

## QCGN Supports Commissioner's Call for Symmetry in the Official Languages Act

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**MONTREAL, June 1, 2021** – Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages Raymond Th  berge is advising the federal government to maintain the equal status of French and English in its coming changes to the Official Languages Act. The Quebec Community Groups Network enthusiastically endorses this advice.

In his annual report tabled in the House of Commons today, Commissioner Th  berge said he is "pleased to see that the Government of Canada's proposed overhaul is based on the principle of substantive equality, because beyond guaranteeing the equal status of English and French, the new Act must provide the means to actually achieve this equality."

"The Commissioner of Official Languages has taken a principled stand in defence of the equality of Canada's two official languages," comments QCGN President Marlene Jennings: "We concur with his recommendation that the government focus on substantive equality rather than legislative asymmetry, in order to foster the development and vitality of both of Canada's official language minority communities."

Substantive equality means that the specific needs of individual official language minority communities can be targeted by federal programs, Jennings explains. "The guarantee of legal symmetry in the Act is particularly important at this time because Quebecers are faced with a provincial government that is doubling down on language regulations that will further restrict the rights of English-speaking Quebecers."

The Commissioner also identifies a significant flaw in the government's reform proposal – that support to institutions under Quebec's jurisdiction requires provincial cooperation in order to ensure resources actually reach our institutions and that they are used for stated intentions. This observation underscores another important, longtime issue for English-speaking Quebecers and the organizations that support them – the need to ensure transparency and accountability regarding federal transfers to Quebec, most notably funds earmarked to support minority and second-language education.

In September of 2019, Official Languages Minister M  lanie Joly announced a framework agreement with 13 provinces and territories – but not Quebec. Through this agreement, the Government of Canada will invest \$1 billion over four years to support French education in minority-language communities, education in English for English-speaking communities in Quebec, as well as second-language instruction.

Joly explained that while Quebec shares the objectives of the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction*, the Government of Quebec refused to sign claiming exclusive jurisdiction in matters of education. The conclusion of a bilateral agreement between the Governments of Canada and Quebec would enable this province to obtain its share of this federal funding, she added.

“If Quebec has the right to opt out of agreements that include accountability provisions, it is only fair that the province’s English-speaking community be ensured transparency regarding the allocation of funds received from the federal government,” Théberge commented in his report. English school boards need to know what federal funding is available in order to plan their development, he said.

“The lack of transparency creates operational issues for our school boards,” Jennings says. She notes that the Quebec government could use funds earmarked for English-language education as it pleases, including spending that money on school infrastructures not covered by the terms of the agreement.

“The QCGN hopes the federal government takes heed of the Commissioner’s concerns,” Jennings remarks: “Our community needs to know that the federal government has our back as we face renewed attacks by our provincial government on the language front.”

*An earlier version of this release reported that the framework agreement in education was concluded last fall.*

The Quebec Community Groups Network is a not-for-profit organization bringing together English-language community organizations across Quebec. As a centre of evidence-based expertise and collective action it identifies, explores, and addresses strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of the English-speaking community of Quebec and encourages dialogue and collaboration among its member organizations, individuals, community groups, institutions, and leaders.

**For further information:**

Rita Legault, Director of Communications | [rita.legault@qcgnc.ca](mailto:rita.legault@qcgnc.ca)

Telephone: 514-912-6555