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# The last thing we need are race-based schools

## Plans for an 'Afrocentric' alternative for students with coloured skin run counter to Canada's history and aspirations

**Daphne Bramham, The Vancouver Sun**

Published: Saturday, February 09, 2008

TORONTO - It seems inconceivable that racially segregated, public schools could be contemplated in Canada in 2008.

Yet 14 years after apartheid ended in South Africa and 54 years after the United States Supreme Court ordered an end to segregation, that's what Toronto is doing.

Late last month, the Toronto District School Board voted to teach an "enriched African curriculum" that touches on the histories, cultures, experiences and contributions of people of both African descent and "other racialized groups." In September 2009, it plans to open an "Afrocentric" alternative school.



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Toronto does have a problem. Four of every 10 black students never graduate, a dropout rate that is nearly twice that of other students.

The theory is that by teaching black and other "racialized" students something other than European and North American history and culture, they won't be bored at school. Instead, the theory goes, they'll be excited by learning and will be more likely to graduate.

Toronto tried this once before in the 1970s with a special school for first nations children. It worked out about as well as the Indian residential schools that we're still making amends for.

Everything about it runs counter to Canada's history and its aspirations to be a peaceful, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multicultural society. And, so far, considering that Canada accepts more immigrants per capita than any other country in the world, we're managing reasonably well. So far, we have not had racial or ethnic riots like those that have racked the United States, France, Britain, Germany and Australia.

Canada's public school system deserves much of the credit for that. There are no income barriers at public schools and, up until now, no colour bars. And our public schools are secular almost to the point of absurdity.

Every child is welcome. Immigrant and native-born Canadians learn the same things in the same grades based on curricula approved by the provincial governments. Together they learn to read, write and do arithmetic and, along the way, they absorb Canadian societal and cultural values such as tolerance, equality and the rule of law.

Public schools are more than just places of shared learning. They are the heart of communities where not only children meet, but their parents get to know each other and form friendships.

The Toronto plan is an attack on the fundamental principles of public education at a time when there seems to be growing support across Canada for publicly funded independent schools. British Columbia succumbed nearly two decades ago to pressure from parents and special-interest groups to accredit and fund separate schools. As a result, we have Sikh, fundamentalist Mormon, Muslim, evangelical Christian and other schools that actively discourage anyone not of that faith from attending.

What's striking in all this Toronto hand-wringing is the notion that it's hard to create good schools. In fact, it's dead simple. Provide children with excellent teachers.

Great teachers don't have bored students. The best teachers can make everything from geometry to genomes to Shakespeare interesting. Their passion and skills open worlds that their students have never even had the chance to imagine. Their students can't under-achieve because the finest teachers make learning painless, inevitable and fun.

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