

Brief on
the fluctuating demographics in the education sector
presented by
the Quebec English School Boards Association
(QESBA)
to
the Education Commission of the National Assembly

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Introduction

The Quebec English School Boards Association, (QESBA), in collaboration with the Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Quebec, (ADGESBQ), welcomes this opportunity to address the Education Commission on the issue of fluctuating demographics in the education sector. The Commission's initiative is timely in that increasingly there is a recognition that the future of Quebec's social and economic development is closely linked to an education system which succeeds in providing students with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes to become productive citizens equipped to participate in a society that is in constant and rapid evolution.

Achieving this grand objective in a manner which respects the rights of all students, irrespective of region and language of instruction, to receive educational services and enjoy equal opportunities to succeed, represents a major challenge at a time when demographic forces threaten to create inequalities. Responding to this challenge will require durable and long-term commitments by the government to ensure equality of educational opportunities throughout Quebec as well as collaborative initiatives between regional and local institutions.

The Association does not pretend to have solutions to all of the problems and questions associated with the demographic challenges facing Quebec. However, we intend to identify some conditions and possible measures that would assist the education sector in responding to the phenomenon of the fluctuating demographics.

Portrait of English school system

The English school system is managed by a network of nine English-language school boards, which, in 2001-2002, provided educational services to approximately 105,000 students at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels. Collectively, the nine school boards manage 340 elementary and secondary schools and employ approximately 10,000 individuals as teachers, support staff, nonteaching professionals and administrators.

To a large extent, the English school system reflects the linguistic make-up of Quebec's population as a whole. With its 105,000 students, it constitutes approximately 10% of the total school-age population with 52% of these students residing in the territories of the two English-language school boards on the Island of Montreal.

Although concentrated in the Montreal region, it is important to note that the English school network is present throughout Quebec with schools serving communities in the Lower North Shore and the Gaspésie in the East all the way to Val d'Or and Noranda in the West. Excluding the Island of Montreal, there are approximately 50,000 students throughout the regions receiving English-language education in 215 schools.

To complete the portrait of the English school network and to provide a context for the Commission, it is important to recall some common and key characteristics that define the English school system, particularly in the regions. The first is that a significant proportion of English schools have fewer than 200 students – a benchmark which is often used to define a small school.

A recent survey undertaken by the Association reveals that in the regions served by four English-language school boards (Eastern Shores, Western Quebec, Eastern Townships, New Frontiers), 60% of the schools in those regions had 200 or fewer students (48/80 schools).

The most striking example in this regard is the Eastern Shores School Board serving the Gaspésie, Magdalen Islands and Lower North Shore which operates 18 schools, all of which have 200 or fewer students. In the Eastern Townships School Board, serving the Estrie region, 13/23 schools fall in this category while in the Western Quebec School Board, serving the Outaouais and Abitibi-Témiscamingue regions, 12/26 schools fall in the same category.

This portrait becomes even more revealing when we examine the proportion of schools with fewer than 100 students. Based on the same survey, 27% of the schools in the four school boards concerned have fewer than 100 students (22/80 schools).

A second common and key characteristic of the English school network is the dispersion factor. Given the immense size of the territories of English school boards and the dispersion of the student population, schools, in order to remain viable, are faced with student encatchment basins that extend well beyond the local municipality. In many cases, the English school is not only the last school in the village but also the last school in the MRC!

Demographic projections

According to MEQ projections, the total preschool, elementary and secondary student enrollment for the English sector is expected to decline from 105,000 students in 2001-2002 to 102,800 by 2006-2007 – a loss of 3.2%.

On a regional basis, modest growth is projected for the English school boards serving the Island of Montreal, Laval, Lower Laurentians, Quebec City and certain sectors of the Montérégie, while declines are projected for the Gaspésie, Estrie, Outaouais and other regions of Quebec. Collectively, for the nine English school boards, the MEQ is projecting a decline in the preschool enrollments by 2006-2007 of 1,220 students representing a loss of 15% compared to 2001-2002. The preschool enrollment projection is a critical indicator of the future health of the system as these students move up through the elementary and secondary levels.

While the overall projections for the English school system reflect the general trend predicted for Quebec's school system as a whole, it is important to note that medium and longer term student enrollment projections for the English sector should be treated with caution. Past experience has shown that projections for the English sector (either growth or decline) can be influenced by factors that are difficult to predict in advance. These factors include the impact on student enrollments resulting from the economic and investment climate particularly in the Greater Montreal region as well as language of schooling choices made by parents who have the option of enrolling their children in either the French or English-language school system.

Our experience with past demographic projections has shown that in light of these factors and others such as interprovincial population movements can result in significant differences between official projections and reality.

Managing declining enrollment

In its background document, the Commission raises a series of questions focusing on how local communities can respond to the challenges associated with declining enrollments as well as the conditions or measures required to facilitate the maintenance of schools in danger of closing.

At the outset, it is important to state that the English-speaking community has a profound attachment to its schools. English schools, particularly in the regions, are often the only remaining public institution signifying the presence of an English community and as such are seen as the focal point for the expression of the community's identity. Throughout the province, the school is not only a building where educational services are provided but also the centre of social and community activities – a place where the local population can share and express their heritage, cultural values and regional attachment.

Because of its unique status, English-language school boards have traditionally demonstrated great sensitivity in situations where local schools are in danger of closing. In many cases, closure of an English school would not only deprive the community of its last institution, but also result in unacceptable increases in student transportation time. In this regard, it is useful to note that in a study undertaken by the Association in 2001, the average number of kilometers for a school bus in the rural regions is 62 km one way or 124 km in a normal school day resulting in daily travel times of over two hours for students.

Hence, the realities of dispersed communities, huge encatchment zones and the attachment of the English community to its institutions have resulted in a general approach by English school boards to maintain its schools as evidenced by the number and proportion of schools with fewer than 200 and 100 students.

Local/regional solutions

In an effort to respect the will of communities to maintain their schools and with the objective of offering a viable educational setting for students, the English sector has developed certain organizational models which merit attention.

The first one involves providing elementary and secondary education within the same building or facility. This approach of regrouping students within the same school has the advantage of creating opportunities for students to remain in their communities for the duration of their studies, strengthening the links between the school and community and developing collaborative teaching practices across all cycles in the school.

This type of organizational approach has been implemented in many areas where student enrollments at the elementary and secondary levels have fallen to a point where maintaining separate schools is not viable and where transportation to the closest alternative school is not feasible.

Current examples of this type of K-11 model in the English sector include Chibougamau, Noranda, Maniwaki, Namur and the Pontiac region as well as other territories across the province under the jurisdiction of English-language school boards.

A second approach, although not widespread at the moment, involves the sharing of a school or facility between the French and English populations in a particular municipality.

This model of cohabitation is illustrated in the municipality of Sutton in the Estrie region where, within the same school building, two deeds of establishment, coexist. While the two schools maintain their own educational projects, the model offers opportunities for collaborative activities and reduces building maintenance costs and other fixed costs for both school boards involved.

It should be noted, however, that the success of this approach is dependent upon extensive community consultation and commitment.

Issues requiring additional attention

Although school boards have developed different organizational models to maintain schools facing declining enrollments, there are a number of other issues which have a direct impact on the future viability of these schools and which merit attention and action at the governmental level.

The first revolves around the management of human resources and more particularly the recruitment and retention of teaching and other personnel.

English school boards, especially those serving the regions, continue to experience serious difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers and other personnel. This problem is particularly acute at the secondary cycle two level in the specialized teaching areas of mathematics and science as well as in certain technical-vocational options.

While not all the root causes and solutions to this problem have been identified, some preliminary research indicates that Quebec universities are experiencing difficulties in recruiting students to their faculties of education and that the retention rate of Anglophone teachers under the age of 35 is 2-6 times less than their Francophone colleagues.

Hence, the dynamic we are witnessing in the English sector is one where recruitment to the faculties of education is lower than the quotas established; where younger teachers are more likely to leave Quebec for other provinces and where teachers in the regions are more likely to leave for teaching posts in the larger, urban areas.

As a short-term measure to address the issue of recruitment we would recommend that the government introduce a one-year (12 month) specialized university program to allow non-education B.A. graduates to enter the teaching profession.

A second and related issue to the management of human resources in the context of declining student enrollment is mobility of personnel.

Over the past several decades, collective agreements have been negotiated which provide for a job-security system for unionized personnel as well as restrictions regarding the movement of personnel between positions and places of work. One such restriction is the right of tenured employees on availability to refuse a vacant position which is more than 50 km from their place of work or domicile.

In a context where some school boards will be managing situations of the fluctuating demographics within their territory and where schools more often than not are separated by more than 50 km, school boards may very well be forced to hire teachers and other personnel for vacant positions refused by existing personnel who are in excess or on availability within the same board.

The collective bargaining process of the past several decades has created a human resources management model which no longer fits the needs of the education system and which is difficult to reconcile with the growing movement towards a more efficient use of public funds.

Given that 2/3 of education spending is in human resources, the issue of mobility and retraining requires close and rapid attention by the government.

A third issue requiring attention and which would assist small schools, particularly in the regions, is access to new communication technologies. Specifically, the plan announced in last November's budget to support schools and other local institutions in accessing high-speed, wide-band telecommunication networks was a step in the right direction. However, the funding commitment needs to be increased and the project approval process accelerated.

A related measure requiring more government attention and support is distance education. This form of teaching and learning is of particular interest to small rural schools and can be a very effective model to deliver educational services to students who would otherwise not have access to specialized courses or training.

Access to these new forms of technology and learning is critical in terms of solidifying the links between the local school and the community by providing learning opportunities for all members of the community.

A fourth issue of particular concern to the English school network requiring attention focuses on the availability of complementary student services.

Over the years, English schools, particularly in the regions, have experienced increasing difficulties in securing student services linked to the mandates of regional or local health and social service bodies. Many schools do not have access to social workers and other professionals. Where resources are available, they are often spread between several schools separated by significant travelling distances.

Over and above the issue of the level of services available in English, we believe there is a lack of coordination between the MEQ and MSSS in terms of mandates as well as the absence of a plan which will provide a durable and sustained level of services to students.

Issues related to increasing student enrollment

The phenomenon of increasing student enrollment also raises certain problems which require attention.

Among these is the delay often experienced by school boards in securing the necessary authorizations to proceed with the planning and construction of the additional student places resulting from increasing student enrollment.

School boards in this situation are often faced with schools that are overcrowded or renting facilities not necessarily suited for students and teachers. In addition, the frustration of the educational community grows as pressure for space such as increased day care services also grows.

Delays are also experienced due to protracted discussions between municipalities and school boards regarding the land to be ceded by the municipality for the construction of a new school. In a number of cases, the property offered by the municipality does not meet the needs of the board with the result that delays inevitably raise the final construction costs.

Secondly, the funding model for school boards experiencing increased student enrollment is one year behind and in some cases can create organizational difficulties in terms of availability of certain complementary services as well as in student transportation.

Conclusion

In our introduction, we stated that there is an increasing recognition that the future of Quebec's social and economic development is closely linked to an education system that provides for equality of learning opportunities irrespective of region or size of a school.

It is clear that the phenomenon of the fluctuating demographics poses serious obstacles in the attainment of this objective and while school boards and their communities have demonstrated a consistent commitment to support and maintain schools, their capacity to do so in the future will be limited without government action on a number of issues.

For the English sector, action is required to address the problems of teacher recruitment, mobility of personnel, support for new learning technologies and the availability of complementary student services.

If these issues are to be addressed with the objective of supporting viable learning and training opportunities throughout Quebec, a clear and durable funding commitment must be made by the government to provide the necessary resources and conditions that will promote school success for all.