



*Townshippers' Association brief in response to Bill n°86:
An Act to modify the organization and governance of school
boards to give schools a greater say in decision-making and
ensure parents' presence within each school board's
decision-making body*

Introduction

For more than 37 years Townshippers' Association has been a leader in community engagement, pursuing its mission to promote the interests of the English-speaking community in Quebec's historical Eastern Townships, strengthen its cultural identity, and encourage the full participation of the English-speaking population in the community at large. We work on behalf of over 46,000 English-speakers who are spread across a region that is larger than Belgium, stretching from Philipsburg in the west to Megantic in the east, and from Inverness in the north to the U.S. border in the south.

Overview

The Quebec government has proposed legislation in the form of Bill 86 that would substantially change the way that public education at the primary and secondary schools is governed. Many of the provisions of this bill target changes that will give a much larger voice to both parents and professional educators in the decision making processes affecting how schools are administered.

Townshippers' Association fully supports the position that parents, education professionals and community members need to have a greater, not lesser, voice in the governance of schools and the services they provide to both students and the community. This bill provides a welcome opportunity to closely examine the importance of these governance structures at the board level, and to look at how to improve decision-making processes at the school level that will enhance the education of English-speaking minority youth, especially in regard to curriculum, pedagogy and student success. Article 72, sections 207.1 and 209.1, would appear to define the mission and mandate needed to carry out this requirement and in many ways would appear to be a solid foundation for constructive change. However, we respectfully request that, before this government

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moves forward with its reform, it carefully examines the following three concerns in the context of the impact on a minority rural population already struggling with poverty, underemployment and outward migration.

Concern Number ONE: There is no provision in this bill recognizing the special status of the English-speaking minority in respect to governance.

In general, we see Bill 86 in a positive light; however, we find there is no mention of the specific needs and rights of the English-speaking minority. Townshippers' Association wishes to call attention to the fact that the Eastern Townships School Board is the only institution that the English-speaking population of the Townships can still call its own. Our community members value this institution —and the schools within its jurisdiction— for the historical, political and cultural contributions they have made to the development of the English speaking population of this part of rural Quebec.

By proposing the abolition of elected Commissioners to the new “school councils” as laid out in Article 39, the selection of council members will no longer reflect our constitutional right to governance of our schools. The selection process is consolidated almost entirely in the hands of parent representatives, who may or may not decide to recommend elections for the six seats reserved for community representatives. While this may be seen as efficient and cost saving, such a change goes against the principles inherent in representational democracy. How can a community be asked to support its schools if it is only the parent representatives who determine how, and if, community members will be selected? [Article 39 sections 143 to 143.2 of the Bill]. We advocate that, **in keeping with the spirit of the constitution, a clear majority of seats should be allocated to representatives elected by the community and that the election process be strengthened through the implementation of recommendations 6 through 8 as proposed by the English School Boards Election Systems Study Panel Report (referred to as the “Jennings Report”, see annex).**

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Concern Number TWO: Lack of school council input into the English language curriculum

A related concern is that Bill 86 affirms that the Ministry will retain much of the decision-making power at the provincial level, particularly in areas related to curriculum. We would respectfully recommend that a close examination of the administrative structures at the Ministry of Education be undertaken in regard to the constitutional right of the English-speaking communities of Quebec to have the major say in running our schools. With planning for success as a major target of this Bill, the desired outcome would be to ensure that the curriculum prescribed for the English-language education sector receives a **much higher and more hands on level of input from the community it serves**. In this way, we believe that our preoccupations and needs would be better addressed at the provincial level. Our intention is not to challenge the authority of the Ministry but rather to encourage ongoing cooperation and involvement of our community in an area that is crucial to our future as fully participating members of Quebec Society.

Concern Number THREE: Bill 86 has a potentially negative impact on the vitality and identity of the English-speaking Community of the Eastern Townships

Since the English-language school boards are the last remaining institutions that English-speaking citizens of rural Quebec can call their own, this is not only a **community vitality** issue, but an **identity** issue which must be taken seriously in any upcoming debates regarding Bill 86. English-language schools are not just places where our children are educated; they are meeting places for the transmission of the cultural, social and historical identity of one of the founding peoples of Quebec. It is in this context that the question of how our community governs these schools becomes an issue that touches the vitality and identity of the English speaking minority language community in the regions of Quebec in a very significant way.

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We believe strongly that the maintenance of the community-based governance of our English-language educational institutions is **critical** to our community. Moreover, since **the Canadian constitution provides for minority language communities to have independent governance of their schools**, Townshippers' Association asks the government of Quebec to accept its moral obligation to recognize that English-language school boards are a vital extension of the English-speaking community. As such, they must remain within the control of that community at large, rather than in the exclusive domain of parent representatives.

Conclusion

While Townshippers Association recognizes many positive aspects of Bill 86, we strongly believe that the Quebec government needs to address the concerns noted above. **In particular, we would like to see, in law, an affirmation that our school councils will 1) remain within the control of the communities they serve, as a matter of legal right, community vitality and identity, and 2) obtain the responsibility to provide solid input into a curriculum that truly reflects the unique nature and needs of the English-speaking minority.**

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Annex

Excerpt from the *2015 English School Boards Election Systems Study Panel Report, page 26*

6. That English School Board elections be conducted through online, telephone and mail-in ballots only;
7. That English School Boards be given the legal authority to collaborate with their French School Board counterparts to revise voter lists for School Boards on their territories;
8. That the voter registration process be modified so that:
 - a. English Minority tax payers who pay into the English School Board system are automatically registered to the English School Board voting list;
 - b. Graduates of English public high schools are automatically registered to the English School Board voting list;
 - c. English Minority youth who turn 18 are automatically registered to the English School Board voting list;
 - d. Parents of children who have graduated from an English public High School are automatically registered to the English School Board voting list;
 - e. In the event that the Québec government does not implement ESSP recommendations 6 and 7, that voters in English School Board elections have the ability to identify their respective School Boards and be registered to vote for the appropriate candidates by showing proper identification on the day of the elections at their polling station;

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