

Montreal


English school board chair booted from Denis Coderre's party over stance on language reform

Montreal mayoral candidate says EMSB's stance on Bill 96 'totally goes against his party's values'

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Joe Ortona was touted by Ensemble Montréal for his history of upholding the constitutional rights of the English-speaking community. That all changed Tuesday. (Sudha Krishnan/CBC)

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Denis Coderre's party has booted one of its star candidates for the Montreal municipal election out of caucus in a dramatic show of support for the Quebec government's proposed language reform bill.

Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), was the Ensemble Montréal candidate for Côte-des-Neiges—Notre-Dame-de-Grâce's hotly contested district of Loyola — a largely English-speaking neighbourhood that currently has no councillor after Christian Arseneault's recent resignation.

On Tuesday, Coderre said in a statement that the EMSB's stance on Bill 96 "totally goes against his party's values."

In a statement on Tuesday afternoon, Ortona said he was disappointed in the decision and was considering running as an independent.

EMSB commissioners adopted a resolution last week calling on Quebec to withdraw Bill 96. It also called on the federal government to refer the bill to the Supreme Court of Canada to rule on whether it's legal.

The wide-ranging bill, if adopted, would beef up the province's language laws, affecting the education, immigration and court systems.

Workplaces would also be affected as Bill 96 would essentially make French the only language needed to work in the province.

In a statement, the board cites concerns over issues such as restrictions on who is entitled to receive government services in the language of their choice, a cap on English CEGEP enrolment, and a narrowed definition of who qualifies as a member of Quebec's English-speaking community.

Party touts Ortona's upholding of constitutional rights

When Ensemble Montréal announced Ortona's candidacy back in July, the party touted his "dedication to upholding the constitutional rights of the English-speaking community."

That exaltation flipped to condemnation as Coderre proclaimed that the protection of French is "one of our fundamental values."

"We have demonstrated this publicly on several occasions, in particular with our request for the creation of a French language council," he says in a statement.



Lionel Perez, left, is running for CDN-NDG borough mayor under the leadership of Denis Coderre, right, against incumbent Sue Montgomery. (Ivanoh Demers/Radio-Canada)

Coderre says he and his party recognize Quebec as a nation.

Meanwhile, Quebec Premier François Legault described the EMSB as radical and disconnected during a news conference. He said he was happy that Ortona was kicked out of Coderre's party.

Loyola district hotly contested

In recent elections, the Loyola district has had a number of popular candidates diluting the vote.

In the 2017 election, Arseneault, flying the Projet Montréal banner, ran against incumbent Jeremy Searle, taking 43 per cent of the vote.

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Searle, who stirred up a storm of controversy during his four-year mandate, managed to win only 12 per cent of the vote, but Ensemble Montréal's Gabriel Retta came in second place with 32 per cent.

Ensemble Montréal says Retta, the official opposition's cabinet director, will replace Ortona and once again run in the district.

Retta also ran for Coderre in the neighbouring district of NDG in 2013 — the long-time stronghold of Peter McQueen.

Come November, Retta will be facing off against Annalisa Harris, the borough's former chief of staff. She is running with Équipe Sue Montgomery.

He's also up against Despina Sourias of Projet Montréal. Sourias, who speaks four languages, has worked at the local Carrefour jeunesse-emploi Notre-Dame-de-Grâce since 2006.

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Retta is no stranger to west end politics. He headed the constituency office of former MP Marlene Jennings in NDG for about 10 years while she represented the NDG—Lachine riding. Harris also worked for Jennings for a short time while she was MP.

Jennings was put in charge of the EMSB by the Quebec government in 2019 after an investigation revealed mismanagement and spending irregularities.

Ortona said in a statement Tuesday afternoon that he is disappointed by Ensemble Montréal's decision, and had been looking forward to running in Loyola, where his reputation as a defender of English rights was well known.

"Many supporters want me to stay in the race as an independent and I am now in reflection where that is concerned," said Ortona.

The EMSB resolution has drawn criticism from Bill 96's proponents for questioning the bill's statement that Quebec is a nation, and Ortona said he will recommend that section be deleted

from the board's resolution.

"In looking ahead, I will continue to speak out in favour of an inclusive Quebec where the use of French is promoted," Ortona said. "At the same time, I will not back down from promoting the interests and the views of English-speaking Quebecers."

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