

To:
The Honourable Ed Stelmach
Premier of Alberta

Re Bill 44:

This is one more letter in protest of Bill 44. I am dismayed and angry in regards to the content and the method by which this Bill is being foisted upon the majority of Albertans. Sadly, despite talk of a liberal media bias and the purported attack on traditional values waged by secular humanists, we have no lobby. Bill 44 embodies contempt for the notion of a well educated public. It also shows disdain for millennia old humanist educational ideals. Bill 44 is parochial, exclusive, and small minded. This legislation will further enshrine narrow parental and small group interests, under the rubric of parental rights. We have allowed this to happen with the creation of “quasi-private” charter schools within the province. I say quasi-private schools, as we publicly fund these at a cost-in diminished funding- to the public system. Under the pretence of increased choice, our children have been separated into their tiny “interest based educational camps” potentially limiting their ability to interact with others of different abilities, interests, and beliefs; all at the expense of a well functioning public. Given the difficulty of predetermining what a child might grow to become, why would we specialize and balkanise their educational experiences? Is it your intention to further separate our children into groups with dissimilar educational experiences and thereby jeopardize our students’ -- future citizens--ability to interact in a world which is varied in: belief system, opinion, and experience? You speak disdainfully of the “nanny state” versus a parents’ right to determine what their children can be exposed to in public education. Does a parent’s right outweigh our collective responsibility to educate our children based on a sense of age old humanist ideals, which are: inclusive, expansive, and comprehensive? I think of Humanism in terms of a general education which includes: the Humanities , Sciences, Fine Arts , and Practical Arts/Craft. Alberta Education already ignores the latter two categories, and focuses mainly on the second. We have a responsibility to equip children with flexibility, creativity and knowledge so that they might become full human beings in every sense of that word.

I am incensed that my tax dollars are siphoned into private educational special interests and see Bill 44 as an ill conceived attempt to further erode my elementary school aged daughter’s experience of public education. I intentionally chose public education for many reasons.

I recognise that there is diversity of opinion, belief and value in the world, and want my daughter to experience the world in its entirety. Burying your child’s head in the sand, to hide from dangerous ideas such as: same sex marriage, evolution, human sexuality, and anything else that you might not like, is wrong headed. In regards to human sexuality, failure to provide sexual education nearly constitutes abuse, given what children must know to protect themselves in this brave new world of human sexual relations. My responsibility as a parent does not extend to removing my daughter from situations that she or I might find: challenging, cognitively dissonant, and likely a springboard for discussion around our dinner table. Bill 44 represents a fear of “dangerous ideas”, and is a mean spirited attempt to legislate socially conservative values into the hallways of our public schools , which is exactly where the children who have been removed from class will be sitting. This legislation is also impractical, vis a vis our Teacher’s rights and responsibilities. How long a list of potentially dangerous information will a teacher have to vet? Will this protection of our children’s minds extend to any knowlege

which is contentious? Which knowledge isn't, save faith based knowledge? Can you think of faith based educational systems and nations which might provide shining examples of harmony and good living? I can think of several that are neither harmonious, nor particularly civilized. On what basis will we decide where the limit to parental rights exist?

Bill 44 implies that parents always know best. This is hubris pure and simple. I am University educated (BA honors in Sociology U of A class of '92), relatively affluent, have taught music for more than 20 years (within private, public, university and college settings), performed as a professional musician for seventeen years, and recently incorporated, as I have started doing socially and environmentally progressive renovation work. It might sound like a lot, but I work 30 hours a week and have time off most days for things that matter to me. It also allows me to participate in my government. It is my government and yours too, we would all be advised to remember that we get the government that we deserve. I'm not bragging about my success and good fortune, this diversity of experience and skill has been acquired over the past 30 years of my working life, and most of it has been gained "rock and roll" style--on the job and on my own. This would not have been possible without my general education in public school and in the Arts (Sociology and Music) which has given me a great deal of flexibility and creativity and certainty in an economy which is increasingly dynamic and uncertain. I wish the same flexibility, creativity, variety, and the joyful life that results for all of Alberta's children, not just mine.

What message does Bill 44 send to the children who are removed from the classroom during lectures? The subtext of that removal is that Parents know best; I wish that that were always the case, but I don't believe that it is. We are all fallable; it is through trust in our education system, vis a vis, its breadth, generality, its inclusive and flexible nature, our own involvement in our children's education-at home and elsewhere (including churches of all denominations and associations of many types) that we utilize the "village" to teach our children well. Bill 44 undermines our children's trust in our educational system and the authority of their teachers. This legislation will affect not just those removed from the dangerous ideas, but those who remain to hear them. I believe that there will be a social cost to the erosion of a sense of a greater inclusive public, and I believe that we will have a less cohesive, educated, creative and flexible society.

I might be less incensed if there were not already options for those who would keep their children from the harm of contrary ideas. Parents can choose Christian charter schools, which my tax dollars partially fund, or they could enrol their children in Separate Catholic School systems. I may not agree with either choice, but I can understand, and do respect the reasons behind those choices. It is a Parent's decision to make after all. I would argue that it is an extremely difficult decision to make given the lack of knowledge we have about the meaning of our choices both for our children and the greater society. What I would ask is that others accept my right to advocate for an inclusive humanist public school system that is not eroded by socially conservative values hidden in the "sheep's clothing" of Parental Rights. If you want to call me something, call me a "small liberal", or even a secular humanist-a title that is often slung about pejoratively. I feel that "small liberals" are: socially progressive, inclusive, and represent a secular and ethically oriented majority. I would be happy to be called a secular humanist given the millennia old tradition and value of these ideas, as compared to, the historically recent, mean spirited, divisive, exclusive, fearful and socially destructive socially conservative values embodied in legislation such as Bill 44. I know I am not alone in my

feelings, and for political and other reasons the Alberta Conservative party seem to be happy to pander to those who would support this agenda. Sadly, people like myself are not as organized as those who would attack the universality, historically demonstrated value, comprehensiveness, and humanistic nature of public education. Here's hoping that common sense, a long tradition of humanist education, and a sense of commitment to Alberta's future win out over this poorly considered legislation.

Sincerely,

John Newton

PS What message does this legislation send to those we are trying to attract to Alberta? Do you believe that the Freedom to Create, Spirit to Achieve is shining through in Bill 44, and that this legislation represents a well considered marketing plan concerning the social environment that our province has to offer? Or is it possible that people considering a move to Alberta: who might desire a beautiful natural environment, vibrant cultural environment, and socially inclusive political and social environment, might find this legislation to be as distasteful as I do? Our freedom to co-create a robust and flexible education system comes with the responsibility to consider the collective good, I ask that you dump Bill 44 so that we all have the Spirit to Achieve.