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Allison Hanes: Is the new EMSB council being set up to fail?

There is a monitor still keeping tabs on the English Montreal School Board council of commissioners. Is it really necessary or is this part of the CAQ government's plans to undermine English school boards?

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette

Nov 23, 2020 • Last Updated 4 hours ago • 4 minute read



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When the Quebec government put the English Montreal School Board under trusteeship just over a year ago, Premier François Legault and Education Minister Jean-François Roberge surely never expected the council of commissioners to ever sit again.

Bill 40 was adopted in the meantime, scrapping school boards and replacing them with service centres. The EMSB in all its turmoil had been a handy foil justifying the law. Even if English service centres were to elect their new governing bodies by universal suffrage – a concession to the anglophone community determined to keep its constitutionally protected right to manage and control its schools – the transformation of all boards to service centres was supposed to be a *fait accompli* by now.



So sending in former Liberal MP Marlene Jennings to clean house at the EMSB after two decades of dysfunction, the Coalition Avenir Québec government was expecting her to reshape it in this mold at the same time.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Unfortunately, they miscalculated. Over the summer, the court handed groups fighting Bill 40 a preliminary victory, ordering the current governing structures to be kept intact until the legal challenge is resolved. This affected the councils of commissioners governing all Quebec's English schools, from the Eastern Shores School Board in the Gaspé to the Western Québec School Board in the Outaouais.

But this posed a particularly irritating problem at the EMSB, where Jennings was not only ridding the organization of the toxic personalities who dragged it down for so long, but preparing it for a future as a service centre. Those plans went awry when the court allowed English school boards to live another day.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

All of a sudden, the clock was ticking on the return of the old council of commissioners. Probably even more vexing for the government was that in the brief window of time between the government calling English school board elections in Quebec for Nov. 1 and then postponing them in mid-October for public health reasons, nine out of 10 EMSB commissioners, many familiar faces among them, were acclaimed. This included interim chair Joe Ortona becoming the new chair.

Before the end of her mandate, Jennings was unable to fill the role of the EMSB's director general after Ann Marie Matheson vacated the position. (Her departure was ironically made public the day of the Bill 40 ruling). Jennings tried but faced pushback from the wider English-speaking community, which insisted this job should be left to the incoming council to appoint as a matter of principle. Since she was running for the top job at the Quebec Community Groups Network, an anglophone rights lobby, forcing the hiring of a new director general would have left her in an awkward predicament.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The new EMSB council was given Jennings's short list of candidates, but the selection of the new director general will be its exclusive domain. This can't sit well with a government bent on centralizing control of schools.

No sooner had trusteeship expired than the education ministry followed through on Jennings's final recommendation to appoint a special monitor to "accompany" the council in implementing the rest of the reform agenda, which is not necessarily compatible with an organization run by a pre-Bill 40 council of

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The sordid history that got the EMSB put into trusteeship may be fresh in mind, but the anglophone community must be wary in the coming months about its perceived missteps along a pathway that may well be strewn with landmines.

Just look at the underhanded way the Legault government is treating English school board elections. After calling the vote over Bill 40 opponents' objections, then cancelling it, last week it suddenly announced the elections are back on again for Dec. 20 — five days before Christmas. This is a time that now conflicts with the government's order for families looking to celebrate the holidays to reduce their contacts.

More than bureaucratic bungling, this is nothing short of sabotage. Jennings, who is now head of the QCGN, went as far as to call it voter suppression.

If the Legault government has every interest in seeing English school board elections flop in order to bolster its defence of Bill 40 in court, for the same reasons it has just as much to gain in seeing the new EMSB council stumble, too.

The appalling truth is that it appears ready to sacrifice both democracy and the stability of English schools to win its case.

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