

## **TheStar.com - comment - Public historically cool to faith-based funding**

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Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's new position on funding all faith-based schools is a poor fit with public opinion.

In 20 years of polling, we have never found more than a minority in favour of any extension of public funding to private schools.

Moreover, the views of this minority do not privilege faith-based schools but prefer funding extended to all private or independent schools meeting provincial standards.

Since 1984, the OISE Survey of Educational Issues has asked Ontarians every two years about extending public funding beyond the current public and Catholic systems.

In 10 separate surveys over this period, support for funding religious schools has only once reached 10 per cent (in 1992) and has usually languished at between 4 per cent and 7 per cent. In contrast, support for extending funding to all private schools has fluctuated between 17 per cent and 27 per cent.

In 2004, the last year for which specific data are available (a different question was used in our soon-to-be released 2007 survey), 7 per cent favoured government funding of religious schools but 20 per cent wanted financial support extended to all private schools.

This strongly suggests that among the minority who favour extended funding, the key issue is parental choice, not equity

among faith communities. (In 2000, in the wake of the United Nations Human Rights Committee finding that Ontario's policy of funding Catholic schools but not other denominational schools was discriminatory under international human rights provisions, we asked people their preference if they were forced to choose between funding schools for all religious groups or no religious groups, including Catholics. Forced to choose on this basis, the public split down the middle: 46 per cent to fund all religious schools, 47 per cent to fund none.)

Overall, willingness to extend funding at all to private schools has been and remains a distinct minority position. Between 1984 and 2004, support has fluctuated between 25 per cent and 35 per cent. Most Ontarians continue to support either a single public system or the status quo of public and Catholic systems.

The split between these options has fluctuated over time but neither option alone has ever come close to commanding majority support.

Since full funding was extended to Catholic schools by the Conservative government in 1984, around 40 per cent have supported this option. Support for funding a single public school system, with Catholic schools converted into it or losing their public funding, has hovered around 30 per cent.

Our 2007 survey uses a more general question (suitable for the national survey conducted with the Canadian Education Association this year) asking whether only currently funded public schools or all public and private schools should receive funding. In Ontario, we find 58 per cent in favour of currently funded public schools and 39 per cent willing to extend funding to all public and private schools.

The Conservative party proposal is in line with public thinking in making acceptance of the provincial curriculum, province-wide testing and teachers certified by the Ontario College of Teachers necessary conditions for public funding.

There is widespread unanimity on these conditions among all political parties and the general public. In 2002, when the issue was tax credits for parents of private school students, the OISE survey asked whether the public agreed or disagreed that to be eligible for the tax credit system private schools should have to accept each of those three conditions. The overwhelming majority (around 80 per cent) agreed that all three should be conditions for eligibility.

The whole issue of which schools should be funded is caught in a long-term gridlock as far as public support is concerned. There is no consensus on any basic option – a single public system, the status quo or extending funding to all private schools.

Hence, there is no net public pressure for change. The current Conservative policy to fund faith-based private schools charts a course through a political landscape at odds with most public opinion on the issue.

If politicians are going over this ground again, they might pause to check that their maps take account of the landscape as the electorate actually sees it.

Finally, while strong views on each of these options surely will be expressed in the current election, it should be kept in mind that whatever their views on extended school funding, Ontarians show similarly strong support for greater government funding of elementary and secondary education, and a willingness to accept higher taxes to improve public education.

In groups of all religious persuasions there is a similar acceptance of the need to improve the resource base for public schools.

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*Doug Hart and D.W. Livingstone are authors of [Public Attitudes Towards Education on Ontario 2007: the 16th OISE/UT Survey](#), to be released shortly.*