

# Religious symbols survey existed under Liberals, CAQ says

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge calls out the previous government and school boards over questionnaire sent out to principals.

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Quebec's Education Ministry sent a detailed questionnaire to school principals across the province last fall seeking information about religious symbols and requests for reasonable accommodation.

The questionnaire, drawn up in June 2018 while the Liberals were in power, was sent out two months before the later request by ministry officials — now working under a Coalition Avenir Québec government — sparked their own controversy by phoning school boards asking for information about staff who wear religious symbols.

The revelation sparked a war of words between the current Minister of Education, Jean-François Roberge, and the previous minister, Sébastien Proulx, who called separate news conferences to blame each other for dabbling in the issue and letting fly accusations of religious profiling.

The questionnaire sought information about reasonable accommodation requests for religious, “ethnocultural” and linguistic reasons and whether such requests created discomfort. It defined “ethnocultural” as ethnic or national origin, race or colour.

It also asked about the “intercultural relations climate” at schools. Some of the questions asked whether there were absences at the school “without cause related to ethnocultural identity” or to religious identity.

Not public until this week, Roberge pounced on the revelation to deflect attention from his own government’s probe on the symbols question Tuesday by saying the previous Liberal government had the survey drawn up in June, which was then sent to more than 2,600 schools in November.

The Coalition Avenir Québec government was elected on Oct. 1.

Roberge said the survey was sent without his knowledge, and that he got wind of its existence about a week ago. He said he waited to check its authenticity before calling a last-minute news conference to make it public.

“Several school boards said this (the CAQ’s phone survey) was scandalous, that it was terrible,” Roberge told reporters. “The Liberal Party even used the word ‘profiling.’”

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“It seems last June the Liberal Party didn’t think it was profiling. It seems last fall, school directors also did not think this was abnormal, because 1,100 schools answered the questionnaire and this was not a scandal.”

Later in the day, former Liberal minister Proulx went on his own attack, telling reporters that while bureaucrats in his department drew up the survey while he was technically minister, he was not aware of it and never authorized anyone to send it to school principals.

He noted the survey actually went out in November, which was when Roberge was minister.

“I am unaware of the content of this survey, I would not have authorized a survey asking who is wearing religious symbols,” Proulx told reporters. “You know this (symbols issue) is not our battle, this is not something we (in the Liberals) are debating.”

According to documents released by Roberge Tuesday, a questionnaire was first sent to schools in June 2016. Schools were to be surveyed every two years.

In November, the questionnaire was sent to principals at 2,616 preschools, elementary schools, high schools, professional training centres and adult education centres.

Schools had until Dec. 14 to respond to the survey in writing.

A summary of the findings reveals about 45 per cent of schools responded. The vast majority — 93 per cent — said there were no tensions in their schools caused by employees wearing religious symbols.

The survey showed there were religious symbols present in 16 per cent of schools, but most were not worn by teachers. The survey showed 46.9 per cent were worn by support staff and 38.8 per cent by teachers.



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"What's important for us is that very few teachers wear symbols," Roberge said.

Roberge said the CAQ government was accused of intolerance after it was revealed the Immigration Department had asked the education, public security and justice ministries to check if information about the number of employees wearing religious symbols existed.

Among the questions the survey asked schools to elaborate on:

- In the last 12 months, did your school receive requests for accommodations of a religious, ethnocultural or linguistic nature?
- Are there staff members who wear religious symbols at your school?
- How many wear religious symbols (whether it be regularly or on an occasional basis)?
- What is the job ranking of those staff members who wear religious symbols?

The survey document said the findings would be analyzed "taking into account the number of students stemming from immigration."

The survey contained three parts:

**Part One** asked for elaboration on requests for accommodations made via legal channels. Citing Quebec's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the survey requested details on specific types of accommodations — those based on religion, ethnic or national origin, race or colour ("ethnocultural motive") and language.

**Part Two** asked for details on "voluntary" accommodations made by schools in order to "favour inclusion and avoid problematic situations" that emerge from "diversity" in the school population. Schools were asked to give examples of how they coped with those requests.

**Part Three** asked questions about the school's atmosphere when it came to "intercultural relations." Among the questions in this section: Whether or not there had been any conflicts between ethnic or linguistic groups. This section also asked for a head count on how many staff members wore religious symbols.

Roberge called the news conference after the Montreal Gazette contacted his department on Tuesday to ask who ordered the questionnaire be sent to schools and why it asked them for a head count of personnel who wear religious symbols and what categories of personnel wear them, about their discomfort with requests for reasonable accommodation based on religion, race and ethnicity and language and other questions.

The newspaper received a copy of the questionnaire from a source who wished to remain anonymous.

Before Roberge's public outing of the questionnaire, some of the school boards on the island initially told the Gazette they didn't receive the four-page form and weren't aware of it.

For example, the English Montreal School Board initially said through spokesperson Michael Cohen that it didn't know about the questionnaire and that none of its schools had received it.

However, once Roberge spoke to reporters, Cohen said he was “trying to find out.”

The Commission scolaire de Montréal said early Tuesday that it would look into whether anyone was aware of the questionnaire. Following Roberge’s scrum, CSDM spokesperson Alain Perron said the schools that belong to the board had received the questionnaire directly from the Education Department in December.

It was the schools’ administrators who received the questionnaire and not the school board itself, Perron added. However, “some people here (at the school board) were aware of the tenor of the questionnaire ... since December,” he said.

He also said the questionnaire was sent to all the schools in Quebec.



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“The administrations of the schools answer the Education Department’s questionnaires directly,” Perron said. The department occasionally needs statistics from them, he said.

Asked why the CSDM didn’t denounce the questionnaire when it became aware of it, yet later criticized a phone call from the Education Department at the end of January asking for a head count of personnel who wear religious symbols, Perron said: “You can ask the question why the government asked these questions.”

Meanwhile, the French-language Marguerite-Bourgeoys school board said through spokesperson Gina Guillemette that it didn’t receive the questionnaire. She gave the same answer before and after Roberge’s scrum.

The [EMSb’s human resources committee has called an emergency meeting for Wednesday evening \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-calls-emergency-meeting-for-wednesday-on-quebec-plan-to-ban-religious-symbols\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-calls-emergency-meeting-for-wednesday-on-quebec-plan-to-ban-religious-symbols) to hear the public’s opinions on the Legault government’s plan to legislate a ban on religious symbols worn in the workplace by public servants in positions of authority, including teachers.

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