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Quebec / Local News

English school boards say Bill 96 would go too far in limiting enrolment

"If that's not affecting our institutions, I don't know what it is," said Quebec English School Boards Association executive director Russell Copeman.

Philip Authier • Montreal Gazette
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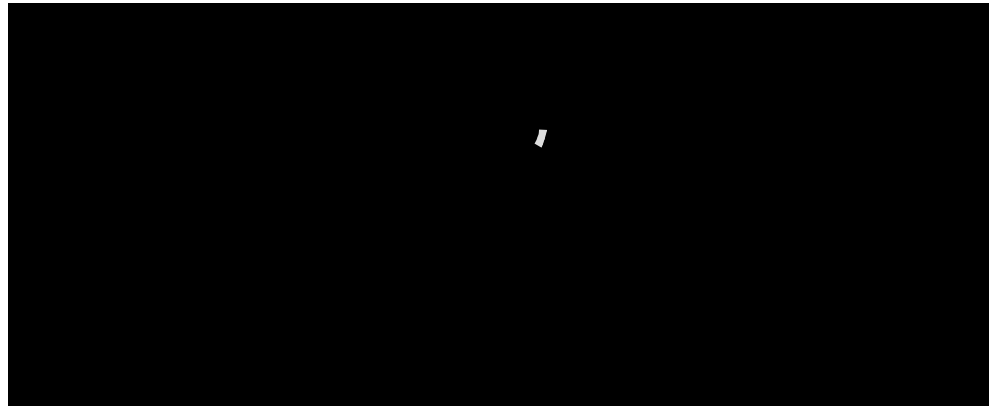


Quebec English School Boards Association president Dan Lamoureux, left, and executive director Russell Copeman in 2020. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

QUEBEC — Proposed new restrictions on eligibility for English schooling could adversely affect enrolment in the anglophone system and deter foreign nationals from moving to Quebec, the committee examining Bill 96 was told Thursday.

But Simon Jolin-Barrette, the minister responsible for the French language, said he is determined to plug what he considers a hole in the French language charter that makes it too easy for non-Canadians to avoid the obligation of sending their children to a French school in Quebec.

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Bill 96 proposes to [amend the Charter of the French Language](#) to specify that English-language education certificates for dependent children of foreign nationals temporarily living in Quebec will apply for three years only.

Under the current system, the certificates can be renewed as long as the status of the parent does not change. Four categories of temporary residents are covered: foreign nationals, Canadian citizens here for work or study, nationals posted here as representatives of a foreign country or international organization, and members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

The amendment would not affect people in the last three categories.

But in a 16-page brief submitted to the committee Thursday, the Quebec English School Boards Association asked the government to scrap the clause outright because of the potential effects on already dwindling enrolment in the English school system.

It would also hurt Quebec's ability to woo foreign talent, the association said.

The QESBA gave concrete examples of advantages of the existing system, noting that in the past many general managers of Reynolds Aluminum (now Alcoa) were Americans who committed to working and living in the region because they could send their children to English school.

U.S. Vice-President [Kamala Harris spent five years in Quebec](#) and graduated from Westmount High School when her mother took a job teaching and doing research at McGill.

Appearing before the committee to present its brief, QESBA executive director Russell Copeman and president Dan Lamoureux said given the relatively small number of people making use of foreign certificates, the Bill 96 clause seems to be "a solution in search of a problem."

The total number of students in English public schools on temporary certificates last year was 4,108. Of that number, 926 were members of the Canadian Armed Forces and by definition not foreign nationals.

Copeman said that means the real total is 3,182, which would represent 0.33 per cent of the total enrolment in Quebec schools in 2020-21, which was 963,000 students.

He said QESBA filed an access-to-information request with the education minister to find out the current data and whether it represents a real problem, but it did not get an answer.

According to Copeman, contrary to the Legault government's line that Bill 96 will in no way affect the rights and services of the English-speaking community, the proposed legislation does in fact do so.

"This will limit our enrolment," he said. "If that's not affecting our institutions, I don't know what it is."

Jolin-Barrette, however, insisted the gap in the law is real and runs against Quebec's philosophy that immigrants should go to French school and integrate into Quebec society. As a result, temporary residents who eventually became Canadian citizens have been able to acquire the right for their children

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“If it is a contradiction, it is a contradiction that has existed since the creation of the charter,” Copeman said.

“So if there is a contradiction,” Jolin-Barrette asked, “should we perpetuate this hole in the Charter of the French Language?”

“So a few thousand people will throw off Quebec’s linguistic balance?” responded Copeman. “I can’t agree.”

But Jolin-Barrette challenged Copeman’s assertion that the English school system is able to churn out graduates fluent in French.

He quoted Bernard Tremblay, president of the Fédération des CEGEPs, who recently said, “I have testimony from the directors of anglophone CEGEPs who tell me the quality of the French of anglophones who attended the English system is atrocious.”

Copeman responded by asking why, if this is the case, does the ministry exempt English graduates from the need to take a language test to be admitted to their professional field.

QESBA did not get many answers to the other issues raised in its brief, such as the government’s decision to use the Constitution’s notwithstanding clause to shield Bill 96 from court challenges.

The hearings resume Tuesday with an appearance by the Quebec Community Groups Network, which recently held parallel hearings to Bill 96 featuring groups that were not invited to the official ones.

pauthier@postmedia.com

twitter.com/philipauthier

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