

DECLINE OF ENROLMENT IN QUEBEC'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SCHOOL SECTOR

Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN)

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The Charter of the French language (1977),¹ also known as Bill 101, has had a strong and lasting impact on the English-language public school sector.² Under this law, kindergarten to secondary school students whose Canadian parents or siblings were educated in Canada in English are entitled to English-language public education. Aside from a few exceptions, all other students must attend French-language schools. These educational clauses limit access to English-language schools³ by routing the children of newly arrived immigrants to French-language public schools,⁴ as well as restricting the access of Francophone Quebecers with no family history of attending English-language schools.

Since the early 1970s, the decline of the English-language school population has been over twice as pronounced as that of the French sector.

The number of students enrolled in the English-language public and private sectors declined by 61.4 % from 256,251 in the 1971-1972 school year to 98,865 in 2021-2022. Over the same time span, the enrolment rates in the French language public and private sectors in Quebec also experienced a decline: down 26.7% from 1,378,788 in 1971-1972 to 1,010,504 in 2021-2022 (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2022; MELS, 2014).

Percent Decline for Public and Private Schools in Quebec, 1971-1972 to 2021-2022

English-language sector

-61.4 %

French-language sector

-26.7 %

Source: ISQ, 2022; MELS, 2014

¹ The Charter has been revised over the years. In the bibliography to this Brief, the version updated to August 27, 2023, is listed.

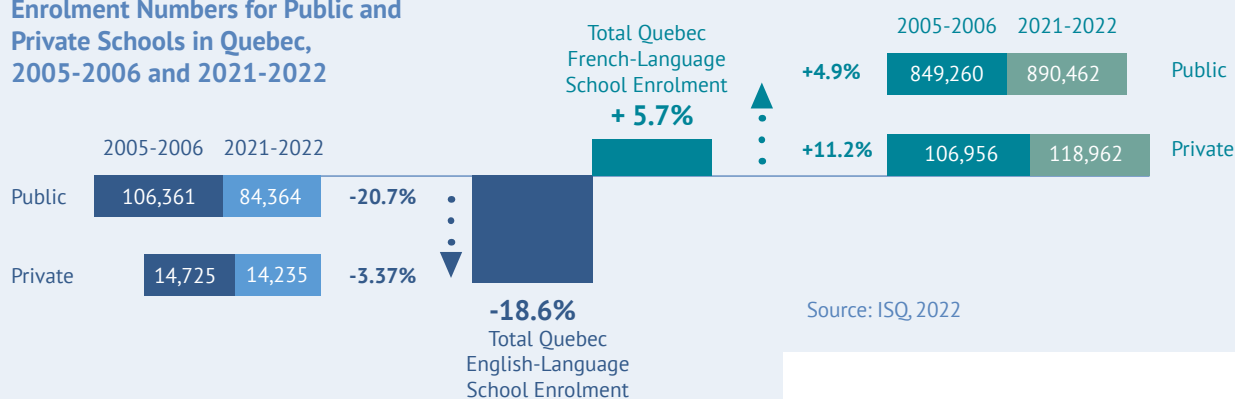
² English-language schools in Quebec are legally recognized as official language minority (OLM) schools under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, with a mandate to protect and promote the vitality of Quebec's English-speaking minority. In this and other briefs in this series, the terms "English-language schools" and "OLM schools" will be used interchangeably.

³ Alternatively, parents can send their children to independent (private) schools, some of which are partially subsidized by the government (Ministère de l'Éducation [MEQ], 2023).

⁴ In 1971, 85.4% of Allophone students in the Quebec public education system attended English-language schools. By 2012, the proportion had decreased to 12.5% (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2014).

The decline in enrolment in Quebec’s English-language schools, particularly in the public school sector, is not limited to the decades immediately following Bill 101, but has continued right up to recent years. This must be understood within the context of a country-wide decline in the school-aged population since 2000 (MacLeod & Hasan, 2017).⁵ Between 2005-2006 and 2021-2022, Quebec’s English-language public sector saw a 20.7% decrease in its registration numbers. English-language private schools saw a smaller decline of 3.3% for these same years. Conversely, Quebec’s French sector saw an initial decline followed by an increase; this translates to a 4.9% increase in the public school population and a 11.2% increase in the private school population for the 2005-2006 to 2021-2022 period (ISQ, 2022).

Enrolment Numbers for Public and Private Schools in Quebec, 2005-2006 and 2021-2022



Source: ISQ, 2022

In comparison, French official minority schools in the other provinces experienced a rapid increase in enrolment between 2000 and 2015.⁶

Beyond the educational clauses of Quebec’s Charter, other factors have contributed to the declining numbers in student enrolment. These include the outmigration of Anglophone⁷ families and youth and the growing trend towards Anglophone cross-over to French-language schools. The latter factor reflects a desire to provide children with strong bilingual skills and better cultural integration into Quebec’s Francophone culture, but is also a consequence of large English-language school catchment areas. These result in long commutes for children to access the closest English-language school when a French-language school is nearby, leading parents to choose to send their children to the closer school (Advisory Board on English Education [ABEE], 2018; Lamarre, 2012). Ultimately, declining enrolment contributes to diminishing educational services and resources across the English-language school sector, impacting in particular what small schools can provide.

⁵ With the exception of Alberta, every province reported a significant decline in total enrolment between 2000 and 2015 (MacLeod & Hasan, 2017).

⁶ The country-wide decline in public school enrolment between 2000 and 2015 is especially pronounced in English-language schools. For instance, while in Ontario the English public school enrolment rates dropped by 7.4%, French public school enrolment in Ontario increased by 44.3% (MacLeod & Hasan, 2017).

⁷ Until recently, the provincial government defined “Anglophone” as someone for whom English is their first language learned and still understood. The statistics here reflect this definition of the English-speaking community. It excludes “Allophones” who speak English.

At the post-secondary level, in contrast, enrolment levels in English-language CEGEPs and universities are growing. Enrolment in English-language universities increased 13.9% from 68,542 in 2009-2010 to 78,111 in 2021-2022⁸ (ISQ, 2023). This high post-secondary enrolment can be partially attributed to the presence of Francophone and Allophone students who had gone to French-language schools earlier in their education and, at the university level, a significant number of international and out-of-province students (Lamarre, 2012). In 2022, nearly 38% of international students in Quebec were enrolled in an English-language university in Quebec compared to 44% in 2022 (Bureau de la coopération interuniversitaire [BCI], 2022). This proportion has declined in part because of increased Quebec government subsidies toward international recruitment efforts at French-language universities (Colpron, 2023). Enrolment caps on French-language students at English-language CEGEPs introduced through Bill 96 will also likely affect enrolment levels in the future (Gouvernement du Québec, 2023).

Whereas Francophones are increasingly drawn to English-language higher education, the opposite is true for Allophones and, to a lesser extent, for Anglophones. In 1981, 2.9% of French mother tongue students chose to attend English-language CEGEPs. By 2010, this proportion had increased to 5.8% (MELS, 2014). A different trend can be seen among Allophone students having completed their secondary education in Quebec: they are increasingly choosing to stay in the French education sector. The same trend is visible at the university level: the percentage of Allophone students educated in Quebec schools and choosing to attend French universities increased from 52.2% in 2002 to 70.3% in 2014 (Olivier, 2017a). The proportion of Allophone secondary school graduates choosing to attend English CEGEPs drastically dropped from 80.5% in 1981 to 47% in 2010 (MELS, 2014). A small drop in Anglophone students enrolled in English universities can be observed (from 93.2% in 1981 to 92% in 2010), as the trend for them to attend French universities continues to grow (from 5.9% in 2002 to 9.5% in 2014, Olivier, 2017a). Enrolment of Anglophone students in colleges across the province as a proportion of total college enrolment decreased from 10.9% in 1985 to 8.2% in 2015 (Olivier, 2017b).

When it comes to the decline of Quebec's English-language education sector, the main challenge is clearly enrolment in elementary and secondary public schools.

⁸ Enrolment in French-language universities also increased by 16%, going from 203,469 to 236,064 during the same period (ISQ, 2023).

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