

# 27. Towards an Education System for the Common Good: Desegregating Quebec's Schools in a Market Context

*Stéphane Vigneault*

This is the author's accepted version of the chapter appearing in the volume *Research Handbook on Education Privatization and Marketization*, edited by A. Zancajo, C. Fontdevila, H. Jabbar and A. Verger, and published by Edward Elgar Publishing in 2025. The published version is accessible at: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035311385>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Quebec has a three-tier education system in which subsidised private schools, selective public schools and regular public schools compete for the most profitable students in terms of income and academic results. This market-oriented rationale produces high levels of school segregation. Despite the serious educational and social consequences of this situation, politicians have mostly ignored it for 50 years.

Troubled by the skimming of their neighbourhood primary public school by a so-called international school (also public), concerned parents founded the association *École ensemble* in June 2017. The name, which could be roughly translated as “let's go to school together”, encapsulates the mission the group had given itself: make Quebec's education system fair. The association's *raison d'être* is defined by its mission – “for Quebec to have an equitable education system by eliminating the school segregation caused by subsidised private and selective public school networks”; and its vision – “Quebec students learning together, regardless of their socio-economic background”.

The strategy adopted by *École ensemble* represents a departure from prior attempts at desegregation efforts. *École ensemble* quickly realised that urging parents locally and individually to “do the right thing” (send their children to the local public school) would not work. Parents want the best for their children: if they perceive that there is a better option available, they will pursue it. Trying to change the system by curbing individual behaviour in the name of the greater good had failed before and was bound to fail again. What was rather required was a collective solution, a political one.

This chapter provides an overview of such efforts, focusing on the grassroots campaign *Plan for a Common School Network* launched in 2022, through which *École ensemble* managed to revisit the question of equity in education on new grounds. The chapter also summarizes the main challenges encountered by such efforts and the strategies mobilized by *École ensemble* to overcome them.

This article will start by describing Quebec's education market, its consequences, and the ways in which it has been justified or opposed in the public debate since the 1970s. It will then look at the solutions put forward by *École ensemble* during its first (2017-2020) and current (since 2020)

phases. This second phase is characterised by the search for a politically realistic proposal to end school segregation, with the launch of the *Plan for a Common School Network*. The chapter concludes with a balance of the opportunities and challenges faced by *École ensemble*, while reflecting on the implications of this experience for our understanding of ongoing attempts at curbing market forces in education.

## 2. QUEBEC'S SCHOOL MARKET

One has to go back in history to understand the development of an education market in Quebec<sup>1</sup>, Canada's only province with a French-speaking majority<sup>2</sup>. Like many things in modern Quebec, education was shaped during the Quiet Revolution, a period of intense political, social and cultural change in the 1960s (see also Lachance in this volume). Between 1959 and 1968, Quebec's governments pursued both a goal of accelerated modernization along the lines of the welfare state and a clear objective of national promotion for French-speaking Quebecers. In 1964, the province created a Department of Education. Prior to that point, the Catholic and Protestant churches had been in charge of education. The creation of a department was a clear indication of the secularization underway in society, but the Catholic Church continued to retain considerable power. In 1968, the government struck a deal to partly fund Catholic private schools with taxpayers' money. Bill 56 allowed those subsidised private schools to select students and charge tuition.

This victory for the Catholic Church and private schools can be, in hindsight, considered the beginning of Quebec's de facto school segregation policy. It would reach a new level in the 1990's when some public schools also started to select their pupils. The resulting three-tier school system is commonly known as *école à trois vitesses* ("three-speed schooling"). This section will provide an overview of the three main types of schools currently present in Quebec.

### 2.a. Subsidised Private Schools

Subsidised private schools have continuously increased their share of the school market. Only 5% of secondary school students attended private schools in 1970, nowadays, 20% of them do so (Larose, 2016). At the primary education level, 6% of students attend subsidised private schools. This popularity is explained by three factors.

First, the public funding: a student in a private school receives 75% of the public funds that an equivalent student in the public system (Quebec, 2004), allowing "private" schools to reduce the cost of tuition. Tuition differs from school to school; the government sets a maximum amount every

---

<sup>1</sup> Under Canada's federal system, education is a provincial jurisdiction. There is no "Canadian education system", but rather 10 provincial and 3 territorial systems. The federal government, and for that matter, the municipal administrations, have no power over pre-school, primary and secondary education.

<sup>2</sup> Quebec is Canada's second most populous province, behind Ontario. The province is made up of a large majority of francophones, with anglophone and allophone minorities, as well as eleven indigenous nations. According to the 2021 census, 77.8% of Quebecers had French as their mother tongue, while 10% spoke English.

year. To this tuition, many fees can be added, ranging from the cost of an iPad to sports programmes well in the thousands of dollars (Leroux, 2017).

Second, given their socioeconomic composition, as well as their capacity to select (and expel) their students<sup>3</sup>, these schools often show better academic performance. A 2015 study by Statistics Canada made hence clear that “Students who attended private high schools were more likely to have socio-economic characteristics positively associated with academic success and to have school peers with university-educated parents” (Statistics Canada, 2015, p. 5)

These higher grades are used by right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute to publish yearly school rankings that are then advertised by the mainstream media. Subsidised private schools land the top spots in these rankings, thus reinforcing their “good school” reputation. The prestige, standing and overall visibility of subsidised private schools are reinforced by their education marketing efforts, which include advertising campaigns in different media and a variety of promotional material and strategies, including tours within school premises (see for instance Cassivi’s (2017) overview in *La Presse*).

Third, most of these schools are no longer religious, but they carry with them the elitist aura of the *collèges classiques*, the pre-Quiet Revolution Catholic schools where the limited number of francophones who had access to secondary education at that time were educated.

Subsidised private schools do not fall under the same law that public schools do. Instead, they have their own law, the *Act Respecting Private Education* enacted in 1968. This is coupled with a lack of information on some key aspects: there is no mandatory reporting on pupils with special needs and socioeconomic data about private schools is not collected or made public by the Department of Education. However, according to an analysis commissioned in 2018 by École ensemble and relying on Quebec’s PISA sample, there are six times more disadvantaged children in regular and selective public schools combined than in private schools (Dion-Viens, 2018).

## **2.b. Selective Public Schools**

Public school officials began to realise in the 1980s that the playing field was not levelled (Lessard, 2021). High-performing students and those from richer families were increasingly avoiding public schools, thus leading to an overrepresentation of poorer and low-performing students in the public sector. Rather than oppose the privileges granted to private schools, public institutions and education ministers instead decided to compete with subsidised private schools on their turf: selection. Public school officials wanted the same competitive advantage private schools had, i.e., the capacity to offer parents an exclusive environment for their children. As chronicled by Kamanzi

---

<sup>3</sup> Tuition fees are the main filter in the selection process of subsidised secondary private schools, but many other tools are employed, including entry exams, elementary school records screening, interviews, auditions and reference letters by primary school teachers. Remarkably, the age of entry into the selection race for secondary schools is decreasing, and now starts as early as 4<sup>th</sup> grade (9 years old) in some cases (Dion-Viens, 2023).

(2019): “Since the 1980s, the Public Education Act has allowed public secondary schools to develop special programs for so-called talented or gifted students” (p. 20).

At the end of the 1980s, *projets particuliers* (selective public schools —or parts of a school— with a given focus) were created, with modes of selection mimicking those of subsidised private schools: mandatory registration, entry exam fees, entry exams, elementary school records screening, programme fees, auditions, reference letters, mandatory parental involvement, etc. The share of public institutions resorting to this strategy has gradually increasing since then. With a number of different focuses —international, sports, arts, alternative pedagogy, etc.— the new “public” schools proved extremely popular among parents. Not only were most of them cheaper than private schools, but they offered a comforting loophole for left-of-centre parents who wanted the benefit of private-like exclusiveness without actually leaving the public system. Hence, in a 2007 report, the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation (an arm’s length public body advising the Education Minister), estimated the proportion of pupils in selective public schools at 20%. A recent study by the Institut de recherche et d’informations socioéconomiques estimated the market share of secondary selective public schools at 23%. At the elementary level, that share is only of 3% (Plourde, 2022) However, the proportion is growing, having gone up 50% between 2007 and 2019 (Dion-Viens, 2019), and selective public preschools are now in development (Dion-Viens, 2022).

### **2.c. Regular Public Schools**

Unlike private subsidised and selective public schools, regular public schools accept everyone from their catchment area and are free. Selection by the other two networks means that regular public schools have an over-representation of students with special needs and of students from poorer families. This composition of the regular public school classroom, in turn, makes subsidised private and selective public schools more attractive to parents, giving rise to a self-reinforcing dynamic. It is estimated that 90% of pupils are in regular public schools at the elementary level and 56% at the secondary level (Plourde, 2022).

This three-tier school system has never been an official policy in Quebec. But the existence of subsidised private schools, selective public schools and regular public schools make it *de facto* a public policy. Even the United Nations is calling Quebec to account<sup>4</sup> for its three-tier system (United Nations, 2020). Sixty years after the creation of the Department of Education, Quebec’s education system is defined by its market-like nature. The current state of affairs is summarized by Kamanzi (2021, p.7),

In the contemporary context, the aim of bringing public and private institutions closer together to improve the quality of education has accentuated a market culture. Whether public or private, schools are increasingly competing to recruit and select the right students. They are therefore

---

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations’ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights asked Quebec in 2020 to provide information on “measures taken to ensure that students have equal access to education under the three-tier school system in Quebec, regardless of the economic status of their parents, and measures taken to improve the quality of education in ordinary public schools.”(p. 6). At time of print, the government’s answer had not been made public.

required to differentiate programs to meet the particular needs of students with different levels of performance.

### 3. EDUCATION MARKET CONSEQUENCES

This section will outline the consequences of Quebec's three-tier education system. First, the diagnosis of a landmark report from a governmental consultative body will be presented. Second, the sociological description of pupils in the three speeds' will be examined. Third, the consequences of the lack of social diversity in education, as researched internationally, will be briefly outlined.

The problematization of the marketization of education in Quebec reached the general public in 2016 when the three-tier school system led the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation to sound the alarm in a landmark report, *Steering the Course Back to Equity in Education*. Before that, there had been other reports trying to warn the government and public opinion, but with limited success. First, the Parent Commission's report in 1966 (cf. Lachance in this volume). The report, still revered as Quebec's education founding document, made suggestions regarding private schools' complementarity to the public sector (cf. Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec, 1966). However, the government of the day (the Union nationale party, catholic conservative) did not follow this recommendation and instead voted Bill 56 creating subsidised private schools and allowing them to select students and charge tuition. Second, the report of the Estates General on Education, a vast governmental consultation of all education stakeholders in 1996, also warned about the marketization of the education system. By that year, public selective schools had started to sprout and the Estates General's report took notice, noting that the establishment of 'elite streams' within the public network was incentivizing an important share of students (oftentimes those in a most advantaged social and academic position) to leave regular public schools (Rapport final de la Commission des états généraux sur l'éducation, 1996). However, the topic was not picked up by the government of the day who instead used the 1996 report to reform pedagogic methods.

Contrary to the 1966 and 1996 reports, the Conseil's 2016 *Steering the Course Back to Equity in Education* focused solely on the issue of equity in education. The Conseil stated "in all provinces or regions of Canada, students in disadvantaged schools have performed less well than those in privileged schools, but this difference is much higher in Quebec." (p. 53)

The Conseil found by looking at PISA results that the socio-economic status of students in Canada appeared to have relatively little influence on their performance. However, in every subject measured by PISA, the difference in achievement between students from schools in disadvantaged areas and those in affluent ones continues to be markedly more significant in Quebec than in other Canadian provinces or territories (even though social programs in Quebec are more generous than in other provinces). The analysis also showed selective public schools and subsidised private schools lead to unequal treatment that tends to favour the more affluent students. The report noted that competition in education goes hand in hand with the belief that not all schools are alike, thus

feeding a crisis of confidence that is weakening the public education system. In turn, this crisis reinforces school segregation patterns and social stratification between schools (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2016).

The Conseil asserted that Quebec's education system perpetuates inequalities. Academic research confirmed this both in terms of the inequity of social intake by type of school and the inequity of access to higher education. Hence, the social origin of students is found to vary following the three "speeds" of the education system. This has a clear impact on access to higher education, be it college or university, as documented by Kamanzi (2019):

Students enrolled only in regular programs in public schools access college<sup>5</sup> at a rate of 49%, versus almost all students in private schools (94%) or public institutions with enriched programs in mathematics, science and languages (91%). The gaps widen even more at university, where the transition rates are, respectively, 15%, 51% and 60%. (Kamanzi, 2019, p. 22)

The educational effects of the three-speed system are multi-faceted: student dropout (the highest rate in the country), teacher dropout (a quarter of teachers leave the profession during their first five years), and insufficient literacy (53% of 16-65 year-olds have low or insufficient literacy skills). This is in line with recent works on the consequences of school segregation and school selection on academic performance (e.g. Matthewes, 2021; Terrin, 2022; Gorard, 2023) but also social mobility (Chetty, 2022) and cognitive skills including critical thinking and problem-solving (Wells, 2016).

#### **4. DEFENDING SELECTIVE SCHOOLS: 50 YEARS OF JUSTIFICATIONS**

Despite growing awareness of the inequalities associated with the three-tier system, the status quo continues to be defended by various actors on the basis of a series of (changing) arguments. École ensemble had to take those narratives into account in order to plan all necessary counter-arguments.

Since 1968 and the decision by the now-defunct Union nationale party to fund private schools, many justifications have been put forward to maintain the flow of public money to private institutions. The changing justifications for this arrangement have been summarized by emeritus professor and former Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's president Claude Lessard (now the chairman of École ensemble's board). Three periods are identified.

During the first one, the freedom of conscience and freedom of education in relation to religion was the clear justification. Private education has been historically denominational and, for a long time, was presented as obeying a Christian educational project. Parents' freedom of choice was therefore linked to freedom of conscience and religion.

---

<sup>5</sup> Post-secondary education in Quebec includes two levels: college education (known as *cégep*, an acronym for *collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*) and university education.

Second, with the loss of religious fervour, the justification changed: the nation needed an elite and it was the private schools' role to educate it. Public schools came to be portrayed as responsible for the basic training of all the people, while private schools were made responsible for training an intellectual and professional elite. References to elitism have since then become more discreet and more meritocratic – in fact, public subsidies are today defended on the grounds that they ensure the democratization of access to private schools.

Lastly, in conjunction with an individualistic mentality, subsidised private schools are justified as an antidote to Big Government and a conduit for competition. In this vision, private education acts as a counterweight and spur to the public sector, as well as a lever for change and innovation, notably through information technologies. In this logic, education is clearly a private good: the customer's satisfaction guarantees the quality and relevance of the education provided. (Lessard, 2021)

As for selective public schools, they were rarely a concern for media or politicians until recently. The official justification for their existence is that they help raise attainment thanks to the extra motivation triggered by special programmes – albeit such as higher attainment is largely a consequence of selection. When pressed, politicians, public school officials and unions would also provide a second justification for selective public schools: public schools are in competition with private schools; special projects) are thus the only tool they have to compete. As noted by Lessard (2021), this is a 'paradoxical' victory for the public sector, for it forces it to act as the private sector, thus favouring educational inequalities.

## **5. ÉCOLE ENSEMBLE'S POLICY PROPOSAL: FROM OPPOSING TO PROPOSING**

The association *École ensemble* was founded in June 2017 by parents of Gatineau and Montreal concerned by the skimming of their neighbourhoods' primary schools by selective public schools. Like many grassroots organisations, *École ensemble* was created to oppose something. The association opposed school segregation and wanted to put an end to private school subsidies and selection in public schools. But the first years of its campaign made clear that not only did the classic defunding narrative it had adopted have many shortcomings, but also that *opposing* inequity had its limits: *proposing* a fair system, although challenging, had much more potential.

### **5.a. *École ensemble*'s First Phase (2017-2020): Building on the Defunding Narrative**

When *École ensemble* was launched in 2017, the debate on school segregation was quite limited. In the media, it was almost absent. Politically, the issue was considered too divisive and was carefully avoided, especially during election campaigns. Only some teachers' unions and academics would try to bring back the topic every few years. Institutional actors, when confronted with the issue of Quebec's unfair education system put forward three main solutions: make (regular) public schools more attractive; enact quotas of special-needs students in private schools; and nationalize/defund private school

The first two proposals are akin to harm reduction. They maintain the problem but seek to minimise the consequences. Specifically, the idea of making public schools more attractive is problematic given that the continuity of selective schools renders an impossible challenge any attempt to increase the “attractiveness” of the regular public network<sup>6</sup> – as schools with special programs will continue to draw certain social groups attracted precisely by their selective nature. However, this idea remains popular among editorialists and columnists, which feature among its main proponents.

Similarly, the proposal of forcing subsidised private schools to accept low-performing students is unlikely to succeed. Quotas would not only be difficult to enforce (the private sector would not give up its right to expel “unfit” pupils to the public sector), but they would also be inevitably biased: the private sector would only accept low-performing students who have rich-enough parents. However, such proposals are supported by education faculty scholars (oftentimes coming from psychology) and remain popular with elected officials and the media, for it has the advantage of hiding the topic of socio-economic inequalities behind that of special-need students.

As for the third position, its appeal seems to lie in its apparent simplicity: taking the public funds sent to private schools and instead allocating them to public schools. However, and although left-of-center parties and teacher unions have historically supported this nationalization/defunding option, it has never been thoroughly conceptualised. A debate emerged between a gradual approach and a one-time end to subsidies, yet how these options are to unfold legally and practically was never addressed nor costed.

Nevertheless, the position of *École ensemble* when its first campaign was launched in June 2017 built precisely on this third option. However, and contrary to past campaigns, the defunding narrative articulated by *École ensemble* also included the issue of selective public schools. Such an approach initially generated some resistance among organisations on the left, which asked for selective public schools not to be included in the demands of *École ensemble*. For public school advocates, selective special programmes seemed like the only tool at their disposal to compete with private schools. However, *École ensemble* went ahead with both demands, based on the argument that selection by public schools is as problematic as selection by private schools.

*École ensemble* launched its campaign almost a year before the 2018 provincial elections won by the right-leaning party Coalition Avenir Québec. While *École ensemble* did not manage to gain support from parties during the political campaign, progress was made during these first years. The association managed to slowly get the topic into the public debate. Words like *school segregation* appeared (always in quotation marks at first) in newspaper articles. *École ensemble*’s vocabulary to describe the three networks (*subsidised private*, *selective public*, *regular public*) started to be picked up by more and more people in the education community. The old public/private dichotomy was somehow disrupted. The new framework was well-received among a variety of stakeholders - including teachers appreciative of finally having words to describe the situation they were

---

<sup>6</sup> While it is never mentioned that *regular* public schools are those that need to become more attractive; it is implicit for the proponents of such approach that selective public schools are “good” and should not be bothered.



enduring, but also parents upset by the pressure of competing with each other. Retired senior civil servants reached out encouraging the association to continue what they had fought for inside the Education Department, with the minister of the day invariably trying to avoid the issue. But for all its *succès d'estime*, École ensemble was also attacked – within social media but also by media commentators, some of which even labelled supporters of the association “communists” and implied they were funded by unions.

Remarkably, some of these critiques addressed issues the association simply had no answers to, thus motivating a certain refinement of École ensemble’s initial proposals. An issue that kept coming back, especially from elected officials, was the transition. Concerns included the potential need to relocate students attending private schools, thus putting considerable strain on public schools; but also, the impact of a potential price-hike on parental and school finances, and the risk of school closures. The collective agreements of teachers in the private sector were another recurrent concern -specifically, fears over the fact that, if a private school joins a school board that is unionised with another union, its teachers might lose all their seniority. The legality of nationalisation was also put into question since the right to attend a private school is in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Quebec’s own *Charter of human rights and freedoms*.

The issue of special programmes was also constantly brought up. Parents (those with children in these programmes) highly value them and genuinely believe it makes a difference in their child’s attainment. Putting an end to these programmes seemed inconceivable. Other issues oftentimes raised during that period included the risk of residential segregation to neutralize school desegregation efforts, and, more in general, the overall cost of such a structural change.

### **5.b. École ensemble’s Second Phase (2020-present): Taking the Lead**

During the summer of 2020, the association started to receive funding from the Chagnon Foundation, Quebec’s biggest philanthropic foundation. It was an enormous boost as it allowed the hiring of a full-time employee. This, in turn, created the appropriate conditions to build on the lessons learned during the first phase. Specifically, it became clear there were three main puzzle pieces that had to be taken into account in order to put forward a complete and politically realistic proposal: student assignment policy, subsidised private schools, and selective public schools’ special programmes.

#### *Student Assignment Policy*

This is maybe the most important piece of the puzzle: Which student goes to which school? As discussed earlier, harm management strategies (including the betterment of regular public schools, and quotas of low-performing students for private schools) are increasingly recognized as unlikely to bring equity. Designing an assignment policy with the potential to put an end to school segregation thus emerged as a central challenge, especially as school choice has been found to lead to school segregation, and attempts to regulate it often run into the same pitfall.

A return to the neighbourhood school with its own catchment area was identified as a solution holding considerable potential. Neighbourhood schools have many advantages, including the continuity from preschool to high school, the preservation of the networks forged by parents and children and the positive community, public health and ecological effects of local school attendance. However, school catchment areas have one major drawback, by reproducing neighbourhood boundaries, they also reproduce existing residential segregation. There could, therefore, be little or no socioeconomic progress made by replacing choice-based assignment with catchment-based assignment, even though research shows that the school segregation created by school choice is stronger than that caused by residential segregation (Ramos Lobato, 2020).

This very real obstacle to equity is the subject of much reflection and experimentation around the world. A number of players concerned about school segregation are trying to combine local attendance with an equitable composition of schools. These initiatives involve conditioning the design of the catchment areas to a socio-economic index, with the aim of obtaining socio-economically similar catchment areas within the same territory. In short, with a school in an advantaged neighbourhood to the south and a school in a disadvantaged neighbourhood to the north, two school catchment areas are created, one to the west and one to the east.

An example of this is the Parisian pilot project of *montée alternée* (Grenet & Souidi, 2021), in which two adjacent but largely socially differentiated middle schools were paired in a single catchment area. Students in the new single area who are enrolled in a given level of education are assigned to the same college, and the levels are distributed between the different colleges. Despite the opposition and mobilisation of parents of the privileged college, the potential of this approach was confirmed by a 2023 analysis that showed that it had not led to a migration to private schools, that the overall grades had remained stable, and that a greater social diversity had positive effects on personal and social well being, for pupils from both disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds. (Conseil scientifique de l'éducation nationale, 2023)

However, the potential of this approach faces some limitations given the existence of large areas of poverty. Some catchment areas will be difficult to balance because other disadvantaged areas surround them, an issue beyond the scope of the Ministry of Education.

### *Subsidised Private Schools*

Subsidised private schools are obviously a difficult piece of the puzzle to move around. Their place has long been considered immutable, as if their presence were an inescapable fact of nature. By subsidizing them for 55 years now, the Quebec government has created this network; it also has the legitimacy and leeway to modify it in the interests of the common good.

This is of particular relevance given that, if fair public school catchment areas are to be set up, a decision needs to be made on the role of subsidised private schools. Obviously, if subsidised private schools are not part of the catchment area system, they retain their right to select their clients, and the school segregation they engender is maintained. However, another option is to integrate subsidised private schools with the public network in a kind of common network as far as school

catchment areas are concerned. This approach would mean that subsidised private schools would no longer be able to choose their pupils. In contrast, they would be allocated by their catchment area in the same way that for public schools.

However, this policy is difficult to put into practice, as many parents of students would not be able to pay the tuition fees. To counter this, a possibility is for the Ministry of Education to fund private schools at 100% (i.e. as much as public schools) to put an end to private tuition fees. This seems a feasible option with public funds already representing 75% of secondary school funding (plus indirect funding through tax-exempt foundation donations), and would mean the end of access based on parents' ability to pay, as well as the end of the right for private schools to “offload” pupils to the public sector.

### *Selective Public Schools' Special Programmes*

The benefits associated with extracurricular activities are well documented. A sense of belonging, valuing students in ways other than grades or behaviour, additional motivation for attending school, creating a network for more isolated young people (Porter, 2018) and getting to know teachers in a different light are examples of the important contribution of extracurricular activities.

These many benefits are only realized if all students have access to them (McCabe, 2018): it is therefore important to ensure that the most vulnerable students are included. Since this is not the case now in Quebec, a strategy needs to be devised to offer special projects to all students. This poses challenges including the adjustment of timetables but also their cost and the need for a more discriminating approach to the programs that can be publicly funded. In a context of fee-elimination, expensive programs like downhill skiing or ice hockey cannot be covered. A potential option here would be a school-specific budget dedicated to special programmes, established in consultation with parents, to take advantage of local strengths, such as a nearby forest, the presence of a swimming pool, a conservatory located in the neighbourhood, etc. If the organisational issues can certainly be solved, the political question remains: can a vast array of stimulating, free special programmes choices within a neighbourhood school (that they have not chosen) satisfy parents' thirst for “choice”?

As this section shows, dismantling such a large, segregated structure and reassembling it into a coherent, equitable and politically attractive whole is complex. The scale of the task may have been daunting, but the challenge was inescapable in order to provide Quebec with a fair education system.

## **6. A POLICY PROPOSAL: THE PLAN FOR A COMMON SCHOOL NETWORK**

The drafting of the new plan, initiated in 2020, was an iterative process. The shortcomings of the old “defunding” proposal were well known. The arguments of status quo stakeholders were also well understood by 2020. It was necessary to find a way through all those obstacles in order to offer elected officials a politically realistic way out of what seemed like an intractable problem.

The process consisted of a series of drafts that were circulated to key stakeholders and advisers (ex-education executives, historians, economists, teachers' unions, philanthropic organisations, teachers, etc.) for comments. By that time, École ensemble had formalised its board and its members were also involved in this back-and-forth process, with many consultations being held online given the Covid pandemic. Foreign expertise was sought, especially in the United States, France, Finland and Ontario. The Finnish experience with the 1972 “integration” of private schools coupled with the Parent Commission’s principle of distinguishing between public-interest and non-public-interest private schools were highly influential in the drafting process. So were the warnings French academics made about residential segregation. This problem was taken seriously, with the breakthrough coming with Swiss startup Ville Juste and their optimised catchment zones procedure. The process also benefited from the input of École ensemble’s counterparts in the world (Belgium’s Appel pour une école démocratique, France’s Collectif Apprendre Ensemble, Catalonia’s Col·lectiu d'Escoles contra la Segregació, UK’s Private Education Policy Forum).

During those two years, key breakthroughs allowed École ensemble to overcome some of the obstacles identified before. These included a concept for a parent-friendly transition from the current to the new system and an elaborate economic analysis from the University of Sherbrooke which found that the proposal saved money, thus dispelling some concerns relative to the cost (Delorme, 2022)<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, the discovery in a small school in Quebec of a special programmes model that allowed every student to choose a programme without any selection by fees, behaviour or grades helped demonstrate the feasibility of the plan. After two years of work, the puzzle was completed. The new policy proposal, the *Plan for a Common School Network* (École ensemble, 2022) was launched in a May 2022 press conference in Montreal.

The plan proposes the creation of a *common network* encompassing public schools and *contracted private schools*. All schools in the common network will have their own catchment area and thus will no longer be allowed to select students. The elimination of student selection also entails removing the right to charge tuition fees: students are to attend their local school, regardless of their parents’ ability to pay.

Accordingly, contracted private schools (which must be non-profit) are to be entirely financed by the state, exactly like public schools. Contracted private schools will retain their current legal status and their management autonomy. Some private schools in Quebec have long been operating with management autonomy and 100 per cent public funding, including a dozen private schools for students with special needs. Alternatively, existing private schools that choose not to be part of the common network will have a *non-contracted private school* status. These schools will not receive any public funding, either directly or indirectly. They will retain their right to select their clientele and so will not have a school catchment area.

---

<sup>7</sup> According to this, the implementation of a common network encompassing public and contracted schools, discussed below, would eventually result in net annual savings of about CAD 100 millions in public funds.

The transition period from the current system to the common network will be gradual. In a contracted private school, students from the catchment area will arrive in Year 1 only in Secondary 1. Current students will pursue their schooling in the same school with the same classmates. However, the school will be tuition-free from Secondary 1 to 5 on Year 1. The same transition will be used for Elementary 1 to 6.

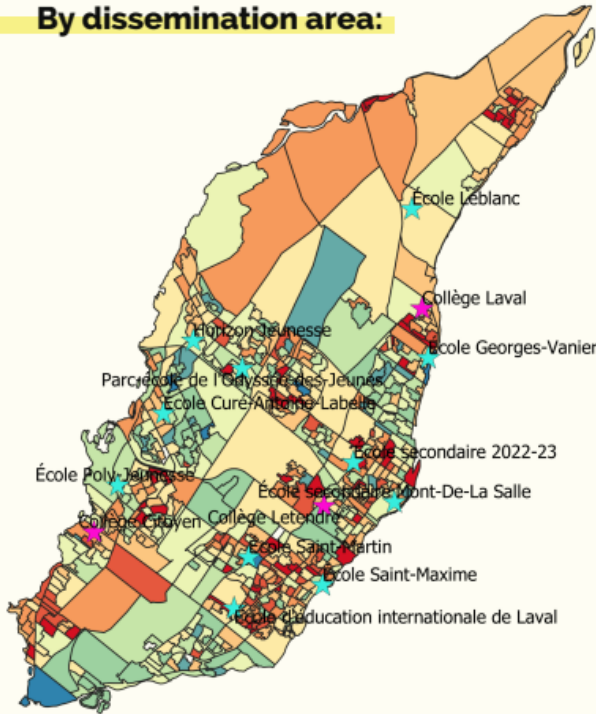
The plan also avoids a rate shock for parents whose children already attend a subsidised private school that would choose to operate outside of the common network by maintaining their subsidised tuition. This transition model is very important politically. Current private school parents will either get free education if their school becomes a contracted private school or they will pay what they already were prepared to do if their school chooses to have a non-contracted status. Parents are represented on the boards of private schools and will vote on the new status.

Regarding the alternative to special programmes, the plan proposes that all schools in the common network will offer every student the choice between different free elective courses based on the “fifth period” model. With this model (Biron, 2019), the time allocated to the current four daily periods is reduced to allow for the creation of a fifth period that is used for elective courses that enhance general education. The additional costs of this measure are estimated at CAD 43 million.

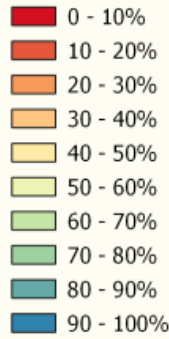
Finally, the plan includes the creation of an equitable school map for each regional school authority, based on the innovative concept of optimized school catchment areas. This entails the modification of boundaries through successive rounds in order to achieve the most socio-economically similar catchment areas. This will prevent neighbourhood residential segregation from extending to school settings. This tool will allow mapping according to clear criteria and guarantee students access to a local school and true socio-economic balance. A proof of concept (Figure 27.1) was developed for the City of Laval in collaboration with the University of Zurich and Ville Juste.

**Figure 27.1. Distribution of families with school-age children in Laval, Quebec, with at least one parent with a university degree by dissemination area and by optimized school catchment area**

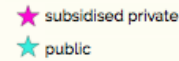
### By dissemination area:



Laval average: 48 %



#### Schools

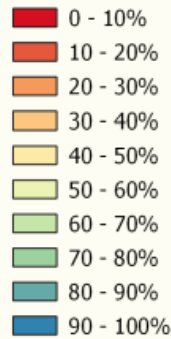


Source : Statistics Canada table: Census families with at least one child aged 18 and under living at home in private households by highest certificate, diploma or degree of parent with highest completed degree, and number of children aged 18 and under / 2016 Census / 25% sample data / geography: 637 Laval Census Subdivision dissemination areas

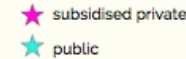
### By optimized school catchment area



Laval average: 48 %



#### Schools



Source : Statistics Canada table: Census families with at least one child aged 18 and under living at home in private households by highest certificate, diploma or degree of parent with highest completed degree, and number of children aged 18 and under / 2016 Census / 25% sample data / geography: 637 Laval Census Subdivision dissemination areas

Source: Dłabač (2022)

Optimised school catchment areas thus succeed in optimizing home-to-school distance, school capacity and the selected socio-economic index. To be sure, in some territories, including large underprivileged areas, it may prove impossible to create equitable school catchment areas while guaranteeing access to a local school. However, in such cases, a range of compensatory measures to mitigate this situation will be offered to schools in the common network.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The issue of *école à trois vitesses* is no longer a taboo. In fact, along with the shortage of qualified teachers, it is now the foremost issue in Quebec education. *École ensemble*'s role in that new situation has been to problematize the issue, leaving the veil on a political problem that drew strength from staying in the shadows. While doing so, *not* blaming parents for entering the selection processes has always been top of mind. The goal is thus to avoid forcing parents to arbitrate between wanting to be a good parent and wanting to be a good citizen. *École ensemble* thus aims at making these two proposals compatible rather than mutually exclusive.

By not entering the blame game and by avoiding individual solutions, the attention was directed where it belonged: to the policies and the elected officials. This has allowed a variety of education stakeholders to partake in the public debate, bringing content to journalists and opposition parties. This is key in an education system without socioeconomic data.

But problematizing the issue was not enough. *École ensemble*'s role was also to propose a politically realistic solution. As discussed, the old public/private debate was a dead-end. Fresh thinking was required to bring about a new equilibrium in Quebec's education system. While this pragmatic approach has raised some suspicion (especially on the left, where abolishing private schools has been an old dream for many), overall, it has been met with enthusiasm. The realistic roadmap it provides brings a lot of energy to a debate that was stalled for half a century.

This speaks to the role of civil society in the matter of education marketization. Civil society organisations can focus on one issue and take stock of every stakeholder's position. For example, the Plan for a Common Network took in consideration the situation of unionised private school teachers and their seniority issue. This allows a respectful dialogue and builds trust. This trust is key for an issue where stakeholders' positioning has been entrenched for so long. Getting everyone to see the benefits of a better education system is crucial for overcoming the last sources of resistance.

The *Plan for a Common School Network* is pragmatic, ambitious and innovative. It is the best solution in Quebec's context. So much the better if, thanks to this article, it can be of service to other educational equity advocates around the world.

## 8. REFERENCES

Biron, P.-P. (2019, October 26). Une école fait un bond prodigieux en révisant l'horaire des cours. *Le Journal de Québec*. <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2019/10/26/une-ecole-fait-un-bond-prodigieux-en-revisant-lhoraire-des-cours>

- Cassivi, M. (2017, October 1). Visite libre. *La Presse*. [https://plus.lapresse.ca/screens/0b60df9f-d6e5-40f2-97d9-e812e653162d%7C\\_0.html](https://plus.lapresse.ca/screens/0b60df9f-d6e5-40f2-97d9-e812e653162d%7C_0.html)
- Chetty, R., Jackson, M. O., Kuchler, T., Stroebel, J., Hendren, N., Fluegge, R. B., ... & Wernerfelt, N. (2022). Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. *Nature*, 608(7921), 122-134.
- Conseil scientifique de l'éducation nationale. (2023). Mixité sociale au collège : premiers résultats des expérimentations menées en France. [https://www.reseau-canope.fr/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Projets/conseil\\_scientifique\\_education\\_nationale/Note\\_CSEN\\_2023\\_09.pdf](https://www.reseau-canope.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Projets/conseil_scientifique_education_nationale/Note_CSEN_2023_09.pdf)
- Delorme, F., et al. (2022). Plan pour un réseau scolaire commun : estimation des impacts budgétaires de la réforme proposée. *François Delorme Consultation Inc.* [https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652084678/Re%CC%81seau\\_scolaire\\_commun\\_-\\_Rapport\\_technique.pdf?1652084678](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652084678/Re%CC%81seau_scolaire_commun_-_Rapport_technique.pdf?1652084678)
- Dion-Viens, D. (2018, September 9). Six fois moins d'élèves défavorisés dans les écoles privées du Québec. *Journal de Québec*. <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2018/09/09/six-fois-moins-deleves-defavorises-dans-les-ecoles-privées-du-quebec>
- Dion-Viens, D. (2019, March 8). Engouement pour l'école à la carte dès le primaire. *Journal de Québec*. <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2019/03/08/engouement-pour-lecole-a-la-carte-des-le-primaire>
- Dion-Viens, D. (2022, April 22). À 4 ans, une fillette est refusée après un test d'admission en maternelle au public. *Journal de Québec*. <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2022/04/22/refusee-apres-un-test-dadmission-pour-la-maternelle>
- Dlabač, D. (2022). Optimized school catchment zones for the City of Laval. *Ville Juste*. [https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652084764/School\\_catchment\\_zones\\_for\\_City\\_of\\_Laval\\_def\\_.pdf?1652084764](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652084764/School_catchment_zones_for_City_of_Laval_def_.pdf?1652084764)
- École ensemble. (2022, May). Plan for a Common School Network. [https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE\\_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun\\_2022\\_EN\\_web.pdf?1652344700](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun_2022_EN_web.pdf?1652344700)
- École ensemble. (2023, June 7). L'équité en éducation dans l'angle mort du PL23. [https://www.assnat.qc.ca/Media/Process.aspx?MediaId=ANQ.Vigie.Bll.DocumentGenerique\\_190597&process=Default&token=ZyMoxNwUn8ikQ+TRKYwPCjWrKwg+vIv9rjij7p3xLGTZDmLVSmJLoqe/vG7/YWzz#:~:text=%C3%80%20propos%20d'%C3%89col e%20ensemble,priv%C3%A9%20subventionn%C3%A9%20et%20public%20s%C3%A9lectif.](https://www.assnat.qc.ca/Media/Process.aspx?MediaId=ANQ.Vigie.Bll.DocumentGenerique_190597&process=Default&token=ZyMoxNwUn8ikQ+TRKYwPCjWrKwg+vIv9rjij7p3xLGTZDmLVSmJLoqe/vG7/YWzz#:~:text=%C3%80%20propos%20d'%C3%89col e%20ensemble,priv%C3%A9%20subventionn%C3%A9%20et%20public%20s%C3%A9lectif.)
- Grenet, J., & Souidi, Y. (2021). Secteurs multi-collèges à Paris : quel bilan après trois ans ? *Institut des politiques publiques*. <https://www.ipp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/n62-notesIPP-fevrier2021.pdf>
- Gorard, S., et al. (2023). *Making Schools Better for Disadvantaged Students*. Routledge.



- Kamanzi, P. C. (2019). School market in Quebec and the reproduction of social inequalities in higher education. *Social inclusion*, 7(1), 18-27.
- Kamanzi, P. C. (2022). School market and the democratization of education: one step forward, two steps back. The case of the Canadian Province of Quebec. *International Review of Sociology*, 32(1), 107-127.
- Larose, A. (2016). Les projets particuliers à l'école publique en contexte de concurrence scolaire: un état des lieux. *Fédération des syndicats d'enseignement*. <https://serf-csq.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2023/12/Note-de-recherche-Les-projets-particuliers-a-lecole-publique-en-contexte-de-concurrence-scolaire-Un-etat-des-lieux-Septembre-2016.pdf>
- Lessard, C. (2021, Autumn). Privé/public : une différence qui s'estompe. *Nouveaux Cahiers du Socialisme*. <https://cahiersdusocialisme.org/prive-public-une-difference-qui-sestompe>
- Lobato, I. R. (2020). School segregation in urban contexts: socio-spatial dynamics and educational inequalities. *Urbaria summaries series*, 1-12.
- McCabe, J., Dupéré, V., Dion, E., Thouin, É., Archambault, I., Dufour, S., ... & Crosnoe, R. (2020). Why do extracurricular activities prevent dropout more effectively in some high schools than in others? A mixed-method examination of organizational dynamics. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(4), 323-338.
- Matthewes, S. H. (2021, April). Better Together? Heterogeneous Effects of Tracking on Student Achievement. *The Economic Journal*, 131(635), 1269-1307.
- Plourde, A. (2022, October). Où en est l'école à trois vitesses au Québec ? *IRIS*. <https://iris-recherche.qc.ca/publications/ecole-a-trois-vitesses>
- Porter, I. (2018, May 10). Le parascolaire a un énorme impact sur le décrochage scolaire. *Le Devoir*. <https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/education/527391/dcrochage-scolaire-le-parascolaire-a-un-enorme-impact>
- QUEBEC. Commission des états généraux sur l'éducation. (1996). Rapport final de la Commission des états généraux sur l'éducation.
- QUEBEC. Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec. (1966). Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec.
- QUEBEC. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. (2016). *Steering the course back to equity in education*. <https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/50-0494-SU-cap-sur-lequite-REBE-2014-2016.pdf>
- QUEBEC. (2004, May). *Rapport du comité d'experts sur le financement, l'administration, la gestion et la gouvernance des commissions scolaires*. [http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/PSG/politiques\\_orientations/rapport\\_comiteCS\\_mai2014v3p.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/PSG/politiques_orientations/rapport_comiteCS_mai2014v3p.pdf)
- Statistics Canada. (2015). Academic outcomes of public and private high school students: What lies behind the differences? <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2015367-eng.htm>

- Terrin, É., & Triventi, M. (2022, June). The Effect of School Tracking on Student Achievement and Inequality: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 93*(2).
- United Nations. (2020). List of issues prior to submission of the seventh periodic report of Canada (E/C.12/CAN/QPR/7). *UN Economic and Social Council*.
- Wells, A. S., Fox, L., & Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016, February). How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students. *The Century Foundation*. <https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/>