

Catholic board split over religious testing

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Town Crier

By Claudia Cautillo

What is the Word of God? What do Catholics remember during Holy Week? How many books are in the Bible?

Some grade 4 students will be asked to show how much they know about their faith when they have their religious knowledge put to the test next month.

Students in half of the Toronto Catholic District School Board's 12 wards will take the religious knowledge test, while trustees representing the other six wards opted their schools out of writing it.

Ward 7 schools Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Timothy will have students participate, while others in Ward 5, including St. Gabriel and Blessed Trinity, will not.

Ward 7 trustee John Del Grande had five schools in his ward take a pilot test last year, and says it will help the board measure how well students are grasping Catholic concepts.

"As a separate school board, religion is one of the fundamental core courses that we offer, and I think it's only prudent to make sure that we're assessing whether or not the students are obtaining the knowledge that we're teaching in that course," he said, adding that he prefers to consider the test an assessment.

Del Grande says there's been a misconception that what's being tested is the child's faith, but he says that's not the case.

"Faith is something that you either have or you don't have, and you practice it or you don't practice it," he said.

Ward 5 trustee Maria Rizzo, one of the trustees who opted her schools out of taking the evaluation, says you can't test spirituality, and kids are tested too much already with standardized provincial tests in grades 3, 6, 9 and 10.

Many parents in her community thought the test was stupid, and parents should have been consulted before moving forward with the evaluation, she says. Parents can choose not to have their child write the test.

"Are there people in my community that might support religious testing? I would say yes, there are. Are they the vast majority of parents? I know for sure that's not true," Rizzo said.

Del Grande says students' test scores won't go on their report cards, and kids won't be

penalized for scoring low.

He says the results, which will be reported to the board in September, will give them a chance to look at whether curriculum changes are needed.

He says if scores were high, testing would only take place every few years.

But Rizzo calls the whole process “a waste of time and energy,” adding that it will disrupt the classroom, and that students are already living their faith daily.

Maria Russo, the chair of the parent council at St. Timothy’s, says she doesn’t mind the testing content, but is concerned that another standardized evaluation will be added pressure for the students.

Anthony Bellissimo, president of the Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers, has the same concerns, and says the grade 4 religion program already evaluates students.

“So not only is this test not necessary, it’s redundant,” he said.

The test won’t take into account the role that family and the Church play in religious formation, he said, adding that schools that don’t score as well as others could be perceived as doing something wrong in their Catholic teachings.

“Religion and living out the gospel is emphasized in every subject area, and to take this kind of snapshot I think minimizes what we do in our Catholic schools,” he said.

Randal Hendricks, pastor at St. Timothy’s Parish in North York, says the test could be helpful to assess how well the kids are grasping elements of their spirituality, but adds faith is something they have to live and not just learn.

“Obviously the question of faith or faith experience is something that’s difficult to be judged from these things, but it does give us a sense of whether they are engaged in their knowledge of their faith.”

The 77 schools in Wards 2, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11, will write the test in May. The evaluations will cost the board \$12,000.