

# What's really behind push to eliminate publicly funded Catholic education?

In late October, the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta launched a campaign with a benign-sounding name: "Together for Students." Its stated goal is to close the Catholic separate school system in Alberta (as well as all private schools) and consolidate all education under a single public system.

This is not the first time there has been a push to end Catholic schools in Canada. As we shall see, ever since the multicultural project of instituting separate schools began, there have been efforts to stop that project – efforts often tainted by racist and colonialist overtones.

But, for now, it is worth mentioning that the website for this initiative was released just in time for Catholic Education Sunday, on Nov. 4 this year. This is when the dioceses of Alberta and Northwest Territories celebrate the work of Catholic schools, which educate one-fourth of all children in Alberta.

Why does the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta want to close them down? Are they failing their students?

The data irrefutably says otherwise.

Whether you are looking at the rates of high school completion, performance on diploma exams, or parental involvement, the statistics consistently show that Alberta's Catholic school districts are performing higher than the provincial average:

- [Edmonton Catholic – Three Year Education Plan – Summary](#)
- [Calgary Catholic – Three Year Education Plan – Summary](#)

Alberta Catholic schools are clearly doing an excellent job teaching and supporting students, and this support begins even before kindergarten in the case of Edmonton Catholic Schools, which offer the groundbreaking and well-funded [100 Voices](#) program based on the best research on early childhood development. From pre-K to the end of high school, students in Catholic schools flourish.

You wouldn't know this from the [Together for Students](#) website, which curiously claims that "We thought choice among school systems would improve educational outcomes, but it hasn't." What this is supposed to mean is a bit mystifying.

Alberta has had Catholic schools for longer than it has existed as a province (Edmonton Catholic School District just celebrated its 130th birthday), and

Alberta's students consistently have some of the highest test scores, especially in math and science, [in the world](#).

Even when there is a dip in performance, as with math results in Calgary, Catholic schools in the exact same area have often shown themselves immune to this and [continued to produce high test scores](#). As it happens, there was a lot to celebrate on Catholic Education Sunday.

## Why do Catholic schools see so much success in Alberta?

Senator Paula Simons, despite her misinformed attacks on Catholic education in other contexts, has admitted, based on her own experience as a parent who has sent her child to a Catholic school, that [Catholic schools have a different ethos than their public counterparts](#). As any teacher can tell you (and I say this as an elementary teacher myself), the ethos of a school makes all the difference for how everyone in it performs.

In the case of Catholic schools, we know what the source of that ethos is. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Catholic Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, pronounced that Catholic schools should have "a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity" in order "to help youth grow."

The reason such an atmosphere is so beneficial for young people is obvious. In a world of increasing loneliness and depression, Catholic doctrine teaches that each person is infinitely loved by God and has inherent dignity and value. In a world where we recognize the importance of a healthy sense of body positivity, St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* teaches that the human body is holy and sacramental.

And, in a world where positive role models for young people are so important, the models for Catholic educators are figures like St. John Bosco, who developed a method of pedagogy based on making students feel loved and accepted and thus preventing misbehaviour rather than punishing it; like Pope Francis, himself a former teacher and a model of kindness towards others, especially towards children; and like Jesus Himself, who not only called children to Himself, but called on His followers to be like children.

This is to say nothing of the fact that Catholic Social Teaching, with its declarations about taking care of the poor and of the planet, is something young Albertans would benefit much from learning about. This is a school ethos with a lot to offer to our province and to our children.

So why does a movement called Together for Students want to close an institution which does so much for its students?

## The reason seems to be less “for students” as much as it is “for money.”

“Our province funds more educational systems and boards than any other province in Canada,” its website laments, and we need to curb “costs.” Student success is not worth spending the extra money on, it would seem. (This is in spite of the fact that [research done into the financial effects of merging school districts](#) suggests that it might not save any money and in some cases is actually more expensive.)

But the real objection to the Catholic schools is the same as it has always been in Canada. First, many people who want to close Catholic schools do so because of a commitment to an American-style idea of “separation of church and state.” Second, and more importantly, proponents of a single system want a single system so that all Albertans can be assimilated into a single culture (the Public School Boards’ Association uses the word “community”) and be taught the same (usually secular) values.



**Egerton Ryerson**

Egerton Ryerson, the father of the “common school” system in Upper Canada, resisted Catholic schools for just this reason: he wanted generic Protestant values (but not religious doctrines) taught to all students so that they would grow up to be loyal and productive members of the British Empire. (Proponents of “separation of church and state” in education should remember that public schools themselves were explicitly founded to teach specific religious values). Catholic schools represented a threat to [that] hegemony.

Ryerson feared that Catholic children would not be integrated into the new Canadian society, and he openly expressed his belief that “the fewer of these separate schools, the better.”

What is important to note is that Ryerson was also an intellectual architect of the residential school system.

[His report on industrial schools](#), which recommended that First Nations people be inculcated with certain religious sentiments and taught how to farm, was used as the framework for residential schools.

Ryerson’s rationale in that report is the same as in his opposition to Catholic schools: First Nations people needed to be homogenized into the rest of society and taught the appropriate values and technical skills to be good citizens of the Empire.

Since then, opposition to separate schools has often taken on the same imperialist pallor as the residential schools.

In Manitoba, for example, during its own Catholic schools controversy, D’Alton McCarthy, a politician who vehemently opposed Catholic schools, said the purpose of having a single public school was “to take up our French Canadians and make them British,” which has the same ring as the residential school agenda to “kill the Indian in the child.”

McCarthy was often in league with the bigoted and anti-French Equal Rights Party, which also had a benign-sounding name and complained about the “unfair privileges” of Catholic schools.



Sir Charles Tupper, former prime minister

Canada, and Alberta, were founded on better principles than this. Instead, a truly multicultural alternative was found in allowing for the existence of separate Catholic schools which taught a slightly different worldview than the “mixed” or public schools.

This solution went back to Ryerson, who grudgingly ended up allowing for Catholic schools (though he expected them to quickly die out) after experiencing push back from figures like Bishop Armand-Francois-Marie de Charbonnel of Toronto. Charbonnel had insisted that Catholics deserved to educate their children in schools that had a Catholic ethos.

French Catholics were not the only ones insisting on separate schools: D’Arcy McGee represented the Irish Catholic community, which was equally afraid of being assimilated into the American “melting pot” and would only join Confederation if it meant their rights to their schools would be protected.

For this reason, Prime Minister Charles Tupper said that, if not for Section 93 of the 1867 *British North America Act*, which gave constitutional protection to separate schools, “there would have been no confederation.”

Nor, perhaps, would there have been an *Alberta Act*, which recognizes school rights in Section 17.

Alberta’s Catholic schools are a part of our Canadian multicultural project, one of the most successful examples of this in the world, which is perhaps why separate schools continue to be protected by Section 29 of the [1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#).

To abolish Catholic schools would be to choose to be more like the American cultural model, which, given today’s political climate, should perhaps give us pause.

The Public School Boards’ Association confidently points out that Quebec abolished separate schools, and suggests that Alberta should follow its lead.

Quebec also recently announced a ban on all public displays of religious symbols, just as last year it banned the niqab. Does that seem like a healthy trajectory? Is it the model of intercultural relations we want to follow? Is that the kind of society we want to be?

We should also be skeptical of seeming concessions to Catholics. The Public School Boards’ Association suggests, following Edmonton trustee Michael Janz, that public schools could offer religious programming. These kind of “compromises” have been made before, as when the Manitoba government (including an attorney general who openly called any religious teaching in schools “rank tyranny”) closed Catholic schools but allowed some schools to have a half-hour

of French and religious instruction at the end of the day.

The Pope himself issued an encyclical in 1897 saying that this inadequate effort to appease Catholics was unacceptable.

Similarly, in our own Albertan history, Father Hippolyte Leduc wrote a book called *Hostility Unmasked* about how the government of Western Canada may have officially recognized Catholic schools, but were actually doing everything they could to undermine them, such as passing legislation that underhandedly stripped nuns (some with 30 years of classroom experience) of their ability to teach.

## **Catholics have learned to be suspicious of these kinds of offers, as all Albertans should be.**

For Bishop Charbonnel and McGee, this was a religious liberty issue: Catholics had the right to give their children a Catholic education. Catholic education continues to be an issue of religious liberty, as it was in their day. Magisterial documents like *Gravissimum educationis*, as well as canon law, are clear: the Church teaches that Catholic schools must be ecclesial schools, not just schools with “faith-based programming.”

Depriving Catholics of these schools is an attack on their freedom to obey their consciences. (*Note that the argument cannot even be made that abolishing separate schools would still leave Catholics free to set up their own private schools, since the Public School Boards' Association wants to abolish private schools as well.*)

But haven't times changed, as the Public School Boards' Association suggests? Why are Catholics the only denomination that get their own separate schools? Aren't there many other religious groups in our province, especially with so many changes in demographics because of factors like immigration?

Yes, indeed, and the evidence suggests that [religious minorities in Canada often send their children Catholic separate schools](#) because they give an outlet for them to teach some key tenets of their traditional religions and cultures which may not be found in other school environments (for example, teachings on the existence of God or sexual morality).

This is why the Alberta Council on Religious Liberty, which represents a spectrum of different religious communities, supports the continued existence of separate schools. The demographics are different, but the question is the same as it was in 1867, 1897, and 1982:

“Are we going to be a truly multicultural society, or are we going to

be an imperialistic one that forces religious minorities into the dominant worldviews?"

The Gospel reading for Catholic Education Sunday had Jesus explaining that the most important commandment is to love God with all your heart and mind, and the runner-up is to love your neighbour as yourself.

This is the ethos of Catholic schools, and it has borne the fruit of consistent student success. It is the blueprint for a more loving and a more just world, one where, instead of hegemony being imposed, diversity is allowed to flourish.

A multicultural society has more than enough room for that ethos

*-Brett Fawcett is a teacher and columnist. He has degrees in theology and education and is the winner of the 2018 Lieutenant Governor's Award for Excellence in Social Studies Education.*

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This article was updated on Nov. 8 to correct the name of the author of *Hostility Unmasked*.