

Shutdown of Riverdale destabilizing and ill-advised: QCGN

Montreal – January 28, 2019 – A steady stream of assurances that the government of Quebec Premier François Legault is taking the interests of Quebec’s English-speaking community into account has been contradicted by its actions – this time with the abrupt elimination of Riverdale High School from our English-language school system.

“While the Quebec government talks quite positively and in an often encouraging way about respecting community interests, to all appearances they don’t understand minority-language rights. Or they simply don’t care,” Geoffrey Chambers, president of the Quebec Community Groups Network, declared following today’s announcement.

The immensely disruptive process to force dispersal of Riverdale’s 450 English-language students across the remainder of the Lester B. Pearson School Board network, before the next school year begins, is clearly improper, Chambers added: “It disregards long-accepted school-shutdown policy, which for good reason requires public consultation as part of a thoughtful, judicious 18-month process. For the Quebec government to sidestep the rules in its own education act by exercising an extraordinary power (*invoking Art. 477.1.1 of La Loi sur l’instruction publique*) is dangerously destabilizing and ill-advised.”

“The government is using a hammer here, and we have to wonder where and how they will next grab it,” Chambers said: “Riverdale may mean there will be more pre-emptive exercise of ministerial power, despite all their soft words. It certainly suggests the so-called new service centres to replace school boards will be unable to protect community interests.”

From a legal standpoint, he noted, “Quebec’s path here also clearly breaches the constitutional guarantee that our minority-language communities have the right to manage and control the educational facilities in which our children are taught.”

“Schools are not simply buildings with classrooms,” Chambers emphasized: “Because this is where we form and shape our next generations. They provide place and focus for a vast variety of extracurricular and community activities. In all sorts of ways – for our young people, for parents, for our dedicated teachers, for other school staff and for community organizations such as those devoted to sports and culture – these institutions express, nourish and nurture the hearts and souls of our communities. They assure, enrich and define our future as well as our heritage.”

Rather than treating our community foundations and institutions with respect, Chambers added, “this government is treating the English-speaking community as something of an afterthought, where our constitutional rights can be safely shoved aside.”

Where demographics dictate, dividing school buildings into French-language and English-language schools is known as cohabitation. That, he added, is the obvious model for Riverdale. “Such shared use is good for community cohesion, so that there is no sharp division based on a language line,” Chambers said.

“It’s not an unhealthy thing to share facilities,” he noted. “It’s actually the way our communities function, how we live and learn and work so successfully together.”

The Quebec Community Groups Network (www.qcgn.ca) is a not-for-profit organization bringing together 59 English-language community organizations across Quebec. Its mission is to identify, explore and address strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of English-speaking Quebec and to encourage dialogue and collaboration.

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