

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the back of a student's head and shoulder is visible. In the middle ground, a female student with her hair in a ponytail has her right hand raised. In the background, a male teacher in a light-colored shirt stands facing a green chalkboard. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Declaration

Making Public Education The Quebec Priority

ENDORSED BY ELEVEN UNION
AND STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS
FROM THE EDUCATION SECTOR

As a society, can we accept that one out of every three students leaves high school without a diploma? Can we accept that Quebec citizens do not have the education that is minimally required to lead comfortable lives? Can we accept that Quebec is in the group of Canadian provinces with the lowest rates of adult participation in on-the-job training activities?



During the Quiet Revolution half a century ago, Quebec came to realize the importance of education in the life of an individual and in the life of a nation.

The Great Democratic Reform in Education

In the aftermath of the Parent report, the Quebec government carried out a major reform that would democratize education, improve its quality, and ensure universal accessibility. The aim of the reform was clear: To provide all of society with equal opportunity by giving everyone a chance to learn, specifically by making post-secondary education accessible to all. From that day on, education became a common good and an essential public service. And the Quebec government became responsible for its development and financing.

An enormous and unprecedented collective effort was undertaken. The Ministry of Education was created; comprehensive high schools, the Cegep system, and the Université du Québec network were established; levels of education, curricula, teaching methods, and teacher training were revised in depth; school attendance became compulsory until the age of fifteen, and adult education was made a priority; tuition-free education was introduced at the primary, secondary, and college levels; and a financial assistance program was established for college and university students.

This declaration is published by eleven organizations that represent half a million people working in the education sector.

November 2008.

Undeniably Positive Results

Since that great reform, significant progress has been made in areas such as rates and levels of schooling and access to quality education:

- Quebec now has the most developed and most accessible systems in North America of daycare service for young children and school daycare service;
- Full-time preschool education for five-year-olds is now the rule;
- In the early 1960s, some 40% of children did not even finish primary school and only 50% of children reached secondary school. Access to the various kinds of secondary schools is now 100%;
- In the past, no more than 14% of them graduated from secondary school. Today, 70% of them earn a diploma; and, by means of adult education, this graduation rate reaches 86%;
- Previously, only 16% of young people went to college; today that rate is 60%, while 40% of young people earn a diploma of college studies;
- The percentage of the population attending university has increased from 5% to 25% today.



This democratization of education has enabled Quebec to overcome its disastrously slow development and to enter the modern age. It has allowed generations of Quebec citizens to get an education, to acquire a critical sense, and to become free, independent, and responsible citizens. All of society has benefited. The remarkable progress made by Quebec in subsequent years has been largely the result of this democratic reform and of the public education system that was created to implement it.

A Calling Into Question With Disastrous Results

For several years now, advocates of neoliberal ideology in pursuit of “zero deficits” and the disengagement of government have been seriously threatening the democratization of education in Quebec. In the view of some of them, public education is in terrible shape—from primary school to university. These detractors have undermined the confidence of citizens in our public institutions, with disastrous consequences.

Equality, solidarity, social justice, and co-operation have inspired the democratization of education in Quebec, and these are humanistic values that we still share with conviction and pride. Yet the values that should be at the heart of the education system are being attacked at all educational levels.

Our education system is being led down a slippery slope towards commercialization and privatization. The diktats, values, and practices of private enterprise, focused as they are on competition and profit, are attacking the very heart of our institutions. According to this ideology, the general education of students is to be sacrificed in order to train them in skills in order to meet the short-term needs of the labour market.

An unnecessary and costly competition is spreading throughout our institutions. Instead of working together in the interest of education, our institutions are competing against each other for programs and “clienteles,” to employ the term being used to describe the youth in our schools, colleges, and universities.

Private educational institutions, which are mostly financed by public funds, are expanding. In a futile attempt to compete against them, public schools increasingly resort to selective educational projects that distort their mission.

An Unacceptable Segregation of Education

The final report of the Commission for the Estates General on Education (1996) emphasized that “Concern for equal opportunity has given way, in several instances, to elitism... adopting selection practices based on performance and creating a small group of elect students and a contingent of excluded ones.” This trend has grown to such an extent in recent years that a real segregation of education now exists in our society.

Nearly half the population struggles to function within our “knowledge-based society.” In poor neighbourhoods with high unemployment rates, the percentage of students who drop out of school is over 50%. The dropout rate is twice as high in secondary schools located in poor areas as compared to more affluent areas. Left without adequate professional support, public schools and adult education centres in underprivileged environments struggle in overcrowded classrooms to integrate newcomers and students with learning disabilities. As a result, these institutions have a hard time ensuring academic success and keeping students in school.

Few young people educated in such classes attend university. In 2001, only 35% of 18–34 year-olds whose parents had incomes of less than \$25,000 were enrolled in college, while only 18% of them attended university. These rates are 50% and 37% among young people whose family income exceeds \$100,000. Increases in tuition and so-called related fees coupled with serious shortcomings in public financial aid that force more and more young people to spend time working instead of studying—these do not contribute to equal opportunity in our society. Other factors that do not support equal opportunity include a lack of services in remote areas, inadequate pedagogical and professional support, and insufficient appreciation for education and other services provided to communities. These factors, along with a focus on



subsidized research, have had a major impact on the recent development of our post-secondary institutions.

In a society that prides itself on wanting to build a knowledge-based economy and that fears a shortage of skilled labour, access to adult education and continuing education remains shamefully inadequate. We do not even have an appropriate standardized policy for recognizing prior learning or previously acquired skills, and the participation rate of Quebec adults in continuing education still lags behind that of other provinces.

Urgent Action Is Required



In fact, the plan to democratize education and the development of public education are no longer real priorities. The Quebec government no longer plays a leadership role and is content to manage the contradictions and problems that exist within today's education system. It has abandoned the development of the system, handing it over to the values and models of private enterprise. Specific proof of this is the inadequate funding that has for far too long affected all levels of the education system.

For all these reasons, we who are studying and working in Quebec's educational institutions—from preschool to university—express our deep concern regarding the deterioration of the public education system. And we declare our strong conviction that we must act now to restore public education as the main priority in Quebec.

Today we are urgently asking citizens, political parties, and the Quebec government to support the following ten proposals.

1 To restore the fundamental democratic mission of the education network

By denying the humanistic values of education, by promoting the commercialization and privatization of education, by funding academic competition and segregation, by allowing the learning conditions of students and the working conditions of teachers to deteriorate in the public system, the Quebec government is endorsing a neoliberal and elitist vision of education. It is contributing to the development of a two-tiered society in Quebec, with all the serious social consequences that this entails.

Given the serious political, cultural, environmental, and socio-

economic challenges we must face in the coming years, the Quebec government is making a serious mistake in denying a large number of citizens the benefits of a quality education.

The government must make education the main priority in Quebec and resolutely support the development of a public, universal, accessible, and free education of a high quality.

Quebec must re-establish its plan to democratize education and strongly reaffirm that education is a public good. The government must make education the main priority in Quebec and resolutely support the development of a public, universal, accessible, and free education of a high quality by defending it against unhealthy competition, against the petty logic of narrow-minded accounting, and against the pressure from proponents of elitist “every man for himself” neoliberal fetishes.

2 To give us the means to combat academic failure

A sound basic education is important not only because it allows people to participate in the labour world but also because it helps them to live full and rewarding lives within society. Consequently, we can no longer tolerate the waste of human potential caused by the academic failure and dropping out of a significant number of Quebec’s young people. We must give ourselves the means to keep students

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in school and to improve student success.

The education system alone cannot solve these problems. A true spirit of social solidarity is required. The Quebec government must invest more coherently and substantially to eliminate poverty, which is the main cause of student dropout and academic failure. The government must enact measures to help poor families.

These should include a higher minimum wage, additional social housing, increased support for single-parent families, improved access to cultural activities and sports, and more generous food aid programs. It is unacceptable that young Quebecers still show up at school with a hunger other than for learning.

To reduce dropout and failure rates, several international studies have shown the effectiveness of upstream intervention, particularly among poor and im-

migrant children. Prevention and early detection, following up with parents, increased francization measures, and universal access to quality childcare—these are all factors that support academic perseverance and performance in underprivileged settings.

Public schools, especially those in underprivileged areas, must finally be given more resources to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to acquire knowledge and to pursue an education. The implementa-

tion of educational projects for all students; fewer students per class; additional resources for teaching and for professional and support staff to improve guidance and support for students in difficulty; the development of after-school activities; and better school day-care services—all are structural changes that will help turn our elementary and secondary schools into motivating environments focused on success.

3 To enact social justice and equal opportunity

All parents have the right to send their children to private school. This does not imply, however, that the government must pay for it. American states and most Canadian provinces do not subsidize private schools. In contrast, subsidies in Quebec are among the most generous in the world. Subsidies for a student attending a private elementary or high school equal 60% of what the government pays for a student attending a public school. In 2004-2005, this represented \$375 million for preschool, primary, and secondary schools, an amount that does not include public funding of school transportation for students in the private sector.

By financing a private system that practices school segregation based on parental income, religious

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beliefs, and the academic performance of students, the Quebec government deprives the public system of badly needed resources. Studies have shown that integrating students who perform well academically benefits students who have difficulties, while penalizing no one.

Quebec must emphasize social justice, equal opportunity, solidarity, and co-operation. It must promote and strengthen the public education system. To this end, the government should gradually stop subsidizing the private education system and move to integrate it and its personnel into the public education system.

4

To strengthen the Quebec college system

Quebec took an important step towards democratizing education when it established the Cegep system, which ensures that people have access to post-secondary education throughout Quebec. Hundreds of thousands of young people have benefited from our colleges, which also contribute significantly to regional development.

Nonetheless, the existence of Cegeps is regularly called into question. Their mission is undermined by pressures to tailor education to labour market needs, by government policies that betray the government's responsibilities, by the excessive decentralization of learning activities that threatens student mobility, and by inadequate funding, which limits service offer in remote areas and which everywhere leads to unproductive competition between schools.

The Quebec government must develop and strengthen the Quebec college network. This system is based on the coexistence of two education sectors—pre-university and career/technical—that share a common central education component, which guarantees student access to the cultural background required for a well-rounded education. The government has the responsibility of ensuring that all regions have access to a wide range of

free services and to a quality education that is equivalent and transferable throughout Quebec and recognized by a ministerial diploma. To meet these responsibilities, the

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government must preserve the system-wide coordination of programs and continue to monitor the bridges between education levels. It must foster co-operation among institutions, and it must fund study programs based on actual costs.

The government must do much more to support academic perseverance and student success at the college level. To do so, it must reduce student-teacher ratios and the number of multiple preparations. It must increase resources for teaching and for complementary professional and other services to ensure that students receive appropriate academic supervision, guidance, and support.



5 To refocus universities on their core mission

In recent years, universities have been under intense pressure to meet a variety of social needs. They are pressured to turn out highly qualified personnel according to labour market requirements and to give preference to research that produces immediate and measurable results. This obsession with reducing education to an exercise in short-term profitability harms and even deforms the humanistic development of independent citizens able to manage their personal and professional lives and to participate actively in the community.

The balance between the three core components of the mission of universities—education,

innovation and research, and community services—is increasingly threatened as university administrators seek to isolate and segregate teaching and research. Research itself is increasingly subsidized at the expense of university operating funds, while performance require-

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ments consume time previously allocated to community services. All these factors have led to a weakened sense of collegiality. The conditions required for the development and dissemination of free and critical knowledge—institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and independent research and governance—are increasingly compromised. Starved by inadequate funding, and characterized by the opening of university branches in “competitor” territory along with costly recruiting campaigns, universities have substituted fierce competition for co-operation.

The Quebec government must put an end to the commercial hucksterism that is hijacking the educational mission of universities. Strengthening the accountability of universities is one thing, but it is quite another to hand over control to external managers from the private sector. Instead, the government must reaffirm the fundamental nature of universities as a public service and support their autonomy and academic independence. It must provide the financial and structural resources that will allow universities to exercise their full role in society. Finally, along with academic perseverance and student success, the government must support access to university education throughout Quebec.



6 To set guidelines and limits for the relationship between education and private enterprise

Quebec secondary schools, colleges, and universities have always worked closely with the business world. One example of this co-operation is the organization of various kinds of work terms for student trainees. Companies are also consulted in the development of vocational, career, and technical training programs. However, when private companies—taking advantage of inadequate funding and government laxity—invade our institutions with their advertising, call for exclusive rights for their products, demand that university buildings display their name, require a majority of seats on boards of directors, impose their management

methods, ban the publication of unfavourable research results, and, in short, do all they can to sacrifice general education for their immediate profit and for their immediate labour requirements, then indeed does business culture menace the

very mission of our education system.

We cannot abandon the relationship between educational institutions and the economic sphere to the whims of neoliberal development. The mission of the education system must be clearly distinguished from the imperatives of economic competition. The Quebec government must forcefully reassert the importance of general education and basic scientific education in regard to the instrumentalization and applications of knowledge. It must take concrete measures to regulate the relationship between learning institutions and private enterprise, in particular by setting guidelines and limits for partnerships and research funding.

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7 To expand access to adult education and continuing education

Every day, the accelerating evolution of knowledge, socio-economic transformation, and technological change make access to adult education and continuing education increasingly essential. Yet, these two sectors remain neglected within the Quebec education system, and this situation has dramatic consequences. According to a recent study, almost half of Quebec citizens aged 16–65

do not have the education that is minimally required to function adequately in today's society.

Governmental commitment, corporate participation, mechanisms to recognize prior learning and previously acquired skills (especially for newcomers) coordinated service offers between educational levels, along with welcoming, referral, guidance, and support services—all of these are insuffi-

cient to meet current needs. Inadequate funding denies the access of thousands of people to training programs while thousands of others linger on waiting lists. One example of these shortcomings is that the majority of colleges still do not offer part-time technical training for adults, at a time when jobs requiring this kind of training will experience the strongest growth in coming years.

The Quebec government must act now. It must recognize that all adults have a right to education and training, and it must provide them with the means to exercise their right. It must develop access to a range of quality programs, policies, and services in a variety of places and education modes. To all that need them, it must provide serv-

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ices that recognize prior learning and previously acquired skills, including the opportunity to receive additional training, if necessary. Also, the government must encourage companies to develop a culture of continuing education and to invest more in the training of their employees.

8 To improve the financial situation of students

The appalling financial situation of many students in Quebec is one of the major obstacles to accessibility and academic success in post-secondary studies, adult education, and in vocational, career, and technical training.

The government financial aid program for students is clearly inadequate. One example of its shortcomings is that the calculation of living costs has rarely been adjusted to keep pace with the rising cost of living over the years, with the result that aid has had little correspondence with reality for quite some time. Another example is that the income threshold, which determines when parents must pay for the university education of their children, is \$30,850 for a Quebec

family with two children, this in contrast to \$65,000 in the rest of Canada!

Faced with an inadequate aid program and the increasingly high cost of getting an education, a large proportion of students have no choice but to contract significant amounts of debt, to drop out, or to work while they study.

The principle of free education so central to any attempt to democratize education has never seemed as remote as now. After experiencing an average increase of 362% in so-called related costs from 1993/1994 to 2007/2008, university students must now absorb a 30% increase in tuition over five years, an increase that began in 2007. According to a study commissioned by the Quebec government, this measure alone will prevent some 6,000 to 13,000 people from going to university. Moreover, this study does not take into account the people who do not have access to university to begin with.

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choice but to contract significant amounts of debt, to drop out, or to work while they study, this along with the known negative consequences regarding the length and success of studying under such circumstances.

It is essential for Quebec to engage in a wide-ranging social debate over the financial situation of

students and the cost of education. This debate must involve not only students pursuing college or university educations or indeed vocational or technical training but also those adults who decide to return to school and who are not eligible for government financial assistance.

The Quebec government must initiate this process because it urgently needs to improve financial aid for students and to establish mechanisms that will reduce financial barriers for students who wish to pursue their education.

9 To recognize and respect educational workers

Access for Quebec youths and adults to quality education has deteriorated over recent years, and the same is true for the working conditions and work environments of educational personnel. The lack of recognition for the role they play in society, attacks on their professional autonomy, declining job security, heavy workloads, increasing numbers of students with difficulties, and the complexity of related problems—these are all factors contributing to a general lack of respect for educators, an alarming number of whom suffer from burnout or simply quit their jobs.

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tional workers. They are two sides of the same coin.

From preschool to university, the Quebec government must remobilize educational personnel and restore confidence and pride in the project to democratize education. It must make every effort to enhance the role and the work of these professionals. This entails respecting their professional autonomy, recognizing their expertise, reducing job insecurity, attracting new staff, supporting professional induction, preparing staff adequately, providing continuing education, maintaining employment, paying fair salaries, and ensuring better conditions for staff members nearing retirement.

10 To end the chronic underfunding of education

We must end the chronic underfunding that now places Quebec as one of the worst Canadian provinces in terms of per capita investment in education. Just to catch up with the Canadian average, the government would have to contribute an additional \$700 million per year to preschool, primary, and secondary school education. To achieve the level of funding that existed before the 1993 federal cuts, \$800 million more per year would have to be spent on post-secondary education and financial aid to students.

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Just one of the two GST points discarded by the federal government, points that the Quebec government has refused to claim, represents a loss of \$1.5 billion, the minimum required investment that we are calling for. Of course, this investment in education should not be made at the expense of other social programs. We therefore call upon the Quebec government to continue the fight to solve the fiscal imbalance and to conduct a review of taxation so as to make the tax burden more equitable.



Conclusion

To enact all changes needed today in the education sector of our society, from preschool to university, would require the Quebec government to fully assume its democratic responsibilities and develop a policy for public education based on the humanistic values of social justice, equal opportunity, solidarity, and co-operation.

Therefore, we call upon the Government of Quebec:

- 1 To make education the Quebec priority and, consequently, to develop and implement a Quebec policy on public education that firmly supports the development of education—high quality, universal, accessible, and free.
- 2 To implement structural changes that make our primary and secondary schools motivating environments focused on success, including the following:
 - Implementation of educational projects accessible to all students;
 - Decrease in the number of students per class;
 - Additional resources for teachers and professional and support staff to provide better guidance for newcomers and students with difficulties;
 - Development of after-school activities;
 - Increase in the quality of school daycare services;
- 3 To establish ways of ending the public funding of private schools by moving to integrate private schools into the public education system, while fully respecting the rights of the personnel involved;
- 4 To develop and strengthen the Cegep system, and ensure that people in all regions have access to a wide range of free services and to a quality education that is equivalent and transferable throughout Quebec and recognized by a ministerial diploma;
- 5 To ensure that a balance is maintained among the three core components of the mission of universities—to be the originators of a real collaboration between institutions, to ensure that the mission of universities is at the heart of all decisions, regardless of their source; and, as a result, to review the government’s approach towards the governance of post-secondary education;
- 6 To take concrete steps to regulate the relationships between educational institutions and private companies, in particular by setting guidelines and limits for partnerships and research funding;

- 7 To recognize that all adults have the right to regular and continuing education, and to provide them with resources required to ensure that they are able to exercise their right;
- 8 To organize a debate on the financial situation of students, and immediately improve student financial aid and establish mechanisms to reduce financial barriers for students who want to further their education;
- 9 To establish the means required to attract professionals, to improve professional induction, to ensure fair salaries and a better preparation of educators, and to promote continuing education, employee retention, and better conditions for education professionals nearing the end of their careers;
- 10 To end the chronic underfunding of the education system by massive investment in order to meet current and future needs.

The partner signatories of this declaration believe that to make public education the Quebec priority is to choose to invest convincingly in our collective future and in our ability to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century with knowledge and confidence.

Quebec must make this commitment now.

Signed by:

The Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ)

The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)

The Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE)

The Fédération autonome du collégial (FAC)

The Fédération des associations étudiantes universitaires du Québec en éducation permanente (FAEUQEP)

The Fédération du personnel professionnel des universités et de la recherche (FPPU)

The Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ)

The Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ)

The Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU)

The Mouvement québécois des adultes en formation (MQAF)

The Syndicat de professionnelles et professionnels du gouvernement du Québec (SPGQ)

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