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The Importance of Public Education to Canadian Society

The importance of public education to the fabric and character of Canadian society has been largely left out of the recent discussion and debate around Justice Layh's decision to not fund non-Catholics attending Catholic separate schools.

In an increasingly diverse and multicultural province, the public school system offers the most promising potential for building a harmonious and tolerant society. It is the public school system in which all religious and non-religious beliefs are treated as equal. The public system has been created to fulfill certain missions that go beyond the purely academic purposes of schools; to provide universal access to free education, to guarantee equal opportunity for all children, to unify a diverse population, to prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society, to prepare people to become economically self sufficient, and to improve social conditions. Public school divisions are required by law and expected by society to carry out these purposes as a primary mission.

Public education is highly valued by Canadian citizens because they have recognized the impact that a strong public education system has made to the Canadian way of life. Michael Den Tandt, a national political columnist for Postmedia News wrote in 2012, "The acceptance, respect and 'openness to all' that are fundamental to public education has helped to shape Canada and influence the world."

A public school system exists to nurture kids in the understanding that they live and will live together, regardless of differences of race, religion, economic circumstances, intellect, whatever. Public school education can and does teach about religion and spirituality. It takes care, however, to recognize that faith is personal, and that it would be wrong for the institutions of the State to bring their weight to bear in promoting one faith over another.

Rick Salutin, respected columnist with the Globe and Mail wrote a series of articles in 2012 strongly in favour of public education, entitled, *Keeping the Public in Public Education*. "Simply by being what they are, they can teach kids about the society they live in. What's unique about public education isn't only the education part, it's the 'public'. In public schools the medium really is the message; the classroom is the curriculum".

School boards in Saskatchewan value and embrace the responsibility of serving the children and youth of our communities. It is imperative that rules and structures be defined to enable school boards to plan for the education challenges of the future and to focus without distraction on their students. It is important to respect the mandates of public and separate systems or move further along the path to two parallel public school systems.

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