

The guardian of public education

Writing in *Teacher Newsmagazine* in the garb of a "guardian of public education," Murray Corren urges his colleagues to assert their "professional autonomy" and "fend off" parents who refuse to allow their children to participate in classes for reasons of conscience or religion. He asks, "Whose worldview should we privilege and whose should we censor? Who should decide what gets taught and what doesn't?"

To answer this question, consider Mr. Corren's private agreement with the government. It awards him privileged status in the development of public education policy and curriculum. The agreement was signed secretly, includes a provision for continuing secrecy, and was kept secret for over a month after it was signed. It is intended to prevent objecting parents from removing their children from "queer-positive" lessons.

The privileged worldview

Clearly, it is Mr. Corren's worldview that is privileged. Those who disagree with it will be censored, and a coterie of 'professionals' who share his views will decide what gets taught.

For example, the Ministry of Education called an invitation-only meeting to discuss the proposed grade 12 'social justice' elective with the Correns and others deemed worthy of consultation, like the BCTF and the SPCA. Religious representatives were not invited; groups opposed to the Corren agreement and concerned about curriculum revisions were deliberately excluded. The President of the BC Civil Liberties Association sniffed that such groups "should not be contributing to any dialogue on education reform."

Everyone is equal in public education, it seems, but some are more equal than others.

Whose children are they?

In the light of all of this, it is tempting, as Mr. Corren parades in his robes of office as a "guardian of public education," to observe that the emperor has no clothes. But one does not do so. Instead, one humours his claim to the guardianship of public education on the condition that he admits that he shares the office with fellow citizens - including

those who disagree with him. But his assumption of guardianship over other people's children warrants a different response.

The Minister of Education is not the source of parental authority, nor is professional certification the source of a teacher's authority as it relates to the formation of students entrusted to them. Quite the reverse: the authority of the Minister, teachers and administrators with respect to students is delegated to them by parents.

Primacy of parental authority

Parents remain the primary educators of their children when their children attend public schools. This primacy is not only in order of time and importance, but in order of authority. Parental authority cannot be suppressed by Mr. Corren's private agreement with the government, nor by fiat of the Ministry of Education.

Moreover, citizens do not surrender freedom of conscience, religion, thought and belief as a condition of attending a public school. Neither the Corren agreement nor direction from the Ministry of Education can relieve teachers, administrators and school districts of their responsibility to accommodate these fundamental freedoms. Were that the case, it would give Mr. Corren and the Ministry the power to override the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, a power reserved to parliament and provincial legislatures. There is also the issue of international agreements, to which Canada is a signatory.

The goose and the gander

Mr. Corren asks if the "sensitivities" of one parent should determine what novels are used in a public school classroom. Clearly not: no more than Mr. Corren's sensitivities should force the revision of public school K-12 curriculum. If sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, his private contract with the government is markedly inconsistent with his scornful rhetoric about the sensitivities and religious beliefs of "a small segment of the parent population."

Once more, everyone is equal in public education, but some are more equal than others.

Still, the question remains. How should a teacher respond if parents refuse to allow their children to participate in lessons or classes?

'My way or the highway'

Mr. Corren urges his colleagues to "take a stand" and invite the objectors to avail themselves of "other educational options," ignoring the fact that home-schooling is unrealistic for many families, and other alternatives may be unavailable.

More to the point, Mr. Corren's answer - "my-way-or-the-highway" - is a wrong answer that comes of asking the wrong questions. His questions do not lead to an enlightened response to the dilemma posed by profoundly divergent worldviews reflected in the classroom. Rather, one should ask how a state educational system can respect differences among families with diverse moral and religious outlooks while developing broadly acceptable curriculum standards.

Real tolerance, real diversity

A state educational system can respect differing moral or religious outlooks while developing generally acceptable curriculum standards. If, despite appropriate consultation, the standards are unacceptable to some parents, they can be accommodated by acknowledging their authority to withdraw their children from the objectionable classes. Alternatively, discussion between objecting parents and school authorities may yield other acceptable solutions. What Mr. Corren thinks of their solutions is unimportant.

The duty to accommodate

In fact, the accommodation of religious and conscientious conviction is a legal obligation that binds teachers and school districts to the point of undue hardship. Mr. Corren's call to teachers to "take a stand" against the accommodation of religious beliefs is, arguably, a statement of an intention to discriminate, something forbidden by the *BC Human Rights Code*. So, for that matter, is the Ministry's 'clarified' Alternative Delivery Policy and the letter from the Deputy Minister of Education quoted by Mr. Corren. Both of these, by the way, are products of his private agreement with the government. An uninformed reader would be unaware of this, since *Teacher Newsmagazine*

does not follow the practice of professional journals that require disclosure of an author's 'competing interests.'

Introducing the elephant

Turning to Mr. Corren's assertion (backed by the Deputy Minister) that students from objecting families "are not exempted from meeting the prescribed learning outcomes," it is time to introduce the elephant in the room.

BC students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 are almost never failed because they have not met prescribed learning outcomes. They pass each year, whether or not they meet curriculum standards for reading, writing, mathematics, or any other subject. Only in Grade 9 must students begin to meet a minimum course standard: 50%. This clearly indicates that substantially less than the full complement is acceptable. Further: students are not suspended or expelled from school for failing to do assignments or participate in a class activity.

Thus, if a Kindergarten to Grade 8 student does not meet a prescribed outcome related to Mr. Corren's "queer-positive" curriculum for reasons of conscience or religion, that would not justify holding the student back or imposing other penalties for non-compliance, since that is not done in any other subject. Similarly, there would be no justification for failing or penalizing Grade 9 to 12 students in similar circumstances who were otherwise meeting the course standard.

Conclusion

To sum up: Mr. Corren's appeal to his colleagues to refuse to accommodate freedom of conscience, religion, thought, opinion and belief is an invitation to engage in wrongful discrimination that is likely to embroil them in confrontation and even litigation, all in the service of his personal agenda and his private contract with the government. It is inconsistent with respect for authentic pluralism in a liberal democracy, and it is not in the best interests of students, parents or teachers.

See the back panel of this pamphlet for the URL to obtain the full text of this article with end notes.

"...citizens do not surrender freedom of conscience and religion as a condition of attending a public school, nor do parents surrender their authority to the state, to a union, to a profession or to special interest activists when they entrust their children to a public school system." (CCRL letter to BC school districts)

For more information -

The Corren Agreement

More detailed information and news about the position of school district with respect to parental authority. <http://www.ccrl.ca/index.php?id=4835>

The Goose, the Gander and the Elephant

The response to Murray Corren's article in *Teacher Newsmagazine* that the BCTF refused to publish. <http://www.ccrl.ca/index.php?id=452>

Parental Authority in Education: the International Context

A review of nine international covenants and declarations. Those who want to compel children to attend lessons or classes that their parents find morally objectionable will not find support for their policies in these documents.

<http://www.ccrl.ca/index.php?id=4836>

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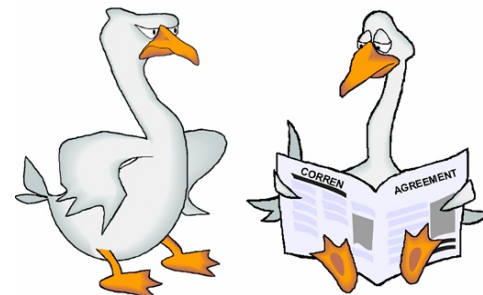
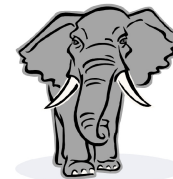
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The Goose, the Gander and the Elephant

An answer to Murray Corren's
"A censor? Who, me?"



The response that BCTF's *Teacher Newsmagazine* refused to publish.