

Robert Libman: Anglophones need to show up in large numbers for EMSB election

If apathy prevails, the CAQ government could use a low turnout to its advantage.

Robert Libman • Special to Montreal Gazette

Published Oct 05, 2024 • Last updated 2 days ago • 3 minute read



Katherine Korakakis and Joe Ortona are running to be chair of the English Montreal School Board. Photos: Dave Sidaway / Montreal Gazette

In the first week of November, an important election is taking place. Yes, much of the world will be watching what happens south of the border, but for Quebec's English-speaking community, another important vote is coming.

On Nov. 3, there will be elections for the province's nine English school boards. Voters will cast ballots for the chair of their local board and for a commissioner to represent their local district.

For many of the boards, several positions, including that of the chair, have already been acclaimed. But for the highest-profile English Montreal School Board, which has been a bee in the bonnet of the Coalition Avenir Québec government over the years, the race is on. All commissioner positions will be contested as well as the chair, where Katherine Korakakis, the president of the English Parents' Committee Association, will be challenging the incumbent, Joe Ortona.

One of the CAQ's stated political objectives from the outset has been to do away with elected school boards, characterizing them as an unnecessary and expensive level of governance with paid elected commissioners. It has been easy for the premier to dismiss the importance of school boards to Quebecers by pointing to the low voter turnout — percentages in the single digits on the francophone side and typically in the teens for English boards.

Early in its first mandate, the CAQ government adopted legislation — Bill 40 — to replace all school boards with administrative “service centres” under direct control of the Ministry of Education and the government. While there was marginal opposition from the francophone sector, it was much stronger in the anglophone community, which saw the bill as a threat to its constitutionally enshrined guarantee to control and manage its school system.

Maintaining control is critical for Quebec's linguistic minority, particularly when certain governing parties — in the name of protecting French — treat English institutions as threats. Some would suggest the targeting of all school boards with Bill 40 was a disguised attempt to do away with the English boards.

The English boards have challenged Bill 40, and the lower courts have maintained that the legislation is unconstitutional as it pertains to English schools. But the CAQ is appealing.

With the case still before the courts and the fate of this valued community institutional network potentially at risk, the anglophone community can make a statement by showing up in large numbers for the EMSB election. Korakakis should be thanked for throwing her hat into the ring. For one thing, her involvement is good for democracy and might generate more interest in the race, with every position now on the ballot, thus no acclamations. She has also raised important issues and generated debate about some of the current board's decisions.

For his part, Ortona has rehabilitated the tattered reputation of the EMSB after the troubled tenure of his predecessor, Angela Mancini, which led to the EMSB being placed under trusteeship in 2019. Former MP Marlene Jennings was appointed and deftly righted the ship toward being functional again. Subsequently in 2020, Ortona was acclaimed chair and has since stood out as an articulate spokesperson for the EMSB court challenges — not only against Bill 40, but also Bills 21 (religious symbols) and 96 (language).

The fact there is a race between two worthy, high-profile candidates with a deep understanding of education is good news for the English-speaking community and will hopefully get voters out. If apathy prevails and turnout is low, the CAQ could use it to its advantage. There are only 10 days left for voters to make sure they are on the electoral list. All the information is available on the EMSB website.

The U.S. election may be politically sexier, but the community shouldn't minimize the importance of showing how much it values its institutions, sending a message to the government and the courts at every opportunity.

Robert Libman is an architect and planning consultant who has served as Equality Party leader and MNA, mayor of Côte-St-Luc and a member of the Montreal executive committee. He was a Conservative candidate in the 2015 federal election. [X@robertlibman](#)