OP EDS

Opinion: Quebec estates general on education must put politics aside, students first

The English-speaking community must have a seat at that table from Day 1 — not consulted at the end, but as a full partner.



"English-speaking Quebecers are not guests in this province. We are part of its history, its present and its future," writes Joe Ortona, president of the Quebec English School Boards Association. "We are not asking for special treatment, only a seat at the table."
(Allen McInnis / Montreal Gazette)

By **Joe Ortona, Special to the Montreal Gazette**

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For generations, English-speaking Quebecers have helped build this province, raising our families here and contributing to its economy and

culture. Our schools are essential to our community's success.

Quebec has a new government, and with it a rare opening: an estates general on education, to be held in 2027. It is a chance to step back from partisan debate and ask the question that matters most: What do our students need to succeed?

The English-speaking community must have a seat at that table from Day 1 — not consulted at the end, not treated as a special case, but as a full partner. Our staff, parents and school boards have much to contribute, and we're ready.

Our nine English-language school boards serve about 100,000 students. With a graduation and qualification rate of 86 per cent, our network ranks among the most successful public education systems in North America.

Those results come from committed teachers, support staff, parents and elected commissioners who know education is about more than grades. It's about giving young people the confidence and skills to build full lives.

We also take our responsibility toward Quebec's common language seriously. French immersion was born in an English-language school in St-Lambert in 1965. Six decades later, we remain committed to graduates who can live, work and thrive in French while keeping their identity as English-speaking Quebecers.

These goals are not contradictory. They are part of what makes Quebec unique.

When Quebecers hear about English-language school boards, it's usually about court challenges. That's only a small part of the story. Every day, from Gaspé to Gatineau, our boards hire teachers, run special education, adult and vocational programs, and work with families to help every child succeed.

> The new government has a chance to show that it represents every Quebecer. It can start by recognizing that our children's futures are not competing interests. They are a shared responsibility.

We have gone to court to defend our rights under Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Managing our own schools is essential to the vitality of our minority-language community, and we make no apologies for protecting that right.

But it has never meant opposing the French language or Quebec's francophone majority. Our students graduate bilingual and build their lives and careers here.

We want what every parent wants: excellent schools, qualified teachers,

accessible services and a brighter future for our children. We also face the same challenges as everyone: staff shortages, aging buildings, growing mental health needs, gaps in specialized services and unpredictable funding.

These shared challenges should bring us together, not divide us.

Every education decision should begin with one question: Will this improve our students' lives and learning?

We need stronger mental health support, faster access to specialists, adequate staffing and sustainable funding. Teachers need resources to teach, and school boards need flexibility to serve their communities.

We must also face harder questions. In Quebec's three-tier system, public schools compete with selective programs and subsidized private schools, and too often the students with the greatest needs are left with the fewest options. Equity and access can no longer be an afterthought.

That is why we support an estates general: a broad, independent public review, in French and English, guided by evidence rather than political calculation.

English-speaking Quebecers are not guests in this province. We are part of its history, its present and its future. We are not asking for special treatment, only a seat at the table.

Our children will grow up in a world shaped by artificial intelligence, economic uncertainty and rapid social change. They deserve schools ready

for that future.

The new government has a chance to show that it represents every Quebecer. It can start by recognizing that our children's futures are not competing interests. They are a shared responsibility.

Join us. Talk to your MNA. Speak up in your community. Tell decision-makers you want an estates general that includes every voice and puts students first.

Our children are counting on us. Let's build their future together.

Joe Ortona is president of the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA), representing Quebec's nine English-language school boards.

EDITOR'S PICKS