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Opinion: Don't let Quebec's language laws sideline parents

When families are welcomed by schools and encouraged to contribute their talent and time, teachers, students and communities benefit.

Arron Neal • Special to Montreal Gazette

Published Dec 21, 2023 • Last updated 4 hours ago • 3 minute read

5 Comments



The English Montreal School Board has raised concerns that, under Bill 96, written communications within and between English boards would have to be translated into French, placing “an unnecessary burden on our staff (and) diverting their focus from educational priorities and students.” PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

A recent news story revealed the English Montreal School Board’s plan to legally challenge provisions of Bill 96 and the Charter of the French Language that affect its internal communications.

Part of the concern is that written communications within and between English boards would have to be translated into French, placing “an unnecessary burden on our staff (and) diverting their focus from educational priorities and students.”

As a parent, this prompted me to reflect on my role in school governance and the symbiotic relationship between parents and teachers.

Striking teachers want resources to better serve students; parents want to offer more than a supportive nod.

When families are welcomed by schools and encouraged to contribute their talent and time, teachers, students and communities benefit.

Three years ago, I was elected chair of the governing board for a bilingual English public school near downtown Montreal. My son was a new first grader paving a path for his younger sister to follow.

My objective was to help parents collaborate with staff and add value to the student experience.

During my time as chair, and in spite of a global pandemic, those objectives were met.

We refreshed a dated dress code, relieving parents of the white shirt laundry battle, and freeing teachers of having to enforce a code that had little impact on the educational experience.

We facilitated the purchase of new library books featuring culturally and inclusively diverse characters in both English and French, better representing the students in our school.

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And we helped the “parent participation organization” host extracurricular activities, parent convenings, community dinners and an annual Halloween party, underscoring the invaluable contributions of parents and their collaboration with teachers.

Two months into an exhaustive home search, another challenge emerged — notification that our family could no longer attend English schools.

I wasn’t surprised.

Language debates on the news hinted that our English eligibility was in jeopardy, and our school principal shared that several families would soon be informed they could not return in the fall.

I suspected we were on that list.

Bill 96 modified rules governing English eligibility. Our daughter, a Canadian citizen born to American parents with work visas, originally qualified. However, at the end of her Grade 1 experience, we were informed she would no longer have access to English education and, consequently, I could not fulfill my second two-year mandate as board chair.

After settling into our new place on the South Shore in the fall, our kids started a new school in a fully French-language school system.

We all had butterflies.

Would our kids feel alone and out of place? Would their confidence and their grades drop?

We endured a rainy, bumpy start and the usual challenges of the first two weeks of school. When our routine was established, what was at first awkward and clunky began to feel familiar and easier.

High marks on their report cards say our kids are doing just fine — a testament to the benefits of the bilingual education they received in the English system until now.

We were compelled to switch education systems when our English eligibility changed. My limited French proficiency leaves me feeling sidelined, particularly when it comes to governing board participation. Nevertheless, I’m committed to finding ways to contribute and support the school staff.

Our new school’s warm welcome heartens me.

Despite linguistic differences, I’ve been invited to organize fundraisers and support other initiatives.

During parent teacher conferences, a francization educator joined, facilitating translation as needed.

This reaffirms that the warmth of a school’s welcome, along with opportunities for parent involvement, contribute to the overall strength and joy in schools.

Any bureaucracy or government policy that threatens to get in the way of this kind of co-operation and collaboration must be vigorously challenged.

Arron Neal is an American expat and a former governing board chair at an EMSB school. She is navigating the Quebec education system with two children in primary school.

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