

Opinion: CAQ focus on school governance overlooks the real issues

It is time to move on from a discussion on structure to one on how to best tackle the challenges students and educators are facing.



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The English Montreal School Board building on Fielding Ave. in N.D.G.: "By most measures, English school boards, despite limited resources, are performing exceptionally well. Our graduation rate last year across the province was 85

per cent, with my school board leading the way at close to 89 per cent," EMSB Chairman Angela Mancini writes.

JOHN MAHONEY / THE GAZETTE

The Quebec election campaign seems to be off to an early start. While the election will not be held until Oct. 1, various op-ed and letter writers in these pages have already weighed in on what is shaping up to be an important election issue: Coalition Avenir Québec's renewed call for the abolition of school boards. Last week, CAQ education spokesperson Jean-François Roberge defended his party's proposal ("[CAQ's plan respects English education rights](http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-caqs-school-governance-plan-respects-english-communitys-rights) (<http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-caqs-school-governance-plan-respects-english-communitys-rights>),” Opinion, May 3).

A debate on policy options and approaches is welcome: It will allow voters to make informed choices as they reflect on the party and the program they wish to support.

What is less welcome is the CAQ's plan.

It is time to move on from a discussion on structure to one on how to best tackle the challenges students are facing inside and outside of the classroom.

Two years ago, the English Montreal School Board joined others in leading the charge to protect the constitutional rights of Quebec's English-speaking community. The English boards across Quebec mandated Marlene Jennings and her committee to conduct a broad-based consultation with parents, teachers and community leaders. [Their report](http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-rejects-report-that-would-see-school-board-elections-maintained), (<http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-rejects-report-that-would-see-school-board-elections-maintained>) which was endorsed by community groups from across Quebec, stressed that school boards are highly valued by Quebec's English-speaking minority.

As an elected commissioner, my role is to oversee the proper functioning of the board, and I am the link to our community. We are known by our constituents and mandated by them to help ensure the education system adapts to the changing needs of students and to be their voice in Quebec City.

And, by most measures, English school boards, despite limited resources, are performing exceptionally well. Our graduation rate last year across the province was 85 per cent, with my school board leading the way at close to 89 per cent.

After reviewing different models and consulting with constitutional experts, the Jennings Committee concluded that the current practice of electing English school boards by universal suffrage is the best, and perhaps only, way to fulfill the government's obligation to protect the minority language community's constitutional rights.

The issue, to which the CAQ quite rightly draws attention when it points out the low participation rates in school board elections, is how to encourage higher voter turnout. In the past, exercising one's democratic right has not been easy. Voters have had to deal with inaccurate voters lists and long lineups at the polls. In some regions of Quebec, some voters have had to travel 100 kilometres each way to vote. Looking ahead, we should consider online voting and mail-in ballots, and we need to work with our French school board colleagues to clean up the lists.

But our primary focus should be on helping students, parents and teachers deal with rapidly evolving learning environment. With the advent of the internet, students have access to limitless sources of information, thus changing the role of the teacher, who has become less the source of knowledge and more of a coach. Social media, as we all know, has created its own set of challenges. And, of course, our student body is more diverse, and our schools have an important role to play in helping to build bridges between young people from different backgrounds and cultural traditions.

Access to English schools and declining enrolment is another topic that our political leaders should have the courage to address. It is decades since the Chambers Report recommended that "Access to English-language schooling must be widened at least to include all immigrant children who were being educated in English or whose parents come from English-speaking parts of the world."

Over the next few months, I look forward to a flurry of opinion pieces on how best to address these and other pressing issues facing our young people. That is the constructive debate we need to have.

Angela Mancini is chairman of the English Montreal School Board.