

WATERLOO REGION (Jul 25, 2007)

For six years, Cathy Stemeroff got up early to get one or both of her children into a shared taxi to the Hamilton Hebrew Academy.

In the afternoon, she and a few other families carpooled to get them home to Waterloo Region.

It was a huge commitment of time and money -- \$7,000 a year per child for tuition alone. But it was worth it to give her kids a grounding in their faith and culture, the Kitchener woman said.

Although at 15 and 20, her children are now too old for the elementary school, Stemeroff likes the Progressive Conservatives' promise to extend public funding to faith-based schools other than Catholic ones.

"As with the Catholics, why not the Jews, the Muslims and whatever else?" she asked.

Conservative Leader John Tory recently released more details of his oft-stated plan to fund faith-based schools.

Although details have yet to be worked out -- former premier Bill Davis is heading a commission to do just that -- the idea isn't to just hand money to private schools or families.

To join the public system, faith-based schools would have to follow the provincial curriculum, administer standardized tests and hire accredited teachers, said Kitchener-Waterloo Conservative MPP Elizabeth Witmer.

There are no changes envisioned for the Catholic school system or the French-language systems, she added.

The plan sounded good to Khalid Khokhar, principal of the Islamic School of Cambridge and treasurer of the Multi-Faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Faith-Based Schools.

His school already follows the provincial curriculum, administers standardized tests and hires certified teachers in all areas except religion, said Khokhar, adding many other religious schools do much the same thing.

"I agree with following the rules that are established," he said. "There should be a transparent system in faith-based education."

Funding schools such as his would only be fair, Khokhar said.

Fairness isn't just about religion, said Maureen Gorloff of Waterloo. Her daughter Stacey, 12, who has some hearing and learning disabilities, goes to Laurentian Hills Christian School.

When Stacey went to a Catholic school, she had access to a system allowing teachers to broadcast their voices directly into Stacey's hearing aid.

But when Gorloff put her daughter in a private school in part because she needed to be in a smaller class, she lost access to the expensive device.

Luckily, a Rotary Club that heard about Stacey's plight bought her an FM system of her own.

But Gorloff said it's appalling that even though her taxes go into the public education system, her daughter can't benefit.

"Catholic, public, private or home-schooled, every child should have the ability to have the required tools to be educated," she said.

Doug Thomas, treasurer of the secular humanist Society of Ontario Freethinkers, agreed there is a fairness issue.

But to him, the solution isn't to publicly fund all religious schools.

The reason Catholics got their own system was to make things fair for them, said Thomas, a teacher at Elmira District Secondary School.

In the 1800s, what eventually evolved into the public school system, was essentially a Protestant school system, Thomas said.

"So when Confederation happened, there was an attempt to balance things, to make it fair for Roman Catholics."

The result now is that Catholics get special treatment, he said.

"Our concept of how to address that would not be to make the problem worse by creating more religious schools but to solve the problem by removing the Roman Catholic system."

James McCormack, president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Waterloo Region, said his organization supports Ontario's current four systems.

CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT

Catholic schools are special because their right to exist is enshrined in the Constitution, McCormack said.

"But I don't accept the idea that anyone else should now be able to have their own school system. . . .

"Our legal system and our society say you can have those schools (of other religions), but you have to pay for them because they don't represent the multicultural aspect of our society."

Thomas said in his experience, many students coming in from private schools go through an adjustment period when they enter a public school.

"Children are raised in a school where they are not exposed to a wide range of ideas and as a result you get people who have misconceptions about other people and you have, I think, a fragmented society."

Khokhar disagreed.

"I think we have the greatest example of the Catholic system -- it hasn't split the society," he said.

Witmer argued bringing faith-based schools under the public umbrella will actually bring together students of different backgrounds more often.

Catholic and public school students often come together for events such as science fairs, drama festivals and track meets. If schools of other religions were brought into the public system, they could do the same, she said.

For Catherine Fife, a public school trustee running against Witmer as a New Democrat, the main problem with the Conservative idea is one of dollars.

\$400 MILLION MORE A YEAR

Tory has said extending funding to non-Catholic faith-based schools will cost an additional \$400 million a year.

"I'd like to see Mr. Tory talk about where the money is coming from," Fife said.

"We don't have enough money right now in the public education system. Any attempts to move outside that envelope will reduce public funding for public schools."

But Witmer said her party's first priority is to "strengthen the public school system as it exists today."

If elected, a Tory government would spend \$800 million more on education in the first year and \$2.4 billion more by 2011-12, she said.

Catholic trustee and provincial Liberal candidate Louise Ervin echoed Fife's funding concerns. She also urged caution about rushing into change.

The Tories want pilot projects by 2008-09 and provincewide implementation by 2010, Witmer said. Judy Greenwood-Speers of the Green Party, who is running against Ervin, Fife and Witmer, couldn't be reached for comment.

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