



# Rural Schools, Linguistic Identities, and Official Language Minority Rights:

Insights from Rights Holder Parents in Quebec

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Since the enactment of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, section 23 has recognized Canadian citizens' right to have their children educated in their first official language. At its core, section 23 guarantees minority language education rights as a tool to resist assimilation and guarantees that such rights are sustained through generations of rights holders. Protecting official language minority education rights is a means to preserve and promote the identity and culture of English-speaking communities in Quebec, which, along with Francophones outside of Quebec, form Canada's official language minority populations.

Quebec is unique in Canada for adopting its signature *Charter of the French Language* (1977), also known as Bill 101. The law includes provisions that regulate language of instruction in schools to protect the French language. Although two public school systems coexist in Québec—the Anglophone system and the Francophone system—access to English instruction is restricted. Under Bill 101, parents wishing to register their children in an English-language school must hold a government-issued Certificate of Eligibility. This document is granted based on criteria established by Quebec legislators to reflect a genuine educational pathway in the minority language. The Certificate is generally granted to children (i) who completed the majority of their elementary or secondary studies in English in Canada; (ii) whose sibling(s) completed the majority of their elementary or secondary studies in English in Canada; or (iii) whose parent(s) completed the majority of their elementary schooling in English in Canada (QESBA, 2014). Additional exceptions granting the right to attend English-language schools can apply to specific situations, for example, allowing a child with a serious learning disability to attend school in the parents' language of choice. The collective right to uphold French as Quebec's only official language is thus protected in law.

The impact of Bill 101 on English-language schools in the province, particularly in rural areas, cannot be overstated. Rural English-language schools exist at the crossroads of political, social, and linguistic ecologies. Enrolment in the English-language school system plummeted from 256,251 students in 1971 to 96,235 in 2018, a 63% drop (MEES data, as reported by Bourhis, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Rural and remote<sup>2</sup> communities, whose Anglophone populations have always been small in comparison with those of Montreal and other urban centres, are disproportionately disadvantaged by Quebec's language policies (ABEE, 2018). As a result, many English-language schools in rural and remote regions of the province have been forced to innovate, restructure, or close.

There is considerable scholarly work examining the ways Quebec's language policies regulate the language of instruction in schools. The current paper contributes to the existing literature by sharing the voices of 21 rights holder parents living in rural areas of Quebec and discussing the ways language of instruction policies influence their school choices and impact their children's school experiences in rural contexts.

1 In addition to Bill 101 restrictions, outmigration and lower birthrates are also factors accounting for the decline (Bourhis, 2015).

2 Like rural(ness), discussed below, remote(ness) is a relative, not an absolute concept. Remote areas are generally less accessible from rural areas, and especially urban areas, in other words, "remote from" more developed villages or towns, and where transportation connections are time-consuming and/or limited (e.g., see Statistics Canada, 2020).

# Key Questions

- 1 What are rights holder parent participants' experiences navigating English-language schooling in rural areas across Quebec?
- 2 In what ways does ruralness influence these parent participants' experiences?

## Shifting the *Rural* to *Ruralities*

There is a tendency in scholarship and everyday discourse to discuss the *rural* as if everyone knows what it is, as though its meaning is obvious and unassuming. This next section provides a brief overview of the literature to complexify such identifications and better understand the diverse nature of rural contexts in this study.

Quantitatively, definitions of *rural* vary from population size and/or density and settlement patterns to labour market conditions, brought to life through ostensibly neutral statistics and graphic representations. Rural is often referenced as the geographic location of areas located outside urban centres. For example, Statistics Canada defines the rural area of Canada as “the land that remains after the delineation of population centres,” and rural populations as including “all populations living in rural areas” (Statistics Canada, 2021). Such technical definitions tend to position rural areas and peoples as urban postscripts.

Qualitatively, conceptualizations of the *rural* tend to be based upon binary analyses, that is, in contrast (or in opposition) to the *urban*. On the one hand, rural spaces may be regarded as romanticized wholesome havens, assumed bereft of the crime and social ills more associated with urban places (Little, Panelli, & Kraack, 2005). On the other hand, rural can be presented relationally as less progressive, lacking racial and ethnocultural diversity, more patriarchal, and more poverty-stricken than urban (Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008; Corbett, 2006; Green & Corbett, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). Rural is stereotyped as stagnant or in decline, “rustic, historic, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes pathetic, always in need of reform and modernization” (Corbett, 2006, p. 297), contrasted against the stereotype of urban as progressive (*urbane* signifies sophisticated and civilized).

Deeply embedded in rural places is pride of place, an emotional attachment to land through its peoples and histories. Arguably, there is no one static rural culture. When we homogenize the rural, we dehumanize rural peoples, their stories and histories, and their communities. Instead, there are ruralities: various multiple social identities, lived experiences (past and present), and ideological differences embedded within and across rural communities.

The voices and experiences of the rights holder parent participants presented in this paper illustrate that there is no single story emerging from rural places. However, there are common challenges and priorities that bind rights holder parents together in conversation, particularly when deciding which linguistic school experience will best support their children's current and future needs. Rural, in the context of this study, is both a *geographic concept* (places and spaces located outside of urban centres, with low population density) and a *social representation* (having distinctive lived meanings; a state of being and/or living rural).

# Methods

Consistent with the constructivist paradigm, this research explores how individuals within a particular social context ascribe a range of meanings to various situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). While the experiences and stories of individuals are unique, they are also variations of larger narratives embedded in a culture (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Through inviting and analyzing the stories and narrative accounts of rights holder parents about their experiences navigating English-language schooling in rural settings, knowledge can be acquired about larger processes and Quebec society as a whole. This study's data comes from two distinct data sets.

## Data Set 1:

This initial phase involved a secondary analysis of unpublished focus group transcripts extracted from a Master's thesis research project exploring Quebec parents' perceptions of and attitudes toward language of instruction policies (Langevin, 2022). Eight of the 44 parents who participated in Langevin's focus group study shared experiences seemingly unique to their rural circumstances (e.g., transportation challenges, school size, and challenges with access to services for children with a learning disability). The experiences of parents living in rural communities were not discussed in depth in the thesis. The present study revisits these participants' transcripts as a part of the analysis.<sup>3</sup>

## Data Set 2:

A second round of participant recruitment and data collection using purposive sampling took place between April and November 2022. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select "information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 1990, p. 230). Participants were rights holder parents with children eligible to register in the English-language school system, with experience navigating school systems in rural settings in Quebec. The research invited prospective participants through professional and personal networks. Calls for participation were also posted through parent groups and local community groups in rural areas through the social media platform Facebook. These 13 participants took part in initial intake interviews and were asked to disclose their children's eligibility status for English-language instruction in the province and the location of their children's school(s).

The 21 participants (across data sets 1 and 2) reported that their children had attended or were attending school(s) in one of five administrative regions in Quebec (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Four parents were born outside of the province (within Canada). At least seven participants identified as *historic Anglophone Quebecers* (e.g., *seven generations on the farm; descended from Loyalists*).<sup>5</sup> Some parents referenced rural and/or regional identity markers (*rural to the bone, rural roots,*

3 All eight participants consented to the secondary analysis.

4 A high number of participants are from the Eastern Townships owing to the principal investigator's professional and community connections in the region.

5 Participants were not asked to self-identify as Anglophone, Francophone, or Allophone during intake interviews.

*rural is in my blood, Townshipper*). At least six participants identified as current or former community leaders within their schools and/or school boards (e.g., members of parent councils, commissioners). Many of the parent participants belonged to small, tight-knit rural communities. To ensure confidentiality, the individual backgrounds and circumstances of parent participants will not be shared in this paper.

Data collection in this second phase entailed parents' participation in either a focus group discussion or an individual interview. All interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded using the communications platform Zoom. Participants were asked to describe their place in the history of the English-speaking community in the province, explain their reasons for school choice, and describe what it means to have their children attend school in their rural setting, and what opportunities and challenges they experience in their local context with respect to their children's education.

Data analysis entailed a vertical examination of interview transcripts (each parent participant's narrative was analyzed individually and assigned initial codes using NVivo software), followed by a horizontal examination (constant comparison across focus groups and interviews) to identify common themes (Saldaña, 2014). This approach allowed for context-specific knowledge to emerge through an understanding of the complexity of each parent's narrative. In this way, the researcher was initially a narrative finder, and then a narrative constructor in conducting the analytical and interpretive work (Polkinghorne, 1995).

**Table 1:**  
**Regional distribution of parent participants in Quebec**

Region	Number of participants with children attending school in the region
Abitibi-Témiscamingue	1
Chaudière-Appalaches	3
Côte-Nord	2
Eastern Townships	10
Centre-du-Québec	3
Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine	2



# Results

The narratives shared by participants in this study illustrate similarities and differences in their experiences navigating English-language schooling in rural Quebec. These nuances guide the analysis of their ruralities. Verbatim quotes have been included throughout this results section to present participants' experiences and sentiments in their own words (Patton, 2002). Three themes emerged as recurrent topics of discussion during the focus groups and interviews. For the participants, language of instruction policies in rural contexts contribute to stress and challenges related to (1) long commutes, (2) small schools and class sizes, and (3) lack of access to specialized services.

## Home-to-School Connections: Distance Dilemmas

Bus journeys are a habitual part of everyday life for children living in rural areas, where travel can be long. According to the 2021 Census, the average distance between the place of residence and the closest official language minority school is four times greater for eligible students living in rural areas (19.7 km) than for those living in urban areas (4.9 km) (Statistics Canada, 2022). In Quebec, 21.3% of eligible children in rural areas live at least 20 kilometres away from the nearest English-language school, compared with 3.3% of eligible children in urban areas. Some English-language school boards have schools dispersed over vast geographic areas, requiring students to embark on long daily commutes to attend the nearest English-language school.

The distance between home and school, and the means to get to school, warrant careful consideration when rights holder parents in rural settings decide to enroll their children. For many parent participants, particularly those with elementary school age children, distance and transportation were the determining school choice factors. Opting for the school closest to their residence was often the obvious choice, regardless of language of instruction. One parent who had moved to Quebec from Alberta reflected on his own childhood transportation experience growing up in rural Alberta:

*I was on a bus for two hours every day when I went to school. Life on the bus was hard. Winter was the worst. Getting up early in the morning to get on the bus in the dark; then, coming back home in the dark. Without cell phones to keep us occupied. Imagine! I didn't want that kind of life for my children. I'd feel so guilty. So we sent them to the French school in the local village, even though we preferred the English school, but it's too far away.*

Older students in rural areas are more likely to require bussing to attend English-language secondary school, since these schools are fewer in number compared with elementary schools and have wider catchment areas. Some participants, who preferred to keep their children closer to home when they were younger, felt comfortable sending them to the English-language system in secondary school when they were more mature to ride the bus. Parent participants with secondary school aged children also tended to leave the school choice decision to their adolescents.

An analysis of 2021 Census data and the location of official language minority schools shows that the greater the distance between an eligible school-age child's residence and the nearest official language minority school, the more unlikely they are to have ever attended a school in the minority language (Statistics Canada, 2022). In Quebec, French-language schools may benefit from home-to-school distance challenges faced by rights holder parents, further limiting English-language school enrolments in rural and remote areas. When school boards in the province restructure or amalgamate, or a when a school closes in a rural or remote community, children will likely be required to be bussed to schools at greater distances owing to these changing patterns of school networks.

Bus journeys are more than a means of transportation; they are also moving social spaces (e.g., see Gristy, 2019). One parent highlighted a concern of having her two children be the only English-speaking students travelling alongside “48 other French kids. At the beginning of the season, it was hard until they got to know them, of course.” This parent's children were riding on the same bus as children being transported to the local French-language school. In this case, the local English- and French-language schools were required to share a bus because the English-language school did not have enough students to support another bus. On the flip side, another parent embraced bussing as an intercultural opportunity for Francophone and Anglophone students to come together in a shared space. His daughters attended a regional secondary school where half of the building was operated by an English-language school board and the other half by a French-language service centre. Anglophone and Francophone students travelled on the same busses “as neighbours,” which, according to this father, was an important means to support bilingualism and rural community building.

## Divergent Views on Small Schools and Small Class Sizes

Following the adoption of Bill 101 in 1977, English-language school enrolment has continuously declined across Quebec. To illustrate this situation, the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) published figures from the 2015-2016 school year showing that 23% of schools in the English-language system had small populations of 100 or fewer students (ABEE, 2018, p. 45). English-language schools share an increasingly sparser student population scattered across all establishments, a situation that can put some remote, less populous schools at risk of closure due to an insufficient number of students.<sup>6</sup>

*We're always looking over our shoulders, trying to see if we're at that point, when we'll lose our [English-language] school to the French because we don't have their numbers. It's exhausting.*

Participants mostly viewed the province's language policies as necessary to ensure the survival of the French language in the province. Many participants alluded to that fact that they could “see [Francophones'] side of the coin

<sup>6</sup> According to Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (section 23 – Minority language educational rights), where the number of rights holder students warrant, minority language schools must remain open and accessible.

because, if they don't preserve the French language, it's going to go away." This study's data set reveals that English-speaking parents living in rural contexts hold French and learning French in high esteem, deeming it a priority in their children's education, as expressed by this participant: "I would be looking at trying to ensure that my kids have the same level of French as in the Francophone system." Learning French is also seen as a means to ensure the demographic survival of their English rural communities, since Anglophone children who can also speak French are more likely to secure a future in rural areas: "When my daughters graduate from high school, they will speak French and be able to stay here in Trois-Rivières."

Nevertheless, encroaching language laws are viewed by participants as the leading factor in English-language school closures in the province. In the words of one participant, "politically, they won't be able to shut our English school down, because it would be a definite faux pas, but there won't be any kids left in those schools very long." In a similar vein, a parent in Abitibi-Témiscamingue shared the following:

*When my daughter started kindergarten there were 27 kids; when they graduated there were 9. There's just not enough population to populate those English schools. Bill 101 is just the government's way of making sure English schools are extinct in 50 years after its instauration. In the next 10 years, the rural communities will have no English schools left. There won't be any at all.*

Dwindling enrolment was a common narrative expressed among rights holder participants living in more remote communities. In this study, the further away a participant's residence is from Montreal, the more likely they were to raise concerns about declining English-language school enrolments and school closures. For instance, one parent living in Sept-Îles shared how her family experienced the decline of their English-language schools through the years:

*The elementary school where my kids are attending is almost 200 students, which is the biggest school in the Eastern Shore School Board, which is a huge territory. Whereas the high school here, the student population is in the low sixties. When my sister went there (she graduated in the 1980s), there were 450 students in that same high school. When I went, we were already down to 160, and now it's 63.*

For some rights holder participants however, smaller schools and class sizes can result in better opportunities for teachers to create differentiated learning environments for their students.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of rural schools was appealing to many participants, who viewed small classes as spaces for their children to receive more individualized attention and interaction with the teacher.

<sup>7</sup> The concepts of *small* school and small class size are relative. The terms are always expressed in relation to something else deemed to be larger. In this study, the term *small* tended to be applied by participants in two ways: first, in contrast with larger schools in urban areas, perceived to have larger student populations compared with schools in rural settings; and second, in relation to local rural French-language schools, generally perceived as having higher student populations compared with the local English-language school.

Students in small classes were also perceived as having more opportunities to participate and become more involved in different activities both inside and outside of the school, thereby experiencing community-based learning. For example, a parent from the Eastern Townships shared her experiences visiting the local French- and English-language schools before deciding to enroll her daughter in the English-language school, where the class size was 12 students:

*My husband, in the beginning, wanted [our child] to go to French school, but in the French school there were two or three kindergarten classes, and there was like, 60 kindergarteners. My husband found that too big; we're used to small schools.*

Other parents shared stories of local English-language school teachers “going above and beyond” to ensure their students’ success, described by one parent as “care on a level that makes me feel grateful every day to live in a small community.” There was wide acknowledgment that small classes support a tight-knit, family-like community, where “it’s difficult for students to fall through the cracks.”

On the flip side, other parents held the view that, despite the perceived benefits of individualized attention, small schools and class sizes can be “socially limiting” and a poor fit for their children. One parent explained how their child is now “in the French system, just because the school is large and she’s a social butterfly.” In this child’s previous English-language school, there were 34 students aged 4 to 16. Such low numbers did not address her daughter’s socialization needs. Other parents, without the option to send their children to a French-language school for more opportunities to socialize, expressed anger and resentment concerning the small population of their English-language schools: “It was hard for my kids to go to a school where there were only nine in the class. It wasn’t easy for them.”

Small school and class populations also did not align with some parents’ expressed desire for their children to have opportunities to interact with children from diverse backgrounds. “I’d like my son to be able to mix and mingle with more kids, outside the eight in his class, and different kinds of kids, from different families and backgrounds.” Another participant who acknowledged the homogeneity of their community’s English-language school’s population shared a concern that “everybody looks the same.” According to her, this lack of ethnocultural and racial diversity in the English-language school was potentially harmful for the children’s socialization.

With so few students, small schools are limited in the programs and services they can offer, thus further weakening their appeal to attract and retain parents and students. Two parents voiced frustrations about the limited course options available at their children’s secondary schools. One parent explained that their child’s secondary school could not offer a fuller range of advanced science and math courses, owing to small class numbers and a shortage of qualified English-speaking teachers in the disciplines. Even though their child was eventually able to complete physics and advanced math courses in English online through *L’École en réseau* (networked schools), they were still unable to

acquire all the credits needed to register in the local French-language CEGEP:<sup>8</sup> “So that’s where I find that the French schools, because they have the numbers and the funding, are able to offer more subjects and credits than the English schools in the regions.” Without a local English-language CEGEP, following graduation from secondary school, her child had to move to Sherbrooke, nine hours away from home. Anglophone students in rural and remote communities thus face additional barriers limiting post-secondary degree access. Some participants feared the looming possibility of “losing” their children to the city (likely Montreal) or seeing them move out of the province. These results align with a survey conducted by Allard and Landry (2014), where only 34% of English-speaking students indicated they would stay or return to their home region after completing their studies. Some survey respondents cited language politics as their reason for leaving. However, deteriorating economic conditions across many rural communities was also a compelling factor in their decision. According to the Advisory Board on English Education:

*A high school graduate who leaves the region to study, faced with career opportunities in urban areas or outside Québec, being persuaded by the majority population that he does not have the French-language skills to work in his home region, and unappreciated for the skills he does have, is unlikely to be attracted “home” (ABEE, 2018, p. 24).*

While some participants embraced small schools and class sizes as an opportunity to deepen relationships and learning, others viewed these small classroom communities as potentially impeding their children’s social development. For this study’s participants, however, the main concern they expressed with regard to shrinking class sizes was the threat this phenomenon poses to their local school’s survival. For some parents, they expressed living with constant stress associated with their children’s uncertain future because they belong to a community that cannot guarantee sustained access to English-language schooling for their children.

8 Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel (general and vocational college, a post-secondary higher education establishment unique to Quebec).

## Lack of Access to Specialized Services in Rural Communities

In Quebec, the demand for learning support services in English has increased steadily over the years as “more students are identified as having social, intellectual or behavioural difficulties” (ABEE, 2018, p. 37). Access to such services is further limited in rural settings:

*In some regions, access to complementary educational services has declined and is now worse than “uneven.” The lack of access to support services in English to students who have English as a common language is a major problem. There are few providers of services such as speech therapy available in English and no incentives for English-speaking professionals to relocate to remote areas. [It] is difficult to attract professionals, such as psychologists, to jobs that might be divided in communities as far apart as La Tuque, Jonquière and Thetford Mines (ABEE, 2018, p. 65).*

When school boards with schools located in remote communities share specialists, it is likely the specialists will spend long hours on the road.<sup>9</sup> Long commutes reduce the time learning specialists can spend with students. To compound access demands, small rural schools are limited by the number of students they can refer to a psychologist in one year, irrespective of the actual number that need support. Parents may find themselves on waiting lists for two years or more in some areas (ABEE, 2018).

The French-language system was widely viewed by participants as having more funding available to support students’ needs, owing to their higher enrolments. According to one parent:

*In the English system, there is not the same level of resources for kids. At my kids’ school, there are no psychoeducators. They haven’t had one for years and years. Whereas in the French system, you can find some of those resources.<sup>10</sup>*

Some parents expressed deep resentment toward the government at how their children seemed to be denied access to specialist services because of their English-speaking and rural school contexts.

For different reasons, parent participants with children with learning challenges tended to opt for English-language instruction. For instance, one mother recounted how she had initially enrolled her son with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the local French-language elementary school to support his French-language learning. However, she found that the school did not seem interested in taking any “creative” measures to support him.

9 For example, the Central Québec School Board covers a land area of 515,000 square kilometres and serves 5,000 students across 17 schools. The Eastern Townships School Board spans a geographic area the size of Belgium.

10 Psychoeducators develop and implement programming and intervention plans for students with learning challenges. Most psychoeducator training programs in Quebec are offered in French only (Gouvernement du Québec, 2023).

The school's approach to teaching and learning was deemed too rigid to support his learning needs, described by his mother as "trying to fit a square peg into a round hole." And so the family moved him to the local English-language school where they felt he was provided more support in his learning.

In other instances, parents viewed learning two languages simultaneously to be too challenging for their children. "My eldest has a lot of special needs.... So, he is in English, and will stay in English, because English is hard, so French is almost impossible for him." If English was the language spoken at home, then it was seen as important to have English as the language of instruction, particularly for children with speech disorders. One mother shared a deep concern that her son, born with permanent neurological needs, would never be able to achieve the level of proficiency in the French language to pass the French-language exam required to graduate from English-language secondary school. "I'm terrified and I have a plan B," she said, explaining her strategy to move her son to Ontario to live with her sister so that he could graduate secondary school in English without the French-language exam requirement if needed.

Some parents had simply given up seeking specialist support through the English-language system altogether. They had no expectation that their school and school board could meet their child's needs:

*As far as psychologists and evaluations, we've had to pay for a lot of them. I continue to pay for an English-speaking psychologist because there wasn't one offered through the local system. I've had to go to the city for lots of specialists. I've not even requested anything public because it's just not available.*

This parent had the financial means for her children to access private English-speaking specialists in urban centres (Montreal) and the proximity needed to travel back and forth from her rural village in the Eastern Townships. Parents who do not have the resources to attend to their children's learning needs privately cannot always rely on an already stressed English-speaking education system. Children living in remote areas of the province are further marginalized because they are less likely to have access (proximity) to private resources and services outside of their schools.

Parents with children who need more specialized health support to function in their English-language schools face different challenges. One mother, whose son required medical care for his learning challenges, offered her "theory" to explain why parents like herself are at a particular disadvantage when attempting to access high-quality services in rural English-language schools:

*My son is in an English school and all of his medical team is in French. Not only are they two bureaucracies, education and health, they don't speak the same language. The hospital team is used to dealing with the French school system in the regions because that is the majority of the cases that they see, and so they have a better understanding of how that system works and who to contact in those schools. They can get a hold of the people they need easily. What I have lived is when your medical team is French and school team is English the barrier is bigger, and they're more likely to make a mistake and so you just get lost in the miscommunication.*

This parent identified as fully bilingual, and yet admitted to still feeling helpless because she could not always ensure that correct (e.g., detailed) translations are communicated to her son's school so that he can receive the support he needed to learn. This parent and others in this study, particularly mothers, spend many hours driving their children to specialists, even further if English-speaking support is available, at great emotional and financial costs.



# Discussion

Although not stated explicitly, economic considerations were at the centre of many parent participants' concerns about sustaining quality English-language schooling in their rural communities. Whether linked to the exodus of youth further afield for work or post-secondary opportunities, or the shortage of specialist services, hard economic times in rural Quebec is a real concern. These challenges, however, are not unique to Quebec. Small schools across Canada are closing in rural communities largely owing to aging and declining populations, outmigration of youth to urban areas, and economic decline (see ABEE, 2018; Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Gollum, 2017).

Immigration is often touted as one way to meet social, demographic, and economic needs in small communities. Outside the province, federally supported immigration programs invite skilled foreign workers to lay down roots in participating rural and remote communities. The Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot<sup>11</sup> and the Atlantic Immigration Program<sup>12</sup> operate in nine provinces to support foreign workers to establish permanent residence outside major urban areas. These regional and community-driven programs encourage economic immigration to bolster growth in small communities with aging populations and labour shortages in health care, trades sectors, etc. The federal government also collaborates with provinces and territories to encourage French-speaking immigrants to settle in rural and remote northern communities outside Quebec to support Francophone minority populations. In 2022, however, only 4.4% of Francophone immigrants settled in French-speaking communities outside of Quebec (CBC, 2023), a far cry from the Federation of Francophone and Acadian Communities' call for 12% of Francophone immigrants by 2024 (FCFA, 2022). And yet, while the Francophone population as a whole is declining, the population within official language minority schools outside of Quebec is growing (Canada, 2023).

Unlike the other provinces and territories, Quebec has the power to manage its own economic immigration to the province. Quebec has attempted to attract immigration to its rural areas for many years, with the regionalization of immigration policies beginning in 1993 (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2011).<sup>13</sup> Such immigration initiatives, however, do not benefit English-language school populations in rural and remote communities owing to the province's language policies. A cornerstone of Bill 101 is to ensure that children who recently immigrated to the province attend French-language schools and integrate with the Francophone majority. Drawing on Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur figures, Bourhis (2019) reports that enrolment of students without French or English as a first language in the English-language

11 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/rural-northern-immigration-pilot.html>

12 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/atlantic-immigration.html>

13 Similar to the policies in other provinces, these policies in Quebec tend to result in "suburbanization" instead of regionalization of immigrant settlement. Retention of immigrants in the regions is an ongoing concern (see Vatz-Laaroussi, 2011).

school system dropped by 78% between 1972 and 2017, a testament to the effectiveness of Bill 101 in restricting Allophone and immigrant students from English-language instruction.<sup>14</sup>

In rural areas of the province, concerted efforts have been made to enroll newcomer students in English-language schools based on humanitarian grounds and draw immigrants into adult education programs (ABEE, 2018). Not surprisingly, any gains have been negligible. Population decline will continue in rural Anglophone communities and English-language schools unless their economic circumstances improve, which is uncertain with the recent adoption of Bill 96 (2022). The *Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* strengthens the provisions of the *Charter of the French Language* by imposing language requirements on small businesses and companies.

Regarding learning specialists, as previously discussed, there are very few professional resources such as psychoeducators and speech therapists who offer services in English. Given this shortage across the province in general, children requiring services in rural and remote English-language settings are especially vulnerable to spatial and linguistic inequalities. As a provincial requirement, all members of professional orders must demonstrate proficiency in French in their examinations, a possible deterrent for English-speaking candidates who may struggle with written French and pursue their studies outside the province (ABEE, 2018). There are also currently no incentives to attract English-speaking specialists to live in rural and remote areas. Enticing these professionals, however, would be difficult, since their jobs would likely be divided across vast geographic areas (ABEE, 2018; OLLO, 2022).

Without programming to invite and support English-speaking immigrant professionals to settle in rural and remote areas in the province, the English-language school system may need to look to the English-language post-secondary institutions for support. In its 2018 report, the Advisory Board on English Education recommended that English-speaking students in psychiatry, psychology, and social work, among other professions, be required to complete supervised internships in rural and remote English-language schools. Like pre-service teachers who can complete practicum teaching hours in remote placements, living accommodations and other stipends could be made available to incentivize an alternative internship model of professional support to alleviate the shortage. Interns would gain valuable insight and experience working with children from diverse communities while providing much needed relief to an overburdened sector.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, many of the parent participants were current or former English-speaking school and/or school board community leaders. All participants had access to stable Internet that enabled them to meet in the evening to participate in a one-hour Zoom interview. This study does not include the stories and experiences of rights holder parents who do not have access to such technology, the means to pay for private specialists to support their children's learning needs, or the time to meet because interviews took place during their evening working hours. Thus, this study paints a narrow yet compelling image of some of the experiences of rights holder parents in rural Quebec communities, and arguably, a privileged view.

14 A decrease from 56,376 students in the English-language school system in 1972 to 12,144 students in 2017.

# Conclusion

Since this working paper is dedicated to giving voice to the experiences of rights holder parents in Quebec, it seems fitting to offer them a last word.

*I grew up here, and my kids go to the same [English-language] school that I went to. I find that really cool. I just wanted them to be in a rural area. I can't imagine raising them in a city. We're on a farm. My husband grew up here. My kids catch newts and salamanders. I just can't imagine them in an urban environment. They would just be different children than they are now. And then being part of a community where they have long-standing roots. That has a lot of value to me. And their [English-language] school is part of a bigger social network.*

As was argued at the beginning of this paper, there is no single story or experience of rural peoples or places. This quote, from an Anglophone mother whose family history reaches back “seven generations on the farm” in the Eastern Townships, is but one of many insights into rural lives and values that are anchored in the land. The English-language schools that pepper the province are spaces where these different stories reside and thrive, especially as other English institutions seem to fall into shadow. The social network to which she refers will no doubt continue to advocate for small rural English schools, as part of a greater effort to protect the integrity and survival of English communities, cultures, and heritages across the province, as is promised through historical linguistic rights.

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