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Letter: Diversity not on the curriculum at faith-based schools

The funding of faith-based schools is the biggest (OK, only) issue for the upcoming Ontario election, with politicians on both sides trying to spin the issue in their favour. In tomorrow's Post, we hear from a university student who went to a such a school. As he relates in this letter, they are not the hotbeds for diversity and inclusiveness that John Tory say they will be.

-- *Paul Russell, NP letters editor*

John Tory's plan to publicly fund faith-based schools in Ontario is attracting a lot of attention. The provincial Conservative leader says it's a question of fairness, while calling for a "more effective integration of Ontario's increasingly diverse student population into the mainstream of our province."

What puzzles me as a university student, and future teacher, is how separating students by religious beliefs will integrate them into the mainstream. As a student who formerly attended a faith-based religious school, I can almost guarantee you this won't be the case.

I can recall a session from my Grade 9 Bible class where we had a debate focusing on homosexuality. One group had to argue that homosexuality was "right" and the other that it was "wrong." The "right" side barely even bothered to make a presentation, knowing the futility of it all, and class was dismissed. Walking back to my locker I heard some of my peers proudly claiming to be homophobic. Our class agreed; homosexuality was wrong, and the next logical conclusion was to be afraid of it.

The seriousness of this incident did not occur to me until I transferred to the public system for Grade 11. A teacher there threatened to suspend a student for derogatorily calling another student "gay," unless he recognized that such actions are no longer tolerable.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, faith-based schools breed a community of homogenous beliefs, values and ideals. This shouldn't be surprising to anyone. In faith-based schools, students are taught that a particular religion is fact, not belief. It is part of the curriculum to dismiss all other religions, systems of belief and values as false, untrue and meaningless, unless they line up exactly with that religion. How can we expect students to develop the ability to challenge authority systems, develop critical thinking and explore new ideas when they are in schools that claim to have all the answers?

John Tory's plan isn't going to bring anyone into the mainstream. It's going to isolate students from other belief systems and values. That's not moving Ontario forward and that's certainly not helping students.

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