

Opinion: A Quebec English education wish list

If the CAQ government is truly committed to enhancing relations with our community, it need look no further than the field of education.

Joe Ortona • Special to Montreal Gazette

Published Dec 21, 2022 • 3 minute read

18 Comments



"By ending his government's opposition to elected English school boards, the premier would be sending an important signal to our community that we have a critical role to play in building an open and inclusive Quebec," English Montreal School Board Chair Joe Ortona writes. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

On election night, François Legault stated that he intends to be the premier of all Quebecers. Eric Girard's appointment as minister responsible for relations with English-speaking Quebecers is also promising. Yet, if the government is truly committed to enhancing relations with our community and wishes to show its seriousness of purpose, it need look no further than the field of education.

The recent decision to provide English CEGEPs with access to education records is a good first step. Students will no longer have to scramble to find their proof of English eligibility, removing an unnecessary hurdle to continuing their studies.

But there is more the Quebec government should do.

Since Bill 40 was tabled three years ago, we have maintained that it infringes on our constitutional right to "manage and control" our education system by transferring power to the minister and the ministry of education and transforming school boards into service centres. In August 2020, a stay was granted on the application of the law in English school boards until a full legal challenge could be heard. We made our case before the Quebec Superior Court in April 2021, and a judgment is expected shortly.

Legal challenges are costly, and if we win — and we are confident that we will — the government should show its good faith by not appealing the verdict.

Polling shows that this would be a popular approach.

A recent national survey found that 93 per cent of respondents felt the elimination of English-language school boards would place minority rights at risk, and only 13 per cent of respondents said they supported the provincial government's intention to abolish English-language school boards.

Let's also be clear that strengthening English school boards is consistent with the government's focus on promoting and protecting French. Our community invented French immersion in the '60s, well before Bill 101, and our school boards across Quebec are committed to ensuring our graduates are able to live and work in French. The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) offers three models of French in elementary schools: core, bilingual and French immersion. Our secondary schools offer several French programs that exceed the minimum requirements set by the ministry.

The government should also put a pause on plans to impose a three-year limit — until now it was six years — on attending English schools for the children of people temporarily working in Quebec. Forcing students to abandon their friends and teachers and to adjust a new setting is not a recipe for student success.

Another area for collaboration is more complex, but needs exploring. New data from Statistics Canada shows that only approximately 76 per cent of the 304,000 children who have the right to attend regular English public schools attend, or have attended, a regular English public school.

Proximity is a key factor. The analysis shows that the further eligible school-age children live from a minority official-language school, the less likely they are to attend a minority official-language school. Also, a number of families may have opted for private schools or to study in French. Our community's continued vitality depends on our gaining an understanding of the situation and then addressing the concerns of those who have opted out of our English public school system. The Quebec government should provide us with the funding to analyze and address the situation.

As the year comes to an end, let's hope that Premier Legault and his colleagues remember the oft-quoted wisdom, "The holiday season is a perfect time to reflect on our blessings and seek out ways to make life better for those around us." By ending his government's opposition to elected English school boards, the premier would be sending an important signal to our community that we have a critical role to play in building an open and inclusive Quebec where French is the common language.

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

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