



Dispelling Myths About Catholic Education

As we begin the month of March, we begin as a Catholic Community to concentrate on the Liturgical Season of Lent. One of the gifts that the Catholic school system has is its ability to deal with faith related matters in an integrated fashion. I would like to speak to some of the myths that are circulating around Catholic education and hopefully dispel those myths. Our greatest advocates for Catholic Education should be our students who are benefiting from the programs, our parents who have chosen to send their children to our system, and all who work for the Catholic school system. My hope is that this information will assist you in your journeys and in situations where you are confronted with those who question the value of Catholic education. Catholic trustees, teachers, administrators, support staff, our priests and bishops have a long history of supporting Catholic education in Ontario and this tradition continues to this day.

Our success is rooted in the mission of Catholic education, which has been publicly funded in Ontario for over 169 years. For nearly two centuries, Catholic education has added to the greater good by graduating students who are caring, compassionate and contributing members of society. There are a number of myths about Catholic education, which those who would see the destruction of our system often promote.

MYTH I: The United Nations has called the Ontario funding of the Catholic system discriminatory.

REALITY: Not true. The United Nations has never made such a ruling. Rather, this was the opinion of one of the United Nations committees. It has never moved beyond the committee stage, nor has it been supported by the United Nations as a whole. Both the Canadian and Ontario governments have responded in strong support for Catholic education and that matter has never been pursued either by the United Nations or by any member of government of the United Nations.

MYTH II: Catholic schools are duplicates of public schools and it would be more efficient to have one system.

REALITY: The current publicly funded system of education supports four branches. Nearly two and a half million rate payers support the education of over 670,000 students in our English and French Catholic schools in Ontario. Educational funding in Ontario is calculated on a per pupil basis, regardless of which school a student attends. Attempts to amalgamate all four systems would cause massive upheaval and, based on past experience, would lead to higher costs. Often the myth that amalgamation saves money is a good slogan, but it has not been demonstrated to be historically true when we look at past amalgamations of school boards, cities or other services.

MYTH III: Catholic schools are the same as public schools, except with religion.

REALITY: While both Catholic and public schools teach a curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education, our schools are in view with the Catholic perspective; a lens, if you will, through which all curriculum and action is viewed. The curriculum is enhanced by the gospel values in the school working together with home and parish to ensure that our students are formed in the traditions of Catholic faith through spiritual, academic and social development.

MYTH IV: It is unfair that Catholics have their own school system when other faiths do not. To make it fair, the Catholic system should be taken away.

REALITY: Catholic education was established before to 1841, prior to Confederation. In fact, the solution to Catholic schools has often been identified as one of the more important items that had to be resolved if this country was to be formed. Protection for Catholic schools is the same protection granted other constitutional groups within our country. Catholic education, by becoming a pre-condition for Confederation, established its existence prior to the formation of this country. The Supreme Court of Canada has recognized the Constitutional Rights in Canada and Ontario to educate

A Lenten Prayer

God our Liberator,
Free us from the chains of selfishness
And the false idols of materialism
Move us to show regard for the lowly,
Advocates for the voiceless
And reduce victims from their oppressors.
Remove the grind of poverty
By opening our hearts and minds
To your Gospel message to love our neighbour,
Awaken our desires with the gifts of your Spirit,
So your justice may be fulfilled
In Christ we make this Prayer.

--William Purcell

Catholic children. It is not just a right; it is a right that has been proven to be meritorious in the system of education in Ontario. Whether other faiths receive publicly funded education, is a public policy debate. The Ontario Bishops are on record as supporting this approach. Stripping away the Constitutional Rights of one minority is not an appropriate way to gain what might be perceived as equity. In the same way that when women sought the vote in this country, the solution was not to take away the right of males to vote, it was rather, to include women's right to vote within the legislative laws. Equity is never achieved by removing the historical, constitutional and moral rights of one group.

MYTH V: Quebec and Newfoundland have ended publicly funded Catholic schools and Ontario should do the same, as this concept is a historic relic.

REALITY: Catholic schools are either fully or partially funded in six provinces and this is often overlooked by those who would claim that there should be one school system. Education is a provincial jurisdiction and school governance in each province is unique. In Ontario, our history and our commitment to support Catholic education isn't unlike that of any other province. As to Quebec, it moved to a language-based system to reflect its linguistic and cultural reality. This is a very different situation from Ontario. There have, however, been recent court cases in Quebec that have demonstrated that the loss of Catholic schools has been at a very significant cost to the Catholic community.

Newfoundland had a number of denominational schools it closed and consolidated in 1997. In both cases, the circumstances were entirely different than those that existed in Quebec. The discussion in Newfoundland dealt not only with the question of denominational schools, it dealt also with the larger issues that were confronting the Church at that time. Interestingly enough, when schools were told that there would be a savings by amalgamation, savings has not, in fact, been the reality. Finally, Ontario is a world leader in education and Catholic education is a critical component of education in Ontario. The present system works. It is illustrated by EQAO test results, by student graduation rates, by student achievement and a host of other demonstrable facts that our schools are educating our students. Ontario would create enormous disruption for all, both in the Catholic and public system, if Catholic schools were to be removed and we moved to a period of massive closing and re-shifting of our student populations.

We, in Dufferin-Peel and Ontario, have a proud record of student achievement, a proud record of students' and parents' support for our system, and of teachers' and administrators' support. Our board, each and every day, builds up the importance of Catholic education by the programs that we deliver and the services that we offer within the context of the culture in which we provide these programs and services.

We all have the responsibility of ensuring that when untruthful statements about Catholic schools are made, we challenge them. We challenge them both on a legal understanding, on a constitutional understanding, on a historical understanding and on an equity understanding. St. Thomas Aquinas once stated, "Error has no rights". We have a responsibility to confront the error, confront those who would propose the demise of the Catholic school system by suggesting that any such action would be legally, constitutionally and morally unacceptable. School systems that are achieving success in this province should not be tinkered with because some groups dislike those systems.

As we begin our Lenten Season, we see in our schools the reality of our faith, illustrated by the activities that we do. Let us all continue to be strong ambassadors and spokespersons for Catholic education this year as we begin this period of Lent.



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