

Response to the Minister of Education regarding school board governance

Advisory Board on English Education

January 16, 2008

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the issues raised in the Minister's letter, even though the timeframe has been extremely short.

A few themes emerge in this response:

- The absolute need to maintain school boards as one of the essential institutions of the English-speaking community of Québec,
- The need to make school boards as effective as possible,
- The need for the Ministry to develop clear expectations for school boards, but with built-in flexibility for boards to deal with local issues,
- The need for more effective communication of responsibilities, regulations, and achievements to the general public, by Ministry and school boards.

We submit a list of recommendations, followed by an elaboration of the rationale behind the recommendations.

Respectfully submitted,

Cathrine Le Maistre
On behalf of CELA/ABEE

Summary of recommendations

General comments

1. We recommend close analysis of the status quo and population trends before implementing changes to the school board structure.
2. We recommend a longer time frame for all stakeholders to study and respond to the issue so that any change made to the school board structure is thoughtfully considered and implemented on a principled basis.
3. We recommend that the consultation be advertised broadly and as much participation as possible be invited.

Thème 1 : Le rôle éducatif, social, culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région

1. We strongly support the maintenance of school boards as an essential institution in the English community in Québec.
2. We recommend maintaining the geographic structure that has been established over the past ten years and further recommend that the Ministry increase support to the low population, large territory, school boards.
3. We recommend that partnerships between the English language school boards and other institutions in the communities, such as the community learning centres, be encouraged and supported financially by the Ministry.
4. We recommend that the Ministry set clear expectations for the public educational system, making it clear that Ministerial policies and programs, and board/community partnerships will be structured through the public system, to make accountability possible.
5. We recommend that the Ministry and the school boards make resources available to promote and advertise to the population the functions and activities of school boards and of individual commissioners.

Thème 2 : La démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections

1. We recommend that the Ministry investigate school board structures, functions and voting procedures in other jurisdictions to determine best practice.
2. We recommend that the Ministry should perform a finer-grained analysis of voter turnout, and clarify why low voter turnout is a problem, what criteria are used to evaluate a “good turnout,” what would be an appropriate level of turnout, and for what reasons.
3. We recommend that the role of commissioners be clearly defined and explained to the public.
4. We recommend that school boards make greater efforts to encourage public participation at board meetings and other school board events.
5. We recommend that the role of the school in the community, serving not only academic needs, but also the preparation of youth to be responsible and contributing citizens in their out-of-school activity, should be recognized and promoted by the Ministry, the school boards and the schools.
6. We recommend that school boards and candidates should contact their target populations and make them more aware of the issues that could be of importance to them.
7. We recommend that the Ministry and the school boards cooperate on a forceful information campaign to explain the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry, school boards, commissioners, and staff.
8. We recommend the promotion of strong, individual, candidates for school board commissioner.

9. We recommend that the Minister investigate more closely the composition of the population who voted in the last school board elections and why the turnout in different boards was substantially different.
10. We recommend that a permanent voters' list be established for school board elections and that the population be informed which list they appear on.
11. We recommend that anyone who graduates from an English-language school board should be placed on the English voters' list, and the French list should not be the default value.
12. We recommend reducing the number of commissioners in urban and suburban school boards.
13. We recommend that the boards' committees should be open to representatives from the schools' governing boards, whether principals, parents, employees or senior students, as well as commissioners.

Thème 3 : La transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats

1. We recommend that the Ministry should ensure that School Boards are adhering to pre-set guidelines, while helping them by giving them latitude and flexibility to develop new orientations and to respond to local issues.
2. We recommend that school boards be required to report their budget income and expenditure to the population in a clear and accessible way.
3. We recommend that the Ministry work with school boards to develop indicators that would allow the boards to assess their effectiveness and to report the results to the Ministry and to the population.
4. We recommend that consideration be given to redefining the roles and tenure of commissioners and board chairs, and that good candidates for commissioner are actively solicited by school board staff and school personnel.

Thème 4: Le financement des commissions scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire

1. We recommend that school boards use the issue of taxes to promote the role and responsibilities of school boards, including explanations of how school taxes are collected, where they are deposited, how they are distributed and what they are able to finance and accomplish.
2. We recommend that school taxation be collected and distributed through general taxation, not property taxation.
3. We recommend that school board funding should be in a single envelope, that budgets be spread over a longer time period, and that boards be given permission to use surpluses for local priorities that they establish, as long as Ministry priorities are respected overall.

General comments

The need for renewal

From the Minister's letter: *Au fil des ans, et particulièrement au cours des dernières décennies, elles ont su démontrer leur savoir-faire et leur capacité à s'ajuster aux nombreuses transformations qui ont marqué le monde de l'éducation.* Nevertheless, a review of the state of school boards is welcome for several reasons. For example:

- Linguistic school boards have been in effect for 10 years

The perspective and recommendations in the Advisory Board's 1993-1994 Report (The Reorganization of School Boards along Linguistic Lines; an English School Perspective) are generally still valid, and the preoccupations and recommendations in the ABEE 2006 Report (Decentralization, Regionalization and Adaptation: *jamais deux sans trois*) must be considered in conjunction with any reflection and decisions related to school board reorganization.

- Variation in student population

Quebec has seen record increases in the birth rate in 2006 and 2007. Based on past history, any restructuring of school boards will probably not take effect for several years just as this mini-baby boom will be entering schools. We should learn from experience in the healthcare system that drastic amalgamation and downsizing can backfire if population trends are not considered.

Any restructuring of School Boards should not mean abandoning what works well. All systems need overhauling from time to time, but change for the sake of change, or consultation and change that are rushed are unproductive and smack of political expediency.

We recommend close analysis of the status quo and population trends before implementing changes to the school board structure.

Timing

We feel strongly that the procedure is not commensurate with the seriousness of the issues. The timing and scheduling of the consultation process for this discussion on the state of school boards has not allowed for sufficient thought, reflection, and preparation of presentation and commentary. Announcement of the consultation and Forum coming just as schools closed for the December Holiday Break has not lent itself to thoughtful reflection on any issue, nor have people generally been available for comment and discussion among themselves. The ABEE learned of the consultation on the day before its December meeting, and a meeting with the Minister was scheduled one day after its January meeting, with the holiday in the middle. Had the ABEE meetings been one day earlier in December and one day later in January, there would have been no opportunity for ABEE members to meet in person to discuss these issues. Requiring submission and presentation of commentary within days of the schools reopening, and business and everyday life returning to normal, does not respect the opinions and responsibilities of the very people to be consulted. What quality and reflection is expected under such conditions? It would be too easy to conclude that our opinions have no real weight in this discussion.

Notice of the consultation appeared in *Le Devoir* on December 20, but we did not see publicity in *La Presse* nor in *The Montreal Gazette*. Has publicity concerning these discussions has been limited to one French-language newspaper?

We recommend a longer time frame for all stakeholders to study and respond to the issue so that any change made to the school board structure is thoughtfully considered and implemented on a principled basis.

We recommend that the consultation be advertised broadly and as much participation as possible be invited.

Overall it is important that the Ministry keep in mind at all times that it carries the responsibility for English language boards, as well as French language boards and that decisions and directives can not only apply to boards of the language of the majority.

The Minister's letter raises many serious issues that go far beyond the issue of the rate of voter participation in elections. It is not clear what the Minister sees as the link between the voting rate and the other issues. For example, would issues such as school taxes, the rigor of administration, the social cultural and economic role of boards, be raised at this time if the voting rate were higher?

Thème 1 : Le rôle éducatif, social, culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région

The ABEE believes that school boards are worth preserving, particularly for the anglophone community. The presence of English school boards must be maintained as one of the few remaining English institutions in Quebec.

The importance of the school board role with respect to this theme in its region cannot be overemphasized, especially in regard to English language school boards. There should be involvement of the school board in any discussions or decisions related to them, and there should be partnerships between school boards and other organizations within the region. In the current situation, however, the English school boards may have a quieter voice than the French boards in regional affairs, considering the geographical complexity faced by some English boards that must interact across several municipal regions.

It is clear that if an English board is to service the same territory as 2, 3, or up to 17 French boards, it requires the resources, both human and other, to be involved in the potential partnerships on its territory. The ABEE is aware that in response to one of its recent reports on Decentralization, Regionalization and Adaptation, the Ministry has made some extra money available to some English boards to allow them to attend a number of *Table-inter-ordres* meetings, but this is still limited.

We strongly support the maintenance of school boards as an essential institution in the English community in Québec.

We recommend maintaining the geographic structure that has been established over the past ten years and further recommend that the Ministry increase support to the low population, large territory, school boards.

For the English school boards and schools, partnership with institutions (governmental and community) in other sectors – social development, cultural, economic, etc. is a vitally important issue: English schools are often the last English-language institution in the community or the region – and the work with potential partners (CLSCs, CLE, CJEs, etc.) who are unable to service anglophones in their own language is problematic. There are expectations from the English community that the school board should provide a

variety of services, and yet funding and staffing for the English schools does not have the luxury of expansion, nor is the cooperation with other institutions a foregone conclusion. Where other groups are involved in planning, surveys, and the examination of joint projects, the English schools may often be left out of the picture.

We give two examples of English School boards in the regions:

- The Central Quebec School Board is seen to be providing service to its clientele (both the English school community and the English population). The fourteen elementary schools, ten high schools and one adult education/vocational training centre of the CQSB are managed by individuals who know each school and staff individually. It would be difficult for a French school board to provide the expertise to cater effectively to the needs of the English population, and easy for the needs of the English community to fall through the cracks
- In the Eastern Townships the School Boards (English and French) have come together with local elected officials to work on the high drop-out rate problem. With more of this type of dialogue school boards could become a strong tool for positive educational and economic change.

We recommend that partnerships between the English language school boards and other institutions in the communities, such as the community learning centres, be encouraged and supported financially by the Ministry.

The Ministry should clarify its expectations of the school boards. Some aspects of the school system, such as sanctions, are very clearly demarcated, regulated and inspected by the Ministry. Many other aspects of educational administration are left to the good will of the boards – the Ministry provides orientations or guidelines and the boards are expected, to a greater or lesser extent, to implement them. There is little consistency or coherence in how this is done, yet the same Ministry policy applies to all. (e.g. how special needs are dealt with, how professional development for all levels of staff is organized, whether adult or vocational services are offered in a region, whether governing boards are functional, whether Board strategic plans are comparable, etc.). The Ministry should make it clear to what extent it requires (as opposed to suggests) that boards implement the various policies and orientations of the Ministry: is it satisfied if many school boards decide not to implement various orientations? Is this an acceptable part of educational democracy? To what extent is there stable recurrent funding for measures and projects which have not traditionally been part of a board's responsibilities?

The responsibilities of the school boards to all the population have to be better articulated by the Ministry and the boards: Ministry policy calls for all Quebecois to have a first diploma (*formation de base*), yet many in the school boards still understand their responsibilities as being oriented to those under 18. The role of boards will not expand unless there is concerted governmental encouragement, something that has been substantially lacking since the adult education policy was released 6 years ago.

We recommend that the Ministry set clear expectations for the public educational system, making it clear that Ministerial policies and programs, and Board/community partnerships will be structured through the public system, to make accountability possible.

There is a sense in the community that school boards serve little function, that they have narrow powers dealing with curriculum and taxation within the rules, directives and formulae sanctioned by MELS (e.g., taxation issues are effectively dealt with at an island-wide supra-board level) and oversee large, entrenched school board bureaucracies. School boards and school board commissioners will have a significant educational, social, cultural, economic and political role to the extent that the school boards and commissioners are perceived to have real powers over students' lives, taxpayers' bills and school board administrations. In Québec, school boards and school board commissioners are widely seen as relatively weak, with few powers to exercise. They are viewed as only having one real power, that of choosing which school to close, and having little capacity to provide leadership to the community.

Many elected commissioners are unaware of ministerial policies and orientations and therefore unaware of the government's expectations for school board operation. Further, candidates for commissioner are allowed to spend limited amounts of money on campaigning and are given a small honorarium if they are elected.

We recommend that the Ministry and the school boards make resources available to promote and advertise to the population the functions and activities of school boards and of individual commissioners.

Thème 2 : La démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections

This is a complicated issue raising many questions about the reason for low voter turnout, but we do not believe that it is the only reason for making changes to the school board system. The low participation rate at school commissioner elections is troubling, given the important issues that schools face, but the percentages of participation at school board elections are not necessarily different from local municipal elections and are probably better than health board elections. It would be important to see if the situation is better elsewhere because of different structures and procedures.

We recommend that the Ministry investigate school board structures, functions and voting procedures in other jurisdictions to determine best practice.

How do we interpret lack of turnout at the polls? Better breakdowns of voting numbers would paint a better picture of the characteristics of voters to provide information about non-voters to be targeted with information. More participation would seem to be a preferred thing, but is it necessarily so? Interested people are already participating. If there are more people to answer to, will others want to present themselves as candidates? It is not evident that a higher voter turnout will, in itself, produce better candidates, better administrative decisions taken by commissioners, and better education.

We recommend that the Ministry should perform a finer-grained analysis of voter turnout, and clarify why low voter turnout is a problem, what criteria are used to evaluate a “good turnout,” what would be an appropriate level of turnout, and for what reasons.

Is voter apathy an issue that is tied to others, such as the undervaluing of teachers in our society? Is it a result of government underfunding of education in general, and a consequent perception on the part of the public that education is not a high priority in society? Is the role of school commissioner afforded a status that makes it interesting? The perceived role of a school board commissioner will discourage many people from voting and many people in the community see participating in school board elections as choosing which personality gets to be a mid-level bureaucrat for a term of office. Or are people just too busy? Is low voter turnout an indication of general dissatisfaction? Is it just a general malaise, a feeling of disenfranchisement? Is it part of a general sense of apathy or feeling of impotence *vis a vis* public institutions and our ability to truly influence their directions? Parents on governing boards, designed to have an important function in encouraging participation in the school and its policies, often feel that they are powerless and can effect little change or influence with the Board where the real power lies. This leads to apathy. Is it a lack of faith in the current experience? In many instances the school boards have become like private corporations that do not welcome any “outside” influence. They are often not transparent with regard to their budgets and financial statements, so that constituents are not privy to current year budgets. Often too, council meetings discourage interventions and participation from the public, by severely limiting question period and the opportunity to make presentations to the board. Are there issues such as the population targeted and their sense of belonging to these institutions? In particular does the English community feel that their institutions are at risk and need to be supported or

that it is futile? Is the community aging and feeling less of an urgency to involve themselves with schools? Some voters feel that they have no vested interest in the school system in that they have no children or grown children.

We recommend that the role of commissioners be clearly defined and explained to the public.

We recommend that school boards make greater efforts to encourage public participation at board meetings and other school board events.

We recommend that the role of the school in the community, serving not only academic needs, but also the preparation of youth to be responsible and contributing citizens in their out-of-school activity, should be recognized and promoted by the Ministry, the school boards and the schools.

With regard to the role of the commissioners and candidates and their relationship with the population, there is certainly much more work to be done to reach the voting population. Unless there is an issue, such as a school closure or other major change, there is apathy on the part of the general population. There is little motivation to vote if the issues are not clear or relevant to the voter. Some voters do not feel that the election of one candidate or another as a school commissioner will have any effect on their daily lives. The attitudes of some candidates have discouraged some voters. For example, candidates belonging to the previous majority faction on the EMSB refused to participate in all-candidate meetings or to discuss issues. Many people believe that low voter turnout does not necessarily put the institution at risk as they believe it will carry on anyway – the commissioners will still be there whether elected or acclaimed.

We recommend that school boards and candidates should contact their target populations and make them more aware of the issues that could be of importance to them.

The Minister's letter refers to the desire to adapt school governance "aux attentes et aux exigences de la population" on the same page as statements decrying low participation rates. This introduces two possibilities: that the "attentes et exigences" of the population are so amorphous or poorly articulated that the public does not understand or appreciate the educational system and that few voters see elections as a way of realizing these expectations; that the population's "attentes et exigences" for what they want in their local schools are so sophisticated that they have no confidence in any changes that elections for commissions could bring about. But the ABEE's first conclusion is that low voter participation is not necessarily the result of disappointment with the social economic or cultural role of the boards, or the issues of taxation, clarity, or accountability. Rather it is founded on a lack of information and understanding about what is at stake in school board elections. Most electors know little about the workings of the school boards, nor the requirements in law and responsibilities of board staff and commissioners.

Responsibility for this ignorance must be shared by the Ministry, the boards, the candidates, and especially the media, which cover little more than scandals or the school ratings conducted by outside agencies. There is no lack of interesting and pertinent information on the importance of the educational system and its institutions, but at present, both in the Ministry and in the boards, contact with the media is tightly controlled. The ABEE believes that it is essential for the population to understand the structures of educational governance both at the board and the local level as a prerequisite to engagement and commitment to the electoral process.

The Ministry could start by setting a good example by publicizing its major initiatives, making clear the role that local boards have to play in achieving them (e.g. special needs policies, school improvement

policies, adult education policy). By encouraging its own employees and encouraging boards to encourage their employees to spread news and information about how schools work and the issues they are concerned with, the public would have access to considerably more information than at present, and give it the basis on which to develop opinions and feelings which would motivate the desire to vote. It is important (and the Ministry is best placed to do this) to inform the public on an ongoing basis about what a school board can or cannot do; what financial decisions are already determined by the law and which are open to local decision-making; what decisions are made by the governing board, the school board or the labour relations committees.

School boards should be encouraged to promote discussion of issues within the board's jurisdiction throughout the term of office of the commissioners. Local school commissioners, throughout their term of office, need to be more visible – through reports and general community involvement – to the general public and not just to school-related groups.

Leadership from the Ministry and the boards is essential in continually explaining to the public why a democratic educational system is important. Leadership is also important on the specifics of the various major issues confronting the school system: the reform of the curriculum, the challenges of diverse populations, the changing needs of the work force, etc.

We recommend that the Ministry and the school boards cooperate on a forceful information campaign to explain the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry, school boards, commissioners, and staff.

We recognize the existence of a party system within some school boards and acknowledge the value of such a system in presenting alternatives, although it has the potential to breed a climate of confrontation and conflict. We believe that democracy is best served when individuals can present themselves as candidates outside the party system.

We recommend the promotion of strong, individual, candidates for school board commissioner.

Enumeration

While the figure of 7% is widely mentioned as the participation rate in the last school board elections, it must not be forgotten that the participation in English boards elections, was substantially higher, reaching into the high 20s in certain cases. Certainly in the English sector participation in school board elections was higher than that of French school boards. Were there specific political issues? Have the English boards established closer ties to their constituents? Are there practices of the English boards, which affect voter turnout that should be emulated by the French-speaking boards?

We recommend that the Minister investigate more closely the composition of the population who voted in the last school board elections and why the turnout in different boards was substantially different.

But voting for English language school boards is not without its difficulties. Compiling a list of English-language voters according to the language of the school currently attended by one's children and then eliminating those parents from the English list once the children graduate is disrespectful and irresponsible. Such a practice also serves to imply the mistaken notion that only citizens with school-aged children are interested or expected to vote for the school board in their area. Care must be taken that once one has registered on the English language list that the name is not dropped from one election period to the next. Also, students who have graduated from English school boards are automatically placed on the French school board voters' list. Ironically, the fact that many English-language voters had

to ensure their name was on the proper list made many more aware that an election was taking place and resulted in a higher rate of voter participation for English Boards during in the election of Fall 2007.

We recommend that a permanent voters' list be established for school board elections and that the population be informed which list they appear on.

We recommend that anyone who graduates from an English-language school board should be placed on the English voters' list, and the French list should not be the default value.

While some rural boards are so geographically scattered that the existing number of commissioners is necessary for adequate representation of each community, some school boards appear to have too many commissioners, making them unwieldy, and reducing the council meetings to votes on issues already decided by small committees of commissioners. There is also a perception that these sub-committees of commissioners are too restricted and closed to input from knowledgeable and interested stakeholders.

We recommend reducing the number of commissioners in urban and suburban school boards.

We recommend that the boards' committees should be open to representatives from the schools' governing boards, whether principals, parents, employees or senior students, as well as commissioners.

Thème 3 : La transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats

Transparency and good budgetary management must be the main thrust here, as well as accountability to the Ministry and to the population. A key component of thoughtful and motivated voting is a well-informed voter, which needs communication between the boards and the population.

Given the different circumstances and needs of the regions of Québec, school boards must be allowed a degree of autonomy so that they may meet local needs. But the autonomy of a school board must be properly defined and communicated carefully to the population. Autonomy should mean that there is a legislatively sanctioned *marge de manoeuvre* that allows a board, while respecting all legal requirements, to place emphasis on local or regional priorities; it should not allow a board to ignore a Ministry policy or decide to pay lip service to a legislative intention.

We recommend that the Ministry should ensure that School Boards are adhering to pre-set guidelines, while helping them by giving them latitude and flexibility to develop new orientations and to respond to local issues.

The counter-weight to autonomy is accountability. School boards have been subjected to overwhelming changes in structures, policies and curriculum implementation in recent years. At the same time, they must be accountable for what they do, and their actions must be transparent and rigorous with respect to the use of public money. School board budgets are public but not very detailed, so it would be difficult to be clear on what use is made of the budget provided for each school and each student. For example, is money allocated for Ministerial priorities used appropriately? Is money allocated for assisting students with special needs used to the best effect? We wonder whether it is apathy, or confidence in the school boards, that causes the population's apparent lack of interest in their budgets? The ABEE assumes that

the verification process works adequately as far as accounting for monies. However, accountability must be apparent regarding information for constituents about decisions taken and the orientations behind them.

We recommend that school boards be required to report their budget income and expenditure to the population in a clear and accessible way.

To parents, accountability goes beyond an accountant's approval on a financial statement; it includes receiving information to permit them to monitor the issues that are of importance to them. The Education Act assumes that the annual report of a school board is a sufficient tool for satisfying the requirements of legislation. There is not evidence, in the opinion of the ABEE to support this. Annual reports vary substantially in size and detail and transparency. Most constituents are not aware that they even exist, or that they are available within the municipality. By definition, such a report is produced by an administration and is not "objective". If the Ministry were to decide to require a certain number of pertinent and consistent indicators to be included in all such reports, it might help communicate better to the public. Again, we caution the need for local autonomy and input from the boards in setting the indicators. As an example, retention of at-risk students is at least as important an indicator as grades on school-leaving examinations, yet the two criteria might be counter to each other. Both are important, but a particular board might put emphasis on one over the other.

We recommend that the Ministry work with school boards to develop indicators that would allow the boards to assess their effectiveness and to report the results to the Ministry and to the population.

Concern has been expressed that in some boards, there is a dysfunctional relationship between the Director General and the Council. Although the roles of each are clearly defined in law, they may be poorly understood by the participants and the public. The permanent school board staffs are not necessarily more open, but do seem to have more real power, information, accountability and, frequently, a sense of their educational mission, than the commissioners. There is also a sense that some commissioners stay on a school board for too long, and that they may lose contact with the population. The system is complicated and it takes time to learn. However when people are elected or acclaimed there is a perception that there is no room to grow. Renewal could be achieved by changing the composition of the executive committees more regularly and limiting the tenure of the chair to two consecutive terms.

We recommend that consideration be given to redefining the roles and tenure of commissioners and board chairs, and that good candidates for commissioner are actively solicited by school board staff and school personnel.

Thème 4: Le financement des commissions scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire

This issue is very poorly understood by the population, and even by many within the educational system.

We recommend that school boards use the issue of taxes to promote the role and responsibilities of school boards, including explanations of how school taxes are collected, where they are deposited, how they are distributed and what they are able to finance and accomplish.

It is not clear why a regressive form of taxation such as the property tax should finance important parts of the educational system, while most of the funding comes from a more progressive tax system, income tax. Property values do not correspond to ability to pay, and tenants see this tax integrated into their

rents, also without any relation to ability to pay. What is the rationale for school taxes being collected only from property owners? A property-based tax creates the impression amongst taxpayers who receive the bills directly – a limited proportion of the population - that this is what finances the school system. It is not at all clear what educational or social purpose such a tax serves when little of the school board's *marge de manoeuvre* has anything to do with these taxes. Just as health care is a right for the citizenry of Québec, so is education, and both should be funded by a direct tax based on income.

The present taxation system appears to be unfair for the English school boards. Potentially the English school boards could have a wider taxation base if they had more power to recruit taxpayers rather than being limited to the distribution of a “low key” form letter informing the taxpayer of his choice to pay to either school board in a given area. The present system, where everyone is placed on a French school board taxation list until they request otherwise, would seem to place the English school boards at a disadvantage. We hear of cases where the French school boards had a lower tax rate than the English school board and where taxpayers were not choosing to place their names on the English school board's list in order to pay less tax. It would be more equitable to allow the provincial government to tax the population and then distribute the funds equitably.

We recommend that school taxation be collected and distributed through general taxation, not property taxation.

The status of the Ministry policy must be clarified. If certain policies are obligatory, there should be no doubt about them. When clear measures, directives, budgets, and indicators have been devised, then concrete results can be appropriately expected. The areas that are left open to local decision-making must be clearly defined. If Ministry orientations are to require additional expenses by boards, there should be adequate budgets to accompany them, or clear indications of what is of high and low priority to the government. One cannot assume a healthy delivery of service by doing more with less. School boards will resemble each other less and less, and all will be frustrated.

Government financing must be insured and at the highest possible rate, if Quebec Schools are to meet contemporary educational needs. Rather than seeking ways to cut funds to boards, the Ministry should be finding ways to help boards deal with their problems, such as the integration of special needs students, or the provision of appropriate educational tools and materials. Restricting the use of funds within certain envelopes militates against fiscal responsibility and the creative use of unused money. As an extreme example, in a year when there is little snow, a surplus in the snow removal budget could be used to buy extra materials. School boards would develop long-term plans more easily if the budgetary period were longer

We recommend that school board funding should be in a single envelope, that budgets be spread over a longer time period, and that boards be given permission to use surpluses for local priorities that they establish, as long as Ministry priorities are respected overall.

Québec, le 7 décembre 2007

Madame Cathrine Le Maistre, présidente
Commission de l'éducation en langue anglaise
600, rue Fullum, 9^e étage
Montréal (Québec) H2K 4L1

Madame la Présidente,

Le taux de participation aux élections scolaires du 4 novembre 2007 et le débat qui a suivi nous amènent à examiner certaines des pratiques liées à la démocratie et à la gouvernance au sein des commissions scolaires. Je vous invite à participer activement à la réflexion sur le sujet à l'occasion d'une rencontre que nous aurons entre les 10 et 24 janvier 2008 de même qu'à l'occasion d'un forum réunissant les principaux intervenants concernés par l'éducation, les 20 et 21 février 2008.

Depuis leur création, les commissions scolaires ont eu un rôle stratégique à jouer pour offrir à la population l'accès à des services éducatifs de qualité et pour contribuer au développement de leur région. Au fil des ans, et particulièrement au cours des dernières décennies, elles ont su démontrer leur savoir-faire et leur capacité à s'ajuster aux nombreuses transformations qui ont marqué le monde de l'éducation. Aujourd'hui, j'entreprends un chantier de réflexion afin d'explorer des voies de modernisation de la gouvernance scolaire pour mieux l'adapter aux attentes et aux exigences de la population.

À cet égard, je vous propose quatre thèmes sur lesquels pourront porter nos échanges :

- le rôle éducatif, social, culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région;
- la démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections;
- la transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats;
- le financement des commissions scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire.

Vous trouverez, en annexe, des éléments de réflexion liés à chacun des thèmes. Ceux-ci pourront vous être utiles lors de la rédaction d'un texte résumant vos idées et propositions au sujet de la démocratie et de la gouvernance des commissions scolaires. Si cela vous était possible, vous pourriez me transmettre ce texte avant notre rencontre, de manière qu'il serve de point de départ à nos échanges. Ce texte servira également à appuyer nos discussions lors du forum public. Je vous invite à acheminer ce texte à M. Alain Veilleux, sous-ministre adjoint par intérim à la formation professionnelle et technique et à la formation continue et directeur général des régions, à l'adresse suivante : Direction générale des régions, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 1035, rue De La Chevrotière, 13^e étage, Québec (Québec) G1R 5A5.

Par ailleurs, une personne du Ministère communiquera avec vous dans les prochains jours pour fixer le moment de notre rencontre. En janvier 2008, vous recevrez une invitation à participer au forum de même que toute l'information relative à la tenue de cet événement.

Nous devons travailler ensemble à la mise en place d'une gouvernance renouvelée des commissions scolaires, une gouvernance qui soit toujours plus transparente, efficace et proche de la population. En d'autres termes, celles-ci doivent pouvoir s'affirmer comme des organisations au service des élèves et d'une population qui exige, en toute légitimité, d'avoir accès à des services éducatifs de qualité partout sur le territoire. Voilà le défi que nous devons relever avec succès, au plus grand bénéfice des élèves d'aujourd'hui et de demain.

J'ai la conviction que notre réflexion conjointe sur ces thèmes nous permettra de dégager de nouvelles avenues, de nouvelles manières de faire, qui apporteront des réponses appropriées aux préoccupations exprimées par nos concitoyennes et concitoyens à cet égard.

Je vous remercie de votre collaboration et vous prie d'agréer, **Madame la Présidente**, l'expression de mes sentiments les meilleurs.

MICHELLE COURCHESNE

p. j. (1)

DÉMOCRATIE ET GOUVERNANCE DES COMMISSIONS SCOLAIRES

Éléments de réflexion

Décembre 2007

THÈME 1. Le rôle éducatif, social, culturel et économique de la commission scolaire dans sa région

La Loi sur l'instruction publique précise la fonction et les responsabilités des commissions scolaires. Celles-ci sont d'organiser les services éducatifs prescrits par le gouvernement pour l'éducation préscolaire, pour l'enseignement primaire et secondaire, pour la formation générale des adultes, ainsi que pour la formation professionnelle sur leur territoire. La commission scolaire est appelée également à intervenir auprès des organismes de la région comme les municipalités, les partenaires du marché du travail, et les agences de la santé et des services sociaux. Elle les appuie aussi dans la création de liens de partenariat avec leur communauté.

Éléments de réflexion :

La mission confiée à la commission scolaire en matière de développement éducatif des jeunes et de la communauté

La contribution de la commission scolaire au développement social, culturel et économique de la population de son territoire et de sa région

THÈME 2. La démocratie scolaire et la valorisation de la participation aux élections

Plusieurs modifications ont été apportées à notre système scolaire au cours des quarante dernières années. Ces modifications ont touché l'école, sa mission, ses programmes, son fonctionnement et sa gestion. Cependant, le rôle et les fonctions des commissaires de même que leur mode électif, n'ont jamais été revus en profondeur. Or, les dernières élections scolaires ont soulevé de nombreuses réactions et autant de questions sur ces aspects de la gouvernance scolaire. Tous les efforts consentis récemment, à partir de la création des conseils d'établissement composés de représentants élus par leurs pairs jusqu'aux modifications apportées récemment à la Loi sur les élections scolaires, se sont révélés impuissants à freiner la baisse du taux de participation des électeurs, qui est passé de 15,4 % en 1998, à 7,7 % en 2007. Afin de favoriser l'appropriation locale de l'éducation, il convient de se pencher sur cette question.

Éléments de réflexion :

Le rôle des commissaires et leurs relations avec les citoyens

La participation aux élections scolaires

Le mode électif des commissaires

La reconnaissance de partis politiques scolaires

L'élection du président de la commission scolaire au suffrage universel de l'ensemble des électeurs du territoire de la commission scolaire

Le nombre de commissaires d'une commission scolaire en milieu rural et en milieu urbain

THÈME 3. La transparence et la rigueur de la gestion dans les commissions scolaires en vue d'une reddition de comptes axée sur les résultats

De plus en plus instruite et de mieux en mieux informée, la population québécoise se fait maintenant très exigeante à l'égard de ses institutions publiques. Les commissions scolaires ne font pas exception à la règle. Comme pour les autres institutions, certaines personnes s'interrogent sur l'efficacité de la gestion des commissions scolaires, sur les coûts administratifs qu'elles engendrent et sur l'utilisation des sommes qui leur sont allouées, notamment dans le cadre de programmes particuliers élaborés par le gouvernement afin d'intervenir dans des problématiques nationales clairement identifiées.

Par ailleurs, à l'instar d'une tendance mondiale, les élus québécois sont de plus en plus invités à gérer avec transparence. Nous sommes à l'ère de l'imputabilité. C'est là l'un des fondements de la démocratie et la base d'un gouvernement responsable. L'imputabilité est un enjeu important pour améliorer la confiance des citoyens envers leurs élus et l'administration publique. Les gouvernements et les organismes publics ont conséquemment apporté d'importants changements à leur mode de gestion, celui-ci étant désormais fondé sur l'atteinte de résultats. Ils exercent de plus en plus une reddition de comptes formelle sur leur performance par l'entremise, notamment, de rapports annuels.

Éléments de réflexion :

L'autonomie de gestion de la commission scolaire

Les liens entre les activités des commissions scolaires et les orientations ou les priorités gouvernementales

La relation entre les budgets adoptés par les commissions scolaires et le financement gouvernemental de certaines politiques ou de certains programmes

Les résultats concrets attendus des commissions scolaires à l'égard de problématiques éducatives précises comme la qualité du français, l'intégration des EHDAA et les interventions en milieu défavorisé

Les orientations des commissions scolaires pour répondre aux attentes des jeunes, des parents et de la communauté

Les types de processus de reddition de comptes des commissions scolaires et l'information transmise au gouvernement, aux parlementaires et à la population

Les coûts de gestion des commissions scolaires

Le processus de gestion des plaintes au sein des commissions scolaires

1.1.1.1.1 THÈME 4. Le financement des commissions scolaires et la fiscalité scolaire

Le financement des commissions scolaires provient de subventions du ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), de revenus de la taxe scolaire et d'autres revenus. La majeure partie des subventions du MELS sont attribuées *a priori* à partir d'un mode d'allocation qui tient compte de la nature des services à rendre, de la composition de l'effectif scolaire et de la situation économique et géographique de la commission scolaire. Celle-ci bénéficie d'une grande marge de manœuvre de gestion de ses allocations pour répartir elle-même son budget sur son territoire en fonction des particularités de ses établissements.

Une autre source de financement de la commission scolaire provient de la taxation. Ce pouvoir est limité et encadré par la loi. En effet, une commission scolaire ne peut, par exemple, imposer un taux de taxation supérieur à 0,35 \$ du 100 \$ d'évaluation foncière ou un taux qui générerait des revenus supérieurs au produit maximal de la taxe scolaire fixé annuellement par le gouvernement. Pour excéder l'une de ces deux limites, une commission scolaire doit obligatoirement tenir un référendum. Ces revenus de taxes, auxquels s'ajoute la subvention de péréquation, sont utilisés par la commission scolaire pour financer la gestion de son siège social, la direction des écoles et des centres situés sur son territoire, les dépenses de fonctionnement liées à l'entretien des bâtiments et une partie du transport scolaire. Alors que certains souhaiteraient voir s'élargir ce pouvoir de taxation, et l'imputabilité qui en découle, de manière à accroître la marge de manœuvre des commissions scolaires, d'autres, au contraire, estiment que le financement de l'éducation devrait être entièrement assumé par l'État.

Éléments de réflexion :

Le type de financement appliqué aux commissions scolaires : les subventions gouvernementales et le pouvoir de taxation des commissions scolaires

Les modes d'allocation aux commissions scolaires : la formule de financement *a priori* et la transférabilité des ressources

La formule de financement des commissions scolaires en lien avec l'atteinte des objectifs gouvernementaux

1.1.1.1.2