

AVONELLE TITUS: A VICTORY FOR THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

Press conference statement by William Johnson, president of Alliance Quebec.

July 2, 1999. MONTREAL - Our community today has something to celebrate. Avonelle Titus, who joined us in Canada from Trinidad five years ago, has now received her certificate of eligibility to attend English school. This means that her older brother, who has been attending a private English school at great cost to his mother, a factory worker, will now also be eligible to attend English school.

This was a personal tragedy for Avonelle, her mother and her brother. Avonelle was one of those many people with a blockage to learning in a second language. She should have just completed her Grade 7. Instead, she was studying at the Grade 3 and Grade 4 level.

The Charter of the French Language says this: "Children having serious learning disabilities may, at the request of one of their parents, receive instruction in English." Avonelle's mother was never notified of her right.

There is even a very specific exemption from French schooling in the regulations to the Charter of the French language. That exemption is for "children having serious learning disabilities demonstrated by a generalized academic delay of two or more years."

Every English-speaking child with an academic delay of two or more years is supposed to be evaluated by a psychologist and, almost automatically, transferred to an English school. Instead of this being done, Avonelle suffered frustration, humiliation, a sense of diminished worth, and she was deprived of the educational development to which she had a right.

Quebec's Civic Code, at Article 33, lays down the principle that should have governed this case and every similar case - we are told there are hundreds of them.

"Every decision concerning a child shall be taken in the light of the child's interests and the respect of his rights. Consideration is given, in addition to the moral, intellectual, emotional and material needs of the child, to the child's age, health, personality and family environment, and to the other aspects of his situation."

Today we rejoice with Avonelle and her family. But Avonelle has lost two years of her life that she can never recover, because she was deprived of her rights. Who will compensate Avonelle for the damage and injury that was done to her?

And, beyond Avonelle, we must now turn to the hundreds of others who are also suffering in French schools where they are unable to learn. I am thinking, for instance, of Shomar Johnson, who has also been deprived of his right to learn.

And so Alliance Quebec will write next week to every French school board in the Greater Montreal area to ask them to identify, evaluate and transfer to English school all those who are studying at a level that is two years or more behind their age group. We will also contact the Minister of Education. We hope to receive prompt cooperation from the school boards and the minister. But if prompt, determined action is not forthcoming, Alliance Quebec will go to court as petitioner to ask the court to force the Quebec Ministry of Education and the school board to do what the law requires: that is, identify, evaluate by a psychologist and transfer to English school all those children so designated by the law and its regulations.

We are asking the Quebec government to apply its own law, to conform to international standards of the rights of the child, and to cease cruelly taking children as hostages to be sacrificed in the interest of building a greater French state and a larger French-speaking community in Quebec. That is unworthy of Quebec, and we believe that the people of Quebec are unaware of such reckless disregard for the children and their future.

I now pass the microphone to someone who rushed to the support of Avonelle from the first moments that her plight was made known to lawyer Brent Tyler, that is Howard Galganov, broadcaster and president of the Quebec Political Action Committee. I know that Howard Galganov needs no introduction.