

## **ADVISORY BOARD ON ENGLISH EDUCATION**

# **Returning to school in the English education system in uncertain times**

**A Brief Presented to the Minister of Education and Higher Education**



## ADVISORY BOARD ON ENGLISH EDUCATION

The mandate of the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) is to advise the Minister of Education and Higher Education on all matters affecting the educational services offered in English elementary and secondary schools and vocational and adult education centres. The Minister may also ask the Board for advice on a specific topic.

The Minister names the members to the Advisory Board. The term of office is normally three years. Candidates are nominated by various English education associations and organizations that represent, among others, teachers, parents, school and board administrators and commissioners, as well as individuals involved in post-secondary education. Nominations can be received at any time.

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## **Returning to school in the English education system in uncertain times**

### **A brief to the Minister of Education and Higher Education**

The sudden and widespread occurrence of COVID-19 has pointed out the great disparities across the province of Québec, such as the different situations between the cities and the regions, and also between sectors of the population within these settings. These differences have resulted in different policy decisions, such as when—or whether—to reopen schools, and we commend the Minister for applying local solutions to local situations. We hope this strategy will continue during the uncertainty that will apply to the probable second wave of the pandemic predicted for the Fall, and we welcome the possibility of different scenarios proposed in the working document on resumption of school for all in September. An unwelcome result of the rapidly changing situation and the need for quick decisions is the appearance of hasty, spontaneous decisions that are not conveyed appropriately to the educational partners who must respond to them. Policy-makers can react quickly. Systems can not. Announcing a policy then modifying or reversing it causes stress and confusion, especially when those who must implement the policy—including principals and teachers—feel excluded from the process.

For many years, the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) has counselled the Minister of the day that one size does not fit all<sup>1</sup> and asked for equitable treatment for the English education system. That is, even-handed application of policies and allocation of resources according to particular circumstances, rather than equal treatment, where policies and resources are the same for all, regardless of particular circumstances and needs. In the present, and in the immediate future, the English educational community continues to be concerned that materials and resources developed in French will not be available in English in a timely manner and that the Ministry will not avail itself of the many resources available in English and match them to the requirements of the curriculum.

The high incidence of COVID-19 infection and the variety of circumstances across Québec, as well as the unpredictability of the post-pandemic period, will have a great impact on the plans to resume activities in society at large, as well as in the educational community. This makes it an especially appropriate time to urge the Minister to act in an equitable way and to leave it to local authorities to develop solutions to the many local issues that will certainly arise, and also, in spite of the need to respond to rapidly changing needs, to keep in mind the need for long-term planning.

There are some concerns common to all educational settings, and school boards and their communities will look to the Minister for guidance, decision-making, and support in addressing them. We will address two of these salient issues as examples: the mental health of everyone in the school system and learning at a distance, which will be a component of one of the proposed scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, ABEE 2013. One Size Does Not Fit All.  
[http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/ministere/organismes/C/ELA\\_Rapport\\_AuDeLaDuModeleUnique.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/ministere/organismes/C/ELA_Rapport_AuDeLaDuModeleUnique.pdf)

## Mental health

The English educational system has placed some emphasis on wellness, both physical and mental, in recent years<sup>2</sup>. This has been a timely and welcome initiative, given the research showing an increase in mental health issues among children and adolescents. A recent UNICEF study highlighted mental health as a “top concern” for Canadian youth in its 2017 report, *Child Well-being in a Sustainable World*,<sup>3</sup> and also that 22% of Canadian adolescents reported “two or more psychological symptoms – feeling low, irritability, nervousness, and sleeping difficulties – more than once a week.”<sup>4</sup>

If this has been the situation in a time of stability, how much worse will it be after the upheavals and uncertainties of the past months, the disruptions to the children’s normal routines, and the new conditions that will surround them when they return to school? If classes are to be reduced in size to allow physical distancing, will young children be in the same room as their friends or even in the same school? As more or fewer students attend and classes are reorganized, will they have different teachers on different days? How will they interact with other children if they are not able to play together, eat together in a cafeteria, or play sports and games together? What plans are there to address extra-curricular activities? For many older students, this is their opportunity to shine, and success in extra-curricular activities is often a powerful motivator for classroom success.

Much of the research on children and emergency situations has been conducted after events such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States, or the Fort McMurray fires in Alberta. There is less research on the effects of a sustained disruption such as the one many children are experiencing now, but many authorities are proposing strategies for dealing with children’s wellbeing after the pandemic has lessened. QUESCREN has begun developing a collection of research and practical ideas<sup>5</sup>. that has already been circulated to some school boards We commend these to the Minister and his advisers and recommend the establishment of a panel of child psychologists to assemble a toolbox of strategies, then disseminate them to teachers and caregivers.

English language school boards, especially those in the regions, have faced a shortage of psychologists and other support staff for many years. We are concerned that this problem will become even more acute as more students will be in need of services. The task of identifying and supporting children in need of psychological support will fall on teachers, untrained for this role and already burdened with adapting to the new conditions under which they will have to operate.

Children and adolescents are not the only people experiencing disruption and anxiety. Teachers and caregivers are also dealing with stress and will continue to do so when schools are in partial or full operation. Teacher unions, school board personnel and faculties

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<sup>2</sup> LCEEQ Conferences: “Well-Being – Being Well,” February 2009. “Being Even Better,” February, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.ca/en/unicef-report-card-14-child-well-being-sustainable-world>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF Canada. 2017. UNICEF Report Card 14: Canadian Companion, Oh Canada! Our kids deserve better. UNICEF Canada, (Figure 18, p. 35) Toronto.

<https://www.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2017-06/UNICEF%20RC14%20for%20youth.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> GUIDE: Resources for Organizing Educational Services Under Shutdowns Including COVID-19 April 30, 2020. Revision 3, May 20, 2020.

[http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/QUESCREN\\_GUIDE\\_Resources\\_Covid19\\_2020-05-05-rev2.pdf](http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/QUESCREN_GUIDE_Resources_Covid19_2020-05-05-rev2.pdf)

of education will have a role to play in supporting teachers, suggesting new methods of teaching, and addressing particular problems as they arise. This kind of initiative should be addressed locally, within individual schools, classrooms and daycare facilities, but they should be governed and supported by a common policy from the Minister's office.

Outside the Ministry of Education's mandate, but a concern that must be kept in mind when deciding how the education system will reopen, is that parents have been under considerable stress and many will continue to suffer, whether financially, emotionally, or with ongoing health problems. These stresses will impact their parenting skills, including their ability to support their children's learning, whether that occurs in a school setting or at home, and the parents will also need support.

### **Learning at a distance**

There are many implications to consider if students are to return to school under a mixed model that includes some distance education. One practical problem for parents will be to organize part-time child care for elementary school children. There are also important pedagogical and practical problems for the school.

New teaching methods will include tactics for teaching at a distance, a new experience for many teachers. Specific research on computer-assisted learning has tended to focus on tertiary education and should not be applied to younger students without great caution. A university student is different from an adolescent, who is different from an elementary student in cognitive ability, motivation, attention span, need for socialization, and ways of socializing.

Clearly, different strategies are needed for different age groups as well as different subject matter. Group work is a key activity in classes. Will teachers be able to guide groups of students working on-line? Is all subject matter susceptible to being taught online? Subjects such as science, art or music will be problematic and it is difficult to imagine how most vocational education subjects can be taught without hands-on access and on a part time basis.

Teachers and parents report that motivation is a problem for many students of all ages learning at a distance. Since many students are more adept with interactive technology than their teachers, they can—and do—subvert the learning process. What requirements will be in place for students to attend on-line classes, or even to turn on their cameras? How will evaluation methods be modified to assess what is being learned? Many private schools in the province have been incorporating on-line learning for several months and it is hoped that the public system will be able to learn from their positive and negative experiences.

In the minds of students, and one of the missions of Québec's Education Act, socialization is an important feature of the school experience. The absence of contact with peers is already reported to be presenting signs of distress among children, so compensating for the lack of peer contact in the classroom and schoolyard will be an important consideration in planning for distance education. This will be partly addressed by part-time physical attendance in school, although the distancing restrictions will reduce the classroom and playground contact that students crave.

We have learned from teachers' experiences over the past months that preparing and delivering lessons from home is very different from doing so under the structure of a school classroom. Preparation takes longer; methodology needs to change; group work is difficult; discipline at a distance is a challenge. Individual help for students with learning difficulties will need to be incorporated into the on-line experience, bearing in mind that students should not be overloaded, and that interactions between one adult and one student may be susceptible to a perception of abuse from both partners.

Teachers will need considerable support to make the necessary modifications and training must be offered in English as well as in French. This could come from consultants and from universities, although university resources will be occupied by offering the same services to university professors and teacher interns. Parents should certainly be involved and encouraged to supervise their children, although this is being seen as problematic in many households: parents should not be expected to replace teachers: parents may be struggling with employment, either at home or externally; a family may have several children of different ages, with different educational needs.

Faculties of Education are worried about access to placements for practicum internships and about preparing students for the blended classroom. How will they determine if an intern has the competencies to become a teacher if interns are not able to have classroom experiences? How will they determine if they are able to manage a classroom if they are teaching on-line?

On a practical level, the availability of devices has been identified as a problem. This is especially true of low-income families, both in Montreal and in the regions, but also a problem in families of several children in different grade levels or if parents are working from home and needing computer access. One computer or tablet is in high demand. Some schools have helped by lending equipment to students, and reports in the press that the Ministry will provide adequate equipment are welcome news.

Equally problematic is the access to Wi-Fi. Individual homes lose connectivity when there are several devices trying to access the system. Remote regions are still suffering from a lack of robust connectivity and in some regions, not all households are connected to the Internet. As two examples: Indigenous communities in all regions of Québec are seriously underserved with Wi-Fi connection (as well as with many other resources); the Eastern Townships School Board estimates that 20% of its families are not connected. If Internet access is an essential component of education, like textbooks and laboratory equipment, it should be provided and supported like other educational resources.

The upheaval that society is experiencing at present is an appropriate time for questioning our practices in many aspects of life and for making large-scale changes in our activities. In the future—we hope the near future—ABEE will communicate with the Minister with recommendations for rethinking some of our entrenched educational practices with a view to accommodating what has been called the “new normal,” but also to improve the success and wellbeing of our young and adult learners. For now, we recommend that the Minister apply research-based, equity-driven policy decisions to the issues facing educators, supporting school boards as they apply latitude to address the situations in their own jurisdictions, as the education system is restarted.