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# Student commissioner brings a fresh face and new voice to EMSB




*When Jamie Fabian, a 20-year-old Concordia student, is sworn in next month he will become one of the youngest commissioners ever in Quebec.*

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette  
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"I will bring a new perspective and I have a lot to offer in terms of ideas," said Jamie Fabian, who studies Community, Public Affairs and Policy at Concordia University. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

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conversation at home.

His grandfather, a holocaust survivor from Hungary, was a keen student of history and closely followed Canadian politics.



“He was opinionated and was always watching the news,” Fabian recalled. “Those are things that I picked up on. He was definitely a role model.”

So when Joe Ortona began recruiting candidates to run as a school commissioner in Montreal’s west end, Fabian’s name ended up at the top of his list — even though he’s only a few years out of high school.

“He’s a smart guy,” said Ortona, who was acclaimed chairperson of the English Montreal School Board in September. “He seemed very eager and up for the challenge.”

When Fabian is sworn in next month, he will be one of the youngest-ever [school commissioners in Quebec](#).

The 20-year-old university student was also acclaimed last month in a ward that covers Côte-St-Luc and Hampstead.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

When the new council of commissioners holds its first public meeting on Nov. 11, after one year of trusteeship, Fabian will be more than just a fresh face at the table.

“I will bring a new perspective and I have a lot to offer in terms of ideas,” said Fabian, who studies Community, Public Affairs and Policy at Concordia University.

One issue he wants to tackle is improving mental health services for EMSB students.

A recent Léger poll revealed that 46 per cent of Montrealers aged 18-24 report symptoms of generalized anxiety or major depression.

The mental health crisis among young people has existed for years and has come to light more recently

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“A lot of people don’t seem to recognize the extent of the mental health crisis with young people,” said Fabian, who attended high school at Royal West Academy.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Too many students are plagued with stress, anxiety and body image issues, he said. Often, social media posts exacerbate the problems.

“When (students) see this idealized version of other people’s lives; it seems like everyone else’s lives are perfect and yours isn’t,” Fabian said.

“They’re constantly comparing themselves to friends, classmates or favourite influencers. Students need to learn to be happy with themselves.”

Male teens, in particular, find it difficult to discuss mental health issues with peers, Fabian said, noting: “It’s a lot more taboo.”

Fabian honed his problem-solving skills while working in the constituency office of Liberal MP Anthony Housefather for two summers. He helped constituents with immigration issues and fielded phone calls about legislation that legalized the sale of marijuana.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“It was very rewarding to deal with issues that affect people’s lives,” he said.

Fabian has participated in debate clubs and Model United Nations conferences and says he’s not afraid to ask tough questions.

Housefather said Fabian has attributes that will make him an effective school board commissioner.

“He’s personable and energetic and he genuinely cares about the community he lives in,” said Housefather, who represents the Mount Royal riding.

“Not every 20-year-old or 90-year-old can be elected, but I think some of them can be,” Housefather added. “People shouldn’t exclude people from being elected because they’re young or old.”

While Fabian is eager to start addressing the needs of students and school principals in his ward, it’s not clear how long commissioners in English school boards will be in their posts.

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Under Bill 40, Quebec has abolished school boards in the French system and replaced them with service centres that do not have elected commissioners. However, the new law doesn't apply to English boards because it's being challenged in court.

The English boards contend that Bill 40 is unconstitutional because it erodes the English community's ability to manage its school system. The case could end up before the Supreme Court of Canada.

Ortona said he's happy to have Fabian on board and is open to hearing his ideas.

"I don't want 15 Joe Ortonas around the table," Ortona said. "I have selected a team of east-enders and west-enders, with a mix of youth and experience."

After a year under the stewardship of trustee Marlene Jennings, and with new faces on the council of commissioners, Fabian hopes the years of infighting and acrimony at the EMSB are over.

"School boards are there to serve students and to better their lives and education," he said. "That's what I want the council of commissioners to start focusing on."

[kwilton@postmedia.co](mailto:kwilton@postmedia.co)

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