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# Allison Hanes: Who should appoint the EMSB's next director general?

*With her mandate as trustee about to expire, Marlene Jennings has left the school board in much better shape. But one sensitive outstanding matter threatens to mar her legacy.*

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette  
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As the clock ticks down to the expiration of her one-year mandate as trustee of the English Montreal School Board, there is no doubt Marlene Jennings has left the troubled organization in much better shape than she found it.

She got rid of incorrigible figures who repeatedly disgraced, damaged and undermined an important institution in pursuit of their own personal interests.



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She took a body riven by scandal, controversy, conflict and low morale and made the dedicated professionals who work there feel valued, listened to and respected.

For that, the community owes her a debt of gratitude.

But there is one outstanding order of business on Jennings's agenda that threatens to unravel much of her good work: the appointment of the next director general at the EMSB.

This is a sensitive matter that strikes at the very heart of wider English community interests. A court challenge of Bill 40, the Coalition Avenir Québec government's law to replace school boards with service centres, is predicated on the notion that minority language communities have a constitutionally protected right to manage and control their own schools. The choice of a top administrator is considered one example of sacrosanct management and control — whether Bill 40 stands or is eventually struck down.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The newly acclaimed EMSB commissioners, led by chair Joe Ortona, certainly believe choosing the DG is council's duty and should be council's alone once they regain power over the EMSB on Nov. 6, when the trusteeship ends.

Push came to shove last week when Ortona took Jennings to court in an unsuccessful attempt to constrain her powers in the final weeks of her mandate. He has declined her belated invitation to join the selection committee as a matter of principle, seeing it as a Catch-22 between participating in a flawed

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It also opens up the possibility the new council — nine out of 10 of whom were acclaimed when hastily called school board elections were postponed due to the pandemic, and eight out of nine of whom belong to Team Ortona — will overturn the hiring.

“My first recommendation to the new council will be reviewing the hiring,” Ortona said Tuesday.

Whether or not it would be legal, overturning the decision would be a shame for all involved. It would set the new DG up for failure. It would serve as a blow to good governance. And it would doom the EMSB to more of the same mistrust between administrators and council that poisoned relations in the past.

No one wants this — least of all Jennings. But that is the stalemate that is looming.

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Although she insists she has the absolute legal authority to name the new DG before she departs — reconfirmed by a judge thanks to Ortona's failed injunction bid — Jennings concedes she may be running out of time to get it done.

With less than three weeks to go, Jennings said there are many scenarios on the table. Among them: the selection committee, of which she is but one member, could recommend a single candidate and hire the person; it could recommend more than one contender, which would require a new round of interviews that could be left to commissioners to complete; or it could simply leave a short list of applicants, compiled after a rigorous process, for the next council to consider.

This conciliatory overture may offer a way out of an impasse that risks damning the EMSB to the kind of dysfunction Jennings has just spent a year delivering it from. The bottom line is she believes EMSB administrators and employees deserve to be left with a strong leader.

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And one can understand her hesitation leaving the EMSB to many of the same elected officials who were there a year ago — even minus its most toxic personalities.

“You have to hope for the best and plan for the worst,” she told the Montreal Gazette in an interview.

But much of the rumbling about her doing the CAQ's bidding, or undermining the rights of anglophones in her final act as trustee, may have a political dimension. Jennings is running for the leadership of the Quebec Community Groups Network, an anglophone rights group.

“No one who has ever followed my career ... would ever doubt my commitment to our community or to our rights,” Jennings said. “No one.”

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