

Christian Education: Participating in public education

by John Vanasselt, Director of Communications

When my son was in grade 2 or 3, he told us about field day at the public school he passed on his way home from Laurentian Hills Christian School. He said, “I wish we were publics. They have better sports stuff than we do.” I asked, “Publics? Who are publics?” He didn’t miss a beat. “Well, we’re Christians, they’re publics.” Aha! The teachable moment!

Looking back I realize two things. First, in our efforts to teach children that we are in the world, but not of the world, we can over-emphasize the last part at the expense of the first, and in doing that, we can create obstacles where they need not be found. Let me explain.

In Ontario, whenever the words “public” and “education” are used in the same sentence, almost everyone thinks of a state system of education. The educational establishment has succeeded in making people think that public education and public schooling are the same thing—but they are not. Throughout the western world, governments support not only public schools, but a wide variety of school choices as legitimate ways to do public education. In those jurisdictions, governments have understood that the state’s obligation to provide for good education is significantly different from actually providing and controlling that education.

Acquiring government support for school choice is not about “the Christians” vs. “the publics.” Christian school supporters and their children are part of the public, and Christian schooling is a way of educating the public. Every politician, regardless of party affiliation or level of government, who has ever attended a function at one of our schools, has lauded the achievements and contributions of the students and graduates. Christian schooling is in the public interest!

Government support for Christian schooling must be viewed as an expansion of the education of the public. In the only comprehensive study of the issue in Ontario, the 1984 *Report of the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario* (aka *Shapiro Report*), the Commission stated,

That, as a matter of public policy, and so long as the public policy objectives [of public schooling] are not substantially eroded, new initiatives both in the public support of private schools and in the relationship of these schools to the public schools should be actively developed and tested. (p. 40)

Echoing what we stated above, the Report goes on to say that, “many such schools also contribute to the fulfillment of public purposes in ways substantial enough to make the label ‘private’ somewhat misleading” (p.43) and the Report subsequently recommended “‘independent’ as a better descriptor, giving a clue about the intent of the relationship of independent schools to public schools.

As we raise the issue of government support for parental choice in education during the upcoming election campaign, we must choose our words carefully. We go forward with the following message:

1. Our Christian schools must remain true to their purposes, and authentically live out their mission statements.
2. Government’s role of providing for the education of the public should include financial support for Christian schools.

3. Legislation must find the proper balance between the school's integrity and public accountability.

Just as Paul claimed the rights of citizenship in his day, we approach our political leaders with our claims to first class citizenship, which include recognition and support for educating the public through Christian schools. ◆

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