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Opinion / Columnists

# Hanes: EMSB spotlights its diverse population and emphasis on inclusion

*The English Montreal School Board has formed a new committee to focus on celebrating diversity in every aspect of its operations.*

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette

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Students in Grades 1 and 2 at St. Monica Elementary in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce had a reading of the book *Dear Black Girls* on Friday morning by author, educator and facilitator Shanice Nicole.

The virtual presentation was held in advance of Black History Month in February. But it is just one of many such events planned during a week of activities to promote diversity and inclusion [at the English Montreal School Board](#).

Every year, the board picks a theme to help promote its schools to eligible parents in the lead-up to kindergarten registration, which starts Jan. 31, and this time the focus is diversity, said EMSB director general Nick Katalifos.

“We really believe it’s one of our strengths, whether it’s our students, our employees, we have so much diversity and it’s something we should really celebrate,” he said.

The emphasis on inclusion is broad. Not only does this mean embracing various racial, cultural and religious backgrounds, but Indigenous Montrealers, special needs students and members of the LGBTQ+ community, too.

But this year’s theme is just the tip of the iceberg signalling a much deeper commitment toward making diversity a priority.

“It’s not just about this year or a week’s worth of activities,” Katalifos said. “It’s really one of our long-term objectives. And more than that, it’s part of our identity.”

The EMSB recently struck a committee to bring a lens of inclusion to all aspects of its operations. The board wants to be proactive instead of reactive.

Among the committee’s goals is ensuring a respectful awareness about diversity is taught in the classroom in ways that are appropriate for a range of age groups. For older students, this also means helping frame sometimes controversial current events. The board plans to do outreach with various communities and groups who could be partners in these efforts. The EMSB also hopes to recruit staff with different backgrounds to better reflect the makeup of the student body and help address the teacher shortage.

The search is on for an Indigenous education consultant who will bring a knowledgeable perspective on how to convey painful chapters in history while acknowledging modern-day injustices.

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remarkably diverse. It speaks to the fact the English-speaking community itself is made up of many creeds and cultures.

The elected council of commissioners of the EMSB has never shied away from crossing swords with the government of Premier François Legault on questions of minority rights. Although other English boards opposed it, the EMSB was the only one to join the court challenge against Bill 21, Quebec's law preventing teachers, among other authority figures, from wearing the hijab, kippah, turban or other religious insignia. It's also among the boards fighting Bill 40, which would abolish school boards and replace them with service centres, infringing on constitutionally enshrined minority education rights. And it has been vocal in denouncing aspects of Bill 96, Quebec's proposed legislation to strengthen protections for the French language, which would come at the expense of the rights of English speakers.

This activism has at times gotten it in hot water with Legault. And the EMSB has often found itself taking sides in some of the most heated societal debates raging in Quebec.

But the open and tolerant tone set by the elected members filters down throughout the organization.

"I'm most proud of the team here," Katalifos said. "The team wants to do this. They're very excited about it. They're very motivated. They know that this is the right thing to do. They know that it's important in terms of where we're headed in the future as an organization.

"This is a genuine and very concrete initiative. We want to make sure it's the base of operations in terms of the services we're offering our students, and in terms of the image of our school board. It matters and it's important that this message gets out."

Which is why the promotion of diversity will be so prominent in many classrooms this week.

Downtown, kindergarten students at FACE School are having a workshop on what they can express with their bodies with the board's sex-ed consultant, while Grade 6 students at Pierre de Coubertin Elementary in St-Léonard are sharing what they learned from the school's Hispanic Heritage Project with the kindergarten class.

"It's a theme we've all taken to heart as an organization, but it has to start with the students," Katalifos said.

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