

**Nurturing the Scholar: Inspiring and Challenging
Excellence in Religious Education**
Report of the English Catholic Board Council
Of the
Ontario Student Trustees' Association – Association
des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Letter from the President	4
Preface.....	5
Executive Summary	6
Premise.....	7
Recommendations	8
Report	9
Strengthening Our Morals and Values	9
Living the Mission to Serve.....	11
Disciples of Faith and Culture: The Role of The Educator.....	12
Integration of the Catholic Faith.....	15

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This report was carried out by the 2006–2007 English Catholic Board Council Religious Education Committee:

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This subcommittee was created and called on to accurately reflect the views of the English Catholic Board Council of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association–l'Association des élèves conseillers and conseillères de l'Ontario.

Special thanks to all English Catholic Student Trustees for providing additional resources, opinion and commentary which were extremely beneficial in the content of the report.

We hope that this report will offer insight as to how the religious studies courses can be improved for the benefit of all of Ontario's Catholic school students.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

May 2007

Dear Minister of Education & Catholic Stakeholders,

On behalf of the English Catholic Board Council, I am extremely jubilant and pleased to present you with our latest report entitled, "*Nurturing the Scholar: Inspiring and Challenging Excellence in Religious Education*". This report offers a student perspective on the topic of religious education credits at the high school level and more importantly, brings forth valuable opinion on an intimate subject that effects every secondary-level student taught within the Catholic Education System.

As Catholic District School Boards educating the youth of today and more importantly, the leaders of tomorrow, Catholic Educators must strive to give the students the most valuable educational experience possible. This report outlines the main concerns in regards to teacher quality in the classroom, as well as the inability to receive religious teaching outside of the administrative walls of the classroom. This specific report also describes the importance of religious education in order to strengthen one's Catholicity and furthermore, outlines the need to live by the values and morals of the Catholic Church on a daily basis.

In addition, this report was created to bridge the gap of communication between administrators and Catholic students of Ontario. This report truly signifies a Catholic student's perspective of the current Catholic Education curriculum.

I pray that you will find the information contained in this report to be both thought provoking and satisfying.

Yours In Fellowship,

Carolina Spagnuolo
English Catholic Board Council President 2006–2007

PREFACE

Fundamentally, the traditional religion courses are one of the aspects that truly define the Catholic Education System in Ontario. Religious Education is what separates the Catholic and public sectors; therefore, it constitutes as a unique and furthermore, an irreplaceable system.

As educators in the Catholic faith, Catholic District School Boards, along with their affiliated schools, possess various mission statements which clearly reflect the importance of Catholic values and morals. A faith-based school is one that holds a mission of building a religious atmosphere in all classes, regardless of the course. In essence, it must nurture the Catholic pupil in body, mind and soul.

In addition, the presence of these divine classes strengthens the long-established bond of the triad; the school, home and the parish or better known as a community at large. However, the partnership between the three forces has somewhat diminished since the instigation of the Catholic education system. In many instances, religious courses are the only method of sacred education that some students receive. For this reason, an updated and modernized curriculum that allows students to excel in their studies while being engaged, motivated and successful in the classroom is duly needed.

Due to the overwhelming desire for change, the English Catholic Board Council of OSTA-AÉCO formed the Religious Education Committee. This report group's main mission is to expose student perspective and interpretation on an issue that constantly affects them on a daily basis and to enlighten all boards of the discrepancies present within the system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Catholic School Boards across the province strive to provide all of their students with an invigorating education. The English Catholic Board Council of the OSTA commends the past work accomplished by such Catholic Stakeholders in education as the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE), the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) and the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA). These eminent bodies in education consistently and effectively lobby for additional rights on behalf of the province's 29 Catholic District School Boards.

This report is designed to guide and aid Ontario's Catholic District School Boards in building religious studies courses that allow students to broaden their horizons as they allow for additional credits to be valid towards the mandatory religion credits. Also, it will establish a common ground and system in which religious studies teachers shall be assessed, while gaining opportunities for greater professional development. Educators must be responsible for guiding pupils thorough their faith journey while conveying the curriculum in a stimulating and prestigious manner.

These investigations allow us an opportunity to evaluate our current efforts in conveying Christ's faith-filled message. The abovementioned concerns and recommendations are steps in an encouraging and parallel direction; this ability to influence positive change ultimately exemplifies our values and commitment to an enhanced Catholic Education.

PREMISE

The premise for our report was to foster a greater sense of understanding and knowledge in the field of religious studies. The report will present an array of commentary and opinion on the topic of religious education courses and credits and teacher quality and performance in the classroom. More importantly, the report will focus on religion as a way of life rather than an academic endeavor. This course shall be geared to furthering an individual's faith outlook and ensuring that all of today's youth generation is lead to make positive and favourable contributions to society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. THAT every Catholic District School Board in Ontario offer a greater number of Professional Development opportunities for Religion teachers to ensure educators are adequately prepared to lead the current generation of students.
2. THAT the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Catholic Education, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ensure that all Catholic educators administering the religion curriculum follow similar guidelines as those outlined in the valued Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations.
3. THAT the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Institute of Catholic Education, and the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ensure that religious study is integrated further into additional courses and offered to students as alternative options to a mandatory religion credit, while still maintaining the strong conviction to Catholicity in the curriculum.

STRENGTHENING OUR MORALS AND VALUES

The focus of Catholic education should not only be limited to further understanding the workings of the faith but should also focus on grasping concepts of Catholicism in order to keep an open mind to the multi-cultural world one will face in modern society.

As students enter secondary schooling in the Catholic system they are required to successfully complete four mandatory religion courses. The courses are significant in furthering student Catholicity. Through the themes studied in these courses, the Catholic teachings and morals which exemplify who we are as a faith body are reinforced in the students. The purpose of the curriculum to students is to affirm the faith they belong to.

To Catholic school students in this province, religion is part of their lives on a subconscious level. The learning atmosphere, administrators, and attitudes that are expressed through the Catholic religion curriculum cultivate a stronger image of God's creation. The students in this province highly value the Catholic education they receive.

The journey in religious education is self-growing in nature and presents oneself with a new understanding of God. As students progress in age, controversial issues regarding religion in society are addressed giving confidence to the youth. The religion curriculum in secondary schools focuses on how people as a whole are affecting religion and what changes can affect society. The ways in which religion is integrated into our schools aids us into becoming respectable and discerning citizens in our society.

The voice of the students heard through the Ontario Student Trustees' Association has expressed a united message of value in terms of our unique curriculum. As students across the province of Ontario gathered together, the issues surrounding the Catholic school system were discussed and a growing concern in the teachings of the religion courses was brought to the forefront. This intimate topic was first discussed in hopes of uniting all Catholic District School Boards and building a strong foundation for the future generation.

Moreover, a message for the importance of religion was expressed in relation to the Catholic Graduate Expectations. It is extremely important to note that this

initiative was carried in hopes of also working to fortify our stance as Catholic faith ambassadors, as we serve the world in the Spirit of Christ.

In essence, religious studies courses are vital to the education system. The program's teachings reinforce the student's sense of faith, the importance of their diversity and culture within society, and generate strong familial love towards the school and local communities. By focusing on faith-centred activities, a student finds themselves in a positive and enlightening school environment which provides them with spiritual guidance.

LIVING THE MISSION TO SERVE

In order to preserve the sacredness of religious education, we must exercise the right to teach individuals about a common faith background outside the administrative walls of the religion classroom. Our highly respected and sacred Catholic religion should be integrated into every class and should not be confined to one sole credit per year. Whether it is a science or humanities course, teachers in the Catholic Education system should consistently work to bring an aspect of Catholicism to everything they do and teach.

Likewise, the Catholic faith can be simply defined as a set of values and virtues founded by sacred text such as the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and all other biblical scripture. The subject of religion should be integrated into everything an individual does due to the very eminent fact that values are a way of life. All virtues, values, commandments, teachings and beliefs of the church should not only be an aspect of a student's Catholic high school experience, but a philosophy of life itself. These values are what Catholics live by, which is why they should be incorporated into all classes, versus one solitary class.

In addition, one should never neglect these particular values and virtues; they should always permeate every aspect within our Catholic school education. In addition, we must have an effective moral compass to learn right from wrong and virtue from sin. When our Catholic faith is integrated into our everyday life at school, our Catholic values are continually reinforced.

In order to spiritually nourish a child's faith development, our Catholic beliefs should be reinforced at home, church and school. The three-way connection is extremely vital, and our Catholic education system can only be stronger if a partnership is created. If Catholic schools can show students that faith is part of the way we live our life, and not just a subject studied in school, it will help to better spiritually develop all students. In essence, religion class cannot exist in isolation; if this ever becomes the case, our Catholic values are not being rightfully portrayed nor applied.

Since the inception of the Catholic Education System over 150 years ago, Christian ideals have been and must continue to be the founding principles of our one-of-a-kind education system.

DISCIPLES OF FAITH AND CULTURE: THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

Fundamentally, the success of the Catholic Education system depends heavily on the administrators of the Religious Studies courses. These individuals must emphasize the values of Christ in the classroom while implementing strategic learning modules for their students. It is their responsibility for providing a rich environment that enables students to grow and further deepen their faith. Catholic educators must also work to further commit students in becoming life-long faith centred learners. The environment in which students acquire such qualities must be welcoming while providing a forum for discussion where all opinions, views and comments are duly respected. Also, religious education must be taught with passion. These classroom leaders must find innovative techniques and methods to engage their students and promote the mission of the Catholic faith.

In today's world, teachers must be open-minded and aware of the diversity of cultures, perspectives and spectrums present within the Catholic faith given the growing rich diversity of Ontario schools. More importantly, educators must relate religion to the youth of today. These administrators must have a deeper rooted faith that goes beyond a textbook and educate youth by means that appeal to the present generation. The existence of Catholic teachers is to purely educate and embrace life in a faith-filled manner.

Moreover, Catholic educators must not only possess these imperative qualities to be successful, it is also essential for these people to model and follow similar guidelines such as those set for graduates in the well-established Catholic Graduate Expectations. This would inevitably inspire and challenge the complexity of the present and current religious studies program as it would motivate and engage the administrators. Every Catholic graduate is expected to foster a vision of the devoted learner. Similarly, the same should be expected of the educator to ensure the student is receiving the finest education possible.

As a subcommittee of the OSTA, the English Catholic Board Council believes that each Catholic faith educator must possess the qualities outlined in the Catholic Graduate Expectations, or be in accordance with any other similar style document, to effectively communicate the gospel and highlight the key aspects of our faith to the youth of today.

A discerning believer: A practising member of the Sea of Rome. This represents the individual's ability to exercise moral living. This individual must have a great understanding of all aspects of the triad which is the true foundation of the Catholic learning community.

An effective communicator: Catholic faith educators must have the ability to pass down morals that they have gained as members of the Catholic faith community to the next generation. It is essential for all educators to be inspirational and motivational in their delivery of course materials.

A reflective, creative, holistic thinker: This area defines a person whom is ready to examine a variety of perspectives on the topic of religious education. An accepting educator is one who is able to transcend generational barriers in order to portray the Catholic faith in a modern fashion.

A self-directed lifelong learner: This individual is able to supplement course material with external resources and personal experiences. The teacher is accountable to one's faith, acts as a mentor for their students and one who aids and comforts those who question the faith.

A collaborative contributor: A true and passionate educator must treat this as a vocation and call to service rather than an occupation or career path. They must foster spirituality within the child and lead the generation of tomorrow.

A caring family member: This teacher treats the classroom as a second home and fosters a sense of community among the children. Respects the dignity of every student and promotes healthy relationships.

A responsible citizen: An educator who truly abides in the gospel values and sets the pathway for being a conscientious member of society, as taught by the teachings of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Recommendations:

1. THAT every Catholic District School Board in Ontario offer a greater number of Professional Development opportunity for Religion teachers to ensure educators are adequately prepared to lead the current generation of students.

2. THAT the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Catholic Education, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ensure that all Catholic educators administering the religion curriculum follow similar guidelines as those outlined in the valued Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations.

INTEGRATION OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH

In order to allow students to excel in religion courses, many schools across Ontario are providing alternate courses for students in order to target various talents and interests. This essentially allows for studies to be hands on and engaging. Many English Catholic Student Trustees believe this should be the case province-wide. This alternative provides students with the opportunity to choose from various courses directly relating to religious education, however, through different means of expression and interpretation.

Courses such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, peace and politics, marriage, leadership, world history and construction technology are various courses offered at select schools. This allows for students to learn religious history and key principles while also teaching essential life skills and allowing for creative expression. These classes still review all vital information, however they are incorporated into a captivating and engaging lesson. These courses also allow for those focusing on a particular area to get further experience for post-secondary education. Catholic students claim that these alternative courses allow for a break from repetitive religion course options. Catholic students request a review of the content be made to the religion course material to modernize it in order to appeal to a young generation. These courses would allow those who may not do well simply with textbook learning to excel at their specific area of interest.

Recommendations:

1. THAT the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Institute of Catholic Education, and the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ensure that religious study is integrated further into additional courses and offered to students as alternative options to a mandatory religion credit, while still maintaining the strong conviction to Catholicity in the curriculum.