

(Alberta, Canada is one of very few jurisdictions that funds home education. Although ostensibly making home education more available, funding creates its own set of problems. For a summary of events that inspired this article go to <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-education-shuts-down-private-christian-school-in-cold-lake-1.3821580> and for a comprehensive look at the original case go to <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=43682E60F26AE-DC39-6AB2-BFED48253B59C233>)

How Did It Happen?

Introduction

October 25, 2016 will be etched into a lot of people's memory for a very long time. That was the day Alberta's Minister of Education closed down the Trinity Christian School and, by extension, their associated home education provider, Wisdom Home Schooling. The closure was conducted in a manner that brings to mind stories of totalitarian regimes rounding up dissidents, only this time, without the use of physical guns. How did it happen? What led to such an inexplicable event that saw nearly 3500 students being effectively "de-registered" two months into a school year?

I am certainly not going to condone the government's action as it was not what one would expect of any reasonable governing body or agency. Nor will I defend the Trinity/Wisdom enterprise as I do not know what actually transpired, but I can say that nothing happens without due cause or reason. Something had to have led the government to act. It is not likely that it was some isolated incident, nor do I believe it is a recent thing, as much as the result of years' worth of issues that came to a head. And I doubt it was something unique only to the targeted school, which, as the biggest home education provider, may have been simply used by an ideologically driven government, to create the maximum impact. To get at least some understanding of what happened, we should look back in time and follow the developments that may have led to this shocking event.

A Personal Observation of Schools

During my many years as a classroom teacher, I consistently observed something that eventually became the focus of my opposition to the school systems. No matter where I was, I noticed that without children there was no school! Now, this may seem a bit simplistic, so let me explain. I came to understand, no matter what school or school system I taught in, that children were NOT usually the focus of the institution. Survival, growth and especially money, usually was. Although it was everywhere stated that "Public Education Works", it was painfully obvious to me that the system was not putting students or caring teachers first. In fact, I eventually realized that children were nothing more than the "fuel" needed to "power" the "engines" of the multibillion dollar education industry where the players usually advanced their own agendas first.

As I became more and more disillusioned with what I had come to see as the "business of education", my wife and I came to the conclusion that we could not, in good conscience, keep sending our children to school. This led us to the decision to educate our own children at home in the late eighties! As we embarked on this new venture, we came in contact with other like-minded parents who valued their children,

just because they were, indeed, special. I found that the small, but dedicated community of home educators shared a common purpose and motivation to follow the long-standing biblical directives for parents to train and teach their own children. I was astounded as I witnessed, for the first time in my life, that children (students) were being truly respected, having individual intrinsic value as unique human beings rather than as a form of educational currency. I had also come to understand that aside from God, only parents could love children unconditionally and that even the very best teacher, sincerely operating “in loco parentis”, could never truly replace a loving parent.

A Brief History of Home Education In Alberta

When home education first appeared in Alberta in the early eighties, all children between the ages of six and sixteen had to be registered with their local school authority. Although there may have been home education options when registered with a private school, that was limited to reasonable driving distances and affordability. Local school authorities were obligated to make sure that all their school-aged students were accounted for, but most had no idea what to do with those whose parents had determined to teach at home.

It should also be noted that a few home educators of the day had a bit more understanding of legal options for home educating, but it is probably safe to say that the majority simply demanded the right to teach their children at home, being fully prepared for a contest from the “authorities”. They were a brave and dedicated bunch who did not need or seek help or permission from government or any of its agencies.

When the Alberta School Act was passed in 1988, home education was included for the first time, with directives that home educated students between the ages of six and sixteen had to be registered, but it was not specifically stated that this had to be with the local school authority.

This new provision was good news as many home educators had found their local schools to be uncooperative, even hostile, towards parents teaching their children at home. However, even if we graciously assume that the government was trying to solve the problem of having to register with schools hostile to home education, the government of the day unwittingly created an even greater problem than the one they were trying to solve, one that was sure to come back to haunt them in the years to come. Without future insight, this new directive was very significant as, for the first time in history, the government had created students without borders.

Funding of Home Education Begins

Up until the passage of the 1988 School Act, schools were limited to serving students within their assigned jurisdictions. It should be noted that school authorities received funding for all registered students, including the home educated, although few made any of it available to parents. When borderless students came to be, a few school boards saw them as a possible solution to their constant funding shortfalls. Although this “opportunity” got a slow start, school authorities suddenly found a new “appreciation” for home education! Offering financial incentives for parents to join their

programs, they were able to increase their student count and corresponding income. Needless to say, the benefits to the school greatly outweighed those to the parents.

Disappointed, I saw this as the beginning of the end. I had seen plenty of this ascribing a monetary value to children in school systems and loudly expressed my concerns about allowing money to influence home education but, alas, I was shouted down. I was not the only one to be warning of the dangers of letting money direct our educational decisions, but unfortunately, the die had been cast. Home educated students now had a monetary value and the bidding wars for these borderless students initiated the slow deterioration of the home education community. The focus started changing from parental freedom to educate their children at home, to the rights of home educators to access at least some of the taxpayer funds that followed students to a regular school.

Let me be clear that I also believe home educators have a right of access to taxpayer money. After all, home educators are taxpayers too and the rate of funding for home education is a fraction of the cost of public education. However, this belief comes with a caveat!

People have to be crystal clear that while money itself is not the source of all evil, the love of it surely seems to be. In my opinion, parents who are insisting on receiving funding for educating their children at home are usually not basing their decision on what is best for the child. This unhealthy focus often leads to offering their children to the highest bidder, whose motivation is also not likely to be in the best interest of the child.

As more agencies “interested” in home education joined the movement, the competition for students began. Entities that were not actually schools began to partner with genuine schools who “allowed” them the use of their accredited authority so they could register home educated students. One could question the initial objective of these agencies by asking whether they would have been created had there not been money involved. In other jurisdictions where there is no funding available to the home educating, there are no dedicated home education agencies. In addition to these “third party” entities, other businesses came to “serve the needs” of this growing community.

A Return to the Same Old

Although all this development may have started with good intentions, it was bound to deteriorate with time. As is usually the case when money is involved, if it becomes the goal rather than a means for accomplishing a goal, it does not take long for the original intentions to be lost and the focus to become the accumulation of more of it.

When borderless home educated students were created, enterprising individuals saw both the need and the opportunity. Assuming that all the agencies were initially created with the best interest of students and parents in mind, what would be the chance that they would remain true to their original convictions and objectives? Anyone familiar with human nature should know that to remain dedicated to principle

requires a great deal of self-discipline, especially when overcoming the temptations associated with money.

In time, many home educators started losing sight of their original reason for home educating, while home education providers developed ever more resourceful and creative ways of attracting parents to their programs. This was mostly accomplished by taking advantage of parental ignorance, fears and misunderstandings, such that no matter what the need, whether real or perceived, there was an agency poised to offer a “solution”. This eventually led to the normalization of doing school at home, either through the direct offering of public programming, or facsimiles of public programs, as well as blended and accredited programs of questionable value and ethics. This caused much harm to the home education community as it blurred the lines between home and school, perpetuating a misunderstanding of authority rather than equipping parents to take responsibility for the education of their children.

Home education providers, now primarily focussed on building their businesses, started to develop club-like followings, effectively dividing the home education community into sectarian groups. Parents started to identify as members of home education agencies rather than as being home educators, in much the same fashion as Christians identifying themselves as part of a particular denomination before seeing themselves as part of the faith. The once united home education community had become more of a collection of segregated groups, divided on the basis of, and dependent upon, which home education provider (source of funding) they associated with.

Eventually, I realized that the very thing that had so greatly disturbed, even disgusted, me about schools, was now infecting the home education community as well. With providers driven by opportunity to take advantage of borderless students who came with an attached monetary value, the home educated had also become the “fuel” that powered the “engines” of a new multimillion dollar home education industry. What made this new industry more insidious was that, for the most part, it was cloaked within a worldview that clearly teaches that children are of much greater value than that of being a mere currency propelling an industry.

The Downward Spiral

The development of the home education industry, while not entirely evil, ushered in opportunities for the unethical, and the unprincipled who, while they may not have started in error, were quick to do what seemed necessary to survive, grow or to gain preeminence. While most home education agencies claimed to be coming from a Christian perspective, many were found to be willing to subjugate Christian principles to marketing objectives.

As the industry developed, Private Christian Schools, with very few students in actual attendance, no doubt found the extra cash being generated by supporting home education to be a welcome asset. This was accomplished either directly or through their affiliation with third party contractors, many of whom were operating as de facto school authorities. In step, the provincial home education association became more a

defender of the industry than of the home educating community. Influenced primarily by a particular provider, they began advancing third party contractors as “Independent Contracted Home Education Specialists” or ICHESSs for short. They went so far as listing them on their web site as registering boards, while ignoring the schools through which these ICHESSs exercised “authority”. This led most parents to erroneously believe that students were registered with their chosen ICHESS which, being neither boards nor schools, lacked the authority to directly register home educating students. Most had become businesses that, while advancing “service” for the home education community, often engaged in questionable antics more designed to “expand their market share”. This development did not escape the attention of the Department of Education, which began to question the legitimacy of schools “contracting out their authority”.

With ICHESSs now seeing themselves as essentially autonomous entities, some engaged in action that must have further attracted the attention of the government. While one cannot conceive of a school picking itself up and moving from one community to another, this did in fact occur no less than a dozen times within the home education community, involving nearly every ICHESS in one way or another. Never have schools containing hundreds of students simply moved from one community to another until the advent of third party contractors. Believing they had ownership of their borderless home educating “clientele”, they simply moved their entire enterprises from one sponsoring school to another while vying for survival and/or better business opportunities.

Addressing money, there seems to be no end of resourceful ways of using and abusing it. It cannot be said that most parents demonstrate greed when it comes to the educational expense reimbursement, nor can it be said that all home education providers are “shady” in its use, but it can be accurately stated that there has been a lot of misuse and misappropriation of funding that has taken place. It is unfortunate that some providers were willing to “purchase” parent affiliation. No doubt, this helped attract negative attention from the government also.

Besides these three main issues, there are other things that have crept into the home education community over the last twenty years that may also have caused the government to take a serious look at home education in this province. Like most other movements, the home education community shifted its focus from an initial clearly defined motivation, to defending the survival of key players within the industry that was developed around it. Things have crept in that would have had no place in the beginning of the movement. For all intents and purposes, the home education community came to resemble the public education industry I had escaped from.

Conclusion

While it is naive to think that the unwanted negative attention directed at home education was entirely a consequence of bad behaviour within the industry, nor is it fair to say that this is being directed specifically at Christians, but it is fair to say that not all the activities within the home education movement could be viewed as upstanding. The general ignorance of home educating parents regarding what is going on at the

administrative level has allowed questionable activities to occur, not only unchecked, but with their tacit approval. One must also bear in mind that if any individual or corporate segment of the home education industry is accused of impropriety, the entire community is implicated. Understanding that we are now under the management of different political masters than we were twenty years ago, and that the present political environment is becoming increasingly hostile towards anything that is not under direct governmental control, it becomes easier to comprehend how we could have arrived at this juncture in the story of home education, in Alberta.

In my opinion, the home educating community has been generally in decline for years, drifting in its focus from ministry to industry, with an increasing addiction to money. Even though it was in need of correction, it is really unfortunate that it had to occur at the time, in the way, and to the specific agencies targeted by the government of late. I was not at all pleased by what happened on October 25, 2016. However, even though it was a profound shock, it was not unexpected.

Likely the main reason for the slow decay of the home educating community and its associated industry over the years has been the willingness on the part of providers to engage in compromising activities that few people have been aware of and even fewer were willing to question. What is most perplexing is that the majority of the players within this home education industry initially claimed to be coming from a Christian perspective, yet engaged in blatantly mercenary activities that more closely resembled marketing than ministry, made increasingly obvious by diminishing references to faith.

However, it must be stated that it is not the parents who have caused the greatest damage to our collective reputation, but the antics of businesses. While most claim to be coming from a Christian perspective and say they are motivated by a desire to serve the home education community, many entangle themselves with an unhealthy focus on monetary objectives.

Considering these things provides us with at least a potential for understanding how our collective behaviour could have led us to witness what took place in Alberta, Canada on October 25, 2016.

Personal Disclaimer

I must admit that as part of this home education industry, I may be accused of having questionable motivations for writing this article. Understand that, in spite of being part of the home education movement over the last nearly thirty years, I most certainly never could reconcile children as currency, nor have I ever seen anybody, other than the parents, as being fully responsible for their children. In fact, what made me a very well-liked and successful classroom teacher for twenty-five years, is that I have never entertained having greater authority over children than parents. It was with the objective of helping parents to understand what a true Bible-based home education should look like, with an eye to providing the greatest freedom to parents by accessing the minimum funding and staying away from all forms of school programming, that Education Unlimited was formed in 1999.

Again, I can truthfully say that both myself, as leader, and all those associated with the Education Unlimited management, have never lost sight of the original mandate, ministry, focus or objectives of home education, nor have we knowingly compromised on principle, having consistently objected to unethical, mercenary and questionable activity within the home education community.

Even though I may have painted a bleak picture of the home education movement and community, I am well aware that the vast majority of those within the movement are ethical, law abiding citizens that want nothing more than to freely educate their children at home, as they see fit. Since the home education community is largely made up of committed Christians (as well as a growing number of non-Christians), along with the fact that we are generally going against the status quo, we are naturally held to a higher level of accountability. This is why it is so important for parents to be fully aware of what is going on and to avoid being associated with those who would be willing to compromise the children for the sake of themselves.

All is not lost, if we see this latest event as an opportunity for correction and a return to our true focus on the family. What happened is a wake up call that we should heed.

To my audience, I implore you to get involved, to get informed, and to understand what can, and is, hurting the home education movement. The freedom to do what we deem to be best for our children will only be a reality when we are prepared to get engaged against those lined up to destroy it, even if it means standing against things within the home education community itself. Edmund Burke is credited with saying something along the line of “all that has to happen for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing”. I can further add that the recent “disease” of apathy among home educators is not only allowing, but encouraging those who would consume us. It is time for us to return to our first love and refocus on what truly matters.

(Léo has been actively involved as a professional educator for over forty years. His experience spans two provinces, nearly every system and general exposure to a variety of grades, subjects and schools. His advanced training as a biologist as well as his bilingualism placed him at the high school level for the majority of his teaching career. Having educated his own children and having been involved in multiple capacities within the home education community uniquely qualified him to advance and defend the home education movement.)

Post-Script

On January 5, 2017 a Court of Queen's Bench judge approved an agreement between the Alberta government and Trinity Christian School that restores the school's legal status and funding. Alberta Education will appoint a financial administrator who will oversee the school for about one year to ensure that its administrative procedures are arranged according to government requirements. This means that home educating families who were registered through Wisdom Home Schooling will continue to be registered with Trinity Christian School, but Wisdom's role in administering the home education program will change. Further details can be found here (<https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/judge-restores-christian-homeschooling-operation-after-alberta-ndp-govt-shu>).