



Creating linguistic school boards:

It can be done right; it can be done now

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Students...children. Remember them?

Quebec, despite the pumped-up volume of the past two weeks, has an historic chance to deliver those children the modern, responsive school board structures they deserve for the 21st century. There is a strong and solid consensus on what those structures should be.

That consensus calls for linguistic school boards -- and it transcends political, confessional, constitutional and linguistic lines. Lest we forget, linguistic school board structures are essential to the health of an English school system. And English schooling is essential to the health of our communities across Quebec. Only through linguistic structures will our communities have the essential control and management over their own schools.

No longer would dwindling educational resources be split between English Protestant and English Catholic schools. And, no longer would some 40,000 students in the Catholic system find themselves in a situation where their families were, in many instances, frozen out of full participation in the management of majority-French school boards.

Education Minister Pauline Marois has clearly recognized the need for structural change. She did so, in the clearest terms possible, only three weeks ago. She announced then that Quebec will have linguistic school boards in July 1998. That is most welcome news.

But how do we get there from here? There are three ways, each of which has been the subject of much discussion, argument and confusion over the past weeks. In our view, there is at least one of those ways that protects the consensus and honors this government's commitment to move quickly.

The first way: Abrogate s. 93.2 of the Constitution Act of Canada. Remove historic constitutional protections that continue to provide important assurances for English schooling. Risk long delays in difficult negotiations with the federal government and, perhaps, a number of other interested provinces. Risk losing the support of major parents' groups, educational, community and political leaders. Risk subjecting the hope for important educational reform to the highly-charged atmosphere of constitutional debate and ultimately, political stalemate.

The second way: Amend s. 93.2 of the Constitution Act. This might be done in a number of ways -- but could entail many of the same difficulties outlined above. An amendment might be sought (along the lines of the so-called Proulx-Woerhling formula) to remove the special status of confessional school boards in Montreal and Quebec City. This would presumably allow for the implementation of linguistic school boards uniformly, across the province. It would not have the effect of eliminating essential protections under the Canadian Constitution.

A second amendment, which Alliance Quebec and others first proposed some 12 years ago, would replace s. 93.2 with new guarantees for linguistic school boards. We maintain that this is a fair and sensible option. Despite this "win-win solution", the Quebec government, is not prepared to consider such an amendment.

The third way: Don't touch the Canadian Constitution. Implement Law 107 and deliver a linguistic school board system by July 1998. Law 107, the Education Act provides a perfectly legal avenue for creating linguistic school board structures. In a reference case, the Supreme Court of Canada confirmed this fact. It offers a made-in-Quebec solution. It offers the chance to get on with the job. And, this solution leaves intact all current constitutional guarantees.

If Quebecers have spent 20 years debating school board reform, it is because the issue is important and because there is no picture-perfect solution to the question. Together, we have lived through three draft laws on school board reorganization, two Estates Generals, one Supreme Court reference case and countless broken political promises. After all of that, it must be granted that the current Quebec government is the only one that has publicly stated its unequivocal determination to move forward.

Now is the time to do so. And, in an imperfect world, implementing Law 107 is the way to do it. The system will work. Parents and educators will make sure it does.

How will we know it is working?

- By the only measure that matters: Students...our children. Remember them?

The signatories are the members of the Executive Committee of Alliance Quebec.