

EMSB decries timing of leak alleging inappropriate spending

Legault hinted Monday that a decision on whether to put the English Montreal School Board under trusteeship may come this week

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"We don't have anything to apologize for, and the timing was clearly orchestrated for this to be released the day the hearings (into Bill 40) started, and that really is troubling," says EMSB spokesperson Michael J. Cohen. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The English Montreal School Board lashed back at the Quebec government Monday, pointing to the suspicious timing of a leak alleging inappropriate spending by the board on the very day hearings began into the government's proposed legislation to abolish school boards

A report published in the Journal de Québec Monday, citing an unnamed source, said a government investigation into the operations of the EMSB announced last January (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-opens-investigation-into-english-montreal-school-board>) has found several instances of irregular spending by the board.

Examples include the purchase of hundreds of dollars worth of alcohol for school board meetings between 2016 and 2018, \$5,000 in travel reimbursements for board members and gifts for employees, including a \$400 Swarovski watch in one case. There was also a bill of \$12,000 for seven rooms in a luxury hotel for a conference in Boston in November 2017, the Journal reports.

Premier François Legault hinted Monday that a decision on whether to put the English Montreal School Board under trusteeship may come this week.

"The problems are accumulating and we are (looking into that)," Legault said in Montreal on Monday. "We may decide in the next few days about the situation of the school board, but it's unacceptable what we keep on hearing about the school board."

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge echoed Legault's concerns, saying the new revelations show that the status quo is no longer an option for the EMSB. He said the government will decide in the next few days which option it will retain. Roberge has said in the past the government has three options for intervening with the EMSB: full trusteeship, partial trusteeship, or simply sending in a government official to help manage the board.

"We will make a decision in a few days," Roberge said. "It's not a surprise because we went public with parts of the report two months ago. I think it's obvious that the government has to take some action."

He said the current reforms he is proposing under Bill 40, which would see service centres replace school boards, are not because of the EMSB situation, noting the reform idea has been around since the birth of the Coalition Avenir Québec.

But in a statement issued by the EMSB Monday, the council of commissioners said the leaked report is “another example of the CAQ government’s concerted campaign to discredit the EMSB for political reasons.”

They note the minister has had the investigation report in hand since early September, but has chosen to make public only parts of it and has never provided the full report to the EMSB or asked for its response.

EMSB spokesperson Michael J. Cohen said the government is obviously picking on the EMSB because the board has been critical of the CAQ government’s policies, including decisions to move schools from the EMSB to a francophone board, its ban on teachers and other public servants wearing religious symbols on the job, and Bill 40.

“We don’t have anything to apologize for, and the timing was clearly orchestrated for this to be released the day the hearings (into Bill 40) started, and that really is troubling,” he said, adding that spending of the EMSB’s \$350-million budget is very transparent.

“None of this stuff is done under the radar. It’s all very public and we don’t apologize for any of it,” he said. “We don’t apologize for sending teachers to a professional development conference or having a few bottles of wine over several years for board meetings when we have a dinner and so people who are there for seven or eight hours can have a glass of wine with their dinner.”

He said the expensive watch was given to a person who had worked for the board for 40 years and created a daycare program that ended up being quite lucrative for the EMSB.

“The fact is we have such a significant check-and-balance system here at this school board,” Cohen said. “The items that were highlighted by this article, and allegedly by the auditors, none of these are anything remotely close to lavish. They are no different than probably from any other school board in the province of Quebec.”