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## **Equal school funding not a ‘priority,’ despite ‘injustice,’ Kennedy says Multi-Faith Coalition members vow to fight on**

By Rick Kardonne  
Tribune Correspondent

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said it was “an injustice” that Roman Catholic schools receive the same amount of funding as secular public schools, but that schools of other faiths do not, forcing parents to pay exorbitant tuitions while at the same time paying for public schools through their property taxes.

The UN Human Rights Commission has publicly condemned Ontario for this practice.

McGuinty talked about this injustice with Metropolitan Archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas, head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Canada and chair of the Multi-Faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Religious Schools (MFC).

But the Ontario Ministry of Education, according to both Archbishop Sotirios and Education Minister Gerard Kennedy, so far has not transformed the premier’s opinion into concrete remedies to end this injustice.

Kennedy said in a phone interview that his ministry has no immediate plans to change the status quo.

In December 2004, the Multi-Faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Religious Schools – representing Muslims, Sikhs, Jews and a wide range of non-Catholic Christians – gave Kennedy a detailed proposal for the equal funding of faith-based schools. In fact, a member of Kennedy’s staff signed for and received a copy of the proposal sent by the MFC.

It is now 15 months later and “they have not replied,” the Archbishop said. “Mr. Kennedy has consistently refused to meet with us to consider our proposals. I am amazed that Kennedy has not replied.”

The Ontario Association of Jewish Day Schools (OAJDS), a member of the MFC, has encountered similar evasions, according to both past presidents Ira Walfish and President Stephen Dreezer.

In an interview with the Jewish Tribune, Kennedy claimed that he “has listened to the people of the MFC,” and that he did read the proposal. But then he said that “it is not realistic to make this a priority. Our first goal is to fix up the public school system.” When reminded that the UN Human Rights Commission had censured Ontario for this inequality of funding one religion but not others, Kennedy admitted that the premier feels that the status quo is “unfair,” but then said that “I don’t want to put this on the agenda right now.”

Kennedy raised the issue that funding for faith-based schools, whether in the form of a tax credit or equal funding, would have “no standards.”

However, Conservative Opposition Leader John Tory, who has challenged the Liberal policy on this matter and favours aid to faith-based, non-Catholic schools, said that he would ensure that “any funding to address fairness will be accompanied by provisions requiring accountability on teaching standards, course content and respect,” adding that the Conservatives “continue to work on developing our policy.”

Both the Archbishop and the OAJDS executives were pleased with John Tory’s positive sentiments on equal school funding, even though “the details of the Tory plan have yet to be finalized.”

Archbishop Sotirios said, “Of all the children who attend religious schools 93 per cent... attend Catholic schools and receive 100 per cent funding. We are simply asking that the 7 per cent who attend other religious schools should be equally funded and thus end this discrimination. This is our right under an international agreement that was signed by the government of Canada, with the approval of the government of Ontario.”

Kennedy’s response was that under the previous Ontario Conservative government, enrolment in “private schools,” under which he listed faith-based schools, grew by 45 per cent. He regarded faith-based schools as including “elitist” private schools who nominally have a religious affiliation, such as Anglican. He implied that demand for faith-based schools would balloon, without mentioning that demand for public secular schools would correspondingly decrease.

“We need regard for faith schools,” said Kennedy, “but we don’t want fragmentation.” Kennedy previously stated, according to an MFC press release, that the current system will end up being divided up into as many as 20 different religious systems. “By no stretch of the imagination is this true,” replied the Archbishop. “His lack of

understanding of the issues and of the implication of funding our schools shows that he needs to study the issue.”

Kennedy admits that the issue of equal funding for faith-based schools is “a large hurdle.” But on the other hand, this issue is not, for him or the Liberal provincial government, an immediate priority.

Walfish from OAJDS and Archbishop Sotirios, chair of MFC, have vowed to continue their fight for equal funding.

“We will use all means necessary, including political and media channels, to alert the public as to the injustice of this issue, so we can change it,” said Walfish. Archbishop Sotirios said, “We will fight to the very end.”