

PRACTICE AND PROCESS AROUND RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS

Introduction

Central to Catholic education is creating and shaping the Catholic identity. The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations are intended to establish a provincial curriculum framework regarding learning expectations which define what all students are expected to know, to do and to value when they graduate from Catholic schools.

In recent months, the media has focused attention on the exemption in the *Education Act* with respect to a program or course of study in religious education. This exemption applies to "Open Access" students only (i.e., "persons who are qualified to be resident pupils in respect of a secondary school operated by a public board who attend a secondary school operated by a Roman Catholic board"). In short, Open Access students are students who attend a Catholic secondary school, but whose parents have been public school supporters.

Of the 189,842 students in Ontario's Catholic schools, we understand that only a handful of requests for exemption from religious education courses or programs have been received. It is evident that Ontario families are choosing Catholic high schools because they appreciate and want the spiritual focus in our learning environment.

The relevant provision regarding entitlement to an exemption is subsection 42(13) of the *Education Act*. It provides:

'[...] no person who is qualified to be a resident pupil in respect of a secondary school operated by a public board who attends a secondary school operated by a Roman Catholic board shall be required to take part in any program or course of study in religious education on written application to the Board of,

- (a) the parent or guardian of the person;
- (b) in the case of a person who is 16 or 17 years old who has withdrawn from parental control, the person himself or herself;
- (c) in the case of a person who is 18 years old or older, the person himself or herself."

This section sets out the relevant exemption for courses of study or programs in religious education and applies to students who attend Catholic schools but whose parents have been public school supporters.

On rare occasions when Catholic parents make the request for such exemptions, school administrators will make decisions within the context of the *Education Act* which mandates Catholic schools to provide Catholic education for ratepayers who choose Catholic schools for their children.

It should be recognized that religious education courses are part of the course curriculum in Catholic schools. These credit courses teach not only an inclusive world-view perspective on the major world religions, they reinforce social justice teachings that are part of the foundation of a Catholic education. Some of these courses count as social science courses. It should also be noted that religion infuses the curriculum in all areas of study, so any idea that being excused from religion excuses you from Catholic content is clearly misinformed. Christian values infuse all of the curriculum.

Best Practices

The *Education Act* sets out who may apply for the exemption. Under the Act, the exemption is not automatic. A parent of a student, an adult student or a student who is 16 or 17 years old and has withdrawn from parental control can apply for an exemption. It is common practice in Ontario Catholic secondary schools for parents or relevant students to apply for the exemption on an annual basis. The parents or relevant students should be clear regarding what religious education course or activities of a religious nature they are requesting an exemption from. A religious education program may include mass, religious retreat or other activity with a substantial component of ritual and prayer. Catholic school boards across Ontario examine each request for an exemption on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the needs and priorities of the student and parents in the context of the requirements set out in the *Education Act*.

When a student or his/her family raise the issue of a possible exemption with school administration, we suggest the following practices:

1. Meet with the student and his or her parents.

It is important to have a discussion with the student and his or her family about the objectives of the school in providing a Catholic education. Prior to this meeting, the educator should obtain certain relevant information, such as:

- Verify the tax status of the student's parents or adult student;
- Review the student's index card;
- Review Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations and how they align with 21st Century education priorities;
- Review the student's timetable; and
- Review the student's credit summary.

2. Confirm the historical mandate of Catholic schools.

In meetings with students and his/her family, school administrators should confirm that notwithstanding the religious exemption provision in the *Education Act*, the historical mandate of the Catholic school system in Ontario is to model the entire syllabus of the school on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. School administrators should also confirm that throughout the

province, Catholic school boards have been using the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations as a foundation reflective of the vision of all learners and the strong sense of distinctiveness and purposes that is publicly-funded Catholic education.

All students who apply to a Catholic school should be asked to recognize the importance of Catholic identity, which is rooted in the teachings and faith of the Church. The school should confirm to each student that its objective, in partnership with family and church, is to provide a Catholic education which develops spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, social and physical capabilities of each individual to live fully today and enriching the community.

3. Listen to the student and his or her parents and understand their concerns.

The principal or vice-principal should attempt to understand the student's concerns regarding their participation in a program or course of study in religious education. This will involve having an individual discussion, preferably face-to-face with the student and his or her parents to understand the student's circumstances.

The discussion with parents and the student should be faith-based and respectful. We suggest that school administrators thank the parents and student for coming and taking the time to meet, as the school explores the reasons for bringing forward this request.

4. Explore options.

Where possible, the principal or vice-principal should examine options for the student in trying to assist the student to take the religious education course or program. In discussing the student's concerns, the educator should explore possible alternatives, reviewing the student's timetable, having the student take the religious education course online or arranging for the course to be taken in a different semester or a different method of taking the course.

5. Assess eligibility for the exemption based on each individual case.

Each student situation is different. School administrators are encouraged to assess eligibility for the exemption based on the facts of each individual case. In this regard, educators will need to have information about whether the parents are separate or public school ratepayers, the student's history and relevant credit requirements. As part of the school administrator's discussion with the student and his/her family, the administrator should indicate that notwithstanding the student's ability to apply for an exemption, it is the school's view that all students admitted to the Catholic system will benefit from these values and teachings. School administration may also confirm that it is the school's position that such values and teachings are important in forming students into responsible, reflective and well-rounded citizens.

6. No alteration in the rest of the student's timetable.

In communicating with a student who qualifies for an exemption under section 42(13) of the Act, school administrators should confirm that although the relevant exemption will be granted to this student for a particular school year, there will not be any alteration in the religious or moral education that infuses the remainder of the student's timetable and school observances. The student and parent should be cognizant of what other subjects are available during that period.

The principal or vice-principal should indicate to the student and his/her parents that the decision to grant the exemption in a particular case does not change the mission of the Catholic school community, which is, among other things, to grow in an understanding of Catholic teachings and traditions and incorporate them into a student's daily life.

7. Ensure enrolment forms are clear about the mission and objective of the Catholic school.

All prospective students to the school should be made aware that a Catholic school is one in which God and His Life are integrated into the entire curriculum and life of the school. The enrolment documents for Catholic secondary schools should indicate clearly that, subject to the provisions of the *Education Act*, all students in the school will participate in the prayer life and in the liturgical life at the school. The enrolment documents should confirm that a religious and moral education is not one subject among many in the student's timetable, but rather it infuses all classes and materials during the school day.

Conclusion

Individual discussions with students and their parents with regards to religious exemptions requires time and effort on the part of school administration. Educators should come to this meeting prepared with an understanding the parent's relevant tax status, the student's history and relevant credit requirements. The school administrator needs to understand what religion course or program the student is asking to be exempted from. Significant time is required to listen to and understand an individual student's or parent's concerns about participating in a program or course of study in religious education. In many cases, in working with the student and their family, solutions can be found in trying to understand the concerns and relevant circumstances where adjustments can be discussed such as revising his/her timetable or offering the religion course in an alternative format, including online.

In these meetings, the educator should confirm that in the Catholic school, religion infuses every subject area and all other aspects of life of the school. The school administrator should indicate that it is the school's view that students will benefit from the full and ongoing experience that is Catholic education.

These face-to-face meetings with students and their parents require significant preparation and commitment. The time spent in meeting with individual students and their parents and educating them about the benefits, values and traditions of Catholic education and the importance of Catholic identity in our school system represents a meaningful opportunity to create a "teachable moment" for both the student and his/her parents.

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