

Faith and education mix promises firestorm

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In Ontario, few things are more fraught with emotion than education. Many voters have children. Even more have gone to school. Everyone has an opinion.

The only topic more loaded with passion is religion. Religion awakens dark fears and stirs long-buried social memories, particularly when it is married – as it often is in Ontario – to ethnic or national origin. Combine religion with education and you have a firestorm. That is what this provincial election campaign promises to deliver.

It is a firestorm deliberately kindled by Conservative Leader John Tory. In a bold effort to appeal to Greater Toronto's growing, non-Christian, immigrant population, Tory is vowing to publicly fund all religious schools.

And in a move that is equally and uncharacteristically bold, Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty is taking a firm position against.

So far, the New Democrats are doing their best to stay out of the way. The party's official position, according to a spokesperson, is that the NDP supports the status quo (that is, it sides with McGuinty) but wants more money spent on schools (that is, it doesn't side with McGuinty).

But as the campaign progresses towards its Oct. 10 finish, NDP Leader Howard Hampton may not have the luxury of staying silent. Already, the language is heating up – both from politicians and interest groups.

"If you want the kind of Ontario where we invite children of different faiths to leave the publicly funded system and become sequestered and segregated in their own private schools, then ... vote for Mr. Tory," McGuinty said recently. "If ... it's important that we continue to bring our kids together, so that they grow together and learn from one another, then you should vote for me."

Strong words. And they were soon blasted by advocates of expanded religious funding. The Canadian Jewish Congress called the premier's remarks "hurtful."

All of this comes at a time when the mixing of religion and education has taken on chilling overtones. No one publicly suggests Tory wants to fund Taliban-style

madrassas, the hard-line Islamist schools that turn out suicide bombers. And indeed he is not. Under his scheme, religious schools funded by public money would adhere to common curricula and use accredited teachers.

But you can be sure that images of madrassas, stonings and public beheadings – no matter how unjustified – are lurking in the post 9/11 public mind, just as they were two years ago when a group of Muslim clerics tried, unsuccessfully, to set up arbitration panels using sharia law.

In addition, a good many Ontarians feel that it is simply wrong to divide up the public education system on the basis of faith – that in a province as heterogeneous as 21st century Ontario it is crucial that the children of all backgrounds have some opportunity to connect.

Some of the fiercest critics of mixing religion with education are those who left their countries of origin to escape the control of religious figures.

"As long as we are viewed as living in ethnic ghettos where supposedly the community cleric calls the political shots, integration is hampered, not facilitated," Muslim activists Tarek Fatah and Salma Siddiqui wrote recently in the Star.

Education has always been a divisive issue in Ontario. Conflicts between Catholics and Protestants were so stark in the mid-19th century that Canada's Confederation bargain had to include specific clauses on religious schools. Under that 1867 compromise, Ontario would fund Catholic elementary schools while Quebec would fund Protestant ones.

In 1984, all parties quietly agreed to a scheme by then Conservative premier Bill Davis to expand separate school funding. But the voters chose to disagree and, in 1985, punished the Tories by denying Davis's successor, Frank Miller, a majority of seats in the Legislature.

In 2003, the Conservatives under Ernie Eves – this time in an effort to woo elements of the party's Christian right wing – promised tax breaks for those who sent their children to private schools. But that promise was buried when McGuinty's Liberals came to power.

So now we are back at it. For all parties, the issue is as difficult as ever. At some level, both the Conservatives and the Liberals are going against the historical grain. The Liberals, who have long prided themselves as supporters of minority rights, now risk sounding unfair to immigrant communities. The Conservatives, who unnerved portions

of their base with Davis's 1984 decision on separate school funding, risk repeating history.

Meanwhile, the elephant in the room remains Catholic schools. Advocates of the Tory approach ask why the public should fund Catholic schools but not, say, Zoroastrian ones. Among those who oppose Tory's scheme, only the Greens have taken the logical step of calling for an end to Catholic funding.

But don't expect any of the major parties to be talking about this option as the rancorous school debate unfolds. Unless they are forced to.