

Statement on Bill 21, An Act respecting the laicity of the State (Loi sur la laïcité de l'État)

We the undersigned faculty of the School of Education at Bishop's University condemn and reject the Quebec government's proposal of Bill 21, An Act respecting the laicity of the State. Bill 21 is discriminatory and in direct conflict with our values and focus at an institution of higher learning. It targets our colleagues and peers on the basis of religious affiliation and practice, and impacts every citizen in Quebec by normalizing state-sanctioned discrimination against specific, identifiable groups of people. It is a dangerous precedent that creates a climate of suspicion, fear, and hostility that serves to render the profession of teaching unsafe, and schools less safe, for everyone.

In the School of Education, we understand our public mandate to promote education as a collective project of social transformation aimed at building a more just, equitable world through critical reflection and the values of pluralism, openness, and anti-oppression. The School of Education prepares preservice teachers to take up their roles as public intellectuals and agents of social change who are committed to analyzing and challenging all forms of individual, systemic, and institutional discrimination, in their classrooms, schools, and in society as a whole. The focus emerges from our commitments as educators, but also from the professional competencies to which teachers in Quebec are expected to adhere. We note that Competency 12 requires teachers "To demonstrate ethical and responsible professional behaviour in the performance of [their] duties," and further states that teachers must avoid "any form of discrimination toward students, parents or colleagues. In a pluralist society such as ours, there is a broad range of values and views. The classroom or school is a kind of centre that brings together students of different origins, with different mother tongues, belonging to different religions, races, social classes and so on. Teachers have a particular role to play in this respect; they must counter situations conducive to discrimination or exclusion and implement mechanisms to ensure respect for equity and differences, especially differences related to origin" (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2001, p. 119).

Bill 21 is, in our estimation, in direct contradiction to our mandate as defined by the Ministry of Education and QEP in addition to our commitments under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other academic and professional bodies. Given the current state of affairs, we do not believe teachers and students should be placed in the unethical and intolerable position of condoning, through their own teaching and learning, participation in a policy of state discrimination. We stand in solidarity with all of our partners in the Quebec education community who reject this law.

We strongly implore the Quebec government to withdraw Bill 21 from consideration for the points outlined above, but also because there is no reason that the laicity of Québec and the preservation of its status as a distinct society require the violation of the fundamental rights and freedoms outlined in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (Chapter 1.3 and Chapter 1.10). In addition, we strongly oppose use of the notwithstanding clause to override the protections afforded by Section 2(a) the right to freedom of religion and conscience; and Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which provides all people in Canada with equality rights regardless of their faith, ethnoracial identity, inter alia.

Signatories:

Avril Aitken
Nolan Bazinet
Eva Mary Bures
Mario Corbin
Anthony Di Mascio
Kevin Drysdale
Trevor Gulliver
Corinne Haigh
Brian Hopper
Sunny Lau
Jackie Loughheed
Gretchen Wentzell Lowerison
Tom Matthews
Scosha Merovitz
Marc-Alexandre Prud'homme
Lisa Taylor
Stephen Trew
Chantal Turgeon
Miles Turnbull
Fil Walker
Dawn Wiseman