

The Politics of Class Size

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The issue – Primary Class Sizes in Schools

Our View – It's A Highly Political Issue

When Dalton McGuinty promised during a Guelph stop on the 2003 provincial election trail that his party would cap primary class sizes at 20 pupils if elected, he obviously meant it. And with another election set for the fall of 2007, the premier wants to make sure he can tell voters during that campaign that he kept this promise. Hence the apparently unexpected pressure on the Upper Grand District School Board, and presumably some other Ontario boards, to demonstrate sufficient progress towards that goal this fall. Pressure, as in telling the Upper Grand board: just do it, or we'll claw back grant money you can't afford to lose.

At least part of what's behind this rather startling show of Ministry of Education determination is the private school funding issue that starkly separates the provincial Liberals and the provincial Progressive Conservatives. The Mike Harris government enacted tax credits for parents over the vigorous opposition of the Liberals, who claimed it diverted much-needed public money from the public education system.

The Liberals pledged to kill the tax credits if elected and stop a drift towards private education, but they had to deal with public doubts about the public system. If parents think their children will get a better start in life in private schools, they'll often send them there if they can afford it. Many who can't easily afford it will make a lot of financial sacrifices to do so, if they really think it's best for their kids. Government help for parents who send their children to private schools is a trend in the United States, and the Ontario PCs wanted this province on that train, under the banner of parental choice.

Faced with this, the Liberals apparently felt they had to tackle parental queasiness about the public system head-on by something dramatic. Capping primary class sizes filled the bill, as it assures parents their children will get the individual attention they need to learn to read and write properly and otherwise get a good start in the public system.

In the eyes of provincial Liberals such as Guelph MPP Liz Sandals, a strong public education system is one of the best ways to try to offer equal opportunity to everyone, no matter what their family income is.

Sandals, who has been a strong voice against private school tax credits, is a former veteran trustee on the Upper Grand board. So it's a bit weird to hear that this board was on the receiving end of a provincial ultimatum in August to create more primary classes this fall.

As the board couldn't afford to hire more teachers in what has been a difficult budget year, this means five Guelph area elementary schools will get some bigger classes than originally planned in grades above Grade 3. Call it a cost of making sure this and other school boards will be able to accomplish the provincial cap on primary class size next fall.

McGuinty won't have it any other way.