

Minister says price tag for plan is \$100M higher than PC leader promises

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John Tory is campaigning on the slogan that "Leadership Matters," but the Progressive Conservative leader's handling of the religious schools funding issue demonstrates he's not up to the challenge of governing Ontario, says Liberal Health Minister George Smitherman.

The plan to extend public funding to religious schools "might be born out of a nice emotion or something, but it's not a well thought-through policy," Smitherman said. "And it certainly doesn't meet the test of `Leadership Matters.'"

He made the comments yesterday while campaigning for re-election in the heart of his downtown riding of Toronto Centre-Rosedale.

Smitherman's jabs came at the end of a week when Tory floated the possibility that creationism might be taught alongside the theory of evolution in publicly funded religious schools.

The Liberal minister also said the price tag for such a move is far higher than Tory has suggested.

Funding for private religious school students will cost at least \$500 million – \$100 million more than Conservatives are promising, he said.

Furthermore, the Conservative plan would divert \$500 million from a public system that serves 2 million students, in order to accommodate 53,000 students attending private religious schools, Smitherman charged. The Liberal emphasis, he said, is to "focus on the core responsibilities of the Ontario government."

"We don't think it's right to divert the attention from the core responsibilities for those 2 million kids in Ontario, in favour of a policy which encourages people to divide up on religious and ethno-cultural grounds," he said.

Outside urban areas, Smitherman added, the potential danger of the Tory plan is just as great.

"In rural Ontario, small schools hang on by their fingertips to remain open because of low student counts," he says. "Imagine the challenge associated with ... some of those kids peeling away?"