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Some pastors, imams and rabbis are embracing John Tory's promise to fund faith-based schools from tax revenues. But old truths are being conveniently forgotten and some key questions are going unasked.

There is no question that the funding of only Catholic schools is inequitable. This funding was founded on a 19th century constitutional provision that by the 1980s had long been a historical anomaly. Better, many Ontarians believe, that this provision was not in force; better yet that the decision to extend that funding past Grade 10 had not been made. But it was and we're stuck with it, and some leaders of other faiths have been gnashing their teeth ever since.

Understandably, they want their children to learn the history, ritual and culture that makes them different from members of other faith groups. But they wish to do this in classrooms unaffected by the influence of those faith groups or the practices of the secular system. And they want to do this at public expense. That, goes the argument, is what the Catholics have.

But what Catholics have is different from what the Tory proposal will provide. A Catholic school is catholic in the broader sense – it is multi-ethnic, multi-racial, culturally and economically diverse. Faith-based, yes, but large enough and broadly enough constituted that in every other way it mirrors the culturally diverse Ontario community. This is not likely to be the case with much smaller faiths or those with a far more homogeneous demographic. Their classrooms would mirror themselves and that self-absorption threatens the assumptions of an inclusive civil society.

That being said, there is still an undeniable inequity that makes many of us uncomfortable. The Conservative proposal would deal with that inequity, but in doing so would place at risk the great Ontario achievement of pluralistic public education, turning it into merely another commodity to be bartered in the political marketplace. The proposal is playing well among some religious special interest groups. Happily, polls tell us that the vast majority of Ontario voters understand that it is far better to endure the present unfairness than to suffer the threat to social cohesiveness implicit in a faith-based school system.

Such a system would narrow the bounds of the inclusive society and the discourse that keeps it healthy. Where, if not in the public classroom, will Muslim and Jew and Hindu and Christian and Sikh, white and coloured and native meet and greet each other? And where else can each other's cultural and religious practices be understood other than in the give and take of learning and playing together?

Some faith leaders have been upset at this charge that faith-based schools weaken social cohesion, and it is true that the graduates of many such schools have made great contributions to Ontario. But it is also true that faith-based schools are inherently based on separation, and that not all faith-based schools are alike.

Public funding of some of these schools would only increase the number of children out of touch with the cultural diversity outside their classrooms. This is especially the case with some fundamentalist faith groups, which in whole or in part reject the values of the larger society. In a system that funds those schools, the best hope will be for a lack of understanding of the other, and the toxic worst is always a possibility – that those who are different and unseen will be perceived as different and dangerous.

Once the door is opened further to faith-based schools, difficult questions arise. What is a "faith"? Who decides what is acceptable in the faith component of a mixed curriculum? How could a fundamentalist religious school allow the secular curriculum on which our notion of a civil society stands to coexist with faith positions diametrically opposed to that notion?

How will the government ensure not only compliance with the secular curriculum, but guarantee that the faith-based curriculum will not regularly subvert it? How to ensure, for example, that Darwin's theory of evolution taught in the publicly approved curriculum will not be followed by lessons in intelligent design in the faith-based curriculum? If governments choose to fund faith-based schools, they will have to deal with these issues, which should not be their concern but are properly the business of faith groups themselves.

And to those who want to send their children to a faith-based school because of eroding academic standards in the public system, the case can surely be made for investing in our public schools the hundreds of millions of dollars that a faith-based system would cost. Public school excellence is a powerful antidote to this motive for privatization.

That John Tory should look for votes wherever he can is not surprising, though in this case, his political judgment seems question-able.

What is surprising and troubling is the rush to the Tory proposal by some religious leaders who have forgotten that the status quo, though not entirely equitable, is contributing to the greater good. If they looked over their shoulders, they would see many of their congregants heading in the opposite direction.