

Allison Hanes: Rethinking education in Quebec should be our summer project ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

School is out for the summer, to the joy of students and teachers across Quebec.

But just before classes wrapped up last week, the Liberal government outlined a sweeping vision for revitalizing the education system. The timing is a bit strange, for something so important. But it gives Quebecers a lot to think about as we head off on vacation.

The new policy framework pledges to deal with everything from Quebec's stubbornly high drop-out rate and the funding formula for helping students with learning difficulties, to renovating crumbling schools and bringing more technology into the classroom. It is chock full of heart-warming sentiments about setting the conditions for success, learning being a lifelong process, inclusiveness and education being at the heart of "our lives, our families, our communities, our society."

What it is short on, however, is details of how all these major challenges will be tackled. As the document states, this is a departure point for steps that will be taken over the coming years. The other missing element, of course, is financing. Quebec loosened the purse strings in its last budget, with \$3.4 billion more for education and a \$1.9-billion youth strategy. But if the government is really serious about making education a priority, it will have to put its money where its mouth is.

The goal is to have 85 per cent of students graduating from high school in Quebec by 2030, up from about 74 per cent now. Quebec's stubbornly high dropout rate is no small matter. According to the 2017 Quebec budget, there are 160,000 young people ages 15 to 29 who were neither attending school nor working last year. They account for 11 per cent of the youth population. It's a huge loss of potential, with Quebec's economy firing on all cylinders and our labour pool shrinking because of an aging population.

It's also a huge drain on resources. The long-term implications of this terrible problem are staggering: a 2012 study from the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity estimated poverty, and all its associated difficulties, costs Quebec \$15 billion a year, including \$5 billion for social supports. (Yes, that's billion with a B.)

Perhaps it took looking at education as an economic problem to spur this Liberal government to act. They spent the first two years of their mandate squeezing education, from early childhood to post-secondary, to put Quebec on sound financial footing. But Finance Minister Carlos Leitão just announced a \$2.5-billion surplus — 10-times greater than the notoriously cautious economist initially projected.

Johnny-come-lately though it may be, the government's plan to make education a signature issue heading into the 2018 election should give Quebecers licence to dream big. And the latest budgetary windfall should remove any excuses for not going "all in" when it comes to transforming our education into one of the best in the world, the stated goal.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of ideas worthy of consideration, many of them from beyond the pedagogical experts in academia and policymakers at the education ministry.

The Quebec government has recently woken up to the idea that success in school starts long before kids show up there at five years old. It is rolling out pre-kindergarten classes in disadvantaged areas, announcing 100 more will be set up by September. It also wants to make the transition from daycare to school smoother for young children. This is great.

But it could go further. The Association des centres de la petite enfance, the umbrella group representing Quebec's publicly subsidized daycare network, held its own roving consultations over the last year and recently recommended making high-quality, universally accessible daycare free for all children from birth. This would require an expansion of CPEs, which the Liberals have sorely neglected, and the abolition of their income-based daycare fees they instituted when they took office in 2014.

In an unusual twist, the government has engaged three celebrities, Ricardo Larrivée, the chef, Pierre Lavoie, the sporting guru, and Pierre Thibault, an architect, to come up with a vision for reinventing Quebec schools. Some unions have grumbled that the well-known trio piloting the Lab-école project, as it's called, are not experts in education. But their outsider status will hopefully mean their input contains

fresh thinking and innovative concepts.

Others have also weighed in with radical proposals. Montreal business executive Mitch Garber recently pitched the idea of paying graduates of Quebec's public high schools \$1,000 upon obtaining their diploma as an incentive to stay in class. Education Minister Sébastien Proulx immediately shot down the suggestion. But some Scandinavian countries pay students to stay in school, and we might need to think outside the box to make progress on this intractable problem.

So our homework this summer is to think about the kind of education system we want in Quebec and how we can achieve it. Some of what's needed is obvious, like more help for students with behavioural and learning difficulties to take the burden off stressed classroom teachers. Other ideas are simple enough: more physical activity would help young brains as well as bodies. Others will require careful consideration, like bringing more technology into the classroom without sacrificing the critical thinking skills today's youth will need to thrive in age of automation.

There is no more important challenge for Quebecers than reinvigorating our education system. So while sitting on the dock or chilling at the park: think about it.

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