

DALTON J. MCGUINTY ON WHY THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD FUND FAITH-BASED AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Dalton J. McGuinty was a teacher, professor, Ottawa Public School Board Trustee, and the father of ten children, including the current Premier of Ontario. He served as the Ottawa South MPP until he passed away in 1990. The following is an edited version of his written submission to the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario, (the "Shapiro Commission") in 1984. The Shapiro Commission subsequently recommended the extension of funding to independent schools, including faith-based schools. Those recommendations have never been implemented. In the wake of the UN's recent criticism of continuing noncompliance with the UN's 1999 ruling that Catholic-only religious school funding is discriminatory and violates international human rights law, and Premier McGuinty's recent statements in the context of abolishing religious arbitration options that there should be "one law for all Ontarians", public debate is once again taking place on how to eliminate the discrimination. Some say the discrimination should be fixed by amending the constitutional and cutting funding to Catholic schools which are currently attended by about 700,000 children. Others say the only fair and practical way to eliminate the discrimination is by extending equal funding to the 7% of faith-based schools that are currently not funded. In this debate, the issue of the value of funding faith-based schools is more topical than ever. Dalton McGuinty Sr. addresses the issue eloquently in a manner that is highly relevant to today's debate.

Dec. 27, 1984

To Dr. B.J. Shapiro,
Chairman, Commission for Independent-alternative schools Funding...

Dear Dr. Shapiro:

I regret that I was out of town at the time, and therefore unable to make a submission to your Commission with regard to public funding for independent-alternative schools. The enclosed statement is forwarded at this time for your consideration. ...

[Enclosed was a memo dated Dec. 13, 1984 from Mr. McGuinty to the Public School Trustees of the Ottawa, to which was appended an 11 page document giving his views on extending funding to independent-alternative schools.]

Memo to: Trustees, Ottawa Board of Education
From: Dalton J. McGuinty, Trustee
Subject: Public funding for Independent-alternative schools

Unfortunately I was unable to attend meetings on December 3 and 10 of our Committee to prepare a preliminary Brief on the status of independent schools. ... I am passing along for your consideration some personal observations on the question of public support for independent-alternative schools

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THE RELEVANCE OF INDEPENDENT ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN SOCIETY TODAY

In my experience the phrase “independent-alternative schools” refers to schools such as Counterpoint, Montessori, Waldorf, Christian, Jewish, Catholic high schools [which in 1984 were not fully funded] and other schools which are not within the public system and to which the Education Act applies a loaded label as “private schools”. ...

I will suggest some of the reasons why I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant in our society of today and are worthy of public support.

First, I believe that these schools are relevant in society today because they exist. ... These schools ... have a remarkable kind of existence. In Ontario they number over 500 different school units and have a total enrollment of approximately 80,000 students. And they would appear to be increasing in size and number.

They exist by virtue of the interest and sacrifice of a significant number of concerned and dedicated people, who support these schools in addition to paying their school taxes. These schools and their supporters cannot be dismissed with a respectful wave of the hand. These parents are not a lunatic fringe living on the periphery of society. And these schools cannot be accurately and fairly considered as “divisive”, “second class”, or “elitist” and “snobbish” as the label “private” denotes. They are simply and factually significant in number and in size and in quality. And they are a long way from death through discouragement, indifference, or the blight of obsolescence.

Secondly, I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant because they have a right to exist – and that right implies a correlative obligation of government to respect that right in practical ways. They have a right to exist insofar as they efficiently serve the needs of their pupils and parents, and society, by fulfilling the basic function of the school. And they have a right to exist because the common good of our society does not hinge on a single, uniform type of schooling, in a monolithic system. ... I do not believe that it can be shown that independent alternative schools are inadequate as schools and that they exert an influence detrimental to the well-being of our society. And those who might not agree should look to their programs and their teachers and students – and to the parents, children, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, [and] teachers who are the products of independent alternative schools. And those concerned and dedicated tax paying citizens who work and sacrifice to support them.

Thirdly, I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant in our society because **they are capable of serving important needs** ... which ...are of value not only to their students, but to the public school system and to society as a whole. I believe they are capable of doing some things which are not possible nor permissible to the same extent within the public system. **These things have to do with academic program, pedagogical techniques and, to use an awkward but I think meaningful phrase “the realm of values”.** And to my mind, first in order of importance has to do with values. Traditionally, education has been thought of a process of enculturation – a means whereby the values of the past are transmitted to the present and the future. ... During the past fifty years the public school system has become more vulnerable to criticism by many parents for its alleged failure to do so, in accordance with many parents’ desires.

In a pluralist society there is a real problem posed for the public school – for the public school must serve children who come from families divided into hundreds of religious and anti-religious bodies. This is pluralism with a vengeance. This is a fact. And the fact has implications. **With students and teachers of diverse convictions, the public school must attempt a so-called neutrality on the great issues of life.** It must operate with limited horizons. The independent-alternative schools is able to assume a clearly defined philosophy of life and a specific orientation in accord with the values of its students and their parents. The public school must serve the interests of those who would keep that dimension out. The independent-alternative school can serve those who would keep it in. ... And this “something of value” which the independent-alternative school would attempt to impart is of value to society. ...The fortunes of a free society are **intimately linked to the fact of a morally informed and sensitive citizenry.** Values and standards which are more than mere habits, which go down below the soil of custom into the rock of clear conviction... are founded in a philosophy of life. A liberal state spends on the morality of its people. The state cannot create this morality. It has to take it for granted. While this is primarily the responsibility of the church and the home, many people feel that they want the help of the school in this regard – with their school an extension of their home. And the state which is not cognizant of this fact may very well deprive itself of the kind of citizens it needs for survival. ... I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant insofar as they can serve this purpose...

And with regard to the wishes of parents who support independent-alternative schools from the aspect of their values or pedagogical techniques, there is here an important principle. **The prior right in education is with the family.** The family is an imperfect society which needs the help of other agencies – notably the school. And historically the school was set up for this purpose. And so the family delegates to the school a part of this responsibility. But education is a cooperative activity between the home and school. And the family has a right to look to the school as in some ways an extension of itself. ... And **some parents, by choice, for valid reason, would exercise what they consider to be their parental right to have**

their children in a school which more nearly approximates their idea of a school, from the aspect of values, atmosphere, program [and] teaching techniques. The independent-alternative school provides these people with an institution which serves their felt need.

Fourthly, I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant because of their character as a natural resource..., in the boys and girls, in the young men and women whom they are preparing for their productive and mature years in Canadian society. All schools have value as a natural resource – whether public or private, independent or alternative. As a natural resource independent-alternative schools have a value. ... Only recently have the governments of this country become properly conscious of their responsibility for natural resources. ... In my experience, independent-alternative schools were not properly appreciated as natural resources in the past, nor are they at present.

My father worked at a lumber mill, and he worked hard and long to raise his six children. He served his country well and loved it – a lot more uncritically than I do. You know about what his salary was. But he worked extra hard and long to pay our fees through an independent alternative high school. We helped him all we could – knowing full well that he was in a sense paying double taxes for our schooling – that he was a second class citizen not permitted by law to direct his [education] taxes to the school of his choice – a school incidentally which produced some of the finest lawyers and doctors and judges and ordinary people in the country. And even some politicians.

And there are some people like myself who are somewhat critical of a government and its policies towards those who are part of the natural resources I am talking about. ... independent-alternative schools are relevant because they have the character of a natural resource – the most precious natural resource of all. And if we fail to appreciate this natural resource we do so at their peril – and ours.

There are other reasons why I believe that independent-alternative schools are relevant in society today, and worthy of public support:

- Because they make for a healthy rivalry with a public system which of necessity is characterized by a massive bureaucracy.
- Because their existence brings into the educational order the very kind of competitive spirit and comparative standards that we find necessary for the well-being of our political and economic orders.

And many others which I will not go into.

I would ask only that you consider the four reasons for relevance which I have given:

Alternative schools exist. They have a right to exist. They serve important needs. They are a precious natural resource.

And their right to public support should be recognized. In a free and just society the rights of all are diminished, if the rights of any one are infringed.

