

Québec's **Public** Schools:

# Responding

to the Diversity  
of Moral  
and Religious  
Expectations

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Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000–0100

ISBN 2-550-35973-9

Legal Deposit—Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2000





## Message From the Minister

Québec society today is experiencing pluralism in all its forms, and Quebeckers' philosophical, moral and religious choices are more diverse than ever before. Schools must provide services that reflect this evolution. They should not only introduce young people to the basic values of Québec society and culture, but they should also make them aware of the richness of diversity. It is for these reasons that the government has deemed it necessary to reconsider the place of religion in the schools.

The orientations presented in this document are intended as a practical response to the expectations of Quebeckers with respect to moral and religious education. They pursue an objective of social cohesion and propose changes to services and structures in the area of religious education that are consistent with the wishes of parents and students.

I hope that these orientations meet with widespread support, for no Quebecker would wish to see religion become a source of division between people, groups or regions.



François Legault  
Minister of State for Education and Youth







## Québec's **Public** Schools: Responding to the Diversity of Moral and Religious Expectations

In spring 1999, the task force set up by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec to examine the place of religion in schools published its report, which subsequently fuelled a far-reaching debate and led to the creation, last fall, of a Parliamentary Committee on Education, which received 254 briefs and held public hearings over a 13-day period.

All parties and interested groups had the opportunity to express themselves and be heard. The debate made possible an open examination of the facts, viewpoints and interests at stake. A number of convergent opinions emerged; not surprisingly, however, on a topic where convictions and sensitivities are strong and contrasting, no firm consensus was reached.

Now that the consultation process is over, it is up to the government to draw conclusions and provide orientations for the years to come. While it would be unrealistic to try to reconcile all points of view, it is possible to make practical adjustments that should meet with the approval of the majority and enable the school system to develop in the best interests of the population as a whole.

### Four Guidelines

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The government followed four guidelines in developing the orientations it is proposing. We hereby submit these guidelines to the public at large, that they may contribute both to the understanding and to the implementation of the orientations described below.

Each of these guidelines is important individually, but none more so than any of the others.

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- A social guideline. The expectations and demands of individuals and groups concerning the place of religion in schools must be heard and assessed from the perspective of an **open, pluralistic society**.
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Schools, like many other institutions, must target a new social cohesion that takes plurality, in all its forms, into account: plurality of mindsets, convictions, origins, local interests, customs and traditions; plurality of philosophical, moral and religious options; and plurality within religious groups themselves. This plurality, although more obvious in the greater Montréal area, is apparent in all regions of Québec, notably because of the impact of the media. This means that religion must not find its place in schools by creating barriers, but instead by being a factor of cohesion, tolerance and openness. It can and must promote coexistence in an ever more pluralistic society.

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- A cultural guideline. The expectations and demands of individuals and groups concerning religion must be heard and assessed **from an educational, cultural and historical perspective**.
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The fundamental mission of schools is to introduce children to the vast store of human knowledge: language, science and the arts. This mission is best fulfilled in an environment that is geared to the integrated development of young people in all aspects of their life. For this reason, schools aim to help them get to know themselves and their environment, and to find their place therein. Among other things, schools

introduce them to the symbolic universe of Québec, which bears the traces of religion in its landscapes, history, place names, celebrations and forms of cultural expression, from popular sayings to the background of the musical *Notre-Dame-de-Paris*. Cultural initiation implies, beyond the recognition of religious pluralism and emerging cultures, a certain understanding of the specific role that the Judeo-Christian tradition has played and continues to play in Québec culture. This results, for everyone, in a dual obligation which schools cannot escape: an obligation to preserve the memory of Québec's religious and cultural origins, and an obligation to achieve openness and dialogue with the various religious and humanist traditions in their current forms, with their own specific symbols and cultures.

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- A legal guideline. It is important to adopt positions that ensure **respect for basic human rights**, especially the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.
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Everyone agrees that the charters of human rights must be respected. It is thus imperative that all individuals be treated fairly, regardless of their moral or religious convictions. The rights of all citizens must be taken into account, whether they constitute a majority or a minority, while at the same time encouraging the harmonious coexistence of various ways of thinking and lifestyles. For this reason, rights cannot be affirmed without social ties and the will to live together being taken into account. In practice, rights often call for reasonable accommodation.

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- A pedagogical guideline. In this regard, it is important to adopt a **gradual approach** consistent with the evolution of mindsets and environments.
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Literally, pedagogy is the art of accompanying. In the area of moral and religious expectations with regard to schools, it is important to proceed in a pedagogical fashion, i.e. one that promotes adaptation to various situations while respecting each individual's pace and sensitivity. This gradual approach recently bore fruit: in 1998, Québec was exempted from the application of section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*, and the transition was made, with widespread support, from confessional to linguistic school boards. Today, we suggest other steps that we feel are timely and feasible, again with a view to better adapting the response of schools to public expectations.

This gradual approach leads the government to periodically assess whether a proper balance exists in the respect shown for the expectations and rights of parents and children, taking into account current demands and contexts and in a transparent manner. The only intention underlying the changes proposed here is to accompany Québec in its social and religious evolution, without seeking either to resist or to control this evolution.

To find fair and viable solutions, these four guidelines must be followed together, even though it may be tempting to give precedence to one or another of them while discounting the others. This effort calls for all citizens to exercise their social and civic spirit.

In light of these guidelines, the government intends to implement the following orientations concerning: (1) the confessional status of public schools; (2) moral and religious instruction; (3) pastoral and religious animation; (4) administrative structures.



# 1. The Confessional Status of Public Schools

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## 1.1

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The confessional status of public elementary and secondary schools will be repealed as of July 1, 2000.

This change is in keeping with the four guidelines. Public schools in a pluralistic society can hardly be defined using religious references; it makes more sense to define them on the basis of a neighbourhood or village, since they target the social and cultural integration of all young people living there. They have an obligation to treat all parents and children equally. They must take into account pluralism within their walls, that is, among the teaching staff and the students, as well as among the parents and in the community.

Numerous briefs presented to the Parliamentary Committee on Education requested that the

confessional status of public schools be abolished. In many cases, the real significance of this status was challenged, and the difficulties it raises with regard to rights and social cohesion pointed out.

Other parties, including parents' groups, who had asked that it be maintained, will mourn the disappearance of the confessional status to which they were accustomed. This status served a purpose; it displayed the school's colours and was a useful reference in terms of values. But, as everyone knows, appearances can be deceiving; it is what is inside that counts.

Moreover, for the past 20 years or so, the content or the quality of a school has been measured less in terms of its status, whether confessional or not, than in terms of the efforts it made to develop a coherent educational project. In the past, religion often served as a

rallying point for a school; today, this is no longer the case. Instead, the efforts of the teaching and administrative staff and the students are devoted to carrying out the educational project. Even parents are called upon to collaborate on the educational project to ensure that it truly represents the community and meets its expectations. Today, it is the school's educational project that can best enlighten the public as to the quality of the school's pedagogical practices, discipline, ability to ensure its students' success and fundamental values.

It should be noted that the administration of schools has changed profoundly in recent years. Today, each school has a governing board that approves the policies, orientations and rules underlying its organization. The governing board is responsible for adopting the school's educational project, overseeing its implementation and evaluating it (*Education Act*, section 74 *ff*). Parents are an important part of the governing board, on a par with teachers (*Education Act*, sections 56 and 63).

Within the framework set out by law, all will now be called upon to contribute to the educational project, free of the discomfort often associated with having to comply with the values of a specific religious tradition. Everyone, without restriction, will be able to participate in creating a common school that serves all the children in a given area. An inclusive school that takes into account the social, cultural and religious background of its students as well as their talents and limitations. A democratic school that educates students in

shared civic values. An open school that gives students access to the world of knowledge and a broad-based culture and that is responsive to the community it serves.

If public schools no longer have a confessional status, does this mean that schools named after St. Agnes or St. Francis must change their names overnight? They may if they wish; or else they may choose to keep their names, just as St. Mary's Hospital Centre, the St. Lawrence River, and the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles have kept theirs.

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## 1.2

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**The *Education Act* will be amended so as to expressly exclude the possibility for a public school to adopt a specific educational project of a religious nature.**

The repeal of the confessional status of public schools means that it will no longer be possible, even in exceptional circumstances, for a public school to adopt a specific religious persuasion or to serve as a place of instruction for one religion in particular.

Section 240 of the *Education Act* authorizes the establishment of schools "for the purposes of a specific project," such as schools that focus on a particular area: music, sports, "international education," etc. Under this section, a certain number of public schools in school boards that used to be confessional were recognized as having a specific project of a religious nature, that is, a project

associated with a specific religion or a specific religious group.

Such schools have a very marked single-religion character, and are attended only by children belonging to the religion concerned and children who choose to attend them despite their religious orientation. In the context of the proposed changes, these schools are no longer compatible with the common, open and intercultural nature of public schools.

Therefore, section 240 of the *Education Act* will be amended to eliminate the possibility of such schools.

In the meantime, the 11 existing schools with specific projects of a religious nature will be allowed to remain within the public system until July 1, 2001, to give school boards time to make the necessary changes to their organization.



## 2. Moral and Religious Instruction

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### 2.1

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In public elementary schools, the parents of students will continue to have a choice between moral and religious instruction.

Under current legislation, parents are entitled to choose one of the following courses for their children: moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction, Protestant moral and religious education or, at the request of the governing board and where considered feasible by the school board, religious instruction other than Catholic or Protestant religious instruction.

The legal provisions giving parents the right to choose among moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction, and Protestant moral and religious education are maintained (*Education Act*, section 5). This freedom of choice allows schools and school boards to

fulfill, in a fair and satisfactory manner, the four guidelines set out above. We will explain briefly why.

Freedom of choice allows for the fulfillment of diversified social demands: a moral education course that is valid for all, and courses in Catholic or Protestant religious instruction for those who wish to receive such instruction. We feel that it would be neither reasonable nor appropriate to refuse a request that came from a considerable proportion of the population.

This opportunity to choose, offered each year, allows schools and school boards the leeway to adapt to the diversity of local situations. In certain schools, the majority of students opt for moral education, while religious instruction is more popular in others, depending on the community and individual choices. Furthermore, offering this choice to parents enables

them to trace an individualized path for their children by determining, from year to year as they see fit, the amount of moral or religious instruction their children receive.

As concerns moral and religious instruction, the work of the Parliamentary Committee has clarified certain additional points that should be underscored for everyone's benefit.

1.

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Parents expect the school to give their children a solid moral education and to introduce them to the basic values of our society.

To date, moral education courses have often been perceived as replacement courses, a substitute for religious instruction. In a society where beliefs are increasingly eclectic, one fact is becoming more and more clear: individuals need moral points of reference that foster the responsible exercise of freedom and the ability to live together in harmony. This is precisely the rationale behind the moral education program: it aims to develop young people's moral judgment and to instill in them personal values and a sense of responsibility on an individual, civic and community level. Extensive research has been done on this program; it is still far from perfect. In the context of an increasingly pluralistic society, it must continue to be meaningful and relevant. It can be offered to all students, regardless of their beliefs or cultural background. This program is fundamental to the development of a common, civic-minded conscience. Moreover, in recent years,

important components of moral education have been integrated into religious instruction courses. In schools without a confessional status, this aspect of religious instruction programs must also evolve in order to meet the high expectations of parents and society in general.

2.

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The religion courses offered in schools today are designed and given as academic courses and are therefore different from ecclesiastical and family practices connected with initiation into a religion.

Religious instruction falls within the educational objectives of the school, and the teaching approach is in line with that used in other courses. It does not seek to proselytize or indoctrinate but to further the human, moral and spiritual growth of young people. Just as other courses help them deal with other types of realities, religion courses help them find their way among the moral and religious traditions of their families and of the other people they must learn to live in harmony with. This is an aspect of cultural initiation and socialization that fits in with the mission of the school.

In short, the confessional religious instruction given in schools today must not be confused with catechism practices, which are the role of churches and the family. It must be clear to all that in providing religion classes the school is not taking the place of either of these institutions.

3.

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None can deny the philosophical, cultural or political importance of religion in Québec society. To understand certain aspects of our civilization, one must have some knowledge of the religious component. Moreover, to work with some young people, it is helpful to be familiar with their religious tradition. Teachers, without seeking to become experts, should acquire certain elements of religious culture and history as part of their general education.

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## 2.2

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**In Secondary Cycle One, schools will continue to offer a choice between moral and religious instruction, with the possibility of programs adapted to local needs.**

For the first three years of secondary school, students will have the same choice as in elementary school: moral education, Catholic religious and moral instruction or Protestant moral and religious education.

For the first and second years of secondary school, the choice will be made by the student's parents. In the third year, the choice will be made by the individual student.

As at the elementary level, this freedom to choose from among several courses enables secondary schools to better respond to young people's aspirations while observing the guidelines presented earlier.

To reiterate, in both elementary and secondary school, moral education will always be the first course offered. This is the course chosen by an increasing number of secondary school students. Its content will be adapted according to the new measures outlined in this document.

An addition will be made to Secondary Cycle One. Because of the growing diversity of philosophical, moral and religious convictions, it is appropriate to make programs of study more flexible and adaptable to local situations.

For this reason, two new possibilities are introduced:

1.

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School boards will be able to set up local programs of study on ethics and religious culture as a replacement for the official programs.

2.

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School boards will also be able to develop local ecumenical programs on Christian traditions in response to specific situations.

Local ecumenical programs will be approved by the committee on religious affairs, based on the same criteria as those used for confessional

programs. In the case of programs on ethics and religious culture, the committee's opinion will be sought, but they will be approved by the Minister.

The programs must observe common values such as respect for freedom of conscience and religion, respect for the norms and values generally embraced by democratic societies, respect for young people's need for age-appropriate education, absence of any attempt to proselytize, and rigour and objectivity in the treatment of scientific data and research in religious matters.

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## 2.3

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In Secondary Cycle Two, students will be offered only one course, ethics and religious culture, and it will be compulsory.

Towards the end of their secondary studies, students in the various options will come together to consider and reflect on the subject of ethics and the various spiritual, religious and humanist movements that have marked and still mark the history of civilizations.

This is a new program that remains to be developed. Here are some of the main orientations it will follow:

- Use the existential questions of students as the starting point and meet their needs in an age-appropriate manner
- Address major contemporary ethical issues affecting individuals and society

- Underline the need to have moral points of reference that guide conduct
- Recognize the importance of spiritual and religious experience in human existence
- Present the basic tenets of the major religions, an outline of their historical development, and answers they provide to existential questions
- Present the religious heritage of Québec, including the Judeo-Christian and Aboriginal traditions

This program will be introduced on an experimental basis in 2001, and will become compulsory in 2002.

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## 2.4

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The teaching time allocated to moral and religious instruction will be changed.

At the elementary level, the suggested teaching time will be 72 hours in each cycle. At the secondary level, four credits will be allocated in Cycle One and two credits in Cycle Two. At present, the time spent on moral and religious instruction is prescribed by the regulations of the Catholic Committee and the Protestant Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. In future, it will be determined by the governing board in keeping with the basic school regulation. This is in line with the procedure provided for in the legislation, namely that the governing board approves the time allocated to each compulsory or elective subject (*Education Act*, section 86). It also complies with the basic school regulation, which provides a suggested allocation of teaching time for the various



subjects. Moral and religious instruction should no longer be exempt from this procedure.

The basic school regulation will be modified to provide a suggested 72 hours of moral and religious instruction in each of the three cycles of elementary school.

This corresponds to about one hour a week, but each school will have the freedom to distribute the hours as it sees fit. The total time allotted is on a par with that allowed for history or geography.

In secondary school, the basic school regulation sets the number of credits for each compulsory subject and each elective. One credit equals about 25 hours of instruction.

For the various programs (moral education, religious instruction, ethics and religious culture, local programs), the number of hours of instruction will correspond to four credits in Secondary Cycle One and two credits in Secondary Cycle Two.



### 3.

## Pastoral and Religious Animation

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### 3.1

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In public elementary and secondary schools, pastoral and religious animation will be replaced by a spiritual support and community involvement service for all students.

Under the current legislation, all public schools, whether or not they have Catholic or Protestant status, must offer pastoral (Catholic) and religious (Protestant) animation services. These services must be redefined in keeping with the context of nonconfessional schools and in light of the four guidelines discussed at the beginning of this document.

It is appropriate that public schools provide a spiritual support and community involvement service, but it should not be restricted to a single faith. It must be a common service designed for all students in their diversity.

Why provide such a service? Because a school is not just for giving courses. It must also offer students various activities—cultural, sports, science, social, etc.—to round out and enhance their education. These activities should include spiritual support and community involvement. What do these terms mean?

“Spiritual support” refers to the meaning of life, reflective and responsible experience, and values. “Spiritual” is therefore different from “religious,” a term referring to our relationship with the divine and including the spiritual dimension but in connection with faith in God and a community of faith. Spiritual support consists in helping students deal with issues related to the meaning of life, life events and everyday situations: family problems, the search for identity, adjustment problems, spiritual quests, accidents, mourning, falling in love, social injustice, etc. It will help them

develop their conscience, see the meaning of things, and find fulfillment in their lives.

The expression “community involvement” refers to a sense of belonging and solidarity. Community involvement is designed to develop young people’s sense of belonging to their school and their community, as well as a sense of service and concrete dedication to other people. In short, it is intended to foster their social conscience. There could be a variety of activities and projects to encourage communication between cultures or generations (involving grandparents or seniors, for example), participation in humanitarian projects (working with disadvantaged individuals, fighting for social justice), or greater awareness in terms of international solidarity, alternatives to violence, respect for the environment, or nonviolent conflict resolution.

The report of the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools acknowledged that services of this type are appropriate in a public school. It pointed out that the spiritual dimension is important in its own right, a fact which justifies the provision of spiritual support in an educational setting.<sup>1</sup> It spoke of “the relevance of providing support to all students who are looking for meaning in their lives or pursuing a spiritual quest. This support would take the form of one-on-one or group meetings with a person who can help them look for meaning in their lives, meet personal or group commitments and possibly celebrate their religion.”<sup>2</sup>

This service must not be marginalized nor should it be isolated from trends and influences that mark young people’s lives. Rather it should deal with real issues that have relevance for young people, making use of everything in the school and the community that can promote their human and spiritual growth while respecting their freedom. The service could offer a variety of humanitarian, spiritual, interfaith or religious activities based on young people’s search for meaning, the students’ needs with respect to their own religious affiliation, the development of a social conscience, the humanization of the environment and community involvement. Within the overall structure, individual schools will be able to tailor activities to the social and religious characteristics of their students.

The usefulness of a spiritual support and community involvement service will depend largely on the quality of the people in charge. Their ability to be accepted and recognized by the various religious groups and faiths represented in the school will of course be crucial. The operation of such a service must be adapted to the elementary or secondary school organization, as the case may be.

Spiritual support and community involvement services will be set up gradually: September 2001 in secondary schools and September 2002 in elementary schools. They will be funded by the government.

1. Québec, Ministère de l’Éducation, *Religion in Secular Schools*, report of the Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec (Québec: Ministère de l’Éducation, 1999), p. 210.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 211.



## 4.

### Administrative Structures

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#### 4.1

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A committee on religious affairs will replace the Catholic Committee and the Protestant Committee of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.

A committee on religious affairs will advise the Minister of Education on all issues related to the place of religion in schools.

The committee will monitor changing public expectations with regard to the place of religion in schools. It will state its opinion on the measures proposed here and on any necessary changes. One of its responsibilities will be to approve the confessional or ecumenical programs referred to above.

The committee will be composed of parents, educators and advisors on philosophical and religious matters. The idea will not be to ensure

proportional representation of the different faiths but rather to constitute an advisory board capable of examining issues with insight and wisdom and forming enlightened decisions about them.

In carrying out its responsibilities, the committee must consult the appropriate religious authorities or authorized representatives of religious groups, particularly with respect to the approval of programs of study. It may also establish subcommittees to deal with specific issues. Thus, the committee will be able to make an effective contribution to consensus-building and serve as an interface between the public, various religious groups, the school system and the government.

The creation of this committee will require amendments to the *Act respecting the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation*: the Catholic and

Protestant committees will cease to exist and the confessional conditions affecting the makeup of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation will be eliminated.

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## 4.2

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A religious affairs office will be set up within the Ministère de l'Éducation to replace the associate deputy ministers for the Catholic and Protestant faiths.

Even after the proposed changes, the Minister of Education will continue to exercise his or her responsibilities in the areas of planning, policy making, resource allocation, evaluation, information, accountability and advising legislators and political authorities. Similarly, the Minister will continue to advise the government on all legislation concerning religion in the schools.

The Minister will be supported by a religious affairs office: a specialized senior executive unit of the Ministère responsible for dealing with issues related to religion in the schools. It will carry out its duties in close cooperation with the other administrative units.

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## 4.3

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School boards will be responsible for ensuring that their students receive the moral and religious instruction services provided for by law.

Since the establishment of linguistic school boards, the law provides for the appointment of a person responsible for administrative support to schools in confessional matters (*Education Act*, sections 262 and 263). In view of the orientations that have been adopted, the functions described in these sections cannot be maintained.

However, in compliance with the provisions of the law, school boards must take the necessary measures to fully assume their responsibilities in moral and religious instruction with respect to the choice of courses offered to elementary and secondary school students, the application of the basic school regulation and programs of study, observance of the rules governing local programs, and the establishment of spiritual support and community involvement services, as defined by the Ministère. It will provide for the professional development of teachers and animators and support the governing boards in carrying out their responsibilities with respect to moral and religious instruction in the youth sector. In this area, as in the case of all educational services, school boards must keep the public informed and be accountable for the quality of the services offered in their schools.



## Conclusion

These are the measures to be implemented in Québec's public elementary and secondary schools in order to meet the diverse moral and religious expectations of the public as we enter the new millennium.

These measures will promote social cohesion, which is a shared responsibility. They also demonstrate respect for the beliefs of parents and students, are consistent with the school's educational mission and reflect changing attitudes.

The government is proposing these measures in a spirit of confidence in the public's open-mindedness and tolerance. Beyond the legitimate diversity of beliefs and religions, it is nonetheless possible to agree on these types of adjustments, which are concrete, fair and achievable. They are proposed in a spirit of openness to what the future may bring.

The required legislative amendments will be introduced this spring. It is important that the changes be received and understood correctly not only by the organizations concerned and the stakeholders in the education system, but by the entire school population, so as to elicit broad support and ensure harmonious implementation.

A number of details must still be worked out regarding the implementation or operation of some of the planned measures. This will take place gradually, and preferably with the participation of school boards and school administrators. Particular attention must be paid to the people directly affected, that is, those whose jobs will be eliminated or redefined or who will have to acquire new skills.

The new powers granted to governing boards and the increased decision-making role of parents in the school will ensure the quality of the services provided in the area of moral and religious instruction for young people. However, the ministerial guidelines will achieve their full effect only if school teams and parents become actively involved. A single objective should guide the implementation of these changes: to make sure that in a pluralistic and evolving society, our schools help young people find meaning in life.

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