

# Opinion: School transfers and the state of anglo relations in Quebec

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Parents listen during a special EMSB meeting Monday on the possible transfer of three English-language schools to the francophone sector. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) received a formal 30-day notice from Education Minister Jean-François Roberge that he intends to invoke

## emergency powers to transfer three school buildings to the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'île.

In three weeks, these schools risk being lost to the English-speaking community even though the Education Act calls for an 18-month consultation prior to the closure of a school. There has been no consultation with local parents or the wider English-speaking community.

Our community has a constitutional right to control and manage its schools. The government cannot arbitrarily remove and redeploy our educational infrastructures. Yet after the Riverdale High debacle in February, this is the second time this year the minister has employed this extraordinary confiscation power.

Overcrowding in French boards is a result of government decisions and the solution lies with the Ministry of Education and the French boards. If they underinvested in school infrastructure it is not the responsibility of our boards or our community to provide a solution.

Our schools are located where they are needed. Student numbers may be down, but local communities atrophy when schools close and students must travel out of their neighbourhoods to attend an English school.

The EMSB made a number of goodwill gestures, including offering to transfer the Galileo Adult Education Centre, with its 60 classrooms. While Roberge should have had no role in the negotiation of this transfer, he intervened improperly to block it.

This unfortunate chain of events is a powerful illustration of why the English-speaking community needs strong, democratically elected school boards. It also illustrates how the government seems ill-informed about our community and how it embarks on important policy initiatives without any useful input from, or understanding of, the interests or rights of our community.

The Secretariat for Relations with English-speaking Quebecers was established in the premier's office last year with a mandate to provide a channel for policy input to the government during the public policy development process. Sadly, input from our community into government decisions has deteriorated, not improved.

The civil service and political decision-makers seem as indifferent to our community interests as they ever were. If the secretariat was not consulted on these initiatives it is a pointless exercise in public relations. If its opinion was solicited, it either offered bad advice as to the needs and rights of our community, or its input was ignored. In any case the secretariat can only be counted as a disappointing failure in respect of this key element of its mandate.

Instead the secretariat has acted as a channel of some public funding to a variety of worthy community projects in a very familiar political manoeuvre of buying some goodwill with well-targeted cash. A few dollars here and there to well-meaning local community projects is of little consolation when we are facing the loss of our school boards, the curtailment of health and social services in our language, the imposition of unconstitutional restrictions on our personal freedoms, and whatever else may follow.

We call upon the premier to engage with Quebec's English-speaking community, as he has taken the responsibility at the cabinet table for this file. We ask him to instruct his senior ministers — Roberge first — to enter into constructive dialogue with our community leadership. We call upon him to restructure and repopulate his secretariat so that it can truly function as a channel of advice from, awareness of and connection with the Quebec's English-speaking population.

Less than one per cent of the civil service is drawn from our community. The system seems unaware of our interests. This problem can be addressed. Today's English-speaking community is committed to a positive, engaged role in Quebec society. It's time to let us in.

Geoffrey Chambers is president of the Quebec Community Groups Network, which brings together 60 English-language community organizations across Quebec.

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