

Standing against hate

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EDUCATION is a cornerstone of our society, a means to combat hate and foster understanding. Teachers, school trustees, and government officials bear a profound responsibility to ensure that schools remain safe and inclusive for all students.

This is particularly crucial for Indigenous Peoples, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and all marginalized individuals and groups who have historically faced systemic discrimination and prejudice.

As president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, I feel compelled to address the recent and deeply troubling incidents involving the Mountain View School Division board.

On April 22, trustee Paul Coffey made a public presentation titled "Racism Anti-racism, Nice Until It Isn't" to the school board. It contained vitriolic, uninformed, and harmful disinformation.

The provincial government responded by launching a governance review of Mountain View.

Meanwhile, Coffey continues to serve in his role as school trustee without sanctions or restrictions. His presence on the board is extremely harmful because it compromises the safety, equity, and quality of education for all students. It also sends a dangerous message that racist behaviour will be tolerated.

At the end of May, superintendent Stephen Jaddock was fired, which was followed by the resignation of three long-serving school trustees.

While we do not know the specific reasons behind the firing and mass resignations, the timing of this — coupled with the actions of Coffey — raises red flags and points to significant issues that I believe require immediate and decisive action.

The hateful rhetoric expressed by Coffey is not an isolated incident, it is symptomatic of a broader, troubling rise in far-right agendas that threaten the fabric of our society. In fact, the Louis Riel School Division just held a byelection to replace a school trustee who was suspended three times for what the board called "transphobic social media posts."

We are witnessing an alarming increase in attempts to control the educational narrative, suppress truth, and undermine efforts towards equity and inclusion. This trajectory is dangerous. We must confront it with unwavering resolve.

Coffey's remarks tried to whitewash the atrocities of residential schools, deny the existence of white privilege, and discredit the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They are not only factually incorrect but profoundly offensive: an affront to those who have suffered and continue to suffer from the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic racism.

Such views have no place on our school boards or in any institution dedicated to the education and well-being of students. We must stand strong against hate and uphold our commitment to truth and reconciliation. The recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must guide our actions as we strive to create a more just and equitable society.

Schools must be safe havens for learning and growth, where every student feels seen, valued, and protected.

Allowing or ignoring the distortion of history and the perpetuation of harmful myths undermines this mission and betrays our collective responsibility. It is our duty to ensure education serves as a force for good, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and social justice.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society unequivocally rejects the opinions expressed by Trustee Coffey. He should be immediately removed from his position.

A trustee with racist views is likely to resist or undermine efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. This hampers progress toward creating an educational environment that values and respects all cultures and identities.

Furthermore, the province must act immediately and take decisive action against the Mountain View School Board to address this issue and prevent any recurrence of such harmful behaviour.

Our position is that the current board no longer serves the needs of the community and has failed to uphold the values of inclusivity, equity, and respect and should therefore be dissolved.

We urge all Manitobans to stand with us in opposing hate. If we allow racist views to influence educational policy and practice, systemic inequities are perpetuated, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage for marginalized groups.

Government must move to dissolve the board, and in doing so reaffirm its dedication to the well-being of all students and the truth of our shared history.

Together, we can build a society where education empowers every individual to stand strong against hate.

Now is the time to act.

Nathan Martindale is the president of the Manitoba Teachers Society.