

## What Is an Alternative School in Quebec?

There are 31 alternative public schools operating in French in Quebec: 28 at the primary level and 3 at the secondary level. They are attended by nearly 6,000 students across the province, and approximately another 1,000 are waiting to get in.

The pedagogical approach of these schools is socio-constructivist: that is, each of their students is responsible for building his or her own understanding of the content and the competencies contained in the Quebec school curriculum. Guided by their classroom teacher, working in large and small groups and sometimes on their own, alternative school students are led to realize their full potential in ways that respect their individual learning rhythm and styles. Class discussions on behavioural issues build respect for the rights of others and confidence in one's ability to express oneself in front of a group.

The students' performance is evaluated, not in relation to that of any other student, but against benchmarks for the content or competency being learned: the objective is to show students their areas of strength and those needing improvement – on a continuous basis over a cycle of two years or longer. Each school has its own version of a “report card”/portfolio that captures the student's self-evaluation, as well as that of his teachers and of his parents. The sections dealing with personal growth and social interaction are considered as important as those on Math and French.

By the end of elementary school, alternative school pupils know how to manage their time, how to plan their studies, how to find and use information, and how to interact with others. They also know a lot of “stuff” or content, in particular through the many projects they have carried out in areas of their own personal interest. In short, they are excellent, self-directed, autonomous and well-adjusted learners. By the end of high school, their exploration of a wide range of fields has enabled them to discover their assets, talents and real interests, and they have the self-esteem and decision-making processes to take these into account when choosing a first career and/or further studies.

Alternative schools achieve these results because they are a partnership between the students' teachers and parents. When the latter apply for their child's admission into such a school, they commit themselves in writing to being involved in the school – in its overall orientation, in decisions affecting its day-to-day activities and in being part of those activities. They may find themselves in a classroom, helping a teacher with a small group needing extra help in writing texts, or with another group honing their math skills by playing chess. They may serve on the Pedagogical or some other Committee, or on the school's Governing Council. The latter brings together the principal and representatives of the parents, teachers and other staff and, at the secondary level, students. It is responsible for setting the guidelines that govern the day-to-day functioning of the school.

Finally, all of these schools are connected through four Networks – one each for primary school principals, teachers and parents, and a fourth one that brings together the parents, teachers and principals of the alternative secondary schools. Under a Board of Directors consisting of representatives of all four groups, the partners work together to support each other, to improve what already works well, and to help groups trying to start new alternative schools in those areas where none yet exists. While Quebec's alternative schools have thus graduated thousands of people who have gone on to become successful citizens/parents/workers/community leaders, their experimentation and efforts at continuous improvement have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the overall success of Quebec's school system.