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Greetings,

First of all I wish to thank the Canadian Education Association, and especially Ms. Christa Freiler, for inviting me to speak to you at this workshop on Teachers Unions as Agents of Change.

Of course, we like to describe teachers unions as agents of change; and we like to believe that we are working to achieve greater equity and greater equal opportunity, not only in the education system but also in society as whole. After all, education is the best tool for achieving upward social mobility and the best means of achieving social success.

But how does this work out in reality? In other words, are we walking the talk?

I would like to propose a short course in history. After all, teaching courses is what we teachers do best.

In the 1960s, during the Quiet Revolution, when we reformed our education system in Québec, we created the Ministère de l'Éducation. We made education accessible and compulsory for all children to the age of sixteen. It was costly, but everyone agreed on making these investments, because people understood that education contributed to the well-being of society and benefited individuals. The catch phrase of the era accurately echoed the reality: "Qui s'instruit s'enrichit!" (he who studies grows rich).

It wasn't long before the effects were felt. Remember that at the time, Québec was Canada's poor relative in terms of education. Education was a privilege reserved to a small proportion of children from the most affluent classes. Less educated Francophone Quebecers were also among the poorest people in Canada. Moreover, a renowned author of the era described us as the white niggers of America.

Today, the situation has been completely transformed. Young Quebecers are just as educated as young Canadians in the other provinces and they perform very well on international tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, the PISA, even out-performing young Ontarians.

When they enter the labour market, they succeed in finding attractive jobs, and their income is comparable to earnings in the rest of Canada. Moreover, in recent months, the unemployment rate in Québec has been lower than the overall rate for Canada and that of the United States. Just a few years ago, this would have been unimaginable.

Our public education system was largely responsible for making these improvements possible. And this is all the more true for women.

But 50 years on, what about equal opportunity and equity in education?

One thing is certain – the socio-political context has changed. We are no longer living in the era of expanding government and significant public investment.

On the contrary, we are facing a government that fosters competition in education by providing private education with massive funding. We are facing media that promote private schools by publishing lists ranking the top schools. Unsurprisingly, the top ranks of these lists are filled with private schools in affluent neighbourhoods, the schools that can screen their students, whereas the bottom ranks are filled with public schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the schools that must accept all students, including those who are rejected by the private schools because they fail.

This impacts public opinion and parents, who now shop for schools for their children. It also has consequences for the public schools, many of whom offer special programs, such as international education and sports-study programs for selected students.

Screening in both the private and public education systems means that regular classes no longer resemble regular classes because they contain large numbers of students experiencing all sorts of difficulties: students with learning disabilities, adjustment difficulties, or behavioural problems, as well as students with physical disabilities. We are dealing with a two- or three-tiered education system, which poses problems in terms of equity.

Integrating students with physical or learning disabilities or adjustment problems was a core issue at the last bargaining round, concluded in June.

Speaking of unions as agents of change. This is a good example of where we succeeded, through negotiations, in improving the situation by providing better services not only for students in difficulty but also for other students, ensuring that their rights are also respected. We also succeeded in improving the working conditions of teachers by requiring the government to take into consideration the excessive constraints involved in implementing integration.

Thanks to the new collective agreement in implementation since September 2010, CSQ-affiliated teachers won an additional, dedicated and recurrent allocation of \$20 million in support of classes containing students with behavioural problems that provides for a number of things, including additional respite classes or additional professional or support services. The level of difficulty associated with certain students is now taken into consideration when determining the maximum number of students in classes (which we call weighting).

Lastly, the Ministère de l'Éducation agreed to establish a task force to study problems related to integration. These are the main mandates:

- the process of identifying students;
- the criteria and benchmarks for limiting integration;

- the problem of balancing the rights of integrated students experiencing difficulties with the rights of other students.

We also secured additional professional resources to provide direct services to young and adult students. This involves a dedicated budget of \$24 million, corresponding to 380 regular professional positions.

In addition, class sizes have been reduced in elementary and secondary schools. At the elementary level, we succeeded in securing a significant reduction in the number students per class in disadvantaged communities, so that the maximum is now 20 for all grades in elementary school. In other communities, class size will be reduced by three students from the current maximum class size.

At the secondary level, we secured a reduction of the number of students per class in all types of communities for Secondary I and Secondary II (grades 7 and 8). The maximum is now 28 students per class in Secondary I and 29 students per class in Secondary II, compared to 32 last year.

The Ministère de l'Éducation also agreed to grant a specific allocation of \$2 million to address the problem of class size in adult education.

As we may observe, our union action can—sometimes—effect significant changes that improve the quality of education and foster equity, particularly when we focus our efforts on schools located in disadvantaged communities.

However, winning our case with respect to integrating students in difficulty meant that we had to work on internal union education. In fact, the weakening of our public systems and the shortage of resources have most certainly created distress among our members who can no longer cope with the situation in their classes. As a result, some of our members have embraced a strong right-leaning position and advocate a return to special schools and classes, which would lead to a degree of social exclusion.

Many union representatives are torn between a societal ideal and the real distress of their members who say they can no longer cope with too many students in difficulty or with behavioural problems. In some venues, we were told: “reducing class sizes is all well and good, but I want to be able to choose the students who will no longer be in my class.”

Thus, the unions are at a strategic crossroads between corporatism and social involvement.

Choosing social commitment means that we have to communicate effectively with our members and draw inspiration from solidarity and mobilization. This was true in the past and it is still true today; we cannot make any gains in society if we do not conduct our campaigns in solidarity.

But mobilization and solidarity don't come about magically. As union leaders, we must maintain contact with grassroots members at all times, and not merely when it's time to renew collective agreements.

For this reason, in 2006 at the CSQ, we launched a large-scale campaign all across Québec to make education a province-wide priority. We kicked off the campaign with a tour of all the regions so that we could listen to what our members had to say. Nearly 15,000 members participated in the first year of the campaign and expressed their views on the best actions to be implemented to ensure that all young people and all adults in the education system, from preschool through university, receive quality education.

The findings of this vast consultation were gathered and formulated in five proposals to improve education in Québec.

One of the key principles underlying these proposals is the deep feeling that education in Québec will improve insofar as all of the societal actors decide to make it a province-wide priority. In this way, once again, it could become a powerful means for all of realizing their dreams for a better future.

The following year, in 2007–2008, we returned to the regions to discuss our five proposals to ensure quality education. In every region, we organized a series of “Rendez-vous de l'éducation” (meetings on education), inviting, in addition to our members, parents, Members of National Assembly (MNAs), members of community organizations and citizens to take part.

Finally, during the third year of the campaign, we held a major colloquium where we argued in favour of the need to make education a province-wide priority.

What does that mean? It means providing parents with the tools and means they need to support their children as they progress through school. It means supporting educational institutions and the personnel working in them every day, fulfilling their educational mission. Lastly, it means that the government must commit and reinvest in education so that schools, vocational training centres and adult education centres, Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEPs) [vocational colleges] and universities meet the high expectations the public has of them.

It is very difficult to accurately determine the impact of this kind of campaign on the development of education issues in Québec. What we can assert without too much risk, is that the place the CSQ has occupied in the media over the course of the past three years has enabled us to rekindle the debate on education and to put education back on the agenda as a priority. We can also assert, without too much presumption, that this campaign influenced the decision of the Ministère de l'Éducation to establish a student perseverance plan.

While conducting this campaign, we found ourselves playing a role in which we were advancing proposals rather than merely reacting to the government and the advocates of neoliberalism.

What we are proposing is the development of a more just education system and a more just society. In this regard, the campaign enabled the CSQ to strengthen its role as a social movement and to act as an agent of change!

I thank you.