



**Merging the Public and Catholic School Boards
into One Unified School Board**

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MERGING THE CATHOLIC AND PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

A CHANGE LONG OVERDUE

INTRODUCTION

Ontario is the most diverse province in a nation home to people who speak more than one hundred different languages and identify with over two hundred different ethnicities. This includes Toronto, a city where over half of the population is composed of immigrants, making it the most diverse city in the world. Ontario was the first jurisdiction in the world to recognize same-sex marriage and was the first province in Canada to legalize gay marriage, which contributed to the remaining Canadian provinces to follow suit.

With such a colourful history in supporting progressive values and social equality, it is no surprise that the casual observer is generally shocked to learn that Ontario is the only province in Canada that publicly funds Catholic school boards (as well as one Protestant school board). These are the only minority faiths to have a separate education system that is publicly funded. This is appalling in light of the fact that Ontario recently slashed funding for public schools, teachers' compensation, nurses' compensation, and hospitals without significantly reallocating resources to these important areas from the Catholic School Board system, which is draining between \$1.2 billion and \$1.6 billion each year. By discussing the following, this paper will demonstrate the reasons for which it is necessary to unify the Catholic School Board with the public one.

1. The history behind having a Catholic School System, and consequently, why it is based on antiquated ideals
2. The alternatives to having two concurrently operating school boards
3. The projected cost savings from a merger
4. The political implications of a merger
5. The possible constitutional issues associated with a merger

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE CATHOLIC SYSTEM AND THE RELEVANT MODERN ISSUES

In 1841, before Canada became a nation, an act was passed in Upper Canada (present day Ontario), which allowed the establishment of denominational schools. In effect, this meant the creation of a set of Catholic schools in the area. The growth of these schools was driven by the fear of proselytization by the Protestant majority in the public school system – the Catholic community was afraid that the non-sectarian Christianity promoted by the largely Protestant-administered public school system was little more than a “Protestant education” in disguise. Consequently, they separated into their own school system and rallied ardently for its protection in order to preserve their culture and faith. By the time the BNA Act was signed in 1867, Catholic lobbyists managed to entrench publicly funded Catholic education rights. As time passed, the separate Catholic education system grew into a series of school boards, and many Catholic Canadians came to view the ability to get a religious education for themselves and their children as a right.

Although Catholic opposition to eliminating their school board is understandable, the historical reasons for creating and maintaining the board are not relevant anymore. Protecting the Catholic religion from being influenced by Protestants is not a concern in today’s society. The current public school system is entirely secular, and therefore, does not pose the threat of teaching denominational values to Catholic students. Moreover, in a society where there is a strong presence of people from different ethnic backgrounds, the idea of a school board for Catholic education has gone from being an institution to protect minority rights to one with special rights. This is because Catholic school boards have the power to rally for religious values in a secular government system. However, the separation of the church from the state is critical. This can be illustrated by the 2011 Anti-Bullying legislation. The Liberal government under Dalton McGuinty created a bill, which, among other things, allowed members of the LGBTQ community to create student groups. The Catholic school board condemned this action and went as far as to argue that their freedom of religion was being infringed by forcing them to allow LGBTQ groups to exist. Not only does the Catholic system favour one religious denomination at the expense of others, but it also blurs the separation of the church from the state by having public funding and political influence.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE CURRENT SYSTEM

There are two possible courses of action that can be pursued in order to put all minorities on a fair playing field regarding the education system:

1. The creation of separate, publicly funded school boards for every religion in the province

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2. A merger between the Catholic and Public school boards creating one unified secular system

The first response is impractical. It is likely to be expensive and lead to an increase in demands based on religious grounds. The associated bureaucracy would slow down the system, and require a myriad of new legislation.

The second response is the one proposed by our policy. It is cost-effective and makes the school system far more efficient and accessible to the average student.

A unified secular system offers opportunities for equality in religious education. When the two school systems are merged, we will have the ability to add optional credits of a religious nature, including many of the credits currently offered by the Catholic school system, to the pool of electives from which students can currently choose. The courses would be made available in the same way that all other courses are made available in high school: by demand. If a teacher can be found and enough students are interested, the same school could be teaching classes that vary from a world religions course to a course on a particular religion. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador adopted a similar system in 1998.

This proposal has many advantages. Many proponents of religious education argue that in order to be truly in touch with your faith, it must be prominent in all parts of your daily life, and for a child, an integral part of daily life is school. Under the merged school boards, the government would be allowing more students to connect with their faith on a deeper level and would consequently be better serving its citizens. Furthermore, if students take classes that do not relate to their own faith or that offer a broad overview of several different religions, they are likely to grow up without religious prejudices and with a more holistic knowledge of the world. It is then clear that offering equitable religious education can lead to the creation of an even more open and accepting society than with what is currently available in Ontario. Of course, these benefits cannot be realized if we continue to endorse a policy of religious segregation in schools. It is difficult to justify the introduction of various faith-oriented credits in a secular school system when there is another publicly funded religious school system operating within the same jurisdictions. It is time to adapt to the current state of affairs and recognize the need to have one unified school board.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MERGER

A paper published in March 2012 by the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario Inc. outlines significant potential savings from a merger of the two school systems. These largely result from the elimination of governance grants for some school boards; the amalgamation of French school boards; a reduction in under-utilization of school facilities, the

combination of student transportation resources; savings in capital programs; and economy of scale savings.

The elimination of governance grants for the 29 Anglophone Catholic District School Boards (CDSBs) would result in savings of approximately \$165 million. These CDSBs would be merged with their public counterparts and no longer require the grants. The number is based on funding for the 2011-2012 school year.

Most French Language school board facilities are used considerably less than their English counterparts, with some boards having utilization rates as low as 35%. There is sufficient excess capacity in the French Language school boards to allow for the reduction of the number of school boards from 12 to 8. Eliminating the four boards with the lowest use would result in savings of about \$28 million; however, this number can vary depending on the school boards that are amalgamated and the process by which they are amalgamated.

Not all schools facilities in Ontario are operating at capacity. Most elementary facilities are operating at around 83.6% capacity, and most secondary facilities at 89.4%. Upon merging the two school boards and consolidating students, the use of these facilities would be expected to increase to 90% at the elementary school level and 95% at the secondary level. This would result in an estimated annual savings of \$170 million from reductions in the School Operations Allocation and the School Renewal Allocation.

Due to the duplicate school systems that are in place right now, a duplicate transportation system has also been established to support it. By combining these services and reducing the distance travelled by each student, it is projected that up to \$169 million can be saved annually.

Furthermore, by merging the two school systems, many excess facilities can be declared surplus and sold. These savings are difficult to calculate, but would generate substantial lump sum savings that are enough to cover the costs of such a merger. There is also expected to be a 20% reduction in capital costs, because fewer administrative buildings will be required. This would save \$239 million annually.

Finally, the school board merger would result in savings from several other grant areas, such as the Pupil Foundation Grant and the Language Grant. The six largest grant areas are valued at \$16 billion, and economies of scale should provide savings in these areas. Even if we were to estimate (conservatively) a 3% to 5% reduction in costs, the savings would be between \$488 million and \$813 million annually; however, they could be much higher.

Overall, estimated savings would total between \$1.37 billion and 1.6 billion. To put this in perspective, the recent legislation of teacher contracts is estimated to have saved the

government \$250 million in 2012-2013 and is expected to save \$540 million in 2013-2014. There are also projections of \$1.1 billion in one-time savings from the elimination of banked sick days; however, many agree that this figure will never be fully realized. The elimination of the Catholic school system would have replicated these savings *in one year*. In light of the recent strike action by elementary school teachers and the teachers' refusal to hold extra-curricular activities, partially due to a lack of funds, the provincial government has a responsibility to take action on this substantial cost cutting measure, which will continue to prove beneficial in the future.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MERGER

Many politicians realize the significant amount of savings that would occur if the two school boards were merged. The reason that there is yet to be any action on this issue, then, is a lack of political will. This proposal can be viewed as contentious because of the fear that such a decision will be labelled as anti-Catholic. Although it would be logical to consider the potential loss in voter support, especially support from those in the Catholic community, the potential benefits of this policy suggests that there is reason to believe that many more will support the change. The current fiscal climate requires drastic cost cutting measures, and if the benefits are properly highlighted, including those to the Catholic community, voters who may initially oppose such a move would be more likely to understand its necessity.

Since John Tory's defeat in the 2007 general provincial election, following his campaign promise to publicly-fund all religious schools, politicians have been afraid to approach this issue. Now, however, with polls indicating that around 60% of Ontario residents support a unified public education system,) this option seems more politically feasible. In Quebec, Catholics comprised 83% of the population when the Catholic education system there was eliminated, and in Newfoundland, that number was 37%. In Ontario, less than 34% of the population identify as Catholic, another indicator that this proposal could be embraced by the public, and prove to be an asset to the platform if, and when, a general election is held.

A unified school system can also improve Ontario's image on the international stage. A 2006 United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) report condemned Ontario for the existence of Catholic schools as it discriminates on religious grounds. The elimination of such a system is likely to win praise on an international scale.

CONSTITUTION ISSUES RELATED TO THE MERGER

The Catholic Church has argued that section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 provides complete protection for Catholic schools in Ontario. That being said, Section 43 of the Constitution Act, 1982 allows the amendment of the constitution of Canada wherein a

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provision relates to some provinces but not all. This same clause was used by Quebec in November 1997 and by Newfoundland a month later. Each time, the Government of Canada passed an act granting an exception to the provincial government from paragraphs 1-4 of the Constitution. It is a well-established tradition that the Government of Canada could pass legislation to enable the provincial government to pursue a school board merger if the Government of Ontario decided to opt for such a change. As such, there should not be any constitution defying concerns if our government were to pursue this policy.

CONCLUSION

There are pressing financial and social reasons to change the current school board system. The Catholic school board was originally created to allow the Catholic community to preserve their faith and culture, but this need no longer exists. Furthermore, the demographics of this province have drastically changed in the last 175 years, and our institutions must reflect this reality. The establishment of a single, secular system where religious credits are offered is something that many citizens of Ontario have been asking for and continue to demand. The financial benefits from such a merger are tremendous, and the government should strive to pursue cost savings, especially against the backdrop of wage freezes and service cuts. Other provinces have ended this archaic system and it is time that Ontario does the same.

POLICY

Merging the Public and Catholic School Boards into One Unified School Board

WHEREAS in the current economic climate the Ontario Government should be considering all possible opportunities for cost savings;

WHEREAS Ontario is the only province to provide full funding for two school boards;

WHEREAS estimated annual savings from a school board merger are between \$1.2 billion and \$1.5 billion annually including \$164.9 million for the elimination of school board and governance grants for discontinued Catholic school boards, \$38 million in French language education savings by reducing under-utilization, \$164.9 million in student transportation grants, \$239 million in capital program cost, and between \$488 million and \$813 million in economies of scale savings;

WHEREAS a substantial portion of the cost of a merger between the Catholic and public school boards could be covered by the sale of buildings and lands that are declared surplus after the merger;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Ontario Government merge the English public and Catholic school boards into one unified publically funded English school board.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Ontario Government merge the French public and Catholic school boards into another unified publically funded French school board.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Ontario Government promote the inclusion of both secular world religion credits and faith-based religion credits in the high school system where reasonably justified by demand.