



Opinion

# Opinion: Key questions for Quebec politicians on education

*To start: Would you allow teachers to wear religious clothing in the classroom in order to alleviate our chronic teacher shortage?*

Joe Ortona • Special to Montreal Gazette  
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EMSB chair Joe Ortona says politicians must explain how they plan to help students succeed. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Both the start of the school year and a fall election campaign bring hope. For students it is the promise of personal growth and the chance to renew friendships and make new ones.

For politicians it is a different type of promise. It is their turn to outline their vision for Quebec as well as their plans and priorities.

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But it is also our chance to provide feedback and to push the candidates to address critical issues.

While the English Montreal School Board has a point of view — we have been vocal, for example, in our opposition to government efforts to eliminate democratically elected school boards and to restrict our ability to hire qualified teachers — I maintain that the issues we are raising are of critical importance to all Quebecers.

As we head to the polls, here are the questions we will be asking candidates:

*Would you allow teachers to wear religious clothing in the classroom in order to alleviate our chronic teacher shortage?*

As demonstrated by the case of Fatemeh Anvari, a Grade 3 teacher at Chelsea Elementary School who last year was removed from the classroom and reassigned because she wears a hijab, we are turning our backs on qualified teachers. As our experience at the EMSB indicates, recent graduates are not applying for open positions, and others are leaving the public school system because there is no possibility of advancement for teachers affected by Bill 21.

*What programs would you launch to support young people facing mental health challenges due to the pandemic?*

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, many struggled as they have had to adjust to the challenges of online learning and the social isolation stemming from school closures.

*Would you follow the lead of other jurisdictions and install air purifiers in classrooms that have inadequate ventilation systems?*

The health and well-being of our school community should be our top priority, which is why the EMSB purchased air purifiers for schools without mechanical ventilation systems early on in the pandemic. We realized that having a large number of students in a confined space with poor ventilation for an extended period of time was risky. The Quebec government has set a “target” of 1,000 parts per million when monitoring Co2 level, which is well above the 800-ppm benchmark set by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. During the week of June 6 there were 172 classrooms with an average reading above 2,000 ppm, and 622 with an average of between 1,500 ppm and 2,000 ppm.

*Would you change policies governing access to English schools for children of people in Quebec on temporary work permits?*

As a result of Bill 96, the children of people on temporary visas can attend English schools only for a maximum of three years. And the government decided that children of people here on a one-year visa can attend English school only for one year even if the visa is extended. These policies are not in the interest of the student or a business community that faces worldwide competition for talent.

*Would you initiate a review of service centres?*

It is now several years since school boards in the French sector have been replaced with service centres. School communities should be asking whether the disappearance of elected school boards has had a positive or negative impact on student success.

These past weeks have been full of promise as young people returned to school across the province. But we need to put the framework in place to help them succeed. Now is the time to ask our politicians to tell us how they would do that.

*Giuseppe (Joe) Ortona is chair of the English Montreal School Board.*

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