



Understanding Conflicts with School Boards

In its August 2017 submission, AQED explained some of the reasons for the difficult relationship that many parent educators have with the educational authorities.

To read the details of these recommendations and AQED's position, please consult "Recommandations pour la mise en place d'une véritable collaboration entre les parents-éducateurs et l'État (août 2017)," on our website.

Today's educational system, developed according to the industrial logic of the 19th century, is not well-suited to all children or to the realities of the 21st century and the new challenges that await young people.

Too many parent educators are subjected to prejudice and harmful procedures in trying to homeschool their children. If parents do not enroll their children with a school board, it is neither by whim nor due to delinquency. Rather, parent educators have been discouraged from enrolling their children due to the stories of other parents who have experienced hostility, misunderstanding, threats, administrative harassment, total lack of support, etc. on the part of the educational authorities. School boards are looking for money to fill the shortfall in their budgets and to meet the needs of the thousands of children for which they care; to them, every unregistered child represents a financial loss.

The law and procedures currently in place do not account for the changing educational context, nor for the conflicts of interest – both financial and ideological – on the part of educational authorities, including school boards.

i. The Changing Context of Non-Institutional Education

Homeschooling has become a major phenomenon in North America. In the United States, Canada and many parts of Europe where a significant number of children are homeschooled, this phenomenon has been welcomed. Many of these places, including Scotland (Donnelley, 2007) and the Canadian provinces of Ontario (Van Pelt, 2015: 37-38) and British Columbia, have found oversight and management methods that are respectful of homeschooling families. Yet even though the number of homeschooled children in Quebec continues to rise, the province has not followed suit and has failed to recognize that homeschooling has changed over the decades. In Quebec, educational authorities clearly lack specific training on the subject. Many of them do not know the law, do not apply ministerial guidance, and are not aware of pedagogical approaches existing outside Quebec schools. Too often, the moment the educational authorities or the DYP hear about homeschooling, they presume educational neglect.

The association of educational neglect with non-attendance at school dates to a time when children were forced to work under miserable, precarious conditions in order to support their families. It goes without saying that child protection laws, labor laws, and social policies have happily put an end to such practices.

Although the refusal to send one's children to compulsory schooling at the beginning of the 20th century was part of an anti-modernization logic and nostalgia, the current motivations behind homeschooling in



Quebec reflect a desire to look to the future, to equip our young people with the tools necessary to adapt in a quickly changing society, and to foster their personal and professional growth.

ii. Ideological Conflicts of Interest: Defining Quality Education

The conflict between an individualized and respectful approach to each child's unique journey and the duty to protect the child's right to education is reflected in the debate around assessments. The correlation between school assessment and quality is too simplistic. Standardized assessments cannot provide a complete and objective evaluation of an educational experience that differs from that for which the assessments were developed. The experience of our members shows that it is difficult to combine an individualized approach with traditional assessments for several reasons.

a. Evaluation is not an end in itself

Many children are withdrawn from traditional schools because their mode of operation causes them harm. We should not then expect that continuing to impose the same educational logic (and forms of discipline and evaluation) will lead to better results at home.

Moreover, bureaucratic classification requirements should not be presented as primarily serving the needs of the child. Evaluations are not a guarantee of quality, nor are they a good measure of the educational experience. Evaluation is too often far removed from the learning experience. A lot of time and effort is devoted to preparing assessments in the school system, and the bureaucratic constraints of evaluation deprive children of valuable time without increasing educational value or guaranteeing quality. In this context, many families prefer to avoid contact with the school system in order to devote this precious time to enriching the educational experience, rather than fighting within an institution that operates in an arbitrary manner. Parent educators want to use their time to enrich their child's educational experience rather than meeting bureaucratic needs.

b. Home schooling is based on the principle that children have different ways and different rhythms of learning

Quality education must respect the rhythm of children and their needs. Adjustments along the way, breaks of several weeks or months in a more structured program, and experimentation (changing pedagogical approach, changing the pace of teaching, changing the materials used, etc.) are normal for a family looking for what will most inspire their child's desire to learn. The very idea of progression therefore presents itself differently in the context of non-institutional education.

It must be recognized that homeschooled children learn differently than children in a classroom setting. The anecdotal experience of our community shows that it is common to see children pick up several years' worth of schooling in a short period of time when they are motivated and when an individualized approach is taken. A motivated teenager can do in a few months of individualized instruction what he or she could do in a few years at school. While the concept of "delay" and "catch-up" makes sense within an institutional logic, it is very poorly adapted to the realities of homeschooling. It takes more time to train



autodidacts, but their achievements will allow them to build the bridges they need – and these bridges will often be much stronger.

All parents want their children to succeed and to become well-rounded adults, both personally and professionally. But we differ in terms of the point at which learning occurs. Upgrading and enrichment happens in an individualized way.

c. The Department of Education's policy for the evaluation of learning supports the idea of adapting the type of evaluation to the teaching context

The *Department of Education's* policy for the evaluation of learning currently in force in Quebec provides that "for some students who receive their training outside the formal school setting, it is sometimes necessary to adapt the assessment" and that "ongoing evaluation must be integrated into the learning process".¹ In addition, the Learning Evaluation Policy invites school authorities to consider assessment as a component of learning rather than as an entity in itself. For a homeschooled child, it is evident that an examination conducted at a school board office is an entity separate from his or her usual home-based learning, which is clearly contrary to the spirit of the school board's policy.

d. Requiring exam success from homeschooled children would require more from parents than from teachers at school

Inequity arises when parents are required to meet performance standards that are even greater than those required of schools. Deciding the fate of an educational program based solely on exam results is an unfair double standard. We cannot ask more of parents than we do of Quebec schools and teachers. This is even more important when the child has already experienced failure (either due to a lack of resources or despite the professional training of teachers and various other academic services offered).

e. Education in schools is so focused on exam preparation that even a child who does well in school may not be able to pass an exam developed by a teacher other than his or her own

It is unfair to impose standardized assessments on children who have not prepared for evaluation according to these standards throughout the year, which appears to be an end in itself for many school boards.

Some families desire an experience that more closely reproduces the classroom experience at home. At first glance, evaluation methods may not seem like a problem in these cases. But because school boards have an attitude of tolerance rather than support at best (and intolerance at worst), it is often difficult to prepare children for this kind of testing, as families are not given clear instructions, lack access to services and materials, and are thus unable to adequately prepare their child.

¹ See *Politique d'évaluation des apprentissages*



Inequity also arises due to the differences between school boards concerning student evaluation. It is unacceptable for school boards to possess so much latitude, as it results in the unequal treatment of families in different regions of Quebec.

f. School boards' lack of knowledge concerning pedagogical innovations undermines their legitimacy as educational evaluators

Under the Public Education Act, school boards are responsible for evaluating the educational experience of homeschooled students (Education Act, Section II, Section 15.4). However, a lack of information and training, as well as a lack of knowledge concerning educational innovations on the part of many school board authorities, mean that these bodies lack legitimacy when it comes to evaluation. The experience of our members has repeatedly demonstrated the difficulty – and even incapacity – of school boards to evaluate equivalent (but not identical) educational experiences. This incapacity is especially flagrant when the pedagogical approach varies from that of a traditional school, especially in the case of autonomous and democratic learning.

g. The current bill is not based on scientific evidence

The controls – or more accurately, the repression – proposed in the current bill are not based on scientific evidence. In fact, homeschooling does not pose any systematic problems; no studies have shown an increase in negligence or any other problem linked to homeschooling in Quebec. Rather, according to the Ombudsperson (2015), studies indicate that:

on average homeschooled children are as successful as children who attend school. They generally do not have any difficulties reintegrating into the school system nor in pursuing college and university studies. The percentage of homeschooled youth who successfully pursue higher education is similar to that of young people who attended conventional school. Moreover, there is no evidence that homeschooling has a negative impact on the socialization of children, and it is an error to assume that children can only socialize in an institutional setting.²

h. Forcing evaluation sends an offensive message to families

Requiring evaluations, without a formal request by families or as part of an educational program, sends a hostile message and is highly offensive to dedicated families. It reflects a lack of confidence on the part of the government concerning the role of the family in a child's education, and questions families' competence to ensure the best conditions for the development of their children. Opting to homeschool is not choosing the easy way. Parents must be very proactive, providing a tailor-made education adapted to their child's needs and rhythm, and remedying intolerable aspects of the traditional education system. A decision to homeschool is a decision to put the best interests of the child and his or her individual needs at the heart of the family's priorities.

² Protecteur du Citoyen. *La scolarisation à la maison : pour le respect du droit à l'éducation des enfants* : Rapport, Assemblée Nationale, 28 avril 2015, p. 12.



The current climate of mistrust and hostility, reflected in the emphasis placed on evaluation and monitoring, sends a message to parents that they do not care about the quality of their child's education. To remedy this, the legislative framework should demonstrate that the Quebec government trusts the good intentions of parents.

iii. Financial Conflicts of Interest: Are Values in the Right Place in this Time of Austerity and Budget Cuts?

School boards lose thousands of dollars when a child is exempted from school attendance. This amount can be doubled in the case of children with special needs. With a growing number of families choosing homeschooling, the financial amounts lost are substantial. School boards, in the context of budget cuts, therefore have no interest in facilitating or supporting parents in their efforts to homeschool their children – a fact that the experience of our members has demonstrated. Cooperation with school boards is often tedious and can threaten the integrity of parents' learning plans. Giving more money to school boards without changing their organizational structure will only reinforce the financial conflict of interest that weighs heavily on homeschooling families. In addition, as school boards rarely offer support for foreign institutions (correspondence programmes or programmes on the internet) and even fewer resources, the allocation of more money to school boards, without requiring a return of services and adequate support for these children, does not serve the well-being of homeschooled children. Instead, these funds are used to maintain a cumbersome bureaucracy.

iv. Examples of Abuse on the Part of School Boards

Over the years, AQED has supported hundreds of families in their conflicts with school boards. Here are some examples of abuse that occurred this year:

- A school board reported a family to the DYP three years in a row because the school board would not agree to carry out the portfolio assessment. On three occasions, the DYP closed the file, highlighting the excellent quality of the educational experience that had been provided to the children. This highly educated, and very involved family left Quebec this year because of the harassment they received from the school board.
- Despite the positive report of a support teacher who said that the children of a family were at the right level, and despite a more than complete portfolio, the school board reported the children to the DPJ because the school board would not agree to assess the portfolios. A judge ordered the family to subject the children to examinations. Following the exam results, the judge determined that the school board was the expert in education and ordered the family to follow the school board's instructions to reintegrate their children into school.
- A 15 year old girl, suffering from anxiety, who was completing her studies through distance education was told that the school board would not under any circumstances grant her the credits necessary to receive her diploma. She is prepared to complete all the ministry exams and to show proof of her educational activities, but she cannot graduate without being granted credits for the subjects for which there is no exam. The school board says that the only way this young woman can earn the credits is by attending school all year.



- A mother took her daughter out of school because the school required the child be medicated before agreeing to provide her with specialist services. However, the school board required the consent of the father, who is abusive and absent from the child's life, before permitting the removal of the child from school.
- A school board refused a gifted, autistic and anxious child to be homeschooled, despite a letter from his psychiatrist and the CLSC saying that, for the child's health, he should be homeschooled and despite the mother's learning plan that included teachers as tutors. The school board refused to listen to the opinion of these health professionals and insisted that this brilliant child stay in school. For lack of adequate resources, this very intelligent child must build boxes in a specialized class or stay in isolation because his mental health does not allow him to be in the regular classroom. The child regularly threatens to commit suicide, but the school board would lose funding if the child received his education at home.

The hostile approach towards parents who wish to homeschool their children is unfounded and inappropriate. Yet too many families, to the detriment of their children, are subject to intimidation and exhausting conflicts with school boards, the *DYP*, and other authorities. The negative experiences of many families who homeschool their children (misuse of the *DYP*, traumatic assessments, disrespect for parents by the school board, etc.) have created a general climate of distrust. The loss of confidence on the part of families within the current system, and the limited resources available to these families, coupled with the lack of respect for educational alternatives, explain the low percentage of homeschooled children registered with school boards. The situation is so serious that many families are moving to more openminded Canadian provinces, a trend that will only increase in the future.