

GOVERNMENT FUNDING AND A PARENT'S FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

by Kristine Buchholtz

So what exactly is “home education” in Alberta?

Does it simply consist of any learning that occurs in the home?

If that were indeed the definition, then it would seem that almost every single student in Alberta would qualify as being “home educated” since almost every single student of every description in Alberta – public schooled, private schooled, separate schooled, charter schooled, virtual schooled and home schooled – spends a significant amount of time completing homework at home.

Clearly “learning at home” does not define what home education in Alberta is.

AHEA has always affirmed “the primacy of parental responsibility for the welfare, socialization and education of their children” and from its inception has been “dedicated to the education and socialization of children in the natural setting of the family.” In addition, AHEA “holds that student assessment is an integral aspect of the education process, and that therefore parents have the sole right and responsibility to determine the methods and instruments to be used to ensure the educational welfare of the child.”¹

Likewise, Alberta Education also defines “home education” in a similar way in its 2006 Home Education Regulation: “Home education program’ means an education program provided by a parent to a student in accordance with this Regulation, but does not include any portion of an education program that is the responsibility of a board or an accredited private school to deliver.”² Indeed, according to the same Regulation, “A parent providing a home education program must administer and manage the home education program.”³ Our provincial government, then, understands “home education” to consist of a child’s education that is directed by the child’s parent... controlled, if you will, by the parent.

From its beginning, AHEA’s unique mandate has been to advocate for this parent-directed education. Home education means that the parent chooses the subjects to be studied (as well as when and where that studying will take place), the materials that will be used, and the evaluation method that will – or will not – be used. The home educating parent is in control of his or her child’s education.

Our provincial government complicated the situation several years ago when they began to offer three different levels of funding to school jurisdictions on behalf of home educated students. At this point, home educators were offered a choice of “blending” their “traditional” (i.e. parent-directed) home education program with a government-controlled program, and most school jurisdictions encouraged this approach by providing them with more money. While at least 50% of a child’s program* needed to be directed (or

controlled) by the government in order to qualify for the higher level of funding, parents who chose to “align” even more, or all, of their child’s education with the Alberta Program of Studies could receive a correspondingly greater amount of money.

Parents are well within their rights to choose to accept more funding from the government in exchange for blending or fully-aligning their child’s education with the Alberta Program of Studies. But make no mistake: When a parent chooses to accept funding to blend or fully-align his or her child’s education, he or she is relinquishing a part or all of his or her freedom to choose and direct that education. That portion which is aligned becomes the government’s responsibility rather than that of the parents. That portion of their child’s education is no longer “home education.”

It is not, nor has it ever been, AHEA’s mandate to advocate for government-controlled education, even if that education is occurring in the student’s home. AHEA has always existed to advocate for the right of parents to direct their children’s education. Government-controlled education in Alberta already has plenty of people and organizations promoting its benefits...indeed, the Alberta Teacher’s Association is extremely adept at promoting the virtues of government-directed education. As a political organization in Alberta, AHEA is alone in promoting both the benefits of home education as well as the rights of parents to direct their children’s educations. It is possible for AHEA to offer support (by means of the annual home education conference in Red Deer or the HOME Matters magazine, for instance) to people who have opted for some form of government-controlled education. At the same time, it is NOT AHEA’s mandate to advocate politically for the government-directed education that these parents have chosen.

That said, it is important to make a distinction between funding choice and curriculum choice. Parents who opt for home education have a plethora of materials and methods from which to choose. And please remember: because the parent is in charge, there is no limit to those materials. Whether it’s workbooks, textbooks, living books, classical books, courses on CD or DVD, online courses, swimming lessons, music lessons, other in-person tutors, or even materials that conform to the Alberta Program of Studies, the home educating parent is well within his or her right to choose ANY (or all!) of those options. The key as a “home educator” in Alberta is this: To retain legal control of your child’s education, you must accomplish your child’s educational goals by accepting from the government the lesser (i.e. “traditional”) amount of funding or no funding at all. (If a school jurisdiction is offering you more than traditional home school funding – for the 2011-12 school year, that will be \$812. 25 per student – there is a very good chance that they have registered your children with Alberta Education as receiving a school-delivered program.) When you accept more funding FOR aligning a part or all

of your child's education with the Alberta Program of Studies, you have signed over to the government the freedom you have to control that portion of your child's education. On the other hand, when you choose "traditional" or no funding from the government, you retain control of your child's education. You are still considered to be a home educator according to how that term is defined by both the government and by AHEA. You are in charge. AHEA exists – indeed, AHEA has always existed – to advocate for your right to direct your children's education.

One last point that should be addressed is this: Why is the amount of funding one accepts important? I have often heard parents who choose to accept increased funding for blending or fully-aligning their children's education ask, "What's the big deal? Why does it matter? Nothing has changed for me. I still choose the curricula we use and teach and evaluate my children just as I did with "traditional" funding. Why shouldn't I accept more money? It makes no difference." A response that might be made at this point in time is that it has begun to make a rather significant difference, since the government has recently begun to "crack down" on school boards that offer blended and fully-aligned education programs by insisting that those boards do what they are supposed to do (i.e. plan, deliver and evaluate those portions of their students' programs that are aligned with the Alberta Program of Studies). This increased accountability has – not surprisingly – also increased the pressure (and the paperwork!) on both the school boards and their blended and fully-aligned families.

To be perfectly candid, I myself – when we opted several years ago to blend our children's home education programs over a two-year period – believed that the level of funding I accepted made no difference. But...

...when I discovered that in the eyes of the government I was no longer officially in control of the blended portion of my children's education...when I discovered that in a legal sense, I was not considered my children's teacher (even though I was the one doing the lesson-planning and the teaching!)...when I discovered that my school board was receiving thousands – yes, thousands! – of dollars more from the government for each of my children's blended programs...at that point, I realized that there was a difference. A large one. Philosophically, I bristled at the concept of having sold my authority over any part of my children's education to the government. Ethically, I was conflicted when I found out that the government understood my facilitator to be planning and delivering the blended portion of my children's education when in fact I was the one doing those tasks. Emotionally, I felt betrayed by my school board who had convinced me to "just try" blending our program (since "nothing will change. You'll just receive more funding."), while failing to disclose the very sizeable increase in funding that my school board itself would receive when I traveled the road of blended education. Who stood to benefit more from my children's blended education programs: my family...or my school board?

I understand all too well the temptation of more money – oh, the things we could do and the books we could buy! – and I certainly do not consider myself, as a proponent of home education, to be "bet-

ter" in any way than someone who chooses to blend or fully-align their children's educations in order to receive increased funding.

Instead, I fear for the future of parent-directed education in our province as government-directed blended and fully-aligned programs continue to be encouraged and promoted by various school boards. As those options are normalized, I believe the vulnerability of the right of home educators to their "traditional" parent-directed education increases significantly, to the point where not only our society may become less open and friendly to the idea of parent-controlled education, but our government, too, could conceivably "pull in the reins" one day on the remaining home educators in this province when only a handful of us are left.

Friends, there is strength in numbers. Let us keep parent-directed education – home education – in this province strong, together.

*In grades 1 through 9

1 Schedule A to the By-Laws of the Alberta Home Education Association, PHILOSOPHY OF THE ASSOCIATION, #1, 2 and 7

2 2006 Alberta Home Education Regulation: Definitions, Section 1e

3 2006 Alberta Home Education Regulation: Home Education Program, Section 3(9)