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DOES SCHOOL BILL HOLD MERIT?



Jaffer Dhalla says education helps form our attitudes

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Education shapes attitudes, values

Every education system, whether it aims to or not, helps form the attitudes and values of its pupils.

The process of education refers to the inherently moral enterprise of forming human beings and greatly differs from the thin exercise of instruction, which is the teaching of skills and facts.

Thus, secular narratives function as a religion by making claims about human nature and the purpose of life, giving meaning to moral commitments and shaping distinctive ways of living.

I never realized what a loaded term, "education" was until I studied the field as a masters student at York University.

Challenged by professors to ponder philosophical issues such as "What are schools for?", "Who decides what is taught in school?" and "Whose point of view is it taught from?", I realized the direction of (or lack thereof) my moral development had been shaped by the Canadian education system.

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I was the product of a public system that had, in an effort to avoid controversy and appear unbiased, effectively purged distinctive moral and religious elements from the curriculum. The experience of being educated in a system biased in "no faith" had its repercussions. No wonder it had been so challenging to reconcile the tenets of my faith with my secularly shaped world view. I had been brought up in a pluralistic, multicultural society, yet the education system had left me conflicted, uncomfortable and disjointed in my identity as a Muslim.

Now that I am a parent, education has taken on an even more imperative role in my life.



Shyrose Jaffer Dhalla

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." This statement gives me a comforting sense of liberation.

I can choose to give my children an education where the curriculum does not have to purge God and religion. In fact, they can have the opportunity to learn the basics and practices of their faith alongside mathematics, languages and sciences.

If any type of education will shape my children's moral development, I would like to choose that they are shaped in the value system of my faith.

The option of having faith-based schools can only benefit society as all religions — whether Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh — propagate values that cultivate honest, ethical, hardworking, upstanding and integrity filled individuals.

As a Canadian Muslim, it is reassuring to know steps are being taken to correct this inequity as the Canada I know always looks out for the basic rights of its citizens. I have faith Ontario will do the right thing.

As a Canadian Muslim, it gives me great pride to contribute my taxes toward the maintenance and betterment of the worthy institutions of this nation.

But it appears there is a flaw in our system, which, unlike in British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec, demands I pay extra fees to send my child to the school of my choice, in addition to the taxes I pay toward public education.

It is reassuring to know steps are being taken to correct this inequity as the Canada I know always looks out for the basic rights of its citizens. I have faith Ontario will do the right thing.

Shyrose Jaffer Dhalla is an anti-racist educational consultant and serves on the board of trustees for As-Sadiq Islamic School in Vaughan.

Private school funding fight: ROUND TWO

Tory tax credit promise back

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Ron Alexandrowich would be happy to have a tax credit to help cover the cost of sending his 12-year-old daughter to Stouffville Christian School.

But he knows the devil is in the details.

Ontario Conservative Leader John Tory has brought back a promise to provide tax credits to offset private school fees.

Do you support tax credits for parents who send their children to faith-based schools? Tell us at yorkregion.com

It was a policy the Tories promoted before they were

It was a policy the Tories promoted before they were defeated in the last provincial election. The announcement after last weekend's policy convention was short on details, such as how much money would be offered to parents, how the tax credit would be funded and if it will be extended to non-religious schools such as Newmarket's Pickering College.

"(The policy) has no arms and legs to it. It means nothing to me until it has arms and legs. It's just fluff in the air," Mr. Alexandrowich said, adding he is concerned about how the funding change would affect the public school system.

That is also a concern to Gay Stephenson, a researcher with People for Education.

"The school system is funded on a per person basis.

For every student that leaves the system, it would be less money available," she said.

"Already school boards are complaining they don't receive enough to pay teachers' salaries, for example."

But Oak Ridges Tory MPP Frank Klees dismissed concerns the plan would decimate the public system.

"Under no circumstances will there be a diversion of funds from the public school system to any other school," he said.

"Anybody who says this is dismantling the public system is fearmongering. We're asking people to look at the broader context through the prism of fairness and not to be fearmongered by this," he said.

It's an issue of fairness, he said, noting the Catholic prism of fairness and not to be fearmongered by this," he said.

It's an issue of fairness, he said, noting the Catholic school system is funded but other faiths are on the outside looking in.

For example, 3,700 students are enrolled in York Region Jewish schools.

"Many, many Jewish parents place great value on having children educated in Hebrew schools," Joel Richler, chairperson of the Canadian Jewish Congress Ontario Region said.

But Ms Stephenson argues the greater societal good is not served by further segregating religious groups.

"The public system in Ontario has done a tremendous job of promoting tolerance and allowing children from all different cultures and backgrounds the chance to go to school together," she said.

ANTI TAX CREDIT

Why fund private businesses?

The Progressive Conservative tax credit for public schools was first introduced by the Mike Harris government in 2001. A cynic might say the purpose was to entice parents to send their children to a private school, therefore lessening the burden on the underfunded public school system.

According to Mr. Harris, the tax credit was simply a way for lower income families to be able to take advantage of education offered at private schools.

This comment insinuates public schools offer a substandard level of education. This is simply untrue.

In 2001, there were 734 private schools in Ontario with an enrolment of 102,000.

To open a private school in Ontario today all that is needed is a completed application form, a \$250 fee and students.

'Divisive cracks are segregating communities into impenetrable enclaves of suspicion and fear.'

Tuition fees range from \$4,000 to \$40,000. Add to this the cost for such items as uniforms, textbooks,

Tuition fees range from \$4,000 to \$40,000. Add to this the cost for such items as uniforms, textbooks, computers and sports fees. Private schools are businesses, not schools. They don't follow the prescribed curriculum, are not mandated to hire certified teachers and are not subject to provincial testing.

No other province uses a tax credit approach.

In Alberta and British Columbia, only private schools that use provincial curriculum and hire qualified teachers are eligible for subsidies, which are paid directly to the school in which the student is enrolled.

The United States has been debating school voucher programs for two decades and has yet to pass pro-voucher legislation.

President George W. Bush has, in fact, abandoned his

campaign promise to introduce voucher education.



Sandy Glassford

The Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees every person in Ontario can practise their religion, celebrate their culture and extol their heritage.

Ontario Human Rights Chief Commissioner Keith C. Norton expressed concern over the tax credit introduced by Progressive Conservatives. His main concern was the potential proliferation of schools with no mandate to teach a curriculum that parallels the values guaranteed under the Ontario Human Rights code.

Ontario is a cultural mosaic. It is a mélange of beliefs and a radiant tapestry reflecting the global community.

As racial, religious and cultural tensions erupt around the world, our little corner of utopia is beginning to shatter.

Divisive cracks are segregating communities into impenetrable enclaves of suspicion and fear.

Divisive cracks are segregating communities into impenetrable enclaves of suspicion and fear.

In 2001, a Lang Research poll concluded 70 per cent of Ontarians (over 18) believed the public school system was the best way to promote multiculturalism.

Unlike public schools, private schools create a homogenous community according to religion, gender, ethnic group, class or even political belief.

Public schools, which support inclusion not exclusion, which foster diversity not segregation and which reflect equality, not inequality, are critical to building a harmonious, multicultural society.

Alexander (Sandy) Glassford is the communications political action committee chairperson with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation.