

News / Local News

N-word controversy: EMSB, Lester B. Pearson school boards pull history workbook

The EMSB will put a sticker over the offending section and use it to feature a text explaining the history and context of the N-word.

Brendan Kelly • Montreal Gazette
Oct 29, 2020 • Last Updated 18 hours ago • 4 minute read



"The debate that's going on is largely a debate that's going on in the white population," says Marlene Jennings, the English Montreal School Board trustee. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Marlene Jennings says there is no place for the N-word in Quebec's schools or anywhere else in our society.

That's why the English Montreal School Board trustee made the decision to remove the controversial Secondary 4 history workbook *Journeys Through the History of Quebec and Canada* from all of the school board's classrooms. They will take all copies of the workbook and put a sticker over the offending section and use the sticker to feature a text explaining the history and context of the N-word.



On Thursday, Lester B. Pearson School Board chair Noel Burke said his school board will be removing the same workbook and will decide what action to take, whether it's applying a sticker like the EMSB is doing or asking the publisher to change the book.

"I think it's completely unacceptable," said Jennings in a phone interview Thursday. "There is absolutely no need (to use the word)."

Jennings is set to step down as trustee of the EMSB next week. She was a member of Parliament from 1997 to 2011.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The use of the word in the book officially sanctioned by the Quebec Education Department is in a short discussion of a 1968 book by convicted FLQ terrorist Pierre Vallières. The original French-language title when translated in the English version of the book uses the N-word. The book likens the experience of French-Canadians to African-Americans.

There has been a huge debate in Quebec since a University of Ottawa professor was suspended for using the N-word in her class.

"The debate that's going on is largely a debate that's going on in the white population," said Jennings, who is Black. "It is not censorship at all. We have pretty much as a society banned from our common language usage derogatory terms for Jews, derogatory terms for homosexuals, and there's no debate. Everybody agrees. Nobody uses it. And if someone uses it, they're immediately called on it.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"How is that when it comes to Blacks, we don't have the same reaction," Jennings asked. "And Blacks are the only identifiable people who a whole economic system was built through slavery in order to advance societies in Europe and to create the society in North America. Everything was built on the human trafficking and enslavement of Africans."

Jennings gave an impassioned speech at an EMSB meeting on Wednesday, going through her own family history that goes back on her mother's side to French immigrants arriving here in 1667 and on her father's side to an African-American family in Alabama that has its roots in slavery.

"One of the things I've always fought for is equal access for everybody," Jennings said at the meeting. "And I just want to make the point that when I hear or see that word, I am filled with such pain because I know what my ancestors lived through as slaves. And I know what my Black relatives lived through in the United States. And I know what I and my siblings have lived through as Black English-speaking Quebecers. So just keep that in mind, any of you, when you think there's a debate to be had on this.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"In my view there is no debate," Jennings told the meeting. "The word should not be used. And in our literary works that are renowned — *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* — no, we don't ban those books. We use them as teaching moments. We use them to explain how these words came into existence and how they were used to dehumanize a whole people for centuries. And that system of slavery has to be removed, that system is equitable and inclusive and respectful and knowledgeable of the contributions of everyone."

MONTREAL GAZETTE

N-WORD IN QUEBEC CLASSROOMS OR TEXTBOOKS.

"If the government is still looking for a definition of systemic racism, this is exactly what systemic racism is, that a publisher and an author would find it appropriate and normal that this word be used in this day and age," Burke said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

For Burke, it's not just the use of the N-word but the reference to the Vallières book.

"Once we get past the N-word, which is the title, we start to look at Pierre Vallières's comparison between French Quebecers in and around the Quiet Revolution and the oppression of African-Americans in the civil rights movement in the '60s, completely ignoring hundreds of years of history of slavery that preceded and probably still has an impact on the Black community. The comparison and the denial of that history to the Black community, one could say that it is even more racist than the use of the N-word."

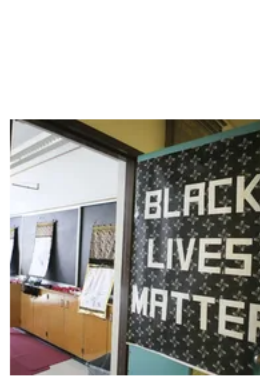
bkelly@postmedia.com

twitter.com/brendanshowbiz

MORE ON THIS TOPIC



Questions raised about N-word in Quebec high-school textbook



Fariha Naqvi-Mohamed: N-word has no place in a high school text



[Share](#)

TRENDING

- 1 Corona Canada by a qu Tam [with](#)
- 2 Tony A \$4 mill
- 3 Quebec vaccin [with](#)
- 4 'Quebec Legault years a [with](#)
- 5 RAMQ of high seniors