

Regional News

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But education critic points to British Columbia's public education model as proof Tory plan can work

By: Teresa Latchford

The math just doesn't add up when it comes to funding faith-based schools, according to one university professor.

Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's plan to take \$400 million and put it toward funding faith-based schools means other services will have to be slashed or taxes will have to rise to meet the financial demands of such a scheme, York University political science professor James Laxer told The Era-Banner last week.

"John Tory is claiming he will do this without raising taxes or taking money from other major priorities in the budget," Mr. Laxer added.

"All I have to say is, 'good luck'. This kind of cheerful math just doesn't work out."

The PC leader let loose a lion leading into the election campaign, proposing to invite faith-based schools into the publicly funded education system. His proposal quickly became the hot election topic.

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"His strategy is to appeal to groups of people he can win over by appealing to different cultural groups," Mr. Laxer said.

"If this proposal should occur, there will be many faith-based schools cropping up across the region and the educational system will suffer tremendously," Thornhill Liberal candidate Mario Racco said.

If elected, the Conservatives would begin a process to implement the transition of 53,000 students into the public fold, which is estimated to come with a price tag of \$400 million, Newmarket-Aurora PC candidate and education critic Frank Klees said.

But that doesn't mean it's a done deal. The plan would need extensive consultation and research, he said.

A committee would be appointed to study the feasibility of the proposal, Mr. Klees said, adding this group would consider the impact on the education system.

The committee would take 18 months to research the idea and make recommendations on practical issues, including administration, curriculum standards and testing and determine how many faith-based schools would opt in, since joining the public system is not mandatory.

The funding formula would remain on a per-pupil basis, Mr. Klees said.

Proposals will then be presented to the legislature, Mr. Klees said, adding this would be a major policy change.

To determine implications on school boards, it must be determined how schools are overseen.

The premise is school boards — in our case, York Region District and York Catholic District — would oversee the faith-based schools, along with their current schools or those schools would report directly to the Education Ministry, as is the case in British Columbia, he said.

The western province has been providing funding for religious, as well as independent schools, for close to three decades.

There are conditions in B.C. set out for schools looking to receive funding: schools can't teach racial or ethnic superiority or intolerance of other religions and the B.C. curriculum must be delivered. There are 360 independent schools in the province but only 19 have opted to follow the rules and receive public funding.

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Declining enrolment should not be an issue, Mr. Klees said, judging by the models studied in six other provinces showing minimal decline when funding these schools.

According to B.C.'s education ministry, enrolment in its public schools declined by more than 50,000 over 10 years, while independent school enrolment increased by just more than 11,000 students over the same period.

Furthermore, Mr. Klees said, having some students enrol in faith-based schools could even assist in high growth areas of York Region, such as Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill, where populations are booming.

"Look at all the portables mushrooming up over the region," Mr. Klees said.

"The faith-based schools could help absorb some of those students."

But when it comes to portables, he is only half right.

Mr. Klees' observation is true in the case of the Catholic school board where the number of portables has increased from 249 in 2003 to 300 in 2007.

Data from the ministry indicates many Catholic secondary and elementary schools in highly populated areas are operating above capacity such as St. Justin Martyr in Unionville, which is operating at 154 per cent, while St. Angela Merici in Woodbridge operates at 143 per cent.

However, numbers provided by York's public board show a decline in elementary school portables from 337 in 2003 to 307 in 2007. Of its 156 elementary schools, 64 have portables.

Both York boards have anticipated the growth of the region and have created long-term strategies to accommodate more students via additions and new construction projects.

As far as Mr. Laxer is concerned, if schools in York Region are operating at or above capacity, it would make better sense to expand existing public and Catholic systems.

"It makes more sense to focus on our existing school system that is working now. I'm not saying we still don't have more to do but we have accomplished a lot so far," Newmarket-Aurora Liberal candidate Christina Bisanz said.

Despite B.C. ministry statistics on the issue, enrolment evidence is still not strong enough since every demographic in Canada is unique, Mr. Laxer argues, warning the PC party's claims there will be little or no decline in enrolment is an unknown factor.

It's hard to predict the impact the plan would have on enrolment numbers in public schools.

“This might not attract more parents to send their children to faith-based schools and, then again, it may be enough to get them to leave their current school.

“There could very well be a large impact.”

Going ahead with the scheme will likely erode the public school system, Mr. Laxer warned.

If, for instance, thousands of students moved into faith-based schools, it would drive a wedge between cultures, Mr. Laxer said.

“Diversity is the hallmark of Canada,” he added.

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“I would hate to see our diversity break down and putting people in separate boxes and compartments is putting that in danger.”

The faith-based funding issue has hijacked the real education issues politicians should be discussing, Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario president David Clegg said.

“For our federation, the real issue is the gap (\$711 per pupil) between elementary and high school student funding,” he said.

“This investment doesn’t address the issues currently of concern to us.”

If a substantial amount of money is to be spent on the education system, it should be earmarked to put a librarian in every school, add more guidance counsellors and reduce class sizes of junior and intermediate sectors, Mr. Clegg said.