

Comment

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Education platform about more than funding

By JOHN SNOBELEN

Conservative Leader John Tory should be salivating at the chance to contrast with Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty, but it seems he is off to a rough start.

Tory's education platform has a pledge to update the funding formula and a really good idea about limiting homework but the public seems fixated on the notion of faith-based schools.

In fairness to Tory he does not claim that faith-based funding is driven by pedagogy and he does not intend to fund faith-based schools at the cost of the public system. It is, for him, an issue of fairness. Tory believes it is unfair to fund Catholic education and exclude all of the other religions in Ontario.

This isn't the first kick at this cat. The Ernie Eves government wanted to give tax credits to parents who enrolled their kids in private schools. This was not wildly popular with the public.

Other provinces have rolled religious schools into the public system and many people, including a lot of Conservatives, believe this makes a lot of sense.

The Harris government rejected the idea for three reasons. First, Catholic education is constitutionally guaranteed and any attempt to remove it would

involve a long and expensive court challenge. Second, the Catholic system has evolved and meets or exceeds the hiring and curriculum standards of the public system. Third, before the funding formula the public and Catholic systems competed for funding; now they compete based on student achievement.

Tory's idea for faith-based education is the next logical step in bringing provincial standards to all faith-based schools, but it will not be easy to enact. The demands placed on publicly-funded institutions (fair hiring practices, for instance) and limited curriculum space in senior grades make the idea difficult if not impossible.

Consider that in order to create the common curriculum we needed two expert panels, Catholic and public, and their French equivalents. In a faith-based world would you need six panels or 30? Or would it become impossible to initiate broad curriculum changes? How about school boards? Catholics have the right to manage their schools; will this apply to other faiths? What about busing?

Tory has asked no less an expert than Premier Bill Davis to sort through the difficulties of implementation.

Tory's biggest challenge will be in convincing Ontarians that more religious schools will be better for Ontario.

People in this province don't warm to faith-based education for two reasons. They don't like to mix religion and politics. And they believe the great strength of Ontario is its diversity and mixing kids of all kinds of ethnic and faith backgrounds in schools makes for a better Ontario.

No one would argue that parents should not be allowed to enrol their children in a faith-based school, but Tory will have a challenge convincing people that it is in the public interest to pay for it.

Having sprayed public money all over cricket pitches and the like, you might think McGuinty would have difficulty opposing an effort to make education fairer for faith minorities. You would be wrong again. McGuinty has found that he doesn't like differentiating between communities. Ah, the wonders of politics.