

Thank Heaven for Religious Schools

They keep our public system honest

By Christy Clark

The premier of Ontario could be having a tough time right now. He's in the middle of a hotly contested election and his opponents believe they have lots to complain about. He signed a pledge saying he wouldn't raise taxes. He spent millions advertising his promise. Then he introduced a hefty new health tax.

But no one's talking about taxes in Ontario. They're talking about education — in particular, the Conservatives' promise to extend public funding to religious schools.

Although Catholic schools already receive 100% of their funding from the province, Dalton McGuinty opposes extending funding to other types of religious schools. He argues it'll hurt the system by taking money from public schools.

In B.C., all religious schools that meet provincial criteria have been 50% government-funded since 1977, when Bill Vander Zalm was education minister.

I remember my father, a public-school teacher and sworn enemy of Social Credit, telling me the decision would spell doom for public education in our province.

Boy, did he turn out to be wrong. Extending public funding to religious and other independent schools has turned out to be one of our system's great strengths. Those schools provide parents with choice in a province where public schools have long resisted differentiating themselves from one another.

The B.C. public-education system is one of the best in the world. But offering essentially the same programs at every single school doesn't provide much choice for those kids who don't fit the mould. And it doesn't work for families for whom religion is an important part of schooling.

There are those who say that allowing religion a place in state-funded schools messes with the separation of church and state. But who says the state has primary responsibility for educating my children?

It has an obligation to ensure that a high-quality education is available to every child. But it shouldn't be the sole discretion of the state to decide how that education should be delivered. I'm a parent; that's my job.

And it's hypocrisy to complain, as many critics of religious education routinely do, that faith-based schools preach a biased world view. So do public schools. It's called secularism, and a good number of parents don't subscribe to that world view.

They care so much about that issue they're willing to pay for their kid's education twice — first through their taxes that go to fund public schools, then to cover the costs of a religious education that is only half-funded by government.

And thank goodness they do, because religious and other independent schools inject an element of competition into the system that wouldn't otherwise be there. No institution improves when it has a monopoly. Schools are no exception.

Knowing that parents can vote with their feet and get their kids an education elsewhere is part of what keeps public schools honest.

(Reprinted with permission from The Province, September 23, 2007. Ms Clark is a former British Columbia Minister of Education.)