

## Ontario cuts funds for private-school French

### Religious school advocates say the move is meant to punish them for supporting Progressive Conservative candidate

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The Ontario government is quietly cutting off funding to most private schools for French-language instruction, a move critics link to fallout from the election campaign.

New rules leave very few independent schools - and no religious ones - eligible for the funds, say those in the field.

The changes, effective in September, restrict the grants to private high schools that spend one-quarter of their classroom time teaching in French. Elementary schools will no longer be eligible. During the 2007-08 academic year, 230 private schools were eligible for grants ranging from \$500 to \$157,000.

The money that would have gone to the now-disqualified schools will be redistributed to those, both public and private, that can still receive the funding.

Independent schools see the new rules as petty, noting that the federal grants, now administered by the province, have been available since 1970.

"It looks suspiciously political," said John Vanasselt, spokesman for the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools.

Some religious school advocates believe the governing Liberals are punishing them for supporting Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's controversial election campaign pledge to finance the province's religious schools. Widespread opposition to the policy helped Premier Dalton McGuinty win a second majority last October.

"I feel that we're being targeted," said Gila Gladstone-Martow, a Thornhill, Ont., mother of four and spokeswoman for Parents for Equality in Education Funding.

Education Minister Kathleen Wynne denied that the changes are linked to the campaign.

She said she made the changes last February, after becoming aware that some private schools were not using the money to teach French.

Private elementary schools will no longer be eligible to receive funding because the Ministry of Education does not inspect them and therefore cannot monitor what they teach nor how the grants are spent, she said. The ministry inspects only those private high schools that grant

provincial diplomas every two years to ensure they follow the curriculum. That leaves out religious schools and others that don't follow the province's education system.

"It is inconsistent from my perspective for us to be flowing funding to a system or to an individual school over which we have no oversight," Ms. Wynne said.

The new rules mean the private Kitchener-Waterloo Bilingual School, which has 348 students in kindergarten through Grade 8, will no longer be eligible for funding, despite teaching in French half the time. It received \$17,044 in 2006-07.

"It's a modest amount of money, but it's the principle of the thing that gets me mad," said Michel Poinot, principal of the school.

The federal and Ontario governments together provide funding totalling \$357.7-million a year to support learning in Canada's two official languages. Independent schools are eligible to receive federal funding of \$860,000 a year, under a four-year agreement between Ottawa and Ontario ending in 2009. Ms. Wynne said she has the authority to change that agreement. Charles Drouin, a spokesman for Canadian Heritage, said the federal government is aware of the changes.

Barb Bierman, spokeswoman for Parents for Educational Choice, said the move "smacks of petty."

"Those transfer payments are no longer being used for exactly what they were meant to be used for," she said. "That doesn't seem fair and it doesn't seem very Canadian."