

## **Facing Bill 21 In The Classrooms: Silence is not an Option for the Future**

**By: Sabrina Jafralie, PhD**

The day Law 21 was adopted in Quebec was one of the saddest days of my fifteen year plus teaching career. When I entered the profession, one of my main goals was to be a teacher who nurtured her students. I strived to nurture them to help reach their full potential and to give them the skills and tools to navigate our world with respect, knowledge and kindness. This is what my teachers cultivated in me and I am paying that gift forward to my students. However, the provincial government of Quebec is trying to limit my ability to serve my students.

The adoption of Law 21 creates two fundamental problems: 1) it sends a divisive message to our students and 2) it sits in contraction of my teacher duties as outlined in the Quebec Education Act. Firstly, the message and laws created by the provincial government, in our name as electors, sends a message of limited freedom and choice to students. This law is clearly establishing a hierarchy of citizens and tells students you are not truly free to choose any path forward in their lives. This bill and its implications discourages students to embrace their choices to explore their talents nor flourish in our society. Is this the message we want to permit the government to send to our future generations?

Secondly, as teachers, this law strong arms us, especially those teachers of faith and contradicts the Quebec Education Act. Currently, the Act states in Article 22.1 that the duty of a teacher is to “contribute to the intellectual and overall personal development of each students entrusted in their care.” This is my duty yet Law 21 contradicts and suffocates my teaching ability to do so. Instead, it sends a negative message to the students, whose faith is being targeted that they are not welcomed. How can I contribute to the intellectual and personal development of my students when I am forced to send the message that some of the students cannot access certain careers? And the reason being is the expression of their faith. This distressing law does not help my students understand the concepts of belonging. Secondly, how do my students of faith develop a strong sense of belonging? For other students, who may not be directly affected by the law, how can does this law impact a student’s understanding of acceptance, equity and a pluralistic society?

Furthermore, the Education Act Article 22.3, explains that a teacher’s duty is also to “take appropriate means to foster respect for human rights in their students.” Let us be clear, the current Quebec Education Act directs me to cultivate respect for human rights and yet the Quebec government undermines my duties. Again, this begs the question how can a conscientious teacher encourage students to revere human rights when Law 21 clearly violates, disrespects, and disregards the rights of its own citizens? The contradictions continues to infuriate and baffle me as a teacher. It is not only the human rights of students to choose, it is also the rights of new teachers to exercise their desire to work in the chosen career.

I, as a dedicated teacher, believe in the rights of the individual and religious expression. It may be cliché but we are truly our stronger in our diversity. This law needs to be struck down because it sends a global message of xenophobia and religious selection, which impacts all of us. “You are not the right type of person,” is an alarming message to send to citizens especially young

people. We are meant to encourage young people to believe in themselves and yet the government's message is glaringly the opposite.

This unjust law needs our action right now. The standing of the law is a reflection of our values in society. It is not solely a teacher issue or a judge issue, it is fundamental societal issue. If this law is left to stand, what is the message and direction we are setting for our future? Are we prepared to send the message that you can only work in certain jobs, if you look a certain way? I am calling for civil disobedience to overturn this law. Civil disobedience looks different for all of us and one should find their own way to protest. But be clear, it is time to stand up for our children and ourselves. It is now the time to stand up for our right to choose. Let us not be complacent and allow the Quebec government to use borderline democratic tactics to stronghold teachers and school boards, who do not wish to comply to this law. If we do not take action, in whatever form, then we send a message of silence. And silence can be interpreted as acceptance and approval. Let us never be silent on matter of rights especially when our future is involved.



Author: Sabrina Jafralie, PhD

Head Teacher of Ethics and Religious Culture

Sabrina Jafralie, PhD, is a teacher at Westmount High School, where she teaches and heads the Ethics and Religious Culture department. She is also a McGill University course lecturer, a co-founder of the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy and an education networker for [snjafralie.com](http://snjafralie.com)