

CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION

ABRIDGED VERSION

report

ON THE STATE AND NEEDS OF EDUCATION
2006-2008

**EDUCATION IN OUTLYING REGIONS:
A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

MARCH 2009

Québec 

The present document is an abridged version of the Report On The State and Needs of Education 2006–2008 entitled L'éducation en région éloignée : une responsabilité collective

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INTRODUCTION

In Québec, demographic decline, coupled with the geographic dispersal of communities across wide territories and tenuous socioeconomic conditions, poses great challenges for education in outlying regions, and calls for new and proactive approaches. In the present report on the state and needs of education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation proposes new paths to support education players in these regions in their will to ensure better access to quality educational services as well as stimulate individual and community development.

For the Conseil, access to quality educational services in all regions of Québec is a question of equity. A fundamental value in Québec society, this principle demands not only recognition of the same rights for all individuals, but to provide the conditions and means to meet their needs, while respecting their differences and unique characteristics.

To prepare an overview of the present state of education in outlying regions, the Conseil conducted a review of literature and consulted many experts in the field, noting opinions and proposals offered by education players, primarily during National Assembly committees on education and during the Forum sur l'avenir de l'enseignement collégial. The Conseil also recorded the views of education players during its visits to the regions.

To complete this overview, the Conseil canvassed the opinions and views of education personnel who work in outlying regions, at every level and sector of the education network. The goal of this consultation was to define the challenges they encounter in their educational institutions or regions, as well as initiatives which, in their opinion, were locally undertaken to meet them. With regard to education, they were also asked to indicate the strengths of their regions and any innovative projects—either already adopted or planned—to ensure the accessibility and quality of education in their communities.

During its consultation, the Conseil focused on six administrative regions considered “outlying,” as they are located at a considerable distance from either the Montréal, Capitale-Nationale or Outaouais regions. These six regions have a large percentage of their population living in communities that are remote, if not almost isolated. These regions are: Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Bas-Saint-Laurent, Côte-Nord, Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Nord-du-Québec and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. Together these regions

encompass 87.7% of Québec's territory. In 2006, they accounted for 11.1% of the Québec population as well as 10.9% of its pupils and students.

It is important to note that many of the above outlying regions include Native populations. The Conseil has not conducted a specific study on the state of education among First Nations and Inuit communities for this report. Indeed, it deems that the recommendations included in the February 2007 study conducted by the Committee on Education on The Educational Success of Aboriginal Students remain valid. From the outset, this parliamentary committee deemed that Native populations are the best placed to meet their education needs.

As the recommendations of this committee in general dovetail with the four key approaches proposed in the present report, the Conseil therefore recommends adopting the same principle regarding the educational needs of Native communities. In brief, the Conseil has formulated its approaches on the principle that local and regional communities should be encouraged to take ownership of their educational future, and that in order to do so, solutions need to be adapted to their specific educational needs.

Lastly, the Conseil wishes to thank the members of the Committee for the Report on the State and Needs of Education for their collaboration, as well as all those who contributed to its preparation.

1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SIX OUTLYING REGIONS: AN OVERVIEW

A Demographic Decline With Significant Impact

With the exception of Nord-du-Québec, the outlying regions selected for the present study have all experienced a decline in population since the 1990s, in contrast to an overall increase in the rest of Québec during this period. These regions have consequently undergone a demographic decline, albeit to varying degrees. The two key factors that can influence demographic change are natural population growth and net migration, or the difference between the number of people that leave the region and the number who come to reside there. It is in this latter aspect that these six regions are experiencing a difficult period that threatens to worsen in the coming years.

This demographic decline is primarily due to inter-regional migration, which remains pronounced among young adults in the 15-24 age group. Although there has been a drop in this migration and a return to the regions by adults aged 25 and older, the net migration rate still remains negative in all the regions. As this net migration is often greater than the natural population growth rate, this results in a persistent decline in resident populations.

An Alarming Drop In Enrolment

Demographic change has a direct impact on declining enrolment among the student population, a situation that further weakens the education network in outlying regions. This appears alarming in many areas, particularly in elementary and secondary schools.

According to projections by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), the six outlying regions in question will see a decline in enrolment between 2006 and 2015, at all levels of instruction, as shown in the table below. The decline will be significant: an estimated drop of approximately 20% in this ten-year period for at least four of the six regions, and almost 30% for Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine. The only exception is the Nord-du-Québec region, with a projected decrease in elementary and secondary school enrolment (the youth sector) lower than the Québec average, and a preschool enrolment that has been increasing over the past few years, notably due to growth in the Cree and Inuit populations.

***Projected Change In Enrolment Of Full-Time Pupils
and Students According to Region and Level of Instruction,
2006–2015***

Region	Elementary and Secondary (Youth Sector)*			College (Public Network)**			University***		
	2006	2015	Projected Change (%)	2006	2015	Projected Change (%)	2006	2015	Projected Change (%)
Abitibi-Témiscamingue	20,797	16,276	-21.7%	2,233	1,895	-15.1%	1,358	1,327	-2.3%
Bas-Saint-Laurent	27,251	23,092	-15.3%	5,430	4,252	-21.7%	3,373	3,163	-6.2%
Côte-Nord	12,258	9,831	-19.8%	1,160	964	-16.9%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Gaspésie- Îles-de-la-Madeleine	10,816	7,827	-27.6%	1,095	761	-30.5%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Saguenay- Lac-Saint-Jean	37,030	29,642	-20.0%	7,719	6,181	-19.9%	4,104	3,760	-8.4%
Nord-du-Québec	8,785	8,323	-5.3%	78	83	6.4%	n/a	n/a	n/a
All of Québec	1,051,111	936,356	-10.9%	143,689	136,591	-4.9%	188,489	197,714	4.9%

* Not including part-time students, students in the adult sector, students in vocational training and students enrolled in government schools.

** Not including students in continuing education (adults), part-time students and students enrolled in the private school network and in government schools.

*** Refers to full-time equivalent enrolment. Université du Québec à Rimouski's Lévis campus is entered under the Bas-Saint-Laurent entry.

n/a = not applicable.

Source: Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, Special Compilations, October 2008.

For more information, see the MELS website at

www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/sections/publications/index.asp?page=statistiques

Safeguarding Advances In Education

A study of the six regions in question reveals considerable advances in the area of education for populations in outlying regions. In 1985, the likelihood of obtaining a secondary school diploma in these regions—as well as enrolling in post-secondary studies—was lower than the Québec average, with the exception of the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region. Currently, the situation has improved: the level of education among populations in these regions has risen greatly, an increase that has occurred primarily at the secondary and college levels. However, these advances are not uniform throughout the six regions, nor for all levels and sectors of the education network.

Moreover, according to projections for the next 10 years, enrolment should continue to decline in most regions of Québec, and more markedly in outlying regions. The forecasts project a sharp and continuous decline, particularly at the elementary, secondary and college levels, posing an even greater challenge to those regions already at risk. Despite considerable efforts that have led to great leaps in education in outlying regions, there is a real and justified fear of reversing the trend, as shrinking enrolment directly impacts the number of diplomas awarded at every level of the education system.

An Outlook Subject To Economic Fluctuation

The six outlying regions in the present study are currently experiencing a challenging period in some economic sectors. As economies in these regions are not very diversified and largely dependent on natural resources such as fisheries, forestry and mining, they are particularly susceptible to economic fluctuations.

During the 10-year period between 1997 and 2007, the unemployment rate dropped in all regions, as it has in the rest of Québec. The employment rate has risen in four of the six regions, except for the Nord-du-Québec and Côte-Nord regions.

To diversify their economies and improve prospects for long-term development, economic players and their partners have for a number of years now drawn on regional assets and wealth and developed niche areas of excellence, in which these six regions have great potential for future development. These efforts are supported primarily through the ACCORD (Action concertée de coopération régionale de développement) Program.

2 FOUR CHALLENGES

Current changes and those forecasted over the short and long term present considerable challenges for education networks in outlying regions. Based on its consultations and review of research, the Conseil has defined four challenges which, when combined, can limit an individual's access to educational services in an outlying region: 1) the impact of demographic decline on the number of pupils and students; 2) the geographic dispersal of communities; 3) student retention and student success; and 4) the variety, continuity and adequacy of the education offer.

Largely caused by youth migration, *demographic decline* poses serious threats to outlying regions, as the funding for Québec's education system is primarily based on student enrolment numbers. This decline affects these regions more acutely than others and can jeopardize their ability to maintain quality educational services. It is for this reason that local communities call for public funding formulas that consider the distinct conditions of education in outlying regions.

Geographic dispersal of communities over wide areas has a major impact on accessibility, the size of classes and educational institutions, the continuity of the education path and transportation costs, as well as attracting pupils, students and education personnel. Physical proximity of educational services and professional resources is therefore perceived as fundamental. The use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) is viewed as one innovative means to facilitate access to educational services and establishing outside links.

The challenge of *student retention and student success* concerns all education players across Québec, at every level and sector of the education system. It is, however, uniquely challenging in outlying regions, as material and professional resources are limited and often dispersed. Greater support would particularly help in increasing individual success and qualifications, integrating students with learning difficulties, pursuing post-secondary studies, as well as integrating students in college or university.

Lastly, the *variety, continuity and adequacy of the education offer*, calls on all education communities and their partners to work together and take collective action to guarantee basic education and qualifications, to facilitate a continuous education path from one level or sector of education to the next, and to quickly adapt the education offer to evolving or future community needs.

Means For Meeting the Challenges

The Conseil has observed that the distinct conditions in outlying regions often compel education communities and their partners to be creative. Indeed, in addition to continually seeking means and solutions, one of their key strengths resides in forged links and collaborative relationships on which they can rely to develop a shared vision and act collectively. Solutions are adopted for specific issues, such as providing financial or material support to pupils and students; adapting educational services and creating channels to encourage a continuous education path; using innovative technologies to facilitate distance education; establishing educational programs responsive to local demand; and adapting the transportation system. Initiatives are also undertaken in the area of attracting pupils and students as well as education personnel and their families.

Moreover, initiatives in education communities require government support. The Conseil has identified various types of government policies and measures regarding education in outlying regions. A good number of these are applied uniformly across Québec from one region to the next. Others are adaptable to situations in outlying regions, as they provide education players with a certain latitude for initiative, while some others recognize the unique conditions of outlying regions through specific funding adjustments.

However, the Conseil found that very few measures appeared to be accompanied by subsequent means to strengthen education communities' ability of action, encourage their participation in decision-making in areas that concern them, or widen their manoeuvring room so they may take ownership of meeting educational demand at a grassroots level—for example, funding formulas for educational services that consider the distinct characteristics of each region.

The Conseil also deems that current solutions and procedures no longer appear adequate given the scope of future changes. The present environment calls for a different approach which, in Québec as elsewhere, must rest on the vitality of local communities and on the solutions they adopt in establishing strategies best suited to meet their educational needs.

3 PROMOTING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A NEW DIRECTION

In formulating its four key approaches, the Conseil considered the Government's responsibilities and obligations in the field of education, missions and responsibilities in the education system, as well as a framework of guiding principles.

Government Responsibilities and Obligations

The Conseil has identified a number of responsibilities and obligations on the part of the Government in the educational development of individuals in particular and society as a whole.

First, the Government has the responsibility to ensure the full development of all individuals, which translates into the *legal* obligation to impart knowledge, foster social development and provide qualifications. This obligation must be accompanied by the appropriate means to guarantee access to educational services throughout Québec, currently to a high standard of success. While specifically applicable to elementary and secondary education, this responsibility must also serve as an inspiration to other levels and sectors of the education system.

There is also a *political* responsibility, based on existing government policies and action plans, which the education system is responsible for adopting. For example, the Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training requires that the education network guarantee a basic education for adults contribute to raising both their level of education or qualifications and the development of a culture of lifelong learning, for the benefit of individual regions and Québec as a whole.

A third responsibility, more *socioeconomic* in nature, has the objective to ensure regional vitality and growth. In fact, the education system must contribute to the development of all regions by eliminating demographic and geographic barriers. This type of obligation is most clearly expressed in the recent Employment Pact, according to which the Government of Québec must enlist the participation of all players in maintaining the vitality of the economy: the Government, partners in the labour market and education communities, employers, employees, and community organizations, as well as the available workforce.

Lastly, there is also a *moral* obligation to innovate. The Conseil has often stated that the Government and the education system must contribute to broadening the social, economic and cultural horizons of all regions of Québec.

Missions and Responsibilities In the Education System

The missions and responsibilities in education are shared among the players working at the various levels of the education system.

At the local level, schools have a mission to impart knowledge to students, foster their social development and provide them with qualifications, by enabling them to undertake and achieve success in a given course of study. They fulfil this mission in accordance with educational projects implemented through their school success plans. The goals of these plans must also be aligned with Québec-wide objectives. Like public schools, schools in the private network are also required to adopt the Québec Education Program, while vocational training centres and adult education centres, for their part, must provide educational services at a local or regional level.

At the regional level, school boards have the responsibility to organize educational services in their territory for public preschool, elementary and secondary schools. They must also promote and advance public education in their jurisdiction, oversee the quality of educational services and student success in attaining a higher level of education and qualifications, as well as contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of their regions.

For their part, colleges and universities must provide post-secondary education for all of Québec, both regionally and nationally. Colleges can establish ministerially-accredited pre-university or technical training programs. They can also participate in developing and realizing new and transformative technologies, implementing and disseminating them, as well as actively engage in the development of their regions.

Universities have a mandate to advance higher learning for all individuals by carrying out three fundamental activities: training, research and serving society.

The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport is responsible for enforcing laws and regulations that fall under her jurisdiction throughout Québec.¹ Through her ministerial policies, she must also establish and implement programs that:

- 1) promote education;
- 2) contribute—through promotion, development and support—to raising the level of scientific, cultural and professional achievement of the people of Québec;
- 3) encourage access to higher forms of knowledge and culture for any person who has the will and the necessary ability;
- 4) contribute to the harmonization of her ministerial policies and activities with government policy and with the economic, social and cultural needs of Québec.

The Minister also establishes methods of allocating resources and can also define broad national educational objectives (*An Act respecting the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport*).

It should be noted that the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport shares responsibilities with other ministries and bodies in the area of training and research.

As for the Government, it formulates all policy and direction in education matters, and determines the allocation of public funding to education by taking into account the needs of the different levels of the education system.

Lastly, the National Assembly legislates all regulatory and legal frameworks that define the missions and responsibilities of all education players.

By respecting the missions and mandates of all players—regardless of their level or sector—and by giving each the necessary means to fully assume their responsibilities, the education system can then exercise its role, particularly in outlying regions.

¹ The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport carries out her functions in matters related to preschool education, elementary and secondary instruction, college education and university training and research, with the exception of education and research under the jurisdiction of another Minister, such as agri-foods or culture.

A Framework Of Guiding Principles

EDUCATION: A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

Education is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of their status, situation or place of residence. This right can be found in section 1 of the *Education Act*: “Every person is entitled to the preschool education services and elementary and secondary school instructional services provided for by this Act.”

This right means that all people living in Québec should have access to an education. To be sure, this is recognized by compulsory education, as the latter offers all individuals the opportunity of obtaining an initial secondary school diploma. However, it must also be considered within a larger and more ambitious perspective, namely, the objective of providing all individuals the opportunity of achieving the highest levels of education and qualifications possible.

Nonetheless, access to education only assumes its full meaning when educational services are of quality. This notion presupposes that these services enable students to reach set standards. In compulsory education, a quality education refers to students obtaining a comprehensive education following the objectives and standards established by the Québec Education Program. In other levels and sectors of education, quality means having standards comparable to those found throughout Québec.

Society, then, must strive to do everything possible to guarantee that all individuals who live in outlying regions—like every other Québec citizen—receive the best educational services. For the Conseil, this is not simply a question of equity but one inextricably linked to the development of all people living in Québec.

PROXIMITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

A second key principle that should guide any education initiative is ensuring that educational services are placed as close as possible to the individual or community, for two major reasons: The first is a moral obligation to allow individuals to receive an education without having to necessarily leave their home or community. The second is related to the Government’s will to include and develop every region of Québec. Access to education throughout Québec is an essential means of providing individuals living in outlying regions comparable opportunities for development within their communities.

The Conseil wishes to emphasize, however, that the obligation to provide proximity to educational services is not a fundamental right, but rather an ideal to continually strive for, particularly in basic education and qualifications. Moreover, the notion of proximity should be distinguished from actual physical distance given the introduction of ICTs throughout Québec, which permits access to educational services, albeit in a new form. For the Conseil, it is important to ensure that any such services are of comparable quality.

ADAPTING EDUCATION INITIATIVES TO REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

A third principle to which the Conseil attaches particular importance is adapting education initiatives to regional—or, in some cases, community—needs and characteristics. Indeed, it is important to eschew standardized strategies in favour of those that could be adapted to be closer to the pupil or student, depending on regional or community characteristics and strengths.

This need for flexibility and adaptability could be met through individually tailored initiatives. However, the Conseil believes that a more successful approach over the short and long term would be one that provides local and regional players the necessary latitude to adapt initiatives, according to their situation and/or needs. Indeed, such an approach is in keeping with the Government's objectives of decentralization and increased regional empowerment, which have been proposed for a numbers of years now.

Consideration of regional characteristics also involves the notion of equity. Consequently, the Government must provide all individuals or communities with the means to meet their needs, while respecting their differences and unique conditions.

RENEWING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES THROUGH INNOVATION

For the Conseil, innovation is another key guiding principle, for it is fundamental to renewing education initiatives and practices. The ability on the part of the education system to guarantee a quality education and access to it, particularly in outlying regions, must necessarily be steeped in an innovation-based approach. Therefore, it is crucial to promote the development of innovation, its perfection, testing and evaluation, as well as foster the dissemination and sharing of the best practices that result.

The Conseil has often emphasized the importance of innovation in the field of education. In its 2001 report on the governance of education, the Conseil recommended that the Government establish a framework for the ongoing

adaptation and renewal of education practices, namely by encouraging and supporting experiments and innovation, particularly those from local and regional players (CSE 2001). In its report on the dialogue between research and education practices released in 2006, the Conseil emphasized the need to foster a culture of innovation in education, through a synergy between the research community and those practicing in the field. Given the Government’s pivotal role, the Conseil recommended that it acknowledge the value of innovation in education and support its development and dissemination throughout the education network (CSE 2006).

For its part, the Government has indeed affirmed the value of innovation through its 2006 policy *An Innovative, Prosperous Québec: Québec Research and Innovation Strategy*—particularly in the fields of social sciences and humanities—to facilitate the introduction of new practices or approaches in areas such as health care, qualifying the workforce and education (Gouvernement du Québec 2006).

The Conseil believes we must continue on this path, and that it is important to foster innovation and experiments by supporting local and regional initiatives. Similarly, innovation must play a role in the process of establishing government policy in the field of education. In short, innovation must be at the heart of both in government policy and education practice.

INVESTING IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL OWNERSHIP

The Conseil recommends that common educational objectives be established at the local and regional levels, and that the education community take ownership of the means to attain them. These objectives must be consistent with Québec-wide ones, and ownership must be exercised while respecting the missions and responsibilities mandated at each level of the education system. As it did during its presentation at the 2008 Forum On School Board Democracy and Governance (CSE 2008), the Conseil believes that there should be a clear allocation of responsibilities and obligations on the part of all players at each level of the education system. Moreover, it recognizes the importance of decentralization established in 1998 to ensure a better response to student needs.

As far back as 1993, the Conseil has subscribed to the school of thought that recommends the devolution of decision-making powers and the ability of initiative to be as close as possible to the intended individual or community while still respecting Québec-wide education objectives. This trend toward local ownership has been a feature of Québec education policies since the end of the 1990s, and is also reflected in the shift toward greater regional empowerment, specifically in new approaches for development that

leverage local and regional assets.

It would be useful at this point to note some key findings of Mark Goldenberg's 2008 research report *A Review of Rural and Regional Development Policies and Programs*, which examined developmental policies and programs by government bodies in Québec and other Canadian provinces, as well as other jurisdictions in the United States and Europe. In this report, policy approaches most likely to contribute in the short and long-term to the social and economic viability of communities are identified. Some of the elements of these approaches are as follows:

- modifying the Government's stewardship role to be that of an "enabler" and "convenor" and greater devolution of responsibilities downstream to regional and local levels;
- adapting a more holistic, community- and place-based approach to foster local and community involvement and to propose solutions built on existing assets and resources;
- adopting an approach of flexibility and greater local leadership to establish strategies tailored to reflect community characteristics and to provide the necessary latitude to identify local needs as well as to establish and implement the means to meet them;
- developing effective partnerships—namely between the government, the local community, private and non-profit sectors, business, labour, educational institutions—to coordinate actions and pool different resources;
- establishing consultation, evaluation and accountability mechanisms that promote local civic and community participation.

In brief, these new approaches leverage the Government's stewardship role and the devolution of responsibilities and means downstream to local and regional levels, by building on the leadership of community players and partnerships. In addition, these approaches are intended to provide players with the necessary latitude to adopt means to meet the specific needs of their community.

CONTRIBUTING TO COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One final and crucial guiding principle is the contribution of education to community and regional development.

To be sure, the primary mission of education remains the development of the individual, while striving for the ideals of accessibility, quality and equity. Nonetheless, the Conseil has often advocated that education, community and regional development are closely and inextricably linked (CSE 1989, 2002 and 2003). Education is one of the linchpins of regional employment and development, primarily through the offer of educational services that meet the needs of the intended population.

As a result, the education network could become even more dynamic when its actions are aligned with community and regional development objectives. This could act as a catalyst to mobilize all community players, as it could open new prospects for the future.

Four Key Approaches

For the present report, the Conseil has formulated four key approaches:

- 1) Adapt and innovate to ensure access to quality educational services in outlying regions.
- 2) Introduce greater harmonization of the education offer with individual needs and regional strengths.
- 3) Strengthen local and regional cooperation and engagement to meet individual and community needs.
- 4) Modify and adapt Government policy to reflect regional strengths and potential.

KEY APPROACH I:

Adapt and Innovate To Ensure Access to Quality Educational Services In Outlying Regions

For its first key approach, the Conseil maintains the importance of ensuring access to quality educational services in all regions of Québec, particularly in outlying regions. Indeed, in a perspective of long-term development, it is fundamental to guarantee that access to educational services be as close as possible to the community where pupils and students—both children and adults—reside. To eliminate barriers linked to geographic distance and dispersal as well as declining enrolment, an innovation-based approach is essential for any education initiative to be better adapted to the dynamics of these regions.

Access to Education at Risk

Access to educational services in outlying regions can be placed at risk due to a combination of factors. As already emphasized in the preceding chapters, these regions are defined by two key characteristics: low population density and remoteness. Although populations in these regions tend—as elsewhere—to settle near urban centres, a large percentage is concentrated around small communities scattered across a large territory. In some aspects, similar patterns can be found in other Québec regions such as the Mauricie or Chaudière-Appalaches, as well as in many countries around the world.

Indeed, low population density and geographic dispersal can affect enrolment numbers, and consequently the size of classes and educational institutions. Thus, between one-third and one-half of educational institutions in many outlying regions have a low student population, particularly elementary schools (with less than 100 pupils). Moreover, the further the distance from a major urban centre, the fewer the number of education levels and sectors.

Access to educational services in some communities could be further jeopardized by the demographic decline, particularly by the drop in the young, school-age population.

In these regions, it could prove increasingly difficult to provide educational services at the elementary and secondary level—both for children and adults—as well as at the college and university levels. In many communities, enrolment numbers may not be sufficient to justify establishing or maintaining some elective courses or programs, or even employ specialists or teachers. Also, the geographic dispersal of educational services can adversely affect access to education, the pursuit of an educational path, and student retention. Moreover, these conditions can also impact the quality of education professionals' careers.

Despite these alarming trends, the Conseil believes it is not only important to maintain access to educational services, but strive to improve them. Community vitality in outlying regions depends on it, for community development and quality education are closely and inextricably linked. It is precisely at this junction that anticipating needs, innovating and adapting initiatives acquire their full meaning.

Bringing Educational Services Closer To the Community

The right to education means access to educational services for the entire Québec population. In this regard, the National Assembly's standing committee on education stated in 2003 that in order to assist the education network fulfil its mission, it was necessary to ensure its quality—as well as its accessibility—throughout Québec, according to actual population rates and available resources, and adapt choices to regional conditions. Institutions better adapted to rural realities are vital if education is to be accessible throughout Québec, provide a quality of life and respect the right of education for all (Commission de l'éducation 2003, free translation).

The Conseil entirely concurs with this view. In its 2001-2002 report on priorities in education, it underscored the need to provide access to quality education throughout Québec, stating that the Government has the obligation in the name of equity to guarantee that the offer of quality education for elementary and secondary schools be as close as possible to where students reside. The notion of the optimal territory for maintaining a school, however, needs redefining (CSE 2002, free translation).

Access to quality educational services is a right that demands obligations on the part of society as well, obligations that must also respect the principle of equity. Thus the Conseil herein reaffirms the need to offer and provide access to quality educational services in outlying regions, as close as possible to where pupils and students reside. It also intends to state its position on the notion of proximity to educational services.

Access to educational services in outlying regions indeed raises issues and presents challenges which are not the same for all levels and sectors of education. For the Conseil, it is important to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the obligation to guarantee access to preschool education and elementary and secondary instruction, and on the other, the requirements for vocational training and post-secondary education.

In the opinion of the Conseil, all students must be guaranteed access to the entire Québec Education Program (QEP). The education network must notably provide students with the opportunity to take elective courses as well as facilitate access to new education paths, as stipulated in the *Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education*. The Conseil also maintains that the QEP must also be made accessible as close as possible to the intended community. In some cases, this may require establishing multi-program classes, ad hoc groupings of students from several schools, or using new information and communications technologies (ICTs).

As for vocational training, it is important to consider two specific issues: 1) access to basic education for both youth and adults; namely, programs of study essential to maintaining the vitality of an entire community or region, and 2) access to programs of study which could meet regional development needs. In both cases, the need to bring educational services closer to the community appears all the more vital. The Conseil therefore deems that the Government must do its utmost to ensure that the education network provide access to this type of education, close to the intended communities.

With regard to other programs of study in vocational training, the need for proximity should not be as great, but it should nevertheless rest on a “fair and reasonable” balance between the right of people to live, work and prosper in their own community, the opportunity for regional development, and the limitations of resources required to this end. It should be noted that the latter vary from one program of study to the next, primarily in the area of pedagogical expertise, necessary investment for infrastructure and equipment, as well as workforce demand across Québec. The notion of proximity, therefore, should be considered with greater flexibility.

As for post-secondary education, the need to bring educational services closer to the community should follow a similar rationale of flexibility and balance. The education network must strive to provide greater access to higher learning and qualifications a continuous education path, as well as the opportunity of pursuing studies. The objective, then, is to have an offer of post-secondary education as close as possible to local and regional communities. In technical training, there should be access to programs of study and qualifying training that meets the basic needs of individuals as well as demand for regional development.

It is important to recognize, however, that post-secondary education must also meet objectives that transcend regional or even national borders. College education must continue to participate in the educational and socio-economic development of all regions in Québec, as well as in their technological development, notably through college centres for the transfer of technology.

For their part, universities located in outlying regions must be able to carry out their training and research activities and serve society, albeit on a broader scale. While keeping their roots in a given region, universities must be open to all students regardless of origin and contribute to the higher learning of the Québec population. Universities must also play a part in the development of Québec’s society, culture, economy and technology as well as pursue their own goals of excellence in international research, particularly in leading fields or areas of specialization.

How, then, can the objective of bringing educational services closer to the communities in outlying regions be attained? The Conseil deems that given the weaker aspects of access to education in outlying regions, some adjustments are called for. It therefore recommends reviewing the means of making educational services accessible, as well as the processes by which they are established and delivered.

Adapting and Innovating Education Initiatives To Meet the Challenge of Accessibility

Ensuring access to educational services indeed requires transforming the way these services are delivered, a change that must be guided by a shared vision on the part of all education players in view of community and regional development.

The Conseil recommends adapting education initiatives in an innovation-based approach. Consequently, this means finding new and long-term solutions to address the issue of accessibility. Education communities already draw on their creativity to explore and use adapted means to improve access to educational services, be it through partnership, establishing services closer to communities, sharing facilities or equipment, or even distance education. While recognizing education players are the best placed to find the right approaches for adapting and innovating educational services to the needs of their communities, the Conseil herein recommends two specific courses of action: 1) Review certain elements of the education system's rationale; 2) Redefine the notion of physical access to educational services to encompass a broader spectrum of possibilities.

To establish a forward-thinking vision of education in outlying regions, the Conseil believes some elements of the education system's rationale must be rethought. Some of these elements concern administrative frameworks and procedures, such as work organization frameworks or the type of relationships between educational institutions.

Other elements pertain to legislative and regulatory frameworks, chiefly in the area of funding and investment, methods of establishing and allocating programs of study (particularly vocational and technical programs) as well as the management of collective agreements and working conditions. As previously noted, the Conseil believes that these regulations and frameworks should be reviewed to provide local and regional players the required latitude to adapt their initiatives, innovate their educational offer, and thus fully assume their responsibilities. Indeed, the Conseil has devoted its fourth key approach entirely to this issue.

Lastly the Conseil recommends redefining the notion of physical access to educational services in light of the range of possibilities offered by information and communications technologies (ICTs), and ensuring that future educational services will be of comparable quality.

It appears, in fact, that further integration of ICTs to improve access to educational services is a must. The Conseil has long been an advocate of integrating these technologies in the field of education. In its 1993-1994 report on the state and needs of education, it recognized the need for clear governmental direction on using ICTs as learning and teaching tools, and invited the then-Minister of Education to issue a policy on ICTs with a consistent action plan (CSE 1994). Several ministerial action plans were indeed established between 1996 and 1997, for every level of education. The Conseil later reiterated the need for a policy statement in its report on the state and needs of education for 1999-2000 (CSE 2000). This statement had to define the rationale for using ICTs in education consistent with educational objectives, as well as guide education, technological and budgetary government decisions in this matter. The Conseil also believed that ICTs could serve as tools to support innovation in education and renew teaching practices.

It is worth noting that some ministerial programs for integrating ICTs in the field of education have not been active for several years now. For example, the Programme de soutien à l'innovation pour l'intégration des TIC has not been effective since 2000, the Programme d'acquisition d'équipement was decommissioned in June 2001 and the Programme de soutien à l'édition sur Internet ended in 2003.

Broadband telecommunication infrastructures will soon be more widely available throughout Québec (by the end of 2009), and the imminent arrival of this new "information superhighway" will be a giant leap forward. Its potential to revolutionize educational services and make them more accessible—particularly in remote communities—should thus be further developed and leveraged.

Exploring the issue of ICT integration appears more timely than ever. In its strategic plan for 2008-2011, the Conseil noted that this integration is one of the greatest challenges facing the education system. It is for this reason the Conseil invites the Government to consider ICTs as an investment in the future of education (CSE 2008). It is important, however, to also pay special attention to the internal structures and work organization this integration would require, not only to deliver services to pupils and students, but also to support the professional development of education personnel.

KEY APPROACH II:***Introduce Greater Harmonization of the Education Offer With Individual Needs and Regional Strengths***

For its second approach, the Conseil proposes that the education offer give greater weight to individual needs, as well as regional strengths and potential for development. To do so, it recommends three possible courses of action: 1) adapt the education offer to current and future regional needs; 2) support the continuity of students' education paths; and 3) foster local and regional ownership to meet educational needs. The Conseil concludes this section with some considerations on the notion of "viable" educational services.

Adapting the Education Offer to Current and Future Regional Needs

The education network must play a role in the vitality of a region and lend support to its goals for development. To this end, the education offer—be it general education for children and adults, vocational training, college or university education, specialized training for industry or prior learning assessment and recognition—is a key driver in raising the level of education of the population and ensuring a qualified workforce, as well as enriching the social and economic fabric of the region and thus contributing to its vitality.

The Conseil's study and consultation also revealed that education players have expressed a desire for an education offer better anchored in the strengths and assets of their region, one reflecting their vitality and characteristics. Consequently, adapting the offer requires a consideration of current regional strengths and potential for development as well as current and future needs.

Education communities and their partners are therefore called upon to develop a proactive understanding of their population's and region's needs, within a perspective of short- and long-term development. This understanding should be also based on an ongoing examination of regional demand and assessment of the education offer. Anticipating and meeting this demand presupposes that education players do have the ability to take risks. This *risk* capital, as it were, allows players to create an education offer that could potentially become an important lever or open new paths to employment in the region. It is important, then, to strengthen players' ability to manage the education offer at the regional level so that they can meet demand and ultimately spur innovation and the economy.

Anticipating demand also requires dialogue between partners to reach a common understanding of the needs and issues, and work together in adopting solutions and best practices, all in order to define education offers best suited to meet the needs of their communities and regions.

With regard to qualifying training (vocational, technical or university), it would appear advantageous to explore each region's unique opportunities for development, notably in economic sectors that fall under the ACCORD Program. Government measures such as the Vocational and Technical Training Collaboration Plan, the Plan d'action éducation, emploi et productivité or the Employment Pact also offer support in this area. Lastly, education players and their partners may collectively define their region's educational needs and adapt the education offer through collaborative forums such as the *tables interordres de l'éducation* (inter-level forums on education).

The Conseil will examine cooperation and engagement of education players and their partners in greater detail in the section devoted to its third key approach.

The issue of the education offer in outlying regions also concerns the education network's ability, at all levels and sectors, to adapt and maintain the offer of quality education in each region. This must be able to raise the level of education and maintain community and regional vitality, while respecting the principles of equity and viability. It must also allow for each region to leverage its strengths and full potential.

Supporting a Continuous Education Path

For the Conseil, it is equally important that in addition to meeting the needs of individuals, the education offer should ensure that the continuity of their education path takes place within their own communities or regions as much as possible. Moreover, the education network should collectively assume responsibility for this continuity, even more so in outlying regions.

Consequently, the education network must not only provide educational services to children and adults, but also assume responsibilities that transcend the programs of study offered by a single institution. The network should do everything possible to assist pupils and students in continuing their education in an uninterrupted manner between levels and/or sectors. Each educational institution could, for example, become a one-stop reference point for its pupils and students regarding access to educational services offered in any institution in the region or elsewhere in Québec.

This responsibility, however, presents different challenges for each level and sector of education, given their mandated responsibilities and geographic allocation of programs of study. At the secondary level it would then appear necessary to collectively ensure the availability of education paths and elective courses in spite of reduced enrolment, while in vocational or technical training, to fulfil students' educational plans even where school boards or colleges in their region do not offer the program in question. The underlying rationale is that if individuals were to enlist the assistance of an educational institution in their region to fulfil their educational plans, they should then be able to receive the necessary assistance to do so.

The responsibility for providing a continuous education path must, then, be a collective effort, one that requires institutions, levels and regions in the education network to work together. To support individualized education paths, several possibilities are open to local and regional education players, such as finding alternative means of offering educational services: allowing a student to enrol in another institution for a given course or semester, for example, or facilitating access to distance education, specifically by utilizing information and communications technologies (ICTs). Players could also agree to share teachers or infrastructures, as many are already doing. They could also pool infrastructures with other regional partners, such as the labour market or businesses.

The need to ensure a continuous education path will be even greater in times of declining enrolment. Innovation could then prove to be beneficial in establishing and adapting strategies and delivering an education offer likely to meet this need.

Fostering Local and Regional Ownership to Meet Educational Needs

To deliver an education better adapted to regional needs, local or regional players must first be able to define the demand, then have the ability to respond. For the Conseil, local and regional education communities are positioned sufficiently close to pupils and students to allow them to adapt educational services to their environment or community, to anticipate its needs, and meet them promptly. This ownership also means being able to reach a common understanding of community needs and modify the education offer accordingly, and even cast its framework in a perspective of short- and long-term development. This means envisioning the offer as more than simply a catalogue of education programs. It also requires consensus on appropriate methods and forums for local collaboration that best reflect the region's vitality and characteristics.

The Conseil noted that in several regions, education players have shown a steadfast will to work together and engage the community in defining common educational objectives for their respective sectors, and to undertake concerted actions to attain them. For example, some regional collaborative mechanisms have made better management of the education offer possible, particularly in the fields of vocational and technical training. Others have led to adapting collective strategies in the area of student retention. However, establishing and implementing an education offer on a regional level may lead to friction in several areas, such as reconciling individual educational needs with institutions' developmental objectives; the goals of each institution with regional demand, or regional strengths with available resources, to name but a few.

Rethinking the Notion of “Viable” Educational Services

The notion of a viable program of study is another factor to consider when adapting the education offer in outlying regions. For the Conseil, this notion, used as a condition of the education offer, merits a closer examination of current conditions in these regions and their prospects for development.

The notion of viability is most often associated with weighing the costs and benefits of an activity within an overall economic model. In the field of education, this refers to the funding allocation threshold set by the Government in establishing and maintaining a program of study or training program, a threshold typically expressed as a minimum number of pupils or students. This model was chosen because current funding formulas for educational services in institutions are largely based on school enrolment numbers. An assessment of viability also considers the potential attraction that a new program of study may bring, which would ensure its funding, as well as the impact that adding the new program would have on the entire offer of existing services.

Despite some flexibility introduced in the past few years to allow for some exemptions, this model does have its limitations. In fact, in the context of declining enrolment in outlying regions, it could curb if not stifle community initiatives. For the Conseil, the notion of viability should instead be considered within the wider perspective of short and long-term community or regional development: Education must, then, not be perceived as an immediate *cost* but rather as a long-term *investment* for society.

As with any new business model or innovation, the viability of a program of study or educational service should also be assessed through the lens of potential regional development. Thus viability should be gauged not only in terms of current educational needs, but also future ones. From this

perspective, the allocated funding should be seen as *risk capital* investment in the future. Any assessment of viability should also include an evaluation of individual and community needs as well as the responsibilities and obligations of the education network in meeting them.

The criteria for viability should thus first address the need to guarantee basic education and qualifications for children and adults. It would then appear important to consider the need for vocational and technical training in light of demand and prospective regional development. Lastly, the opportunity of developing post-secondary education should also be taken into account.

The Conseil acknowledges, however, that the education network must ensure mechanisms that would allow regional and inter-regional referees to guarantee the viability of those programs of regional or national scope. It should also foster the balance of the overall education offer with current and future demands of Québec society, in light of the resources that the latter wishes to allocate to it.

For the Conseil, access to quality educational services for elementary and secondary students must be guaranteed, even if its cost may be higher for outlying regions. Government policy must strive—by all means necessary, including modifying funding—to ensure that children and adults who live in outlying regions have access to basic education and qualifications.

KEY APPROACH III:

Strengthen Local and Regional Cooperation and Engagement to Meet Individual and Community Needs

Current educational challenges are of such wide scope, particularly in outlying regions, that they demand a shared strategic approach founded on increased cooperation and engagement on the part of all education players and their cultural, social and economic partners. This, in essence, is the third key approach proposed by the Conseil.

In the field of education, the need for cooperation and engagement toward common objectives is increasingly recognized in many developed countries, just as it is in Canada and in Québec. During the past few years, there has been an increase in initiatives rooted in cooperation and engagement in many regions of Québec. These initiatives should be encouraged and supported locally, regionally and nationally. It is important to note that achieving the Government's objectives of decentralization and regional empowerment is to a large extent dependent on community and regional leadership, cooperation and engagement.

Strengthening cooperation and engagement presupposes that first and foremost education players exercise their leadership locally and regionally. This also means that these players should be able to receive direct government support and assistance, and that ministerial authorities also carry out their leadership with their official partners. Lastly, cooperation and engagement should rest on consensus and forums that reflect the distinct characteristics of each region.

Strengthening the Leadership of Education Players

The leadership of education players is vital in outlying regions, because of the key role education plays in community development, even more so in its survival. The education network must exercise leadership primarily by establishing a vision of regional education needs and objectives, both locally and regionally. It must also share this vision to engage the community in attaining these objectives.

Indeed, examples abound where education players fully assume this responsibility within their community or region. The most common initiatives undertaken are in the area of student retention and certification, but there are also examples of support for children with learning disabilities, the offer of vocational and technical training, or meeting continuing education needs. This responsibility is often shared with other partners when addressing larger issues, for example, between education and employment, education and health, and more generally between education and socio-economic development.

To be sure, there would not be any effective leadership in the field of education without dynamic educational institutions and organizations that are well respected in their own communities. Consequently, to exercise their leadership, these bodies must also invest in their own development, so they may be able to provide quality education. Their quality and vitality are therefore equally important for viable collaboration and successful shared initiatives.

Fostering Collaboration Between Education Players

Another important factor in a shared strategic approach for outlying regions is the collaborative effort between players in the education network. Indeed, it is crucial that educational institutions and organizations work closely together to ensure access to a quality education that is both diversified and one that meets individual and community needs. The Conseil has previously highlighted the need to foster the spirit of collaboration between institutions—particularly in the area of education—so together

they are better positioned to face global competition (CSE 2002, free translation).

Institutions, then, must look beyond their own internal goals of development and align their efforts with the aim of meeting individual and community educational needs. As legitimate as these goals may be, they should nevertheless not hinder working together and sharing initiatives. The educational needs of a community should therefore gradually supersede the internal objectives of the institution. Indeed, the mission of educational institutions and organizations—to contribute to the development of their region and of society in general—perfectly dovetails with this perspective.

In fact, for the Conseil, working together is one of the key conditions for advancing regional development, particularly when paired with tangible government support. This involves both public and private institutions from every level and sector of education: schools, adult education centres, vocational training centres, school boards, colleges and universities. In some cases, it can also extend to other stakeholders, such as the non-profit sector, labour, health care, and the workforce.

During its work, the Conseil noted that a culture of cooperation and engagement has taken root and is currently growing, albeit unevenly, from one region to the next. Education players and their partners often concur on educational needs and objectives, and show a firm will to work together and pool available resources. Examples include sharing teaching resources and practices, expertise or infrastructures (buildings, equipment, etc.), innovative practices and solutions to common problems, as well as the decompartmentalization of educational services to improve access.

The Conseil is cognizant however, that a viable collaborative effort rests on the will of partners to find a common ground beneficial to all. This will is even more vital in outlying regions given the vast expanse of the territory and geographic dispersal of communities, which requires an even greater and additional investment of time and resources on the part of education players.

These players can often easily reach a common understanding of educational needs for their community or region. They can even agree on a shared vision of objectives, solutions and the necessary means to attain them. Yet despite this, their collaborative effort may sometimes fail over a important point such as sharing means or resources. The need to reconcile the goals of each, just as arbitration on these means, can also occur between institutions and organizations, between local communities, between sub-regions or between regions.

The education network does have some latitude of initiative in this regard. However, arbitration on means and resources largely falls under the authority of the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport, and restrictions and practices exist that can limit the scope of collaborative mechanisms. Educational institutions, particularly in remote communities, often do not have the necessary means to work together, as they must devote most of their efforts to ensure the viability of their own educational services. At other times, collaborative mechanisms do not have the necessary levers to obtain the desired outcomes.

It is important to recall that operating procedures and mechanisms can also hinder collaborative effort. For example, the centralized method of establishing and implementing programs of study or allocating funding can limit the manoeuvring room of local and regional players. Moreover, processes for allocating resources to school boards and educational institutions do not encourage partnering nor pooling of resources, particularly when the latter are limited.

Lastly, cooperation enables the synergy required to ensure a collective response to individual educational needs and a continuous education path. It also makes it possible to build on a common understanding of educational demand, identify weak areas, find solutions, and share those that appear the most promising, as well as reconcile the goals of the players and partners in a regional perspective. In sum, cooperation encourages community players to participate in shared initiatives or projects to attain set educational objectives and to promote local and regional development.

Engaging Community Partners

Another important factor in a shared strategic approach is the ability to engage not only education players but all other partners in attaining educational objectives.

Centres locaux de développement (CLDs or local developments centres), les conférences régionales des élus (CREs or regional boards of elected officials), municipalités régionales de comté (MRCs or regional county municipalities), businesses, chambers of commerce, regional councils of labour markets, and social, cultural, and community groups are just some of the partners in the education network. They provide a valuable insight on developing the education offer in the broadest sense and can play an important role in defining educational objectives and in engaging the community.

During its consultations, the Conseil noted that one of the strengths of education players' efforts in outlying regions is their ability to work together with their local partners. Education personnel from every level and sector stated that the size of the community and the strong ties between people made working together easier. They also added that their partnership with community players was genuine and the contribution of the latter often considerable. Some examples of partnership at the local level were in broadening access to educational services, student retention, diversifying the education offer, and implementing prior learning assessment and recognition services.

The Conseil has also noted collective projects carried out in outlying regions to meet specific challenges, in education and other sectors. In general, these projects were built around leveraging existing community assets. They engaged the communities to varying degrees, making it possible to meet local needs, and increase community well-being. Rooted in distinct regional characteristics, these examples embody the will for local and regional development.

It is important to note the motivating role that a collective project can play in a community or region. This type of project can inspire action and innovation and provide meaning to players' efforts in maintaining and reinforcing the vitality of their region. The Conseil believes these projects are good drivers of both local and regional development, projects that can engage many partners and draw on the potential and expertise of all sectors in the region: economic, cultural, health, non-profit and education.

During its visits to the regions in question, the Conseil noted, on the one hand, a clear will on the part of education players to take the future of their community into their own hands, and on the other, the ability to launch and realize collective projects designed to this end. For the Conseil, common issues, particularly those arising from demographic, social or economic conditions, call for shared solutions.

The Conseil régional de prévention de l'abandon scolaire (CREPAS) is a good example of regional cooperation and engagement, able to successfully combine all factors and levers in a collective short- and long-term strategic initiative. CREPAS was established in 1996 by two players in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region to encourage students to remain in school, be it secondary, college or university. According to CREPAS, dropping out of school is an issue that affects the whole community: the youth themselves, their parents, teachers, the school community, elected officials, the

Government, unions, health care providers, and businesses. Cast in partnership with the community, the goal of the project is to maintain a shared vision of this issue and support preventive actions that are concerted, structured and efficient.²

Defining Forums for Cooperation and Engagement

For education players to be engaged and work together, a meeting place that considers their sense of community and belonging as well as the social, economic and cultural life in their region is called for. Indeed, each region has a different way of working and developing over time, depending on its size, geographic location and characteristics, including those of its sub-regions and communities. These shape the sense of belonging and how a community engages and works together. As a result, forums for cooperation and engagement should be defined to be more representative of the individual community, its strengths and the issues that concern it.

There could be many such forums, arising anywhere there is a common interest to do so. It is therefore essential to trust the ability of local and regional players to adopt mechanisms that best reflect their needs and characteristics.

The education network is fully able, for example, to choose the best collaborative mechanisms at the local and regional levels. Over time, educational institutions and organizations have developed differently—depending on the needs of their community and their collaboration with it—to fulfil their missions and attain the educational objectives set by the Government.

The Conseil notes that a structure for cooperation already exists in each of Québec's regions: the *table interordres de l'éducation* (inter-level forums on education). While it has no binding authority, this structure presents great potential, and the scope of its actions largely depends in part on the will of regional players. In addition, its operating procedures, area of influence, and consideration of sub-regional and community concerns vary from region to region. It would therefore seem prudent to give it time to reach its full potential.

For the moment, the *tables interordres de l'éducation* primarily devote their efforts to organizing vocational and technical training, which includes managing the selection of programs for each administrative region.

2 Free translation of an extract of the CREPAS mission statement, retrieved from its website in February 2009: www.crepas.qc.ca/crepas.php.

Defining forums for cooperation and engagement presupposes that these bodies have the necessary authority and levers to attain target objectives. To this end, local and regional partners must be willing to reach a consensus and adopt true decision-making and executive powers. In this regard, Government support becomes essential.

In its ability to strengthen the cooperation and engagement necessary to realize educational projects, the education network must exercise its leadership in a manner that promotes educational objectives in the community, as well as contribute more widely to the development of the region. Collaborative forums for implementing local and regional development strategies could be diversified to this end. Moreover, to fulfil its responsibility in education matters in outlying regions, the Government must primarily support education players in their will to work together and engage the community, affirm its education priorities and communicate them to its major national partners. The fourth key approach proposed by the Conseil examines the various aspects of the Government's role in this area.

In sum, the Conseil herein presents some conditions which, in its opinion, could foster long-lasting and successful cooperation and partnership in education:

- Adhering to the role and goals of education;
- Acknowledging the unique and complementary contribution of all partners;
- Respecting the mission and responsibility of all players, notably educational institutions;
- Exercising leadership on the part of the education network to engage the community and pool efforts toward common educational objectives;
- Developing cooperation and partnership skills in education for all regional players and partners;
- Forging a mutual relationship of trust in establishing and evaluating partnerships.

KEY APPROACH IV:***Modify and Adapt Government Policy to Reflect Regional Strengths and Potential***

To meet the great challenges of education in outlying regions, Government policy should be modified to reflect regional strengths and characteristics. Thus the Conseil invites the Government—and primarily the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport—to increase the latitude of local and regional education players, harmonize her own education policy both internally and with local and regional objectives, and promote and support community-placed innovation and initiatives, as well as engage all stakeholders so they may all contribute toward attaining the educational objectives of each region.

As the Conseil has emphasized in the preceding chapters, the current state of education in outlying regions is alarming and challenges will be even greater given the scope of the demographic decline. To face these challenges, common throughout Québec, it urges the education network in outlying regions to continually adapt and innovate in order to continue meeting individual and community educational needs.

The Conseil also calls on the Government to modify its approach and adapt its policy to be more inclusive of regional characteristics and developmental potential. This must necessarily include more flexible policy, increased responsibilities on the part of education players, and greater support for their initiatives.

This more modified approach should not only enable pupils and students in outlying regions to acquire basic education and qualifications but also to have access to a post-secondary education. It must also support a more diversified education offer, better harmonized with regional strengths and developmental goals. Lastly, it must also provide education players with sufficient latitude for them to fully assume their mandated responsibilities. In sum, better-adapted Government policy is a key condition and fundamental for the education network to continue fulfilling its mission regarding individual and community development, particularly in outlying regions.

There are many government programs and measures that already follow this rationale of modifying and adapting to reflect regional characteristics and educational needs: the Table Québec-régions group, the École éloignée en réseau project, the Plan de rapprochement de la formation professionnelle et technique and the Communautés rurales branchées program, to name a few. The Conseil also notes that education communities do have some latitude in their educational initiatives and budgets.

Nevertheless, the Conseil recommends that the Government consider an approach even more responsive to distinct regional characteristics and strengths, one that would foster local and regional players to take ownership of education. These devolved responsibilities and flexible frameworks could be aligned with the Government's own broad vision of decentralization and empowering the regions, implemented primarily through the Employment Pact and individual agreements signed with the various regions under the ACCORD Program.

Increasing Local and Regional Latitude

During its study, the Conseil noted that the need for increased flexibility is a recurring theme throughout all the regions. According to education players, current government frameworks do not provide sufficient latitude to meet individual educational needs in their regions nor to support regional development, and also prevent them from swiftly addressing emerging challenges.

When facing regional challenges, latitude in initiative is indeed crucial, particularly in an outlying region. Education players are continually searching for new means and solutions better adapted to their community's educational characteristics and needs. They therefore expect to have the necessary manoeuvring room to assume their responsibilities and embrace innovative solutions, and also expect official frameworks to be sufficiently flexible to this end.

The Conseil has long asserted the need to adapt government education policy to the needs of the communities. In 1993, it called for a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between the Government and the education network, as well as more flexible ministerial frameworks for elementary, secondary and college education: school regulations and programs of study, budgetary regulations and collective agreements (CSE 1993). In 2001, it highlighted the desire on the part of the education communities for increased responsibility and autonomy, noting that education policies and legislation had already begun to address this, namely through the establishment of governing boards in elementary and secondary schools (CSE 2001).

In 2002, alarmed by the changing state of education in the regions, the Conseil maintained that it was incumbent on the Government to promote the social and economic development of less-densely populated regions and provide the financial means and necessary latitude for the education system to fulfil its role within a comprehensive and integrated strategy for regional development (CSE 2002, free translation). In 2004, the Conseil revisited the

issue by calling for a review of funding formulas for education institutions, in order to prevent the vicious circle of diminishing resources due to declining enrolment (CSE 2004). It also recommended rethinking funding formulas to better reflect regional demographics, the education of small groups, and the needs of students who do not follow a typical education path (ibid.).

Many government measures and programs established since appear to be headed in the right direction. The Conseil believes, however, that some of them remain homogenous or restrictive in nature, and that any modifications often appear too modest or ill-matched with educational objectives established by local or regional communities.

To face current and emerging challenges in outlying regions, restrictive programs or simple and standardized solutions no longer appear viable. A true rethinking of government policy in education matters is a must, particularly in light of decentralization and regional empowerment. In fact, if education initiatives are to be placed closer to pupils or students, their family or communities, local stakeholders need sufficient latitude to adapt them to their own realities. The Conseil therefore invites the Government and all education players—regardless of level or sector—to evaluate the frameworks they establish considering the levers required by the education players closest to the pupils or students.

To this end, existing government education frameworks should thus be reviewed in order to encourage increased responsibility and greater autonomy for communities, by providing them with effective levers to fully carry out their work. Similarly, the Conseil invites the educational institutions and organizations responsible for the frameworks and allocation of resources in their region to grant to those closest to the pupil or student the latitude they require.

Harmonizing Government Education Policy With Local and Regional Objectives

For the Conseil, government education policy—in addition to having to be modified to meet regional needs—should also be harmonized with a twin concern for consistency: within the Government to avoid “silo” effects, and with defined local and regional educational objectives.

Education players in outlying regions and education personnel in particular have indicated that many government or ministerial programs and measures supported their education initiatives in their community or region. However, they also added that the number of these programs or measures, as well as their range and nature, was often limiting or too narrow in scope.

Moreover, many thought some of these programs appeared to have very little consistency between them and were hardly compatible with the defined educational objectives of their community or the educational project of their institution.

Education players also noted that these programs and measures required accountability on a one-to-one basis, instead of community-based or broader educational objectives. Moreover, efforts invested in these mainly administrative tasks often took up a considerable amount of their time, time they would rather devote to working with their pupils or students.

This need to harmonize government and ministerial policy, however, is not just for the education network in outlying regions; the entire Québec education network is affected by education measures and support programs. The Conseil deems that Government policy must address the need for consistency and flexibility called for by the education communities. Policies, then, should be less specific, more consistent with each other and better aligned with the needs of communities. They should enable the latter to adapt their education initiatives to the individual needs of their pupils and students. Similarly, accountability regulations for each program or measure should be consolidated and focused on fundamentals, namely, fulfilling educational projects at the institutional level and contributing to broader educational objectives at the regional and national levels.

The proliferation of measures or programs that are either too restrictive or have overly-narrow objectives should thus be discouraged, in favour of a more comprehensive and flexible approach, one that provides education players with the needed latitude at a locus where education initiatives are closest to pupils and students. The Government could thus effectively exercise its leadership and stewardship role, and local and regional education players could assume their roles and responsibilities.

Promoting Innovation and Supporting Local and Regional Initiatives

To better fulfil its responsibilities in the regions, the education network must also be able to monitor trends in education needs and anticipate emerging challenges. Consequently, it must adopt a forward-looking mindset in planning and establishing collective projects. It must also be able to innovate, test and experiment, both to meet future challenges and to contribute to strengthening the economic, social, and cultural potential of each region.

As previously stated, the exercise of anticipating and innovating means being able to take risks, that is, trying new approaches, testing new methods of delivering educational services and implementing new tools. It also entails the right to trial and error, as well as access to the appropriate resources. Education communities therefore expect Government support for their most promising initiatives, and to receive assistance and allocated resources commensurate with their region's educational needs and future potential.

It is important to encourage and support the development of local or regional innovation for the education network to pave the way for new potential in each region. To this end, government assistance is critical. The Conseil has often advocated the importance of innovation and its dissemination throughout the education network. In 2002, it emphasized the need to advance and share innovative practices and models in education (CSE 2002). In 2006, in its report on the dialogue between research and practices in education, it recommended that the Government actively support innovation in this area (CSE 2006). In the same report, it presented good examples of government assistance in research and innovative practice in education. One such example was the Centre de transfert pour la réussite éducative du Québec (CTREQ),³ an organization for the advancement of innovation in education and the dissemination of research. Lastly, the Conseil maintains that the objective of the Québec Research and Innovation Strategy is to promote innovation and its transfer to social sciences and humanities, including education.

The Conseil herein recommends an active role on the part of the Government in fostering, supporting and encouraging initiatives and experiments by local and regional education communities. Its approach should, on the one hand, establish broader, more flexible government and ministerial frameworks that give education players the required room to develop their spirit of initiative and enterprise, and on the other, encourage local and regional experiments and innovation, through appropriate support frameworks in the allocation of funding for public education. This would provide local and regional education players the necessary latitude and support to create new solutions to their challenges.

³ Founded in 2002, CTREQ is a non-profit organization whose mission is to advance and facilitate the application of innovation in the area of educational excellence through the transfer of research, support of practical experience, and liaising and monitoring services, in order to assist front-line education players perfect their practice.

Engaging Education Partners

Successful solutions to meet regional education challenges, specifically in outlying regions, require that all local and regional partners engage and work together. This is precisely what the Conseil recommended education players and their local and regional partners do in its third key approach. It herein makes the same recommendation at the government level. Indeed, government policy should not only be internally consistent but also harmonized with other jurisdictions, and encourage the latter's engagement as well. Indeed, the Government must strive for a better harmonization of ministerial policies and stakeholder organizations, and engage other partners in a shared vision for education.

As education plays a front-line role in the development of outlying regions, ministerial authorities must leverage their leadership with other jurisdictions and stakeholders. Firstly, to have the support of the ministries involved in economic development, employment, health and culture, as well as partners in the labour market such as employers, employees, and community organizations. Working together with these partners, ministerial authorities must strive to adopt common and harmonized measures for the educational, social and economic development of regions. Education communities in outlying regions could benefit from such a concerted approach, not only from the ministerial policies themselves, but equally from combined strategies with other ministries and key education partners.

The Conseil noted examples of such strategic approaches consistent with regional needs are already being implemented by the Government of Québec and its partners in large portfolios, such as the economic and technological development of regions under the ACCORD Program and the recent Employment Pact. The Conseil recommends a similar approach for the field of education, particularly for outlying regions. In its opinion, if regional challenges in education are to be met, cooperation and engagement are essential.

In conclusion, the Conseil deems that modifying and adapting government policy to reflect the distinct characteristics and educational needs of outlying regions would provide better support of education community initiatives, and ultimately, regional development. Through this approach, the Government must seek to broaden the latitude of local and regional players and harmonize its policy with their education initiatives, while respecting the responsibilities of all. It must also encourage and support innovation in the education community, both locally and regionally, in finding new solutions. In addition, the Government must also exercise its leadership role

by establishing broad national educational objectives and requiring accountability based on these objectives as well as defined regional and local ones. Lastly, all education stakeholders should be encouraged to engage in attaining educational objectives and as a result, review their frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Education is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of their status, situation or place of residence. Consequently, the Government has the binding obligation to provide access to quality educational services throughout Québec. Moreover, in addition to ensuring individual development, the education system must also contribute to the development of all regions of Québec.

In the wake of the Parent Report and the founding of the Ministère de l'Éducation at the beginning of the 1960s, the Government of Québec has invested a major effort in establishing the current education system. Supported by a network of players mandated with complementary responsibilities in the area of educational services—preschool education, elementary or secondary instruction, or post-secondary education in colleges and universities—for children and adults alike, this system has made possible great leaps in the areas of access to education in Québec, student success and certification.

Education in Québec has developed against a backdrop of redefining the Government's role and strong population growth. This, to a large extent, has influenced the expansion of the education network, as well as its operating procedures and regulations.

The education network has always faced unique challenges in outlying regions, given contributing factors such as the geographic dispersal of communities over vast territories, low population density and tenuous economic conditions. In the present report on the state and needs of education, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation has focused on the engagement of education players in meeting these challenges. At the Government level, various measures have been implemented that consider existing conditions in outlying regions. As for education players in the regions, they have been able to establish and adopt innovative solutions, often the result of their own creative efforts and the strength of their collaboration and community engagement. Great advances in the field of education outlying regions have thus been possible.

In several previous reports on the state and needs of education, the Conseil has called attention to education-related issues in these regions. However, the current alarming conditions created by a demographic decline have led the Conseil to devote the present report entirely to the issue of education in outlying regions.

Starting from an overview of the current state of education in outlying regions and consultations with education players in the regions in question, the Conseil has identified four key challenges that impact access to educational services in these regions: 1) declining enrolment; 2) geographic dispersal of communities; 3) student retention and student success; and 4) the variety, continuity and adequacy of the education offer. In the opinion of the Conseil, these issues are not exclusively inherent to outlying regions; other parts of Québec are facing similar challenges. For this reason, the Conseil's study and approaches formulated in the present report are equally applicable to other regions and communities.

The approaches recommended by the Conseil were based on a specific framework of guiding principles. First, education is a fundamental right for all. This right can be found in section 1 of the *Education Act*: "Every person is entitled to the preschool education services and elementary and secondary school instructional services provided for by this Act." This right is indeed recognized by compulsory education, but for the Conseil, it must also be considered in the perspective of providing all individuals the opportunity of achieving the highest levels of education and qualifications possible.

Second, the proximity of educational services offered, in the opinion of the Conseil, must guide education policy, for two reasons: 1) individuals in an outlying community should be able to acquire basic education and qualifications without having to leave their communities, consequently giving them the same opportunities for development as they would have in a large urban centre; and 2) the Government's will to develop all regions of Québec. The recognition and value of education's contribution to community and regional development forms a corollary to the latter and is part of the foundation of the Conseil's four key approaches.

Innovation was also determined to be essential to the renewal of education practices and initiatives. The ability of the education network to ensure a quality education and access to it—particularly in outlying regions—must necessarily be steeped in innovation. For this reason, the Conseil has placed innovation at the heart of each of its four approaches.

Lastly, the Conseil recommended investing in local and regional ownership of education needs expressed by community and the response to them. Common regional objectives must be consistent with Québec-wide ones, and ownership should be exercised while respecting the missions and responsibilities of all players in the education network. The Government, for example, must provide each community with the appropriate means to meet its educational needs while considering its differences and unique conditions.

The Government of Québec has, over the years, significantly redefined the responsibilities of education players to shift them further downstream. It has also been investing in regional empowerment for several years now. This approach is aligned with public policy established in other parts of Canada and many developed countries, policy whose objective is to bring the locus of decision-making closer to the people and community to better reflect their conditions and needs. Thus government policy can be adapted to consider the distinct characteristics of each region or community.

During its study, the Conseil found laudable examples of players at every level of the education network meeting individual and community educational needs. The challenges, however, are becoming increasingly more daunting. Consequently, the Conseil recommends that the most promising approaches be consolidated and new formulas developed so that all education players, regardless of level or sector, can fully assume their responsibilities as mandated by the National Assembly.

To strengthen the education network's ability in outlying regions and to pave the way for new courses of action, the Conseil has proposed four key approaches. The first two are related to objectives, while the latter two are levers or means for attaining the former.

The first approach consists in guaranteeing access to quality educational services, to be as close as possible to individuals or their communities. To ensure long-term community development, this access must be anchored in better-adapted and innovative initiatives.

The second approach recommends a greater harmonization of the education offer with individual educational needs and distinct regional characteristics and strengths. This should be accomplished by introducing a greater consistency in the education offer to better reflect community vitality, by providing the necessary support to all individuals in achieving their educational plans and, lastly, by local or regional ownership of the response to educational needs.

For the third approach, the Conseil proposes leveraging cooperation and engagement within communities and regions. To do so, education network players must first and foremost exercise leadership in their own communities or regions to offer and share a vision of educational objectives and the necessary means to attain them. These players must also work together and pool resources to engage the entire community in collective initiatives and to be able to meet current challenges and prepare for future ones.

In its fourth approach, the Conseil invites the Government, in particular the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport, to modify and adapt government education policy to better reflect regional characteristics and strengths. While leadership and stewardship of the education system should continue to be done at the ministerial level, official policies must provide the players closest to pupils and students sufficient latitude for initiative—be it locally or regionally—to adapt means that best mirror their reality and provide the requisite accountability. Moreover, the Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sport engage all relevant national partners to consider outlying regions in their work.

Québec has established an education system that has enabled it to make a great leap forward. In light of current as well as future challenges—particularly in outlying regions—the Conseil herein reaffirms the importance of providing all individuals who live in an outlying region the opportunity to achieve the highest possible level of education and qualifications, and supporting local development in each region of Québec. The Conseil calls on all players, be they in the education network, communities, or other sectors, to work together and meet these challenges.

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