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Trustees' Association

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July 10, 2017

TO: Chairpersons and Directors of Education
- All Catholic District School Boards

FROM: Sharon McMillan, Director of Communications

SUBJECT: **Letter to Postmedia re: Education Funding in Ontario**

Last week OCSTA was interviewed by Postmedia reporter Andrew Phillips which resulted in a story published this weekend in the Barrie Examiner and the Orillia Packet & Times regarding Catholic education in Ontario. The story arose out of a recent series of articles by Mr. Phillips on religious education exemptions; however, the published article also included some inaccurate information shared by one school system advocate, Renton Patterson. Following is OCSTA President Patrick Daly's response to Mr. Phillips which addresses this misinformation.

Letter to Postmedia Reporter, Andrew Philips from Patrick Daly, OCSTA President

On behalf of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association I'd like you to know that we appreciate the series of articles you wrote to inform audiences on the facts regarding religious education exemptions in Ontario's Catholic schools. We do however have some concerns about the inaccurate information shared by Renton Patterson regarding an alleged \$1.5 billion savings to be realized upon the merger of Ontario's education systems. This figure has no basis in fact. One only has to look at the significant increase in costs associated with recent municipal and school board amalgamations to understand the reality of the financial implications.

Education funding in Ontario is per-pupil based. This is the driver of costs and would not change under an amalgamated model. The only way to save money through amalgamation would be to close SEVERAL HUNDRED schools in Ontario.

If schools were amalgamated and hundreds of schools closed, all Ontario students (across all systems) would be displaced. There is no indication that public school supporters would be prepared to move their children from the local public school in order to accommodate children living closer to a Catholic school or vice versa. **There would be disruption and chaos in every community across this province.**

The cost of amalgamation would far out-strip any savings. The last amalgamation in the education sector happened in 1998 and resulted in the province spending **\$1.2 billion** in additional "transition" costs for that amalgamation (SOURCE: Ministry of Education).

Recent research from the University of Western Ontario (Timothy Cobban, 2014) shows that amalgamation does not save money.

Catholic and public boards save taxpayers millions of dollars annually through a variety of successful business partnerships in such areas as: co-operative school financing; purchasing; transportation; energy management and other shared services.

Andrew, I think your audiences would appreciate this clarification given the inaccurate conclusions proposed by Mr. Patterson.

Attachments: Postmedia articles on Religious Education Exemptions

PROMOTING AND PROTECTING CATHOLIC EDUCATION

A Learning Curve for Catholic Education

July 6th, 2017 • The Barrie Examiner

Author: Andrew Philips

Editor's note: This the first part of a three-part series examining public Catholic education.

Although their daughter now attends university, the parents of a girl who fought the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board over an exemption from religion classes are happy the ordeal is finally over.

But Brenda and Rick Sorgini also hope their efforts and those of their daughter, Claudia, pave the way for other parents seeking to have their children exempt from religious studies at area Catholic high schools under provisions in the provincial Education Act.

"We hope this will make it more common knowledge that this is about the law," Rick said. "Claudia has been very courageous, very brave through all of this."

The couple's three older children attended nearby Midland Secondary School, but Claudia was interested in attending St. Theresa's Catholic High School because of its varied programming, sports teams and musical productions.

Claudia had taken what she thought were mandatory religious courses in her first three years at the school, consistently achieving grades of 95% or higher, both parties said in documents filed in the case.

The family, who is not Catholic, sought the religious-course exemption so Claudia could focus on other academic pursuits in math and science in her final year. They said Claudia even tried to take the Grade 12 religion course in Grade 11 but wasn't allowed despite outstanding marks that saw her receive the Governor General's Award in her final year.

"From the very, very beginning, we were misled," Brenda said, adding the school and board seemed to hide the fact an exemption was even possible.

"There were many things that occurred."

At the heart of the matter remains the exemption issue that traces its roots to 1984, when then-premier Bill Davis's government extended full funding to Roman Catholic secondary schools. Until then, funding had been provided up to Grade 10. But with the added funding came "open-access legislation" to Catholic schools for non-Catholic students.

The Education Act allows students of all faiths to attend Catholic schools, provided they also take religion courses. But parents can write to the relevant school board to ask their child be exempted from "any program or course of study in religious education."

Claudia learned in her final year exemptions were possible for students who are able to attend a public high school but who attend a school run by a Catholic board instead. She applied for one in October 2015 with the support of her parents.

Both sides agreed the school initially denied the request and sought multiple meetings to clarify the issue but ultimately granted the exemption within about a week of the request.

In the human rights complaint, however, Claudia alleged she felt pressure to stop seeking the exemption and would face reprisals once it was granted.

So, despite securing the exemption, the family decided last year to launch a human rights complaint against the board on Claudia's behalf, with the two sides reaching a private settlement before it got to the tribunal stage. The settlement has resulted in changes to the board's exemption policies and an agreement to encourage other boards to adopt a similar approach.

The couple firmly believes the board knew what it was doing from the get-go.

"I think they had a pretty good understanding from the beginning," Brenda said. "They were well aware of the situation.

Because of the public funding, they had to respect that right."

In a separate statement seeking comment for this story, the board said the case has been completely settled to the satisfaction of both parties, yet "allegations continue to appear in the media which are inaccurate and without merit."

The emailed statement goes on to say non-Catholic students have always been eligible for religious education exemptions.

"Catholic students, however, are not eligible for exemptions and this is an important distinction families need to be aware of," the statement reads.

"No student (including in this case) is threatened, singled out or treated unfairly as the result of making an exemption request. Our goal is always to provide every student with an inclusive, accepting and faith-filled environment in which to learn.

"We fully support the remedies outlined in the settlement agreement and we look forward to updating and clarifying our current procedures to reflect the terms of the agreement."

The Sorginis declined to say how much they spent on legal fees "to get what (Claudia) should have been entitled to," Rick added.

"The truth of that matter is we shouldn't have had to spend a nickel. The vast majority of families wouldn't have the intestinal fortitude (to continue). The school had all these anti-bullying campaigns and this was a prime example of bullying in the school."

Requests for such exemptions are rare, say school officials.

The board denied all of the Sorginis' allegations. It said it ultimately did nominate Claudia for two scholarships based on her strong academic performance and that she was never barred from events.

In a statement filed with the Human Right Tribunal last year, the board said it felt its exemption policies were sufficient and did not need to be changed.

"The board has a procedure in place for granting exemptions under the Education Act," the statement read.

"Students that have applied and have met the criteria for an exemption have received an exemption, including Sorgini."

According to the terms of the settlement, however, the board must now amend its policies and potentially set the tone for other boards across the province. The board's exemption policy will be revised to allow students to stay in or opt out of whatever religious programs or activities they want, the settlement indicated.

The board will also develop a standardized exemption form that clearly lays out the process and provides a list of activities from which students might want to be exempted.

The settlement also orders the board to share the new policy with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Once approved and in place, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, which was also named in the complaint, must distribute the Simcoe Muskoka District School Board policy to all 29 English Catholic school boards in the province.

Simcoe-Muskoka board representative Pauline Stevenson said the exemption request has been a relative anomaly in the past.

"I don't think it's very many," she said. "It really is on a case-by-case basis. It's kind of hard to narrow that down. They can also be exempt from going to mass."

Stevenson also noted since the board's curriculum is faith-based, the religion course is just one element, meaning it's impossible to extricate the faith since it's essentially woven throughout the fabric of the board's schools.

"It's our goal that we provide students with an inclusive and faithfilled environment," Stevenson said, noting the settlement makes it easier for the board going forward when someone seeks an exemption by providing greater clarity for staff and families.

"It simplifies things for everyone involved. We're pleased that we were able to reach a settlement outside of the tribunal."

The Sorginis, meanwhile, say they're hopeful other families won't have to jump through hoops to gain exemptions in the future.

"We would like to see that every student is treated with dignity and respect," said Rick.

Beyond the Cross

July 7th, 2017 • The Barrie Examiner

Author: Andrew Philips

Editor's note: This the second part of a three-part series examining public Catholic education

There's a lot more to Catholic schools than crosses, communion wafers and spiritual retreats. Advocates for the school system say opponents don't truly understand what secondary-school religion courses entail and can't fully comprehend how much Catholicism and spirituality remains intricately knit throughout a school's fabric.

"Our expectation is that we're creating lifelong learners," said Lyndsay Novakovich, chaplaincy team leader at Patrick Fogarty Catholic Secondary School in Orillia, who pointed out the idea isn't to indoctrinate or convert someone to the Catholic faith.

Erika Downing just completed Grade 12 at Patrick Fogarty and plans to attend Wilfrid Laurier University to study business in the fall.

"The main thing about Patrick Fogarty and Catholicism is how the school is so welcoming and supportive," Downing said. "You just feel so at home here. You know they care about you. It's so important to have your faith in your school."

Novakovich, who also teaches religion courses, said there are seven core principles that guide the school's faith, including respect for others and creating caring individuals who realize there's worth and beauty in everything.

"They can apply to any situation you find yourself in life," she said, noting the school also features a daily morning prayer and a "beautiful" chapel that's open all the time right at the school's entrance for students, staff and volunteers who want some private time for contemplation.

"It's right at the front of the school and isn't tucked away. And every month, we celebrate mass together, which brings the school together. There's a real sense of family. Spirituality permeates throughout the school."

Grade 12 students also volunteer with the local St. Vincent de Paul Society and the school regularly has trips to foreign lands Novakovich said often relate to being in solidarity with others and giving back to people from other cultures.

"We live in this age of abundance in our culture," she said. "How am I going to make a difference in the world? We have a universal hunger for more. People are looking for something more by respecting other people and living a full life."

"You experience that true sense of joy. A lot of people get that from faith."

Noah Stong will begin Grade 11 at Patrick Fogarty in September. While he has a strong interest in the sciences, he's matter-of-fact when discussing how religion courses and the school's themes relating to values and morals resonate.

"It's through science where we can learn the what, where and when," he said. "With religion, we learn the who and the why. We learn why we were called upon to live, our purpose and our responsibilities as humans to better the world."

The issue of religious courses seems to be regularly raised when the public hears about a case where parents seek a religious exemption for their children and initially have the request rebuffed.

But exemptions remain a rarity within the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, according to board officials. At Patrick Fogarty, for example, just two or three exemptions were issued during the most recent school year.

As well, the courses aren't just about Catholicism, but also teach students about other religions and deal with social-justice issues with an emphasis on ethics and morality.

"It's not Catholicism Part 1, Catholicism Part 2," Novakovich explained. "In Grade 11, we focus on world religions. It's important to understand and respect other religions."

Pat Bullock, a former chaplain and teacher at St. Theresa's Catholic High School in Midland, once said the curriculum "exudes" Catholicism and promotes looking after one another through compassion and caring.

"If they feel they're going to be indoctrinated, it's not going to happen in a religion course," Bullock said during an interview a few years ago. "It's not heavy-handed, Biblethumping Catholicism. It's an exploration of religion."

"What parent wouldn't want their children exposed to Gospel values and social justice? When you get someone from a fundamentalist background, the casualty in any conversation is reason. We try to be exemplars of the faith and draw out the very best in other people."

Tide Turning in Public Opinion?

July 8th, 2017 • The Barrie Examiner

Author: Andrew Philips

Editor's note: This is the third part of a three part series examining public Catholic education

The province's Catholic school system won't be deterred by a recent human rights complaint settlement.

That's the word from Patrick Daly, president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association.

Daly doesn't expect Catholic school boards to see the floodgates suddenly open with more students seeking religious course exemptions as a result of the Claudia Sorgini/Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board settlement that occurred this spring before the case reached a provincial human rights tribunal.

"Like parents in Simcoe Muskoka and hundreds of thousands throughout Ontario, my wife and I wanted our children educated in a learning environment which supports the values we teach our children in our home," said Daly, who also chairs the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board.

Daly said he and his wife, like other parents, choose Catholic schools for their children's education because they value the spiritual environment and focus on Gospel values that permeates every aspect of the curriculum.

"For more than 30 years, parents of other faiths have chosen a Catholic secondary school for their children," he added. "The vast majority have and continue to see the benefit of having their children fully participate in all aspects of Catholic School life including religious education. We do not see this strong preference of parents changing."

But not everyone agrees with Daly's assessment.

Renton Patterson, who heads a Pembroke-based entity called CRIPE (Civil Rights in Public Education Inc.), said the tide is turning towards the province featuring only one French and one English public school system; especially given the Sorgini settlement that's resulted in changes to the Simcoe Muskoka board's exemption policies.

"I am opposed to the public funding of the Roman Catholic separate school system because it is a social disgrace and an economic disaster," said Patterson, whose group's analysis of government financial figures claim it costs almost \$1.5 billion in extra taxpayer dollars each year to maintain the separate school system.

According to CRIPE's website, the organization is composed of citizens of differing backgrounds living in more than 155 communities across Ontario, who are committed to one strong public education system, "which offers neither privilege nor prejudice to anyone."

Years ago, Patterson's group carried out an opinion poll that seems to support its purpose as "advocates for civil rights in public education so that the public is informed about the issue of publicly-funded Roman Catholic separate schools."

The province-wide poll determined that 79% of 7,551 respondents favoured one public school system. Regionally, the poll, which doesn't list a margin of error, found 48 Orillia residents favoured a oneboard system with four opting to stay with the status quo. In Barrie, 77 voted for just one system with nine voting against.

At the heart of the matter remains the exemption issue that traces its roots back to 1984 when then-premier Bill Davis's government extended full funding to Roman Catholic secondary schools. Up until then, funding had been provided up to Grade 10. But with the added funding came "open-access legislation" to Catholic schools for non-Catholic students.

The Education Act allows students of all faiths to attend Catholic schools, provided they also take religion courses. But parents can write to the relevant school board to ask their child be exempted from "any program or course of study in religious education."

"The exemption provisions really mean that a Roman Catholic high school can become a duplicate of the public high school," Patterson said.

"So why put over \$1 billion a year extra into supporting a duplicate system. It should mean the end of public funding for Roman Catholic schools."

Daly, meanwhile, said he's not worried at all about the future of Ontario's Catholic school system and the need it serves.

"Each day, I see the goodness, success and vitality of publicly funded Catholic schools throughout Ontario," he said. "Catholic schools have been an integral part of the fabric of Ontario's society for more than 170 years.

"As a result of the professionalism and Christian witness of its teachers and other staff, Catholic schools provide academic and co-curricular excellence."

Daly said Ontario's 2.3 million Catholic school supporters and the parents of children of other faiths who attend its secondary schools appreciate and prefer the distinctiveness of Catholic education.

"We do not see this strong preference changing," he said. "Our Catholic Schools are committed to educating young people to become socially responsible citizens who contribute to their communities and serving others.

"The structure of publicly funded education in Ontario and the Christcentred Catholic schools that are such an integral part of it are cause for celebration, and are to be strengthened."