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Local News

CEGEP leaders say they're in the dark on how Bill 96 will be implemented

Some of the law's amendments were included at the last minute, without consulting CEGEP administrators, pedagogical experts or teachers.

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette
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There's a lot of anxiety surrounding Bill 96 and "at the moment, we don't have any answers," Marianopolis director general Christian Corno says. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Days after the National Assembly adopted [Bill 96](#), the head of Marianopolis College continues to get daily phone calls from parents and high-school guidance counsellors seeking [clarity on myriad changes](#) coming to Quebec's anglophone college network.

"They're asking when this is going to be applied and what will the program be," Christian Corno said in an interview. "There's a lot of anxiety and uncertainty and, at the moment, we don't have any answers."

The [controversial legislation](#), adopted last Tuesday, will bring major changes to the English CEGEP system that will affect staffing, enrolment and student success.

Bill 96 places enrolment caps on the English system, which will limit how many francophones and allophones can access

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All students will be required to take three more courses in French. Francophones and allophones will have to take three of their core courses in French and pass a French proficiency exam to graduate — the same exam taken by students in francophone CEGEPs.

Students with English eligibility certificates have the option of taking three core courses in French or a total of five French second-language courses.

CEGEP and private college administrators remain in the dark about how Bill 96 will be implemented because senior officials in the higher education department had refused to discuss the issue until after the bill was passed by the Quebec government.

They hope to get some answers June 6 during a virtual meeting with Marc-André Thivierge, an assistant deputy minister in the higher education department, and his staff.

“They will be presenting us with their plan (and) how they intend to implement it within the time frame in the law,” Corno said.

Most of the bill’s amendments, such as extra French courses and the French exit exam, are scheduled to come into effect in the 2024 academic year. CEGEP leaders say they will lobby to have those start dates extended.

Some of the law’s amendments were included at the last minute, without consultation with CEGEP administrators, pedagogical experts or teachers.

“As educators, we have the responsibility to plan and mitigate the effects of the law on our students and staff,” said John McMahon, the director general at Vanier College.

Some students fear the changes will compromise their grades and their prospects of getting into a university program of their choice.

Students with special needs and those from First Nations communities want to be exempt from the additional French classes.

What’s more, Quebec has a shortage of French teachers and there are questions about whether enough teachers will be available to fill the new positions.

Corno said there’s also a lack of clarity about whether teachers or students will be consulted before the changes come into force.

“Will it be a consultation with only the directors general?” he asked. “Or will we have room to seek feedback internally? It seems difficult to imagine that we can do a proper consultation given the time frame.”

Many English teachers are fearful of job losses, and anglophone students in French secondary schools are unclear on what French courses they will be required to take, Corno added.

A spokesperson for the English Montreal School Board said he understands that some parents are worried about the additional French courses, but said the board’s French immersion programs are very strong.

“Most of our students are very good at French,” Michael Cohen said. “We are hoping people will not panic, will take a deep breath and give us a chance to ensure our kids are completely prepared for CEGEP.”

Bill 96, designed to update Bill 101, includes measures that affect everything from immigration, education and health care to businesses, municipalities and the judicial system.

The English Montreal School Board is planning to challenge the new law before the courts.

Although Bill 96 invokes the notwithstanding clause to override provisions contained in the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights, opponents can challenge the use of the clause before the courts.

There has already been a legal challenge to the use of the notwithstanding clause in Bill 21, which bans teachers and police officers, among other public servants, from wearing religious symbols on the job.

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