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How the English Montreal School Board is challenging the CAQ, from the media to the Supreme Court

by [Toula Drimonis](#)

“We’re feeling constantly under attack, and that’s because we are. This government has attempted to abolish school boards, imposed arbitrary measures on who we can hire as teachers with Bill 21 and imposed further language restrictions with Bill 96.”

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Joe Ortona, the chair of the English Montreal School Board, recently made headlines when he pointed out that the EMSB is better at teaching French than the Quebec government. Education Ministry statistics seem to confirm his point.

Ortona, the 43-year-old trilingual Quebecer of Italian origin who’s [heading up](#) the Bill 21 Supreme Court challenge, says a big part of his role as EMSB chair is fighting against the falsehood that English-speaking Quebecers aren’t interested in French.

“English schools didn’t have bilingual programs when I was young,” he says, “so my parents enrolled me in Nesbitt, a 45-minute bus ride each way. It was important to them that I attend a school with French immersion. They wanted their kids to not only speak French but speak it well.”

Fighting against misconceptions

“It’s an unfortunate perception of the English-speaking community that we’re this unilingual class of people who live and socialize exclusively in the West Island,” he says. “In fact, French immersion programs started in the 1960’s and were pushed by English-speaking parents. It was completely voluntary. A grassroots [parent-led initiative](#) got this off the ground a full 15 years before Bill 101. Our community was the one demanding more French instruction in our schools. This idea that French needs to be imposed on us so we can adapt to Quebec’s linguistic reality is a false perception, and a historical fact largely ignored.”

Ortona, who attended the University of Ottawa and studied civil law, works almost exclusively in French. He suspects many Quebecers are uninformed about the amount of actual French taught within the English-language school system.

“The overwhelming majority of our kids are enrolled in either French immersion or bilingual programs,” he says. “French immersion is exclusively or almost exclusively in French from kindergarten to Grade 2. Then, Grades 3 to 6, it’s 50% English and 50% French. That roughly translates to 63% French instruction and 37% English instruction over seven years. Bilingual schools are 50% French and 50% English from kindergarten to Grade 6. Even schools with English core programs have 40% of class time in French.”

Legal challenges continue successfully



English Montreal School Board (EMSB) chairman Joe Ortona

The EMSB was recently successful in [obtaining a stay](#) on some of the provisions of Bill 96, meaning parts of the law will not apply to English-language school boards until a legal decision is made on the constitutionality of the bill.

In response, the CAQ government attempted to challenge the ruling, but Court of Appeal Justice Geneviève Marcotte rejected it and upheld the Quebec Superior Court decision regarding Bill 96 on May 31. The injunction therefore remains in place.

“The fact that the Charter of the French Language requires English school boards to communicate exclusively in French when interacting with other English-speaking community organizations, including the QESBA and the English Parents’ Committee Association of Quebec, never made any sense,” said Ortona. “The decision makes it very clear that English-language school boards are an English institution, and they have the right to work and communicate in English.”

The EMSB chair refers to the ruling as a “significant victory” for a community feeling increasingly scapegoated by the CAQ government’s identity and language politics. “We’re feeling constantly under attack, and that’s because we are,” he says. “In the last five years, this government has attempted to abolish school boards — the only institutions left controlled by Quebec’s English-speaking community — tried to impose arbitrary measures on who we can hire as teachers with Bill 21 and imposed further language restrictions with Bill 96.”

According to him, none of these measures will do anything to change Quebec’s linguistic reality. “If you have legitimate concerns about French Quebecers being ‘anglicized,’” he says, “that’s a problem to address with French speakers.”

Implementing French courses in English CEGEPs or restricting English communication among English speakers, he says, won’t affect how Quebec francophones behave. “It’s not Quebec’s English-speaking community — which has been in decline over the last 50 years — that’s anglicizing Quebec,” Ortona says. “It’s Netflix, Snapchat, TikTok and cellphones with internet access. That exposure to English is anglicizing Quebec, not us.”

Quality education required

Ortona warns that punitive legislation or adding enormous bureaucratic hurdles that the community has to jump through won’t change things.

The CAQ’s zero-sum thinking essentially requires French Quebecers to believe that a loss for the English community is somehow a gain for them. “They’re appealing to their base,” he says. “If they’re aggravating the English community, they must be doing something good.” Ortona says the focus, instead, should be on better education.

“The quality of French education needs to be strong,” he says. “Current success rates in the French public system show there’s lots of work to be done.”

With Quebecers’ massive exposure to American culture — music, movies, social media influencers — Ortona believes it’s essential that students master the language from a young age.

“We need to find ways to incentivise people to speak French rather than punish them if they choose to speak English,” he says. “That won’t get anyone to want to adopt Québécois culture. I don’t think this government understands that at all.”

Responding to an OQLF [report](#) showing the use of French among young Quebecers is in decline, Ortona says it’s like “trying to change the current of the sea with a fan.” “If you want a society to evolve a certain way,” he says, “you need to find creative ways to make it enticing for people to adopt certain habits, a culture, or language. Otherwise, you’re just going against the current, and eventually it’s going to overwhelm you. Legislation isn’t enough.”

Ortona insists that it’s not contradictory to believe the English language and culture can thrive within the English community while French thrives in Quebec. “Both can be achieved,” he says.

Part of the solution

For years, the EMSB has requested money and resources to offer francisation welcome classes in the English system, for children eligible for English education, like the French system offers. That request has consistently been denied.

“If you’re coming into our system from abroad or from another province in Grade 7 and you don’t speak French, you have a lot of catching up to do,” he says. “Yet we’re refused. As a result, these kids graduate not speaking French as well as they could and far more likely to be immersed in English culture. It makes no sense.”

Ortona says the government only recently granted the EMSB permission for welcome classes for adults, “only because the French system was overwhelmed and couldn’t meet the demand.”

The CAQ also appears ignorant of minority-language educational rights, according to the EMSB chair. “Section 23 imposes obligations on the Quebec government to protect English-language institutions,” he says. “We have constitutional protections. If you’re constantly going to attack us, you have to expect that at some point we’re going to fight back.”

While the French school system is unquestionably a provincial jurisdiction, explains Ortona, when it comes to minority-language public education, it’s a shared jurisdiction between the province and the minority community.

“English education in Quebec and French education in the ROC are not exclusive provincial jurisdictions and haven’t been since the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” he says. “Quebec’s English-speaking community has a right to manage and control its institutions. The government can either accept that, and work with us when they legislate in areas of education that touch upon English school boards, or they can continue to be hostile towards us and we’ll keep finding ourselves in litigation.”

A ‘radical’ group?

Reacting to the EMSB’s legal pushback, Premier Francois Legault once [referred](#) to the EMSB as a “radical” group, a characterization Ortona says is unjust.

Having lived through Liberal and PQ governments and one referendum, Ortona says Quebec has never had a government so hostile towards the English-speaking community.

“This is our home,” he says. “All we want to do is be contributing and accepted members of society and we don’t get that feeling from the Quebec government. We’re constantly vilified and used as scapegoats to score cheap political points.”

“I don’t think there’s anything radical in wanting to be accepted and respected,” he says. “Even if Quebec became a independent tomorrow, we’d still continue to be a minority community that has a right to exist and to certain protections. We’re not going anywhere. We’re here, we’re raising our families and we have to find a way to coexist respectfully.” ■



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The EMSB takes strong exception to comments made by Minister of the French Language, Jean-François Roberge, which unjustifiably take aim at English school boards.

Mr. Roberge’s comments last week are particularly stunning since, when he was Minister of Education in the previous CAQ mandate, his administration issued a directive for the EMSB to reduce the number of hours devoted to French instruction in immersion program schools.

“Whether Mr. Roberge is ignorant of the facts, or disingenuous, such statements are unbecoming and undignified of an elected official, much less a minister,” said EMSB Chair Joe Ortona. “Has his position changed? Was he not even aware of what letter he signed?”

To read our full statement, click <http://www.emsbpressreleases.com/2024/05/emsb-chair-takes-aim-at-language.html?spref=fb>

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