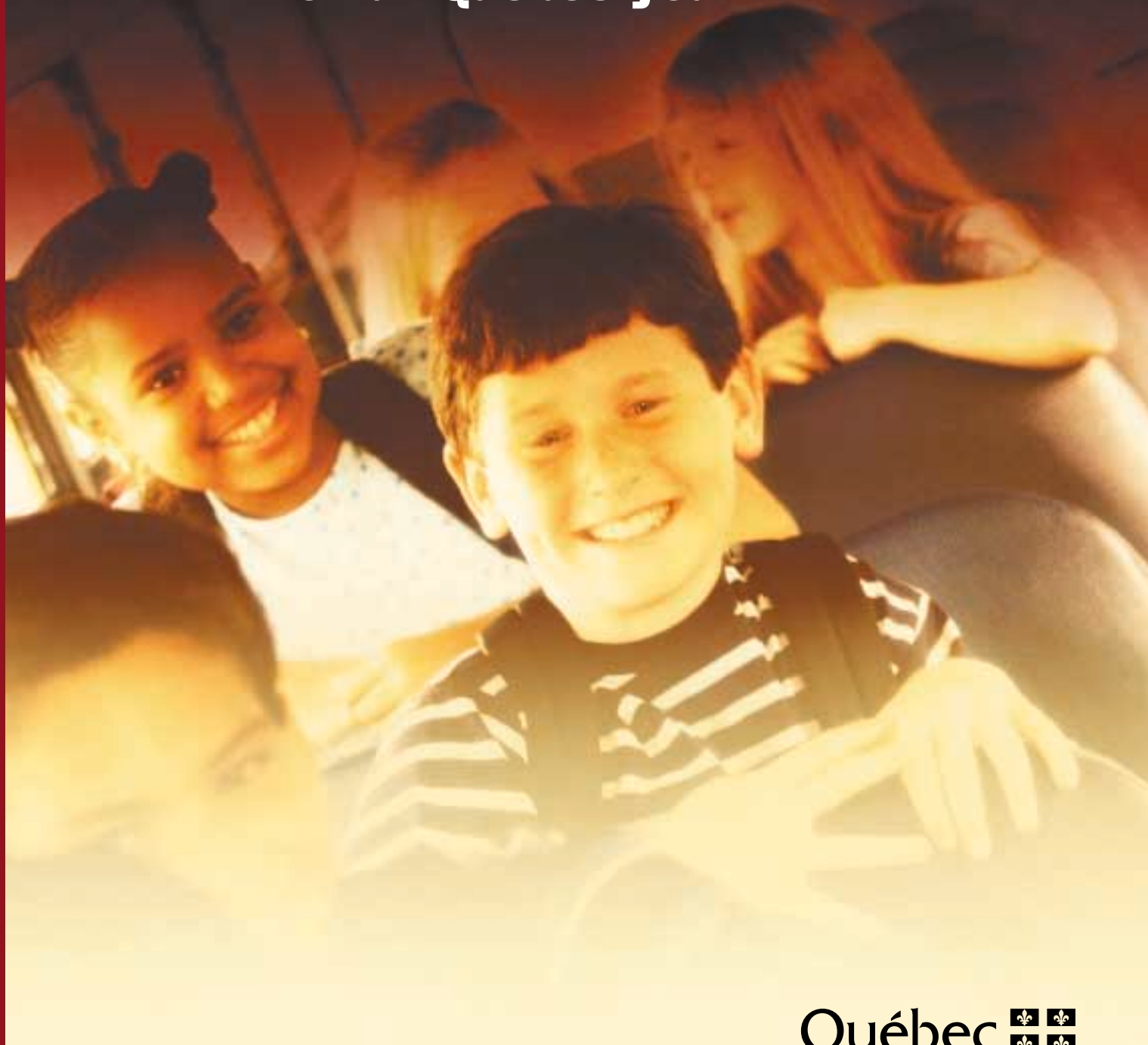




Establishment of an ethics and religious culture program

Providing future direction
for all Québec youth



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INTRODUCTION

The school's mission is to instruct, to socialize and to provide students with qualifications. While the vocabulary of education has changed over time, the fundamental mission of the school has remained the same: to help students grow, to open new horizons to them, to develop their talents and to give them the necessary tools to become accomplished, free, responsible adults.

However, society is changing. The current state of knowledge differs from that of past centuries, societal challenges are spreading from urban centres to rural regions, mentalities are varying with different influences from around the world, certain values are strengthening and cannot be ignored, while others are dying out, sensitivities are becoming refined, and questions continue to multiply at the speed of the information pouring in from the four corners of the globe. The time comes when the school must adapt to this changing society. This led to the education reform process begun by the Ministère in the late 1990s.

A number of goals have been achieved, such as creating linguistic school boards, redesigning the programs of study in elementary school and Secondary Cycle One, adopting a new policy for complementary services, dismantling the denominational school structures, renewing the *Policy on the Evaluation of Learning*, etc.

The expiration of the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in June 2005 is another opportunity for decision-making in this process to renew the school system. Resorting to this clause is inevitable in order to continue offering Catholic and Protestant religious education at the elementary and secondary levels. In this context, the Ministère intends to determine the type of instruction the school should provide to all students on ethical and religious issues. This responsibility cannot be avoided.

The decisions made are based on a close analysis of current social and school conditions: problems had to be solved, orientations specified and adjustments made based on current social challenges and the education needs of students.

Consequently, the **ministerial proposal** includes the following:

- abandon recourse to notwithstanding clauses and replace the current system of options with a common ethics and religious culture program for all elementary and secondary students
- plan for a transition period to allow the Ministère and the schools to prepare for this change. This is why the notwithstanding clauses will be renewed until June 30, 2008 and the current system of options will be maintained for another three years.

1 A COMMON ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM

The implementation of a common ethics and religious culture program for all students in Québec is rooted in the government's will to best serve the interests of everyone involved (students, parents, school staff and society as a whole). This decision attests to the government's intent to respect contemporary sensitivities with regard to equal treatment of people and groups and not to perpetuate a system of exceptions that contravenes the fundamental rights recognized by the Charters, while contributing to transmitting Québec culture, which has particularly been shaped by Catholic and Protestant traditions.



2 THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE PROGRAM

Various reasons are behind the decision to include ethics and religious culture education in the same curriculum. The intent is to initiate elementary and secondary students to these subjects, rather than to make them specialists. It is also important to make the best use of the time allotted to these subjects in the schedule. Furthermore, it is pedagogically desirable to facilitate students' understanding of the world by not putting up barriers between worlds that, although specific, may be complementary¹. However, the program structure has been designed so that ethics and religious culture can be taught individually and presented separately during certain learning activities. Training should help teachers make the necessary distinctions and connections between the learnings in ethics and those in religious culture.

The learnings carried on in the proposed program are based on the following four principles: they are continuous learnings, rooted in the student's reality and in Québec culture; they respect the freedom of conscience and religion, and foster living in harmony with others.

2.1 CONTINUOUS, PROGRESSIVE LEARNINGS

The competency-based approach favoured in the curriculum redesign is consistent in that the learnings are continuous from elementary to the end of secondary school². The development process must be designed as a spiral, from the simple to the most complex, from the concrete to the abstract, based on the stages of the cognitive, affective and social growth of a student. Therefore, the educational aims of the ethics and religious culture program are the same at the elementary and secondary levels, but the approach taken to address the topics differs.

For example, it may be difficult to ask a child who is learning to read to understand the text of a regulation or a message from a prophet; however, children are interested in stories and they are able to tell them. Therefore, at the beginning of elementary school, stories are used to help the students learn the rules that govern life in society or elements of wisdom in a religious tradition. At the end of secondary school, they will rather be asked to analyze, comment on and discuss a text.

2.2 LEARNINGS ROOTED IN THE STUDENT'S REALITY AND IN QUÉBEC CULTURE

Learnings must be rooted in the immediate reality of students in order to broaden their horizons. Each school has its own social, cultural and religious characteristics. Opening the minds of students to ethical reflection and religious diversity is relevant when they are concerned with these issues. It would be unusual to talk about world-renowned temples, cathedrals or mosques before teaching students to recognize the religious buildings in their village or neighbourhood. Moreover, the current reform puts students at the centre of their learnings, in the role of active players in their development.

As with the other programs of study, ethics and religious culture will be taught flexibly, giving teachers latitude to adapt their instruction to the reality of the school, but without losing sight of the educational perspectives of the program.

Learnings must also be rooted in Québec culture, which can be perceived in architecture, language expressions, the names of streets or villages and artistic expressions. It can also be seen in the choice of values or ways of being privileged in our society: the importance given to the right to equality, solidarity, respecting democratic institutions, and rejecting violence as a method of resolving conflict. The presence of religions in Québec is also obvious. Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions, Judaism and Native spirituality long ago left their mark on Québec culture. There are also new influences due to more recent immigration (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.), the emergence of new religious groups, and constant growth in the number of people who claim no religious affiliation. All this makes Québec a richly diverse society.

At the elementary level, teachers will draw on elements in the students' immediate environment that they can observe and recognize, while at the secondary level, students will be asked to explore experiences elsewhere in Québec or the world or to study other periods of history using media, research or exchanges between urban and rural schools, francophone and anglophone school boards, and the public and private sectors.

1. Other subject groupings can be found in the *Québec Education Program*, such as "Science and Technology" and "History and Citizenship Education."
2. A four-unit program (100 hours) in Secondary IV compensates for the absence of an ethics and religious culture program in Secondary III.



2.3 LEARNINGS THAT RESPECT THE FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION

Respecting the fundamental right to the freedom of conscience and religion is the basis of all ethics and religious education. This results in two consequences for teachers and students. Teachers must attach particular importance to respecting the values, beliefs or convictions of families and students. Addressing these issues calls for objectivity and impartiality on the part of teachers, as is the case with other subjects, but is especially important here. Moreover, students studying ethical or religious issues should aim to understand them without negative prejudices or blind submission.

In elementary school, emphasis will be placed on the values, beliefs and convictions that the students have in common in order to foster recognition of others and to develop their respect and tolerance. At the secondary level, students will broaden and consolidate their knowledge in order to address ethical or religious issues with objectivity and discernment.

2.4 LEARNINGS THAT FOSTER LIVING IN HARMONY WITH OTHERS

Every day, interaction between people or groups requires making choices that sometimes isolate and divide, and other times bring people closer and foster solidarity. Religious convictions, like ethical choices, can be a source of tension and conflict. To promote social cohesion, the learnings in the proposed program expressly aim at sharing common values, acquiring a sense of civic responsibility when expressing one's convictions and values, and becoming aware that individual choices affect the community.

This is why the classroom is a place of expression, research, awareness and discussion on different topics adapted to the students. Different points of view are taken into account, as is the commitment made with others to pursue the common good, based on what the students are capable of doing at their age





3 CURRICULUM CONTENTS

The ethics and religious culture program combines components of ethics and religion, but also explains the secular representations³ of the world and humanity.

3.1 ETHICS EDUCATION

Ethics are part of Moral Education in the Québec Education Program. The suggestions here are designed to carry on and develop the existing curriculum.

It is important here to define "moral" and "ethics" in Moral Education. Moral refers to the question "What must be done?" based on the rules of conduct, norms, prohibitions, obligations, rights, laws, values, principles and ideals proposed to the person from outside oneself. Ethics, on the other hand, mainly pertains to questioning and judging what would be preferable to do in a given situation, with regard to oneself, to others and to the effects of our actions on community life.

The ethics curriculum is based on different focuses, particularly the following :

Reflection on values and social prescriptions

Students may be required to know the origin of values and social prescriptions; to learn the advantages and disadvantages of norms, rules and codes of conduct for life in society; to know the requirements related to rights and obligations in a democratic society.

Appreciation of different views of the world and of humans

Students may learn that depending on the location, era or circumstance, views of the world and of humans are not the same for everyone. By analyzing certain views, students gain the ability to exercise their personal judgment and to tell how different perspectives influence a person's actions.

The ability to take a reflective position on moral or ethical issues

When asked to identify the challenges of a given situation, students may analyze what the issue is, think of possible solutions and their consequences, and be able to make an enlightened choice. By discussing the facts and context of a situation, students may be able to identify the intentions and motivations of the individuals in question, the possible causes, the values and norms at stake, and the different points of view, beliefs or conceptions of the individuals present. They progressively become more aware of the effect of their actions on others.

At the elementary level, students will reflect on values and social prescriptions based on their experiences with their family and friends, in the classroom and at school. They will interact with others to enrich their view of the world and humanity using immediate realities as a basis. They will analyze moral problems presented in simple contexts to determine what must be done.

At the secondary level, students will ponder increasingly complex questions that go beyond their immediate reality. They will examine the relevance of the rules, norms, rights, laws, etc. at stake in a given situation. They will become aware of diverse views of the world and humanity down through the ages or in various cultures and will ponder their own view of humanity. They will examine diverse values specific to societies here and elsewhere and will be able to put them into perspective. They will also be required to take a step back from their own values. Students will analyze ethical issues, pondering the desirable action to take in a given situation in light of a set of references taken from their research and their common reflection.

By the end of their elementary and secondary studies, students will be able to judge the values and standards (obligations, rights, etc.) that orient human actions, make choices based on the common good, and get involved and work with others autonomously and responsibly within a pluralistic and democratic society.

3. "Secular representations" refers to conceptions of the world, of human beings and of their place in the world, all of which influence a person's actions, but do not refer to religious beliefs (e.g. atheism, greenism, Marxism, etc.).



3.2 RELIGIOUS CULTURE EDUCATION

The religious culture curriculum is centered around different focal points, particularly the following:

Familiarization with Québec religious heritage

Students will learn and increase their knowledge of the important aspects of Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions, based on their manifestations in Québec culture. They will also learn about Judaism and Native spirituality. For each tradition, they may ponder the origin, key figures, significant stories (e.g. beginning and end of the world), rites, celebrations, symbols, teachings, places of worship, beliefs and preferred values.

Openness to religious diversity

Students will take an interest in certain major established religious traditions that have appeared only more recently in Québec: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc. They will become familiar with criteria to study new religious movements. They will explore the characteristics of these traditions and religious movements and may be required to ponder on the contribution of these groups to Québec society.

The ability to position themselves after due consideration with respect to religions and new religious movements

Students will also become aware of and analyze various views of the world, humanity and life in the great religions and certain religious movements (e.g. meaning of life, death, suffering, etc.). They may develop an understanding of how these views influence human behavior and gradually develop their ability to make judgments on these views.

At the elementary level, students will discover the principal characteristics of different religious traditions and what they have in common, based on elements which students can detect in their immediate environment: celebrations, holidays, places of worship, clothing, common expressions, rites, celebrating milestones, etc.

At the secondary level, students will analyze common and specific aspects of different religious traditions (e.g. symbolism, beliefs, teachings, modes of organization, etc.), based on the realities of Québec society and societies around the world. They will learn to recognize that, as well as secular representations, religions propose views of life that, although different, are worthy of respect and give meaning to existence, suffering and death.

By the end of their elementary and secondary studies, students will have learned what it takes to understand others in a society marked by religious pluralism; they will have developed appropriate attitudes to religious diversity, particularly respect, tolerance and openness to dialogue. They will be aware of the importance of making well thought-out decisions with regard to religion.

3.3 CONSIDERATION OF SECULAR REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WORLD AND HUMANITY

Since the beginning of time, but in a more apparent way today, there have been people who claim no religious affiliation and who have their own philosophy to give their lives meaning. Today, a growing number of families who enroll their children in school choose this option. It must therefore be considered in an ethics and religious culture program that is based on the principle of respect for freedom of conscience and religion.

This program, intended for all students, must include learnings on currents of secular thought, even though it is not indicated in its name.

In a certain way, these teachings fit in with ethics and religious culture education because their purpose is to give students an understanding of a secular representation of the world, the individual, life, death, suffering, etc.; how these views are expressed in Québec culture by certain important groups or figures, through certain events or particular symbols or in certain texts; and how the secular representations are a reference that influences human actions and religious views as well.

Whether they ponder ethical issues or issues raised by religious reality, students will be asked to consider different characteristic points of view of currents of secular thought, analyze them, exercise their judgment and take a reflective position with regard to these views of the world and humanity.

Evidently, these learnings will be progressive and taught according to the level of comprehension of the elementary and secondary students.

By the end of their elementary and secondary studies, students will have the basic skills it takes to understand others and their diverse views of the world; they will have developed appropriate attitudes towards religious diversity, particularly respect, tolerance and openness to dialogue in a pluralistic and democratic society; they will be able to make well thought-out decisions by considering the variety of possible points of view.



4 REASONS TO ACT

There are many reasons behind the implementation of the ethics and religious culture program.

Primarily, for the students

Instead of putting students into distinct groups based on their secular or religious beliefs, the ethics and religious culture program will provide all students with the necessary tools to understand Québec society by sharing the cultural and religious heritage of Québec. It will also help open the mind of the students to the world and develop their ability to work with others while showing respect for cultural, social and religious differences. Appreciation of Québec culture and origins, openness toward others, tolerance and a sense of cooperation are essential for social peace. The school must see to it that all students acquire these learnings, whether they settle in their home region or elsewhere. These educational aims are consistent with and support the civic and intercultural education objectives already pursued by the school.

For the quality of instruction

Given the recourse to notwithstanding clauses, the elective system for moral instruction, Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction, and Protestant Moral and Religious Instruction has been periodically questioned for nearly 20 years. This has resulted in the teachers being dissuaded from pursuing professional development and teaching these subjects.

Teachers should be able to count on stable, recognized programs of study that are well integrated into a curriculum if they want to develop their skills and professional expertise.

Furthermore, a combined ethics and religious culture program will offer future teachers an attractive advancement opportunity that better respects their freedom of conscience and religion. Consequently, we can hope for a rapid mobilization of all education players, including universities, around this innovative training program, which will become sustainable and significant in the school curriculum.

Lastly, a program common to all students fits well into the Québec Education Program and will better meet the orientations of the curriculum reform by more effectively establishing links with other subjects and carrying out projects that include history, geography, literature, arts, etc.

For parents

The high enrollment rate in Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction implies that parents want their children to learn about both moral and religious issues.

However, the confessional nature of religious instruction stirs up an ever-growing malaise in new teachers. Consequently, instruction in this subject has been reduced, especially at the elementary level. It has also been noted that this service is disintegrating. For various reasons, each apparently as good as the next, some schools are not respecting parents' choices and are requiring the children to take moral instruction; others no longer offer religious education, while other schools, despite commendable efforts, do not manage to respect parents' choices due to a lack of qualified teachers or for reasons related to the school organization. The proposed program should reassure parents, who will see their children receive the same ethics and religious culture education as all the other students.

For society

The fact that religious instruction is reserved only for the Catholic and Protestant traditions and that it requires breaching the Canadian and Québec Charters of Rights and Freedoms poses a problem. In the Abitibi, on the Côte-Nord as in Montréal, schools must deal with the growing diversity of values, beliefs and convictions. Students must prepare to live in this society that is increasingly diversified and open to the world that they see every day on television. The development of respect and tolerance toward people of any conviction—religious or secular—is a key advantage for all of society. In this regard, every group interested in education should be pleased that such education objectives are being adopted.

The time has therefore come to rally parents, school staff and students around this common education project that better meets the current needs of young people and society.



5 A SHARED ORIENTATION

The government understands that for various reasons, some groups wish to keep the option between moral instruction and Catholic or Protestant religious instruction. However, it believes that the time has come for a change, which has already drawn a good deal of support.

5.1 ADVISORY BODIES

Several government advisory bodies recommend this orientation, particularly the Comité sur les affaires religieuses, whose specific function is to advise the minister on the orientations that the school network should take based on the socioreligious evolution of Québec. Other organizations have the same stance. They include the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse and the Conseil des relations interculturelles.

5.2 EDUCATION PARTNERS

Many partner organizations have already expressed their support for the direction that the government intends to take. The main organizations include the general council of the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec, the board of directors of the Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, the Québec English School Boards Association, the Association québécoise de l'éthique et de l'enseignement moral, and the Association professionnelle des animatrices et animateurs à la vie spirituelle et à l'engagement communautaire du Québec. It is also important to mention the Coalition pour la déconfessionnalisation du système scolaire, whose members consist of an impressive number of associations, federations and other organizations, including the Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement.

Some groups representing the Catholic and Protestant communities have also expressed their approval for the government proposal. These include the Protestant Partnership on Education, the Centre justice et foi, and the Réseau culture et foi.

Academics and most editorialists also consider this change a good one.

5.3 TEACHERS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS

The Ministère asked certain school boards and private schools about how various locally taught ethics and religious culture programs have been received.

Moreover, pedagogical consultants from three school boards were asked how the students, parents and teachers liked the local ethics and religious culture programs approved by the minister for certain schools. In total, 3 220 students from 16 schools in three school boards studied this program, and favoured it over confessional religious education in Secondary Cycle One (EA, s. 222.1).

A survey was conducted among Secondary V teachers on various religious programs offered as electives during the 2003-2004 year. The 51 respondents (25 from Montréal, 9 from Québec City and 17 from other regions) taught a total of 6 331 students.

The two studies revealed the marked interest that students have in studying religions, the highly favourable reception from parents, and the positive contribution that such a program can make to understanding the world.

With such support, one may think that the proposed ethics and religious culture program will meet most people's expectations.

4. Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses. *L'appréciation de divers programmes d'études sur les religions offerts localement dans des écoles publiques et privées*, April 2005.



6 THE ACTION PLAN

An action plan is being developed in order to respect the implementation schedule for this program, beginning in September 2008. To develop a program for both elementary and secondary students and to ensure the training of teachers, several tasks must be managed simultaneously.

6.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

It is important to mention here that the "Ethics and Religious Culture" program is already being written for Secondary Cycle Two⁵, since it is stipulated in the projected amendments to the Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education. Its validation is planned for the fall of 2005.

Moreover, it will be necessary to simultaneously develop the program for Elementary Cycles 1, 2 and 3 and the Secondary Cycle One program⁶ during the years 2005-2006, 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 by creating two teams that will collaborate and work concurrently on the programs. The process including writing of the program, consultation with experts, validation, notice from the advisory committees, review, ministerial approval, publishing and distribution will follow the usual schedule.

6.2 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

As of the winter of 2006, a team will begin to develop and organize the professional development training for teachers. Training is slated for completion in the spring of 2008.

Training sessions that give elementary school teachers the opportunity to experiment with learning situations corresponding to the competencies to be developed in the program must also be developed for the 2006-2007 year.

At the elementary level, it is primarily the homeroom teachers who will teach this program. Therefore, training for more than 20 000 homeroom teachers must be planned.

At the secondary level, close to 2 400 teachers must be trained to teach this program.

The school boards and regional offices must be involved in providing teachers with this professional development.

Beginning in the fall of 2005, specialized university faculties will be invited to offer continuing education for teachers (short-term programs, symposia, conferences, intensive sessions) in ethics and religious culture.

5. Secondary IV and V

6. Secondary I and II



CONCLUSION

The importance of the decision to replace the current system of options for moral instruction and Catholic or Protestant religious and moral instruction with a common ethics and religious culture program for all elementary and secondary students in three years cannot be minimized. These orientations call for significant changes in pedagogical, culture and school organization practices. The government considers them necessary today, and it is convinced that everyone with an interest in education, particularly parents, can understand the extent of these changes and see the benefits for young people's education and the future of Québec society.

A bill to update these decisions will be examined at the National Assembly in the near future. To allow the key interested groups and persons to comment on this bill, a parliamentary commission by invitation will be held.

The next three years will be especially important for making the desired clarifications on the implementation of the program. The Ministère will make sure to adequately answer questions from parents and school staff so that they understand the perspectives involved.

It is important to work together for students. Enriching the students' general culture, allowing them to open up to others with tolerance and respect, equipping them to act responsibly toward themselves and others, and teaching them to live together in a democratic Québec that is open to the world is reason enough to support these orientations with confidence and determination.



