

Schools surveyed on religious symbols: Who answered, who didn't

Only 3 schools in Laval filled it out — one in 3 did in Montreal. The highest response was in Centre-du-Québec, a region that includes Drummondville and Victoriaville.

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All but three of the 94 schools in Laval that received a Quebec Education Ministry questionnaire probing for information on religious symbols and requests for reasonable accommodation late last year declined to answer, data from the ministry reveals.

Ninety-seven per cent of the schools in Laval ignored the survey, making it the region that offered the lowest response rate across Quebec.

By contrast, questionnaires were filled out by more than a third of schools on Montreal Island, where the chairperson of the largest school board, the Commission scolaire de Montréal, called a more recent phone survey by ministry officials seeking similar information from school boards concerning personnel who wear religious symbols “an aberration.”

For its part, the largest English-language school board on the island, the English Montreal School Board, said it doesn't track the number of employees who wear religious symbols and has also evoked the possibility of defying a law that Premier François Legault has said his Coalition Avenir Québec government intends to draft to prohibit teachers and other public servants in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols in the workplace.

However, EMSB chairperson Angela Mancini defended school principals who answered the written survey, which was sent to them directly by the education ministry in November, saying the principals “have done their job.”

“They were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and they did so in good faith,” she told reporters on Wednesday evening while attending an emergency meeting of the EMSB’s human resources committee to hear reactions from parents and teachers to Legault’s plan for a religious symbols ban to help the board plot its strategy to fight the impending legislation.

“I think that’s an important component of their job that they did.”

Besides asking how many and which personnel wear religious symbols, the questionnaire also sought information about reasonable accommodation requests for religious, “ethnocultural” and linguistic reasons and whether such requests created discomfort. It defined “ethnocultural” as ethnic or national origin, race or colour.

It also asked about the “intercultural relations climate” at schools. Other questions asked whether there were absences at the school “without cause related to ethnocultural identity” or to religious identity.

The proportion of schools on Montreal Island that responded to the questions was lower than the average for the province, but not by much.



“I’m frustrated and I’m annoyed that somebody is forcing me to choose between my faith and my career,” Furheen Ahmed, a teacher at Westmount High School, said at an emergency meeting held by the EMSB on Wednesday. *PHIL CARPENTER / MONTREAL GAZETTE FILES*

In all, the ministry sent the questionnaire to the principals of 2,616 preschools, elementary schools, high schools, professional training centres and adult education centres in the province, of which 1,164 — or 44.5 per cent — completed it by the Dec. 14 deadline, the data shows.

On the island of Montreal, 35 per cent, or 180 of the 152 schools that received the questionnaire, answered it.

The highest response rate to the survey across the province came from schools in Centre-du-Québec, a region that includes Drummondville, Victoriaville and Bécancour. There, 87 per cent — or 92 of 106 schools — filled out the ministry's questionnaire. The next highest response rate came from schools in the Mauricie and Laurentides regions, where 72 per cent and 65 per cent of schools, respectively, answered the questionnaire.

The office of Quebec Education Minister Jean-François Roberge made the data available this week following [a dust-up at the National Assembly](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-government-surveyed-schools-about-religious-symbols) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-government-surveyed-schools-about-religious-symbols>) on Tuesday that saw Roberge's CAQ and the opposition Liberals accusing the other of religious profiling and charging that the other was responsible for issuing the questionnaire. (Roberge said the questionnaire was sent by his ministry without his knowledge, and that he got wind of its existence about a week ago.)

The questionnaire was drawn up in June 2018 while the Liberals were in power, but was sent out after the CAQ government was elected on Oct. 1. And it was sent out to schools two months before education ministry officials sparked controversy with their phone calls to school boards asking how many members of staff wear religious symbols.

The [phone survey drew an immediate reaction from the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-wants-schools-to-count-teachers-who-wear-religious-symbols-report) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-wants-schools-to-count-teachers-who-wear-religious-symbols-report>), which said the matter will be examined by its legal department.

The questionnaire has not drawn the same rebuke by school boards as the phone survey.

The data released to the Montreal Gazette shows that nearly all schools in one other region besides Laval ignored the questionnaire. In Lanaudière, a region that starts just north of Laval, six per cent of schools — or nine out of 154 — answered it.

But was the non-response an act of defiance or the result of an oversight? No one seemed to be able to answer.

Maxeen Jolin, a spokesperson for Sir Wilfrid Laurier school board, which has schools in Laval and Lanaudière, said she had been told the board's schools didn't receive the questionnaire.

The ministry, meanwhile, said this week the questionnaire was sent to all schools in the province.

About one-third of Laval residents have a language other than French or English as a mother tongue, 28 per cent are immigrants and more than a quarter are members of a visible minority, according to the latest census data. Across Quebec, 13 per cent of the population has a non-French or English mother tongue, 14 per cent are immigrants and 13 per cent are members of a visible minority.

A spokesperson for the Education Ministry said on Friday the list of schools that responded to the questionnaire "is not public."

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The survey showed there were religious symbols present in 16 per cent of schools, but most were not worn by teachers. The survey showed 46.9 per cent were worn by support staff and 38.8 per cent by teachers.

Of the 1,164 schools that answered the questionnaire, 130, or 11.2 per cent, said they had received at least one request for accommodation in the past 12 months.

In all, there were 289 requests for accommodation, of which half were requests to be absent for a cultural or religious reason. A distant second were requests for absence due to the curriculum to be taught — 9.7 per cent, or 26, of the requests were over content, such as in a sexual education class, an ethics class or a religion class.

Nearly all the requests — 92.4 per cent — were based on religious grounds.

More than half of the requests were granted, while another 21.8 per cent were granted with a compromise on, for example, an organizational or pedagogical level.

More than half of the requests — 51.8 per cent — that were granted presented no difficulty, and 3.1 per cent saw some difficulty among parents and students.

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