



School tax credit plan welcomed

Ontario Tories promise balance

By Sharon Boase

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Religious communities shut out of public funding for their faith-based schools are jubilant Ontario's Tories will make private school tax credits a main plank in their campaign platform in next year's election.

Muslims, Jews and evangelical Christians have applauded Ontario Progressive Conservative Party Leader John Tory for promising to help pay private school tuition fees if elected.

"This is a resurrection of a good idea," said John Vanasselt, spokesman for the Ancaster-based Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools.

"We were instrumental in moving the first tax credit five years ago," said Vanasselt. "We're very heartened by the fact this may be the first plank in their 2007 platform."

Emerging from a weekend policy conference, Tory announced his party would bring back the private school tax credit scrapped by Dalton McGuinty's Liberals.

Yves Apel, chair of the board of directors of Kehila Jewish Community Day School, said he was surprised Tory would mount his party's platform on an issue that is controversial and not very "sexy."

Tory said a tax credit for faith-based schooling would be a difficult balancing act. It mustn't threaten currently funded school systems or amount to a tax credit for those who can afford to send their children to private schools.

In a statement to the news media, Tory acknowledged that faith-based schools present a far more compelling argument for tax credits than do private schools.

Ontario funds Catholic schools because of a constitutional guarantee upon joining Confederation.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has twice denounced Ontario's education system as discriminatory, for funding a Catholic system but not other religious schools. Yet few people beyond the parents lobbying for faith-based schools seem to care, Apel said.

"It's hard to say the public has to fund Jewish or Muslim or Hindu education, but if the precedent is there, that they're funding Catholic education, then one has to stand in awe at the inequity of the situation," he said.

Tuition for a full-day at Kehila is just under \$8,000, but likely to go up, Apel said. Yet his board would never ask for anything more than the annual \$7,500 per student funding that the province gives to public and Catholic schools.

Aziz Jafer, a member of the education committee at Hamilton Mosque and a vocal supporter of the mosque's Islamic school, believes in a strong public education system and is happy to support it through his taxes, he

said.

"At the same time, parents who want to send their kids to Jewish or Muslim or Hindu school, it's only fair that they receive a tax credit," he said.

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