

Public statement

It is with mixed emotions that I announce that I can no longer return as a school trustee for Louis Riel School Division (Ward 1). Although I was committed to serve the people, the work environment has become unbearable.

There is an ongoing debate all over North America over gender issues. **In this province, notice has now been served on all Manitobans – a school trustee who holds traditional views will not be tolerated or be allowed to express beliefs that counter the narrative.**

As most of you are aware, I have been under scrutiny following an article published in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on June 6th, 2023. The time has finally come to share my story.

On June 1st, 2023, the beginning of Pride Month, the board chair Sandy Nemeth took me aside on school property and accused me of breaching the Board Code of Conduct for having posted in May 2023 on my personal Facebook page (made private). Incidentally, the posts have not been removed because I have nothing to hide. Who screen shotted my opinion-based posts and sent them to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and for what purpose exactly? This question remains unanswered to this day. To give you an idea of the posts that were considered “hateful” according to Ms. Nemeth, here is a link to a poll conducted by the Frontier Centre for Public Policy: <https://fcpp.org/2023/06/09/another-attack-on-free-speech/>

The Board Code of Conduct (number 10) states that school trustees should: “Refrain from expressing opinions and/or sharing information through social media that would discredit, undermine or compromise the integrity of the Board.” How does expressing traditional views on gender issues discredit, undermine or compromise the integrity of the board? I have been singled out and punished for voicing the concerns of the people who have voted for me, including Christians, Muslims and many sensible secular citizens.

According to the Manitoba Public Schools Act section 35.1(2), it is stated that: “A code of conduct must, at minimum, a) require a trustee to ii) respect others who may have different opinions.”

A review of the posts would also suggest that I was not targeting the board or its members; I was simply voicing an opinion that happened to reflect my own values and those of my voter base. I maintained a good working relationship with all trustees throughout my first year within LRSD, just like with all other positions I have held in the past. As someone who very much values people and their ideas, I tend to shy away from conflict and drama. Professionalism and integrity have always been part of my work ethic.

In mid May, a couple weeks prior to the publication of the *Winnipeg Free Press* article, during an informal meeting with the trustees, I simply dared to question, as per my duty as trustee and obligation towards the public, *Policy AC: Respect for Human Diversity* as well as the wide array of highly explicit material (ie diverse books) available within LRSD. My question was met with hostility by Ms. Nemeth who immediately shut me down. In my opinion, which is supported by the majority, a healthy school board should include members with various view points. In fact, I was voted in (2,817 votes to be exact) by citizens who stood behind a lifelong St. Boniface resident upholding traditional views and wishing to lend a voice to those defending parental rights. Now that voice is gone.

However, it would be unsafe and unhealthy to work in an environment where intolerance reigns.

After being accused by Ms. Nemeth of breaching the Board Code of Conduct, my legal team and myself proceeded to formally appeal the motion approved by the Louis Riel School Division Board of Trustees (the “Board”) on June 6, 2023, which resulted in a 3-month suspension without pay. Not only was my remuneration taken away, but I was terminated from my teaching position at St. Boniface University due to the controversy surrounding the *Winnipeg Free Press* article.

The appeal process was well on its way and the hearing date was set for December 5, 2023. However, on October 18, 2023, the day the NDP government was sworn in, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning advised us that a decision had been made to immediately revoke the appointment of the adjudicator assigned to this matter, who was selected by Hon. Wayne Ewasko prior to the provincial elections. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning would seek to appoint a new adjudicator as soon as possible.

On October 19, 2023, I received an unexpected and intrusive phone call from the *Winnipeg Free Press* asking me if I would like to comment on another 30-day suspension that was entering into effect immediately. LRSD had decided to suspend me once again without pay for not signing the annual declarations, even though the reasons for this refusal had been communicated in writing to Ms. Nemeth. Despite their validity, the reasons were disregarded, and the article that was published made me erroneously appear irresponsible and neglectful.

On November 8, 2023, another defamatory article was published by the *Winnipeg Free Press* and later by the CBC, stating that my comment on a friend's Facebook page ("flied lice") was considered "racist" and "abusive". If the language used appeared insensitive, that was not the intention. I strongly disagree with racism. Once again, I was labelled with ill intent. Anything can be taken out of context and turned around. This comment garnered me a 3-month suspension without pay, starting November 17, 2023. When I was advised of this suspension, I was already serving a 30-day suspension, which makes this a revolving door of endless suspensions.

In the CBC article published on November 9, 2023 (the story was picked up from the *Winnipeg Free Press* article published the day before), Ms. Nemeth alluded to her intended agenda: "Because Champagne was democratically elected by the community, there is no provision within the Public Schools Act for the board to remove her. However, the board can and will continue to suspend Champagne if she fails to sign and uphold the code of conduct." Much has been

revealed through this statement. The intent was made clear, which was to keep suspending me (without pay) until I surrender my beliefs.

Consequently, since when does a chair have greater rights or powers than any other member of the board? Where does the abuse of power come from that would allow one to consistently run to the press each time a suspension has been planned, then taking one's remuneration away, time and time again?

As per sections 1.2(1), 1.2(2) and 1.2(3) of the Manitoba Public Schools Act:

*Bullying is defined as behaviour that:

*Is intended to cause, or should be known to cause, fear, intimidation, humiliation, distress or other forms of harm to another person's body, feelings, self-esteem, reputation or property; or

*Is intended to create, or should be known to create, a negative school environment for another person.

*Bullying characteristically takes place in a context of real or perceived power imbalance between the people involved and is typically, but need not be, repeated behaviour.

*Bullying may be direct or indirect.

*Bullying may take place:

*By any form of expression, including written, verbal or physical, or

*By means of any form of electronic communication - also referred to as cyberbullying - including social media, text messaging, instant messaging, websites or e-mail.

*A person participates in bullying if they directly carry out the bullying behaviour or intentionally assists or encourages the bullying behaviour in any way.

I firmly believe I have been wrongfully accused in all instances. I'm certainly not hateful or racist, and the defamation by the press that ensued is repugnant to say the least. As John Wooden expressed: "Worry about your character not your reputation. Your character is who you are, and your reputation is who people think you are."

The hearing with the newly appointed adjudicator had been set for November 29, 2023, but as communicated to him in writing, I would have been unable to attend. In addition, I was no longer able to afford the legal fees towards the appeal process and other matters. I surely did not become a school trustee with the intention of entering a legal battle. My objective was to focus on education (the 3Rs) and the moulding of healthy minds, but political activism seems to take precedence.

For all the reasons listed above, I will be forced to leave the board, and not of my own volition.

I was given the opportunity to comment via certain mainstream media outlets, but I declined because the facts would have been twisted, leading to misinformation, just like all the articles that were published on my subject so far. I give credit to the alternative media outlets that report the truth.

Freedom of expression seems to be quickly eroding in Canada even though we still technically have a democracy. These days, those who stand up for their values and beliefs are cancelled and persecuted. Being the daughter of a WWII veteran, I was taught to defend what is righteous and just, which includes guarding children's innocence. I have the duty to pass the torch in honour of the veterans who fought for our rights and freedoms, including the freedom of opinion and religion.

In society, we must re-learn that disagreeing with someone does not equal hate. To equate a lack of approval with hate is dishonest at best, and it is a rather slippery slope that exposes the true goal of the agenda at work.

On the bright side, I am grateful for everyone with whom I have interacted, including administrators, educators, support staff, parents and community members at large. Determined to familiarize myself with LRSD, I visited numerous schools, attended various concerts and

exhibits, volunteered at school events, etc. while attempting to lend a voice to the electorate.

From the bottom of my heart, I wish to thank every single person who has voted for me and all those who inspired me during my mandate which was prematurely cut-off. I appreciate the ongoing support!

I wish you all peace and unity going forward.

Sincerely,

Francine Champagne