

EMSB meeting hears parents, teachers' blast CAQ's religious symbols plan

School board says it was seeking the public's input to help it formulate an "action plan" to fight the CAQ's pending legislation.

LINDA GYULAI, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/LINDAGYULAI](https://montrealgazette.com/author/lindagyulai)) Updated: February 6, 2019



"I'm frustrated and I'm annoyed that somebody is forcing me to choose between my faith and my career," Furheen Ahmed, a teacher at Westmount High School, says about the CAQ's proposed religious symbol ban. *PHIL CARPENTER / MONTREAL GAZETTE FILES*

Parents, teachers, former students and some people who fit all three categories took turns speaking out against Premier François Legault's plan to legislate a ban on teachers and other public servants wearing religious symbols in the workplace at a meeting at the English Montreal School Board on Wednesday night.

Their forum was an emergency meeting that had been called two days earlier by the EMSB's human resources committee (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-calls-emergency-meeting-for-wednesday-on-quebec-plan-to-ban-religious-symbols>), which said it was seeking public input to help the school board formulate an "action plan" to fight such a law.

"The secular nature of our school system is clearly reflected in the Quebec education curriculum," Peter Sutherland, the president of the Montreal Teachers Association, the union representing EMSB teachers, told the panel. "These values are ensured by the professional manner in which our teachers deliver this curriculum, not the personal attire the teachers choose to wear."

He added that the union, which opposes any ban on religious symbols, has "never received any report of harm being caused by a teacher wearing a religious symbol."

"Targeting individuals based on what they wear and their personal religious beliefs feeds intolerance and is in complete opposition to the very values of tolerance and inclusion that teachers promote in their classrooms every day," Sutherland said.

"MTA will vigorously defend the rights of any of its members whose job security is threatened by any law that is passed in this regard."

Thirty people registered to speak at the meeting, which attracted about 60 people despite freezing rain.

Most of those who addressed the panel said they consider the law planned by Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec government discriminatory and unnecessary, with some of the speakers arguing that Legault should direct his energy at tackling "real problems" in classrooms that result from government cutbacks.

Michael MacKenzie, a parent and a child psychologist, said of the CAQ's plan: "It's hard to comprehend how ... this can be construed as anything other than as a racist and xenophobic policy clearly aimed" at Muslims.

He also said he wondered how the Legault government will be able to defend a policy that it claims is aimed at protecting women from oppression, but tells them what they cannot wear.

"My ultimate goal is to ask how we can support you in opposing this," Michael Dorais-Bunn, a teacher at Marymount Academy, told the panel. "We know this is wrong. There is no reason for teachers to be forbidden to wear the symbols that some of our own students will be wearing. We're supposed to represent everyone in our society."

Stephen Brown, a parent who said he graduated from Royal Vale, said his seventh generation grandfather escaped slavery in the U.S. South and fled to Canada. He also said he remembered as a child being told by his grandfather that they couldn't work at some jobs because they were black.

Yet Brown said he questions how he can be living today "in a place where the government can remove fundamental rights simply because some people in society are uncomfortable with how other people are different."

The planned legislation will have a negative influence on children by teaching them that diversity is bad, he said.

Furheen Ahmed, a teacher at Westmount High School who wears a hijab, told reporters that she felt heartened as she listened to the speakers.

"I'm frustrated and I'm annoyed that somebody is forcing me to choose between my faith and my career," she said. "But hearing what my colleagues and my community is saying here tonight, I feel so supported. I feel good. I have faith that this is not going to go through."

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