

# Catholic schools spend too much on being Catholic, say opponents

Proponents of a single secular school system for Alberta set their sights on Catholic schools at a recent panel discussion, arguing that they waste money on hiring Catholic teachers and nurturing their Catholic identity.



Former Education Minister David King (left) proposes eliminating separate Catholic education, joined by Luke Fevin (centre) and Patricia Grell (right). Photo by Thandi Konguavi

Over 70 people, including many Catholics, turned out for the Nov. 27th event at the University of Alberta, organized by David King, a former provincial education minister who is advocating for a referendum on the Catholic school system. The panel also included former Edmonton Catholic school trustee Patricia Grell and Luke Fevin, director of Edmonton Atheists.

Grell, a one-term Catholic trustee, said she found it “difficult to watch” the Edmonton district spend more than \$2 million on Catholic identity initiatives such as school chaplains, sending teachers for master’s degree programs in religious education, faith development days, retreats, catechism, and religion teacher salaries. She added that Catholic boards are spending more to hire teachers from out of province because they can’t find enough Catholic teachers in Alberta.

“All of that money is money that’s being taken away from the classroom,” she argued.



John Tomkinson, former vice-president of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association. Photo: supplied

The panel included no supporters of Catholic education. However, audience member John Tomkinson, a former vice-president of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, noted that the identity of Catholic schools is not only enshrined in law but also supported by court decisions.

“We would be doing a disservice to the citizens of Alberta by not being Catholic in delivering Catholic education,” said Tomkinson, adding that many would consider the religious portions of Catholic

schools to be underfunded.

Tomkinson said he attended the event as a father of eight and a supporter of the Catholic education system in Alberta, and he did not hear anything new from the panelists.

“We have an amazing and cost-effective system of separate schools in Alberta, and the only objection seems to be coming from this small meeting of biased critics,” said Tomkinson. “Catholic education needs our continued support, but it will continue to produce excellent outcomes and value for all Albertans.”



**Luke Fevin**

Fevin argued that Catholic schools are being filled by non-Catholic students “despite” the fact that they are Catholic, not because they are Catholic. He called for a moratorium on building Catholic schools until the resolution of a Court of Queen’s Bench ruling in Saskatchewan, which ordered the provincial government to stop funding non-Catholic students who attend Catholic schools. The ruling is being appealed and may end up in the Supreme Court.

Mark Gueverra, a St. Albert pastoral assistant who attended Catholic school, agreed that “real issues” were raised by the panel, and said public and Catholic schools should find ways to work together, especially in areas where schools are close to each other.

“I think it wakes us up as Catholics to say there are issues as Catholics we need to seriously look at,” said Gueverra. “It raises the questions for us, it says there are errors that need to be fixed, injustices that need to be fixed, absolutely.”

However, he found the idea of a referendum on abolishing Catholic schools troubling.

“I’m one of a very few people of visible minority in this room, and whenever a majority group determines something for a minority group, I am deeply concerned,” he said. “Why is it OK to have this referendum for this minority group?”

Education Minister David Eggen has offered his government’s full support for Catholic education in Alberta as recently as last week.

King said it would take 10 years for Albertans to accept the idea of a referendum on merging the Catholic and public school systems. He proposed three years of sharing public information, followed by a political campaign before a

referendum could take place.

Alberta is one of only three provinces that constitutionally require separate funding for Catholic schools (Ontario and Saskatchewan are the others). Two provinces, Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec, have eliminated their separate Catholic school systems.