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News National & World

Sat, September 15, 2007

Voters' faith falters Sun Media poll shows 50% oppose extending funding religious-based schools

By JAMES WALLACE AND ANTONELLA ARTUSO, SUN MEDIA

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TORONTO -- John Tory's plan to extend public funding to non-Catholic, faith-based schools is proving a tough sell among Ontario voters, suggests an SES Research/Sun Media poll.

The poll indicates 50% of Ontario voters oppose the Conservative leader's plan, while 43% are supportive.

"I think it would be fair to say a lot of people are just reacting to this," said Nik Nanos, president of SES Research. "It's almost an emotional reaction."

But it's still too early in the campaign to tell whether that split among voters will hurt the Conservatives, Nanos said.

"I think a lot of it will have to do with how John Tory personally handles this over the next little while," he said.

"If you think of it this way, 43% support the initiative," Nanos said. "That would be more than enough to form a government under our first-past-the-post system."

"So, it's really hard to tell what kind of impact this is actually going to have."



Ontario Conservative leader John Tory is all smiles as he prepares to deliver a speech before the Toronto Chamber of Commerce. (J.P. Moczulski/CP)



YOUR TURN

Do you think the city should go along with a city staff recommendation that says some of the south side stands at Lansdowne Park should be torn down?

- Yes
- No

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Faith-based school funding has emerged as the most controversial issue so far in the run-up to the Oct. 10 election.

Tory proposes to spend \$400 million to bring 53,000 students in Jewish, Muslim, Christian and other faith-based schools under the umbrella of public education. To qualify for funding, those schools would have to accept conditions, including standardized testing, provincially-accredited teachers and agree to teach Ontario's curriculum.

Tory has proposed to appoint former premier Bill Davis to head a commission to look at a process to integrate faith-based schools into the public system.

Premier Dalton McGuinty once again hammered away yesterday at Tory's proposal during a Sudbury stop.

"It's a bad idea," he said. "We want our kids coming together in the same classroom, sitting side-by-side from various faiths."

NOT WEDGE ISSUE YET

Faith-based school funding isn't yet the wedge issue Liberal strategists say it could be, the SES polling suggests. The intensity of opposition to faith-based school funding is stronger than support for it, Nanos said.

"For those Ontarians who support the initiative, they probably support it because they think it's the right thing to do," he said. "But there isn't the same type of passion to support the initiative compared to the passion to resist."

"The people who are not happy about this are very unhappy," Nanos said.

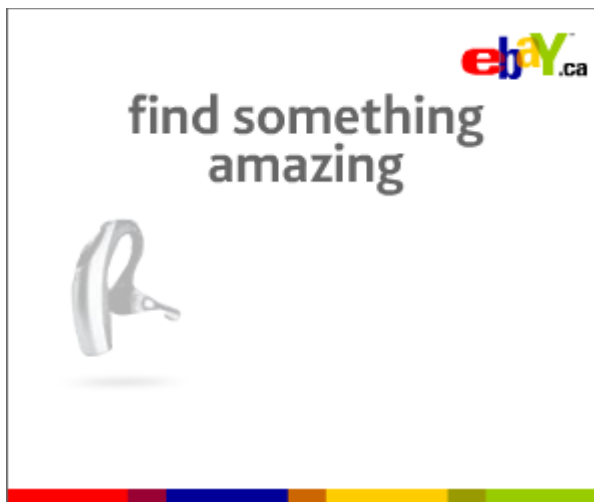
Older Ontarians are the least supportive of the plan, perhaps in part because that generation recalls the controversy surrounding the Davis government decision to extend full public funding to Catholic high schools in the mid-1980s.

"In a way, I think there's a certain minority of voters out there across Ontario where this is kind of opening up an old wound from 25 years ago," Nanos said.

For Tory, the gamble will be whether the faith-based issue turns into a ballot question -- whether voters, when they go into the polling booth, cast their vote based on that issue. "If it is, it's going to be very difficult for John Tory," Nanos said.

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