



# Our Schools/Our Selves

The voice of progressive education in Canada

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**Wrong, again.**

The political evolution of “parental rights”



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Shannon D.M. Moore, Erika Shaker and Anton Clark

# Wrong, again

## The political evolution of “parental rights”

As editors, each of us came to this special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* with both shared and distinct concerns about the recent iteration of the parental rights movement. However, as our conversations progressed, it became clear that the seemingly distinct concerns that we each had, were all really one in the same. That is, the rise of Christian nationalism, the privatization of public education, the normalization of transphobia and homophobia, the ubiquity of the corporate agenda, and the attacks on democracy, are all rooted to the same underlying motivations. Collecting a multitude of concerns under one label serves the broader ideological purpose to centre neoconservative views and serve neoliberal interests in public schools.

Each of us also came to this issue with a sense of urgency. Under the guise of “parental rights” we are witnessing private values and

religious freedom being used to undermine established human rights. In the current context, [religion is used to alibi, rationalize, and legitimize homophobia and transphobia](#) (Mayo, 2021). Under the guise of parental rights, provincial governments are enacting policies and legislation that brazenly ignore Charter rights, lend legal legitimacy to the notion of parental rights, subvert educator professionalism, and undercut the rights of children.

[Political and religious conservatives, who believe they should control what their children learn, are taking steps to control what all students learn](#) (Hornbeck, 2023). Although parental advocacy groups position themselves as grassroots organizations, many are lobbyists and professional staff masquerading as parents. The goal is to fabricate a crisis about public schools and curriculum in order to justify and promote changes that reflect their beliefs. As

Little (2021), from *Media Matters*, writes, [these are well-connected partisans opportunistically manufacturing outrage and selling it to parents under the guise of empowerment](#).

Resultantly, and relatedly, the curriculum is being undemocratically narrowed and censored, and student access to diverse texts in school libraries is being denied, due to the beliefs and values of some “parents.” This results in the privileging of particular people and narratives and the erasure and dehumanization of ‘others.’ Because these changes do not reflect current human rights legislation, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1991), or the views of most parents, these groups are succeeding in reshaping public schools, public knowledge, and the public good. The majority of parents support a diverse curriculum that includes learning about different cultures, a range of perspectives on gender and sexuality, and the complexities of class, history and identity.

Moreover, children also have rights, [including the right to an education that is truly public, one that introduces them to values beyond those held by their parents](#) (or spokespeople posing as parents). Although children are being weaponized to advance and legitimize changes to public school curriculum (through pleas about childhood innocence, age-appropriateness, and harm), without irony, these groups wholly ignore children’s rights—in their assertion of parental rights over children, and in their erasure of children’s voices, perspectives, and stories.

These groups are also weaponizing notions of “balance,” “neutrality” and “diverse perspectives.” Yet, public schools have an ethical obligation to uphold human rights—not to make someone’s humanity or right to exist debatable. As Bigelow & Peterson (2002) unabashedly state, [neutrality in education is neither possible nor desirable](#). Public schools must, and already do, take clear ethical stands on a myriad of issues. There are particular issues and periods in history for which platforming varied viewpoints would result in legitimizing unfounded and harmful positions. For example, taking a “neutral” or ‘both sides’ stance on subjects like slavery, gender-based sexual violence, or residential schools is ethically indefensible.

Rather than curating curriculum for baseless and harmful perspectives, public schools have an obligation to uphold decided public values, research informed understandings, and evidenced based conclusions.

For all of the reasons above, and countless others, we felt an urgency to curate this special issue,

and to offer a historical overview of the parental rights movement. In doing so, we invite readers to think about the parallels and divergences between previous manifestations of “parental rights” and those we are witnessing today.

The articles that follow offer a snapshot of how this movement is unfolding distinctly within provincial borders and also point to the ways parental rights groups are working across provincial and national borders. As the authors in this issue reveal, there are similar tactics being used by provincial governments to legitimize “parental rights” and privilege the views of particular parents. Moreover, the authors speak to the ways local governments, like school boards, are being similarly impacted by groups claiming to speak for local parents.

In addition, this issue asks readers to consider the way mainstream media, sports podcasts, and discursive strategies more broadly, are being used to advance the narrative of “parental rights” at the expense of the broader public.

We see this as the beginning of a much needed conversation. While these articles expose the multitude of topics that have been collected under the umbrella of “parental rights”, there are many more that could have been included. Although we have tried to demonstrate the way these seemingly distinct issues feed and fold into one another, we know there are many more ways this interconnectedness can be uncovered by readers. We invite readers to consider why so many interests are using the term and the tactics of “parental rights”.

This issue is also intended to be educational. As the authors in this issue reveal, there is a lot of mis/disinformation about “parental rights” and the role of religious rights and private values in public schools. We hope this issue challenges the pervasive discourses being used to legitimize and validate “parental rights” in public education.

Finally, this issue is a form of advocacy, to put on display the way that parental rights rhetoric is being used to dismantle public education and undermine public values and the public good more broadly. It is essential that those who endorse upholding human rights, research-informed curricula, comprehensive sex education in public schools, and diverse texts in libraries make their voices heard by curriculum developers, provincial governments, and mainstream media—even if we feel unaffected in the short term, or if we no longer have kids in the school system. Otherwise, a small group of “parents” will be determining the future of our public schools—not just for their kids, but for all kids. /OS



# 10 PM DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILDREN ARE?

Erika Shaker

## It was the best of times

Tracing the roots of the “parental rights” movement

I have always been a fan of how historical narratives evolve, and how they influence current contexts. And, often, how that history is then erased from present day conversations.

I am also a fan of Dr. Paul Fairie at the University of Calgary. Dr. Fairie started posting threads on social media of current and historical newspaper headlines commenting on behavioural issues and trends — “Kids today are rude.” “Workers today are lazy.” School is just too easy.” “Schools should get back to the basics.” Turns out that people in positions of power love to crap all over young people, students, women, schools, and workers pretty consistently...and have done so for...well, forever.

It’s a very clever, show-don’t-tell way to illustrate that, in spite of the alarmist headlines, the elite are strikingly UNoriginal when it comes

to their beefs about those they seek to instruct, manage or control. Apparently, when compared to some vaguely defined idyllic past, workers have *always* been lazy, kids have *always* been rude, and schools have *always* fallen short when it comes to preparing students for life and work.

So why do these same complaints keep making headlines, over and over, decade after decade, in any number of media outlets? And further, why are the memories of those who were once (and are perhaps still) the targets of these same criticisms so short when it comes to the next generation of headline victims?

### Everything old is new again

Those with power have *always* marginalized, mocked or oppressed people who a) reveal



or reject the mechanisms maintaining those structures of dominance or b) challenge or constrain that authority. We know this.

Power structures and those benefiting from them have shown incredible resilience and relentlessness in continuing to assert their dominance—changing tactics and finding new scapegoats where necessary. But the true target is consistent: it's always social progress. And the framing is consistent too: anything that serves to contain or limit or even reveal those structures is evidence of "government overreach." Paper straws, vaccines, fluoride in drinking water, all-gender washrooms, walkable communities (or even the much maligned '15 minute cities')—all of these are reconfigured not as health, accessibility or climate measures, as options or even alternatives, but as symbols or evidence of government control. (Side note: at a recent protest I was approached by a bystander who offered me a bumper sticker for *theylied.ca*. 'Who's they?' I asked. 'The Government,' he replied. 'What'd they lie about?' He paused, looked around, then leaned in, conspiratorially. 'Everything'.)

To some degree, growing suspicion of government motives is not an entirely illogical response. Decades of public disillusionment with a system that was sold as being better for everyone—a meritocracy!—combined with the repeated drumbeat of "doing more with less" as budgets continue to shrink has left neighbours fighting each other over scarce resources to ensure their children have a leg up on the competition (read: the kid next door). This disillusionment and desperation at what neoliberalism has wrought creates an audience receptive to those intent on painting government programs as "useless" at best, and as overbearing and controlling at worst.

And right on schedule, we have another round of "breaking" news. Masculinity (and femininity, for that matter) is being ["erased."](#) Parents are being terrorized by [rude kids](#). Kids are [too soft](#): witness their sunscreen and bike helmets. (Not like when we were young and played in traffic and drank from garden hoses and were apparently perpetually concussed.)

This "back in my day" generational finger-wagging (yes, even with Gen X and Millennials) goes beyond Facebook memes and takes on added significance in the current manifestation of the "parental rights" narrative.

## Safety, surveillance and schooling

The appeal to a parent's anxiety about what unknown or unfamiliar forces might be influencing or even endangering their kids isn't new. In the early 70s, George Gerbner termed this "Mean World Syndrome"—the sense that the world was getting more dangerous (all evidence to the contrary), due in large part to sensationalist reporting and TV shows. Anyone else remember the ominous nightly "It's 10:00—do you know where your children are?" warnings on television?

Suggesting their child's safety is at risk (whether immediate or theoretical) has always been a very effective strategy for mobilizing parents against a particular target (from music to movies), to increase support for certain policies or priorities (like enhanced police budgets) or to purchase various products to keep us safe (often of the surveillance nature, like cell phones or home security cameras so even when your kids are home you can make sure they're actually home).

But it turns out that, rather than simply helping parents keep tabs on their kids, technology inflames a whole host of existing fears and creates new ones. With the post-pandemic lockdown solidifying the role of technology in our daily lives, parental anxiety now transcends distance and curfews and closed bedroom doors.

Your kid might be on the couch in the next room, but they could be talking to anyone, at any time. They could be influenced by things beyond your control. By curriculum or school staff or books in the library. By people who believe in things you don't, or who eat foods you can't pronounce.

And what's worse, you might not even know it—until it's "too late" and your kid is choosing hummus over hotdogs and starts researching settler-colonialism for a paper and refers to a friend as "they" and you find a Planned Parenthood brochure in their backpack. Appealing to parents has required the weaponization of the "other" fear factor: you entrust your kids for 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, 9 months of the year (give or take) to an institution filled with other adults and other kids you don't know. What are they learning? And from who? And what the hell has the school been teaching them and why weren't you informed (ironically, at a time when parents have ever more contact with their children's schools through email, applications, teacher websites, and classroom platforms)—after all, this is *your* kid, not the school's and not the government's, and what about *your* rights as a parent?



Obviously I'm exaggerating for emphasis. I'm certainly not ignoring — no one should — the proliferation of far right influencers on social media platforms. And I'm not dismissing cyber bullying or online predators, those digital and networked versions of the strangers that our parents or grandparents warned us to not talk to or take candy from.

I'm also not minimizing the need for ongoing and enhanced communication channels within school communities — something made all the more challenging by the takeover or shuttering of school boards in several provinces and the sidelining of democratically elected trustees in a patently transparent power grab.

The act of parenting obviously brings with it a heightened sense of responsibility, a duty of care, and the constant push/pull of wanting to protect your kids from pain and hardship and the dangers that lurk around the next corner while simultaneously wanting them to learn to stand on their own two feet, recover from the challenges life throws at them, and to somehow develop that ever-elusive "work ethic." It is precisely these loaded feelings that are being capitalized on and weaponized — the sense that powerful forces seek to control and manipulate our children, transforming them into something unfamiliar, unrecognizable, and potentially even dangerous; perhaps even leading them to reject their parents altogether.

But in spite of the "save our kids" or "hands off our kids" slogans, the parental rights movement isn't actually about protecting children. It isn't about alleviating the sources of parental anxiety about their child's future, and it's certainly not about examining to what extent parental self-worth and personal success is so wrapped up in how we perceive our kids, or how we think our kids are perceived by the outside world. How often have we heard (perhaps even said) that kids are the products of how they were "raised" — the "apple doesn't fall far from the tree" or, alternatively, that kids are tiny ambassadors for their parents.

This is because despite its framing, the movement isn't parent-driven, it's parent-targeted and championed by astroturf parent groups as part of the strategy to camouflage its market-driven roots. The reason for this camouflage is a simple and very effective peer to peer marketing strategy. Because when it comes to day-to-day concerns, the bread and butter issues about what kids need and what families want, CEOs aren't going to be trusted the way "regular" parents are.

Not surprisingly, the parental rights movement — and those seeking to court and benefit from it — has fixated on public schools. But this is a continuation of a long tradition of the elites criticizing what public schools will do and won't do, all of which is in perpetual opposition to the demands of the marketplace and the requirements of a 'decent' (and a comfortably familiar hierarchical) society.

However specious in theory the project might be of giving education to the labouring classes of the poor it would, in effect, be found to be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them; instead of teaching them the virtue of subordination, it would render them factious and refractory, as is evident in the manufacturing counties; it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors; and, in a few years, the result would be that the legislature would find it necessary to direct the strong arm of power towards them and to furnish the executive magistrates with more vigorous powers than are now in force. — British Tory MP Davies Giddy, 1807

We shouldn't be surprised. Like unionization, mandatory schooling has always been an obstacle to the unfettered demands of the market, in large part because (even ignoring the content) it requires children to be in school rather than in the workforce.

## Parental rights™

But making the case for child labour over child learning requires a special kind of PR — a sideways rather than a frontal attack, an appeal to "work ethic" and "morality" and "natural order" and "behaviour."

Dr. Fairie has curated decades of headlines making these allegations about public education: it's too [easy](#), it doesn't focus enough on the ["basics"](#) it makes kids [rude](#) (insolent!) and it encourages too much [reading](#) (vicious books!). It may even necessitate more policing to quell an uprising brought about by too much learning, too much awareness, too much (dare I say) wokeness.

Fairie challenges the notion that we have outgrown previous moral panics. But it's a lesson that bears repeating, particularly in the current policy and narrative context where the tropes of parental rights and protecting kids are once



again being used to obscure a much more self-interested lobby.

The [Economic Policy Institute](#) has documented how child labour legislation has been rolled back in a number of American states, and child labour violations are increasing: 'Attempts to weaken state-level child labor standards are part of a coordinated campaign backed by industry groups intent on eventually diluting federal standards that cover the whole country.' Apparently, kids have been choosing to complete high school and even seek additional education, accumulating an enhanced skill set. One would assume this would be recognized as a positive trend — not one that should be reversed.

But what's intriguing is the way proponents framed this legislative rollback as a family-rights issue, not a big business lobby initiative. In Arkansas, when Senator Sarah Huckabee Sanders repealed the "Youth Permitting Act" loosening restrictions on child labour, it was lauded by "regular family guy" [Nick Stehle, of the Foundation for Government Accountability](#): "the main push for this reform didn't come from big business. It came from families like mine, who want more of the freedom that lets our children flourish. We are not a state that values perpetual adolescence and government control. We are a state that thinks families know best and work leads to better lives."

The Foundation for Government Accountability, a Florida-based think tank founded in 2011, has been instrumental in drafting state legislation to expand the legality of teenage labour by rolling back aspects of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (which established a federal minimum wage, a 44 hour work week, and established the legal age of work at 16 years). But they've deliberately and explicitly framed this as a parental rights issue — not a big business or even an economic one. Significantly, their 2022 [white paper](#) was titled *How states can streamline the hiring process for teenage workers and restore decision-making to parents* [emphasis added]. The first key 'finding'? "Parents, not schools, should have decision-making power over whether their children get a job."

The paper is punctuated with phrases like "schools should not replace parents" and "some pro-work states already recognize the importance of allowing teenagers to join the workforce and respect parents' decision-making rights."

This is not about keeping kids safe. It's a corporate-led strategy, positioning public school in direct opposition to parents, to families, to child development, and even to national productivity...

with the intention of rolling back child labour laws.

And here we come full circle, because using parental fear to undermine and vilify schools is not a new strategy at all. Whether it's media barons or CEOs or just 'reg'lar folk' posing as parents (and forget about their corporate credentials), schools and those who work in them are routinely and perpetually blamed for making kids soft, rude to authority figures (their "betters"), and undermining that elusive work ethic on which our national survival depends.

Regardless of the homemade signs, the "everyday moms and dads" tone, there's nothing grassroots about this corporate-driven astroturf campaign. Its claims of being parent-led and "all about kids" stand in stark contrast to the actual impact — less protection, less safety, fewer options, and ultimately less public funding. And of course the ramifications go far beyond "their" kids — ultimately, this is about all of us.

Canada is not immune, as we have seen, to the parental rights drumbeat and how it's being utilized by decisionmakers, right-wing media pundits and conservative activist groups with their own agenda and for their own purposes, some of which are decidedly un- or even anti-democratic. We need to pay attention to why so many people are susceptible to this narrative, and why others are prepared to cede ground or cater to it.

And while we must protect those who are being scapegoated and sacrificed as collateral damage in the drive to undermine our public schools, we must also (and perhaps even more importantly) always remember who and what is pulling the strings behind the parental rights curtain — and to what end. /OS

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Anton Clark

# Gender shocks, public education, and the crisis of democratic care

The rise of Canada's parental rights movement isn't just about sex ed or trans youth—it marks the return of an ideological project that seeks to police difference at every level. Disguised as a concern for children or educational freedom, this movement functions as a vehicle for revanchist politics: a backlash against queer and trans liberation, racial justice, and the broader promise of inclusive public education.

But despite its current surge, its politics are far from new. The idea that parental authority should override collective educational values has deep roots in Britain, the United States, and Canada. What's changed is how digital infrastructure—monopoly platforms, algorithmic radicalization, and [cyberlibertarian](#) encodings of

“free speech”—have reenergized the movement and expanded its reach.

What we suggest is that the parental rights movement can be understood as a form of recurrent gender shocks—a political strategy that, building on [Naomi Klein's model](#), exploits moments of economic despair and cultural uncertainty to intensify gender policing, erode public education, and reassert traditional hierarchies under the guise of protecting children and preserving parental authority. In this light the movement is best seen as a recurring feature of capitalist crisis: an anti-solidarity formation that resurfaces when economic breakdown coincides with the growing visibility of progressive gains.

While gender nonconformity is the movement's current focus, its ambitions are



broader—to redraw the boundaries of belonging and to undermine the collective promises at the heart of co-operative economics. For Canada, the stakes—social, educational, and economic—are not simply about curriculum or parental oversight, but about whether we will defend or dismantle the democratic commitments that once animated the promise of the welfare state.

What then, we ask, accounts for this movement's return—and why now? If we understand parental rights as a recurrent response to economic crisis—we must also ask: what fuels its resurgence in this particular moment? What roles do digital platforms, educational privatization, and transnational disinformation networks play in helping old anxieties find new life?

At the heart of this movement is not simply a moral panic, but a structural vulnerability in liberal democracies themselves: the erosion of shared public commitments, the fraying of social trust, and the failure to deliver material stability. As public institutions falter under the weight of austerity, inequality, and ecological crisis, gender becomes a proxy terrain for managing broader anxieties about control, order, and the future.

The policing of children's gender and sexuality is not a fringe impulse—it is a recalibration of the democratic imaginary, one that seeks to reimpose social hierarchy at precisely the moment it might be unraveling. This is especially visible when we consider how the modern welfare state, from its inception, has been shaped by the contradictory treatment of women and children. While often heralded as an engine of equity, the welfare state was also built on the assumptions of dependency and domesticity—offering benefits that mirrored, rather than disrupted, gendered subordination.

What we are seeing now is not simply a retreat from that model, but a targeted effort to erase the limited gains it enabled: autonomy, pluralism, collective care. If the democratic promise includes the dignity and freedom of the child—as learner, thinker, and future citizen—then what does it mean that this promise now faces not only backlash, but abandonment? At a moment when the welfare state reels under pressure and the legitimacy of public institutions fractures, how we respond to this crisis will shape more than education policy—it will shape the moral and material foundation of Canada's democracy.

We are, in many ways, at a crossroads: between solidarity and enclosure, between collective care and reaction. What we defend—or fail to—will determine what kind of future remains thinkable, and for whom. The task ahead is not to simply reject reactionary politics, but to

rebuild the structures—of education, care, and belonging, that make democracy active, lived, and fundamentally plural. If this moment brings danger, it also brings possibility: to reclaim public education not as a battleground, but as a shared ground for imagining freer ways to live together.

## Histories we've forgotten

The parental rights movement, often treated as a recent eruption in response to trans visibility or pandemic-era schooling debates, is anything but new. In fact, it's a recurrent feature of educational backlash, one that has gained traction during moments of economic anxiety, welfare retrenchment, and rising visibility of marginalized groups. Despite this long history, much of the critical scholarship on the movement has fallen out of circulation. Revisiting this work now is not just useful—it's urgent.

In his 1990 essay ["The 'Third Wave': Education and the Ideology of Parentocracy"](#), sociologist Phillip Brown offered one of the earliest and most influential analyses of this dynamic. For Brown, the evolution of British schooling could be understood in three phases: from working-class mass education to mid-century meritocracy, to a new model of "*parentocracy*"—in which a child's education is shaped not by ability or need, but by parental wealth, values, and social power.

Importantly, Brown situated this shift in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, when economic downturn, youth unemployment, and middle-class fear were leveraged by conservatives to frame public education as a failed social experiment. The idea of education as a public good was displaced by the language of choice, efficiency, and market logic—underwriting a moral panic about "declining standards" and legitimizing new forms of privatization.

In the 1990s, Brown's insights seeded a wave of critical scholarship across Britain, the United States, and Canada. Researchers Barbara Miner, Sara Diamon, and LouAnn Dickson examined how otherwise separate conservative movements—religious traditionalists, market libertarians, and ethno-nationalists—fused their agendas through education. This process, sometimes called 'fusionism', became a defining feature of how scholars began to conceptualize and study the parental rights movement.

In the U.S., backlash to desegregation, sex ed, and child-centred pedagogy became the fuel for traditional schooling experiments, from fundamentalist "academies" to charter school expansion. In each case, the rhetoric of "choice"

was used to cloak a politics of social control, driven by the perception that public schools no longer reinforced inherited hierarchies of race, gender, and class.

In Canada, this same logic took root—though often in quiet, more bureaucratic forms. By the 1990s, teachers' unions, progressive education coalitions, and a growing network of public interest think tanks—including the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—had begun pushing back. Through *Our School/Our Selves*, and in landmark reports like *Education: Whose Business is it Really* (1997) and *In the Name of Choice* (1998), Canadian scholars tracked how the traditional schooling movement imported American-style narratives of decline, filtered through both Christian conservatism and economic individualism. In *Pandora's Box* (1993), John Calvert and Larry Kuehn mapped how corporate influence and free trade agreements were reshaping the educational landscape—laying the groundwork for “parent-preferred” schooling aligned with market interests.

[Cecilia Kalaw's work](#) in particular marked a turning point. Combining education policy, migration studies, and media analysis, Kalaw traced how groups like *Focus on the Family*—a U.S.-based evangelical lobbying organization—helped transplant U.S.-style gender panic into B.C.'s traditional school movement. She found that anti-gay and anti-trans rhetoric were already becoming organizing tools, reframed as neutral concerns about “values” and freedom. In one of the earliest studies to link gender panic to the logic of educational privatization, Kalaw showed how traditional schools were marked as alternatives to supposedly “ideological” public institutions—often targeting racialized and working-class neighborhoods under the guise of restoring standards.

This history has largely disappeared from view. Contemporary scholarship, particularly in legal studies and trans studies, [has done vital work](#) exposing how today's parental rights movement weaponizes gender nonconformity as a threat to children's innocence and parental sovereignty. But too often, this work has been disconnected from the movement's longer history of fusionism, market logic, and imperial nostalgia. The result is an incomplete picture: one that captures the moral panic, but not the cynical structure of backlash that reemerges at every moment of crisis.

And that cycle matters. What Brown, Kalaw, and others revealed—often decades ahead of their time—was that the parentocracy is not simply a cultural argument about values, but

a political strategy for redistributing public goods upward and eroding the infrastructure of the welfare state. Just as early 20<sup>th</sup>-century movements for women's liberation collided with the patriarchal assumptions of the welfare regime, so too does today's gender panic target the very conditions that allow for pluralism, equity, and collective belonging.

The parental rights movement's fixation on trans children is not an aberration—it is a tactic of structural restoration, through which elites recode public fear into demands for control.

In that sense, gender is not the movement's limit—it is its entry point. Historically, education has always been a battleground for the remaking of democratic life, and children's gender has been a particularly potent proxy for anxieties about national identity, economic decline, and social order. From the British tripartite system to B.C.'s traditional school experiments, from American charter school lobbying to today's social media-fueled campaigns against “wokeness,” gendered moral panic has reappeared at every juncture where the promises of democracy threaten to become real.

What makes this moment different, however, is the infrastructure of virality: the way digital platforms and algorithmic propaganda have breathed new life into old fears. Where the parentocracy once advanced through think tanks and policy papers, it now moves through TikTok, Facebook groups, and encrypted messaging chains. These channels don't just scale the movement—they give it the appearance of a grassroots movement. The result is a feedback loop of despair and nostalgia, in which structural failure is blamed not on austerity or privatization, but on the presence of queer, trans, racialized, or “non-traditional” children in the classroom.

Revisiting this history is not merely an academic exercise—it's a recasting of how we understand and preserve the foundational entry point into democratic freedom and the ongoing struggle over choice and equality. One that helps us understand how **gender shocks** operate: as a recurring political maneuver used to fracture solidarity, obscure economic injustice, and reset the terms of democratic participation.

## Despair, disinformation, and digital capture

The parental rights movement, like the economic shocks described by Naomi Klein, has always thrived on crisis. As Klein showed, market fundamentalists didn't wait for stability to push



their reforms—they relied on disruption. From Pinochet's Chile to post-Katrina New Orleans, disasters became opportunities to restructure society in line with neoliberal ideals. The parental rights movement, like its economic predecessors, has always built momentum not through consensus but through fear: fear of decline, disorder, and difference. And like earlier crises, this panic is used to justify sweeping attacks on public education, queer and trans rights, and social solidarity itself.

But the machinery of crisis has undoubtedly changed. Where Friedman's disciples operated through governments, policy advisors, and a complex array of university and prestige networks, today's revanchist movements rely on algorithmic infrastructure—what David Golumbia has called a politics of *cyberlibertarianism*. Rooted in Silicon Valley's peculiar fusion of countercultural idealism and deregulatory zeal, cyberlibertarianism promises openness and freedom while systematically empowering anti-democratic forces.

Meme pipelines, Facebook groups, and YouTube algorithms don't just echo outrage—they actively manufacture it. In this environment, a parent's fear becomes a headline, a rumor becomes a platform, and bigotry gets framed as common sense. The result is a pernicious form of personality capture, where digital architectures—claiming neutrality—are used to discipline gender nonconformity, amplify white nationalist talking points, and reanimate long-standing hierarchies under the guise of "protection".

In this light, the parental rights movement isn't a grassroots revolt—it's a digitally enabled restoration project. It channels legitimate despair—about inflation, inequality, and institutional failure into moral panic. The digital terrain offers a potent weapon: the appearance of democratic spontaneity masking a deeply coordinated, anti-solidarity campaign. As with earlier shocks, the goal isn't merely to block reform—it's to roll back the gains of collective struggle.

While disinformation thrives and reactionaries dominate headlines, something else is happening—transformation in pedagogy, care, and democratic practice that are often explicitly obscured. These experiments aren't hidden—they're simply not made to circulate in a U.S. dominated media economy. What any contemporary study of parental rights must then contend with is a question of visibility, inclusion, and legibility in an entirely new media ecosystem. Whose fears are amplified? Whose knowledge circulates? And what forms of care, justice, and resistance are being left out of the frame?

## Building the alternative

Across Canada, educators are building curriculums that centre equity, foster belonging, and anchor learning in the realities of students' lives—programs rooted in restorative practices, land-based education, anti-racist teaching, and queer-inclusive pedagogy. Yet these initiatives are often ignored, underfunded, or treated as fringe—even when they offer real tools for resilience in a time of deep social fragmentation. In parallel with this growing wave of progressive educational reform, the new 'parental rights' movement functions as an escape hatch—not just from these collective gains, but for a particular class. It responds not with engagement, but with withdrawal, upholding a broader project of denationalization by fracturing public responsibility into a patchwork of private entitlements.

This logic, of course, isn't confined to Canada. It echoes globally—from MAGA to Orbán—in a growing alliance orbiting the regressive idea of the ethnostate. The same coalition that distrusts science, loathes collectivity, and romanticizes a return to tradition also dreams of a tech-enabled future freed from social constraint. These are not contradictions—they are the ideology of the [telecosmic](#), a world in which sovereign individuals, sovereign families, and sovereign wealth transcend the obligations of common life.

To meet this moment, progressive pedagogy must offer more than critique. It must make visible the work already being done—the classrooms already modeling care, justice, and collective possibility. But it must also offer new ways to unravel the mechanisms underpinning this moment of regression.

Revisiting the history and evolution of the parental rights movement is one such way: a critical task that connects historical inquiry into visible educational practice. We are not just defending our schools, we are defending the very idea that education can be a form of collective solidarity, organized around progressive democracy. If the increasingly brazen cyber elite values disconnection and disassociation from any collective center, ours must concentrate on connection: a vision of public life worth remembering, worth sharing, and worth fighting to uphold—together. /OS

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Shannon D.M. Moore

## Parental rights as privatization

As a public education advocate, I am particularly attuned to the ways that the “parental rights” (PR) movement has been used to undermine faith in public education in order to advance privatization. Recognizing that there are various pathways to and manifestations of privatization ([Ball & Youdell, 2008](#); [Winton, 2022](#)), the “parental rights” movement has been used to rationalize, legitimize, and mobilize privatization of and in public education.

### Choice

Through hyperbolic rhetoric and manufactured crises, “parental rights” advocates sow doubt in public education and public school teachers in order to justify the introduction of private options. “Parental Rights”, and other exploits of the culture

wars, [have been exploited to foster distrust and doubt in public schools in order to encourage and rationalize more private options](#) and increase school ‘choice.’

School choice satisfies and unites neoliberals chasing increased marketization of education, and neoconservatives seeking schools steeped in traditional values. It is marketed as [the cure to the ‘woke ideology’ that is allegedly overtaking public schools at the expense of ‘real learning.’](#) In Alberta, for example, [education reformers have exploited the accusation of ‘gender ideology’ in order to undermine faith in public education and advance school ‘choice.’](#)

Despite the marketing, school choice results in public funds going to a private system that [lacks accountability](#), rations choices to select students, and ignores and undermines public values—such as a strong, equitable, public



# Labelling particular content ideological or political so that it will no longer be taught in public schools is a form of **politically motivated censorship** to align with private interests

education system that provides equal access to everyone.

## Censorship

In the current iteration of the PR movement, the (mis)use of terms, such as *back to basics*, *woke*, *gender ideology*, and *critical race theory*—and the term *parental rights* itself—are also used to motivate the censorship of public curriculum and assert control over public school classrooms. PR advocates intentionally use this rhetoric to evoke anger about what and how subjects are being taught.

By using a loaded term like *ideology*, PR advocates are promoting the idea that public schools are indoctrinating/brainwashing students into particular ways of thinking. Moreover, they are suggesting that what is being taught is brazenly political, rather than a decided aspect of the public curriculum that is based on research-informed understandings, enshrined rights, and scientific consensus. In doing so, they are also promoting the idea that a “neutral” or “apolitical” curriculum is possible—although what they mean by “neutral” is any curriculum that aligns with the status quo, or with their personal views.

[Labelling certain curricula “ideological” or “political” while advocating for “neutrality” is a political tactic used to secure existing power structures and to make topics that challenge the status quo taboo or dangerous.](#) And, unfortunately, this tactic is having an impact.

Provincial governments are altering or censoring curriculum and resources in response to claims from within the PR movement. This is particularly evident in topics surrounding gender and sexuality. As I write this, the Alberta government has announced a ban on sexually explicit books in school libraries. This ban stems from alarmist claims about library books, undermines the professionalism of educators and existing procedures used by librarians, ignores the lived experience of students, and disregards research informed understandings of comprehensive sexuality education—among other things! Beyond that, it is undemocratic. As [the Alberta government’s own surveys on this ban makes clear, nobody wants this](#). The [majority of parents in Canada support sexual health education in K-12 schools](#). Moreover, the research demonstrates that [comprehensive sex education saves lives, reduces homophobic and transphobic violence, sexual violence, and gender-based discrimination, and can help students understand how to foster healthy relationships](#).

Yet, through opt-outs/ins, sensitive content labels, outdated and absent curriculum, and the assertion within curriculum documents that parents are sex educators, provincial governments across Canada continue to [abdicate their responsibility to the public good and public education by placating particular parents](#), ignoring research informed understandings, and negating the basic human rights of all children and youth to receive sexuality education. Or, to

In a time in which classrooms have become the site of ongoing culture wars it is hardly surprising that some teachers are hesitant to broach certain topics in their classrooms. **The result, however, is curricular erasure of people, topics, and activities.**

see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in library books. Or, to engage with challenging narratives about our nation. Or, to consider the way extractivist economic practices contribute to current environmental issues. Or, to question military actions. Or, to question government narratives or the structure of our government. I could go on.

My point, if it isn't yet obvious, is that labelling particular content ideological or political so that it will no longer be taught in public schools is glaringly hypocritical. It is a form of politically motivated censorship of public school curriculum to align with private interests. In this way, [the legal fiction of 'parental rights'](#) is being used to shape public schooling for everyone.

[When provincial governments advance, defer to, and accommodate private values that undermine and ignore human rights or children's rights—whether in curriculum, or through parental consent policies, or through censorship of resources in school libraries—they are contributing to public education privatization.](#)

## Chill

Beyond direct changes to curriculum or policy made by provincial governments, the PR movement is also having a [chilling impact](#) on educators. That is, educators are avoiding “contentious” topics or censoring themselves in their classrooms in order to avoid controversy.

The harmful rhetoric used by people within the PR movement, which is then repeated

and legitimized by mainstream media (see McCorquodale-Bauer, this issue), contributes to increased censorship of public school curriculum and, in some cases, educators as well. In a time in which classrooms have become the site of ongoing culture wars, and in which [teachers are flippantly and recklessly being called groomers and pedophiles by people within the PR movement](#), it is hardly surprising that some teachers are hesitant to broach certain topics in their classrooms. The result, however, is curricular erasure of people, topics, and activities.

[Without strong support from school leaders](#), it can be even harder for teachers to uphold their professional and ethical obligations to enact the provincially endorsed curriculum and uphold human rights and children's rights.

## Conclusion

Parental rights advocates assert that public schools discriminate against traditional conservative values, and that their views should be represented in public school classrooms. These accusations are often accompanied by efforts to regulate classroom content and censor books in libraries. In some cases, they also threaten to leave public schools or encourage disinvestment from the broader project of public education.

While public schools want to make every effort to make families and students feel included, and to embrace a variety of viewpoints, they also need to maintain their values. If the views and values of families and students within the school do not align with human rights or children's rights, public schools must not platform and legitimize these viewpoints.

When public schools are asked to accommodate or alter their curriculum and policies in ways that harm students, undermine children's rights, reject research-informed curriculum and scientific consensus, and deny educator professionalism, they need to reject these expectations. The risk, otherwise, is that we undermine the very essence of what makes a public school public. /OS

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Heather Ganshorn

# In Alberta, “parental rights” and privatization go hand in hand

In recent years, public education systems have become a battleground in a culture war fomented by the far right. The points of contention include manufactured panics over “wokeism” and accusations that schools are teaching “critical race theory” and “divisive concepts.” The current flashpoint, around the supposed indoctrination of students with “gender ideology,” has seen several Conservative-governed provinces introduce legislation and policy around transgender children and youth, often at the behest of groups calling for recognition of “parental rights.” Many of these same groups also call for increased “school choice” in the form of public subsidies for private education.

These culture-war pressures on public education and the push for privatization are

inextricably linked, part of a wider North American movement in which the discourse of parental rights is used to justify policies that undermine public education, marginalize vulnerable students, and advance privatization agendas. This article examines these interconnected trends in Alberta, tracing their historical roots and how they are currently reinforcing one another.

## Understanding parental rights

The concept of parental rights, especially in the context of education, is often framed as an established legal principle despite the near-total lack of laws defining parents as a rights-holding category. Under the Canadian Charter of Rights

and Freedoms, parents do have the right to raise their children according to their values, within reasonable legal limits. However, children are also recognized as rights-bearing individuals, and Canadian law does not support the notion that parental rights supersede children's rights.<sup>1</sup> This is an idea that upsets many social conservatives.

This tension is particularly evident in debates around LGBTQ+ rights, sex education, and gender-affirming care for transgender children and youth. Conservative ideologies have long resisted the idea that children, including adolescents, may have the right to hold beliefs or take decisions that their parents disagree with. Notably, the U.S. has never ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, due in part to conservatives' concerns over Articles of the Convention dealing with children's rights to freedom of thought and expression, as well as to privacy.<sup>2</sup>

UBC education professor Jason Ellis noted that in Canada, "parental rights" advocacy can be traced back over a century, usually related to issues like language and religion in education. Whatever the specific issues sparking concern at a given point in time, Prof. Ellis notes that parents generally view education as being a social contract in which schools will educate children in accordance with parental wishes and values, and that things "tend to become very contentious" when some parents perceive that this unwritten contract is being violated.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, then, to see that parental rights are often asserted in relation to how schools navigate contentious social issues such as race, gender identity, sex education, and even COVID-19 public health restrictions.

In recent years, conservative governments across North America have sought to codify a restrictive view of parental rights in legislation. The FutureEd think tank has tracked dozens of parental rights bills introduced in U.S. states in 2022 and 2023, many of which restrict or prohibit content related to race, gender, and sexuality, or compel schools to use birth-assigned names and pronouns, or seek parental permission to use students' preferred name or pronouns.<sup>4</sup>

These trends have crossed into Canada. New Brunswick and Saskatchewan introduced legislation requiring parental consent for students under 16 to use chosen names or pronouns at school<sup>5,6</sup> (New Brunswick's policy was reversed by a subsequent government). Alberta followed suit in 2024, with legislation that went further by requiring parental opt-in for any instruction related to gender or sexuality, and limiting schools' ability to implement public health measures (this latter provision appears to pander to those opposed

to COVID-19 measures).<sup>7</sup> Alberta also passed legislation curtailing access to gender-affirming healthcare for minors, even those whose parents wish them to receive this care.<sup>8</sup>

Alberta announced in May 2025 that the province would be formulating a new policy around school library books, supposedly in response to concerns raised by parents who contacted the Education Minister over "inappropriate" materials that included several graphic novels with LGBTQ+ themes. However, an article by the Investigative Journalism Foundation indicates that these complaints actually came from Parents for Choice in Education, a group that advocates for "parental rights" and education privatization; and Action4Canada, a Christian group that embraces anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracy theories.<sup>9</sup> Such tactics are familiar to anyone who has been following the American parental rights group Moms for Liberty's attacks on books, school and libraries.<sup>10</sup>

Most "parental rights" advocacy comes from socially conservative groups, is not inclusive of all parents, and is a clear threat to the rights of vulnerable children. Emerging research shows that anti-LGBTQ+ policies correlate with increased risks for LGBTQ+ students, including bullying, mental distress, and suicide attempts.<sup>11,12</sup> An article in the Tyee<sup>13</sup> reports on a focus group held with parents from LGBTQ+ families in Calgary, who express concern about the mental health impacts of Alberta's legislation on their children, and also anger that the government is overriding their right to support their children's access to gender-affirming health care.

### **Privatization and "school choice" through the lens of parental rights**

Privatization in education extends beyond the existence of private schools. It involves the redirection of public funds to private entities, whether through subsidies to schools or families. Alberta's private schools receive 70% of the per-student funding that public schools do — one of the highest levels in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Charter schools, while publicly funded and tuition-free, also fall within the privatization spectrum. They are not governed by publicly elected boards, may limit enrollment, and are not obligated to serve all students. Homeschooling is also subsidized in Alberta, reinforcing a broader framework in which public funds support private choices.

Public funding for privatized school choice is often justified by appeals to parental rights. The



Alberta Bill of Rights affirms “the right of parents to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children,”<sup>15</sup> echoing the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>16</sup> However, these statements are often selectively quoted, omitting key principles that emphasize education as a collective public good.

In Alberta, the efforts of conservative groups invoking parental rights to secure public funding for private education date back to the 1960s. These efforts were led primarily by Dutch immigrants who arrived in Alberta in the mid-20th century. These immigrants belonged to the Dutch Reformed branch of Protestantism, and did not feel that either the public or Catholic school options met their needs. Accordingly, they founded private religious schools for their children, and lobbied the government to fund these schools through groups such as the Christian Action Foundation, which sought to create “a growing understanding in [provincial MLAs] with respect to **parental rights** in education [emphasis added], different philosophies of education, and injustices with respect to the present system of Government financing of Education.”<sup>17</sup>

Though the origins of the school choice movement in Alberta were rural and religious, this view of education as a private good where individual choices should be publicly funded has become increasingly common as neoliberal ideas about the purpose of education gained broad acceptance beginning in the 1990s. Neoliberalism, broadly speaking, positions individual self-interest above the public good, and posits that the private sector can do a better job than the public sector of delivering programs such as health care and education. According to education scholar Sue Winton (p. 17), “A central neoliberal idea is that the economic and social world should be organized according to the principles of the free market. That is, individuals, organizations, and businesses should be able to compete for success with minimal government involvement.”<sup>18</sup>

In education, this means fostering an environment of choice and competition, in which schools compete for students and families are “customers” directing “their” share of public funds to their chosen provider. Offering individuals an array of choices becomes more important than ensuring equity for all, despite the fact that individuals with greater socioeconomic privilege obviously have more options and therefore benefit most from the “choices” offered by privatization. Under such a system, parents are

encouraged to think first and foremost about their own children’s success, and, as Winton notes, (p. 19), “many [parents] embrace, if not outright demand, privatization of public education as a means of securing advantages for their children.” Thus, the public funding of private education options is seen as a parental rights issue in and of itself.

While educated urbanites seeking to optimize their children’s opportunities may not appear to have much in common with religious or rural parents concerned about the values of a secular or “liberal” school system, privatization proponents have learned that stoking culture war issues and presenting “choice” as a solution can be persuasive to both camps, particularly when vague but disturbing allegations of “indoctrination” are levelled against public schools. Regarding the issue of controversial school library books, the group Parents for Choice in Education argues that “monopoly public schooling itself would make such disagreements [over the appropriateness of books] inevitable,” and that school choice “lowers the stakes of these fights” and “is the best tool to peacefully resolve this issue.”<sup>19</sup>

## Polarization and the weaponization of parental rights

Recent education policy debates in Alberta have been shaped by moral panics and culture war rhetoric. Jason Kenney, before becoming UCP leader, described Alberta’s curriculum as indoctrinating youth with “collectivist ideas” and “identity politics.”<sup>20</sup> After becoming UCP leader, Kenney’s government halted a curriculum update that was underway, and replaced it with a reactionary K-6 curriculum update of his own, as well as passing laws enabling parental notification if students joined gay-straight alliances.<sup>21</sup>

This narrative — that public education pushes a progressive agenda — has fueled a resurgence in parental rights discourse. Conservative groups claim schools indoctrinate children with “woke” values, and use these claims to push for privatization. These dynamics mirror U.S. movements that have long opposed LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools under the banner of parental rights.<sup>22</sup>

Alberta’s education debates are also entwined with conspiratorial rhetoric. Movements opposing COVID-19 restrictions have merged with anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-CRT sentiment, as seen in the 1 Million March 4 Children demonstrations, which drew support from convoy organizers and QAnon affiliates.<sup>23,24</sup>

Two groups exist in Alberta specifically to advocate for greater school choice. Both have disseminated disinformation about “gender ideology” and sex education in schools. The oldest group is [Parents for Choice in Education](#), which has been active since at least 2012. Its Executive Director, John Hilton-O’Brien, is a frequent contributor to the right-wing *Western Standard*, where he advocates for private and religious education, and against public school boards and supposed “wokeness” in education. In one column about gender-affirming care, Hilton-O’Brien made the clearly untruthful claim that the gender clinic at the Alberta Children’s Hospital “is accepting referrals of children as young as five years old, from teachers. Parents don’t need to be in the loop.”<sup>25</sup> Hilton-O’Brien’s group appears to have some sway: over the current UCP government launched a 2022 petition calling for the Education Act to be amended to require opt-in for sex education, instead of the practice used at the time to opt out.<sup>26</sup> These changes were later enacted by the UCP government, despite objections from school boards and the Alberta Teachers Association.<sup>27</sup>

While Parents for Choice in Education advocates for increasing private education that aligns with private parental values, they also seek to influence public education by electing pro-school-choice trustees. In preparation for the 2025 municipal elections, the group has [developed training workshops](#) for trustee candidates.

A newer parent group, the [Alberta Parents’ Union](#), was founded in 2022. On its web site, the group claims to advocate “for the best possible education for all Alberta students—whether that be public, separate, francophone, alternative, charter, independent, or home education.” However, the group’s many online petitions include one advocating for school vouchers. One petition about “what kids are learning” suggests schools are indoctrinating students with critical race theory, LGBTQ+ content, climate change, and “an ideological spin on the events at the United States Capitol Building on January 6th, 2021.”<sup>28</sup> The group’s Executive Director, Jeff Park, gave an interview to *Rebel News* in 2023, in which he relayed an anecdote of a 13-year-old boy who he claimed 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.”<sup>29</sup>

The other main group in Alberta that has been active in the debates around parental rights and K-12 education is Take Back Alberta.

Founded by David Parker, a former Conservative staffer, Take Back Alberta is widely credited with harnessing popular anger around COVID mandates to take over the UCP board, forcing Jason Kenney out and replacing him with Danielle Smith. Parker, who grew up in rural Alberta and was homeschooled, has often expressed hostility to public education. He has advocated for his group’s supporters to take over public school boards, citing a belief that public schools operate under “the tyranny of the rainbow guard and the green guard.”<sup>30</sup>

## The road ahead

The intersection of privatization and parental rights poses a significant challenge to the future of public education in Alberta. While these policies are framed as empowering parents, they often serve to fragment the education system, divert resources away from inclusive public schools, and marginalize vulnerable students.

Public education advocates must remain vigilant, especially as Alberta approaches municipal elections in 2025. Trustee elections are low-turnout contests, making them susceptible to organized campaigns by ideologically motivated groups. Voters should scrutinize candidates for coded language such as “fund students, not systems,” and question whether their definitions of parental rights are inclusive of all families or respectful of children’s rights.

A truly equitable education system must centre the rights and well-being of all students, not just the preferences of a vocal minority. It must resist the erosion of public governance and funding in favour of opaque, unaccountable alternatives. And it must reaffirm that education is not a consumer product, but a public good that benefits all of society. /OS

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*This article is adapted from a backgrounder prepared by the author for the Parkland Institute.*

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Haniel Sorensen

# I am become woke, destroyer of schools

In early 2022, then-elementary school teacher, Caroline Burjoski (or the 'cancelled teacher,' as she later self-branded), attempted to expose what she characterized as wildly inappropriate materials available to young students in elementary school libraries. According to her presentation, the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) engaged in a double standard, permitting books that, in her words, "glorified" 2SLGBTQIA+ perspectives, while others were spuriously culled from the library's and teachers' collections.

What Burjoski failed to mention was that this "culling" was part of a standard exercise, by which the "library collection remains current and relevant through the continuous process of the acquisition of new materials and the deselection of materials that no longer meet selection criteria" (WRDSB 2023).<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, none of that mattered. Within a matter of months, Burjoski became a bit of niche celebrity, celebrated by Parents As First Educators (PAFE) and the Campaign for Life Coalition (CLC), op-ed columnists at the *Epoch Times* and *National Post*, Fox News pundits, and parents' rights advocates across Ontario as a fearsome warrior against "woke trustees," the "woke agenda," and "wokeness" in general.

Consistent throughout these discussions was a reliance on clever phrases, buzzwords, jargon, and rhetoric, which obscured the horizons of this discussion. What even was the "woke agenda" being forwarded? Were kids being "groomed?" What were the "parents' rights" being trampled on? Again and again, these terms were employed without context or explanation. And this is a deliberate strategy because the vagaries and lack of specifics creates the perfect political target,

and ensures those who use and repeat those terms don't have a clear understanding of what or who they are critiquing. The target is a spectre, devoid of context, and usefully ever-shapeshifting to suit the needs of those with privilege.

This piece contextualizes four key terms, commonly used by the parental rights movement, showcasing them not as utterances of care and compassion for our communities and kids, but rather as complicated feelings born of and shaped by misunderstanding, hate, and a deep-rooted sense of alienation. While people that use these terms do not offer specific definitions, I do so here in order to provide some of the missing (implied or actual) context to help readers identify these as dog whistles or rhetorical tropes.

### **"Woke"**

"Woke," or some variation of it, is likely the most recognizable and widely used term on this list. But what does it even mean?

Historically, "woke" meant to be "awake" to systemic injustices and racist violence (Hall 2024; McCurdy, Clarke, and Cammaerts 2025). One of the earliest recorded instances of its use was by folk singer Lead Belly in his 1938 song [Scottsboro Boys](#), which recalled the 1931 case of nine Black teenagers accused of raping two white women on a freight train in Alabama and the wrongful imprisonment and extrajudicial murder of Black men and boys, falsely accused of violence against white women (Richmond and Charnley 2022, 177). Here, Lead Belly sings, "So I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there—best stay woke, keep their eyes open." Here, "woke" draws attention to the very real and immediate and material reality of white supremacy that Black folk were meant to navigate.

Following the execution of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, and the public lynching of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2020, "woke" reemerged in mainstream discourse, maintaining its cultural footing through Black Lives Matter (BLM) and connection to Black histories.

However, as "woke" continued to garner broader support among liberal-progressives, pop culture, and media circles, it was slowly flattened, used to vaguely denote multiple strains of liberal anti-racist and progressive politics. The Right, positioned against inclusive and progressive practice, identified it as a target—nebulous enough to encompass almost anything, which allowed the Right to find evidence of it in *everything*.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Right, to embrace "woke" is to alienate "white majorities for their reasonable concerns" (Richmond and Charnley 2022, 40). It is to support "big government" intervention (or perhaps more aptly, interference) in curtailing or compensating for traditional and institutionalized systems of power and privilege—the patriarch(y), the nuclear family, cis-heterosexual normalcy—benignly exercised by white middle-class people, and those benefiting from institutionalized systems of domination.

Rather than an acute awareness of the realities of racial violence, this version of "woke," affirms a sycophantic, domineering group-think politics that has supposedly led to a weaker, less virile, and dumber population.<sup>3</sup> It implies an unfair, unmeritorious, and unreasonable retooling of power relations to benefit an imagined Other who, according to the Right, is not disadvantaged due to structural inequity, but because of their personal, moral, and spiritual failings (as defined by those very systems of privilege whose dismantling is so lamented by the Right).

### **"Groomer"**

Like "woke," "groomer," and the anxieties it conjures, has an extensive catalogue of historical uses. But unlike "woke," it is not grounded in progressive or liberationist histories. Rather, "groomer" is just the latest iteration in a *long* line of attacks launched at queer and trans folk—and even their allies—casting them as sexually, morally, and intellectually corrosive, corrupting "our" youth.

"Groomers," identified most often as teachers and queer folk in proximity to children, are indicted for the misdirection of children's (cis-heterosexually charged) innocence, working to "turn" them queer. At the core of "groomer" is the assumption that queer folks (and their allies) are inherently predatory. Children, especially in school, are positioned as vulnerable to being manipulated—and converted—for the benefit of some imagined and coherent queer (and pedophile-adjacent) "agenda." Teaching "queer-tainted" material (often in "secret," without parental knowledge or consent) disrupts the normative development pathway laid out for children, undermining the sanctity of the family unit, subverting the authority of the patriarch(y), and (were that not enough) threatening the nation's future. As a Campaign Life Coalition<sup>4</sup> (2019) blog post details, "[t]his is partly why math scores continue to fall."

While positioned as a new and immediate threat, the fear of "grooming" is not new



(Rosky 2013). During the 1970s, however, these anxieties took on new life with the rise of “religious conservative opponents of LGBT rights...in response to the rapid rise of the LGBT movement” (609). From Anita Bryant’s opposition to Miami-Dade County’s Ordinance 77-4 — “a law that protects homosexuals from discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodation” (Ayres Jr. 1977) — to the Thatcher government’s Section 28, opponents of gay and queer inclusion worked overtime to stoke fear and colour debates around LGBT rights, specifically the possibility that “in one way or another, ‘any and every child’ may be queer” (Stockton 2009, as cited in Rosky 2013, 617).

As folks outside of the cis-heterosexual matrix found a home in Conservative politics (Blair White, Christian Walker, Lady MAGA, MP Lantsman) being both queer and Conservative had to be made acceptable. So, “groomer” was nuanced ever-so-slightly, augmented to now denote “good” and “bad” expressions of gender and sexuality, reinforcing certain acceptable expressions of queerness and gender presentation while monsterizing others.

This outlook was championed by [Gays Against Groomers](#), to clarify that “grooming” is indicative of a *specific type* of outward, unafraid, proud, and non-assimilationist queer expression. While this often explicitly refers to drag queens and trans folks, it can be easily weaponized to apply to any part of the queer community that refuses to adhere to dominant norms and attitudes of the supposed “good gay citizens.” Here, the ideal queer person, one that children can be in proximity to, is sanitized, depoliticized, and demobilized, anchored in the private domicile of the family. A good queer person is one with “an ongoing case of *no sex please, we’re gay*” (Balogh 2014, 182).

### “(Radical) gender ideology”

Unlike “woke,” “groomer,” and even “LGBT propaganda,” “(radical) gender ideology” has no meaningful or coherent referent outside of a loose amalgamation of feminist philosophy, gender studies, and intersectionality.

Absent a clear definition, the term “(radical) gender ideology” is employed to underscore a broad collection of ideas that serves to mock those who differentiate between gender and sex, or those who cast gender (and sex) as socially constructed. It’s a sharp contrast to the binary gender-realist view of the Right, which sees sex as immutable and insurmountable and gender as synonymous with sex. Hence, “(radical) gender

ideology” is divorced from “truth,” cast against a supposed and shared idea of “common sense,” forwarded as a “feelings over facts” (ARPA Canada 2025, 2) ideology that undermines the normalcy of heterosexuality and the “true” gender binary — ultimately, harming students and undermining parental authority.

“(Radical) gender ideology” implies a permeability to the categories of man and woman, unsettling the perceived immutability of these supposedly biologically distinct classes, which works to undermine the patriarchy, traditionally ascribed gender roles and norms, and the supremacy of the nuclear family.

### “LGBT propaganda”

“LGBT propaganda” is simply used to indicate the presence of identities, perspectives and ideas featuring, centring around, or mentioning<sup>5</sup> queerness, transness, or something other than an accepted expression of gender and sexuality — those outside of the accepted cis-white-heterosexual canon.

The supposed proliferation of “LGBT propaganda,” specifically in schools, echoes the concerns of Burjoski’s presentation, focusing on supposedly age-inappropriate materials available to children. These materials serve to divert students from the real pillars of education, the “basics” (math, science, reading, and writing), distracting them with emotional development and soft skills (that which might not be *immediately* relevant to the labour market or the strict process of work and value production). Threatening the sanctity and seeming neutrality of the school, “LGBT propaganda” supposedly infects educational materials, shaping content in direct opposition to “common sense” (Perry 2023), exploiting the student’s malleable mind and imposing a reality of untruths.

“LGBT propaganda” rests on the notion of *purposeful* dissemination of LGBT (e.g., queer, trans, etc.) “doctrine,” usually via educational and cultural materials, with the goal of recruiting children — as though latent in every child is a dormant “gay” gene awaiting activation via a proximity trigger or activation phrase.

If elimination is not possible, the implicit solution to the “woke” indoctrination via “LGBT propaganda” is regulation, maintaining a “safe” learning environment, distinct from the influence of LGBT issues, bringing education back to the basics. Such a “solution,” however, would effectively create a zone in schools that is “safe” for some (e.g., students performing



cis-heterosexuality), and unsafe for others (e.g., those who will not or cannot perform these roles).

## Conclusion

Where, then, can we find solace from the issue of “woke,” “groomers,” “radical gender ideology,” and “LGBT propaganda” that now plague our schools? The solution, of course, is to return to a simpler, more “basic” time before our education system was hopelessly rainbow-clad and “woke.” (“Getting Back to Basics in Education” 2024; Ferguson 2018; Guarin 2024). But what is meant by “basics” in the “back to basics” mantra?

Again, this isn’t revolutionary or new: the calls for “back to basics” stretch far back into history. In the late 1970s, the basics denoted “the principles of honesty, efficiency, sound fiscal practice, and anti-socialism” (Morgan and Robinson 1976, 2), aiming to “ensure student competence in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.”

But we can reach even further back. After the American Revolutionary War, a number of texts were published that sought to teach more than “just ‘reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic’ to the younger generations of Americans.” Seeking “cultural independence from England the country’s leaders wanted to inculcate loyalty to the United States by instilling in its boys and girls a knowledge of democratic precepts and a strong patriotic commitment” (Rippa 1971, as quoted in Johnson 1979, 644). These “basics” are those of a “good” citizen, embracing an ethic of loyalty and productivity, where they are prepared to work, fight, and die for their country—the hard skills that the “woke agenda” seeks to undermine.

Teaching children to embrace the merits of “woke,” of recognizing systems of power and privilege, and standing against hate, troubles the production of loyal and productive bodies willing to fight, work, produce, and die, for King and Country. And this is precisely why public school classrooms continue to be a battleground—between those who acknowledge the systems of power and privilege (and hard work required to overturn them), and those who insist on their continued supremacy. /OS

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## Notes

- For more information on selection criteria see <https://www.wrdsb.ca/blog/2021/11/08/reviewing-our-library-collections/>; and, <https://www.wrdsb.ca/blog/2023/04/19/wrdsb-selection-of-library-materials/>
- For example, here is a non-exhaustive list of things that have been labelled 'woke' in the past decade, in no particular order: The military apparatus under the Trudeau government (Poillievre 2025); Paper Straws (Lobell 2022; The White House 2025); Tim Hortons' Paper Lids (Lianne Rood (@Lianne\_Rood) 2024); American Colleges and Universities (Marjorie Taylor Greene (@mtgreenee) 2023); Captain America (Ted Cruz (@tedcruz) 2025); ESPN (Ted Cruz (@tedcruz) 2024); Research grants for "studying how to make self-driving vehicles safer" (Lambert 2025); K-12 schools (Cruz 2023, 79); Canada's math curriculum (Blaff 2023); Florida's math book, prior to the DeSantis government (Hurley 2022); The words "women," "diverse," "systemic," and "cultural relevance" (Jean 2025); Nike (Ehalt 2024; Ben Shapiro 2025, 12:56–14:45); Hollywood (PragerU 2022b); Big Business (PragerU 2022a); Sesame Street (Fox News Staff 2021).
- It is important to note that, yes, 'woke' is still used by those on 'the left' to indicate material awareness, but woke's more popular and more well-known counterpart is that which is described above.
- The Campaign Life Coalition is a "national pro-life organization" working to against "abortion, euthanasia, doctor assisted suicide, reproductive and genetic technologies, cloning, infanticide, eugenics, population control, and threats to the family" ("About Us," n.d.).
- 'LGBT propaganda' is nebulous enough to encompass the mere implication of queerness, so 'mention' does quite a bit of heavy lifting in this instance.





Simon Enoch

## Discrimination through deception

The parental rights movement's school board strategy

In spite of the role trustees play in communities across the country, school board elections in Canada have historically been rather perfunctory affairs, often beset by poor voter turn-out and little to non-existent media coverage. Yet, that has changed dramatically in the past few years, as what were once considered low-stakes contests have transformed into increasingly polarized and intense flashpoints of public debate.

Catalyzing this transformation has been the aggressive entry of the conservative "parental rights" movement into debates over public education in Canada. Indeed, across the [country](#),

parental rights groups have sought to challenge and contest local school board elections often in a bid to reverse anti-discriminatory policies and programs aimed at 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

Here in Saskatchewan, Regina's public school board elections last year witnessed a slate of candidates supported and endorsed by the Regina Civic Awareness and Action Network (RCANN), a conservative advocacy group [opposed](#) to diversity, equity and inclusion policies and pro-2SLGBTQIA+ initiatives in schools. Similar conservative slates of school board candidates appeared in local elections [across the country](#) last year.



# The ultimate goal is **the roll-back of equality-focused rights for adults as well**, as we have seen in the United States through restrictions on access to abortion

## **The discriminatory roots of the movement**

While this sudden transformation of usually uneventful local elections into intense expressions of the culture wars might strike many people as novel, the targeting of school boards by conservative activists has a long and sordid history. This history has been most manifest in the United States, where school boards have been the battleground over larger [social questions](#) such as de-segregation, abortion and 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. Like its current manifestation, many of these past battles were also couched in the rhetoric of “parental rights.” American conservatives opposed to racially integrating public schools spoke of their inherent rights as parents to choose their children’s schools in defiance of integrationist bussing efforts in the 1960s. Similarly, parental rights were invoked to justify employment discrimination against gay and lesbian teachers in the 1970s, based on the right of parents to “determine who is going to teach our children.”

Canada has certainly not been immune to this tendency. As Hazel Woodrow writes, “parental rights” have been [invoked](#) in this country to push back against students’ confidential participation in school-based GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliances/Gender-Sexuality Alliances), against comprehensive sex education, racial equity, and most recently, against transgender students’ self-identification in schools.

## **A twin strategy**

So while not a new phenomenon, there is no doubt that the current level of organization and effort by conservative activists to roll back anti-discriminatory policies and initiatives within the classroom definitely feels more acute. Many commentators point to the experience of school COVID shutdowns as a key event emboldening conservative education activists.

“The COVID-19 pandemic opened the digital doors to classrooms,” Libby Watson writes in [Education Week](#). “For many parents, it was their first time seeing daily lessons. Some were appalled by content about race, gender identity, and sexuality, igniting a fervor that led to the conservative parents’ rights movement and its calls for giving parents more control over curriculum and books, and organized political efforts from groups such as Moms for Liberty to win school board majorities.” While initially an American phenomenon, we have seen the same conservative organizing efforts cross the border into Canada.

Both the use of parental rights rhetoric as well as the targeting of local school boards need to be seen as twin parts of a strategy to obscure the real intent of conservative education activism. As American legal scholars Mary Ziegler, Maxine Eichner and Naomi Cahn [argue](#), the use of parental rights rhetoric helps obscure the real goal of conservative education activism, which is the rolling back of anti-discrimination policies and

initiatives designed to protect vulnerable minority groups. They call this strategy, “retrenchment by diversion.” Recognizing that openly stating their goals to stymie and roll-back rights and protections for minority groups would be largely unpalatable to significant numbers of the electorate, conservative education activists “sidestep controversy” by diverting attention from its “rights-reversing motivations by supplying a more politically palatable rationale for its actions”—the long and valued tradition for parental rights.

And while these rights-reversals are initially targeted at students, the ultimate goal is the roll-back of equality-focused rights for adults as well, as we have seen in the United States in regards to restrictions on access to abortion that were initially directed at minors but have now come to apply to adults as well. This diversion also allows conservative activists to appeal to more moderate sections of the electorate, parents who might recoil at the idea of denying protections for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, but may believe they are instead advocating for greater control over their children’s school lives.

Moreover, given what little attention and turn-out school board elections usually exhibit, they are eminently [winnable](#)—even by a relatively small minority. By using parental rights rhetoric to skirt controversy and peel off more moderate voters, the belief is that conservative advocacy groups can covertly place their preferred candidates into positions of influence on local school boards to advance their wider agenda.

## School boards in the crosshairs

Fortunately, so far the ability of these groups to practice this kind of message discipline has been found wanting, often alerting more progressive voters and the media to their wider designs. Certainly this appears to be what occurred in Regina, as a published list of RCANN endorsed candidates was quickly retracted once the public got wind of their actual policy positions.

This appears to have been the experience in other jurisdictions as well, as [many](#) of these endorsed candidates would ultimately face electoral defeat once their actual agendas became public. Despite these defeats, the strategies employed by conservative education activists may still prove successful in the future. In Regina, certain RCANN endorsed candidates were still able to pull [close](#) to 40 percent of the vote. While in mostly two-way races this level of support was insufficient, we only need to imagine

a more crowded field where this could deliver victory.

Moreover, these efforts to take over control of our school boards are not going away. The conservative advocacy group [Take Back Alberta](#) is already training a slew of candidates to run for school board elections in October of this year, in “response to widely felt concerns that our school boards have been overtaken by radical activists.”

We have been fortunate so far that many voters have been able to see through the deceptions of these groups, but as the above makes clear, deception in service of discrimination is the goal. **/OS**

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## SCHOOL TRUSTEE

Vote for ONE (1)

## COMMISSAIRE D'ÉCOLES

Voter pour UN/UNE (1)

TO VOTE, FILL IN THE CIRCLE  NEXT TO YOUR CHOICE.  
POUR VOTER, REMPLISSEZ LE CERCLE  À CÔTÉ DE VOTRE CHOIX.

Ellen Bees

# Parental rights and school boards as contested spaces in Manitoba

Over the past five years, the school system in Manitoba has been the subject of public dialogue, debate and conflict. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were placed under pressure as staff and students balanced public health measures with schooling. A push to “modernize” the public school system was also happening, which would have included sweeping changes like eliminating elected school boards and amalgamating school divisions. While the provincial government ultimately withdrew this plan in the face of public opposition and dialogue, other conflicts remained.

As pandemic restrictions eased and modernization plans were put on hold, school boards became contested spaces, this time

with parental rights becoming a focal point. By examining two case studies in Manitoba where the parental rights movement caused school boards to become sites of conflicts, we can learn how this movement impacted public education and interfered with democratic practices.

### The history of parental rights

The push for parental rights is not a new phenomenon. Parental rights movements have emerged at many points throughout history to control school curriculum, pedagogy and practices (Hornbeck, 2023). The claim of parental rights has also been used as a rhetorical tool by campaigning politicians to attract support and push forward agendas of privatization, particularly



when these agendas involve incorporating private values into systems that should reflect public values based in human rights (Moore, McCorquodale-Bauer & Lopuck, 2025). More recently, this drive has been connected with opposition to public health measures, like mask or vaccine mandates. However, as these measures faded, attention shifted to opposing instruction relating to gender identity, sexual orientation, and race and racism. Proponents of parental rights at times frame the issue in relation to freedom of speech or religion, government indoctrination, and protecting children, although these talking points often obscure underlying homophobia, transphobia and racism (Mayo, 2021). In some cases, slanderous and false accusations are made against educators, such as grooming or pedophilia, and it is not unusual to find links to conspiracy theories and other disinformation (Moore & Lopuck, 2025).

The Manitoba Public Schools Act enumerates seven rights that parents have within the school system, such as the right of a parent to consult with a teacher about their child's progress or the right to be informed of their child's behaviour or achievement. The current parental rights movement is pushing to expand this list to obtain more control over what is taught and the ability to censor content for all students. However, no parent has the right to control what other people's children learn within the public school system, particularly when censorship negatively affects equity-seeking groups and counters human rights. This tension has led to school boards becoming contested spaces as a culture war plays out in school board offices across Manitoba.

## The 2022 school board elections

In October 2022, school board elections took place in Manitoba for the first time since before the pandemic. [Some people who had protested public health measures](#) and who had garnered media attention decided to run for school trustee, with the hope of influencing school board policies. Several candidates were connected to the far right. [The Canadian Anti-Hate Network](#) profiled five far-right candidates, several of whom made the jump from COVID restriction protestor to school trustee candidate. Several of these far-right candidates expressed homophobic or transphobic rhetoric and advocated for limiting sex education in schools. Some of these candidates had been associated with far-right groups, like the Proud Boys or Action4Canada, a group that pushes conspiracy theories and

disinformation. While candidates connected to far-right ideology were a fringe group, some of their far right ideas became a part of their platform.

During this election, parental rights emerged as an underlying discourse in a few campaigns. For instance, a candidate who ran in Seine River School Division, in South Eastern Manitoba, emphasized parental rights and indicated that, ["another thing is to have all the highly sexualized stuff removed from the school, and the gender ideology."](#) While this candidate and most others expressing these ideas did not succeed in their elections, a few did win their races, leading to later conflicts.

## Louis Riel School Division

The Louis Riel School Division in Winnipeg serves as an example. In 2022, Francine Champagne was elected as a school trustee in Ward 1. In May 2023, Champagne posted and shared content on social media that was transphobic and she linked to a website that publishes false information about the WHO and the United Nations. She wrote, ["the sexualization of our children in schools is all part of the agenda."](#) She was suspended in June 2023 for three months for breaching the school division's code of conduct.

On June 20, 2023, a group of protestors went to a school board meeting to oppose the suspension, although a number of attendees were not members of the Louis Riel School Division community. Since the suspension was not an agenda item, the protestors were not permitted to register to speak as a delegation. Some of the protestors made homophobic, transphobic and racist remarks and [a trustee who had recently come out as bisexual was targeted with abusive language and a threatening gesture](#). The police were called to deal with what [one newspaper labelled a mob](#), and 35 people were later barred from future school board meetings. The board chose to move subsequent meetings online for a time to ensure a safe environment and to minimize disruption to the surrounding residential area. Despite this, Action4Canada chose to protest the next school board meeting in September. Community members responded with a counter-protest in support of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Given the unsafe nature of the situation, it is understandable that the school division chose to move their board meetings online. However, this decision also emphasizes the serious impact of the parental rights movement on democratic

# No parent has the right to control what other people's children learn within the public school system

systems. Democratic processes involve sharing differing points of view, with decision-making being informed by a variety of perspectives. However, this process cannot effectively function within an unsafe environment, particularly when marginalized groups are targeted, offensive language is hurled, and human rights are undermined and violated. This is an example of how the contested space of the school board had to shift its practices in response to conflict and abuse.

Champagne was later suspended in October 2023 for a month for refusing to sign her school division's code of conduct. In November 2023, she was suspended for a third time for posting a racist comment online. The school division began the process of unseating her permanently via the courts and she chose to resign. While two pro-parental rights candidates ran in the June 2024 byelection and received a combined 24% of the votes, they were both defeated by a candidate who received 64% of the votes by running on a campaign that was supportive of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

## **Brandon School Division**

Another case study to highlight is the Brandon School Division's response to calls for censorship. On May 8, 2023, a delegation presented to the Brandon School Board requesting a committee be established to review books found in Brandon schools. The delegation's presenter focused on books that included 2SLGBTQIA+ characters and themes or books that teach about sexuality education. Throughout this presentation she cited disinformation targeting the 2SLGBTQIA+

community as part of a call for privately motivated censorship.

The response was intense; the next board meeting on May 23 was attended by hundreds of community members. The trustees had received 289 letters or emails, the vast majority of which criticized the book review proposal. At the meeting, 28 out of the 30 people who presented spoke against the proposal. Speakers emphasized the importance of access to books with 2SLGBTQIA+ representation for queer youth, the need for inclusive schools, and the benefits of comprehensive sexuality education for young people. In the end, the school board voted 6-1 against the proposal, with Trustee Breanna Sieklicki offering the sole vote in support.

This incident captured national attention and it appeared to be a decisive victory against censorship. However, in subsequent months, parental rights advocates continued to challenge trustees about this decision. In June 2023, a Brandon resident demanded that the board provide communications that occurred prior to the May 23 meeting to demonstrate their decision-making process. Board Chair Linda Ross refused, indicating that further discussion about reviewing books would interfere with the board's main mission of educating children. She also indicated that evaluating books and resources was the role of professional library staff, not the board of trustees or private citizens.

Months later, the same resident would tell the board that packages containing notices of liability had been delivered to six of the trustees. This act is part of Action4Canada's playbook, where legally dubious notices are given to school officials accusing them of exposing students to

sexually explicit or pornographic material. The trustees were unmoved. At the end of August, Trustee Sieklicki tried to reopen the debate at a school board meeting, putting forward a new motion to establish a book review committee. She also made a second motion to require schools to inform parents about school activities, such as curriculum, presentations, and information relating to students. The other trustees did not support these motions and they did not move forward.

Constantly focusing on parental rights issues comes at a cost. Foremost, there is the stress experienced by members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and allies who are forced to assert their humanity and right to exist by responding in support of safe and inclusive schools. Additionally, there are consequences for how the Brandon School Board operates. First of all, the school board incurred the expense of hiring private security for their meetings, which had been unnecessary previously. Secondly: opportunity costs. [Board Chair Ross](#) made it clear that repeatedly retreading the same issues takes time, which interferes with the board's ability to attend to school governance and other matters. An October 23, 2023 [opinion piece in the Brandon Sun](#) made a similar point when discussing parental rights delegations scheduled to present to the board. They stated that delegations continually communicating intolerance was an abuse of the process and urged the board of trustees to take steps to limit the disruption these presentations cause. Constant focus on parental rights issues became a costly and disruptive problem for the school board.

On October 25, 2023, byelections were held for Wards 1 and 2 of the Brandon School Division and parental rights became an election issue. In Ward 1, seven out of eight candidates agreed with the board's decision to not establish a book review committee (one candidate was staunchly against the decision). Ward 2 included two candidates, one of whom was the father-in-law of Trustee Sieklicki and a supporter of the parental rights movement.

In both wards, the winning candidates expressed public support for safe, inclusive, and welcoming schools and each received more than twice the votes of their parental rights opponents. This echoes the Manitoba provincial election that had occurred on October 3, 2023, where the incumbent Progressive Conservatives campaigned on a parental rights platform and lost to the New Democratic Party. While the supporters of parental rights were loud, they did

not garner massive public support when it came time to vote.

## Conclusion

In both the Brandon and Louis Riel School Divisions, school boards became contested spaces as groups used parental rights to push for changes that were harmful for students. This results in spaces that are unsafe for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and for school trustees more generally. It wastes money and time that could be better spent on school governance. It normalizes the framing of parental rights ideology as something other than fringe, even though it runs counter to widely accepted views of human rights (and was rejected in the 2024 Louis Riel byelection, the 2023 Brandon byelection, and the 2023 Manitoba provincial election).

The parental rights movement has led school boards in Manitoba to become sites of conflict and dysfunction, distracted by individuals who cite conspiracy theories and push for changes that are not in the best interest of students. As the next school board elections approach in 2026 in Manitoba, it is important for citizens to pay attention and stay well informed in order to elect candidates who truly represent their communities. /OS

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Matthew McCorquodale-Bauer

## Language matters

Framing of family, vilifying gender,  
and reshaping public education

Parental rights is a constructed term strategically framed to evoke legitimacy and moral authority (Fowler and Mountz, 2024). It is a phrase that rings with [ofcourseness](#), a definitive sounding term that veils the underlying ideological motivation. A [thought terminating cliché](#) that discourages further inquiry. In this article, the 'parental rights' movement will be framed deliberately, enclosed in quotation marks, to signal its curated and ideological nature, because — as will be shown in this article — how we say things matters.

As Montell (2021) writes, “words are the medium through which belief systems are manufactured, nurtured, and reinforced” (p. 14). When these terms are repeated within popular media, they become, as Giroux calls it, a form of

[public pedagogy](#) that instructs the public how to think about an issue or topic.

This piece examines how two *National Post* articles contribute to the public understanding of the 'parental rights' movement. Specifically, I consider how these two articles frame gender as an enemy, the child as property (in certain contexts), and public education as an opposition to traditional understandings of the 'family'.

Although this analysis centers on the *National Post*, it offers broader insight into how mainstream media legitimizes, endorses, and mobilizes particular ideological views. The *National Post* was selected not only because of its ideological alignment with the movement, but also due to the sheer volume of coverage it has dedicated to the topic — publishing nearly twice

as many articles on the subject as outlets like CBC or *The Globe and Mail*.

## Privatizing the public

In a previous *Our Schools/Our Selves* publication featuring an article by [Moore, Lopuck and myself](#), we argued that the parental rights movement should be recognized as a fourth pathway to privatization of public schools. This pathway involves the infiltration and enforcement of private values in public education, particularly those rooted in neoconservative ideology. Whereas public education is supposed to uphold decided public values, particularly those enshrined in human rights legislation, The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1991), the parental rights movement has resulted in private values—that run counter to established public values—being prioritized, enforced, and mobilized in public education. As these values become embedded, education's purpose is redirected away from its democratic responsibility to the public good and toward the advancement of individualistic, moralistic agendas.

The two *National Post* articles analyzed here exemplify this shift: they frame gender diversity as a threat, construct moral panic around inclusive education, and portray deviation from normative masculinity as dangerous. In doing so, they evoke a call to restore the so-called “traditional family,” using language to justify exclusion and control.

At the core of the ‘parental rights’ movement is a discursive strategy of othering, particularly directed at gender non-conforming and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, where gender diversity is framed as a threat to children's innocence, family cohesion, and social order. This othering serves a dual function: it consolidates the role of the parent as the moral authority while casting school as actors of ideological subversion. As Butler (2024) argues, in neoconservative discourse, gender is a kind of amoral contagion, something that spreads, corrupts, and must therefore be contained. Such framings are not incidental; they serve the broader ideological work of restoring and safeguarding what Seymour (2024) calls the sanctioned fantasy of the nuclear family, where queerness is cast as the villain that disrupts moral and social order.

It is through this lens that these *National Post* articles can be understood as neoconservative/neoliberal projects engaged in the public pedagogy of fear, exclusion, and privatization. That is, these articles don't just report, they

teach. They frame public schools as dangerous, cast gender-diverse students as threats, and present parents as victims of a system that has supposedly turned against them. By using emotional language, refusing to acknowledge trans identities, and telling selective stories about whose rights matter, they work to make neoconservative values seem like common sense. In doing so, the articles help build a broader message: that public education should no longer serve everyone, but instead protect certain beliefs, identities, and family structures.

## Combative language

[Blaff's \(2024\)](#) *National Post* article, “Who's Carl? When parents are the last to know about their trans kids” exemplifies this pattern. This nearly 5,000-word piece reads as a crusade against the public school system, presenting educational practices that respect children's autonomy and identity as villainous. Blaff writes, “Ontario's school board policies are ‘paving the way to family dissolution,’ Biddy said. They are ‘uprooting the bedrock support systems kids need to succeed in life.’” Here, the language constructs a combative dichotomy between schools and families. This framing aligns with the logic Butler (2024) critiques, in which trans identities are rendered not as expressions of self but as ideological threats, unnatural and in need of governing.

Another instance that exemplifies this combative language reads as follows: “Robin was stung by the policy pitting parents against their own children” (Blaff, 2024). While the surface structure of this sentence suggests a conflict between parent and child, its deeper function is to reassert parental ownership over children and frame the school system as the true antagonist. This framing draws on an *ad hominem* fallacy (attack against a person or group), in which the legitimacy of educational institutions is undermined not by critiquing their arguments or practices directly, but by attacking their trustworthiness, values, or alleged ideological agendas. Rather than offering a reasoned assessment of inclusive educational policy, the article reduces the conflict to an emotional narrative in which parents are victims of a covert institutional betrayal.

This move also relies heavily on the hot appeal fallacy to bypass critical reasoning and inflame a sense of moral urgency. By using words like “stung,” “pitting,” and “dissolution,” Blaff's language evokes pain, fragmentation,

and loss, inviting readers to respond not with inquiry but with outrage. In doing so, the article helps construct a narrative in which the 'parental rights' movement is a necessary corrective to an overreaching state — where schools, rather than supporting youth, are framed as hostile agents that corrupt, confuse, or conceal. The implication is not just that public education has overstepped, but that it has violated a sacred boundary: the rightful dominion of the parent over the child.

This rhetorical pattern reinforces what Butler (2024) and Seymour (2024) describe as a neoconservative/neoliberal moral order, in which gender diversity is not simply unfamiliar but threatening to the imagined sanctity of the nuclear family. It teaches readers to distrust institutions that offer care and affirmation outside the home, and to see such interventions as acts of ideological warfare rather than of educational support.

### **"Biological daughter"**

An unsettling rhetorical trend in Blaff's article is the repeated refusal to use the child's affirmed name or pronouns. Instead, Blaff relies on the term "biological daughter" and consistently uses the child's deadname throughout. This deliberate linguistic choice does more than misgender, it functions to deny the child's subjectivity altogether. By centering assigned sex at birth and erasing the child's self-identification, the article invokes a logic in which identity is fixed, external, and biologically determined.

This rhetoric carries two significant implications. First, it dehumanizes: referring to someone primarily through biological classification and without personal agency reduces them to a body rather than recognizing them as a person. Second, it constructs the child not as an autonomous being but as a possession, implicitly reinforcing the idea that parents have not only legal authority but existential ownership over their children's identities. The repeated use of the deadname signals to the reader that the child's chosen identity is invalid, a betrayal of some imagined biological truth.

This directly relates to Butler's (2006) notion of performativity; the way naming practices can reinforce normative power structures and render nonconforming identities unintelligible. The performative nature of gender and sexuality is further highlighted in Blaff's commentary on generational shifts in queer youth identity: "Something has shifted in the past 50 years. Two generations ago, many gay and lesbian

children feared their parents rejecting them and went to great lengths to avoid disappointing them by staying closeted. They craved parental acceptance."

On the surface, this statement may appear sympathetic. But rhetorically, it functions to reintroduce shame as a disciplinary mechanism. By romanticizing an era in which queerness was hidden out of fear of disappointing one's parents, Blaff somehow positions parental rejection not as a problem, but as a normative and even moral reaction, something that once kept queer children in line.

This nostalgic framing reasserts heteronormativity by casting past repression as a preferable alternative to present-day visibility. The implication is that shame once served a socially cohesive function, maintaining the primacy of the nuclear family and parental control. In contrast, contemporary existence of queer identity, particularly those that receive institutional support, are portrayed as a moral contagion.

### **The crusader**

The second article, "Catholic board wants to ostracize Christian teen. He wants to go to class" by [Higgins \(2023\)](#), exemplifies the contradictions and hypocrisies embedded within the 'parental rights' movement — particularly in how it selectively invokes parental authority. While this movement is framed as a defense of parental control over their children's education and values, this article reveals how that control is conditional, wielded only when it aligns with dominant ideologies, particularly conservative Christian values.

The article centres on a teenage student who was suspended for making anti-trans comments in class. "And I simply said you can identify as you please, but the fact of the matter is God created male and female," said Josh in an interview. "That was considered bullying," (Higgins, 2024). The article frames the student as a martyr for truth and tradition, ignoring the harmful rhetoric in his language. His invocation of divine authority over gender is presented as common sense rather than exclusionary rhetoric that undermines human rights. This is yet another instance of "of course" language, in which ideological beliefs masquerade as neutral or self-evident truths.

Higgins writes that the student "gained a victory when the court ruled he had withdrawn from parental control, was, in effect, an independent adult, and could, therefore, appeal



the disciplinary notices himself." This directly contradicts the earlier article's message that children are under full parental control. Here, Josh is allowed to act independently. The rules seem to change depending on whose story is being told and which values they uphold.

In this moment, parental control, so fiercely defended in the previous article's contexts, is casually ignored to bolster the image of a rugged individual, a truth-speaking crusader. The 'parental rights' movement, in this instance, becomes less about the sanctity of family governance and more about legitimizing a specific set of values through whichever rhetorical or legal mechanism is most effective.

This contradiction becomes even more apparent as Higgins quotes Hooper, who stated, "I do not believe a court has the right to overrule the manner in which a family decides to structure itself, just because it is outside the norm." While framed as a defense of family autonomy, this logic does not extend to affirming families of queer or trans youth. Rather, it operates selectively, protecting only those family structures and values that conform to neoconservative norms. The argument of state control of autonomy is defended in this case, and yet it is denied to families who affirm queer or trans children.

Thus, the article reveals how the 'parental rights' movement is not about consistent advocacy for parental control or child autonomy, it is about policing which values are permitted in public spaces. When a queer or trans child asserts independence from their parents, it is framed as indoctrination or rebellion. When a conservative child asserts independence from their school and advocates for legal autonomy apart from their parents, it is framed as a heroic act of resistance.

## Conclusion

The 'parental rights' movement reveals itself not as advocacy for parental involvement, but as a strategic discourse that seeks to restore neoconservative/neoliberal dominance. Through the repetition of "of course" language, appeals to emotion, and the weaponization of gender as the enemy, gender-diverse identities are framed as existential threats to children, the family unit and social order. These rhetorical moves are not accidental, they are part of a larger restoration project that seeks to reassert control over public education by filtering it through private, often religious or moralistic, values. As demonstrated through the articles analyzed,

this movement inconsistently applies the very logic it claims to defend: parental authority is championed when it supports dominant ideology, but inconsequential if the child is pursuing to reinforce neoconservative hegemony.

This selective advocacy exposes the 'parental rights' movement as a Trojan horse for the erosion of public education's democratic aims. It replaces collective responsibility with individualized morality and reframes education as a battleground for ideological purity rather than a space for equity and inquiry. If language shapes what is understanding and belief, then it must also be interrogated, challenged, and corrected. /OS

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7 reinforce the fundamental right of parents to make  
8 decisions regarding the upbringing and control of  
9 their children in a specified manner; prohibiting the  
10 procedures from prohibiting a parent from accessing  
11 certain records; providing construction; prohibiting a  
12 school district from adopting procedures or student  
13 support forms that prohibit school district personnel  
14 from notifying a parent about specified information or  
15 that encourage or have the effect of encouraging a  
16 student to withhold from a parent such information;  
17 prohibiting school district personnel from  
18 discouraging or prohibiting parental notification and

Logan Bates

# The emotional discourses of parental rights

## Florida's *Parental Rights in Education Act*

**A**cross the globe, governments are passing anti-LGBTQ+ curriculum laws that curtail queer and gender-inclusive education initiatives, prohibit trans students' inclusion in sports, and require the use of bathrooms according to sex assigned at birth. Tying these policies together is a common rhetorical theme of "parental rights" that seeks to secure the authority of parents in a child's upbringing and to ensure "fairness" in school activities.

In North America, one of the first bills to use this rhetoric was Florida's 2022 *Parental Rights in Education Act* (PREA). The contents of the bill provide that parents must be allowed to make decisions regarding a child's mental and physical well-being at school, be notified of any social

or health-related changes, and that classroom instruction on gender and sexual identity be age-appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

While the advent of legislation such as Florida's PREA comes at a time of increasing anti-gender movements worldwide,<sup>2</sup> the shift to "parental rights" framing differs from recent opposition models used by anti-LGBTQ+ rights activists. Whereas previous efforts to block LGBTQ+ rights expansions saw discursive frames of religion, morality, and disgust, this new model uses the parental rights frame to weaponize neutrality,<sup>3</sup> obscuring the overt homophobia and transphobia inherent to parental rights bills.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, by circumventing a discussion of LGBTQ+ rights, the framework reifies cisheteronormativity as the best model for a child's welfare and upbringing.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the shift in framing, the current strategy of deploying parental rights is not new—it is a continuation of preceding oppositional strategies. More specifically, the parental rights debate uses fear and security to achieve institutional change while sanitizing discourses of disgust and moral outrage. Emotion discourse analysis (EDA) helps uncover the emotional discourses of PREA policy debates and demonstrates how the emotional discourses of Florida policymakers share discursive continuity with previous conservative opposition to LGBTQ+ rights.

## Emotions and institutions

Institutions are important to understand in politics because they are the formal and informal rules, organizations, and structures that influence political behavior, policy processes, and decision-making capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Often viewed as neutral and rational, an emerging literature in policy studies highlights how institutions are constituted and influenced by emotions through how they build support for policy ideas and legitimacy for policy actions,<sup>7</sup> mobilise resistance and advocacy,<sup>8</sup> frame and shape policy content,<sup>9</sup> shape policy processes,<sup>10</sup> and re/produce social relations within policy contexts.<sup>11</sup>

To investigate the emotions inherent to policy debates surrounding the PREA, I used EDA. The method is concerned with interpreting language to analyze its emotional potential and contextualizing these sentiments within the broader social, institutional, and political environment.<sup>12</sup>

To conduct this analysis, I gathered transcripts from all legislative debates, press conferences, social media posts, and committee hearings on the bill from the policymakers who supported it. What this analysis reveals is that, through the use of emotional discourses to inform policy responses, the PREA changed the institutional structuring of Florida education laws to one that is less inclusive and accepting of LGBTQ+ students and families.

## Opposition to LGBTQ+ rights advancement

There exists a long history of LGBTQ+ opposition in the United States based on frames of disgust and morality. Using the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a catalyst to assume more influence, anti-LGBTQ+ activists framed queer people as “deviants” and “undeserving” to restrict research funding

for HIV/AIDS research. The Save Our Children Campaign, founded in Florida by Anita Bryant, sought to prevent the employment of openly LGBTQ+ people in publicly funded school systems due to fear of moral corruption.

Curricular laws often referred to as “no promo homo” laws gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s citing the risk to public health if same-sex attraction was promoted in classes through mandated curriculum or sexual education. The “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy of the Clinton administration restricted LGBTQ+ service members from coming out due to the perceived corrupting effects on military readiness and troop morale. Opposition to reversing sodomy laws and expanding marriage rights to same-sex partners in the 2000s and 2010s used the morality-based language of traditional gender roles and family values to support anti-LGBTQ+ ballot initiatives and court battles.

With Florida passing the PREA in 2022, the fight over LGBTQ+ policies seemed to take a turn by focusing on rights-based arguments instead of feelings of morality and disgust. However, using EDA reveals that emotions such as disgust and moral outrage still play a part in this debate alongside discourses of fear and security.

## Discourses of fear and security

Of the emotional discourses discovered in the collected transcripts, fear and security were the most prevalent. While similar in their usage, they evoke different meanings.

In the debate over parental rights, fear constructs and legitimises policy ideas and solutions. It cements the fact that parents need to be afraid of the current state of education in Florida and allows policymakers to make the case that the state needs to adopt the bill to prevent indoctrination from reaching children. For example, in a press conference, [Governor DeSantis stated](#), “We will make sure that parents can send their kids to school to get an education, not an indoctrination.” Fear was also used to construct and legitimize the idea that the state was encroaching on the rights of parents through gender ideology.

During floor debates [State Representative Fernandez-Barquin claimed](#) “In states like California, and in our totalitarian neighbour to the North, Canada, they are terminating parental rights because the parents refuse to affirm a child’s gender orientation,” and [State Senator Baxley](#) stated, “I’m always very anxious when it looks like we’re moving away from educating



and beginning to socially engineer people as to how they're supposed to think, feel, and do. I don't want to wait till we're like Russia where you have to go to a thought improvement school". Narratives of indoctrination, government overreach, and gender ideology painted the picture that parental rights were on the precipice of collapse in the state and children were in danger. This frame provokes a response in the public that this bill is necessary to protect both parents and children in Florida.

While fear was dominant in political communication, it was not used in isolation. Supporters of the bill also used the narrative of security in their emotional appeals.

Security is a consequence of fear, but is tempered by hope and the promise of protection. In the debate over the PREA, security presented itself as a need to protect parents and their children from indoctrination, as evidenced by [Governor DeSantis tweeting](#), "...keep indoctrination out and put parents in charge of their children's futures". In order to protect against these fears produced by "gender ideology", policymakers framed the bill as one that would take care of Florida families and empower parents to take charge and protect their children.

Consider, for example, [State Representative Elizabeth Fetterhoff who stated in a news release](#), "Parents, who are their children's first teachers, should always have a voice and decision making rights in the education of their children." Here, narratives of security prioritize the importance of parents in a child's upbringing, distancing the role of the state and teachers in a child's upbringing. Similarly, [State Representative Tom Leek tweeted](#), "...give our school system back to the parents." Whereas emotional appeals to fear were used to explain the necessity of the bill, emotional appeals to security were used to promise hope and empowerment to Florida parents.

Emotionalizing security was an effective discursive strategy because it preemptively shut down interventions from opponents of the bill. The security discourse is premised on a binary relation, such that opposition to security was constituted as "anti-security" and therefore not persuasive. Working in tandem with fear, discourses of security convinced the public of the need for drastic changes to education standards. These uses of security point to further policy legitimization on behalf of supporters of the bill, but underneath this legitimization lay dormant frames in conservative opposition — disgust and moral outrage.

## Discourses of disgust and moral outrage

Disgust and moral outrage informed the passing of Florida's PREA during floor debates and committee hearings amongst policymakers. They were used to call into question queerness and gender diversity in the name of protecting the innocence of children. For example, [State Senator Baxley stated](#), "Why is everybody now all about coming out when you're in school?... I know parents are very concerned about the departure of the core belief systems and values."

Despite increasing rights and attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, these emotions of disgust and moral outrage are still seen to inform policies through beliefs of what queerness or gender diversity are. Take for example how [State Senator Garcia believes](#), "...gay is not a permanent thing," or how [State Senator Burgess advocated for the need to](#) "Protect children's innocence a little longer." By espousing these beliefs of impermanence or corruption, policymakers reaffirm emotional appeals of disgust and moral outrage seen in previous opposition movements against LGBTQ+ rights.

Unlike the discourses of fear and security, disgust and moral outrage are hidden from the wider public audience. Instead of appearing in communication directly to the public, for instance, through social media posts or press conferences, these emotional discourses appear in the more formal institutional settings of legislative debates.

In past opposition movements, disgust and moral outrage were useful frames to create, legitimise, and persuade others of socially conservative policy initiatives opposed to LGBTQ+ rights. Now, with increased acceptance of said rights, these discourses are not as useful for legitimization and persuasion, but they remain useful in policy creation. When the bill was being presented to the public, only fear and security were invoked in its favour through discourses of legal — that is, neutral — rights. This demonstrates an awareness among policymakers that disgust and moral outrage are not as salient as they once were in wider public forums. As a result, these emotions remain largely hidden from political debate, yet remain central to the creation of the bill.

This sanitization of disgust and moral outrage demonstrates how the parental rights framework repackages past oppositional strategies to hide inherent homophobia and transphobia through more neutral and legal rights-based discourses based on fear and security.

## Conclusion

Through the sanitization of emotional appeals based on disgust and moral outrage, policies based on anti-gender rhetoric and beliefs have seen increasing successes. Canada is no stranger to the strategies used in Florida to pass the PREA with the Alberta and Saskatchewan Legislatures passing similar parental rights bills. Attuning to how these bills are discursively framed using emotions can provide useful analysis as to why the parental rights debate has been so successful for social conservative forces despite steady increases in LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance over the past several decades. /OS

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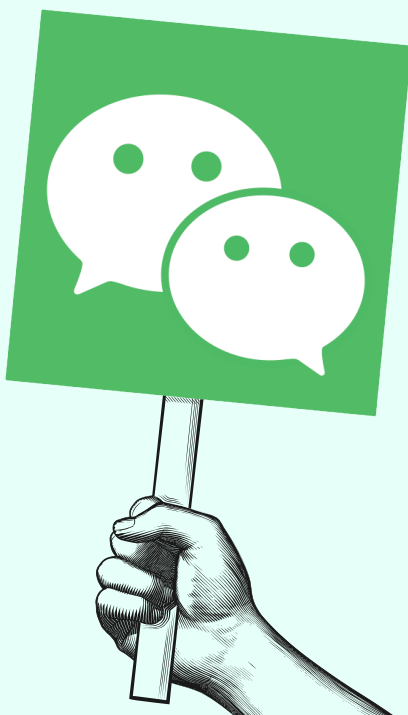
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Heng Simone Wang

## Difficult knowledge

### Understanding “parental rights” and anti-SOGI mobilization among Sinophone Canadian parents in Metro Vancouver

Over the past 15 years, there has been a rapid rise in anti-SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) mobilization, primarily led by self-identified “parental rights” protesters in Metro Vancouver and across Canada more broadly.

In 2011, [Burnaby School District’s Policy 5.45](#)—designed to support 2SLGBTQI+ students and employees—was met with organized opposition from a parents’ group called “[Parents’ Voice](#).” This group ran candidates for school board and protested the policy, citing a lack of adequate consultation.

In 2014, a similar controversy unfolded in Vancouver when the Vancouver School Board proposed updates to its anti-discrimination

policies to better support trans and gender non-conforming students. In response, opponents formed a group called “Protecting All Children in School,” which gained visibility through press conferences and online petitions (Leung, 2017).

In 2016, the British Columbia government passed the [Human Rights Code Amendment Act, 2016 \(Bill 27\)](#), formally adding “gender identity or expression” as protected grounds under the B.C. Human Rights Code, following “sexual orientation.” To comply with these legal protections, the Richmond School District adopted Policy 106-G in 2018, a comprehensive SOGI policy affirming the rights of 2SLGBTQI+ students and staff. At the public hearing that June, hundreds of residents attended, including vocal



opponents. The policy passed in a 6-1 vote, but media backlash grew, as [many Richmond local media covered anti-SOGI parental protests](#).

While the anti-SOGI conflicts of the early 2010s were largely localized and focused on individual school districts, by 2023 a national anti-SOGI movement had emerged, significantly broader in both scale and rhetoric. That year, a coalition of “parental rights” groups organized the “1 Million March 4 Children” (1MM4C), a self-described coast-to-coast protest against SOGI education in Canadian schools.

On September 20, 2023, rallies took place in dozens of cities across the country, marking the largest coordinated anti-SOGI mobilization in Canadian history. Metro Vancouver saw multiple protest sites, including a rally in downtown Vancouver where a few hundred anti-SOGI protesters gathered—though they were ultimately outnumbered by counter-protesters supporting 2SLGBTQI+ youth. Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric became more visible and direct during these events, fueled by rising pro-conservative and “anti-woke” sentiment circulating both online and in public discourse.

One question stands out: Who are these “parental rights” protesters? In Metro Vancouver, the anti-SOGI mobilization includes a diverse array of parents. Evangelical Christians of European descent were the most visible during the 1MM4C. However, given Metro Vancouver’s immigrant history and racially diverse population, Asian parents have also played a significant role in these protests since the early stages.

## The difficult knowledge

This article explores the involvement of racialized immigrants in these mobilizations—especially in coalition with groups known for overt xenophobia, white supremacy, or Catholic fundamentalism.

Analysis for this issue is difficult for two key reasons. First, media and public discourse often depict racialized immigrants as inherently conservative, while downplaying the substantial participation of white, European-descended protesters. Second, within progressive spaces, the fear of reinforcing racist stereotypes can discourage open discussion of how some first-generation immigrants are being drawn into far-right, neo-fascist political movements.

Taking an anti-racist, anti-xenophobic, and intersectional approach to the anti-SOGI backlash, this article focuses on the participation of Chinese Canadian parents in Metro Vancouver as an entry point into the broader dynamics of parental mobilization. In doing so, it adopts the term “Sinophone” (Chinese language-speaking) rather than “Chinese” to refer to these “parental rights” protesters. This shift highlights the role of language in forming social groups and facilitating protest within immigrant communities. It also reflects the distinct immigration histories and population geographies of Metro Vancouver, and acknowledges generational differences between first-generation Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking immigrants and their children.



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## Sinophone parents' engagement in anti-SOGI movements and media representations

Sinophone parents have been involved in anti-SOGI movements since their early emergence, often drawing on the language of “parental rights.” Their presence has been noted by many [pro-SOGI media articles](#). Two patterns have emerged in how this participation is represented.

The first frames Asian parents' involvement through the lens of ethnocultural conservatism—a concept that links specific ethnic groups to perceived traditional values, social norms, and conservative cultural beliefs. This framing often reinforces stereotypes and can invoke racism by singling out certain communities while rendering their white counterparts invisible. Meanwhile, some “parental rights” protesters have themselves strategically utilized discourses of ethnocultural conservatism, [using ideas of cultural differences between the West and “family values” associated with their ethnicity to justify opposition](#).

The second pattern, which has been more common in mainstream English-language media, involves avoiding references to ethnicity altogether. However, as Leung (2017) observed in her study of the 2014 Vancouver School Board SOGI policy debates, Vancouver's Chinese-language media often portrayed the controversy as a “Chinese issue,” with little critical reflection. In both scenarios, anti-SOGI organizers have pushed back against English-language portrayals that emphasize ethnocultural conservatism, even as they frequently invoke “family values” and “Chinese culture” in Chinese-language outlets as core reasons for their protests.

Sinophone parents' involvement in anti-SOGI activism in Metro Vancouver grew steadily and reached a peak in 2018, when the [Richmond School District's adoption of Policy 106-G drew hundreds of protesters](#). Richmond, a gentrified suburb in Metro Vancouver, has the highest proportion of racialized residents in British Columbia, with [Chinese Canadians making up over 50% of the population](#). The anti-SOGI campaign was widely interpreted as [a form of political struggle within the Chinese community itself](#). This interpretation was reinforced by voting patterns in political elections, where many Sinophone Conservative voters campaigned through Chinese-language social media, framing [SOGI policies as a central electoral issue](#).

The role of Chinese-language social media and local Chinese-language press expanded significantly during the 1MM4C protests. In

downtown Vancouver, [a few hundred anti-SOGI protesters gathered](#), including Sinophone parents carrying signs written in Chinese. WeChat groups in Mandarin and Cantonese circulated calls to join the march, along with videos of confrontations at school board meetings. One viral incident involved a Chinese mother with a baby allegedly being shoved by a pro-SOGI activist, which was framed as an example of the “intolerance” of pro-SOGI counter-protesters. Numerous WeChat articles in Chinese were published around the time of 1MM4C, and local Chinese-language newspapers such as [Sing Tao](#) applauded the “parental rights” discourses.

While Sinophone parents' participation in anti-SOGI movements cannot be adequately explained by ethnocultural conservatism alone, it remains important to acknowledge their insistence on being recognized as ethnic subjects (Leung, 2017). Equally essential is situating their mobilization within a broader Canadian—and indeed global—pattern of anti-SOGI movements shaped by transnational and generational dynamics. These dynamics take material form and have real consequences. Understanding them is key for educators, community workers, and policymakers seeking to counter harmful anti-SOGI mobilization among racialized immigrant communities.

## Manifesting transnational and generational dynamics in the mirage of multiculturalism

Sinophone parental mobilization against SOGI policies in Metro Vancouver is shaped by complex transnational ties and generational divides. First-generation Chinese immigrant parents have often appeared alongside white Christian activists in these protests. As diasporic scholars have noted, many newcomers from China and Hong Kong are more likely to seek support through religious communities. Some have joined local Chinese Christian churches that connect them to transnational conservative networks dominated by right-wing ideologies. Limited social networks and language barriers can prevent these parents from accessing progressive or 2SLGBTQI+ affirming spaces, making them more vulnerable to misinformation and even conspiracy theories. Many have absorbed ideas from global conservative movements—particularly the “anti-gender” agenda circulating in the UK and U.S.—which frame SOGI education as a threat to children and to “traditional” family values. Slogans like “parents have rights” and “don't

# The rhetoric of “protecting children” can become a rallying cry — **scapegoating SOGI policies to obscure deeper tensions** in a multicultural yet unequal society

mess with our children,” long popularized by American and European far-right groups, have been echoed by Sinophone protesters, revealing how anti-2SLGBTQI+ ideologies travel across borders and take root in immigrant communities.

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics. Many Sinophone parents rely primarily on Chinese-language media — WeChat groups, Mandarin and Cantonese newspapers, and ethnic radio stations — rather than mainstream English outlets. On closed platforms like WeChat, misinformation and fear-mongering about SOGI policies spreads quickly. Because of heavy censorship of pro-2SLGBTQI+ content by the Chinese government, there are few counter-narratives available in the same linguistic space. Observers have noted that right-wing actors have successfully used WeChat to spread conspiracy theories in Sinophone communities (Lu, 2020). This linguistic echo chamber limits access to official information. Many parents never encounter the actual content of SOGI resources — which are mostly in English — and instead learn about them through secondhand translations or rumors. The assumption by school officials that English-language outreach

is sufficient can alienate immigrant parents from the policy process. Many Sinophone parents who opposed SOGI reforms claimed they were never properly informed and only became aware through Chinese-language media coverage.

Generational divides further complicate the picture. Younger Chinese Canadians — the 1.5 or second generation — live in very different information circles and social networks than their parents. These youth attend public schools that actively implement SOGI policies and often support inclusive practices. Within families, this can lead to generational tension. Aggravated by the broader privatization of education — which, as Moore et al. (2025) argue, prioritizes the promotion of private values over public responsibility — many middle-class Sinophone parents channel their anxiety about losing connection with their children into heightened suspicion of public education. These anxieties are also tied to dominant narratives about the “desirable immigrant family,” particularly among first-generation parents who arrived in Canada through skilled worker or economic immigration streams. In this context, Metro Vancouver — and Richmond in particular — stands at the intersection of these transnational and generational tensions.

The involvement of racialized immigrants in anti-SOGI movements in Metro Vancouver highlights deeper contradictions within Canadian multiculturalism. While the Canadian Multiculturalism Act promotes the celebration of ethnic diversity, its application often remains surface-level. Scholars have described the “paradox of diversity” in multicultural policy: by emphasizing *visible* cultural differences, multicultural discourse tends to obscure underlying power relations, rendering structural inequalities and forms of oppression invisible (Bannerji 2017). In the context of anti-SOGI mobilizations, the “moral panic” over sexuality and a kind of “multicultural panic” over race and religion are often juxtaposed (Bialystok and Jessica 2019). Therefore, viewing immigrant parents’ opposition solely as ethnocultural conservatism under multicultural frameworks overlooks the intersectional, transnational, and generational factors that shape their positions.

## Moving forward

It is critical for educators, community workers, and policymakers committed to creating safer environments for 2SLGBTQI+ children to meaningfully engage with immigrant parents who



participate in anti-SOGI mobilizations. As Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2017) suggests, we must “create spaces that meet specific cultural and linguistic needs as much as possible while cultivating an ethos of dialogue and solidarity.” This approach can build on emerging practices already developed by and for immigrant communities.

Local Asian diasporic organizations have provided services tailored to the distinct needs of various linguistic and generational groups. Asian 2SLGBTQI+ individuals and collectives have worked to shape cultural subjectivity through film festivals, exhibitions, and performances, often using multilingual materials to reach broader audiences—including first-generation parents of queer and trans children. Scholars have also contributed by publishing Chinese-language articles that explain and contextualize SOGI policies.

Yet these individual and community-based efforts cannot fully shift anti-SOGI perspectives without institutional change. This article has shown how easily the rhetoric of “protecting children” can become a rallying cry—scapegoating SOGI policies to obscure deeper tensions around belonging and power in a multicultural yet unequal society. It is time to initiate sustained, multilingual dialogue within and beyond schools, and to support the coalition-building work already underway in diasporic 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Only by transforming this “difficult knowledge” into collective action can we move toward truly inclusive and equitable educational spaces. /OS

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Taylor McKee

## Manosphere in the classroom

Long before I devoted my professional life to academic research and teaching, I grew up during the nascent years of reality competition television. *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*—these shows often dominated '90s schoolyard discourse.

One of the key formulaic variables in these shows was the host. My first memory of one of these figureheads was an enthusiastic, engaging figure with jet-black hair and a particular penchant for sharing in each contestant's emotional experience, even if that required calmly explaining that a metal claw would be dumping 3,000 scorpions onto their restrained body. In that instance, Joe Rogan, host of *Fear Factor*, coached the contestants through the process, urging them to "Relax, calm down" and instructing the competitors to "find their happy place" as scorpions engulfed their ersatz graves.

In that moment, as the claw descended upon screaming contestants, I did not consider the extent to which Joe Rogan would remain a relevant public figure decades later. But, remarkably, this man "[played a key role in US elections](#)" when his invitation for Vice President and presidential hopeful Kamala Harris to join his famed podcast was declined.

How did a figure like this develop a following where his wishes and hopes determine scheduled campaign stops, or alternatively, [hotly debated omissions when left ignored](#)? The immense reach of Rogan and his many acolytes and imitators was built, painstakingly, through networks of mostly-male listeners, many of whom share a love of an industry, pastime, and activity of particular interest to my students: sport. Exceptionally prominent creators such as Rogan have used sport to preach sermons that harmonize elegantly

with the psalms of the resurgent parental rights movement.

For both the parental rights movement and creators like Rogan in what [has been labeled the 'Manosphere'](#), the enemies are clear: 'woke,' 'SJWs,' 'snowflakes,' 'DEI,' and trans-women athletes all threaten societal institutions, including sport, and listener communities are formed in opposition to these perceived threats. As the parental rights movement seeks to preserve 'tradition' through aggressively targeting inclusion efforts in schools and legislatures, a network of content creators have used sport to foster proscriptive notions of acceptable masculine responses to a changing world.

Despite their [often stated sport-facing political agnosticism](#), these voices are responsible for shaping the way that many young males explore and understand: public health, masculinity, and politics, moulding them in the images of their content creators.

### **Consuming content: sports with a side of social commentary**

The classrooms of my university are filled with some of the most talented, ambitious, and thoughtful devotees of sport from across North America. I am immensely privileged to have the opportunity to teach them, and I consistently endeavour to understand their sporting tastes to better appreciate how they consume and contribute to the sport industry.

In recent years, while the NHL and NFL remain near the top of the list, Mixed Martial Arts, and its largest platform the Ultimate Fighting Championship, has worked its way into the top tier for many students, both as viewers and aspiring employees. And the UFC is synonymous with two individuals in a way that is uncommon for most sports: CEO and President Dana White and ringside commentator, podcast magnate, and former *Fear Factor* host, Joe Rogan. As a result, the former figurehead who once cheered on reality game show contestants in my youth now plays a formative role in my classroom.

Before they arrive at my university, many of my students have already consumed sports from childhood. But beyond actually watching games or matches, this content takes many diverse forms, including podcasts, streamers, TikTokers, and Instagram accounts. These broadcasts are a distant relative of sports talk radio or even the panel-style broadcasts popularized through cable television. Such programming provides fans with the opportunity for endless coverage

of their favourite sport, without the strictures of traditional media. But if someone were to question how so many young sport fans can digest endless chatter, the answer lies in the form these outputs ultimately take.

When it comes to sports talk, content creators have found that sport pairs nicely with a broad array of seemingly random takes and topics. Although innumerable podcasts and YouTube videos break down the minutiae of every play from any given game, many sport podcasts are far more akin to lifestyle podcasts that cover sport.

The result is that sport new media is frequently co-opted as a forum for a particular ideology: one that often promotes exclusionary, elitist, and extremist views that have come to define the toxic landscape of the manosphere.

For example, Ryen Russillo, a football and basketball podcaster, offers "Life Advice" as a segment of his weekly show, which features friendship queries, parenting tips, and dating advice, among many other topics. Former NFL Quarterback Cam Newton offers dating advice on his "Funky Friday" episodes of his "4th and 1" Podcast, including, in one episode, [the realities and risks of dating sexually promiscuous women](#).

It's not just dating advice, either; young sports fans, who have long ingested this programming, are developing a political consciousness that, in some prominent sport podcasts, view Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as a ["sheep costume the wolf wears,"](#) fears the [dangers of socialized medicine](#), and argues that "the trans-woman movement is actually anti-woman."

The anti-trans discourse is often mirrored in contemporary manifestations of the parental rights movement, including: the prominent parental rights group [the Alliance Defending Freedom's 2019](#) anti-trans women in sport lawsuit, [Donald Trump advocating for a ban on transgendered athletes](#) in women's sport, and the [2024 Fairness and Safety in Sport Act](#) enacted by the Government of Alberta, which "would emphasize fairness, safety and inclusion as core principles of sport in Alberta" by forcing sport organizations to develop eligibility criteria delineated by biological sex. Exceptionally prominent creators like Rogan have preached barring trans women from women's sport.

Joe Rogan's American listeners, [roughly 80% of which are male](#) and 51% aged 18-34, preferred [Trump to Harris 54% to 26%](#) in the 2024 election. After welcoming then Vice Presidential nominee, J.D. Vance, and Trump onto the show, these numbers are likely not surprising.



Rogan also dabbles in Canadian politics as well, [declaring in 2022 that](#): “Canada’s Communist... They’re f\*cked... And then during the pandemic, I’m like, ‘oh, you’re a f\*cking dictator’ Oh, you don’t like criticism. You’re trying to shut down criticism by saying that all your critics are misogynists and racists... Yeah, he’s gross.”

Underscoring the direct line between sport and political coverage, this same episode explored how [trans women’s participation in sport](#) and “woke ideology” posed existential threats to women’s sport. Also discussed were beauty standards and optimal Subway sandwich juiciness.

The effect of Rogan’s shows is dizzying: episodes are often over three hours long and the topics are expansive, shapeless, and conversational, providing a smokescreen of unserious deniability for anyone seeking to clip: after all, it was just one small part and it wasn’t meant to be serious.

This format has been imitated, diluted, and disseminated globally, to varying levels of success for those attempting to emulate Rogan’s journey from reality television to political tastemaker.

In Canada, many versions of sport-themed podcasts, complete with their own political discourse, are now common. This home-grown industry is in addition to the growing dominance of American content creators — [it was estimated that](#) Rogan alone had three million Canadian listeners per month in 2020.

In their own way, Canadian-made [podcasts, like the “Slangin’ the Bizkit” podcast](#), with nearly 10,000 YouTube subscribers, offer a smaller-scale example of Rogan’s formula, but are no less virulent. Whether commenting that the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders are to be praised for their lack of DEI hires or “fat chicks,” or revealing a practice of the “hot lap,” where players are celebrated for having unprotected sex the night before, “Slangin’” promotes openly misogynistic narratives.

However, by intermixing pernicious rhetoric with seemingly apolitical sport coverage, such as interviews with former NHL players, they create the false impression that sports are intrinsically intertwined with an especially corrosive perspective: sugar laced with arsenic.

## Conclusion

Young Canadian men, a group well-represented in the demographics of my classrooms, are still early in their political journeys. When we first meet, many of them have not yet had the opportunity to vote in an election. There is time and opportunity for them to decide, but I see the early polling results in the stickers on many laptops and the hats on some heads.

Sport talk, like sport itself, merchandizes well and these classrooms represent battleground ridings for the next generations of our voting body. In the last election, men aged 18-34 voted Conservative: nearly 20% more than the party that nearly won a majority government. This counter-cultural impulse towards conservatism is not surprising to those of us who research sport and see the sizable gains the right has made in appealing to this demographic through sport.

While I (and I believe most of my young, male students) hold that sport and sport studies are instead at their best when they are humanist, adaptive, and reflective of our evolving world, we ignore the snarling, furious politicization of sports through new media channels at our own peril.

So, rather than relinquish sports as a tool of right-wing ideology and accept Rogan’s advice from *Fear Factor* to “relax, calm down,” perhaps it is time for those of us who love and study sport to stand up and leave the scorpions behind. /OS

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