

Minister Hancock's Remarks to the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association 2008 Fall AGM and Convention

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

I'm sorry I missed your opening ceremonies and Dr. Rymarz's address last night.

I understand that the theme of this weekend is The New Evangelization. This is both a provocative and evocative theme. The term comes from Pope John Paul II, who said that "Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ."

Why, then, do Catholic schools in Alberta need a New Evangelization? What has changed in our province to make this necessary? Some people go so far as to ask why we still have a Catholic school system. What is the value add to our society of having a Catholic school system? The answer to these questions is simple. It's not the value add, it's the values added.

Instilling hope, respect, dignity and humility in our young people is a task for all educators, but one with a very special meaning and purpose for Catholic teachers.

Our province is unique because of the content of our characters and the sense of purpose in our souls. People come to Alberta from all over the world because of the opportunities that are available here. These new arrivals and new technologies have changed the way we interact with our fellows and participate in our communities.

What has not changed is the common experience of spiritual needs that must be ministered to. I believe that is why you are discussing a New Evangelization this weekend.

One of the great strengths of Alberta's K-12 system is the amount of choice it allows and offers parents and students. The ability to choose a Catholic education is one of those choices, and it will remain one of those choices.

But with so many things changing in our society, we must reconsider how we do things in our schools – including the Catholic system. We recognize the right of Catholic school authorities to reflect their particular views and belief systems in locally developed religious studies courses and infuse Catholic values into academic programs of study.

The challenge for you is to make sure that each subject area is taught within the Catholic context, and that the broader teachings of the Catholic tradition are passed on to the next generation.

With the help of discussions like this weekend's, you're doing a fine job.

It is to your system's credit that your courses respect and promote understanding of individual and minority group differences.

That's important because one of our challenges as educators is to help create citizens of the world.

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There are some people who see faith-based education as a divisive factor in society. I don't think you and I see it that way. The religious studies courses you develop promote an understanding and appreciation of the beliefs, customs and practices, literature and traditions of other major world religions.

This is very important aspect of the education of children who are going to live in an increasing culturally and religiously diverse society and who are likely to have to form working partnerships with individuals from all around the world. I also think such courses help develop the kind of critical thinking that will serve our children well in the world into which they will graduate.

The ability to differentiate opinion from fact, myth from reality, and reasoned argument from flawed assertion will take on increasing importance in a technological world that allows unvetted access to the hearts and minds of just about everyone on the planet.

Though the Catholic system is unique in its focus, I think it has some things to teach all the school jurisdictions in the province. One of the greatest challenges facing all boards in the province is to better engage the community in education. Putting the public back into public education is, in fact, the major theme of the ASBA fall convention. That's certainly one area where all boards can learn some valuable lessons from the Catholic system.

The partnership between school, home and parish that is the bulwark of the Catholic system is a good model for the future of education in the province. The success of the Catholic system is achieved through the personal involvement of all members of the community. All boards in the province must create that kind of working partnership if we are going to continue to have an education system that ranks as one of the best in the world.

We'll soon be launching a dialogue with Albertans called Inspiring Education to look at the value and future of basic education in Alberta. This process is not about making recommendations that come with funding requirements attached.

It's about raising education as a fundamental value of our society –as a way for every Albertan to find their talents, passions and fulfil their potential. We can afford nothing less.

Albertans have always traded out into the world. When we look to the future, we'll continue that trade, but with knowledge products. Our people will need to be among the best if we are to succeed in that.

It doesn't matter where in Alberta you live – education is just as valuable across the province.

I was really inspired a few years ago by an ophthalmologist who spoke at an awards ceremony. He and some friends had equipped a jet so they could fly around the world to do eye surgeries and teach eye care. He wasn't saying this to brag, but rather to say that his life was driven by knowing that each person has a God-given potential they must develop – not only to care for themselves and their families, but to give back to their community.

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That's the kind of citizen we must have in Alberta.

Your work as Catholic school trustees is essential to that mission.

Thank you for being so willing to get up at 6:30 to do this.