



A
BRIEF
TO
THE COMMISSION
FOR
THE ESTATES GENERAL ON EDUCATION
FROM
QUEBEC FEDERATION OF HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS

Montreal, August 1995

3285 Cavendish Blvd.
Suite 562
Montreal, Quebec H4B 2L9



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INTRODUCTION

Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations (QFHSA) was founded in 1944 to bring together local Home and School associations, some of which had existed since the 1920's. It is an independent voluntary parental organization representing approximately five thousand families, the majority being within the English speaking communities throughout the Province. In addition there are about a hundred other educational and parental groups, such as private schools, school committees etc. that are affiliated with QFHSA. Parent volunteers are active within local Home and School associations, the provincial organization and at the national level through the Canadian Home and School Parent Teacher Federation.

One of the stated aims of the Home and School movement is to assist in forming public opinion favourable to educational reform and to the advancement of the education of the child. Thus we are pleased to be able to submit this brief to the Commission for the Estates General on Education.

This brief is presented in both French and English. However, these two versions are not direct translations, but have been written independently based on the same input and the same discussions. Care has been taken to examine both versions to ensure that their message is the same.

I PARENT INVOLVEMENT

QFHSA supports the government in its steps to increase parent involvement in the schools. The present system of school committees, orientation committees and parents committees must be protected, and every school community must continue to have the right to choose to form a Home and School association. The general right of access to the school must be maintained together with opportunities for parent volunteers helping in the school, the organization of extra curricular activities and fund raising activities.

However, parents must not be used to fill in the gaps caused by the cycle of diminishing funds and human resources. In some areas parents are feeling imposed upon as a result of their desire for their children to benefit from all the advantages available through the regular curriculum, some of which the local school board may be unable to provide.

Parents want to be involved as far as their interest and availability dictates. They want the right to be involved but they do not want to manage the school; this latter should be left to the professionals. Furthermore, there are many parents who are unable

to find time to volunteer or to contribute to the school in other ways; these include persons who are already marginalized in our society, those struggling financially, single parents etc. Involving parents in the management of the school would only serve to increase the distance between these parents and their children's school.

II SCHOOL BOARDS

It is of vital importance that direct control of schools remain with locally elected school boards. School governance must remain with those persons who have a specific interest in education. It is inappropriate to give responsibility for school buildings to municipalities; shared responsibility for a service seldom works smoothly and inevitably leads to another layer of bureaucracy. It is also unadvisable for the MEQ to assume more control.

There are many reasons for the maintenance of school boards. Among these QFHSA wishes to highlight the following:

School boards remain the most accessible level of school governance.

Schools need to be grouped under school boards to ensure access to a wider variety of services.

School boards, not schools, should be involved with tasks such as the following:

- Teachers' employment contracts, payroll etc.
- Local aspects of collective agreements.
- Assignment of school administrators.
- The provision of support services, whether directly or seeking these services from other organizations.
- The adaptation and implementation of pedagogical programs.
- The drawing up of budgets.

Parents want a local centralised authority for assuring the education of their children. And they want an authority to which they have a right of access, a right to give advice and which has an obligation to give reasons for its decisions.

QFHSA supports the concept of school boards, but finds the current electoral process to be flawed and wishes to offer the following recommendations for improvement:

If there is to be a common electoral list, then information pertinent to school board elections must be included. The

enumeration process must include questions necessary to determine the electors "choice " of school board.

School board elections should be held in conjunction with municipal elections.

School board elections should be run by and paid for by the provincial elections office.

Identified "Parties" should no longer be permitted in school board elections. School board decisions should be made for sound pedagogical and administrative reasons, not for political expediency. There should be free discussion and voting according to conscience. Political parties tend to paralyse discussion, inhibit individual contribution and impede good decisions.

QFHSA has kept its members informed of matters relating to the implementation of linguistic school boards. The government has so far failed to make its intentions known in this matter. Indecision is a symptom of poor governance. The community needs a decision now.

III FUNDING FOR EDUCATION

QFHSA is very concerned about the continual cutting of funding for education. Cutting funding now will lead to increased costs later. The lack of skills, unemployment, ill health, social needs, and dilapidated school buildings that will result from the present cuts will bring a vastly increased financial burden on the government, taxpayers and citizens in general.

QFHSA sees many vital aspects of the educational system that are in jeopardy. For example:

Special programs - keeping students in school requires not only programs of support for those with difficulties but programs of enrichment for the gifted who may otherwise become bored and turn their intelligence to antisocial activities.

Text books - The cost of books is soaring at the same time as the durability of books is decreasing. Money is needed not only to replace out of date books, but to replace texts that only too often lose pages, and quickly fall apart.

School buildings - Any householder knows the expenses involved in maintaining a house, and that small problems ignored quickly deteriorate into big problems requiring extensive repair. School buildings also have roofs, plumbing, walls, paint that are no less vulnerable to deterioration. The capital budget of the school boards has consistently been

insufficient for carrying out regular repairs to the extent that these are often set aside for dealing with crises such as leaking roofs, rotten window frames. It is hard for parents and student to be proud of some of the older school buildings.

Social needs - The ability of the school board to meet the needs of its students in the area of psychological and health support is rapidly decreasing. It is acknowledged that problems with student violence and aggression are on the increase. Many of the causes stem from the students' feelings of isolation from the mainstream of student achievement. Diagnostic services are vitally needed for early identification of students with special needs whether these are in the area of learning needs or psychological needs. Support services to address these needs are essential to allow these children to mature into healthy, competent adults.

Libraries and Computers - When cuts are made nothing is sacrosanct and library funding often comes at the bottom of the list. Some schools rely on the parents to fund raise in order to buy books for the library. Parents are happy to contribute for "extras" but to require this fund raising is tantamount to putting an extra tax on some parents. The provision of computers often falls into this category. In many elementary schools the only computers are those provided by the parents. If libraries and computers are essential to the educational progress of the students then the school boards must be given adequate funds for their maintenance and the staff to ensure their proper use.

Class size - Many elementary schools have classes larger than the maximum, others close classes when the maximum number of students is reached and assign the overflow to another school. School boards are caught between the financial advantage of refusing to have any classes greater than the maximum and the social and psychological advantage to the student not to be "bumped" from a school.

Transportation - In an era of increased awareness of road safety, it is deplorable that the funding cuts may eliminate initiatives such as the change to flat-nosed school buses, the reduction of time spent on buses and the rescinding of the "three per seat" rule.

IV CURRICULUM AND THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

QFHSA is of the opinion that there is room for improvement in this area.

The students' competence, on leaving school, in the language of instruction (French or English) does not appear to meet the needs

of the institutions of post secondary learning. To complement their ability in the first language students should have a high level of second language ability (English or French).

The MEQ is to be congratulated in its copyright agreement with the Union des Ecrivains/Ecrivaines du Quebec. Copyright agreements are now needed in other areas of writing and also music, discs audio and videotapes, radio and TV.

New programs need to be piloted under conditions that include all the new material required; texts, teacher guides and supplementary tools. The piloting should evaluate both the new program and the suggested method of implementation. The common links between the new program and the old need to be clearly stated as parents need to be assured that the "good" parts of an old program are retained in the new. Parents' confidence in some of the new programs needs to be established. To do this a systematic evaluation of each new program is needed, with the results shared with parents.

There has been much talk of exit profiles. At present this appears to be purely theoretical. If there are to be exit profiles then these must be used as a tool for education. Students' progress should be measured against the exit profile and identified problems addressed. Exit profiles provide an effective tool to manage education. It should be noted, however, that parents in general want their children to be well rounded, knowledgeable and competent in English and French, the arts, mathematics, science and having a world view that leads to an understanding of persons, society and nations.

With the daily bombardment from all aspects of media: print, audio, television, computer networks, it is vital that our children be taught how the media work and acquire the ability to read the message in a critical fashion.

V TEACHERS

For QFHSA the students are the most important factor of the educational system and the teachers rate a close second. This valuable resource is squeezed between the needs of the children and the demands of the parents on one hand and the constraints of collective agreements and the policies of the school board on the other.

QFHSA supports the MEQ's initiative to provide longer teacher training with more time spent in school. The new teacher should enter the work force with an updated professionalism and having been exposed to a greater number of the tasks required of a teacher. The longer time in school should also give student teachers, and their mentors, a greater ability to assess their suitability to the profession.

Parents are, however, concerned with a system which seems unable to come to terms with the concept of meaningful evaluation. Meaningful evaluation provides the teacher with positive support in the following ways:

It provides a means to recognize effective teachers.

It enables teachers who need help to be provided with the support required to improve their teaching.

It enables teachers to update their pedagogical methods, and to be acquainted with new trends.

Parents are very concerned about the people in the profession who are or who have become unsuited to be teachers. Meaningful, regular evaluation should provide a means of addressing this problem and put an end to the continual movement from school to school of such teachers.

Teachers are often not provided with the necessary pedagogical support. They need help to enable them to deal with new or changed programs; they need to be provided with time and encouragement to undertake personal professional development.

QFHSA is concerned with the current low staff morale. The lack of universal respect from the public at large, and the double burden of both an educational and a social role that has been thrust on teachers are perceived to be contributing factors.

The social role of the school has already been alluded to in the section on finance. The social, health and psychological needs of the students are growing at a time when there are fewer dollars to provide for these needs. The teachers are expected to fill in the gaps.

The school, and consequently the teacher, has to be parent, counsellor, nutritionist, caterer and social worker. This burden is compounded by the increasing problems of society in the areas of aggression, violence, drugs, sex, abuse, etc.

The teachers task has also changed through the policy of integration of special needs students. QFHSA supports this policy where the teacher is provided with adequate supplementary resources. The teachers need support in the classrooms by increasing the number of qualified aides available to assist as needed.

Early identification of learning and behavioural difficulties is essential as is the provision of resources to address these difficulties. Students so identified and given help in the first cycle of elementary school often progress without the need for further support in their later schooling.

Schools have limited resources in the area of diagnostic and psychological services. This expertise could be augmented by adequately staffing the CLSCs and requiring them to work cooperatively with the schools. (However QFHSA is concerned that the extra burden put upon the CLSCs as a result of the hospital closings make these essential services less rather than more available.) A first step towards an effective contribution from the CLSCs would be a greater cooperation between MEQ and MSSS.

There has been a growing trend for MSSS to withdraw from the provision of certain essential services without discussion with the ministries on the future funding of these services. Too often the school boards, with their diminishing resources, are expected to pick up the slack. Parents feel caught in the middle.

CONCLUSION

Public education must remain a priority of the government. The government must support and maintain proven initiatives that encompass sound pedagogical practice together with modern technology and communication systems.