

# Ontario study recommends merging Catholic and public school systems

It isn't just polls that show more than half of Ontarians wish there were no publicly funded Catholic schools.

There are organized campaigns to get rid of Catholic boards. Lawsuits are being prepared that will argue publicly funded Catholic education violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And now serious academics are making the case for putting the kibosh on Catholic education.

Two Western University professors – one in the faculty of law and the other in the department of management and organizational studies – have made the case for merging Catholic and public school systems in Ontario.

"I'm not an old Protestant Orange person with prejudice toward Catholics, and neither is my co-author. We're both university professors," law professor Sam Trosow told Canadian Catholic News.

Trosow's co-author Bill Irwin holds a PhD in education and specializes in the issue of school closures. Together they wrote "It's time to merge Ontario's two school systems" for the well-regarded online policy journal *The Conversation*.

Since Quebec and Newfoundland ceased funding for Catholic education in the 1990s, only three provinces remain that give public funding and official status to Catholic school boards. In each of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario there are concerted lobbies trying to defund the Catholic systems.

Trosow and Irwin argue that if Premier Doug Ford's new Progressive Conservative government wants to find savings, freezing the \$100 million school repair fund – as the Conservatives did within weeks of taking office – is only going to make the eventual repair bill worse.

Whereas eliminating Catholic school boards and their administrations could save between \$1.269 billion and \$1.594 billion a year.

"They keep throwing this number out and I really don't understand how they arrive at that. It's very frustrating," said Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association president Beverly Eckensweiler.

"The way it is funded is per pupil. Every little butt in the classroom in the chair is how we're funded. So, with that comes the number of teachers you need, transportation and all that. So tell me how that is going to save money?"

Whether the students are all enrolled in one big board or in four separate boards (English Catholic, English public, French Catholic and French public) it all amounts to exactly the same number of students and exactly the same total of per-student grants, said Eckensweiler.

Vast duplication of administrations and costs between Catholic and public boards is mostly a fantasy, she said. Boards throughout the province pool their resources for purchasing supplies, co-ordinate on bus routes so the same bus picks up both public school and Catholic kids along their routes and all 72 boards participate in the provincewide Ontario Education Services Corporation, which sources software, training and other services.



**Beverly Eckensweiler, president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association**

“Where they’re talking about they will save all this money is beyond me,” Eckensweiler said.

The numbers in Trosow and Irwin’s article come from a 2012 study for the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods, a coalition of neighbourhood associations across Ontario.

But worries over the survival of Catholic education may not end with a couple of professors in London, Ont. This summer an IPSOS poll found 56 per cent of Ontarians were in favour of merging public and Catholic systems and only 26 per cent in favour of the system as it stands. It’s a result consistent with polls going back more than a decade.

So far less than a third of those polled (30 per cent) think merging the school systems is an important or urgent issue.

But popular opinion isn’t going to stampede the Catholic system into trying to change people’s minds, Eckensweiler said.

"I know it's always been a struggle to keep Catholic education, but we will continue to struggle and we will continue to fight for it," she said. "We have a lot of organizations and people who want Catholic education. Maybe we don't hear from them as much as we hear those other voices."

Those other voices include a candidate running for the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board.

Eric Renaud, a 27-year-old graduate of Windsor's Catholic schools, is running on the idea that ratepayers and the government will save money if public and Catholic systems merge.

"Let's be honest – the PC government is looking for cost savings," Renaud told the *Windsor Star*. "And this is the best way of giving them that without affecting front-line services."

Against the likes of Renaud, Eckensweiler holds up 2.3 million Catholic ratepayers who have registered as Catholic school supporters. The OCSTA's big worry is that there are even more Catholics out there who think they're Catholic school supporters, but who aren't.

Ontario's system for registering voters and municipal property taxpayers registers everyone as public school supporters unless they fill out a form to tell the government they're separate school supporters.

The number of registered Catholic supporters determines the number of trustees that sit on Catholic boards. Eckensweiler wishes parishes and schools did more to urge Catholics to go to [voterlookup.ca](http://voterlookup.ca) and check their status.

Because the 1984 extension of full funding for Catholic high schools turned on a constitutional challenge, most Ontario Catholics believe their education rights enjoy the iron-clad protection of Canada's Constitution.

But Trosow argues eliminating education rights from the constitution is no big deal. It was done in both Quebec and Newfoundland. All it requires is a resolution calling for the change in the provincial legislature, followed by a corresponding vote by federal law makers in Ottawa.

Twenty years ago, Newfoundland went to the extra trouble of holding two referenda on consolidating its complex web of seven different education systems.

Father Winston Rye remembers the fight to save Catholic education in Newfoundland from his days as principal of Gonzaga High School in St. John's in the 1990s. What Catholics lost was something more profound than catechism lessons in school, said Rye.

"There is a religious, Catholic, moral milieu that is part of a Catholic school," he said in an e-mail.

Ontario Catholics may soon find themselves fighting for their education rights in court. An organization called OPEN has raised almost \$70,000 to support a legal challenge to Catholic education rights.

Their test case is a Hamilton Wentworth District School Board teacher named Adrienne Havercroft who claims she was harmed by Catholic school board hiring policies requiring teachers to be Catholic.

Trosow warns Catholics that, "The public is further ahead on this than the politicians are and a majority of people would be interested in doing it."

The majority doesn't scare Eckensweiler.

"Just because we're not out there shouting doesn't mean we're not fighting for it," she said. "Catholic education has always fought for what we believe in."