

Liberals ads target cash for religious schools

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TORONTO — The Ontario Liberal Party kicked off the first day of the election campaign with a series of ads attacking Opposition Leader John Tory's promise to extend public funding to the province's religious schools.

A 90-second spot to air on CTV during the 6 o'clock newscast this evening will feature Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty speaking directly to the camera and rattling off a number of his government's achievements in health care and the environment during its four years in office.

He devotes most of his time, however, to talking about education. "It's no secret: My top priority is getting our schools back on their feet," he says. "I believe taking \$500-million from public schools is a big mistake. In a very real sense, it's our public schools that make Ontario Ontario."

A similar message greeted commuters this morning in Toronto's free newspapers. "You know what I love about our publicly funded schools? They're public!" the advertisement says. "Whatever race, creed or cultural background, our kids attend the same schools. Together."

In a 60-second spot to run on MSN and in two 30-second spots, Mr. McGuinty will once again speak directly to the camera. "Our schools are threatened anew," he says in the MSN spot. "On Oct. 10 I'm asking you to help Ontario stand up for our schools."

The Progressive Conservatives' policy on faith-based funding is shaping up to be a major issue in the campaign. Mr. Tory has said he would extend funding already available to Roman Catholic schools to the 53,000 students in Ontario who attend Jewish, Muslim and other religious schools.

Mr. Tory said religious schools must meet the Ontario curriculum to be eligible for public funding, but the policy is very much a work in progress. He estimates that it would cost \$400-million a year to fund these schools; the Liberals peg the figure at \$500-million.

Mr. McGuinty has prided himself on his track record for improving public schools during his party's four years in office. He says his government has reduced class sizes and improved test scores and argues that Mr. Tory's policy would distract any government from making further improvements. Mr. Tory counters that the policy is a matter of fairness, because the province funds Catholic schools. He won support for that argument from religious school leaders, who spoke out Monday in favour of his plan and against Mr. McGuinty.

Supports of the proposal say that, as the product of the Catholic school system, Mr. McGuinty is being hypocritical when he attacks full-funding for private religious schools as socially divisive.

Howard English, spokesman for the Public Education Fairness Network, said Mr. McGuinty attended a religious-based school system that gets full provincial funding, as have his four children. Mr. McGuinty's wife, Terri, teaches in a Catholic school.

“There is a logical inconsistency for someone who is the product of a faith-based system to allege all the dire consequences that are being alleged will result for extending funding to other faith-based schools,” said Mr. English, whose group represents Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu schools.

Mr. English, who is vice-president of UJA Toronto, a Jewish group, said Mr. McGuinty is insulting parents who send their children to non-Catholic religious schools by suggesting that they are undermining the province's social order. “The vast majority of faith-based schools are very much part of Canadian society,” he said. “Many of these people came to Ontario in the first place because they admire the diversity and the tolerance of this province.”

He rejected the suggestion that Catholic schools have a special protection because funding was guaranteed in the British North America Act, upon which the country was founded.

“Can you argue that inherited discrimination is any more justifiable than recent unfairness?” he said.

John Vanasselt, a spokesman for the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools, also questioned Mr. McGuinty's consistency when he attacks Mr. Tory's plan to extend public funding to private schools on the grounds that such schools undermine the province's social cohesion.

“It is remarkable to me that someone who benefited from public funding for faith-based Catholic schools would be so opposed to extending that benefit to others,” Mr. Vanasselt said. “The lack of logic is staggering.”

Mr. Vanasselt said critics of the Conservative promise have raised the question of evolution as a “straw man” to cloud the overall issue of fairness. Mr. Tory stumbled last week when he initially suggested religious schools could teach Biblical accounts of creation alongside evolution, only to backtrack quickly and suggest that discussions of creationism would be limited to religion classes.

Currently, Christian high schools that award Ontario secondary school diplomas must teach the provincial science curriculum, and can base student evaluations on only that curriculum, he noted. They are allowed to supplement that

curriculum with other materials, as are Catholic schools that now get provincial funding, he said.

The Conservatives say they would put an additional \$2.44-billion in public education as they extend the funding to private schools.