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OPEN LETTER
Have faith in public education

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Every election offers up one or two issues with the potential to determine its outcome. Funding faith-based schools seems to be the early leader.

Presented as a matter of fairness and principle, portrayed as bringing religious schools "into" public education, this notion – whether or not intentional – is unfortunately a Trojan Horse carrying within social fragmentation and major distraction from the most important issues at hand.

We strongly support effective public education informed by a vision that people of all faiths must be respected and accommodated in the currently evolving publicly funded system. Our friends who choose to send their children to privately funded faith-based schools have our deepest respect. Yet we strongly believe that work to improve publicly funded education in Ontario must not be impeded by policies that would seriously detract from these efforts and take us back to the future.

Inclusion rather than fragmentation must inform our way forward. We imagine schools where children of all and no faiths learn about all religions. Where numbers dictate, we imagine curriculum opportunities where students can participate in religion-specific studies and, where appropriate, have prayer breaks and separate washroom facilities. We imagine schools where all of our children learn first-hand to live with respect for, and appreciation of, the differences they all represent to create something special ... together.

With respect to the Separate School funding issue, let's be clear about this constitutional inheritance. First, our Catholic schools are increasingly small "c" catholic marked by an increase in ethnocultural diversity reflecting the changes to

our society. Second, if we were starting a new system of education in 2007, who among us would recommend spending public money on a religion-specific basis?

Regarding what other provinces have done regarding funding faith-based schools, there are other examples of policies across Canada which further fragment our nation as well. Should we adopt those? We need to avoid hopping on the wrong bandwagon.

As the future unfolds, as the Catholic system becomes more "public" as it continues to respond to its increasingly diverse constituents and our public schools progress to become more responsive and supportive of cultural and religious differences, maybe a virtual single system will emerge naturally somewhere down the road. There is nothing unfair about moving forward with the legacy we have. But using this legacy to fragment an already tentative society is not good public policy. With respect for what has been, let's nurture not disrupt this natural progress. There's too much of the right kind of change that needs doing.

In the short run, let's dedicate and increase – not reduce – our public resources to improving every student's literacy and mathematics; raising the bar and reducing the gap among groups; doing better for disabled children, second language students and gender issues; tackling high-school reform and the alienation of youth, paying more attention to recreation and the arts, and the major unfinished business of ensuring the best possible start by developing and integrating early childhood learning and child care with neighbourhood schools.

Indeed, we need to focus on what matters, for we all know how important education is to the future of all of our children, our communities, and our society in general. The right kinds of investments in education will yield futures that are more prosperous, healthier, fairer, and just for everyone. Over the longer term, let's continue to imagine and realize those schools and curriculum opportunities that allow for a variety of different religious and cultural studies where students

can learn to respect first-hand the personal choices that inform the diverse lives of Canadians and the newly arrived – people who choose to live together in a deeper and more active mutual respect.

Our students deserve no less. Ontario and Canada need no less.

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