



Ontario fails to deal with school funding issue

By Gila Gladstone-Martow
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While driving by the large brick building, bold black letters out front caught my eye: "Your Local Catholic School."

I was astounded by the suggestion, since in my mind, "local school" had always conveyed the image of the neighbourhood non-denominational publicly funded school for all children, regardless of their religion.

Curiosity led me to call the York Region Catholic School Board. Chris Cable, the communications director, explained that a baptism certificate (Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox or Ukrainian Orthodox) was required to enrol at the elementary level. (That is also the case at Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, although exceptions are made in consultations with school principals.)



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Ontario is the only Canadian province that fully funds faith-based schools of one religion to the total exclusion of all other religions. However, John Tory, the leader of the Ontario Conservatives, has committed that if elected premier he will address the unfair funding imbalance for faith-based students.

Since this requirement does not fit my criterion of a local school, I must surmise that there is a certain degree of confusion between public schools and publicly funded schools in Ontario; while the former implies the latter, the reverse does not.

The murky waters of faith-based school funding get even murkier when we introduce private schools.

Independent private schools exist for those parents seeking specific programming not found in the public schools, or who merely wish to enrol their children in an atmosphere of privilege, all at a high cost. But parents who choose faith-based schools, be they Catholic, Jewish or Muslim, mostly do so for cultural and religious reasons.

Catholic faith-based schools receive public funding and are, therefore, considered "public" schools. Jewish or Muslim faith-based schools do not receive public funding and are therefore considered "private." When these "private" schools ask for public funding, they are told that funding is only available to ... you guessed it ... public schools! So the non-Catholic schools find themselves in this inescapable circular logic: you do not get public funding, therefore you are private and because you are private you cannot get public funding! How fair is that?

Ontario's previous Conservative government recognized the discrimination in school funding and instituted a program of partial tax credits to alleviate some of the inequity faced by parents of non-publicly funded students. John Tory, leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, has committed that if elected premier he will address the unfair funding imbalance for faith-based students. Disappointingly, Premier Dalton McGuinty reacted with fear-mongering statements that Tory plans to fund private schools at the expense of publicly funded schools.

Ontario's premier hopes that an unsuspecting public will ignore the fact that only Catholic schools (where McGuinty happens to have sent most of his kids) have the privilege of operating as publicly funded schools. Other religions do not have that privilege. It is discrimination, pure and simple.

There has been no denial on the part of the Ontario Liberals that the continued full funding of Catholic students -- while the remaining 7 per cent of faith-based schools receive no assistance -- is unfair. All Canadians should be embarrassed that while the UN has ruled twice (1999 and 2005) that Ontario's school funding is discriminatory, the black spot on Canada's record of human rights remains.

When pressured for a comment by Michael Coren on his Aug. 30 television talk show, McGuinty attempted to justify the funding inequity by saying that it is "part of Canada's history." Sorry, Premier McGuinty, Canada's history isn't at issue here; rather it's about how Ontario has not dealt with that issue. This is the only province in Canada -- in fact we are the only

Western democracy -- that fully funds faith-based schools of one religion to the total exclusion of all other religions. Excluding the Maritimes, all provinces fund faith-based schools and have thriving public school systems.

Let us not forget that at the same time Catholic school funding was entrenched in our constitution, women were denied the vote, yet another part of our "history." Apparently, only some laws warrant changing -- it always comes down to political will.

In case you missed last year's Ontario Ministry of Education promotional spots on TV, I shall recap for you. What are supposedly the publicly funded students of today are seen as the adults they shall eventually be, happily bouncing along in a yellow school bus. The ending caption read: "It's our plan to reach every student." Obviously, the advertising agency did not get the memo or they would have printed: "It's our plan to reach every student ... except the non-Catholic ones".

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