

GrACE advocacy group ready to defend Catholic education

The voices speaking out against Catholic education in Alberta may have temporarily quietened, but a provincewide group of advocates remains vigilant and ready to defend faith-based schools.



Scott Morrison

“Our biggest challenge is to not get complacent,” said Scott Morrison, superintendent with Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools, which includes the Canmore and Drumheller areas of southern Alberta.

“Right now, it’s a time of calm. We’ve got a government that supports school choice. But we have to remember there are still those voices that think Catholic education shouldn’t exist. We have to make sure that we can activate our stakeholders at any given time to express how important Catholic education is.”

Morrison was one of nearly 100 attendees at the inaugural summit for GrACE – Grateful Advocates for Catholic Education – a provincewide group of educators, trustees, parents, and clergy. Alberta is one of only three provinces that have publicly funded Catholic schools, currently teaching 181,000 students.

The Oct. 21 summit, held in Leduc, focused on several priorities for the coming year. Those include an increase in promotional videos, hashtags for social media like #IbelieveinCatholicEd, and networking to support Catholic schools. GrACE also promoted the use of novenas and prayer intentions for Catholic education.

The summit also came just days before Catholic Education Sunday is celebrated in Alberta and the Northwest Territories on Nov. 3.

A year after GrACE was launched, there are 18 local GrACE advocacy groups with more than 100 members. GrACE has also held several workshops and received input from nearly 1,300 people.

“If we need to mobilize the Catholic community to spread the good news of Catholic education during any crisis, we’ve now got the infrastructure to do that,” Morrison said.

In recent years critics, including organizations like Together for Students, have called for a single public education system based on cost, infrastructure and other factors.

That’s why GrACE is crucial for families who want a future with Catholic schools.



Bonnie Annicchiarico

“We have been under attack so we have to start asking ‘How important is our faith?’ Is it something we’re ready to defend and have those tough conversations about?” asked Bonnie Annicchiarico, the director of GrACE and a former school district administrator.

“It’s now a time when people want information and the tools to speak on behalf of Catholic education. To have this much momentum in one year is really affirming.”

For Annicchiarico, the greatest challenge has been to determine how GrACE can promote Catholic education.

“We really want to activate initiatives and celebrate our legacy at the grassroots level,” she said. “We’ve heard that since GrACE was formed, the protection and promotion of our Catholic schools is a bigger topic in parishes, in Catholic Women’s League meetings, and at home.”



Michelle Campmans, a parent and teacher with Holy Spirit Catholic Schools in Lethbridge, believes students are key to the success of GrACE. Initiatives like video testimonies or art projects by students should become a staple of their advocacy efforts.

“If we want to show what makes our Catholic schools unique, our students have to be a huge part of that. My own children go to a Catholic school and I’d like to see them advocate for it more, and become more aware of what sets Catholic schools apart.”

Another area of focus is faith formation among teachers who set the example for students.

“Our schools will only be as Catholic as our teachers are,” Annicchiarico said.

“We should always be bringing the Catholic worldview into our work. We should expect that; it should not be controversial. That is the mark of a Catholic school ... we teach from a Catholic perspective and recognize that every child is made in the image of God.”

Maintaining and protecting that Catholic identity in schools is foundational, said Kim Pasula, a Red Deer school trustee. Pasula said the arguments against Catholic education are not just from secular organizations or public school trustees, but happen more intimately around dinner tables and among friends.

Therefore, GrACE is essential in helping parents, teachers and students know the appropriate arguments for when those conversations arise, Pasula said.

“You’ll get arguments from others that Catholic education is a waste of resources, it’s why their public school doesn’t have enough teachers, and so on,” he said. “People know they love Catholic schools, but it can difficult for them to verbalize that and know how to explain to a non-Catholic why Catholic education is important.

“So we need to ensure people have the data and the language to have those conversations. Part of our plan is to ensure people have that information to comfortably defend the division.”



Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith called on all Catholics to defend the beauty of Catholic education, no matter which government is in power. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith said concerns about the future of Catholic education are commonly raised when he visits parishes. Regardless of any political situation, he said it must be defended.

“If we strive to think that we can keep this extraordinary gift of Catholic education in any way for granted, then it seems we may be at significant risk. We all know the why of Catholic education, we just need to strengthen that why,” Smith said.

“We need to deepen our convictions and persistently need to speak positively, forcefully, joyfully and convincingly about the community of Catholic education.”

Anyone wishing to learn more about GrACE can visit the GrACE4cathed Facebook page, or contact your nearest Catholic school division.