

A LESSON IN DIVERSITY; TWENTY-FIVE PER CENT OF HAMILTON MUSLIM FAMILIES SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS. OTHER NON-CHRISTIAN STUDENTS ALSO SAY THEY BENEFIT FROM THE SYSTEM'S FAITH-CENTRED CURRICULUM.

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It has been several years since the Jalali sisters have worn school uniforms, done so much homework and written as many tests.

But they're loving it.

Tamimah, 15, and her 14-year-old sister Tahminah, know a thing or two about pedagogical styles.

Back in their native Afghanistan, they studied at a school that had uniforms, a strict code of conduct and rigorous performance standards.

And when the Taliban forbade girls from going to school, they studied at home with their mother, Vahidah, a science teacher.

When they came to Canada, they went to Tweedsmuir Public School. While all their classmates went on to Sir John A. Macdonald, the Jalali girls enrolled at Cathedral High School, the flagship school of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board.

"The way that they teach, they're stricter in the Catholic school," says Tamimah. "There's more homework, more tests and they encourage us to do well in school. It's like they are preparing us for our lives."

That's high praise from a teen -- and a Muslim teen at that.

The Jalali family, observant Muslims who go to mosque three times a week, number among the 25 per cent of Hamilton Muslim families who send their children to Catholic schools.

In fact, 7 per cent of the Catholic board's 30,000-plus students aren't Catholic, a phenomenon that has developed since full funding was instituted by the provincial government in the mid-1980s and the board has had to take all comers.

The board doesn't track how many of its students are Protestant or even non-Christian. It just knows it is reaping the benefits of being the only publicly funded **school system** in town where values are a natural outgrowth of a faith-centred curriculum.

"People believe there's better discipline in Catholic schools and that any religious values are better than no religious values," says Javid Mirza, past-president of the Hamilton Muslim Association.

As well, Mirza says, countries such as India and even Islamist Pakistan have long held in high regard schools there that are run by Catholic nuns. To this day, they are believed to offer a more disciplined environment and a superior education. Those who emigrate to Canada continue to see Catholic schools in that light, says Mirza.

Across Ontario, school boards are marking Education Week. Catholic boards fete Catholic Education Week, a chance to celebrate the philosophical, pedagogical and

administrative approaches that set Catholic education apart from Ontario's larger public **school system**.

For Hamilton Catholic schools, it's a time of particular significance as they also mark the 150th anniversary of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board.

But just what is a Catholic education in a day and age when students need not be Catholic to be enrolled?

"The most basic way to describe what makes Catholic education distinct is that it is Christ-centred," says board chair Pat Daly.

"Our commitment to excellence would flow from our vision of the child as a unique being created in the image of God," Daly says.

"We have a responsibility to ensure each and every child achieves the fullness of their humanity of which Jesus Christ is the model."

Although educational standards and curriculum are similar for the two systems, Catholic boards have their own way of doing business.

They hire only Roman Catholic teachers and staff (and are legally entitled to discriminate in favour of hiring only Catholics). Their schools are bedecked with crucifixes, religious icons and pictures of the Pope.

Catholic schools work with parishes to prep students for first communion in Grade 2 and confirmation in Grade 8. They see parents as their partners in propagating the faith.

While the public schools introduced mandatory community service in 1999, Catholic schools have been doing social justice work locally and globally for decades, Daly says. High school chaplains organize worship services, retreats, fundraisers and community service works and draw teens into extracurricular activities, often social justice initiatives. In addition to making religion classes mandatory, Catholic doctrine is brought into lessons and discussions whenever possible, whether it's math class or history.

The Jalali girls have no problem with mandatory religion classes or even school-day masses.

"We listen," says Tahminah. "It's mostly about God and how to obey Him and that's good to know."

"What's beautiful about the Catholic school," her sister adds, "is that they accept you. They don't care what religion you are."

When it comes to Ontario's public schools, religion is a topic that is carefully controlled. After a century and a half of Christian domination, Ontario's educational system got a dramatic overhaul in 1988 when the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that religious indoctrination in public schools was coercion. The Lord's Prayer was outlawed shortly after.

Then the government of Bob Rae introduced Memorandum 112, which prohibits teaching religion from a believer's point of view.

It seems to be at odds with the provincial Human Rights Code, which requires public institutions to make some accommodation for faith observances, and with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees freedom of conscience and religion.

Amid ever-increasing cultural and religious diversity, the current state of affairs in some public schools seems to be trampling minority rights rather than protecting them, says Lois Sweet, author of *God In The Classroom: The Controversial Issue Of Religion In Canada's Schools*.

Hundreds of thousands of Ontarians want to see religion addressed in the **school system** and not necessarily through proselytization, says Sweet, who teaches journalism at Carleton University. She deems the lack of progress "continued intransigence."

Hamilton's public schools strictly control faith-based activities.

In 2003, parents challenged the banning of a Christian Club at a city high school. They were concerned their activities were being restricted even though Muslim students were allowed to gather to pray. In 2004, the board developed a policy requiring school-approved supervisors and parental permission for religious activity.

Faith clubs must take a multifaith approach meant to "educate versus convert," while prayer groups may meet "to interact with each other and with God or guiding Spirit." Meanwhile, the board is looking to reintroduce values education. While it's still thrashing out which values will be included, the campaign will be unveiled this fall.

Annie Kidder, spokesperson for parent lobby group People For Education, wonders if reintroducing values education is a response to the number of kids today who have grown up without religion or even a defined set of values.

"I grew up in the '50s and '60s," says Kidder. "I'm part of a generation that was loath to simply pass along a ready-made set of values to my kids.

"Now I look at my kids and think, 'Hmm ... they could have learned more about that -- and maybe about religion too.'"

Dr. John Portelli studies values in education at the Ontario Institute For Studies In Education. He says the notion that values issues don't arise in public schools is just wrong.

"My concern as a citizen is that in public schools, as they are set up now, people with religious viewpoints can't bring them into the discussion," Portelli says. "The secular approach is not neutral at all."

His OISE colleague, Dr. Jack Miller, who studies the role of spirituality in education, says public school boards are at a disadvantage. Miller, the author of *Education And The Soul: Toward A Spiritual Curriculum*, agrees with 19th-century educator and writer Elizabeth Peabody that education relies on its attitude toward the soul.

"The human spirit or soul or whatever you want to call it is part of all of us," says Miller.

"If we ignore that, we're diminishing an important part of the human being."

Ignoring spirituality, Miller continues, is what breeds societal problems such as violence and substance abuse.

But for all the talk of values and fulfillment of human potential, religious studies scholar Dr. Peter Beyer says he can't spot much difference between Catholic and public school graduates in his classes at the University of Ottawa.

"And there's a lot of Catholics who come to the University of Ottawa," Beyer notes. "But I can't tell the difference, they're just as smart, just as dumb."

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History

* Ontario's publicly funded Catholic **school system** began with provisions in the 1867 British North America Act (BNA);

* At that time, 82 per cent of the province was Protestant and 17 per cent was Catholic.

* The BNA put education in provincial jurisdiction; Section 93 said separate schools are entitled to public funding.

* Unlike private schools, Catholic schools are subject to all Education Ministry guidelines and regulations.

* Catholic **school funding** was initially guaranteed until Grade 9. It was gradually extended when in 1985 the government of Bill Davis extended funding to cover the last two years of high school after having rejected that proposal 15 years earlier.

* The historically Protestant system was transformed into the present day secular public board.

* Since 1978, minority religious groups have been fighting to have their faith-based schools publicly funded.

* In 1979, an Ontario court found that mandatory religious instruction in public schools was not permitted.

* In 1987, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the constitutionality of provincial legislation that extends full funding to Roman Catholic schools. In that decision, Madame Justice Wilson stated for the minority: "These educational rights, granted specifically to ... Roman Catholics in Ontario, make it impossible to treat all Canadians equally. The country was founded upon the recognition of special or unequal educational rights for specific religious groups in Ontario."

* In 1996, the federal supreme court upheld a decision rejecting a challenge of Ontario's Education Act on the grounds it violates rights of freedom of religion and equality.

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Illustration:

• Photo: Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator / Sisters Tahminah, left, and Tamimah Jalali share an art class at Cathedral High. They are among many Hamilton Muslim students who attend Catholic schools.

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