

## **Time to put an end to Ontario's support for separate school system**

National Post September 11, 2008

*By Malcolm Buchanan and Bryan Kerman*

As students return to school this month, the issue of why there are two publicly funded school systems in Ontario needs to be addressed. It is time to correct an injustice.

Separate Roman Catholic schools exist in Ontario because Catholic Quebec legislators insisted on them as a condition for the legislators' co-operation, first in the Union Parliament before Confederation, and then for Quebec joining Canada. But times have changed. Quebec no longer supports public religious schools, and Ontario now contains many adherents of non-Christian religions. Ontario is now among the world's most diverse, secular societies and yet the Ontario government is still being held hostage to 1867 arrangements.

One of Ontario's publicly funded school systems serves students and parents of all creeds and cultures in an atmosphere that focuses on our community as citizens of Canada. The other, the Roman Catholic separate school system, sorts and segregates on the basis of parents' religion and uses public dollars to hire a select group of employees to inculcate the beliefs of that religion into a select group of students.

In a world where religious tensions seem to be growing, stressing what unites our next generation of citizens is of paramount importance. There would be no better way to accomplish that than establishing a single, secular, publicly funded school system made up of English- and French-language school boards. Imagine, students of all faiths and backgrounds attending school together, making friendships and accepting each other as equals.

The constitutional "obligation" used to justify the discriminatory duplication can be removed by legislation. Recent constitutional history has seen both Quebec and Newfoundland eliminate denominational schools and move to a single public school system. Both provinces had constitutional obligations to provide denominational funding not unlike Ontario's.

Defenders of Ontario's Catholic schools claim that they have a divine right to receive public funding because the right is enshrined in the constitution -- "carved in stone" forever. This is not true.

The only thing carved in stone in the constitution is the power granted to the provinces to legislate as they please with respect to education. To eliminate public funding for Roman Catholic separate schools all that is necessary is for the Ontario government to pass legislation to that effect.

Here are some of the benefits establishing a single, secular publicly funded school system would confer:

- It would put an end to the wasteful duplication of running two parallel systems, which

costs many hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars annually. Many of the cuts now being felt in school boards across the province would not be necessary under one public school system.

- It would put an end to the discriminatory hiring and promotional practices of the publicly funded separate school boards that favour Roman Catholics in good standing with local parish priests. Pastoral letters of recommendation for employees would become a thing of the past.
- It would bring Ontario in line with the majority of Canadian provinces. Ontario is one of only three provinces that have not eliminated publicly funded school systems separated by religion.
- It would conform to the United Nations ruling stating that Ontario is in violation of the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights by funding only Roman Catholic religious schools. The UN ruling provided two solutions: Fund all faith-based schools or fund only secular public schools.

A majority of Ontarians are fed up with maintaining two duplicate systems. An Oraclepoll Research poll, along with other opinion polls from the summer of 2007, indicated that over 60% of those polled supported the creation of one publicly funded education system in Ontario. Under 30% supported the status quo.

Why then is Ontario continuing to grant special privilege to one group of citizens?

By funding Catholic schools, the government is in effect proclaiming that Roman Catholicism is the recognized official religion of the province. The government should have no say in religious matters. Religion is for churches, temples, mosques, synagogues and gurdwaras. Public schools should not be a place where religious dogma is taught.

Public schools should be places where students learn mathematics, language skills, science, history, etc., without being subjected to any one particular faith at the expense of others. Schools should be places where we tear down the barriers that exist between us and build the bonds that draw us together.

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