

Quebec school reform: Agreement reached on who will appear at Bill 40 hearings

The National Assembly will soon be the theatre for hearings into Bill 40, which scraps school boards and replaces them with service centres

PHILIP AUTHIER, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/PHILIPAUTHIER](https://montrealgazette.com/author/philipauthier))

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"Bill 40 is less bureaucracy, more services to students and more power to those who run schools," Jean-François Roberge says. *CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

QUEBEC — An agreement has been reached on who will get to testify (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-school-reform-caq-accused-of-muzzling-debate>) at hearings into the bill scrapping school boards, and the list will include the president of the Commission scolaire de Montréal (CSDM).

But the minister responsible for Bill 40, Jean-François Roberge, said he hopes the process quashes the many “falsehoods” that he says have been circulating about the government’s vision.

After last-minute meetings between Coalition Avenir Québec ministers and the three opposition parties, deputy government house leader Sébastien Schneeberger announced Thursday in the legislature that a deal had been struck on witnesses to appear at hearings into the bill.

To get all the parties aboard, the government had to add more groups. The final list is thus expanded from 31 to 50.

Included on the new list is Catherine Harel Bourdon, president of the CSDM (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/fearing-trusteeship-csdm-now-plans-to-apply-bill-21>). The board had been left off the list, prompting it to call a news conference where they denounced the fact the province’s largest school board was not invited.

The new list fixes other errors and adds representatives of Quebec’s Indigenous Peoples, including the Cree School Board and the Société Makivik, the legal representative of Quebec’s Inuit.

It also adds six regional school board (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/school-board-officials-say-bill-40-doesnt-have-a-clear-plan>)_associations.

While the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is not on the list, the Quebec English School Boards Association (<https://www.qesba.qc.ca/en/>) is there to represent all nine English school boards.

The date for the start of hearings, Monday, Nov. 4, is unchanged. Five days of hearings are scheduled.

In Montreal to deliver a speech, Roberge defended the process, saying the government is not rushing things because its intentions have been known since 2012.

Bill 40 will abolish Quebec's 60 francophone and nine anglophone school boards and replace them with service centres. Gone also will be the elections to name board commissioners. Only the English system will be allowed to keep elections.

The government estimates the reforms will save taxpayers \$45 million over the next four years, with the money going back to student services.

"Everyone knew where we're going," Roberge told reporters. "If they aren't ready now, they never will be."

He denied the bill is a disguised effort to centralize more power in the hands of the ministry.

"Falsehoods have been said about Bill 40," Roberge said. "People have tried to pervert the bill, to make it into things it is not. Bill 40 is less bureaucracy, more services to students and more power to those who run schools.

"Since we're talking about teachers, let's educate people. Explain things."

He returned to arguments he made when the bill was tabled earlier this month (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/bill-40-tabled-quebec-offers-compromise-to-anglos-on-school-boards>), saying it will depoliticize boards that have been out of control.

And Roberge welcomed the agreement on who will appear. It is the legislature's culture and education committee that will study the bill.

"Everyone concerned will be heard," Roberge said.

Roberge made the comments while outside the hotel where teachers affiliated with the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/bill-40-quebec-devaluing-teaching-profession-union-says>)(FAE) staged a protest against Bill 40.

pauthier@postmedia.com (<mailto:pauthier@postmedia.com>)

[Twitter.com/philipauthier](https://twitter.com/philipauthier) (<https://twitter.com/philipauthier>)