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Politics And Policy

Montreal School Boards to implement religious secularism law and abide by Bill C-21

PM.

Dylan Gibbons, 4 mins ago 4 min read

On September 3, despite a great deal of pushback from Montreal school boards, particularly English-speaking districts, Quebec's Bill C-21, a secularism law which prevents the wearing of religious symbols for certain public officials and teachers, is set to come in effect for the upcoming school year.

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is the last of three to finally agree to the new conditions of Bill C-21, which will prevent teachers from wearing such articles as crosses, as well as religious garbs like the niqab.

As *Global News* reports, "A recent letter from the Education Ministry sent out to school board directors stated, "It is the responsibility of the highest administrative authority in

the school board to take the necessary measures to ensure compliance with the prohibition to wear a religious sign.”

Many teachers, principals, and other workers in the education sector have voiced their opposition throughout the year. Yet it appears that their compliance is mandatory, and many are coming to terms. However, the EMSB has still had to give stern warnings to its teachers that failure to abide by the new law may lead to even more strict sanctions.

“We believe there are very strong arguments that Bill 21 infringes on the constitutional rights of our community to control and manage our school system,” said Russell Copeman, executive director of the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA).

The bill comes as part of Quebec Premier Francois Legault’s previous campaign promise to further extend the divisions of church and state in Canada. While many public servants are upset, [Legault believes these changes are only “moderate” and long overdue.](#)

“Some people will say that we are going too far. Some will say, we aren’t going far enough,” Legault said. “In reality, this bill is moderate, just like Quebecers.

“In Quebec, it’s been a long time since we decided to separate Church and state,” he said. “And it’s been more than 10 years that we’ve been debating religious symbols. It’s time to nail down the rules.”

This latest capitulation comes after the EMSB’s vow in March that it would oppose the secularism bill and never comply to such crack downs on religious freedom. Additionally, a council of commissioners representing Quebec’s largest English-language school board “unanimously passed a resolution that said it could not support and will not apply such a ban.”

“The Fédération autonome de l’Enseignement (FAE) has filed a legal challenge against the provincial government over its attempts to track the number of teachers that wear religious symbols on the job,” reports [Global News](#).

“The federation is one of the largest in Quebec, representing nine unions and about 43,000 teachers in the province.”

“We believe in the secularity of the state while supporting an individual’s right to freedom of religion,” said EMSB chair Angela Mancini in a statement.

As [Global News reported at the time](#), “The school board has also strongly opposed similar legislation from other provincial governments in the past, including the Parti Québécois’ proposed Charter of Values.

“The move comes one day after a Quebec teachers’ federation filed a legal challenge against the CAQ government over its attempts to track the number of teachers who wear religious symbols at work.”

As summarized in the [National Assembly of Quebec’s document](#):

The bill proposes to prohibit certain persons from wearing religious symbols while exercising their functions. However, the prohibition does not apply to certain persons

holding positions at the time the bill is introduced, subject to the conditions specified by the bill.

Under the bill, personnel members of a body must exercise their functions with their face uncovered, and persons who present themselves to receive a service from such a personnel member must have their face uncovered when doing so is necessary to allow their identity to be verified or for security reasons.

According to the bill, under the heading “PERSONS SUBJECT TO THE PROHIBITION ON WEARING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN THE EXERCISE OF THEIR FUNCTIONS”, the following people will be affected:

- Public employees who carry weapons, such as police officers, courthouse constables, bodyguards, prison guards and wildlife officers.
- Crown prosecutors, government lawyers, and judges.
- School principals, vice-principals, and teachers.

The bill will also come into affect when receiving certain government services, including:

- Municipal services, for instance, public transit. “A woman who gets on a bus wearing a Muslim niqab would need to uncover her face in order to confirm her identity in order to use a discounted transit card, Jolin-Barrette said,” reports [CBC](#).
- Doctors, dentists and midwives in public institutions.
- Subsidized daycares.
- School boards.

However, special exceptions exist for those who have were hired while wearing religious symbols before the bill became law, and other forms of religious symbolism, such as tattoos, may still be permitted.

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