

Tory's proposal hands McGuinty an issue

Eric Dowd – Queen's Park Bureau – Ottawa Citizen

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Premier Dalton McGuinty desperately needs an issue that can give him some upward momentum in the Oct. 10 election campaign and one has fallen into his lap like manna from heaven.

Progressive Conservative leader John Tory's promise to fund faith-based schools has quickly become the most discussed idea in the campaign and could end up being the most influential.

Tory, in an attempt to find votes, particularly in the growing immigrant community, would have the province pay for schools operated by Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Christian fundamentalists and other religious groups. The Conservative leader says they deserve the same funding as Roman Catholics receive under the Constitution, which is not easy to refute.

Parents who send children to faith-based schools complain they have to skimp and save so they can be educated according to values they cherish, while paying to educate others' children in public schools. Opponents, and there are many, counter schools should provide education, not religious indoctrination, and funding the 53,000 already in faith-based schools will cost \$500 million a year and more if additional parents are enticed by the funding.

Tory's scheme is substantially different from one Conservatives operated briefly before being turfed out by McGuinty in 2003, which offered tax credits to parents who sent their children to private schools of all types, not just faith-based, and was criticized justifiably for helping the better-off.

Some observers have been quick to see Tory's promise as one that could win religious groups' votes and clinch the election for the Conservatives, who recently have drawn level with the Liberals in polls.

McGuinty has campaigned so far mainly by defending his record, which is not easy because it is sprinkled with broken promises, particularly one not to raise taxes.

His closest to a change of pace has been defending himself against new gaffes, including one in which a minister steered funds to immigrant groups run by Liberals and had to be fired.

Premiers do not like to spend election campaigns on the defensive, but Tory's promise to fund private religious schools gives McGuinty a rare chance to attack with an argument that will appeal to many.

Liberals and non-partisan supporters of public education are refining their argument and saying educating children of different faiths together gives them more understanding, tolerance and respect for others' beliefs. They suggest Tory's plan would encourage some families to live close to their faith-based schools, so their children will be educated and interact socially almost exclusively with those in their own racial and religious communities, which will breed ignorance and intolerance of others.

Taxpayers' funds also could wind up promoting concepts not generally acceptable to Ontarians, such as the extreme right-wing politics espoused by some Christian fundamentalists and dominance of males and marriages only between members of the same race and faith by others.

Some Asian immigrants also have said Tory's proposal reflects the demands of religious leaders in their communities and not the vast majority of immigrants, who want their children to be educated the same as most Ontarians in a climate of diversity.

News media also so far have been mostly critical of funding the faith-based schools, which shows opposition is widespread.

Tory's Conservatives have claimed a large majority of residents they polled favour funding the faith-based schools, but that may be before they heard the concerns now being raised.

McGuinty has moved to prevent religious courts from adjudicating in family disputes, which they did too often in favour of men. He also has claimed his Liberals have brought Ontarians together more than their predecessors and this has been shown by fewer confrontations and strikes in the public sector.

McGuinty has now said voters who want to segregate their children in school according to their faith at home should support Tory.

The premier could widen this and campaign on the theme he wants to bring Ontarians together and the Conservatives want to divide them further he probably would find most voters favour togetherness.

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