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Time for action that speaks loud on academic freedom

This edition of *Carnets* is largely devoted to academic freedom. It has been a hot topic on Québec campuses and in the media, especially since the Verushka Lieutenant-Duval affair in the fall of 2020. And it has been on our radar screen at the FNEEQ for more than three years. Our June 2018 convention mandated the Federation to formulate a position on freedom of expression in order to defend teachers' right to speak critically. At the time, employers were trying to muzzle public expression of opinion by employees by invoking the duty of loyalty. There was the epic legal battle waged by Marie-Ève Maillé to protect her sources. There was the case of agronomist Louis Robert, the whistleblower who revealed interference by the pesticide lobby in government decisions. Closer to home, the FNEEQ's member unions stood in solidarity with the president of the union at Collège Montmorency, who was the target of outrageous accusations after she spoke out about junk food at her Cégep.

More recently, the question of academic freedom has shifted to the classroom. Students have aggressively challenged the choice of words, texts and subject matter at universities. The controversy took a shocking turn when some university administrations disciplined teachers who were the subject of complaints. Given the social tensions surrounding the issue and the polarized debate, even within its own ranks, the FNEEQ decided to take time to reflect and conduct a broader discussion. Five of its committees have been involved: Sexual Diversity & Gender Plurality, School & Society, Women, Interculturality & Systemic Racism in the Workplace and in Education, and Precariousness, Succession & Union Life. At the Federal Council meeting in December, the results of the analysis conducted over the past year will be submitted to the delegates from all the unions and they will be able to debate the Federation's position.

This issue of *Carnets* also looks at academic freedom through the lens of each sector: professional autonomy and freedom for the Regroupement privé, new appendix to the negotiated collective agreement for the Regroupement cégep, professional vulnerability and precarious status for the Regroupement université. The FNEEQ is the only union federation that includes teachers from the pre-school to Ph.D levels. This unique feature affords us a wide-angle perspective on the issues that affect us and a strong basis for effective action.

I hope you enjoy reading *Carnets*!

Caroline Trépanier



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Academic freedom threatened by job insecurity

Might a person whose contract is up for renewal every year tread carefully and try to avoid making waves, for fear of dire consequences? The answer is obvious.

Guy Dorval has been a lecturer in geography at Université Laval for 30 years. “Despite the collective agreement and the scoring system, which recognizes seniority to some extent, it’s never iron-clad. Never. You have to be very careful in dealing with sensitive terms, immigration, poverty, social classes, anything controversial. It’s slippery ground. We don’t have job security. Precarious status means you never know whether you’re going to be working next year.”

Today, about half of undergraduate courses are taught by lecturers. Their expertise and hands-on experience is enormously valuable to universities. But their vulnerability as contractual employees threatens their fundamental right to academic freedom.

Lecturers have been discussing the quandary among themselves. Guy doesn’t use the word “self-censorship” but he does say this is a moment in which instructors, and particularly lecturers, need to tread carefully. “For the past three or four years, I haven’t necessarily been avoiding certain topics but I do handle them with kid gloves (laughs). On old American posters, I black out the N word. You don’t want to be recorded without your knowledge, or be taken out of context and end up on social media.” One student complained because the word “races” appeared repeatedly on USCensus maps of the territory of the United States. In that case, the university defended its teacher. But how many are left to fend for themselves, as happened last fall at the University of Ottawa in the now-famous Lieutenant-Duval affair?

Say the things that need to be said

“Academic freedom means being able to say important things that society needs to hear,” says Astrid Tirel, lecturer in sociology at UQAM. “And for us, society is our classroom.” Many of her colleagues feel they are walking a tightrope when dealing with issues such as racism. Astrid believes teachers should try to shed light on history, not rewrite it. She says things must be called by their names if we are to move forward together as a society.



“Personally, I don’t have to censor myself to avoid problems, especially when it comes to racism, because I’m a racialized person,” Astrid says. “But that’s also a kind of stereotyping. Some people expect us to address these subjects, which we may not always do.” Astrid welcomes the diversity in her classroom. Her students’ comments are informed by their life experiences, often by their backgrounds in other countries, and by their daily lives here in Québec. And she believes that in the classroom, there is a social obligation to say the things that need to be said. But, Astrid points out, in the wake of the recent controversies, lecturers have often been the targets. “If we can’t defend ourselves and claim the right to academic freedom, we may be let go, since we have no job security.”

Guy believes strongly in the ideals of university instruction and thinks lecturers need to have their say. “We’re asking the Ministry of Higher Education to protect academic freedom by requiring universities to come to an agreement with their profs and lecturers, on a collegial basis. We have to be consulted. The university is a site where it must be possible to debate, even on controversial topics. It is a place for discussion.”

UNIVERSITIES UNDER PRESSURE: ACADEMIC FREEDOM, UNIVERSITY FUNDING AND THE MANAGERIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Christine Gauthier

VICE-PRESIDENT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE REGROUPEMENT UNIVERSITÉ



The debate on academic freedom has attracted much media attention over the past year and has given the general public a better understanding of how universities operate. Far from being a tangential issue, academic freedom is one of the foundations of uni-

versity and Cégep education, and is a vital factor in the working conditions of faculty members. Indeed, it is worth recalling that it is a fundamental right recognized by UNESCO: “Higher-education teaching personnel have the right to teach **without any interference**, subject to accepted professional principles including professional responsibility and intellectual rigor with regard to standards and methods of teaching.”

“Interference” can take many forms, some of the most serious of which are ignored in the CAQ government’s narrow vision and populist discourse on academic freedom. There is more than one threat to academic freedom and some of the other threats seem to pose greater dangers for the future of our universities.

Counteracting government interference

The first threat resides in the way universities are funded and in government interference in higher education. Premier Legault’s secret meeting with university rectors about channeling students into “fee-payer programs,” complete with a framework for funding and accountability, is cause for concern. The government is conducting a comparative study of university funding and performance; the Regroupement université has responded by reviving its funding committee and will remain on the alert in the coming months.

Resisting the encroachment of managerial ideology

A second particularly insidious threat resides in university governance methods, which are increasingly based on managerial ideology, including the centralization of power, clientelism and an emphasis on rankings

and “performance” indicators. These approaches are incompatible with collegiality within the university community, which UNESCO regards as an essential condition for the full exercise of academic freedom.

Allowed free rein, this ideology can lead to authoritarianism, demands for loyalty, intransigence and disciplinary measures that can obstruct the free operation of our universities. To combat the encroachment of managerial ideology, it is necessary to reform academic governance structures, promote collegiality, give the “members of the academy” more leeway in the management of academic affairs, and protect teaching staff from retaliation.

Addressing the professional vulnerability of lecturers

Finally, if government and university actors are firmly committed to defending academic freedom, they will have to come to grips with a third major threat: the precarious status of lecturers. Job insecurity leaves many university teachers in a position of professional vulnerability that can have an impact on academic freedom and lead to self-censorship. It is time to take action to redress this issue, which relates not only to working conditions but also to academic freedom.

Lecturer involvement in research activities

Another important topic came up in the fall of 2021 when the Regroupement université was busy preparing a brief for the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation on the issue of lecturer participation in research activities. Six recommendations were submitted, including several aimed at promoting the inclusion of lecturers on research teams and giving them access to funding from granting agencies. The Regroupement université will take concrete action in the coming months to fight spurious institutional constraints.

School and Society Committee tackles academic freedom

In the fall of 2020, media coverage of some troubling incidents involving academic freedom at a number of universities triggered shockwaves. In November, the FNEEQ's Federal Bureau adopted a [statement on academic freedom](#)¹ and in December the Federal Council asked the School and Society Committee to produce a report on academic freedom as it relates to racism and systemic discrimination. The purpose was to stimulate discussion of these issues, especially in their pedagogical, historical, social and legal dimensions, among FNEEQ members, to promote dialogue between teaching staff and students, and to help member unions in their discussions and negotiations with teaching institutions.

To carry out its mandate, the School and Society Committee held a joint meeting with the members of the Women's Committee, the Interculturalism, Systemic Discrimination and Racism in the Workplace Committee, the Sexual Diversity and Gender Plurality Committee, and the Precariousness, Succession and Union Life Committee. The activists attending the meeting concluded that one of the problems is the lack of knowledge and information among students and teachers. Many affiliated unions also submitted briefs and think pieces. In June 2021, the School and Society Committee submitted a preliminary report to the FNEEQ's 33rd Convention covering the main historical, philosophical and legal dimensions of academic freedom.

At the same time, the Québec government tasked an independent scientific and technical commission headed by Alexandre Cloutier (UQAC's Vice-Rector, Partnerships) with conducting an inquiry into the state of academic freedom at the university level. The FNEEQ submitted a [brief](#)² to the commission in June 2021 and had an opportunity to discuss it with the commissioners in August. The Cloutier commission is supposed to submit its report by the end of 2021. At the time of writing, it is not yet available.

In-depth analysis

Based on its preliminary report and brief to the Cloutier commission, the School and Society Committee produced a deeper analysis, which will be presented to the Federal Council in December 2021. This document will also make the connection with issues of racism and discrimination. The Committee wants to take a carefully nuanced approach to this complex question.

The starting point of the School and Society Committee's analysis is the definition UNESCO proposed in its Recommendation

concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) and Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (1966). The Committee's report comprises three main sections: the first explores what constitutes academic freedom and critically examines the existing state of affairs; the second deals with legal considerations; the third is devoted to a discussion of inclusive pedagogy.

SECTION 1

The components of academic freedom

The Committee regards academic freedom as both negative liberty (protection from interference) and positive liberty (the ability to do something). It identifies possible threats to academic freedom from religious authorities, political authorities, economic power, local administrations, external public opinion and internal opinion. Since academic freedom is "a freedom consisting of freedoms" (Beaud, 2010), the School and Society Committee looked at freedom to teach, freedom to conduct research and publish, freedom of expression and freedom to study.

The main guarantees of academic freedom are university autonomy, respect for collegiality, peer review, peer sanction and job security. It should be noted in this regard that teaching staff with precarious status, especially lecturers, do not have access to these protections.

SECTION 2

Legal issues

From a legal standpoint, union advisor Josette Côté argued that academic freedom is not sufficiently protected under the law as it stands. It is not included in the charters of rights and is therefore not a constitutional right. The courts have a tendency to defer to educational institutions to some extent and refuse to give academic freedom precedence over legal provisions such as the duty of loyalty. The Committee



concluded that the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms should be amended to include academic freedom.

SECTION 3

Inclusive pedagogy

The power differentials that run through society produce inequalities. These include, for example, capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, colonialism and systemic racism. The educational sphere does not exist in isolation and is permeated by the same power relations. At the same time, the emancipatory mission of education makes it possible for the classroom to become a forum for reflection on inequality and systemic discrimination. Thus, respect for teachers' academic freedom is not incompatible with the struggle for social justice. This is an area in which we can and must reconcile our duty as trade unionists to defend our members' rights with our desire to build a more egalitarian society.

The third part of the report addresses these issues by discussing various forms of inclusive pedagogy that the FNEEQ has been advocating since its inception. This section also deals with tools for encouraging dialogue with students, while

respecting the teacher's didactic authority. Finally, the report contains a short glossary to clarify some contested terms.

The School and Society Committee report will be available on the FNEEQ website once it has been presented to the Federal Council in December.

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- 1 Déclaration sur la liberté académique : https://fneeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Point-12_CF5_Declaration-FNEEQ_liberte_academique.pdf
 - 2 Mémoire : <https://fneeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021-06-30-Me%CC%81moire-sur-la-reconnaissance-de-la-liberte%CC%81-acade%CC%81mique.pdf>

REGROUPEMENT CÉGEP SECURES AGREEMENT IN PRINCIPLE AFTER TWISTS AND TURNS

Yves de Repentigny

VICE-PRESIDENT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE REGROUPEMENT CÉGEP



After three non-consecutive strike days during the winter term and pressure tactics that were complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the bargaining and mobilization committee representing FNEEQ Cégep teachers finally reached an agreement in principle with the Comité patronal de négociation des collèges (CPNC) on the night of June 21 to June 22. But parts of the agreement were verbal and the texts the union subsequently received from the employer's bargaining committee did not accurately reflect what had been discussed. A series of meetings between political representatives therefore had to be held over the summer, followed by a reconciliation process lasting slightly over a month in September and October. That process yielded a written agreement deemed satisfactory by the Regroupement Cégep, which recommended that it be submitted to union general meetings by no later than November 19.

Despite the difficult pandemic conditions under which the bargaining talks had to be conducted, we were able to reach an agreement in principle that contains some important improvements to the collective agreement, in particular for continuing education teachers (recognition of prep time and supervision as part of their tasks; salary scales that significantly improve their pay; an inter-round committee under the auspices of Treasury Board; hourly rates for some activities that were not previously covered by the employment contract, and which will also apply to the regular sector in some situations); teachers with precarious status (creation of positions for personnel who work with students with disabilities, possibility of tenure, taking multidisciplinary courses and complementary courses into account, option of forgoing assigned workload without penalization, splitting of course loads); program committee coordinators and, for Health Services, internship co-ordinators (more personnel); the Nursing program (letter of intent on a program funding review); the Centre québécois de formation aéronautique (major salary adjustment); members of the LGBTQ+ community (more inclusive terminology); etc.

Obviously, given the theme of this issue of *Carnets*, we would be remiss if we did not mention another significant gain: a new appendix on academic freedom to the collective agreement (see box).

EXCERPT FROM THE AGREEMENT IN PRINCIPLE FOR FNEEQ–CSN PROFESSORS

All professors enjoy the freedoms of teaching, research and expression that are inherent in their role and responsibilities within public institutions of higher education. Their rights cannot be curtailed by the colleges where they work, provided that they exercise these freedoms in a manner consistent with their obligations to these institutions.

For greater clarity, these freedoms include, in particular:

- freedom to determine the knowledge and content to be taught, the pedagogical approaches to be used, and the student evaluation activities to be conducted;
- freedom to carry out research activities and disseminate the results, and freedom to produce and disseminate creative works;
- freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to criticize society, institutions, paradigms, opinions, laws, policies, regulations and public programs;
- autonomy in choosing their professional-development activities.



Other important issues for the Regroupement Cégep

The FNEEQ stepped up its media presence during the fall to defend college programs that are under attack. Among other things, the coalition to keep the DEC in nursing as a qualification for entry into the profession, of which the FNEEQ is a member, held a press conference to oppose the efforts by the Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec to require a bachelor's degree.

On June 2, the Federation submitted a petition signed by 2,323 people to the National Assembly calling on the Ministry of Higher Education to drop its plans to merge the Accounting & Management Technology, Business Management, and Office Systems Technology programs into a single generic business program in the name of “multiskilling.” The petition was sponsored by Sylvain Roy, MNA for Bonaventure. The FNEEQ formed a new coalition including not only other union federations but also a number of business organizations to defend the three existing programs. The coalition recently sent a letter to Québec Minister of Labour Jean Boulet and Audrey Murray, president of the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail, seeking their support.



The pandemic is not yet over, so the FNEEQ continues raising Cégep teachers' COVID-related concerns and demands in its regular meetings with the Ministry of Higher Education.



CÉGEP NURSING PROGRAM REVIEW

Cégep teachers must be consulted

The FNEEQ has long been calling for a review of the Cégep nursing program, which has not been done in 20 years and is definitely overdue. So theoretically, the Québec government's announcement in October that it will be "modernizing" the program is a step forward and something we would welcome.

However, what are we to understand by the new term "modernization" that Minister of Higher Education Danielle McCann has been using in her official communications, whereas in the past the discussion has always been about a program "review"? Members of FNEEQ unions have reason for misgivings, especially since the minister has also cited the work of the Québec task force on nursing staff, which has never sought any input from teachers.

The FNEEQ believes that, for the sake of the nursing profession and the quality of public services, the minister has a duty to consult all stakeholders, starting with the people who train Québec's future nurses: Cégep teachers.

The Order sows disorder

Québec's professional order of nurses, the Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec (OIIQ), which the government is consulting for its program review, is openly lobbying

for the radical move of eliminating the DEC in nursing as a qualification for entering the profession, despite its value to the health-care system. This irresponsible position on the part of the OIIQ, at a time of unprecedented nursing staff shortages, contrasts with health institution administrators' high regard for the training received by nursing recruits coming from the Cégep program. The OIIQ, whose primary duty is to protect the public, prefers to leave unmentioned the devastating effects this change would have in every region of Québec. It would aggravate the shortage of nurses, discourage students from enrolling in the program, and increase training costs. How would this change benefit Quebecers? Yet the OIIQ continues to push its senseless message with mass-media advertising claiming this would "enhance" the profession.

Consult the teachers first

The FNEEQ believes that the teachers in the Cégep nursing program, who are part of the higher-education system and are specialists in their disciplines, should be called upon more than once every 20 years to contribute their expertise in the training of future nurses.

One of the solutions that the FNEEQ proposes is to establish a provincial program committee to prepare the program review and then monitor the fit between the program and the skills needed in the workplace on an ongoing basis. It would also conduct consultations on questions such as the number of hours nursing students should spend acquiring skills in specific clinical areas, e.g. mental health or geriatrics. This solution, which is just common sense, could be applied to all Cégep vocational programs.

NEW UNION

SPITAQ chooses FNEEQ for its expertise and representativeness

Benoit Garon, a machinery and fertilization teacher at the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire du Québec (ITAQ) in La Pocatière, greets us on a farm in the Lower St. Lawrence. He is standing in the field, in the shadow of a huge round baler. Benoit became a union activist to fight for recognition of ITAQ teachers as members of the higher education system and is now vice-president of the Syndicat des professeur(e)s de l'Institut de technologie agroalimentaire du Québec (SPITAQ-CSN). He explains why he and his fellow teachers decided to join the FNEEQ.

The nearly 150 teachers at the ITAQ campuses in La Pocatière and Saint-Hyacinthe teach all stages of the process that brings food from the soil to our tables. Their specialties include agricultural business management and operation, agromechanical engineering technology, horticulture, processing, agro-environmental crop management and marketing. Previously, they worked directly for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. But the Québec government finally agreed to merge the two campuses into a single institute with its own management, and ITAQ was created in July 2021. At the same time, after years of discussion, the unionized instructors decided to leave the Syndicat des professeurs de l'État du Québec and affiliate with the FNEEQ.

“For a long time, we had been talking about changing our union affiliation to obtain true recognition for our work, which we didn't feel we were getting,” says Benoit. “The FNEEQ-CSN is the organization that has the largest number of college teachers and best represents what we do.”

At the other end of Autoroute 20, Patrick Fafard, who teaches ornamental, environmental and nursery horticulture at ITAQ's Saint-Hyacinthe campus and serves as SPITAQ vice-president there, tells a similar story. “We wanted to have full autonomy for our members, to be present on the shop



floor, to be on-site so we could dialogue with the new administration. From our very first meetings with the FNEEQ, we were impressed by their professionalism and expertise.” It was a homecoming for SPITAQ, which had been one of the FNEEQ's founding unions some 50 years ago.

The challenge of creating one union for two campuses

Patrick Leduc, who teaches food processing at ITAQ and is now president of SPITAQ-CSN, is enthusiastic about the challenges that lie ahead: “The challenge in the short term is to negotiate the collective agreement. The FNEEQ has a lot of experience in this area, and it's the kind of support we needed. Another challenge will be to organize our union's internal operations, with a brand-new, unified executive committee that has members at two physical locations. Information has to flow freely between us.”

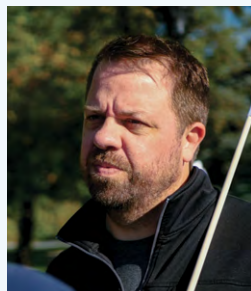
Patrick is also enthusiastic about the doors that are now opening for him and his colleagues when it comes to research and partnering with business. “There are technology-transfer centres that we couldn't work with before but have access to now. We want to build those relationships. From a union standpoint, we must also decide how we are going to incorporate these new activities into our duties.”

ITAQ currently offers seven DECs, two attestations of college studies (AECs) and a secondary school vocational diploma (DEP). It is expected to grow in the future. The FNEEQ is proud to be part of this exciting collective endeavour.

STRIKE ACTION AT COLLÈGE ESTHER-BLONDIN

Léandre Lapointe

VICE-PRESIDENT, REGROUPEMENT PRIVÉ



After more than 10 bargaining sessions with the employer, 98% of the approximately 60 members of the teaching faculty at Collège Esther-Blondin voted in favour of a five-day strike mandate, to be exercised when appropriate. Bargaining talks are currently deadlocked

over critical issues that have a significant impact on the quality of the services provided to students. The workload has been increasingly steadily at the Collège, with the number of special needs students more than doubling over the last five years. At the time of writing, the union has exercised its right to strike twice, on a professional development day and a regular school day. The Collège's administration must take cognizance of its teachers' determination and grant them the conditions of practice and working conditions they are demanding. Solidarity!

Application of Bill 40: professional development for teachers

Bill 40, which came into force on July 1, 2021, amended the Québec Education Act by adding subsection 22.01, requiring teachers to undergo 30 hours of continuing education over a two-year period while respecting their professional autonomy: teachers are free to choose the training activities that best meet their needs. School administrations cannot require any specific training but they must ensure that all their teachers do fulfill this obligation. Since no mechanism is stipulated in the text of the new subsection 96.21, school administrations will only be able to tally the number of hours dedicated to continuing education by each teacher. Moreover, the Ministry of Education does not require any reporting.

Consultation on screens and kids' health

After submitting a brief on the topic to the Ministry of Health and Social Services, we attended the second consultation day. In recent years, we have seen many technological upheavals in education, the transformation of teaching conditions, and substantial changes in the way students relate to learning and success. Clearly, the public health crisis has accelerated these changes



PHOTOS: DOMINIC MORISSETTE

and exacerbated many already-existing problems in education. Screens have essentially become inescapable. They are used for reading, research and writing. They have become an integral part of communication, teamwork and basically all teaching activities. Screen time has grown exponentially from a few hours to the entire school day. There has been a proliferation of studies and data unequivocally demonstrating the harmful effects on young people of overexposure to screens. The Regroupement privé is working to identify healthy ways to use screens. The unions want to develop policies on the appropriate use of screens in the classroom in order to protect the health of students and also of their members. Among other things, the right to screen-free time needs to be defined and applied.

The importance of professional autonomy

The teaching workload has been increasing steadily for years and school administrations have been constantly weighing teachers down with additional tasks. There's no need to wonder why one in five teachers leaves the profession within a few years, why there is a teacher shortage, or why so many teachers are on sick leave. Clearly, one reason has to do with professional autonomy, a right frequently claimed by pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers and just as frequently denied by school administrations, making it a perennial flashpoint.

Valérie Baldacchino et Marie-Noël Lanthier
COLLÈGE DE MONTRÉAL UNION EXECUTIVE

Professional autonomy, commonly confused with academic freedom, refers to teachers' power to make decisions and act in accordance with their own judgment in the performance of their duties.

At the pre-school, primary and secondary levels, teachers' professional autonomy is a vague concept. It is interpreted in light of the Québec Education Act, the Basic School Regulation, and the Québec Education Program, as well as ministerial and local learning evaluation policies and the school's educational project. The employers' obligations, stipulated by the same laws, are constantly at odds with teachers' professional autonomy.

Given this theoretical, yet rarely defined, sharing of pedagogical leadership, the limits of professional autonomy have been drawn only by the struggles teachers have waged in the past and the resulting case law. Is it surprising then that this debate is still on the agenda?

Homework management, marking deadlines, assessment practices, teaching platforms, selection of textbooks and novels, success plans, pedagogical strategies and classroom management are just a few areas where teachers have to fight for the respect their expertise deserves.

Even though they are evidence-based, these choices all stem, ultimately, from overarching educational ideologies. And such ideologies have been piling up at a frenetic pace, generating greater workloads and more demands upon teachers, who must take on the added duties to the detriment of their working conditions.



As the legislation intentionally keeps the limits of pre-school, primary school and secondary school teachers' professional autonomy vague, there is one certainty: only through our collective agreements can we win respect for our professional autonomy. We must protect ourselves from the major changes being demanded by school administrations by adding clauses to the collective agreements that ensure our workloads do not continue to increase year after year.

Culture and Québec Citizenship: hijacking education for political ends

On October 24, the Québec government mounted a major PR operation for the launch of the new “Culture and Québec Citizenship” course, which will officially replace the old Ethics and Religious Culture course as of the 2023-24 school year. Never in the history of the Ministry of Education has a new course been announced with such fanfare. There was a press conference by Education Minister Roberge and his assistant with three public personalities in attendance (Ingrid Falaise, Dany Turcotte and Pierre Curzi) and a promo video in which the Premier promised that the course would instill in students “our Québec values” and “pride in being a Quebecer.” Clearly, the government is using education for partisan political purposes. The CAQ wants the school curriculum to serve its vision, push its values and teach its narrow version of nationalism.

The new Culture and Québec Citizenship course will have three components: culture, Québec citizenship, and dialogue and critical thinking. Culture (in the singular, significantly), will “enable students to understand the culture of societies, with a strong accent on Québec culture,” said Roberge. The Québec citizenship component will be subdivided into several themes which are supposed to guide students on the path to becoming full-fledged citizens. Not all the themes are known at this time but here are a few examples: freedom of expression, rights, media literacy, digital citizenship, environmental responsibility, personal growth and interpersonal relationships, and sexual education. In the program’s third component, ethics, dialogue and critical thinking, students will grapple with moral dilemmas and develop and apply critical thinking skills.

Need for appropriate teacher training

While we have some strong reservations about the form of the new program, the basic concept is attractive in many ways and so are the program’s components. An introduction to dialogue and critical thinking, civics and cultures could certainly help students develop attitudes and knowledge that will help them become active citizens. As in every other case, however, the devil will be in the pedagogical details, the conditions of practice and the training made available to teachers. The ambitious goals of the course can never be achieved unless all the teachers receive the necessary training and leave, and are given the time and space they need. Will two hours of teaching time per schedule cycle (which amounts to 40 hours per school year) be enough?



In the past, governments have often promised extensive training which never materialized. We will have to make sure that the training in this case is accessible and comprehensive. The new program is still being finalized. The FNEEQ will be there at every stage and plans to actively participate in the process.

Red-hand coalition fights return to austerity

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Québec – and the rest of the world – hard. The crisis demonstrated the importance of our social safety net but also laid bare its fragility. Decades of neoliberal management, austerity and budget-slashing have done their work. As we look ahead, we have to try to rebuild all that has been destroyed: a truly egalitarian education system, a truly accessible health and social services system, educational childcare services for all, ambitious policies for building social housing, fighting poverty, and more.

Election on the horizon

In less than a year, Quebecers will go to the polls to elect a new government. It will be tempting for the next government to revert to the days of financial austerity. But another round of budget cuts would have devastating effects on our working conditions and on public services. At its general meeting in June, the Coalition Main rouge, of which the FNEEQ is a member, adopted an action plan with four objectives: 1. Advance the Coalition's analysis of fiscal policy and the social safety net; 2. Take ownership of the second edition of the Coalition's \$10 billion plan for a fairer society; 3. Connect with the membership; 4. Promote critical thinking about public finances.

Information videos were produced and disseminated in the fall. The Coalition also organized a public event on November 23 to debunk myths about public finances. The speakers pointed out that public finances are in good shape despite the crisis and showed that it is possible to make budget choices that meet public needs. The purpose of the event was to support the mobilization effort for policies that will help build a society rooted in solidarity.

We need to mobilize this winter to promote the solutions put forward by the Coalition main rouge.

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