

# Breaking up our school system: MacDonald

By **MOIRA MACDONALD** - TORONTO SUN

March 19, 2011 - 4:41pm

When a left-wing school trustee uses “choice” to describe a reason for creating schools to address chronic underachievement in a particular community, you know it’s not politics as usual.

That was the word Toronto District School Board trustee Maria Rodrigues used last week as we discussed the possibility of a Portuguese-focused school among options on the table for an upcoming TDSB task force. It will look at causes and solutions for persistent low graduation rates among Portuguese students.

“It’s not segregation. Segregation is forced ... This is about choice.

“Not everybody is going to choose this but it’s another choice on the parents’ list to help their kids succeed,” said Rodrigues, Portuguese herself and a university graduate. “I think it’s important to give that choice — if that’s what people want.”

I’m not trying to engage in “gotcha” journalism and catch Rodrigues using a word that’s code among supporters of charter schools and voucher systems, where public dollars are used to help students attend schools of their choice — public, private or a blend of the two.

Rodrigues was not referring to any of those things, other than giving parents more options.

What’s interesting in this debate is not shaking down neatly along political lines.

When the TDSB approved its Africentric Alternative School, it had support from the right and left, and opponents on both sides, too.

Ontario’s Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty said he didn’t like it but wasn’t going to stop it.

More recently, we’ve got Ontario Conservative Leader Tim Hudak actually agreeing with irascible provincial NDP loudmouth Peter Kormos. Both represent Niagara-area ridings where the local public school board plans to open the DSBN Academy — a school dedicated to helping kids make it to university or college where their parents did not. Admission is by application.

During their research, board officials looked at similar schools in southern California — run under the charter model. The hope is DSBN Academy will help combat the poverty cycle in a region with one of Canada’s highest jobless rates.

Still, Kormos branded DSBN Academy “educational apartheid” and wrote education minister Leona Dombrowsky to put a stop to it, fearing it could be the start of a slippery slope of other such schools springing up across Ontario. Hudak started a petition against the school, saying it will “segregate students based on family income and history,” and “undermines the fundamentals of public education and equality.”

Funny, because it’s often those on the left who say the value of the public school system is in bringing children of diverse backgrounds together. What they learn there — if they learn anything at all — becomes secondary.

And that’s the question that needs to be asked: Are these targeted schools there to make a certain group feel good, or will they tackle a persistent student achievement problem?

The Africentric school was started because of a decade-plus campaign for one within the black community to deal with a high black student dropout rate mainstream schools had failed to fully address. As for a Portuguese school — we know there’s a problem but I haven’t heard a groundswell of calls from within that community for such a school, at least not yet.

For these schools to work — and be legitimately worth trying — there has to be demand and a demonstrated problem that's resisted other solutions.

As for the DSBN Academy? It will only fly if parents choose it. It's telling that the politicians don't seem to have enough faith in their voters to choose what's right for their own kids.

Move over Premier Dad — you've got company.