

Protecting Our Heritage

Ontario's tax credits go some way towards preserving fairness and freedom.

By Ernie Checkeris

Growing up in Toronto 70 years ago, with my dark eyes, olive skin, and funny accent, I was definitely in the minority. My refugee parents accepted racial comments — but that was over 70 years ago.

To its credit, our country has overcome most of the prejudice of those days long ago and, to their credit, those refugees have contributed to the quality of life in their adopted homeland.

My father marveled that he, by his vote, could elect a government and never have to worry about being shot by the police because of his political views. His greatest appreciation was reserved for the fact that he could work as long as he wished, own his home, worship in his Greek Orthodox Church, and raise his sons according to his personal philosophy.

Our parents loved and honoured this nation of Canada with a passion. They urged their sons to work to keep the land safe for future generations and the freedom provided for all.

My brothers and I attended public schools and, although there were very few “ethnics” at the time, the teachers made us feel at home. They respected our differences and helped us to do our best. We felt valued and respected.

Times have changed, and nowadays on the streets we see a parade of many peoples of the world, many colours, many in different dress and fashion, many sizes and shapes but, I reckon, all Canadians.

I am annoyed to hear various people express their fear that the Ontario public system will not survive the tax credit recently promised to parents who send their children to alternate and faith-driven private schools.

The principle behind public education is to provide every individual with equal access to educational opportunities, regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnic origin, disability, and

place of residence, in English or in French, consistent with the provisions of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

At present, we have special publicly-funded schools for Roman Catholics, French-speaking students, French-speaking Roman Catholics, and members of the First Nations.

Why can't those with other religious beliefs, such as Judaism or Islam or Anglicism, have publicly-funded schools that support their values? What about parents who seek schools with a different educational orientation? They all pay school taxes into the Ontario treasury.

The four “public” systems have a monopoly and do not hesitate to accept taxes from those who decide to send their children to schools of their choice. Somehow, it seems unfair in a nation that prides itself on being fair, tolerant, and democratic.

The fact that some parents are so eager to send their children to private schools that they are willing to bear the additional financial burden is sending a strong message to public school supporters.

Why in the world don't the public school systems open up their systems to choice, including within their orbit schools of various faiths and philosophies? Why not incorporate schools for those parents who are looking for an alternatives to the existing one-size-fits-all public schools?

Such an approach is not new; it exists in many European nations at present. Even within Canada, there is one school board that incorporates schools with various orientations — Christian, Hebrew, arts, technology, and so forth.

This school board is in Edmonton. Bucking the trend everywhere else, that publicly-funded school board is growing while the number of private schools is shrinking. But of course, this is happening in Alberta: they even have charter schools there!

I believe that competition from private and charter schools will in the long run make the publicly-funded schools better. Unlike those who would protect the publicly-funded schools from competition, I believe that public school personnel are not helpless but rather can rise to the challenge.

I support the public school system. I believe that it is the foundation of our free society and that it will continue to be the best way to inculcate in our youth the ability to understand the differences in a changing society.

I cannot understand the panic that some groups are exhibiting over the Ontario tax credits. Four other provinces have been giving grants to private schools for years, with nothing but positive results. I know that the Ontario public system can and will survive and become better.

Perhaps the issue of the tax credits will at least force publicly-supported school systems to examine what they are doing. The only reason the system exists is to serve youth, the future of our society.

When I was a trustee, I always carried the following quote with me, to remind me of my duty as a citizen and parent.

“In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again: and in him, or her, too once more, and in each of us, our terrific responsibility towards human life, towards the utmost idea of goodness, of the horror....”
James Agee

(Mr. Checkeris was a public school trustee for 55 years and the founder and past president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. In December 2000, he was honoured with the Order of Ontario. Mr. Checkeris lives in Sudbury, where a school is named after him.)