

Our Catholic Schools 2006-07

A Discussion on
Ontario's Catholic Schools
And Their Future

Discussion Points



Institute for Catholic Education

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A GUIDE TO THE DISCUSSION POINTS

The points for group discussion are intended to help structure the discussion without in any way constraining it. The following tips are offered to help the discussion leader introduce the topics and deepen the discussion on each point.

Introducing the Discussion

Before the discussion begins, it may be helpful to:

- Give the participants a little background on *OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS 2006-07: A DISCUSSION ON CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND THEIR FUTURE*.
- Explain how you, as a discussion leader, came to be involved with this consultation.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves to each other, and tell a little about themselves.
- Give an overview of the discussion points.
- Display/distribute slides from the enclosed **PowerPoint Presentation** (the presentation is available on CD and is also included in the kit in hardcopy). These slides contain quotes from Catholic educators that may help to generate discussion on certain points. Each quote is followed by a notation that indicates the section of the kit to which it is most relevant (e.g. DP 4b).
- **Note:** Printed documents in the “Resource Materials” can help to set the context for this discussion and could be distributed in advance of the discussion (e.g., 1 to 2 days before your meeting).

The Discussion Points address a number of specific areas which are presently being considered by many of those involved in Catholic education—the distinctiveness of Catholic schools, their value, their future, and the major issues they face. There could also be other issues of equal or more concern to participants. The group should be assured that *the discussion need not be limited to the specific points proposed or to the order in which they are suggested*; if they would like to change the order, or add other points either at the beginning or in the course of discussion, this is completely up to them.

Point 1. The Distinctiveness of Catholic Schools

Ontario has “four distinct and equal (education) systems that share many common goals and responsibilities, while simultaneously protecting and promoting the cultural, linguistic, and religious values that are central to their individual purposes” *The Road Ahead II, A Report on the Role of School Boards and Trustees, 1997.*

All four systems are equitably funded, overall. Within this reality, Catholic schools must be distinctive, and must be perceived and understood to be distinctive. This will become increasingly difficult if our schools offer nothing different than what is available in the secular school system.

- 1a. Over the years the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association has done extensive polling to better understand the aspects and features of Catholic schools that parents value the most. Throughout these surveys a few key responses have surfaced as the top reasons parents give for sending their children to Catholic schools and they include:
- “spiritual focus”
 - promotion of “family values and the respect for the dignity of all persons”
 - the emphasis on “moral development”
 - “quality education” and
 - a “disciplined atmosphere.”

In your opinion is each of these traits a key aspect of our system? Of your school? In what way? What other features would you list? Why?

- 1b. There are several basic and distinctive values at the very heart of Catholic education. They include, for example, a sense of reverence for human life, a sense of social responsibility and solidarity, a commitment to service, a sense of the sacred as real, and an understanding of forgiveness as the Christian response to human weakness. How do you see these values at work in Catholic schools?
- 1c. How would you describe the difference that Catholic schools make to your local parish community, and to the larger community in which you live?

Point 2. What We Value About Catholic Schools

- 2a. Generations of parents in this province have struggled to secure and maintain Catholic schools for their children. They have been assisted in their struggle by Catholic trustees, Catholic educators, the clergy and the whole Catholic community. What was it that parents in the mid-nineteenth century wanted so badly for their children that they believed could only be found in Catholic schools?
- 2b. The world in which Catholic parents and students live today is far different from that in which Ontario's Catholic schools were originally founded. Yet, in many ways, the struggle for Catholic education and the commitment of those who support it, continue. Why do parents today choose Catholic education for their children? If you are a parent of children in the system or a student in the system, why did you make that choice? If you are an educator in a Catholic school, why did you choose to minister within a Catholic school board?

Point 3. Our Hopes for Catholic Schools

In many fundamental ways, Catholic education in Ontario has changed very little since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century. Now, as then, the central mission of Catholic schools is a constant – the passing on to our young people of a profound vision of life shaped by the message of Jesus Christ and by the tradition of the Church. Catholic schools have always been about the formation of young people, and through them, the transformation of the world.

At various points in the history of Catholic education, however, there have been changes in its structure (e.g. the amalgamation of school boards), modifications to its curriculum (e.g. the introduction of a formal family life program), significant changes in key personnel (e.g. the end of a significant presence of priests and religious within the schools) and other notable modifications to the framework within which Catholic education is delivered.

- 3a. Catholic school councils are important to the structure within which Catholic education is delivered at the local school level. They function in an advisory role to the principal and where appropriate to the Board on any matter in accordance with the Education Act and the board's policies. As legally constituted bodies of elected and appointed representatives of the local school community,

Catholic school councils help to support and promote the faith traditions and Gospel values of our system and encourage activities that will enhance the quality of school programs. What are your hopes for the future of school councils in Catholic schools?

- 3b. From the perspective of Catholic education, the family is always acknowledged as having the primary responsibility in the nurture and education of children. As the Second Vatican Council emphasized, “since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children” (Declarations of Christian Education, para. 3).

Catholic schools extend and complement the educational process which parents have begun. The attitudes to learning which children pick up at home will have immeasurable and lasting impact on their own approach to education.

In similar fashion, parents carry the primary responsibility for their children’s education in faith. The faith-witness which children observe within their family will be a most powerful influence on their own faith development.

The partnership between the school and home is foundational to good Catholic education. In what ways would you like to see this partnership extended and strengthened in the years ahead? How can Catholic schools, and Catholic school councils, encourage greater involvement of parents in all aspects of the education of their children, including their education in faith?

- 3c. The Catholic community has distinctive expectations for graduates of Catholic schools. To help guide school boards, teachers, parents and students in realizing these goals the Institute for Catholic Education developed the *Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations*. Under these distinctively Catholic learning expectations, our school graduates are expected to be *discerning believers; effective communicators who write and listen honestly and respond critically in light of gospel values; reflective and holistic thinkers; self-directed, lifelong learners; and caring family members and responsible citizens who give witness to Catholic social teaching by promoting peace, justice and the sacredness of human life.*

How do you see our Catholic schools contributing to the good of our society in the 21st century? What modern societal values

should Catholic schools be fostering? What others should they be questioning?

Point 4. **Major Issues Facing Catholic Schools
in Ontario Now and in the Future**

Participants can be asked to discuss what they see as the major issues that will be facing Catholic education during the next twenty years. Participants should be encouraged to air their concerns without feeling obliged to offer solutions to problems they may identify. However, any solutions that come forward should be noted.

In order to stimulate discussion, the discussion leader may want to ask the group to consider the following areas:

Curriculum

- 4a. Over the past eight years, significant changes have occurred in curriculum in both elementary and secondary schools. New curriculum guidelines were implemented across the elementary curriculum. The secondary program was shortened to four years and boards must now prepare students to meet new provincial achievement standards in literacy and numeracy.

Catholic school boards receive specific funding for preparing and implementing Catholic curriculum in our schools. This funding has supported preparation of primary and secondary school course profiles, and in-service of teachers who will deliver this curriculum in our classrooms.

In the face of all these changes, educators and administrators in Catholic schools continue to exercise their responsibility to ensure that the message of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Catholic Church are infused throughout the entire school program.

Are there major issues for Catholic schools now or in the foreseeable future in regard to curriculum? If so, what are they?

Resources Available for Catholic Education

- 4b. The Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997 affected a fundamental change in how elementary and secondary education in Ontario is funded. For the first time in history, all students in publicly funded schools have access to the same level of educational funding.

While the fundamental structure of the education funding formula is sound, many of the benchmarks that are used in the formula are now outdated, creating a funding shortfall. For example, for many school boards *current* transportation and special education costs exceed the amount that has been allocated through grants. Difficulties caused by inadequate funding allocations are further aggravated by the fact that the funding formula places some limitations on how those dollars can be spent.

While Catholic school boards retain the right to spend available resources on those aspects of their operations that are necessary for carrying out the unique mission of Catholic education, current under-funding stresses and certain spending limitations imposed by the formula significantly reduce board flexibility.

Are there major issues at present or in the foreseeable future, in regard to resources for Catholic Education? If so, what are they?

Degree of Public Support for Catholic Schools

Sec. 93 of the Constitution Act of 1867 protects the existence and funding of Ontario's Catholic schools. Nonetheless, certain persistent individuals and powerful groups have from time to time made efforts to convince the government of the day to eliminate all public support for Catholic schools, in favour of a single, secular school system.

These forces are still at work today. The existence and purpose of such groups and issues causes legitimate concern for the security and vitality of Catholic education. The public continues to debate the merit of maintaining two publicly funded English language school boards in the province and the lack of provincial funding for non-Catholic faith-based schools.

Issues regarding faith-based education funding were highlighted by a complaint launched a few years ago with the United Nations Human Rights Committee. The complaint alleged that the funding of Catholic schools in Ontario is discriminatory and violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The United Nations issued a ruling* in 1999 that concurred with the complainant. Currently, a multi-faith coalition of parents and other supporters are actively lobbying the provincial government to comply with the UN ruling and to address the issue of discrimination by providing funding to all faith-based schools. Other

groups maintain that the only way to resolve this “imbalance” is to eliminate public funding to Catholic schools.

The issue has become further politicized by pre-election campaign promises of Ontario’s official opposition party--the Ontario Progressive Conservatives. The party has announced that, if elected, they will address the funding needs of Ontario’s private faith-based schools through a possible tax-credit to parents and will continue to acknowledge the Constitutional rights of Ontario’s Catholic community.

{*Additional information on the UN decision is available in the **Resource Materials** section.}

On a national perspective, Catholic education is an issue that has been taken to referenda in some provinces.

In Newfoundland*, as the result of public referenda, all denominational schools have now been eliminated.

The change from religious to language based schools in Quebec* has also occasioned concerns.

{*Additional information in regard to the Newfoundland and Quebec situations is available in the **Resource Materials** section.}

- 4c. Do you feel that the survival of Catholic schools in Ontario is a major issue now or in the foreseeable future? If so, why? How do you feel this issue should be dealt with?

Point 5. Promoting and Protecting Catholic Education for the Future

Catholic education has survived to this day, and has grown stronger, as a result of the hard work and commitment of all the partners who support it. This unified effort is still required.

Many of us believe that the continued existence of our Catholic school system is dependent upon its distinctive nature. If we are no different from the other publicly funded system, we are redundant.

It is important for Catholic schools not only to be different in fact but to be seen and known to be different.

This discussion kit is one way in which the partners in Catholic education, under the auspices of the Institute for Catholic Education, are trying to

deepen understanding about our distinctive school system within our own Catholic community. We are also making efforts to give the general public information about our system, its values and philosophy, and through this to shape public perception and public opinion in favour of Catholic schools.

- 5a. What can you, as parents, students, teachers, principals, support staff and fellow parishioners do to help to ensure that the very things you value most about our Catholic schools are preserved for our future generations?
- 5b. What can your partners in Catholic education – including clergy and trustee/parent/teacher associations – do to help you in your efforts to preserve and strengthen your school system?

Conclusion

As you conclude, please remember to:

- . Ask the group what else they would like to tell their local school board and the Institute for Catholic Education
- . Ask that individual reports on the discussion be completed, if desired
- . Ensure that the group response form is completed, and returned as soon as possible to the local school board
- . Encourage participants to form other groups for similar discussions.