

School credit was good benefit

JOHN VANASSELT

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For two years now, Dalton McGuinty and the Liberals have been saying, "One of the first things we will do is cancel the education tax credit and use the money elsewhere."

Why the urgency on this issue? If it is as significant as we have been led to believe, why have we never heard a good reason?

It can't be the money. There is not much money involved, and here is the irony: Canceling the credit could cost more than keeping it because some of the low- and middle-income families who benefit most will have to send their children to public schools. This will cost the public purse about \$7,800 per student per year, compared to the average of \$280 per student received by Christian school parents last year.

It can't be the priority of the public system. The tax credit has no bearing on the educational budget or policy set for public schools. This is not an either-or situation. All over the western world governments maintain a strong commitment to public education and at the same time support parental choices. Making public education the main priority does not require cancelling the tax credit.

It can't be educational concerns. The requirements of the tax credit provide parents with more information about their child's education than what is provided in public schools. Most independent schools existed long before the tax credit, successfully graduating productive young citizens. If the education isn't up to par, the independent school will disappear.

It can't be the public outcry. There isn't one. Only the teachers unions complained. To the contrary, a recent Ipsos-Reid poll of 1,000 randomly selected adults, showed that 84 per cent of Ontarians agreed that, "parents should have the right to choose a school for their child that best reflects their personal values and beliefs."

The tax credit is good social policy because it strengthens families and encourages parents to become more involved in the education of their children. The Ontario College of Teachers surveyed its members last summer and 98 per cent of teachers agreed that "parental involvement is essential to students' educational success."

It can't be social concerns. In the same Ipsos-Reid poll, Ontarians overwhelmingly (86 per cent) agreed that parents are the most important factor in "the development in children of proper social values such as tolerance, respect, discipline, and work ethic."

In partnership with parents, many independent schools cite the development of character as a main



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During the recent provincial election campaign, children at Thunder Bay Christian School presented Progressive Conservative Leader Ernie Eves with flowers. The Liberals opposed tax credits for private schools, a policy introduced by the Conservatives.



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feature of their programs, something McGuinty wants to have in public education.

It can't be the safety and welfare of students. Many parents choose an independent school precisely because they feel their children are more protected. Independent school staff and volunteers are subject to the same human rights laws as everyone else; they are required to undergo the same security screenings as their public school counterparts, and information about the status or decertification of teachers with the Ontario College of Teachers is provided to parents.

It can't be that the wrong people benefit from the tax credit. Statistics Canada reports that most families choosing independent schooling are from low- and middle-income brackets.

It can't be that government support for parental choice is against the Liberal policy platform. McGuinty himself has stated that he has "no ideological opposition to the extension of public support to denominational schools," just as he has acknowledged that there is "an issue of fairness to be addressed."

It can't be a legal problem. In 1996, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled there were no legal obstacles for provinces seeking to support parental choice.

In fact, the legal problems arise from revoking the tax credit. These parents will be paying more taxes next year in spite of McGuinty signing the Taxpayer Protection Act. More broadly, canceling the tax credit will break Canadian law and an international treaty by deliberately discriminating against religious parents who are not Roman Catholic.

So what's left? Mean-spiritedness? The sky is falling? Pay back? My guess is the latter.

It is common knowledge that teachers unions vowed to do everything possible to defeat the Tories and during the campaign members were told to vote Liberal. While discussing support for the Liberals, the head of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation made it clear that the Liberals "need to oppose this (tax credit) legislation without equivocation."

The first item on the Required Action List of the Legislative Agenda of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association -- even ahead of implementing Mordechai Rozanski's recommendations -- was to, "Repeal the tax credit." Is this the Faustian bargain: Teachers will support the Liberals but the tax credit must go? Seems like it is and this brings to mind Shakespeare's observation about something being rotten somewhere. This stinks.

Didn't we hear fatherly pronouncements about ending the politics of division? What else could this be called when government takes away a small tax credit that makes a world of difference to low- and middle-income parents in order to pay back powerful teachers unions? Didn't we hear a promise that no one would pay more tax next year? These parents will.

What was the point of all that lofty language about "starving cynicism and feed(ing) hope?" What happened to "taking the high road?" The high road would be to implement the tax credit as legislated and to get busy with planned reforms to public education. That would be the best road for all Ontario's students.

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