

At the February 25 meeting of the EMSB Council of Commissioners, a report was submitted by the School Board Elections Committee dealing with concerns that arose from the recent school board elections, which took place in November of 2007, and offered recommendations to how these concerns can be properly dealt with. The information that was gathered for the report was based on meetings that were held between EMSB Director-General Antonio Lacroce, EMSB school board elections director Pierre-Yves Bezazz, School Board Elections Committee Chairman Ginette Sauve-Frankel, and at least one other committee member.

Although voter turnout to elect the new slate of EMSB commissioners was the highest amongst the other school boards that held elections at that time (18 percent), the key school board election issues that needed to be addressed were: the electoral list; financing; the revision period; voter apathy; advertising; and polling stations.

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Regarding the revision of the electoral list, it is not updated in an automatic manner, for example, by cross-referencing with data from Revenue Quebec, by a driver's license, or through provincial electoral lists. The list is only updated by the school board in the fall with GPI information or when electors file an ES 70 form.

However, there is also the problem of the public not being sufficiently informed about revision procedures. There is a perception by electors that if they are on the Quebec electoral list and have voted in provincial elections, they will automatically be placed on a school board electoral list. This is not the case. Some people are neither on the French nor the English school board electors' list. Through the years, thousands of English-speaking electors have been automatically transferred to the French lists. Although the list is updated yearly and there is a reminder found in every student's agenda, the names of some parents, including candidates and Governing Board members, were omitted. Some electors that made a formal written request in 2003 or prior were also removed from the list. (i.e., family members of commissioners) although the written request was supposed to be the guarantee to remain on the list, until a written request was made by the same person to have their name removed from it.

The question was raised with the DGQ as to how people were removed from the list, but no answer has been given. By law, people on the 2007 electoral list should remain on it (without any further removals); however, students graduating from high school will continue to be placed on the French list automatically.

Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

* Update the electoral list automatically by cross-referencing with data from the Provincial Elections List and/or driver's licenses and/or tax returns from Revenue Quebec.

*Include a section on the Income Tax forms that would give individuals the choice to be placed on the French or English school board lists.

*The DGEQ does a thorough enumeration to rectify the lists.

*Advocate having our graduates placed on our lists. Send a resolution to QESBA to pursue the talks that have already started.

*Make it clear to voters that they must vote at the poll in the ward in which they reside, not at the school where their child attends if it's located in another ward.

*Conduct a publicity campaign to inform voters on how to get their name on the list.

*Graduating students from our high schools who are 18 years of age and older should be automatically placed on our list. Younger graduates should be added when they turn 18.

*Ensure that all eligible parents of students who are currently enrolled in English schools will be entered on the electoral list.

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On the subject of the revision period, many people saw that the timeline for revisions was way too short. The notice that was sent to every household regarding the school board elections was confusing and people did not read it over carefully.

Because candidates knew that many people were not on the English electoral list, many candidates spent the first few weeks of the campaign going door-to-door with the forms needed for voters to transfer their names onto the English list. The EMSB Elections Office processed 7,000 forms, with 600 being rejected. Some people tried to get on the EMSB list by filing the ES 7.0 form, but in order for that form to be accepted, they had to be on the French list. It is not the role of the candidate to be an enumerator. In turn, it is not the role of the Elections Office to update the list from thousands of forms brought in by candidates.

Also, few people took advantage of the revision offices that were set up in the schools. As a result, many electors were not aware of the relevant information regarding the revision periods, and several revision office locations were too far for the elderly to get to.

Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

*Make the notice to the electors more distinct, so it will be easier to identify on which list the elector has been placed (French versus English lists).

*Make the revision period better known to potential electors.

*Extend the revision period. It is recommended that it should begin in January of the year when the election takes place.

*Make revision locations easier to reach, particularly for the elderly and those individuals who have limited or impaired mobility.

*Find a mechanism by which each school could have a designated period when people could come and place themselves on the list without burdening school staff.

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From the Board's perspective, funding is insufficient and directly affects such election-related issues as publicity, the number of polling stations, etc. From the candidates' perspective, given the low level of expenses allowed, the whole financing process is too complex.

The expenses allowed to candidates are not sufficient to cover mailing costs required to reach voters living in apartment buildings. Also, the cost of school board elections is too high, compared to the annual salary of a commissioner; the maximum allowed in the EMSB was more than 2/3 of a commissioner's salary for one year.

The banks did not have the necessary information regarding the type of account required by the DGEQ for school board elections. They were not prepared beforehand. Many of the candidates experienced several problems, such as the wrong type of accounts being opened; an inordinate amount of time required, which resulted in several trips to the bank in order to open an account; several consultations by the bank officer within the bank or outside the bank on how to proceed with an election expense account. As a result, expenses were disallowed because the information had to be clearer and consistent. As well, campaign ads were checked with the board for their approval before printing and afterwards, were disallowed by the DGEQ.

Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

*Simplify financing and reporting procedures.

*The DGEQ should make sure the banks are aware of what's required and inform their officers, so that candidates can be better served.

*Increase board election budgets. Make sure all candidates are fully informed about all the essentials to financing a campaign.

*Control measures should be put in place to ensure budgets are respected.

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Voter apathy is probably the biggest and most difficult problem to address. Although our school board did better than most at the polls (18 percent), voter apathy is still quite difficult to overcome. Although the QESBA & DGEQ ran good advertising campaigns to sensitize people to the need to exercise their democratic right to vote, demographically speaking it is the older generations that vote, not the younger.

Communication, in particular lack thereof, has also contributed to voter apathy. The role of a school commissioner and what they do is not known to the average voter. The public is also not well informed as to where to address any complaints they may have (i.e., the DGEQ) if they are aware of any infractions of the rules.

There are also concerns regarding the time and place for voting. Sunday is seen as not being the best day for elections. People are used to voting on Mondays for federal and provincial elections, with time allocated for going to vote by law. People who live in apartments are even less involved than home or condo owners. As well, people are used to voting at a polling station that's located close to where they live.

Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

- * Make voting locations better known to the voters, and ensure that the information sent to them is accurate.

- * Increase the number of polling stations and make sure they're the same ones for both voting days.

- * Change election day from Sunday to Monday.

- * Begin educating parents about the election process as early as the year before a school board election takes place.

- * Find a way to spark interest amongst electors who do not have children in the public school system.

- * Conduct a series of public Town Hall meetings and/or candidate debates.

- * Educate the public on the role of school commissioners, what they represent and what their powers are.

- * Add an additional polling station (Ward X) in a voting location if it's from a different ward, but located close by.

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There are also several concerns dealing with polling stations, in particular how they were publicized to the voters and how they were operated on election day.

The electoral wards were large and proximity to polling stations was not great, as most wards had only one polling station. This is because the number of polls is tied to the cost and board budget. As well, information regarding the advanced poll was in some cases inaccurate, which was due to lack of adequate exposure in the media.

There were also several problems regarding what went on inside and around the polling stations. There was a clear lack of vigilance at voting sites to make sure rules were not being violated. Some of the polling station staffers were not dressed appropriately and were not aware that additions to the list were separate. There were also several complaints about the behaviour of candidate representatives, which was in some cases problematic. Campaign posters were torn down or defaced in several wards, and were not removed as required around polling stations prior to the Advance Polls and Voting Day. Some of the ballot counts took longer than others within a polling station, due to the difference in experience or lack of training. There were also reports of missing ballots between recounts and the court recount.

Several candidates were campaigning at schools at inappropriate times. They should not be permitted to do so, unless it's at an event that is specifically set out for that purpose – such as a public town hall meeting or a meet the candidate evening – which should take place at venues outside the schools, and be properly publicized in the local media.

Finally, other concerns include: the Electoral Office at the EMSB head office is too small; adequate space, as well as additional staff to handle the calls and personal visits are needed. The president of elections had to address all related problems before and during voting. The funding mechanism is heavily in favour of political groups as opposed to individual candidates. Individual candidates must do everything themselves (i.e., bank account, forms, signs/posters, etc.).

Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

*School board electoral laws should be revised and amended to include enforceable measures for any acts of misconduct.

*Electoral wards, as well as the number and placement of polling stations, must be subject to review.

*Guidelines for dressing and behaviour inside a polling station should be provided for staff and candidate representatives.

*Review training procedures and determine if additional training should be provided to ensure smoother service by poll workers.

*Ensure all candidates know the rules regarding the placement of posters and the distribution of leaflets on and around school properties.

*Ensure board employees remain neutral during the election period. They should not be permitted to promote or canvass for candidates. Candidates should not run in wards where their family members are employed at EMSB schools or centers, in order to deter the perception of bias and access to privileged information.

*Training of candidates on election and polling station rules and decorum should be mandatory.

*A review should be undertaken dealing with Sunday public transportation availability prior to choosing polling station locations.

*Increase the number of polling stations to accommodate the elderly and those individuals who are less mobile.

*Investigate the possibility of having more polling stations by sharing facilities with other school boards.