

## Alternative Approaches to Public Education

### Introduction

While the controversial sexual education component of Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum was withdrawn for re-examination in April due to many parents' negative reaction to the content, numerous parents – in Ontario and other provinces – remain concerned about curriculum development, changes in the public schools and the effect that public education will have on their children. This concern is also echoed in a recent Quebec court case between a government subsidized private Catholic school and Quebec's Ministry of Education. The school fought for the right to teach a provincially mandated ethics course from a Catholic perspective.<sup>1</sup> Even though the Quebec Superior Court stated that the Quebec Ministry of Education violated the school's freedom of religion, guaranteed by the provincial charter of rights, the question of provincial control and influence over curriculum continues as the Quebec government has appealed the decision.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying these cases is the parental concern that children will be taught values in schools that contradict those they aim to instill at home and the apprehension of provincial governments that religious values bias an otherwise non-religious public education. Exclusion of religious perspectives in the classroom by government reveals the assumption that "public" or "secular" means "non-religious," a bias that fails "to pass the legal, practical or logical tests once we recognize that the public sphere is made up of religious and non-religious citizens," argued Iain T. Benson in a recent article in the *Ottawa Citizen*.<sup>3</sup> An inclusive public education should therefore include religious perspectives, just as it aims to incorporate the perspectives of other recognized minority groups, or else it fails to reflect the many facets of the public sphere.

While these issues continue to be debated, the immediate concern remains that the values and perspectives taught in public schools increasingly fail to reflect or accommodate the religious and spiritual perspective of children within the public school system. The following is a brief discussion paper that considers four educational alternatives to public schooling, including options that both depart from and remain within the public school system.

### Homeschooling

Homeschooling is a recognized method of tailoring a child's education to his or her personal, social, and spiritual needs. Homeschooling is generally permitted in Canada, though parents must comply with provincial administrative requirements or risk investigation by their Ministry of Education. Education is a provincial government responsibility in Canada, and therefore each province's education legislation outlines the procedures for homeschooling. Visit your province's Ministry of Education website for specifics.

An example of the provincial provision for homeschooling is Ontario's Education Act which maintains in section 21(2), clause (a) that "a person is excused from attendance at school" if the student is receiving "satisfactory instruction at home."<sup>4</sup> According to the Ontario Ministry of Education website, parents are required to notify their school board in writing of their intent to home school their children, providing the name, gender, and date of birth of each child who is receiving home schooling, and the telephone number and address of the home.<sup>5</sup> Within the provisions of Ontario's Education Act parents may individualize their children's curriculum as long as standard educational requirements are being met. Many resources are available for parental use, including curriculum support material provided by the Ministry of Education free of charge at [www.edu.gov.on.ca](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca).

Alberta's education system provides similar support of homeschooling families through the *Home Education Regulation* that clarifies the responsibility of local school boards to support parents in designing education programs for their children. Furthermore, the *Home Education Regulation* reasserts parental flexibility in designing their children's educational programs, and provides methods and tools to parents so they can evaluate the performance their home-schooled children.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from provincial provisions for homeschoolers, the Home School Legal Defence Association of Canada, an EFC affiliate, provides information regarding starting home school programs, and offers curriculum resources as well as personal and legal support. Visit their website at [www.hslda.ca](http://www.hslda.ca).

## Private School

Another alternative to public schooling is to enrol children in a private school. Private schools are generally funded by non-governmental sources, including tuition fees and donations. There are a plethora of established private Christian schools across the country, and the curriculum may vary widely depending on each school's denominational affiliation, provincial requirements, etc. Various online sites provide listings of Christian schools according to location. Visit the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (<http://www.oacs.org>), the Prairie Association of Christian Schools (<http://www.paocs.ca/index.htm>), or the Society of Christian Schools in BC (<http://www.scsbc.ca/AboutUs.html>) for listings of private Christian schools in those areas.

Additionally, under the Ontario Education Act, Catholic schools are publically funded, and many will accept non-Catholics if the families are seeking alternative education for faith reasons. Catholic schools provide faith-based education, and in the case on Ontario, do not require additional tuition, thus providing an economical alternative. Contact the Catholic School Board in your area for more information about sending a child to a Catholic school.

## Public School: Opting Out

For parents who want their children to remain within the public school system but whose religious beliefs are in conflict with the perspective or content of a particular course, in some provinces the parent (or student over the age of 18) has the right to have the student "opt out" of the class. For example, in a 2008 letter then Minister of Education in Ontario Kathleen Wynne states:

Should a component of any course conflict with a religious belief held by a parent or a student aged 18 or older, the right to withdraw from that component of the course shall be granted on the written request of the parent or student.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Alberta passed Bill 44 in 2009 that makes provision for students to be withdrawn from class if a parent objects to the course content.<sup>8</sup> The bill, which came into effect September 2010, amends the *Human Rights Act* to include "sexual orientation" as prohibited grounds for discrimination, but it requires that parents be advised when children are being taught about religion, sexuality or sexual orientation.<sup>9</sup> If parents oppose the material presented, their children may be excused.

The right to withdraw from or "opt out" of a class recognizes religious values and presents an appreciated effort to accommodate these beliefs. It is, however, an imperfect solution that may not be in compliance with the goals of inclusive education as outlined by some provinces' education and school acts.<sup>10</sup> Student withdrawal from the classroom has been recognized by the Ontario Court of Appeal in the *Zylberberg v. Ontario* decision as an unsatisfactory means of accommodation.<sup>11</sup> Excusing children from the classroom may expose them to ridicule, exclusion, and discrimination, contrary to the goals of inclusion initiatives. According to Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, school boards will "implement strategies to identify and remove discriminatory

barriers that limit engagement by students, parents, and the community.”<sup>12</sup> Under this provision, withdrawal fails to adequately accommodate different perspectives into the classroom and therefore limits the engagement of the students.

However, “opting out” does offer a temporary solution and draws attention to the need for provincial governments to provide an educational environment that “[helps] students to connect their learning to their own life experience and spiritual understanding.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Public School Alternative Programs**

While provincial school and education acts do not allow religion to be the basis of a charter school, several acts can enable the public system to create alternative programs that incorporate a faith perspective if the program meets the province’s curricular requirements.<sup>14</sup> Under the Alberta School Act, section 21, the province provides for alternative programs “emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter” or “uses a particular teaching philosophy.”<sup>15</sup> The board may offer alternative programs based on the demands and needs of the community as long as it still offers the regular educational program for those who might not choose the alternative.<sup>16</sup> An alternative program is not a special or religious education program offered by a separate school board, and therefore still must comply with provincial curriculum standards. But the program can provide additional options and curriculum resource material to meet the needs of the students.<sup>17</sup>

Former superintendent of the Edmonton Public Schools Emery Dodsall took advantage of this important legal distinction and established Logos, a charter school within the public system that offers an alternative Christian faith based education to those who choose to attend while fulfilling Alberta’s curriculum requirements. Logos is one of 29 program choices that the Edmonton School District offers, all of which are publically funded and grow according to the community demands. Due to parental and student demand, Logos has expanded into eight separate locations and has also incorporated two private Christian schools into the public system.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the wide range of educational options in the Edmonton School District, 41% percent of elementary school students, 48% percent of junior high and 58% of high school students attend alternative programs other than their otherwise designated schools.<sup>19</sup> The alternative streams range from athletic to aboriginal programs, from liberal arts to science focused. A few alternatives even feature a home education correspondence program that allows students to carry out schooling from home with the supervision and support of district teachers.<sup>20</sup> Other alternatives include a dance program, French immersion, and a soccer academy for highly motivated athletes to provide a supportive learning environment in a flexible timetable to accommodate travelling. Additionally, the Nellie McClung Girls Junior High Program is an alternative for girls that includes a women’s studies component and emphasizes experiential learning, leadership development, and independence in young women.<sup>21</sup>

Ontario’s Education Act also provides for alternative programs under Statute 171.7 which grants school boards the authority to establish different “kinds” of schools, and a number of Ontario school boards have already implemented alternative program streams.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, in consultation with the Ontario Association of Public School Boards, the president of the Edmonton Logos Society, and principals of schools with alternative programs from Alberta and Ontario, various parent groups have developed viable proposals for both Judeo-Christian and “Traditional Values” education alternative programs.<sup>23</sup> The alternative programs would supplement required courses with supplementary material that presents additional perspectives. For example, within the Judeo-Christian program alternative, a social science lesson discussing the origin of the human species would discuss theories of Darwinism and Creationism, and the scientific evidence that supports both. The Traditional Educational Values Program, which seeks to present the perspectives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, would present a similar discussion in conversation with the tenets of these three faiths, examining areas of convergence and divergence.<sup>24</sup>

Research by Harvard University's Caroline Hoxby suggests that offering parents and students program choices through public education alternatives reduces costs for the school board, improves student performance, and reduces the demand for private education.<sup>25</sup> The alternative educational programming that has been developed in Edmonton and is being developed in Ontario school districts offers viable educational alternative that accommodates religious perspectives in conjunction with other minority perspectives. Parents and students are given the ability to choose the students' education based on their particular needs and backgrounds, and thus are offered an "opt in" rather than an "opt out" of the public schools.

## Conclusion

With the debate continuing in regard to curriculum change in public schools and the concerns it provokes, it is important to be aware of educational options within and outside the public school system. There are a number of resources available through either The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada or its affiliates that can help you to identify rights and responsibilities within the educational system. Also, contact your local school board to discover ways to get involved and help shape the policy in schools.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> "Quebec to appeal ethics course exemption," CBC. June 21, 2010.

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/ottawa/story/2010/06/21/loyola-ethics-course.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Iain T. Benson. "Why 'public' should not mean 'atheist,'" *Ottawa Citizen*. 16 September 2010. Available: <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/public+should+mean+atheist/3531980/story.html#ixzz0zhM0NDQs> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ontario *Education Act*, section 21(2), a. <http://www.canadalegal.com/gosite.asp?s=1789>; Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 131, Homeschooling.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/131.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 131, Homeschooling.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/131.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Government of Alberta Education website. <http://education.alberta.ca/parents/choice/homeeducation.aspx> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from the Ontario Minister of Education, Kathleen Wynne. April 17, 2008. [http://files.efc-canada.net/si/Education/Letter\\_from\\_OME\\_2008\\_re\\_Accomm.pdf](http://files.efc-canada.net/si/Education/Letter_from_OME_2008_re_Accomm.pdf) (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Ken Dickerson, "Bill 44: Alberta Government's Human Rights Amendments Spark Religious Controversy, but Leave Free Speech Untouched," *Centre for Constitutional Studies* (April 29, 2009). Available at <http://www.law.ualberta.ca/centres/ccs/news/?id=264> (accessed September 23, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "An Open Letter to the Ontario Ministry of Education in Regard to Health and Physical Education Curriculum." EFC, September 10, 2010. <http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Page.aspx?pid=7123> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. Ontario Ministry of Education. 2009. 21.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf> (accessed September 23 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Standards of Practice in the Teaching Profession, Ontario College of Teachers. Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Emery Dosdall, "Edmonton's Enterprise," *The School Administrator*. No.5, Vol. 58. May 2001. 5-11.

<sup>15</sup> Government of Alberta Education website. <http://education.alberta.ca/parents/choice.aspx> (accessed September 20, 2010).

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<sup>16</sup> Alberta *School Act*, section 21(2).

[http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=s03.cfm&leg\\_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779733941](http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=s03.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779733941) (accessed September 23, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Emery Dossall, "Edmonton's Enterprise," *The School Administrator*. No.5, Vol. 58. May 2001. 5-11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ontario *Education Act*, statute 171 (1). <http://www.canadalegal.com/gosite.asp?s=1789> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> For more information, visit P.A.C.E., Public for Alternative Community Education: a project proposal developed by the Hamilton-Wentworth Family Action Council, at

[http://www.hamiltonfamilyaction.org/Education/PACE/PACE\\_Index.htm](http://www.hamiltonfamilyaction.org/Education/PACE/PACE_Index.htm). Also visit their affiliated website

P.E.A.C.E. News at <http://peacehamilton.org/index.php>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "The Difference that Choice Makes," *Economics Focus, Economist*. January 27, 2001.