



## Toronto Sun: Religious education out, 'spiritual animators' in at Quebec schools

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MONTREAL -- Catholic and Protestant instruction was removed from Quebec schools more than 15 years ago but nuns and priests are now replaced by "spiritual community animators," some of whom lead students in meditation and rhythmic breathing sessions.

The spirituality program, entrenched in the province's Education Act, has raised red flags in the Catholic church, which has publicly opposed the Parti Quebecois's plans to ban religious symbols among school workers and other bureaucrats.

The PQ abolished religious school boards in 1997, the last time it was in power, as part of a plan to implement what it calls "state neutrality" on the question of religion.

All boards were ordered to hire spiritual animators in 2000 to run anti-bullying campaigns, organize humanitarian efforts and "focus on young people's search for meaning," according to an education ministry directive.

In a 2006 report, entitled *Developing the Inner Life and Changing the World*, the ministry said its activities are complementary to religion and "do not present any particular belief as being superior."

Among the spirituality program's "areas of operation" are "interiority, silence and meditation."

Elizabeth Pellicone leads students in meditation sessions at the English Montreal School Board and says most of her colleagues do the same.

QMI Agency observed one session last week at a north-end elementary school. Pellicone rang a bell while a group of Grade 2 students sat quietly, hands on their desks.

She says meditation has a particularly powerful effect on kindergarten and Grade 1 students.

"They pick it up quite easily and quite quickly," she said. "They say they felt 'the sound was travelling around my head or I was lifting off my chair'."

"They were having one of those -- not out-of-body experiences -- but one of those experiences where their mind is so focused on something that they're not paying attention to anything else."

Pellicone denied her teachings amounted to New Age instruction.

"I don't see it as religious," she said. "I see it as spiritual and I see a difference between the two."

She defined spirituality as "this sense that all human beings ... have an essence. And that we are connected by an invisible thread that binds all humans together."

Another animator, in a report to another Montreal school board, said she leads students in rhythmic breathing sessions where children are asked to count their breaths.

The school board was told that "the breath is the centre we can turn to when the going gets rough."

Parents have the right to opt their children out of the Quebec spirituality program, which is not part of the core curriculum.

**"Ability to opt out is absolutely key," said Andrea Mrozek, director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.**

**"In certain circumstances, in the province of Ontario, for example, they have said, 'No, you can't take your child out of this or that course'."**

**As for Quebec's claim that its spiritual program is religiously neutral, Mrozek is skeptical.**

**"You can't actually teach these sorts of things in a vacuum," Mrozek said. "Having removed (religion) entirely, they can't now start to insert some post-modern pseudo-spiritual equivalent."**

Quebec's education ministry declined to comment on its spiritual guidelines and instead referred calls to the school boards.

#### QUEBEC "SPIRITUAL LIFE" GUIDELINES (SELECTED)

- To find one's inner source, the thirst for life
- Situate one's life in relation to time, space and the absolute
- Become familiar with interiority, silence and meditation
- To be aware of one's inner life, one's spiritual dimension
- Seek the meaning of life through others ... "through nature, science, etc."

#### QUEBEC RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

- Spiritual animators "serve as a defence against indoctrination and fundamentalist thinking"
- Religious activities are "not organized very often" and only in "exceptional" circumstances"
- Must have "educational usefulness"
- Religious activities can't "impose ideas and practices" on students
- Can't present a belief as "superior to another or necessary for self-fulfilment"
- Cannot be a "structured program whose specific goal is to develop a faith"

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