

Columnists

Allison Hanes: Good riddance to big cause of dysfunction at the EMSB

Don't cry for Angela Mancini. Her Hail Mary pass to save her moribund political career by playing the victim backfired — and badly.

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette

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In her resignation statement, Angela Mancini expressed pride in her long record of service and acknowledged that she made some mistakes along the way. JOHN KENNEY / Montreal Gazette

After a tumultuous 22 years at the English Montreal School Board — 12 of them at the helm — Angela Mancini finally backed herself into a corner she couldn't manoeuvre her way out of.

Last week, a damning report from an independent human resources consultant recommended that the EMSB chair be barred from running in upcoming elections for the new service centres that are replacing school boards in the wake of Bill 40. Ironically, the exhortation was the outcome of an investigation into a complaint filed by Mancini herself, alleging she was the victim of harassment by her fellow commissioners. Instead, it deemed her charge “vexatious” and found that she was more often than not the bully.



Though Mancini initially lashed out at the findings, calling it a “political vendetta” by her eternal enemies, the writing was on the wall. If she didn't go quietly, she would most certainly be shoved out by a government already thin on patience where the EMSB is concerned.

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So she did the only dignified thing she could. Mancini mercifully resigned Wednesday. Of course, she had to have the last word, castigating the process initiated by government-appointed caretaker trustee Marlene Jennings to probe her claims of intimidation “unfair.”

But don't cry for Mancini. Her Hail Mary pass to save her moribund political career by playing the victim backfired — and badly. Checkmate.

Her departure is actually good news for the students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators at the EMSB after two decades of drama.

The rare step of suggesting someone be banned from running for public office in a democratic society constitutes a scathing indictment of her leadership. Mancini's reign was marked by endless vitriol, infighting, the resignations of competent administrators, political jockeying, ethics violations, nepotism, paralysis, myopia and childishness that often made the council of commissioners the embarrassment of Montreal's English-speaking community.

There were certainly some laudable accomplishments since the EMSB was founded in 1998, but they have largely been overshadowed by the endless bickering on display at board meetings. Montreal's English schools have thrived in spite of, rather than because of, these antics — a credit to the efforts of countless educators and administrators.

Jennings took the high road by thanking Mancini and wishing her well in her future endeavours.

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In her resignation statement, Mancini expressed pride in her long record of service and acknowledged that she made some mistakes along the way.

But it's too late for introspection and humility. Mancini had plenty of opportunities to shape up. Instead, she always blamed others for her failings, rejected differing opinions, and continued with the brass-knuckle politicking that has discredited the EMSB many times over. Her mortal wounds were all self-inflicted.

As the report that sealed Mancini's fate noted: “The EMSB Council/Service Centre desperately needs turnover and renewal, i.e., new views, fresh perspectives, vision and expertise that only current ‘outsiders’ can bring to the table.”

Perhaps some of Mancini's ex-colleagues should also take note of this key finding. While she no doubt contributed greatly to the toxic climate that permeated the board, particularly the council of commissioners, she didn't do it alone. It takes two to tango, after all. Mancini was a big factor — but certainly not the only reason — the EMSB was placed under trusteeship by the Quebec government last year. All commissioners were put on a tight leash in that move.

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Say what you will about the Coalition Avenir Québec's political motivations or its rocky relationship with the English-speaking community, it was high time the EMSB was brought to heel. And the appointment of the calm and competent Jennings to bring things under control may be the best thing that has happened to the organization in a very long time.

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But looking toward the future, new blood is definitely required.

The EMSB, or more accurately what replaces it, needs a fresh start to continue its important role of representing the anglophone community's interests on the crucial issue of education. Whether the new governance body becomes rubber stamp for the education ministry, as many fear, or develops some credibility and clout remains to be seen. But everyone will benefit from a clean slate that steers clear of acrimony and adopts a more constructive approach that puts children first, rather than political allegiances.

Good riddance to one major cause of the dysfunction that has plagued the EMSB for far too long. Let Mancini's demise be a lesson to anyone tempted to carry the noxious baggage of the past 22 years into a new era that it's simply not welcome.

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