**Speech to “KEEP THE FAITH—BUT NOT IN OUR SCHOOLS!” Rally**

**Queen’s Park, Toronto, Ontario, September 18th, 2011**

My name is Leonard Baak, president of Education Equality in Ontario. We are a human rights and education advocacy group working to replace Ontario’s public and Catholic school systems with a single, secular school system for each official language.

In Ontario today, our school system suffers institutional duplication on a massive scale. Four school systems, two English and two French, serve completely overlapping jurisdictions. Two of those school systems are Catholic.

What this means is that in most Ontario communities, school children are sent in up to four different directions every school day. Hundreds of thousands are bussed past their nearest publicly funded school to attend another one farther away. Tens of thousands more live within walking distance of their nearest school and wouldn’t need bussing at all if they would or could attend it.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know this costs a lot of money. The smaller the school board and the more geographically dispersed their schools and students, the more money they receive to overcome the disadvantages of their size. This isn’t favoritism – smaller school boards need these additional funds in order to offer a quality of education comparable to their larger counterparts, which can more easily realize economies of scale.

You can see this in Ministry of Education funding figures. Almost without exception, English Catholic school boards (the smaller of the English boards) receive more money per student than English public school boards. French public school boards (the smaller of the French boards) receive more money per student than French Catholic school boards. French school boards also receive significantly more money per student than either English board, as they are typically much smaller.

Moving to one school board and assigning students to their nearest school would mean a huge reduction in bussing. Hundreds of thousands of children would be bussed shorter distances to their nearest school and tens of thousands of formerly bussed students would not be bussed at all, as they already live close enough to their nearest school to walk.

Declining enrolment has meant a costly epidemic of half empty schools across Ontario, a problem particularly acute here in Toronto. Half empty schools are less cost effective to run than fully enrolled schools, which is why cash strapped school boards are always threatening them with closure. They simply can’t fund too many of them without taking educational funds out of the classroom and hurting educational outcomes. I understand parents don’t want to see their neighborhood school close, but often that doesn’t have to happen – particularly if inefficient and costly under enrolled schools in the same area, one public and one Catholic, are combined into the better of the two buildings. A move to one school system would save many currently threatened neighborhood schools, giving them new life and a more secure future. It would also allow newly combined school boards to cherry pick the best schools from their combined inventories and remove their excess capacity through the closing of their oldest schools.

No discussion of Ontario’s divided school system would be complete without touching on the discrimination aspects. Indeed, the discrimination aspects are amongst the most offensive of all.

Catholic school boards have an absolute right to reject non-Catholic children until grade 9, when “open access” is supposed to apply. My own children, though Church-going Christians, were themselves rejected on account of their non-Catholic faith. Catholic families are guaranteed a choice of at least two schools (four if French Catholic) no matter where they chose to live in this province. We all pay the same taxes based on our income, not our faith, but Catholic families enjoy greater choice. They get a two for one deal available to no one else. That is an outrage.

Catholic school boards also have an absolute right to reject non-Catholic teacher applicants at all grade levels. One third of Ontario’s publicly funded teaching positions, those in the Catholic system, are effectively closed to two thirds of the population, the non-Catholics. Catholic teachers pay no more in taxes than their non-Catholic counterparts, but enjoy 50% more teaching opportunities in the publicly funded education sector. That is another outrage.

Catholic schools annually use the students in their care as political pawns in anti-abortion rallies, bussing in thousands to Parliament Hill for such occasions. Isn’t it ironic that in a province where abortion is legal, the government also funds a school system that teaches a significant portion of the population that it is an evil akin to murder? Isn’t it ironic that in one of the first jurisdictions worldwide to legalize gay marriage, the government funds a religious school system whose catechism teaches that homosexuals are “intrinsically disordered” and that homosexual acts are “gravely depraved? The inconsistency is baffling, but Jesus Christ himself said that a house divided against itself cannot stand. See, there is hope. I don’t see us going backwards on abortion or gay marriage, but I do see us going forward to a single secular school system.

Our politicians like to hide behind our constitution when questioned about superior Catholic rights with respect to education, but I think all of them know they are hiding behind a lie. The truth is, Ontario’s constitutional “obligation” to fund Roman Catholic separate schools is ***largely illusory,*** as it can be removed very quickly or can even be ignored. Quebec, Newfoundland, and Manitoba all removed or ignored very similar constitutional “obligations” before moving to a single public school system for each official language. The Ontario Government could ***easily*** follow their example.

If decency and fairness are not in themselves sufficient motivation to amend Ontario’s discriminatory educational regime, then politicians should consider the opportunity cost. At well over $200 billion, our province’s debt has spiraled out of control. Our annual deficit now nearly equal expenditures on education, our second largest program.

Despite the McGuinty government’s investments in education and health care, wait times for emergency care and surgeries continue to be far too long. Individual school boards have maintenance backlogs totaling into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Programs for special needs children go without adequate funding. And it’s getting worse.

According to 2011 provincial budget documents, a family of four’s share of the provincial debt will total $73,000 at the end of this fiscal year. That’s about $7,300 more than last year -- an 11% increase in a single year. That is not sustainable.

Whatever party wins this election will have to get serious about controlling expenditures. They will have to introduce some degree of fiscal austerity – and possibly tax hikes as well. These changes will bring hardship to the average Ontarian. Health care waits and services may get worse, civil servants will likely suffer wage freezes, and school boards will have to do more with less. In short, the truly essential services that people rely on will take a hit. It is unthinkable that we would cut these true essentials, however, while leaving the relative non-essential of Catholic school funding unscathed.

Quebec and Newfoundland both eliminated their religious school boards over equality and cost concerns. Neither was facing the sort of fiscal crisis now facing Ontario. It is time for all Ontario parties to dance with the elephant in the room. It is time to move Ontario towards one school system.

Thank you for listening.

**Bio for Leonard Baak**

Leonard is a Software Engineer working in Ottawa, married with two school aged children. After moving to Ontario for university, it always struck Leonard as odd that Ontario had a publicly funded Catholic school system, but that no other faiths were given any such consideration. He'd always assumed that this "choice" was available to all -- until experiencing the rejection of his own children when he tried to enroll them in his local Catholic school to escape an extreme overcrowding situation at his local public school. He appealed to the Ministry of Education for help and was shocked to discover that within the context of Ontario's school system, the Charter of Rights' protections against religious discrimination were ineffectual. Catholics were special. They alone were guaranteed a choice in Ontario. He's been fighting to end the wasteful duplication and discrimination in the Ontario school system ever since, forming Education Equality in Ontario with two other parents in 2004.