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TCDSB Catholic School Advisory Councils
TCDSB Elementary School Principals

Dear Partners in Catholic Education,

WHY WE SUPPORT A STANDARDIZED RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE TEST

Across the system this week, you have been asked to weigh the benefits and process of the standardized religious test to be deployed across much of the system later this year. The religious knowledge test was originally requested by the Board in 2003, and a majority of trustees voted last month to continue the rollout in additional wards for grade 4 students after a successful pilot in Ward 7.

One important fact is that the purpose of a standardized religious knowledge test is not to measure faith but to measure religious knowledge instruction. The religious test, which was originally developed in 2005 by Board staff has been vetted through the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) and the National Office of Religious Education at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. It is built on the foundations of our current religious knowledge instruction and based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the catechetical documentary tradition of the Church.

The National Catholic Educational Association, (NCEA) an umbrella body that represents Catholic school boards in North America has had religion assessment on their radar for some time. They point out in a recent article entitled “Why Pastors Get On Board With Religion Assessment” that both the Catholic school and the parish are equally responsible for delivering religious instruction and formation. The pastor bears the primary responsibility from the Church in providing catechesis; but both the parish and the Catholic school share in this responsibility by carrying out the daily actual instruction. The assessment program, “is a tool to help both (you) and (your) pastor ensure that the parish school of religion is delivering the best possible program by showing areas of strength and areas of needed growth.” It is not as much about the individual student achievement as it is about the collective measurement as a whole.

We have heard from time to time that our schools are not up to the standard they once were in terms of providing core knowledge demonstrated by our students preparedness for confirmation. A large focus of religious education beyond grade 9 focuses on elements such as world religions and self-development. We have also seen a significant migration of confirmation preparation from the school into the parish. In the move to the standardized Ontario Report Card, Catholic schools lost the right to “grade” religious instruction as we once did as is now only for commentary. We unfortunately also have a situation that our unique Catholic schools could be at future risk if put to a vote as was done in several other provinces across the country.

A standardized test shows that we are not only in the business of core education and faith formation but about religious instruction. Faith and values can never be demonstrated on paper but do occur by continually sharing our good news and highlighting our virtues. Knowledge instruction creates better formed and knowledgeable Catholics by laying a foundation that can ultimately be measured. A better informed individual can also defend the roots of their belief. While it is true that a knowledge test is not the only method used to assess such information but it can be used as a notable gauge for estimating how students assimilate the Catholic faith.

In the overall perspective, the standardized test is not stored in the students Ontario Student Record, but we are interested in the aggregate results within a school and across the school board. Good results will illustrate there is no issue. Additionally, we should not shy away from results that we fear could be less than favourable from time to time or in place to place, there is always room for improvement. Just as other standardized tests help us target revised materials and instruction methods, so too will this test.

In a changing society where Catholic values and traditions are under threat, it bears the responsibility of all of us, parents, teachers, administrators and trustees to make sure Catholic schools are (both fundamentally and demonstrably) the schools with a difference and to ensure our Catholic Schools continue to thrive and be models of educational excellence.

Sincerely,



John Del Grande
TCDSB Trustee – Ward 7



Ann Andrachuk
TCDSB Trustee – Ward 2