



SEPARATING PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ORGANIZED RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

FREEDOM PARTY OF ONTARIO 2011 ELECTION PLANK

In recent months, Ontario has faced a number of different issues relating to religion in our public schools. Dalton McGuinty's Liberals and Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservatives have refused to get involved, even though public schools fall exclusively within the jurisdiction of the Ontario legislature. The range of examples is broad, but includes the following:

1. Distribution of Religious Texts by Public Schools

In November of 2010, public school trustees in Waterloo voted to continue the 65 year practice of allowing public schools to distribute the Gideons' "Little Red Answer Book" to grade 5 students. A letter at the beginning of the book tells the student to "read prayerfully...Pray before you read and afterwards... Ask God to open your mind to understand His Word. Ask Him to reveal to you Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord."

In January of 2011, it was reported that a Muslim leader in Kitchener had applied to have Waterloo's

public schools distribute the Qur'an to grade 5 students. The distribution of the Gideon "Little Red Answer Book" was cited as precedent for his request.

Growth in the number of religious texts that would be distributed in our public schools led to public debate. However, Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty refused to get involved, saying "I'm not going to weigh in on that, other than to say that I encourage the representatives of the school board there to make sure they give this careful consideration, listen to the population."

In June, the Waterloo public school board reversed its decision. It will no longer distribute any religious texts in Waterloo's public schools. However, the practice of distributing religious texts to grade 5 students continues in numerous other Ontario public school board jurisdictions. In 2010, the Gideons' Little Red Answer Book was distributed through public schools in other jurisdictions, including Hamilton, Toronto, Grimsby, Newmarket and Orangeville.

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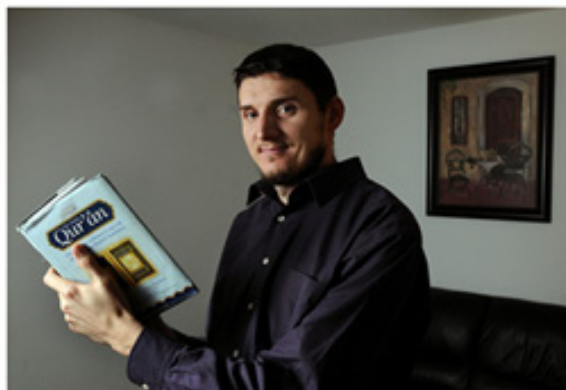
McGuinty won't say if OK to give bibles to public school kids



Little Red Answer Book: Premier Dalton McGuinty won't offer a public opinion on whether Gideons International should be able to distribute its Little Red Answer Book to public school students. Robert Wilson/Record staff file photo Source: Record staff file photo

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Muslim leader hopes free copies of Qur'an sent home with students fosters understanding



Muslim holy book: Mirsad Kaplani, executive director of the Kitchener masjid (mosque), holds a copy of the Qur'an at his Waterloo home. David Bebee/Waterloo Region Record Source: Waterloo Region Record

2. Religious Worship in Public Schools

In July, 2011, it was reported that at least one Ontario school board (the Toronto District School Board) has been allowing public schools in Toronto to be used as places of worship, during school hours. Over the last three years, a weekly Islamic religious service has been held at Valley Park Middle School - a public school in Toronto - on Fridays during the school year. The service is held in the school's cafeteria after lunch, during class, for 30 to 40 minutes. A local Imam comes into the school each Friday to lead the service, which involves approximately 400 students. The female students are required to pray behind the male students. A line of desks has been seen, in one media photograph, to separate the sexes. Menstruating girls are required to pray behind the non-menstruating girls.



Toronto Star photo. Desks separate boys (front) from girls. Menstruating girls are required to sit in a third row at the back.

On July 6, 2011, Toronto Imam Steven Rockwell defended organized prayer in public schools, telling the John Oakley Show (AM640, Toronto) that:

Imam Rockwell: "I feel that the Hindu community, the Jewish community, the Christian community owes Islam an incalculable debt for putting religion back in schools".

Oakley: "...Other faith groups are feeling somehow they're kept out of the equation. Why are you getting special dispensation here?"

Imam Rockwell: "I don't think we're getting special dispensation. If the other religions

are lack or slack in practicing their religious principles, or the dogma, the ethics: that is not our problem. We are simply asking: once a week, once a week."

Oakley: "Well how can the Christians assert that? That ship has sailed already. I mean, the Lord's Prayer's been taken out..."

Imam Rockwell: "Yes, that ship has sailed, and the Christians lost the battle to the secularists."

Oakley: "Oh. So what you're saying is that you're fighting the battle for all, and to reintroduce religion...It's sort of the spearhead back, introducing - reintroducing - religion, in this case Islam, into the public school system, into the public sphere."

On July 16, 2011's episode of Global Television's Ontario politics program "Focus Ontario", host Leslie Roberts spoke with Imam Rockwell about the issue. Imam Rockwell's responses were, again, illuminating:

Roberts: "Would you like to see [an Islamic religious service like the one at Valley Park Middle School] in every school, yes or no?"

Imam Rockwell: "Wherever it's practical."

During the show, the panelists got rather peeved with one another and engaged in ad hominem attacks. With respect to that tone, Roberts continued:

Roberts: "...I hope that, going forward, we can have a less passionate - is the word I'll use - discussion, because this is something that isn't going to go away, as [co-host] John [Tory] knows, he lived this a few years ago."

Imam Rockwell: "It gets bigger. It's gonna get bigger."

Roberts: "Alright. And we'll, no doubt, talk about it again."

Imam Rockwell: "The number of Muslims in this country is exploding exponentially."

Despite the fact that the seriousness of the issue is likewise growing exponentially, the Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty is taking a hands-off approach to the issue. A July 19, 2011 Canadian Press report quoted Dalton McGuinty as saying:

“I count on school boards to work in consultation with their school communities, talking to parents in particular, to strike the kinds of accommodation that they think are reasonable and supportable.... So when it comes to faith matters, I have faith in the school boards, I have faith in the schools themselves, to make judgments they think are appropriate in their circumstances.”



Dalton McGuinty says school boards should decide how to accommodate prayer

Oakville, Ont.— The Canadian Press
Published Tuesday, Jul. 19, 2011 6:26PM EDT

3. Teaching in Arabic

The Islamic holy book, the Qur'an, is written in Arabic. In Windsor, Ontario, the public school board is allowing some schools to teach students in Arabic for the first three years of their public school education, skirting laws requiring public school students to be taught in English or French.

4. Religious Menus in Public School Cafeterias

The parents of Hindu children in Toronto are also expressing concern that the school refuses to serve meat that is not prepared in accordance with Islamic law (i.e., that is not “Halal”). Many Hindus consider the consumption of Halal meat to be contrary to their religious beliefs.

Similar Events in Other Provinces

In other parts of Canada, growing requests for religious accommodation foreshadow similar requests that are sure to be made in Ontario in the near future. For example, in February of 2011, the Winnipeg Free Press reported that a dozen Muslim families were demanding that their children be excused from compulsory co-ed gym and music courses in Winnipeg public elementary schools. They demanded that girls and boys have separate gym classes even at the elementary school level. They were “adamant” that they did not want their children “exposed to singing or playing musical instruments”, because, they claimed, it is “not part of the cultural reality”.

Not Limited to Toronto: Province-wide Religion Policy

On April 6, 2009, the McGuinty government's education minister at that time, Kathleen Wynne, issued a document titled “Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy”. In it, Wynne wrote:

“I believe it is critical for us to articulate an equity and inclusive education strategy for Ontario schools. Embracing diversity and moving *beyond tolerance* to acceptance and respect will help us reach our goal of making Ontario's education system the most inclusive in the world.” (*emphasis added*).

By moving “beyond tolerance” toward “acceptance and respect” of all cultures and cultural norms, the Liberals' education minister paved the way for a mandate requiring all cultural practices to be treated as acceptable and respectable in Ontario society, even if those practices in fact run contrary to Ontario's respect for the ethical and political superiority of values such as democracy, individual freedom, and the equal rights of every individual independently of their sex, genetic make-up, or sexual orientation.

Pursuant to the Minister's strategy document, on June 24, 2009, the McGuinty government's Ministry of Education released Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119. The memorandum required all public school boards to adopt a religious accommodation

policy by the beginning of the 2010 school year. Implementation of the requirements set out in the memorandum was supported by the Ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy document.

The Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC) is "a non-profit corporation jointly owned by all School Boards in Ontario whose mission is to provide outstanding services to all Boards at a reasonable cost." In March of 2010, the OESC released "template documents for policy and procedural guidelines which will meet the requirements the Ministry of Education Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy 2009 to address the needs of diverse classrooms across the province." Among the documents is a template for Ontario's public school boards to use in order to have a Religious Accommodation policy compliant with Ontario's Human Rights Code and the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy 2009. The template states, in part:

"Board schools will make reasonable efforts to accommodate individuals' requirement for daily prayer by providing an appropriate location within the building for students and staff to participate in prayer."

"Breakfast and lunch programs in both secondary and elementary schools will consider relevant dietary restrictions in their menu planning."

"Board schools will reasonably accommodate students with regard to religious attire. Religious attire is not cultural dress; it is a requirement of religious observation. Religious attire that should be reasonably accommodated in Board schools includes, but is not limited to: Head covers: Yarmulkes, turbans, Rastafarian headdress, hijabs; Crucifixes, Stars of David, etc.; Items of ceremonial dress."

"The Board will seek to reasonably accommodate students where there is a demonstrated conflict between a specific class or curriculum and a religious requirement or observance."

In short, the issue of merging organized religious practice into our public schools is not peculiar to the Toronto District School Board, and it did not start with the Toronto District School Board. The merger of religion and public schooling that we are now seeing has been facilitated and required by the McGuinty government. The McGuinty government's Ministry of Education now requires all public school boards across the province to accommodate religion in our public schools, and the OESC has handed our school boards a religious accommodation policy to which they need merely add the name of their board, and adopt the policy as their own. The policy favours the sorts of controversial and divisive religious accommodations that have sprung up in the news in recent months.

Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservatives Now Planning to Offer Religious Schools Within the Public School System

Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservatives - the official opposition in the Ontario Legislature - did not oppose the Liberal government's 2009 religious accommodation mandate.

In the election of 2007, Ontario's Progressive Conservatives went down to defeat because they proposed that private religious schools be given taxpayer funding. On November 1, 2007, weeks after the party's electoral defeat, the Canadian Press reported that:

"Progressive Conservative MPP Tim Hudak says his party shouldn't give up on trying to financially help families who send their children to private religious schools."

Hudak, who represents Niagara West-Glanbrook, said the faith-based funding policy of leader John Tory was not the best approach."

Since that time, Hudak has continued to say that he looks forward to working with the Progressive Conservative caucus on a different approach: creating choices within the already-existing public school system. Although Hudak has kept that plan out of his party's election platform, and although he tries

never to talk about it with the media, Hudak is on the record as wanting to change the public school system so that some of our public schools are turned into religious schools...taxpayer funded, religious schools that are part of the public school system.



Religious school funding issue not over: Conservative MPP

| Last Updated: Thursday, November 1, 2007 | 8:32 AM ET The Canadian Press

Progressive Conservative MPP Tim Hudak says his party shouldn't give up on trying to financially help families who send their children to private religious schools.

Hudak, who represents Niagara West-Glanbrook, said the faith-based funding policy of leader John Tory was not the best approach.

Specifically, during his 2009 bid for the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party leadership, Conservative blogger Stephen Taylor interviewed Tim Hudak about his stand on various issues, including religion in taxpayer funded schools:

Taylor: “Do you think Ontario went down a road when it was moving toward - at least, under the Conservatives - vouchers for private schools and faith based schools? Do you think that’s a path that Ontario should not go down again, at least under the next few years?”

Hudak: “Well, you know, I’ve always been a supporter of parental choice in education. I believe that parents make the best choice for their children. That’s why I supported, for example, the tax credit we had for independent schools. But, very clearly, in the 2007 election, voters rendered a clear verdict that they didn’t support the party’s policy of [private] faith-based schools support. And, as leader of the Ontario PC party, I won’t be opening that door again. It has been closed by the voters.

I will look forward to working with our - just to finish Stephen - I’ll look forward to working with our grass roots policy process and the members of our party who are involved and the PC caucus colleagues, to look for ways to innovate and create competition and choice,

but within our public school system. I think that’s where the debate should be focused.”

In short, a Tim Hudak Progressive Conservative government would give parents the choice of sending their children to a religious school that is part of the public school system, funded fully by taxpayers.

In a report titled “Ontario Tories on Muslim prayer in schools: it’s not for politicians to decide”, Progressive Conservative MPP Elizabeth Witmer told the Canadian Press that the issue of Islamic services in Ontario public schools “...is an issue that the Toronto board needs to deal with.” Given Hudak’s stand on religion in public schools, the Progressive Conservatives’ hands-off, do-nothing response is not surprising: the PCs are allowing school boards to pave the way to the opening of religious schools within our public school system.



Ontario Tories on Muslim prayer in schools: it’s not for politicians to decide

ROMINA MAURINO

Toronto— The Canadian Press

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Freedom Party’s Stand: Pro-Democracy, Anti-Theocracy

Whatever the strengths or failings of our laws at present - as they relate to the issue of religious worship or religious indoctrination in our public schools - it is both wrong and dangerous to allow our public schools to be used, by any religion, as places of worship or religious indoctrination.

Canada is a democracy, which means we oppose any decidedly anti-democratic system, such as theocracy. Being democratic, we are committed to the belief that our government gets its authority only from the people it governs, not from anyone’s god. We are committed to the idea that government serves

only the people it governs, not anyone's god. We are committed to the idea that our laws are crafted by human beings who look at problems and come up with suitable responses. We do not subscribe to the view that our laws should be dictated by one religious text or another.

We in the west have access to a long and global history. We know how individuals have been treated for failing to obey God's alleged will in a theocracy. We know about the wars, the beheadings and other murders, the assaults, the imprisonments, the stonings, the tortures, and the expropriations that result from such things as being raped, being gay, dressing wrongly, being irreverent, daring to question the existence or alleged will of God, or opening ones retail store on the Sabbath Day.

Despite our knowledge of that history, democracy is as fragile as it is precious because it is a belief, not a physical object. To keep the belief alive and strong over time, our government must ever conduct itself in ways that promote democracy, and reject theocracy (and other anti-democratic systems). To defend our belief in democracy, we limit the term of our legislators and hold elections as reminders that government is a servant of the people, not of anyone's alleged god. In contrast, when we allow our public schools to be used as places of worship, or when we extend tax funding to religious schools, we are nurturing an opposing belief: that government and its property is in the service of a god. We are promoting a belief that there's nothing wrong with theocracy, that maybe we're not democratic after all, and that democracy is merely different from theocracy, not better than theocracy. And, in so failing to promote and defend democracy, we are indeed legitimizing the violations of life, liberty, and property that are carried out in the name of God and religion in theocratic countries.

If non-believers and holders of a wide and conflicting variety of religious beliefs are to live in peace and harmony in Ontario, democracy must be defended, promoted, and cherished. To nurture and defend our reverence for democracy, we must not allow our public schools to be used - by any religion - as places of worship or religious indoctrination. We must not allow them to accommodate religious policies or practices that run contrary to the defence and nurturing of respect for democracy and freedom.

A Freedom government will ensure that our public schools are places of science and reason; places where our children learn how to think and choose rationally and independently; places that promote respect for democracy and freedom. In particular:

(a) A Freedom government will prohibit the distribution, in or by Ontario's public schools, of religious texts or other religious materials, to students.

(b) A Freedom government will prohibit public schools from providing or designating prayer rooms or locations (to the extent it is practical, students will be free to pray without disturbing or leaving classes). Organized religious worship, religious services, or religious outreach programs will not be permitted in public schools;

(c) A Freedom government will require students in our public schools to be taught classes only in the official languages of Canada: English or French. Alleged "pilot" projects that skirt that requirement will not be permitted.

(d) A Freedom government will bar religious considerations from a public school or public school board's policies and procedures regarding cafeterias, food, or kitchens, while ensuring that a wide variety of healthy foods are available for consumption;

(e) A Freedom government will prohibit religion-based exemptions of students from mandatory classes (e.g., music in elementary school), and religion-based segregation of students in classes (e.g., segregating boys from girls in elementary school gym);

(f) A Freedom government will prohibit students, teachers, staff, and volunteers from wearing burqas (full body and face covering) or niqābs (face coverings) on public school property or at public school functions. Hijabs (headscarves) that do not include a niqāb (face covering) will not be prohibited.

(g) Overall aim / umbrella provision: A Freedom government will prohibit any other religious accommodation policies in our public schools

that would undermine respect for democracy and freedom, or that would accommodate, promote, or normalize racism, sexism, or discrimination based upon sexual orientation;

(h) A Freedom government will require public schools to explain that democracy is right, good and pro-freedom, and that theocracy is wrong, bad and anti-freedom.

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