

# Civil Rights In Public Education, Inc.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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## The White River Fiasco

### Plan to enrol in a Separate School? Be vigilant!

Since the 1970s, the town of White River has had only a Roman Catholic elementary school to serve both Roman Catholic and Public students.

In the Fall of 2002, a chain of unfortunate incidents happened there as a result of the mixture of religions and an administration that was not sensitive to a previously agreed-upon arrangement. The White River situation of a single Roman Catholic community school for all could be repeated in other areas of the province as enrolments drop and schools close.

The following account is given to raise awareness to the type of problem which could arise because of a government which practices religious discrimination by providing public funds for a Roman Catholic separate school system.

#### BACKGROUND

White River is a community of less than a thousand people on highway 17 located inland, above the eastern shoulder of Lake Superior, 310 km north of Sault Ste. Marie and 380 km east of Thunder Bay. (See map on page 2.) Like Chapleau to the east and Schreiber to the west, it was a CPR railroad town. Lumbering now sustains it. When the highway 17 trans-Canada route was completed through White River in the 1960s, it benefited by a tourist boom of travelers, but traffic is now reduced and summertime in the town is not as busy as previously.

White River is a pleasant place made famous by its claim to be the coldest spot in Canada with a recorded temperature of

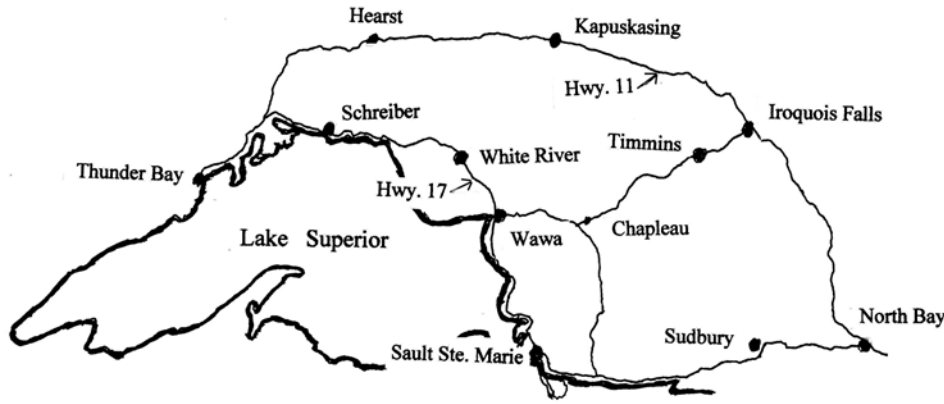
72 Fahrenheit degrees below zero. It is also the location of a small but spacious park dedicated to Winnie the Pooh, because it was at the White River train station where his story began.

Below a large colourful likeness of Winnie, (See page 10.) a commemorative plaque states that: "On August 24, 1914 Lieutenant Harry Colebourn, V. S., of the 34<sup>th</sup> Fort Garry Horse & Canadian Army Veterinary Corps, purchased a black bear cub at WHITE RIVER, Ontario, while enroute overseas. He named her WINNIE after his home town, Winnipeg. WINNIE became the soldiers' mascot, and was left in the care of the London Zoo on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1914, while Lieutenant Colebourn served in France. In 1919, he gave her to the Zoo for permanent keeping where she was watched and loved by many, including author A. A. Milne and his son Christopher." The rest is history.

In a town of White River's size, there are not many school-age children, but in the boom times after the CPR went

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through in the late 1800s, an eight-room Public school was built to accommodate the families of the railway workers. A good many years later, a Roman Catholic separate school was built.

As the 1970s approached, the public school was showing its age with structural and heating problems. Due to amalgamations, there are no school board records to give the details, but after many public meetings, it was agreed that in June, 1973, the public school would be closed and the students would take instruction at St. Basil Roman Catholic separate school.

St Basil is a much newer building (See picture on page 10.) with a gymnasium and a library. The nearest public school is in Wawa, 100 km away. There is busing for high school students, but not for elementary-school students. Although I could track down no formal agreement, it is said that there is a now-unwritten agreement which includes the right of Public students to be excused from religion classes and ceremonies.

The mix of Roman Catholic and Public students in

the school varies from year to year, but as of May 2005, it is 53% Roman Catholic and 47% Public. I have received conflicting estimates on the religious persuasion of the White River families.

#### THE BREAKDOWN

About two years ago I received an e-mail from Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe. They have two children and lived in White River from 1990 until 2004. They are not of the Roman Catholic faith, but, because of the arrangement mentioned above, their two children attended St. Basil school starting in junior kindergarten.

In September 2002, the older was in grade 7 and the younger in grade 5. Since the Sharpes are Christian, they did not mind when school started with the Lord's prayer, nor did they mind the children participating in some religion classes. If some did not wish to participate in the Roman Catholic program of religious instruction, they could take a Family Values class. It cannot be said that the Sharpes were completely happy about this situation, tolerating it would better describe their attitude.

Another wrinkle was that when the Roman Catholic priest visited on a regular basis, all children from grade 2 and up were required to go and see him individually. This was for "reconciliation" or "confession." Youngsters who were not Roman Catholic and didn't know what it was all about, were told to go anyway and "just talk". Since grade 2 students are at an impressionable age and are used to doing as instructed by a person in authority, to object to this procedure probably never entered their heads. Parents whose children didn't tell them what was going on had no idea they were participating in a Roman Catholic confession.

When a new principal, Gail Rebek, was assigned to St. Basil in September of 2002, things changed. The Family Values class was still offered, but it was changed to religion one day and Family Values the next. If one didn't take religion, one did homework. Also, a new program was introduced called "School Rules Olympics". In this program, a student who was "good" was awarded a check mark. If the student had done something "bad", a B was put beside their name.

But there was the option of redeeming one's Bs for check marks. No matter what faith the student may have been, redemption for Bs was done by attending the Roman Catholic church or singing in the Roman Catholic church choir. As a result, if one was not a Roman Catholic, and did not wish to attend the Roman

Catholic church, one had no opportunity to redeem bad marks for good ones.

The situation came to a head when, on Friday morning, at 8:30 a.m., October 25th, 2002, Mrs. Sharpe was told by another mother that the all students would be going to church that morning for a Roman Catholic mass. Mrs. Sharpe called her husband and at 9:15 he called the school and told the receptionist not to send his children to church. When told that they had to go, Mr. Sharpe insisted that his children not go, whereupon he was told he would have to speak to the principal, Gail Rebek.

From this point on, Mr. Sharpe kept a written record of events as they happened. The record said: "When I spoke to Mrs. Rebek again, I told her that my children are not to be sent to Catholic mass; she insisted that they will be sent to mass. I told her 'no' we are not Catholic and my children should be given an alternative program for the morning. She told me there would be nobody there to watch the children. Then she suggested that I pick up my daughters for the morning. Again I told her 'no' there should be an alternate program for them; DO NOT send them to Catholic mass. She told me it was beyond her control and to contact the Huron Superior Catholic School Board."

Mr. Sharpe took her advice and at 9:45 called the Roman Catholic board and explained his grievance. He was told to speak to superintendent Jack Stadnyk. Mr. Stadnyk, not available, was left a message to call Sharpe back.

Later that day, at 2:00 p.m., Mr. Sharpe said that: "Jack Stadnyk called me back. I explained my grievance to him and he replied that he wasn't really aware of what is going on and that he would look into this grievance with an answer or resolution by Sunday night."

#### **FORCED TO ATTEND**

At 4:00 p.m. on Friday, after the children returned from school, the Sharpes found out that: "...they were indeed forced to attend Catholic mass at the church."

At 4:09 p.m., Dr. Cecile Sommes, Director of Education for the Huron Superior Roman Catholic School Board, phoned the house to tell Mrs. Sharpe that her children must comply with the school curriculum. Mr. Sharpe recounts that his wife: "told her 'no', we are not Catholic, my girls have been attending this same school since Jr. Kindergarten and have **never** been forced to attend mass before and will not attend mass now. Again Dr. Sommes told my wife that Catholicism was practiced throughout the day and that mass is part of the curriculum. My wife again insisted that my children are **not** allowed to attend mass to which Dr. Sommes replied that if our children did not attend mass, then they were not taking part in the curriculum and by refusing to take part in the curriculum they should not be allowed to attend this school. My wife then said: 'Are you telling me that my children are no longer allowed to attend St. Basil?' Dr. Sommes said; 'That's right'".

Mrs. Sharpe "...was very upset about this conversation. She then called on many other parents and members of the community to get some kind of feedback as to how others feel about this development. We have just been informed that our kids are kicked out of school and the only alternative we have is to send our kids to Wawa to go to school. This is 100 km away (200 km return). There is no busing available to them, and if the kids did take the high-school bus, there was no busing to go from the high school to the elementary school."

At this point the Sharpes began to call their MPP, Mike Brown; MP, Brent St. Denis; Brian Kelley at the Sault Star, and Elizabeth Witmer, Minister of Education. Being Friday evening, most calls were either faxes or messages, but they did speak to Mike Brown who seemed quite concerned about the events.

The Sharpes put it in writing to the school with a letter, dated October 25<sup>th</sup>, with a "(Copy to Mr. Jack Stadnyk Huron superior catholic school board)" as follows:

"To whom it may concern (St. Basils Roman Catholic School White River)

"This letter is to confirm that I/we do not allow our daughters ..... or .....to participate in your roman catholic program during school hours.

"My taxes support the public school program and my children will attend public school. As per our phone conversation, you have no right to remove my chil-

dren from the school property to send them to a roman catholic church against our will. This practice was supposed to have stopped with native Canadians almost a century ago. The privilege of being a Canadian citizen includes the right to choose our own beliefs; furthermore we will be watching carefully to see that our children are not discriminated against because of our beliefs.”

Monday, October 28, 2002

“Monday morning; my girls are home today awaiting a decision by the Catholic school board and others.”

“Over the weekend”, said Mr. Sharpe, “we have spoken to Mike Brown again. Also Jack Stadnyk called us Sunday night and said he will be holding an emergency meeting on Monday with Mrs. Rebek and others to discuss events on Friday and to try to resolve this situation. We are supposed to hear from them by the end of the day.”

9:10 a.m. “Mike Brown’s office called, asked us about events over the weekend and current situation. I told him I was very concerned about my kids being out of school, and that Mr. Stadnyk called Sunday night to inform me that they will be holding an emergency meeting regarding this issue. Mr. Brown’s assistant told us that he will also be looking into this issue as well and we will keep in contact.”

9:15 a.m. “Brent St. Denis office called, referred us to Mike Brown’s office.”

9:36 a.m. “St Basil school called

to see why my daughters are not in school. I replied: ‘Because the school board kicked them out.’”

9:41 p.m. Mr. Sharpe received a phone call from St. Basil school and was told that the School Olympics program was cancelled along with the Family Values program, and mass, required only of Roman Catholic students, was to be held at the school instead of the church.

The Sharpes’ proposed resolutions to the problems were:

“-- Students be given a lesson on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This will hopefully prevent other students from harassing the non catholics by informing all children of their rights.

“—Note be sent to all parents stating that

“—All students have the right to opt out of the catholic program. Students who choose to opt out are to remain in the school to do homework or receive additional instruction. Any discrimination\* against non-catholics is to be dealt with immediately.”

(\*The discrimination mentioned here means discrimination by the Roman Catholic teachers against the Public students.)

The situation did not sit lightly with the Sharpes over the weekend. They wrote a letter to Elizabeth Witmer, the Minister of Education at the time which said, in part:

“I thought the idea of the Catholic Church recruiting our

children and sending them to facilities was a thing of the past. Since this time, we as Canadians have fought for the RIGHT to have our own beliefs. I do not believe that a township with a population of only 1000 people should even have a Catholic school, while there is no public school here. To now force our children to participate in this religion is unconstitutional. It is not our youths’ fault that the closest public school is 100 km away with no busing access. But to now force our youth to participate in the Catholic Church is wrong.”

“As things have turned out, by giving in to the little things,\* our kids are constantly getting pushed further and further into the Catholic program. Now they have pushed too far and the only resolve I can see is to remove our children completely from ANY Catholic programs. If I may remind you, we believe that we as Canadians have the right to be educated in the public school and we are now asking you to help us exercise our rights.

“I look forward to your response regarding this issue.”

(\*The “little things” were giving in to Roman Catholic practices in the school such as prayers, etc.)

The letter resulted in a phone call from Ms. Witmer about two and a half weeks later. She asked if the Sharpe children were back in school, and when told that everything was settled, that was the end of it. (Although I give Ms. Witmer credit for responding, it is my view that when a politician responds with a phone

call to a letter of such a serious nature, it is to ensure that nothing from the Ministry is put on paper.)

In later years the Sharpe children did take part in some religious activity, but only with a phone call or permission note, the decisions being made by the children, "most times they did not attend any mass."

The Sharpes wish to emphasize that the "situation" which caused so much trouble was not directly the fault of Mrs. Rebek. It was her first year as principal and she apparently had no idea of the public/separate school mixture; Dr. Cecile Sommes expressed that "it is most disappointing."

#### **THE BLAME**

The blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the federal and provincial governments who support a two-tier citizenship in Ontario based on a citizen's religious beliefs.

#### **THE SOLUTION**

We fully agree with Mr. Sharpe when he said: "I do not believe that a township with a population of only 1000 people should even have a Catholic school, while there is no public school here."

**Until such time as publicly-funded separate schools are totally eliminated, Civil Rights in Public Education, Inc. believes that, if a community can support only one school, then that one school should be a Public school.**

**Such an arrangement would ensure that no student of any faith group would be insulted by having to be immersed in a religious environment of someone else's choosing.**

I, Renton Patterson, editor, raised this point recently with the Minister of Education, Gerard Kennedy. My letter follows:

05 - 01 - 04

RE: Small schools

Dear Mr. Kennedy;

In many communities across the province, there is an accommodation problem due to declining enrolments. If the enrolment in a school becomes so low that your Ministry deems the cost per pupil too high to sustain, school closures and / or long bus rides seem to be your Ministry's answer.

If a high school is up for closure in a small town in rural Ontario, the prospect can have a devastating effect on the community. Families, and therefore businesses, may shy away from that locality due to the fact that no local high school exists. The problem is exacerbated by your Ministry's decision to continue with dual Public, and publicly-funded Roman Catholic, school systems.

There are two situations in Renfrew County where the Public school board is facing the closure of elementary schools in two different communities. In each case, there is a Roman Catholic separate elementary school which will

remain open. To avoid long bus rides, or to avoid placing young children in vacant high-school classrooms where they would be forced to mingle with much older high-school students, some have suggested that the public school board rent classroom space in the separate elementary school for public school students, or even that the public school students be integrated into the classrooms of the Roman Catholic separate school, as has been done in at least one other Ontario community.

Since all public and separate schools are paid for from the public purse, it is our position that, in any community with one public and one separate school, whether elementary or secondary, if the enrolment drops to the point where one school must close, and it is either impossible or undesirable to bus students to an adjoining school of the same type, then the remaining school must be a Public School. Such a solution would ensure that, whether the Public or the Separate school had to be closed, no student of any faith group would be insulted by having to be immersed in a religious environment of someone else's choosing, i.e. all students would be guaranteed the same rights to religious freedom as the students in public schools. Also, such a solution would mean that fewer communities would lose a school and that long bus rides for students, along with busing costs, would be considerably reduced.

Do you support the solution outlined in the previous paragraph in order to respect the relig-

ious rights of public-school students as guaranteed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights?

Would your Ministry act to ensure that the charter rights of public-school students are upheld by not allowing local boards to integrate public school students into a Roman Catholic school or Roman Catholic classrooms in order to eliminate the need to, for instance, transport 4-year-old JK students for over an hour to attend the nearest public elementary school?

OR

Does your Ministry allow the school boards involved to introduce any solution they care to come up with as long as they live within the financial restraints imposed upon them by your Ministry?

I look forward to receiving the answers to the questions posed above.

Sincerely,  
(signed)

R. H. Patterson, President

### THE NON-ANSWER

Ministry of Education, Toronto  
and Area District Office.

April 3, 2005

Dear Mr. Patterson:

Your letter to the Honourable Gerard Kennedy, Minister of Education, has been forwarded to me for reply.

Roman Catholic separate schools have existed in Ontario for over 140 years in accordance with laws made prior to and at the time of Confederation. The *Constitution Act, 1867* (formerly the *British North America Act, 1867*) guaran-

tees Ontario Roman Catholics the right to govern the education of their children.

The concept of a single school system for Ontario would probably necessitate amendments to the *Constitution Act, 1867*. Kindly be advised that the Government of Ontario has no plans to adopt a single school system. The government respects the constitutional rights of Roman Catholics in Ontario, and will therefore continue to fund the Roman Catholic separate school system.

Yours

(signed)

John De Fazio  
District Manager  
Toronto and Area District

Is it ignorance, or is it some sort of strategy? The point of my question was totally ignored.

This response was very defensive, typical of any inquiry to government with regard to any topic concerning any reference to the separate school system.

For instance, when I phoned the Ministry of Education's North Bay/Sudbury District Office to inquire about White River, I spoke to a Ministry official and said that I was doing some research on some schools in the north and asked a question. The immediate response was: "I'm sorry, you're calling from Pembroke, you're doing some research — what sort of research?" "On...some schools." "For whom are you doing this?" "For...myself, I'm interested in a school situation in White River and I'm trying to find out all I can

about the situation." "Have you been hired by someone in White River?" "No...no I haven't" "OK and um..."

Then I got into the details of why I was calling and — with very much care — she answered. When I indicated there were public meetings in White River to decide what to do after the Public school closure, I said that it was agreed that Public school students would be allowed to opt out of religious instruction. She then said: "No, no, I don't think it was on receiving religious instruction per se, as much as catechism and so on, and the sacraments."

"It would be a Board decision" on whether students could opt out of religious instruction. She emphasized that as long as the Education Act was not violated, the Boards could work out anything between them they wished. "The partnership in White River has been, overall, successful, and we don't intervene in that case."

### ON YOUR OWN

The bottom line is that any student in a Roman Catholic school, for whatever reason, has no Public advocate.

The Public student is not represented by the Public Board.

Recourse for any grievance goes up the line of authority of the Roman Catholic Board — from principal, to superintendent, to director of education.

There is no one to advocate for the religious rights guaranteed in the Charter of Rights — **Public students in Roman Catholic schools are on their own.**

**THE UP SIDE**

There is an up side. When I spoke to the present principal, Kathleen Proulx, she acknowledged that there was a “problem” in 2002, mainly because the new principal assigned to St. Basil was from Sault Ste. Marie where a Roman Catholic school is a true Roman Catholic school. Ms. Rebek was just doing her job — as she saw it.

Ms. Proulx indicated that St. Basil was the only school in the province with a significant number of Public students and therefore with an opting-out arrangement such as theirs.

However, all is back to “normal” and Ms. Proulx, and parents with whom I spoke, indicate that there has been no trouble since the 2002 incident. Mass is no longer held in the church, but at the school, and Public students are excused. In fact, even Roman Catholic students can be excused from any religious sacrament or religious instruction.

The school presently accommodates 87 students in 5 dual classrooms with a 53% / 47% Roman Catholic / Public split. There are Roman Catholic and Public teachers and Educational Assistants. Even a former principal was a Protestant.

But, Ms. Proulx admitted, the school is visibly a Roman Catholic school, with appropriate pictures and symbols. The Public students therefore grow up in this atmosphere. Young people are impressionable, and one wonders how much of this foreign religious belief rubs off on them.

**THE NUMBERS PROBLEM**

Declining enrolments across the province mean significant school closings. The Renfrew County District (Public) School Board has announced that SIX elementary schools, and possibly SEVEN, will close within the next year. In Deep River, both elementary schools may close and students housed in renovated high-school classrooms.

Already, some parents have announced that, to avoid busing small children, or sending them to the high school, they will attempt to register their students in St. Mary’s Roman Catholic school which remains open.

However, despite White River’s openness, in response to an inquiry, a letter from Cheryl St-Élier, principal at St. Mary’s, stated: “New students who are not Catholic must apply for entry to the board. Usually parents will come for an interview, because the application requires the principal’s consent to register the student; the reason for this is to ensure that the parents understand and agree to the Catholic nature of the school, the fact that the student would be required without exception, to participate in religious education, prayers, Mass etc.”

The law allows this, but Roman Catholic schools/boards that face a declining enrolment problem may welcome others, indeed, advertise for others, to register with or without an arrangement to opt out of anything religious. The reason is that each new elementary school student is worth \$3,885 in grants.

**CLOSE, BUT NOT QUITE**

The previously stated ideal of any single school in a community being a Public school, is almost reached with Renfrew County’s Madawaska Valley District High School. People in the town of Barry’s Bay and surrounding area are of largely Polish descent and are therefore predominantly Roman Catholic.

To avoid busing high-school students 75 km to either Bancroft or Pembroke, there is one Public high school of 584 students in Barry’s Bay, 80% of whom are said to be Roman Catholic. The arrangement the Boards worked out for Roman Catholic students includes a Chaplaincy Program with a full-time Roman Catholic teacher/counsellor, and Roman Catholic courses in religion offered at the school by the Renfrew County Roman Catholic School Board.

The only problem for the purist is that the Roman Catholic Church is given this position of primacy in a Public school.

**THE LAST WORD**

Any situation in the public domain, which gives privilege to one group of citizens over all others, is a situation which violates our fundamental rights and “guaranteed” freedoms.

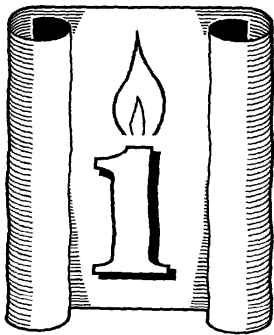
For any parents who contemplate sending their children to a Roman Catholic school, the word is to be careful, and find out exactly what you are getting into. Any opting-out arrangement should be an iron-clad written agreement.

**WHO WE ARE**

Civil Rights in Public Education, Inc. is an organization composed of citizens of differing backgrounds, living in more than 135 communities across Ontario, committed to one strong public education system, which offers neither privilege nor prejudice to anyone.

**OUR AIMS ARE**

- To serve as advocates for civil rights in public education so that the public is informed about the issue of publicly-funded separate schools.
- To hasten the day when Ontario's education policy recognizes the dignity and worth of all children, their right to equality, and their right to freedom from religious discrimination.

**OUR LOGO**

Our logo is composed of a background scroll representing the charters of rights which guarantee fundamental freedoms to all individuals; the numeral "1" signifies equality and social unity in one public education system for each official language; the flame above is the universal symbol for freedom.



Above: St Basil Roman Catholic elementary school, White River, Ontario



Left: Park in White River honouring the origin of Winnie the Pooh at the White River CPR train station

**A Thought to Consider**

**Until such time as separate schools are eliminated, if a community can support only one school, then that one school should be a Public school.**

**Such an arrangement would ensure that no student of any faith group would be insulted by having to be immersed in a religious environment of someone else's choosing.**

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**ABOVE ALL WE MUST MAKE SURE THAT NO CITIZEN OF ONTARIO, NOW, OR EVER IN THE FUTURE, IS PRIVILEGED OR DISADVANTAGED PUBLICLY BECAUSE OF HIS/HER FAITH, OR ABSENCE OF FAITH.**