

Anglos support school boards: poll

Only 12 per cent favour Quebec government plan to abolish them

RENÉ BRUEMMER

The vast majority of English speakers in Quebec feel school boards are essential for the health of their education systems and should remain independent to protect minority English-language rights, a new Léger poll has found.

Only 12 per cent support Premier François Legault's plan to replace the boards with regional service centres run by government civil servants.

"Often the argument has been nobody cares about school boards and people don't think they're important, even in the English-speaking communities, so, we thought it was important to test that," said Geoffrey Kelley, the former West Island MNA who is now chairman of APPELE-Québec, a coalition of organizations formed in late April to fight the Coalition Avenir Québec's plan to abolish the school boards.

"I think the polling numbers were quite eloquent in saying that people still think it's important to have elected officials making decisions for the English community."

The poll of 1,001 English-speaking Quebecers, titled Study on the Perceptions of English-Speaking Quebecers Regarding School Boards, was conducted from March 13 to March 21. The CAQ has argued that abolishing 72 school boards, including nine English ones, would reduce bureaucracy and save money that could be put into student services.

The poll was taken before Education Minister Jean-François Roberge announced in early May he would force the transfer of three

east-end Montreal English-language schools to the French system to solve overcrowding issues unless the English school board could offer alternatives.

Most of the poll respondents (88 per cent) said they were aware of the existence of their region's English school board, and half said they knew or had heard of their local school commissioner.

Two-thirds said they felt school boards contribute to the efficient functioning of elementary and secondary public schools, and overall, 85 per cent of respondents said the school boards are important to them.

"We've said all along, we're not saying that school boards are perfect," Kelley said. "We're open to looking at suggestions on how to reform the electoral process and how they operate, but we think the schools boards as they are play an important role in our communities and I think they're something that should be protected."

Kelley noted that schools and the boards that administer them often play a crucial role in small communities, where schools serve as libraries, adult education systems, cub scout meeting places and sports gymnasiums.

Close to 90 per cent of respondents said the English school board was important for their community's identity, while slightly less than half said they consider it as a hub of community life.

Just over 60 per cent said they were aware of the government's plan to abolish school boards. Three-quarters said they felt a local school board would do a better job at making decisions on English public education than a govern-

ment of Quebec civil servant.

Minority education language rights were of particular importance, with 90 per cent saying it was important to them, and 87 per cent saying school boards should remain independent to protect those rights. Only 12 per cent supported the CAQ's proposal.

"We're talking numbers in the mid-70s all the way to 90 per cent supporting the principles of a minority linguistic community having a say in the education of its children," Kelley said.

Despite the support, only 31 per cent of respondents voted in the last school board elections, and only 30 per cent said they intended to vote in the next ones. Low voter turnout — it was about 17 per cent for English boards and five per cent for French boards in the 2014 elections — has been cited as one of the justifications for their abolition.

Respondents said they were much more likely to vote, however, if internet voting was allowed (82 per cent) or if the votes were held at the same time as municipal elections (74 per cent), as is done in several other provinces and which the Quebec boards are considering.

The poll results signal that the boards remain important to the community, Kelley said, and he hopes the government will pay heed.

"My hope is that before legislation is tabled, some consultations with the English school community and the English community leadership in general, should be done to avoid a sterile court battle. Consult the English community — it's proud of its school boards, proud of its schools, and before passing legislation, I think at a minimum some conversation, some dialogue should be done."

rbruemmer@postmedia.com

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