

## One system teaches kids to learn, live together

**Justin Trottier, Special to The Windsor Star**

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Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's recent announcement to fund faith-based schools under the umbrella of public education, just like Catholic schools, has generated considerable discussion. While the Centre for Inquiry, a founding member of the One School System Network, applauds those who recognize the problems inherent in our current discriminatory education apparatus. Where we part company is in the belief that the public funding of more faith-based schools is the solution.

The only fair, multicultural and economic solution before us is to merge our public secular and public Catholic boards into one strong secular school system.

First, as many are now learning, the so-called constitutional guarantee of the status quo is illusory. The Constitution gives the provinces absolute power over education with one provision for federal oversight -- s. 93(4) -- a mandated process for change which guards against frivolous or premature abrogation of privileges granted at an earlier time for a reason that no longer exists. Catholics may represent a large voting percentage of the population of Ontario, but that does not guarantee them the endless privilege of a separate school system. The provinces of Newfoundland and Quebec have both added Constitutional amendments to rescue themselves from using public funds to finance discriminatory religious schools.

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The position of John Tory's Conservatives, to segment our society along religious grounds, is a pseudo solution. The beauty of a multicultural society is that individuals, regardless of background, work and live together. If we wish to raise future generations with a tolerant and informed outlook, children must learn and live together from the earliest age, rather than being educated in an isolated system, then thrust into a multicultural work environment.

In 1999, the United Nations cited the province of Ontario as being in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for discriminatory funding of Catholic schools using public funds. Since no measure was taken by either the provincial or federal government, the province was reprimanded a second time in 2005 for the same violations. The Covenant that we are in violation of is the same document that was used as a basis for our own Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We as Canadians view ourselves as upholders of human rights and justice and yet, on the world stage, we are abusers of those same rights.

The United Nations provided two solutions to remedy our disgrace; fund all the religious schools who demand funding, or fund only one, public, secular system. Providing public funding to every religious denomination is not the solution. It would be equally unrealistic for a government to choose which deserve funding and which do not, as this would force our elected officials to define what constitutes a religion. The province of Newfoundland attempted to fund an education system for eight religious denominations, resulting in 1266 schools, many only one room in size, in 270 school boards; by comparison there are currently only 72 school boards in Ontario. During a referendum in early 1997, nearly 73 per cent of Newfoundlanders, including a majority of Roman Catholics, voted to end church controlled education that had existed for nearly 165 years. Recent polls on CBC and City TV showed that nearly 60 per cent of Ontarians want a single school system by merging the public secular and Catholic systems, while less than 30 per cent are happy with the status quo. Furthermore, the Liberal government has gone on record testifying funding more religious school

boards would necessitate closing and reducing services in our already underfunded public schools.

Recently, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board voted to ban non-Catholic parents from sitting on school councils. When pressed why the board members did not wish a single non-Catholic parent to sit on the board, a member replied "Catholic schools were created for Catholics and we've tried to be inclusive but at the same time I think we do risk watering down our faith." Recent comments by Pope Benedict echo this sentiment. In a very public address, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, declared all Protestant and Orthodox churches "suffer a deep wound" by not recognizing the supremacy of the Pope. The document went on to declare Protestants "suffer defects," and that "title of Church should not be attributed to them." This arrogance is reflected in our laws, by allowing Catholic schools the right to hire only practicing Catholics, and fire those who do not recognize the supremacy of the Pope. Blatant discrimination on the basis of faith or lack thereof, is contrary to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and is made even more egregious while using public funds to do so.

As a founding member of the new One School System Network, we are deeply concerned that the current publicly funded Catholic school system, effectively stifles a student's ability to enquire and express themselves openly.

It is time to put an end to this grappling for public money to further segment, and discriminate against, our students. It is time to use public funding to ensure the best possible education for all Ontario students regardless of sex, race or religion.

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