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Opinion / Columnists

Opinion: Quebec's leaders put policy agenda ahead of student success

While school boards are 100-per-cent focused on our students, our political leaders have been setting up new and unnecessary roadblocks.

Joe Ortona • Special to Montreal Gazette
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"While school board leadership has been grappling with helping our students, faculty and parents adjust to the vagaries of the public health crisis with a particular focus on the mental health and well-being, our political leaders have been setting up new and unnecessary roadblocks," Joe Ortona writes. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

As we enter the final weeks of the school year, our teachers and staff should be recognized for their flexibility and hard work over the past two years. Throughout the pandemic they have kept their eye on the ball, single-mindedly focusing on student success.

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While school board leadership has been grappling with helping our students, faculty and parents adjust to the vagaries of the public health crisis with a particular focus on the mental health and well-being, our political leaders have been setting up new and unnecessary roadblocks.

The most recent example is Bill 96, which is expected to be adopted soon.

At the English Montreal School Board, we are not only committed to ensuring that our students have a working knowledge of French, we are also delivering. At the same time, we also know that one size does not fit all; not all students have the same aptitude for languages.

The recent amendment allowing CEGEP students to take three additional French courses, rather than three core curriculum courses in French, was a welcome improvement over the earlier plan. However, the policy is still problematic, especially for students who have trouble with languages or have recently arrived from another province. Including so many second-language courses in the CEGEP curriculum could mean their grades and thus career opportunities will suffer.

Bill 96 also will play a significant role in closing the tap on international talent coming to Quebec to work, due to the three-year non-renewable cap on the number of years children of foreign workers can attend school in English if the parents are here on a temporary basis. For months, the EMSB along with many others, has been calling for the government to maintain the status quo.

If the Bill 96 approach had been in place four decades ago, U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris would probably not have been a 1981 graduate of Westmount High School. Her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, a breast-cancer scientist originally from Chennai, India, brought Harris and her sister, Maya, to Montreal for several years when she took a job teaching at McGill University and doing research at the Jewish General Hospital. This talented academic might not have accepted this position if told her children could not benefit from a bilingual education in Quebec.

Bill 21 and Bill 40 are other examples of how the government is putting its political agenda ahead of student success.

Bill 21, which bans the wearing of religious symbols by our teachers, conflicts with our values and our mission and with those of all Quebecers as expressed in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. As the case of Fatemeh Anvari, the Chelsea teacher who was moved to a non-classroom role for wearing a hijab underscores how we have had to refuse promotions to some qualified candidates and employment for others. And of course, many talented young people have simply not applied or have left the province.

As for Bill 40, which calls for the replacement of democratically elected school boards with government-appointed service centre boards, we maintain that it violates our right as an official language minority community "to manage and control our school system." If Bill 40 is implemented — it is on hold pending a court ruling — it would transfer decision-making from community representatives to bureaucrats in Quebec City who are far away from the day-to-day realities of our students, parents and staff.

Despite recent challenges, the EMSB continues to enjoy the highest success rate on the island of Montreal and battle for the top position in the province. We succeeded because we adapted and offered a variety of models of instruction during the pandemic and because we are 100-per-cent focused on our students. Unfortunately, our masters in Quebec City are not on the same wavelength.

Joe Ortona is chair of the English Montreal School Board.

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