

Shoring Up Our Public Anchors*

Feelings are running high in Ontario around the financing of private schools, which has emerged as the hot-button issue in the provincial election campaign. Because Catholic schools already receive public funds, debate is raging over the value of extending equal treatment to other religious groups.

In a culturally diverse world, some people contend that it is essential not only to tolerate difference but also to support it. Others claim quite the opposite: that a multicultural society should go out of its way to secure its public space, institutions and practices. A society marked by cultural, racial and religious difference needs to find the common anchors that hold it together. It is our public institutions that serve this very purpose.

Public schools play a role well beyond education. Community centres offer more than recreational programming. Libraries are not simply stacks of books.

Public schools, child care centres and libraries comprise the foundations of vital shared space. They provide a place where residents can

come together to learn, to play and simply to meet. They act as a neutral place for citizens to discuss, debate and argue the concerns that affect their lives and the quality of their communities.

In many neighbourhoods, schools serve as a support hub for families. In Toronto, for example, parenting and family literacy centres operate in free space provided by more than 50 schools that offer educational and literacy programs, nutritious snacks, recreational opportunities, public health and mental health services, and assistance for children with special needs. These centres are found only in public schools. In fact, the Government of Ontario has tried to promote a broader neighbourhood role through its “community use of schools” policy that offsets the rental of school space when used by nonprofit groups.

Community centres are also vital neighbourhood hubs. They organize play groups for toddlers and offer quality after-school supervision for the children of working parents, now the majority of families. These centres help prevent crime by developing recreational and cultural programs for young adults, and provide social-

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ization opportunities for seniors. Yet the vulnerability of these vital public places was evident in a recent cost-cutting move by the City of Toronto to close operations on Mondays in 130 centres. Fortunately, the decision has since been reversed.

The Toronto Public Library uses its public space creatively not only to promote literacy but also to foster the engagement of residents. It hosts an array of cultural events including lectures and presentations of art, music and dance – at no charge. Immigrant settlement organizations work with library branches to offer information, English conversation and interpretation services. Despite their role as core community anchors, libraries were also targets in recent City budget slashing with the slated closure on Sundays of 16 branches.

These examples involving schools, community centres and libraries form the tip of a big iceberg: the precariousness of public institutions.

The vulnerability of public schools is rooted in religion – where rites are seen as rights. The frailty of community centres and libraries derives from a different source: shaky financing based on stretched-to-the-limit municipal property taxes and user fees.

Despite their differences, all three public institutions face a common challenge: making the case for their inherent value. These are the places that create healthy and safe communities. They are the spaces that add quality to neighbourhood life. They are the community hubs where anyone – and everyone – is welcome.

Ironically, we protect difference when we support the common anchors that bring us together. We respect diversity when we shore up the elements of shared space. We build a strong society through public anchors that secure its very foundation.

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