

Quebec school board elections could be delayed until 2020

Education minister fears election fatigue as voters are to go to the ballot box for provincial and federal general elections in 2018-19.



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Education Minister Sébastien Proulx says he's talking with the other political parties over a possible delay in school board elections. JACQUES BOISSINOT / THE CANADIAN PRESS

QUEBEC — The province is seriously examining the idea of delaying school board elections until 2020.

Education Minister Sébastien Proulx confirmed the possibility Thursday, noting he is in talks with the other political parties to see if they can come to an agreement.

Proulx said the delay would apply to all of the province's 72 school boards including the nine anglophone boards. Elections are scheduled for Nov. 4.

Voters in Quebec are casting ballots in a provincial election Oct. 1, and in a federal election in 2019. Proulx said there might be confusion or a lack of interest if a school board election were held, as well.

Also in the mix is the possibility of introducing electronic voting in school board elections, which the province's chief returning officer is studying. That will take time, too.

"Given the proximity with the provincial election — and with discussions about a possible use of an electronic voting system, which could stimulate participation — there is a reflection underway," Proulx told reporters.

"All the parties ... are taking part in the discussion. The proposal on the table is to delay the elections until 2020.

"To date all the parties seem to agree. We are in discussions with the boards, too. It's a proposal. Don't see it as a fait accompli."

Participation rates in school board elections are notoriously low, making them a hot political topic these days. In 2014, voter turnout was 4.85 per cent in the French network and 17.25 per cent in the English system.

They also cost money. The last election in 2014 cost \$20 million to stage. There are costs in delaying them, too, because school board commissioners come and go and have to be replaced in byelections.

Radio-Canada reported Thursday that there have been 40 byelections since the 2014 general election costing taxpayers a total of \$809,549.

Proulx said he hopes to come to an agreement on the issue before the legislature goes into summer recess on June 15. He would need to adopt legislation to delay the vote.

He said if the delay is authorized, the terms of existing school board commissioners would be extended.

It would not be the first time in recent history that such elections were delayed. Elections planned for 2011 were delayed until 2014, meaning the mandate of the commissioners lasted seven years instead of four.

Reached later, Jennifer Maccarone, president of the Quebec English School Board Association, welcomed the delay.

“We are in favour of a postponement of elections provided there is a clear action plan in place that aims to improve electoral turnout and the electoral process,” Maccarone said in a telephone interview.

That plan could include more funding to promote the elections to drum up interest and more flexibility on where and how people can vote. Electronic voting would be a plus.

She noted Quebec is the only province in Canada where school board elections are not held simultaneously with municipal elections, another possible cost-cutter.

But Maccarone dismissed concerns the delay could endanger the future of elections given the possibility of the Coalition Avenir Québec government winning the next election.

The CAQ’s policy is to abolish school boards and school board elections and replace them with education service centres.

Maccarone said recent experience has shown the English-speaking community values the existing system and will fight to keep it. The constitution is also on its side, she noted.

She was referring to the Liberal government’s [Bill 86](http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec-to-scrap-contentious-education-reform-bill-report-says) (<http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec-to-scrap-contentious-education-reform-bill-report-says>), which would have abolished boards but was eventually dropped.

“If they (in the CAQ) were to try this again, they would fail,” she said. “They are going to put the community completely against them because we shouldn’t have to consistently fight for our rights.”

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