

Columnists

Allison Hanes: Time for the EMSB to turn over a new leaf

After two decades of dysfunction and a year of trusteeship, the English Montreal School Board will hold its first meeting of the new(ish) council of commissioners Wednesday.

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette
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Marlene Jennings's mandate as EMSB trustee expired on Nov. 6. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

The English Montreal School Board quietly emerged from trusteeship on Friday, but the council of commissioners still faces the spectre of being kept on a tight leash.

In one of her last acts, Marlene Jennings, the former Liberal MP appointed by the Coalition Avenir Québec government to clean house at the troubled institution, recommended that an outside consultant be named to “accompany” the EMSB in implementing the rest of the good governance reforms she developed during her time as trustee.



Jennings shared her advice with Education Minister Jean-François Roberge. She explained it in a letter to the incoming council that she read aloud at her final de-facto one-woman board meeting Wednesday. And she said in an interview that despite all the progress made over the past year, she worries old habits die hard when it comes to the new council.

“In terms of the personnel, (I have a) high confidence level. In terms of the council, I have concerns,” she said. “One word of advice to the incoming council is recognize that you have people who know what they’re doing working for you and empower them to do their job and to do their job well.”

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Jennings’s mistrust is perhaps understandable. She came to a deeply dysfunctional organization where nepotism, favouritism and political interference in day-to-day operations ruled the day. She managed to oust the worst offenders: the toxic duo of former chair Angela Mancini and former vice-chair Sylvia Lo Bianco. She improved morale among the “dedicated” senior administrators who have long exhibited great professionalism in spite of a poisonous work environment.

But she clashed with Joe Ortona, the sidelined interim chair, now the acclaimed chair of the incoming council.

The main bone of contention was her plan to name the new director general after the resignation of the previous top administrator, Ann Marie Matheson.

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Ortona tried unsuccessfully to stop her in court from hiring anyone. A judge rejected his bid and Jennings insisted she had the authority.

However, members of the wider English-speaking community challenged the legitimacy of taking that power away from the elected council. And after running for president of anglophone rights group the Quebec Community Groups Network, a position she was elected to only Thursday night, Jennings proved sensitive to these fears. Also, forcing through the appointment when Ortona had refused a belated invitation to participate as a matter of principle might have set up the incoming DG for failure. That would be unfair.

So, in a wise, face-saving move, Jennings did not go through with the nomination.

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Instead, she left the new council with a short list of two finalists who have been interviewed by the search committee. She said the candidates were quizzed about their views on matters like the EMSB’s participation in constitutional challenges of Bill 40, defending the English community’s management and control of its schools, and Bill 21, the secularism law that forbids the hiring of teachers who wear religious symbols. She forwarded the commissioners a report on the rigorous recruitment process.

So the ball is now in their court when they meet for the first time as a council this coming Wednesday. Will they take an honest look at the candidates or reject them outright as a political hot potato? Their first actions will speak volumes.

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But Jennings’s last curve ball, thrown in her final inning as trustee, nevertheless has Ortona stewing.

“It’s a little surprising. Trusteeship is for one year. It’s over. If the government had wanted to bring an outside observer, that should have been done prior to trusteeship. Trusteeship is the most extreme measure.” he said. “We were entrusted to govern. The government should respect Section 23 (of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms) and let us do our jobs.”

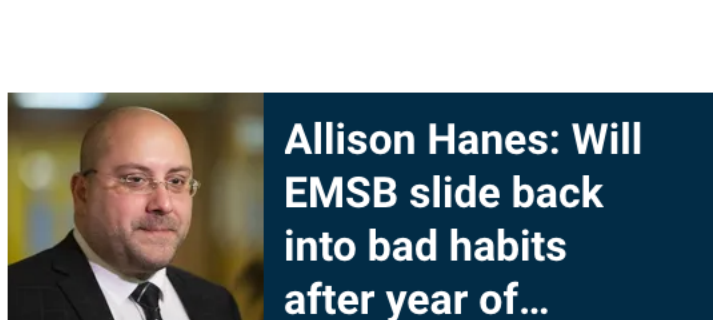
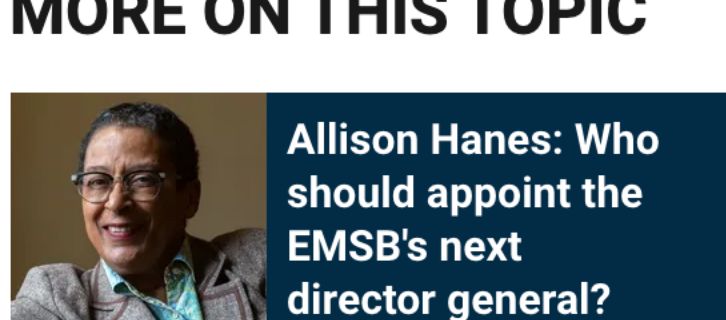
Ortona has a point. At the very least, the new EMSB council should have an opportunity to show it has cleaned up its act, taken important lessons about governance to heart and is now ready to turn over a new leaf — even if its ranks are occupied by many of the same old faces. The Quebec government is still expecting monthly reports as a condition of lifting the trusteeship.

Jennings’s recommendation may be aimed at ensuring a year of progress at the EMSB isn’t undermined, but it still gives the CAQ government something to lord over an important anglophone institution. Closer scrutiny may have been warranted in the past, given the EMSB’s tumultuous history. But it may not be justified anymore.

At least, let’s wait and see. The new council deserves a chance.

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