THE POSITION STATEMENT OF THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING CATHOLIC COUNCIL ON THE PLAN TO BAN RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Submitted by

The English-Speaking Catholic Council

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Position Statement of the English-Speaking Catholic Council (ESCC)

The English-Speaking Catholic Council (ESCC) strongly opposes the Parti Québécois government's proposed legislation to prohibit elementary school students from wearing conspicuous religious symbols, including hijabs, kippahs, turbans, crosses, and other visible expressions of faith in Quebec's public schools.

While Quebec has long engaged in thoughtful discussions regarding secularism and the role of religion in public institutions, this proposal crosses a troubling line by targeting children. It shifts the debate from state neutrality to the regulation of personal religious expression among some of Quebec's youngest citizens.

The ESCC believes this measure is unnecessary, divisive, and fundamentally inconsistent with the values of freedom, inclusion, and respect that should underpin our educational system.

A Solution in Search of a Problem

The government's proposal is being advanced despite repeated warnings from educators and school administrators that religious symbols are not a significant issue in Quebec classrooms.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association has accurately described the proposal as "a solution in search of a problem." The absence of evidence demonstrating a widespread challenge raises serious questions about why the government has chosen to prioritize this issue while schools continue to struggle with staffing shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and deteriorating infrastructure.

When public policy seeks to solve a problem that does not meaningfully exist, the risk is that it creates new problems where none previously existed.

Children Should Not Be the Target of Ideological Debates

Education Minister Joël Arseneau has stated that the government's education platform is "non-negotiable" and that the ban fulfills an election commitment. However, fulfilling a campaign promise does not absolve a government of its responsibility to listen to educators, parents, legal experts, and affected communities.

Children do not wear religious symbols to advance political agendas. For many families, these symbols reflect deeply held beliefs, cultural traditions, and personal identities. Restricting their use sends a deeply troubling message that certain forms of religious expression are unwelcome in Quebec society.

The ESCC rejects the notion that a child wearing a hijab, turban, kippah, or cross/crucifix undermines social cohesion or the educational mission of public schools.

An Unprecedented Coalition of Concern

Significantly, opposition to this proposal extends across religious, cultural, and political lines.

Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and Muslim leaders have all expressed concerns that the restrictions could effectively exclude some children from the public education system. The National Council of Canadian Muslims has condemned the proposal and warned that it would disproportionately impact religious minorities.

The breadth of this opposition should give legislators pause. When communities with diverse beliefs and traditions unite in concern over a proposed law, it is worth asking whether the legislation is truly serving the public good.

Threatening Inclusion and Social Cohesion

Premier Paul St-Pierre Plamondon has defended the proposal by arguing that schools should be spaces where children interact without visible distinctions based on religion, comparing the measure to school uniform requirements.

The ESCC strongly disagrees.

School uniforms are designed to create common standards of dress while accommodating fundamental freedoms. Religious symbols are not fashion accessories. They are expressions of conscience, identity, and belief that are protected by both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

True inclusion is not achieved by asking children to conceal who they are. It is achieved by teaching children how to live respectfully alongside those who may be different from them.

A pluralistic society does not erase differences. It learns to welcome them.

Risks to Families and School Communities

School officials have already expressed concern that some parents may withdraw their children from public schools if such restrictions are adopted.

This outcome would undermine rather than strengthen Quebec's educational system. Public schools are among the most important places where young people learn civic values, mutual respect, and social belonging. Policies that drive families away from public education weaken opportunities for dialogue and understanding.

Rather than building unity, this proposal risks increasing mistrust between schools, families, and communities.

The Wrong Priority at the Wrong Time

The ESCC is particularly concerned that the government is choosing to focus on religious attire while many Quebec families face pressing and urgent realities:

- Rising housing and rental costs.
- Inflation and the growing cost of living.
- Teacher recruitment and retention challenges.
- Aging and deteriorating school infrastructure.
- Increasing mental health concerns among children and youth.
- Poverty, homelessness, and social exclusion affecting vulnerable families.

Even Québec solidaire, despite holding different views on many issues, has argued that government attention would be better directed toward staffing shortages and improving school facilities rather than policing what children wear to class.

Quebecers deserve solutions to the challenges that directly affect students' learning and well-being, not symbolic battles that deepen social divisions.

Religious Freedom is a Fundamental Right

Freedom of religion is a cornerstone of Canadian democracy. It protects the ability of individuals and families to live according to their beliefs and to express those beliefs peacefully in public life.

The ESCC believes parents, not governments, should have the primary responsibility for guiding the religious formation and identity of their children.

Any restriction on religious expression must meet a high threshold of necessity and demonstrable public benefit. To date, the government has failed to demonstrate that such a threshold exists.

The English-Speaking Catholic Council calls upon the Quebec government to abandon this proposed ban and engage in meaningful consultation with educators, families, faith communities, civil liberties organizations, and human rights advocates.

Quebec's diversity is not a threat to be managed. It is a strength to be embraced.

Schools should prepare young people to live in a society marked by differences in culture, language, and belief. They should teach respect, understanding, and dialogue, not exclusion and conformity.

The ESCC stands firmly against any legislation that restricts the peaceful religious expression of children. No child should be made to choose between their faith and their place in a Quebec classroom. A society confident in its values has no reason to fear a child wearing a symbol of faith.