

November 4, 2020

SUBJECT: FNEEQ-CSN REPORT TO CAUT COUNCIL

The FNEEQ-CSN represents 35,000 members from 101 unions in Quebec, of which 90% are in higher education: 45 CEGEP unions representing 85% of all teachers in the college network, and 12 unions at 10 universities representing 85% of contract instructors (lecturers, tutors, senior lecturers).

There is no doubt that 2020 will remain engraved in our memory, as the degree of upheaval that it has brought to the world of education, both here and elsewhere, is unlike anything that we have experienced before. In Quebec, the date of March 13, 2020, is sure to become a historic milestone—on this day, Premier Legault announced a two-week closure of all daycare centres, schools, colleges and universities, thus proclaiming the end of what is now nostalgically referred to as “normal times.” After seven months of a barrage of Ministerial Orders, contradictory guidance and announcements of all kinds, it is clear that if the government is so determined to keep institutions open, it is not so much in order to keep its election promise of granting “priority to education” as to serve its economic interests and those of businesses.

In the context of the pandemic, the emergency measures put in place by the Government of Quebec forced all institutions of higher education, at one time or another, to resort to teaching in a “non-face-to-face mode”.¹ What was to have been temporary in the spring of 2020 has extended into the fall of 2020, and already, by the end of September, several universities were announcing that this mode of teaching would be extended into the winter of 2021. This change has major repercussions for the task of teachers represented by the FNEEQ. Most of the collective agreements do not address such rapid transformations, and the resources granted by the Government to institutions are inadequate for supporting our members, whose duties have become considerably more onerous. Quickly adapting courses, struggling to provide distance coaching for students, increasing the size of course sections, completely rethinking evaluations: every dimension of the teaching profession requires more time in this context. Consequently, the psychological health of our members has never been as fragile and worrisome. Teachers are truly at the end of their rope and, since the spring, the FNEEQ has tirelessly called for the Government to invest significant resources earmarked for teaching in order to support teachers in the winter 2021 session.

Since March 13, the FNEEQ has been very active in terms of political representations. It has continued to apply pressure on the Ministry and employers, with special emphasis on the following six demands:

- To guarantee the safety of settings of education, including higher education, and to give particular attention to the physical and psychological well-being of all their members by following the WHO recommendations before considering lifting restrictions;

1. The FNEEQ considers that it is preferable to use this term rather than distance teaching. Reference: FNEEQ, Comité école et société, *Chronique d'un (dé)confinement* annoncé, [online] <https://fneeq.qc.ca/fr/publications/chronique-88-chronique-dun-deconfinement-annonce/> (page accessed on October 14, 2020).

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- To favour stability for 2020–2021 and, wherever possible, predictable teaching activities in each session;
- To reach an agreement with the unions on the development of national guidelines and local modalities for work organization during a pandemic;
- To ensure equity between pupils, students, teachers and institutions;
- To respect the autonomy and professional judgment of teachers;
- To increase funding for education and higher education networks;
- To remunerate the work for teachers to adapt their teaching to a non-face-to-face teaching mode.

Before the pandemic, pressure to move to distance teaching was already mounting, and the FNEEQ created a platform for demands in May 2019.² After the pandemic, the pressure will clearly become untenable. The health crisis has accelerated a transformation of teaching practice that had already begun, but without consultation, without guidelines or national strategies and, above all, with no safety net for the working conditions of teachers. For many directors of institutions, particularly in the private or university sectors, non-face-to-face teaching imposed in part by public health authorities represents an unhoped-for opportunity to accelerate the conversion of courses to distance education (DE) that is structured and permanent. With the deterritorialization of education opening the door to purely mercantile opportunities, one can imagine that this will certainly have consequences for the professional autonomy of teachers and the survival of institutions in the regions.

Professional autonomy and academic freedom are based on individual practice as well as on collective practice. The conditions of practice must therefore allow for both to be maintained. What we have witnessed since the start of the pandemic does a disservice to both. By giving priority to information and communication technologies (ICTs), non-face-to-face teaching, as we have known it since the spring, has forced the transformation of both individual and collective practice, limiting it to the available technologies without leaving room for reflection or analysis. It would, however, be possible to integrate the new ICTs into course offerings to make them more accessible, without this affecting faculty autonomy. But this requires time and consultation, which we have been sorely lacking since the beginning of the health crisis. It is necessary, at all costs, to fight against unilateral decisions, made without transparency and with no heed to the opinions of experts in education. This is the immense challenge that awaits us in the immediate future.

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President
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2. FNEEQ, Comité école et société, *L'enseignement à distance: Enjeux pédagogiques, syndicaux et sociétaux* [online] https://fneeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/190424EnseignementADistance-FINAL_CES_CF3_mai-2019.pdf (page accessed on October 14, 2020).