

'GrACE' forms to support and defend Catholic education

A new alliance has been formed to tell the story of Catholic education in Alberta. The grassroots initiative seeks to present a united front to advocate for Catholic education's future, at a time when there are growing threats against it.



Michael Ouellette

The goal of GrACE – Grateful Advocates for Catholic Education – is to inform people about the history and issues facing Catholic education, and its uniqueness and benefits, through events and discussions in parishes, schools and communities throughout the province.

“It was time for us to present a strong united front. GrACE came together with the aim to unite, engage, educate and communicate as a whole,” said Michael Ouellette, chairman of the GrACE board of directors, and board chairman of Grande Prairie Catholic schools.

“I feel that is what we needed now to not only counter negative messaging but use this moment as an opportunity to reignite and strengthen our own passion for providing high quality education.”

GrACE's membership includes representatives of all 16 Catholic school districts in Alberta. Its key stakeholders are the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta and Alberta's bishops. GrACE officially launched in October, and will be promoted

in parishes across the province on Nov. 4, Catholic Education Sunday.

GrACE supporters say the need is great to advocate for Alberta's Catholic school system which currently educates an estimated 170,000 students.

"Catholic education is so important because it's rooted in the Gospel and the Gospel is rooted in love," added Bonnie Annicchiarico, executive director of GrACE and a retired assistant superintendent with Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools in southern Alberta.



Bonnie Annicchiarico

"The more loving places we can give our children to learn and to grow and to be in community, the better it is for them and for society at large. Catholic schools are doing a fantastic job of that."

Although GrACE has been in the planning stage for nearly a year, its public promotion comes just days after the Public School Board Association of Alberta launched its own campaign advocating for a single education system. The PSBAA says that would lead to cost savings, more resources in the classroom, and greater choice. It would also mean the dissolution of the Catholic school system.

While GrACE is not a direct response, the PSBAA campaign – along with other efforts to push for a single school system – are seen as the biggest threat to Catholic schools.

"It's just an obvious one at this point. It's the organized effort by public school lobbyists for one publicly funded system, and the lack of awareness that our own parents have in that regard," Annicchiarico said.

“We have very passionate parents and parents who maybe need more information, didn’t realize certain things were happening in the province, don’t even know the history of Catholic education and some of the issues we’re dealing with.”

The worst-case scenario, Annicchiarico said, is to lose publicly funded Catholic education altogether. Precedents have been set in Newfoundland and Quebec in the late 1990s.

“It’s been explained as an apathy that was happening in the Catholic communities there, a lack of willingness to engage, to be vocal, to be advocates, and we’re determined in Alberta not to let that happen. We have such vibrant schools and vibrant communities, I can’t see that happening.

“I can’t imagine any decision making that would say ‘This is all going great. Let’s eliminate it’. It just doesn’t make sense,” Annicchiarico said. “But others out there will have a different opinion.”

Here in Alberta, Annicchiarico explained that the issue is not so much apathy as it may be lack of awareness and information among Catholic school supporters and parents.

“They’re very happy with Catholic education. Most of them are just enjoying the good things that are happening and not realizing the organized efforts that are against it. We do have very real threats in regards to Catholic education. The fact that we’re organized and united is a bonus for all of us. It gives us key messages to talk about and raises awareness for all our school communities.”

Annicchiarico said GrACE will help equip Catholic parents and supporters to be part of a united effort to advocate for Catholic education.

“It’s being ready to have conversations with the like-minded and those who are not like-minded or those that are asking questions. And with an election not too far up in our future, to have those conversations with representatives of potential governments.”

In a statement last week, Alberta Education Minister David Eggen reiterated his support for Catholic schools.

In addition to other organizations and associations, GrACE will also advocate for Catholic values in curriculum development and educational policies that value Catholic schools and their mission.