

Longtime educator adds her voice as new head of Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association

The Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association will soon have a new person at the helm to navigate the challenging, and occasionally choppy, world of education in the province.

Eugenia Pagnotta-Kowalczyk is the new executive director of the ACSTA.

Kowalczyk has been the organization's director of advocacy for two years. She takes over the top job on Sept. 1 – the day after the retirement of executive director Dean Sarnecki who has led the ACSTA for eight years.

“Certainly it's a wonderful opportunity to work with our stakeholders, our Catholic community in a role that's always been very important to me and that is advocating for Catholic education,” Kowalczyk said after the ACSTA made the announcement July 6.

Kowalczyk has a PhD in educational leadership from the University of Victoria. She also has a master's degree in education from the University of Portland, and a bachelor's degree in music and English from the University of Alberta.

She had a 32-year career with Edmonton Catholic School Division as a teacher and administrator, as a sessional instructor with St. Joseph College, a field experience associate with the University of Alberta prior to joining the ACSTA.

What's the biggest challenge she faces as the new executive director? “Filling Dean's shoes,” Kowalczyk quipped.

“The biggest challenge is just being able to celebrate all the good work that is out there,” she said. “We have 24 school boards, and they're all just bursting at the seams trying to provide Catholic education and advocating and celebrating the great work that it being done.

“Catholic education in Alberta definitely has a track record of success,” Kowalczyk said. “We have increased enrolment year after year after year, so certainly our community – Catholic and non-Catholic – are choosing to put their students in Catholic schools and trust us with their children.”

As recently as two years ago, there were calls for a referendum – even by some public school trustees – on the future of Catholic education. In 2017, Red Deer's public school board approved a motion to advocate for one public system. Alberta is one of only three provinces in Canada, including Saskatchewan and Ontario, to have a publicly-funded Catholic system.

Kowalczyk said the ACSTA welcomes the *Choice in Education Act*, introduced in the Legislative Assembly by the UCP government last month, which outlines several changes to the former Education Act.

For the ACSTA, it's another level of assurance of the future of Catholic – and faith-based – education.

"It's really about understanding the role of Catholic education within a democratic, pluralistic society," Kowalczyk said. "The *Choice in Education Act* certainly asserts the parents as the primary educators of their children. From there, they have the choice to put their child in faith-based education or not. It always boils down to parent choice."



Serena Shaw

"Certainly this government has been outspoken about the rights of parents to choose the education for their children and for parents to be primary educators," added Serena Shaw, chair of the ACSTA and a St. Albert Catholic school trustee. "That's what we would agree with as a Catholic community."

Kowalczyk said the biggest distinction about Catholic education is that it's Christ-centred.

"For me, it's helping our students, our communities, grow in their relationship with Christ," she said.

"Christ is the reason for our Catholic schools. Christ is our role model and in fact the first teacher, and most important teacher, in our faith. So bringing that relationship to our students, that's what makes Catholic education distinct."

The biggest misconception is that Catholic schools teach only Catholic students.

“We find that non-Catholic students choose, their parents choose, a Catholic education for their children because they believe in the morals, the values, the traditions that are part of the Catholic faith,” Kowalczyk said.

“I had a parent once tell me ‘My child gets enough of the secular world on social media and TV. I’d like them to be a part of the Catholic school community because I know that they’re going to learn how to pray, and they’re going to learn about the saints and they’re going to learn about being a good person in relationship with one another.’ Our schools are welcoming, inclusive places. We bring that message to every student who comes through the door.”

Born in Edmonton, Kowalczyk attended St. Basil’s and St. Cecilia’s school as well as Archbishop O’Leary high school.

Kowalczyk is a member of Santa Maria Goretti Parish where she is involved in music ministry, baptism preparation and parish council. She has also been involved in Ronald MacDonald House ‘Meals that Heal’ and Catholic Social Services’ Sign of Hope Campaign.

The announcement of Kowalczyk as the new ACSTA executive director was made coincidentally on the feast day of Santa Maria Goretti, the patron of her parish.