

FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND EXCLUSION IN QUEBEC'S EDUCATION SYSTEM DURING THE YEARS 1945-1977

Two-year research project (2025-26) conducted by Guy Rex Rodgers
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Second preliminary report - January 2026

See the first preliminary report in English – [here](#)

Voir le premier rapport intérimaire en français – [ici](#)

Table of Contents

Purpose of the Interim Report	2
Keys to Comprehension	3
Methodology	11
Former Student Evidence, Evaluated by Decades	14
English Catholic and English Protestant Schools	15
French Protestant Schools.....	30
French Catholic Schools	32
Historical Evidence.....	35
Contextual Evidence	38
Exceptions	41
Possible Explanations	43
Interim Conclusions	50
Context Declarations	52
Project Partners and Funder.....	62

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<http://tiny.cc/QSQ>

Purpose of this Second Interim Report

The first preliminary report for this research surveyed hundreds of ex-students who entered the education system prior to Bill 101 in 1977. The purpose was to assemble a composite portrait of WHAT happened during that period. Previous researchers on the topic consulted bureaucrats, administrators, historians and statisticians. No one had consulted parents and students. They are the primary focus of this research project.

This second preliminary report is going to examine theories about WHY segregation occurred in Quebec schools. The first report heard from former students who chose schools that corresponded to their religion and language (within the four education options available pre Bill 101: English Protestant, English Catholic, French Catholic and French Protestant), or were denied access to the school of their choice. The question is – WHY? We are releasing this preliminary report now – in English and in French – so that former students, educators and administrators from that period can validate the explanations proposed here or propose alternative explanations. All additional information received will be included in the final report to be released November 2026.

Many students educated in the 21st century do not know that prior to 1998, education in Quebec was defined by religion rather than language. The process of deconfessionalization officially began in 1977 when Bill 101 obliged all immigrants to enroll at French schools.

Prior to 1977, Non-Catholics and non-Christians usually enrolled in Protestant schools. It is important to remember that denominations known as ‘Protestant’ often have little in common other than not being Catholic. The Church of England (Anglican) and the Orthodox Churches have been defined as ‘believing everything that Catholics believe except the Pope’ while Calvinists and Lutherans fought wars against Catholics. Diverse Protestants denominations could not agree on points of theology or a ‘Protestant worldview’ and so their schools choose to transmit ethical and moral values. This philosophy made it easier to accommodate non-Christians who shared these values.

Prior to 1977, Catholic schools were reserved for Catholic students, and exceptions were rare. Catholics schools taught literacy and numeracy, but they were also designed to teach religion and endow students with the Catholic worldview of their elders. Quebec had a large French Catholic system and a smaller English Catholic sector. English Catholic schools did not refuse to admit Catholic immigrants, even if

they could not speak English. There are many instances of French Catholic schools refusing to accept Catholic immigrants, particularly if they could not speak French.

These practices were well understood by politicians in the 1960s as language laws were being written. (see report #1 page 5). It is therefore surprising that the official historian of Montreal's Catholic School Commission, Robert Gagnon¹, declared in 1997² that no student – Catholic or non-Catholic – was ever turned away from a Catholic school – French or English. This affirmation (see report #1 page 3) so clearly contradicted the evidence that it is extraordinary it was ever published, that it was never refuted, and that many people still believe it to be true.

Many aspects of this subject are puzzling. Why did Quebec have four public education options prior to 1997? Which students were permitted to enroll in specific schools? On what basis? Which students were denied admission to schools? Why did French Catholic schools reject so many students prior to 1977? And who made the decision(s) to turn students away from French Catholic schools and send Catholic students to English Catholic schools and non-Catholic students to Protestant schools?

This report will review the historical evidence, as well as the information revealed by new research, and propose some explanations. But first, we need to understand how the complex and confusing pre-Bill 101 education system evolved. The keys to comprehension are religion and language.

Keys to Comprehension - Pre-Conquest Period

Schools in Nouvelle France were designed for Catholic students who spoke French. However, there were also French Protestants in Nouvelle France such as Huguenot Jean-François de La Rocque, Sieur de Roberval, lieutenant-general of Canada between 1541 and 1543. Little is known about how French Protestants in Nouvelle France were educated.

¹ Histoire de la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (Boréale, 1996)

² [Pour en finir avec un mythe](#) : le refus des écoles catholiques d'accepter les immigrants. (Bulletin d'histoire politique : Volume 5, numéro 2, hiver 1997)

Keys to Comprehension - Post-Conquest to Confederation Period (1759 - 1867)

French Catholic Schools

During this period, the majority of francophones continued to be educated in French Catholic schools because of rights conferred by the Quebec Act of 1774³.

French Protestant Schools

French Protestants⁴ developed their own schools. Some of the French Protestants were descendants of Huguenots, while others were recent converts. In the early 1800s, Methodists and Baptists sent missionaries to Quebec to 'save the souls' of Catholics. They united their efforts to create the French-Canadian Missionary Society, and they began to open French Protestant schools.

In the 1830s, several small French Protestant schools consolidated into the Evangelical Institute boarding school at Pointe-aux-Trembles, later administered by the Presbyterian Church. Most of the students were francophone but the school also accepted anglophones who wanted a bilingual education.

The Feller Institute opened at Grande Ligne (near St-Jean sur Richelieu) in the 1840s. Several French Protestant Schools opened in Montreal in the 1860s: a Methodist school on Craig Street⁵ near Champ de Mars, a Presbyterian school on Dorchester⁶ just west of Saint-Lawrence, and a Baptist school that frequently relocated.

English Protestant Schools

English Protestants schools proliferated after the Conquest as English-speaking Protestants began to settle in the territory. The first English Protestant school opened at New Carlisle in the Gaspé in 1774, followed by schools in Montreal and Quebec City (1794) and Sorel (1801). Dozens of schools opened in the first decades of the 19th century along the Saint-Lawrence River and in the Eastern Townships.

Jewish settlers from England arrived around the same time, and they attended English Protestant schools because they spoke English. "By the time of Confederation,

³ Histoire de l'Éducation au Québec, Leclerc, 1989

⁴ Information about Protestant schools is from MacLeod and Poutanen (A Meeting of the People: School Boards and Protestant Communities in Quebec 1801-1998.)

⁵ Now Saint-Antoine

⁶ Now René-Lévesque Boulevard

Quebec's Jews had established an uneasy alliance with the Protestant community, partly out of fear of ultramontanist⁷ and partly because most prominent Jewish families had origins in Britain."⁸

English-speaking Catholics

The first Irish settlement was established at St-Columban (on the Rivière-du-Nord in the Lower Laurentians, near Mirabel) in 1819. Large numbers of Irish came to Quebec in the following decades because of the potato famine of 1845–52. The largest wave fled Ireland in the summer of 1847. Twenty percent of the refugees died crossing the Atlantic before the ships landed in Boston, New York, Saint John and Halifax. At least 90,000 sailed down the Saint Lawrence River, where they were quarantined at Grosse Île. More than 5,000 are buried there.

Some Irish remained in Quebec City but 75,000 continued up the river to Montreal. The City's population at the time was just 50,000. Municipal authorities built sheds on the western edge of the city to provide shelter for the flood of refugees. Montrealers dug graves for the 6,000 Irish immigrants who died that summer, and they adopted so many orphans that an estimated 40% of the city's francophones share Irish blood. Many of the Irish continued moving on to the Eastern Townships, the Ottawa Valley, and Upper Canada (Ontario) but thousands made their new homes in Montreal.

Irish and Catholic are often synonymous, but many Protestants also left Ireland. At the time of Confederation, the Protestant-Catholic split in Canada was 50/50 in the Atlantic regions and two-to-one Protestant in Ontario. Quebec was the only region that had a majority of Catholics. Protestant Irish found a natural home in English Protestant schools, but where did Irish Catholics fit?

Language was not an obstacle for English-speaking Irish Catholics. Robert Gagnon⁹ found that French Catholic schools in 1857 were highly bilingual. « *L'élément le plus frappant du cours d'études se trouve dans l'importance accordée à l'enseignement de la langue seconde. Le français et l'anglais sont enseignés sur un pied d'égalité.*¹⁰ » It was easy for Irish Catholics to receive an education in English within the existing Catholic system. Most also learned French.

⁷ Ultramontanism was a school of thought of the Catholic Church which promoted supreme papal authority in matters of spirituality and governance.

⁸ MacLeod and Poutanen

⁹ Robert Gagnon, *Histoire de la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal*, 1997

¹⁰ The most striking element of the course of study lies in the importance accorded to second language instruction. French and English are taught on an equal footing.

Keys to Comprehension - Confederation to Second World War Period (1867 – 1945)

Immigrants arriving during this period were more diverse in their religions and languages. It was not always obvious which education option they should choose – or where they would be accepted. This period introduced the complexity and created the confusion that emerged after the Second World War.

The British North America Act (1867)¹¹ established the constitutional framework of public education in Canada, authorizing provincial legislatures to make laws related to education in their provinces, while disallowing laws that infringed upon the interests of certain (minority) groups. Section 93 of the BNA Act guaranteed the education rights of Catholics and Protestants. Note, section 93 did not guarantee rights for any other religions, nor did it guarantee education rights in any particular language.

In rural Québec, the religion of the majority determined the religion of the schools, but in regions where a single school and school commission existed, it was considered a ‘common school’ and was open to all children of the community. Under the BNA Act, a minority religious group could create a ‘dissentient school’. This was the case for Protestants in most parts of Quebec and for Catholics in the few regions where Catholics were the minority, eg the Eastern Townships. Unlike common schools, dissentient schools were not obliged to enroll students of other religions.

Montreal and Quebec City were different because in 1867 both cities already had dual school commissions (Catholic and Protestant). This status was preserved by the BNA Act, however both Catholic and Protestant schools were open to all students. In practice, Protestants were expected to attend Protestant schools and Catholics to attend Catholic schools, but exceptions were to be made for students who did not fit the binary model. The BNA Act had the effect of not only protecting the rights of minority groups, but of expanding them. In Montreal and Quebec City, English-speaking Catholics or French-speaking Protestants could choose an education based on religion or language – at least in theory.

¹¹ Murray Magor: Constitutional Guarantees and Education in Quebec, 1980

French Protestant Schools

No significant changes occurred in French Protestant schools during this period. The Evangelical Institute at Pointe-aux-Trembles educated more than 10,000 students between its foundation in the 1830s and 1950s. However, French schools did not become a prominent sector of the Protestant system until the 1970s, as a response to language laws.

English Protestant Schools

The largest contingent of new students in this period was Jewish from Eastern Europe and their mother tongue was Yiddish. (See Montreal Population by ethnic group in report 1, page 12.) Most Jewish students attended English Protestant schools (the number in 1900 was 1,775) but in 1903 a court ruled on the 'Pinsler Case' that Jews had no legal right to attend either Protestant or Catholic schools.¹² After a public outcry, the National Assembly passed the **Quebec Act of 1903** (*An Act to amend the law concerning education, with respect to persons professing the Jewish religion*), a provincial law that designated people of the Jewish faith as 'Protestants' for the purposes of education and school taxation.

New schools built by the Protestant Board of School Commissioners during this period to accommodate immigrants were Bancroft, Fairmount, Edward VII and Strathearn. Baron Byng high school opened in 1922, and its student population was 97% Jewish. As the number of Jewish students grew, questions of taxation and representation for parents, and rights for Jewish teachers, demanded answers. This conflict was finally resolved when the Hirsch case went before the British Privy Council in 1928. The Privy Council found Quebec's 1903 Act ultra vires, and declared that the federal BNA act of 1867 conferred no rights to Jews for education within the Protestant-Catholic model, and that it was a violation of section 93 of the BNA act to grant Jewish students rights as 'Protestants.'

The Jewish community began to create a Jewish school board¹³ to administer separate schools, but in 1930 Jewish leaders and the Protestant boards negotiated a contract whereby Jewish children would attend Protestant schools and be treated the same as Protestant pupils. "The federal Liberal government exerted pressure on the Jewish school commissioners to commit themselves to the Protestant camp, which, given the vociferousness of Catholic antisemitism at the time, seemed by far the lesser of two evils."¹⁴

¹² This information comes from Arlette Corcos, Montréal, les juifs et l'école, 1997

¹³ Bureaucratic opposition to a Jewish board (mostly from within the Catholic hierarchy) kept it from functioning.

¹⁴ MacLeod and Poutenan

Catholic Schools

During this period, Catholic schools were also confronted with a far greater diversity of students who spoke languages other than French. In 1996, Robert Gagnon¹⁵ published the history of the Montreal Catholic School Commission, which provides most of the following information.

During this period, bilingual Catholic schools were popular. «Les parents francophone eux-mêmes exigent que leurs enfants apprennent la langue anglaise dès leur entrée à l'école.¹⁶ » A more recent book, *L'École d'antan (1860 – 1960)*¹⁷ reported that in 1879 CÉCM schools were teaching almost equal amounts of French and English.

1re année	français 8 heures	anglais 7 heures
6e année	français 6 heures	anglais 7 heures

Table 1. Percentage of English and French taught in 1879 in Montreal

Why was so much English being taught? Gagnon quoted Curé Perrier, who espoused a social philosophy. « Les deux langues sont nécessaires parce que les Canadiens français et les Canadiens anglais sont destinés à vivre ensemble et qu'il faut donc qu'ils connaissent, s'estiment and se respectent.¹⁸» J-P Labarre offered a more pragmatic explanation. « La connaissance de la langue anglaise n'est plus à Montréal un simple ornement, mais une nécessité. Les parents demandent que leurs enfants apprennent l'anglais. Tout le monde sait que les jeunes garçons et les jeunes filles, qui aujourd'hui se pressentent dans les maisons de commerce sans cette connaissance, trouvent ordinairement les portes fermées, alors qu'ils voient à côté d'eux des compagnons ou des compagnes moins instruites par ailleurs se placer plus facilement et obtenir des promotions rapides, grâce à une connaissance des deux langues.¹⁹ »

¹⁵ Robert Gagnon – Histoire de la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal, 1996

¹⁶ Francophone parents themselves demand that their children learn the English language from the moment they enter school.

¹⁷ Presses de l'université du Québec, 2011

¹⁸ Both languages are necessary because French Canadians and English Canadians are destined to live together and therefore need to know, value and respect each other.

¹⁹ In Montreal, knowledge of English is no longer a mere ornament, but a necessity. Parents demand that their children learn English. Everyone knows that young men and women who today approach businesses without this knowledge usually find the doors closed to them, while they see their less educated peers more easily finding employment and obtaining rapid promotions, thanks to their knowledge of both languages.

Bilingual schools continued to exist well into the 20th century, but separate schools for English-speaking and French-speaking Catholic students were emerging. In 1894 «14 des 39 écoles de la Commission (de Montréal) sont fréquentées principalement par des élèves dont la langue maternelle est l'anglais.²⁰» By the early 1900s, Montreal had three different Catholic school models : « écoles françaises où l'anglais est enseigné comme langue seconde (Montcalm, Saint-Brigide) : écoles anglaises où le français est enseigné comme langue seconde (Saint-Patrick, Sainte-Anne); et écoles bilingues qui réunissent des enfants dont la langue maternelle est l'anglais où le français (Edward Murphy, Chaveau).²¹»

In 1903, Montreal was home to 600 Syrian students, who spoke neither English nor French. They enrolled at the bilingual Edward Murphy school. Gagnon reported that in 1914, Lithuanians were enrolled at École Meilleur, and in 1915 Poles and Ukrainians were enrolled in Point Saint-Charles. In 1916, Chinese families were living on De La Gauchetière Street in the area that would become Montreal's China Town. They were enrolled in a school under the auspices of les sœurs missionnaires de l'Immaculée Conception.

Gagnon confirmed that these immigrant children were Catholic. « La Commission catholique ne s'intéresse qu'aux immigrants de confession catholique. Les Grecs, qui représentent un groupe ethnique importante à Montréal, vont dans les écoles de la Commission protestante.²²» Gagnon reported that in 1924, only 257 of 88,444 students in Quebec's Catholic schools were non-Catholic. Of this tiny contingent, 70% were Protestant, probably French-speaking Huguenots or converts, and only 30% were non-Christian. By 1942, the number of non-Catholics in the entire Montreal Catholic School Commission had dropped to just 78 students. It was extremely rare, even prior to the linguistically politicized post-War era, for non-Catholics to be present in Catholic schools.

Why? Catholic schools could argue – “We are Catholic. That is our mandate. Non-Catholics have a more appropriate option in Protestant schools.” And that argument would have been credible, except that historian Gagnon claimed that his

²⁰ 14 of the 39 schools in the Commission (of Montreal) are attended mainly by students whose mother tongue is English.

²¹ ... French schools where English is taught as a second language (Montcalm, Saint-Brigide); English schools where French is taught as a second language (Saint-Patrice, Sainte-Anne); and bilingual schools that bring together children whose mother tongue is English or French (Edward Murphy, Chaveau).

²² The Catholic Commission is only interested in immigrants of the Catholic faith. The Greeks, who represent a significant ethnic group in Montreal, attend the Protestant Commission's schools.

1997 study “completely refutes the notion that Catholic or Francophone schools refused the children of immigrants, whether Catholic or not.”

Quebec’s history books also report that immigrants ‘chose’ English schools and never mention or even suggest it was possible that Quebec’s Catholic schools only rarely accepted non-Catholic students. In addition, many sceptics continue to agree with Gagnon that the small number of non-Catholics present in Catholic schools was entirely due to students preferring English schools and rejecting French schools.

The clashing narratives regarding Catholic students are far more controversial. There was never any justification for Quebec’s Catholic schools to deny admission to Catholic students.

The major group of Catholic immigrants after the war was Italian. A few Italians had arrived early in the history of Quebec, but the first Italian diaspora began around 1880, two decades after the Unification of Italy. The 1901 Canadian Census recorded 2,102 Montrealers of Italian descent, 7,460 in 1911, and by 1941, Montreal’s Italian population had grown to 25,281.

Donat J. Tadeo and Raymond C. Taras²³ studied the relative distribution of Catholic immigrant groups between French Catholic and English Catholic schools from 1930 to 1960.

Year	Italians		Germans		Poles		Ukrainians	
	Fr	Eng	Fr	Eng	Fr	Eng	Fr	Eng
1930	2,549	1,504	36	222	363	394	130	333
1940	1,478	1,785	27	211	119	699	97	411
1950	1,773	1,860	41	206	75	678	54	553
1960	4,072	9,629	134	683	229	1,769	12	1,184

Table 2. Immigrants students enrolled at French and English Catholic schools in Montreal 1930-60

In 1930, 63% of Italians were enrolled at French Catholic schools. By 1950, Italian enrollment in French Catholic school had fallen to 48%, and then to 30% in 1960. The numbers continued falling to 11% in 1970 and then just 8% in 1975, on the eve of Bill 101. What changed so dramatically? Did Italian students increasingly reject French Catholic schools or did French Catholic schools increasingly reject Italians (and other Catholic immigrants)? This report will examine the data in report #1 about WHAT happened and seek to understand WHY this happened.

²³ Le débat linguistique au Québec, 1988

Methodology

In April 2025, we created an education survey and posted it online, where it was widely shared among former students, who began their education prior to 1977.

Were You Educated in Quebec?

Prior to Bill 101, students in Quebec had several options for education: French-Catholic, English-Protestant, English-Catholic, French-Protestant, as well as private schools for several religions and languages.

There are many unanswered questions about education in Quebec prior to Bill 101. How many students were turned away from French-Catholic schools? And why? How many students preferred not to attend French-Catholic schools? And why?

Can you help us by answering a few questions about your education?

1. What was your first year of elementary school? _____
2. What was the name of your school? _____ Where was it located? _____
- 3a. **Were you one of the students turned away from a French Catholic school? If so, please answer the next questions.**
- 3b. What was the name of the school? _____ Where was it located? _____
- 3c. Were your parents given a reason why you were not admitted to the French Catholic school? _____
- 4a. **Were you a student who choose not to attend a French Catholic school? Please answer the next questions.**
- 4b. Did you choose a school that was _____English-Protestant_____English-Catholic
_____French-Protestant_____private
- 4c. What was the reason for your choice? _____
- 5a. If you attended an English school, how would you rate your French skills (1-weak, 10-strong) _____

- 5b. If you attended a French school, how would you rate your English skills (1-weak,10-strong)

6. Do you speak other languages? If so, which other languages _____

Would you be willing to participate in a more detailed interview?

If so, please share your phone number _____ email_____address

Thank you.

Invitations spread on social media and by the end of June 2025, more than 200 former students had filled out the survey and almost half of them agreed to participate in personal interviews. Some social media responses were skeptical. The level and intensity of skepticism necessitated a change of methodology. Rather than collect information for two years and then release a report in November 2026 that could be disputed or dismissed, we decided to release a series of interim reports to offer skeptics an opportunity to question our findings, and to provide additional information that we could incorporate into the final report.

Our initial appeal to francophone journalists in autumn 2025 proved fruitless. None responded to our requests to engage their readers, listeners and viewers in this conversation. A number of people on social media refused to believe that segregation ever happened, while others alleged they knew immigrants -- and even non-Catholics – who had been educated in French Catholic schools but, when pressed to substantiate their claims, they could not provide names of schools to investigate or students to interview.

The complexity of the story creates confusion, as illustrated by the following examples. Not all members of a specific community shared the same religion. Most Greeks were Orthodox, but there are exceptions – some were Catholic – and so a Greek student enrolled at a Catholic school does not prove that ‘non-Catholics’ were accepted. Similarly, most French schools were Catholic, but there were also French Protestant schools and private schools, so ‘knowing a French-speaking Jew, Haitian or Muslim who was educated in French’ does not prove that they were educated at a French Catholic school. When pressed about these clarifying details, skeptics could not be certain that their Greek example was not Catholic or that their Jewish or Muslim example was not educated at a French Protestant school or private French school.

It is also important to remember that education practices shifted over time. After 1977, Bill 101 required immigrants to be educated at French Catholic schools, which was the opposite of rules in force pre-Bill 101. The change occurred nearly half a century ago so memories of dates have become blurred, particularly in the years immediately before and after 1977. In addition, we have found examples of non-Catholics (notably Greek Orthodox students) enrolled in French Catholic high

schools (but not elementary schools) a few years before 1977 (for example William Hingston high school in Park Extension). These students are examples of evolving practices, but they do not refute the reality of earlier decades.

Meaningful analysis of student experiences requires clarity in three areas:

- the religion and language of the school,
- the religion and language of the student,
- the years in which elementary education occurred.

This project analyses former students according to these three parameters. However, as noted above, we are keenly aware that even a few hundred examples can still be dismissed as incidental or insignificant. Therefore we have also collected 'context' information to support and corroborate information from former students. This 'context' information consists of:

1. Interviews with francophones-de-souche students (primarily baby boomers) about the French Catholic schools they attended. "How many of the students at your elementary school were immigrants? How many of the students were non-Catholic?" The answer to both questions has been consistently 'few or none', which corroborates that Catholic school were reserved to Catholics and that non-Catholic immigrants mostly attended 'English schools'.²⁴
2. Public quotes by politicians and other authority figures. Quotes from 1960s²⁵ to as recently as 2025 (former premier and education minister Pauline Marois speaking on Radio Canada²⁶), all agree that Catholic school were restricted to Catholic students prior to 1977.
3. Interviews with former school principals, administrators and priests who were in a position of authority prior to 1977. These interviewees are older than the students (the oldest was 95) but their memories remain vivid and they provide valuable insights into how segregation was practiced prior to 1977. Why it happened is less clear.

In the following analysis of student information presented in Interim Report #1, we will identify patterns and seek explanations. In the 'political' debate about the

²⁴ Francophones interviewed spoke of immigrants attending 'English schools' but did not know if the English schools were Catholic or Protestant

²⁵ See preliminary report #1 page 5

²⁶ Interviewed on the program TOUT PEUT ARRIVER / Radio Canada, (22 November, 2025)

language of schools, high level motivations are often imputed to school choice by immigrants. “They were siding with the Anglos. They rejected Quebec.” The actual reasons are far simpler and more pragmatic. The most frequent reason given for choice of school is proximity. Parents wanted the shortest and safest route between home and school for their children. Religion and language were important – particularly for families that were Catholic or Protestant and spoke English or French – but the priority remained the closest school that offered the desired religion and/or language. No one mentioned choices based on politics. Most immigrants wanted to live in peace with Catholics AND Protestants, francophones AND anglophones.

Another clear pattern that emerges from the interviews is the belief that learning as many languages as possible is beneficial, hence many immigrants wanted to learn French and English as well as retain their mother tongue. They did not want to be forced to choose French OR English. They sought institutional support to acquire both languages. Early in the 20th century, French Catholic schools provided the best bilingual instruction. By the mid 20th century, French Catholic schools reduced the amount of English taught and introduced it later, while English schools (Protestant and Catholic) began to offer high levels of second language instruction, particularly in French Immersion programs.

Several of the former students interviewed described a strategy of enrolling in one system for elementary school (usually French, perceived as the more difficult language), and then switching to the other system for high school or CEGEP. The ‘switching’ strategy was designed to acquire both languages (French and English), not to choose one or the other. We will examine the complex subject of language acquisition and transmission (to the next generation) in the third interim report, to be released in July 2026.

Former Student Evidence, Evaluated by Decades

All participants in this research project filled out the short survey shown above. Nearly half also took part in a personal interview, and a smaller number signed a declaration attesting to their personal experience as a student in Quebec prior to Bill 101. Thumbnail profiles are presented in the first preliminary report from page 13 to 85, divided into four education options: English Protestant, English Catholic, French Protestant and French Catholic. Signed individual declarations are listed from page 86 to 179.

In this section, we will examine the data to identify patterns and seek explanations. Student responses have been divided into four education options and the data within these four sections is presented chronologically because contextual factors changed significantly between the 1930s and the 1980s

Note, the former students are listed by year of birth, but enrollment in grade one happened six years later, so a six-year adjustment must be taken into account for the decade-by-decade examination. For example, a student born in 1933 started school in 1939, while a student born in 1934 started school in 1940, and is included in the 1940s decade.

Abbreviations used

- EPS English Protestant school(s)
- ECS English Catholic school(s)
- FPS French Protestant school(s)
- FCS French Catholic school(s)

English Catholic and English Protestant Schools

1930s

Context: Depression years, minimal immigration. In 1930, 63% of Italians were enrolled in French Catholic schools.

English Catholic Schools

Student SO: Polish, born 1933 in Ville-Émard. SO remembers that ‘even in the 1930s, immigrants were expected to go to English school.’ This memory is consistent with the data from Tadeo and Tarras - see page 12 above. In 1930, 48% of Polish students enrolled in French Catholic schools, but by 1940 the number had fallen to 15%.

SO mentioned being educated in Polish for grades 1 and 2. This is consistent with Robert Gagnon’s history of the CÉCM²⁷. « Au début des années 1930, ils sont près de 7,000 (immigrants Catholiques) à fréquenter une école de la Commission. Dans les quartiers cosmopolites de la ville, des classes ont été aménagées pour qu’ils puissent recevoir une partie de leur instruction dans la langue maternelle.²⁸ »

27 La Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal

28 In the early 1930s, nearly 7,000 Catholic immigrants attended a Commission school. In the city’s more cosmopolitan neighborhoods, classrooms were set up so they could receive part of their education in their mother tongue.

Gagnon mentioned special grade 1 and 2 classes for Italians, Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians. The purpose was the same as a modern classe d'accueil. Gagnon also reported that the CÉCM was determined to attract and retain immigrants because of the fear that Catholics would reject the faith and be educated in a Protestant school. Nonetheless, SO reports that despite Commission programs designed to attract and retain Catholic immigrants, they were expected to enroll in English Catholic schools rather than French Catholic schools

English Protestant Schools

Demetrios (Jim) Tjelios was born in 1933, and his older brother in 1930. When their mother took the elder brother to the local French Catholic school in 1936, she was told that the school only accepted Catholics. This is consistent with Gagnon's research quoted above. "The Catholic Commission is only interested in immigrants of the Catholic faith. The Greeks, who represent a significant ethnic group in Montreal, attend the Protestant Commission's schools."

1940s

Context: War years (1939-45) minimal immigration. Between 1940 and 1943, around 700 Italian-Canadian men were arrested and sent to internment camps because of alleged fascist connections. Although they later received an apology from the government of Canada, the accusation of being "enemy aliens" created animosity with English and French Canadians.

Post-war – mass immigration begins.

In 1940, 45% of Italians were enrolled in French Catholic schools.

	Chose English	Rejected from French	Indirect rejection	Other
ECS	2	4	0	0
EPS	3	1	1	0

Table 3. Student admission or rejection experiences during the 1940s

English Catholic Schools

Six Catholic students who started school in the 1940s participated in this project. Two of them (one Irish (TC-1940) and one Italian (Sharon-1943)) chose English Catholic schools. Four attended English Catholic schools because they were denied access to French Catholic schools. The two Italian students (Mike-1936, Angelo-1942) were told that Italians or immigrants were not accepted. This experience was shared by a Czechoslovakian immigrant (RS-1942).

The experience of **Gerry Turpin-1937** suggests that language was also a factor in exclusion. His father was an anglicized, Catholic francophone-de-souche and his mother was British and Protestant. GT’s father wanted him to be educated in French but GT was directed to an English Catholic school because the family was de facto ‘anglophone.’

English Protestant Schools

Only two of the former students who attended Protestant schools in the 1940s unequivocally chose that option: an English speaker from Winnipeg (DT-1939) and a Jewish student (Norman-1941). Another Jewish Student (Anonymous-1942) “went to the nearest English school accepting Jewish students,” which ruled out ECS and FCS. A Ukrainian student (MP-1940) learned from Jewish neighbours that, “it was a given that immigrants went to English Protestant schools.”

The experience of **Miriam Zylberstein Byers-1943** confirms that non-Christians were not admitted to French Catholic schools. Although she had been educated in France for two years, when the family arrived in Quebec, MZB was denied admission to a FCS because the family was Jewish

1950s

Context: Peek immigration and baby boom years.1950 - 48% of Italians were enrolled in French Catholic schools.

	Chose Eng	Rejected from French	Indirect rejection	Other
ECS	9	24	2	2
EPS	13	11	4	0

Table 4 Student admission or rejection experiences during the 1950s

English Catholic Schools

Of the nine students who chose English Catholic Schools, six were mother-tongue English-speaking Catholics, so their choice was clear. MK-1945’s story indicates the complexities and subtleties of the admission process. Her parents were British, although her Protestant mother received part of her education in France. Her Catholic father was raised by Jesuits. The eldest child in the family, a boy, was accepted in a FCS but did not fit in because of his ‘British’ style. MK and her younger brother enrolled in ECS, mostly because of proximity after moving to

a new neighbourhood. The youngest sister enrolled at a French Catholic school, although she initially encountered resistance, and continued all of her education in French. MK's experience shows that French and English Catholic schools were not impermeable.

GS-1949 demonstrates an inverse example. His parents were unilingual francophones-de-souche who believed that an education in English would 'give (their children) an inheritance' by making them bilingual. There is no record of francophone Catholics turned away from ECS. In fact the process was so easy (and in the 60s and 70s so popular) that francophones educated in English schools found it hard to believe that immigrants were not as readily accepted in FCS.

Two allophone immigrants in this period chose ECS: one was Italian (Mike-1949) and the other Slovakian (Ted-1951).

Twenty-four students who attended ECS were turned away from FCS in the 1950s. Thirteen cited 'language' as the reason for rejection: most were Italian but Kevin-46 was Irish and LR-1946 was Irish-Scots. LR's father was a Catholic francophone but her mother did not speak French, which was the reason given for directing LR toward an ECS. **Claire Ropeleski-1950** was a Hungarian immigrant turned away from a FCS because it was "not equipped to teach French to immigrants." **Rocco Barbieri-1946's** father tried to enroll his children in FCS twice, but was refused admission at two different schools "because the boys didn't speak French."

Joe-1953 was turned away because 'they had reached their quota of immigrants.' It is unclear who imposed this quota, or how many immigrant students were accepted before the quota was full.

Annalisa-1952 was turned away because "they didn't have room for us."

Ten students were rejected because they were immigrants: eight were Italian, one was a French-speaking Belgian (**Ilse Hellemans Sullivan-1948**) and another was Ukrainian, Lesia-1951, whose 'parents were DPs from Ukraine.' **Faustina Bilotta-1948** presents a particularly disturbing example of immigrant rejection. She emigrated from Italy at 15 years of age, expecting to complete her high school education at a FCS because she was Catholic and spoke French. Although she knew no English, FB was forced to complete HS at an ECS. FB still speaks mostly French and more than 60 years later is still deeply disturbed that the FCS refused to admit her.

Two students were 'indirectly rejected.' Anonymous-1952 reported, "There was a history in my community of Italian children not being accepted in French schools so my parents - like most of those in 1950 - chose English Catholic schools."

The final two cases from the 1950s were accepted by FCS but transferred to ECS. **Jean Racine Wayland-1946** and her brother were accepted into a FCS but they were the only anglophones and “their French was not strong so they were directed to ECS for the following year.”

Maria Prizio-1952 was also accepted into a FCS but the Italian immigrant could speak no French. MP had completed grade 5 in Italy but she was put back to grade 3 in Quebec. There was one other Italian girl at the school but she was not allowed to speak to MP, so there was no one to translate or explain. MP was very unhappy, and would probably have failed grade 3 because she couldn't understand French and no one helped her learn. Note, language support provided for immigrants in earlier decades – or post 1977 – was not available at this school in the 1950s. MP transferred to St Rita's (ECS) where she was only required to repeat grade 5. About 90% of the students were Italian immigrants so there was always somebody who could explain or translate.

English Protestant Schools

Thirteen students in the 1950s chose EPS. Eight were English-speaking Protestants. One Jewish family (Anne-1953) chose an EPS because of proximity. Two Jewish students (KH-47, HA-49,) choose EPS because that was where other Jewish families were enrolled. Two others chose Jewish elementary schools (MB-51 and Eva-52) and later continued with EPS.

Ten students were rejected for reasons of religion. Two were Jewish, including Judith-1951 who believed the rejection could have been circumvented by paying a 'monthly fee' that her family could not afford. One Jewish student – **Anna Fuerstenberg-1947**– believed she was rejected because she was a refugee. She was also Jewish.

Four of the students were Protestant, including **Marlene Jennings-1951**. Her maternal ancestors were Belgian and Franco-Manitoban. Her father was a Black American from Alabama. The family's home language was French but MJ was refused admission to French Catholic school because her family was 'Anglican and not Catholic.'

Edward Stuart Rogers-1950 was nominally Protestant although his father was atheist and his mother agnostic. His father tried to enroll ESR in a FCS but “the school would not accept Protestants.’ His father also tried to enroll ESR in a private

French school but was told 'we can't accept him because he's not Catholic.'

George Contaxakis-1951 arrived in Quebec age 12, speaking Greek and good French. He was briefly enrolled in a FCS until the principal found out GC had listed his religion as Greek Orthodox. The principal came into the class, pointed at GC and asked, "Are you Catholic?" GC said, "No, I'm Orthodox." Then the principal said, "You're not allowed to be here." The principal did not divulge the authority that decided who was 'allowed' to enroll in FCS.

Mary Moroska-1949 was Russian Orthodox but her parents were educated in France and had French passports. MM was born in Morocco and spoke French but was not allowed to enroll at a FCS unless she converted to Catholicism, which her family was not willing to do, so she enrolled in an EPS.

Johan Mady-1952 was Muslim but her mother had been educated in Lebanon by French nuns. The family was living in Lachute and so the regional Catholic school was a 'common school' and should have accepted all students, but it didn't. JM enrolled in an EPS.

HM-1952 had a francophone-de-souche mother and a Hungarian father but HM's Catholic mother had been 'excommunicated for marrying a Protestant.'

Four of the students enrolled at EPS in the 1950s were 'indirectly rejected' by FCS. AB-1946 was Jewish and the family 'heard from neighbours that Jews were not accepted' at FCS. GR-1947 was also Jewish and it was "common knowledge that only Protestant schools would take Jewish students." GR's wife "arrived in QC age 10 from Paris but could not go to a FCS because she was Jewish." EF-1948 was also Jewish and "other Jewish immigrants informed the family that only Catholics could attend French schools." F also remembers parents talking about a special fee for non-Catholic students in Catholic schools, but no fee for Jews in Protestant schools. John-1951 was German and chose EPS because his "parents were told they would have to pay school fees of approximately \$20 to \$25 per month" to attend a FCS.

1960s

Context: Quiet revolution, FLQ, English schools introduce French immersion, French schools reduce quantity of English taught and start it later.

Ministry of Education created 1964, first CEGEPS opened 1967, Université du Québec network launched 1969

1960 - 30 % of Italians were enrolled in French Catholic schools.

	Chose Eng	Rejected from French	Indirect rejection	Other
ECS	7	51	9	1
EPS	16	16	8	2

Table 5. Student admission or rejection experiences during the 1960s

English Catholic Schools

Only seven students in this group chose English Catholic Schools. Three Italian students (Maria-1955, Anonymous-1956, Maria-1959) gave proximity as the primary reasons. Two Italian students (RM-1960, PD-1961) wanted to learn English, and one Italian student (Luisa-1954) attended a trilingual elementary school.

Nine students were rejected indirectly from FCS and enrolled in ECS. Carmen-1956: "Since my father lived in France for a number of years and my mother learned French, they would have preferred I attend French school. However, as other family members were refused my parents sent me to English Catholic school." Franca-1956: "My parents were informed that I wouldn't be accepted so they didn't try to register me." Anna-1962: "We had just gotten here and my parents didn't speak the language so they were told to not even bother trying in the French system." Mary-1962: "My older cousins tried to go to French school but were turned away, so my parents put my sisters and I in English school." FC-1962: "In the 1960s it was 'common knowledge' that Italians would attend ECS." **Irene Ioannoni-1961** reported that 'older cousins and neighbours had already been refused admission to FCS' so she entered directly into the English Catholic sector.

One student in the 1960s Catholic group fell into the 'other' category: HM-1962. Her Anglo, Protestant parents decided to enroll HM (eldest of 3) in a FCS after a year in private French K. There was no problem being admitted, despite not being Catholic or francophone. HM never asked her parents about why or how she was admitted to FCS.

Fifty-one students in the 1960s Catholic group were rejected from FCS. Only four gave religion as the reason. Monique-1963 was Lebanese/Arabic. Anonymous-1962 was Protestant and Anonymous-1960 was rejected because her “mother was excommunicated by the local priest for using contraceptives.”

Demetra Darsaklis-1960 was Greek Orthodox. “The biggest reason (for choosing ECS) was that the school was very close to our home. My parents had not been in Quebec very long and did not understand that there were different schools for different religions and languages. My mother was told that I couldn’t go to the school because we were not Catholic. Then she found out that all the other Greek kids in the neighbourhood had to go to Protestant schools.”

One student mentioned quotas. **Paul Esposito-1959** reported that his mother, who spoke mostly Italian, took a neighbour along to help communicate in French. PE learned later his mother was told the school had filled its quota of immigrant children and they suggested trying the English elementary school.

Ten students mentioned language as the primary reason for exclusion. MG-1960: “My older siblings were refused because we did not speak French.” FR-1958 reported a language test. When it came time to register for school, FR was given a verbal test to make sure he could speak French, and failed the test. “None of the immigrants in the neighbourhood – Italian, Polish, Ukrainian – passed the test and so none were accepted in the French school.”

Monika Boos -1954 was Yugoslavian but the family spoke mostly German. “The school did not want to accept a German-speaking student, even if the family was Catholic.” **Clementina Clerici-1956** was Italian and when her parents took her to the French Notre-Dame-de-Grâce school, “the places that they had were only for the French community.” **Teresa Picciano-1959** was taken by her mother to the neighbourhood French school and was told, “Here it’s strictly French. You’re Italian. You’re not coming to this school.” **Michael Leclair-1960** attended an English elementary school. For high school, his parents thought a French high school would be a good idea. His mother, who was Catholic and spoke very good French, took ML to the FCS where they met with a nun, who spoke to ML slowly and quickly ascertained that he could not understand what she was saying. ML was not accepted into the FCS.

Two students were refused admission “because there was no room” in the FCS. Piera Di Fruscia-1954 reported that her mother was told the school was too crowded (because of the baby boom) so there was ‘no room.’ Anonymous-60 said, “There was no space in the French school.”

Twenty-three students reported that they were not admitted to FCS because they were immigrants. **Carole Verdone-Smith-1954** reported that her Quebec-educated, bilingual parents expected to enroll their children at FCS but a nun said, « On accepte pas des immigrants ici. Y'a d'autres écoles pour vous autres.²⁹ » The nun also said, « S'il y a d'autres familles comme la vôtre, dites leurs de ne pas perdre notre temps.³⁰ » **Luisa Silvestro-1954**: Despite the family's religion (Catholic) and her mother's proficiency in French, she was told to take her daughter to the ECS. LS's mother believed it was because she had an Italian name.

Sabino Grassi-56 reported that his parents were told that Italians were not welcome at the French schools and they were directed to the English system. **Franca Confente-1956**: When her older sister was school age (1960), the father took her to the local FCS. The school said, No. Her father begged them to take his daughter who spoke French but no English, but the official insisted that French schools did not take immigrant children. **Vincent Gabrielli-1956**: His newly immigrated father took him to the local FCS, but was told that immigrants had to attend the ECS. As new immigrants, they did not question authority and followed instructions.

Michael Gaug-1956 reported that both his parents were educated at Saint-Louis-de-France school in a mixture of French, English and German. His Quebec-raised parents spoke French and attended St-Jude's (French) church in Longueuil. However, the Curé decided MG should attend the ECS with other immigrants. **Claudia Ottaviano-Maheu-1958**: Her father had worked for five years in Paris. Her parents tried to enroll her older brother at local FCS in 1958, but were turned away. The family tried again for COM in 1964. The administrator said, « Vous êtes des immigrants. Il faut aller à l'école anglaise.³¹ »

Rosanna Bruni-1961 reported that her older brother was not admitted because he was an immigrant. **Tony Spano-1962**: When his eldest sister was school age, parents took her to the neighbourhood FCS but they were directed across the street to the ECS, although the parents did not speak English. By the time TS was born, they had moved to Ahuntsic so his parents tried to enroll him at the neighbourhood FCS. The father had become comfortable in French and insisted that his son be accepted in the FCS, which was close to home – and one of the reasons they had bought that house. In 1968, language politics were intense because of the Saint-

29 We don't accept immigrants here. There are other schools for you.

30 If there are other families like yours, tell them not to waste our time.

31 You are immigrants. You must go to English school.

Leonard crisis. When the father was told, 'Italians are not welcome here' 'there was a violent exchange' and the father had to be escorted out of the school.

Twelve students were turned away from FCS for no particular reason. Most were Italian. Anonymous-1954: "I don't know. I only spoke French and Italian, but I went to English school." Maria-1955: "Back in Italy my father was preparing my brother and I with French workbooks but in Quebec we were informed that we were not allowed to go to French schools." **Gary Kaiserlian-1956** had an Armenian Orthodox father and Catholic mother. They had both been educated in French and would have preferred GK to be educated in French. He was directed to the ECS. **Ralph Mastromonaco-1956** experienced a typical bureaucratic rejection. His parents wanted to enroll him and older brother at the nearest FCS but they were 'turned away and sent to enroll at the nearest ECS.' The immigrant family did not question authority, and only understood later that they had been subject to segregation based on their language or ethnicity.

English Protestant Schools

Sixteen students in the 1960s choose EPS. Eleven were English-speaking Protestants. A Ukrainian student (Iwan-1959) chose the closest available school. His elder siblings were already attending Franklin Elementary. A Jewish student (Debra-1961) chose Guy Drummond because she spoke English. MM-1958 chose EPS after being frightened by nuns at a Catholic kindergarten. SM-1961 was Jewish and chose EPS because Chomedey had many Jewish students and they all attended Protestant school. Anonymous-1960 was Hungarian-Greek enrolled in EPS because "the French school system was not adequate and had high dropout rates."

Sixteen students were rejected from FCS, twelve because of religion. Two were Protestant (Martin-1955, Andy-1960). Two were Dutch, including **Nicolette de Smit-1954**, who wanted to go to French school but because the family was not Catholic, she was not accepted. Three students rejected because of religion were Jewish including Joel-1955, who emigrated from Morocco and spoke French, no English, but "I was denied access to a French school because we are Jewish." **Rachel Sinyor-1954** lived in Israel prior to Quebec. Her father was from Morocco and mother from Bulgaria. The family spoke Hebrew and French, which was why they chose Montreal. RS's parents went to register her at the local French school but were turned away because they were Jewish and not Catholic. The family had many Moroccan friends who spoke primarily French, but were also turned away from FCS and sent into the English Protestant system.

Betty Esperanza-1961 reported that her Jewish mother came from France in 1959. BE's mother was very proud of her French Lycée education, did not speak English, and wanted her children educated in French. The family spoke French at home and their neighbours were almost all Québécois francophones. Because BE's mother was an immigrant from France, there were no complications with enrolling BE at local FCS but when the school examined the enrollment papers, they saw that the mother listed her religion as Jewish. Years later she told BE that the school called a few days later to say they could not accept BE's enrollment because there was 'not enough room' and that she should 'go to the Protestant school.' The mother would have accepted a FPS but the only Protestant school in Chomedey was English. The mother complained about this to the francophone neighbours, who did not find the decision surprising. They said, « C'est comme ça. Vous êtes pas comme nous autres³². » BE's mother was furious and could not believe it possible in Quebec that her daughter would be forced to go to an English school.

One student rejected because of religion was German. **Carole Rentschler-1956**: Her family lived in a very French part of Ste-Therese so the children learned French playing on the street with neighbours. Her father went to enroll CR at the local French school in 1962, but they would not enroll her because the family was not Catholic. CR's parents placed her in a private kindergarten to learn English and then she enrolled at McCaig elementary in Rosémere, which was the closest EPS but much further from their home in Ste-Therese. Another student rejected because of religion was Armenian. Three students rejected because of religion were Greek. Anonymous-56 "was not allowed to attend French Catholic school because we were Greek Orthodox." **Jenny Kalantzis-1963** was living in Park Ex when she was old enough for school. Her parents wanted the nearest school, but when JK's Father took her to the Catholic school but they only accepted Catholics.

Four students were rejected because of language. Two were anglophones, including JE-1963 whose eldest sister (b 1954) was taken to FCS for enrollment in grade 1. The school was run by nuns, who had no problem speaking English to parents, but they told them that their daughter could not enroll in a Catholic school because the family was Protestant. "She will contaminate the other children." JE's father never forget the word 'contaminate'. SC-1962 was partly Welsh and Indian. SC's Sikh father was very keen on learning French and immediately took lessons, and he wanted his daughter to learn French and be fully integrated in Quebec but it was understood that FCS would not accept an English-speaking nominally Sikh immigrant.

³² That's the way it is. You're not like us.

Karyn Zuidinga-1962 was Catholic and Dutch. Her older brother was taken to the FCS to enroll because the family was Catholic and the school was very close. The principal explained to them that they could not enroll at the school because they were not francophone. “Immigrants don’t ask questions. They just want to fit in.” So they went to the English school where the secretary told them Catholics could not attend the Protestant school unless they filled out a form renouncing their Catholic religion – which they did. In the small town of Prévile in 1968 there only two schools: French Catholic or English Protestant. Neither was a natural fit for allophone Catholics.

Eight of the students who attended EPS experienced ‘indirect rejection’ from FCS. Three were Jewish. CG-1954 would have preferred a French school but it was ‘common knowledge’ that Catholic schools did not take Jewish students. DP-1960: “The family did not believe Jewish students could be accepted into Catholic schools so Protestant school was the only public choice.” Mark-1961 chose private Jewish education. Three of the ‘indirect rejection’ students were Greek. SP-1956 attended Greek school for a year, then Bancroft. His parents are deceased so cannot verify why they chose Protestant school, but it was ‘common knowledge’ that Greek orthodox students were not accepted into French Catholic schools. HB-1958 went to Bancroft (EPS) because his parents were told by other Greek families that they could not send kids to Nazareth because it was Catholic. Mary-1959 reported that her “parents were informed that Greek Orthodox children were not eligible for enrolment in Catholic School.”

Donna-1961 remembered her mother saying “it would have been expensive going to a different school board to which we did not pay taxes as one of the reasons we couldn’t go to the French system.” Anonymous-1962 said his parents, “looked into it and but we were not Catholic couldn’t attend Catholic school.”

Two students were rejected for ‘other’ reasons. DM-1954 had Huguenot ancestors who could not attend FCS in the Gaspé. PM-1959 was Italian but his Catholic GF became Pentecostal and so PM could not attend FCS.

1970s

Context: old patterns were breaking down. By 1977, language has superseded religion. Bill 101 became law, and French Protestant schools rapidly expanded as a legal alternative to FCS.

1970 - 11% of Italians were enrolled in French Catholic schools. (by 1975, just 8%)

	Chose Eng	Rejected from French	Indirect rejection	Other
ECS	6	10	0	2
EPS	11	3	3	0

Table 6. Student admission or rejection experiences during the 1970s

English Catholic Schools

Six students in this group chose English Catholic Schools. CR-65 was not sure why his Portuguese parents enrolled him in English school. Anonymous-1966 said, "Other Italian Catholic kids in the neighborhood went to St Dorothy's." Angie-1968: "My parents preferred us going to English Catholic school."

Three students wanted to be bilingual. RF-1966: His Italian he parents spoke French at home so English was to be learned at school. Mario-1966 reported that the "English school had French subject starting from first grade where the French school had English subjects starting only in fifth grade." JT-1967 was accepted into both systems. JT "started school at St Paul's elementary (ECS) then moved to Saint-Anne-de-Bellevue and enrolled at École Saint-Georges (FCS). Other Anglo kids were also attending the FCS, so that kids could learn a good quality of French. No fear of losing English."

Ten students in the 70s were rejected from FCS. Two because of religion. Maria-1966: "I was (Italian) anglophone and not baptized." Tara-1970: "My mother is Protestant and my parents were divorced." Two were rejected because of language. Rosie-1954: "We were Italian not speaking French." Francesco-1969. "I was born in Rome and I did my 1st grade in USA. For the principal of St. Clement I had no possession of the French language."

Five were rejected because they were immigrants. Adrianna-1964: "My mom said immigrant children had to go to English schools." Anonymous-1967: "My parents tried since they found French was closer to Italian. Both schools shared a courtyard and they were asked to go to the other side to Dante where all Italians had to go. No excuses, just that it is the rule in Quebec." **Gino Insogna-1964** reported that

his father took him to Sainte-Bernadette-Soubirous school because he believed French was more difficult to learn than English, so French school would be better. GI's father was told, « On n'accepte pas les Italiens ici.³³ » **Nina Gentile-1965** was living in Quebec so French was important. Also the French school was very close to home, just a block away. Her older sister started school in 1955. "Our father took her to the French school on the corner. They said, 'We don't want immigrants here.'"

Dominique Poletti-1965 grew up in Ville-Émard. The neighbour kids were mostly francophone so DP learned French. Her parents spoke little French. The closest school to home was Notre-Dame-du-Perpétuel-Secours. DP's mother took there and was told, "No, no, you're immigrants." The mother assured the administrator that DP spoke French, but the administrator insisted that immigrants should enroll at ECS. Holy Cross was farther away and DP spoke little English. The kindergarten teacher at Holy Cross told the mother, "Your daughter would do much better at a French school." The mother said, "I know, but the French school didn't want her."

Two students had more complex experiences as language politics evolved. GS-1965 arrived in QC in 1971 with two infant boys. GS and her husband were Italian. The eldest son (born 1965) had completed grade one in English in USA. GS put him in ECS (1972) because he had started school in English, but enrolled younger son in private French kindergarten. Later, GS wanted to enroll her eldest son at Saint-Clément for grade 6, although he spoke little French. The principal said, "He will ruin the French of my students," and denied him admission. The father threatened to write a letter to Le Devoir to let them know that his son was being denied admission to a French Catholic school – in 1975. The boy was given three months of private French tutoring and then was accepted at Saint-Clément. Both boys later went to Collège Notre Dame and pursued higher education in French.

Mary-1971 reported that, "My parents were forced to send my sister to English school when she started in 1972. With me, they were forcing them to send me to French, but my parents fought against having 2 kids in different schools so I was not allowed to go to kindergarten and the law was changed that year for all siblings to be allowed to go to same language school."

English Protestant Schools

Eleven students in this group chose EPS because they were English-speaking Protestants. Three were indirectly rejected from FCS: WT-1966 grew up in Quebec City. The Chinese community was largely isolated and his parents never really

³³ Italians are not accepted here

learned French. The Chinese community in Quebec City was assisted by les soeurs missionnaires de l’Immaculé-Conception. (Gagnon mentioned this same group assisting the Chinese community of Montreal in 1916.) Les soeurs missionnaires recommended that WT enroll at Holland school (EPS) because the family was not Catholic (although not Protestant either). WT knew Catholic Chinese immigrants who went to Saint-Patrick’s (ECS). None enrolled at FCS.

EP-1966 was Greek. “There was no question of enrolling at FCS. It was understood that Catholic schools only accepted Catholics so she enrolled at EPS.” However, her husband, also Greek Orthodox, did attend a FCS in Pierrefonds. Kristina-1968 was German and her family “chose English Protestant school because we weren’t Catholic or French.”

Three students in this period were rejected by FCS. Elizabeth-1965: “Although we only spoke French (Jewish immigrants from Morocco), we could not study in French as they were all Catholic schools. They sent us to the English protestant schoolboard who take everyone.” Two Greek students were born in 1969 and started in school in 1975. Although Quebec was in transition and only two years from Bill 101, they were denied admission to FCS. Mary-1969: “Yes because we were not Catholic we were Greek Orthodox. My parents wanted to send us there because Nazareth was a school right next to our house. I went to Bancroft.” Stavroula-1969: “Parents wanted to enroll me at École Coursol but we were not Catholic so I went to Martinvale.”

Post Bill 101

	Chose Eng	Rejected from French	Indirect rejection	Other
ECS	3	0	0	3

Table 7. Student admission or rejection experiences during the 1980

After 1977, immigrants were obliged to enroll in FCS unless they had an exemption, and the doors were opened to students who were formerly turned away. PD-74 was “the only member of the family to receive part of his basic education in French.” His elder siblings, parents and grandparents had all been educated in ECS. PD attended St Lawrence (English) CEGEP followed by Concordia, Université de Montréal and a PhD at Université Laval. Teresa-75 attended Notre-dame de la defense in Little Italy.

Three students who filled out the survey reported that their parents had been rejected. Franca-1982: “I went to English school because my parents were refused French Catholic school access.” LG-1978 went to ECS but her “mother was turned away from French school.” Sylvia-1989 reported that “My parents were not allowed because they were immigrants.”

French Protestant Schools

The French Protestant sector was the least understood education option in Quebec. A brief (and partial) history is recorded in “Pluralisme et école protestante”³⁴ The French Protestant sector only became significant during the 1960s and then grew rapidly for non-Catholic Francophones until it was merged with the FCS in 1997.

In 1955 the United Church took over management of the venerable Institut evangelique français in Pointe-aux-Trembles. The PSBGM created some French classes at Peace Centennial in 1962. To respond to a wave of French-speaking Jews during the 60s, Baron Byng high school opened a French wing, and many Moroccan Jews attended French classes at Northmount. Roberval school was named after the best known historic Huguenot. The teachers engaged for the FPS were mostly from Europe and the Maghreb because (French Canadian) Catholic teachers could not work in Protestant schools. Many of the students enrolled in the new FPS were francophone Jews and Muslims from North Africa, as well as Protestant Haitians.

	Montreal	%	Regions	%
Jewish immigrants	101,460	98.0	3,267	2.0
Italian immigrants	102,724	93.5	5,826	6.5
Other immigrants	169,240	71.2	68,283	28.8
Total immigrants	373,424	82.8	77,376	71.2

Table 8. Immigrants in Quebec, 1961

Immigration was mainly a Montreal issue in 1961. The complex religious-linguistic identity of immigrants could not easily be accommodated by English and French Catholic schools plus English Protestant schools. A fourth option was required for the growing number of French-speaking non-Catholics.

³⁴ Pluralisme et école protestante, Gouvernement du Québec, Comité Protestant (1993)

As the number of students in the EPS system decreased after Bill 101, the number and percentage of students in the FPS sector increased dramatically.

	Students in FPS	% of all Protestant students
1976-1977	2,221	4.4
1981-1982	4,186	12.3
1986-1987	9,314	29.8
1991-1992	11,911	39.4

Table 9. Number and percentage of students enrolled in French Protestant schools, 1976-1992.

Originally created for Protestant francophones, following the implementation of the Charter of the French Language in 1977, the percentage of allophones in FPS rose from 27.3 percent in 1978 to 65.2 percent in 1988, while in EPS, the percentage of allophones fell from 72.7 percent to 34.9 percent over the same period.

Michelle Serano-1951 emigrated from Algeria during the War of Liberation in 1957. MS had already been educated from K to grade 2 in French. Her parents tried to enroll her at FCS, but the family was not Catholic. The usual path for non-Catholic immigrants was EPS but MS did not speak English. Her parents were quite upset until they found out about a French Protestant section in an EPS. Peace Centennial opened for grade 5 (1960) and MS enrolled her there and stayed to grade 7. MS became a teacher and eventually worked in the FPS, becoming a principal at École secondaire Van Horne. Students in 80s were Haitians, Moroccans, Vietnamese and Cambodians.

BD-1958 was the daughter of a holocaust survivor mother, who was not a practicing Jew, and a Italian Catholic who was an atheist. The only available FPS were de Maisonneuve and Peace Centennial. The closest to BD's home was Peace Centennial – a one-hour bus ride. The other students were Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, French from France, North African Muslims and some Indigenous students. The teachers were Huguenots from Belgium and Moroccan Jews. The textbooks came from France.

VZ-1965 was in French kindergarten at Saint-Vincent-Ferrier, but it was full so she had to go to a different school for grade 1 – École Hélène Boulée. VZ remembers going to the FCS with her mother (1971) and asking on the way home, "What is Catholic? It was they first time I'd ever heard that word." Later she understood that she was refused admission because the family was not Catholic. VZ enrolled at the

Peace Centennial FPS. Half of the day was in English and half was French. VZ had to take a bus to school. Other students at Peace Centennial were Greek, Chinese, German, Austrian, Arab, and Italian, and some francophones-de-souche, who were probably Protestants.

VZ's younger brother started school in 1976 in Park Ex and went to FCS: Barthelemy-Vimont. The non-Catholic immigrant kids (Greek, Korean) were enrolled in a special class and parents signed a document to exempt them from Catechism. VZ's brother acquired perfect French and married a francophone.

AA-1971 and SG-1971 were both Italian immigrants. They became a couple of the guinea pigs who started school in September 1977, immediately after the implementation of Bill 101 in August 1977. Both wanted to attend the local ECS with their older cousins and neighbours. Both failed the English test and were directed to the French sector of the Protestant system. AA was "bounced from school to school and struggled to make friends or feel part of a community." She always felt outside the Italian community, which was divided into two groups: part in FCS and part in ECS. AA was not part of either community. SG was "happy to have acquired high level of French but would have preferred that results and benefits would have been explained rather than imposed."

French Catholic Schools

Most of the students interviewed were francophones-de-souche. Their siblings, parents and grandparents attended FCS. All the former students interviewed remembered that most of their fellow students were francophones-de-souche or fully integrated 'immigrants' who spoke French with the local Québécois accent. First generation allophones were rare, and none of the students interviewed remembered students who were not Catholic.

NP-1942 was a third generation Italian. Both her parents and many of her older cousins were educated in FCS. NP enrolled at Saint-Barthélemy in Villeray (FCS) There were no other Italians at this school. NP was picked on, denigrated as 'la maudite Italienne' and became so depressed that she had to be taken out of school in May and she transferred to an ECS.

RT-1943 was also a third generation Italian. RT's older sisters were educated in English but his brother was in the French system for grade school then switched to English HS. RT was the first in his family to receive all his undergraduate education in French. RT wanted to study pure science, which was stronger at English

universities. Despite weak English, he was accepted at McGill. He later obtained a PhD from a USA university and over the years taught at several universities, including UQAM.

Dida Berku-1951 arrived in Quebec in 1953 with her Romanian parents. Her parents were both Jewish but her mother was educated at Notre-Dame de Sion by nuns, and in French. She wanted to send her children to French school. A FCS was right across the street on Dupuis. The school said, "We can't admit you because you are immigrants and you're Jewish." DB's parents did not want EPS and so they chose a French private school – Collège Marie de France. DB's parents initially earned low salaries but scraped together the money (a month's salary) for a French private school. DB remembers only four non-Catholics in the entire school among hundreds of students.

AC-1953 was born in France. Her Italian father spoke French. The parents got their daughter into FCS (for girls) but AC was the only immigrant. A nun pulled her braids and called her a 'stupide Italienne' so she only stayed two and a half weeks then switched to ECS. Her two brothers also quit the FCS for boys and switched to ECS.

MV-1958 was Dutch. Her father was Protestant and her mother was Catholic, born in London and educated by French nuns in Wales. MV's mother wanted daughter to be educated by nuns (as she had been) so enrolled MV at Notre-Dame-des-Neiges. There was no problem getting in because mother was Catholic and spoke French, although MV only spoke minimal French from French Summer Camp. The problem at NDDN was that no English was taught. MV's parents wanted children to be bilingual. Because her father was Protestant, MV switched to EPS but retained good French skills. Her older two brothers received all their education in ECS.

YC-1961 was born in Japan. His parents were exiled from Korea for anti-American, anti-Imperialist sentiments during Korean War and lived in Japan. YC's parents loved French literature, although they did not speak French. The French factor made them want to immigrate to Quebec in winter 1966. YC was initially enrolled in a Classe d'accueil at a Protestant school on the Plateau.

YC's parents knew a Korean Catholic priest who also came to Quebec around the same time. He was probably a university friend of the father and took the family under his wing. The family lived near Chinatown at first and knew that most Chinese children were enrolled at EPS, but YC's father wanted his children to learn French. The priest friend got YC enrolled at Cherrier school FCS on the Plateau. (1967) He was the only Asian or non francophone de-souche.

SM-1963 was an English-speaking Protestant. When his family moved from Laval to Hudson, SM enrolled at école St-Thomas (FCS) for grade 2. SM remembers that the directrice (a nun) was confused why a unilingual Anglo would want to enroll his son at a French school. She explained to the father that SM had the right to attend English school, which would be better because his French was weak. Father explained that for his children to understand the culture of Quebec, they needed to learn the language. The directrice was also confused why a Protestant would want to enroll at a Catholic school. Nonetheless he was allowed to enroll at the FCS. SM switched to Hudson High EPS. His father was disappointed that he switched from French to English, but second language instruction was poor in FCS that SM could not write or spell properly in English.

RC-1970 was YC-1961's younger sister. RC enrolled at Jean-Jacques Olier (FCS) in 1976. She participated in catechism for two years and it was only in grade 3 at confirmation that she – and the other students - discovered she was not Catholic. She thought she would be expelled (as a non-Catholic) but it was already 1978 and Bill 101 was in effect. RC later discovered that Jean-Jacques-Olier was the first multi-ethnic FCS. In grade 4, the boat people arrived from Vietnam. Prior to that, RC was the only Asian at school plus two Chinese boys. She knew that most Asians went to English school because they were not allowed in FCS. The director of Jean-Jacques-Olier school was instrumental in opening the school to multi-ethnic students and he received prizes.

CS-1967 had German and Irish Catholic ancestors. CS had basic French when she enrolled at French K and continued in FCS – Victor-Thérien. There were many immigrants at the school (1973-80). Second language instruction (English) in FCS was pitiful. CS graduated elementary school 1980. She was allowed to switch to ECS – Queen of Angels Academy – because of father's education in English.

MC came to QC from Ontario (born in England) in 1971 as an adult. Her husband, born in Egypt, and was employed at École Polytechnique. He struggled to learn French and teach in French, which he eventually mastered. Their children were 3 and 1 when they arrived in Montreal. The family was Catholic and the parents wanted to enroll eldest daughter at FCS in 1973. They had heard that English-speakers could not enroll at FCS but had no trouble having her admitted to École Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Neighbours, also Catholic, with older children were already enrolled there. MC remembers that about 25% of students were anglophones.

SP-1973 started school the year after Bill 101 in Murdochville. Her parents did not expect to stay in Quebec so they saw an opportunity for their daughters to learn

French. Initially the school did not want an English student (although it was after Bill 101). The obstacle to taking non-Francophone students was the difficulty of integration. SP's mother convinced the nun at École St Paul FCS that the girl would learn French quickly. By Christmas SP could speak French.

Historical Evidence

Books and newspapers preserve a record of what social scientists, historians and politicians were saying about education in Quebec back in the years when language policy was first crafted and implemented. In 1970, immediately after the Saint-Léonard Riots, Jeremy Boissevain, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, published *The Italians of Montreal: Social Adjustment in a Plural Society*. Boissevain's research showed that Montreal's Italians were closer to the French community than to the English community. During the decade he studied, recent immigrants from Italy were more inclined to marry French-speakers than English-speakers. Among Canadian-born Italians, marriages to French-speakers grew from 40% to 52% while marriages to English-speakers only increased from 14% to 18%.

	1951 English	1951 French	1961 English	1961 French
Marriages of Canadian-born Italians to non-Italians	14%	40%	18%	52%

Table 10: Italian relations with francophones and anglophones, changes from 1951 to 1961. (Boissevain)

Boissevain found similar trends for language used at work. Exclusive use of French increased among Canadian-born Italians, while use of English decreased. During the period he examined, Italians had more francophone friends than anglophone friends, and Italians associated more with francophone community organizations and consumed more French radio and newspapers.

	French for immigrants	French for Canadian born Italians	English for immigrants	English for Canadian born Italians
Exclusively	15%	21%	11%	5%
Some	47%	74%	36%	63%
None	38%	5%	53%	32%

Table 11: Language used at work, 1961 (Boissevain)

Boissevain also investigated why the language of schools was the only metric decreasing. The reasons offered by Italian parents for choosing schools – proximity to home, economic mobility, friends – did not explain what had changed between 1951 and 1971 to cause more Italians to attend English schools.

Boissevain reported, “Roman Catholic School Board officials interviewed during the course of the present study **denied that the Board had ever directed the choice of any immigrant group**. According to officials of both English and French sections, there had always been a free choice. One official of the English section suggested that if pressure had in fact been applied on new immigrants to send their children to French schools, it had been applied by their own priests. He pointed out that Italian parishes, especially in the prewar period, were linked even more closely with the French Roman Catholic hierarchy than they are today.” Boissevain’s conclusion that ‘greater freedom of choice’ **was the most likely explanation** for increasing enrollment by Italian students in English schools, indirectly placed full responsibility for changing enrollment patterns on the Italian community. He never mentioned the possibility that schools were at least partly responsible for the change. **(emphasis added)**

Political scientist Henry Milner³⁵ offered a different explanation in 1984: “The francophone Catholics were quite content to let the non-Catholics find their way into the Protestant system. The logic was the same that fostered the **creation of the autonomous English Catholic sector** to serve not only the Irish but, later, a good many children of **other non-francophone origins** who might otherwise have attended French schools. Direct descendants of nineteenth-century ultramontane Catholicism, the elites of the **early twentieth century**, espoused a conservative nationalism. Central to it was the conviction that the **French-Canadian nation’s survival** – its essence – **lay in its language and religion and the institutions that maintained them**. What mattered, thus, was the strength and security of its

³⁵ Henry Milner, *The Long Road to Reform: Restructuring Public Education in Quebec*.

families, schools and parishes. A vital mainstay of the world it sought was the **local French-Catholic school, to be kept as free as possible of any and all outside influences.**” (emphasis added)

Ronald Rudin, in *The Forgotten Quebecers*³⁶ published in 1985, also suggested that shifting enrollment patterns were the result of institutional decisions. “That the Italians and other newcomers might pose a threat appeared clear to certain clerics from the fact that **63% of all Italian-origin students attended French schools** in 1931. Rather than have to deal with such students in the French schools, these **French Catholic leaders encouraged** the establishment of a semi-autonomous English Catholic sector that would be provided with the means **to educate all Catholics whose mother tongue was not French.**” Rudin concluded, “By 1977 nearly half of all students in the English sector of the MCSC (Montreal Catholic School Commission) were of Italian origin. This was a reflection of the **steady routing** of Italian students into the English stream, particularly in the post-World War II era.” (emphasis added)

If Rudin and Milner were correct, the marked shift towards higher enrollment in English schools after the Second World War was at least partly, and perhaps mostly, an institutional decision imposed on immigrant students.

What did politicians of the era think? Thanks to Christophe Chikli’s Master’s Thesis³⁷ that reviewed media coverage of the Saint- Léonard crisis from 1968 to 1970 (see first report pages 5-7), we know politicians understood that schools were playing a major role in segregating students into different religion-linguistic options. This was expressed most clearly by Premier Daniel Johnson, in June 1968, as the Saint-Léonard conflict was veering out of control.

“Mr. Johnson once again severely criticized what had been done to date regarding immigrant integration, particularly at the Montreal Catholic School Commission (MCSC). “Contrary to what has been done so far,” said the Premier, “immigrants must be given the opportunity to integrate voluntarily into the French community. They have never had that chance. Quite the contrary, **the MCSC and other organizations have automatically rejected everyone not French Canadian Catholic and sent them to English schools.**” (Emphasis added)

An objective observer would have seen a clear consensus that the marked shift towards higher enrollment of immigrants in English schools was at least partly, and perhaps mostly, the result of an institutional decision.

³⁶ Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-speaking Quebec*

³⁷ Christophe Chikli Master’s Thesis 2006 Université de Sherbrooke

This conclusion was substantiated in an interview given in November 2025³⁸ by Pauline Marois, former premier of Quebec and, more importantly, Minister of Education in 1998, when Quebec's confessional school system was transformed into a linguistic system.

« Les commissions scolaires catholiques **refusaient les enfants qui pratiquaient une autre religion que le catholicisme**. Ne l'oublions jamais. Les enfants allaient vers les commissions scolaires protestante **qui manifestaient plus d'ouverture**.³⁹»
(Emphasis added)

Note that Mme Marois only recognized that non-Catholics were routed toward Protestant schools. Unlike Daniel Johnson, Marois did not acknowledge that Catholics schools "rejected everyone not French Canadian Catholic."

Contextual Evidence

Despite historian Gagnon's claim to have completely refuted that 'Catholic or Francophone schools refused the children of immigrants, whether Catholic or not', we have found no evidence to support his affirmation. Au contraire, we have found a great deal of evidence that Non-Christians and Non-Catholics were routinely routed toward Protestant schools. This part of the story is almost universally acknowledged by educators, administrators and former students: allophone, anglophone and francophone.

Stories of segregation are widely known among allophones, and the anglophones who shared schools with them. What about Quebec's francophone majority who were educated in different schools? Do they share memories of segregation? To find out, we interviewed a number of baby boomer francophones educated in French Catholic schools. All the former francophone students that we interviewed remembered that most of their fellow students in French Catholic schools were other francophones-de-souche or fully integrated 'immigrants' who spoke French with the local Québécois accent. None of the students interviewed remembered students who were non-Catholic. There was a clear understanding that 'other religions (and languages) attended other schools.'

The only debate concerns Catholic students. To gain some historic insights we interviewed former educators and priests.

³⁸ 22 Novembre 2025, in an interview on TOUT PEUT ARRIVER (Radio Canada)

³⁹ "Catholic school boards refused children who practiced a religion other than Catholicism. Let's never forget that. Children went to Protestant school boards, which were more open-minded."

Gerald R. Cutting (born 1947) brings a dual vision to this investigation. He attended English Protestant schools and French Catholic churches. He also worked for 35 years in the CEGEP system.

During the period prior to Bill 101 in 1977, what is your knowledge of Protestant school policy for enrolling Christians? Do you have any knowledge of the conditions under which Catholics could enroll in Protestant schools?

“Prior to 1977 it is my understanding that the schools under the jurisdiction of the Protestant school Boards accepted any student that was seeking an English language education. There were Jews, Hindus and atheists in the same grades with me. The Protestant system was focused on delivering an English language education to pretty much everyone, including those rejected by the Catholic Boards.”

During the period prior to Bill 101 in 1977, what is your knowledge of Catholic school policy for enrolling Christians? Are you aware of Protestants or non-Catholics, such as Orthodox, enrolled in Catholic school?

“To my knowledge there was one overriding policy that applied to the Catholic School System, you had to be Catholic and French-speaking to get into the French stream, and English Catholic to be in the English stream. If there were exceptions, they would have been allowed only with the approval of the Bishop.”

There is a great deal of evidence that immigrants were more readily accepted by English schools than French schools. Are you aware of different admission requirements for English Catholic schools versus French Catholic schools?

“Admission to the French Catholic system was very rigid and controlled to a great extent by the Church, unlike the English Protestant system. My Mom taught English Second Language in the French Catholic system and was very much aware of the policy differences to ensure that the practice of segregation was enforced. It was often the case that immigrants that were Catholic but did not speak French were referred to the English school systems along with French speaking Protestants. I remember some Families that arrived from France who were not Catholic ended up having to send their kids to the English school that I attended.”

TM, a former educator in the English Catholic sector, preferred to remain anonymous. Born in 1930 (95 years of age in 2025), **TM** was a teacher from 1953 to 1962, and principal from 1963 to 1986 in five different English Catholic schools.

Are you aware of Catholic students turned away from French Catholic schools and sent to English Catholic schools?

“This subject would come up sometimes with Italian parents. They had knocked at the door of the closest school, which was a French Catholic school, and they told me that the director said, ‘You should go to the English school,’ and the French school would give directions to get to the English school.

Are you aware of any policy or directive to turn away immigrant students? Or was the decision made at the local school level?

“Why did they turn away immigrant children? It’s an easier job to run a school for parents who talk your language. It’s easier for teachers who are French to teach children who know French, and it’s harder to have immigrants in your class who are not good in French. Many of the Italians knew as little French as they knew English. Whereas, we – the English schools – we just took them in. They were pouring into Montreal and they needed a school so we just took them, whether it was going to be hard for us or not, because we figured – where are they going to go?”

We also interviewed **Father Gerald Westphal**, a Catholic priest for almost 50 years (in 2025) who spent 70% of his time working in education with the Catholic school board.

“My father was American and my mother was French Canadian. I was born in the USA but after my father died, my mother returned to Quebec. She wanted to enroll my brother and me at Ste-Bernadette school, in the French Catholic system, but we spoke very little French so we were advised to go to the English Catholic sector. If my mother had insisted, we could have enrolled at Ste-Bernadette but we went to the English school. Most of my classmates were immigrants who had been sent to English schools.”

In the period prior to Bill 101 (1977), why were some Catholic immigrants accepted in French Catholic schools while others were only admitted into English Catholic schools?

“During the early part of the 20th century, it was fairly common for Catholic immigrants, notably Italians, to be educated in French Catholic schools. During the 1950s, that changed. French Catholic schools, for whatever reason – maybe for the purity of the language – decided they didn’t want immigrant children, so they had to go to English schools. Friends I knew who arrived from Italy, had a French school across the street, but they were told they had to go six blocks away to an English school.

This created a problem for the Church. Previously, the Cardinal had sent for Italian priests (Scalabrini Fathers) who spoke Italian and French, to assist with educating the immigrants in the French schools. After the Italians were sent to English schools, the Italian priests didn't speak English. So then the Cardinal sent for American Scalabrinis to help in the English schools. I was in the order for a couple of years."

Do you have any thoughts about why immigrants educated in the English sector, and francophones educated in French Catholic schools have different narratives about why so many immigrants were educated in English rather than French?

"Francophones do not seem to understand what happened and why. It was the complete opposite of what's going on today. I don't know if this is amnesia, but the history has been lost. There was a whole period when immigrants were rejected from French schools. I know many Italians who were sent to English schools and they became part of les Deux Solitudes. Many of them felt rejected. I grew up with them and I know their stories inside out. I worked 35 years in the (English Catholic) education sector and a lot of my colleagues were 'rejects'.

Immigrants were accepted into the French system at one point, and then (after the 1950s) they were blocked out. This is a fact, but there is a lot of denial. When I talk about this to francophone priests, they are in shock. They have never heard about it. It is the older generation – people my age – who are responsible for the false narrative that French Catholic schools did not turn away immigrants.

I told my story to the Archbishop, that I was in a class with all the rejects, and he said, 'Ben, non.' He couldn't believe it. "

Exceptions

Before we consider explanations for why students were rejected from French Catholic schools, we can gain some insights by examining exceptions. Under what circumstances were non-Catholics and non-francophones permitted to enroll in French Catholic schools?

MK-1945 (ECS) The mother was Protestant but had received part of her education in France. The father was Catholic, raised by Jesuits. Both parents were anglophones. Their eldest son was accepted into a FCS. The two middle children enrolled in ECS. The youngest daughter was accepted into a FCS after the mother insisted.

Jean Wayland Racine-1946 (ECS) and her brother were accepted into a FCS, but their French was not strong so they were directed to ECS for the following year

Maria Prizio-1952 (ECS) was accepted into a FCS after completing grade 5 in Italy. Because she did not speak French, she was put back into grade 3. There was one other Italian girl at the school but she was not allowed to speak to MP, so there was no one to translate or explain. MP was very unhappy, and would probably have failed grade 3 because she couldn't understand French and no one helped her learn. She switched to ECS.

Carole Verdone-Smith-1954, Luisa Silvestro-1954 and Michael Gaug-1956 (ECS) were all denied access to FCS although their parents had been educated in trilingual schools 'for immigrants' administered by Catholic school boards.

RM-1960 (ECS) chose to go to ECS. Her father and his siblings had been accepted into FCS. Many of RM's cousins were also accepted into FCS.

JT-1967 (ECS) moved to Saint-Anne-de-Bellevue and enrolled at École Saint-Georges in 1975. Other Anglo kids were also attending the FCS, so that kids could learn a good quality of French.

HM-1962 (EPS), whose ancestors were British and Anglican, was permitted to enroll at ECS in 1968. HM cannot remember another anglophone child at the school. HM never asked parents about why or how she was admitted to FCS. Two years later moved to EPS, perhaps to preserve English-language status because of Bill 63.

Jenny Kalantzis -1963 (EPS) was denied admission to FCS for grade 1 in 1969 but was permitted to enroll at William Hingston HS (ECS) in 1977.

VZ-1965 (FPS) went to FPS but her younger brother, who started school in 1976, was admitted in FCS.

Several of the former students enrolled at FCS were 'exceptions.'

NP-1942 was accepted into a FCS. Her Italian parents and older siblings were also admitted to FCS.

RT-1943, was accepted into a FCS, as was his older brother. Their Quebec-born Italian parents were educated in ECS.

Dida Berku -1951 was not admitted to FCS because she was Jewish, but she was accepted in a private French school.

AC-1953 and her Italian brothers were accepted into FCS.

MV-1958, child of Dutch Protestant father and Dutch Catholic mother, was admitted to a FCS because her mother wanted her to be educated by nuns (as she had been).

YC-1961, a non-Christian, non-francophone immigrant from Korea via Japan, was accepted into a FCS with assistance from a Korean priest. His three younger siblings were also accepted into FCS. YC does not know if the family priest friend obtained approval from a Bishop (see Gerald Cuttings above)

SM-1963 was accepted into a FCS in 1972. The directrice (a nun) was confused why a unilingual Anglo would want to enroll his son at a French school. She explained that SM had the right to attend English school, which would be better because his French was weak. Father explained that for his children to understand the culture of Quebec, they needed to learn the language. The directrice was also confused why a Protestant would want to enroll at a Catholic school. SM and his sister were admitted.

Possible Explanations

The keys to understanding this story are religion and language. Catholic schools – both French and English – rarely accepted non-Catholic students. This was true in 1924 when only 257 of 88,444 students in Quebec’s Catholic schools were non-Catholic. It was true in 1977, when Bill 101 was enacted, and it was still possible until 1998, when Pauline Marois oversaw the deconfessionalization of Quebec’s schools, for non-Catholics to attend French Protestant schools.

Quebec is one of the few places in the world that had four ‘public school’ options, with two Catholic options: the major system in French and a smaller sector in English. Evidence supports the assertion that no Catholic student was ever turned away from a Catholic school in Quebec. However, the evidence also suggests that Catholics were segregated into two groups: the main Catholic sector welcomed francophones-de-souche (particularly after the 1950s) while the smaller Catholic sector welcomed immigrants, allophones and anglophones. Why did this happen? Who was responsible? Who set quotas? Who gave the order to send non-Catholic students into Protestant schools, and immigrant Catholic students into English Catholic schools?

Many people believed the orders came from the government, because education is the responsibility of government. In Canada, education is the responsibility of provincial governments. However, politicians from Daniel Johnson to Pauline Marois have accused the Catholic Church and Catholic school boards of segregating students.

The BNA Act required schools of the majority population – in Quebec that has always been Catholic – to act as ‘common schools’ open to all students. The exclusions listed above demonstrate that French Catholic schools COULD, when they wanted, accept students who didn’t speak French, including immigrants, and Protestants and even non-Christians. However as Gagnon’s, 1924 data demonstrate – non-Catholic exceptions were rare even a century ago.

Prior to Bill 101, Quebec’s Catholic population has treated its schools as ‘religious’ schools and not ‘public schools’ open to all. This has been the custom for so long that it would not even be worth mentioning if Robert Gagnon had not declared in 1997 that Quebec’s Catholic schools have always been open to all students, and if Gagnon were not considered a trustworthy authority by skeptics who believe him.

The Protestant system did not automatically assume the role of ‘public schools,’ but once an agreement was reached with the Jewish community in 1930, all other non-Christians could fit inside the capacious Protestant tent. Protestant schools became Quebec’s de facto ‘common schools.’ **Question 1 - If Protestant schools accepted non-Protestants, why did Catholic schools did not accept non-Catholics?**

Catholics in Quebec, at least in urban centres, had two options: French and English. One of the former (Italian) students explained, “It’s a mistake to think we were rejected by the Catholic Church. Catholicism is a universal religion. What happened to us was an administrative reassignment to a different department, where they spoke English. It was purely bureaucratic.” The explanation makes sense. Immigrant Catholic students remained Catholic, although educated in English. For the Church, the language of instruction was incidental. Politically, the issue became explosive by the 1960s.

The mystery remains. Who ordered Catholic schools to segregate children? Investigators seeking to find a directive have never found a ‘smoking gun.’ Father Gerry Westphal reported, “When I talk about this to francophone priests, they are in shock. They have never heard about it. I told my story to the Archbishop, that I was in a class with all the rejects, and he said, ‘Ben, non.’ He couldn’t believe it.”

Note, a Bishop’s authority may have been required for a Catholic school to enroll a non-Catholic, but students could be denied admission without approval.

Robert Gagnon spent a year studying the Montreal Catholic School Commission records and found no record of a plan to reject immigrants. In fact, he discovered abundant evidence that the Commission created programs to attract and retain immigrants. **Sabino Grassi-1956 (ECS)** conducted his own investigation at the

offices of the CÉCM where minutes of meetings were kept. When Grassi eventually located minutes dealing with Italian students, he found a smoking gun, but not what he expected. “The board chairman asked the other board members, ‘Why are all these Italians choosing to go to English school? We should get to the bottom of this.’ And nobody around the table had an answer for him.” It was shocking for Grassi that the people running the school commission did not know what was going on. Somebody had to be giving orders, because Grassi’s family and so many others had experienced segregation, but the school commission was clueless to that fact. Grassi could only conclude “the orders were given at the local level by the school directors. That was the only explanation that fit.”

Again, we have to ask why?

Political scientist Henry Milner (see p 43 above) suggested that: “The francophone Catholics were quite content to let the non-Catholics find their way into the Protestant system. The logic was the same that fostered the creation of the autonomous English Catholic sector to serve not only the Irish but, later, a good many children of other non-francophone origins who might otherwise have attended French schools. Direct descendants of nineteenth-century ultramontane Catholicism, the elites of the early twentieth century, espoused a conservative nationalism. Central to it was the conviction that the French-Canadian nation’s survival – its essence – lay in its language and religion and the institutions that maintained them. What mattered, thus, was the strength and security of its families, schools and parishes. A vital mainstay of the world it sought was the local French-Catholic school, to be kept as free as possible of any and all outside influences.”

Ronald Rudin (page 44 above) concluded that shifting enrollment patterns were the result of institutional decisions. “That the Italians and other newcomers might pose a threat appeared clear to certain clerics from the fact that 63% of all Italian-origin students attended French schools in 1931. Rather than have to deal with such students in the French schools, these French Catholic leaders encouraged the establishment of a semi-autonomous English Catholic sector that would be provided with the means to educate all Catholics whose mother tongue was not French.” Rudin believed the MCSC (Montreal Catholic School Commission) deliberately routed Italian students into the English stream, particularly in the post-World War II era.

What was happening in the Post-War era that threatened language, religion, families and schools?

- mass media brought international turmoil into living rooms, inspiring FLQ violence, in parallel with increasingly heated workers' strikes, student protests and political agitation.
- the Quiet Revolution was a battle between church and government for control of Quebec society,
- the foundations of traditional religion were shaken by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which modernized the Catholic Church,
- the sexual revolution of the 60s was particularly disturbing in a conservative Catholic society,
- in the 1950s and 60s, the Baby Boom filled existing schools with record numbers of students,
- unprecedented numbers of post-War immigrants landed in Montreal, overwhelming already crowded schools,

Given the many ways in which Quebec was changing, it would not be surprising that parents and teachers would want to protect children and defend traditions. This behaviour would be consistent with Sabino Grassi's theory that orders to segregate students were given at the local level by the school directors.

This theory is also compatible with the experiences of former students. Non-Catholics were routinely directed to Protestant schools. This became 'common knowledge' and therefore attempts to enroll at FCS by Non-Catholics became increasingly rare. It became impossible to distinguish between Non-Catholics who enrolled in Protestant schools because they preferred them, and Non-Catholics who enrolled in EPS because did not believe FCS would accept them.

As Father Gerry Westphal explained, 'Immigrants were accepted into the French system at one point, and then (after the 1950s) they were blocked out.' Why? Sometimes no reason was given. It was simply 'the way the system works.' Sometimes the school did not have the capacity to teach kids who couldn't speak French. This seemed reasonable until considered more deeply. **Question 2 - If English schools were willing and able to instruct students who couldn't speak English, why were French schools unable or unwilling to teach immigrants who couldn't speak French?**

Sometimes the reason for turning away a student was that the school was 'too crowded' and did not have room for additional students. This also seemed

reasonable until considered more deeply. Would francophones from Lac St-Jean have been directed to an English school in Montreal? Or did this form of segregation only happen to immigrants? **Question 3 - If crowded French schools did not have the capacity to make room for immigrants, why were crowded English schools willing and able to make room?**

Ex-Principal TM explained that, “They (immigrants) were pouring into Montreal and they needed a school so we just took them, whether it was going to be hard for us or not, because we figured – where are they going to go?” Altruism was no doubt a factor, but there was also self-interest on the part of educators and administrators. More students meant more jobs for teachers and more schools, which meant more teachers would be promoted as principals. **Question 4 - If English educators recognized the professional benefits of enrolling more students, why did French educators not recognize the same professional benefits of enrolling more students?**

Just as rejection became ‘common knowledge’ for non-Catholics, by the 1950s many Catholics reported that they did not try to enroll in FCS because it was ‘common knowledge’ they would not be accepted. It became impossible to distinguish between Catholics who preferred English schools and Catholics who enrolled in ECS because did not believe FCS would accept them.

The ‘local segregation’ scenario would explain why immigrants were sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected. It explains how ‘common knowledge’ spread among immigrant communities so that they increasingly chose one of the alternative options. It explains why school commissioners and Church leaders were unaware of what was happening on the ground. The ‘local segregation’ scenario also explains why the phenomenon was largely invisible to French-speaking Catholics. Immigrants were not present in their schools. The immigrants they encountered attended ‘English schools’ and it was easy to (mis)interpret the absence of immigrants as their ‘choice’ to reject FCS.

Politicians in the 60s and historians in the 70s (Milner) and 80s (Rudin) were aware of wide-spread segregation, but Robert Gagnon the 90s adamantly rejected the segregation theory, and Pauline Marois in 2025 would only allow that non-Catholics were segregated into Protestant schools.

How can this enigma be resolved? Ironically, historian Robert Gagnon, may have provided the solution. I emailed Gagnon shortly after releasing my first preliminary report. He replied the next morning as he was packing his bags for a trip, but took the time to offer the following insights.

“Oui, il se peut fortement que des directions d'écoles francophones de la CECM aient suggéré aux parents catholiques allophones, nouvellement arrivés à Montréal, d'inscrire leurs enfants dans une école anglophone de la CECM. Le problème c'est qu'il n'y a aucune trace de cette pratique dans les archives de la CECM (les directeurs des écoles confrontés à ces cas ne se précipitant pas pour faire part de leur refus à la direction de la commission scolaire qui visait alors un tout autre scénario).⁴⁰”

Gagnon acknowledged that French Catholic schools could have 'suggested' to new immigrants that they enroll at English schools within the Catholic School commission. This is a remarkable reversal on his previous categorical denial. Gagnon also offered a plausible explanation for why he never found evidence of a segregation directive from the Commission to the schools. If FCS principals and administrators were rejecting students in defiance of Commission policies, they were unlikely to report their insubordination. **Question 5 - Does anyone who worked in a FCS prior to Bill 101 have information about segregation that they are willing to share?**

Now I am going to indulge in some unsubstantiated speculation. This is an interim report and I am hoping that former educators and administrators can either corroborate this local segregation theory or provide an alternative explanation. There are good reasons to believe that decisions to segregate students were unofficial and local. We cannot explain why francophone educators and administrators did not capitalize on the economic benefits of maximizing the number of students in their schools in the 1950s and early 60s, but it is clear that by the end of the baby boom they had recognized the negative impact of downsizing.

One feature of the sexual revolution was birth control. Large families disappeared and Quebec's birthrate would become one of the lowest in the world by the 21st century. Absent a strong birthrate among Catholic francophones-de-souche, the only way to maintain schools and jobs was to enroll immigrants in FCS. Teacher's unions became strong supporters of Bill 101, and militant supporters of the French language in the 70s and beyond. It is not necessary to impugn the sincerity of their nationalism to recognize that they also had strong interests in redirecting immigrants from English schools to French schools.

⁴⁰ Yes, it is quite possible that directors of French-language schools within the CECM suggested to newly arrived Catholic parents in Montreal who spoke a different language than French that they enroll their children in an English-language school within the CECM. The problem is that there is no record of this practice in the CECM archives (school principals faced with these cases were not quick to report their refusal the school board, which was pursuing a completely different approach).

Many of the educators and administrators still working in the 70s and 80s started their careers in the 50s and 60s. They were therefore at least indirectly implicated in the segregation of immigrant students. It is easy to understand why no one involved in segregation would want to draw attention to a practice that was so detrimental to Quebec. When politicians and pundits in the 1970s were blaming immigrants for rejecting FCS, it would have required a bold soul to take the floor and proclaim, 'They didn't reject us. We rejected them!'

Rejections would have been individual, unofficial and almost invisible. Over time the 'common knowledge' of rejection meant that fewer immigrants knocked at the doors of FCS. The increasingly invisible phenomenon was easily interpreted as a 'choice' by immigrants to reject FCS. The narrative of 'rejection by immigrants' absolved the host society of responsibility for a serious problem that required strict language laws. Making immigrants responsible also supported the belief that strong language laws were necessary to compel immigrants to be educated in French Catholic schools.

I confess that the preceding paragraphs are unsubstantiated speculation. However, I am inviting anyone with knowledge of what actually happened prior to Bill-101 to contribute evidence. This is a Quebec story involving francophones as much as allophones and anglophones. I am hoping that the francophone community will contribute to this research project and help resolve some of the following puzzles.

Questions requiring further investigation

1 – If Protestant schools accepted non-Protestants, why did Catholic schools did not accept non-Catholics?

2 – If English schools were willing and able to instruct students who couldn't speak English, why were French schools unable or unwilling to teach immigrants who could n't speak French?

3 – If crowded French schools did not have the capacity to make room for immigrants, why were crowded English schools willing and able to make room?

4 – If English educators recognized the professional benefits of enrolling more students, why did francophone educators in the 1950s and 1960s not recognize the same professional benefits of enrolling more students?

5 – Does anyone who worked in a FCS prior to Bill 101 have information about segregation that they are willing to share?

6 – If politicians in office prior to Bill 101 knew that students – non-Catholic and Catholic – were being turned away from FCS, how was that knowledge lost by the 90s (Gagnon) and only partly restored by 2025 (Marois)?

Interim Conclusions

Regarding Non-Catholics

There appears to be no doubt that non-Catholics were rarely admitted to Catholic schools: English or French. This interim conclusion would be absolutely non-controversial except that the ‘official historian’ of Montreal’s Catholic Schools Commission categorically affirmed: *L’étude sérieuse des archives nous révèle des relations beaucoup plus complexes entre les écoles publiques catholiques et les communautés culturelles et, surtout, cette étude infirme totalement l’idée que les écoles **catholiques** ou **francophones** ont refusé les enfants des immigrants **catholiques** ou **non**.* »

Robert Gagnon recently wrote to me and expressed changed views. « Oui, il se peut fortement que des directions d’écoles francophones de la CECM aient suggéré aux parents catholiques allophones, nouvellement arrivés à Montréal, d’inscrire leurs enfants dans une école anglophone de la CECM. »

I have found no record that Gagnon’s affirmation that segregation by Catholic schools is a myth has ever been publically corrected. Even Gagnon’s revised opinion only applies to ‘newly arrived Catholic parents in Montreal who spoke a different language than French.’ Gagnon’s myth hypothesis remains the undisputed explanation for segregation in Quebec’s education system prior to 1977. This misconception needs to be publically revisited and officially corrected.

It is remarkable that such a clearly wrong explanation should have ever been published in an academic journal. The story of segregation in education is comparable to discrimination against women in the workplace during the same period. Everybody knows it happened. The only difference of opinion concerns why it happened and who was responsible.

Imagine an historian in 1997 declaring that discrimination against women was nothing but a ‘pernicious myth’ and affirming that his study ‘completely refutes the notion that employers, public or private, discriminated against any woman in any place or at any time.’ And imagine the historian offering as proof of his assertion

noting but the absence of written evidence of a centralized or coordinated conspiracy to discriminate against women in the workforce. How could such a paper ever be approved for publication? And how could it remain uncontested during the following decades? This aspect of the story requires further investigation.

Regarding Catholics

In November 2025, Pauline Marois, ex Premier of Quebec and Minister of Education in 1998 when Quebec's school boards changed from confessional to linguistic, admitted that: "Catholic school boards refused children who practiced a religion other than Catholicism." She did not however, acknowledge that Catholic school also refused Catholics.

Premier Daniel Johnson knew in 1968 that, 'Contrary to what has been done so far,' said the premier, "immigrants must be given the opportunity to integrate voluntarily into the French community. They have never had that chance. Quite the contrary, the MCSC and other organizations have automatically rejected everyone not French Canadian Catholic, and sent them to English schools." How is it possible that this knowledge was subsequently lost? This requires deeper investigation.

A society is fundamentally damaged – and will remain incapable of resolving fundamental problems – so long as the host community and its immigrants retain different memories of their interconnected history. Education, language and immigration continue to be important issues in Quebec. The recent past offers lessons that can help address these difficult issues today and in the future. It is time for a frank and open, albeit difficult, conversation between Quebec's host society and its immigrant communities. I sincerely hope that Quebec's francophone community will read this interim report and contribute to this investigation.

If you have information to contribute to this research project, please send it to guyrexrogers@gmail.com. All pertinent information will be included in the final report, to be released in November 2026.

Context Declarations

As noted above, even a few hundred examples of segregation could be dismissed as incidental or insignificant. Therefore, we also collected 'context' information to support and corroborate information from former students. Several people contributed contextual declarations confirming the 'community knowledge' of non-Catholics (Eric Bender – Protestant, and Helen Bomis – Greek Orthodox), as well as non-Christians (Endre Farkas and Allan Borshy – Jewish, and Walter Chiyen Tom – Chinese). The exclusion of non-Catholics from Catholic schools is so clearly confirmed from multiple sources that it would be redundant to add these declarations.

The controversy only concerns Catholics. Particularly pertinent to this story are the declarations of:

TM – educator and principal in English Catholic schools 1953-86,

Father Gerald Westphal - a priest for almost 50 years who spent 70% of his time working in education with the Catholic school board.

Lorenzo Bonome, a student who did not attempt to enroll at a French Catholic schools because 'it was well known I would be refused.'

Gerald Cutting – who attended an English Protestant school and French Catholic church.

TM - former student and educator in the English Catholic sector

(TM preferred to remain anonymous)

Interview conducted 21 October 2025

TM's family has been in Quebec for seven generations. Born in 1930 (95 years of age), TM was a teacher from 1953 to 1962, and principal from 1963 to 1986.)

TM - I taught for 10 years, and then was a school principal for 24 years in five different English Catholic schools. About 98% of the students were Italian except for Holy Family school that was 60% Italian and 40% Portuguese.

Question – Are you aware of Catholic students turned away from French Catholic schools and sent to English Catholic schools?

TM - This subject would come up sometimes with Italian parents. They had knocked at the door of the closest school, which was a French Catholic school, and they told me that the director said, 'You should go to the English school,' and the French school would give directions to get to the English school.

Parents whose students were admitted to French schools would not be speaking to me, but over the years I heard from several parents who were refused, and were told to go to my English Catholic school. That was before Bill 101, before the French woke up and said, 'We better take in the immigrants and teach them French and make them part of us.'

Question – Are you aware of any policy or directive to turn away immigrant students? Or was the decision made at the local school level?

TM – Why did they turn away immigrant children? It's an easier job to run a school for parents who talk your language. It's easier for teachers who are French to teach children who know French, and it's harder to have immigrants in your class who are not good in French. Many of the Italians knew as little French as they knew English. Whereas, we – the English schools – we just took them in. They were pouring in to the point that. Whether you believe it or not, I could show you class lists of 30 kids where 29 were Italian.

They were pouring into Montreal and they needed a school so we just took them, whether it was going to be hard for us or not, because we figured – where are they going to go?

Question – Both French and English Catholic schools were run by the same school commission and were subject to the same policies. However, French schools seem to have had much more latitude to turn away students they didn't want, while the English schools appear not to have turned away nobody. Why did French and English schools operate so differently?

TM - There were children who needed a school and we were principals of the (English Catholic) schools. You don't refuse kids school! Whereas the French had their reasons. I always thought the French schools said, 'We've got plenty of kids. We don't need higher numbers and we'd rather just teach French kids. It's easier. It's easier on the teachers. It's easier on everybody.'

The CÉCM was a huge commission and it had an English sector, where I worked, that was rather autonomous. Major decisions, like building schools, was decided by the French. I don't know about the Protestant school boards, but the Italians who arrived after the (Second World) War wanted Catholic schools.

For example, in Rosemount, there was a school called St-Brendan's on 9th Avenue near Rosemount Boulevard. It got an annexe and then another annexe, and another. There had been one school during the war. Three other primary school came into existence after the war and they each had three annexes. Some were what we called Duplessis Boxes because it was cheap to make a small school of about eight classes. Some of the classes had more than 40 kids! Some of the annexes were in apartment buildings. They were terrible, but they had six rooms for 25 kids each.

From one school before the war, we had 16 schools and annexes in Rosemount by the early 70s when we reached the maximum number of students. The school commission always made room for our students, even if they were crowded into annexes, inadequate apartment buildings, and other unusual places, like makeshift classrooms squeezed into a hallway. I remember the Commission gave us a French school because they had a lack of numbers. In some cases, we shared classrooms in French schools. We had different recess times and we didn't have much to do with them, but if ever we spoke to the French principal, he was very nice.

It was all makeshift, makeshift, makeshift from the 1950s until about 1975.

Question – There was a major baby boom after the war. Were French schools also rapidly expanding and adding annexes?

TM – We never felt a big increase in English Catholic kids because of the baby boom. The increase was mostly immigrants. We might have had a 10% increase because of the baby boom, but our numbers increased by 500% because of the number of immigrants!

On the French side, they used to have huge families. I remember a man who was the 23rd child. Post war families on the French side were probably smaller than before the war. There was a change in religion and attitudes that dramatically decreased the birthrate in French Quebec. French schools did not have the same increases that we did.

Declaration Regarding Schools Admissions – Father Gerald Westphal

Prior to 1997, Quebec schools were denominational. Prior to 1977, parents had a great deal of freedom to educate children in the religion and language of their choice. The choices were ambiguous for children whose religion was neither Protestant nor Catholic and whose mother tongue was neither English nor French.

To help understand the decision making process prior to Bill 101 (1977) we are inviting people with first hand knowledge of that period to share their understanding of how the system worked.

Name:	Father Gerald Westphal
Year of Birth	1950
Which language(s) did your parents speak	Father English, Mother French
What was the family religion(s)?	Catholic

Interview conducted 30 October 2025,.

1. What was your experience as a student in Quebec? (when and where you were educated?)

My father was American and my mother was French Canadian. I was born in the USA but after my father died, my mother returned to Quebec. She wanted to enroll my brother and me at Ste-Bernadette school, in the French Catholic system, but we spoke very little French so we were advised to go to the English Catholic sector. If my mother had insisted, we could have enrolled at Ste-Bernadette but we went to the English school. Most of my classmates were immigrants who had been sent to English schools.

2. Do (did) you work in the education system? If so, what is (was) your position and experience?

I have been a priest almost 50 years and I spent 70% of my time working in education with the Catholic school board. I worked in the denominational Catholic system and then (after 1998) with the linguistic school boards.

3. In the period prior to Bill 101 (1977), was it possible for non Catholic students (eg Greek Orthodox and Protestant) or non Christians (eg Jewish) to enroll in Catholic schools?

I worked for a time at Bancroft school. There used to be a Jewish orphanage in the neighbourhood. Those kids all went to Bancroft (Protestant) school. Non-Catholics almost all went to Protestant schools.

4. In the period prior to Bill 101 (1977), why were some Catholic immigrants accepted in French Catholic schools while others were only admitted into English Catholic schools?

During the early part of the 20th century, it was fairly common for Catholic immigrants, notably Italians, to be educated in French Catholic schools. During the 1950s, that changed. French Catholic schools, for whatever reason – maybe for the purity of the language – decided they didn't want immigrant children, so they had to go to English schools. Friends I knew who arrived from Italy, had a French school across the street, but they were told they had to go six blocks away to an English school.

This created a problem for the Church. Previously, the Cardinal had sent for Italian priests (Scalabrini Fathers) who spoke Italian and French, to assist with educating the immigrants in the French schools. After the Italians were sent to English schools, the Italian priests didn't speak English. So then the Cardinal sent for American Scalabrinis to help in the English schools. Father Charlie Zanoni from Milwaukee was one of them, serving at the Pompei Italian parish. I was in the order for a couple of years.

5. Do you have any thoughts about why immigrants educated in the English sector, and francophones educated in French Catholic schools have different narratives about why so many immigrants were educated in English rather than French?

Francophones do not seem to understand what happened and why. It was the complete opposite of what's going on today. I don't know if this is amnesia, but the history has been lost. There was a whole period when immigrants were rejected from French schools. I know many Italians who were sent to English schools and they became part of *les Deux Solitudes*. Many of them felt rejected. I grew up with them and I know their stories inside out. I worked 35 years in the (English Catholic) education sector and a lot of my colleagues were 'rejects'.

Immigrants were accepted into the French system at one point, and then (after the 1950s) they were blocked out. This is a fact, but there is a lot of denial. When I talk about this to francophone priests, they are in shock. They have never heard about it. It is the older generation – people my age – who are responsible for the false narrative (that French Catholic schools did not turn away immigrants).

I told my story to the Archbishop, that I was in a class with all the rejects, and he said, 'Ben non.' He couldn't believe it.

Declaration by Former Student Lorenzo Bonome

Name: Lorenzo Bonome

Were your parents first generation immigrants? Yes
If yes, what year did they arrive in Quebec? Mother 1951, Father 1954
Were you born in Quebec? Yes
If not, what year did you arrive in Quebec? N/A
What was your family's country of origin? Italy
Which languages did your family speak upon arrival? Italian
What was the family religion(s)? Catholic

Year of Birth: 1959
First year of Education in Quebec: (grade 1) 1965
Were you denied admission into a French Catholic school? Yes ..See below. French Catholic school was not considered an option since there would be automatic refusal.

Signature L. Bonome 

Date 19-08-2025

What were your family's reasons for wanting to enrol you in French Catholic school?

My parents did not seek out French Catholic schooling for me or my two younger siblings. It was well established that I would be refused. English had already become the language of education chosen by older siblings, older relatives and older immigrant friends in the neighbourhood I grew up in. English had already become the social and dinner table language of communication within this younger generation of immigrant children. These choices began taking shape as far back as 10 years (circa 1955) before I was eligible for primary school.

The refusal of immigrant students by the French Catholic school system began in the early to mid fifties in my neighbourhood. Two reasons were given; French primary schools were already over capacity; secondly French schools did not accept immigrant children that did not speak the French language because they would slow down French speaking classes. These families were openly invited to go see the nearest English Catholic or Protestant schools. The English Catholic schools accepted everyone, with few exceptions. Even the many Francophones who chose at that time English education.

The English Catholic schools attended in the mid fifties included Saint Gerald's Elementary on rue Hochelaga, Saint Dominics and Cardinal Newman Highschool. In 1965 I attended Saint Gerald's Elementary and subsequently in 1972 Monsignor Harold Doran Highschool. In general, high school required travel by city bus. I think most of or perhaps all the above-mentioned schools no longer exist. This did not mean we ignored the French language. We (young generation along with our immigrant parents) mastered the French language thanks to Quebecois friends and neighbours which abounded in the neighbourhood I grew up in.

Where was your family living at the time? (street and neighbourhood)
Rue Sainte Émile, Tetreaultville, Montreal

How did your parents attempt to enroll you in a French Catholic school?

They did not try enrolling me in French Catholic school since by the time I was eligible to enter primary school, it was well established I would be refused. English had become the adopted language of education and communication between the younger immigrant generation.

What reason was given to deny you admission?

N/A

Which school accepted you?

Saint Gerald's Elementary School

Do you know other Italian students who wanted to be educated in French but were denied?

If so, do you consider your experience to be (underline one): rare (they did not seek it since automatic refusal was guaranteed)

Do you know other Italian students who were accepted in French Catholic schools? No

If so, do you consider that experience to be (underline one): rare

The subject of education in Quebec prior to Bill 101 is highly controversial. Have people subsequently been surprised to hear about your experience, or skeptical? If so, please describe.

Yes, in general surprised and not aware. Especially people living in regions outside the neighborhoods where most immigrant families settled. Having worked in some of these regions I was often surprised by the lack of understanding along with the stereotypes used as a basis for their reasoning. The general thought being that immigrant children chose English over French with both options being equally available to them at the time. French education was in fact not available for us nor were the French schools actively seeking to enroll immigrant children. In conversation with individuals, they are generally surprised but are equally impressed with the level of integration in Quebec culture achieved. The diversity in language is seen as a contributor to success. They wish they would have had been exposed to better English language education.

The application of Bill 101 in 1977 gradually restricted access to English schools for immigrants and francophones. As the controversial debate continues today in the political arena, it is aimed at justifying additional restrictions. Pre-Bill 101 children are made to feel they contributed to a cultural problem. In addition, the institutions which welcomed these children are disappearing and the history is being forgotten. A disappointing situation as immigration over the last 2 or 3 generations is often the convenient argument for some political figures for explaining a supposed weakening of the French language.

Declaration Regarding Schools Admissions – Gerry Cutting

Prior to 1997, Quebec schools were denominational. Prior to 1977, parents had a great deal of freedom to educate children in the religion and language of their choice. The choices were ambiguous for children whose religion was neither Protestant nor Catholic and whose mother tongue was neither English nor French.

To help understand the decision making process prior to Bill 101 (1977) we are inviting people with first hand knowledge of that period to share their understanding of how the system worked.

Signature *Gerald Cutting*

Date *14 October 2025*

Name:	Gerald R Cutting
Year of Birth	1947
Which language(s) did your parents speak	Mother French, Father English
What was the family religion(s)?	Catholic and Anglican
Which system(s) educated you? (Eng-Protestant, Eng-Catholic, Fr-Catholic, Fr-Protestant)	English Protestant

1. What was your experience as a student in Quebec? (when and where you were educated?)

I was educated in a small school in Coaticook that accommodated students from grades 1 to 11. At that time there was a School Board for the Primary sector and one for the High School sector. These Boards were responsible for the Eastern part of the Historical Townships and they were located in Lennoxville. The other Boards were located in Cowansville.

2. Do (did) you work in the education system? If so, what is (was) your position and experience?

I worked 35 years in the CEGEP system which is now being subjected to quotas in the English system to prevent French speaking students from studying in English.

Protestant Schools. The general impression of Protestant schools during the period prior to Bill 101 is that they accepted all Christians except Catholics, although it was possible for Catholics to be accepted by renouncing their faith or paying special fees. Protestant schools are also known to have accepted non-Christians.

1. During the period prior to Bill 101 in 1977, what is your knowledge of Protestant school policy for enrolling Christians? Do you have any knowledge of the conditions under which Catholics could enroll in Protestant schools? Are you aware of any Protestant denominations refused admission?

Prior to 1977 it is my understanding that the schools under the jurisdiction of the Protestant school Boards mentioned above accepted any student that was seeking an English language education. A tuition fee of \$4.50 a month applied and it was expected that School Taxes would be paid to the Protestant School Board but not necessarily required.

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- 2. What is your knowledge of Protestant school policy for enrolling non-Christians. (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist students) Are you aware of Protestant schools enrolling non-Christians? Was this practice common, or rare?**

There were Jews, Hindus and atheists in the same grades with me. I understood that to attend the French Catholic school there were two criteria, one had to be Catholic and French Speaking. The protestant system was focused on delivering an English language education to pretty much everyone including those rejected by the Catholic Boards. To my knowledge this approach did not necessarily apply to schools in other districts of Quebec.

- 3. Are you aware of different admission requirements for English Protestant schools versus French Protestant schools?**

There were no French Protestant schools in the part of the Townships where I was raised.

Catholic Schools The general impression of Catholic schools is that they were restricted to Catholics. One of the objects of this research project is to investigate the widely held belief that French Catholic schools were more restrictive than English Catholic schools.

- 4. During the period prior to Bill 101 in 1977, what is your knowledge of Catholic school policy for enrolling Christians? Are you aware of Protestants or non-Catholics, such as Orthodox, enrolled in Catholic school? If so, was it common for non-Catholics to enroll in Catholic school, or was it rare?**

English-speaking Catholics in the Townships were directed to the Protestant system unless they lived in Sherbrooke which had a separate schools for both the primary and high school for English-speaking Catholics. These two schools were under the control of the French Catholic Board. Protestants were not allowed to attend the English Catholic schools

To my knowledge there was one overriding policy that applied to the Catholic School System, you had to be Catholic and French-speaking to get into the French stream and English Catholic to be in the English stream. If there were exceptions, they would have been allowed only with the approval of the Bishop.

- 5. What is your knowledge of Catholic school policy for enrolling non-Christians. (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist students) Are you aware of non-Christians enrolled in Catholic schools? If so, was it common, or rare?**

See answer to Question 4

6. There is a great deal of evidence that immigrants were more readily accepted by English schools than French schools. Are you aware of different admission requirements for English Catholic schools versus French Catholic schools?

Admission to the French Catholic system was very rigid and controlled to a great extent by the Church unlike the English Protestant system. My Mom taught English Second Language in the French Catholic system and was very much aware of the policy differences to ensure that the practice of segregation was enforced. It was often the case that immigrants that were Catholic but did not speak French were referred to the English school systems along with French speaking Protestants. I remember some Families that arrived from France who were not Catholic ended up having to send their kids to the English school that I attended.

7. Do you have other thoughts about freedom of choice in education and restrictions prior to Bill 101?

We must remember that the time in history you are researching was very much lived under the conditions as best described by the concept of the "Two Solitudes" where the school systems reinforced the structures of segregation, especially in the Catholic system. I can distinctly remember the priests delivering sermons at Mass advising the faithful to avoid all contact with the English because they posed a threat to one's eternal salvation. English is still very much a concern in provincial laws because of the perception of the threat to the French language. I grew up with two languages and two religions so that I am very much at ease with diversity in a Quebec that has never been all that comfortable with differences. In addition, my formative years at the Coaticook High School taught me that differences are a source of wonder and strength. It would appear that the prejudices of an outdated school system have simply morphed into new garments with somewhat the same messages about the "OTHER" and the problems "THEY" pose to the identity of the new secular Quebec.

Freedom of Choice and Exclusion in Quebec's Education System During the Years 1945-1977

This second interim report was produced by Guy Rex Rodgers in collaboration with the English Language Arts Network (ELAN). The first interim report was released in September 2025, the third will follow in August 2026, and the final report will be released in November 2026.

My interest in this research was stimulated in 2020 during a documentary film project about waves of immigration into Quebec. Several participants interviewed in the wave that arrived between 1945 and 1970 mentioned being turned away from French Catholic schools. That project produced a 6-episode TV series for MATv, a one-hour TV special for CBC, and a feature-length documentary film with assistance from the National Film Board of Canada.

What We Choose To Remember can be seen on YouTube.

<https://whatwechoosetoremember.ca/>



When I toured *What We Choose To Remember* to dozens of communities around Quebec from 2022 to 2024, many people who attended screenings mentioned that they had the same experience of being denied admission to French Catholic schools. Most of them reported that their experience was widely unknown and often disbelieved. This is an important piece of contemporary history that needs to be investigated. Le Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise agreed and provided funding for this two-year project.

If you wish to participate in this on-going study and share your story, contact:

guyrexrodgers@gmail.com

Or you can fill out the Quebec Schools Question survey at the link below:

<http://tiny.cc/QSQ>

This project is funded by

**Secrétariat aux relations
avec les Québécois
d'expression anglaise**

Québec 

This project is supported by



elan

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