

THE FORUM

A Section Devoted To Learned Opinion

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Is the Religious Alternative School Useful in the Public School System?

The question of the place of religion in public education, as recently debated by the Calgary Board of Education, focussed upon one way of accommodating a religious emphasis in public education. The proposed way of accommodation is by the establishment of alternative schools which would be distinctively religious and in which pupils and teachers would generally share common beliefs and would undertake their work in a religious spirit. It is most important also to understand that the procedure for developing such alternative schools is through a contract between the sponsoring society and the Calgary Board of Education. The Board of Education does not take the initiative in developing such schools; it only responds to requests from interested groups. All such groups must meet the criteria set down in policy and regulations governing alternate programs and schools. An alternative religious school can come into being only when a contract is agreed upon, and groups other than religious organizations could apply to form alternate schools under the same policies and regulations.

Under Canadian law, including provincial individual rights protection acts and the new charter of human rights and freedoms, there is no prohibition of religious emphasis in schools. In Alberta, the school act clearly permits such emphasis under the provisions of section 160 which allows for religious exercises and religious instruction — though no pupil may be compelled to participate in either. The challenge to the establishment of distinctively religious schools within a tax-supported, non-Catholic school system is therefore not a legal challenge. Such religiously distinctive schools must comply with the law, and they must, for example, admit students without regard to their religious background. It may seem mildly paradoxical, but the case is that a school may be religiously distinctive but must not make religious faith a condition of admission. Other conditions of existing legislation must also be satisfied, such as presenting periods of religious instruction only on an optional basis and within the specified time limits.

The decision to permit religious alternative schools within the public system is a policy decision rather than a legal decision, and the arguments for and against such schools must draw upon general principles and practical considerations. A strong practical argument against religious alternative schools declares that because of the variety of religions in our society we must be prepared to accommodate a considerable variety of such schools once having accepted that any such school can exist. Certainly, it would be most difficult for a school board to decide among religions on the basis of their doctrines or the numbers of adherents. Failing such judgements, how could we prevent the segmentation of the public school system through the emergence of a diversity of religious schools? Furthermore, there is no way of controlling the number of schools which might be established by any one group. At present, for example, the interdenominational Protestant school within the Calgary system has a waiting list sufficient to fill two more schools as large as the one already operating.

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Given that the contractual arrangements with alternate schools require that they be assigned resources on the same basis as other schools and that the school system is protected against any drain or unfair share of support being diverted to such schools, why should we care whether children are enrolled in a "regular" school or in an alternative school? One way or another, the public system must provide for the children of its tax supporters.

There are two further practical concerns to consider. First, the creation of an alternative school offering a program with some special attraction and requiring deliberate additional effort on the part of parents and children results in a school with a self-selected population. All of the added details of going to an alternate school — more forms to fill out, travelling further to school, more service on school committees — demand a little more commitment, a little more seriousness about the education of one's children. Parents with such attitudes are precisely the ones who are vital to the support of a strong public school system, and to the extent that their commitment and energies are directed towards special schools there may be less effective community attention to issues confronting the typical schools in the system.

Second, the alternate schools receive added financial support from the societies which founded them. Even though the contractual arrangements with the school board require that payment of a contribution to the society *cannot* be a condition of a child's attending the school, the societies do manage to raise substantial funds, often drawing much support from members who have no children in the school.

The difficulty with all such arrangements is that any school receiving regular funding from the school board, plus supplementary support from a sponsoring society, can provide extra teachers, learning materials and other advantages beyond what is available in a typical public school. If this process does not seem questionable when carried out in behalf of a religiously oriented school, consider what the consequence would be if parents in various prosperous neighbourhoods were to form educational improvement associations and were to enter into contracts with the school system to operate schools to which they (the parents' associations) would contribute additional resources. Most evidently, the principle of using a tax-supported system to provide equivalent educational programs for all the children of the district would be in jeopardy.

Any alternative school, including religious alternative schools, which can recruit additional resources becomes a school offering special advantage. This process could be controlled by contractual specifications limiting the additional support which can be provided, and it must be admitted that fund-raising goes on in virtually all of our public schools. However, to declare that a sponsoring group cannot contribute resources beyond a certain measure, or cannot use its resources to support changes in the pupil-teacher ratio, or any other attempted procedure of control, will surely give rise to controversy. While I am not averse to controversy in a good cause, I am concerned that it will be very difficult to prevent alternative schools, operating under special arrangements, from becoming select schools enjoying advantages.

This possibility of fostering select, advantaged schools within the public school system concerns me more than all the doctrinal arguments for and against alternative religious schools, and doctrinal arguments there have been in plenty with civil rights groups, for example, propounding as dogmatically upon "freedom *from* religion" as church groups have declared in behalf of "freedom *for* religion."

The "flight" from the public schools and the growth of alternative schools — some 7,000 now in the United States — is generally defended on the grounds that the public schools are failing. They probably are, particularly when they are increasingly asked to deal with every social problem left

over from other agencies, including parent counselling by visiting teachers and before, noon, and after school programs for pupils who have become wards of the school for eight to ten hours per day. Surely, if the public schools are in difficulty it is a short-sighted remedy to encourage the growth of alternative schools as an answer. Ultimately, we will get a group of alternative schools that may be doing very nicely while the public system will probably be even worse off. At the extreme the public schools could become the resort of those who lack the organizational skill and the will to create their own special school. In the broadest sense, the public school system may be on trial in the alternative school debate. At a time when all public institutions are showing signs of strain, it may be appropriate to consider changes in the public school system which would enable it to address, more effectively, the monumental task of mass education in contemporary society. *I question that alternative schools, as so far proposed in Calgary, are a fruitful response in face of that task, for alternativesness, to the extent that it entails self-selection, added commitment, and increased resources entails a kind of return to the schools of privilege which existed before public education was widespread.*

It is all very well to make the glib answer, "Every school should be an alternative school," but that happy suggestion leads to the same kind of contradiction pointed up by the research on ability grouping. Ability grouping was accepted as futile to the extent that it was demonstrated that such grouping was good for anyone who was in the top group. Once everyone is in that group, so that everyone may have the benefits of grouping, there is no longer any grouping. When all schools are alternative schools, there will be, in fact, no alternatives. Nor is this conclusion a mere trick of debate. Every school *cannot* be select in its population of pupils and parents, and every school *cannot* be financially advantaged through special effort. I submit that without these particular benefits the alternative schools that do, or may, exist in Calgary would not have the appeal which they presently enjoy.

I began with the religious alternative school and have now come to discussing the alternative school — without qualification. Such broadening of the discussion is appropriate, I believe, for any alternative school which exists as a result of a contract between a public school board and an outside agency presents us with the practical problems outlined here. In Calgary, the issue has first been raised in connection with religious schools, but religious distinctiveness is not, in my view, the heart of the matter. The deeper, more difficult question is how to reconcile the maintenance of a good public school system with the sincere attempts of concerned parents to make the best educational provision for their children. It is not an issue of good versus evil because there are people of deep conviction and good intention on both sides. Perhaps it is the consequence of affluence, joined by a faith in the importance of education.

Whatever the causes may be, I conclude that the emergence of contractually based alternative schools is not consistent with the purpose of public education. In these days the purpose of public education may be less clear than formerly, we may have abandoned the assimilation function of the school in favor of respect for cultural diversity, and we may have given up using public school programs to produce something like equality of achievement for all pupils. However, there still remains a powerful obligation to use the public schools to serve the needs of all children of the community and to do this fairly, that is, by making a comparable educational effort through provision of quality facilities, teachers, and programs to children in all parts of the district irrespective of their social and economic backgrounds. Such equivalence of educational effort is not, in my view, compatible with the creation of schools which provide special advantage. For this reason, I have opposed the creation of religious alternative schools and am concerned about the possible effects of any and all contractually-based alternative schools upon public education.