

C O N S E I L S U P É R I E U R D E L ' É D U C A T I O N

A B R I D G E D V E R S I O N

annual report

ON THE STATE AND NEEDS OF EDUCATION
2005-2006

**STRENGTHENING
DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION**

December 2006

The Committee for the 2005–2006 Annual Report

Amir Ibrahim (Chairperson), Michel Angers, Diane Dagenais,
Kenneth George (to December 2005), Jean-Pierre Rathé,
Pâquerette Sergerie, Joane Simard, Alain Vézina

Coordination

Jean-François Lehoux, Coordinator, Committee for the Annual Report
Mélanie Julien, Interim Coordinator (as of May 2006)

Text

Mélanie Julien, Interim Coordinator
with the collaboration of Niambi Batiotila, Research Assistant

Research and Consultation

Jean-François Lehoux, Coordinator
Niambi Batiotila, Anny Bussi res, Caroline Gaudreault,
M lanie Julien and Marie-Jos e Larocque, Research Assistants
Julie de Bellefeuille and Pierre-Luc Lajoie, Interns

Technical Support

Myriam Robin, Administrative Assistant
Patricia R hel and Francine Vall e, Documentation
Johanne M thot, Publishing

Translation

Marisa Panetta-Jones

Graphic Design

Bleu Outremer

Layout

Id ation

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INTRODUCTION

In its 2005–2006 Annual Report on the State and Needs of Education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation presents a review of the exercise of democracy in education in Québec elementary and secondary schools. The Conseil believes this is currently necessary as:

- The Québec Education Reform, begun in 1997 at elementary and secondary level schools, has led both to the transfer of some powers to schools and to the creation of governing boards. Parent participation, which hitherto had played a consultation role, has now become one of decision-making; yet despite this gain, full parental participation seems far from achieved for several reasons.
- The advent of governing boards and the rapid decline in participation in school elections have led many to question the *raison d'être* of school government, Québec's fourth level of government, comprised of commissioners locally elected by the public.

In brief, the Conseil's study on democracy in education at the elementary and secondary levels is structured around the following questions:

- What are the means available to ordinary citizens, and parents in particular, to participate in the stewardship of education? What are the strengths and limitations of these means?
- How is democracy in education carried out in practice, beyond legislative provisions?
- Do the practices involved in the exercise of democracy in education serve the interests of all students?
- What is the future of this level of school government, in light of the ongoing debate involved in it?

In order to answer these questions, the Conseil will firstly present an overview of democracy in education, as well as the strengths, limitations and issues related to its practice. Secondly, the Conseil will propose five approaches to strengthen this civic responsibility:

- support citizenship education to contribute to the continuity of democracy;
- refocus democracy in education on students;
- ensure a common interpretation of shared powers and responsibilities in education;
- promote the wealth of contributions of parents in all their diversity;
- strengthen the legitimacy of school government.

1 BASIC DEFINITIONS

Democratic participation by citizens in the field of education can assume different forms, from voting in school elections, sitting on governing boards, or by joining an education-related organization. For this Annual Report, however, the Conseil will examine two aspects of democracy in education, that is, representative democracy and participatory democracy.

According to the *Dictionnaire actuel de l'éducation*, **representative democracy** takes place when citizens elect representatives to lead government.¹ It refers, then, to the election of peoples' representatives in accordance with well-defined procedures, rules and mechanisms. De facto representative democracy encompasses electoral democracy, which in education is exercised by electing commissioners. Representative democracy, however, is not limited to electoral democracy, since regulations for the composition of several bodies require the election of their members by a particular group of stakeholders whom they represent.

Participatory democracy essentially refers to the participation of parents, students, and teaching and support staff who work in education, as well as external social and economic representatives.

1. Legendre, Renald. *Dictionnaire actuel de l'éducation* (3rd ed.). Montréal: Guérin, 2005, p. 366.

2 THE EVOLUTION OF DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION IN QUÉBEC

Two major events have shaped the evolution of democracy in education in Québec: universal suffrage and decentralization in the education system.

UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE IN SCHOOL ELECTIONS

Since the creation of school boards in 1841, the appointment of commissioners has moved toward universal suffrage. At first, the right to vote was restricted to property owners so that taxation be based on political representation. In 1960, the right to vote was broadened to include parents of students without the former having necessarily to pay property taxes to their municipalities. Following this change, parents thus had an accepted and effective means to voice their opinion on their children's education. The Parent Commission of 1963 even went a step further by proposing that school commissioners be elected by the parents whose children attended schools of a given school board. In the opinion of the Parent Commission, the right to vote should be granted to parents because they are front-line stakeholders in education. This would also avoid the onerous and often needlessly expensive organization of a general election, as well as spark more interest in school elections.

This notion akin to democracy is closely associated to what today is commonly referred to as a user's democracy. For the Conseil, however, if users' participation remains fundamental and essential to uphold the legitimacy of elective representatives, it does not, however, justify the exclusion of other citizens who are also members of society. The Conseil will elaborate on this point in its fifth approach. The establishment of universal suffrage in 1971 (with exception of Québec City and Montréal, which followed suit in 1972), has allowed the realization of the principle that education is a public good that concerns all citizens.

DECENTRALIZATION IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

At the outset of the 1980s, methods of participation began to be questioned and some openly criticized what had become an overly bureaucratic education system. The question of decentralizing powers in favour of schools, which had been first raised in the Parent Report, resurfaced in the 1982 Policy Statement *L'école québécoise : une école communautaire et responsable*. The Statement recommended establishing a decision-making structure specific to each education body. During the 1995 Estates General on Education, many groups reiterated this desire for greater autonomy for the schools, criticizing the education system's overly-rigid character and the

lack of efficiency of a centralized system. In 1996, the Commission on the Estates General recommended that decision-making loci be moved closer to the front line and that greater responsibilities be granted to schools and a greater flexibility to the organization of work. The majority of education stakeholders supported this concept of decentralization.

The shift toward the decentralization of powers and responsibilities began in 1997, with the launch of the Ministerial Plan of Action for the Reform of the Education System, *A New Direction for Success*. This reform aimed for a successful, efficient and quality education system in Québec, and in particular advocated a greater autonomy for education. The trend toward decentralizing powers to schools was thus set into motion and it is in this context that the *Education Act* created governing boards in 1998. The governing board has in essence taken on the functions which hitherto had been granted to orientation committees and parents' committees, albeit with increased powers.

3 IS DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS?

The study undertaken by the Conseil on democracy in education is even more relevant as today we live in an era when civic participation in public life is being challenged. This is sustained by the abandonment of some traditional forms of citizenry, which can be seen in the steep decline in the rate of electoral participation by the public at the ballot box.² Indeed, voter turnout appears to be a serious trend throughout the Western World. While the decline in the participation rate appears particularly worrisome, this can be explained to a great extent by the youth segment.³ In this aspect, Québec and Canada do not differ greatly, given that youth absenteeism from the political process is a phenomenon without borders. But what is even more disconcerting is that youth do not go to the polls primarily due to their disinterest in politics. Many factors other than young voter apathy should be taken into consideration to explain and address this trend.

2. In Québec, turnout in provincial elections declined 13.8% between 1970 and 2003 (from 84.2% to 70.4%). During the last two federal elections, the rate of participation remained around 60%, when historically it used to be between 70%–75%.
3. In Canadian federal elections between 1993 and 2000, absenteeism from the polls for youth born after 1970 increased by 14%, climbing from 18% to 32%, while absenteeism among the older segments has remained basically unchanged. Blais, André et. al. *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the 2000 Canadian Election*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002, p.46.

Concurrently with the decline in electoral participation, an increase was also noted in various form of civic participation, through relations between public administration and citizens, donating, volunteering, associations, and other kinds of social engagement. Consequently, social and political engagement appear to be taking on divergent paths through participatory democracy.

4 PRINCIPAL LOCI OF DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

During the course of its study, the Conseil focused on the primary loci where democracy is exercised in school boards (the council of commissioners, parents' committee, and Advisory Committee on Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities) and in schools (governing boards, parents' associations, home and school associations and student committees).

COUNCIL OF COMMISSIONERS

In accordance with article 143 of the *Education Act*, a school board is governed by a council of commissioners either elected or appointed, in adherence to the *Act Respecting School Elections*, and two parent commissioners chosen by a parents' committee. Unlike the other commissioners, these parent commissioners do not have the right to vote during meetings of either the council of commissioners or the executive committee, nor can they hold the position of chair or vice-chair of the school board (the *Education Act*, art. 148). The Act defines the functions and powers of the school board in articles 204 through 301, summarized in the box below:

Functions and Powers of the School Board

General Functions:

- ensure that persons are provided with educational services (art. 208);
- admit persons to and organize educational services (art. 209);
- adopt a strategic plan and a three-year plan for the allocation and destination of its immovables (art. 209.1 and 211);
- adopt a policy concerning the maintenance or closure of schools (art. 212).

Functions and Powers Related to **Educational Services Provided in Schools:**

- establish a program for each student service and special educational service contemplated in the basic school regulation (art. 224);
- adopt the organization of educational services for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities (art. 235);
- determine the educational services to be provided by each of its schools (art. 236);
- establish the school calendar of its schools (art. 238).

Functions and Powers Related to **Educational Services Provided in Vocational Training Centres and Adult Education Centres:**

- establish a program for each student service and popular education service provided for in the basic regulation (art. 247);
- arrange for and provide reception and referral services (art. 250);
- determine the educational services to be provided by each centre (art. 251);
- establish the school calendar of its centres (art. 252).

Functions and Powers Related to **Community Services:**

- contribute as needed to the development of the region and provide for cultural, social, sports, scientific or community services (art. 255);
- ensure, on request, school daycare services (art. 256).

Functions and Powers Related to **Human Resources:**

- hire staff required for the operation of school boards and schools (art. 259);
- assign staff in schools (art. 261).

Functions and Powers Related to **Material Resources:**

- acquire or lease property needed for the carrying out of its activities in schools and oversee its management (art. 266);
- promote the use of its immovables by public or community organizations in its territory (art. 266).

Functions and Powers Related to **Financial Resources:**

- allocate the operating subsidies among its schools in an equitable manner (art. 275);
- approve school budgets (art. 276);
- adopt its operating budget (art. 277).

Functions and Powers Related to **Student Transportation:**

- provide, as needed, transportation for students (art. 291).

Source: *The Education Act*. Québec: Government of Québec, 2005.

However, the Act does not specify the sharing of responsibilities between the council of commissioners and school board staff. Indeed, the director general is the only council employee to whom the entire school board staff reports (the *Education Act*, art. 259 and 260). In fact, directors general oversee the day-to-day management of their respective school boards. They must, however, submit to their council of commissioners recommendations on any actions that the school board must undertake regarding matters such as the division of resources among schools, the closing of schools, the transfer of students and maintenance and building repairs. But it is the council who adopts the decisions through resolutions. As a general rule, the council of commissioners is responsible for the direction of the school board (art. 201).

Generally, councils of commissioners hold public meetings monthly, where resolutions are adopted. The commissioners, director general and all other persons authorised by the council of commissioners may attend the proceedings, yet, as stipulated by the Act: “the council may order that [meetings] be held in camera for the purpose of examining any matter liable to be prejudicial to a person” (art. 167). A question period is allotted for public questions or comments.

PARENTS’ COMMITTEE

In 1972, parents’ committees were first established in every school board across Québec. Yet it was not until 1979 that the *Education Act* was amended to include mandatory consultation by the school boards of the parents’ committees on specific matters. Thus instituted in every school board,⁴ a parents’ committee comprises one parent representing the Advisory Committee on Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities, and one parent from each school (art. 189). The latter are elected from parent representatives on governing boards by parents during a general meeting (art. 47). In principle, one parent from each school in the school board (the representative or his/her proxy) attend the parents’ committee meetings, which are generally held monthly.

4. According to article 191 of the *Education Act*, “[a] school board that divides its territory into administrative regions may, for the same purposes, replace the parents’ committee by a regional parents’ committee for each region and a central parents’ committee [...]”

According to article 192 of the *Education Act*, the functions of the parents' committee are:

- to promote parent participation in school board activities and, to this end, delegate parents to take part in the various committees established by the school board;
- to give its opinion on any related matter to ensure the most efficient operation possible of the school board;
- to inform the school board of the needs of parents as identified by school representatives and by the representative of the Advisory Committee on Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities;
- to give its opinion to the school board on any matter the latter is required to submit to it.

Matters on which the school board must consult the parents' committee are listed in article 193 of the *Education Act*, and are summarized in the box below:

Matters on Which the School Board Shall Consult the Parents' Committee

- the division, annexation or amalgamation of the territory of the school board;
- the school board's strategic plan, and, where applicable, its realization;
- the three-year plan of allocation and destination of the immovables of the school board, the list of schools and the deeds of establishment;
- the policy regarding the operation or closing of schools;
- the financial contributions policy;
- the distribution of educational services among schools;
- the criteria for the enrolment of students in schools;
- the dedication of a school to a special project and the criteria for the enrolment of students in that school;
- the school calendar;
- the rules governing promotion from elementary school to secondary school or from Cycle One to Cycle Two of the secondary school;
- the objectives and principles governing the allocation of subsidies, school tax proceeds and other revenues among educational institutions, as well as the criteria pertaining thereto, and the objectives, principles and criteria used to determine the amount to be withheld by the school board for its needs and those of its committees;
- the learning activities intended for parents by the school board.

Source: The *Education Act*. Québec: Government of Québec, 2005, article 193.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR HANDICAPPED STUDENTS AND STUDENTS WITH SOCIAL MALADJUSTMENTS OR LEARNING DISABILITIES

The function of the Advisory Committee on Educational Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities (commonly referred to as the SNAC) is to advise school boards on policy for the organization of educational services for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities, and the allocation of financial resources to the services intended for those students. In addition, the Committee can advise on the implementation of an individualized education plan for a handicapped student or a student with social maladjustments or learning disabilities (art. 187). Each committee is responsible for establishing its own internal rules of governance. Nonetheless, the *Education Act* stipulates that such a committee must provide for at least three meetings every school year. This committee is comprised of parents of these students (at least seven), teaching and non-teaching staff representatives, representatives of organizations that provide services to these students and a principal (art. 185). The director general of the school board or his or her representative takes part in the meetings of the committee, but he or she is not entitled to vote.

Since 1998, the SNAC has been associated with the parents' committee, as at least one of the committee members also sits on this committee. The Act stipulates that it is the parents' committee that elects all the parent representatives who sit on the SNAC and determines the duration of their mandate.

GOVERNING BOARDS

All the functions and powers of the governing board as stipulated by the *Education Act* in articles 74 to 95 are summarized in the box below:

Functions and Powers of the Governing Board

General Functions and Powers:

- analyze the situation at the school, and, based on this analysis and the strategic plan of the school board, adopt a school educational plan, oversee its implementation and evaluation (art. 74);
- ensure the participation of school stakeholders and, to this end, promote information, dialogue and concerted action between students, parents, the principal, teachers and community representatives (art. 74);
- approve the school success plan and any updated version thereof (art. 75);
- approve the rules of conduct and safety measures (art. 76);
- establish the principles for determining the cost of documents needed by

students and approve the list of pencils, papers and other educational materials (art. 77.1);

- advise the school board on issues related to the efficient operation of the school, the organization of the services, and the selection criteria for the appointment of the principal (art. 78 and 79);
- prepare and adopt an annual report (art. 82);
- inform parents and the community annually on the services provided by the school and report on the level of quality of such services (art. 83);
- make public the educational project and the school success plan, and annually report on the evaluation of their implementation (art. 83).

Functions and Powers Related to **Educational Services**:

- approve the approach for the implementation of the basic school regulation and the overall approach for the enrichment of the study programs (art. 84 and 85);
- approve the time allotted for each subject (art. 86);
- approve the programming of educational activities that entail change in students' regular time of arrival and departure at school (art. 87);
- approve the implementation of student services and special educational services programs (art. 88).

Functions and Powers Related to **Community Services**:

- organize educational services as needed other than those prescribed by the basic school regulation (art. 90).

Functions and Powers Related to **Material and Financial Resources**:

- approve the use of the premises or immovables placed at the disposal of the school (art. 93);
- adopt the annual school budget and submit it to the school board for approval (art. 95).

Source: *The Education Act*. Québec: Government of Québec, 2005.

The composition of a governing board is similar to that of the old orientation committee. According to article 42 of the Act, a governing board must have:

- at least four parents of students attending the school, elected by their peers during a general meeting, with one of them chosen as chair for a one-year mandate (art. 56 and 58);

- at least four members of the school staff, elected by their peers, including at least two teachers (it is also possible to elect one non-teaching staff member and one support staff member);
- two secondary school students in Cycle Two elected by the students enrolled at the secondary level or appointed by the student committee or the association representing those students (these students obtained their right to vote in December 2001);
- a member of the school daycare staff, elected by his or her peers (if this service is provided at that elementary school);
- two community representatives who are not school staff members, appointed by the above members (these representatives are not entitled to vote).

Parents serve for a two-year mandate while the other members are elected for one year. The governing board establishes the rules for its internal management, but it must hold at least five meetings every academic year (art. 67). The school principal attends those meetings, but is not entitled to vote (art. 67). Duly elected commissioners cannot be members of the governing board of a school under the authority of a school board. They may take part in meetings of the governing board but are not entitled to vote (art. 45). Governing board meetings are open to the public, except where the governing board may order an in camera meeting on a specific matter (art. 68).

PARENT PARTICIPATION ORGANIZATIONS

Since 1998, parents can choose to form a Parent Participation Organization (PPO) in the school that their children attend. The decision of whether or not to have a PPO is made at the school's Annual General Meeting. If the meeting decides to form a PPO, "it shall determine the name, composition and operating rules of the organization and shall elect its members" (art. 96). The PPO's function is "to encourage the collaboration of parents in developing, implementing and periodically evaluating the school's educational project and their participation in fostering their child's success" (art. 96.2). The parent representatives on the governing board may consult the PPO regarding any matter of concern to parents and the PPO can also advise parent representatives on these matters (art. 96.3). As the Québec Federation of Parents' Committees (FCPQ) itself states in its parents' training leaflet,⁵ the PPO can also undertake various projects such as organizing

5. *Parent Participation Organization: Helping Schools Be Their Best*. Beauport: Québec Federation of Parents' Committees, 2001.

workshops for parents, fundraisers, extracurricular and information activities for parents. According to the FCPQ, PPOs are found in only 25% of all Québec schools, largely at the elementary level. The low rate of parent participation at Annual General Meetings and the little information available about PPOs may explain this figure.

HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS

The first Home and School Association was established in 1895 from the first parents' association founded by Mabel Hubbard Bell (wife of Alexander Graham Bell), who wished to fight against child labour and promote school attendance. In Québec, the first *foyer-école* association was created in 1919 and its expansion occurred primarily among English-speaking Québeckers, although a few groups were also formed in some French-language schools.⁶ A home and school association is a group of volunteer parents who are involved in various tasks in their children's school, notably helping in planning, funding and organizing extracurricular activities. This grass-roots support group is generally an incorporated and non-profit organization and is included at the parent's initiatives, or at the request of the school principal. The mandate of the association is to improve the learning and well-being of students, parents, and school staff, to encourage student and parent participation in school activities, and to facilitate communications and coordination between home and school. Volunteers are involved in organizing, carrying out and supervising activities. Members hold monthly meetings to discuss and plan activities. It is customary that the principal (or an assistant) and a representative from the teaching staff attend the meeting, so as to inform the association of school events, projects or needs, without involving the association, however, in the establishment and implementation of policies.⁷

STUDENT COMMITTEES

As of 1998, the *Education Act* makes provisions for the creation of a student committee in Cycle Two of secondary school (art. 96.5). This provision, in effect, is a legal recognition of some student representational structures which had been in place for several years in a good number of schools. As stipulated henceforth by the Act, it is now incumbent upon the school principal to see to the creation of a student committee, and for the students themselves to determine the name, composition and operating rules of the committee, as well as elect the members. As written in article 96.6 of the Act, "The purpose of the student committee is to encourage the collaboration of students in developing, implementing and periodically evaluating

6. In 2005–2006, of the 80 members of the Québec Federation of Home and School Associations, only two were from French-speaking schools.

7. This function pertains to the governing board. Home and school associations provide financial, material and human support in the implementation of certain activities that arise.

the school's educational project and their participation in fostering success and in school activities." Moreover, it is the responsibility of the student committee "to make suggestions to the student representatives on the governing board and to the principal that are likely to facilitate the proper operation of the school" (art. 96.6). It should be reiterated that the two students from secondary Cycle Two who are part of the governing board (depending on the case) are appointed by this committee.

Table 1	
Milestones in the Evolution of Democracy in Education in Québec	
Date	Milestone
1841	Founding of school boards , governed by commissioners elected by property owners as of 1845–1846 ⁸
1919	Founding of the first Home and School Association in Québec
1942	Women gain the right to vote in school board elections, provided they pay property taxes
1960	Parents of students gain the right to vote in school board elections
1963	Release of the Parent Report
1964	Establishment of the Ministère de l'Éducation
1971	Universal suffrage in the election of school commissioners ⁹ Creation of school committees and parents' committees ¹⁰
1979	Schools may establish orientation committees at the request of school committees Parents' Committee representatives may sit , without voting rights, on the council of commissioners
1982	Release of the Policy Statement <i>L'école québécoise : une école communautaire et responsable</i>
1988	Implementation of orientation committees in schools
1995	Commission on The Estates General of Education
1997	Launch of the Québec Education Reform <i>A New Direction For Success</i> , heralding the decentralization of powers and responsibilities in education
1998	Establishment of governing boards,¹¹ student committees and parent participation organizations in schools
2001	Student representatives of Secondary Cycle Two gain the right to vote on governing boards

8. With the exception of Québec City and Montréal, where commissioners were appointed by the municipal corporations.

9. Québec City and Montréal follow suit in 1972.

10. Implemented in 1972.

11. Replacing school committees and orientation committees.

5 ASSESSING THE PRACTICE AND ISSUES OF DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

In this section the Conseil will outline the requirements for the practice of democracy in education, to be examined through a tripartite approach:

- citizen participation in the decision-making process;
- the legitimacy of school government;
- balancing powers among education bodies.

The assessment of these requirements is based on various research work, some of which was conducted by the Conseil, notably:

- a consultation in Spring 2005 among the various stakeholders in school boards and elementary and secondary schools involved in the democratic process;
- a call for memoranda in Autumn 2005 from stakeholder organizations in the field of education;
- a telephone survey of a representative sample of Québeckers begun in Spring 2006.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Decentralization has advanced the progress of a new model for school management by bringing citizens and the loci of decision-making closer together. This model, which relies on the participation of various players, is embodied in schools by governing boards. Yet the framework for citizen participation is not strictly limited to these boards. It also extends, notably, to parents' committees and the parent representative on the council of commissioners.

Among the Conseil's assessments regarding the implementation of this new citizen participatory framework:

- **Governing boards have had positive results** in schools. The Conseil noted in particular that governing boards support opening schools to parent participation and the surrounding community. As they bring added transparency to a great number of decisions that concern students, governing boards oblige the different stakeholders (principals, staff, students and community) to work together and consult each other. Governing boards allow, then, for all to rally around educational plans, which can foster a sense of belonging. At the same time, they contribute to the implementation of innovative projects which better meet the real or specific needs of each environment.

- **Recruiting representational parents** in the various education bodies (notably on the governing board and parents' committee) as well as other players in the governing board, becomes challenging at times.
- **The interest of students** is, in general, the driving force behind the decisions and initiatives of governing boards. Nonetheless, some members become involved for reasons other than the best interest of the students. On the one hand, some teachers sitting on governing boards tend to engage in block voting along party lines. On the other, some parents seem to get involved for purely selfish reasons, either to defend their own children's interests or to champion a cause close to their heart.
- Many members of governing boards, particularly newer members, **do not appear very knowledgeable** of all the functions and powers that come with their role.
- The creation of governing boards has led to a certain **confusion about the role given to parents** within the participatory framework. It is often perceived—and wrongly so—that parent members of the parents' committee have the mandate to represent the entire governing board at the school board rather than the parents of the school. At the same time, the role of the parent/commissioner may be a sensitive one, given that it straddles the worlds of the elected school representatives and the participating parents.
- **Parent representatives are not always perceived** as full partners. Some education stakeholders find it difficult accepting the role which the *Education Act* has assigned parents and question their ability to fully exercise the functions and powers transferred to them.
- **Many players question the power of influence** that parents hold in the school system. In governing boards, protocols for preparing and implementing projects often give parent representatives the impression that everything has been decided in advance. Parent representatives often work at governing boards alone without any forum to forge solidarity. Some parents fear that opposing ideas forwarded by the school team might be detrimental to their children. Moreover, as parents are often not familiar or well versed in educational jargon, they are often afraid to voice their opinion. As for parents' committees, although they must be consulted by the governing boards on issues clearly stipulated by the *Education Act*, they hold no decision-making authority. The ambivalent role of the parents' committee has led to some voicing dissatisfaction: while parent representatives must be consulted, their opinion seem to count little. At the council of commissioners, the parent representatives are the players

who seem to have the least sway in decision-making. The fact that they do not have the right to vote on this council is without a doubt the reason for this, yet this provision is exactly what had been demanded by the FCPQ.

- **A power struggle persists in governing boards** between education professionals—teachers—and non-professionals—parents. The former express a certain reserve regarding the place given to parents and citizens in the school environment, fearing that the implementation of governing boards might encroach on their professional autonomy. The latter fear the persistence of the status quo attitude that only education professionals can be responsible for education.
- **Friction has been noted** between school administrators and members of the governing boards. This friction is evident in the influence that school administrators have on decisions taken in governing boards by their acceptance of partial or late information as well as decisions taken in advance. This situation shows that some administrators may worry about sharing a power which hitherto had been theirs, or that they might not have a clear understanding of their new roles.
- The Conseil maintains, then, that there are conflicts at some governing boards which could considerably hinder the implementation of participatory management. These conflicts should not be generalized as relations between governing board members are harmonious in many schools. Yet in light of the persistent power struggle between stakeholders in some cases, the Conseil is of the opinion that citizen participation in education should be promoted while simultaneously respecting the role of each stakeholder and his or her respective field of competency. Moreover, because of its strong influence on the operations of governing boards, school administrators should be better prepared to adapt themselves to their new roles.

Given all these assessments regarding the question of citizen participation in decision making in the education system, the Conseil identifies the following issues:

- equal access to education bodies;
- the wealth of contributions by parents and the community;
- respect for the role of each stakeholder and his or her respective field of competency;
- adaptation by stakeholders of the political aspect of both the governing boards and school administrators.

THE LEGITIMACY OF SCHOOL GOVERNMENT

The findings of a study on the evolution of school boards since 1841 and the considerable powers that have been transferred in the local management of education lead the Conseil to consider the issue of the legitimacy of school government. There is often a tendency to confuse the concept of legitimacy with that of legality. It is crucial to distinguish between the two.

Legitimacy vs. Legality

The legitimacy of a political process of an institution or a body does not generally rest on its legal status. School board elections, the council of commissioners, its functions and powers are **legal**, since they are stipulated or regulated by a law. However, the legality of a democratic school body tells us little about its legitimacy. In contrast to legality, the concept of **legitimacy** refers to the compliance of an institution to a unwritten standard which is recognized by a given society as being fundamental and which serves as a foundation for the institution's moral or political authority.¹²

Among the underlying elements of the question of the legitimacy of school government, the Conseil has identified the following:

- Electing of commissioners by public vote **immerses a school board in a culture of democracy**. However, only a very small number of citizens exercise their right to vote in school elections, a rate which has been consistently well below that seen in municipal elections. In Québec in 2003, the rate of participation for school elections throughout all ridings was 8.4%, whereas the rate in municipal elections was higher, around 50%.

12. Reid, Hubert, *Dictionnaire de droit québécois et canadien* (2nd edition). Montréal, Wilson & Lafleur: 2001, p.330.

- Historically, **the percentage of representatives elected by acclamation is very high** for school elections: since 1977, it has fluctuated around 70%. By comparison, in 2005, 45% of municipal officials were elected by acclamation.
- Findings of a telephone survey among Québeckers conducted by the Conseil in the Spring of 2006 reveal that **few citizens are aware of school government**: 38% of respondents were not aware of the existence of school elections, and only 25% associated commissioners as people's representatives.
- Certain legislative measures **promote civic involvement in school board functions**: all decisions by the council of commissioners are taken publicly; a question period during meetings allows citizens to question the council, share concerns and express views regarding decisions; the school board must adopt a strategic plan based on an analysis of the environment and be held accountable. However, in light of the consultations conducted by the Conseil, these organizational practices do not appear to allow for true public debate.
- According to the Conseil's study, **certain elected school officials seem to have an erroneous understanding of their role**. Some representatives might have difficulty defining the limits of their power in relation to those of school board management or school staff. If the majority of commissioners appear to have benefited from training, a good number of them seem to feel that they have not been sufficiently prepared to carry out their role.
- The Conseil's consultations have confirmed that some commissioners, albeit not the majority, **look out for interests other than those of the students**. Almost one-third of the commissioners who participated in the survey stated that some commissioners in their school board were not defending the same interests as they were; defending, for example, personal or financial interests.
- Although the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec (FCSQ),¹³ is clear regarding the political role of school officials, **the political character of this function is not readily acknowledged** and assumed by everyone throughout. Also, commissioners do not have to put forward an electoral platform to be elected, they do not debate education issues, and need not be accountable to their constituency. Moreover, the politi-

13. The Québec Federation of School Boards

cizing of the commissioner's function worries some administrators, who are concerned about the boundaries of roles between the political and administrative fields.

- The overall findings on school government leads some education stakeholders to **challenge the existence of a government at the school board level.**

In brief, the study conducted on school government suggests to the Conseil the presence of the following key issues:

- **the future of school government, as its existence is challenged by many;**
- **the continuity of democracy in education, where some stakeholders are in favour of a user's democracy that would exclude citizens without school-age children while granting the right to students over 18 to vote in adult education;**
- **the political aspect of the commissioner's role, considering the ambiguity surrounding the function of this elected school official.**

BALANCING POWERS AMONG THE EDUCATION BODIES

Decentralization of power is one of the issues which for a very long time—if not always—has been at the heart of the debate of governing education. While primarily trying to promote a democracy in education, the implementation of governing boards with new sharing of powers and responsibilities has nonetheless exacerbated certain tensions between the different levels, primarily between schools and school boards.

- Given the new autonomy granted to schools with the creation of governing boards (which entails citizen representation in schools) and the tenuous legitimacy of school government (due primarily to low voter turnout in school elections), a **debate is taking place on the *raison d'être* of school boards.** Some stakeholders question this intermediary level between the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) and schools, while others are leading the way for an eventual sharing of responsibilities among school boards and municipalities and regional county municipalities.
- On the one hand, **certain school board stakeholders** interviewed by the Conseil lament that the wave of decentralization has profited only schools and that no real transfer of powers and responsibilities has occurred from the MELS to the school boards. They believe **their margin of manoeuvrability remains slim** compared to provincial structures and see this as a major obstacle in their work.

- On the other, despite it being considerable according to the *Education Act*, **the margin of manoeuvrability of governing boards appears slim** in the opinion of some school stakeholders, notably regarding ministerial policies and regulations, school board decision-making powers, collective agreements and available budgets.
- The *Education Act* defines the areas of responsibility that respectively belong to the governing board and the school board. However, **the Act is open to various interpretations, and this leads to ambiguity**. For areas other than those governed by the Act, the sharing of powers and responsibility between the schools and school boards tends to fall under the latter. In fact, the Conseil's studies show that this sharing varies from place to place.
- Some stakeholders **cautiously foresee a greater transfer of powers to schools**. Because it favours a greater local autonomy, the new sharing of powers and responsibilities can certainly create disparities between schools, and some decisions could create acrimony within schools and between schools. Some school board chairs and directors general have also voiced their concern in this regard. It was stated, moreover, that some school administrators, overburdened with their added new responsibilities and the political aspect of their role, might not want to assume all these powers and responsibilities, and which should be transferred to a higher level, namely the school board.

In short, friction is tangible between schools and school boards in some cases. Not only does the feeling of having inherited added responsibilities without real decision-making power discourage some governing board stakeholders, it also gives rise to strong tensions between them and the school boards, perceived by many to be the true holder of power. Moreover, the slowness of hierarchical procedures hinders the efficiency of the decision-making process. It is in this context that the school board is seen as a major road-block by many governing boards. Conversely, school board stakeholders see a number of barriers to the transfer of responsibilities and powers in favour of schools, and they emphasize the importance of their intermediary role between the governing boards and the MELS. They lament their slim margin of manoeuvrability regarding ministerial policies and regulations and use this to justify some of their decisions, which has created discontent in schools.

Despite this situation, the Conseil notes that relations are becoming harmonious in some cases, which is promising. **However, the Conseil is fully aware of the above-mentioned issues, and that it must take them into consideration in its study of democracy in education, that is:**

- **the balancing of the system, primarily between schools and school boards;**
- **the ability of local stakeholders to exercise their powers transferred down to them by the *Education Act*.**

6 APPROACHES FOR STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

Given its global analysis and principal findings, the Conseil submits for the consideration of the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport, education stakeholders and all Québeckers five key approaches which the Conseil deem a essential to improve the state of democracy in education:

- support citizenship education to contribute to the continuity of democracy;
- refocus democracy in education on students;
- ensure a common interpretation of shared powers and responsibilities in education;
- promote the wealth of contributions of parents in all their diversity;
- strengthen the legitimacy of school government.

APPROACH 1

SUPPORT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONTINUITY OF DEMOCRACY

While the many forms of civic engagement are diversifying and moving closer to a participatory democracy, the outlook nevertheless remains alarming. Indeed, these new forms of participation are an addition to electoral democracy, and should not replace it. Democracy is one of the fundamental values of the Western World; the culmination of 19th Century struggles, it represents a important gain and it is paramount to safeguard its continuity. It is thus necessary to be concerned with the general state of democracy, for without it any effort to strengthen democracy in education will be fruitless. It is clear, then, in the opinion of the Conseil, that the continuity of democracy in education represents an important issue that goes beyond the boundaries of schools and into society as a whole.

Based on studies, the Conseil deems that the education of citizens is certainly one of the major levers that will enable the support of democracy. **In addition, the Conseil believes that it is crucial to encourage the development of a true culture of citizenry to foster the continuity of democracy.** To be sure, it befalls each citizen to participate in civic and political life depending on his or her abilities, interests and availability, in order on the one hand to contribute to a healthy democracy in our society and on the other, to strengthen the civic skills of Québeckers. But, above all, citizenship education represents both a challenge for the education system and a duty for the State.

A Challenge for the Education System

For the Conseil, **Québec education**, in its tripartite mission to impart knowledge, foster social development and provide qualifications for students, **is a front-line player in citizenship education.** This is the position that the Conseil took in its 1997–1998 Annual Report, entitled *Éduquer à la citoyenneté*, where the Conseil clearly stated that citizenship education had to become a integral element of the educational plan. To succeed, students would need to be able to experience first-hand in their school the values, rights and responsibilities that they were being taught.

The Conseil is pleased to note that recent measures have been undertaken to provide students with more opportunities to practice democracy during their studies. Nevertheless, the Conseil's studies have shown that some schools are not yet fully taking advantage of these opportunities: oftentimes student participation in governing boards remains minimal and student committees are more like social clubs than democratic bodies. Given this situation, the Conseil urges school stakeholders—namely school administrators and staff responsible for academic life—to continue in their efforts to provide a better framework for the democratic activities of the students.

At the time of this writing, the Education Reform has yet to be completely implemented in secondary schools, as only the Québec Education Program for Secondary Cycle One is in place. It is therefore too soon to assess the results of social science programs, particularly those that teach citizenship education. Introducing new history and civic education courses in secondary schools can only but have a positive impact on learning about citizenship. Likewise, it is feasible to expect as much from the Education Reform, as it gives a greater place to students, turning them into more involved players in their learning. Moreover, the Conseil is pleased to note that Québec universities are establishing civic education programs or courses in their education departments.

A Duty for the State

Citizenship education does not only involve students and the education they receive. It is also a role for all active bodies in Québec society to ensure that citizens have access to training, information and skills required for their social and political engagement. **Firstly, the Conseil maintains that the Québec Government must fulfil its duty.** While the Conseil applauds several Government initiatives in citizenship education (the *Stratégie d'action jeunesse*¹⁴ as well as activities offered by the National Assembly and the Chief Elector Officer come to mind), it is by no means a work that can be considered fully achieved. It is important to translate theoretical strategies into concrete action, standardize practices and broaden target groups with initiatives to reach the greatest number of youth.

APPROACH 2

REFOCUS DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION ON STUDENTS

In theory, every student's success is at the heart of the school system, the bodies and the processes which constitute it. This principle should therefore guide all policies and decisions as well as any initiatives taken by participating stakeholders. The *Education Act* is indeed quite clear on the fact that education bodies must serve the interest of the student. Yet gaps have been noted at times between what is written in the law and actual practice. In fact, the Conseil has observed that in some cases, both in school boards and in schools, some stakeholders are guided by other interests besides those of the students, including corporate, personal or financial.

For this reason, **the Conseil calls upon all stakeholders in the democratic framework of the education system, regardless of level, to a true civic engagement motivated strictly by the interests of all students.** So as to ensure, as much as possible, that all education bodies place the student's success at the heart of their work and mandates, the Conseil proposes several courses of action which appear particularly promising.

Firstly, **the Conseil urges education bodies to place the interest of students as the foundation** for their strategic plan (school boards), education plan (schools) or their approaches and objectives (vocational training and continuing education institutions); many of which are already doing so. It would also be more desirable if action plans were eventually adopted from this premise.

14. Youth Action Strategy

Secondly, since not placing the student at the heart of the democratic process often stems from a misinterpretation of the functions and powers by some stakeholders, the Conseil believes there is a need for training. While this area is far from being unexplored—school boards, organizations such as the FCSQ, the FCPQ and unions annually provide optional workshops in various subjects—the Conseil laments, however, that not all stakeholders participate, and that training is not required for their positions. **The Conseil proposes to the Government, then, to implement mandatory training for all stakeholders on the functions and powers of education bodies in order to emphasize that the student must be at the heart of their efforts.**

It is also equally important as stipulated by the *Education Act* that the council of commissioners adopt a code of ethics and conduct emphasizing the duties and obligations of the commissioners (art. 175.1). For the Conseil, it appears necessary to ensure that **this code of ethics and conduct include a requirement that prioritizes the interest of students.**

Lastly, the Conseil is of the opinion that only through transparency will it be possible to ensure that democratic processes in education truly serve the interests of all students. Therefore, **the Conseil urges education bodies—both representative and elected—to adopt accountability mechanisms that go beyond minimum requirements.** The bodies must justify their choices to their constituents as to how these choices properly serve the interests of students while still ensuring quality service. It is important, then, to encourage representatives from different bodies to be individually accountable to their constituents to regularly inform them of any issues and decisions. The Conseil is aware that such an approach might be met with resistance in certain circles. Yet it believes all commissioners, members of governing boards and other representatives in the democratic framework must assume their responsibilities and refrain from relying only on their chairperson, even if the latter remains that body's representative and official spokesperson.

APPROACH 3

ENSURE A COMMON INTERPRETATION OF SHARED POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN EDUCATION

The Conseil has observed that sharing powers and responsibilities in education has advanced considerably, even though decentralization is still unevenly applied. Without questioning its clarity, the Conseil has noted that the *Education Act* has been open to different interpretations in practice. In fact, changes brought about by decentralization have yet to be implemented throughout. As it stands, the Conseil believes that the problem does not lie as much in the nature of the sharing of powers and responsibilities, as in the interpretation of this sharing. The Conseil does not deem it necessary to revise the sharing but rather to ensure that all stakeholders share a common interpretation of it. In fact, **the Conseil reasserts the importance of decentralization for promoting a stronger participatory management in education, both in schools and school boards.**

Striving for Harmony Between Schools and School Boards

A climate of discord exists between several schools and school boards that cannot be brushed aside. This situation is indeed detrimental to the full exercise of the functions and powers of official bodies. **The Conseil deems that harmonizing relations between schools and school boards is only possible where staff has a proper interpretation of the sharing of powers and responsibilities.** It is only then that the Conseil feels it will be possible to minimize tensions between the two levels and, ultimately, allow local stakeholders to fully assume their roles. It is important, then, to encourage taking ownership of new roles and responsibilities in order to dispel ambiguities and minimize the different interpretations of the law, as well as the practices which stem from it. To this end, stakeholders must be better informed of the new sharing and be made aware of the importance of adopting a spirit of cooperation, partnership, and complementarity. The Conseil calls on stakeholders to pursue these considerations, share opinions with others and translate these steps into concrete actions.

Stakeholders Who Understand Shared Functions and Powers

The complementarity of roles and responsibilities between the different levels and democratic bodies must not only be clear to education staff, but also to other stakeholders (parents, students, citizens) involved in official processes if they are to fully assume their functions and powers. Moreover, these stakeholders must define the boundary between their role and that of the school staff. In the opinion of the Conseil, training remains crucial. **It is essential, therefore, that all stakeholders participate in the democratic process and receive mandatory training on the roles and responsibilities of each education body and stakeholder at the commence-**

ment of their function. Providing this condition is met, they will be able to understand the scope and limits of their role, and, in doing so, fully exercise their functions and powers.

The School Administrator: A Demanding Position In Need of Better Support

With decentralization and the Education Reform, the position of school administrator has become even more demanding. Roles and responsibilities have changed considerably during the past few years, calling upon those holding this position to adapt. In 1999, the Conseil dedicated its annual brief to this issue, entitled *Diriger une école secondaire: un nouveau contexte, de nouveaux défis*. Based on recent consultations, the Conseil noted that governing boards, even after several years in place, are still not considered by all as an official lever. In some cases, they involve more work for the administrator and a delay in decision-making. For the Conseil, this management method represents one of the most important variables to be leveraged to ensure the full exercise of democracy in education in schools. Administrators must be convinced of the potential available to them by investing in participatory management and by relying on the governing boards. To succeed, **the Conseil deems that administrators should be better supported in the exercise of their functions so that they may take ownership of their new roles.** To this end, several recommendations formulated by the Conseil in 1999 to support secondary school administrators remain valid today and are also applicable to administrators in elementary schools, vocational training and continuing education institutions.¹⁵

15. *Diriger une école secondaire : un nouveau contexte, de nouveaux défis* (Québec : CSE, 1999). Available in French only.

APPROACH 4

PROMOTE THE WEALTH OF CONTRIBUTIONS OF PARENTS IN ALL THEIR DIVERSITY

The Conseil fully acknowledges the pre-eminent authority of parents in their children's education and asserts that parents of students have a fundamental role to play in the official processes of schools and school boards. While Québec can pride itself that the decentralization process in education has given parents a leading role, the Conseil is of the opinion that additional efforts deserve to be devoted to give greater support to parents and to facilitate their participation. In fact, empirical studies reveal some shortcomings whose importance should not be ignored. It seems that only a small number of parents are willing to participate in education bodies and those who do are always called upon to give much more of their time and efforts. Moreover, a substantial number of parents involved have a limited understanding of the functions and powers which they must exercise. This lack of knowledge is also noted among other participating stakeholders (including teachers and school administrators), who sometimes resist accepting the role of parents. Faced with this state of affairs, and considering the benefits reaped from parents' participation in school, **the Conseil deems it necessary to promote the wealth of the contributions of parents in all their diversity and make them full partners in the education system.** To succeed, the Conseil favourably foresees three courses of action:

- championing the role of parents;
- supporting participating parents;
- facilitating parental participation.

Championing the Role of Parents In the Education System

The consultations carried out by the Conseil have revealed that some stakeholders do not consider parents as full partners and a certain mistrust persists regarding increased power of parents. The Conseil believes the will to include parents in decision-making in education should not be viewed strictly from a legal point of view: **all stakeholders must believe in the benefits reaped by the participation of parents in official processes in the education system.** The Conseil urges, then, that the role of parents be championed not only among parents themselves, but also among all education stakeholders:

- The Conseil calls on stakeholders to promote the participation of parents from all social, ethnic and economic backgrounds in official processes;
- The Conseil believes that the wealth of contributions of parents must be supported during training for school officials and mandatory basic training for all members of governing boards.

Practical Support For Participating Parents

The current framework makes parental participation very difficult. Considering the recruitment issues and the rate of parent involvement in educational institutions as well as the low rate of participation by certain categories of parent, **the Conseil is of the opinion that parents who do participate in the education system should benefit from special support.** For example, it favourably considers the implementation of compensatory measures for loss of revenue incurred due to parents' participation in an activity and for expenses accrued such as babysitting (as is the case in some governing boards where it is included in the operating budget). In addition, the Conseil would like to call on employers to recognize the importance of citizen participation and to support their employees in civic engagement, particularly as parent representatives in the education system.

Conditions For Facilitating Parental Participation

At every level within the participatory framework, parents have important decisions to make, but are not always aware of their power or sufficiently equipped to exercise it. Parental participation in democratic bodies is not always easy. It requires a sufficient understanding of the democratic participatory framework, the functions and the powers of the bodies, the *Education Act*, and the jargon used in education. In addition, it requires a minimum of communication and debating skills. Specific obstacles, such as language, may prevent some parents from participating. To facilitate parental participation, **the Conseil deems it is important for parents to be better informed, better prepared, and better mentored in the exercise of the functions and powers at each level of the participatory framework.**

Workshops offered to parents should be mandatory rather than voluntary. The Conseil does not in any way question parents' ability to exercise their functions and powers, but it believes that mandatory training on specific subjects can only but add to their participation and make it more valuable. The Conseil is also of the opinion that school administrators and directors general in school boards have a significant role to play in assisting parents to fully exercise their role in the democratic process. Administrators should mentor and accommodate parents in their participation and invite them to consult the FCPQ when needed. For example, because of the influential role

they have in governing boards, school administrators must encourage the use of an accessible language during meetings.

Moreover, the Conseil believes the Government should implement **a general measure to promote parental participation in the democratic process** of the education system. Such a measure would bring together all courses of action, contribute to championing, supporting and facilitating the participation of parents and ensure their implementation, organization and consistency.

APPROACH 5

STRENGTHEN THE LEGITIMACY OF SCHOOL GOVERNMENT

The Conseil in no way questions the relevance of an intermediary level of government between schools and the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS). This level appears necessary to ensure the organization of services and their equitable distribution among schools, and, ultimately, among students. However, the Conseil is aware of the ongoing dissatisfaction surrounding school government. The very low electoral turnout, the small number of candidates, citizens' lack of awareness and the ambiguities surrounding the political aspect of the role of elected school officials are all detrimental to the legitimacy of this level of government. The Conseil does not believe any less, however, in its existence, given its history and the importance of its responsibilities.

In this regard, the **Conseil urgently calls for action on strengthening school government**. It is important that initiatives be undertaken with the briefest of delays in order to measure their effect as early as next year's school elections, to be held in 2007. The Conseil is also of the opinion that if, **despite the efforts invested, the low turnout rate in elections should persist, the issue could merit revisiting, this time to determine, at the very least, a viable alternative for school government**. Thus the Conseil is convinced of the need to undertake short-term actions likely to revive the political dynamic in school boards, a crucial element for the legitimacy of elected officials at this level. According to the Conseil, actions that would contribute to this should be based on:

- electoral participation;
- accountability of commissioners to their constituency;
- reasserting the value of the commissioner's role.

Electoral Participation

As often reiterated by the Conseil, education is a public good, belonging to all. By exercising their right to vote in school elections, all citizens are able to express their values and priorities with regard to education. One element in particular is indispensable to encourage participation in school voting: In light of survey findings that revealed low voter turnout to be closely related to the lack of awareness of school government, **the Conseil believes it is necessary to ensure a wider and more comprehensive dissemination of information to the people.**

It is important firstly to raise people's awareness about the importance of exercising their right to vote in school elections, just as for any other level of government. Most of all, the entire school electoral process needs to be better managed than it currently is so as to better inform citizens. Thus, **the Conseil invites school board directors general who act as electoral officers and the Chief Electoral Officer of Québec to closely collaborate on reviewing the school electoral process in its entirety in order to better manage it in the next elections.**

For the Conseil, the measures to be implemented to ensure that information reaches citizens must be of an even wider scope. It is important that nominations are better promoted at a local level, as the greater the number of candidates, the better it is for electoral democracy. Candidates must canvas the electorate and inform them of their education platform. The election period should be an opportune moment to encourage debate on issues at the grass roots level. It is incumbent on school electoral officers and on the Chief Electoral Officer to create favourable conditions to give rise to a dynamic electoral climate in the different communities.

Accountability of Commissioners to Their Constituency

For the Conseil, the council of commissioners must be considered as a political entity. It is not like a board of directors, as the elected officials themselves refer to it at times, but a level of government in its own right. In fact, elected by public ballot, commissioners exercise a political function similar to that of an elected municipal official. Thus, the Conseil believes it necessary to **bring the political aspect of the commissioner's role to the foreground.** Each commissioner should therefore:

- defend the interests of his or her constituency, which may legitimately differ;
- have the freedom to disagree during council meetings;
- ensure accountability to the people they represent.

While respecting decisions taken by resolution at council meetings and having the interests of all students of the school board at heart, elected officials should enjoy enough latitude to be able to defend the interests of their constituency at the council of commissioners; to disagree; and individually answer to their constituents. In other words, elected school officials should fully assume the responsibilities that come with decision-making and be accountable. To this end, the Conseil favourably foresees the following courses of action:

- providing mandatory basic training for commissioners on the political aspect of their role at the commencement of their function;
- providing the necessary support to commissioners during their mandate so they may properly assume their role as the people's representative, notably through accountability.

Reasserting the Value of the Commissioner's Role

According to study findings, a great majority of people were not very knowledgeable of the role of an elected school official. For the Conseil, this is a role of great significance for Québec society, for it allows citizens to ensure that decisions regarding the distribution of resources among schools and ultimately among students be as equitable as possible. Thus, the Conseil deems that the role of an elected school official should be promoted, and to succeed, it foresees the following courses of action:

- The MELS, FCSQ and QESBA¹⁶ must undertake to **better educate citizens both on the role of commissioners and the importance of the services they oversee.**
- The Government must implement the proper measures to **promote the participation of quality candidates for the position of commissioner.** One of the possible measures could consist of reviewing campaign financing regulations in school elections.
- **The Conseil similarly calls on citizens and in particular employers to acknowledge the value of citizen participation** by encouraging civic engagement, notably by becoming elected school officials.

16. The Québec English School Board Association

CONCLUSION

The current state of democracy in education in Québec and the breadth of the issues brought on by its practice raise considerable challenges for the future. To be sure, significant gains have been observed, notably with regard to universal suffrage in school elections, participatory management in schools (which promote the governing boards) and the role given to parents in the participatory framework, such as governing boards and council of commissioners. But the presence of obstacles that hinder the full practice of democracy in education—and which threaten its continuity—must not be ignored.

A clear position emerges from the present Annual Report on the State and Needs of Education: the Conseil firmly believes in civic participation in education, as it is an essential means to promote democracy in education and success for a greater number of students. Guided by this principle, it is crucial to strengthen democratic processes in the education system. This is the framework in which the Conseil formulated the five approaches submitted to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport, to education bodies and all citizens.

The actions that the Conseil wishes to see undertaken are not always all of the same scale or impact. Some present considerable challenges for Québec society as a whole and the expected results will only be seen in the long term. Such is the case in the efforts needed to create a true culture of citizenship. These efforts—which must be assumed together by stakeholders in the education system, the Government, and by each citizen—are necessary to ensure the continuity of democracy in the broad sense of the word. They are a *sine qua non* condition for strengthening democracy in the education system.

The Conseil is particularly concerned by whose interests the democratic processes are serving in the education system. While the interests of students are generally at the heart of practices and decisions that stem from them, there were some cases noted which deviated from the *Education Act* that trouble the Conseil. It is crucial that the practice of democracy in education be focused on students so as to safeguard its meaning and value. It is through mandatory training for all involved stakeholders and stricter accountability that the Conseil believes it is possible to keep the interest of students above all else in democratic practices.

Noting the reservations and mistrust that persist among some stakeholders with regard to civic participation in education, the Conseil favours a change of attitude on the part of all stakeholders. In the short term, the Conseil calls for training; it is by training stakeholders involved in the democratic education process, regardless of level, that they would acquire the proper knowledge of the new sharing of powers and responsibilities in education, the functions and powers of the education bodies and also the boundaries of their roles in relation to other stakeholders. A true participatory management in education could therefore be effective throughout, with harmony between levels, institutions, and stakeholders.

The Conseil is also confident that through training the wealth of the contributions of parents can be promoted, so that parents may be recognized as full partners by all, but other initiatives must also be implemented to this end. Not only should the role of parents in the school system be advanced, but their participation deserves to be supported and facilitated. In fact, the Conseil strongly asserts that parents of students have a fundamental role to play in the official processes of schools and school boards. All stakeholders, including the parents themselves, must be convinced of this.

Lastly, the Conseil also urgently calls to action matters that concern school government. For the Conseil, this level of local government, comprised of publicly-elected officials, represents a considerable gain for democracy. However, faced with known obstacles, swift change is required. If not, sooner rather than later, alternate solutions will need to be explored. It is essential that school elections encourage a greater participation of citizens and that the function of elected school officials acquire an importance equal to their responsibility. To succeed, commissioners must fully exercise their political role *vis-à-vis* their constituency. Moreover, school elections should be more closely managed to ensure that citizens are informed, to attract quality candidates and to spark debate on school issues. It is on this new foundation that Québec society could continue to count on civic representation in school boards.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

FCPQ	Fédération des comités de parents du Québec [Québec Federation of Parents' Committees]
FCSQ	Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec [Québec Federation of School Boards]
MELS	Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
PPO	Parent Participation Organization
QESBA	Québec English School Board Association
SNAC	Advisory Committee on Educational Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities

The full text (in French) of the 2005–2006 Annual Report On the State and Needs of Education

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by fax: 418 644-2530

by e-mail: panorama@cse.gouv.qc.ca

by mail: 1175, avenue Lavigerie, bureau 180,
Québec (Québec) G1V 5B2

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