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The Evolution of the Community Learning Centre Network in Quebec's Official Language Minority School System

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Working paper series

QUESCREN's working paper series focuses on the topic of English-speaking Quebec. The working papers are timely and written in plain language. They are not peer-reviewed. For questions, contact Patrick.Donovan1@concordia.ca

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ICRML Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques
CIRLM Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities

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Introduction

Community Learning Centres (CLCs), also known as CLC schools or "community schools," were launched in 2006 by Quebec's English school sector with the goal of connecting official language minority (OLM)[1] schools more closely to their local communities. Three external evaluation reports[2] (WestEd, 2009; WestEd, 2010; Qu'Anglo 2015) were undertaken to document and guide implementation. The purpose of this working paper is to examine how the CLC initiative has evolved since these reports.

Goals of the Working Paper

The first goal of this paper is to provide an update on how CLC schools and the CLC network have evolved since the Qu'Anglo report (2015), the most recent external evaluation. The second goal is to explore what actions need taking for CLCs to continue to evolve and support official language minority schools and communities across Quebec. Some of the major accomplishments, as well as challenges to CLCs, since 2015, will be identified.

For this working paper, I obtained information from the direction of the Leading English Education and Resource Network (LEARN), the Provincial Resource Team (PRT) at LEARN, and the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN). LEARN is a non-profit educational foundation that supports Quebec's OLM schools and the CLC network. The PRT is a team of five people within LEARN who work together to guide actions in CLC schools, organize the network at the provincial level, provide professional development for educational staff and community development agents (CDA), and stay abreast of community school research and evaluation. CHSSN works to redress health status inequalities and promote OLM community vitality in Quebec.

The working paper is based on:

- recent and pertinent documents on CLCs, provided by the PRT, a list of which can be found in the bibliography
- a fact-gathering meeting held in February 2020 at LEARN
- information gathered from experienced representatives within the CLC network (a school board representative, a school principal and a CDA)
- continued contact and discussions with the PRT at LEARN from February 2020 to September 2022

The working paper synthesizes the information collected through these different strategies. It is hoped that this synthesis will prove useful in informing reflection, discussion and future action. The conclusions of this paper were presented for discussion in April 2022 at the CLC virtual conference and in October 2022 as part of QUESCREN's "Lunch & Learn" webinar series.

1 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 paper, the terms "English-language schools" and "OLM schools" will be used interchangeably.

2 See "Annual Evaluation Reports" on the LEARN site: https://learnquebec.ca/evaluation-reports.

Brief Description of Community Learning Centres in Quebec's OLM Schools

The CLC initiative is currently built on three premises (PRT document, 2018):

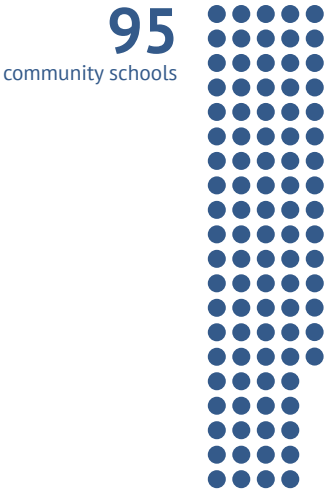
- Collaboration between schools and communities contributes to student success and better educational contexts, enhancing the school climate and the social, emotional, and academic well-being of all students.
- Schools that engage in partnerships with community organizations and service providers can bring much-needed resources and programs not only to school-aged children and youth, but also to their families and the wider English-speaking community.
- Schools have a role in contributing to the vitality[3] of Quebec's English-speaking official language minority.

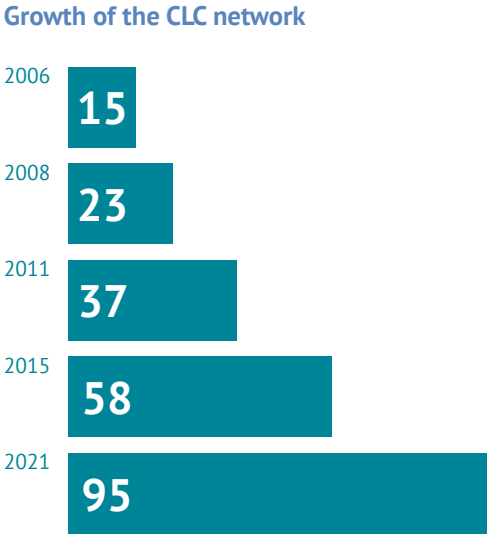
The community school initiative was launched by the OLM sector at the Ministère de l'Éducation,du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) and continues to be funded through the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, drawing on Entente Canada-Québec funding from the Government of Canada's Department of Canadian Heritage to support this initiative.

Since 2006, the growth of the community school network has been significant. In July 2022, there were over 90 community schools located in all nine school boards and in one special-status school service centre. One private school has also adopted the CLC approach. This represents nearly a third of Quebec's OLM schools. CLC schools now reach over a quarter of the student population in the English sector.[4]

3 In Canada, the concept of OLM community vitality grew out of the early work done by Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis (1977) on "ethnolinguistic vitality," which led to a great deal of research on Canada's Francophone minorities and, more recently, has garnered interest for analyzing the situation of Quebec's Anglophone minority. The concept of community vitality has been important within federal policy-making and the evaluation of federal initiatives to support OLMCs and the *Official Languages Act*. Vitality is currently understood as multifaceted and both objective and subjective. It is best understood through its indicators. For a breakdown of these indicators, please consult the "Framework for the Vitality of Official Language Minority Communities (OLMC)": https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/ official-languages-bilingualism/publications/vitality-minority-communities.html.

4 In 2021, there were 327 elementary, secondary, and adult/vocational schools in the English-language public school sector.





Source: LEARN

Community schools are supported by CLC coordinators, renamed community development agents (CDAs) in 2017.[5] CDAs work closely with principals, school teams, community stakeholders, and partner organizations to link resources, services, and activities to students, their families, teachers, and their community.

Quebec's English schools face a diversity of local challenges, such as declining student populations, small schools in the regions, poverty, isolation, and limited resources (ABEE, 2013). This made critical the need for flexibility and adaptability in finding solutions, and it was clear that a "one-size-fits-all" model would not work. To allow for local solutions, CDAs and CLC school principals were given tools and training to help them develop a "theory of change" or strategic plan, identifying needs and goals with school and community stakeholders, as well as mapping assets and resources.

In 2005, to guide the implementation of the community school approach, the PRT was created, responsible for the training and professional development of community school teams. The PRT supports school boards and schools in the development of their community schools, pursues research and development activities, and contributes to the development of provincial expertise on community schools. The PRT essentially acts as a critical backbone for the community school network.

5 To avoid confusion, the term community development agent (CDA) will be used from here on in the text.

Success Stories and Challenges of the Early Years (2006-2015)

Building Capacity

Founded by the OLM sector at MELS in 2006, the CLC initiative represented nothing less than a major change in how schools within their communities function. To support this ambitious innovation, in the early years, the PRT focused energy on building capacity among CDAs (grant writing, partnership building, reporting, and assessing). They also invested in supporting CDA-principal collaboration. The PRT was, and remains, involved in the development of educational materials to support community school goals and in professional development for teachers to engage them more deeply in the community school approach. The PRT also worked to develop activities, programs, and teaching materials aimed at the inclusion of vulnerable populations, bringing support to the social and emotional health of youth. A good example of this type of initiative are materials and activities developed to promote inclusion of Indigenous students, an often forgotten population in Quebec's English-language schools.

Partnerships and a New Network in Quebec's Official Language Minority Community

The PRT immediately proved very effective in developing a network of partners for community schools. In effect, a key feature and accomplishment of the CLC approach in this period is the development of partnerships at various levels and between a wide range of potential collaborators.

At the local level, school-community partnerships quickly provided students with new enriched learning opportunities (for example, a school-community gardening program in partnership with a local ecocentre). Partnerships also facilitated the development of community service learning projects. These allow teachers to connect with community organizations to create student learning opportunities that are in line with the Québec Education Plan and address authentic needs within the community. Many activities organized in a CLC school open the school to the larger community (for example, intergenerational writing projects organized in partnership with the English Language Arts Network [ELAN]).[6] Early on, CLC schools partnered with CHSSN to offer health and wellness programs. All of these partnerships and initiatives extended the traditional mandate of schools and also brought in much-needed resources. They also helped different partners reach into communities and were quickly recognized as mutually beneficial.

6 See for example, LEARN (2020) in the bibliography. See also the presentation used at the QUESCREN Lunch & Learn on October 14, 2022: https://ckol.quescren.ca/en/lib/LS38H6NM/download/WPFRFS3X/horrocks-loomer-2022-what-the-community-school-approach-brings.pdf.

While the one-size-does-not-fit-all model was proving helpful in finding local solutions tailor-made to schools and their communities, it was also becoming apparent in the larger community school network that there was strength in combined efforts and in working together.

In 2013, a small unpublished research study (Lamarre, 2013) revealed that CLC schools could bring extra support to provincial programs aimed at countering disadvantage and poverty, such as the "New Approaches, New Solutions" (NANS) program. This seemed particularly true in schools with a small student population and low per capita funding. According to principals interviewed in 2013, once funding sources were combined, programs such as NANS could more effectively meet common goals.

What Makes a CLC Successful?

Evaluation reports from this early phase (WestEd, 2009; WestEd, 2010) showed that successful community schools contribute to improved school climates, greater student engagement, and increased access to resources and services for the English-speaking community. The factors identified as key to a successful CLC school were (and remain):

- a qualified full-time CDA
- strong leadership from the school principal
- a collaborative approach to engaging partners
- commitment and support from the school board

By 2015, after three external evaluations of implementation (WestEd, 2009; WestEd, 2010; Qu'Anglo, 2015), it was clear that CLC schools were meeting their promise and that many individual schools were attaining the goals set in 2006, showing educational and community benefits.

As briefly described above, the effectiveness and leadership of the PRT was very apparent by 2015. In the implementation years, the PRT played a critical role in holding together diverse local solutions by providing training and support; promoting the sharing of best practices; establishing reporting, assessment and accountability procedures; and providing a provincial level of networking and advocacy.

Broader Networks with Stronger Partnerships

The biggest surprise to emerge from the early years of the CLC initiative was the power of partnerships. Following the launch of the initiative, the CLC created an Advisory Board, bringing together stakeholders and representatives of different organizations and services from different levels of government. Having this provincial level of partnership and support contributed to the development of individual community schools. More unexpectedly, by bringing together stakeholders to support community schools, the meetings of the Advisory Board also proved to be a major first step towards much-needed intersectoral collaboration in Quebec's English-minority community, breaking down the traditional isolation that had characterized it (Bourhis & Landry, 2012). Thanks to the efforts of the PRT, networking in English-speaking Quebec was taking shape where there had been no previous network.

Another unexpected consequence of the CLC initiative was the growing awareness about English-speaking communities, schools, and students on the part of Francophone service providers in the regions. At the outset, CLC schools had been mandated with establishing a "partnership table." It was quickly recognized, however, that local "Tables de concertation" already in existence were an excellent way to connect with local partners and services. Having CDAs participate at these tables provided OLM communities with needed connections to Francophone service providers and increased the visibility of the local Anglophone communities, their schools, and their school boards.

These two structuring initiatives in the first years of CLCs laid the groundwork for eventually winning the buy-in of educational stakeholders, who needed to be convinced that Entente funding was being well used and that CLCs could actually help schools meet their traditional mandate: student success and student graduation.

Issues of Funding and Support

As the CLC network moved out of an early implementation phase, stability and sustainability increasingly came to the fore as key issues. What was also obvious by 2015 was that the "business model" by which CLC schools would generate sufficient funding to cover the cost of a CDA position was not taking shape. Entente funding for CDAs, provided through the Ministère, was scheduled to diminish as CLCs became self-sustaining. However, this was not proving to be an attainable or realistic goal. CDAs were proving effective at generating funding for programs and other services and for pulling in resources. In effect, the amount of new resources and funding for programs generated by a school having a CDA and new partnerships was quite surprising and made the funding invested in a CDA position a valuable return on investment (Qu'Anglo, 2015).

Support at the highest level of the ministry has been variable: the Ministère de l'Éducation formally supported community schools in the OLM sector in its strategic plan for the period 2008 to 2013, but has not done so since. The support provided by the Direction du réseau éducatif anglophone, relations interculturelles et autochtones (DRSEA) at the ministry, however, has been and remains critical, legitimizing the initiative.

Community schools in the OLM sector remain dependent on the continuation of Entente Canada-Quebec funding. This funding has had a very important impact on the vitality of the OLM communities and their schools, a primary goal of this federal funding, in line with the *Official Languages Act* (1988). Recurrent and guaranteed Entente Canada-Quebec money is needed to maintain the CDA and PRT positions that oversee the CLC network.

On a different level, the need for a clearer definition of a CDA's job classification within school boards emerged early and remains a problem. School boards have always been responsible for the hiring of CDAs, and this resulted in great variability in how the work of CDAs is described, as well as in their hours and salary. Some CDAs work for their school board under the "professional" classification, while others doing the same work in other boards are considered "support staff." Job classification has a direct impact on salary, and clarification of a CDA's work would have gone a long way towards more stable working conditions that would, in turn, keep CDAs in their positions. CDA turnover has always been high, and CDAs often work more hours than they are paid for, and with varying pay levels. This has repercussions, and the PRT has devoted, and continues to devote, considerable effort to training new people in CDA positions, while their time and energy is much needed on other fronts.

While recognition of the potential of the community school approach was growing in the first years of implementation, this recognition was still uneven, with some school boards not showing much engagement or commitment, for a variety of reasons, for a variety of reasons, in particular the lack of school board control over management of funding. However, there was growing support and recognition for the community school approach among principals who had worked in CLC schools and among school board representatives who were increasingly taking on an advocacy role for their CLC schools within their boards.

For this period, it can be said that support for community schools remained fragile, but that a growing number of actors became aware of the potential and benefits of a CLC approach. Also during this period, the original model proposed for a CLC had been tested on the ground and, as a result, was evolving as best practices became increasingly apparent. In effect, after a first decade of implementation, the benefits of a school becoming a CLC-school, connected to a network of partners had been clearly established. By 2015, the initiative was at a critical turning point, and to continue would need to win greater buy-in from school board administrators and the continued support of the Ministère de l'Éducation.

From 2015 to 2022: The Continuing Evolution of CLC Schools

Towards a Community School Approach

By 2015, it had become clear that what was guiding CLC schools was an approach, not a model. Furthermore, in the early years of the initiative, in some schools, CLCs were frequently associated with a room to get services or with a coordinator working within an individual school, providing extra hands for after-school activities. CDAs mostly worked with their principals, but, by 2015, only a few were included in the school team. These schools tended to call themselves CLC schools, and included the CLC in the school's action plan. As the potential of CLCs became clearer, so did their definition and the need for their integration into the school. A successful CLC was emerging as much more than a place, a physical space. It could not be tied to one person (the CDA) or even to a principal-CDA team. What drove a successful CLC was an approach, a philosophy, an engagement in a process of change and connection, shared best practices, buy-in from educational actors, and a partnership network. The importance of connecting and of working together *collectively* was becoming a driving concept for the CLC network—with terms such as collective ownership, collective engagement, and collective impact increasingly being used to discuss the future. With collective ownership and collective impact comes a blurring of lines when it comes to "who did what" and "who can claim responsibility for change." This necessarily required a shift in thinking in how to evaluate and attribute success.

What was emerging was a need to no longer talk about schools and CLCs as separate things. This became clear in discussions on how to evaluate the impact of CLCs on student success (obviously it would be impossible to tease out what teachers do in the classroom in attaining this success). Teasing school and CLCs apart for evaluation was not only counterproductive, but counterintuitive. Instead, a *more holistic understanding of community schools* was emerging, schools which could improve students' engagement through efforts to promote a positive and engaging school climate, student health and social and emotional well-being and contribute to a school's community through connections and partnerships. This holistic understanding escapes traditional cause-and-effect types of evaluation and will require a more holistic strategy of evaluation.

If we look back to the launch in 2006, the initiative proposed had dual goals.

- Enhance student success and engagement by connecting schools to their communities
- Extend the mandate of schools as they became community hubs for lifelong learning

This dual conceptualization of goals has also shifted over time, going from what could be described as a challenging and ambitious "double whammy" to community schools with a youth focus at the core of actions and initiatives. Perhaps not surprisingly, schools proved to be hard-wired to remain schools and to prioritize school-aged children and youth. Community schools in the OLM sector have, however, made enormous headway in expanding and extending what a school can do when it is anchored and connected to families and the community. And they have proven this can be done.

A recent document (2022) prepared by the PRT explains the community school approach, describing how the initiative evolved from an ambitious plan on paper to an approach that emerged from the needs and practices adopted and by the constraints, challenges, and realities encountered. It also clearly puts forward that a CLC school is a community school, marking a definite break with an initial conception of what a CLC could or should be: a school but also a lifelong learning centre serving the entire community.

There would appear to be greater engagement with the local community in schools located in the regions, where community needs for services and resources are more critical. Community schools in the regions tend to be more involved in providing students and the community with greater access to resources in English. Urban/suburban schools tend to have a narrower focus on students and school climate.

Adult lifelong learning, an initial goal, has not become an across-the-network reality. While some community schools have programs and services for adults, this is not the case for all. That said, a more holistic, life-trajectory view of students and their experience of schooling has emerged in most community schools, with a lot of importance given to two major transitions: early childhood, with its impact on school readiness of children entering kindergarten; and transitions from elementary to secondary school.[7]

A Stronger and More Self-Aware OLM Community

As the community school initiative evolved, so did the broader landscape of Quebec's OLM communities, as organizations to promote vitality in Quebec's OLM communities became increasingly active and effective (QUESCREN, Quebec Community Groups Network, Inter-Level Educational Table, and CHSSN to name a few). What seems to be happening is an important shift within the English-speaking minority community, currently in the process of giving itself leverage and structure in the province, and of seeing itself as a collectivity, an official language minority, that needs to think and act strategically.

In 2017, the provincial government created the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SRQEA) to ensure that the concerns of English-speaking Quebecers are taken into account by the Quebec government. This marks an important break with a persistent representation in Quebec that English speakers are not a "real" linguistic minority and don't have minority needs (Legault, 1992; Pratte, 2005). The SRQEA makes available new funding for local, regional, and provincial initiatives. For example, funding from the

7 Students' transition to CEGEP from secondary school seems to have been less taken up in CLC secondary schools.

SRQEA supported the recent CLC initiative "I Belong" (as part of a broader partnership project, COM-Unity, managed by QUESCREN) to help counter discrimination, and promote equity and dialogue in schools, as well as a sense of belonging among English-speaking students.

It seems that Quebec's English-speaking population is coming to terms with its OLM status and making strides in raising awareness of that status within the province. It's interesting to note that OLM vitality, which was not often directly mentioned in the CLC network in the early years, now figures in the goals of community schools. There is also growing recognition in school and school board administrations that OLM educational institutions have a role to play in promoting OLM community vitality. Until recently, generally speaking, educational leaders did not recognize the school's role in community vitality—in marked contrast with the Francophone OLM school sector in other provinces. This representation of school and community vitality is part of the growing trend towards working together within the English-speaking Quebec population. Community schools have contributed to, and are part of, this growing trend.

Key Partnerships

While many different partnerships are thriving within the community school network, over time, two strategic partnerships have emerged: the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) and the English Language Arts Network (ELAN) with its focus on supporting the arts and culture in English-speaking Quebec. These two partners, working with and through the PRT, make funding and programs available to the community schools in the network. Relatively small amounts of funding for programs go a long way and have a big impact once distributed across the community school network.

The CHSSN has proven to be community schools' strongest partner, working with CDAs on school and health initiatives for over a decade. This partnership has allowed community schools to support the "Healthy Schools" approach and to extend the notion of health to include the social and emotional well-being of youth. Many CHSSN-school collaborations extend to the family and beyond, revealing that a community school, even when primarily focused on students, can and does have outreach. A framework for CHSSN-school collaboration now exists.[8]

One of the strengths of working collectively is the pooling together of different sources of funding, but also extending the traditional mandate of schools. The "Goodnight Bag" program is a good example of how a partnership can contribute to school readiness. Thanks to funding from CHSSN, Goodnight Bag provides resources to preschool children to support outdoor play, bilingualism, and early literacy, as well as mental health resources for families.

8 See here: https://www.learnquebec.ca/documents/20181/364186/chssn-learn-action_framework.

Doing More with Less and Growing Support

Since 2015, some important structural changes have shaped the evolution of community schools. One of these is the cap on Entente Canada-Quebec funding for community schools provided through the Ministère de l'Éducation, which has not been significantly increased since 2015, when supplementary funding was provided to support an "extended model" for CLCs (more on this shortly). This means that Entente funding for CDA positions has also been capped—contributing to the high turnover rate of CDAs as some continue to be paid roughly the same salary as nearly a decade ago.[9] With funding capped, one position on the PRT team of six was cut, while the number of CLC schools in the network continued to grow.

In 2015, the initiative went through an important phase of reorganization, when the management of CLCs was transferred from the PRT to the English school boards, which now receive Entente funding directly from the Ministère to cover the salaries of CDAs. This contributed to a shift and an adjustment in the role of the PRT.

In 2015, the PRT was integrated into LEARN, a non-profit educational organization providing the English sector with resources. This has proved a positive development in many respects. Firstly, it provided a home for the initiative. The PRT now works within the LEARN team, as part of the team, within a recognized educational actor in the OLM school sector, directly connected to the Ministère and school boards. Alignment with Quebec's educational goals has also been increased, with the PRT working within the larger LEARN team to tie community school activities and programs to curricular content, enriching and extending classroom learning.[10] Being part of LEARN has also clearly placed the focus of CLC schools on students, student success, and student graduation. Integration into LEARN and having LEARN act as an advocate for community schools has strengthened school board and ministry buy-in for community schools.

9 In 2022, most school boards were allocated a cost of living increase in their base CLC funding.

10 A good example of how the Community School Network has benefited from LEARN's support is the Tablée des Chefs (Kitchen Brigades program), a series of culinary workshops offered to teens (at lunch-time or after hours) with the aim of helping them become educational leaders for healthy eating.

With reduced funds, the annual CLC meetings once organized by the PRT, which helped knit the individual community schools into a network in the early years, are no longer held. In 2022, a low-cost virtual annual meeting was organized by the PRT. The main theme was mental health, in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It had a good turnout and strengthened the sense of being part of a community school collectivity. Virtual meetings are likely the most cost-efficient way of building the network into the future, but physical gatherings should perhaps still be considered once every few years.

Since 2015, the PRT has also increasingly been engaged in conducting its own evaluation activities and research, replacing costly large external evaluations with smaller focused studies.

At the present time, the type of support offered to incoming CDAs and CLC schools in the earlier phase of the initiative is no longer feasible, and support is offered on request or when the PRT partners a specific program or activity.

The PRT, nevertheless, remains critical to the vitality of the community school network, even if, since 2015, it has had less staff, less direct funding and more ground to cover as the number of community schools continues to grow. On the other hand, it is now integrated into LEARN, which provides it with a solid educational anchor and greater legitimacy in educational spheres, with LEARN taking on a supervisory and advocacy role for a community school approach and contributing to buy-in to a community school approach where it was badly needed: school boards and the Ministère.

This period of reorganization clearly marks a break with one of the two initial goals of the initiative: lifelong learning. The focus of community schools is at the present time clearly on youth, but radiates out to connect to families, communities, and partners.

This brings us to examining how community schools continued to grow in number, despite the cap in funding, thanks to the "extended model" for CLCs, perhaps one of the most important changes to the community school initiative. The model grew out of the search for local solutions in one school board. In 2011, the New Frontiers School Board (NFSB), in an effort to make a CLC approach available to all schools, adopted an extended model. With funding capped in 2015, other school boards turned to the model developed by New Frontiers. In the extended model, CDAs are assigned to more than one school (usually feeder schools), which explains how the number of community schools continued to grow.

At the present time, different models for organizing CLCs have emerged, and there are three ways of organizing community schools within a school board, as illustrated in the figure below:

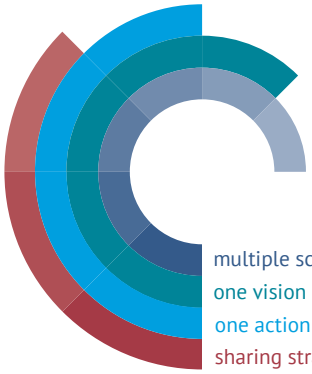
Single-site CLC

one school
one vision
one action plan

Multi-site CLC

multiple schools and communities
multiple visions
multiple action plans
multiple CLC leaders who work independently from one another

Extended-model CLC



multiple schools usually within the same region, serving the same community
one vision
one action plan
sharing strategies and activities

The extended model is the most holistic and collective of the three. A PRT report (2019) identified six key benefits to this way of doing things within a school board:

- Increased access to partners and service providers
- Increased access to programs (such as those provided by CHSSN)
- Increased visibility and presence in the larger community (CDAs present at regional Tables de concertation are able to talk to the reality of more OLM schools and more of the OLM population in a region)
- Increased ability to work at a systems level (emergence of a community school board approach?)
- Increased access to grants and financial resources
- Increased retention and support for parents transitioning their children to secondary school

There are now 18 extended community school sites (3+ schools) in the OLM sector, reaching 56 schools.

The extended model represents a solution to limited funding, extending the impact of a CDA position by providing greater access to partners and resources for more schools, students, and families. This solution has proved effective in some contexts, but less so in others (LEARN, 2019b). One problem with the growth of this model is its lack of tools to assess a school's readiness to become a community school. Another problem identified is that the model has grown without enough attention to cohesion, common harmonized structures and frameworks, and communication practices.

The role of a CDA is crucial within the extended model and clarifies that CDAs are connectors and coordinators, not facilitators of activities and programs. Role clarity is critical within the extended model, as is how decisions are made. The mandate of CDAs is made considerably more complex when they have responsibility for more than one school, and being part of many school teams requires time and energy. Beyond the simple reality of having to travel over more territory, a CDA in an extended model needs to work with more than one principal and more than one school, and attend more school meetings—sometimes without being given more hours. Some work full-time with part-time hours. In some situations, there are unrealistic expectations concerning what a CDA can do with a part-time position. In the 2019 report, it was proposed that a CDA with a full-time position should not be responsible for more than three schools. In some boards, a CDA working with partners can pool sufficient resources for a technician to be hired to work in an individual community school. At the present time there are only 13 CDAs with full-time positions out of 45, contributing to the perennial problem of a high CDA turnover rate, present since the outset.

Despite the challenges and weaknesses present in the extended model, it does seem to contribute to school board buy-in. In effect, gradually, school board engagement in a community school approach has grown. Boards are increasingly working in partnership with the PRT/LEARN, and are increasingly engaged in the community school approach. Some can be said to have adopted a "community school board" approach. School board representatives have played an important role in helping this engagement happen.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

More recently, school boards, CLC schools, and their communities, like the rest of society and institutions, have been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic. Community schools in the OLM sector were present and ready to help schools, families, and school teams meet the crisis. As families with school-aged children faced lockdowns, community schools provided support with online workshops focusing on dance, art, and storytelling for families. Community schools also rallied more concrete help in the form of "rainbow baskets" with self-care supplies and food boxes for those most in need. With parents and teachers dealing with burnout as they tried to cope, community schools stepped in. For example, thanks to a decade-long partnership with CHSSN,

a web series entitled "Parenting in the Pandemic" was quickly made available. Community schools, with their existing partnerships, were there to meet the challenge of the pandemic, and well positioned to bring quick and much-needed support to schools and communities. As Debbie Horrocks, the director of the PRT wrote in 2021:

> *As the pandemic ravaged our communities, school closures highlighted the role that schools play not only in the education of our youth, but also in their social, emotional and physical well-being. Community schools were designed for times like this! Within these types of schools, Community Development Agents (CDAs) along with other members of the school teams—principals, teachers, support staff—leverage existing relationships with community organizations to identify needs and challenges facing their school's communities, and triage these needs in a unit . . . by devising innovative ways to deliver food, and other essential services to support student learning and well-being. (Horrocks, 2021)*

The pandemic has been a moment of revelation for community schools in Quebec's OLM sector, as it has been in other contexts. A recent article by Kimner et al. (2022) examines how COVID-19 put the community schools strategy on the map in the United States, but also revealed how we are at a critical moment in the fight against educational inequality, as lost instructional time widens the educational gap between students and highlights disparities based on socioeconomic and racial background.

The pandemic also revealed the importance of schools extending their mandate to consider students' mental health and well-being. Quebec's 2021-2022 Revitalization Plan for Educational Success[11] provides a blueprint for the post-pandemic recovery, paying special attention to the reduction of learning gaps among students, and the well-being of students. It includes among its priorities many that mesh easily with the community school approach:

- Opportunities to continue learning through the summer months
- More tutoring and pedagogical support
- Reinforcing the winning relationship between schools and families
- The health of students and staff
- Healthy lifestyles and outdoor activities

In the history of Quebec's OLM sector, this is an important moment in the recognition of community schools, and of how they contribute to the resilience not only of schools and students, but also students' families.

11 See here: www.quebec.ca/en/government/policies-orientations/revitalize-education.

Some Concluding Thoughts

What is very clear is that, since the last external evaluation in 2015, which, looking back, marks the end of an implementation stage for CLCs, the community school network has continued to evolve and adjust, finding its way to solutions as challenges arise and are met. This paper describes the phases, transitions, and events in this evolution since 2015.

The PRT, looking at the evolution over time of the CLC initiative, described what has emerged in the past decade as a community school approach, aligned with the Québec Education Program. Charged with keeping abreast of thinking and innovation on community schools around the world, the PRT recently identified that Quebec's community schools share four major pillars with community schools in other contexts, which have been slightly adapted in Quebec to cover the OLM context. These are:

- expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities
- collaborative leadership and practices—including enhanced cooperation between the two official language groups
- active family and community engagement
- integrated student supports

These four pillars support the schooling of children and youth, the population that schools are mandated to work with, while connecting the school to families and the community. Community schools, despite the important change they represent, remain schools, with the mandate of working firstly and primarily with school-aged children and youth. However, Quebec's OLM community schools have adopted an expanded vision of what schools need to do, as evidenced in the four priority areas for the next three years that were recently identified by a survey of community schools in Quebec. In the coming years, community schools intend to focus on:

- mental health
- equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging
- early childhood and family engagement
- outdoor and environmental education

It would appear that it's easier for schools to extend their traditional mandate of working with school-aged children to include early childhood, preschoolers, and their families. It does seem that it's time to move away from the term "Community Learning Centre" and the goal that schools become hubs for communities and centres for lifelong learning, at least for the time being. While the acronym CLC is still used, the actual words "Community Learning Centre" are no longer heard very often, probably because they don't quite fit with how things have shaped. Perhaps it's the right time to let go of the CLC acronym and opt for what is closer to the reality of what has developed, with terms such as "community school" and "community school approach." Community Learning Centres, in their initial conception, were schools transformed into hubs for the surrounding community, as well as physical places for lifelong learning. Schools, however, have remained schools, and, over time, it has become clear that the approach is more about a school anchored in its community, but strongly committed to and rooted in its educational youth-oriented mandate.

As an educational researcher who has followed the evolution of the CLC approach in Quebec's OLM schools since their implementation, I can't say that I am surprised that change within the place called school takes time and is necessarily shaped by the primary missions of schooling. I am also not surprised that schools can be institutions that play a role in OLM community vitality. What has surprised me, however, is what a school can gain through having a partnership network. And here I am using the word partnership in its largest, most inclusive sense. The most important lesson that emerged from this overview is that the community school approach in Quebec's English sector can be summarized in three words: "connect, connect, connect." Just about everything is about connecting and collaboration. And from these growing connections comes the discovery that there really is strength in "numbers," in not being isolated. With connections and collaboration also comes a necessary blurring as to who did what and who is responsible for what, but what also emerges is the strength of collective engagement and ownership.

Recently, community schools showed that they have what it takes to help schools meet big issues and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to a network of relationships, connections, and partnerships already in place, CLC schools were ready to support the community, students, and teachers. Once the pandemic is over, the OLM school sector in Quebec will still need to face the chronic long-term issues of poverty, disadvantage, and vulnerability of youth and of communities—issues that don't mesh with the myth of an English Quebec made up of wealthy English-speaking communities with no pressing needs. At the present time, 65% of community schools in Quebec's OLM sector (49 out of 95 schools) are recognized as economically disadvantaged schools and are eligible for services from the Ministère de l'Éducation aimed at countering poverty. Actually, pulling collectively within a community school approach seems a winning strategy for all schools in Quebec. This seems, however, all the more pertinent for a minority language school sector with a declining student population and declining resources.

Within Quebec's OLM population, there is also the need for a sense of belonging to something called the English community, as well as to something called Quebec. The community school network has contributed to breaking down the traditional isolation within English-speaking communities. It's done this through the power of partnerships and connecting, reaching nearly a third of OLM schools and a quarter of the OLM school population. It has, however, also helped schools and communities connect to Francophone service providers through CDA participation on "Tables de concertation." This has quite quickly helped service providers become more aware of the needs of the OLM school population and OLM communities.

So what comes next? Does the community school network continue to expand? Is it necessary? Is it doable? Should all schools be community schools, at least to some degree? If so, how do we make it happen? Should there be a call for more funding to continue to expand community schools in Quebec's OLMs? How do we support the PRT/LEARN so that they can in turn support an expansion of the community school network in Quebec? The answers to these questions will come collectively and will hopefully take shape in due course. But it does seem like the right time to raise these questions. Where to next? How do we imagine the future? How do we keep on building connections?

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