

Columnists

Allison Hanes: A new battle brewing at the EMSB?

The sudden resignation of director general Ann Marie Matheson raises concerns about trustee Marlene Jennings choosing her replacement.

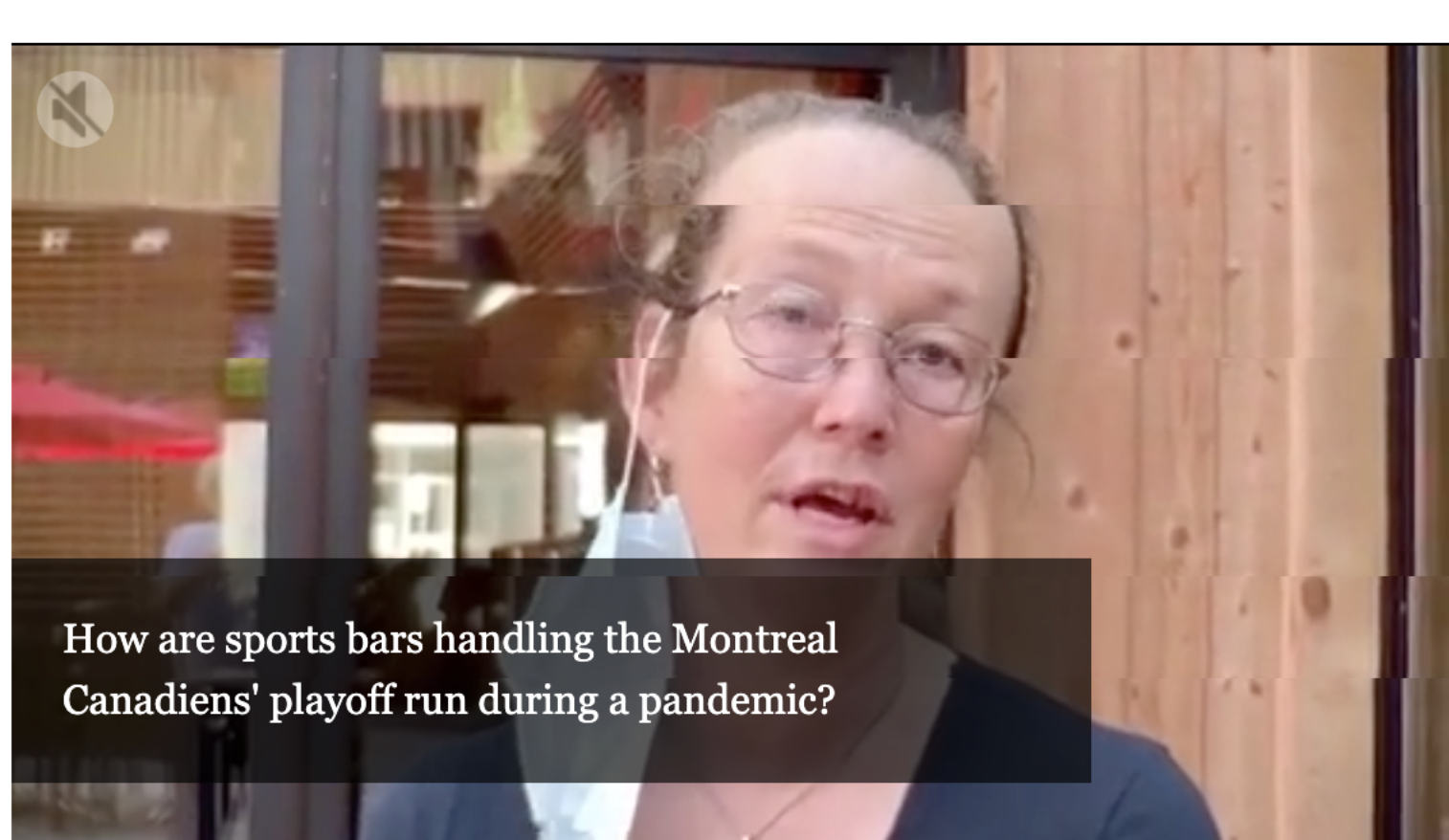
Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette
 Aug 13, 2020 • Last Updated 16 hours ago • 3 minute read



"As long as I am trustee, I'm not going to defer any decision, even if it's a decision that has to be taken on the very last day. ... I have to do my duty," Marlene Jennings said about selecting a new director general for the English Montreal School Board. GRAHAM HUGHES / The Canadian Press

Conspiracy theorists could have a field day reading hidden meaning into the announcement Monday that English Montreal School Board director general [Ann Marie Matheson had resigned suddenly](#).

News of Matheson's departure came the very day groups in the English-speaking community [scored a preliminary victory](#) in their challenge of the Quebec government's law abolishing school boards and replacing them with service centres. A Quebec Superior Court Justice granted a stay on the transformation, acknowledging "very serious questions" about the constitutionality of Bill 40, as it relates to the English-speaking minority's right to "manage and control" its own schools.



Was Matheson pushed out by a Coalition Avenir Québec government eager to install its own official after this early-round rebuff of its school governance reform? Or did Matheson just throw in the towel after a five-year tenure that can charitably be described as "tumultuous," given she often found herself in the crosshairs of the internecine warfare that has gripped the EMSB council of commissioners?

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Either way, Matheson's exit — hard on the heels of board chair Angela Mancini, [after a blistering report on the latter's notorious hijinks](#) — leaves a hole and raises some thorny questions at a sensitive time.

The EMSB was not undeservedly [placed under trusteeship](#) by the Quebec government last year over allegations of mismanagement and after a long history of dysfunction (or downright malfunction), largely attributable to Mancini. To the delight of many, Marlene Jennings, a former Liberal MP, was put in charge to clean up the beleaguered board's act. As trustee, her calm, authoritative [leadership has been a breath of fresh air](#) for staff, teachers and parents, fed up with the previous toxic climate.

However Jennings's move to immediately launch a search for Matheson's successor with the help of an outside head-hunting firm is being greeted with some trepidation. Normally the choice of a new top administrator is the purview of elected representatives. But since Jennings, as trustee, is effectively a one-woman council of commissioners, the responsibility is falling to her.

There is frustration among some central parents committee members who feel shut out of the process. There is resentment among some sidelined commissioners who fear Jennings could install a government puppet to do its bidding at the EMSB, (especially given the court ruling allows them to dare to hope to live another day).

But there is also concern among the wider community challenging Bill 40, that a swift appointment by a government-named caretaker, no matter how respected, usurps the whole idea of the anglophone minority controlling and managing its own schools. It's the very crux of the case. Especially in light of this week's ruling hitting pause on changing school boards into service centres, there is unease that a new EMSB director general appointed by Jennings alone could lack legitimacy.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Jennings defended her right to name a new top administrator when questioned

any decision, even if it's a decision that has to be taken on the very last day. ... I have to do my duty."

On paper, she may be correct. But as a matter of principle, does she have the moral authority to proceed?

The government is probably breathing down her neck to fill the top job at the EMSB before her mandate expires in November. That's when elections for new service centre governing board seats were supposed to be held for English schools in Quebec. This was the CAQ's big concession to the anglophone community in passing the reform bill. But that process is up in the air now as the constitutional case winds its way through the courts.

As for whether Matheson was ousted, there was no sign of bitterness as Jennings paid tribute to her service and even gave her a hug at the Wednesday meeting.

Governance is surely the last thing on the average parent's mind as children head back to school in the midst of a global pandemic. But whether Bill 40 ultimately gets upheld or struck down, decision-making at the EMSB will revert to elected representatives — it's more a matter of of what kind of body they sit on and how much power they have.

Nobody wants a return to the bickering, paralysis, factionalism and polarization that characterized EMSB governance for so long. The board — or service centre — desperately needs renewal to overcome its sordid history. But expediting the choice of the next director general may not be the right way to move forward.

ahanes@postmedia.com

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