

CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION

Revision of the Ethics and Religious Culture program: for a successful transition

Summary

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Introduction

On January 10, 2020, the Minister of Education and Higher Education announced his intention to revise the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program. Eight themes were proposed for the consultations, as follows: citizen participation and democracy, legal education, green citizenship, sexuality education, personal development and interpersonal relationships, ethics, digital citizenship, and societal culture. According to the latest information provided to the education network, the new program would be officially implemented in Québec schools at the start of the 2023-2024 school year.

Through this brief, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation hopes to shed light on the challenges raised by such a revision and to provide the Minister with options for a successful transition to a new program.

This work is based on public communications from the Minister, information found on the website of the Ministère de l'Éducation, a literature review, an analysis of the Québec Education Program (QEP) with respect to the eight themes, and a study of the briefs that the Conseil was able to access¹. The Conseil also met with a number of people who have expertise related to the various components of the ERC program and listened to young people who have experienced this program and who spoke during exploratory consultations.

The ERC program in place since 2008

To produce this brief, the Conseil could not ignore the current ERC program—a non-denominational program based on respect for freedom of conscience and religion—and the sociopolitical context that led to its implementation, in 2008. It should also be noted that this course is mandatory for all elementary and secondary school students.

The Conseil spent considerable time considering the two main objectives of the program, that is, the recognition of others and pursuit of the common good, which would be maintained in the future program. It also paid particular attention to the three competencies the program seeks to develop: *Reflects on ethical questions*, *Demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion*, and *Engages in dialogue*.

The new themes proposed

The eight themes proposed by the Minister are timely and meaningful for young people today. However, the Conseil has observed that several of them overlap. Moreover, they have similarities with many of the learning components already covered in the QEP within the broad areas of learning, cross-curricular competencies, subject areas, or prescribed content. These themes would need to be redefined and reorganized so that this learning is part of a coherent and balanced whole, following a competency-based approach. Finally, it is vital that the choice of themes be adapted to students' cognitive abilities and approach the content in a way that is meaningful to their age group.

1 Briefs submitted to the Minister as part of the consultations on the Ethics and Religious Culture program of study and which the Conseil was able to access.

The place of ethical reflection, engaging in dialogue, and knowledge of facts about religions and secular world views in the new program

The new program offers an opportunity to innovate and to do things differently, while still remaining consistent with the QEP. The revision process should also build on actions that have been successful in the ERC program.

In this respect, the Conseil believes that ethical reflection and engaging in dialogue are the best tools to approach the proposed themes in a consistent way and to lead students toward the recognition of others and pursuit of the common good.

Furthermore, while there seems to be a broad consensus on the importance of ethics and dialogue in the new program, there is a wide range of opinions on what place the knowledge of facts about religions² should occupy, if any. Nonetheless, the Conseil's analysis shows that the majority of specialists and actors in the field recommend maintaining the teaching of knowledge related to facts about religions and secular world views, modified, however, by a different or improved approach.

In the Conseil's opinion, facts about religions and secular world views exist independently of each person's own convictions and play a part in social life. They are among the essential points of reference that enable us to identify, understand and interpret social, cultural and geopolitical situations, both in Québec and around the world. On this matter, the Conseil would like to highlight the need to pay considered attention to both the historical and contemporary realities and spiritualities of First Nations and the Inuit. In short, whether through a dedicated theme or another means, **it is essential that schools educate students on facts about religions and secular world views while engaging them in dialogue and ethical reflection.** This will enable students to interpret this content within a perspective of respect for diversity and maintaining a critical distance.

Lessons learned from the ERC program

Analysis of the experience of implementing the current ERC program reveals the challenges and conditions to take into consideration for the new program. A number of issues raised during the consultations carried out by the Conseil could arise once again with the announced program.

First, the margin of manoeuvre that schools have in setting their own **timetable** often resulted in less time being devoted to the ERC class compared to the number of hours suggested in the pedagogical regime. Given the importance of the objectives maintained in the new program, the Conseil deems that it is necessary to give students sufficient time to acquire the learning that will enable them to achieve these objectives, and to take the necessary steps to ensure this.

In addition, education actors report difficulties in properly carrying out the **evaluation of learning** in the ERC program, difficulties which we can expect in the new program as well if it is carried out under similar conditions. The Conseil has observed that the evaluation of learning can vary greatly from one school to another, and that it carries a number of inherent challenges related to the organization of time as well as the nature and number of competencies to be evaluated. Regardless of what content is

2 Use of the term “facts about religions” refers to the French expression “faits religieux” a definition of which can be found on page 3 of the full brief (in French). To access the full version, please click [here](#).

integrated into the new program with respect to the chosen themes, the importance of the evaluation of competencies should be emphasized, while taking into account the time that teachers have at their disposal to carry out this evaluation. The Minister could take this opportunity to modify the evaluation of learning and the methods used or, in other words, reflect on the possibility of doing less, but better.

Furthermore, teachers will need to be trained and, especially, receive proper support to adhere to these changes, to become familiar with the program, and to integrate it into their practice. **Professional development** poses significant challenges due to the distinctive characteristics of the program, the professional stance required, the diversity of teacher profiles, and the large number of teachers to reach. Initial teacher training programs offered in universities will also have to be revised. The Conseil anticipates this will cause coordination challenges within universities, not to mention the consequences for students currently enrolled in programs specializing in ERC.

Finally, the Conseil is of the opinion that quality **instructional materials** must be available, in French and in English, at the time the new program is implemented. The Minister could take this opportunity to support the production of open digital educational resources and to examine new ways of certifying the quality of what portends to be complex and delicate content.

Building on the ERC program

Several specialists and actors in the field agree that the existing program is relevant, but nonetheless point to shortfalls for which adjustments or corrections could be made. The Conseil believes that actions should be consistent with what is already being done in schools; current and persistent obstacles, limitations and difficulties should be identified, and changes made accordingly. A universal, transparent and participatory process will foster teachers' acceptance of the new program and, in this way, benefit student learning.

A realistic schedule

According to specialists and actors in the field, the schedule to implement the new program in 2023-2024 is ambitious and will be difficult to achieve. Time is needed to take stock of the ERC program; to develop, validate, pilot and promote the new program; to train teachers and the trainers who will support them; and to prepare evaluation tools, instructional materials or digital educational resources in accordance with the program.

The Conseil believes that a realistic schedule is an essential condition to ensure the quality of the new program and its successful implementation.

Orientations and recommendations

To assist the Minister in choosing the most appropriate measures, the Conseil has formulated six orientations that contain a total of fourteen recommendations.

Orientation 1: Ensure consistency with the Québec Education Program as a whole

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

1. Develop a program:
 - that aligns with the current components of the QEP to ensure a coherent whole and to avoid repetition or overlap, and that is in keeping with a competency-based approach; and
 - that is organized around a common thread, consistent with the educational objectives and competencies targeted by the program, and that takes into account the preoccupations of young people.

Orientation 2: Consider ethical reflection and engaging in dialogue as foundations of the new program

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

2. Maintain, in the new program, the practice of dialogue as well as a competency related to ethical reflection.

Orientation 3: Make knowledge of facts about religions and secular world views an important part of the new program of study and of the Québec Education Program

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

3. Maintain non-denomination and secular teaching that aims to develop students' knowledge of facts about religions, First Nations and Inuit spiritualities, and secular world views, in both elementary and secondary education:
 - following pedagogical approaches appropriate to each level of education and adapted to the students' developmental stage; and
 - include, in the program of study, very clear directives for the non-denomination teaching of this material.
4. Form a group of experts (courseware designers, religious studies specialists, Indigenous resource persons, educational psychologists, teachers and other actors concerned) to carry out a reflection:
 - on innovative methods that could be used to integrate into the QEP, explicitly and seamlessly, facts about religions and secular world views; and
 - that considers interdisciplinary possibilities.
5. Review the content on facts about religions and secular world views so as to better reflect religious and non-religious diversity and provide a contemporary view of this reality, which has evolved since the ERC program was implemented in 2008.

Orientation 4: Ensure that rollout of the new program is planned in a comprehensive and structured manner

With regard to subject-time allocations

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

6. Plan the new program in a way to ensure that the desired learning is realistic within the time allotted in the subject-time allocation, and focus on the learning that will enable students to achieve the program's two objectives, i.e., the recognition of others and pursuit of the common good.

The Conseil recommends that school principals and governing boards:

7. Make sure that sufficient time in the school's schedule is dedicated to this new course to allow students to fully achieve the desired learning outcomes and for teachers to evaluate them.

With regard to the evaluation of learning

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

8. Make sure the evaluation of learning is framed in a way that is consistent with the time granted to the new program in the subject-time allocations.

With regard to staff training and support

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education and the Minister of Higher Education:

9. Put in place, as soon as possible and in close collaboration with key actors, an initial teacher training and professional development plan:
 - that will ensure that teachers are trained and equipped to apply the new program, and that includes a clear strategy to support them during the program's implementation in an ongoing manner; and
 - that involves the universities and the Comité d'agrément des programmes de formation en enseignement (CAPFE) to plan the transition of university programmes to the new program.

With regard to instructional materials and digital educational resources

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

10. Make available to teachers a diversity of instructional materials:
 - by supporting the development of open digital educational resources; and
 - through a meticulous analysis of content related to facts about religions and secular world views when approving instructional materials to ensure they are free of stereotypes and represent different practices and beliefs in all their diversity and in keeping with today's reality.
11. Entrust the Comité-conseil sur l'évaluation des ressources didactiques (CCERD) with a mandate to lead a reflection on the use of workbooks, their usefulness for teachers and students, and how to ensure, if applicable, their quality as an educational tool for the new program.

Orientation 5: Build on the results of the ERC program and situate the new program as an expansion of successful practices and expertise acquired in the field

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

12. Carry out an evaluation of the ERC program, involving various education actors: classroom teachers and ERC specialists, cohorts of students who have taken this program, principals, education consultants, teacher training professionals, parents, etc.
13. Use this evaluation to measure the impact of the proposed changes and to determine which are necessary and timely with respect to the orientations of the new program.

Orientation 6: Reassess the implementation schedule for the new program, in light of the current challenges and issues.

The Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education:

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| 14. | Establish an action plan that takes into account the time needed for the different steps leading up to the implementation of a new program that is well thought-out and adapted to the capacities of young people and, consequently, postpone the deadline to a later date. |
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Conclusion

This brief comes at the start of work to develop the next program that will replace the current ERC program. The Conseil supports the Minister's intention to revise the ERC program, and is of the opinion that a new program can favourably build on the foundation of existing elements and by correcting the shortfalls encountered in the current ERC program. Moreover, this is an opportune time to innovate and propose a different formula that will allow the program to evolve over time and take advantage of digital tools, both for student learning and for teacher training and support.

That being said, the current context, with the pandemic still holding sway and the shortage of qualified personnel, adds to the complexity of implementing this governmental priority. The Conseil expects that the effects of the health crisis on the education network, school staff, student success and the drop-out rate will persist beyond the end of confinement. This context must be taken into account when making future decisions. The Conseil invites the Minister to choose a suitable moment to implement the new program so that it enjoys conditions conducive to a favourable response from teachers and students alike.

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