

McGuinty Didn't Do Education Homework

By RORY LEISHMAN

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The Ontario Liberal party proclaims in its official policy platform for 2007 that, "Education is our top priority." More specifically, the Liberals pledge, "We will complete our drive to have 75 per cent of kids meet the provincial standard in reading, writing and math."

Voters are entitled to regard this Liberal commitment with considerable scepticism. During the 2003 provincial election campaign, the Ontario Liberal party promised: "Our Excellence for All plan guarantees that within our first mandate, 75 per cent of our students meet or exceed the provincial standard on province-wide tests."

What do we find? The province's Education Quality and Accountability Office reports only 64 per cent of Grade 6 students passed the standard for reading during the past two years, while in mathematics, only 59 per cent passed this year, down from 61 per cent last year.

Rather than apologize for this lamentable failure, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said the province's elementary students have higher test scores than under the previous Progressive Conservative government.

In response, Ontario Progressive Conservative leader John Tory points out: "The McGuinty government has been quietly lowering education standards to make the standardized test scores look better."

On one point in the educational debate, Tory and McGuinty are agreed: In Tory's words: "Ontario's public school system is one of the best in the world."

This contention is wrong. Ontario public schools are not even the best in Canada. Over the past 25 years, students in Ontario schools have almost always done less well on standard tests of academic achievement than students in Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec .

Funding is not the problem. Ontario spends approximately the same amount per student as Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec.

Likewise, Ontario parents cannot be faulted. They rank among the best educated in the entire country.

The Ontario education system stands out from its counterparts in Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec in lack of competition. This difference is crucial.

In a study of school choice in Canada, the Society for Quality Education notes: "The high-performing provinces -- Alberta, BC, and Quebec -- have the most school choice. . . . Unless defenders of the status quo in Ontario can refute decades of test results or prove that the children in some other provinces are intrinsically more intelligent than Ontario students, we must conclude that Ontario's public schools are not teaching students as effectively as the schools in the provinces with more school choice."

Regardless, the McGuinty Liberals are committed to maintaining the educational status quo. They adamantly oppose any increase in school choice for Ontario parents.

In contrast, the Progressive Conservatives promise to extend public funding to faith-based independent schools. Such a half-measure is insufficient. The government should offer all parents educational vouchers equivalent to the average cost per student in the publicly funded schools.

Some critics oppose educational vouchers on the ground that they could be used to finance schools run by apologists for Islamist radicals, Tamil terrorists and other extremists.

Rather, the government should specifically shut down all subversive, hate-mongering schools and associated houses of worship, whether publicly or privately funded.

McGuinty defames the great majority of independent schools in Ontario, by charging them with undermining the province's "social cohesion." And in taking this stance, he boasts: "Teachers' organizations support us."

That's hardly surprising. The province's strike-prone teachers unions have a stranglehold over the publicly funded schools with an expensive, four-year contract including wage hikes of almost 10 per cent.

Parents have no reason to share the union enthusiasm.

The determination of the Liberals and New Democrats to oppose any initiative to increase school choice and competition will assure the inferiority of the quality of Ontario education.