

The Only Fair, Democratic, Economic and Multicultural Solution is
ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Let's play a game...I'm going to read some quotes and you just guess who said them.

“One of the reasons for our success as a pluralist, multicultural society is because we bring all the kids together in the same classrooms”

“to fracture the system and to create segregation, that is the wrong way to go...In Ontario, we've got kids from more different backgrounds together than anywhere else in the world...the system is completely inclusive”

“we do not want to see our schools divided, we do not want to see our kids divided from one another”

These statements could be used by members of the one School system network to denounce the public funding of all faith schools. But they're not. Rather, these are quotes from the education minister, Kathleen wynn, denouncing the funding of any more faith schools.

Think of the hypocrisy. The liberals denounce public funds to faith schools with casual ease when asked about the Conservative multifaith concept, without so much as flinching... but they seem to keep forgetting one thorny fact...we already use public money to fund faith schools.

Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's recent announcement to fund faith-based schools under the umbrella of public education, just like Catholic schools, has generated considerable discussion. While the Centre for Inquiry applauds those who recognize the problems inherent in our current discriminatory education apparatus, where we part company is in the belief that the public funding of more faith-based school systems is the solution. The only fair, multicultural and economic solution before us is to merge our public secular and public Catholic boards into one strong secular school system.

Why would it be ok to fund catholic schools and not other schools? It's time once and for all to put to rest the lie that this is somehow ingrained in our constitution forever and ever. The provinces of Newfoundland and Quebec – both with higher catholic populations than Ontario - have both added Constitutional Amendments to rescue themselves from using public funds to finance discriminatory religious schools, and have seen public support for one school system rise since that was done. Why can't we do the same. Polls by the CBC have shown that there is majority public support to end all faith based public schools, including roman catholic, and certainly when I've gone out petitioning almost every single non catholic signs the petition.

To this important question the education minister can come up with nothing better than vague statements about how Ontario is different from the other provinces and how now is not the time to move towards One School System. She doesn't explain how our difference makes it harder to move in the same direction as other provinces, nor does she explain why now is not the time, unless the difference has something to do with our having a premiere who's wife teaches and whose children attend, the catholic school system, which makes McGuinty's statement in defense of the status quo a complete conflict of interest.

Perhaps instead ontario's differences – like the higher percentage of non catholic groups in our province - makes it easier – not harder – to move in the direction of One School System, and perhaps now – where school boards are slashing funds to basic programs due

to debt – is precisely the time to make this move which might save us as much as 500 Million dollars a year.

The position of John Tory's Conservatives, to segment our society along religious grounds, is a pseudo solution, and not just because it would double that wasted money. The beauty of a multicultural society is that individuals, regardless of background, work and live together. If we wish to raise future generations with a tolerant and informed outlook, children must learn and live together from the earliest age, rather than being educated in an isolated system, then thrust into a multicultural work environment.

In 1999, the United Nations cited the province of Ontario as being in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for discriminatory funding of Catholic schools using public funds. Since no measure was taken by either the provincial or federal government, the province was reprimanded a second time in 2005 for the same violations. The Covenant that we are in violation of is the same document that was used as a basis for our own Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which mcGuinty soils by pointing to in delusional defense of the catholic school system. I want you to think about that. McGuinty lumping the charter with the constitution to defend the funding of catholic schools is a complete lie. The Charter says not a word about giving catholic special privileges and such privileges are nothing but a violation of section 15, which gives equality before the law to all. If McGuinty can proudly proclaim One Law for all Ontarians around this time 2 years ago when faced with encroaching religious arbitration, why not come out here and proclaim "One education for all Ontarians."

We as Canadians view ourselves as upholder of human rights and justice and yet, on the world stage, we are abusers of human rights. Think this doesn't mean much? In November 2005, an Iranian human rights envoy brushed off a Canadian sponsored UN resolution concerning human rights violations in Iran, saying: "being charged itself with human rights violations, is ottawa competent enough to initiate a human rights resolution in the UN against another country".

The United Nations provided two solutions to remedy our disgrace: fund all the religious schools who demand funding, or fund only one, public, secular system. Providing public funding to every religious denomination is not the solution. It would be equally unrealistic for a government to choose which deserve funding and which do not, as this would force our elected officials to define what constitutes a religion. To questions such as these, regarding the actual implementation of full funding to all faith schools, John Tory has nothing but silence.

And his silence is telling. The province of Newfoundland attempted to fund an education system for eight religious denominations, resulting in 1266 schools, many only one room in size, in 270 school boards; by comparison there are currently only 72 school boards in all of Ontario, a much more populace province. Newfoundland went nearly bankrupt, so, in a referendum in early 1997, nearly 73 percent of Newfoundlanders, including a majority of Roman Catholics, voted to end church controlled education that had existed for nearly 165 years. Recent polls on CBC and City TV showed that nearly 60 percent of Ontarians want a single school system by merging the public secular and Catholic systems, while less than 30 percent are happy with the status quo. Furthermore, the Liberal government has gone on record testifying that funding more religious school boards would necessitate closing and reducing services in our already underfunded public schools.

But it isn't strictly economics that makes a multifaith scenario alarming. Let me read to you a passage in the May 23 issue of the Times of London, entitled "Sneaky, unfair, divisive: welcome to church schools" about public faith schools in England.

"The grammar schools are the least of the problem. There are 164 of them in the country. Compare that with an astonishing 6,848 faith schools, about a third of all the schools in England. More than 6,000 of these are primary schools, overwhelmingly **Church of England** or **Catholic**, with a smattering of **Jewish** (37), **Methodist** (26), **Muslim** (8) and **Sikh** (2).

Their admission criteria are opaque, manipulated and blatantly unfair, ranging from church attendance (twice a week for five years; every week for two years; whatever the governors fancy imposing) to academic record, parental committee work or, in one case, how many raffle tickets a child's parents had sold at the primary school.

When schools are officially banned from selection on the grounds of race, colour, ability or parental background, the system sanctions selection on the entirely random basis of whether a child was born to a practising Christian family. And because faith schools set their own admissions criteria, and run their own admissions, in practice they can discriminate against anyone they choose. Many use their nurseries as a filter, so that a family effectively has to apply to the school when the child is as young as 2, and before any admissions code applies.

I should mention that this discrimination in who is hired to teach at or who is allowed to attend, faith schools, is precisely what is currently happening in our catholic school system. That's right. You wouldn't expect to be denied a job at a private company due to your religion, but catholic schools, with public money, have the right to deny teachers positions because they are not catholic, or they are not catholic enough. And mcGuinty continues to use the charter of rights and freedoms, our most important document defending the rights of all, to uphold this blatant and disgusting unfairness. Ironically, if you visit the Ontario government website, you might see their slogan "fairness for all" staring you in the face.

Recently, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board voted to ban non-Catholic parents from sitting on school councils. When pressed why the board members did not wish a single non-Catholic parent to sit on the board, a member replied "Catholic schools were created for Catholics and we've tried to be inclusive but at the same time I think we do risk watering down our faith." Recent comments by Pope Benedict echo this sentiment. In a very public address, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, declared that all Protestant and Orthodox churches "suffer a deep wound" by not recognizing the supremacy of the Pope. The document went on to declare Protestants "suffer defects",

and that “title of Church should not be attributed to them”. As columnist Dan Gardner satirized in an editorial in the Ottawa Citizen this Saturday, this arrogance is reflected in our laws, by allowing Catholic schools the right to hire only practicing Catholics, and fire those who do not recognize the supremacy of the Pope. Think I’m making an unfair connection. Recently, a letter by columnist Gary Reid supporting one school system was yanked off the Canadian free press by their editor, a practicing catholic. How far is this belief in privilege and untouchability going to be taken on this issue.

Blatant discrimination on the basis of faith or lack thereof, is contrary to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and is made even more worse while using public funds to do so.

It is time to put an end to this grappling for public money to further segment, and discriminate against, our students. It is time to use public funding to ensure the best possible education for all Ontario students regardless of sex, race or religion.

I am the executive director of the Centre for Inquiry Ontario, a non-profit think-tank, and educational organization, promoting science, reason, secularism, free inquiry and free expression in all areas of human endeavor. It is due to this mission that, as a founding member of the new One School System Network we are deeply concerned that the current publicly funded Catholic school system, by limiting admission of pupils and educators to practicing Catholics and those who share a common world view, effectively stifles a student’s ability to enquire and express themselves openly.

The Centre for Inquiry has recently been featured prominently in the National Post, Globe & Mail, the Ottawa Citizen and the Toronto Star because of our success in one important area: the majority of our members are atheists and secular humansits, and we are finally starting to succeed in organizing secular humanists, skeptics and atheists, who make up 15% of the population after all, as a real political force. I bring this up for two reasons.

The first reason I mention our affiliation is admittedly a somewhat self-serving one. The press we've been getting have focused largely on society's surprise that our community of freethinkers is finally organizing, but fail to cover why it is we need to organize. Well, it is for issues like this – issues at the intersection of human rights, religion and secularism – where atheists and humanists have every bit as much of a reason to be concerned with the direction in which our province is heading.

The second reason I mention this is that atheists and secular humanists have always been at the forefront of human rights struggles, including the suffragist and abolitionist movements and have been among the leaders on this school issue, carrying the torch through the decades while the issue itself went mostly underground. We are proud now to have helped to forge a strong alliance involving secular humanist and atheist organizations, but also faith groups, like the Muslim Canadian Congress, the Hindu Conference of Canada and the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.

Unfortunately, a bad case of asthma keeps the chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, Gretta Vosper, from joining us today, but she has asked that I read some remarks on her behalf, and I would like to note how what I've been saying about the One School System really being the only multicultural solution is symbolized beautifully by the way in which it has really brought together a variety of faith and non faith communities.

Here is the Statement regarding the public funding of faith-based schools from Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, which I am proud to read to you.

READ THE MESSAGE FROM THE CCPC

The last comment I wish to make, now speaking on behalf of the Centre for Inquiry once more, is that, yes, this is not an easy change to make, yes it involves changes to our infrastructure. But we've made major changes before to our society. We extended the

right to vote to women, and there were people who said this would be difficult and it would be complicated and it would involve a lot of changes to our electoral infrastructure, but we did it anyway cause it was the right thing to do. Further back we also ended slavery and that was a huge infrastructure adjustment but we did it, because it was the right thing to do. And I don't mean to compare this current human right violation to those other two, quite the opposite, compared to those changes, this should be easy. What has happened to us as a nation and as a province if we shy away from doing the right things because it is difficult. Tradition is not an excuse when we're violating human rights. Now is the time, Ontario is the place, let's do the right thing.