

Nova Scotia set to abolish elected trustees at seven of the province's eight school boards

By Matthew McCully

While Nova Scotia falls just outside of the territory normally covered by The Record, a recent announcement regarding the future of elected school board trustees in the province (who we know as commissioners) raised a red flag.

In recent years Quebec has been dealt its share of blows in the field of education. Between strikes during collective agreement negotiations and a revolving door of Education Ministers pushing for major reform, there have been moments when the focus of school boards strayed slightly from student success towards self-preservation.

Since the appointment of Sébastien Proulx in 2016, however, there has been a period of stability when the Eastern Townships School Board could look more than six months into the future with confidence.

While Quebec has been able to thwart attempts at major school board reform, Nova Scotia has not been so lucky.

An administrative review commissioned by the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education & Early Childhood Development came up with 22 recommendations to improve the education system in the province. At the top of the list was unifying the system by dissolving the seven elected regional school boards and creating one provincial advisory council.

International Education Advisor Avis Glaze was hired to conduct the review. She was given the mandate on Oct. 11, 2017 with a deadline to submit a final report by Dec. 31, 2017.

In the two-and-a-half month span, Glaze stated in her report that she held 91 separate consultations with groups and individuals and received 1,500 questionnaires, along with phone calls and hand-written letters.

The last time there was a reform of the governance structure serving public education in Nova Scotia was 1996 after a three-year consultative process that resulted in an amalgamation of 22 school boards into eight and a new legislative framework. The report mentioned.

According to Nova Scotia School Boards Association Communications Consultant Trish Smith, Glaze's recommendations, entitled Raise the Bar: A Coherent and Responsive Education Administrative System for Nova Scotia, was released to school boards and the public last Tuesday, Jan. 16. The following day, the Nova Scotia education Ministry accepted all 22 recommendations, she said.

Since then, boards have received a list of directives to follow limiting decision-making until the house resumes on Feb. 27 and the legislation can be approved.

"It's been a slaughter," said Nova Scotia School Boards Association President Hank Middleton.

"This is one of the most undemocratic rush jobs I've ever seen."

The province currently has eight school boards; seven regional English boards and one provincial French board.

Middleton added that each board includes an elected African-Nova Scotian member and a Mi'kmaw representative, appointed by the minister in consultation with the Mi'kmaw community and the school board, pointing to the boards' desire to represent all communities served.

"We were moving in a great direction," Middleton commented, admitting there had been issues to deal with in the past, resulting in the complete dismissal of three boards.

While the Raise the Bar report calls for the elimination of the seven governing (elected) regional boards structure of the French Conseil scolaire acadien

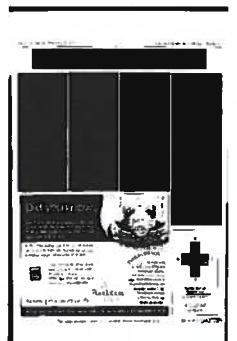
provincial will not change.

"In a province and a continent dominated by the English language, Acadians make up four percent of the population and are justifiably proud of their culture, their language, and their place in the province. And they should also be encouraged to celebrate and protect the rights they have won within a within a predominantly Anglophone culture," the report reads.

According to Middleton, Glaze's recommendations point to three main reasons to eliminate school boards; a fractious relationship between boards and the department of education, poor voter turnout and a high rate of acclamations in elections (61 of 97 in the most recent municipal elections), and sub-par student performance based on pan-Canadian comparisons.

When the position of Quebec's elected school board members was threatened with proposed Education Reform Bill 86, it was quickly stomped out by Anglophones defending their minority rights to govern their own school boards. The additional argument that you can't do to one school board what you do to another was enough of a deterrent for the Quebec Ministry of Education to scrap the bill altogether, the French boards benefiting peripherally from the Anglo call to arms.

"English is not protected by the charter," Middleton pointed out, so a defence of constitutional rights is not an option



School bus cameras on the way?

Record Staff
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Transport Minister André Fortin left the door open Tuesday to the possible installation of photo radar cameras on school buses to punish drivers who fail to stop when flashing lights are on. Fortin was speaking at a *Fédération des transporteurs par autobus* press conference launching the 30th School Bus Safety Campaign.

In 2015, a pilot project allowed Ottawa to install cameras on the stop arms of certain school buses and the project found that there was an average of five offenses per day on each bus route. With the project report in hand, the federal capital announced in November that six cameras, costing between \$16,000 and \$18,000 each, would be permanently installed on school buses.

Luc Lafrance, President and CEO of the *Fédération des transporteurs par autobus*, admits that the number of rule violations is currently much higher than the number of tickets issued by police.

"According to the figures of the Quebec Automobile Insurance Corporation, only 1000 tickets are issued annually in Quebec for ignoring flashing lights on the 10 000 school buses that carry more than half-a-million schoolchildren, which average 20 million kilometers a day," Lafrance said, adding that he was aware that manufacturers of these cam-

eras had applied to the Quebec Government for a pilot project similar to the one attempted in Ottawa.

Fortin, for his part, mentioned that the province's road safety record has improved significantly for school buses in Quebec.

"But even if the bottom line has improved, a single accident can lead to a tragic end," he said.

Fortin says the last case of a student dying inside a bus involved in a car accident dating back to 1986 while Lafrance pointed out that another accident in 2006 involved a student who had just gotten off the bus.

Last November 27, a 17-year-old girl died after being struck by a school bus in Saint-Eustache, and in September, a 61-year-old cyclist was killed in Montreal after being struck by a school bus. In 2011, a collision between a van and a school bus left four people dead and four seriously injured in Sainte-Geneviève-de-Berthier, in Lanaudière.

According to the Automobile Insurance Corporation, 292 people were injured in school bus accidents in 2016, 29 fewer than in 2015. Of these, 276 were slightly injured and 11 seriously. Five adults, one occupying a school bus and four occupying another vehicle, were killed. These figures cover all accidents related to school transportation in the broader sense and that a bus was not necessarily involved in the accident.



REFOULEMENT D'ÉGOUT À L'ÉCOLE PARKVIEW

Les parents informés tardivement



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GRANBY — Un refoulement d'égout survenu lundi dans la cour de l'école primaire Parkview a souillé la neige et la glace dans laquelle les enfants ont joué, mardi. Les parents n'ont été informés que mercredi de la situation.

Un refoulement d'égout a eu lieu pendant la journée pédagogique de lundi dernier dans l'école.

À ce moment-là, la commission scolaire Eastern Townships a ordonné le nettoyage et la désinfection des lieux et surfaces touchés ainsi que la ventilation de l'endroit.

Une autre zone de refoulement a toutefois été découverte le lendemain en fin de journée, soit mardi, dans la cour d'école. Et ce, après que des enfants s'y soient retrouvés.

« Lundi soir, on croyait que tout était réglé. C'est en après-midi, mardi, qu'on a remarqué qu'il persistait une mauvaise odeur dans l'école. Nous nous sommes rendu compte que ça venait des vêtements et des bottes des enfants, dans leurs casiers », explique Éric Campbell, secrétaire général, communications et développement des partenariats avec la communauté à la commission scolaire Eastern Townships.

« Quand on leur a demandé, les enfants nous ont dit que la neige et la glace dans ce coin-là avaient une drôle de couleur », poursuit M. Campbell.

Il n'y avait pas de matières fécales par terre, seulement des liquides qui se sont mélangés à la neige, a-t-il précisé.

On ignore cependant si ce deuxième sinistre est la conséquence du premier ou s'il est arrivé par la suite.

Mardi, en fin de journée, la direction de l'école a condamné la zone contaminée et pris contact avec la Direction de la santé publique (DSP) de l'Estrie.

Des responsables de la Ville de même qu'une firme de nettoyage se sont rendus sur place mercredi

et jeudi pour constater l'ampleur des dégâts et enquêter.

Les casiers des élèves ont été nettoyés et désinfectés mercredi matin.

TENUS DANS L'IGNORANCE PENDANT DEUX JOURS

Ce n'est que mercredi en fin de journée que la DSP et la commission scolaire ont fait parvenir par courriel une lettre aux parents pour les informer de la situation.

« On ignore combien d'enfants ont réellement joué dans ce secteur de la cour, mais on a informé tous les parents par précaution », relève M. Campbell.

Certains déplorent avoir été tenus dans l'ignorance pendant deux jours.

Un père de famille à qui nous avons parlé ne s'étonne pas de la

gestion de la situation. « La communication avec la commission scolaire est horrible. On sait toujours tout à la dernière minute », clame-t-il.

Celui-ci a reçu un message texte de l'enseignante de son enfant, mardi en fin de journée. « Ça nous disait de sentir les vêtements de nos enfants, et que s'ils sentaient mauvais, de les laver. J'avais trouvé ça bizarre. »

Le message ne faisait toutefois pas mention d'un refoulement d'égout, précise le Granbyen.

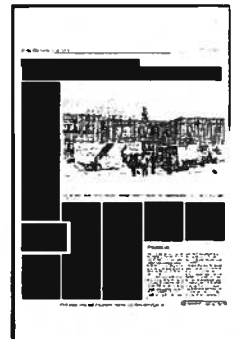
Selon la mère d'un autre élève ayant appris l'incident par la lettre, la direction de l'école et la commission scolaire ont pris des risques inutiles en informant tardivement les parents.

« Certaines familles n'ont pas su le jour même que leur enfant rapportait des bactéries pathogènes à la maison. Combien de ces enfants ont traîné leurs vêtements pleins de bactéries au service de garde de leur petite sœur ? Sur les lieux de travail de leurs parents ? Au centre d'hébergement où résident leurs grands-parents ? » demande la dame, qui n'a pas voulu être identifiée.

À la commission scolaire, on se défend d'avoir tenu les parents dans l'ignorance.

Il importait de mener une enquête avant de communiquer l'information aux parents, soutient M. Campbell.

« On voulait d'abord vérifier l'étendue du problème, dit le secrétaire général. On ne pouvait pas transmettre des informations que nous n'avions pas



nous-mêmes. »

Environ 20 % de la cour d'école est considérée comme contaminée, indique M. Campbell.

« On va devoir casser la glace et excaver », dit-il.

Le terrain devra également être décontaminé, ce qui devrait avoir lieu samedi matin, au plus tard.

D'ici là, la portion de la cour d'école touchée demeurera fermée.

Il importait de mener une enquête avant de communiquer l'information [aux parents], soutient Éric Campbell, de la Commission scolaire Eastern Townships



Des responsables de la Ville de même qu'une firme de nettoyage se sont rendus sur place mercredi et jeudi pour constater l'ampleur des dégâts et enquête.

— PHOTO ALAIN DION

Prévention

« Le refoulement aurait amené des eaux contaminées avec certaines matières fécales et celles-ci ont gelé dans la cour », indique la lettre envoyée aux parents par la Direction de la santé publique et la commission scolaire.

La Direction de la santé publique rappelle que les eaux d'un refoulement d'égout peuvent contenir des matières fécales pouvant être contaminées par « des virus ou des bactéries susceptibles de causer

des infections gastro-intestinales », mais que le fait que ces eaux aient gelé réduit le risque d'infection.

En guise de précaution, la DSP recommande aux parents de nettoyer tous les vêtements des élèves avec de l'eau chaude et savonneuse avant de les sécher, idéalement, dans la sècheuse.

En cas de nausées, de vomissements ou d'autres symptômes, les parents ont été invités à communiquer avec la ligne Info-Santé. **MARIE-ÈVE MARTEL**



Murray weighs in on school boards, sewers and student transfers

By Matthew McCully

After bouncing around outside the jurisdiction of the Eastern Townships School Board (ETSB) in recent weeks to cover education topics in neighbouring boards and provinces, The Record decided to check in with ETSB Chairman Mike Murray to gauge the impact locally.

Murray on the Maritimes

Regarding the Nova Scotia government's decision to accept a recommendation to eliminate the elected school board trustees at seven of the province's eight boards, Murray explained that education governance systems in the Maritimes have long been in flux.

"People who won't read history are doomed to repeat it," he said, adding that New Brunswick abolished school boards at one point, only to find the alternative ineffective and eventually returning to the previous system.

Murray does not see the proposed elimination of school boards in Nova Scotia as having a direct impact on the ETSB, saying the situation here is very different.

"One size doesn't fit all," Murray said, pointing to the importance of a local body to evaluate the needs of different schools in a territory.

According to Murray, the ETSB is small enough to be able to deal with things on an individual basis, to identify and serve the unique needs of each school and centre in its district.

"Bureaucrats of any stripe have a challenge being flexible enough to allow each local part of a system to do its own thing," he said.

While the CAQ is currently campaigning on a platform to do away with school boards, Murray pointed out that they serve an important purpose, espe-

cially during any decision-making process, serving as a buffer between the province and schools.

The edicts passed down from the government are often unrealistic when applied to a territory, Murray said, suggesting that if the provincial legislature had to answer to parents and schools directly regarding its decisions, the situation could become unmanageable quickly.

Bury student transfers

Last week The Record reported that roughly 50 students enrolled in the French Hauts-Cantons School Board (CSHC) living east of Route 108 in Bury could be transferred to École Saint-Paul in Scotstown at the beginning of next school year because of overcrowding at Le Parchemin school in East Angus.

The CSHC held a meeting on Jan. 30 and following testimonials from concerned parents opposed to the transfer, held a brief period of deliberation and then voted unanimously in favour of transferring the students to Scotstown.

Annie Duhaime, head of the parent's group opposed to the transfers, said some of the parents concerned are considering moving out of Bury or exploring home schooling rather than sending their children to Scotstown. While they have nothing against the school, Duhaime said the road to get there is dangerous, especially in winter, and parents would prefer exploring other options.

Among them was the idea of a shared bilingual school in Bury.

ETSB Chairman Mike Murray confirmed that the board had been contacted by parents about the idea, but no formal talks with the CSHC had taken place.

"We have occasionally discussed the concept," Murray said, explaining that

the ETSB is certainly open to the idea.

Sutton Elementary School is an example of a shared school, Murray said. While the classrooms are separate, all other aspects of SES are blended with French and English students interacting in the hallways and playground.

Murray said the board is currently exploring the possibility of a similar model in Mansonville.

"These things can take time," he said.

Sewer trouble at Parkview

Over the weekend the city sewers in Granby backed up due to flooding.

Murray confirmed there was infiltration into Parkview Elementary School.

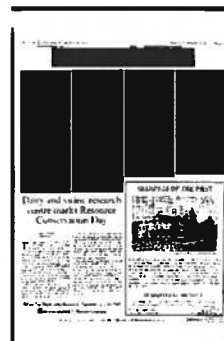
Maintenance crews were dispatched immediately to begin the cleanup, Murray said.

Monday was a planning day so no students were in the school. Even so, many teachers and staff found the situation intolerable and were skeptical whether the school would be clean enough to accept students the following day.

Murray said a thorough clean-up and disinfecting of the school was done and school went ahead on Tuesday as planned. The playground, however, was closed when it was discovered there had been sewer leakage outside.

A note was sent home to parents telling them to inspect their children's outdoor clothes and boots.

Murray said Parkview is lucky enough have a 10-acre park beside the school, so



students were able to play there during recess and lunch hour.

"We're still working with the city," Murray said, to make sure the playground is completely clean before students are allowed to return.

"My enthusiasm is for the crew that worked so effectively and avoided the inconvenience of closing the school," Mur-

ray said, "their reaction time was really good."

Murray did say that the board received a letter saying that the students shouldn't have been allowed to eat in the cafeteria because of the strong smell of sewage combined with bleach.

"We're certainly aware and monitoring the situation," Murray said.

for Nova Scotia school boards.

"It's an uphill battle," commented Middleton, adding that time is of the essence.

"We have about a month to deal with this," he said, until Parliament resumes on Feb. 27.

"If we can't turn this around, English boards will be abolished by March 31," Middleton said, presuming the three readings of the bill will be rushed through to get the job done before the

end of the fiscal year.

Ironically, Middleton said Nova Scotia is slated to host the national conference of School Boards this coming July.

Adding insult to injury, Middleton added that many of the other recommendations in the Raise the Bar report were things school boards had been trying to implement for years.

"We asked for them, and we're not allowed to implement them," Middleton said.

"The only things will ever change is if there is enough push back by the public," commented Middleton.

"Keep your eyes open," Middleton said, explaining that what is happening in Nova Scotia could make its way to other provinces in the coming years.

The Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) recently held a two-day pre-session caucus discussing the party's education platform, which includes doing away with school boards.