

Who controls the curriculum in Ontario’s publicly-funded schools, the Ministry or the RC Bishops?

The Spring of 2011 has given rise to conflict between the students (and sometimes the government) and the Roman Catholic separate schools in the province.

Thunder Bay

In March of this year, the administration of St. Patrick separate High School in Thunder Bay held a pro-life event in which some students wore a red piece of tape with “life” written on it, and also refrained from talking, to display their belief in the injustice of abortion.

Not all agreed. Grade 10 student Alexandria Szeglet, in opposition to the protest, wore a green piece of tape with the word “choice” lettered on it. She handed out at least 25 other pieces of green tape to other students

who agreed with her.

Summoned to the school office, she was told her protest was not a scheduled event, so she was told to take the green tape off her shirt. When she refused, she was sent home.

During a phone interview with the media, John de Feveri, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board director of education is quoted as saying: “on the issue, pro-life is part of the Catholic stand. The pro-choice students were not appropriate in the context of a Catholic school.”

The story was put on the internet by “tbnewswatch.com” on March 10th and it generated over 500 comments in six days. As of early June, the story is still

there at: <<http://www.tbnewswatch.com/news/136109/Students-sent-home>>. Our sentiments are reflected in the comments, two of which follow.

“Maybe it is time for parents to think twice before sending their students to these institutions. How one side can be allowed and the other is censored, is not teaching them the lessons they need in life. Furthermore, I am really bothered that this is happening in an institution funded by my tax dollars. Remove all dollars from the Catholic schools, like the other religious-based schools, and make them private.” 494 others agreed with this comment.

“Alexandria has my support 100%. This is a violation of her freedom of expression. The world needs more people like Alexandria and it’s people like her that make me proud to be from Thunder Bay.” 452 agreed with this comment.

Five days later the story was still news for the Globe & Mail. Its story of March 15th was entitled “Catholic school students sent home for displaying pro-choice stance.”

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The Globe's story said that: "The suspensions, and the faith-fuelled debate behind them, are the latest evidence of growing friction between religion and public education in Canada."

"Catholic schools are struggling to bridge a growing divide between popular opinion and church doctrine, and the strain is showing: A Catholic school board near Toronto won international notoriety in January after it banned gay-straight alliances, and a bedroom community near Edmonton, where Catholic education is the only public option, is currently embroiled in a battle for residents' right to a doctrine-free education."

Alexandria's mother said: "My opinion is that if they don't want both sides to express their opinion, they shouldn't allow either one of them."

The Vatican's stance is clearly one against abortion, but Roman Catholic followers are divided in their opinions, evidenced by the number of pro-choice groups in their number.

The Globe story also accepted comments such as "Why are tax dollars being given to the Catholic school system? Catholics should fund their own schools and not mooch off of non-Catholics who don't share their superstitions". Globe comments totaled 1635.

The story was news across Canada, and even went international with comments as far away as Australia.

This issue not only has "legs" it has caterpillar legs.

The Gay-Straight Alliance fiasco, the concern continues

First of all, CRIPE wishes to point out to our readers that the only reason we are highlighting the GSA issue is because it is very much connected to **our one and only issue**—that of the public funding of the Roman Catholic segregated schools.

Having made international news in January the bad press against Canada continues.

"Xtra, Canada's Gay and Lesbian News" has been a prime source of news about the desire of gay and lesbian high-school students to form support groups in their schools. As such, it has been responsible in bringing the issue to light in the general news media. The resulting publicity about additional discrimination in publicly-funded institutions has helped our cause.

January re-cap

Halton Catholic District School Board chairwoman Alice LeMay told Xtra that her board: "...doesn't allow Nazi groups either. Gay-straight alliances are banned because they are not within the teaching of the Catholic Church."

March 16: Leanne Iskander, age 16, founded a GSA on this date and asked the principal of her school, St. Joseph's Catholic Secondary School, to recognize the group. She was told by principal Frances Jacques that there are already

supports for such persons in her school guidance department and that, at her age, such concerns about her sexuality were premature.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) is supportive of the students and has offered legal assistance if necessary.

March 21: NDP MPP Rosario Marchese asked in question period why the government was refusing to enforce its own policy on equity and inclusivity.

Premier Dalton McGuinty, in reply to a question about the decision of the Mississauga school regarding Leanne, said: "We are making it clear to all our school boards, all our schools, all our principals, all our teachers and all our students that it is unacceptable in Ontario to discriminate based on race, gender, religion or sexual orientation," but stopped short of stating that the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board was in breach of the Ministry's equity and inclusivity policy, saying that "boards can find different ways to ensure that they adhere to those policies."

Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky was not present in the legislature to hear the question, was not available at her office and refused a telephone interview. Up to that point, Dombrowsky had refused comment on the issue for 68 days.

March 29: When Leanne attempted to have the first meeting of her proposed GSA group in the Mississauga high school, more than a hundred students showed up. The meeting, however, was taken over by the principal and Noa Mendelsohn Aviv of the CCLA was not allowed on the school property. She said, however, that: “It’s unconstitutional to deny these students the right to express themselves. It goes against their Charter rights. At the end of the day, yes, it is a Catholic school, but it is also a publicly-funded Catholic school that is required to respect these students’ rights.”

Leanne’s parting comment was “believe me, this isn’t going away.”

April 3: A Globe and Mail article on this date reported that Kris Wells, a researcher at the University of Alberta’s Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services revealed that there is at least one “diversity club” in an Alberta Catholic school and two in Saskatchewan. Wells would not reveal what schools, or even what school boards, have such clubs — a probable indication that it was not safe for them to be identified. The Globe article concludes with the paragraph:

“At its heart, the problem is that the Catholic school boards in question would like to believe that they are insulated from the individual rights protections in the Canadian Constitution; that, in effect, they are an equality-free zone. A religious-school permit is not a licence to discriminate — a point that political leaders, up to and including provincial premiers, need to communicate.”

April 4:

Taechun Menns, one of the founders of the proposed GSA at St. Joseph’s indicated that he has been bullied—physically and on Facebook.

Lori Murphy, Taechun’s mother, in response to the bullying, said she is: “...very upset with the lack of support they are getting from the very people who are their role models at school. Even though I’m a Catholic, if it comes down to protecting the rights and freedoms of my child over giving the right to have religious education, then my child will always trump my religion. Being bullied, being told not to be yourself if you’re gay — that is not what I understand the Catholic religion to be.”

April 5 The CCLA made a two-and-a-half page submission to the Halton Catholic District School Board. A portion of the submission reads as follows:

“Whether or not there are equality clubs in schools, students have basic rights and freedoms. Our Canadian Charter provides the right to freedom of association (the right to form groups), freedom of expression, and equality, subject to reasonable limits. Our Charter requires no proof as to why we need these rights. Applied here, students don’t have to prove that they need GSAs. Students quite simply have the right to associate with people of their choosing, to express who they are and what they believe in through the name of their club, and to be treated equally by their schools.

“Thus students have the right to form GSAs. (In fact, if stu-

dents want to form ‘Quack Like a Duck’ groups, they are entitled to do so as well). The Charter rights mentioned are guaranteed to all people in Canada, including those under 18 years of age. These rights, according to our Charter, can only be restricted if the limit is reasonable, and is demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.”

April 8: The Roman Catholic bishops insist that RC schools in Ontario will not be permitted to use “support groups” called GSAs. This represents an unprecedented challenge to the province’s authority over publicly-funded separate schools.

April 26: The Ontario bishops have made a decision to encourage a network of clubs directed to combat bullying related to sexual orientation. Father de Valk said that: “...if in fact it is an agreement to have gay clubs, it spells the end of the Catholic school system in Ontario.”

April 30: From Macleans On Campus: The Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association is playing with semantics when it comes to naming its new anti-bullying groups in response to requests for gay-straight alliances in separate schools. President Nancy Kirby said: “When I look at a gay-straight alliance, I see an activist group. We are answering the students’ request for support and assistance, not for activism. Students don’t want to become activists; they want to be supported in being bullied by their peers.”

If the administration’s aim was really to create a safe, inclusive environment for gay and lesbian youth at its schools, it would have

no qualms with having 'gay words' in the title of the anti-bullying club. Its wavering, however, suggests otherwise. Just another reason why the public dollar should not be supporting a system that puts religious doctrine before students' welfare.

May 11: From Xtra

The debate around Ontario Catholic separate school boards' refusal to allow their students to form gay-straight alliance discussion groups has been raging for months. But Justin Trottier, executive director of the Centre for Inquiry (CFI), says his panel discussion this Friday night won't be adding to it.

Instead, the panel will discuss "the appropriate moves going forward" to dissolving Ontario's separate school system, in place since the 1867 Constitution Act and later guaranteed in the 1982 Constitution Act to Roman Catholics in Ontario.

June 6, 07 & 11 From Xtra, The Star and Sympatico.ca news

Leanne Iskander was involved in a St. Joseph Catholic Secondary School anti-homophobia event. Signs and posters with rainbows were brought, but the students were not allowed to display them. They were told that the reason was because rainbows were associated with Pride.

Because the students could not display their rainbows openly and proudly, they baked rainbows into cupcakes by dyeing the batter in a rainbow of colours. They raised about \$200 for charity by selling them at 50c each.

Another hassle was that they were not allowed to donate the

cash to any rainbow charitable organization, but were told that they could donate only to Covenant House, a Roman Catholic homeless shelter.

Queer Ontario supplied a variety of materials to be distributed to those interested, but many were rejected by the RC school board, and those that were approved, says Iskander, were censored. "They wouldn't let us have this one booklet because it had one or two sentences about gay sex."

From "thestar.com"

In what appeared to be an editorial in The Star, we quote, in part, the following:

"When Catholic students in Mississauga were told they couldn't put up a rainbow flag at an anti-homophobia event they did what most teens do when confronted with an unreasonable ban: they got resourceful.

"No flag — fine. Students at St. Joseph's Catholic Secondary School baked rainbow cupcakes instead to raise money for charity. Had we known in time, we'd have bought a dozen.

"This latest pushback from students should be a lesson to all Catholic educators. Stop fighting your students and work with them to do what's right."

* * *

"While the Catholic bishops and trustees claim to be generally on-side with student wishes and the province's edict, they continue to oppose them on specifics. The case of the rainbow flag ruckus is just the most recent example."

"Catholic schools continue to ban gay-straight alliances, which are common in public schools.

Catholic students are allowed to have anti-homophobia clubs just so long as the name is somewhat obscure about its intent. "Open arms" or "equity" clubs, for example, are considered more acceptable than actually using the word "gay."

"This can't go on. Catholic board officials routinely tie themselves into knots trying to sound like they want to be supportive of their gay students while actively restricting many student-driven attempts to actually increase understanding, tolerance and compassion.

"It's time the Catholic education system caught up to its students."

A comment printed in response

"The bigotry and exclusionism often practiced by the Catholic system violate the basic principles which govern this country. If they will not reform and make tolerance and respect for others a part of their practice as well as their ostensible policies, then yank their funding and make them pay for their own schools."

A last word

From "Visions and Voices", the Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga

It is again time to raise the question of taxpayer support for a school system whose understanding of its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students is so abhorrent. If we, the people of Ontario, believe in a true welcoming and inclusive spirit, we need to challenge the merits of public support for a parochial system that, in its heart of hearts, teaches injustice and unfair treatment of its students.

Letter to and from Minister of Education Leona Dombrowsky

Dear Minister Dombrowsky,

It has been noted that you as Minister of Education have been silent regarding the non-compliance of publicly funded Catholic school boards in implementing the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Policy. Specifically, the refusal by the Catholic school boards to establish gay-straight alliances [GSA] in their respective secondary schools. Why have you, and the Liberal Government not spoken, out on this travesty? The Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Policy is clear, so why the silence from your office?

It has been reported that gay clubs are prohibited at all Catholic schools, by decree of the Catholic Bishops. If this is true, who is really running public education in Ontario-the Catholic Bishops or the Ministry of Education?

Supporters of the Catholic Bishops and Catholic school boards have been arguing that the real reason for gay-straight alliance clubs is not to shield homosexuals from ridicule, but to promote homosexual acts as being socially acceptable. The Ontario Catholic Trustees Association [OCTA] in a recent publication entitled: *168 Years of Success-Ontario's Catholic Schools* states " that the Catholic school system adheres to Ministry of Education requirements. **It does so from a Catholic perspective** [my bolding]. The curriculum is enhanced by Gospel values". What does this mean? Are Catholic perspectives the same as the Ministry of Education's? Why should publicly funded Catholic schools be permitted to contravene Ministry policies and directives?

This is the crux of the problem. Catholic schools to be truly Catholic must adhere to the values and beliefs of the Catholic Church. Catholic teachings clearly state homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and contrary to natural law, so how can Catholic schools be true to their faith if they uphold and implement the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Policy?

If Catholic schools are to be true to the Catholic Gospel and accountable to the Catholic Church [Catholic Bishops] then they should refuse public funding. If they accept public funding and adhere to Ministry of Education policies and directives then they are insincere in upholding their religious values and beliefs. Publicly funded Roman Catholic school boards and schools cannot have it both ways. Nor can the government of Ontario.

I would appreciate a response from you as to what you and the Ontario government are going to do to address this injustice and contravention of Ministry of Education policies and directives.

Fraternally, Malcolm Buchanan., Hamilton

Dear Mr. Buchanan,

Thank you for your correspondence about the approach that Catholic school boards have taken with regard to establishing gay-straight alliances. I appreciate the opportunity to reply.

We have been clear: discrimination and harassment in our schools is unacceptable. Our government has required all Ontario school boards to implement one of the most progressive equity and inclusive education policies in North America.

We have also passed legislation that requires all board staff to report to the principal serious student incidents that could lead to suspension or expulsion, and we have added "bullying" to the safe schools section of the *Education Act*. The ministry is actively working with boards to build knowledge, understanding and capacity on these important issues.

Discrimination based on race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation or other factors is unacceptable. Our Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is designed to support fundamental human rights as described in the Ontario *Human Rights Code*, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and other relevant legislation. All boards are required to have an equity and inclusive education policy that complies with relevant legislation.

Boards are corporations created under the *Education Act*, which

sets out the duties and powers of school boards as well as the powers of the Minister of Education. As corporations, boards are governed by locally elected bodies that are accountable to their supporters for the decisions they make on matters within their jurisdiction.

Gay-straight alliances are one of several school-based activities that promote and encourage understanding and the development of healthy relationships. These groups have been included in school resource materials as one example of how boards can build more inclusive, respectful schools. Boards may choose different approaches, but all boards must provide support for students. Decisions about how to achieve this objective are made by individual boards. We encourage boards to listen and respond to the needs of their students.

We continue to work with boards and our education partners across Ontario to support positive school environments in which all students, parents, staff and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and where every student is supported and inspired to learn.

Thank you again for writing.

Sincerely,

Leona Dombrowsky

Minister of Education

The Ministry answers are essentially form letters. Two other letters, written by Gary Fitzgibbon of Toronto and Ernie Checkeris of Sudbury, received the same letter except for the omission of paragraph five.

A further observation

The Institute for Catholic Education [ICE], also known by some as the Catholic Education Inquisition Tribunal, vets all Ministry of Education's curriculum guidelines, memorandums, policies and directives to determine whether they meet Catholic values and beliefs.

This shadow group is accountable to no one but the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario. The Minister of Education permits this and agrees with their directives to publicly funded Catholic school boards as to what shall be taught in Catholic schools.

The Institute for Catholic Education's membership is made up of associations representing Catholic school principals, trustees, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association [OECTA] business officials, supervisory officers, parents and the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario.

This group is not accountable to the Premier nor the Minister of Education, although it has absolute power to dictate what, and what cannot, be taught in publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario

One School System Conference

For a report of the conference held in Toronto on May 28, 2011, entitled "Tear Down the Wall — One School System For All" go to the One School System website at:

<http://www.onessn.org/>

Roman Catholic teachers to pay for an anti-PC campaign in this Fall's election

From the North Bay Nugget, and Christina Blizzard of the Toronto Sun

OECTA—the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, voted 67% in favour of a \$60 per member levy to launch an ad campaign in this fall's provincial election against Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservative party.

Since membership in a teachers' union is compulsory, for the 33% who are not in favour of the levy it is just tough luck.

But since union dues and expenses are tax deductible, we, through our tax dollars, are other unwilling participants in this \$3 million exercise.

Blizzard calls this "... a protectionist racket — a shakedown to ensure teachers continue to get their lavish pay hikes and benefits." Teachers have seen their pay hiked around 25% since McGuinty came to power in 2003.

No distinction has been made in the press about the public school teachers' organizations, — the 60,000 member Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation and the 76,000 member Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. These unions are not part of the anti-McGuinty campaign.

However, we'd like to see a campaign by these two public unions for the establishment of basic human rights for all Ontario citizens.

Catholic religious education: Why it is not succeeding in Ontario

By Leeda Crawford of Catholicinsight.com
Excerpts follow

"Many Catholic parents choose to send their children to Catholic schools believing their children will receive the additional benefit of a moral and faith-based education alongside of academics. Unfortunately, morality has become subjective today, and the Catholic Faith is being watered down to fit into a pluralistic society, a fact that is most evident in the Catholic schools."

"The full government funding of Catholic schools in Ontario opened the door to the hiring of many dissenting and lapsed Catholics as teachers who helped spread a secular moral outlook."

"The unionization and secularization of Catholic teachers, and their further secularization by anti-clerical, feminist, anti-Church..."

"The influence of dissenting theologians, Canadian and international, spreading doubts about the Catholic faith..."

"We strongly need to consider the fact that most Catholic students are not attending Mass by grade 12 and have often abandoned their Catholic faith altogether."

"...in the spirit of ecumenism all faiths are inferred as equal in the sight of God."

"...morality has become subjective today, and the Catholic faith has been watered down to fit in our pluralistic society; a fact that is most evident in the Catholic schools."

Many of the reasons given above provide the strong argument — within the Roman Catholic church — for a move to establish schools on their own dime to achieve their own religious education ideals.

Legal group seeks to close Catholic schools in Scotland

From "Scotland on Sunday" May 8, 2011

A legal campaign group has called for the end of separate Catholic education as the only way of "confronting and counteracting sectarianism" in Scotland.

An editorial in the journal of the Scottish Legal Action Group urges the Scottish Government to create a clear division between church and state by "ending religious instruction and denominational schools" paid by the taxpayer.

The suggestion follows growing concern about Old Firm-related sectarianism, which has included parcel bombs following soccer game clashes fuelled by alcohol and religious violence.

The Scolag journal, set up in 1975, believes the problem starts with segregated education in the country's 387 Catholic schools. It warns: "The roots and effect of sectarianism lie beyond the game and we have increasingly resorted to the law to address unfair discrimination in employment, housing, and the provision of services."

"The Scottish Parliament has expressly legislated to make religious discrimination an aggravation to a criminal offence. But the degree to which such legal measures can counteract sectarianism is questionable and even doubtful when in other regards our law and civic bodies continue to enshrine, protect and systematically promote social division on religious lines."

It adds: "That is done most widely and effectively in our education system where the mainte-

nance of religious instruction and observance, along with the public funding of denominational schools create and perpetuate religious discrimination."

It argues that "public funds should not be spent on religious observance", and that having Catholic and Jewish schools but no Muslim ones, for example, is discriminatory.

The Catholic Church condemned the views as "blinded bigotry." Peter Kearney, for the Catholic Church in Scotland, said: "These comments constitute an ill-informed and unprovoked attack on religious freedom."

"Bearing in mind that over 95 per cent of Scottish Catholics attend Catholic schools and over 50 per cent of Scots Catholics marry non-Catholics, our schools, self-evidently, do not create life-long social divisions, quite the opposite."

However, Andrew Wilson, editor of the journal, said: "Separate education is fundamental to continuing discrimination in Scotland and getting rid of Catholic schools is fundamental to tackling it."

"In Scotland, when you go into a social gathering one of the first questions people ask is what school you went to, which is code for what religion are you, because they want to know if you're one of 'us'. It's that pernicious."

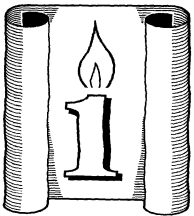
The government will spend £525,000 tackling sectarianism in 2011-12.

WHO WE ARE

Civil Rights in Public Education, Inc. is an organization composed of citizens of differing backgrounds, living in more than 155 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.

School enrolment plunge looming

A dramatic enrolment drop in provincial schools has made staff layoffs common. As reported in the Windsor Star, the separate schools are forecast to experience a drop of 800 to 1,000 students this coming September. In the next five years the larger public board is forecasting an enrolment decline of 1,500.

Since education financing is based on the number of students enrolled, each lost student represents about \$10,000 to the governing board.

The enrolment drop across the province is due to demographics; a smaller number of couples are having fewer children. The problem is exacerbated in south-western Ontario due to people moving west for jobs. The only areas immune are the 905 suburbs that surround Toronto. Roman Catholic boards are affected more because a baptismal certificate is required to enroll in an elementary school, and most immigrants these days are not Roman Catholic.

The results are empty seats and closed schools in some communities — a problem which can be eased with the elimination of religious discrimination and just one public school system for all students.

A Thought to Consider

If churches want to play the game of politics — let them pay admission like everyone else.

George Carlin

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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.