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GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN HIRING AND FIRING TEACHERS IMPROVES QUALITY OF EDUCATION

By Emmanuelle B. Faubert and Vincent Geloso

There is a large empirical literature in economics connecting ease of hiring and firing to greater productivity, higher income levels, and higher quality of services.¹ The main reason for this empirical finding is that firms can get rid of workers who prove to be ill-suited for their needs and more easily try again with new workers who might be a better fit.

Few dispute the importance of this mechanism. Yet there is a steadfast refusal to rely on this principle for one particular group of workers in Quebec: teachers. Over the past decade, the provincial government has considered numerous schemes to try to improve the quality of teaching in Quebec's primary and secondary schools. Widely discussed were smaller class sizes, teacher evaluations, a professional order of teachers, stricter qualification rules, and performance bonuses. But rarely was the possibility of decentralizing school administration and making it easier to hire and fire teachers even mentioned.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY IN HIRING AND FIRING

Everyone agrees good teachers are important. However, given the range of other relevant variables such as class size, educational resources, and curriculum constraints, exactly how important is less obvious. For instance, one could argue that a teacher with a class of fifty



students is unlikely to deliver a satisfying performance regardless of skill level.

A recurrent finding from empirical studies, though, is that class size and spending per pupil have relatively small effects on student performance.² The competence of teachers outweighs these variables by large margins.³ One frequently-cited study⁴ finds that the effect on schooling outcomes of improving teacher competence by one standard deviation is far greater than cutting class size by ten students (a 33% reduction in the case of Quebec high schools).⁵ It is also a stronger determinant of later-life student outcomes such as adult income and higher education levels.⁶

This Economic Note was prepared by **Emmanuelle B. Faubert**, Economist at the MEI, and **Vincent Geloso**, Senior Economist at the MEI. The MEI's Education Series aims to explore the extent to which greater institutional autonomy and freedom of choice for students and parents lead to improvements in the quality of educational services.



However, the competence of teachers is not well-measured by formal qualifications such as degrees,⁷ nor can most of what constitutes competence—things like motivation, creativity, adaptability—be easily measured at hiring time. Moreover, there tends to be some statistical “noise” in evaluations during the first few years of teachers’ careers as they find their footing. As such, a teacher who stumbles in the first months on the job is hard to distinguish from an incompetent one. It is only after a few years of experience that competence can be assessed more reliably.⁸

These difficulties suggest that it would be best to hire teachers and observe them for a number of years, and then retain the best performers.⁹ That is insufficient to ensure competence, however, as retained teachers offered job security might see little incentive to continue to improve or adapt.¹⁰ To ensure teacher competence, then, easier hiring and firing must be allowed.

THE DIFFICULTY OF HIRING AND FIRING TEACHERS IN QUEBEC

Several hurdles exist to the hiring and firing of teachers in Quebec. There are numerous restrictions on hiring people with highly specialized degrees who want to become teachers, for instance, while qualified immigrants (except for those from France) also face restrictions regarding the recognition of their skills.¹¹ This is despite recurrent complaints of a shortage of teachers in the province. Moreover, hiring decisions are not made at the school level, but rather at the more centralized school board level, far from where the repercussions of those decisions are felt.¹²

Even more problematic, though, are the numerous hurdles that exist to getting rid of incompetent or otherwise unsuitable teachers. First and foremost, local collective agreements signed between teachers’ unions and the provincial government specify highly elaborate and complicated procedures for assessing competence, granting job security, and seeking dismissal.¹³

The local agreements specify procedures for evaluating performance before granting job security. However, once this is done, there is little further formal evaluation.¹⁴ Teachers are not

evaluated according to improvements in student outcomes or with reference to the difficulty of the content and groups they teach.

There is a process of “pedagogical supervision” for problematic teachers. However, it is largely ineffectual. First, it offers highly subjective guidelines with no penalties for the teacher.¹⁵ Second, the process of securing a dismissal is long and difficult. The proposal to dismiss must be formally documented. This can then be contested by the teacher’s union, and deliberation ensues. Each step of the process requires further documentation, and cases for dismissals generally drag on for months, often years.

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As such, an underperforming teacher who is not grossly incompetent (but who is incompetent enough to seriously undermine educational outcomes) might be endured by a school administrator who prefers to avoid the lengthy process of securing a dismissal. To do so, the bureaucratic grids of analysis produced by the Department of Education may be liberally interpreted. In other instances, an underperforming teacher might simply be shifted into another function.¹⁶

These difficulties are evident when we look at the data. In 2016, the MEI sent requests for access to information on firings to all the school boards in Quebec, the first such province-wide request.¹⁷ The vast majority of the school boards provided answers regarding firings between 2010 and 2015. Over the entire period, just 58 teachers had been fired, and only 7 of these dismissals were for incompetence. As a proportion of all teachers, this means that 0.007% of teachers were fired for incompetence, which suggests that fewer than one in 10,000 teachers is incompetent. This is of course highly implausible, especially given that Quebec has

one of the lowest rates of high school completion in Canada.¹⁸

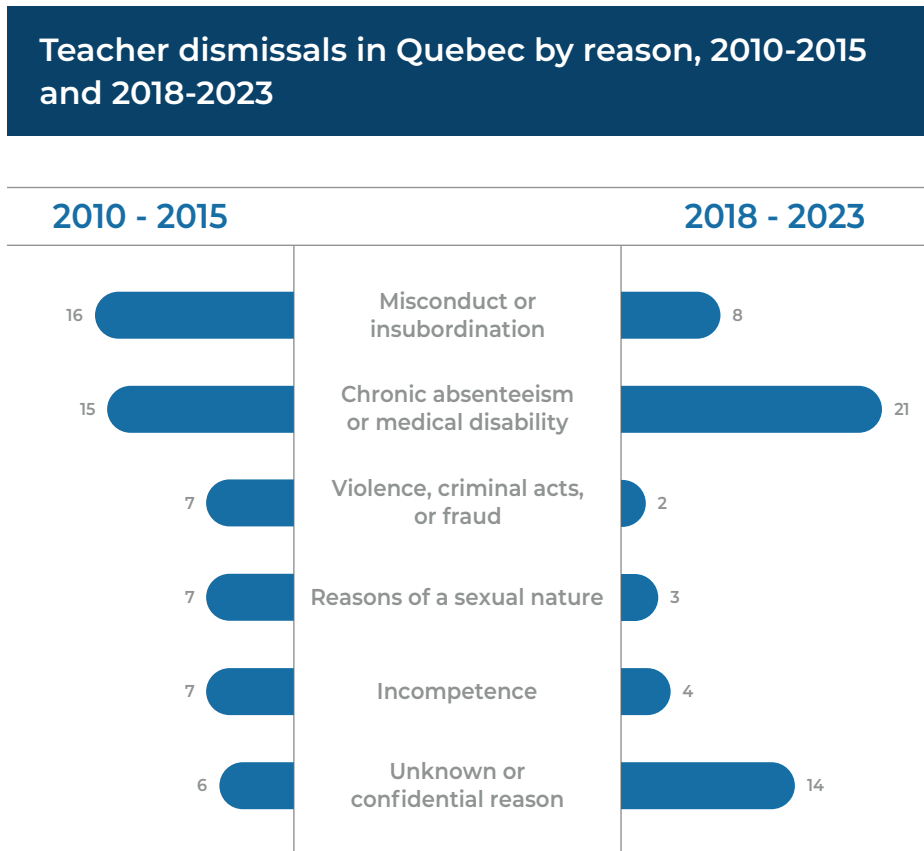
We have now repeated this exercise for the period from 2018 to 2023 and found that those earlier results were not an anomaly. As can be seen in Figure 1, the total number of dismissals actually fell to 52 over this latter period, while the reported number of teachers fired for incompetence fell to 4. Given that there are more than 111,000 teachers in the province (with more than 60,000 being permanent), this means that around 0.0036% of teachers were fired for incompetence.¹⁹ This number is again implausibly low.

DECENTRALIZATION AND COMPETITION

Removing bureaucratic hurdles to hiring and firing is the best way to improve teaching performance. The only question is how to proceed. Hiring and firing based on province-wide standards is not the best approach. As there are significant differences in the populations being served by different schools, what counts as competence is to some extent relative to the social context.²⁰ A certain highly competent teacher might be ill-suited to teach in one area, but would excel in another.²¹ This suggests the need for a more decentralized system whereby schools retain more powers to organize their activities as they see fit, including making their own staffing decisions.

The outcomes from decentralization are generally positive, as cross-country analyses show that students perform better when schools have more autonomy in terms of personnel and day-to-day administration.²² One notable study concerns Norway, where school districts can choose whether to decentralize hiring decisions. Districts that decentralized hiring and firing decisions were found to have exhibited higher levels of efficiency and better student performance.²³

Figure 1



Note: Of the province's 60 school service centres and school boards, 85% provided answers for 2018-2023. However, a certain proportion provided unclear answers. Most of the missing responses are in low-population areas. All of the centres and boards in the most populated regions provided answers. Over 75% of Quebec's population is covered by the answers we received. Also note that for 2010-2015, we used school year, whereas for 2018-2023, we are using calendar year.
Source: 2010-2015 – School boards of Quebec, MEI request for access to information, 2015; 2018-2023 – School service centres (on the French side) and school boards (on the English side) of Quebec, MEI request for access to information, 2023.

Moreover, since this Scandinavian country has a highly centralized education system in general, its decentralization efforts provide evidence that should be applicable to Quebec's quite centralized system.

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The advantages of school decentralization could be increased even further if school funding were tied to parental choice. This is because parental decisions to send their children to one

particular school rather than another provide feedback to school administrators about whether they are doing a good job.²⁴ This in turn provides additional incentive for them to make the best staffing decisions they can.

Students perform better when schools have more autonomy in terms of personnel and day-to-day administration.

The provincial government should do what it can to support high-quality education for Quebec students. Research shows that this means allowing school administrators to make their own hiring and firing decisions, and giving them every reason to choose wisely.

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