

YOUTH PROTECTION DROPS

INQUIRY INTO MONTREAL

CHASSIDIC SCHOOL

*By Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter - August 17, 2016*

Quebec's Youth Protection Department (YPD) has closed the file on a Montreal chassidic educational institution that was the focus of a dramatic police intervention in June after finding insufficient evidence of negligence of its students.

The Vizhnitz community, which runs the boys' religious school on Park Avenue, near Beaubien Street, says the report it received from Batshaw Youth and Family Centres exonerates it from any wrongdoing.

Police cruisers surrounded the commercial building on June 2, where the school is located, after about a dozen Batshaw workers were initially denied entrance to the school by its staff. The unannounced visit was a follow-up to an inquiry the agency had opened in April in response to "signalements," or reports, it had received that the children were suffering from neglect. The law's definition of neglect includes failure to provide an adequate education.

Such reports can be made by anyone, and their source is kept confidential.

"There is not enough evidence supporting the presumption that the security or the development of your children was considered in danger," states the YPD report, which is confidential but was obtained by the media.

"The observations and evaluations show that your children are following the normal stages of development."

Batshaw is managed by the CIUSSS de l'Ouest-de-l'Ile-de-Montréal.

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Hershber Hirsch, a board member of the school, said, "Now we have a letter that proves that we did nothing wrong."

Hirsch has said in the past that the establishment, known as the Vitzhnitz Talmud Torah, was not a regular school, but a place for religious study, and therefore does not require a permit from the education ministry or have to abide by the provincial curriculum and other regulations.

The approximately 70 elementary-aged children, however, were attending the institution during weekdays.

Nevertheless, the community has acknowledged that it must provide its children with the mandatory secular education. Since the Batshaw inquiry, it has entered into an agreement to have them home-schooled by their parents, under the supervision of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB).

There has been an upsurge in interest in home-schooling among the chassidic communities, which have come under renewed pressure to conform to the law.

After at least a decade of negotiations and warnings by successive education ministers – both Liberal and Parti Québécois – the current education minister, Sébastien Proulx, is promoting home-schooling, in conjunction with public school boards, as a way of solving the intractable problem.



*Quebec Education Minister Sébastien Proulx*

The government says it will no longer tolerate the lack of secular education at several chassidic and haredi schools, particularly those for boys, who typically devote most of their time to religious studies.

This past year, a pilot project saw more than 230 students from a Satmar school, Yeshiva Toras Moshe, learning math and French at home, for example, with their parents, while they continued their religious studies at the yeshiva.

The EMSB, which supervised them, found the results satisfactory by the school year's end, and the Satmar Chassidim are also pleased with how the program is going.

The arrangement with the EMSB was part of a 2014 out-of-court settlement reached with the attorney general of Quebec that allowed the yeshiva to avoid being closed.

Starting in September, Quebec is significantly increasing subsidies to school boards for home-schooling to \$1,000 per student per year, from \$616.

The growth in home-schooling has come almost entirely from the chassidic community. More than 600 children from that community are registered for the coming school year with the EMSB, which said it needed more resources to meet the demand.

EMSB chair Angela Mancini told *The CJN* that the spike in the number of children from the chassidic community means it will have to hire additional personnel. Prior to last year, the EMSB supervised an average of about 10 home-schooled students annually.

In the entire province, a total of only about 2,000 children are home-schooled.

A private initiative to address the issue of providing an adequate secular education specifically to boys in the Lubavitch community is also expanding.

The Limmud Centre opened last year with aid from Federation CJA and others. Its qualified teachers provide after-school tutoring to elementary students from the Rabbinical College of Canada. Its goal is to develop a structured homeschooling program to supplement what is taught at the yeshiva.