

## **School Elections: the Search for Conditions Conducive to Our Democracy**

The parliamentary session concluded last December 8, therefore ending any possibility of introducing legislation of importance to Québec's society.

The Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA) and the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec (FCSQ) would like to express their profound disappointment toward the government's immobility on school democracy. It is high time to ensure conditions favorable to citizen action in school democracy. Both our associations have repeatedly alerted the government, either informally or by resolution, to the fact that the upcoming school elections are scheduled for November 2018, three weeks after the provincial elections.

Encouraging citizens to participate in these democratic bodies is a shared responsibility. Elected school officials must increase their visibility and highlight the educational issues in their communities. The Québec government must, at the very least, ensure the promotion of democracy at a local level; the Directeur général des élections du Québec (DGEQ) must ensure conditions favorable to an increased citizen participation; the media must also play their part by covering school election campaigns across Québec.

### **A New Democratic Context**

Since June 2013, provincial elections are held at a fixed date, every four years. This is also the case at the municipal and school levels, and now, at the federal electoral level. Until very recently, when the provincial government chose an election date, it would never have chosen a date within three weeks from another date already scheduled for elections at a different government level. Having the population of Québec vote twice within a three-week period does not encourage citizen participation and is light years from a government's responsibility to provide winning conditions fostering citizen democracy at a local level. It simply does not hold water.

### **Ensuring Winning Conditions**

The QESBA and the FCSQ suggest three conditions to improve citizen participation in electing school officials. The first, of course, consists in setting school elections within a time frame which furthers their promotion, their enhancement and citizen participation to the elections. Concretely, and we've been requesting this for a very long time, this means a simultaneous school-municipal vote, just like everywhere else in Canada. The other option is to set school elections within the current electoral cycle: municipal elections in 2017, provincial elections in 2018, federal elections in 2019 and, finally, school elections in 2020. This way, each democratic level has its own electoral year and all elections would be held in fall. The last solution consists in moving school elections to spring to ensure they receive all the media attention and promotion needed to increase voter turnout.

Although conceivable, the holding of elections next spring isn't ideal since the second condition we suggest involves modernization of the voting process. To allow the DGEQ to implement Internet voting, since that is what we are talking about here, the latter needs more time and resources, as it recently declared before the National Assembly's Committee on Institutions. We sincerely believe that in the twenty-first century, it is high time to make the digital shift and encourage citizen participation with Internet voting. Holding school elections in spring, or even in fall, would probably not give the QESBA enough time to guarantee a successful modernization of the voting mode and pave the way for the other democratic levels. Furthermore, the FCSQ adopted a resolution supporting the DGEQ's request to explore the feasibility of Internet voting for school elections.

The final winning condition is to send a clear and unambiguous message in favor of school elections, as with all electoral levels. Isn't it time to change the rhetoric and to work all together at its promotion? The promotion of a democratic action should be a matter of concern for all active forces of civil society, the government primarily, the opposition parties, municipal officials, DGEQ, all forms of media, the different groups as well, and lastly, those who believe a society is stronger when it engages in its institutions, gives its opinion, and attempts to influence its own development. We believe that promoting citizen participation in a specific election most certainly has a ripple effect on the other electoral levels and that conversely, the challenging of school democracy, invariably drags the other electoral levels into a slow slide toward citizen disengagement.

### **A Simple Request**

At the next parliamentary session, the QESBA and the FCSQ are requesting that the government introduce a bill proposing the postponement of school elections. We are asking the various opposition parties to work together to put in place conditions conducive to citizen participation in school elections. Regardless of political stripes lies your obligation to develop a sense of collective responsibility toward their democratic institutions, among the citizens of Québec.



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