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EDUCATION

End funding for all faith-based schools, group demands

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Ontario should end, not extend, public funding of faith-based schools, contends the Canadian Civil Liberties Association in a statement to be released today.

In a key recommendation sure to fuel an already-volatile debate in the provincial election, the non-partisan organization calls on the Ontario government to repeal the current system of public support for Catholic schools, ending a

Confederation-era commitment expanded to full funding in the mid-1980s.

"It's time to get religion out of all of the schools," says Noa Mendelsohn Aviv, director of the freedom of expression project for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

"Indoctrination of children with particular religious values should not be happening at public expense in places where all kids are required to be, like the schools," she adds.

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Her organization fears that funding all religion-based schools would erode public education, making it harder to integrate youngsters from diverse backgrounds into society.

The CCLA recommendation, submitted as a brief to Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne last week, comes midway through the Oct. 10 election campaign, so far dominated by a Progressive Conservative promise to extend funding to Muslim, Jewish and other religious schools.

The spotlight on the Tories' promise gives voters a chance to press all parties to end any religion-based funding, says Ms. Mendelsohn Aviv, urging Ontario to

seek a constitutional amendment so "the anachronism of Catholic school funding will be eliminated."

That idea won no converts yesterday.

Ms. Wynne, a top Liberal cabinet minister trying to hold on to her seat in Don Valley West against her main rival, Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory, said, "I'm not going to be responding to this as Education Minister. We are in the middle of an election campaign."

But she reiterated her party's pledge to "maintain the current system of governance and funding," ruling out a constitutional amendment.

"Our task is not to push ourselves into a constitutional debate, rather to improve the publicly funded system that has worked for many, many years," she said.

Ingrid Thompson, a spokeswoman for Mr. Tory, said that given the historical guarantees to Catholic education, the policy that "makes the most sense and is the most practical to implement" is her party's proposal to include the 53,000 students now in faith-based schools in the public system.

The Conservatives say they would add up to \$500-million to the education system to pay for the proposal, with participating schools required to follow the Ontario curriculum, hire accredited teachers and apply provincial tests.

The chairman of the 92,000-student Toronto Catholic District School Board also objected.

"The CCLA has ventured outside its core area of expertise, which is the law, into what is in essence a political statement," said Oliver Carroll.

"If there is divisiveness about extending funding, you can only imagine the debate about removing support for Catholic schools," Mr. Carroll added.