

Opinion: Why Côte-St-Luc city council opposes Quebec's school board reform



MITCHELL BROWNSTEIN, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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Voters lined up and waited as long as 1 and a half hours to vote at St. Monica Elementary School during the

advance polls for school board election in Montreal, on Sunday, October 26, 2014. *PETER MCCABE / THE GAZETTE*

Monday night, Côte-St-Luc city council passed a resolution opposing Bill 86, the Quebec government's plan to change how school boards are governed.

While this law would affect both French and English boards, it is a particular affront to the English-speaking community.

Bill 86 would eliminate the election of school board commissioners by members of the community, and replace them with councils that either would not be elected at all, or, could have a minority of community-elected councillors — if 15 per cent of parents request elections.

English-language school boards are the only level of government that the English-speaking community has an absolute right to control and manage. English-language education is a minority right that is protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and is one of the few ways in which the English community can express its voice and ensure its vibrant future in Quebec. Section 23 of the Charter confers upon the minority English-language community the right to manage and control its educational institutions. Such management and control is exercised through the election process. The community's designation of its own representatives to direct its educational facilities ensures the flourishing of our language and our unique culture as Anglo-Québécois.

Our fundamental rights are entrenched in the Charter in order for their inviolability to be enshrined with the utmost protection the law can offer. Constitutional guarantees are designed to protect Quebec's English-speaking minority rights regardless of the views of the members of the majority language group.

Passage of Bill 86 will be a decision of the National Assembly, where only a small minority of MNAs are members of the English-speaking

minority. This means the French-speaking majority of the members will be making fundamental decisions related to constitutionally protected English school boards against the will of the elected commissioners and without having properly consulted our community.

Education Minister François Blais claims that the reforms offer a greater say to parents. However the reforms completely lock out anyone who is not a parent of children in the school system or employee of the school system from being part of the process. Why are grandparents, future parents and every other community member — all of us having a vested interest in our schools — left out?

It is the antithesis of democracy and appears to be suspiciously like the health reforms, where previously elected health board administrators or hospital directors lost power to people named by the minister. Does anyone imagine a future Parti Québécois government will be appointing people to these functions in the health and now educational sector that will please the English-speaking community?

The entire process is extremely dangerous.

Our municipality has a large population of English-speaking residents, many of whom attend, have attended or have children or grandchildren who attend English-language public schools. Our city council strongly opposes these reforms and supports the election of school board commissioners by members of the community, not only parents, for fixed terms.

As elected municipal councillors, it is our duty to speak out in order to protect our minority groups in the same way as our council has presented Canadian Unity resolutions in the 1990s, led the fight to maintain our municipality's bilingual status, opposed the Charter of Values and supported other initiatives affecting the minority groups that we represent.

Our council will not stand idly by and allow this injustice to occur, and encourages other municipalities and the community at large to speak

up and be heard so that we can ensure a strong, vibrant future for the English-speaking community in Quebec.

Municipalities are administrative bodies that understand that grassroots involvement is essential for our institutions' prosperity. We are therefore requesting that all municipalities in Quebec adopt a similar stance and that our resolution be sent to the minister of Education, Higher Education and Research and the member of the National Assembly for D'Arcy McGee, the premier of Quebec, the member of Parliament for Mount Royal and the Canadian Minister of Heritage.

Mitchell Brownstein is a Côte-St-Luc city councillor and attorney.

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