

Connecting the dots between extreme ideologies, "parent choice," and education privatization in Alberta and Canada

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Article abstract

Privatization of public education in North America has long been influenced by two schools of conservative thought: neoliberalism, which seeks to create a marketplace for public services in which individuals choose the option they judge to be in their best interests and government's role is limited as much as possible to simply funding these choices; and neoconservatism, which believes that education should seek to uphold traditional religious and social values. These two strains are divided in terms of their view of how much control government should seek over education, but united in their agreement that funding should "follow the student" to the option of the parents' choice. Recently, far-right conservative groups in the U.S. and Canada have been inciting a moral panic over "gender ideology" in schools, and in particular transgender students. Under cover of this moral panic and the accompanying call to recognize "parent rights," the right is organizing to gain greater influence over public education through legislation and through the election of conservative candidates to school boards, even as it seeks greater privatization options for families who wish to opt out of public education. While this trend has been noticeable in Alberta for some time, it appears to be spreading to the rest of Canada as well.

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Connecting the Dots Between Extreme Ideologies, “Parent Choice,” and Education Privatization in Alberta and Canada

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Support Our Students Alberta

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Abstract

Privatization of public education in North America has long been influenced by two schools of conservative thought: neoliberalism, which seeks to create a marketplace for public services in which individuals choose the option they judge to be in their best interests and government's role is limited as much as possible to simply funding these choices; and neoconservatism, which believes that education should seek to uphold traditional religious and social values. These two strains are divided in terms of their view of how much control government should seek over education, but united in their agreement that funding should "follow the student" to the option of the parents' choice. Recently, far-right conservative groups in the U.S. and Canada have been inciting a moral panic over "gender ideology" in schools, and in particular transgender students. Under cover of this moral panic and the accompanying call to recognize "parent rights," the right is organizing to gain greater influence over public education through legislation and through the election of conservative candidates to school boards, even as it seeks greater privatization options for families who wish to opt out of public education. While this trend has been noticeable in Alberta for some time, it appears to be spreading to the rest of Canada as well.



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The idea that public schools function as sites of progressive indoctrination of children is a longstanding article of faith among conservatives. This view was expressed by Jason Kenney long before he became Alberta's premier at the 2016 convention of the Conservative Party of Canada. Kenney told the far-right online media outlet Rebel Media's Ezra Levant that millennials have "come through a schooling system where many of them have been hard-wired with collectivist ideas...with identity politics from their primary and secondary schools to universities. That's kind of a cultural challenge for any conservative party...and we've got to figure out how to break that nut" (Levant, 2016).

Kenney would have his chance to break that nut when he became Alberta's premier in 2019. His United Conservative Party government moved quickly to overhaul the K–6 curriculum in a more conservative direction (Peck, 2022) and to introduce the Choice in Education Act, which contained language enshrining parents' rights to choose the type of education their children receive, removed the previous cap on the expansion of American-style charter schools, and eliminated the requirement for oversight of homeschooling (Choice in Education Act, 2020). The UCP's move to advance marketization through increased "choice" is the latest episode in a long history of Conservative education policy in Alberta. For example, Conservative governments in recent decades have increased funding to accredited private schools to 70 per cent of the per-student allocation that public school systems receive, making Alberta the province that funds private education at the highest level in Canada. In the 1990s, the Conservatives brought in American-style charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately administered. Alberta's government also provides a subsidy for homeschooling families. This subsidy may explain, at least in part, why Alberta has more homeschooled students than any other province (Statistics Canada, 2021).

While many of these changes reflect the neoliberal value system of consumer choice and marketization of public services, they also play to the concerns of socially conservative parents who wish to limit their children's exposure to ideas they find unacceptable. This coalition between neoliberal market fundamentalist and neoconservative religious elements has long been a feature of North American conservative politics. In her recent book on privatization in Canadian education, Sue Winton (2022) described how these two strains of conservatism view education. In the view of neoliberals, education is a private rather than a public good in which the government's role is limited mostly to funding. Education, in this view, should function as a marketplace where individual parents are positioned as responsible for choosing the best option for their children. Parents, for example, have a right to choose private options and receive some degree of public funding for these choices. Neoconservatives, on the other hand, believe in greater government involvement in education, specifically in terms of upholding and transmitting traditional values. They fear losing their social and cultural dominance and see education as a tool to shore up this dominance, as Jason Kenney made clear in the interview referenced above. Where neoconservatives converge with neoliberals is that they often fear their children are being "indoctrinated" in the public system and both support the public funding of school choice as a mechanism for ensuring that their children are educated in line with their own values and beliefs (Apple, 2006). In this regard, the religious right supports privatization while also seeking greater control over public education. In this article, I argue that the current preoccupation of the right with "parents' rights" and the fear of the "grooming" of children is being co-opted and stoked by

opponents of public education to advance a privatization agenda, while the far right seeks to take over public education and reshape it to more conservative ends.

Extreme Ideologies, Conspiracy Theories, and “Parents’ Rights”

While “school choice” and opting out of public education have been presented as desirable policies in the United States and in Alberta for decades, recent years have seen greater polarization, a rise in extreme right political movements, and events such as the January 6, 2021 Capitol riots in Washington and the 2023 convoy movement in Canada, in which protestors blockaded border crossings and occupied Ottawa to express opposition to COVID-19 public health measures and an array of other grievances.

Many of these right-wing activists are particularly concerned with conspiracy theories about pedophilia and the sexual grooming of children. Some of the rioters in the assault on the Capitol were followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which believes that Donald Trump is fighting a battle against Satan-worshipping, pedophile Democratic Party members enabled in their criminality by a “deep state” (Farivar, 2021). Similarly, the Ottawa convoy movement, which originally focused on anger around COVID-19 health measures, has seen a spin-off group attempt to plan a “Save the Children” convoy. This group claims that schools are indoctrinating and grooming children, possibly as part of a larger “globalist” agenda involving organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization (LeBrun, 2023).

While anxiety about schools’ acceptance and support of LGBTQ+ students has ebbed and flowed in recent decades, we are currently in a moment of high moral panic over transgender students and teachers in schools, with right-wing media publishing inflammatory reports alleging that students are being influenced to think of themselves as transgender and that this is being done without the knowledge or consent of parents. Such reports are amplified and embellished on social media, where people frequently claim without evidence that schools are providing litter boxes for students who identify as cats (Bongiorno, 2023; Kingkade et al., 2022) or that prepubescent children are being given confusing, controversial, or even harmful information on gender identity in their schools (Parents for Choice in Education, n.d.).

In many cases, the individuals and groups stoking fear about LGBTQ+ kids and “sexually inappropriate” books in libraries and schools are also calling for more privatization and greater school choice. This is certainly the case in Alberta where conservative groups have long advocated for an expansion of “school choice,” including through school vouchers, homeschooling subsidies, and charter school expansion. Some of the groups pushing for expanded privatization have recently made unsubstantiated statements about sexually inappropriate content in schools. These claims are used to stoke suspicion of public schools and advance the narrative that parents with conservative values need publicly funded school-choice options.

In a recent interview with Rebel News, Jeff Park, the executive director of the pro-school-choice Alberta Parents’ Union, made an unsubstantiated claim that a 13-year-old boy had been removed from school without his parents’ knowledge, taken to a conference at a hotel, and “given a 50-page flip book about how to have sex and 153 condoms” (Dhaliwal, 2023). John Hilton-O’Brien, executive director of the Alberta group Parents for Choice in Education, has published regular columns in the conservative *Western Standard* arguing for privatization and school choice and raising concerns about Pride and LGBTQ+ policies in schools. In a recent column, Hilton-O’Brien made the dubious claim that the Alberta Children’s Hospital Pediatric Gender Services

Clinic (which he refers to only by its former name, the Metta Clinic), “is accepting referrals of children as young as five years old, from teachers. Parents don’t need to be in the loop” (Hilton-O’Brien, 2023).

The extent to which anti-trans rhetoric is being mobilized to support privatization was evident in the “1 Million March 4 Children” protests by anti-trans groups that took place across Canada in September 2023. In Edmonton, the chosen site for this protest was the headquarters of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, while in Ontario, three Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) offices were vandalized. The ATA, CUPE, and other unions were among those mobilizing to counter-protest this event, and a recent *Rabble* article noted the connection between anti-trans campaigns and anti-union/pro-privatization advocacy (Calugay-Casuga, 2023).

In Alberta, we have seen a worrying surge in the extreme nature of this rhetoric, often pushed by actors who have taken extreme stances on other issues. In the spring of 2023, there were several disruptive protests of drag queen story times in public libraries. In Calgary, these protests were often led by self-proclaimed “street preachers” including Derek Reimer (who has a criminal record for violent assaults) and Nathaniel Pawlowski, son of street preacher Artur Pawlowski, who was involved in the Coutts border blockades. Nathaniel Pawlowski was also involved in coordinating an anti-trans protest outside a Calgary high school along with Josh Alexander, a well-known anti-trans figure who travelled to Calgary from Ontario for this purpose (Tran, 2023). Municipal council meetings in Alberta have been disrupted by extremists, some linked to the convoy movement, who have espoused conspiracy theories about a wide range of topics, including the “gay agenda” and threats to children (Magusiak, 2023a, 2023b).

Such extreme language became an issue in the 2023 Alberta provincial election, when United Conservative Party candidate Torry Tanner resigned after backlash to a video she posted to social media claiming that teachers are exposing children to pornographic materials and gender reassignment (Ferguson, 2023). Later in the campaign, UCP candidate Jennifer Johnson was expelled from caucus after a video was leaked in which she compared the presence of transgender children in schools to feces contaminating a batch of cookie dough (Swensrude, 2023). Johnson won her seat and now sits as an independent MLA. While the UCP’s failure to shut down her candidacy may be attributed to the fact that ballots had been printed and advance polling had begun, it will be interesting to see whether she is readmitted to caucus at a later date. Certainly it is worrisome that her constituents did not see her comments as a deal-breaker.

Extreme Ideologies Are Spreading Across Canada

Alberta’s conservative political culture means it is often an early adopter of movements from American conservative circles, but in recent months, anti-trans rhetoric has been spreading across Canada. The far-right People’s Party of Canada has unveiled a policy about “radical gender ideology” that includes outlawing the use of sex hormones or puberty blockers on minors, “protecting women’s spaces” from “biological men,” and amending the criminal code to allow for censorship of “inappropriate” materials in school and public libraries (Van Hoepen, 2023). The Conservative Party of Canada leader, Pierre Poilievre, has expressed support for “parental rights” as his party prepares to debate a resolution to ban hormonal or surgical interventions for minors (Cullen, 2023).

The concept of “parental rights” as promoted by the far right is worth examining in greater detail. While this is a powerful idea for some, it is not one that is explicitly recognized in Canada’s

Charter of Rights and Freedoms or other human rights law. This is in contrast to children’s rights, which are recognized in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which Canada has ratified. While that document does refer to parents’ rights, it is clear that these are not absolute, are situated alongside responsibilities and duties, and are intended to assist children in exercising the rights recognized in the *Convention* (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 5). School choice advocates often cite Article 26, section 3 of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states, “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children,” without mentioning the other two sections of that article, which emphasize that education should be free and compulsory at the elementary level and that it should be “directed to full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

A commentary in *The Canadian Bar Review* on parents’ rights in Canada noted that, in Canadian case law, “[p]arental rights claims are asserted only in order to challenge laws or other forms of government activity that restrict parenting practices” and noted further: “Special rights for parents under the *Charter* can only operate to diminish recognition of children as full rights-bearing members of our society” (Carter, 2008). These concerns are borne out when we see socially conservative activists asserting that schools must disclose children’s gender identity to parents, rather than considering the safety of gender-minority children or their right to confidentiality.

This preoccupation with outing trans kids has spread across Canada incredibly quickly, with several provincial governments enacting policies in 2023. New Brunswick’s and Saskatchewan’s Conservative governments have passed “anti-secrecy” policies that would prevent schools from protecting the confidentiality of students who wish to use a different name or pronouns in school (Canadian Press, 2023; Moscrop, 2023). Manitoba’s Conservatives campaigned on this issue in the lead-up to the fall election (MacLean, 2023), and Ontario’s Conservatives have expressed support for similar policies to those in Saskatchewan and New Brunswick (DeClerq, 2023).

The connection between the “gender ideology in schools” moral panic and advocacy for privatization in the guise of “school choice” and “parents’ rights” is once again evident here, as the conservative Christian group 4 My Canada took the opportunity to both defend New Brunswick’s premier and the anti-secrecy policy and also demand that private schools and homeschooling parents receive subsidies (Poitras, 2023).

Perhaps surprisingly, at the time of this writing, Alberta’s Conservative government has yet to pass a similar policy to those in other Conservative-governed provinces. Premier Danielle Smith, whose libertarianism extends to social issues, has expressed discomfort with the political rhetoric on this issue, stating, “We shouldn’t be making any child feel like the issues they’re struggling with are something that’s a political football” (Markusoff, 2023).

Whether Smith is able to maintain this distance from the issue remains to be seen, as her party base is dominated by social conservatives often aligned with Take Back Alberta. This supposedly grassroots group formed initially around opposition to COVID-19 public health measures but has since taken over several UCP constituency associations and has expressed ambitions to push for a shift to the right on many policies. Its leader, David Parker, has stated that Take Back Alberta’s next priorities are to field candidates for school and library boards to assert greater control over what happens in those spaces. Parker was filmed addressing a Calgary anti-

LGBTQ rally, referencing conspiracy theories and urging people to run for their public library boards in order to influence policy (Rusnell, 2023). Parker has also indicated that fielding socially conservative candidates for school boards in the 2025 Alberta municipal elections will be a priority for his group (Tait, 2023). Certainly, there are already school trustees receptive to socially conservative views. For example, Red Deer Catholic school trustee Monique LaGrange came under fire in September 2023 for her Instagram post comparing LGBTQ advocates to Nazi “brainwashing” of children (McIntosh, 2023).

Other provinces are also seeing far-right organizations endeavouring to take over school boards. The Canadian Anti-Hate Network (2023) has documented efforts across the country to run socially conservative slates in trustee elections, backed by groups such as the anti-abortion Campaign Life Coalition and the Christian nationalist group Action4Canada. CBC has reported on similar efforts by the fundamentalist Christian group Liberty Coalition Canada, which claims to have trained over 100 municipal and school board candidates in 2022 (Montpetit, 2023). The organization opposes teaching about gender identity and systemic racism. The group has ties to U.S. evangelical figures and espouses reconstructionism, an evangelical movement that views the United States and Canada as Christian nations that should be governed by biblical principles.

As public schools have become increasingly diverse and socially liberal on gender issues, public funding of privately delivered alternatives has functioned as an escape hatch for parents who wish to educate their children in line with their religious or personal beliefs. This compromise is increasingly fragile in a polarized society where the right is taking a more activist stance that focuses on controlling education as a means of shaping culture, society, and politics. The right continues to push for public funding for their private educational choices, while also working to shape the public system that they have often opted out of. They are counting on the complacency of the majority to accomplish their aims.

School boards are a target not only because of the importance of education but because they generally have low voter turnouts and can be won by engaging a relatively small number of voters. Take Back Alberta’s David Parker frequently has reminded his supporters that democracy belongs to those who show up. In a recent post on X (formerly, Twitter), he taunted “progressive Albertans” with the statement, “We will outwork you and that is why we will win” (Parker, 2023). The rest of us, whether or not we have children in K–12 education, need to start paying attention to school board issues, organizing for progressive candidates, and urging people in our circles to be informed and cast a vote when the time comes.

Our public education system is under attack from neoliberals who want to fragment and defund it and from neoconservatives who want to take it back to the 1950s. While this two-pronged assault has in some ways been ongoing for decades, it is currently at an all-time high in North America (Valant, 2022). Alberta premier Danielle Smith has echoed some American far-right figures in musing that perhaps we should defund public schools (Smith, 2018). As American education historian Jack Schneider noted about public education in an interview on the Public Good podcast, “If we lose it, it’s not coming back” (Moore & Hurley, n.d.).

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Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*
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