

February 2020

Advisory Board on English Education

**Response to the consultation on the proposed
Ethics and Religious Culture Program**

Brief to the Minister of Education and Higher Education

ADVISORY BOARD ON ENGLISH EDUCATION

The mandate of the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) is to advise the Minister of Education and Higher Education on all matters affecting the educational services offered in English elementary and secondary schools and vocational and adult education centres. The Minister may also ask the Board for advice on a specific topic.

The Minister names the members to the Advisory Board. The term of office is normally three years. Candidates are nominated by various English education associations and organizations that represent, among others, teachers, parents, school and school board administrators and commissioners, as well as individuals involved in post-secondary education. Nominations can be received at any time.

ABEE Members 2019-2020

Pamela Bussey
Alain Guy
Heather Halman
Susan Hamilton
Jan Langelier
Roma Medwid
Suzanne Meesen
Marzia Michielli

Pelagia Nickoletopoulos
Louise Outland
Corinne Payne
Sylvain Racette
Jean Robert
Chantale Scroggins
Warren Thomson
Robert Watt

Chair and researcher: Cathrine Le Maistre

Ex officio: Steven Colpitts, Assistant Deputy Minister

Secretary to the Board: Lynn Travers

Administrative support: Juliette Larouche

Linguistic revision: DSCA–SL, ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES)

Advisory Board on English Education

600, rue Fullum, 9^e étage, bureau 9.30.01

Montréal (Québec) H2K 4L1

Tél. : 514 873-5656

Courriel : cela-abee@education.gouv.qc.ca

http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/organismes-relevant-du-ministre/cela/apropos/?pk_campaign=CELA

This publication and previous publications of the Advisory Board are available at:
<http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/CELA/anglais.htm>.

Introduction

The mandate of the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) is “to advise the Minister of Education and Higher Education on all matters affecting the educational services offered in English elementary and secondary schools and adult and vocational education centres.” For this reason, we are obliged to offer this contribution to the consultation on replacing the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program, although we are frustrated that the short time allowed for consultation does not allow us to do a careful study of pertinent research and to consult with the milieu to have a fuller understanding of how this course is offered and received in the schools. Curriculum decisions, just as pedagogical decisions, should be based on conclusions from robust research. We question the value of the questions in the on-line survey: it might have been revelatory to have asked respondents to estimate their knowledge of the content and pedagogy of the existing ERC program to assess the pertinence of their opinions.

Although the program occupies a small part of the overall elementary and secondary school curriculum, it is a critical program in the development of our future citizens and one that merits thoughtful consideration. Nevertheless, we also hope that the Minister will consider carefully the submissions made to him and that the proposal does not represent a *fait accompli*.

It is clear that the relegation of the study of different religions to one reference in the eight themes of the proposed program represents the government’s intent to further the secularization of public life. However, we question whether this will effectively educate future citizens in an increasingly diverse and multi-faceted society. In the time available, we can only raise the question, but there are pedagogical and practical issues that we believe need to be considered and that we will elaborate.

Current ERC program

Content There are shortfalls in any curriculum and everything we teach should be periodically reviewed and revised. But this should only be done after a thorough evaluation, not because of criticisms from vocal commentators who have no knowledge—or have misconceptions—about the program. Echoing Suzanne Chartrand and Guy Bourgeault¹, **we strongly recommend an evaluation of the current ERC program and its implementation before a decision is made to replace it.**

One of the problems with the current program is that even though it is mandatory, it lacks precision (This is exacerbated by the way the course is staffed, which will be addressed later under “Teachers”). Much is left to the background and discretion of the teacher, who often has no support or training. This is especially true in small elementary schools where one classroom teacher may be responsible for several grade levels of the ERC program, but also applies at the secondary level in the English language sector.

There appears to be a misconception in the press that the ERC course teaches religion, but teachers explain that this is not true. Religion is not taught *per se*, nor from a confessional standpoint. Students are taught about different religions to give them a lens through which

¹ Suzanne-G Chartrand, Guy Bourgeault, Dynamitage du cours ECR: et après? Le Soleil, le 21 janvier, 2020.

to view their roles as ethical members of a society and to contribute to the creation of their identity. We wonder what has replaced this lens in the proposed program? It appears that the word “religion” in the title of the program is problematic and open to misinterpretation. **We recommend that any modification of the program should be renamed to better reflect its content.**

Interculturalism² This philosophical stance, espoused in Québec, implies, at a minimum, tolerance of differences, whether defined as differences in ability, gender, race, culture, or beliefs as a way of developing empathy and acceptance of others in society and to reduce discriminatory behaviour. This needs knowledge and understanding of the “other.” Increased tolerance can reduce bullying among children, and it helps to develop the belief systems of adolescents. Content dealing with the “other” is especially relevant in small English language schools in the regions where the racial, religious and cultural mix of large urban centres is absent. The content and pedagogy of the existing ERC program serves this purpose.

Teachers praise the content of ERC for its secular and thematic approach, for its emphasis on dialogue, and critical thinking, and for encouraging students to consider other points of view. Taught well, the program uses an approach involving the whole child and makes him an active participant in his learning.

Proposed program

Content It is hard to see any coherence among the eight topics in the program proposed for consultation. Each topic in this broad range demands a different skill set from teachers, some of whom will be unable to do justice to a set of issues as diverse as citizenship, sex education and computer etiquette. If the proposed content remains unchanged, there will be a need for careful allocation of content to various grade levels as well as extensive preparation and support for teachers, who will need a large and diverse skill set.

² “**Intercultural** describes communities in which there is a deep understanding and respect for all cultures. Intercultural communication focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships. In an intercultural society, no one is left unchanged because everyone learns from one another and grows together.”

What’s the difference between multicultural, intercultural, and cross-cultural communication? Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning.

<https://springinstitute.org/whats-difference-multicultural-intercultural-cross-cultural-communication/>

“In their report on reasonable accommodations, Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor (2008) ... described interculturalism as a paradigm which emphasizes social cohesion and integration through communal values, as well as the respect of differences and diversity (pp. 19-20, 118, and 120-1).”

A Clarification of Terms: Canadian Multiculturalism and Quebec: Interculturalism. First of Five Reports prepared by Miriam Chiasson for David Howes and the Centaur Jurisprudence Project, Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, McGill University, August 2012. <https://canadianicon.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/TMODPart1-Clarification.pdf>

Teachers consulted for this brief noted that much of the content proposed is already present in the existing school curriculum, sometimes in other subject areas, such as the Contemporary World and Financial Education course. They also observed, for example, that most English language school boards have developed instruction in digital literacy.

ABEE looked for a component dealing with indigeneity and was disappointed to find it absent. With all the other topics the proposed program aims to cover, it is a sad omission and could be integrated into Unit 8. This would not be an adequate amount of material, but would, at least, demonstrate an intent to address indigenous issues. **In support of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report, we recommend the inclusion of content dealing with indigenous issues.**³ We recognize that a proposal to add content also adds to the problem of curriculum overload. Is it time to take stock of the whole school curriculum and reassess its scope and content?

Teachers Pre-service teachers in Québec are given preparation in how to teach the program, for example, in the distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion. Staffing causes problems in schools with a large number of teachers; it is a special problem in smaller schools where the potential pool of teachers is so much smaller. The small number of credits assigned to ERC make it difficult to assign the course as a major portion of a teacher’s workload, so that a teacher may be unqualified and untrained to teach it.

One teacher in a small K-11 school reported that of the 10 teachers on staff, two were teaching ERC. Neither of them had trained in a Québec university, nor received any in-service training and were doing the research needed to develop teaching materials. In another school, 17 homeroom teachers each teaches a section of the ERC program. The turnover of ERC teachers makes the situation worse; if a teacher is assigned the course in a year when there is no in-service training (in schools where it even exists), he might have no training at all.

In the time available to us, ABEE has been unable to determine how many teachers in the English sector have ERC as part of their workload. Anecdotally, very few teachers in the English school system have a 100% workload consisting of ERC, while it is more typical for teachers to have a full workload of ERC in French sector secondary schools. Given the implication for the logistics and cost of in-service training for large numbers of teachers, **we recommend that the Minister identify the number of ERC teachers in each language sector of the province.**

Administrators and teachers generally view it as a “filler” course to complete the workload of a full-time teacher. This immediately devalues the course and it is probably asking a lot of human nature for a teacher to give as much importance to a two-credit “filler” course as to her main subject area, especially as she may also have four or five other preparations. **We recommend that the Ministry commit to a thorough in-service training program, beyond one-shot workshops, and accompanied by on-going support for teachers.** This could later be a model for in-service training in other subject areas, as they will be renewed and implemented.

³ See, for example, ABEE, (2017). “Walking on both sides of the river.”

Another effect of the large number of teachers and the turnover of teachers in a school is inconsistency in what is taught in the classroom. It is difficult to offer a solution to this problem in English-language schools, given their small size and the variety of courses for which teachers are responsible. As an attempt to support teachers, **we recommend that there be a consultant designated by each school board with responsibility for supporting teachers and identifying appropriate materials for teaching ERC.** This will require additional funding from the ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur.

Teachers would appreciate more definition and precision to the program to alleviate the amount of research and preparation they must do. The summary table developed for the Sexual Education course is a good example of what could be done for ERC. **We recommend that the Ministère spend time developing a detailed teaching guide for teachers.**

We have already identified the broad range of topics as being demanding of a wide and varied skill set from teachers. Work will be needed to apportion the content carefully, to ensure high quality teaching materials, and to provide extensive in-service. **We remind the Minister of the need for providing these materials and training to teachers in the English sector at the same time as they are available in the French sector.**

In the small schools, common in rural Québec, especially in the English-language sector, teachers charged with teaching ERC to different grade levels would benefit from sharing ideas, materials and methodology with their peers. **We recommend the establishment of board-level and provincial networks among ERC teachers that would include consultants and specialists in larger schools who have developed materials and expertise.**

Conclusion

It appears to ABEE that the content of the existing ERC program is less of a problem than its implementation and we reiterate the need to evaluate it before abandoning it, as well as the need to assign teachers appropriately and to train and support them.

In any program revision, especially one as relevant to the student as this, the overarching question should be: What are the important things that students should know and be able to do after graduation? What will best prepare them to live with others in a diverse world? What will give them a sound foundation to do so? The English-language education system has always been outward looking and globally focussed and we begin to answer this question with two findings of United Nations studies. With more time for deliberation, we would be glad to elaborate on these ideas.

By 2030, ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of

a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.⁴

The largest international survey, the International Civil and Citizenship Education Study/International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (ICCS/IEA) study (Schultz et al., 2010), involved some 140,000 students (about 14 years of age) and 62,000 teachers in 38 countries. In terms of content areas, the topics that the ICCS countries most frequently nominated as a major emphasis in civic and citizenship education were human rights (25 countries), understanding different cultures and ethnic groups (23 countries), the environment (23 countries), parliamentary and governmental systems (22 countries), and voting and elections (20 countries).⁵

We respectfully suggest that much of this content already exists in the ERC program, which should be evaluated and, if necessary, modified, then supported with thorough in-service training.

⁴ Target 4.7. Second UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education: Building Peaceful and Sustainable Societies, FINAL REPORT. UNESCO Paris 28-30 January 2015, p.10.

<https://in.one.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/232768e.pdf>

⁵ Henry Maitles. What Type of Citizenship Education; What Type of Citizen? UN Chronicle. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/what-type-citizenship-education-what-type-citizen>