



**SUBMISSION**

**TO**

**SECRETARIAT DES COMMISSIONS**

**ASSEMBLEE NATIONALE**

**ON**

**THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS**

**Submitted by**

**QUEBEC FEDERATION OF HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS INC.**

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**OCTOBER 1999**

## **QUEBEC FEDERATION OF HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS INC.**

### **SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION ON THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC**

#### **Introduction**

The Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations (QFHSA) was founded in 1944 and is an independent, incorporated, non-profit volunteer organization representing approximately five thousand families throughout the Province of Quebec. It is dedicated to enhancing the education and general well being of children and youth and promotes the involvement of parents, students, educators and the community at large in the advancement of learning.

The Report of the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Quebec and its recommendations have been studied by the QFHSA's Education Committee and discussed with our members within a very restricted time frame. Although there are sections of the report that produced responses to which a majority of the participants were in agreement, there are also sections that produced far more diverse opinions about the nature of this submission.

#### **On the Time-Frame for Consultation**

The Parliamentary Committee on Education has encouraged a public discussion on the place of religion in schools. Although the QFHSA is pleased to take part in this discussion, we are appalled at the time frame allotted to consult with our membership and develop a meaningful response. The issues covered in the Report of the Task Force are diverse and complex. It requires a significant amount of time to explain these issues and their implications to our members. Meaningful discussion and consultation can only take place when everyone understands fully what is being discussed. This process is drastically short cut when it is to be accomplished over the summer holiday period when most of the partners in education are on vacation. We would ask that public debate be continued at least through the year 2000 so that all concerned have an opportunity to become fully aware of the issues and are able to give an informed input. Then all the partners in education will feel they have been truly consulted on the issue of the Place of Religion in Schools in Quebec.

### **THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC:**

#### **On the Confessional Status of Schools**

Within linguistic school boards, Quebec public schools should be community schools and mirror the cultural and religious diversity of modern Quebec society – a diversity our children must learn to understand, enjoy and respect in order to become responsible individuals. The majority of the participants agreed that the Confessional Status of schools should be abolished.

However, a large minority of participants felt that the exceptions for which Section 240 of the Education Act provides are both valid and fundamental. They felt that parents should not be prevented from adopting a specific project that gives the school a religious nature while safeguarding the fundamental rights of its community members.

We are, therefore, not in agreement with the total secularization of the school system in Quebec as outlined in the Report of the Task Force.

## **On the Curriculum**

### **A: Parent and Student Choice in Courses:**

The Task recommended repeal of the MRE courses and the implementation of compulsory courses in Moral Education and The Study of Religions from a Cultural Perspective moves us from a position of choice in courses to a position where no choice is permitted. QFHSA has always maintained that the parents' right of choice in courses, particularly those that involve the teaching of moral values and religion, is very important. We do not agree with the recommendation of this Report to reduce the right of parent/student choice of courses. In this complex issue, QFHSA recommends that the Task Force look at any new curriculum with a thought to ensuring that all the children in Quebec will be able to use the course time productively. Children must never be made to feel that they are less worthy of educational opportunities because they are in a minority that chooses not to take a particular course in moral education or religions.

### **B: On the Study of Religions from a Cultural Perspective:**

A compulsory course, The Study of Religions from a Cultural Perspective, is being proposed by the MEQ to impart a knowledge of the various religions of the world to students and make them more aware and tolerant of an increasingly pluralistic society in Quebec. While the objectives of this course are laudable in themselves, there is, however, no mention that spirituality, the essence of all religions, will be discussed or even mentioned. There was a strong consensus from our participants that the curriculum should acknowledge that all humans are spiritual beings and address the spiritual nature of the students within its objectives. The curriculum should include material designed to teach students moral reasoning, i.e. how to determine right from wrong.

### **C: MRE and ME Courses as Options:**

Strong support was given for individual moral and religious education courses (for all religions) to be given as options on the same basis as all other optional courses, i.e. that there is a request for them and that numbers warrant it. This approach was seen to respect both Section 41 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and the sections of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that deal with freedoms of conscience, religion, thought and belief (Section 2) and multiculturalism (Section 27).

The Moral Education course was also to be considered as an optional course on the same basis.

A non-confessional course in world religions and ideologies, with a strong commitment to exploring human spirituality and its development is also an option that the Task Force should explore.

### **D: Implementation of New Curriculum:**

No curriculum program, including a curriculum in religions and moral development, can succeed if the time given to teach it is inadequate, if the resources are compromised and if proper teacher training is not made available. We feel it is of the utmost importance that new curriculum should be implemented and taught only when the time given to it will make it credible, when the resources are available to support the teaching and when adequate teacher training has taken place.

We also recommend that the Task Force take care to examine the effect on course scheduling at the school level when courses are being evaluated for implementation. Members mentioned that full compliance in offering the two MRE courses and the ME course, as currently required under the linguistic system, meant that the scheduling of courses was an extremely complex task. It also resulted in splitting class groups, a particularly trying event for elementary students and an unwelcome consequence of the haste in the transition to linguistic boards.

Care should be taken to evaluate carefully the cost implications of any new program. If community schooling is to become a reality, then the course content of a new program must be acceptable to the entire community. We will lose out on both human terms and funding for the classroom if we once again find that students, for whom the program is unsuitable, need to be otherwise accommodated.

QFHSA strongly recommends that an independent, non-confessional committee consisting of parents and members of the various religious communities would need to be established to oversee the content and delivery of all courses dealing with religions, civics and morals to ensure the objectivity of the curriculum.

### **On Religious and Spiritual Support Services**

Although it would be ideal if “pastoral/religious care and guidance” could be made available to all students, common sense and experience to date indicate that this is not reasonable. Rather QFHSA recommends that precedence be given to ensuring that basic Guidance Services are available to all students. We also believe that, where space permits and where there is a request, public schools should make some space available for students of all the religions and denominations represented in a school to share equally for religious purposes.

### **QFHSA AND RIGHTS IN EDUCATION:**

#### **On Section 41 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms**

To effect the change to secular schools, the report of the Task Force recommends that Section 41 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms be amended.

Section 41 of the Quebec Charter states that “Parents or the persons acting in their stead have a right to require that, in the public educational establishments, their children receive a religious or moral education in conformity with their convictions, within the framework of the curricula provided by law.

The proposed amendment removes the necessity from upholding this right in public educational establishments within the framework of the curricula provided by law.

The Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms has been prepared with a great deal of thought. Many hours of discussion, revision and editing were expended to give this Charter the wording that truly reflects the goals and commitments of Quebec society. QFHSA has a long history of involvement in issues of Charter Rights and we do not agree with this proposed amendment. Any amendment that proposes a diminution of rights must be carefully weighed and thorough consideration must be given to future implications. **We strongly recommend that the Task Force look at broadening the Charter to more accurately reflect the increasingly pluralistic society we live in rather than amending it to curtail carefully thought out rights.**

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The issues contained in the Report of the Task Force are diverse and complex. The time frame for the partners in education to properly discuss, consult, evaluate and form a response has been woefully inadequate.

QFHSA supports the abolishment of Confessional Status for schools. We are not, however, in agreement with the total secularization of the school system.

### **QFHSA recommends that:**

- In the design of a new curriculum the right of choice for parents remains a priority
- The content of the program includes the teaching of moral reasoning and acknowledges and develops the sense of spirituality that is basic to human existence.
- The effect of the program on course scheduling is taken into account and minimized.
- A new program be implemented only when the time given to it will make it credible; when the resources and funding are in place to support the teaching; and when adequate teacher training has taken place.
- Basic guidance services be made available to all students.

**QFHSA does not support the amendment to Section 41 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Rather, QFHSA recommends that the Charter be broadened to reflect our increasingly pluralistic society.**

In summary, QFHSA finds that the report, Religion in Secular Schools: A New Perspective for Quebec, has introduced many new ideas for consideration by the people of Quebec. Our outlook is that it will require much more consultation to determine if there is a common, acceptable path that the Minister of Education will be able to construct with respect to The Place of Religion in Schools in Quebec.

For many years QFHSA has participated, by invitation, in many of committees that advise the Ministry of Education, including the Protestant Committee (developing the MRE and ME programs), Secondary Language Arts Advisory Council, Elementary Language Arts Consultative Committee and Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers [QPAT] Curriculum Council.

It is the hope of the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations Inc. that, as in the past, we will be invited to help in the construction of this new path.

(File:Committees\Education\Submission re Place of Religion in Schools)