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Special interests ahead of kids?

On Feb. 23, 2017, Public Interest Alberta joined with unions, two of the biggest public school boards, and ideologically motivated special interest groups to call for the removal of parent choice in education, via the stripping of independent school funding.

While described as 14 organizations, if you combine the similar interests and motivations of these groups, only three groups were actually signing on to this egregious, freedom-crushing call to strip taxpayers of their representation:

- 1) Unions, who want total control over union-due-paying education staff.
- 2) Public school boards, who want to escape the rigours of comparison and competition in an open education market place.
- 3) Special interest groups, who want to have absolute control over the maximum number of Alberta students, towards whom they can funnel their personal set of ideological values and ideas.

Education choice is important for several reasons. First, it allows parents to choose the best fit for their own children, benefitting children.

Second, the competition for students improves the quality of education in all settings, including public schools, benefitting children in all schools.

Third, choice allows parents to access a school setting that respects

their world view, allowing the freedom of thought and conscience that every free, pluralistic society should respect and honor.

NDP Education Minister David Eggen initially came out on Feb. 24, 2017, stating, "I've inherited an education system that has other models that delivers education ... For the sake of security, for the sake of stability in our education at this point, I have no plans to change that landscape here in the province of Alberta."

Yet, March 6, 2017, on the first day of the sitting of the Alberta Legislature for the spring session, Minister Eggen refused to respond coherently with a 'yes' or 'no' answer to whether independent school funding models will be tampered with this term when asked for clarity by Wildrose Education Critic Leela Aheer and PC MLA Dave Rodney.

In the seven days since Eggen's first response to PIA's calls to strip independent school funding, his tune had changed, as evidenced in the Calgary Herald, March 3, 2017: "To say everything stays static forever is to be not realistic. I'm always looking for ways by which I can provide good quality education for the most efficient use of public money."

The special interest and union pressure on Eggen is becoming apparent and, regardless of the facts, Eggen is now wavering in his support of education choice in Alberta, ignoring benefits of school choice for children and families and the savings to the public purse, conservatively amounting to \$750 million every five years.

As it stands, independent students receive around \$5,000 in public money, while public school children receive over \$10,000 per student per year. It is not rocket science to discern that even if half these children return to the public system, it would be costly to the public purse.

So who wins? Not the public purse, and not children and their families.

But one more detriment to the stripping of school choice cannot be ignored.

At present the funding model allows all students to access independent schools (if parents chose to sacrifice to make that possible). Remove the partial public support for students and only the wealthiest Albertans will have access to education choice.

If the NDP strips partial independent school funding, they will actually be creating the very thing they claim to be opposed to — a two-tiered education system.

So, who benefits? Not the public purse, not children, not education quality and certainly not access regardless of income.

Ironically, Public Interest Alberta and the 13 organisations who joined them, are just standing up for their special interests — all at the expense of Alberta children and the public interest.

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