

Histories framed school-support po

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Guest contributor

The beginning of a new school year is usually a joyful experience for children.

It is often a financially painful time, however, for the parents of Catholic students in America.

Many committed supporters of Catholic education in the United States cast envious eyes north to Canada, where Catholic education is supported by public money. They hope for some parallel American scheme to be instituted, which would bring badly needed relief from growing tuition fees.

At the same time, however, some people have concerns that such government support would also bring about government interference.

The publicly supported Catholic school system in Ontario, Canada, is in many ways an excellent model of what is possible under such a system. Almost no interference exists in the religious nature of our schools while at the same time there is almost no extra financial burden for Catholic parents.

But Canada's constitutional history, which allowed for the development of support for the Catholic school system, is very different from the American constitutional experience. Any possible schemes to aid private or parochial schools in the U.S. will probably fall considerably short of what exists in various parts of Canada.

The Canadian System

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility. As such, there are significant differences among Canada's 10 provinces in terms of the support for Catholic education. Because the school where I am principal, Assumption College School, is located in Windsor, Ontario, I will focus on the system in that province.

Ontario has two fully supported school systems: a public school system and a separate Catholic school system. Both systems are mandated by provincial law, by education acts and by other legislation and regulations.

This situation exists because of the constitutional guarantees that were written into the British North America Act, passed by the British Parliament in 1867 to establish Canada as a virtually independent country.

At that time, the English speaking and predominantly Protestant minority of Quebec feared that the French Catholic majority would use their provincial jurisdiction over education to deny them English speaking, Protestant education. Consequently, a provision was included in the Act to grant them the right to publicly supported separate schools. This enabled the Protestants to have separate schools in Quebec and the Catholics to have separate schools in Ontario.

Individual schools, both Catholic and public, are operated by boards of trustees. Each city or region has a public-school board and a separate Catholic-school board. Separate school trustees are elected during the triennial municipal election by separate school taxpayers.

Taxpayers are required to inform the local government if they are separate school supporters. Catholics may, however, support either system.

Separate school supporters pay their education taxes to the separate school board at a rate set by that board. The Ministry of Education provides grants on

a per capita basis to each school board in the province. The ministry also provides boards with special capital grants to help build new schools or renovate old ones.

What all of this means is that the Catholic schools are controlled by the Catholic community. Board and school policy is set by the elected representatives of the community.

The church plays various roles in the Catholic separate school system. The separate school boards are attentive to the teachings of the church as articulated by the local bishop. Many priests have been elected as trustees. Parish priests are often involved in the school(s) in their parishes while others are hired on a full- or part-time basis to be chaplains in the secondary schools.

In addition, the work of women and men religious in the schools is valued, and in some cases positions for religious teachers and administrators are contractually protected. However, the dwindling number of teaching religious is making this a somewhat moot point.

While the clergy and religious orders do not control Catholic education, they still have a great deal of influence in the

system.

The basic guideline for curriculum in both public and separate schools is set by the Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario. The ministry establishes the requirements for receiving a diploma of graduation. There is a great deal of flexibility allowed in the implementation of these guidelines to allow for local needs.

Consequently, being publicly supported is not a liability for Catholic schools in terms of curriculum possibilities. The Ministry of Education allows for religious instruction at the elementary level, and has guidelines for two credits of religion (out of a total of 30 required for graduation) at the secondary level.

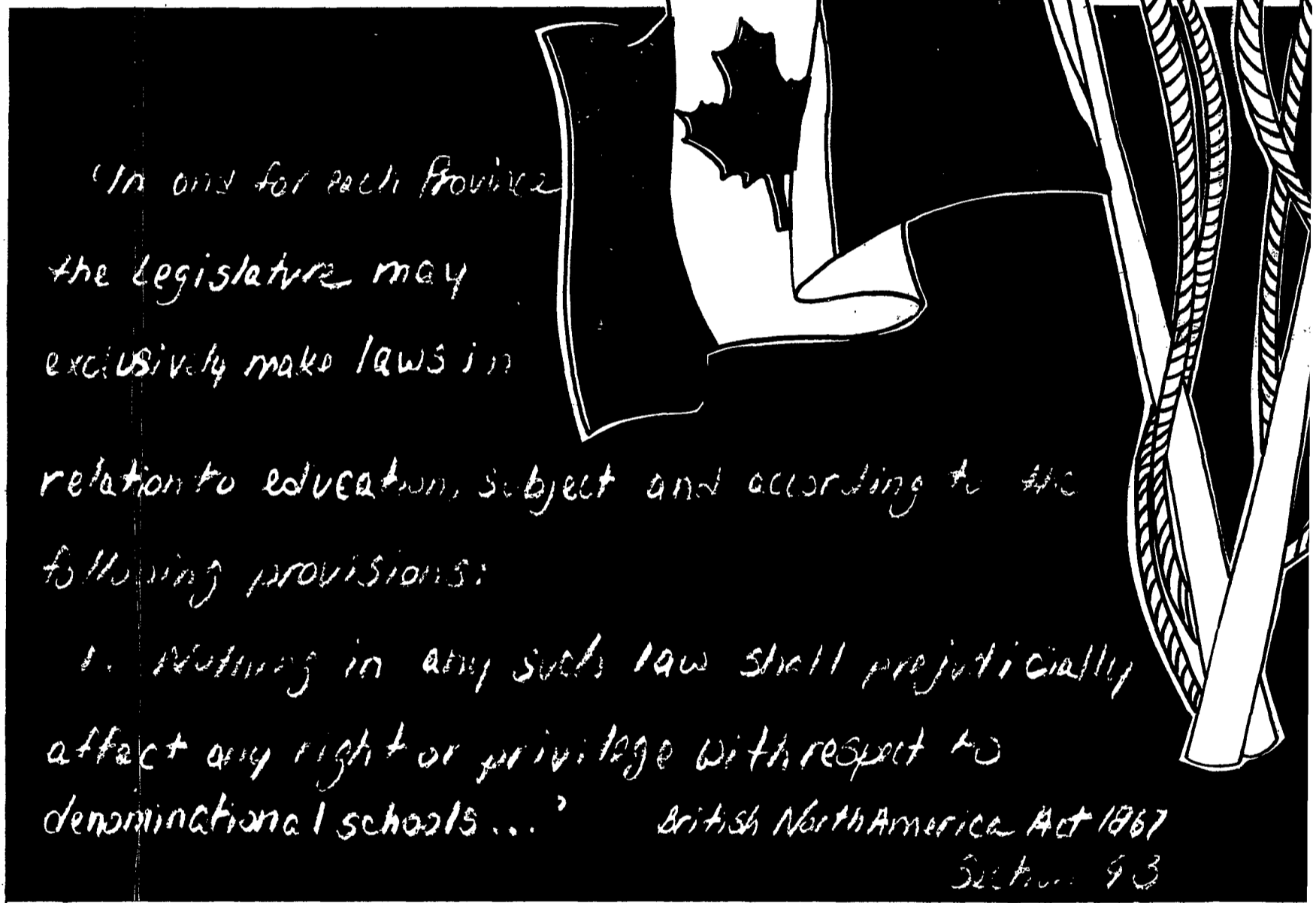
It is also permissible for Catholic schools to include religious and spiritual teaching and insight in the teaching of other guideline courses. For example, it is possible for a Catholic school to teach Catholic beliefs and values in a ministry guideline social science course such as

"Family Studies."

Meanwhile, as a result of receiving provincial aid, elementary Catholic schools are required to educate any child of any Catholic taxpayer. Most separate school boards offer a full range of programs for children with exceptionalities such as physical handicaps, learning disabilities, autism, mental retardation, behavioral disorders, and so on. These costly programs are supported by provincial grants and local taxation.

Although they did not do so until 1967, secondary schools also have open admission. At that time, separate school boards used existing regulations to begin offering publicly supported ed-

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