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SPECIAL REPORT BY THE QUÉBEC OMBUDSMAN



PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

**For adapted educational services for
students with special learning and
adjustment needs**

Summary

In Québec, the *Education Act* guarantees every student the right to free educational services and student services. The latter includes, among other things, services for students with difficulties that prevent them from progressing satisfactorily solely with the general instruction given by classroom teachers.

Because they foster educational success, student services (notably remedial education, psychoeducation, speech therapy, specialized education and psychology services) make it possible to “integrate” students with special learning or adjustment needs into mainstream classes, as expounded in the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MÉQ) special education policy.

Made aware of the difficulty some of these students have obtaining these services in public elementary schools in Québec, the Québec Ombudsman decided to conduct a special investigation into the matter.

The success of student services hinges largely on the school system's ability to offer these services based on the needs of every student and to make them accessible in a timely fashion. To better assess these elements, the Québec Ombudsman focused on the slate of services and their organization and funding.

MÉQ recognizes that student services must be established based on the recognized needs of the students who require the services, and not on the basis of a diagnosis or “category” of difficulty (coding). Needs must therefore be the centrepiece of the slate of student services and should be used to determine the amounts allocated by MÉQ in hiring and organizing the human resources needed for delivering the required services.

One of the findings from the investigation is that school organizations (school service centres and school boards) do not have the staff they need to respond to the needs of all students. As a result, they must make choices that may hinder access to the right services at the right time. Even though this situation can have serious consequences for some students, MÉQ does not have a clear picture of the vacancies in student service positions either for support or professional staff. The Québec Ombudsman considers it imperative that there be ways to recruit and integrate student service staff and to keep a closer eye on vacancies.

The investigation showed that the student service offering is hampered by limited financial resources. This situation worries the Québec Ombudsman greatly because if services are offered only according to what is possible instead of according to what is necessary, some students do not progress the way they could while awaiting their turn.

MÉQ maintains that student educational success is at the heart of the mission of Québec schools, and that professional staff, teaching professionals, school principals and families must work together so that students can achieve success. However, the investigation showed that conditions for teamwork and for fostering support are not always there, so that genuine collaboration between the members of the school team is often an ideal rather than a reality. This is why it is important that MÉQ encourage collaborative practices in order to improve the response to the needs of the students in question, and that it establish orientations for facilitating multidisciplinary work within educational institutions.

Similarly, MÉQ relies on professional development to improve the skills of teaching staff for addressing these students' needs, but the slate of training services could be better. The Québec Ombudsman urges MÉQ to expand teachers' professional development in this area in order to equip them to better play their

role as front-line “interceptors,” notably by quickly detecting the problems that students have and immediately demanding the assessments that are called for.

What’s more, the current funding method is such that part of student service financing is “category-based.” Extra amounts are allocated to schools or school organizations for certain student categories (codes). Cases in point are students who are recognized as having disabilities or severe behavioural problems, who are coded.

The quality-assurance process imposed by MÉQ to justify the use of the amounts thus issued rests notably on the shoulders of the professional staff, who spend huge amounts of time reporting back rather than assessing student needs or providing them with the services they require.

The Québec Ombudsman sees this as a disconnect between real needs and the resources for meeting them, as well as failure to respect the students’ rights to the special services that are necessary for them. Consequently, the Ombudsman feels that the way in which these services are funded must be reviewed, refocused on student needs and rid of the disparities they perpetuate.

Only genuine collaboration among the various stakeholders in education will yield innovative, evidence-based solutions for the difficulties accessing student services as they now stand. The Québec Ombudsman feels that funding based on coding must be replaced by a process that, above all, is aimed at an adequate response to observed needs. Establishing and funding baseline services, with requirements that enable flexibility regarding the client student population and their needs, would certainly be a step in the right direction.