

Election challenge raises questions about who qualifies as 'Catholic enough' for school board

Glen Argan, a former editor of the Western Catholic Reporter newspaper, called for the results in central Edmonton Ward 75 to be overthrown after he came second in the Oct. 16th race, beating third-place candidate Michael Brown by a margin of only 34 votes.

In a blog post on Oct. 22, Argan contended that Brown is not Catholic and said he has called on the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) to apply to the courts for the result to be overthrown and a byelection held.

Brown, an urban planner with the City of Edmonton, said he believes that his inclusion in the Catholic school trustee race was "solid."

"I'm fairly confident that I followed the rules and people made the decision," said Brown, who is enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program to become a Catholic. "But there's a democratic process, and I don't think that it comes from any place of malice that Glen is trying to do what he thinks is right."

The Alberta School Act, Section 256(3.1) requires that a candidate for election as a separate school trustee "must be of the same faith" as "the minority of all individuals living within the boundaries of the region" – in this case, Catholic. But there is no legal requirement that candidates provide proof of that faith, and courts have ruled that no one has a right to request such proof.



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"You are who you say you are," said Dean Sarnecki, executive director of the ACSTA, which is seeking legal advice on Argan's challenge. "If he says he's Catholic, he's Catholic."

Sarnecki said he understands Argan's concerns about preserving the integrity of the Catholic school system, but he hopes that people will act honestly in self-declaring their faith.

Brown considers himself Catholic and he designates his school taxes to support

the Catholic school system.

“(Argan’s) definition is that anybody is not a Catholic unless they’ve completed RCIA and been received. I’m in the process of doing that and I intend to do that, but to me, it’s bigger than that,” said Brown.

“It’s not just about going through the process, it’s about what you believe, and I did share openly in the campaign my faith journey and what led me to become a Catholic,” he added. “I dedicated myself to the campaign and put myself in front of people and gave up over a month’s salary so I could try to play a positive role in the school board, and I don’t regret any of that.”

In an email, Argan said he felt he had to raise the issue, “because no one else was raising it.”

“However, it is up to the ACSTA and Edmonton Catholic Schools to deal with it,” said Argan. “I do not want to put myself at the centre of the story because the issue is not about me, but about the integrity of Catholic school boards. If a byelection were to be held, I most likely would not be a candidate in it.”

Argan would not comment further.

Alene Mutala, the retired teacher and education consultant who won the election in Ward 75, declined to comment. Mutala received 32.38 per cent of the votes with 2,722, Argan received 28.28 per cent with 2,377 votes, and Brown received 27.87 per cent of the votes with 2,343.



Kristin Heimbecker, a candidate in a neighbouring ward, said people should not have to prove their faith. In a campaign video posted on Facebook, she had conceded that she was not a practising Catholic and said she hoped to represent all those ECS students who are not Catholic.

The Ward 77 candidate also took to Facebook to complain after her child’s school requested a copy of her baptismal certificate, coincidentally on the day after the election.

“I don’t think it’s fair and it shouldn’t be allowed because it’s a violation of our human rights,” said Heimbecker. “In no other situation would a government-run facility ask you for documentation to prove that you are the faith that you say you are.”

Asking for the baptismal certificate was a mistake, but it had nothing to do with the election, said Laura Thibert, chair of the board of trustees at Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Thibert said the request for documentation was sent to a number of parents, as

part of the yearly review of kindergarten student records.

“The principal of Frere Antoine (school) has taken responsibility for this error and has followed up with her office staff to ensure this does not happen again,” Thibert said in a prepared statement. “On the weekend, both the principal and myself apologized to Ms. Heimbecker on behalf of Frere Antoine. This error has absolutely nothing to do with the recent election and is extremely unfortunate.”

Heimbecker also took issue with social media comments from an employee of the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton who suggested that since she publicly self-identified as a non-practising Catholic, voters should not support her.

“I think the timing was wrong with (the note from the school) being right after the election and with people who work for the Archdiocese questioning whether I was Catholic enough or Catholic at all on social media,” said Heimbecker.

Lorraine Turchansky, spokesperson for the Archdiocese, said the employee’s views were his own, posted from his personal Facebook account. However, given the employee’s role at the Archdiocese, “it is understandable that his views could be ascribed to the Archdiocese,” Turchansky said. “We have reviewed our social media policy and practices, to ensure that this perception does not occur in the future.”

“In fact, neither the Archbishop nor the Archdiocese recommended for or against any particular candidates in the 2017 municipal election or any other election.”