

## Parent commissioners', elected commissioners', and directors' perceptions of parental participation in school board decision-making in Quebec

## Perceptions des commissaires-parents, des commissaires élus et des directeurs sur la participation des parents dans les prises de décision au sein des commissions scolaires au Québec

Patrice Cyrille Ahehehinnou and Abdoulaye Anne

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Article abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand the perceptions of parent commissioners, elected commissioners, and principals on the political participation of parents in the decision-making process within the councils of commissioners since the adoption of Bill 105 amending the Education Act. A multiple case study was conducted with two school boards in the City of Québec area, and semi-structured interviews were held with 13 participants. A content analysis of the data revealed that greater numbers and the right to vote have brought parent commissioners more legitimacy and recognition, as well as a more egalitarian relationship with the other members of the school governing bodies. The role of parent commissioners is now more decision-making than simply advisory.

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# PARENT COMMISSIONERS', ELECTED COMMISSIONERS', AND DIRECTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL BOARD DECISION-MAKING IN QUEBEC

PATRICE CYRILLE AHEHEHINNOU, ABDOULAYE ANNE *Université Laval*

**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this article is to understand the perceptions of parent commissioners, elected commissioners, and principals on the political participation of parents in the decision-making process within the councils of commissioners since the adoption of Bill 105 amending the Education Act. A multiple case study was conducted with two school boards in the City of Québec area, and semi-structured interviews were held with 13 participants. A content analysis of the data revealed that greater numbers and the right to vote have brought parent commissioners more legitimacy and recognition, as well as a more egalitarian relationship with the other members of the school governing bodies. The role of parent commissioners is now more decision-making than simply advisory.

## PERCEPTIONS DES COMMISSAIRES-PARENTS, DES COMMISSAIRES ÉLUS ET DES DIRECTEURS SUR LA PARTICIPATION DES PARENTS DANS LES PRISES DE DÉCISION AU SEIN DES COMMISSIONS SCOLAIRES AU QUÉBEC

**RÉSUMÉ.** L'objectif de cet article est de comprendre les perceptions des commissaires-parents, des commissaires élus et des directeurs concernant la participation politique des parents dans les prises de décision au sein des conseils des commissaires depuis l'adoption du projet de loi 105 modifiant la Loi sur l'instruction publique. Une étude de cas multiple a été menée auprès de deux commissions scolaires de la région de la ville de Québec, et des entrevues semi-structurées ont été réalisées auprès de 13 participants. Une analyse du contenu des données a révélé que l'augmentation du nombre de commissaires-parents et le droit de vote leur ont apporté plus de légitimité et de reconnaissance, ainsi qu'une relation plus égalitaire avec les autres membres des conseils des commissaires.

Recent years have seen the introduction in most industrialized countries, including Canada, of a new mode of governance based on the involvement of a greater number of actors in public management; education has been no exception (Bherer, 2006; Lacroix, 2018). It is now much more common to see social actors, such as parents, participating in the management of schools and intermediate governance bodies; through such means, parents are able to take a more active part in decisions concerning their children's education (Lessard, 2006; Ng, 2013). Epstein (2010) defines parent participation in school decision-making as involvement in "a process of partnership, sharing views and actions toward common goals" (p. 86). Such involvement can create a sense of belonging to the school for parents (Epstein, 2010); however, it can also enhance school–community relations while building community social capital (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). In addition, parents' greater involvement in school-based decisions can grant legitimacy, acceptance, and quality to the collective decisions made on behalf of children and their educational success (Carrel, 2013; Gordon & Nocon, 2008). Parental involvement in school governance can assure students that their rights are protected (Epstein, 2010) as well as exert a positive impact on students' academic results (Hofman et al., 2002).

In Quebec, the evolution of governance in public education has been achieved through the implementation of participatory mechanisms and several amendments to the Education Act (EA). These have promoted the presence of parents in decision-making at three levels of the educational governance structure: at the local level (in schools), at the intermediate or regional level (in school boards [SBs]), and at the central level (Ministry of Education). As defined by Lacroix (2012), *governance* refers to:

the set of collective rules and processes, formalized or not, by which the actors concerned participate in the decision and implementation of public actions. These rules and processes, like the decisions that result from them, are the result of constant negotiation between the many actors involved. This negotiation, in addition to guiding decisions and actions, facilitates the sharing of responsibility among all the actors involved, each of whom possesses some form of power. (p. 4)

Parents have seen their own power gradually shift from a purely consultative role to becoming decision-makers, particularly in the intermediate-level body that is the council of commissioners (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation [CSE], 2006; Lacroix, 2018). In particular, the adoption of Bill 105 in 2016, which amended the EA, allowed parent commissioners (parent representatives on a council of commissioners) to enjoy the right to vote along with the same rights as other voting members, except for the right to be elected chair of the council (Assemblée nationale

du Québec [ANQ], 2016). Studies conducted prior to the adoption of this bill reported negative perceptions on the part of parents, principals, and teachers concerning the influence of parents in the decision-making process of the council of commissioners; their power was relatively weak and only advisory (CSE, 2006; Lacroix, 2012), and they had little influence over decisions made (Lacroix, 2018). Not having the right to vote was one of the main handicaps to fully exercising their power, as was the belief that parents could not be capable decision-making actors (Lacroix, 2018). We wanted to understand how members of these councils perceive parental participation in governing due to changes introduced through the adoption of Bill 105.

### *Parental participation in the governance of education in Quebec*

The foundations for a mode of governance of education in Quebec involving parents were laid in the 1960s by the work of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec, including the Parent Report. In their report, the commissioners recommended that parents participate more actively, and play a greater role, in the administration of schools. To this end, they advocated the creation of a committee in each school, which would be composed of parent representatives, a teacher, and the school principal. The adoption of Bill 27 in 1971 established school committees, as defined in the Parent Report, as well as parents' committees, and made it possible for parents to become more involved in education by granting the right to vote in school elections to persons 18 years of age and older. The school committee would allow parent representatives to express their recommendations for the improvement and direction of education by working in collaboration with the regional administration (SBs). The primary responsibilities of each school committee would be to ensure the quality of education, and the educational progress and well-being of children and teachers.

The parents' committee, which was at the regional level, was composed exclusively of one parent representative from each of the elementary and secondary schools of a particular SB elected at a general assembly of parents from each school. Parents could therefore become involved in the governance of education in two ways: either at the local level through school committees or at the regional level in SBs as an elected commissioner. In these local and regional bodies, the role of parents was only advisory.

With the adoption of Bill 30 in 1979, for the first time a representative of the parents' committee sat on the council of commissioners. The school committee was replaced by a school-level policy council in 1988 with the

adoption of Bill 107. This council, whose role would be to develop, implement, and evaluate the school's educational mission, was chaired by a parent representative.

However, the measures introduced in the wake of the Parent Report did not produce the expected results. Therefore, the Commission for the Estates General on Education was set up in 1995 to reflect on problems in the Quebec education system. In its 1996 report, the commission supported involving stakeholders, particularly parents, in decision-making.

One of the turning points was the adoption in 1997 of Bill 180 amending the EA with the creation of a governing board in each school to replace the guidance council; this board became the decision-making body at the school level. Bill 180 gave parents their first decision-making powers through their four representatives who had the right to vote, with one also being elected chair of the body. However, parent commissioners, two in number, still did not have the right to vote in the council of commissioners. In 1998, with the adoption of Bill 118, schools and SBs were deconfessionalized and 72 linguistic SBs (French and English) were created. A decade later, with the adoption of Bill 88 amending the EA in 2008, the number of parent commissioners increased from two to three (or four if the number of elected commissioners was greater than 10), while the number of elected commissioners (commissioners elected by universal suffrage through school elections) decreased.

A second turning point came with the adoption of Bill 105 amending the EA in 2016, which gave parent commissioners the right to vote and the possibility to be elected vice-chair of the council of commissioners. One of the main impacts of change was that parent commissioners would be included in the quorum required for decision-making. Under the EA, a quorum at meetings of the council of commissioners is reached by a majority of its members being entitled to vote (s.160); decisions of the council are then made by a majority of the votes cast by the members present and entitled to vote (s.161; ANQ, 2016). For the Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (FCPQ; 2020), parent commissioners now

have the same rights, powers and obligations as other commissioners, for example, access to information, documentation and training activities, the right to speak and make proposals according to the procedures adopted, even in the case of an appointment to an elective position, the right to participate in governing board meetings if authorized to do so, etc. (p. 2)

In fact, parents can become involved in the governance of education in Quebec in several ways. One gateway is the annual general assembly of

parents held at the beginning of the year where the parent representatives who will sit on the governing board are elected. They can also become involved in parent participation organizations (PPOs), which fill an advisory role and are composed exclusively of parents from each school. Parents on the governing board elect a representative to the parents' committee, which is the advisory body at the intermediate level. The parents on the parents' committee in turn elect the parent representatives (parent commissioners) who will sit on the council of commissioners. With the adoption of Bill 105, the council of commissioners is composed of the following members: eight to 18 commissioners elected by universal suffrage, three to four parent commissioners, a maximum of two co-opted commissioners, and the director general of the SB. The elected commissioners and parent commissioners are the only voting members.

At both the school and SB levels, parents are therefore present in advisory bodies composed solely of parents and in decision-making bodies where they participate and vote alongside other school or community actors. The latest reform occurred in February 2020 with the adoption of Bill 40 amending the EA, which replaced SBs with school service centers (SSCs). The SSCs in the francophone network are governed by a board of directors (BOD) composed of five parent representatives, five staff members, and five community members, all of whom have the right to vote. The chair and vice-chair of the board are elected by the parent representatives. This latest reform is, however, not the focus of this study. Our focus is on how members of the council of commissioners perceive parental participation in decision-making given the adoption of Bill 105. Our brief historical review has shown the gradual evolution of parent participation in the governance of education, where they now enjoy a newly empowered status as partners in decision-making, their role having evolved from a simple consultative power to a decision-making power with voting rights.

### *Context and issues of parent participation in school governance*

The important role that parental involvement plays in children's academic success has been widely demonstrated (Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014). When parents are involved in their children's education, their presence can have a positive impact on children's social, academic, and emotional functioning and reduce behavioral problems (El Nokali et al., 2010; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Thomas et al. (2019) have demonstrated that high school students' perceptions of parental involvement in schoolwork correlated with students' self-regulated learning and academic success.

Parent involvement is characterized by individual involvement in schools and collective involvement in school governance bodies (Epstein, 2010). While a multitude of studies exist on individual parent involvement, few studies have focused on collective parental involvement in educational decision-making. What research literature on the subject exists is insufficient, often reporting mixed results regarding the extent of parents' actual influence (Addi-Raccach, 2020). Moreover, despite efforts to increase the power of parents in school governance, a gap still exists between legal requirements and reality (Ng, 2013; Chikoko, 2008), this in various contexts worldwide. For example, in Hong Kong, Ng (2013) reports that real changes have not been seen in school governance because parent governors still remain marginalized in decision-making bodies. In a study conducted in Zimbabwe and based on the perceptions of head teachers, teachers, and parent governors, Chikoko (2008) shows that despite the presence of a legally decentralized school administration structure in which parents form the majority, the marginalization of parent governors carries on because they are seen as lacking decision-making capacity. In Switzerland, findings from Quesel et al.'s (2017) work indicate that even though school principals consider that parents have the right to be informed, to be heard, or to volunteer, they view with scepticism the power of parents to make decisions in school governance (Quesel et al., 2017). The situation in Quebec is no exception. Indeed, despite the prescriptions of the EA – parents' possession of voting rights and a parent occupying the position of chair of the governing board – teachers and principals have a relatively negative perception of parental influence on decision-making in school governance (Beauchesne, 2013; CSE, 2006; Deniger et al., 2002; Deniger et al., 2005; Morin & Deslandes, 2001). Larivée et al. (2015), in their synthesis of effective and/or promising school–family–community collaboration practices, note that authors

do not give equal weight to the various school, family, or community actors (in terms of roles, responsibilities, commitment, relationship, consensus, and participation in decision-making), leading to asymmetrical relationships in which one category of actors, very often parents, are not sufficiently integrated or considered. (p. 18)

The work of Ni et al. (2018) confirms this asymmetry in decision-making influence, attributing low to moderate influence to parents and local communities based on school leaders' perceptions. Some positive influence was found at the parent level, particularly in setting the curriculum and determining professional development, but it remains negative in hiring and evaluating teachers (Ni et al., 2018). In his work on multiplayer educational governance practice and shared leadership in two

Quebec SBs, Lacroix (2018) also reports rather weak leadership from parents as compared to principals, especially the right to speak during formal meetings (Lacroix, 2018). Lacroix (2016) points out that "to be interested in the exercise of power is to be interested in the resources of the different actors that they can mobilize according to their strategic reading of the issues and situations" (p. 9). Lacroix indicates that parents lack formal resources (legislative and regulatory prescriptions attached to the functioning of organizations) and structural resources (structures of concrete functioning), notably the absence of voting rights.

Variable individual resources (skills and capacities related to the personality of each person) also come into play. The possession of resources, although important, is not necessarily associated, though, with systematic influence. For Addi-Racah (2020), these resources must be effectively activated and utilized. Lacroix (2018) concludes that

despite a discourse that values the participation of all the actors involved – particularly parents and community members – the innovations undertaken are real, but remain, in this matter, constrained by resources that can be mobilized by one and all. (p. 80)

### *The current study*

Based on this review of the literature, we note that parents remain the actors with the least influence. We also note that the majority of studies conducted before 2016 focused on governance in schools and not on intermediate bodies such as SBs. In Quebec, since the granting of voting rights to parent commissioners and the increase in their number on the council of commissioners, little data has been generated on the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding the impact of these measures on parent participation in SB governance. The objective of our study is therefore to understand the perceptions of parent commissioners, elected commissioners, and principals on the participation of parents in the decision-making process of the Québec region's councils of commissioners since the adoption of Bill 105. The Québec region includes the City of Québec and portions of two administrative regions (Capitale-Nationale and Chaudière-Appalaches).

## **METHODS**

### *Design*

Using a multiple case study method (Prévost & Roy, 2015; Yin, 2009), our study sought to describe a particular phenomenon in its context, analyzing its manifestations as well as its evolution (Fortin & Gagnon, 2015). For Gagnon (2012), the case study has three main strengths: it (a) provides an



in-depth analysis of the phenomena in their context; (b) offers the possibility of developing historical parameters; and (c) provides strong internal validity, as the phenomena identified are authentic representations of the reality being studied. Our selected cases will allow us to explore in depth the participation of parent commissioners in the decision-making process of councils of commissioners of two SBs since the adoption of Bill 105.

### *Sampling and Recruitment of Participants*

Stake (2006) has identified three criteria for case selection: relevance, diversity, and the ability of cases to produce a wealth of information. These criteria were used as the basis for selecting the two cases (SBs) in our research. The sampling was based on the councils of commissioners from 72 SBs in the province of Quebec. Our accessible population represented the councils of commissioners of the nine SBs in the City of Québec region, from which a convenience sampling facilitated the selection of two councils of commissioners from French-speaking SBs located in urban areas.

The recruitment of our participants was done in two steps. First, invitation emails were sent to the branches of the two SBs. The boards provided us with the procedures to follow and the contact information for the members of their respective council of commissioners, which was also available on the boards' websites. An email invitation was then sent to each member of the council of commissioners of both boards. Recruitment took place between January and March 2020. With the difficulties encountered in recruiting our participants primarily due to the abolition of the SBs, the same email was sent back to the members of both councils of commissioners, whom we also called directly by phone. We were able to recruit additional participants using snowball sampling. A total of 13 participants agreed to participate, including six parent commissioners (PCs), four elected commissioners (ECs), one director general (DG), and two assistant directors general (ADGs). In the first SB (SB1), the participants consisted of four PCs and one EC. In the second SB (SB2), the participants consisted of two PCs, three ECs, one DG, and two ADGs. On the respective roles of each, see Table 1.

TABLE I. Roles of different participants in Quebec's councils of commissioners

Attendees	Main roles
Parent commissioner	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Represents the parents' committee at the SB level, informs the council of the concerns and needs of the parents, and reports to the parents on the decisions taken at the council.</li> <li>2. Determines the direction and adopts the policies of the SB (pedagogical and administrative).</li> <li>3. Participates in the governance of the SB as a voting member of the council of commissioners.</li> <li>4. Ensures that all people (young people and adults) receive the educational services to which they are legally entitled.</li> </ol>
Elected commissioner	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Represents the citizens of their electoral district on the council of commissioners, informs the council of citizens' concerns, and informs citizens of the decisions made by the council.</li> <li>2. Also performs the same functions (2, 3, and 4) as parent commissioners.</li> </ol>
General management (director general and assistant director general)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assists the council of commissioners and the executive committee in the exercise of their functions and powers.</li> <li>2. Ensures the day-to-day management of the SB's activities and resources, sees to the execution of the decisions of the council of commissioners and the executive committee, and performs the tasks entrusted to it by them.</li> </ol>

### Data collection

Our research project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Laval University. Semi-structured interviews (in person or by telephone, depending on the participant's preference) lasted between 25 and 55 minutes. Two interview guides (one for the parent commissioners and one for the other participants) were developed from our literature review. These interview guides included questions to elicit participants' views on their perception of the participation of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners, including their influence in decision-making since the passage of Bill 105 and particularly the importance of voting rights. Some of the questions posed to participants included: "What is your overall perception of the influence of parent commissioners in the decision-making process of the council of commissioners?" and "To what extent do you think voting rights have or have not made parent commissioners more influential in decision-making

on the council of commissioners?” During each interview, we took handwritten notes to prompt the participant. After each interview, we read our notes with the goal of highlighting points for further exploration or clarification for the next interview (Lanoville, 2018). Finally, participants also completed a simple questionnaire that collected demographic information, including gender; age; education level; years of experience on the governing board, parent committee, and council of commissioners; current employment; areas of expertise; number of children still in school; and time spent on council of commissioners activities per month.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of the collected data was conducted concurrently with data collection. All data were processed using NVivo 12 software. The recordings (audio) and notes taken during the interviews were transcribed. All transcripts were read and re-read in depth. This allowed us to collect comprehensive and rich data and become familiar with the content of the transcripts. Most importantly, this recursive re-reading of the transcripts facilitated our total immersion in the data. The transcribed data were examined using inductive content analysis to identify patterns, categories, and themes (Prévost & Roy, 2015; Yin, 2009). An initial list of codes was developed by the research team using an iterative analysis process, and exchanges within the team facilitated the development of themes by grouping similar codes. This process brought out themes and trends at the level of each SB (Fortin & Gagnon, 2015). The results from the two SBs were then overlaid to identify regularities and patterns (Prévost & Roy, 2015; Fortin & Gagnon, 2015; Yin, 2009). Three main themes emerged from this analysis process: (a) recognition of the place of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners (equal or unequal), (b) the influence of parent commissioners in decision-making (weak or strong), and (c) the contribution of voting rights to parent commissioners (weak or strong). The first theme entails the differences in recognition and treatment that may exist between parent commissioners and other categories of commissioners. The second theme of influence refers to the ability of parent commissioners to have their views and preferences accepted in decisions by other voting commissioners. Finally, the third theme encompasses perceptions of participants on the effects of voting rights on parental involvement in decision-making on the council of commissioners.

TABLE 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (N = 13)

Socio-Demographic Data	Parent Commissioners n (%)	Elected Commissioners n (%)	Management n (%)
<b>Sex</b>			
Female	3 (50%)	2 (50%)	2 (67%)
Male	3 (50%)	2 (50%)	1 (33%)
<b>Age (years)</b>			
40-50	6 (100%)	2 (50%)	0
51-60	0	2 (50%)	2 (67%)
> 60	0	0	1 (33%)
<b>Educational level</b>			
College	1 (17%)	0	0
Undergraduate studies	4 (66%)	4 (100%)	0
Graduate studies	1 (17%)	0	3 (100%)
<b>Expertise field</b>			
Education	1 (17%)	2 (50%)	3 (100%)
Administration and accounting	2 (33%)	2 (50%)	0
Computer science	1 (17%)	0	0
Health	2 (33%)	0	0
<b>Years of experience on the CC</b>			
1-10	6 (100%)	3 (75%)	1 (33%)
11-20	0	0	2 (67%)
> 20	0	1 (25%)	0
<b>Number of children enrolled</b>			
0-2	2 (33%)	2 (50%)	3 (100%)
3-4	4 (67%)	1 (25%)	0
5 and more	0	1 (25%)	0
<b>Time spent on the CC per week (hours)</b>			
1-5	5 (83%)	3 (75%)	3 (100%)
6-10	0	1 (25%)	0
> 11	1 (17%)	0	0
<b>Primary language</b>			
French	6 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (100%)
Other	0	0	0
<b>Native country</b>			
Canada	6 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (100%)
Other	0	0	0

Note. CC = council of commissioners.

## RESULTS

Seven participants were female and six were male. The age of the participants ranged from 40 to 70 years old with an average age of 49 years. The participants' highest level of education ranged from college ( $n = 1$ ) to graduate school ( $n = 4$ ), with a majority having completed a university degree ( $n = 12$ ). Participants' areas of expertise (related to their occupation) were as follows: six in education, four in administration and accounting, two in healthcare, and one in computer science (see Table 2).

The results of our research are presented for each SB and according to each of the three main themes that emerged from data analysis.

### *Results of SB1*

#### *Theme 1: The place of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners*

For all parent commissioners in SB1, a hierarchy exists in terms of the place given to them and that given to elected commissioners on the council of commissioners. As elected commissioners (12) outnumber parent commissioners (4) three to one, this difference in numbers is an important factor in the weight that each category of commissioner has in decision-making. One participant described the hierarchy in these terms: "Well actually, it's like a kind of political party .... There's a majority group that's kind of affiliated, there are some independents, and then there are the parent commissioners" (PC4-SB1).

Another parent commissioner felt that this hierarchy affected parents more. Despite an atmosphere of non-conflict on the council of commissioners, parents perceived themselves as having less power, especially with respect to decision-making.

There's really a bit of a fence around the parents and then a fence around the elected commissioners and although we work well together, there's a spirit of collegiality. Around the table, there is respect, transparency. I am able to have discussions with all the other commissioners on an equal level, but from a legislative point of view on who decides what, and who has control over whom, it is clear that the elected commissioners see us as commissioners with less legitimacy. (PC1-SB1)

Parent commissioners were unanimous in their view that they did not have equal standing and were not considered full commissioners as outlined in the EA. Parent commissioners believed that this was due to the non-participatory leadership of the chair of the council who did not value their presence. For Yukl (2010), participatory leadership "involves efforts on the part of a leader to encourage and facilitate the participation of others in important decision making" (p. 137).

We have discussions around the table, and then often the chair will go around to the other commissioners and say, "Okay, we agree, what do you parents think?" Ah well there, I've had my hand up for half an hour now. You know, you could have just checked with me that I agreed with all of you. It would have saved time. (PC1-SB1)

The non-participatory leadership of the chair was also due to critiques levied at parent commissioners for failing to fully inhabit their roles as commissioners, which is above all a political role and where parent commissioners often seemed content to defend the interests of the parents. One elected commissioner clarified:

I don't like the fact that parents are so involved at the school board level without being made aware of their political role and not the role of a person who lobbies for his or her own interests, desires and frustrations as a user of the school system. Sometimes you can be dissatisfied and then there are those who use that as a voice. (EC-SB1)

The parent commissioners, however, all recognized the importance that the director general of SB1 placed on them, whose main role is to coordinate all management activities and carry out the educational mission of schools.

It concurs with a change in governance in general management ... and it's a director general who is extremely open and transparent and respectful. (PC1-SB1)

### *Theme 2: Parent commissioners' influence on decision-making*

Parent commissioners had a positive perception of their influence on decision-making. As one parent commissioner stated, their influence was now equal to that of the elected commissioners: "I think it is good. [Parent commissioners are], I think, no more and no less than any other commissioner. I really think there's an equality there" (PC2-SB1).

This influence was characterized by their ability to weigh in on the decision-making process by being an important source of information. Because of their proximity to the reality of the parents who received services from SB1, parent commissioners often had information that was necessary for decision-making. One parent commissioner stated:

Our strength is that we actually live the reality of other parents. We are the clientele, we represent them. So, we have a knowledge that the elected commissioners do not have. We see things, how they happen. Then we live them. So, it is certain that compared to an elected commissioner who comes to one meeting per month, it is very different. (PC4-SB1)

For all parent commissioners, this influence was felt more as importance was given to them in decision-making.

Right now, it's a lot of influence ... very early on in the decision-making process, general management will find out what the parents think about a particular issue or an upcoming decision, such as the school calendar. Sometimes we get the school calendar before anyone else. (PC3-SB1)

For the elected commissioner and all the parent commissioners, this influence of parents was linked to two essential elements: the increase in the number of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners and the fact that they now had the right to vote.

There used to be 21 of us, now we are 10. So four parents who have voting rights. You know, before we were 21 and then we had two parents that didn't have a vote. You know, for sure, it changed after that. (EC-SB1)

All the participants in SB1 seemed to agree that the influence of parent commissioners depended on collaboration between the parents' committee and the school administration, who work together to ensure that the proposals that are made to the council of commissioners have been well thought-out with the parents:

If there is a lot of discussion and the parents' committee is well regarded in the school board and fed with information, that will give, I think, the dynamic for the parent commissioners as well. (EC-SB1)

### *Theme 3: The contribution of voting rights to parent commissioners*

For all participants, the fact that parent commissioners now had the right to vote made a significant difference in their overall participation in decision-making on the SB1 council of commissioners. Indeed, for one parent commissioner, the right to vote put them on an equal footing with elected commissioners:

It's not a second order, it's not just, "Well, the parents that are there, we're going to take their pulse," you know. We're in the decision-making as much as anybody else. I think it shows that we're not second-class commissioners. (PC2-SB1)

The right to vote has given parent commissioners more recognition and consideration than before, as one parent commissioner stated:

Well it sure does give legitimacy compared to before when there was none. (PC4-SB1)

With the right to vote, it was easier for them to gain a balance of influence and sway the votes. As one participant explained, this situation led the

other members of the council of commissioners to involve the parent commissioners in the entire decision-making process from the beginning, this in order to have as few disagreements as possible during the debates.

Now that we actually have a vote, the balance of power is not hard to come by. At four out of 16, as soon as we're at eight, we only have four commissioners to convince. What this has led to is that the issues are already prepared downstream to try to accommodate as much as possible what the parents want. So instead of ignoring the parents, and living with or at worst ending up with a decision where the parents would not agree, we try to prepare the ground and make concessions so that the parents will also make concessions. (PC3-SB1)

However, the right to vote required a more rigorous involvement of the parent commissioners in the decision-making process. They were accountable for decisions made and could no longer contest them, as was the case before.

So at that point, it makes the stakes much higher for us parents, because it's no longer a masquerade of a vote. It's not fake votes anymore, so when you raise your hand and say you agree or disagree, you have to commit yourself. (PC1-SB1)

One elected commissioner, for her part, shared the parents' point of view on the benefits of the right to vote:

Well, it's true that, before, they had the power to influence, to orient the questions, to make the school board aware of the issues. Then it was, you know, taken into account. But they didn't have a vote, they didn't have real power. Now we can see the difference. (EC-SB1)

In sum, according to the views of the SB1 participants, there was a difference in the place accorded to parent commissioners and elected commissioners in the hierarchy of the council of commissioners. However, the influence of parent commissioners in decision-making has improved significantly since the passage of Bill 105. The right to vote has effectively given parents more legitimacy and recognition in SB1 decision-making.

## ***Results of SB2***

### ***Theme 1: The place of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners***

At the SB2 level, all participants indicated that parent commissioners had an equal place with elected commissioners in relation to their role as commissioners. Parent commissioners were seen as full commissioners and not as second-class commissioners there just to advocate for parents who receive services from the SB.



The fact that we are parent commissioners has no influence, that is to say, that my vote, my decision, my points of view are listened to as much as an elected commissioner. So it makes no difference. I have as much right to speak, I have no difference in the way we are treated, respected or given the right to speak. (PC2-SB2)

The existing internal organization of SB2's council of commissioners was deemed ideal by all participants, as compared to the situation before. On this point, parent commissioners, elected commissioners, and members of the management all agreed.

We are fortunate, I was going to say, in our school board to have an equal place for parent commissioners. In our school board, I must say that our relations are very friendly. For us, a commissioner, whether [they are] a parent commissioner or an elected commissioner, has the same value. (EC1-SB2)

We are fortunate to have a council of commissioners that is very supportive and regardless of where the commissioners come from, we are fortunate to live in a very democratic environment, very open to the ideas of others. (EC2-SB2)

According to an assistant director general, this positive perception seemed to be due to the fact that the parent commissioners were very active in governance of the SB:

Here, they are very active participants. They are really involved. I'll tell you that on the council of commissioners here we don't differentiate. We don't distinguish between a parent commissioner and another commissioner. They're really fully integrated into the council of commissioners. (ADG1-SB2)

According to participants, two main factors explained the equality of place given to parent commissioners and elected commissioners: the pro-parent culture on the board and the participatory leadership of the board chair. The pro-parent culture was linked to the fact that a majority of elected commissioners had themselves been parent commissioners. In this regard, an assistant executive director and a commissioner-elect respectively stated:

This is a somewhat unique board because the current board has a good number of members who are elected commissioners, who are former parent commissioners. So you can see the culture that this has brought. It has brought a board that is pro, very pro-parents in general, because you see the chair is a former chair of the parents' committee, the vice-chair is the former vice-chair of the parents' committee. (ADG2-SB2)

The new president being much more participative ... he wants to have as much as possible, he works much more to have a consensus, and on listening respectfully to everyone around the table. (EC2-SB2)

*Theme 2: The influence of parent commissioners in decision-making*

All participants in SB2 agreed that parent commissioners exerted a significant influence on the council of commissioners. Their involvement in the schools and then in the parents' committee and, above all, their proximity to parents at the grassroots level were factors named as favouring this influence. This proximity gave the parent commissioners an important power of information, as one elected commissioner indicated:

They often bring a different aspect to the table than other commissioners can. This means that they have a significant influence because, as I was saying earlier, their proximity to the community means that they often have many more concrete examples to present, whereas other commissioners are perhaps a little more removed from the schools and do not often have these concrete examples or this discourse of proximity to the school. (EC2-SB2)

For the chair of the council of commissioners, the influence that parent commissioners enjoyed also came from their effective involvement and their ability to convince other commissioners:

I can say that I have always met motivated, competent, rigorous parents. They read their file. Then, when it appeared in the discussion, because they were often able to understand a file well and to take it on board, they convinced other commissioners. They were able to tip the scales. (Chair-SB2)

However, the most important element was that parent commissioners brought a different perspective, which one parent commissioner summarized:

The parent commissioner really has to look at whether the decision is in line with the reality of the situation. But sometimes it happens that they haven't thought about an aspect at all, so we, the parent commissioners, will bring a different aspect. "Have you thought that ... ." I'd tell you that's where the parent commissioner's good is. (PC2-SB2)

An elected commissioner concurred with this parent commissioner by stating the following:

In each of the decisions, their point of view has an important place in the background, in the sense that if they weren't there, we wouldn't have that aspect, and so, for sure, the decisions might be different at that time. (EC2-SB2)

Despite this, the director general of SB2 expressed the concern that certain decisions made by the parent commissioners did not always represent the needs of the parents at the grassroots level and did not take into account all the macroeconomic and financial aspects of the SB. According to her,

some of the decisions were motivated more by personal interests and therefore she questioned the motivation of the parent commissioners.

*Theme 3: The contribution of voting rights to parent commissioners*

According to parent commissioners, the possession of the same right to vote as that enjoyed by elected commissioners broke down a hierarchy that had existed among commissioners when parents could not vote. This allowed parent commissioners to participate not only in the debates, but also in the votes, making their involvement in decisions on the council of commissioners much more important. This contribution of the right to vote to the influence of the parent commissioners was recognized not only by them, but also by the other members.

Parent commissioners with voting rights, like any other commissioner, felt a more equal relationship between the representatives around the table. For me, this was a good thing, because in fact, the majority of the other commissioners are also parents. That's why I was thinking that ... Bill 105 brought people back to the table with the same level, the same status, the same power. Both the executive and the council of commissioners. (ADG2-SB2)

Before that [moment], yes they had the power to influence, but it was limited to the power to influence as long as the vote was asked on more trenchant issues. Well, they could not express themselves, they could express themselves before the vote was taken, but as soon as the vote was taken, if they did not have the right to vote, they could not necessarily express it in a tangible way. ... Whereas now, with a right to vote, well sometimes the four votes of the parent commissioners can change or swing the vote one way or the other. (EC2-SB2)

At the SB2 level, within the internal organization, the place accorded to parent commissioners and the leadership of the chair meant that decision-making was based on consensus-building.

In summary, according to the perceptions of SB2 participants, the place accorded to parent commissioners equaled that accorded to any commissioner serving on the council of commissioners. Parent commissioners were seen as full commissioners. This was due to the internal pro-parent organizational context that existed within SB2, but also to the leadership of the chair. The influence of parents in decision-making remained very high given their proximity to parents at the grassroots level and their involvement in governing and advisory bodies at the school level. They knew the realities and needs of parents better than anyone else. They would thus bring different and relevant points of view and information to the decision-making process. For the participants, having the right to vote also contributed to the improvement of parents'

influence in decision-making within SB2 because they could now fully participate in the decisions.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of relevant actors regarding the participation of parents in decision-making in two SBs from the City of Québec region since the adoption of Bill 105. Our results show that the situation in the two SBs differed from one another with respect to the place of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners. While in SB2 the situation seemed ideal according to all participants, where parent commissioners enjoyed a place and consideration equivalent to that of all other commissioners, in SB1, parent commissioners thought that elected commissioners did not consider them as full commissioners. However, Section 143, as amended in Bill 105, recognizes the parent commissioner as an administrator of the SB, thus granting an equal place to all commissioners (elected or parent) on the council of commissioners. This lack of recognition (e.g., as in SB1) is felt more when political issues and the exercise of power are at stake. Power relationships characterize any political organization where decision-making is shared (Lainey, 2017). The difference in perception found at the two SBs, though, can be explained by the respective leadership exercised by the chairs as well as the internal organizational cultures (pro-parent or not). Indeed, the participatory leadership exercised by the chair of the council of commissioners, and the pro-parent culture resulting from the fact that the majority of the elected commissioners had been parent commissioners in the past, favoured the egalitarian place for parent commissioners in SB2. In SB1, the fact that parent commissioners were not treated in the same way as elected commissioners, despite the respect and transparency among all members of the council of commissioners, can be explained by the fact that they were considered more as parent representatives than as SB administrators.

In sum, the results of our study highlighted the existence of a gap between the legal requirements and the reality that parent commissioners in some SBs still experience regarding their involvement in educational governance. Our results are partly in line with those of Ng (2013) and Chikoko (2008) who observed, in their respective contexts, a marginalization of parents in school governance despite measures and legislation put in place to grant them more legitimacy and recognition.

Our results also revealed, according to the views of our participants, a very significant influence of parent commissioners in decision-making,

depending on the culture of the SB. For our parent commissioner participants, their increase in number on the councils and the granting of voting rights led them to become more involved in the issues and more able to have their voices and views heard in decisions. In addition, parent commissioners felt more legitimate in defending the interests of parents at the grassroots level because of their proximity to those voices and their involvement in other decision-making or advisory bodies, such as the parents' committee, the governing board, or the parent participation organization. The parent commissioners brought different elements that could not have been taken into account in the decision-making process. However, the parent commissioners were criticized for using a more microscopic approach that focused on the interests of the parents of students rather than a macroscopic perspective that focused on the overall interests of the school. While the leadership exercised by parent commissioners in decision-making seemed timid as reported by Lacroix (2018), the results of our study showed that by granting them the same powers as elected commissioners, Bill 105 positively impacted parent participation and influence in decision-making within the councils of commissioners.

Finally, while parent commissioners could previously influence decision-making given their right to speak, particularly during debates in the committee of the whole or the council of commissioners, they were limited by not being able to vote (Lacroix, 2016). The results of our study demonstrate that the possession of voting rights since the passage of Bill 105 has eliminated the sort of hierarchy that previously existed between elected and parent commissioners. According to our participants, with the increase in the number of parent commissioners, and the concomitant decrease in the number of elected commissioners, combined with the fact of now being voting members, it was easier for parent commissioners to sway decisions in their favour when voting. To them, the right to vote has had real impacts on the participation of parent commissioners in the decision-making processes of the council of commissioners of the two SBs in our study.

### *Political and Practical Implications*

The results of our study revealed that the adoption of Bill 105 has positively improved the participation of parents in the governance of SBs. Our results indicate that when parent representatives are well-equipped and properly recognized, they can be very useful in educational governance at the SB level by providing different and relevant information and perspectives and ensuring that decisions are made in the overall interest

of learners. In recent decades, while the objective has always been to increase, through legislation, the power of parents in educational decision-making bodies at both the intermediate and local levels, policymakers need to do more to ensure that the gap between legislative prescriptions and reality can be reduced in contexts where the hierarchical positioning of different commissioners still remains in place. They also need to work on the participatory leadership of the SB chair and executive director. Parents, for their part, must use all the resources they now have, notably the right to vote, to actively participate in decision-making in educational governance and thus enhance their political role and their importance in the Quebec education system.

### ***Contribution of the Study***

Our study is one of the few to explore the perceptions of three different types of actors sitting on the council of commissioners with respect to the participation of parents in the governance of education in Quebec. From a methodological point of view, the choice of the case study as our research method made it possible to carry out an in-depth analysis of the phenomena in their context and to ensure strong internal validity, since the phenomena identified are authentic representations of the reality studied (Gagnon, 2012). That said, the size of our sample, which was very small and not representative of the general population of parents (i.e., an overrepresentation of higher education graduates), does not allow us to generalize our results to all of the SBs in the City of Québec region, as each would have its own internal organizational context. Moreover, in SB1, we were not able to interview the general management or assistant director general. The limitations of our study call for further research on parental participation in educational governance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Using a qualitative, multiple case study research approach, we explored the perceptions of parent commissioners, elected commissioners, and principals about the involvement of parent commissioners in decision-making in two City of Québec area councils of commissioners since the passage of Bill 105. Three issues were considered in exploring these perceptions: the place of parent commissioners on the council of commissioners, the influence of parent commissioners in decision-making, and the contribution of parent commissioners' voting rights. The results of the present study showed an evolution in the participation of parent commissioners in the decision-making process of the two councils of commissioners under our study. While their role had been reduced to

an advisory one, since the adoption of Bill 105 in 2016, parent commissioners now seem to have a much more significant influence in decisions within the SBs. Specifically, the possession of voting rights and the increase in their numbers have brought more legitimacy and recognition to parent commissioners, but also a more equal relationship among members of SB decision-making bodies.

The results of our study could be useful to decision-makers and to various school actors involved in school governance in valuing collective leadership and seeking a permanent balance in decision-making influence between all actors and between the decision-making zones. This would promote a harmonious and efficient school context that would make it possible to offer the services necessary for student success. Further research, especially longitudinal research, is needed to better understand the manifestation of parental leadership in decision-making in order to identify the issues in which parents tend to be most involved. It would also be interesting to examine the involvement of parents in the governance of SBs in rural areas as compared to the urban context.

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PATRICE CYRILLE AHEHEHINNOU holds a PhD in administration and educational policy from Laval University. His research interests include school governance, parental political participation in education, girls' schooling in developing countries, social engagement, experiential learning through reflective practice, and more. [patrice-cyrille.ahehehinnou.1@ulaval.ca](mailto:patrice-cyrille.ahehehinnou.1@ulaval.ca)

ABDOULAYE ANNE is a sociologist of education with an interest in issues related to the quality and relevance of education. Abdoulaye Anne is a professor in the Department of Educational Foundations and Practices at the Faculty of Education Sciences at Laval University. He has a strong interest in the comparative analysis of policies shaping the educational field, as well as the practices that reflect these policies. Mr. Anne's current research focuses on (a) the meaning of education decentralization policies for stakeholders, (b) the role of innovation and stakeholder involvement in the design of educational policies, and (c) the cognitive aspects related to the successful implementation of educational policies. [abdoulaye.anne@fse.ulaval.ca](mailto:abdoulaye.anne@fse.ulaval.ca)

PATRICE CYRILLE AHEHEHINNOU est titulaire d'un doctorat en administration et politiques de l'éducation obtenu à l'Université Laval. Ses intérêts de recherche sont la gouvernance scolaire, la participation politique des parents à l'éducation, la scolarisation des filles dans les pays en voie de développement, l'engagement social, l'apprentissage expérientiel à travers une pratique réflexive, etc. [patrice-cyrille.ahehehinnou.1@ulaval.ca](mailto:patrice-cyrille.ahehehinnou.1@ulaval.ca)

ABDOULAYE ANNE est sociologue de l'éducation intéressé par les enjeux de qualité et de pertinence de l'éducation. Abdoulaye Anne est professeur titulaire au Département des fondements et pratiques en éducation à la Faculté des sciences de l'éducation de l'Université Laval. Il a un grand intérêt pour l'analyse comparée des politiques qui organisent le champ éducatif ainsi que des pratiques qui les traduisent. Les recherches actuelles de M. Anne portent sur (a) la question du sens des politiques de décentralisation de l'éducation pour les acteurs, (b) celle de la place de l'innovation et de l'implication des parties prenantes de l'éducation dans la conception des politiques éducatives et (c) celle des aspects cognitifs liés à la réussite de la mise en œuvre des politiques éducatives. [abdoulaye.anne@fse.ulaval.ca](mailto:abdoulaye.anne@fse.ulaval.ca)