



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec

QPAT Brief on Bill 12

Fees Paid by Parents and the Right to Free Education

March 2019

Introduction

In the context of the consultations concerning fees charged to parents, and more broadly on the scope of the right to free education, the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers, which represents teachers working in Québec's English public school system, will focus its comments mainly on two topics, namely fees charged for educational services and school trips, and the cost of teaching materials, textbooks and other school supplies.

In QPAT's opinion, the reflection on fees charged to parents and related issues should form part of a wider-ranging consideration of the mission of public schools. QPAT believes that this reflection should be based on the vision underlying the Parent Report, according to which education should focus on broad, general learning with the ultimate goal of educating all citizens and providing them with equality of opportunity.

In QPAT's view, our public school system must include education that is truly free, along with better access for all students to a broad range of educational services. Unfortunately, it has become clear that our education system has gradually moved away from this vision in recent years, towards a narrower, more utilitarian vision of its mission. In addition, chronic underfunding has become a major obstacle to fairness within the system, in particular with regard to access to good quality educational services for all students, based on their individual needs. This situation has significantly compromised equality of opportunity, to the detriment of many of the most vulnerable students as well as students from families of lesser financial means.

In QPAT's view, the underfunding of our public education system is partly responsible for the fact that our schools now find themselves in a situation where they must ask parents for additional money in order to fulfill aspects of their educational mission. Largely as a result of this, the principle of free education has been called into question, and inequalities have been maintained and even exacerbated.

Lastly, QPAT feels that, although amendments to the *Education Act* are required for the sake of clarification, they will not be enough, on their own, to ensure fairer access to services, or to enforce the right to free education and guarantee equality of opportunity. As proof of this, some of the principles already set out in the *Education Act*, including section 3, which guarantees free educational services, are not currently applied in reality. Therefore, QPAT thinks that the consultation exercise on school fees should not be limited to the need for clearer guidelines on school fees, to avoid possible legal action in the future; it should also include a broader reflection on the question of how our public education system is funded, to allow for measures that will guarantee true, free, fair and universal access to good quality services in our public schools.

Fees for Educational Services

Access to educational services

Educational services include instructional services and also special and complementary educational services. In QPAT's view, there are two elements that constitute major obstacles to equality of opportunity and also limit the scope of free education: unfair access to complementary educational services and unfair access to special pedagogical projects.

Inequitable access to complementary educational services

Today, in many schools, students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties (students with special needs), especially those who are at risk and those with learning difficulties or disorders, do not have access, within a reasonable time, to the services they need for their overall development and academic success.

In recent years, QPAT has observed a flagrant lack of professional resources and services to meet the needs of this group, whose numbers are increasing constantly. In addition to the challenges faced by the education system in general, many English school boards find it hard to recruit and retain professionals able to provide services to students with special needs. This leads to significant delays in screening and evaluating the students' abilities and needs. As a result, many students at risk or with learning difficulties or disorders must wait for two to four years before they can be assessed. Their problems become more serious during that time, thereby compromising their educational success.

Given this situation, the available professionals must focus their efforts on screening for difficulties and have little time left over to intervene, forcing them to prioritize among the student cases. In addition, the levels of service offered vary significantly from one school board, region or school to the next, thereby adding to the inequity.

Parents who have the means and want a diagnosis and services for their children within a reasonable time, feel that they have no choice but to use private sector resources, thereby paying additional amounts from their own pockets to obtain services that should be provided free of charge by the public system. This is completely contrary to the principle of free education, and is also unfair and discriminatory for students whose parents do not have the financial means to obtain private sector services. In QPAT's opinion, this calls into question the principles of free education and equality of opportunity.

Although the right to free educational services, including complementary services, is included in the *Education Act*, it is clear that the principle is far from being upheld. It is for this reason that QPAT believes additional investments and concrete measures are required to remedy the situation and guarantee that the services to which all students are entitled can be provided free of charge, within a reasonable timeframe.

Recommendations

1. The level of funding for complementary educational services should be sufficient to ensure that all students have equal access to the resources they need within the public system.
2. Short, medium and long-term solutions must be implemented to ensure that all students who need them have access to professional services (screening and ongoing support services) within a reasonable time.

Inequitable access to selective pedagogical projects

Another, increasingly widespread phenomenon in the English sector, especially in the Greater Montreal area, is the growing number of selective pedagogical projects.

As we have seen in recent years, selective pedagogical projects place undue pressure on the composition of so-called “regular” classes and pose a growing threat to the availability of quality educational services for all students. In addition, parents must often pay additional fees when they enroll their children in these projects, and this accentuates the inequity of the system. QPAT thinks that the selective nature of special projects and the related fees mean they are inaccessible not only to the most vulnerable students, but also to students from more modest backgrounds.

Bill 12’s proposed amendments to section 3 of the *Education Act* would limit free education even further because they would not apply to special pedagogical projects. In QPAT’s view, this would have the effect of perpetuating the existing inequity by limiting access to these programs for students from families with greater financial means. QPAT believes a different path should be taken, to ensure that all students have access to stimulating pedagogical projects that will encourage them to stay in school.

Recommendations

1. Eliminate the selective nature of these programs by making them available to all interested students, and hence avoid fuelling a two-tier system.
2. Increase funding so that all students, regardless of their financial means, are able to access special pedagogical projects without paying additional fees.
3. Withdraw the amendment to section 3 proposed in Bill 12, which would allow school boards to charge fees to the parents of children enrolled in these programs.

Fees for school trips

In the broader vision of a school's mission, schools must not only provide instruction but must also socialize students and contribute to their overall development as future citizens.

Accordingly, access to activities and experiences that enrich the school curriculum and provide all students with exposure to the arts, sports and culture in general becomes fundamental. In QPAT's view, access to these activities should also form part of basic educational services.

In the wake of the directive regulating the fees that may be charged to parents by schools and school boards, published by Minister Proulx last June, we have observed a certain number of impacts in schools:

- **Fewer cultural activities and school trips**
Since most schools now no longer charge parents for certain fees, the number of cultural activities and field trips has decreased due to lack of funding, despite the per-student funding allocated for this purpose. This situation is even more obvious outside the main urban centres, where field trips require chartered transportation at a substantial additional cost. In QPAT's view, this aspect is also inequitable.
- **Optional additional fees**
In contrast, some school boards have managed to maintain certain activities by making the additional fees optional. As noted earlier, this gives an advantage to students whose parents have greater financial means, and is, once again, inequitable.
- **Cancellation of activities and trips**
There is still a great deal of confusion concerning the fees that may be charged to parents. Where doubt persists, many schools and school boards have decided not to maintain the activities concerned, leading to the cancellation of many cultural and sports trips and activities.
- **Inter-regional differences**
Generally speaking, practices differ from one region to the next, which is also inequitable.
- **Insufficient funding**
It seems clear that the per-student funding currently granted to pay for school trips is insufficient to compensate for the amounts previously charged to parents.

Recommendation:

1. QPAT thinks that access to educational trips (cultural and/or sports-related) should be available to all students as part of their general education. QPAT therefore recommends

that the per-student funding intended to pay for educational trips should be increased and should also reflect the need for transportation in regions located far from major urban centres.

2. Although Bill 12 does not propose an amendment to the current Act in order to guarantee fair access to school trips, QPAT believes that budgetary measures to allow for these activities should be adopted by the *Ministère* and included in a future draft regulation.

Fees for teaching materials, textbooks and other materials

- **Textbooks**

Textbooks should be free, and all students enrolled in our public education system should have access to them, as is currently the case in the French sector. It is important to note that students and teachers in the English network have access to fewer textbooks and teaching materials, and that the teachers lack choices for youth sector programs. In the case of the adult and vocational training sectors, access to basic teaching materials (textbooks) in English is virtually non-existent for many programs. Given that more 16- and 17-year-old students are now enrolled in adult general education or vocational training programs, and that these sectors are now playing a more important role in increasing the graduation and qualification rates among younger students, it would be appropriate to broaden the scope of free access to basic teaching materials in these sectors.

- **Workbooks**

For some families, the fees charged for workbooks constitute a significant financial burden. Given that workbooks are often essential, are required directly by the program content and are designed to help teachers provide instructional services, they should be available free of charge to all students.

- **Shortage of teaching materials in English**

In the English sector, the limited choice of ministry-approved teaching materials significantly limits the professional autonomy of teachers when it comes to the choice of materials. Because of the shortage of teaching materials in English for many vocational training programs and adult general education programs, teachers are forced to produce their own materials, making the system less inequitable.

- **Insufficient budgets for school supplies**

Currently, many teachers spend between \$100 and \$500 out of their own pockets, every year, to buy school supplies – sometimes basic supplies – for their classes. The budgets

allocated for school supplies are often insufficient, and in some cases are inaccessible because they have been centralized.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure universal access to teaching materials, including workbooks where applicable by providing materials free of charge.
2. Extend free access to textbooks and teaching materials to the adult general education sector by modifying section 7 of the *Education Act*.
3. Provide teachers with a larger fixed budget so that they are able to obtain additional materials to meet their students' needs.
4. Although QPAT is in favour of the proposed amendment to section 7 concerning free access to laboratory, physical education and art supplies, the level of funding should be sufficient to ensure fair access to these items for all students.

Conclusion

QPAT notes that the amendments proposed by the Minister in Bill 12 are designed to clarify the Act, primarily to avoid confusion and prevent future legal action by parents. In a context where our education system is obviously becoming increasingly inequitable, QPAT believes the current exercise should be used as an opportunity to discuss the scope of the right to free education in more depth, based on a wider-ranging vision of the mission of public schools. Accordingly, the amendments to the Act should broaden rather than circumscribe the scope of the right to free education, with a view to offering greater equality of opportunity and fairer access to all programs by eliminating existing factors of inequity in our public education system. In addition, the exercise should also serve to acknowledge that underfunding and staff shortages prevent schools and school boards from complying with the Act as it currently stands, in particular concerning access to quality complementary educational services for the most vulnerable students, within a reasonable timeframe. Lastly, as far as QPAT is concerned, if the Government wishes to be consistent in its commitment to make education a priority, it should commit to investing at a much higher level in our public education system than is currently the case.