

Bill 40 tabled: Quebec offers anglos a compromise on school boards

Critics blast the government, saying the CAQ is creating a two-tier system and that the proposed law is a problem for democracy.

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Education Minister Jean-François Roberge is seeking a compromise with minorities threatening legal challenges by creating a two-tier education system: one for francophone schools and one for the anglophone network.

CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / MONTREAL GAZETTE

QUEBEC — The heads of Quebec’s largest English and French school boards say government education reform plans are putting in peril the principles of democracy.

And the federation of Quebec’s francophone school boards has blasted the proposed legislation saying it amounts to yet another debate about structures, which does nothing to improve the education of youth.

“Regardless of what he’s doing with the English system, the French community has lost its ability to have elected commissioners and I think that’s a problem for democracy,” said Angela Mancini, chairperson of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) in an interview.

“I agree that the anglophone minority retains its voting rights, but it should be the same thing for the majority,” added Catherine Harel Bourdon, president of the Commission scolaire de Montreal (CSDM) in a separate interview.

“It can’t be a two-tier system. We have anglophone parents who have more power than francophone parents.”

Tabled in the National Assembly Tuesday by Education Minister Jean-François Roberge, Bill 40 is designed to blow up what the minister calls an “archaic,” level of government, one that costs millions and is overly political to the detriment of students.

His conservative estimate is that the reforms included in the bill will save taxpayers \$45 million over the next four years, money which he said will be passed on to students in the form of a better education.

In its place, Roberge proposes to create service centres governed by boards of directors made up of representatives of parents, community leaders and school system personnel.

Elections will be a thing of the past for Quebec’s 60 new francophone service centres, but not for the nine anglophone service centres, which will retain the right to elect their boards of directors using universal suffrage as they do now.

The exemption is being sold by the CAQ as a compromise to the English-speaking community, which has been threatening legal challenges to the reforms; arguing any change to the system would violate its constitutional rights to manage their school system.

Quebec also feels the minority has been jostled enough by the Coalition Avenir Québec government in the wake of [Bill 9 reforming the immigration system](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/immigration-reform-bill-voted-into-law-by-caq-government-despite-opposition) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/immigration-reform-bill-voted-into-law-by-caq-government-despite-opposition>) and [Bill 21 on state secularism](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-passes-secularism-law-after-marathon-session) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-passes-secularism-law-after-marathon-session>).

The [transfer of English schools to the French system](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-orders-the-transfer-of-two-anglo-schools-to-cspi) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-orders-the-transfer-of-two-anglo-schools-to-cspi>) to ease overcrowding last June has also not helped relations.

“This confirms what I have been saying, that our government is attentive to the realities of the English community, that the English community does have a voice,” Christopher Skeete, the premier’s point man for the community said at Roberge’s news conference explaining the bill.

“English control is protected with what we’re doing and English access is maintained.”

Roberge insisted regardless of the final formula, he believed their decision to abolish boards and school elections was constitutionally bulletproof.

“We were not afraid of a court battle,” Roberge said. “We simply decided to move forward and show our good faith, that we had listened to the community. We understand that they want to control and manage their system.

“The compromise is a win-win.”

In the lead-up to the tabling of the bill, CAQ insiders said they fully expected some backlash from the francophone community over the olive branch to anglophones, but said they the CAQ was ready to expend political capital to sell the deal.

“We are not here just to provoke,” one official told The Montreal Gazette Friday. “We care. We care what you think about us. The demands have not fallen on deaf ears. There is nothing to be gained politically in alienating anglophones.”

But the decision to go with an asymmetric system was making waves even before Roberge tabled his bill, partially because large parts of the plan had been leaked to the media (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/caq-offers-compromise-anglos-can-still-hold-school-elections>).

“It means he’s (Roberge) abandoning a part of the population,” said Alain Fortier, president of the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec.

“It sends the message that anglophones have rights that francophones do not have anymore. If we want to create a Quebec that is united and inclusive, where everyone works together on the basis of the same rights, I don’t think this is the way to go.”

Fortier also questioned whether the reforms will produce any of the cost savings Roberge has promised.

“There are never savings in a shakeup of structures because they result in re-organization and training,” Fortier said.

The opposition parties also raised red flags, but for different reasons.

“It’s the worst thing to do because we will lose democratic participation in our education system,” said Québec solidaire co-spokesperson Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois. “Parents on the ground will lose their spokesperson inside the school system, and that is not good news for families.”

Interim Parti Québécois leader Pascal Bérubé said he wonders what is motivating the government to create a two-tier system, which is unheard of in Quebec law.

“I am asking questions,” Bérubé said.

Late Tuesday, the Quebec English School Boards Association — which speaks for the nine anglophone boards — was still studying the bill, which includes 300 clauses spread over 90 pages.

“We need time,” said QESBA executive director Russell Copeman in a telephone interview. “We’re not prepared to pass judgment on the bill.”

And the plan is complex.

The bill, which will be studied by a committee of the legislature this fall, stipulates that the current mandate of Quebec’s 60 francophone school boards will come to an end Feb. 29, 2020 to be replaced by 60 service centres.

The mandate of the nine anglophone boards will end Nov. 1, 2020, which will now be election day for their new board of directors. Three special status school boards are not affected by the reform.

The bill scraps traditional boards made up of elected paid commissioners in favour of service centres administered by boards of directors made up of parents, community members and members of school service staff.

Each francophone board gets 16 people: 8 parents, four people from the community and four from the education sector. An anglophone board can have as many as 20 directors.

In the francophone system, board members will be elected by their peers, people already on the governing boards of individual schools, vocational training centres and adult education services.

The new boards of directors get the power to select an executive director.

The boards of directors of anglophone service centres will be elected by universal suffrage. Parents with children in the English system will be eligible to vote as they do now, but Mancini complained nobody quite understands how this will work yet.

The new system is supposed to be much cheaper. Quebec currently pays \$11 million a year in school board commissioner salaries, officials said at a briefing. That amount will drop to about \$1.5 million a year.

The new administrators will not be paid salaries, but instead tokens for showing up. In the case of a regular board member the token will be \$100 per meeting.

The new service centres are supposed to have autonomy from the ministry, with sweeping powers including authorizing renovation projects and handling tax collection.

“We are inverting the decision-making pyramid,” Roberge said. “We want to depoliticize decision-making by ending school elections, but also decentralizing by shifting power from the province to the regional level.”

A central election promise, the CAQ campaigned saying school boards are large, unwieldy and expensive organizations that are not models of democracy.

In 2014, only 5.54 per cent of Quebecers bothered to vote in school board elections. While the rate was 4.87 per cent in the francophone boards, it was higher (16.88 per cent) in the anglophone boards.

But in the same year, 31 out of 72 school board chairpersons were elected by acclamation.

Elections cost taxpayers about \$20 million every time.

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