

SUPPORTING ENGLISH SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Brief to the Minister of Education

October 2020

Introduction

The Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) wrote to the Minister in June, 2020¹ regarding the return to school. Because little has changed since then among the concerns it raised, we urge the Minister to refer back to that document, included with this letter for your convenience.

In September, ABEE met virtually to assess the situation in English-language schools and centres now that they are in operation after a six-month hiatus. In the words of one member, there were “different perspectives from different people with different responsibilities but all focused on how to play our part to make this work for our students, their families and our colleagues.” The discussion was wide-ranging, but several themes emerged that we respectfully share with the Minister.

Communication

As we wrote in our brief to the Minister in June, the educational community is concerned about some ministerial decisions and the way they have been conveyed to the system. As an example, the decision that younger students should not wear masks does not seem to be supported by science and the reasons for this decision are not transparent to administrators, teachers and parents.

We realize that the situation surrounding education during the pandemic has been fluid and can still change rapidly so that policy decisions must be made promptly and often adjusted rapidly. This has, regrettably, given the impression of directives being inconsistent and incoherent and of a lack of control. It is an argument for allowing local decision making to address greatly different local issues across the province, and even within a region, under the umbrella of an overall Ministry policy.

Problems of dealing with centralized decision-making are exacerbated when the decisions are not communicated appropriately to the system. Policy decisions have been preceded by rumours and then announced by media, including social media, rather than by direct communication from the Ministry. This is inefficient and gives a poor impression of the decision-making process. It is also disrespectful to the frontline personnel who carry out the procedures and who cannot transmit official responses to parents—indeed, they may get information *from* parents.

We urge the Minister to put in place more efficient communication methods when changes are made to safety and operation procedures in the schools and centres.

School Board elections

There was discussion about the inadvisability of holding elections for school board commissioners, given the uncertainty as to whether school board elections would take place under the usual rules, or whether candidates would be running for a post with unknown responsibilities and drawn from a restricted eligibility list, preparations were slow to start and many voters are still unsure about the status of school governance. Members identified the problems involved in gathering names to support candidates, given the short time allowed for accepting nominations, and the difficulty of

¹ ABEE, June 2020. Returning to school in the English education system in uncertain times.

approaching supporters, especially in the widely dispersed English school boards in the regions. It was unsurprising that fewer candidates proposed themselves and that there was a large proportion of acclaimed commissioners. Finally, the reluctance of voters to expose themselves to line-ups and to potential infection predicted a low turnout and cast doubt on the viability of the process.

For these reasons, we are pleased that the Minister has decided to delay the elections, even at such a late date and after some initial expenses have occurred. The postponement will allow for some clarity, some examination of the voter eligibility lists—always a problem in school board elections—and protect the safety of the voters.

Mental health

Students. This is now a greater concern for students and school and centre personnel than it was when ABEE wrote to the Minister in June. At that time, the focus was on students' mental health. Being back in school is more normal for them than the past six months have been, even with the new rules about spacing and other procedures and most children wanted to go back to school. But we do not yet know what the impact of the lockdown has been. The coming months—and years—will show how resilient the children are.

Taken from the federal government's grant for educational expenses incurred by the provinces, the money allocated to hire psychologists is welcome, but given the long-standing shortage of psychologists in the English sector, we wonder where the new personnel will be found and how much impact the few hires will have on the whole system. ***Some immediate measures are needed, recognizing that psychologists cannot be trained overnight.***

ABEE has often asked for the *Ordre des psychologues du Québec* to relax its requirement for excellence in French for psychologists wishing to practice in the English sector and whose lack of excellence in French often causes them to leave for other provinces on graduation. ***When more stable times return, we urge the Minister to pursue with the Ordre the possibility of an English language test, already established for teachers, to increase the pool of psychologists available for the English sector.***

Older students in technical and vocational programs faced their own difficulties. Some have needed personal protective equipment that has been scarce, some have had to learn hands-on courses from on-line instruction (and their instructors have had to learn how to teach in this medium), some had to deal with children at home, or with the loss of a job.

School personnel. There is now considerable concern over the mental health of school and centre personnel. Administrators at the school and school board levels have done a remarkable job in adapting quickly to directives. They have spent most of the Spring and Summer changing schedules, altering physical space in their buildings, supporting teachers in new classroom practice, helping teachers adapt methodology to accommodate online teaching. All this in reaction to the changes, without having had input into the process. They are tired, and many will be unable to maintain this level of activity for another nine months if the targets keep changing. They need support. ***Best practices already exist and we ask the Minister to see that they are supported and shared, possibly in collaboration with other ministries.***

Teachers and daycare workers are being asked to change their usual practice in a number of ways and to respond to changing rules. They find physical distancing unnatural, especially when dealing with younger students. Classroom dynamics are different when students are confined to their desks. They have the added stress of knowing that they are exposed to unmasked students who may be carriers of the Covid-19 virus, which the teachers may then carry back to their own homes.

Immuno-compromised teachers working from home and teaching on-line have their own challenges, often learning a new curriculum, dealing with large groups of students, students with a variety of IEPs, learning to use the communication platform, and lacking the support of colleagues.

Many parents took on the burden of trying to accommodate their children's formal education between March and June and are still feeling the stress of trying to support their children's learning at home. In the process, they have gained a vivid picture of the daily work of teachers. We hope the system as a whole, including the Ministry, will also be able to acknowledge this work in some concrete way.

Examinations

All students face stress under the pressure of province-wide examinations. The stress will be even greater this year. Students have had a range of educational experiences this Spring and are returning to the classroom in varying states of readiness for the next grade level. Secondary 4 and 5 students are learning in a variety of models of instruction: some are in full-time attendance; some are involved in a blended model and are only partly in school; some are learning at home. The blended model is challenging for all students, especially those in Adult Education and Vocational Training. Standardized tests will be difficult to justify when teaching is not standardized, when attendance requirements are not standardized and when a change in a region's coding may even close schools for two-week periods. Summative evaluations developed by school boards would be more appropriate, and might produce some innovative strategies. *ABEE members hoped that the Minister is already developing creative strategies for alternative methods of evaluation of school subjects normally subject to provincial examinations and that these will be communicated to school boards as soon as possible.*

Summary

Several words recurred during this meeting, such as challenge, fatigue, inconsistencies, communication, mental health, and the difficulty in maintaining a positive attitude. But we also heard the words resiliency and flexibility and the overall sense of the meeting was the need to establish how all levels of the education workforce can contribute to the education and well-being of the students, while maintaining their own health and well-being. It was reassuring to hear this level of commitment, and ABEE continues to assure the Minister that it will do its part in the process.