

# A culture of educational profiling

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John Vanasselt

Director of Communications

Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools

There is something dark and disturbing happening in Ontario. John Tory's proposal to fund faith-based schools has uncovered a latent prejudice among those who oppose the inclusion of faiths other than Roman Catholic in Ontario's system of education. Even worse, this prejudice is seemingly sanctioned by the leaders of the governing party. History shows us that whenever leaders in power seem to permit the mistreatment of a segment of society, those who follow that leader begin to define their own limits in the treatment of that minority.

Most of us are cynical enough to ignore political rhetoric, especially during an election campaign. It's standard fare to hear politicians oppose and even ridicule what the other candidates and parties are saying. People who choose to enter the political arena know what they're getting into. They know their opponents will often say whatever is necessary to prove their point and that all players are essentially swinging in the wind. This campaign however, is different.

Consider the response of the NDP to Tory's proposal. "Parents who choose to educate their children outside of the existing public system have every right to do so and we respect that choice – but it is a private choice and we do not believe that the public should provide funding to private schools." That's it. A political principle, logical, short and to the point.

But what about the Liberals? Dalton McGuinty, whose family members have all benefited from Catholic education, Kathleen Wynne, who less than a decade ago chided her Liberal colleagues for opposing school choice, and Greg Sorbara, whose children went to Waldorf schools, have suggested, inferred and concluded that bringing non-Catholic, faith-based schools into the publicly-funded system of education would be destructive of the social fabric of this province. Besides the obvious hypocrisy displayed by these three most powerful people in the province, this amounts to overt discrimination against an identifiable minority. There is harm being done. There is a human rights issue here!

The more often the premier talks about “threatening social cohesion,” or the minister of education talks about “divisive,” or the minister of finance says it’s “the greatest threat to public education” he has ever seen, the easier it becomes for Liberal MPPs and candidates, and the public at large, to marginalize and disrespect the communities of faith-based schools. The Liberal leadership is creating a culture of educational profiling—the target being faith-based school communities—without distinction, which are negatively portrayed as problematic, undesirable, and disruptive.

How else to explain a Liberal MPP campaigning door to door on September 14, 2007 and informing voters that, “faith-based schools do not meet provincial standards; faith-based schools discriminate against those not rich enough to attend; faith-based schools exclude less than academically superior students; faith-based schools don’t hire qualified teachers;” and finally that “she had personally heard many horror stories about faith-based schools.”? When challenged by her constituent, a parent whose children attend a faith-based school where none of the above was true, the MPP tried to leave by saying “Let’s agree to disagree.” No apology, no respect for another’s point of view, no interest in learning something about what she obviously didn’t know. This is one incident, but it is the kind of thing that is increasingly acceptable in this Liberal-created culture of educational profiling.

This is Ontario. The proud heritage of this province is as a place of inclusion. People from the world’s variety of backgrounds have been welcomed to participate in, and contribute to, the welfare of this great province—graduates of faith-based schools included. Our country’s main claim to international fame is as a place of unparalleled diversity. Over the years it has been the Liberal party, both federal and provincial, that has championed multiculturalism. And yet not one word from the premier about the valuable contributions made by non-Catholic faith-based schools.

Instead of political debate about the educational value of an educational proposal, we have social unrest promoted by the premier and his party because they don’t have a logical or principled position on the inclusion of faith-based schools becoming part of publicly-funded education. Every day the premier creates additional turmoil in our democratic society by identifying certain faith communities—those with schools—as unworthy of his government’s attention and support. McGuinty’s comments sanction and fuel the baser instincts of prejudice and discrimination which are detestable.

It’s time for this ugly practice to stop. If the premier cannot find a way to state his party’s position on the funding issue without demonizing faith-based school communities, he ought to stop talking about it and stop his MPPs and candidates from talking about it and let the voting public decide whether they like Tory’s fairness campaign or not.