



Brad Dirks, left, supports B.C.'s SOGI 123 learning resources designed to familiarize students with the LGBTQ community. His son, Cole, is transgender. FRANCIS GEORGIAN

SOGI, portables among top issues facing would-be school trustees

Role has been reduced over the years, but elected post still influences how and where students learn

LORI CULBERT

When Cole Dirks began his transition three years ago in Grade 9, his father Brad lobbied their Langley school for changes to make the difficult process a little easier for his transgender son.

It's why Brad Dirks supports new learning resources for elementary and high schools designed to familiarize students with LGBTQ people.

"With SOGI 123, it has already paved the way for kids

like mine so parents don't have to go to bat," said Dirks, whose son is now a socially accepted Grade 12 student.

"It allows trans people to be who they are."

Not everyone likes the learning resources being introduced to schools as part of the province's move to include SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) in its new curriculum. Critics call them inappropriate and damaging to family values.

SOGI 123 has become one of the most talked about

issues this election in Langley and some neighbouring communities, often pitting pro- and anti- candidates against each other.

It has not been a hot topic in other Metro cities, such as Vancouver and North Vancouver, where trustee candidates have been questioned about support for special needs and vulnerable students, portables, selling of public lands, child care spaces at schools, and dysfunctional boards.

On Oct. 20, British Colum-

bians will elect the trustees to set plans, policies and annual budgets for local schools in 60 school districts.

The trustee role has been reduced over the decades, as the province now sets the amount of school taxes collected and the curriculum taught, said Jason Ellis, a UBC assistant professor of education.

Still, who is elected can affect where and how students learn. "Voters who are parents with children in schools, they should think

very carefully (about) electing trustees who will be their eyes and ears and voice on the board," Ellis said.

School trustees, for example, have no power to stop their teachers from using the new curriculum that has sexual orientation and gender identity woven into it or to change new anti-discrimination policies that aim to prevent bullying of transgender and homosexual people. These are now mandatory, following changes to the B.C. Human Rights Code in 2016.

But trustees can, Ellis said, vote for a school district to ban the related SOGI 123 resource materials, which include lesson plans and learning modules designed to help students understand the diversity of genders and family makeups. If there is majority support on the board to stop using these tools, the motion could be taken to the superintendent for a final decision, Ellis said.

And that is exactly what SOGI opponents are hoping will happen.

An anti-SOGI website says there are 37 trustee candidates running in a dozen school districts on a promise to ban the learning resources from classrooms, although that is a small percentage of the hundreds of trustee hopefuls on the ballot in B.C.'s 60 districts.

There are clusters of these anti-SOGI candidates in cities such as Richmond, Abbotsford and Burnaby, where tensions have, at times, run high. Police were reportedly called to a recent Burnaby meeting after a reported skirmish between a pro-SOGI 123 candidate and a woman holding a baby who is against the teaching resources.

In Surrey, where three candidates have been identified as opposing SOGI 123, there are also four women running under the Surrey Students Now banner who held an information night with a university professor and an LGBTQ youth group to discuss why SOGI "is relevant and needed in schools."

Among the candidates most vocally opposed to the learning resources are Burnaby's Laura-Lynn Tyler Thompson, who fears the learning resources are akin to "teaching transgenderism to our children," and Chilliwack incumbent Barry Neufeld, who last year said SOGI allowed young children to "choose" their gender and that



Dave Jensen, a Langley parent, has concerns about the new SOGI 123 learning resources that are being brought into schools. FRANCIS GEORGIAN



“choose” their gender and that amounted to “child abuse.” B.C.’s education minister and the Chilliwack school board called on Neufeld to resign, which he refused to do, though he did later apologize for the child abuse comment.

Dave Jensen, a Langley father of children in Grades 3 and 9, said there are many educational issues that are important to him this election and one is halting the SOGI 123 resources because they were introduced too quickly without parental input. While he said he is not biased against LGBTQ people, he said the teaching resources should be reworked to, for example, include other vulnerable children, such as those with special needs.

“Everyone’s concern is why is this in the elementary schools? It is not age-appropriate,” he said.

“Just because (someone’s) religion doesn’t agree with a certain aspect (of SOGI), it doesn’t mean they’re saying: ‘You need to be mean and bullying LGBTQ kids.’ It just means this isn’t in our family values.”

SOGI opponents organized a rally in Victoria last month,

but appeared to have been outnumbered by SOGI supporters. The demonstration prompted the B.C. government, teachers and education partners to issue a rare joint statement supporting SOGI, saying “there is no room for any type of discrimination in our schools.”

The Education Ministry said it does not require school boards to approve SOGI 123, but that dissenting districts would have to choose some other similar learning resources to help teachers with the new curriculum.

Dirks hopes voters will consider this issue at the ballot box.

“Students in school, they aren’t old enough to vote, they don’t get a say. It is up to us grown-ups, us adults, to set the stage for how these students get to go to school,” he said. “Who we vote for is either going to make LGBTQ students proud and have a great go of it, or it is going to make them ashamed and pushed back in the closet.”

At a recent two-hour all-candidates meeting in North Vancouver City, SOGI 123 was not mentioned once. The issues that were raised by

voters are common to many districts in Metro Vancouver and beyond.

SELLING SCHOOL LANDS

One was the loss of school properties, such as the 2013 sale of the former Ridgeway Annex — which the North Vancouver board said could not be rebuilt as a new school because of its small lot size, although that high-growth neighbourhood is now desperate for more classrooms.

All eight candidates at the Oct. 3 meeting said they were against land sales, with incumbent Megan Higgins noting a developer paid \$5.1 million for the property where nine single-family homes are to be built — a fraction of what that site would be worth today.

While she is against further sales, board chair Christie Sacré said she understood why the trustees who voted in favour of the deal did so: The board needed money to replace the aging Argyle and Handsworth schools, but was saddled with debt. “We were told by the ministry that we needed to get our debt solved,” she said.

This debate is far from over. A combination of an aging population and high real estate prices has reduced enrolment in some areas of North Vancouver, leading the district to declare 12 properties as surplus. And finding a fine balance between protecting public lands and balancing budgets is playing out in other municipalities, too.



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Parent Brad Dirks

This spring, the Vancouver school board agreed to sell the land underneath Lord Roberts Annex so B.C. Hydro could build an underground substation. Proceeds from the sale will be used to build a new elementary school in Coal Harbour by 2023.

Parents told public hearings leading up to the deci-

sion that they were concerned about possible health risks linked to a substation underneath a school.

In recently submitted answers to questions posed by the Vancouver district parent advisory council, some candidates said they were opposed to the underground sale, not just because the board loses ownership of the underground land but because it sets a dangerous precedent of districts financing schools without the Education Ministry’s help. Others, though, said it was a creative way to get the school built at a time when there isn’t enough money available from the ministry, noting the board still doesn’t have the funding for another desperately needed school in Olympic Village.

ARE SCHOOL PORTABLES THE NEW NORM?

While the issue of selling school land has been a hot topic in districts such as Surrey, Richmond and Sooke, voters in many areas also have concerns about properties that districts are keeping. Trustees will continue to

struggle to complete much-needed seismic upgrades on older schools and what to do with the growing number of portable classrooms at sites with too many students.

“I would hope that portables are not the new normal,” incumbent Susan Skinner responded to a parent question in North Vancouver, where there are 36 portables at 16 schools plus three large modular structures that each contain several classrooms.

The solution, Higgins said, is better planning with senior levels of government when giant housing developments are underway, such as 1,500 new homes in the Moodyville area and two proposed residential towers near the Harry Jerome Recreation Centre. “Where are those kids going to go to school?”

This reliance on portables will continue, said candidate Greg Zavediuk, unless the ministry agrees to build new schools in anticipation of growth enrolment. Right now, the government waits until a school is over-capacity before approving a new building, which then takes years to construct.

CONTINUED on Page 10