

CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION

**An Advisory Body Representing Citizens For
Informed Public Policy in Education**

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Introduction

Since its creation in May of 1964, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation has been at the service of education and at the heart of the transformation of Québec, a close observer of societal change in general and education in particular. During the first decades of its existence, it was a privileged witness and participant in building a free and modern public education system, namely by providing advice on specific and operational issues related to planning its development. Shaped by the context of Québec's emerging welfare state, the Conseil's work drew its inspiration from a public policy framework based on the modernization and democratization of education. When it came to policy, the Conseil was more champion than critic, as it shared the same overall objectives as the governing elite at the time.

In its beginnings alongside the Quiet Revolution, the Conseil focused on its unique role in building the education system. Its first annual report in 1964–1965 entitled *La participation au plan scolaire* [participating in the education plan] would thus insist that the development of education was not the exclusive domain of technocrats and planners and needed to embrace a strong civic participation, and that the Conseil's role as advisor was to provide the Minister of Education with an analysis of educational issues from a stakeholder perspective (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1966). Five years later, in its 1969–1970 annual report *L'activité éducative* [educational activity], the Conseil would remind decision makers that this development must address more than just structures and more importantly consider the human element, namely quality student/teacher relationships, the uniqueness of which had to be protected (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1971).

While it was initially called on to provide opinions on short-term operational issues, as it established itself the Conseil began to focus more on the medium and long term, moving closer to the Parent Commission's vision of it as a permanent "commission of inquiry" on the state and needs of education.

Consequently the context of the emerging welfare state taking stewardship of education and the Conseil's starting position to support the modernization and democratization of education over the medium and long term by analyzing educational issues from a stakeholder perspective formed the original footprint of the Conseil, and to a large extent it has remained faithful to this mission over the decades. Today, as in the past, it continues to reflect on its role and the best way of fulfilling it to accommodate and adapt to a world of constant change.

The present document consists of two chapters. The first provides an overview of the Conseil's origins, evolution and role, as well as its mandate and functions. The second is devoted to its use of both research and experiential knowledge in the production of its briefs and reports, and its contribution to developing public policy in education.

CHAPTER 1

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation: its origins, evolution and functions

The Origins of the Conseil

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation was created at the same time as the Ministry of Education, by an Act assented to on March 19, 1964 which came into force on May 13 that same year. Its origins can be traced to Part I of the *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec* (commonly referred to as the "Parent Report"), work on which had started at the beginning of the 1960s. The report's first recommendation called for the appointment of a Minister of Education, whose function was to promote and coordinate learning at every level and sector of instruction. The second recommended the creation of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation [superior council of education] to act in an advisory capacity to the Minister. The third proposed that the Conseil operate as a "unified body." Moreover, an entire chapter of the Parent Report—Chapter 7—outlined in great detail the role and functions of the Conseil, as well as its operations.

According to the Commissioners, the Ministry of Education's primary role would be to administer and coordinate the entire education sector, with the Conseil acting as a permanent "commission of inquiry" in the field. The latter could advise on any education-related matter at any level or sector of instruction, from kindergarten to adult education. The Commissioners also stated the rationale and benefit of the Conseil being an independent body:

Once relieved of executive responsibilities, the Council could retain its proper independence in its relations with the Minister. It would be in a better position to offer fresh points of view on educational policy, to make bold suggestions, to take a broad overall view and to criticize when criticism is in order. The requirements of modern education, demanding for their solution imagination,

research and innovation, will often necessitate departure from beaten paths. [...] Responsibility to keep the educational system in contact with the evolution of society, to point out what changes should be made and to encourage long-term planning will rest above all with the Superior Council of Education. (*Royal Commission of Inquiry of Education in the Province of Quebec*, 1963, p.107, paragraph 176).

The main reasons behind the creation of the Conseil were a need for public representation and to have deeper roots in the field of education:

It seems essential to enlist the participation of associations and groups representing special interests in the formulation of educational policy. Such representation will promote co-ordination between all sections and levels of education. And the combined experience of a considerable variety of persons will help make provisions and plans for the future more realistic, more effective and better rooted in the environment. (*ibid.*, p.105, paragraph 173).

The primary role tasked to the Conseil by the Commissioners was to be the chief advisor to the Minister in education matters, and ensure that the concerns of both education players and the general public be heard by the Minister and by the Government. The Conseil would therefore need to maintain a comprehensive view of the education system, public and private, Francophone and Anglophone. The biggest challenge faced by education at that time, according to the Commissioners, was the lack of coordination and a global vision. Indeed, in the 1960s each sector of the education system (public, private, Francophone, Anglophone, elementary, secondary, university, technical and vocational) operated in silos, lacking coordination or links between each other, making it difficult, for example, for students to transition from one level of instruction to the next. It was for this reason the Commissioners insisted that, in addition to the creation of a ministry of education, the Conseil be run as a unified body.

The Administration and Operations of the Conseil, According to the Parent Report

To ensure that the Conseil could fully exercise its various functions and be representative of the education community, the Parent Report outlined provisions for its operations and selection of members in achieving these goals:

The Council should include persons with different backgrounds who will enrich it with their varied attitudes, cultures and experience of life. It will include persons of both languages and both religious groups, men and women, laymen, parents and clergymen, teachers or school administrators, people versed in the requirements of labour and industry, and one or two individuals not members of the predominant religious groups. Despite the essential contacts between the Council and the Minister, the latter should not

be one of its members, nor should the other Ministers, or the members of the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council. (*Royal Commission of Inquiry of Education in the Province of Quebec*, 1963, p.112, paragraph 187).

The Commissioners also recommended that the Conseil's board be comprised of 16 members appointed by the Government, with maximum, non-renewable mandates of eight years. Nominations for future appointments would be submitted to the Minister of Education by the Conseil, following consultations within the latter's bodies and the education community. To ensure communication between the Minister and the Conseil, the Deputy Minister and the Associate Deputy Minister of education would be appointed to the board as *ex-officio* members without voting powers. Lastly, the Government would appoint the President and Vice-President, choosing from among the members of the Conseil, with the President being of the Catholic faith and the Vice-President of the Protestant faith.

Moreover, seeking to maintain the centuries-old tradition of denominational instruction in Québec (and reflecting the context of their time), the Commissioners also recommended that a Catholic committee and a Protestant committee be established. These two confessional committees would be vested with the responsibility of ensuring the religious character of schools, establishing rules governing the religious and moral education of children and advising the Conseil on matters related to the development of spiritual and moral values or problems that could arise from teaching certain subjects, such as philosophy, history and literature. These committees already existed in similar form under the Council of Public Instruction established in 1856. The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation essentially replaced this Council, apart from the responsibility of coordinating the Québec education system, which would now fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Education.

The Catholic and Protestant committees were both to have nine to fifteen members representing three main groups—religious authority, parents and educators—appointed to a three-year mandate renewable only once. The Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops would appoint their representatives to the Catholic Committee and the Conseil would choose the remaining members in consultation with bishops as well as representatives from teachers' and parents' associations. Protestant Committee members were appointed in a similar fashion. The Conseil would also designate the chairs for both committees from among its own members in order to ensure coordination with the two bodies.

The Parent Report also called for the creation of three commissions—the Commission for Elementary and Secondary Education, the Commission for Higher

Education, and the Commission for Technical and Specialized Education—each being responsible for their respective sector of instruction. Each Commission would be comprised of nine to fifteen members appointed by the Conseil to three-year terms renewable once, following consultations with stakeholder groups in each sector. As with the confessional committees, the Chair for each commission would be appointed by the Conseil from among its own members.

Lastly, to ensure effective independence in adequately fulfilling its role, the Commissioners recommended the Conseil be given an operating budget separate from that of the Ministry of Education, as well as a secretariat with sufficient staff to carry out its functions.

Recommendations adopted into law and changes over the years

In the year between the release of Part I of the Parent Report—devoted to the uppermost structures of the education system—and the passing of legislation that created the Ministry of Education and the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, lawmakers sought to consult the greatest number of individuals and organizations possible. As Tremblay (1989) noted, although the vast majority of people supported the creation of a ministry of education, some strongly opposed its creation and the fact that it would water down the Church's decisional powers in steering education policy. Others, notably the official opposition, demanded that the Conseil's advisory powers be expanded to include decision-making as well.

Lawmakers upheld the overall spirit of the Parent Report, introducing only a few minor changes to its recommendations: In *An Act Respecting the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation* adopted in 1964, the Conseil would comprise 24 members instead of 16, and four Commissions would be established (a Commission of Elementary Education, a Commission of Secondary Education, a Commission of Technical and Vocational Education and a Commission of Higher Education) instead of three. As outlined in the Parent Report, two committees would oversee religious matters: one Catholic and one Protestant.

Over the decades, many amendments were introduced to the *Act*, for the most part to harmonize it with other legislation, for example, the numerous changes to the name of the Ministry of Education (Ministère de l'Éducation et de la Science, 1993; Ministère de l'Éducation, 1994; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2005; Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2015) as well as its division into two ministries in 1985, the other being the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Science et de la Technologie. The latter has undergone its own changes in nomenclature as well (Ministère de l'Enseignement

supérieur et de la Science, 1988; Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche, de la Science et de la Technologie, 2013; Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de la Science, 2014).

The membership of the Conseil and its bodies has also varied over the years, reflecting the evolving times. In 1969, two years after the arrival of the first CEGEPS [Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel or college of general and vocational education], the Commission on College Education was created, replacing the Commission for Technical and Vocational Education. At the same time, a provision for the establishment of a new Commission on Adult Education was incorporated in the *Act*, reflecting the rapid growth in this sector of instruction. It is important to note that the Conseil retained the Commission on Higher Education, even though the Conseil des universités had been established the previous year. In 1979, however, with the creation of the Conseil des collèges, the Commission on College Education was abolished. Yet after careful consideration of the latter's relevance, the Conseil for its part concluded that this commission was indeed integral to its comprehensive view of the education system, which ultimately does not exclude specialized perspectives from outside bodies (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1979). The creation of the Commission on the Evaluation of College Education and the decommissioning of both the Conseil des collèges and the Conseil des universités in 1993 ushered in an era of renewal in college education, and once again the *Act* was amended: the Commission on Higher Education was replaced by the Commission on College Education and the Commission on University Education and Research.

In 1999, the Advisory Committee on the Financial Accessibility of Education was created. While administratively housed within the offices of the Conseil, it was established to operate independently, and mandated with advising the Minister of Education on any issues the latter is required by law to submit relating to financial aid programs—tuition, enrolment, admission and other fees, as well as measures or policies that may have impact on financial accessibility to education—as set forth in *An Act Respecting Financial Assistance for Education Expenses*. The briefs produced by the Advisory Committee do not require approval by the Conseil. As of 2014, this committee is no longer attached administratively to the Conseil; support is now provided by the Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche.

In 2000, as part of the secularization of Québec's education system, a landmark change was introduced to the structure of the Conseil: the Catholic and Protestant committees established with its incorporation in 1964 were abolished. The provision of religious affiliation in appointing members was also repealed, as was

the requirement of having the President and Vice-President profess different faiths. Henceforth, the Conseil would be headed by one President, and the number of its members would be reduced from 24 to 22, as it stands today.

The last major amendment to *An Act Respecting the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* was tabled in 2006, as part of an extensive reexamination of the relevance of government bodies in Québec. The Conseil would continue to carry out its mission, albeit with increased flexibility: It could now submit its report on the state and needs of education every two years rather than annually, and decide on the number and members of its commissions and committees through its own internal governance. As a result, the commissions are no longer established in the *Act* (s.24). (Nevertheless, in 2007, through its own governing bylaws the Conseil adopted the same five commissions as under the previous statute: the Commission on Preschool and Elementary Education, the Commission on Secondary Education, the Commission on College Education, the Commission on University Education and Research and the Commission on Adult Education and Continuing Education.)

Sections 9 and 10 of the *Act*—governing the role of the Conseil—were also amended slightly. What were previously called “duties” of the Conseil were now referred to as “functions.” Previously, these duties were to: a) give its opinion to the Minister of Education on any regulation the latter is required by law to submit to the Conseil; b) give its opinion to the Minister on any question or matter the latter submits to the Conseil; and c) submit an annual report to the Minister on its activities and the state and needs of education, to be tabled in the National Assembly. Section 9 was amended to read: “The function of the Council is to advise the Minister on any matter relating to education. For that purpose, the Council must report at least every two years to the Minister on the state and needs of education.” With regard to Section 10 of the *Act*—referring to the powers of the Conseil—very little was changed, except that henceforth the Conseil had to provide its advice on any draft regulation or any other matter that the Minister is required by law to submit to it (s.10.1, formerly found in s.9). The other three paragraphs in Section 10 and Subsection 10.2 (formerly found in s.10) refer to the powers vested in the Conseil to exercise its function: advise or make recommendations on any education-related matter; solicit or receive petitions; conduct or commission studies and investigations; and adopt internal management bylaws.

The primary mission of the Conseil is essentially the same today as the day on which it was created: to advise the Minister on educational matters, taking into consideration the gamut of education from kindergarten to university or adult education, and establishing the necessary links between the Government and the public.

The Role, Mandate and Functions of the Conseil

The preamble of *An Act Respecting the Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation* clearly states that: “[...] it is expedient [...] to establish [...] a think tank dedicated to the development of a global vision of education, a Conseil supérieur de l'éducation to collaborate with the [Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research] and to advise the Minister on any matter relating to education.”

Thus it is the Conseil's role to keep the Minister abreast of the state and needs of education, to support informed policy with critical analyses founded on research, to consult with both experts and front-line players and to deliberate with its own members, and to propose long-term changes to the education system. In doing so the Conseil ensures that citizens ultimately have a say and some influence in shaping government action in the area of education.

In this capacity, the Conseil operates according to the provisions outlined in its incorporating act, that is, by producing briefs either of its own initiative, when mandated by the Minister, or where the latter is legally obliged to do so in adopting or amending regulations.

In fulfilling this mandate, the Conseil is expected to update both the Minister and various stakeholders in the education system on evolving trends in education and—as it is empowered to make recommendations—advise on possible courses of action to take. This advice, however, is non-binding, as the Conseil can neither replace the Minister, nor dictate positions or policy for the latter to adopt. In other words, with the proposals and recommendations contained in its briefs, the Conseil has a power to influence but not mandate education policy, an authority that belongs to the Minister and the Government alone.

As such, the Conseil is an integral part of the Government's stewardship of education, even if it does operate at arm's length. All its members contribute to its work in this regard both as citizens and volunteers. They are not at the Conseil's table as experts, managers or representatives of special interests, rather as teachers, administrators, parents, students from different levels and sectors of the education system or members of civil society—individuals with deep roots in different communities and regions who belong to Québec's two largest linguistic groups, chosen precisely to reflect today's socio-cultural and educational diversity. They are asked to be representative without being official spokespersons, and are free to think for themselves. Indeed, the Conseil delivers an analysis on the state and needs of education from this citizen-based perspective rather than an expert or scientific

one—a perspective which, to be sure, does not rule out using the input of either experts or science, quite the contrary.

This perspective is not restricted to membership; it is also built on close ties that the Conseil maintains with education communities and the general public. The Conseil pays regular field visits to a different region of Québec each year to meet front line education players to openly solicit their views and concerns in their regions. (The Commissions have even closer ties with education communities.) In preparing its briefs, the Conseil enlists the participation of these players, gathering some of the material required to flesh out a specific issue. By using rigorous approaches and qualitative methods in its consultations, the Conseil finds itself well-positioned in the education communities. Being a good listener, however, does not mean simply echoing their concerns. The Conseil evaluates what is brought to its attention, comparing and contrasting it with existing research literature and institutional frameworks. Through the input of its members, the Conseil acts as a type of filter, testing the validity of these points of view prior to integrating the whole into a broad analysis from a citizen-based perspective over the medium to long term. This role of intermediary between civil society, education communities and ministerial authorities lends great legitimacy to the Conseil's work.

Ultimately, the Conseil fulfills its mission by exercising three complementary yet overlapping functions: *political*, *democratic* and *educational*.

Through its *political function*, the Conseil provides opinions and recommendations to the Minister for informed decision-making. It offers a balanced and realistic view of not only what is currently possible, but also what is feasible over the medium and long term. Its analyses—largely supported by an in-depth understanding of the state and needs of education—provide innovative insight into current matters and issues or emerging trends, guided by research drawing on both scholarly and experiential knowledge. Proposed guidelines and recommendations that can influence decisions appropriate to the context can then be addressed to the Minister and/or relevant education stakeholders. Throughout this process the Conseil strives to be rigorous in order to keep one and all informed.

Part of this rigour comes from continuous observation of what is new in education, both in Québec and around the world. The Conseil must keep abreast of the latest innovations and experiments elsewhere that could be replicated and applied to improve our own education system and ultimately benefit society as a whole. This involves forging ties and building networks with different experts and research centres, which the Conseil has done over the years, by establishing strong relationships with—among others—the Centre de transfert pour la réussite

éducative du Québec (CTREQ), the Consortium d’animation sur la persévérance et la réussite en enseignement supérieur (CAPRES), the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la formation et la profession enseignante (CRIFPE), the Conseil national d’évaluation du système scolaire (CNESCO) in France and the European Network of Education Councils (EUNEC). In doing so, the Conseil keeps its knowledge current and up to date, strengthening its ability to fully understand and anticipate trends in the near future. This role of observer is both indispensable and necessary, and is primarily carried out by the Conseil’s research team and assured by the professionals leading its different commissions.

In exercising its political function, the Conseil must remain both critical and neutral, as it is acting on behalf of the public rather than special interests. Keeping a critical distance from the latest headlines and not issuing opinions prior to any deliberation enable the Conseil to safeguard the critical assessment of its role as an advisory body for both policy makers and the general public. In doing so, the Conseil must seek consensus through dialogue among its members, who, it is worth reiterating, represent all people. This was clearly stated in the Conseil’s first annual report:

“Relieved of all administrative functions, the Conseil is free to devote itself to tasks related to forecasting, innovation, evaluation and critical assessment. It is responsible to keep education abreast of societal changes and must act as a link between the Ministry of Education and the public. These fundamental functions expressly stipulated by the *Act* make the Conseil a participatory body. [...]

“The Conseil is essentially an organization of structures ‘built on dialogue.’ [...]

“The Conseil is a meeting place where different and complementary experiences are shared. Until now, different stakeholder groups acted separately, each with its own voice. At the Conseil, opinions are expressed and debated openly in front of a group for the benefit of one and all and society in general; reciprocal contributions are nuanced, enriched and broadened by dialogue.” (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 1966, p.84, free translation).

Through its *democratic function*, the Conseil promotes building bridges between citizens, decision makers and education stakeholders including parents, teachers, students, staff and other players in the education community. Nearly 80 such individuals lend their civic engagement to volunteer in the deliberation and output of the Conseil and its bodies. This function is also present in the consultations with education players the Conseil undertakes in preparing its briefs and reports.

To exercise its democratic function, the Conseil must first ensure fair representation on its board and within its commissions and committees. Thus the 22 members of its board—appointed by the Government on the recommendation of the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research—are selected following consultations

with associations and organizations most representative of the students, parents, teachers, school administrators and different socioeconomic groups. In choosing board members the Conseil strives to strike a balance in terms of gender, region, Francophones and Anglophones, cultural communities and different levels and sectors of the education system. (To keep an open channel between the Conseil and the Ministère, the Deputy Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research sits as an *ex-officio* member on the board with no voting powers.) It is the board's responsibility to ensure that the Conseil is run as a "unified body" as envisioned by the Parent Commission and, duly vested with decision-making powers, it approves and adopts briefs and reports and coordinates the work of the Conseil's committee and commissions. (The chair of each of these bodies is also a member of the Conseil, thus ensuring links with the latter.) Ultimately, the board's representation of key education players and all levels and sectors of education provides the Conseil its comprehensive view of the Québec education system.

In addition to the current five commissions and committee on the state and needs of education, the Conseil may need to strike *ad hoc* committees to study specific issues, as it did recently to prepare a brief requested by the Minister on teaching science and technology in elementary and Secondary Cycle One (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2013b). Appointed by the Conseil after consultations with relevant stakeholder institutions and/or organizations, commission and committee members are to a certain extent authorities of their respective level or sector, and as such are a valuable source of experiential knowledge.

In preparing its briefs, the Conseil also exercises its democratic function by reaching out to these other education players and giving them a voice. These consultations can take the form of surveys, focus groups, or calls for submissions. The Conseil typically undertakes at least one field visit per brief to inquire first-hand about conditions on the ground, yet another form of bridge-building between itself, the Government and the community.

Moreover, to fulfill its mission, the Conseil counts on the support of a secretariat which has varied in size over the years—depending on need and available budgets—and has a current staff of around 25. The secretariat oversees the production of all the Conseil's briefs and reports. Although at the outset its primary role was to produce studies on a given topic starting with its own analyses and data—compiled internally or from the Ministère—due to the wealth of studies and research in the field of education today, it is increasingly carrying out reviews of literature instead.

In exercising its democratic function over the past 50 years, the Conseil has built a wide-ranging network of more than 100 partners in the field of education. As such, it has established many relationships with the Ministère, education networks, socioeconomic groups and Québec-wide organizations. These relationships have enabled the Conseil to strengthen its analyses, welcome suggestions on potential candidates for its committee and commissions, increase awareness of its role, and disseminate its thought as well as the outcomes of its deliberations and research. In doing so, the Conseil brings together players from the field of education and civil society in its work, in listening to their needs and concerns, fulfilling one of the key functions for which it was created.

Lastly, through its *educational function*, the Conseil proposes values, principles, situational analyses and courses of action, which it submits to various educational bodies and stakeholders for discussion and deliberation. It pays particular attention to ensuring the widest possible dissemination of its work both among these stakeholders and the general public, in the hope of contributing to public debate on education-related issues and exercising its influence with ministerial authorities, the Government and civil society.

To be influential, however, the Conseil must first and foremost ensure an efficient dissemination of its briefs and reports. (This overlaps its political function somewhat, as the content of these published works and the rigour with which they are produced imbue them with an influential power.) This in turn involves raising awareness, which is essentially an educational function. Raising awareness among the public means communicating the status of a given issue, proposed courses of action and recommendations to improve it.

Ultimately, it is important these works reach the greatest number of people possible, always with the aim of establishing fruitful links between the Government, the public and the Conseil. However, to ensure what is being recommended is understood and adopted by the relevant stakeholders, targeting concerned players in a given issue is an equally valid dissemination strategy, and one that bolsters the efficiency of communication.

This dissemination can take different forms: print, digital, press releases, presence, participating in or presenting at conferences or public events, presence in the media outside the release of the briefs. This in a few words is how the Conseil exercises its educational function—by taking its message as close as possible to the relevant education stakeholders and making sure it is understood.

CHAPTER 2

The relationship between the Conseil, research and experiential knowledge and how it influences public policy in education

This chapter outlines how the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation works and uses research and experiential knowledge to inform decision makers and education players, thus influencing public policy in education.

The importance of research in the work of the Conseil

During the first few decades of its existence, the Conseil carried out its work at a time of rising demand for research in education and the social sciences, partly driven by the nascent welfare state in Québec. The Conseil has been both a user and disseminator of knowledge ever since (even though today it utilizes and synthesizes scholarship more than it produces its own), using it to enrich both its own analyses and deliberation on public policy in education, in which it intends to participate by producing and disseminating its briefs. Indeed, these briefs achieve their legitimacy and moral weight not only for their analysis of issues based on broad public consultations, but also for the quality of the research used and the impartiality with which it is treated.

The Conseil thus puts research in the fields of social sciences and education to good use. It is compiled by staff as part of literature reviews and consultations with research monitoring networks, synthesized and applied to the issue under study, subject to formal consultation with university researchers both in Québec and abroad, and regularly kept up to date. Given the explosion of published scholarship today, it is both useful and prudent to frequently update research on a given topic, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to confirm what we know from what we do not.

Types of research used by the Conseil

In its briefs, the Conseil typically contextualizes issues with **historical research**. With 50 years of fruitful experience, it believes that regardless of the issue, it is always helpful to include a short history of any relevant public policies or actions, given that the issue is the subject of public debate and Government interest. Moreover, as long as the Conseil's audience welcomes new members—policy makers, senior officials, education players, who do not all come equipped with the

same knowledge of the recent past—the use of historical research (and how the Conseil played a role in this history) becomes all the more needed. Lastly, historical research can be used to track how Government action on a given issue has evolved over time, adding a temporal perspective to the Conseil’s briefs and further strengthening their value.

Comparative research is also of great importance to the Conseil’s work, as it serves several purposes. Firstly, having a good understanding of the education systems in which studies were produced is critical. As Québec is not a large producer of research in the field of education, the Conseil relies heavily on studies conducted elsewhere, typically English Canada, the United States, French-speaking European countries as well as the United Kingdom, Australia and Scandinavian countries. However, like all politics, research in the social sciences is anchored in a specific reality, and to fully interpret what it reveals on a given issue, it is always imperative to situate it in the context in which it was produced. For example, in preparing a brief on quality assurance in higher education (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 2012a), the Conseil first had to acquire a good working knowledge of the different types of institutional frameworks and regulatory mechanisms in U.S. universities to fully understand the role of accreditation bodies as regulatory tools in the American higher education “market,” a highly different context than that of Québec, where there is stronger regulation in place. Another recent example is found in its brief on the internationalization of college education (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 2013c), which compared several different strategies used to attract international students in Ontario as well as countries such as Australia, France and Sweden. The comparison revealed not only the specific strategies adopted by each, but more importantly that the quality and accessibility of the information related to the offer of international education were key in attracting foreign students.

Secondly, comparisons tend to widen the scope of an issue, compelling a broader definition, one more aligned with both local and global realities. Indeed, foreign studies can often provide a good perspective on our own domestic circumstances and history. For example, the *Report on the State and Needs of Education 2012–2014* curriculum and programs of study reforms in Québec elementary and secondary schools (developed in the 1990s and implemented over the past 15 years) includes an entire chapter devoted to comparable reforms undertaken in France and French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 2014b). In reading this chapter, it is clear that these reforms all shared comparable foundations, were controversial everywhere, that their implementation required some additional “tweaks” and corrective measures, and that not a single country had its compulsory education program locked in. Additionally, these reforms were partially dependent on factors that were not strictly curricular, such as the

organization of teachers' work, teachers' conceptions of professional autonomy, media attention to controversial education issues or changes in government. This comparison enabled the Conseil to better understand what Québec education players had been saying about our own curricular reform.

Thirdly, comparative research is an effective means of anticipating what is possible and, conversely, pitfalls or counterexamples to avoid, making it of particular interest to decision makers. To use a recent example, should Québec move ahead with its plan for full-day kindergarten for four-year-olds from disadvantaged areas, then any foreign experiment favourable to this plan or any international study demonstrating a positive impact on student learning would be welcomed by policy makers, insofar as this would strengthen the cognitive process of legitimization by evidence. In such cases, where there is a strong political need for this kind of legitimacy, the Conseil would proactively mitigate the use of its brief as a political tool by presenting conditions favourable to a successful implementation. In other words, although the Conseil might be in favour of kindergarten for four-year-olds, it would also caution policy makers of their responsibility to be prudent in its implementation, and avoid "botching" a good idea (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2012b).

Finally, using comparative research allows the Conseil to play a role of strategic monitoring of education policy. For all these reasons this type of research is of great use for an advisory body such as the Conseil, and an expertise that its staff is continually developing.

In addition to using historical and comparative research in its briefs to contextualize issues in time and space, the Conseil also seeks out **evaluative research**. This type of research can reveal expected or unexpected outcomes of a policy or practice using qualitative data (the views of education players) or quantitative data (evidence). This research is thoroughly assessed to pinpoint what can or cannot be claimed, what can or cannot be applied to or generalized for the Québec context, under what conditions, and so forth. At times, the Conseil uncovers scientific controversies that can spill over into professional or political arenas: In preparing a brief on quality services in early education, it came across a debate that was both scientific and political in nature, one that pitted advocates of early intervention and pre-school education for children from disadvantaged areas against proponents of global development and early childhood care and education approaches based on play (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2012b). These types of controversies tend to mobilize those directly concerned, compelling the Conseil and ultimately policy makers to take a stand to end the deadlock and reach consensus somewhere between the two extremes.

Another example illustrating the Conseil’s use of evaluative research in examining and illustrating an issue is found in its recent brief on improving the teaching of English in elementary school, particularly intensive English programs taught toward the end of this level (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 2014a). Learning languages is a contentious issue in Québec, a source of strongly polarized debate and views that are highly politicized. The Conseil could have prudently chosen to steer clear of this hot-button issue, however it forged ahead and took part in the debate, informing parent and teacher members of governing boards as the latter deliberated whether or not to include intensive English programs in their schools.

To examine this controversial issue, the Conseil consulted both researchers in the field of teaching second languages—who were unanimously in favour of this measure—and a body of international literature. This exercise proved useful. First, the country of origin of studies, as mentioned above, was relevant. For example, American studies on bilingual education in fact examined learning English as the *language of instruction* by students with an *immigrant background* (primarily Spanish-speaking), a wholly different context to that of a Francophone student who wishes to learn English in Québec. Second and more importantly, it was helpful in dispelling a number of common misconceptions, such as: when it comes to learning a language, children are like “sponges”; the earlier learning starts, the better; learning a second language can have a negative impact on first language skills; and French unilingualism protects Québec from assimilation. Lastly, this comparison also revealed newer approaches that broaden the issue for education players to consider not only individual bilingualism but ambient multilingualism associated with multicultural urban immigration.

The Conseil was able to conclude that, according to research and in the opinion of the experts consulted, intensive courses are indeed an effective way of learning a second language toward the end of elementary school, at a time when children already have acquired sufficient academic skills and can read in their mother tongue. However, certain conditions must be respected and consideration also needs to be given to the existing balance of language dynamics in Québec, which have been transformed by the recent influx of immigration and integration of children with immigrant backgrounds into urban French-speaking public schools. For most children in these schools, French is both the language of instruction and the second (if not the third) language. Caution and contextualization are therefore in order; there is no room for compulsory, standardized, one-size-fits-all measures.

In sum, the Conseil gleaned what the latest research had to say on learning English as a second language and studied it in depth so it could be applied to clarify Québec’s own context. This led it to view the issue as more than a purely

pedagogical matter, and acknowledge the presence of a political issue as well. In seeking a workable and balanced solution away from two polarizing extremes, the Conseil had done its homework well.

Although research may never be able to settle an educational issue, it is relatively easier for the Conseil to take a position when the evidence in certain areas is conclusive, for example: the negative impact of repeating a year, particularly at the elementary level; the positive value of preschool education; the importance of reading in academic progress, particularly among boys; the importance of quality feedback on student work; the significant impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on learning; the positive effect of educational equity and social diversity. Yet research is not always as conclusive in every aspect of education policy objectives and practices. In such cases the Conseil must therefore work not only in terms of the state of the research but also on the beliefs of education players and its own members.

The Conseil's brief on homework in elementary school (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2010) is interesting in this regard. Although studies seem to suggest assigning homework has very little impact at the elementary level, the same cannot be said for the secondary level. What can the Conseil say to education communities and policy makers about a widespread practice (assigned by more than 90% of Québec elementary and secondary teachers on a regular basis) surrounded by very strong opinions (depending on whether one is a student or a parent) which appears to no longer fit with the lifestyle of the modern family (where both parents work, get home late, and don't want to argue with their kids over homework during those few short hours at the end of the day)? To answer this question it first reviewed the state of research and what educators had to say about the different types of homework and lessons, their purposes and objectives, methods, expected outcomes and successful conditions, use in the classroom, evaluation, and so on. Second, it reformulated this analysis grid into questions a decision maker (e.g. minister, teacher, or governing board) establishing a policy on homework would need to ask prior to making a decision. Here again the Conseil did its work in a meaningful way, not by providing an opinion based research alone, but rather by leading stakeholders to debate a seemingly mundane issue (albeit one of great importance to those involved!) intelligently and democratically. This brief is one of the Conseil's most popular (and most downloaded) in recent years.

In addition to historical, comparative and evaluative research, the Conseil always tries to integrate **theoretical and conceptual research** to enhance its examination of an issue. As it plays a role as a forward-thinking observer, it needs to keep abreast of the latest research, which is useful in revitalizing its analyses and injecting a fresh

perspective in studying issues that reflect complex realities. For example, in preparing a brief on adult literacy (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2013a), it was attracted to newer models centred more on building socioeducational environments likely to foster retention of literacy skills than on those focused on individual shortcomings. Similarly, in the area of special education, the Conseil is currently moving away from the dominant psychomedical intervention model to explore newer, more innovative ones such as the universal design for learning. Some of these go beyond the analytical, as they include some normative elements that can be turned into working models for education professionals. Given that the Conseil reaches the community of practitioners, the theoretical and practical value of these models merits serious consideration on its part.

Lastly, from time to time the Conseil may need to use **specific research**. As the Ministère is required by law to collaborate with the Conseil, it must make available any data the latter requires for its work. Given the systemic nature of the Conseil's mandate, any data the Ministère collects through its audits of educational institutions on student paths in the youth and adult sectors would be not only useful but necessary in investigating issues associated with the duration of studies, student retention, integration in the labour market and graduation gaps between different social groups. Building this kind of database is a demanding and expensive undertaking, one that only the Government is currently in a position of being able to do. As not everyone has access to this kind of data, the fact that the Ministère is legally obligated to collaborate in the Conseil's work is indeed quite significant. That the Conseil is required to publicly release briefs that include this type of research is also meaningful.

The importance of experiential knowledge in the work of the Conseil

Members of the Conseil and its commissions come from every corner of education and every walk of life. They bring with them a wealth of knowledge of and experience in education, either as students, teachers, administrators, parents, adult educators or university researchers. This experience varies, depending on individual cognitive patterns, values, generally strong views and—at times—sectional interests, which each member brings to the Conseil's table, shares and learns to put in context through the relational regulation of the group. Thus although experience may not be formally solicited, it is often tacitly invoked to add legitimacy to the views expressed.

Discussions and deliberations at the Conseil are useful means for putting this experience into perspective, and compare it not only to that of others, but also with what research has to say about the issue at hand. Herein lies one of the great benefits in participating in the work of the Conseil—developing an ability to rebuild

the meaning of one's individual experience within a broader framework which allows a more objective view. This can often lead to a change in cognitive patterns (broadening, enrichment, differentiation) in the individual reformulating or updating views and beliefs, and perhaps even being able to objectively step back from sectional interests. In this broadening of experience, developing a more systemic vision of education becomes a valuable asset for one and all.

Experiential knowledge is one of the key reference points for all deliberation at the Conseil, and acts as a sort of filter or test indicator in the situational analysis of an issue and any subsequent positions taken. The analysis must therefore include the relevant experience present at the table, and any position taken by the Conseil must take into account the values and beliefs of its members. However—and this is fundamental—coupling, aligning and hybridizing different types of knowledge must be done through cross-referencing what consultations with front-line players have revealed, what research has corroborated or not, and what appears useful and relevant to tell political leaders when the time comes for the Conseil to express its opinion publicly (assessment of relevance). In other words, it is not enough for the members of the Conseil to agree among themselves and speak with a decontextualized, universal voice; they must also be ready to bring to the table, if only at the time of deliberation, their own views and beliefs, and compare them with the outcomes of research and consultation. It goes without saying that this is not always easy.

The Conseil is in fact fairly representative of the education communities and civil society. This means that members come with their own strong ideas and views on some controversial education issues. The same can be said for the members of its commissions, who are even more connected with their respective level or sector of the education system than board members. Although the Conseil's staff are not involved in the deliberation process (as their expertise lies more in compiling and analyzing research and consulting stakeholders), they too hold views and beliefs that can only influence the process one way or another.

Thus a certain dynamic prevails at the Conseil, a productive tension, if you will, between the expression of views and beliefs on the one hand, and the deliberation and consideration of research on the other. This tension will vary depending on who is sitting at the table and/or the topic at hand. To be sure, the more controversial the topic, the more challenging it is to find the right tension. The closer that views, opinions, research and consultations are aligned, the more this topic provides the Conseil with a clear position and the ultimate message conveyed carries a strong sense of values and beliefs.

We can thus see how research, when combined with experiential knowledge, can be a powerful means of acquiring a perspective and being objective, and serve as a point of reference and a benchmark. The meeting of these two worlds is at the heart of all deliberations at the Conseil.

A third kind of relationship now comes into play, with policy makers and the policy-making process.

The Conseil's relationship with policy makers and the policy-making process

The Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research and—more broadly—policy makers may be the official recipients of the Conseil's work, but in contributing to the policy-making process the latter strives just as assiduously to reach senior officials at the Ministère, education communities and their leaders as well as the media and civil society in general.

The Conseil may not be stacked with *bona fide* experts on specific issues, however the briefs it produces are nevertheless well-respected for their credibility and high quality. For this reason, these documents carry a moral weight and the ability to legitimize (or delegitimize) future policy decisions. This does not mean that political authorities must immediately act on their recommendations, but rather acknowledge them—at times publicly, if and when questioned by the media.

To understand how the Conseil takes a position with regard to political authority, it would be useful to describe it as a second type of tension analogous to the productive tension discussed above—in this case a tension between the relative importance of *specific* recommendations versus *broader* and *more forward-looking* situational analyses and general guidelines. The place of the Conseil's work in relation to political authority tends to oscillate between these two opposites. Should it simply say yes or no to a specific measure and recommend a clearly-defined action, or leave the Government enough manoeuvring room for an appropriate and adapted response to a complex issue that the Conseil has primarily sought to define and understand? It is worth noting that its reports on the state and needs of education tabled in the National Assembly traditionally do not include specific recommendations on issues, but rather situational analyses and general guidelines.

This effectively describes two extremes of policy analysis: the *instrumental* (centred on solving specific issues) and the *cognitive* (based on global views and cognitive-axiological frameworks that can inform issues over the medium to long term). To be sure, both approaches are always present and significant, and the degree of tension

between the two will naturally vary depending on the matter or issue at stake. Using only the first approach would risk tilting the Conseil in the direction of purely technical problem-solving (as championed by the current Anglo-American “evidence-based” policy and practice). The second is also interested in arriving at concrete solutions, but it reflects the concerns of education players as well as the need for reality checks.

The Conseil’s relationship to education policy will also vary depending on the interpretation of the policy-making process itself. Should the Conseil deem it relevant that a new issue be added to the agenda, then a broad examination of it stands a greater chance of being viewed as a useful contribution to the process. Conversely, when policies put into place to address an existing issue are encountering difficulties, the Conseil’s is likely to shift the focus of its examination towards contingencies related to the implementation. In both cases, the Conseil must analyze its relationship to policy makers and specific education policies from a strategic standpoint.

The importance of context in the work of the Conseil

Several changes have shaped the contexts in which the Conseil has worked, in recent years as well as today.

The first of these relates to the market of ideas in public policy in education, which is swiftly changing and becoming increasingly competitive both intellectually and politically. Indeed, over the first few decades of its existence as a think tank organization and advisory body in education, the Conseil stood practically alone, unchallenged for the attention of decision makers.

Today the picture is quite different: many Québec-based, Canadian and international think tanks are actively engaged in pursuing this market; major unions and employers’ associations are busy conducting and/or commissioning research and producing position papers supporting specific education policies. For example, Canada’s Fraser Institute and its Québec affiliate, the Montreal Economic Institute, have had a real impact in recent decades, as has Montréal’s Centre for Interuniversity Research and Analysis of Organizations (CIRANO). Universities now have their own centres for excellence in education and its contributing fields, and are producing robust knowledge for policy makers and education professionals. Moreover, the relevance of this knowledge—as well as measuring its impact—has become a key funding criterion for grant agencies. These agencies in turn are governed by Québec and Canadian policies on research, both of which value defined and quantifiable outcomes in terms of social and economic innovation. At the

international level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Bureau of Education (IBE) are also three influential players in public policy in education.

Competition in this field today is fiercer than ever, and while it can contribute to giving a greater place to education in societal debates, it can also “politicize” educational issues by bringing very specific perspectives of the world, special interests and political agendas to the table, often enlisting the research or science to achieve an agenda of steering the public debate. This scenario might offer clarity, but it can also be dangerous, as the research or science risks (or is) being used as a political tool.

Indeed, boundaries are becoming increasingly porous, not only between the different types of intellectual output, but also between independent and objective situational analyses of an issue and the active promotion of a position favourable to a specific policy; between echoing special interest or advocacy groups and contributing to define the possible limits of the common good; between being one of many lobbies and offering something in the market of ideas that can transcend and move past sectional interests.

In this increasingly crowded market, the last few decades have also seen a rise in the dominance of economic and management thought. While the social sciences and the critical debate they can support may not have left the room, they certainly no longer have the floor, with the end result that our vision of society and education could be reduced to a market-driven metaphor and a quest for efficiency and effectiveness.

In this transformation, the Conseil may appear out of step if not irrelevant in an environment that is moreover increasingly politicized. Indeed, it is not always easy to take the necessary time to examine an issue objectively, far from polarizing positions, and be recognized as relevant by the public.

As competition spills over national borders, it contributes in some measure to the internationalization of education policy as well. Québec and Canada are part of international networks, members of global organizations that produce studies and reports (notably evaluations) and structure educational agendas around a vision of education tailored to the knowledge economy and the production of the knowledge and competencies it demands. In this new world order, education is no longer viewed as an institution guided by an educational mission and specific values, but merely an efficient and effective system.

Another major change in the field of education revolves around the rise in popularity in both the evaluation of students and educational staff and the ranking of academic and research institutions. These are typical components of results-based management, and are seen as requiring constant and often immediate improvement. In fact, evaluations can effectively modify the timeframe of public action, given that they are recurrent and regular—every three years—and ministerial authorities can feel pressured to act swiftly. When evaluations appear negative, the clock starts ticking, and taking the necessary time for an in-depth study of an issue may be interpreted as a delaying tactic, inaction or even stasis. Needless to say, this view is contrary to that of the Conseil, but making the jump from it to thinking that the Conseil, through its work processes, is putting the brakes on the necessary evolution of the system is a short step some players might be one day tempted to take.

All these changes have effectively resulted in the Conseil's staff having to take in a staggering amount of differing types of intellectual output. They must therefore continue to treat it with a critical and open mind, and constantly consider the position taken by the Conseil in an environment that has undergone a major change over the past 50 years, one in which its legitimacy is less firmly anchored.

This transformation is also calling into question the existence of Québec's welfare state, which dates back to the creation of the Conseil, has undergone several different retoolings and has recently been subject to withering criticism. There have even been calls to bid *adieu* to the "Québec model." The systemic planning of the '60s, '70s and '80s is now being replaced with a more targeted and strategic one based on mandatory results for every governmental body—including the Conseil.

This movement toward a leaner and more efficient model of government is drifting away from the spirit that guided the creation of Québec's Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. However, the autonomy and uniqueness of the Conseil's contribution—providing an analysis of issues from a citizen-based perspective, a systemic vision over the medium and long term, maintaining tension between extremes—remain fundamental. This is what lets the Conseil stay if not completely above the fray, at least some distance from it, and avoid being demoted to just another education player as it continues to seek a definition of the common good in education built on stakeholder perspectives. This objectivity is also important inasmuch as it allows the Conseil if not to protect itself at least guard itself somewhat against being reduced to a political tool.

Building the Model Together

In examining the relationship between science and policy, three models can be established based on literature: the *intellectual critic*, the *expert*, and the *informed debater*. The first keeps a great distance from the political in a firm, outward stance that leads to a sharp critical vision calling for transcendent values and denouncing contradictions of power. In this model, science supports a committed view of a political and social order that needs changing. The second model, popular today in Anglo-American countries, has a strong affinity for corroborative science that produces conclusive evidence for politicians who wish to resolve issues the “expert” has contributed to identifying, analyzing and turning into the objects of public action. Lastly, the third model rests on sustained dialogue between the producers of public policy—decision makers, senior officials, influential stakeholders, media, and users—in building together a framework broad enough to encompass the issues, the shared consideration of the representations and theories in action of one and all, an agenda and viable courses of action.

One could not be faulted for thinking that the Conseil’s work would be inspired by the third model, which is more interactive and respectful of the uniqueness of two worlds. Indeed, the Conseil is a unique intellectual critic and political player. It uses available science just as it does experiential knowledge. It works in collaboration with political authorities while refusing to take a supporting or opposing position. It cohabits a space where legitimacy comes from its independence (not only from political players, but also education stakeholders), its ability to listen and synthesize the expectations of civil society, as well as its ability to observe and work in the medium to long term (thus avoiding the snares of politicization or instrumentalization associated with short-term issues).

As an essential part of the Conseil’s work is to build together with education players intelligent and forward-thinking models that can shed light on issues and open the way for action, its role is indeed more of an informed debater, contributing to a collective dialogue between all stakeholders and guiding their ownership of change. As such the work of the Conseil remains not only useful, but necessary.

Conclusion

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation began serving education in Québec in May of 1964. The 2014–2015 year marks its 50th anniversary. The present document has traced its journey, described its work, and revealed how it has been able to evolve and adapt to five decades of major change in education, society, government and representative groups. In the beginning the Conseil was instrumental in building an education system accessible to all, watching over the democratic participation of key education players and consistently reminding all involved that the mainstay of this system must be the teacher/student relationship and the will to lead the greatest number of learners to educational success.

The Conseil has since moved away from implementation and operational matters to focus independently on studying mid- to long-term educational issues. As the education system evolved and became more complex, the Conseil was there every step of the way, accompanying policy makers and stakeholders alike throughout the inevitable renewals and adaptations compelled by societal change, always advising on future directions, cautioning of pitfalls and recommending action. This work was accomplished by being attuned to education players, and strengthened by knowledge gleaned from research in the fields of education and the social sciences as well as the valuable experiential knowledge and deliberation of its own members.

What does the future hold for the Conseil? No-one can say for certain. However, competition between lobby groups and political players in the market of ideas will likely intensify, putting intense pressure on policy makers to find solutions—solutions that, if solely based on international comparisons, may not be always applicable here, given regional differences in cultures and values. Similarly, the ever-growing call for effectiveness and efficiency will undoubtedly lead to increased demand for accountability, a road at the end of which we may no longer be able to see the fundamental aspects of the mission of education. For these reasons, the Conseil will remain a viable player throughout the education networks, continuing to build bridges between research and action, between policy and day-to-day practice. Its role as a co-builder of public policy in a world of polarized tension appears now all the more vital than ever, not merely for the sake of reaching consensus, but mostly to ensure longevity and move past the controversies that are as inevitable in education as harsh winters are in Québec. In sum, for our education system to continue to evolve in a just and equitable way and to provide educational success for the greatest number of people, it is the will of the Conseil to continue in its role of advisor to the Minister, a role as relevant today and tomorrow as it was on the day it was created.

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