



## Meet the English Montreal School Board elections candidates

### Description

## Julien Feldman, candidate with Team Joe Ortona for Ward 3 – Westmount/Southwest Montreal/downtown Montreal east to University Street

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On September 9, candidates for **Ward 3** in the **English Montreal School Board elections** were invited by WestmountMag.ca to submit a text describing their platform for free publication, on a first-come, first-served basis. The articles are unedited and presented in their original format.

Here is the third article of the series, submitted by **Julien Feldman, candidate with Team Joe Ortona**.

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As your school board commissioner campaigning for re-election to the English school board, I've already knocked on hundreds of doors across Westmount, Downtown, St. Henri and Pointe St. Charles.

Many constituents still know me as the English school board's patient, persistent corruption fighter who helped usher in new leadership at the EMSB – or just the dad in the saga of his daughter's own campaign to bring composting culture to the school board's largest cafeterias.

With the election of the CAQ and the emergence of the global pandemic, my role as a commissioner has changed dramatically. After a long period of internal challenges, today we face external threats. COVID-19 is a virus that threatens tens of thousands of unvaccinated students and their families; Bill 96, Bill 21 and Bill 40 are serious legal threats to our community's future.

Here's what hangs in the balance: Montreal's English school board is not only Quebec's most successful public school system, it's also an essential part of Montreal's economic machinery, underpinning the dynamic, bilingual urban workforce of the City's future.



There are two English school boards – one pre-pandemic, receding into the past and the other one a vigorously dynamic post-pandemic organization rising to meet external threats – with new leaders and a brand new chairman, Joe Ortona.

Team Joe Ortona is a cohesive team of parent activists, now school commissioners, committed to the future of an essential community institution serving the children and young families of our diverse community.

As the Delta variant takes hold in the latest surge of the global pandemic, the main issue weighing on the minds of parents and grandparents I've met on their front steps is: "Are the children safe when they go to school?" Well, eighteen months into the COVID crisis, what we've learned is that we can't simply shut down public schools – or rely on computer learning.

As a commissioner, it's always been my focus that day in and day out, our decisions must remain squarely on our mission – opening our doors every day, supporting our families, our students, our teachers and staff – tens of thousands of people depending on common sense prevailing. It was no different during the pandemic. Despite the rapidly changing environment of the last year and a half, that's been the primary objective of the council of commissioners: keeping schools operating – and operating safely – ensuring that our senior administrators work closely with Montreal public health guidelines, following the science.

Many people still recall a year ago, how commissioners debated the board's few options as the second surge mounted – we quickly moved to action: rushing a \$2 million emergency installation of mechanical air purifiers in every student classroom across the Island of Montreal – rejecting Premier François Legault's erroneous claims that air quality is irrelevant in protecting children and staff – and their families – from the spread of COVID-19.

Later on last spring, there was a groundswell of opposition to government orders to lift crucial health safety measures during the third surge – opposition that spread from Westmount High, to Roslyn, Westmount Park, James Lyng and St. Gabriel schools.

I asked Westmount High to convene an emergency governing board meeting on Zoom – and wrote the council of commissioners resolution adopted at council rejecting the Premier's orders. Our policy quickly spread across Quebec, forcing the government to reverse course.

Our back-to-school challenge in recent weeks was getting tens of thousands of students and their teachers back in class while ensuring their health and safety – and their families as well. This will remain our top priority until a sense of normalcy returns.

We took all of our decisions locally, in the belief that every family and all parents deserve to be confident that we are serious about protecting their children. In doing so, we used the precious constitutional right of linguistic minority school boards across Canada – exercising exclusive management control of their institutions – a right accorded by the Supreme Court of Canada decades ago as part of s.23 of the Charter of Rights – one that we prize and intend to fight to preserve as it comes under attack by aggressive populists like Premier Legault.

Even as the pandemic eventually recedes, however, everyone must be clear-eyed about a new cultural reality in Quebec – in Bill 96, we're now facing a different kind of challenge as a community – one that requires skillful, careful and thoughtful representatives with experience overseeing the defence of our public institution. Fundamentally, the role also requires bold leadership and teamwork.

In my role as commissioner, since 2019, I organized the English board's strategy in our challenge to Bill 21's constitutionality – a law that violates the English school board's right to recruit and manage its thousands of teachers.

I also led public hearings on Bill 21 and later, the council of commissioner debate that concluded with a vote to



proceed with the English board's lawsuit against the government, which our lawyers won last year in Quebec Superior Court. The court victory sparked Premier Legault's usual anger and subsequent name-calling and retaliation.

Our efforts were rewarded when Superior Court Justice Marc-André Blanchard ruled in the school board's favour. Not only did the judge find Bill 21 discriminatory, he upheld the English school board's immunity to the Notwithstanding Clause, a rule that today remains solid as a rock – meaning the law can't be used as a weapon against thousands of our professional staffers.

With powerful Bill 21 jurisprudence in hand, the council's lawyers were also successful in obtaining an injunction to block Bill 40, a law to abolish English school boards outright. The law's main objective is crushing dissent, but it's a blatant and deliberate violation of s.23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights, yet another effort by the Quebec government to test our resolve.

During the current campaign – at every door and with every phone call, the community is speaking up, expressing unanimous disapproval of Premier Legault's outrageous antics during the federal election campaign, attacking the English school board.

Voters are also sorely disappointed at federal leaders' growing and dangerous indifference to the civil rights of minorities – not only linguistic minorities in Quebec, but across Canada.

It was also a shock that casual shrugs were the only thing that met Bloc leader Blanchet's demand, during the federal leaders debate, for a promise to block the English school board's access to the courts to defend our Charter rights. Sometimes it appears our democracy is slipping away, leaving a Charter-free zone bereft of freedoms we take for granted.

In fact, last week I arrived at one constituent's front door on Grosvenor below Sherbrooke St. when she exclaimed: "The National Assembly has just voted to condemn Joe Ortona and the English school board for criticizing Bill 96!" I was shocked. Of course, in the current environment, it was not so hard to believe.

In this election, I'm allied with members of the EMSB's brand new council of commissioners, a team of seasoned parents at the core of Team Joe Ortona. In the last year, we successfully turned the page on the old EMSB and ushered in an all-new new senior management that is transforming the English school board.

Today, we're also leading the Anglo community, winning historic constitutional challenges, successfully stopping Quebec in its tracks with its unconstitutional laws. There is little wonder that Premier Legault is trying so hard to stop us!

Members of the new council are battle-hardened after their experience fending off the premier's obsessive attacks against the English school board – but brimming with the confidence that comes with a winning streak of successful constitutional court challenges.

Today, I'm asking you to play a personal role in supporting Team Joe Ortona by voting to continue supporting me as your school commissioner.

Please vote for Julien Feldman on Sept. 26.

Julien Feldman  
School Commissioner, Ward 3

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Feature image: courtesy of Julien Feldman

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### Category

1. Opinion
2. Politics

### Tags

1. candidate for school commissioner
2. English Montreal School Board elections
3. Julien Feldman
4. Ward 3

### Date Created

September 2021