

Quebec government asks Montreal school boards if information on staffers wearing religious symbols exists

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Quebec Premier Francois Legault speaks to the media at a news conference in January, 2019, in Montreal.

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The Quebec government has asked several school boards in the Montreal region if they have a count of teachers who



Catherine Harel Bourdon, chair of the Commission scolaire de Montréal, the main francophone school board in the city, denounced the request in La Presse on Monday and said quizzing teachers about their religious affiliation would represent a serious breach of their right to religious freedom.

“It looks like a witch hunt,” she said. “We don’t enumerate people by religion in the school system. It’s aberrant – and against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.”

Immigration Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette, who is in charge of the secularism file, said that now that he knows the numbers don’t exist, he will not push the matter further. “We wanted to know if the school boards had that information, if they knew who wears religious symbols,” Mr. Jolin-Barrette said.

But, he insisted, the government will be going ahead with a law, regardless of how many teachers may be forced to remove religious wear or leave their jobs. “Fifty years ago, we decided to separate religion from the state and we will enshrine it in law,” he said. He said the government might consider a grandfather clause allowing current employees to keep their religious garments, even though Mr. Legault has expressed opposition to such a clause in the past.

Mr. Jolin-Barrette said Ms. Harel Bourdon should “calm down” and criticized her for going to the media, but her board was not the only one that objected to the request.

“We got the call – and it was a very short conversation,” said Michael Cohen, spokesperson for the English Montreal School Board. “They asked how many teaching and administrative staff wear head covering or religious symbols. We said we don’t know. It’s an astonishing question for a government to ask.”

Teachers pose a particularly thorny problem for the government. Montreal school boards take pride in hiring from diverse backgrounds, with many schools employing Muslim women in hijabs, whereas people wearing religious garments are scarce to non-existent in the other targeted professions; both the Montreal police and Sûreté du Québec have said they have no one wearing religious symbols in their ranks.

“Imagine the operation required to collect this kind of information from schools,” said Sylvain Mallette, the head of a labour federation that represents about 43,000 teachers in eight unions in Quebec. “You would have to profile them based on appearance or question them about it.

“This government does not appear to understand the gravity of this request or the signal it sends.”

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