



McGuinty triggers fight with Catholics

By CHRISTINA BLIZZARD, QMI AGENCY

February 6, 2012

A cynical person might say Dalton McGuinty's government is pushing the issue of gay-straight alliance groups not so much because they want to promote gay rights, but because they need to save money.

What better way to build a case to end the long-standing inequity in this province of funding only Catholic faith schools than by having the government and the separate school system constantly butting heads over issues such as this?

The government responded to a real issue -- bullying -- by framing it almost exclusively in the context of gay-bashing. It created an unnecessarily confrontational policy that any fool could see would put the government at odds with Catholic educators.

And, congratulations, it did.

Instead of adopting the thoughtful anti-bullying legislation Tory MPP Elizabeth Witmer had been working on for some time, it's as if the government chose to have a showdown with Catholic schools.

The head of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, Nancy Kirby, says that organization's stand has been misrepresented by people who are trying to say they don't support gay students.

"That is farthest from the truth," she said. Kirby said OCSTA doesn't support GSAs

in schools because it's an external program developed in the U.S. And GSAs don't meet the objectives of their own Respecting Differences program. "We support and affirm the dignity of all of our students and employees, not just one group," she said.

But Kirby said the program needs to be consistent with Catholic teaching, particularly on morality and sexuality. Kids are bullied for many reasons -- not just because of their sexuality, she said.

That's true. Any time I've written about bullying, it's been because a child is different -- a poor kid, a child with a learning disability. Or anyone who's different. That's why the government's stubborn insistence that bullying is predominantly a gay issue is so mind-boggling it leaves you looking for a hidden agenda.

It's as if they're trying to provoke a showdown to justify asking for a constitutional amendment to end funding to Catholic schools.

You can't tell people what to believe. Catholicism isn't a buffet. Unless you're Martin Luther or Henry VIII, you can't pick and choose which part of it you want to practise. Even if you're the minister of education. The obvious solution to the standoff is to end funding for Catholic schools. That way, GSAs become a non-issue.

You could cut billions out of the school system if we had just one publicly funded system for all faiths. It would also finally end the inequity in this province where Catholic kids get their education paid for by taxpayers, while families of other faiths have to pay their own freight.

You'd think this would be the government least likely to do that. Premier Dalton McGuinty was educated in a Catholic school. His wife, Terri, teaches at a Catholic school. All their children attended Catholic school. Ironically, Education Minister Laurel Broten's twin sons, attend a Catholic school. In an e-mail, Broten told me McGuinty's made it clear. Defunding Catholic schools is "not something we are considering."

As for GSAs, she said all schools will have to comply with the government's anti-bullying law. "If the bill is passed, all schools public and Catholic, English and French, will need to make sure that their policies and guidelines are consistent with the laws of Ontario," she said.

A bullying law that bullies? Is that a first?