

# Creationism raised as Ont. election issue

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TORONTO — Publicly-funded religious schools would be allowed to teach creationism and other theories, says Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory.

Speaking to reporters at the a Jewish day school in Thornhill, Ont., on Wednesday, Mr. Tory defended his plan to bring Jewish, Islamic and other religious schools into the public education system.

“They teach evolution in the Ontario curriculum, but they also could teach the fact to the children that there are other theories that people have out there that are part of some Christian beliefs,” Mr. Tory said at the Kamin Education Centre.

If elected premier on Oct. 10, Mr. Tory has promised to give private religious schools \$400-million if they opt into the public system.

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He says that move will subject the schools to provincial inspection, thereby ensuring students receive a more well-rounded education while still allowing schools to teach their core beliefs.

There are about 100 faith-based private schools across the province, with an enrolment of 53,000 students.

“If we want to be genuinely inclusive, then we have to say we're going to include all faiths in public education,” he said.

At the moment, only Roman Catholic schools get tax dollars, while other faith-based schools are left out of the funding loop. Mr. Tory said that is unfair and will change if he wins power next month.

But Education Minister Kathleen Wynne – who is running against Mr. Tory for her Toronto seat – said teaching creationism alongside evolution would be a violation of the curriculum.

She said Catholic schools are allowed to explore creationism but only in religion – not science – classes.

Ms. Wynne says Mr. Tory's comments show that he has not really thought out his policy and is just distracting from the real need to invest more in the existing public-education system.

“The reason that private schools exist is that they don't want to be part of the publicly funded system,” she said.

“In terms of the public dollars, those public dollars should go into a curriculum that has been agreed upon as being the one that is the best for our kids and is rooted in science and is rooted in evidence.”

The funding of religious education has fast become one of the main issues in the campaign for the upcoming provincial election. Mr. Tory promised to fund Jewish, Islamic and other religious schools, a move Premier Dalton McGuinty said would threaten the stability of the public education system.

Mr. Tory said he has listened to discussion on the topic for 30 years, and says this is the right time to address the issue.

If elected, he said his first year in office would be spent consulting with education groups and other organizations on how to include private religious schools in the public education system.

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