



Quebec Association
for Adult Learning
L'Association québécoise
pour l'éducation des adultes

Démocratie et Gouvernance des Commissions Scolaires

Éléments de réflexion

Présenté par

Quebec Association for Adult Learning (QAAL)

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Réflexion

QAAL (Québec Association for Adult Learning, l'Association québécoise pour l'éducation des adultes) est un organisme à but non lucratif anglophone qui appuie ceux qui appuient les adultes apprenants.

Notre mission est de :

- Défendre une culture d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie
- Sensibiliser le grand public aux enjeux concernant l'éducation des adultes
- Faciliter l'échange d'information et de ressources
- Rassembler les gens pour qui l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie est une priorité

QAAL croit que l'apprentissage se fait tout au long de la vie et représente un droit humain.

QAAL reçoit un financement du Patrimoine canadien et du Ministère de l'Éducation, Loisir et du Sport du Québec.

Les thèmes

1. le rôle éducatif, social culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région
2. la démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections
3. la transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats
4. le financement de commission scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire

The QAAL Board of Directors and the membership of QAAL (approximately 125 members) representing all the regions of Quebec, were consulted for this brief.



Theme #1.

Le rôle éducatif, social, culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région.

It goes without saying that the school has been, still is, and will be a vital component in any community, be it urban or rural. The social and cultural vitality of a community is often centered on the school. Without a school, there are no families; without families, there is no youth, and without youth . . . there is not much of a future. The school is often the centre of community activity, whether that is sporting events or amateur theatre. And the school is the start, the middle and the end of a wide variety of learning activities that engage citizens in a journey of life-long learning that contribute to the social, cultural and economic well-being of the community that it serves. Witness the CLC (Community Learning Centres) project initiated recently by MELS which aims to broaden the school from simply a youth-centred facility to one that serves the learning needs and aspirations of everyone in the community. The CLC redefines the role of the school as the nucleus of all social cultural and learning activities of the community, and the concept of lifelong learning from “cradle to grave” is reinforced when the school is truly the centre of the community.

Schools do not, however, exist in a self-created vacuum. On one side is the local community which provides the school with its location, its operational ‘space’, its clientele and its *raison d’être*. On the other is the larger community that provides staff and structure, financing and other resources such as pedagogical materials. This larger community is composed of various different stakeholders, from departments of education to teachers’ associations to school boards, each with a particular mandate and role in enabling the school to fulfill its function.

As the focus of this brief, school boards have been present in one form or another as part of the ‘larger educational community’ since the inception of organized educational programs. Once the primary organizational structure for linking schools in a common educational purpose (territorial, religious, linguistic, etc.), their status has been gradually eroded over the last 50 or so years through consolidation¹ and a continually expanding role for departments of education. New Brunswick, in 1996, abolished school boards altogether and replaced them with districts administered by the provincial department of education (although this was reversed to some extent in 2000 with the creation of District Education Councils.)

¹ Indepth: Education - School boards. John Bowman, CBC News Online, August 29, 2002, notes that the number of school boards in Canada has been reduced from a peak of 815 to 490 at the end of the 1990s. http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/education/school_boards.html



This transition of jurisdiction and responsibility from school boards to government departments would seem then to be a key question in addressing the issue of school boards and their social, cultural and economic role. Have school boards been less than effective so their tasks are seen to be better carried out by departments of education? Or have provincial governments been gradually transferring responsibility away from school boards so that they *de facto* become less effective and lose their relevance at the local level?

There are, no doubt, arguments for both sides, but from some indicators such as school board elections (low voter turn-out, more commissioners acclaimed) it appears that school boards have ended up in a situation where they are perceived to have a diminished role in their communities.

Regardless of what the reason might be for school boards being perceived as less relevant, we would put forward the argument that there is still an important role for school boards to play, especially for the English-speaking communities as minority language communities. And, rather than abandon or eliminate school boards, they should be reinforced as community and educational institutions. There are a number of points to substantiate this position:

- The New Brunswick example (to eliminate school boards) has been well documented as a failure that alienated parents and the local educational community; as a result, five years later, the province was compelled to reinstate a school board-like structure (district councils).
- The government of Quebec, within numerous ministries, has policies for regionalization, that is to say that governance as well as policy and program implementation is most effectively carried out at the regional and local levels as much as possible.
- Community institutions are a critical factor in the vitality of minority language communities², and school boards are amongst the most essential components of being able to organize quality and accessible education in a minority language setting.

In this context, therefore, school boards should be revitalized rather than eliminated, and given the opportunity to be more relevant to their communities and with enhanced capacity to make a continuing and positive contribution to supporting education. Again, the New Brunswick example is worth examining as the newly instituted district councils leaves the Ministry of Education with the responsibility to ensure that some basic standards are in place across the province while the District Education Councils (DEC)

² Department of Canadian Heritage, evaluation of the Official Languages in Education Program (OLEP), 2003, conducted by the firm Prairie Research Associates (PRA) Inc.
http://www.patrimoinecanadien.gc.ca/progs/lo-ol/pubs/2002-2003/ra-ar/8_e.cfm



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have the flexibility to make decisions and set policy on a wide range of issues as long as these basic provincial standards are met. Giving school boards more responsibility for educational delivery and resource management will give communities greater leverage within the educational system to support their own social, cultural and economic aspirations.

While there are some merits in the area of local governance and efficiencies in the transfer of educational responsibility to other structures, such as has been suggested to regional municipalities, this is not the case for English-speaking communities in Quebec. School boards are dedicated to meeting the educational needs of these communities, something that would become diluted amongst the many other and varied responsibilities at the municipal level. Such a transfer would also 'balkanize' the quality and availability of an English language education by carving up the delivery of these programs into smaller units where, in some cases, the very existence of any meaningful English language program delivery would be compromised by the inevitable application of 'where numbers warrant.'



Theme#2

La démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections.

The recent school board elections have raised a number of questions and concerns, particularly low voter turn out and a high ratio of acclaimed commissioners. In a general context, making school boards more relevant (see first section) would go a long way to instilling a sense of importance in these institutions and, therefore, motivate constituents to participate in the democratic process. There are also a number of more specific issues regarding the election of school board commissioners that deserve a closer look by MELS in the short-term so that any major changes as a result of study can be enacted for the next school board elections to be held in four years (2011).

The following are suggested changes to be examined and implemented:

1. Electoral lists

The accuracy of the lists are questionable. Names of eligible electors should remain on the lists even when their children have graduated from secondary school. In particular, English-speaking parents' names should remain on English language school board lists unless a parent requests that their name be removed (unlike the current regulation which automatically places a parent's name on the French language school board list unless they request to be placed back on the English school board list.)

2. Voter participation

The recent electoral turn out for the English school board elections increased in general. The following are statistics for the turn-out on the Island of Montreal:

English Montreal School Board

Registered voters: 81,728
Eligible voters who voted: 14,542
% of voter participation: 17.79%
No. of wards: 23
No. of wards contested: 19

Lester B. Pearson School Board

Registered voters: 23,197
Eligible voters who voted: 2,905
% of voter participation: 12.52%
No. of wards: 23
No. of wards contested: 7



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While low by standards for provincial or federal government elections, these figures were substantially higher than for Francophone school boards, many of which had voter turnout in the single digits. Possible reasons for this increased level of interest were greater media coverage during the electoral period, and greater concern and awareness by English-speaking citizens regarding their English speaking institutions. From a survey of the Associations' members, the following suggestions have been provided to better the rates of voter participation and engagement of English-speaking communities in school board elections:

- It has been suggested that school board elections be held in conjunction with either municipal or provincial elections. This would not only demonstrate the importance of these elections but would reduce the cost of school board elections while facilitating turnout.
- Commissioners could be elected as part of a school board-wide territory and not just in specific wards (as is the case now). This would result in a greater sense of collegiality among the commissioners, which would be particularly true for the Island of Montreal where the territory is small and well defined. Decisions would be made for the greater good of the school board rather than a specific ward.
- The title “commissioner” should be replaced by one that represents the true nature and function of the given mandate, that is to say one of good governance.
- Commissioners should not be identified with any existing political party either at the provincial or federal level.
- The position of chairperson of the school board could be elected by the general electorate.
- The position of Parent Commissioner could be voted by the general electorate and given full voting rights on the council.



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Theme #3

La transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats.

The concept of funding and operations based on concepts of results-based management is, in theory, a good one and should be incorporated in the educational system. This would permit school boards to be not only responsive to the specific needs of their community but also held accountable for their actions and results. The qualification to this is that the school boards must also be given the leeway and the resources to actually manage their results.

As it stands now, a lot of what school boards carry out is within a management framework prescribed by the ministry, in particular the financing formulas which limit the flexibility of the school board to manage the funds in accordance with the priorities of the schools and as best suits their surrounding community.

If the main pedagogical objectives would stem from MELS in the form of success plans for individual schools and their districts (school boards), then these could be translated into pedagogical programs and activities to respond to the needs of the learner within the school board's jurisdiction. For example, a rural area in need of more of a certain type of vocational training could offer programs in contrast to some other urban area that has different needs.

With regard to the transparency of school board budgets and allotments to various programs and activities, the comments from Association members were positive.



Theme #4

Le financement des commissions scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire.

Consistent with the previous points, the general perception of school board financing is that it is restrictive and cumbersome. It is felt that any pedagogical or operational modifications that school boards wish to make to programs and activities at this time are laborious and time consuming. This is in part due to the 'double' level of bureaucracy that obliges a school board-level process to be repeated in as much or greater detail at the ministry level. Simplifying the ministry-level bureaucracy required for school board operations and programs would reduce costs and provide school boards with much needed funding.

This could be accomplished by allocating school boards lump sum budgets that they are then accountable for within a results-based framework (see previous section) and which will allow them to more effectively and efficiently manage the funds in accordance with the priorities of the schools in their jurisdiction. This also offers the prospect of improved levels of funding through cost reduction which is very important given that there is little public appetite for increased tax dollars (either from income or property taxes) for the educational system.

Building maintenance and transportation are very costly for both rural and urban school boards. Many of the schools are in dire need of repairs and renovations and in this regard special allotments should be considered to provide environments suited to good learning. As well, greater investment should be made in distance education programs and delivery capacity (infrastructure and human resources), especially in the rural areas. To date, many of the rural areas still do not have access to high speed internet service which is essential in the delivery of quality distance education programs and activities. These present opportunities to improve the quality of educational programs, particularly specialty offerings, as well as reduce costs for transportation and the need for centralized facilities.



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Conclusion

It is our general assessment that a school board should be a community-based institution that has an important role to play in ensuring the effective and efficient delivery of an educational program that contributes in a significant way to the social, cultural and economic vitality of the constituents by whom it is mandated and for whom it serves. This is particularly so for the English-speaking communities of Quebec given the importance of maintaining an institutional base specifically to serve the minority language group.

If, as it seems, that there has evolved a duplication of mandate and service through the continued presence of the school board institution parallel to an increased role of the ministry of education, the response should be to reinforce the role and responsibility of the school board and reduce that of the state (at the provincial government level) rather than the other way around. The reinvigoration of the school board as a community institution, furnished with adequate resources within a revamped accountability framework will, we believe, address many of the concerns that have been raised about the effectiveness of the structure and provide local communities with enhanced capacity to ensure a quality educational program to meet their goals for social, cultural and economic development.