

# THE FAITH?

With educational budgets being slashed, Ontario's 171-year-old separate school system is in jeopardy. Could a province without Catholic schools mean a society of kids without values?

BY TIM JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLO MENDOZA

**L**ORRIE BAIRD HAS A STRONG FAITH, but is not a practising Catholic, and for that matter, neither is her daughter, Kennedy, 17. But when it was time to enter Grade 9—after 10 years in the public school system—mother and daughter agreed that Kennedy should move to a Catholic high school in their hometown of Peterborough, Ont. While Baird herself attended Catholic schools, she didn't raise her daughter in the Church, and left the choice in the hands of Kennedy, who visited both the public and Catholic high schools and talked through the decision with her parents. "Going with St. Peter's was the best decision we ever made," says Baird, who adds that their choice was validated very early on, when the public high school called to say that Kennedy was absent—although they hadn't noticed until four whole days into the school year. "I just said to them, 'You really need to look at the way that you take care of your students,'" says Baird.

Catholic schools make the care of students a priority, if Kennedy's case is any example. Baird notes that both she and Kennedy get plenty of feedback from teachers at St. Peter's, who diligently ensure that Kennedy follows her passions in the areas of art and design, while having a recognition of God and a mandatory religion class have been a positive influence in Kennedy's life. And at St. Peter's, social justice and community involvement are a very big deal, with the school holding a number of events that promote awareness of international

issues, like famine and hunger. St. Peter's even gained national recognition as one of the top fundraising schools in Canada for the annual Terry Fox Run. The results of all this have been undeniable. "That kind of thing lingers in a student's life. I don't think it ever leaves them," says Baird. "Without a doubt, Kennedy is absolutely a better student, all around." But an array of budget hawks and those who feel that religious values have no place in a publicly funded system argue that the very choice that Baird and Kennedy made should be taken away, out of the hands of Ontario's parents.

In Ontario, the persistence of publicly funded Catholic schools has become a controversial topic, with an increasingly rancorous debate revolving around one central, essential question: In this day and age, *why* do we still need a separate school system? While there are certainly critics who argue that eliminating duplication at the board level would lead to long-term budgetary savings, a number of experts and parents agree that these schools offer an important pedagogy that would be irretrievably lost should the two systems merge. They believe that at risk are Catholic schools' passionate dedication to a mandate of inspiring excellence by educating not just the mind, but also the body and spirit, their system and curriculum rooted in the teachings within the Gospel of Jesus Christ, their emphasis on having a cohesive school community and their religious devotion to social justice and fundamental rights.

The endurance of Ontario's separate

schools is something of a historical anomaly, observes Mark McGowan, PhD, a historian specializing in the religious, social and educational history of Canada, and former principal of the University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto. Designed to uphold minority rights, the creation and protection of a separate school system for Catholics was a key plank in Confederation, something that was written right into the British North America Act, which established our nation back in 1867. "It was a deal-breaker for the Fathers of Confederation," says Dr. McGowan. He notes that collective rights like these were—and in some cases still are—a key Canadian value, manifested in charters and legislation like French language rights and the collective rights of First Nations peoples. While some provinces have discarded this system—Quebec, for example, in the late 1990s requested that the federal government not act upon its obligations under Section 93 (the protection of the collective rights of Catholics to denominational schools as they existed in law in 1867) in order that the province could reform its system to reflect contemporary Quebec society—the territories, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta have retained their publicly funded Catholic schools (although the latter two weren't present at Confederation and didn't become provinces until much later, and Alberta's Catholic schools are just one part of that province's tradition of funding a wide array of religious, charter and other specialty schools). ➤➤➤

Dr. McGowan notes that a number of elements set Ontario's separate schools apart from their public counterparts, both physically and philosophically. Most Catholic high schools house a chapel, and classrooms at all levels display religious imagery—for example, a prayer table, an open Bible and a Crucifix. And that imagery carries over to what's taught in classrooms—mornings start with prayer, religion classes are mandatory in high schools, and in all grades, Catholicism, wider Christianity, morality and ethics are infused into the teaching. "They're unafraid to talk about the religious presence as part of everyday life," says Dr. McGowan. "It's the Ontario curriculum, with a difference."

He observes that, while nuns wielding rulers are certainly a thing of the past, parents often report feeling that these schools—with their moral base—have a greater atmosphere of order and discipline, something that's reinforced by school uniforms, which are commonly worn. Furthermore, inculcating values like peace and social justice are key parts of the education in a Catholic school. "There's a very strong faith dimension to this, and the driving force is what the gospel screams out for us to do," says Dr. McGowan. Collective rights and responsibilities—the very thing that led to the creation of the system—are given a high degree of importance, with a particular emphasis on a student's responsibilities to his or her neighbour and to the world. Dr. McGowan observes that brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger—graduates of Ontario's Catholic schools—and their Free the Children and Me to We programs are perhaps some of the best examples of a secularized version of Catholic social teaching in action. "It's all part of Aristotelian/Thomistic philosophy, about the necessity of balancing individual rights with the common good. We shouldn't be thinking about ourselves as 'me.' We should be thinking about 'we.'"


And while some critics argue that such a system is an anachronism and that favouring one faith over others is discriminatory, the reality is that many of the kids filling the seats in Catholic schools aren't Catholic at all. Technically, the parents of a separate school student are required to furnish proof of their Catholicity—a baptism certificate, or evidence that they have enrolled in Rite of Christian Initiation classes—however, admission standards at

the K-8 level vary widely by board and even by school, and Catholic high schools are open to all.

Steve and Cindy Harrison,\* for example, have never darkened the door of a Catholic church, and remain faithful members of an evangelical protestant denomination. But when their daughter, Violet,\* now 11, reached school age, they chose to place her in a separate school. A small part of their choice was geographic proximity—the closest public school was a bus ride away, while the Catholic school was just down the street from their Peterborough home. But it was more than that. An older congregant at their church advised them that Catholic schools share many similar values with evangelicals, and that his own kids had a great experience there, noting that when differences between the two faiths were raised in the classroom, it often led to stimulating religious discussions at home. Steve, a police officer, consulted with the officer responsible for the school, who reported that it was among the most problem-free schools in the city. And it turned out that enrolling was easy—Steve simply wrote a letter to the board superintendent and met with the school's principal. Admission was approved within days.

Steve notes that several of the students in Violet's class are non-Catholics, and the Harrisons had absolutely no hesitation about sending their son, Matthew,\* 8, into the separate system too. Especially in the youngest grades, the religious elements of the teaching—focused on simple but important concepts like God's love for His children—were in complete congruity with the family's own beliefs. They have also been able to opt their kids out, without prejudice, from strictly Catholic activities, such as demonstrating the sacraments. The Harrisons are very happy with their decision. "There's a constant focus on virtues like honesty, truthfulness and respect, and the kids win awards for demonstrating those values. They're always talking about God's nature," says Steve. "From a religious and moral standpoint, there's a great benefit."

And it's not just Christians—Dr. McGowan reports that in some Toronto-area Catholic schools, 40 or even 50 percent of students are Muslim. "Many




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Muslim parents prefer a school with some religion versus no religion," he observes. Access to Ontario's separate high schools became open to all during the government of Premier Bill Davis in the 1980s, which at the same time extended full public funding to Catholic secondary schools. Dr. McGowan's wife, Eileen, is a chaplain at a Whitby, Ont., high school that is home to students from many denominations and religions, including both evangelical Christians and Muslims, and she notes that one of the most active students at the school is an Islamic teenager. "He has become a Chaplaincy Team member and a regular at our Tuesday morning masses, mainly because he enjoys in-depth discussions on world issues and social justice with the priest," she says.

She adds that, no matter their religious affiliation, students enjoy the guidance and direction offered by staff, whose purview extends past mere academic interests. While public schools have attempted to inculcate character by requiring a certain amount of community involvement, she says that the role of staff and faculty in a Catholic school goes well beyond that. "We have a common value base and source from which we draw our tone and tenor, how we choose to discipline, how we reach out to the ones

among us who are broken and hurting. Students are thirsting for many things besides community service hours—they are searching for love, affirmation, for guidance, for meaning in their lives.”

But are Catholic schools actually better? Maybe. In some cases, class sizes in the separate system are smaller—Steve, for example, says that Violet’s and Matthew’s classes have never topped 22 or 23 students. And Marino Gazzola, president of the Ontario Catholic Schools Trustees’ Association, points out that Catholic schools consistently register results above the provincial average on Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests. In addition, Catholic schools are overrepresented at the top of the latest school rankings prepared by the C.D. Howe Institute, a prominent conservative think-tank that looks at three years of test scores for all of the province’s 4,000 public and Catholic schools, adjusts for extraneous factors, and rates them. Despite having far fewer schools in the mix, more than half the schools in the very top echelon are Catholic. And Gazzola notes that Catholic schools have been an integral part of an overall public system that is excellent and has been a point of international pride for decades. “This system has been successful for so long. Why would anyone try and ‘fix’ a system that has made Ontario the envy of the world?”

And while the jury may still be out on whether Catholic schools are actually better, Baird says that attending one has definitely been beneficial for her daughter, Kennedy. “She has such great, caring friendships—they all take care of each other,” says Baird, noting that she has joined the school’s parent council again this year, and Kennedy will be participating in a major famine fundraising event. “The faculty and staff really do care about my daughter, and that’s a really good feeling as a parent.” And what so many other parents across the province appreciate is having the option of a system that recognizes God, that keeps collective rights alive and that celebrates social justice and other moral values. If the public and separate school system amalgamate, they know that option will be lost forever. “We’re very proud of our faith-based system—the focus on body, mind and spirit—and the success of it,” says Gazzola. “And we know that once it’s gone it’s gone.” 

# THE ARTS SAVE LIVES



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