

Allison Hanes: Welcome to a Quebec without school boards

From the closing of Riverdale High School to requests for lists of teachers who wear religious garb, we got a glimpse of the future.

ALLISON HANES, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/AHANES2014](https://montrealgazette.com/author/ahanes2014)) Updated: January 29, 2019



Premier François Legault with Education Minister Jean-François Roberge. They've sealed Riverdale's fate, leaving no room for discussion or compromise, Allison Hanes writes. *JACQUES BOISSINOT / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

Students, parents and teachers at Riverdale High School in Pierrefonds were hit by a bombshell Monday (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/lets-slow-down-transfer-of-riverdale-high-pearson-school-board-says>): They learned their school is slated to close next fall.

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge announced that he had made an executive decision (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-to-close-riverdale-high-school-building-will-go-to-francophone-system>) to hand over the half-empty building owned by the Lester B.

Pearson School Board to the Commission scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys to ease overcrowding.

Case closed. No room for discussion, protests, alternatives or compromises. No time to hear from students, teachers, parents or the wider community. Riverdale's fate is sealed.

Premier François Legault on Tuesday called the move an "exceptional situation." But the edict that came down from on high may offer Quebecers a glimpse of a future without school boards.

If or when the Coalition Avenir Québec introduces its promised bill to abolish the province's elected school commissions, this could soon be how such calls are made. The CAQ wants to create service centres that support schools, rather than micromanage them. In his book, Roberge outlined his vision of empowering school governing councils and allowing each institution to develop its own independent identity. That may be a good thing on its own.

But it could come at a price if the layer of democracy provided by Quebec's councils of commissioners is eliminated. More power would be centralized in the hands of the education minister and ministry officials. So in a future with no school boards, strategic decisions that pit one school's interests against those of another could well be made far from the people they affect.

The minister may already have the executive authority to transfer school buildings among boards. But it's not a power that has been wielded often, even in the face of desperate need.

Schools are more than bricks and mortar. Teachers and principals work hard to foster a sense of belonging and pride. Success is sometimes tied to students' sense of attachment. At the very least, a community at risk of its school being shuttered deserves to be heard before it's a done deal.

Think back to 2011 and 2012 when the English Montreal School Board was weighing the closure or merger of several schools due to dwindling enrolment. Proposals were put forth, school communities were given a chance to plead their cases. It was a long, drawn-out and emotional process, but no one can say they weren't consulted.

Democracy is often messy. And sometimes it's downright dysfunctional.

The gong show taking place at the EMSB right now certainly threatens to undermine the arguments in favour of school boards. On Monday night, chair [Angela Mancini](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsbs-mancini-returns-to-board-after-3-months-to-find-salary-slashed) refused to resign (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsbs-mancini-returns-to-board-after-3-months-to-find-salary-slashed>) over a series of ethics violations, so her fellow commissioners slashed her salary instead. The EMSB, which is now being investigated by the Education Ministry, has a long history of factionalism. But even if commissioners are finally trying to rein in Mancini, the latest debacle is an untimely embarrassment.

That's not to say the LBPSB hasn't had its own turmoil. [Long-time chair Suanne Stein Day](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/lester-b-pearson-school-board-boss-suanne-stein-day-resigns) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/lester-b-pearson-school-board-boss-suanne-stein-day-resigns>) quit in 2017 after a series of ethics breaches, internal wrangling and allegations of financial irregularities.

The CAQ government is counting on public apathy or antipathy toward school boards to justify its reforms. Turnout for school commissioner elections has always been abysmal, although it's slightly higher for the English-language boards. Certainly many a parent has left a school board meeting in frustration.

But no one thought they would miss hospital, nursing home or rehab centre governing boards until the Liberal government merged them into larger entities. Bill 10 centralized decision making in the health system — to the detriment of patients and medical staff, many argue.

Will the same thing happen if Quebec does away with school boards?

Who would push back if remote bureaucratic decisions run counter to the needs of local schools or fail to account for realities on the ground? What if, say, Education Ministry officials contacted service centres to find how many of their employees wear religious garb? Would administrative staff have the latitude to object?

It's more than a theoretical question. That very thing happened just this week.

Several school boards sounded the alarm (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-wants-schools-to-count-teachers-who-wear-religious-symbols-report>), about this troubling request to profile and classify teachers. Commission scolaire de Montréal chair Catherine Harel-Bourdon called the query “aberrant.” “We don't treat any employees differently because of the religious symbols they're wearing,” EMSB spokesman Mike Cohen said.

As the government prepares a new law to forbid teachers and principals from donning hijabs, kippahs or turbans, school boards will be called upon to defend the rights and freedoms of their employees — much as they have done in the past.

None of this means there isn't room for improvement in school board democracy or that school commissions are always in the right.

But it's time for Quebecers to ask themselves whether even deeply flawed elected representation is better than none at all.

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