

An Historical Understanding of Key Issues Related to Catholic Education

March 2009



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Our Catholic School Heritage

1. How long have Catholic separate schools been educating Catholic children and contributing to the public good in Ontario?

For about 170 years. In the early 1800s there were separate schools in many cities, towns and townships. In Peel, three separate schools opened before Confederation (1867): St. James in Malton in the 1830s, St. John's Agricultural College (1861) and St. Patrick's (1861), both in Wildfield.

2. Has the Ontario government always supported separate schools?

Yes, as did its predecessor, the United Legislature of Canada East (now Quebec) and Canada West (now Ontario) during its total life from 1841 to 1867. One of the first pieces of legislation it passed in 1841 was the *Common School Act*, with a separate school clause.

3. Why did the United Legislature of Canada East and Canada West keep improving separate school legislation?

It responded to Catholic parents, trustees, bishops and priests, editors of the four Catholic newspapers, members of the business and professional world, all of whom argued for legal and financial rights for separate schools.

4. Was there opposition to separate schools before Confederation?

Yes, as now, there were advocates of one school system. Protestant spokespersons believed in the adequacy of the common (now public) school's basic non-denominational Christianity, which constituted an important element of the common school's religion lessons and their readers. They held that beliefs specific to certain religions should be taught in the churches and homes.

5. Why did Catholics find the non-denominational religious education of the common school unsatisfactory?

Catholics wanted separate schools where all the beliefs of the Catholic Church would be taught, where the pupils would live their faith in a sacramental and community manner in proximity to the parish church and priest, and where religion would permeate the reading, literature and history curriculum. Furthermore, as modern times arrived, the

multiculturalism of the public school's student body necessitated the eradication of the teaching of Christianity.

6. *What sacrifices did Catholics have to make to send their children to separate schools?*

Because the United Legislature of Canada East and Canada West roughly had consisted of members advocating non-denominational common schools and half were in favour of them, separate school legislation, for about fifteen years, contained three obstacles to their existence:

- (a) Catholics could establish and support a separate school, but had to continue paying common school taxes. Thus, they paid tuition for their children in the separate school;
- (b) The separate school had no permanence of existence. If the local common school board hired a Catholic as one of its teachers, then the separate school ceased to exist. Separate schools kept opening and closing in the early years;
- (c) In the cities the separate school board required the permission of the common school board to open a new or an additional separate school. Sometimes the permission was not forthcoming.
- (d) The legislation required the Educator to be

9. *What guarantee for separate schools does the Canadian Constitution still contain?*

early in the twentieth century the government passed legislation which forbade a separate school board from offering education beyond grade ten if its boundaries fell partially or fully within the boundaries of a high school district. Thus, all but one separate school board (in Dublin) lost their ability to receive tax or government grant financing beyond grade ten. Furthermore, if a separate school board chose to continue operating grades nine and ten, it received only elementary school grants for them.

13. How did Catholic high schools survive?

Catholic parents and students paid tuition after grade ten. Parental groups raised money from draws, lotteries and school events. Parish priests contributed money from their Sunday collections. Many separate school boards, including Dufferin-Peel, opened intermediate-division (i.e. grades seven-to-ten) schools. With the vital assistance of the religious teaching Orders (which taught in and administered grades eleven to thirteen for little or nothing), the diocese continued to operate private Catholic high schools and opened new ones. In fact, Philip Pocock, the Archbishop of Toronto, decided in 1971 to open one new Catholic high in the archdiocese every year until the government approved tax and grant funding for grades eleven to thirteen.

14. How was the Catholic high school issue resolved?

In 1984, Premier William Davis, edified by the commitment to Catholic high schools of the Catholic community and convinced of the injustice of truncated separate schools, announced that the government would be completing the separate school system to the end of high school. The Supreme Court of Canada unanimously responded to a court challenge against the ensuing legislation by asserting that separate schools before Confederation were operating secondary school education with funding from taxes and government grants and, therefore, section 93(1) of the Canadian Constitution guaranteed the right of separate school boards to administer from junior kindergarten to the end of high school. After almost sixty years of financial sacrifice by the Catholic community, Catholic high schools once more became an equal partner in Ontario's publicly funded school system.

15. Catholic separate schools had a second obstacle to their survival. How serious a problem for separate school boards was the corporation tax issue?

This was very serious. As corporations like the Ford Motor Co., Inco, the Royal Bank of Canada and thousands of others came on the scene, and as public utilities like the Ontario Hydro and the Canadian National Railway were created, they could not pay separate school property taxes. Thus the assessment of urban public school boards became wealthier and wealthier, while separate school boards received taxes from only Catholic home and property owners and from fully or partially owned small businesses. By the 1920s urban separate school boards were operating with about one-quarter to

one-fifth of the revenues of their urban public schools boards. There were no compensatory government grants

district school boards were cr

Final Words

The history of Catholic schools in Ontario since 1841 is one of dedication and perseverance in the face of financial hardship and adversity. Due to the commitment of the religious teaching Orders, the bishops and priests, the teachers, parents, and students, our forebears have handed to us a great gift – a fully funded public Catholic school system.

The courts of Ontario and Canada have reinforced the rights of the Catholic school system with a number of judgments which affirmed the rights of separate school boards to:

- (a) have their guaranteed powers in the *Separate School Act* of 1863 improved,
- (b) receive equitable funding,
- (c) prefer Catholics when hiring elementary and secondary school teachers,
- (d) have their own buildings,
- (e) have an exclusive Catholic school community.

The integration of religious truths and values with life is one of the most significant elements that distinguish the Catholic school from other schools. This is a matter of crucial importance today in view of contemporary trends and pressures to compartmentalize life and learning and to isolate the religious dimension of existence from other areas of human life. The courts have recognized, over the years, that Catholic education is not a subject but rather a way to view the world that speaks to the interrelationship between faith, knowledge and action. The Catholic school is a unique setting within which this ideal can be realized in the lives of Catholic children and young people. In our Catholic schools this reality can and is lived out.