



LE PROTECTEUR DU CITOYEN

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Report by the Québec Ombudsman

Home schooling:
for respect of children's right to education

Québec City, April 28, 2015

Summary

School attendance is compulsory for every child age 6 to 16 years of age resident in Québec. However, parents who choose home schooling can request that their children be exempted from compulsory school attendance. Exemption is granted further to an evaluation by the school board to ensure that the educational experience and instruction the child obtains is “equivalent to what is provided in school.”

The number of homeschooled children is constantly increasing. Between 2007-2008 and 2011-2012, it rose from 788 to 1,114. These statistics do not include children who receive unsanctioned home schooling. The exact figure is unknown, but the Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche (the Department) puts it at 2,000.

The Québec Ombudsman has seen that in some circumstances, supervision and follow up of home schooling by school boards is inadequate and may hinder these authorities' ability to detect harmful situations that compromise the right to education of the children concerned.

This report presents the main difficulties encountered by parents and school boards in establishing the collaboration needed to carry out home schooling. The Québec Ombudsman's intervention showed that this collaboration occurs within a context marked by uncertainty regarding, among other factors:

- ▶ a normative framework subject to interpretation;
- ▶ disparity in the supervision and evaluation of home schooling;
- ▶ the difficulties school boards have procuring the expertise for supervising and evaluating homeschooling.

The recommendations in this report are aimed at rectifying and preventing harmful situations for all homeschooled children. They seek in particular to establish measures that would incite parents to officialize the status of their homeschooled children who were not granted an exemption from compulsory school attendance and who have no contact with the school system. Since the possibility cannot be ruled out that some of these children are socially isolated or do not get the education to which they are entitled, the Québec Ombudsman is concerned. It considers that the lack of third-party oversight or a form of evaluation and follow up outside the family, especially for children who were never enrolled and are unknown to school authorities, hampers the detection of harmful situations.

Documenting the diversity of supervision and follow up practices

The Québec Ombudsman has noted that the procedure and criteria for granting exemptions from compulsory school attendance and practices regarding the evaluation of learning vary with the responsible school authority. With a view to harmonizing practices across the school system, it considers that thought should be given to appropriate methods and means for evaluating homeschooled children's learning and educational experience.

This exercise must also address the information gathering required for adequate and fair evaluation of the children's learning progress. The Québec Ombudsman has noted that disagreements about the way of evaluating learning are the main obstacle to establishing collaboration between parents and school authorities.

The Québec Ombudsman recommends that the Department proceed to examine educational project evaluation practices and the various methods used or that could be used to supervise homeschooled children's learning.

Support joint action for developing school system expertise

The information gathered during our intervention also raised questions about the ability of certain school boards to supervise and follow up on home schooling. The Québec Ombudsman has noted that the small number of homeschooled children under school board responsibility and the frequent turnover of the staff in charge are not conducive to marshalling and maintaining the expertise required for evaluating and supervising home schooling.

The Québec Ombudsman has found that this expertise exists in certain school boards. In this respect, better dialogue and cooperation among the players responsible would allow sharing of this expertise and the adaptation, if not improvement, of supervision and follow up practices. The Québec Ombudsman feels that the representatives of the community of parent-educators should also be involved in this dialogue and cooperation. This openness would strengthen school authorities' ability to establish conditions that foster the desired collaboration with parents. The Québec Ombudsman believes that such an approach would incite parents to regularize their child's situation and take the required steps to obtain or renew the exemption from compulsory school attendance.

In order to provide school boards with greater support for exercising their responsibilities, **the Québec Ombudsman recommends that the Department establish and support dialogue and cooperation among education players so that they can share their best practices in matters of supervision and follow up, harmonize certain administrative procedures and offer parents support and explicit information**, notably about:

- ▶ the procedure for obtaining or renewing an exemption from school attendance;
- ▶ development and assessment of the educational project;
- ▶ the different procedures for evaluating and supervising student learning;
- ▶ the procedure for getting a child back into school;
- ▶ the rules for certifying studies and obtaining a secondary school diploma.

The Québec Ombudsman is aware that the school system has limited resources for supporting families where homeschooling occurs. However, it feels that it is possible to offer them certain services efficiently and at low cost. **It therefore recommends that the Department encourage the responsible school authorities to offer parents and their children exempted from school attendance:**

- ▶ the loan of textbooks and instructional material;
- ▶ access to a library at their neighbourhood school and to school and extracurricular activities;
- ▶ the possibility of obtaining a student card.

It also recommends evaluating the possibility of expanding access to distance education to homeschooled children under age 16 exempted from attending school.

For effective recourse in cases of legal dispute

The Québec Ombudsman has seen that collaboration between education authorities and parents can become so strained that there is no longer any communication between the parties. In some cases, the inability to obtain information about the family situation may prompt school authorities to report the situation to the Director of Youth Protection (DPJ) on the grounds of non-attendance of school. In the absence of any other ground that could compromise the child's safety or development, the DPJ will dismiss a report based solely on non-attendance of school.

After the DPJ has closed the file, there is virtually no follow up on families by school education authorities. In this context, many families for which an unsubstantiated report has been made are at greater risk for permanently severing ties with the school board, which, in some cases, could compromise children's right to education.

The families and education players consulted, who say that they prefer mediation, consider that there is no effective recourse that would prevent and rectify contentious situations harmful to homeschooled children. **The Québec Ombudsman feels that the Student Ombudsman at each school board could assume this role of mediator and propose measures that foster collaboration and improved supervision, evaluation and follow up of homeschooling.**

In short, the purpose of the Québec Ombudsman's recommendations is to enable the Department to better support school boards in exercising their responsibilities in order to ensure that homeschooled children truly receive the education to which they are entitled, in the children's and in the public interest.