

Political Engagement

[1977, revised 1993, 2003, 2009, 2013]

Political engagement as envisioned by the policy of the Alberta Teachers' Association lies within the objects of the Association as outlined in the *Teaching Profession Act*—"to arouse and increase public interest in the importance of education and public knowledge of the aims of education."

Many of the decisions that affect teachers in the classroom are political decisions. If teachers wish to involve themselves in the decision-making process, they must become both individually and collectively aware of the political process. The term *political process* can be defined as "the ways and means by which decisions are made and implemented at all levels of society by individuals, groups or levels of government." The most suitable way for the Association to influence political decisions affecting education is to do so within the political system. Working against or outside the current political system would be confrontational and subversive, which is not advantageous in seeking change from those who have the ability to make it.

Because of their elected position, politicians are subject to pressure and will receive it from a wide variety of viewpoints. Those groups that exert the greatest and most effective pressure will have the most success. Pressure can be applied both formally and informally. The formal method involves the Association's directly approaching politicians, through recognized formal channels, speaking as representatives of all Alberta teachers. The informal method involves individual teachers building ongoing and respectful relationships with politicians in an effort to promote quality public education and Association objectives. Both methods—the formal, structured one and the informal, unstructured one—involve working with politicians to achieve favourable outcomes.

In order to maintain trust, respect and openness with those in office and those who might come to office, it is imperative that the Association maintain a position of neutrality. It must avoid affiliation with any specific political party or candidate for political office. The Association as an organization must avoid alignment with any one political group or individual but, rather, should maintain contact with all major political parties to ensure relevancy and ongoing trust with whoever assumes office. The Association must work with each major party in an attempt to improve the quality of education within Alberta. Representation either solely to the government or solely to the opposition would show a high degree of political naïveté.

In maintaining effective political engagement from a position of nonpartisanship, it is important that teachers are familiar with the educational positions of all political parties. The Association should, therefore, encourage all political parties and candidates for political office to articulate their policies on education. Where these policies have financial implications, the parties and candidates should also provide plans for funding the implementation of such policies.

Consistent with a policy of nonpartisanship, the Alberta Teachers' Association and its subgroups should refrain from making financial contributions to parties or candidates for political office. While there is not and should not be legal impairment to the Association's making partisan political donations, it is not in the best interests of the Association and should be discouraged. However, grey area exists related to fundraising events, which can serve functions both as a vehicle for making donations and for building relationships. Although such fundraisers include a donation element, the participation of the Association or its subgroups should not be restricted as long as the attendance at the event is part of a larger nonpartisan program of political engagement.

Teachers, as individuals, should be encouraged to participate actively in the political process, including through partisan activity. Having teachers involved in all aspects of the political process will reap benefits for the profession as a whole. Similarly, teachers and other school employees have the democratic right as citizens to participate fully in the process and should not be restricted from running for or serving as school trustees without resigning their employment.

Political engagement as defined does not limit itself solely to the work of the provincial government. As education is affected by decision making at all levels of society, political engagement by teachers must cover all levels. The Association must encourage locals to become engaged in all aspects of the political arena in Alberta, from provincial government to school boards.

Role of Provincial Association

One of the principal duties of the provincial Association should be to monitor the proceedings of the legislature. This monitoring should be conducted through attendance at the legislature whenever education debates are taking place and through careful study of the provincial Hansard. Such monitoring serves three main purposes: (1) it permits the correction of false and inaccurate information that sometimes can occur in debate, (2) it permits the preparation of information for members of the legislature and presentation of Association views prior to the debate taking place, and (3) it permits reading the mood of the legislature and thereby determining possible future directions for educational policy. It allows the Association to be prepared for most of the major issues well in advance. This monitoring of the legislature needs to be of a constant nature so that rebuttal can be as immediate as possible. Such work is time-consuming but essential if the Association wishes to carry out a successful program of political engagement. Equally important and part of the same process is the supplying of information to members of the legislature, both when requested and when the Association believes it would be beneficial.

A second duty involves educating teachers in the political process. Almost daily, decisions that directly affect teachers and their classroom conditions are made. Often these decisions are not the result of consultation with teachers and yet must be implemented by teachers. It is important that teachers become engaged in the decision-making process. In order to create such engagement, teachers should become aware of the political processes through which such decisions are reached. The Association must help to create this awareness through a flow of political information. Such information will enable teachers to know the decision makers, to understand the process of decision making and to become engaged. Likewise, teachers must be made aware of the educational issues and of programs, policies and recommendations so that when they talk of the politics of education, they know exactly what is involved.

A third course of action for the Association is to take a stand on issues that affect student learning. Criticism is levelled at teachers and their Association for both taking a stand and not taking a stand on social issues. Many such issues are peripheral to the learning process and should be treated as individual matters. Some issues, however, are critical in classrooms and in learning, and the Association should take a positive stand whenever it feels that an issue is of major significance. In particular, the Association should align its interests with the interests of students and act as a spokesperson on behalf of the educational interests of all children. Taking a stand in this way can develop a feeling of engagement with students and will prove beneficial to both teachers and the Association in the long term. One issue that is regularly part of political discourse is that of private encroachment on public domains. The Association believes in the importance of the public interest, including the maintenance of public institutions, services and spaces. The Association should support and advocate for this public interest.

Several other organizations in the province have an interest in education policies, and it may be necessary at some time for the Association to act jointly with these organizations. Such united action can prove politically beneficial if it is necessary to prove a specific point to the government. At the same time, the Association should monitor closely any education policy pursued by any other organization and should endeavour to provide assistance in the preparation of such policy.

Role of Local Association

There is a common phrase: all politics is local. This saying appropriately suggests that the most significant influence on politicians comes from local constituents around local issues. Even larger-scale provincial or national issues become relevant for politicians only when their impacts are felt on the ground. Consequently, a program of political engagement becomes most effective through local engagement. Locals of the Association are encouraged to undertake political engagement in their local areas. Similarly, locals should be encouraged to work with the Association on their programs of engagement, because the impact of such engagement is enhanced through coordination across the province.

Decision making takes place at all levels, with local school boards and provincial government. Therefore, teachers have a responsibility to become engaged. Locals should be encouraged to become actively engaged in promoting interest in local elections. Since locals are more acutely aware of local issues and programs, the provincial Association will become engaged only on request and will supply assistance and materials as needed.

One aspect of the local program that should be stressed involves the establishment of contacts with local members of the legislature. Such contact persons could provide direct and personal input to MLAs, as well as keeping them fully aware of all educational and education-related issues. These individuals must be in touch with MLAs as often as possible, and their work is crucial to the success of the program. Politicians are much more likely to listen to their own electorate than they are to the Association as a provincial body. At this level particularly, the local and the provincial Association can work closely in supplying each other with materials.

However, it should be stressed that openly supporting certain candidates is a dangerous role to play, and it would be far more effective if locals concentrated on presenting fair and unbiased exposure to all candidates on education issues. Engagement at the local level with all candidates for political office should follow the same nonalignment concept as is pursued by the provincial Association in its political program.

The development of a political engagement program by the Association has two basic requirements: time and continuity. To be successful and influential, a program requires diligent work over many years. Time to build up a program and to create confidence is essential. The second requirement is that the program not be subjected to changes in policy resulting from whim. Once the level of engagement has been developed, it must be constantly maintained. Significant variation may well result in the program's becoming ineffective.

Political engagement for teachers is a responsibility. Exercising the democratic right of engagement in politics is an honest and open attempt to influence politicians to make decisions favourable to education. The Alberta Teachers' Association favours this engagement so that the teachers of Alberta can become a part of the decision-making process in education.