

# Funding religious schools is bad policy

**Farzana Hassan And Salma Siddiqui, National Post**

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Ontario Progressive Conservative leader John Tory says he wants to "ensure that students from the widest range of faith and cultural backgrounds are part of public education." Many Ontarians have interpreted this to mean that Mr. Tory would provide public funding for religious schools of all types -- not just Catholic schools, as under the current system.

While the status quo may be flawed, providing more government funding to religious schools would only make matters worse. Such a plan would further ghettoize religious communities -- especially the Muslim community, which is already quite insular.

Conservative Muslims may support Mr. Tory's plan, and downplay differences between Islamic and Canadian values in an attempt to win support for public funding. But step into their schools, and you may be shocked at what they're teaching.

In some Muslim schools, girls must pray behind boys, and segregation based on gender is advocated as a religious duty. This is obviously in conflict with Canadian norms.

Furthermore, Muslim children, like other Canadian children, must be provided a full opportunity to explore their creative talents through instruction in subjects such as music, art, drama and dance -- disciplines that are often shunned in Muslim schools due to educators' austere religious outlook.

Advocates of public funding argue that such funding would ensure that private schools will be subject to more governmental oversight. They assert that extremism will be discouraged because curricula will be closely vetted. This ignores the reality that values within schools are rarely taught through formal curricula. Rather, it is the school culture which plays a dominant role in imparting values to children.

If Mr. Tory's proposal leads to the funding of conservative Islamic schools, then Ontario taxpayers will be subsidizing an indoctrination program that treats Muslim girls as second-class citizens. Because faith-based education would become cheaper, and therefore more accessible for Muslim families, more Muslim children will attend religious schools, and therefore have less contact with other Canadians. In the mosques, a new generation of young Muslims will come to embrace a more orthodox and archaic understanding of Islam.

Ontario would do better to gear its policies toward greater integration of ethnic and religious communities. Funding private religious schools will not advance diversity, which is best promoted in the public school system. There, children of all backgrounds can prepare to live together under a common set of Canadian values. - Farzana Hassan is the president of the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC). Salma Siddiqui is the senior vice-president of the MCC.