



Official Languages Commissioner Raymond Th berge speaks during the Quebec English-speaking Community Research Network (QUESCREN) Vitality Forum on Nov. 5. (Screenshot)

# Th berge: Community-led schools 'crucial' for minorities

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In the early 1960s, growing up in the almost entirely French-speaking town of Sainte-Anne-des-Ch nes, Man., southeast of Winnipeg, Raymond Th berge and his classmates attended elementary school in English. They were handed social studies textbooks with the title *My British Heritage*. "None of the students in my class," recalled the current commissioner of official languages, "could identify with that."

Public education in languages other than English had been outlawed in Manitoba since 1916, when bilingual schools were shut down by an anglophone-dominated government aiming to create a standardized English-only public education system. Until 1947, it was even forbidden to teach French as a second language, and French-language textbooks weren't available until

1959. What Th  berge learned about his own culture, heritage and mother tongue came from his parents.

In 1969, when Th  berge was 16, the federal government passed the Official Languages Act. "For my generation, that was an affirmation of who we were as French-Canadians, and later, as Franco-Manitobans," he recalled. The following year, Manitoba officially authorized French as a language of education; Th  berge's younger siblings, and the generations of students that followed, were able to attend school in French. However, ripple effects of previous policies led to language loss in many families. "I have countless cousins and acquaintances [from francophone families] who do not speak French, and I often hear the expression 'I used to be French,'" Th  berge remarked.

"The examples of Manitoba and Ontario [which had similar legislation restricting French-language education in the early 20th century] illustrate how watering down language rights had an impact on generations of children, and ... contributed to the assimilation of francophones outside Quebec," Th  berge said.

Th  berge shared his reflections on minority-language education in closing remarks given to the Quebec English-speaking Community Research Network (QUESCREN) Vitality Forum on Nov. 5. The forum focused on the role of education in maintaining the vitality of English-speaking communities in Quebec.

"Educational institutions will always be linked to community vitality," noted Th  berge, who was rector of the Universit   de Moncton before his appointment as official languages commissioner. He noted that English-speaking communities in Quebec, particularly outside of Montreal, face difficulties accessing early childhood education that are analogous to the struggles francophones outside Quebec face.

"The needs in early childhood education described [by the Community Health and Social Services Network in Quebec City and the Committee for Anglophone Social Action (CASA) in the Gasp  ] reminded me of the same needs I had as a parent in a francophone community in Manitoba," Th  berge noted. He mentioned the implementation and expansion of Bright Beginnings, a CASA-led bilingual early childhood education initiative in the Gasp  . He praised the "willingness to innovate" shown by English-speaking parents and institutions, which gave rise to the Community Learning Centre system, and decades before that, to French immersion.

Th  berge expressed concerns that Bill 96, the sweeping reform to the Charter of the French Language proposed by the Legault government, could have a detrimental effect on enrolment in English-language schools in Quebec. Similar concerns have been expressed by Voice of English-speaking Qu  bec, the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Central Qu  bec School Board. Th  berge said he hoped the government would "keep lines of communication open" with the English-speaking community as it moved forward with Bill 96.

Th  berge could not directly comment on Bill 40, the provincial law which replaced elected school boards with provincially run service centres, due to the fact it is currently being challenged in court. However, he noted that a measure of community control of schools was "crucial" for the vitality of language communities.

"The more community-based the school is, the more it can deal with local conditions and local situations," he said. "One of the strengths of education in Canada is decentralization of school management. Communities know what's best for their communities, and we have evidence supporting that."