

Bill 24: Parents, trustees, superintendents fear harm to parent-school relationships

Dave Bjorkman is a Catholic school parent who supports gay-straight alliances and other anti-bullying peer groups – but he is not so keen on the Alberta government's plan to make it illegal for his daughter's teachers to inform him if she joined one.

"It's not about being gay or not gay, or transgender; it's about the fact that all parents should be fully aware of any extracurricular activity their children are in," Bjorkman said in an interview.

His daughter Jerreca is a high-functioning autistic student in Grade 7 at Father Michael Troy Catholic Junior High School in Edmonton, and very close to her dad. He fears that the new legislation will encourage her to start keeping secrets from him.

"It's easy for people to round her up into groups," Bjorkman said. "I'm afraid because she can be coerced into things I cannot shield her from. I don't want to see the schools making choices for children against the parents when they really don't know the full situation."

His objections are shared by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA), which issued a news release Monday warning of potential unintended consequences of Bill 24, currently being debated at the legislature.

The School Act already requires school authorities to support students in creating and naming student organizations aimed at promoting equality and non-discrimination, including gay-straight alliances. Under Bill 24, the act would be further amended to prohibit them from discussing with parents any student participation in such groups.

The Catholic trustees argue that while the bill's overall goal of protecting vulnerable students is commendable, its broad language may damage both the parent-school relationship and the autonomy of local elected school boards.

"There should not be a blanket refusal to communicate information to parents without some assessment of the child's best interest in the particular circumstance," the ACSTA stated. "While inclusion clubs are welcome in all Catholic schools, the requirement to immediately approve of any activity without the opportunity for schools to evaluate the broader context in which the group is being formed can potentially impact our denominational religious Charter rights."

Education Minister David Eggen has said the prohibition is necessary to protect kids who may want to join a GSA but would be afraid of their parents' reaction.

Parent Bjorkman concedes that not all parents would be supportive of their child joining such a group, but notes there are existing laws to protect children from abusive parents. "I understand not all kids can talk to their parents, but you shouldn't penalize everybody else," he said. "To pull the parents from the children, it's wrong on so many levels."

As for daughter Jerreca, she'd welcome a GSA at her school but probably wouldn't join: "I like people just the way they are, but I like to be alone," she said.

"We were caring for kids before the legislation came to be" – Karl Germann

The ACSTA also argues that Bill 24 would diminish the roles of elected school trustee boards and school superintendents.

They warn that the wording of Section 16.1, which would require principals to give immediate approval to any request for a GSA, "erodes, degrades and takes away the school principals' 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."

The NDP government and the opposition United Conservative Party have been engaged in a war of words over the proposed legislation, with Minister Eggen and Premier Rachel Notley defending it as necessary to give students a safe, supportive place to meet and prevent adults from "outing" them.

UCP Leader Jason Kenney said teachers, not politicians, should decide when it makes sense to engage parents.

"The unique circumstances of each child should be the key factor, not the blunt instrument of law," Kenney said in a statement on Bill 24.

Karl Germann, president of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta, said educators "always have to have difficult conversations with parents," but a school would never "out" a student who identified with a sexual minority.

"They would try to figure out what they could do to support the child and to have as many people as they can around the table to support the child," Germann said.

"What we want is to ensure that there's confidentiality for kids, but there comes a point where you have to have a conversation with families," he said.

"You involve the parent at some point. It might not be the first minute, day, but somehow. That's a pillar of our Catholic ethos."

"We were caring for kids before the legislation came to be," Germann added. "We were inclusive, loving and caring of all people in our care before any legislation. That's what the Church teaches us first and foremost."

If passed, the amendments proposed in Bill 24 would come into force by April 1, 2018.

With files from Lorraine Turchansky, Chief Communications Officer