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# A Profile of Private Schools in Quebec

## Abstract

*Quebec leads the nation in the percentage of its school-age population in private schools. Among other reasons, the popularity and strength of private education in the province can be attributed to an historical tradition that is measured in centuries, parental dissatisfaction with public education, and a liberal scheme of government funding. At the same time, there is a continuing debate over government aid to private schools. Critics charge that government assistance is tantamount to a misuse of public funds.*

## Résumé

*Le Québec se classe en tête de toutes les provinces pour ce qui est du pourcentage de la population d'âge scolaire qui fréquente l'école privée. La popularité et le dynamisme de l'enseignement privé dans la province sont attribuables à une tradition historique qui remonte à plusieurs siècles, au mécontentement des parents vis-à-vis de l'enseignement public et à un régime de financement gouvernemental assez libéral. En même temps, le débat se poursuit sur l'aide de l'État aux écoles privées. Les critiques soutiennent que cette aide équivaut à un détournement des deniers publics.*

Quebec qualifies as a "distinct society" in fact if not yet in law. The province's distinctiveness is reflected in the make-up of her institutions, including schools. Quebec's public school system, divided along religious (Roman Catholic and Protestant) and linguistic (French and English) lines in a predominantly French-speaking society, is unique in Canada. But it is not only in the public education domain that Quebec stands apart from the rest of the country. Indeed, nowhere in Canada is private education as popular, as diverse and as well financed as in Quebec.

### Statistical Profile

Enrolment and financial data testify to the leading position of Quebec in the private school sector. Of a total of 240,904 youngsters enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools in Canada in 1990-1991, 100,742 or 41% were in Quebec. Ontario was second with 27% (*Statistics Canada*, 1992, p. 23). Expressed in other terms, 9.6% of Quebec's total school enrolment was in private schools, representing more than a doubling of the national average of 4.6%. British Columbia, with 7.8% of its total school enrolment in private schools, was the only province to rival Quebec. In fact, the remaining eight provinces fell below the national average. Private school attendance was lowest in the maritime provinces and Newfoundland, where it constituted less than one percent of total school enrolment. Federal government figures also show that Quebec spends more on private education than does any other province. Preliminary data for 1990-1991 reveal that Quebec spent more than \$561 million on private education or almost half the Canadian total of \$1.3 billion (*Statistics Canada*, 1992, p. 28).

Although private school enrolment in Quebec registered a moderate increase during the 1980s—from 88,758 in 1980-1981 to 99,696 in 1989-1990—the rise was significant when measured against public school numbers and counteracting forces. In the first place, whereas private school enrolment was on the rise, public school enrolment was on the decline, due largely to a fall in the birthrate in the preceding decades. In 1989-1990 public school enrolment in Quebec stood at 1,038,935, down by more than 93,000 over the 1980-1981 figures (*Statistics Canada*, 1991, pp. 33-34). At the same time, private school enrolment continued to climb during the decade despite government efforts to curb private school expansion. For example, between 1977 and 1987 the Quebec government imposed a freeze on new private schools, which means that new students had to be absorbed by existing institutions. In addition, private schools had to get along with less money from the government. At the beginning of the 1980s, government aid to private schools was pegged at 80% of public school costs; at the end of the decade, the percentage had fallen below 60.

The strength and popularity of private schooling in Quebec owes a debt to history. In a society that reveres tradition, the private school has accumulated centuries of merit, tracing its roots to seventeenth century New France when religious orders founded schools in the colony. Over the years, church-run private schools have been dominant at the secondary and post-secondary levels, charged with preparing French Canada's professional and ruling elite. Although the massive public education reforms of the 1960s left private education in a weakened state, as witnessed by the disappearance of classical colleges, normal schools, and other institutions, remedial legislation reversed the trend. By the *Private School Act of 1968* the right of private schools to exist and to receive government assistance was reaffirmed.

### Definition of Private School

Before going further, it behooves us to define the private school for purposes of this discussion. In brief, it is a school owned and operated by a nonpublic authority rather than by the government, usually charging fees and offering full-time tuition at the elementary and/or secondary school level. Thus the definition excludes schools offering part-time instruction and those at the post-secondary level. Viewed from a comparative perspective, the private school is differentiated from the public school by its greater autonomy. Less accountable to the government, the private school enjoys a margin of freedom in the running of its affairs. This freedom is best exemplified in admissions practices. Unlike the public school, where an open door policy is in effect, the private school is free to set its own admissions criteria and select its own students. Though screening procedures vary from school to school, not a few institutions subject applicants to personal interviews and written entrance examinations. And while most private schools are on the lookout for academically able youngsters, the applicants' religious and ethnic backgrounds also figure in the selection process.

### Number and Type of Schools

Table 1 classifies Quebec's 294 private schools in 1989-1990 according to language of instruction, gender, level of instruction, ethnicity, and boarding and special education facilities (*Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec*, 1989). Of the 100,000 private school students, most were attending French-language, co-educational secondary schools. Inexplicably, Ministry of Education data are silent with respect to the denominational character of private schools. However, it is common knowledge that many French-language institutions have Roman Catholic ties. For example, of the 100 private secondary schools belonging to the *Association des institutions d'enseignement secondaire* (AIES), 64 of them are governed by diocesan clergy or religious communities.

Quebec's 294 private schools are spread across the province, from Hull in the west to Sept-Îles in the east, from Chicoutimi in the north to Stanstead in the south. Not all regions, however, are represented. Private schools are absent in the far reaches of the province, including the Gaspé, the northwest, and Nouveau-Québec. In general, the private school is an urban-based institution, with two-thirds of the schools in the main population centres. Accordingly, 151 schools are in the greater Montreal area, 36 in the Quebec City region, and a further 12 in the Trois-Rivières and Sherbrooke areas. Of the 100 rural-based schools, almost all are French-language institutions. The anglophone population of the province, largely concentrated in the Montreal region, numbers only three private schools

**Table 1*****Type and Number of Private Schools in Quebec, 1989-90***

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>
Total Institutions	294
Language of Instruction:	
French	238
English	25
French and English	31
Gender of Clientele:	
Co-education	219
Girls	47
Boys	28
Level of Instruction:	
Preschool <sup>a</sup>	42
Elementary	24
Preschool and Elementary	41
Secondary General	127
Secondary Vocational	15
Elementary and Secondary	16
Preschool, Elementary, and Secondary	29
Ethnic Schools:	
Jewish <sup>b</sup>	23
Greek	3
Armenian	3
Muslim	1
German	1
Boarding Schools	79
Special Education Schools <sup>c</sup>	19

<sup>a</sup> In almost every case preschool instruction means kindergarten for five-year-olds.

<sup>b</sup> The large number of Jewish schools—all of them in the Montreal area—means that an estimated 40% of Jewish school-age children are in private schools. No other ethnic group boasts such a high rate of private school attendance.

<sup>c</sup> Schools for physically and mentally handicapped children.

elsewhere in Quebec.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the rural areas lead the urban centres in the number of schools with boarding facilities, which is related to geographical and demographic factors. Of the province's 79 boarding schools, 54 or two-thirds are found in small towns or in the countryside. The largest boarding school in the province, and perhaps in the nation, is Collège Bourget in Rigaud, with some 1,000 residential students.

Statistics alone do not do justice to the richness in variety that characterizes private schools. A thumbnail sketch of several Montreal schools illustrates this institutional diversity. Villa Maria is a Catholic secondary school for girls directed by the sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, a religious community whose Canadian roots reach back to seventeenth century New France and its foundress, Marguerite Bourgeoys. The school is distinguished by its practice of providing separate instruction in French and English. For its part, Collège Stanislas is a French-language co-educational school with connections to France. Founded on the eve of the Second World War to serve the educational needs of the sons of French nationals living in Quebec, its clientele is more cosmopolitan today. Students at Stanislas work toward the international *baccalauréat*, which admits their holders to universities in Europe and North America. A recent addition to the private school scene in Montreal is École Rudolph Steiner, a French-language alternative school. Named after a nineteenth-century Austrian philosopher, the school, as with its counterparts in Europe, makes artistic expression the centrepiece of instruction. Children are taught the basic subjects through drawing, painting, music, drama and the like. Though it has lost much of its tweedy and Anglo-Saxon flavour, Selwyn House School still bears some of the characteristics of a British "public" school. Once described as a school with more freckles per capita than any other in town, Selwyn House's 500-plus boys, each decked out in blazer coat and striped tie, are put through a demanding program of academic and extracurricular instruction. Virtually all of its graduates go on to university. Located near McGill University, Trafalgar School for Girls is one of the city's oldest English-language schools. Established in 1887, it pioneered in the preparation of girls for university entrance in the late nineteenth century.

### Funding of Private Schools

Government funding of private schools is as old as the institutions themselves. As early as the seventeenth century the Crown sometimes provided financial assistance to schools. And while public support of private education has been a characteristic of Quebec over the years, the assistance has not always been consistently or equitably given. In short, some schools were recipients of aid, while others were not.<sup>2</sup> *The Private School Act of 1968* largely redressed the wrong by putting financial aid to private schools on a statutory basis.

By any yardstick, the financial provisions of the 1968 law constituted an economic windfall for private schools, which were eligible for government assistance up to 80% of per-student expenditure in public education. Critics were quick to condemn the government's largesse to private schools as fiscally irresponsible and harmful to the integrity of public education. The funding provision became a hot campaign issue in the 1976 provincial election, which pitted the incumbent Liberal government of Robert Bourassa against the separatist-oriented *Parti québécois* (PQ) of René Lévesque. The PQ boldly promised that if elected it would cut off government aid to private schools. But following its stunning election victory, the new PQ government beat a quick retreat on its promise. Rumour has it that the campaign promise found little support in Cabinet, many of whose members had sons and daughters in private schools.

On the other hand, if the Lévesque government reneged on its promise to withdraw aid to private schools, it did take steps to reduce the level of assistance. As was mentioned earlier, in 1977 the government established a moratorium on new private schools and from 1981 it began a gradual reduction in the level of funding to the schools. The policy of aid reduction has been continued by the present government of Robert Bourassa. In 1990-1991 government assistance to private schools stood at a maximum 52% of per-pupil costs in public education.

The reduction in public aid has not resolved the larger question of whether governments should assist private schools at all. The debate between those who support public funding of private schools and those who are opposed to it, is not confined to Quebec. It is an issue being played out right across the country. Indeed, the provinces are split down the middle on the question. Five provinces—Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia—issue direct government grants to private schools; the other five provinces, including Ontario, do not.

In Quebec the debate over government funding of private schools is fought around two arguments, the ideological and the economic. Those who support funding—the government, private school representatives, and parents—say that the issue is one of natural justice, that government aid assures that a private school education is within the economic reach of most families, since assisted schools are limited as to the tuition fees they charge. According to government regulations, a funded private school cannot charge fees that are more than half its *per capita* grant. Simply put, if a school receives a *per capita* grant of \$2000 from the government, its student fee cannot exceed \$1000. A second argument in defence of government aid to private education is that such assistance translates into relief for taxpayers, since private schools are far less expensive to run than public schools. Were government funding to be cut off, runs the argument, not a few private

schools would be forced to close, thus throwing their students onto the lap of the public schools, which would have to educate them at full public expense.

Leading the fight against government funding of private schools is *Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec* (CEQ), the province's French-language teacher union. While not disputing the right of private schools to exist in a democratic society, the CEQ regards as contradictory the notion of public subsidization of private institutions. Denouncing the practice as a misuse of public funds, a union official quipped that public aid to private schools is akin to the government purchasing cars for commuters dissatisfied with public transportation (*The Gazette*, May 9, 1987, p. A-4). A companion argument is that government monies poured into private school coffers means less money for the public schools. The CEQ also disputes the government's claim that the withdrawal of funding to private education would result in the closure of many schools, noting that private schools have long flourished in Ontario and the United States without the benefit of direct government aid.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is no obligation on the part of Quebec's private schools to accept government assistance, almost all do. However, the acceptance of aid comes with a price, for schools must comply with many of the laws pertaining to public education. Thus assisted schools must offer the public school curriculum, present their students to the provincial examinations, engage only certified teachers, and respect the education clauses of Bill 101. (Bill 101, or the Charter of the French Language of 1977, requires that immigrant and francophone children attend French-language schools.) Adjusting to these regulations is more difficult for some schools than for others. Government regulations work a particular hardship on ethnic schools, which must find curricular time in a crowded school day for their own cultural priorities. In Jewish, Greek, and other schools the public school curriculum is supplemented by instruction in the language, religion, and history peculiar to the ethnic group. The upshot is an expanded curriculum, an extended school day, and a heavy work load for staff and students. In some schools it is not unusual for the school day to run from eight in the morning to six in the evening.

Some observers believe that private schools pay too stiff a price for public assistance, that in a Faustian scenario private schools have sold their soul to the government in exchange for financial security. According to this point of view, government funding and regulation have robbed the schools of their identity, integrity, and independence. As a result, the private school has become less an alternative of the public school than a pale image of it (Gingras, 1988, pp. 119-122).

Not all private schools are funded by the government. A small number of schools, principally English-language institutions, are self-financing. The list includes, among others, Lower Canada College, Stanstead College, Bishop's College, and Sedbergh School. What these schools lose in public assistance they gain in autonomy. Little burdened by Ministry of Education rules and regulations, they are free to chart their own educational course and develop their own institutional personality. Still, most nonsubsidized schools offer the main elements of the public school curriculum, if only to facilitate the passage of students to post-secondary education. In the absence of government assistance, the schools are forced to charge high fees to maintain themselves. Annual fees at nonsubsidized private schools range from \$5000 to \$20,000, the higher fees applying to boarding schools. In comparative terms, annual fees in assisted private schools averaged \$1000 in 1988-89 (*La Presse*, November 3, 1990, p. 14).

A controversial feature of nonsubsidized English-language private schools is their exemption from the education clauses of Bill 101. In contrast to other English-language schools, public and private, these institutions are free to admit immigrant and francophone children. Some schools have treated the exemption as a recruitment opportunity to attract students who are normally barred from attending an English school. One such school is Stanstead College, an English-language boarding school in the Eastern Townships, which has advertised in the French press for francophone students. In an advertisement that appeared in the November 16, 1990 edition of *Le Devoir*, the school reminded its readers that as it did not receive government aid, *les élèves francophones n'ont pas besoin d'un certificat d'admissibilité* (the francophone students do not need a certificate of eligibility) to be admitted. To critics of private schools, the Bill 101 exemption confirms the schools' privileged position before the law. Since only well-to-do families can afford the high fees of nonsubsidized schools, they alone can take advantage of the loophole in the language law. Private school critics also like to point out the little-known fact that nonsubsidized English private schools serve as conduits to English-language public schools. Francophone and immigrant children who attend such schools for one year are eligible to transfer to English public schools.

### Defenders and Detractors

The funding question continues to be the most hotly debated issue in Quebec private education. Private school interest groups such as the AIES and the *Mouvement pour l'enseignement privé* (MEP), which represents private school parents, regularly petition the government for more aid. Noting that many private schools are in a deficit position, these groups call for the restoration of funding to its pre-1980 level of 80%. For their part, some private school critics demand no less than the abolition of government

aid to private schools. Caught between the two extremes is the provincial government, which is unlikely to move boldly in either direction. Strapped for funds and faced with serious problems in public education, the government, though ideologically disposed to helping private schools, is not well positioned to meet their requests for increased aid. However, financial relief for the schools may come from a different quarter. The government has been toying with the idea of allowing private schools to raise their student fees (much as the province's universities were permitted to do several years ago). The engaging quality of this scheme is that it would generate more income for the schools without costing the government a cent.

The financial debate aside, supporters and critics of private schools have much to argue about, including the role of private education in society. Proponents maintain that private schools are compatible with the values of a democratic society, which respects the citizen's freedom of choice. Just as citizens are at liberty to choose from among different goods and services, so should they be presented with educational choices, between public and private education. Private school defenders also contend that a healthy private school is the best guarantee of a healthy public school, for the former challenges the latter. Without the competition of private education, public education would have less reason to improve itself. Jean-Paul Desbiens, teacher, commentator on public affairs, and author of the 1960 bestseller *Les insolences du Frère Untel*, takes the argument one step further. To him, the private school serves as a political bulwark against the state monopoly of education, which he describes as *stérilisant et antidémocratique* (*La Presse*, April 29, 1987, p. B-2).

In defending their schools, private school proponents are frequently critical of public schools. They portray public schools as being plagued by social and pedagogical ills, including low academic standards, lax discipline, and a surging secondary school drop-out rate, which jumped from 27 to 36% between 1985 and 1989 (*Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec*, 1991, p.37). Private school defenders claim their institutions have smaller classes, tighter discipline, more caring teachers, closer home-school ties and, above all, superior academic results. They point out that in the annual provincial examinations, private school students outperform their public school counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

Critics of private schools see the situation in a different light. To their way of thinking, private schools are socially and academically elitist institutions whose impact on public education is more negative than positive. As they are able to select their own students, private schools enjoy not only an academic advantage over public schools, but in the process compound the harm by siphoning off the best students. The same critics also accuse the private schools of operating at cross-purposes with the public schools in the

social domain of education. Whereas the public school strives to make schooling a common socialization experience for children from different socio-economic backgrounds, the private school marches in the opposite direction by catering to narrowly-defined populations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> They are Bishop's College School in Lennoxville, Stanstead College in Stanstead, and Sedbergh School in Montebello.

<sup>2</sup> Boys' and girls' classical colleges, which were institutional casualties of the Quebec school reform of the 1960s, were treated differently by the government during their years of operation. For many years only the boys' schools were recipients of government funding.

<sup>3</sup> About 11% of school-age children in the United States are in private schools.

<sup>4</sup> In the June 1990 examinations the average mark for private school students was 73/100 as opposed to 66/100 for public school students.

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