

Professional

School boards across Canada fight for their survival

Many provinces have abolished school boards – or tried to. But finding a better alternative that ensures locals are heard has proved challenging



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December 5, 2023



Entrance of the Commission Scolaire School Board in Westmount, Montreal. (Dreamstime)

During the pandemic, thousands of Quebec children sat in poorly ventilated classrooms in decades-old schools, says Katherine Korakakis, chair of the English Montreal School Board's parents committee.

When Quebec's education minister announced plans to [install](#) carbon monoxide detectors in schools, many English schools boards decided to take a different route. On the advice of health experts, they installed [air purifiers](#), says Korakakis.

"The parent community felt safer having these air purifiers in the classrooms," she said. "That allowed us to then send our kids with an extra layer of protection."

Korakakis, who is also President of the English Parents Committee Association of Quebec, says the English school boards could only take this action because they are self-governing institutions. "School boards play an integral part in... having the voice of the community heard."

Yet, the usefulness of school boards — often touted as one of the most basic forms of democracy in Canada — continues to be debated in many provinces. Some governments and experts say they are ineffective and not focused on students' education. Others suggest there is no better alternative that ensures local communities' needs are met.

'Obligation to consult'

In February 2020, Quebec passed [Bill 40](#), a law that aims to turn all public school boards into service centres. Unlike boards, service centres are run by non-elected officials and take significant direction from the government. Their role is to [manage](#) some decisions over the school's operations.

There are [nine](#) English public school boards in Quebec, in a sea of [60](#) new French service centres.

The province's argument for introducing Bill 40 was that boards are expensive and garner low community participation.

In the past, Quebec [spent](#) \$11 million a year on school board commissioner salaries, according to a public briefing. Instating service centres was expected to lower that figure to \$1.5 million a year.

But a few months after Bill 40 was passed, Quebec English school boards filed an injunction against the government stating the law violates minority language rights guaranteed in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

School boards give schools the ability to refuse the government's request to give up land or ban prayers, says Giuseppe Ortona, chair at the English Montreal School Board.

"We have an obligation to consult the community," said Ortona. "We make decisions, we set policies, and all of that is done with a sense of accountability because we are elected."

This year, the Superior Court of Quebec [ruled](#) in favour of the English school board. The government plans to appeal the decision.

'Leaps and bounds'

The political controversy playing out in Quebec has taken place in several provinces.

Prince Edward Island eliminated local school boards in 2015, only to re-establish them in 2022. Nova Scotia abolished its seven English school boards in 2018 and replaced them with regional educational centres that are led by government-appointed directors.

Government support for, or opposition to, local school boards, "swings like a pendulum," says Josh Watt, executive director of the Manitoba School Board Association.

Watt knows. The Manitoba government introduced legislation to abolish school boards in March 2021. After great public outcry, the government withdrew the bill later that year.

The relationship between the school boards and provincial government improved by “leaps and bounds” after the bill was withdrawn, says Watt. The Progressive Conservative government released several reports on education in its final months in office, before being defeated in October’s provincial election.

Five years after abolishing English school boards, Nova Scotia is still trying to figure out how to ensure local perspectives are considered in decisions about education.

In addition to its new regional educational centres, schools have volunteer-staffed school advisory councils that give recommendations about how a school should run.

Last week, the Nova Scotia government announced plans to increase the power of these councils. The plans include government funding for council projects to improve student well-being and achievement, starting a new annual conference for council members and holding public meetings between regional executive directors and parents three times a year.

Education expert and consultant Avis Glaze, who had recommended in a 2018 report that Nova Scotia eliminate its English school boards, did so because the boards were ineffective. Between 2006 and 2011, the province had appointed temporary directors of three separate school boards because of governance problems.

But Glaze is not against school boards in general. “I am for school boards that are being successful in educating all children successfully and who have that focus,” she said.

When she made her recommendation in 2018, she also recommended that the decision to eliminate boards be reviewed in five years.

But five years on, the Nova Scotia government is not planning to reinstate the local English school boards.

“We heard that people want to better understand what is happening in the education system and the priorities of their school, region, and the province. We are confident we can do that through the actions we announced,” the department of education and early childhood development told Canadian Affairs in a statement.

Duopoly

Local communities don’t have that much power over schools, says Robert Berard, a professor of education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax.

“That idea of profound community involvement in school issues, if it existed at all, would have existed only in very small rural communities in the province,” said Berard, who teaches courses about the history of education.

In his opinion, public education is controlled by a “duopoly” of the teachers’ union and provincial government.

But proponents of school boards say they’re crucial to local democracy.

“Locally elected school boards are the longest standing form of local elected governance in most of the country,” said Alan Campbell, president of the Canadian School Boards Association.

“The best way for community representation to influence public education is through the local school board.”

School boards “bring the public into public education,” said Watt, from the Manitoba School Board Association. School boards may not be able to charge taxes to support schools, but people can easily find their budgets and see how they’re spending money, he says.

Few people vote for school board officials. School board elections are commonly held at the same time as municipal elections. Low voter turnout in municipal elections often means few people vote in school board elections.

“If turnout is an indication of public engagement in an election, then most Canadians are distinctly disengaged from school board politics,” wrote Michael McGregor and Jack Lucas, professors at Toronto Metropolitan University and the University of Calgary, in a 2019 article in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.

McGregor and Lucas found that in Toronto’s 2014 election and Calgary’s 2017 election, voter turnout for school boards hovered at around 40 per cent — less than the 50 per cent voter turnout for municipal elections.

Parents in general and parents who have school-aged children had similar voting patterns, their research says.

But “democracy isn’t just about elections,” says Annie Kidder, executive director at People for Education, a non-partisan research and advocacy organization focused on public education.

Democracy is also about access to elected representatives. Even if a person does not vote, they can still bring their concerns to a local school board representative.

Local school boards, said Kidder, are “a very accessible form of democracy. It’s very hard to think about ‘How do I access a provincial government?’ But it’s very easy to access your school board.”