

Faith-based Schools Idea Backward - McGuinty; Tory's Pledge Seized As An Election Issue

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TORONTO - Premier Dalton McGuinty signalled yesterday he intends to make a ballot issue out of his Conservative rival's pledge to extend full funding to Jewish, Muslim, fundamentalist Christian and other faith-based schools in the run-up to the Oct. 10 provincial election.

Speaking to reporters before a Cabinet meeting yesterday, Mr. McGuinty said he viewed the pledge by opposition leader John Tory as retrograde, a step backwards for the province's successful multicultural makeup.

"I think it's a really important and defining issue and I'll continue to talk about that during the course of the campaign," Mr. McGuinty said, responding to a reporter's question. "And it's one of those issues where I'm hoping to grab Ontarians by the earlobes and say it's not just another election, it's not just business as usual. It's about the kind of Ontario you want.

"If you want the kind of Ontario where we invite children of different faiths to leave the publicly funded system and become sequestered and segregated in their own private schools, then they should vote for Mr. Tory."

"If they think it's important that we continue to bring our kids together so that they grow together and learn from one another, then you should vote for me."

Some proponents of change, however, disagree with the Premier's position. Mr. McGuinty, his wife, Terri, and the couple's four children all attended Catholic schools. Ms. McGuinty continues to teach part time in the Catholic system. York University professor Eric Lawee said he sees "tremendous hypocrisy" in Mr. McGuinty's opposition to extending funding to religious schools.

"As he tells the story, [faith-based schools are] segregationist, regressive and so on and yet here's someone whose wife goes off every day and provides this type of education," said Mr. Lawee, a member of a multi-faith coalition pushing for funding. "I think it belies everything he says about faith-based schooling." The fact that we have a Premier who's a product of these types of schools shows that one can not only integrate, having had exposure to faith-based schooling, but can flourish and make major contributions to the welfare of all Ontarians regardless of their faith."

Mr. Lawee's children attend Jewish schools in the Toronto area. "I bike to work every day and I bike by a Catholic school and I see all the things my kids don't have because they're members of the wrong religion, as it were, in Ontario in 2007," he said.

Mr. Tory has framed the issue in terms of equality. The province has had fully funded Catholic school boards since 1984. Extending the same rights to other religious minorities will fix a fundamental inequality, he argues.

In 1999, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that Ontario was in violation of the international covenant on civil and political rights by not funding faith-based schools.

"It's an issue of fairness," deputy provincial Conservative leader Elizabeth Witmer said yesterday.

Ms. Witmer noted that in order to qualify for funding, religious schools would have to teach the provincial curriculum, take part in standardized testing and hire qualified teachers. The plan would cost an estimated \$400-million.

"If you bring them into the public school system they can interact with one another, they can participate in sports or science fairs or other activities together," she said. "[Students] would develop an appreciation certainly for the values and understanding of our province, our country, our history."

Mr. McGuinty called the Tory plan "regressive." The Premier said in recent trips overseas he has boasted about Ontario's social cohesion, a big part of which is due to "a publicly funded education system where we invite children of all backgrounds and faiths, economic circumstances to come together, to grow together and to learn together."