

A text in the making with parents and youth of Greater Montreal

In principle, all children have the right to succeed and flourish in public schools. **In reality**, inequalities among groups of children still exist in our schools. Too many injustices continue to undermine our children's dignity at school.

Parents have long struggled with schools to ensure equality. **Yet**, many obstacles still stand in their way.

In this context, as Montreal citizens of all backgrounds, we have been mobilizing within the **Parents in action for education** movement since 2004. Our children attend public schools and, together, we have gradually developed a common understanding of our experiences in their schools.

Declaration for Equality in Education



So far, we have organized five popular forums in as many neighbourhoods. We have managed to bring together two hundred and eighty (280) parents, educators and community organizers. Together, we have examined the problems that children and their families face in public schools, and have discussed measures for ensuring that our children's rights are respected. The idea of creating a Declaration for Equality in Education grew out of these popular forums.

We decided to write a **Declaration for Equality in Education** to demand that schools remove the obstacles that prevent parents from playing a role in their improvement.

The creation of the **Declaration** is a collective initiative. The text you are holding is the starting point. It includes an analysis of four obstacles that parents face, as well as four proposals and various action strategies to strengthen their participation.

This text will evolve over the next few months as we meet with parents and youth who will share their experiences and perspectives with us.

Obstacles to parent participation in schools

1 Schools often have a flawed image of parents

- Parents do not recognize themselves in the simplistic ways they are portrayed. Too often, they are branded with deficiencies, incompetence, problems and needs. Various services and programs organized in schools are designed to make parents *more competent, responsible and capable of taking control of their lives*. But when schools judge families and try to educate them on their duties towards their children, they impose their own model as the only benchmark. Schools would benefit from an approach that values families and finds ways to work with parents.
- Parents are not clients or users of services provided by schools, nor are they “parent divas”¹, demanding individual privileges for their children. These terms have become part of the language of schools and the media. However, parents are not only the guardians of their children, they are also citizens within the public space and schools.
- Schools claim that many parents are not interested in getting involved in school or have *dropped out*. The school system is responsible for reaching out to parents and getting to know them.

We want schools to have a truthful image of parents.

¹ “Pour un ‘Parlement’ des parents”, Philippe Meirieu, Le Devoir, February 19, 2007.

2 Schools do not always take into account parents’ ideas and opinions

- Parents’ opinions do not usually carry as much weight as those of experts recognized by the school system. Parents feel that schools are not open to their opinions if they differ or contradict the general consensus. Moreover, the opinions and ideas of parents are not all equal: parents from certain social groups are given greater consideration.
- Parents are not sure to whom they should convey their opinions and ideas, nor how to defend them. Therefore, the information they have is not used to better understand their children’s experiences at home or at school.
- Communication among parents is not necessarily encouraged and is often controlled by the school. Yet, parents have knowledge and information that could be useful to other parents.
- Schools claim that many parents cannot communicate with them because they do not speak the language or because they do not have time. The school system is responsible for soliciting parents’ critical perspectives and taking their opinions into consideration.

We want schools to take parents’ ideas and opinions into consideration.



3 Schools do not provide enough space for parents to participate in decision-making

- Often, parents must simply accept decisions made by others even though these decisions have a direct impact on their children. Parents are not always given information on how to participate in decision-making processes.
- Parent participation in making decisions that affect the whole school is unclear. The annual general assembly, parent participation organization (PPO) and governing board are not structured to ensure that parents are regularly consulted and informed. Parents elected to these bodies do not have sufficient resources (a space to meet, budget, etc.) to prepare themselves and fulfill their duties.
- The general assembly convenes only once a year. Parents do not have access to a permanent independent group within the school, nor do they have a forum where they can collectively discuss the interests that must be defended within the school and the school board.
- PPOs are not mandatory in schools. When they do exist, parents and school staff know little or nothing about them. They serve primarily as pools of volunteers for the school.
- PPOs and governing boards often work behind closed doors. Decisions are made on behalf of parents without parents being given a chance to ask questions.
- Parents who sit on PPOs and governing boards are generally from the most privileged groups in society ². Consequently, the diversity of families is not reflected.
- Schools claim that many parents do not have the will or the capacity to show interest in school affairs. The school system is responsible for giving parents the tools they need to express their opinions, access information, take part in decision-making and disagree with decisions.

We want schools to create a space for parents to take part in decision-making.

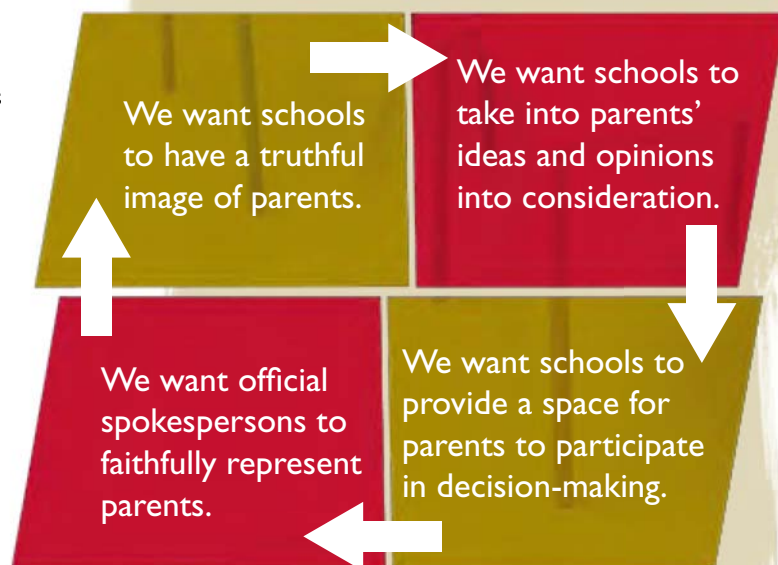
² *Mémoire de la Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, 2005: (Translation)* Parents from underprivileged neighbourhoods and those who have immigrated to Québec are largely under-represented on school participatory bodies.

4 Official spokespersons do not always represent parents faithfully

- Parents do not know their official spokespersons on governing boards, school boards and parent organizations even though they hold official public positions. Their roles are often poorly understood. In fact, they are so removed that parents wonder how they can speak on their behalf.
- Parent spokespersons do not place enough emphasis on concerns about inequality in schools.
- Parent groups that try to organize and speak out on their own behalf lack recognition and support. Organizations that seek to support them in their efforts are also limited in their scope of action.
- Schools claim that many parents neglect their role by not voting for their spokesperson or commissioner. The school system is responsible for bridging the gap between parents and those responsible for defending their interests.

We want official spokespersons to faithfully represent parents.

Our four proposals for genuine parent participation in schools:



Action strategies for our four proposals

1 So that schools have an accurate image of parents

- Make sure to include in the classroom and at school parents who offer to share their talents and skills.
- Provide parents with a room where they can meet, before and after school hours, to discuss, train and acquire tools to take action on their own initiative.

2 So that parents' ideas and opinions are taken into consideration

- Help parents gather so that they can get to know each other and discuss their realities and their children's school experiences in an open and trusting environment.
- Bring parents together to discuss issues that are of concern to them at school, develop a common position and convey it to school officials



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3 So that parents have the space they need to participate in decision-making

- Encourage elected parents to report back to the others on the decisions and actions of the governing board and the PPO throughout the year and at parent assemblies.
- Develop effective procedures for adequate and equal parent participation in parent assemblies, PPOs and governing boards: distribute the agenda in advance, adapt meeting schedules to family realities, proceed by vote when making important decisions, allow sufficient time for discussion before making decisions, etc.

4 So that parents are faithfully represented by their spokespersons

- Each year, institute four regular parent assemblies and make them the main forum for spokespersons on governing boards, school boards and parents organizations as well as school commissioners to consult parents.
- Recognize and support the creation of a parents' movement rooted in every neighbourhood in Montreal and take into account the opinions and ideas of these parents in order to make existing participation mechanisms more democratic.



Working document