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## News Release

**For immediate release**

### **Tory education plan would hurt public education, divide society**

OTTAWA, June 21, 2007 - The Ontario Progressive Conservative Party's religious school funding proposal would seriously undermine the public education system by compounding the duplication penalty already borne by the taxpayer in funding a parallel Catholic system, say the directors of Education Equality in Ontario.

"To compensate for diminished economies of scale and inefficiencies arising from smaller and more geographically distributed student populations, English Catholic school boards generally receive hundreds of dollars per pupil per year more than their coterminous English public boards", said president Leonard Baak. "French boards receive thousands of dollars per pupil more than English boards for the same reasons."

"The Tory funding scheme would see the creation of many more publicly funded religious schools serving far flung student populations with attendance zones overlapping those of the schools in the existing four systems", said Baak. "The cost of that additional redundancy will be enormous," Baak said, "with the per pupil costs of these minority faith schools easily outstripping those of schools in the existing four systems."

Director Geraint Jones pointed out that even Liberal estimates of the cost of the Tory proposal likely understate the real cost. "The Liberals have said that if you bring the 53,000 students currently in private religious schools into the public system at the provincial average per pupil funding, the additional costs would total nearly half a billion dollars," said Jones, "but that assumes that the removal of the tuition cost barrier for private religious schools would not promote a further exodus from the public system to new types of segregated schools." "It also assumes that the per pupil costs of the new schools would be no greater than for schools in the existing public systems", said Jones, "which is a totally unrealistic expectation given their smaller constituencies."

"The loss of economies of scale and the diminished student population densities that would result from the Tory plan would also result in higher costs for the current four systems," said Jones, "exacerbating their funding issues." "The Tory plan is fiscally irresponsible and will, at the very least, eat up all of the new funding he has promised to address the new inefficiencies that it brings", said Mr. Jones.

The directors also pointed out that with a trend to more schools serving less and less dense student populations in overlapping jurisdictions, average bus commutes for all students will rise. "The existing duplication in the Ontario school system already sees thousands of students bussed right past their nearest publicly funded school to attend another publicly funded school", said Mr. Baak, "and the Tory plan will only see more students in that situation for even longer commutes." "Under a single school system," said Baak, "average commuting distances would fall and more

children would end up walking to school.” “By increasing the number of students who will require bussing and by increasing their average commuting distance, the Tory plan will have a negative impact on the environment and on student quality of life”, Baak said.

The creation of more segregated religious schools also raised concerns amongst the directors related to the creation of new divisions within Ontario society. “One of the strengths of our public system is that it brings Ontarians of all backgrounds together in an environment that fosters tolerance and mutual respect”, said Jones. “Segregation of children by faith, which is invariably accompanied by some degree of racial and ethnic segregation, will only undermine that mission”, said Mr. Jones.

Mr. Baak went further: “The religious school vested interests have put forward a very self-serving definition of ‘multiculturalism’ which suggests that we do not respect those of different backgrounds if we do not support segregated schools”. “We categorically reject that,” said Baak. “Multiculturalism should entail respectful and mutually enriching engagement,” Baak said, “not isolation and physically separate development.”

“The Tories have proposed a fundamentally different school system that will fundamentally change Ontario society”, said Jones, “and all Ontarians should consider the eventual consequences of their divisive proposal when voting this fall.”

The directors were also critical of the governing Liberals and the NDP. “As flawed as the Tory policy is”, said Mr. Baak, “at least the Tories recognize that something has to be done to address the discrimination against non-Catholic Ontarians in our school system. So does the Green party.”

“The Liberals and NDP recognize the costly and divisive nature of the Tory proposals”, said Baak, “but neither has been willing to recognize that continued Catholic school funding creates the very same cost and segregation issues that they criticise so freely in the Tory plan.” “To constructively and effectively counter the Tory proposals,” said Baak “they need to be proposing a single public school system.”

When censuring Canada for the religious discrimination in the Ontario school system in 1999, the UN Human Rights Committee stated that “the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] does not oblige State parties to fund schools which are established on a religious basis”, but that if they chose to, they must fund all such schools without discrimination.

“Given that Ontario’s constitutional ‘obligation’ to fund Catholic schools can be removed very quickly, no party can rely upon it to excuse Catholic school funding”, said Mr. Jones. “The fact that Ontario has a time-honoured tradition of Catholic privilege is no reason for it to continue. Such logic would have never seen women receive the vote. All Ontarians deserve equal respect and consideration from a religiously neutral provincial government”, said Jones. “The way to provide that equal respect is not through increased segregation”, Jones said, “but through one school system.”

“The Tory proposal promises to make education and unjustifiable Catholic privilege central issues in the coming election”, Jones said, “and for that we need to thank them.” “On the other hand”, said Jones, “they have ensured that the stakes will be very high for our education system and for our society”. “We hope Ontarians weigh their options very carefully.”

### **About Education Equality in Ontario**

Education Equality in Ontario is a non-governmental human rights organization and education advocacy group. We seek the elimination of religious discrimination and duplication in the Ontario school system through the establishment of a single publicly-funded school system for each official language (English and French).

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