

# Globe Alberta

## EDUCATION

### Is home-schooling making the grade?

Alberta moved this week to shut down an operator over questionable practices and how tax dollars were being spent. Now, some supporters of teaching kids at home fear an erosion of parental rights



## PROVINCIAL POLITICS

### No love for uniting the right from Wildrose

JUSTIN GIOVANNETTI EDMONTON

Any notion of uniting Alberta's two largest conservative parties under former MP Jason Kenney won't be on the agenda this weekend as the province's Official Opposition Wildrose Party meets in Red Deer.

Merger talks with Alberta's Progressive Conservatives would be a distraction, Wildrose Leader Brian Jean told his party's general assembly on Friday evening. The Tories are "rife with uncertainty, division and instability," he said.

Wildrose officials told The Globe and Mail they were surprised no unite-the-right motions were proposed by the party's members for the general assembly. Wildrose meetings can be fractious affairs that don't shy from controversy. Former leader Danielle Smith was embarrassed by a revolt on the floor of a 2014 assembly where members voted to upend her outreach efforts toward LGBTQ groups.

On Thursday, Mr. Jean said that his party's members might be taking a wait-and-see approach: "I think a lot of people are waiting to see what takes place over the coming year, and I am as well."

Mr. Kenney, a former federal minister of citizenship and defence, is one of the leading candidates to take over the leadership of the Tory party that





Home-teacher Judy Arnall, playing chess with son Scott, is part of a new group called Alberta Home Education Parents Society. JEFF MCINTOSH/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CARRIE TAIT CALGARY

**B**ari Miller never learned about evolution in high school. She graded her own exams. She had few textbooks. She graduated without meeting Alberta's basic standards in classes such as English or science.

At 17, Ms. Miller ran away from home, escaping her mom and the education program she deemed shoddy. She dreamed of university, but without a grasp of the Big Bang theory or proper transcripts, was not going to get there.

Ms. Miller is a product the Wisdom Home Schooling Society of Alberta, which ran home-schooling operations for Trinity Christian School Association, a private-school operator funded by the province. The Alberta government shut it down this week, alleging the two main families that run the organizations mismanaged millions of dollars to their own benefit.

The New Democratic Party said in a detailed report that key players struck questionable land deals, charged exorbitant rental rates for offices they owned, and withheld taxpayer money intended for parents to use for resources, such as textbooks. The government says the relationship between Trinity

and Wisdom and their approach to student evaluations were inconsistent with provincial legislation on home-schooling.

The NDP has alerted the RCMP and Canada Revenue Agency to its findings. It is up to those agencies to decide whether to investigate further.

Ms. Miller, who was taught at home by her mother in the Wisdom program from Grades 2 to 12, does not understand what took so long.

"My mom could do whatever she wanted with very little oversight," she said. "I could just show [facilitators] test results that I myself graded."

Ms. Miller graduated from Wisdom's program in 2010. (Trinity considered Wisdom a contractor, but the organizations share some senior officials, and that created financial conflicts, the government says.)

Ms. Miller believes someone should have addressed problems long before Alberta's department of education began to review Trinity's books last summer. She said her mom neglected to buy textbooks for her and her siblings some semesters, forgoing the government cash that would have gone toward the costs.

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Mr. Kenney, a former federal minister of citizenship and defence, is one of the leading candidates to take over the leadership of the Tory party that long ruled Alberta before losing to Rachel Notley's New Democrats in 2015. His campaign has run into opposition from both the PCs and Wildrose as he has pledged to merge both parties before the next provincial election in 2019.

The PCs have implemented rules for their leadership contest that forbid candidates from undermining the Tory brand. The party's new leader will be elected in March.

The party's first leadership debate will be held next Saturday in the same central Alberta hotel where Mr. Jean spoke on Friday. Along with Mr. Kenney, former MLA Donna Kennedy-Glans, current MLAs Sandra Jansen and Richard Starke, and Calgary lawyer Byron Nelson have joined the contest.

The Wildrose is planning to spend its last general meeting before the Tory leadership vote targeting Ms. Notley. The NDP Premier is nearing the midpoint of her four-year term amid the backdrop of one of the weakest economic performances in Alberta since the Great Depression.

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## Home-schooling: Financial prudence becomes subject of concern

» Money, rather than quality of education, was the Alberta's Department of Education's focus. One of the report's many allegations is that Wisdom, rather than Trinity, controlled \$988,000 of government funding earmarked for parents over the past three years.

Scores of home-schooling supporters – inside and outside of Wisdom's system – believe the NDP wants to shut down home-schooling. The parents say the government action was about politicians eroding parental rights.

Parent Judy Arnall says the NDP's move goes beyond Wisdom, and that the NDP is enforcing a stricter interpretation of the legislation. She says, for example, the government no longer allows expenses, such as gym fees for physical education teaching, thereby limiting what parents can provide for their kids.

"Parents are very worried that this is a slippery slope to shutting down parent-directed home education," she said.

Ms. Arnall teaches her kids through Calgary's Third Academy, a secular private home-schooling operation. Four of her five children have graduated high school under her instruction. Two have graduated university, one will finish this year and the fourth intends to go soon. She has been at this 19 years.

Ms. Arnall is part of a new group of parents called the Alberta Home Education Parents Society (AHEPS). It is holding its first annual meeting this weekend in Calgary. Families started AHEPS in the summer to lobby the government because they worry the NDP will limit their home-schooling opportunities.

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**Scott Arnall is home-schooled by his mom Judy and could be following in the footsteps of two of his siblings who were also taught by their mom at home and have since graduated from university.** JEFF MCINTOSH/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

are spent legitimately."

The provincial government allotted \$8-billion to its education department this year. Of that, \$155-million is set aside for accredited private schools, such as Trinity and Third Academy. School boards and private schools that supervise a home education program are provided \$1,670 a year per student, and at least half of that is supposed to be offered to parents to offset qualifying expenditures.

Bricks-and-mortar public schools receive approximately \$6,500 a student, as do charter schools, as a base amount. Private brick-and-mortar operations receive 30 per cent less than those in the public and charter system. Trinity had 13 students in

outpaces that in British Columbia. For example, just 2,247 children were registered in B.C.'s public and independent home-schooling systems in 2015-2016.

Alberta Education Minister David Eggen dismisses allegations he shuttered Trinity for reasons beyond spending and accounting. "My job is to ensure that public money is being spent as it should be," he said in an interview on Thursday.

Parents involved with Trinity and Wisdom say the move came without warning. The government said it long ago told Trinity its practices did not comply with the law.

The province said in the report that it warned Trinity in 1997 that its contracting structure with

The report also found some salaries related to Trinity and Wisdom's two main families alarming. It said total compensation to all members of the two clans exceeded \$2.76-million over three years.

Wisdom did not return several calls from The Globe and Mail seeking comment.

Trinity and Wisdom issued statements on Thursday, addressing some of the government's allegations.

"Trinity and Wisdom deny the accusations (e.g. misappropriation of funds) coming from Alberta Education. Wisdom's holding of funds on behalf of Trinity is neither illegal nor deceptive, a fact that is expected to be substantiated by the courts in the days ahead," the pair said.

## Wildrose

» The economy has been in recession for nearly two years and the unemployment rate is at its highest rate in decades.

Mr. Jean says his main goal is unseating Ms. Notley, not talks with Mr. Kenney. On Friday, he said that the New Democrats were "disastrous ... shameful ... intent on hurting families."

The Wildrose Leader and his party view the NDP as a government that has besieged the Alberta it holds dearest, with a carbon tax opposed by its rural base, a law requiring workplace-safety rules on farms and tax hikes that have stung the wealthy.

"It feels like Alberta is becoming almost unrecognizable," Mr. Jean told his party.

Instead of appealing to Martha and Henry, the fictitious couple created by former premier Ralph Klein as a symbol of average Albertans, Mr. Jean said the NDP is instead seeking to engage "Leap Manifesto authors Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis."

The Leap Manifesto is a far-reaching document that would ban all future pipelines. The federal NDP voted to send the manifesto to local associations for discussion earlier this year. Ms. Notley and her lieutenants quickly repudiated the document.

Wildrose members will debate policies over the weekend drawn from the federal Conservative Party, as well as a return to the dogmas of Ralph Klein, among them reinstating a flat income tax, repealing the carbon tax, ending government subsidies of political parties and requiring that parents be informed of sexual-identity discussions in schools.

While Ms. Notley has unveiled plans for a cap on emissions



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"We really need to protect parents' choice of curriculum and instructional methods," she said. "A lot of people think home education is textbooks and workbooks, [but] it can be anything from games to video games to textbooks."

At the same time, she is sympathetic to the parents who taught under Wisdom, and to the Alberta government as it faces criticism. "I feel bad for the parents, but I think the government is our gatekeeper and they do need to ensure that tax dollars



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Bricks-and-mortar public schools receive approximately \$6,500 a student, as do charter schools, as a base amount. Private brick-and-mortar operations receive 30 per cent less than those in the public and charter system. Trinity had 13 students in its physical school in Cold Lake, and about 3,500 at home. The government is encouraging parents to sign up with alternate school authorities. Students under 16 must be registered with a school.

Trinity and Wisdom issued statements asking parents to "await the intervention of the courts prior to taking steps to find new placements for their students."

Home-schooling in Alberta far

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The province said in the report that it warned Trinity in 1997 that its contracting structure with Wisdom breached the legislation.

After reviewing the association's 2013-2014 audited financial statements, the province again informed Trinity its contract with Wisdom and evaluation methods did not follow the law. The department said it raised concerns with Trinity for two years.

The association's inability to provide proper accounting sparked the department's more intense review this summer, the province said.

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Ms. Miller, now 23, is a Masters student in the University of Ottawa's political studies program. She could not get into university with her Wisdom credentials, so she took extra classes.

"It is not about taking choice away from parents," she said. "It is about ensuring that kids don't fall through the cracks, and if they chose to go to university, they have been adequately prepared for that."

The Wildrose Leader and his party view the NDP as a government that has besieged the Alberta it holds dearest, with a carbon tax opposed by its rural base, a law requiring workplace-safety rules on farms and tax hikes that have stung the wealthy.

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While Ms. Notley has unveiled plans for a cap on emissions from the oil sands and a carbon tax to help win approval for pipelines, Mr. Jean's Wildrose base rails against any concessions to what it perceives as elite interests in Montreal and Toronto.

He told his party that Alberta is being "ripped off" by other provinces. "And what have we got in return? Sewage-dumping mayors in Montreal attacking our pipelines," he said.