What will ultimately determine the future of Catholic education is the Catholic identity of teachers, parents and students, said Dean Sarnecki, executive director of [Alberta Catholic Schools Trustees Association](#).

“I feel there is only a thin veneer of Catholic identity in many of our schools,” Sarnecki said. “I call it ‘Catholic lite.’ We want to get along with progressive society. We want the public to like us, so we water down our Catholic education.

“I fear that most of all, because we will make ourselves irrelevant. If Catholicism is just about niceness, then the richness of our Catholic tradition will have no effect on our schools and we will cease to exist.”

Archbishop Smith said the only thing that will keep that Catholic identity strong is Christ and the Gospel.

“We don’t want our kids’ lives to be built on quicksand; we want their lives built on truth and certainty,” he said. “Only Jesus Christ is that cornerstone. Jesus known, contemplated, and loved – that’s the foundation on which we build our lives, and that’s the foundation we must set firmly in the lives of our students.”



Natalie Lavigne

Natalie Lavigne, whose children attend Catholic schools in Sherwood Park, agrees that's the biggest concern.

"It's so important to our family that the environment of the school matches the values we have in our home," Lavigne said. "Everything they learn, in the sciences or whatever class they're in, they should recognize that the source of the goodness, order and beauty in the world all comes from God.

"That's why I'm grateful for Catholic schools. We have those shared values and recognition that Christ is at the centre of our lives and in everything we do."

Sarnecki said that's why the faith formation of teachers is an increased focus for the ACSTA. He believes bringing prayer into staff meetings and offering faith mentorship for teachers is crucial to ensuring faith is the foundation in any classroom.

"It's not the quality of education, it's the motivation and goal of education that differs us from public schools," said Sarnecki. "Both our public and Catholic schools have high academic standards. But our schools are not grounded in a purely consumerist and economic vision of the world. Catholic education sees every student as a masterpiece of God with talents and abilities. We help develop and maximize these gifts.

"Catholic education should not be measured by its test scores or the number of scholarships or its graduation rites. It's not why we exist. Test scores are not the destiny of the human person, heaven is."



Brett Cox

Brett Cox, an assistant superintendent with Elk Island Catholic School Division, said he believes the uniquely religious mission of Catholic schools should always be reinforced to teachers.

“I’ve taught in Catholic and public schools, but I don’t know how I could ever go back to a public school without feeling like I was handcuffed and not able to provide everything I know is good for a student’s development,” said Cox, whose daughter is in Grade 8 at a Fort Saskatchewan Catholic school.

“We have to ensure we support our Catholic teachers so they remain that example of faith for students in the class. It can’t just be a turn-off and turn-on button; they have to live that faith 24-7.”

Archbishop Smith said an important part of their advocacy is in challenging teachers to be witnesses to the faith both in and outside the classroom. A students’ faith, he said, cannot be offloaded just to religion class.

“When the parents drop off those children, it underscores that they’re entrusting us to an extraordinary degree,” Smith said. “They entrust us in forming their son or daughter, and in the Catholic context, to form them to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

“The enormity of that trust can never be understated. Because of that sacred trust, we have to get this right and always remember what is at stake – the children.”