

Canadian bishop tells schools to stop raising funds through gambling

EDMONTON, Alberta - Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton has banned "harmful gambling activities" by Catholic schools to raise funds, but he admitted it is likely to be years for the new policy to take effect.

The archbishop planned to meet with school officials to set a date to implement the ban, which is among a large number of archdiocesan policies developed in an overall policy review. Most of the policies take effect Oct. 1.

In an e-mail interview, Archbishop Smith said he recognizes that schools have become reliant on gambling revenue and "will need some time to transition away from this." It "may be a few years from now" before the ban is implemented, he said.

The archbishop took issue with media reports that suggested the gambling ban has created "some sort of antagonistic situation" between school boards and the archdiocese.

"Nothing could be further from the truth. Everyone is committed to our responsibility to keep our schools true to their Catholic identity," he said.

School officials, he said, understand that raising money from gambling creates a problem and that the problem must be addressed.

The new policy bans parishes, Catholic institutions and Catholic organizations from fundraising through "harmful gambling activities" including casino gaming, video lottery terminals and high-stakes bingo.

It also bans Catholic organizations from applying for funding from the Alberta Lottery Fund or other sources that raise money from gambling.

Archbishop Smith questioned why schools and parent councils are in the position of

having to raise funds for educational necessities.

“To take but one example, computers and other technology requirements, in this day and age, are not ‘extras’ to be acquired only if additional revenue can be raised through casinos or other methods,” he said. “They are necessary and should be funded directly by the government.”

To put the burden for paying for necessary educational expenses on schools or parent councils is unfair and “introduces inequities among schools,” the archbishop said.

The archdiocese’s new policy statement noted the Alberta bishops have been trying since 1998 to create awareness of the moral issues associated with legalized gambling “and to call for a Christian response.”

“Foremost among the moral and social problems that arise from legalized gambling in this province is the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable,” the policy stated.

The new policy was distributed to Catholic school superintendents and chairs of boards of trustees along with a Sept. 16 memo from the archbishop stating that he wanted to allow “sufficient time for a smooth transition out of this dependence.”