Censorship claims mar candidate meetings

Questions scrutinized before being asked

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Two Catholic education organizations are voicing criticism of election candidate meetings for school trustees that, they claim, are tightly controlled sessions that offer little opportunity for debate or direct questioning of candidates.

Penny Boyce-Chester of the Greater Toronto Catholic Parent Network attended the Oct. 6 meeting for Ward 8 at Cardinal Leger High School in Scarborough.

"This is a very censored meeting," she charged. "The moderator decided which two questions he was going to ask from the box and his interpretation of how he was going to word these questions. That really bothered me.

"What they're doing is restricting or keeping the electorate away from the candidates and being able to ask effective questions of the candidates."

She was referring to the ground rules for all-candidates meetings being run by the Catholic Parent Involvement Committee of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, also known as CPIC. At CPIC meetings all questions from the floor must be submitted in writing and then they are screened before being asked by a moderator.

At one meeting, the questions were read out as they had been written, while at another meeting the moderator paraphrased some questions or modified them to apply to all of the candidates. There is no opportunity for debate or interaction with the audience.

Bob Dixon, head of Catholics United for a Responsible Ballot, said open debate is essential.

"There are some pressing issues that need to be debated, particularly with the previous performance of incumbents and how that's going to change and that needs to be debated," said Dixon, an adjunct professor at St. Augustine's Seminary, historian of Catholic education and author of a history of the Toronto Catholic board.

Angela Kennedy, seeking re-election after being ousted as chair of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, speaks at an all-candidates' meeting. Critics say questions to candidates are being censored. *(Photo by Sheila Dabu)*

"If we can't have a debate, that really favours the incumbents," he said. "People who go to these debates are expecting to be able to ask questions and if they can't, what the heck, they may as well call it a wine and cheese party."

Dixon said that there was an opportunity for debate in his ward, where some tough questions were asked of incumbent Ann Andrachuk.

Dan Barrett, chair of the Toronto Association of Parents in Catholic Education, defended the format and said critics should cut some slack for the parent volunteers who run the meetings.

"I don't see it as CPIC trying to hold back democracy, but they're trying to do the best they can. They've never done this before," he said.

Fourteen of the 17 planned meetings for the 12 wards are being hosted by CPIC, in collaboration with Catholic School Advisory Councils. These meetings are held in schools, while the other three are at churches.

CPIC co-chair Geoffrey Feldman said the meeting format isn't about censorship.

The group decided to "use Catholic values and not turn it into a fight between candidates," he said, adding that the objective was to foster discussion, not debate, and "try and make it an even platform," as well as promote respectful behaviour.

Attendees are invited to approach candidates after meetings to ask one-on-one questions. But Dixon said that defeats the purpose of an all-candidates meeting.

"When a question is asked and an answer is given, it conveys the information to everybody there on what the trustee's position is. It shouldn't be a private conversation," he said.

Valerie Lawson attended the meeting of Ward 11 candidates Angela Kennedy, Kevin Morrison and Ryan Ward. She said the moderator's paraphrasing of the questions and weeding out of "inappropriate" questions was "very high-handed and frankly, indicated perhaps part of the attitude that's led to the current problems of the board."

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