

Faith-based schools would offer freedom of choice

Kitchener Record - Jun 16, 2007

BARBARA BIERMAN

I read a recent Ian Urquhart column (Conservatives Dust Off Religious School Funding Plank - June 13) and decided to write before the usual suspects with the usual arguments and criticisms write their responses.

I fully expect that local representatives of the teacher's federations will write about the disaster that will befall public schools if faith-based schools are included in provincial funding so let me be the first to say that, as a parent and a citizen of this province, I am glad to hear that the Ontario PCs are committed to ending a discrimination that even the United Nations has said (twice) Ontario is guilty of, namely the practice of funding one type of religious schools and no others. If the Conservatives are elected and follow through with their policy ideas for faith-based independent schools, there will be greater legitimate choice for families and average citizens will get to feel good about the correction of a blatant human rights infraction that has existed in our province since 1985.

For the next several weeks before the provincial election, the educational establishment will trudge out the usual and tired criticism about extending funding to faith-based schools, namely that this move will take millions away from public schools, thereby starving them further financially than they already are. That is simply not true and we average citizens need to get a lot smarter about what we hear.

Right now, public schools get funding based on the number of students that attend. And even though the parents of children who attend faith-based independent schools, and indeed all other non-parent citizens, pay their share of education taxes, none of that money ends up in public schools. That money ends up in the general revenue coffers of the province and is likely used for a variety of government initiatives.

Regardless of what financial support government extends to independent faith-based schools, public schools will continue to receive the same amount of money because they still have the same amount of students. So, when the teacher's federations and the current governing Liberals start up again about how funding independent schools will bankrupt the public schools, and we logically know this not to be the case, we must also logically conclude that there is some other unspoken reason for the inaccurate messaging, perhaps a reason that relates to job security more than what is best for the future of our province.

One only has to give the PC education policy a close read to discover there an increased financial commitment to public schools side by side with a commitment to increased parental choice in education. Fear-mongering about the precarious

future of public schools when such an equitable solution is possible, is just a scare tactic that was used by the Liberals successfully in 2003 to win the election. Hopefully, we citizens are a little wiser this time around.

The truth is, provincial governments have been supporting greater educational choice in six other Canadian provinces for a long time now -- Ontario is actually lagging way behind in this regard.

B.C. regulates its many independent school choices with a whole independent school branch of its ministry of education. Alberta, a province which has the most options for government supported school choice, continues to boast the highest test scores and levels of parental satisfaction of all Canadian provinces according to a report published recently by The Fraser Institute. And in all other Canadian provinces where school choice is supported by government, 90 per cent of children continue to attend public schools and all schools seem to be doing well, financially and otherwise.

It is my hope that the Ontario Conservatives get an opportunity to implement their education policy and make good on the obligation each province has to provide for the education of all children living there, not just some of them.

Barbara Bierman is a spokesperson for Parents For Educational Choice. Second Opinion articles reflect the views of Record readers on a variety of subjects.