



Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc.

A Brief on School Board Elections Systems

Submitted by: The Rights and Education Committee of the
Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc

To: The Election Systems Study Panel, Marlene Jennings, Chair

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THE QUEBEC FEDERATION OF HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS INC. BRIEF

The Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. is dedicated to promoting the involvement of parents, students, educators and the community at large in the advancement of learning. The Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc., welcomes this opportunity to present this Brief to the Election Systems Study Panel as a response to the call for consultation.

OUR ORGANIZATION

The Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. (the “QFHSA”) was officially inaugurated in May 1944 and was incorporated by Letters Patent under the Québec Companies Act in August 1959. The QFHSA is an independent, incorporated, not-for-profit volunteer organization dedicated to enhancing the education and general well-being of children and youth. The QFHSA promotes involving parents, students, educators and the community at large in the advancement of learning and acts as a voice for parents.

We are a federation of local Home and School Associations driven by one objective: to provide a caring and enriched educational experience for students. The over four thousand (4,000) family members of Home and School Associations come from all sectors of society: working parents, stay-at-home parents, grandparents, educational professionals and other ordinary citizens with an interest in maintaining a high level of education in this province. The schools that their children attend are scattered across the province: in Western Québec, the Eastern Townships, the North Shore, the Gaspé and the Greater Montreal area. They represent the cultural diversity within the

minority English-language school system: Anglophones, Allophones and Francophones. Our members pay a modest annual fee through their local associations to the QFHSA. Membership is also open to individuals without any school affiliation.

We represent 84 school communities and work with, for example, Community Learning Centers (CLCs), community organizations, and other associations who share our goals and objectives.

The QFHSA is a charter member of the Canadian Home and School Federation (CHSF). The roots of the QFHSA run deep in the history of the education system of Québec. Historically linked to the former Protestant system (both English and French), it has continued to build relationships within the linguistic system.

Partnerships with school boards, teacher and administrative associations, community organizations and other parent associations have been long-standing, and necessary, in addressing common concerns affecting the minority language communities as a whole. For over 70 years, our briefs, position papers and resolutions to various provincial and national governments and agencies illustrate that we have been consistent in stating our beliefs and values, and further demonstrate that we have no affiliation to any political party.

QFHSA AND 2014 SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

Due to the importance of elected English school boards to the English-speaking community, in 2014 the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. (QFHSA) decided to get involved in promoting school board elections. The Rights, Education and Resolutions Committee (RER) was mandated to produce a Special Bulletin on School Board Elections, which would include contributions from the Québec English School Board Association (QESBA), the Québec Community Groups Network (QCGN), out-going School Board Commissioners as well as a

message from our own president, Lawrence DePoe. Included in the bulletin would be information on returning officers and how to get on the right voters list. The intention was to provide as much information as possible to parents to boost voter turnout at the polls. This information would be of benefit to Home and School parents and the general public. Forty thousand (40,000) copies of the Special Bulletin were printed and distributed to all English public schools in Quebec, with assistance from QESBA through their internal mail system. Consensus at the QFHSA Board of Directors' as well as within the QFHSA Rights Education and Resolutions and Editorial Committees', was that the future of school boards in Québec was at stake, and this justified the special effort.

The QFHSA also developed a template procedure for hosting "Meet the Candidates' Nights" and distributed it to its member associations, encouraging them to contact their local candidates and invite them to meet their electorate. In the time period allotted, fourteen schools organized "Meet the Candidates" nights, nine of them with Home and School Associations. Notice of the Special Bulletin was distributed through the QCGN's "Daily Briefing" and "Network News (Fall)" and the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's (QAHN) "Heritage line" e-bulletin. Further information on school boards and their importance was provided in the Fall issue of the QFHSA NEWS.

INTRODUCTION

The Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. (QFHSA) firmly believes a community institution (in this case school boards) is an extremely important social construct as they are the central pillars or anchors on which a

community is built. The dictionary defines an institution as follows “an organization, establishment, foundation, society, or the like, devoted to the promotion of a particular cause or program, especially one of a public, educational, or charitable character”. (Dictionary.com).

Sociologically an institution is “a well-established and structured pattern of behavior or of relationships that is accepted as a fundamental part of a culture”. Nowhere is this fact more true than in the manner which the English-speaking community of Québec regards its community institutions. The importance of our institutions to the vitality (life blood) of our communities throughout Québec cannot be underestimated or dismissed off-hand. English school boards and English language schools are a prime example of institutions which bring value to the community, so much so that they are singularly protected under Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which states:

(1) Citizens of Canada:

- a) first language learned and still understood is that of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province in which they reside, or
- b) who have received their primary school instruction in Canada in English or French and reside in a province where the language in which they received that instruction is the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province, have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in that language in that province.

(2) Citizens of Canada of whom any child has received or is receiving primary or secondary school instruction in English or French in Canada have the right to have all their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the same language.

(3) The right of citizens of Canada under subsections (1) and (2) to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of a province:

a) applies wherever in the province the number of children of citizens who have such a right is sufficient to warrant the provision to them out of public funds of minority language instruction; and

b) includes where the number of those children so warrants, the right to have them receive that instruction in minority language educational facilities provided out of public funds.

The Supreme Court also ruled that the right to "facilities" in section 23 (3) b) could include more than classrooms and schools. Namely, the existence of a large number of children could mandate that minority language schools have their own school boards. Somewhere between the right to a school and a right to a school board, is the right for the minority language community, to have its members represent their interests on a larger school board.

Even in small communities as was the case in *Arsenault-Cameron v. Prince Edward Island* (2000) where even a small school might struggle with providing certain educational services, protecting the culture of the minority language community was considered too important to do

away with it. Such is the case with school boards for the English-speaking community in Québec. Regardless of the size of the community, low voter turnout for elections, or the political winds of change, **English language school boards are too important to the life and future of the Québec English-speaking community (ESC) to be abolished.**

However, this does not mean the system is perfect, but despite its imperfections, the Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. would like to highlight the successes of English school boards who have done better comparatively than our French-speaking counterparts in every significant Ministerial category. Our graduation rates average right now is 82% which is higher than the Ministry's hoped for goal of 80% by 2022. In terms of performance, English language school boards have consistently placed three boards in the top five, six of its nine members in the top ten, and all nine in the top fifteen school boards in the province. As for proficiency in French, studies have shown that English-speaking and French-speaking students taking the same French language exams, English-speaking students have scored the same or higher.

Some have argued that on the average, the English and French school boards serve a very different demographic, and, thus accounts for the discrepancy. The argument is that the French school boards serve a lower socio-economic population and that is the reason for lower graduation rates. However, socio-economic data from the 2006 enrollment of students in the French and English school boards in Montreal, show nearly identical demographics of the population bases of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and its French-speaking counterpart la Commission scolaire de Montreal (CSDM), with 78.6% of EMSB students graduating in the spring of 2012, versus only 45.3% of the CSDM students successfully graduating.

Given these numbers, it is hard to argue that English school boards have not done well in their primary directive which is to educate the students in their jurisdictions and prepare them to be productive citizens in society. By any measure, English school boards have succeeded beyond Ministerial expectations and have done so while keeping administrative costs under six per cent across the board while French-speaking boards have consistently averaged fourteen per cent or higher. The *Ministre de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* high-school graduation figures for the 2006 cohort show that only 62.6 per cent of students from the French public sector earned a diploma within five years, compared with 76.2 per cent of English-language students. Clearly, the English school boards of Quebec have a system that works and works well! So in the vernacular of our youth “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it!”

THE MISLEADING ISSUE OF VOTER TURNOUT

The Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. adamantly believes in the constitutional right of the English-speaking community to manage and control its educational system. The English-speaking community has long believed this to be the best method to preserve the existence and quality of English education in Québec. The Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. is also well aware that a small number of members of the community have decried the low turnout rate as an indication of a lack of interest by the English-speaking community in its educational institutions. As an organization representing the voice of parents within our system, we believe nothing could be further from the truth.

Over the last three school board elections in 2003, 2007, and 2014, we are looking at two different trends: a positive rise in voter turnout in English language school boards – from 14.6 % in 2003 to 16.7 % in 2007 to 16.88 % in 2014. On the other hand, a negative drop in French language school boards from 8.1 % in 2003 to 7.2 % in 2007 to 4.87 % in 2014, and since French language school boards outnumber English language school boards by sixty to nine, the overall turnout rate provincially dropped from 8.4 % in 2003 to 7.9 % in 2007 to 5.54 % in 2014.

The voter turnout rate would have been even higher had the process been expedited by the government, if more polling stations had been provided for the many voters who became discouraged by long voting lines, frustrating lengthy waiting times, and long distances to travel to the polling stations. Insufficient funding available to administer school board elections in an efficient manner, coupled with very confusing voters lists and a convoluted process for repatriation of English voters from the French voters lists unfortunately diminished the voter turnout rate. Despite these and other barriers we believe the English-speaking community strongly indicated its belief in the importance of our educational system.

A number of suggestions have been put forward as to how to improve the election system. We believe that the election system would be improved by introducing electronic voting as an option for voters, twinning school board and municipal elections and having the Directeur général des élections du Québec (DGEQ), run the elections on a week day as for provincial and federal elections. Although turnout may be improved by this method, there are still a number of tricky questions that remain as to how exactly this should be accomplished. Given the current problems

with the voter's lists as to eligibility, we are not confident the government would be able to ensure that eligible English voters would be assured their rights to vote for English school boards. However, the Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc., as well as other English speaking community organizations would be willing to work with the government to build a process that would assure our community's right to vote and the regulations governing school board electoral lists to be modified to ensure a true representation of the English-speaking community. In other words, the law which presently de-lists parents of students, once their children leave the English public system, from the English voting list and places them on the French school systems voting eligibility list, must be changed to prevent the English-speaking community's constitutional right to choose who represents them.

As to the idea of electoral colleges being bandied about as an alternative, we do not believe that adding another layer of governance between the school boards and the electorate is a positive solution. However, we do advocate exploring the idea of enticing the voters through Tax Credits or Deductions, through electronic voting and through mandating that both Parent Commissioners and Student Commissioners to have the right to vote and not be prohibited from exercising their franchise, as they are presently under the Education Act.

We also believe the government can assist school boards by instituting mandatory training for all commissioners under the law concerning their roles and responsibilities. In addition, the Education Act could be amended to decentralize the offices of commissioners to local schools particularly in regions where vast geographic territories are under the jurisdiction of a single school board such as Eastern Shores, Central Québec, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and Western Québec

school boards. Technology like videoconferencing, Skyping and other technological platforms could be used to increase participation, save money and reduce bureaucracy.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

The Austerity Measures presently being implemented by the Québec government have already adversely affected English school boards. Many have been forced to submit deficit budgets as a consequence, as the cuts demanded by these measures have been applied in a one size fits all approach. Traditionally English school boards have more effectively and efficiently managed their administrative spending than their French counterparts. Since the transition from confessional to linguistic school boards, the English-speaking school boards have reduced their administrative costs to below six per cent province wide. As such, any additional cuts demanded by the government have had to involve a reduction of direct services to our student populations.

Although we have still maintained a high standard of quality education for our students, the proposed cuts will have an adverse effect on services to our special needs students, school libraries, extra-curricular activities, and our ability to offer special programming or concentrations like the Arts and Sport etude programs. This, in turn, will affect our public school system's ability to attract students in an increasingly competitive environment, which sees our school boards competing with private schools.

In an environment which is becoming increasingly more difficult for English language schools to maintain and increase their enrolment of new students, the austerity measures are cutting off our

ability to maintain the integrity of our school boards. These measures are forcing major school change in many of our school boards and will affect in many cases access to local schools for many of our students throughout Quebec. Parents are increasingly concerned about the daily distance already traveled by their children. School closures will assuredly increase the travel times and place additional burdens on English school boards in terms of transportation costs and access to English language instruction in the communities where the students live.

Undoubtedly, access to less educational services will lead to less student success which in turn will lead to increased costs in the health and social service system. The resulting fallout will undoubtedly have an impact both on the economic and social levels. An increasingly unskilled labour force negatively impacts spending on social assistance and unemployment services, as well as acts as a disincentive to attract new business or industrial development to any community.

Obviously, the austerity measures blanket approach, unfairly and adversely affects the English-speaking community in a manner which does not impact the French-speaking community of Québec. The proposed measures fail to take into account the cultural and linguistic nature of our communities or respond to our repeated requests for recognition of our unique needs in preserving the number, nature and character of the English-speaking communities of Québec.

The English-speaking community has a very long history of parental involvement in our schools and school boards. Our community's parents are extremely worried about how this tradition will be maintained under the new measures proposed by the government to eliminate school boards.

Who will guarantee the same level of quality we have built into our system over the years under our community's guidance? What will happen to our libraries, support services and the maintenance of our schools? How will the pedagogy in our schools be managed and by whom?

REMOVE INEQUITIES FOUND IN THE CURRENT SCHOOL TAXATION MODEL

Current government policy on school taxes is hurting the English Speaking Community on two fronts. First, Québec's language law restrictions have a clear causal negative effect on the enrollment in English schools which in turn reduces funding through school taxes. The inability of English school boards to increase their enrollments under the present law creates a situation of diminishing returns and will negatively impact much needed program development necessary for preparing our students for the future. Secondly, the practice of different taxation mill rates, for linguistic school boards covering similar territories is a practice that should be discouraged. People with limited income, in some cases are drawn towards changing their taxation affiliation to school boards offering a lower mill rate, in order to save money and make ends meet. This is especially true for those who no longer have children in the public educational system, are childless, and/or are seniors living on fixed incomes.

One thing that should be avoided at all costs is having a single tax rate across Québec. Politically expedient as this might be, it would place an additional burden on urban property owners without having any linkage to the quality of educational services offered. As property values go up, the revenue from school taxes goes up without providing any incentive for school boards to operate in a more efficient manner.

If property value taxation is continued, it would be more favourable to have regional tax mill rates established in specific homogeneous regions so as not to continue to unfairly discriminate against certain regions. We need to look at alternatives to the current “property value” tax model and find new ways to provide greater equity across Québec. The current property evaluation tax model provides no incentives or linkages to offer quality educational services.

Conclusion

The Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. is deeply concerned about the potential loss of the English-speaking community’s constitutional rights under the government’s misguided attempt to balance the budget by eliminating all school boards in Québec. The historical presence, contributions and legal obligations to our community, particularly in education, are being patently ignored and passed over as if they mean nothing. We know otherwise. Once again the English-speaking community has to fight for its rights to be respected in spite of all we have contributed to the health and welfare of Québec.

Our achievements in increasing bilingualism in our community (85%), our superior graduation rates (82%) and our fiscal management of limited resources are not being viewed as methods to learn from and are seemingly deemed irrelevant in the present socio-economic context. We feel that particularly in the case of the English school board’s success model, that in the immortal words of George Santayana “those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it”.

Recommendations

The Rights and Education Committee of the Québec Federation of Home and School

Associations would like to offer the following recommendations:

1. In place of eliminating school boards, the government should look at the successful model developed by the English school board system
2. Improve the election system by the introduction of electronic voting as an option for voters, and by the twinning of school board and municipal elections.
3. Mandate Le Directeur général des élections du Québec (DGEQ) to run the elections and to hold them on a week day as is the case with provincial and federal elections.
4. Consult with other English speaking community organizations to work to build a process that would assure our community's right to vote, and to modify the regulations governing school board electoral lists, to ensure a true representation of the English-speaking community.
5. Explore the idea of enticing the voters through tax credits or deductions,
6. Mandating that both Parent Commissioners and Student Commissioners have the right to vote and not be prohibited from exercising their franchise, as they are presently under the Education Act.
7. Assist current school boards by instituting mandatory training for all commissioners under the law concerning their roles and responsibilities.
8. Amend the Education Act to decentralize the offices of commissioners to local schools, particularly in regions where vast geographic territories are under the jurisdiction of a single school board such as the Eastern Shores, Central Québec, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and Western Québec school boards.

9. Use technology such as videoconferencing, Skyping, and other technological platforms, to increase participation, save money and reduce bureaucracy.
10. Take into account the cultural and linguistic nature of our communities and respond to our repeated requests for recognition of our unique needs in preserving the number, nature and character of the English-speaking communities of Québec.
11. Amend the regulation de-listing graduated English students and their families from the English Voting List and placing them automatically on the French Voting List, in order to preserve the constitutional right of all members of the English-speaking community to vote for representatives on their English language school boards.

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