

Patriotic education in the spotlight

BY MEAGAN FITZPATRICK, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE FEBRUARY 14, 2009



A full moon rises over the Canadian flag on Flag Hill in Victoria, B.C.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Canwest News Service

Canada marks Flag Day on Sunday amid renewed debate over national pride and the role of schools in instilling patriotism in the country's youth.

While Feb. 15 honours the day in 1965 when the Maple Leaf was first raised over Parliament Hill, this year it's another symbol - the national anthem - that's been commanding the patriotic spotlight.

And schools have been at the centre of the ensuing storm over pride and political correctness.

"Historically, schools in both Canada and the United States have been seen as instruments of inculcating patriotism, that schools should be charged with teaching children to love their country," said Joel Westheimer, author of *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in American Schools*.

Schools are partly to blame for generations of students with a weak sense of citizenship, according to Marc Chalifoux, executive director of the Dominion Institute, and one manifestation of that can be seen in the low voting rates among youth, he said.

"Anything that our schools can be doing to instil a greater meaning of citizenship, a greater pride in being Canadian into our students should be looked at," said Chalifoux.

That role has been hotly debated in recent weeks over the decision of a small New Brunswick school to relegate the playing and singing of O Canada to monthly assemblies, rather than daily.

Westheimer, an American who now lives in Canada and is the research chair in democracy and education at the University of Ottawa, said patriotic fervour tends to intensify when a country is at war. The recent controversy over the anthem at Belleisle Elementary likely had an added intensity because Canada is fighting in Afghanistan, he said.

The family that brought the issue to the media's attention last month cited losing a relative in Afghanistan as a primary reason for wanting the anthem played every day. The principal at the school attended by Susan Boyd's daughter had cancelled the daily ritual in the fall of 2007, citing an effort to streamline the morning routine and be more "inclusive" in light of unspecified objections of other parents to the daily playing of the anthem.

Boyd, whose nephew, Pte. David Greenslade, died in Afghanistan in April 2007, views the national anthem as a fitting way to pay tribute to Canada's soldiers.

The Afghanistan mission is "obviously going to have an impact on the way that we think about Canadian patriotism," says Chalifoux.

When the anthem flap broke out, the organization offered to send military veterans to the school to talk about the song's significance.

"The way we look at it, singing the national anthem is a really important way of showing our national pride," said Chalifoux. "It's our view that schools are really one of the ideal places to start instilling that sense of national pride in the next generation of citizens."

What happened at Belleisle should be the start of a conversation among parents, schools, and legislators, Chalifoux said, and Westheimer agrees.

"I think that the most patriotic thing any Canadian school could do right now, especially that one, is cut out all those newspaper articles, go online and print out all those irate parents on both sides and discuss what kids think," he said. "Any educator who doesn't see this as a teachable moment is missing an incredible opportunity."

In the Belleisle controversy, the school board eventually stepped in and ordered the daily anthem be reinstated.

Schools in British Columbia are required to play O Canada a minimum of three times a year at school assemblies and in Manitoba and Ontario, the anthem must be part of daily school activities.

Long gone are the days however, when Ontario devoted an entire day solely to fostering patriotism and loyalty to the homeland. Empire Day was made part of the school calendar in 1899 and featured special lessons on the British Empire, plays, recitations of poetry and essays, speeches and the singing of patriotic songs. Empire Day fell by the wayside in the 1970s, according to the Ontario

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