

Faith-based schools study already exists

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John Tory says he will appoint former premier Bill Davis - the man who extended funding to Catholic high schools in the 1980s - to head a commission to analyze ways to bring faith-based schools into the public system.

Somehow I can't help but feel that we've all been there and done that.

In 1984, Bill Davis himself hired Dr. Bernard Shapiro, then the dean of OISE, to study how to bring religious schools into the public system.

The resulting thoughtful and detailed Shapiro report recommended that funding be extended to other faith-based schools on condition they are provincially regulated by newly formed boards associated with the public school board. This would give other religions the identical educational benefit that Ontario's Roman Catholics have always had.

Now where do we stand?

Over the past few weeks, the ink had no sooner dried on the pages of this newspaper before everyone retreated from Tory's proposal into their entrenched corners.

Yet, as Shapiro said two decades ago, no one, not even the Catholic Church, can articulate a principled defence of the status quo. Everyone will tell you why Catholics historically got special rights and privileges, but no educator or policy-maker can come up with a defence of why Ontario's Catholic schoolchildren should continue to be special.

Nevertheless, many speak of the lack of money and the importance of integrating our kids as key arguments against funding other religious schools.

First of all, let's dispense with the money argument. We all support more funding for public schools, but is there any other social policy where we will allow ourselves to say we have enough money for Catholics this year, and maybe in better times we will consider a couple of other groups? Suppose we ran health care or police services that way?

Second, to say that separate religious schools will not teach the proper civic lesson of integration is to insult those schools and to ignore our own history. After all, the Catholics have run separate schools since before Confederation, and no one is suggesting that they haven't produced civic-minded graduates. Premier Dalton McGuinty is a proud graduate of these very separate, supposedly non-integrationist schools.

Or are we saying that the Catholics have a formula that no other religious educators can reproduce?

Finally, let's not delude ourselves about our multicultural society. Ontarians, especially those residing in cities, live in neighbourhoods that are increasingly ethnic enclaves. From the Jane-Finch corridor to the tracts of South Asian-dominated housing in Brampton to the Bathurst Jewish corridor, public schools are hardly venues for integration. Americans realized 50 years ago that it is neighbourhoods that create school segregation.

On the religious side, while not impossible, it would be the rare Muslim public school child who encounters Jewish classmates and vice versa. On the other hand, faith-based schools can, and do, make it part of their mission to introduce their students to other religious groups.

Under a Shapiro-style associated school board, these kinds of meetings could be institutionalized as a regular feature of religious schools. In fact, there is no end to the way tolerance for others can be integrated into the school day.

If we truly wanted integrated schools, it wouldn't begin with continuing to elevate Roman Catholics above all others. Someone - Bill Davis, at long last? - will have to adopt a better model for treating all Ontario citizens equally.