

# Keeping Children in School: The Response of the Montreal Catholic School Commission to the Depression of the 1930s

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## Résumé de l'article

Au Québec, comme ailleurs au Canada, la crise des années 1930 a mis en relief les carences du système d'assistance social existant. Cette situation provoqua finalement l'intervention accrue de l'État ainsi qu'une rationalisation de la philanthropie. Les historiens(nes) ont jusqu'ici accordé peu d'attention au sort des enfants et à l'évolution des services sociaux qui leur étaient destinés durant cette période marquante. La présente étude a pour but d'examiner les effets de la Crise sur l'origine, le fonctionnement et l'impact des politiques d'aide développées au niveau d'un système scolaire urbain. L'analyse porte sur la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (CECM), qui est la plus importante parmi les commissions scolaires locales au Québec, au cours de la période 1929 à 1940. En 1930, près de 100,000 élèves étaient inscrits dans les écoles primaires et secondaires de la Commission. Ces enfants, à majorité francophone et issues de la classe ouvrière, étaient durement touchés par la dépression économique.

L'auteur soutient que le dénuement extrême des écoliers dans les années 1930 entravait l'assiduité et le progrès scolaire de ceux-ci. Devant cette situation, les autorités scolaires se voyaient obligées d'abandonner la conception voulant que l'éducation, le bien-être et la santé soient des catégories distinctes. La Crise amena ainsi la Commission à accroître, diversifier et systématiser son intervention sociale auprès des écoliers. Les dirigeants scolaires ont, d'une part, rationalisé et élargi l'ancienne politique de la gratuité scolaire pour enfants indigents, et, d'autre part, créé en 1934 une agence sociale fournissant du lait et des vêtements aux élèves nécessiteux. A cet effet, ils ont eu recours à la charité privée ainsi qu'aux nouvelles techniques du service social professionnel. Cependant, ces programmes se sont manifestement avérés insuffisants face aux besoins énormes de la population scolaire. Les initiatives de la CECM lors de la Crise, malgré ses lacunes, n'en revêtent pas moins une importance capitale, car précurseurs de l'entrée du service social dans le système scolaire.

# Keeping Children in School: The Response of the Montreal Catholic School Commission to the Depression of the 1930s\*

WENDY JOHNSTON

## *Résumé*

*In Quebec, as elsewhere in Canada, the depression of the 1930s highlighted the inadequacies of existing welfare arrangements and ultimately compelled a shift towards greater state intervention and rationalization of philanthropy. Historians have so far devoted little attention to the situation of children and the evolution of child welfare services during this crucial period. This paper seeks to examine the effects of the depression on the origins, the nature and the impact of aid policies in a particular urban school system. The analysis centres on the Montreal Catholic School Commission (MCSC), the largest of Quebec's local public school boards, during the period 1929 to 1940. In 1930, the Commission's primary and secondary schools boasted an enrolment of nearly one hundred thousand students. These mainly French-speaking children of working-class origin were particularly hard hit by the economic crisis.*

*The author argues that the severe physical want experienced by schoolchildren in the depression years constituted a formidable obstacle to regular school attendance and to learning. Faced with this situation, MCSC officials were obliged to abandon a conception enshrining education, health and welfare as separate categories. The economic crisis thus compelled the commission to assume an enlarged, systematized and diversified role in student welfare. School authorities rationalized and expanded the long-standing policy of free schooling for indigents and, in 1934, created a social service agency to provide free milk and clothing to needy children. To this end, they allied a continuing reliance on private charity with the adoption of modern social work practices. However, lacking sufficient funding, MCSC assistance programmes proved hopelessly unequal to the enormous student need. The MCSC's depression-era initiatives were, despite their inadequacies, developments of long-term significance, providing the springboard for social work's entry into the school system.*

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\* The author would like to thank René Durocher, Dominique Jean, Andrée Lévesque, Michael D. Behiels and Bettina Bradbury for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this text.

*scolaire urbain. L'analyse porte sur la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (CECM), qui est la plus importante parmi les commissions scolaires locales au Québec, au cours de la période 1929 à 1940. En 1930, près de 100,000 élèves étaient inscrits dans les écoles primaires et secondaires de la Commission. Ces enfants, à majorité francophone et issues de la classe ouvrière, étaient durement touchés par la dépression économique.*

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Restless children kept home from school for want of sturdy shoes and adequate clothing. Thin and sickly young students too hungry to concentrate on classroom lessons. Such images bear witness to the devastating impact of the Great Depression in Quebec. The children of the unemployed and working poor, no less than their more visible and vocal adult counterparts,<sup>1</sup> were prime casualties of the economic crisis. Yet the contours of the depression experience in the lives of children, and the response of Quebec's public and private authorities to the problems of juveniles remain issues largely ignored by historians.<sup>2</sup>

1. Excluded from positions of power, rarely leaving behind first-hand accounts of their experience, children constitute one of the long-neglected groups in Canadian and Quebec historiography. The situation is changing, however; the history of childhood in Canada has been an expanding research field in recent years. For a sampling of historiography, consult the bibliography in Joy Parr, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982).
2. Brief references to the situation of children and juvenile social services can be found in Claude Larivière, "Crise économique et contrôle social: le cas de Montréal (1929–1937)," M.A. diss., Université de Montréal, 1976, and in Serge Mongeau, *Évolution de l'assistance au Québec* (Montreal, 1967), but in-depth analysis of these themes is long overdue. On the depression in Quebec, see for example: B.L. Vigod, "The Quebec Government and Social Legislation during the 1930s: A Study in Political Self-Destruction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 14 (Spring 1979), pp. 59–69; Evelyn Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec* (Montreal, 1975); Michel Pelletier and Yves Vaillancourt, *Les politiques sociales et les travailleurs*, Cahier II: Les années 30 (Montreal, 1975); F.J. Frigon, "Catholicism and Crisis: L'École sociale populaire and the Depression, 1930–1940," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 45 (1975), pp. 54–70; Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit: les communistes, les socialistes et leurs ennemis au Québec, 1929–1939* (Montreal, 1984).

Studies of social policy in Canada underline the importance of the depression period in the development of the modern welfare state.<sup>3</sup> In the context of an unemployment crisis of unprecedented proportions, traditional forms of local and philanthropic social assistance were tested and found wanting. Federal authorities were forced to introduce emergency relief measures financed under cost-sharing formulas with the provinces and municipalities. Yet the central government refused during the 1930s to assume responsibility for the elaboration of a permanent, comprehensive social security system.<sup>4</sup> In Quebec, as elsewhere in Canada, the unemployed, the working poor and their dependents paid a high price for the ad hoc, politically expedient approach of governments to the economic crisis.<sup>5</sup> By highlighting the inadequacies of existing welfare arrangements, the depression ultimately compelled a shift towards greater state intervention and rationalization of charity efforts. How did this conjuncture affect the development of social welfare policies aimed at school-age children? Did the depression result in expansion and innovation in juvenile social services? To what extent did assistance measures meet the needs of Quebec youth during these "années dures?"

This paper aims to provide a partial response to these questions by examining the aid policies of an urban school system serving a mass juvenile clientele during the

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3. For an overview of social welfare developments in Canada from the pre-Confederation era to the 1980s, see Denis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada*, 2nd edition revised (Vancouver, 1985). On relief policy during the Great Depression, the following may be consulted with profit: James Struthers, *No Fault of their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914–1941* (Toronto, 1983); H.B. Neatby, *The Politics of Chaos* (Toronto, 1972); L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, introduction to *The Wretched of Canada: Letters to R.B. Bennett 1930–1935* (Toronto, 1971); articles in the thematic issue, "Dependency and Social Welfare" of the *Journal of Canadian Studies* 14 (Spring 1979). See also the works cited in note 2 and the suggestions for further reading in Michiel Horn, *The Great Depression of the 1930s in Canada* (Ottawa, 1984).
  4. See in particular the excellent recent study by Struthers, *No Fault of their Own*.
  5. Quebec's welfare system offered only limited social assistance to supplement the inadequate emergency relief programmes sponsored by the three levels of government. Since 1921, the provincial Public Charities Act provided public funds for institutional care of the indigents under a cost-sharing formula with municipalities and institutions. Outdoor or noninstitutional relief was left almost entirely in the hands of religious- and ethnic-affiliated charities. In 1932, the act was interpreted to recognize English-speaking Protestant, Catholic and Jewish charitable agencies, almost exclusively centered on home care, as institutions "sans murs" eligible for small grants. The French-speaking social service agencies only availed themselves of this possibility some ten years later. The decade of the 1930s was not rich in government-sponsored social welfare developments. Though the provincial regime appointed a Social Insurance Commission (1930–33), most of its recommendations, including family allowances and subsidized health insurance, remained dead letters. It was only during the period 1936–39 that modest pension schemes for the aged, the blind and needy mothers were implemented. For a discussion of the act and social assistance developments during the 1920s and 1930s, consult Mongeau, *Evolution de l'assistance*, pp. 44–70 and B.L. Vigod, "The Quebec Government and Social Legislation."

depression. This study focuses on the Montreal Catholic School Commission (MCSC), the largest of Quebec's local public school boards, during the period 1929 to 1940. The MCSC boasted in 1930 a predominantly French-speaking and working-class student body of nearly 100,000, or approximately 20 per cent of the province's total elementary school enrolment.<sup>6</sup> The commission's primary and secondary schools served the population of an industrial, commercial and financial centre hard hit by the international and Canadian trade slump. By 1932, some 30 per cent of Montreal's 818,577 inhabitants<sup>7</sup>—a higher proportion than any other Canadian city—were on relief, and they were receiving less per capita than their counterparts elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Economic "recovery" awaited war preparations at decade's end.<sup>9</sup>

Analysis of the origins, the nature and the impact of the commission's aid programmes will show that the Great Depression obligated the MCSC to adopt an enlarged, diversified and systematized role in juvenile welfare. Like many other depression relief efforts, similarly handicapped by lack of funds, the intervention of the MCSC proved woefully inadequate compared to existing needs. However, the initiatives of the thirties would set an important precedent in the expansion of the school's social role.

This article is divided into two major parts. The first section will discuss the principal socioeconomic problems facing commission students in the depression years. Part II will analyze the programmes developed by school authorities to address the material needs of their pupils—the fee remission policy and ventures in feeding and clothing students.

## I. STUDENTS IN CRISIS

The repercussions of the Great Depression were felt severely in the mainly lower-class student population served by the Montreal Catholic School Commission. Few observers could fail to notice the signs of growing impoverishment among these school-children during the early thirties. Commission employees and agents in direct contact with the children—those on the front lines, so to speak—provided compelling evidence of a student body in crisis.

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6. In 1929–30, there were 564,374 students enrolled in the primary level schools of the Protestant and Catholic sectors in Quebec. The MCSC alone accounted for 97,556 of these, of which approximately 10 per cent were enrolled in its English-language schools. Quebec, Bureau des statistiques, *Statistiques de l'enseignement pour 1930–31*; Archives of the Montreal Catholic School Commission (hereafter AMCSC), (5) Services, (8) Service de l'Informatique, (2) Statistiques–Inscription par degré 1923 à 1973; Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (CECM), "Relevé de l'inscription par degré du cours (1928–1967)," undated. (The numbers in parentheses used in document references throughout this article correspond to the classification system for papers at the AMCSC.)
  7. According to the 1931 *Census of Canada*, Vol. II, p. 277.
  8. Struthers, *No Fault of their Own*, p. 49.
  9. Larivière, "Crise économique," pp. 12–14.

The distress of the commission's clientele was early reflected in the rise of absenteeism directly attributable to poverty. The commonly invoked excuses of illness and employment were, in large part, products of indigence. In addition, however, truant officers charged with the enforcement of regular attendance<sup>10</sup> often explicitly recorded poverty, indigence, or the lack of certain material effects as the specific source of truancy. During the 1930–31 school year, poverty was cited as the direct cause of 9 and 11 per cent of the total volume of absences in the commission's western and central districts.<sup>11</sup> By 1933–34, material need alone motivated some 14 and 17 per cent of absences in these same districts.<sup>12</sup> The statistical results of the truant officers' weekly investigations, combined with their occasional comments on individual cases, provide dramatic insights into the everyday misery of schoolchildren during the 1930s.

A frequently cited obstacle to regular school attendance was the lack of adequate clothing and footwear.<sup>13</sup> Many children were kept home from school for this pathetic but fundamental reason, especially during the long and difficult winter season. In a typical case in February 1932, a young boy without shoes of his own was obliged to don his father's galoshes to accompany the truant officer "chez la dame qui s'occupe d'habiller les pauvres."<sup>14</sup> In some cases, children needing clothing were reported to be "tout nu" or "presque nu" and some were therefore absent from school for periods exceeding a month.<sup>15</sup> The other constraints experienced by the young prisoners of overcrowded city apartments can only be imagined. Little wonder that a dictation for pupils published in the commission's pedagogical journal in 1933 argued that a good pair of shoes constituted "le premier désir des gens dénués de tout."<sup>16</sup>

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10. Although school attendance to age 14 became compulsory in Quebec only in 1943, the MCSC established its own truancy control service as early as 1928. For more on the structure and evolution of this service, see AMCSC, (4) *Élèves*, (7) *Contrôle des absences—Généralités 1924 à 1969*, CECM, Service des archives, "Mémoire relatif au contrôle des absences des élèves," 24 February 1944.
  11. Percentages calculated on the basis of data contained in the "Rapport hebdomadaire des contrôleurs d'absences," 1930–34, in AMCSC, (4) *Élèves*, (7) *Contrôle des absences—Rapports hebdomadaires des contrôleurs d'absences, 1929–1942* (hereafter RHCA). Absences for which the truant officer recorded the cause as poverty/indigence, lack of shoes, clothing, eyeglasses or books were considered as motivated directly by poverty in this compilation. Note that these rates underestimate the full weight of the poverty factor as they fail to take account of indigence-related excuses like sickness or work, and of the reticence of families before the truant officer. For more concerning the methodology employed and the series of statistics for the 1930s, see Wendy Johnston, "La Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal face à la Crise des années 1930," M.A. diss., Université de Montréal, 1984, pp. 163–76.
  12. See note 11.
  13. Judging by the letters received by Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, many children throughout Canada suffered the same fate in the depression years. See L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, introduction to *The Wretched of Canada*, p. xiv.
  14. AMCSC, RHCA, J.-M. Brosseau, "RHCA pour le District Ouest," week of 29 February 1932.
  15. *Ibid.*, weeks of 30 January and 6 November 1933. According to Brosseau's 30 January report, an almost naked boy had been absent from school since Christmas.
  16. Marcelle Tinayre, "Chaussures d'enfants," *L'école canadienne* (février 1933), p. 274.

In a context where parental revenues were often insufficient even to feed and clothe children properly school fees constituted another formidable barrier to regular attendance. At the MCSC, all children were required to purchase their textbooks, while certain categories of pupils were also subject to monthly tuition fees.<sup>17</sup> In poor families, especially those with several school-age children, it may often have been a choice between schooling and food. In other cases, children unable to afford corrective lenses stayed home rather than waste their time on lessons they could not comprehend.<sup>18</sup>

If the increasing rate of truancy due to indigence was cause for alarm, so too was the appearance and health of children in school. Clerical visitors and provincial school inspectors charged with the inspection of pedagogy, discipline and school facilities witnessed more than academic problems in depression-era classrooms. Widespread undernourishment among young pupils attracted the attention of many school commission agents, like the clerical visitor who in 1931 sadly reported on the large numbers of poor children who often came to school without breakfast.<sup>19</sup> From the comments made by these agents it is clear that inadequate nutrition interfered with the children's intellectual development. The direct link between hunger and learning difficulties was presented in stark terms by another clerical visitor in 1932: "La pauvreté... est un grand obstacle au développement des élèves. Il arrive que l'enfant n'a pas toujours de quoi se mettre sous la dent. Le ventre creux, comment peut-il fournir un bon travail intellectuel?"<sup>20</sup> The debilitating effects of extreme poverty and resulting underfeeding also struck the provincial inspectors. They noted in their 1933–34 joint report "la faiblesse physique et mentale"<sup>21</sup> among commission students.

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17. Examples of truancy caused by the inability to pay school fees can be found in AMCSC, RHCA, E.-B. Brunelle, "RHCA pour le District Centre," week of 5 September 1932; AMCSC, *Contrôle des absences, Rapports-Généralités 1929 à 1938*, W. Gravel to E. Leblanc, 26 September 1931. While Montreal city residents in the preparatory to seventh grades attended school free of charge, nonresidents, non-Catholics, as well as students in the advanced classes were subject to monthly tuition fees ranging from \$0.50 to \$2.00 on the eve of the depression. Under the pressure of financial difficulties, the commissioners even introduced substantial increases in these rates during the thirties. Moreover, as stated, all categories of pupils were obliged to purchase their schoolbooks. For the evolution of tuition rates, see Johnston, "La Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal face à la Crise," pp. 55–9. Free tuition to age 14 and a free textbook policy were introduced by provincial legislation only in 1943 and 1944.
  18. For examples, see AMCSC, RHCA, P.-N. Carle, "RHCA pour le District Est," week of 6 to 13 March 1932; *ibid.*, week of 18 to 25 September 1932.
  19. AMCSC, (7) *Inspections — Visites des écoles — Visiteurs ecclésiastiques d'école — Visiteurs ecclésiastiques, Rapports*—J. Eugène Gareau, 1929 à 1931, "Notes tirées des rapports de M. L'abbé Garneau pour le District Nord," weeks of 8 to 28 February 1931, 3 March 1931.
  20. *Ibid.*, H.-A. Forget, 1929 à 1932, "Rapport de H.-A. Forget à J.-O. Maurice," 19 January 1932.
  21. AMCSC, (7) *Inspections — Visites des écoles — Inspection des écoles — Rapports des inspecteurs d'écoles*—J.-R. Côté 1931 à 1953, "Rapport conjoint des inspecteurs d'écoles de la CECM pour le 2e semestre scolaire 1933–34," p. 4.

The results of the medical inspection of schoolchildren carried out periodically by municipal health authorities reinforced these classroom observations. While the existence of malnutrition among students predated the depression,<sup>22</sup> a growing proportion of children clearly were eating inadequately in the years of economic crisis. During the opening years of the decade, the proportion of schoolchildren suffering from malnutrition never fell below 13 percent of those examined.<sup>23</sup> The real incidence of malnutrition was probably much higher, as city health department figures during the thirties were based solely on a periodic weighing of children rather than on a combination of clinical and size factors or more sophisticated biochemical techniques.<sup>24</sup> Poor diet, combined with squalid living conditions and lack of adequate, affordable medical care had serious repercussions on student health. Medical inspections diagnosed a wide variety of diseases and physical weaknesses, affecting at least 50 per cent of all children examined throughout the thirties.<sup>25</sup> Vision defects and eye disease troubled numerous children, many of whom were unable to afford corrective eyeglasses.<sup>26</sup> The tonsils and glandular system proved another serious problem area and reexaminations indicated that relatively few children underwent surgery to correct their condition.<sup>27</sup> Many other pupils suffered from lung, heart and digestive disorders.<sup>28</sup> Dental problems appeared to be especially widespread. Some 50 per cent of the children examined in the early 1930s displayed dental defects including cavities and gum disease, and many were unable to afford treatment.<sup>29</sup>

The fundamental problems experienced by Montreal Catholic schoolchildren during the depression were certainly not novelties in the metropolis. During the

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22. During the 1927–28 school year, 8998 city students “ayant des affections de la nutrition” were identified by the medical inspection; the following year, the number rose to 9943 or 15 per cent of children examined. *Rapport annuel du Service de Santé de la Cité de Montréal* (RASSCM) (1928), Tableau IV, p. 88 and (1929), Tableau IV, p. 96.
  23. The statistics on malnutrition and student health are drawn from the reports of the doctors, nurses and dentists of the city medical inspection service. See AMCSC, (10) Service du personnel, (2) Bureau médical—Rapports des médecins-inspecteurs et des infirmières-visiteuses 1929–1940, “Rapports des médecins-inspecteurs,” “Rapports des infirmières-visiteuses,” “Rapports des inspecteurs-dentaires,” 1929/30–1939/40. These figures are compiled in Tables 29, 30 and 31, pp. 197–203 in Johnston, “La Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal face à la Crise.”
  24. Before 1930–31, it appears that malnutrition was diagnosed by the medical authorities on the basis of a “subjective” evaluation of skin appearance and other indicators. The superintendent of the city’s child hygiene division maintained that the adoption of a “more rigorous” method (based on periodic weighings) in 1930 was responsible for the decreasing rate of malnutrition recorded between 1929 and 1933. *RASSCM* (1934), p. 125. The inadequacy of weight as the sole criterion of nutritional state was signalled by McGill University social scientist Leonard Marsh in his depression-era study, *Health and Unemployment* (Montreal, 1938), p. 53 and 155.
  25. “Rapports des médecins-inspecteurs.”
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. *Ibid.*
  28. *Ibid.*
  29. *Ibid.*; see also AMCSC, Rapports médicaux, “Rapports des inspecteurs-dentaires.”



supposedly prosperous twenties, life below the poverty line was the lot of many Montrealers.<sup>30</sup> Indeed it is largely because many were already living below or near the poverty line that the depression hit so quickly and so hard. Indigence-related difficulties took on critical proportions in the 1930s. The extreme misery strained the capacities of traditional private and public relief systems beyond the breaking point and overwhelmed the emergency assistance programmes introduced by the three levels of government. What was the reaction of the local school authorities to this dramatic state of affairs?

## II. THE AUTHORITIES RESPOND: AID PROGRAMMES IN THE SCHOOLS

The MCSC response to the apparent state of emergency among its pupils was conditioned by the material and ideological situation of the organization. By 1930, the school commission had become a centralized and sophisticated administrative entity which an employee compared to a "colossale machine," tended by "ingénieurs," "mécaniciens" and "humbles manoeuvres."<sup>31</sup> Determining the policies of this modern bureaucracy were some nineteen appointed commissioners, without exception members of the city's clerical and lay elites.<sup>32</sup> Ultimate authority was vested in the president and director-general, a position held for much of the decade by Victor Doré, accountant, professor and active public figure. Doré's adherence to the prevailing ideology of economic liberalism, allied with a strong sense of social duty and a concern for educational reform, set the tone for commission operations during the critical depression years.<sup>33</sup> For the "machine" was experiencing difficulties. The depression seriously aggravated

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30. In 1919, the clerical visitor for the commission's western district identified poverty among the principal causes of absenteeism. AMCSC, *Visiteurs ecclésiastiques-Généralités 1917 à 1964*, Joseph-H. Dupuis, "Notes pédagogiques pour l'année 1918-19," 10 September 1919. For a description of working-class life in Montreal before the depression, see Terry Copp's excellent study, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto, 1974).
  31. AMCSC, *Visiteurs ecclésiastiques — Rapports annuels 1925/26-1957/58*, "Rapport annuel du visiteur ecclésiastique en chef 1931-32," p. 3.
  32. The commissioners were named for a five-year mandate by four public authorities: the Quebec government, the municipal council, the Archbishop of the diocese of Montreal and the Université de Montréal. *Statuts de Québec*, 1928, chap. 50, art. 4. In 1937, the number of commissioners was reduced to nine and a consultative twenty-member Pedagogical Council was added. *Statuts de Québec*, 1937, chap. 65, art. 3.
  33. Doré was obliged to trade his post of commission president for that of secretary-treasurer in 1937, following the victory of Duplessis' Unionistes over the Taschereau Liberals. In 1939, he left the commission to serve as the province's superintendent of public instruction. Doré's later career included stints as Canadian ambassador to Belgium and Switzerland and as first president of UNESCO. During the thirties, Doré headed a team of commissioners which included such prominent "progressive" Liberals as Édouard Montpetit, who presided over the Social Insurance Commission (1930-33). On the links between the Montreal education officials and the Taschereau regime, see B.L. Vigod, "Qu'on ne craigne pas l'encombrement des compétences: Le gouvernement Taschereau et l'éducation 1920-1929," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 28 (septembre 1974), pp. 224-25, and 235-7.

the commission's chronic financial problems which stemmed from a dependence on local property taxes for the bulk of revenues.<sup>34</sup> In the face of spiralling costs, mounting deficits and declining revenues, the MCSC sought to minimize expenditures. The costs and benefits of additional financial or administrative undertakings would be carefully weighed within the parameters of a mandate for public instruction.

On the eve of the Great Depression, the MCSC already had a long-standing policy regarding student inability to pay tuition and book fees. Provincial regulations dating to the late nineteenth century required all Quebec school commissions to provide free education for indigent children.<sup>35</sup> This remission of school fees for the needy was to be financed directly from school commission funds. At the MCSC, eligibility for exemptions was traditionally determined by the parish priest or the president of the local chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society to whom school principals submitted requests for free schoolbooks.<sup>36</sup> Those receiving textbooks free of charge at the MCSC apparently were also supplied with such articles as notebooks, pens and pencils.<sup>37</sup> In the difficult financial context of the depression, school authorities modified and expanded these subsidization policies.

Faced with falling revenues and rising expenditures during the thirties, the MCSC implemented procedures designed to tighten control over the free schooling accorded to indigents. Official regulations were instituted to consecrate the existing procedures concerning free schoolbooks.<sup>38</sup> In 1935, moreover, a school commission directive urged greater vigilance. School principals and teaching personnel were instructed to use "beaucoup de prudence" and to obtain all the necessary information concerning demands for schoolbooks.<sup>39</sup> Cases of tuition fee remission were also subjected to closer scrutiny. In 1934, the research and statistics division added several special investigators to its staff. Their job was to make home visits in order to determine the validity of requests for tuition exemption and reduction in the advanced classes. Still serving the commission at the end of the decade, these agents had evidently proved

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34. An analysis of the depression's impact on the financial situation of the MCSC can be found in Johnston, "La Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal face à la Crise," pp. 40–99.
35. *Code scolaire de la province de Québec* (Quebec, 1899), art. 215, 249; *ibid.*, (Quebec, 1931), art. 221 and 261. The legislation concerning the MCSC confirmed this duty. *SQ*, 1928, chap. 50, art. 24.
36. AMSCS, (7) Service des études, (3) Recherches et programmes, (5) Manuels scolaires — Manuels fournis gratuitement aux élèves par la C.E.C.M., Généralités 1912 à 1946, J. Casgrain to V. Doré, 16 September 1931.
37. AMSCS, CECM, "Livre des délibérations (LDD), 28 December 1937, Res. XIX; AMSCS, Circulaires, "Lettre circulaire de la Direction des études à la direction des écoles," 7 January 1938.
38. AMSCS, Manuels fournis gratuitement, R. Desjardins to V. Doré, 27 August 1936; CECM, "Règlement no. 35," 27 August 1936. A subsequent revision of the regulations in 1940 allowed the presentation of the father's Commission de Chômage card for francophone students and the father's relief card for anglophones, to be accepted in the place of local charity organization approval. "Règlement no. 35," 3e révision, September 1940.
39. AMSCS, Circulaires, "Lettre circulaire de la Direction des études à la direction des écoles," 3 September 1935.

their worth by increasing the sum collected.<sup>40</sup> The commission's truant officers also aided in this task during the period.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the decision to stop supplying notebooks, pens and pencils to indigent pupils as of January 1938 was another cost-cutting measure born of the depression.<sup>42</sup>

The restrictive regulations governing the free education policy were introduced in the context of expanding assistance. Two areas of policy were involved, the first of which was the remission of monthly tuition fees. As Table 1 shows, the commission's financial commitment increased dramatically from \$1,000 in 1932, to more than \$40,000 in 1936. Tuition fee increases accounted in large part for this enormous rise in expenditure. Rates were increased as much as six-fold in certain cases in 1934. Nevertheless, local school authorities shouldered a greater responsibility for subsidization. The proportion of fees remitted in commission schools rose from just 3 per cent of the total potentially imposable in 1931 to some 43 per cent in 1936.

**Table 1**  
**Tuition Subsidization at the MCSC, 1931–39**

Year	Total imposable	Reduction and exemptions	%
1931–32 <sup>1</sup>	\$25,949.50	\$723.00	2.79
1932–33 <sup>2</sup>	23,618.00	1,773.00	7.51
1936–37 <sup>3</sup>	97,216.00	41,526.75	42.72
1939–40 <sup>4</sup>	112,321.50	43,898.00	39.08

Sources:

1. AMSCS, (5) Services, (14) Service de la Trésorerie, (10) Frais de scolarité — Rétribution mensuelle — Sommes perçues 1932 à 1960, CECM, "Rétribution mensuelle, Rapport au 30 juin 1932," 24 August 1932.
2. Ibid., CECM, Division des statistiques, "Relevé de l'imposition et de la perception de la rétribution mensuelle, exercice 1932–33," 28 November 1933.
3. AMSCS, CECM, "LDD," 3, 4 and 9 August 1937.
4. AMSCS, (5) Services, (8) Service de l'Informatique, (2) Statistiques — Frais scolaires, 1937–38 à 1949–50; CECM, "Rétribution mensuelle, Tableau sommaire de l'imposition et de la perception des frais scolaires couvrant la période du 1er septembre 1939 au 30 juin 1940," 26 July 1940.

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40. See note 44, below. The number of investigators went from three in 1934 to four in 1937–38. AMSCS, Contrôle des absences, Généralités 1924 à 1969, J.-F. Vincent to V. Doré, 17 October 1936; AMSCS, Service de l'Informatique, Frais scolaires, J.-F. Vincent to R. Delcourt, 8 April 1940; CECM, "LDD," 19 October 1937.
  41. AMSCS, Contrôle des absences, Généralités, CECM, Direction des études, "Rapport no. XI," 27 October 1938. From five in 1930, the number of truant officers passed to nine at decade's end.
  42. AMSCS, Circulaires, "Lettre circulaire de la Direction des études à la Direction des écoles," 7 January 1938.

## KEEPING CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

The existing sources do not allow one to evaluate the number of pupils admitted free-of-charge or at a reduced rate during the depression years because tuition fees varied according to the category of student.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as previously noted, the rates increased during the period. However, it appears that a growing number of children benefitted from the increase in budget for the fee remission policy.

The commission also allocated a greater sum for free schoolbooks in the depression years. From less than \$5,000 in 1928, the contribution rose to nearly \$9,000 in 1930. As Table 2 demonstrates, the budget for free schoolbooks attained its peak between 1931 and 1936, when it ranged from \$11,000 to \$16,000 annually.

**Table 2**  
**Free Schoolbook Provision at the MCSC,**  
**1928–1939**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Sum allocated</b>
1928–29	\$4,674.18
1929–30	6,057.59
1930–31	8,845.73
1931–32	13,731.38
1932–33	11,363.89
1933–34	15,122.24
1934–35	13,906.99
1935–36	13,647.68
1936–37	15,575.41
1937–38	8,537.59
1938–39	5,736.12
1939–40	7,493.19

Source: MCSC, *Financial Reports*, 1928/29–1939/40.

Despite the expansion of commission expenditures and the subsequent increase in the number of fee remission cases, the subsidized schooling programme did not keep pace with existing need. The fragmentary existing evidence suggests that the number of demands for fee remission far exceeded those approved.<sup>44</sup> The commission president

43. See note 17.

44. Between 1934 and 1938, commission truant officers and special investigators carried out on average 2000 case investigations each year concerning requests for total or partial exemption of fees in the advanced classes. The commission saved considerably from their efforts: in 1936, for example, total remission was granted to only 32 per cent of the demands made in the commission's eastern district. AMCSC, RHCA, P.-N. Carle, "RHCA pour le District Est," weeks of 6 to 27 September 1936; CECM, Direction des études, "Rapport no. XI," 27 October 1938.

hastened to assure a union representative protesting the massive fee increases introduced in 1934 that the MCSC did not intend to close its doors to poor children.<sup>45</sup> Doré claimed moreover never to have refused admission to a child that he knew could not pay. The veracity of these affirmations cannot be easily evaluated. But on the question of the application of free schooling policies for indigents, one might wonder, with the historian Gabriel Désert, “à partir de quel seuil commence la pauvreté, notion très relative?”<sup>46</sup> Even worse, how many children would have stopped attending school, or would simply have never enrolled, without ever having requested tuition fee exemption or free books?<sup>47</sup>

More innovative than the free schooling policy were commission efforts to feed and clothe its clientele. By the midthirties, the MCSC would introduce school canteens to distribute milk in the schools and would establish an agency destined to expand and administer the canteens as well as to provide clothing to needy children.

The state of chronic want in which many schoolchildren lived in the early thirties provoked numerous calls for the social intervention of the school commission. Commenting on “l'état miséreux dans lequel les enfants de certains quartiers se présentent à la classe,”<sup>48</sup> the commission's chief ecclesiastical visitor considered in 1930 that the authorities should organize a programme of school canteens. That same year, a truant officer suggested the creation of a charity association in the schools for the purpose of buying clothing and shoes for needy pupils.<sup>49</sup> Various women's organizations also called for commission aid programmes.<sup>50</sup> Commission failure to help the destitute was even partly responsible for a loss of clientele to the Protestant public schools whose charitable agencies apparently offered a better level of social services. The several apostasy cases reported by outraged truant officers in the early thirties were indicative

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45. AMCSC, (14) Service de la Trésorerie, (10) Frais de scolarité — Rétribution mensuelle — Généralités 1896 à 1966, V. Doré to L. Girard, 7 August 1934.

46. G. Désert, “Alphabétisation et scolarisation dans le Grand-Ouest au 19e siècle,” in *The Making of Frenchmen. Current Directions in the History of Education in France 1679–1979*, eds. Donald N. Baker and Patrick J. Harrigan (Waterloo, 1980), p. 160.

47. Note that a drop and subsequent stagnation of enrolments in the primary superior classes at the MCSC is evident beginning in 1934 when substantial tuition increases were introduced. AMCSC, Service de l'Informatique, CECM, “Relevé de l'inscription par degré du cours (1928–1967).”

48. AMCSC, Visiteurs ecclésiastiques, Rapports annuels, “Rapport annuel du visiteur ecclésiastique en chef pour 1928–29,” 13 March 1930, p. 15.

49. The associations administered by the pupils of each school would collect contributions from children and their parents for the needy. AMCSC, Contrôle des absences, Généralités, W. Gravel to J.-M. Manning, 27 October 1930.

50. See note 58.

of a larger trend viewed with anxiety by the city's leading clerical authorities.<sup>51</sup> Such pressures did not however lead to immediate action by the concerned school authorities. MCSC officials were aware of existing misery but considerable time passed before they executed a plan of attack.

The attention of the MCSC centered first on the problem of malnutrition. On the agenda of the commissioners during the late autumn of 1929, the question was still at the study stage a year later. At that time, members considered the organization of school canteens for the distribution of milk to underfed young pupils whose health and "progrès scolaire" were judged to be in danger.<sup>52</sup> The project of milk distribution finally took shape at the close of the 1930–31 school year. The ground had been prepared by the work of a lobby composed of the superintendent of the child hygiene division of Montreal's health department, several members of the commission's hygiene committee, and, importantly, representatives of the Montreal dairy J.-J. Joubert et Compagnie.<sup>53</sup> Beginning in the fall of 1931, canteens were established on an experimental basis in selected schools. By springtime of that school year, some 60 per cent of commission schools possessed a canteen. These operated under the supervision of the commission president, its direction of studies division, and of the nurse-hygieniste Alice Lebel who represented the sole milk supplier.<sup>54</sup>

The programme was supposed to remedy the undernourishment of poor young pupils. Some children did benefit from a charity-subsidized distribution during the year. However, the canteens operated primarily as the vendors of milk at school recess

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51. In 1932 the truant officer for the central district reported concerning a girl registered in a Protestant school that he had "réussi à la faire changer d'idée après l'avoir habillée et lui avoir procuré les livres nécessaires." AMCSC, RHCA, E.-B. Brunelle, "RHCA pour le District Centre," week of 5 September 1932. See also *ibid.*, P.-N. Carle, "RHCA pour le District Est," week of 29 November to 6 December 1931. Archdiocese and school commission sources reveal that from 1930 to 1938 some 2865 Catholic Montrealers officially renounced their faith. These apostacies were in part apparently motivated by a lack of interest on the part of French and Irish welfare agencies towards nonfrancophones, as well as by the inadequate quality and limited accessibility of English-language teaching in the Catholic schools. See AMCSC, (5) Services, (7C) Services aux étudiants, (3) Bureau de l'accueil et de l'admission-Néo-Canadiens—Élèves non-catholiques et non-protestants -1941- "Rapport du J.-Rod Thibodeau à l'Hon. Hector Perrier re: Prosélytisme Protestant et instruction aux enfants non-catholiques romains, non-protestants," 17 November 1941, p. 2.
52. AMCSC, CECM, "Rapport du Comité d'enseignement d'hygiène," 22 November 1929, Res. IV; *ibid.*, 26 November 1930, Res. VI, VIII, in "LDD de la Commission Pédagogique."
53. Dr. J.-A. Beaudoin, professor at Université de Montréal's École d'hygiène sociale appliquée, was also present. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1931, Res. XI, 15 June 1931, Res. I. V. Doré to members of the Commission Pédagogique (CP), 11 January 1934, in *L'école canadienne* (février 1934), pp. 248–9; AMCSC, (7) Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, Cantines scolaires, Fournisseurs 1931 à 1939, J. Casgrain to C.B. Price, 3 November 1931.
54. V. Doré to members of the CP, 11 January 1934.

breaks and the bulk of the milk supplied was sold not given to students.<sup>55</sup> On an average, nearly six thousand or only 6 per cent of enrolled pupils per month purchased a daily half-pint of milk in 1931–32, at a cost of three cents per serving.<sup>56</sup> Lack of outside funding, as well as the commission's own severe financial problems, undoubtedly presented major obstacles to the introduction of a free milk programme. Commission efforts to obtain subsidies for such a project from societies such as the St. Vincent de Paul, proved vain at this time.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, school authorities appeared in principle reluctant to assume responsibility for the material welfare of their clientele. To suggestions that the commission either alone, or in conjunction with other authorities, undertake to feed or clothe schoolchildren, officials made it clear that the MCSC was in the business of instruction, not relief. School funds were to be used only for "des fins strictes d'éducation."<sup>58</sup> This attitude would however be modified with time.

The canteen experiment, judged successful by the commission, was continued in 1932–33. Ceding to the solicitations of city dairies, the commission accorded to several companies the contracts for the milk distribution that began in December in a greater number of schools. Despite the reduced price of 2.5 cents per half-pint, milk sales declined. As the ranks of the needy grew over this period, the nadir of the depression, fewer and fewer families could afford even this minimal expense. This deplorable situation, commented upon by school principals and milk company representatives alike, led the school authorities to suspend the canteens in June of 1933 in order to study the restructuring of the service.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1933, the commission studied the problem and called upon school principals to estimate the number of schoolchildren who should receive free milk. This preliminary inquiry produced a total figure considered extremely high by the authorities. As a result, the commission charged the canteen supervisor Alice Lebel with investigation of the criteria used to identify needy chil-

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55. Ibid.; AMSCS, Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, Cantines scolaires, Fournisseurs, J. Casgrain to W. Mitchell, 6 December 1932. The St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Canadian Progress Club apparently furnished milk tickets to poor children, a practice they continued in 1932–33. The number of children aided by this is unknown.
  56. CECM, in "Rapport du Comité d'hygiène," 13 June 1932, Res. V, "LDD de la CP."
  57. V. Doré to members of the CP, 11 January 1934.
  58. Response of CP to letter from l'Alliance canadienne pour le vote des femmes in "LDD de la CP," 6 October 1931, Res. XXVIII. On another occasion, the president noted that the school commission was obligated by law to provide instruction to school-age children and to furnish indigents with free school articles but "non à les nourrir et les vêtir." Since 1931, however, the commission had voluntarily provided shoes and clothing to a few of the most needy children. See AMSCS, Service des études, Manuels scolaires fournis gratuitement, V. Doré to Marie Claire Laroche, 5 October 1933.
  59. AMSCS, Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, Cantines scolaires, Fournisseurs, Soeur Sainte Céline to J. Casgrain, 16 December 1932; Ibid., M. Valiquette to J. Casgrain, 17 June 1933; CECM, "LDD de la CP," 20 June 1933, Res. VI.

dren.<sup>60</sup> Nurse and graduate of the public health programme of the Université de Montréal's École d'hygiène sociale appliquée,<sup>61</sup> Miss Lebel was considered the "expert" required to evaluate the situation correctly. Her discovery that the initial classification of pupils had been based on physical appearance and the list of those receiving free schoolbooks, evoked a response worthy of the professional administrator: more "scientific" procedures were necessary. Miss Lebel suggested the weighing of pupils to obtain "une sélection minutieuse"<sup>62</sup> of malnutrition cases. During the fall and winter of 1933, the municipal health authorities would help the commission identify the underweight, needy children.

The need had long been evident: the target clientele of milk distribution would now be "objectively" selected. And by the beginning of 1934, the commission had secured subsidies for the project. In January of 1934, President Doré announced the creation of the Catholic School Social Service (CSCS), which adopted the motto: "la joie de donner."<sup>63</sup> In addition to the distribution of free milk and the supervision of school canteens, the new service aimed to furnish clothes, shoes and other necessities to poor students and to promote hygiene, charity and civic duty.<sup>64</sup>

For the MCSC, the creation of an allied social service agency represented a significant initiative in the field of child welfare. Why did local school authorities assume a larger responsibility for the material well-being of their pupils, a domain they previously considered outside their mandate? Were education officials acting out of genuine concern for student welfare? Or did public and milk company lobbying, or fears of the potential for social disorder and religious "defection" among destitute children and their families, constitute the prime spur to action? The question of motivations underlying policy decisions is a complex one, not amenable to monocausal explanations.<sup>65</sup> All these factors seem to have played a part in the decision to create

60. AMSCS, Service des études, (4) Organisation scolaire, (6) Nutrition (bureau)—Bureau des oeuvres sociales scolaires catholiques et cantines scolaires, Rapports mensuels 1934 à 1936, A. Lebel to V. Doré, 8 January 1934. The total figure reported by the school principals is not mentioned.

61. Founded in 1925, the École d'hygiène sociale appliquée dispensed a one-year public health programme to qualified nurses. Lebel also completed a practicum at Columbia University before 1940.

62. See note 60.

63. In school commission documents, the service is generally referred to by its French title, Service Social Scolaire Catholique.

64. V. Doré to members of the CP, 11 January 1934.

65. The limitations of a rigid "social control" approach to social welfare and educational developments—the tendency to neglect the reactions and experience of the "controlled," and to underestimate the role of conflicts within the ruling class and unintended outcomes—have been signalled by a number of historians in recent years. For an influential statement of the social control thesis and a sampling of its critics, consult the following: Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (Toronto, 1971); Joan Higgins, "Regulating the Poor Revisited," *Journal of Social Policy* 7 (April 1978), pp. 189–98; J. Donald Wilson, "Some Observations on Recent Trends in Canadian Educational History," in *An Imperfect Past: Education and Society in Canadian History* (Vancouver, 1984), p. 12.



the CSSS. However, even more important, one suspects, was the change of attitude forced upon the MCSC's conscientious administrators by the severity of the socio-economic crisis. It was clear that the task of public instruction could no longer be carried out when large numbers of children were malnourished, sickly and ill-clad.

The CSSS joined the ranks of the emerging French-Canadian social work profession whose origins lie in depression-era Montreal.<sup>66</sup> The founding in 1933 by prominent Catholic clergy and laymen of the Fédération des oeuvres de charité canadiennes-françaises reflected the growing movement to transform traditional charity practices in the interests of efficiency and the curative and preventive results of aid. This centralized organization grouped together a variety of philanthropic agencies and carried out annual collective funding drives.<sup>67</sup> The CSSS joined the Fédération in 1934. In 1935, the new umbrella organization established the Conseil des Oeuvres as a central planning and coordinating body. The Bureau d'Aide aux Familles, a social service agency dealing with all aspects of material and moral welfare, was added to the list of Fédération creations in 1938.<sup>68</sup> Trained social workers for these agencies would eventually be produced by the first francophone university school of social work, established at the Université de Montréal in 1940.<sup>69</sup>

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66. On the beginnings of social work in French Canada, consult the following: Hayda Denault, "L'insertion du service social dans le milieu canadien-français," *Service Social* 10 and 11 (October 1961–April 1962), pp. 3–29; Serge Mongeau, *Évolution de l'assistance au Québec*, pp. 49–70; L. Groulx, "Le service social confessionnel au Canada français—ses énoncés et son rôle," *Canadian Social Work Review/Revue canadienne du Service social* (1983), pp. 141–60.
67. The Fédération was preceded by less successful attempts at coordination: in 1927, the Fédération des Oeuvres sociales de santé, superseded in 1929 by the Fédération des Oeuvres d'hygiène infantile. S. Mongeau, *Évolution de l'assistance au Québec*, pp. 49–50; L. Groulx, "Le service social confessionnel," pp. 141–2.
68. Groulx, "Le service social confessionnel," pp. 141–2.
69. Since 1932, however, courses in social work were offered by the Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Bon Conseil—a religious institute involved in parish social services—for their members and interested laics. H. Denault, "L'insertion du service social," pp. 10–11. The first professional school, organized by priests trained in social work at the Catholic University of Washington, was officially annexed to the Université de Montréal in 1942. Nicole Vanier, "Aperçu historique de l'école de Service Social de l'Université de Montréal," *Service social* 10 and 11 (October 1961–April 1962), pp. 95–101; H. Denault, "L'insertion du service social," pp. 10–11. One might note the parallels between these developments in the Quebec francophone community and the movement towards "scientific" charity in Britain during the nineteenth century and in English Canada and the United States during the opening decades of the twentieth. The current reflecting "the growing concern about inefficient and palliative relief, the duplication of charitable services and the perceived perpetuation of pauperism" gave birth in Montreal to centralized charity organizations and a school of social work serving the English and Jewish milieu in the wake of the First World War. Yet despite certain common developmental imperatives, the young social service sectors in Montreal remained divided along sociocultural and confessional lines, each group maintaining its network of social service agencies and institutions. See Patricia T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, "Child Welfare in English Canada, 1920–1948," *Social Service Review* 55 (September 1981), pp. 484–8; S. Mongeau, *Évolution de l'assistance au Québec*, pp. 49–50 and 63.

## KEEPING CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

The CSSS borrowed from the theory and practice of social service efforts elsewhere. Milk distribution programmes in the United States and Europe apparently inspired the MCSC venture.<sup>70</sup> Yet the service was also the product of a specific milieu. The CSSS declared its Catholic colours and operated within the confessional affiliated system based on the traditional institutions of parish, school and family.<sup>71</sup> Analysis of the structure and functioning of the CSSS reveals a welfare organization combining systematization and bureaucratic control of assistance with a reliance on parish action and private charity.<sup>72</sup>

The administration of the new service under the immediate direction of Victor Doré and the direction of studies was entrusted to Alice Lebel. For this health care professional, forerunner of the school social worker,<sup>73</sup> the first major task was the implementation of operating and regulatory guidelines for the free milk distribution. The school canteens serving the daily half-pint of milk at recess time were open only during the five to six of the most physically trying months of the school year, generally from December to April. This was precisely the winter period when many children were unable to attend school regularly for lack of clothing or footwear.<sup>74</sup> Added to this unfortunate paradox was a set of cruelly parsimonious eligibility criteria combining "objective" standards and traditional means tests.

The practice of classification by weighing, elaborated previously by Miss Lebel, continued to serve as the basis for selection of recipients. Teachers were charged with the weighing of their pupils three times annually: at the beginning of the school year, towards the end of December and at mid-April. The results, recorded on forms supplied by the direction of studies, were compared with the table of normal weight and height

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70. Édouard Montpetit, "L'école primaire est-elle américanisée?" *Revue trimestrielle canadienne* 26 (1940), pp. 63–4.

71. A recent study argues that the social work field born in depression-era Montreal was not a professional and "progressive" import, but a product of the milieu, wedded to the values of social catholicism and aiming to introduce new measures of moral control over the lower classes. To Groulx's otherwise convincing arguments this author would like to point out the similarities between elements of social work ideology and practice in Montreal, English Canada and the United States. See L. Groulx's arguments in "Le service social confessionnel."

72. A prominent commissioner, the author and educator Édouard Montpetit, underlined the CSSS's preference for parish action and private charity to social organizations "à tendance rigide et enregimentée" of the United States. See Montpetit, "L'école primaire est-elle américanisée?" pp. 63–4.

73. With only four to five hundred trained social workers in all of Canada throughout the depression, many public health nurses, policemen and other civil servants were pressed into service for relief administration. See Struthers, *No Fault of their Own*, p. 49.

74. The canteens reopened in February 1934. Thereafter, and until 1936, they operated from December–April; in 1937–38, from mid-December to mid-May; in 1938–39, from mid-November to end April and in 1939–40, until mid-May. AMCSC, *Service des études*, (4) Organisation scolaire, (6) Nutrition (Bureau)—Bureau des oeuvres sociales scolaires catholiques et cantines scolaires—Rapports annuels 1932 à 1962, "Rapport annuel du SSSC/BOSSC 1934/35–1940/41."

furnished by the school medical inspection service. On the basis of these records, teachers prepared lists of the children corresponding to the standard fixed by the CSSS. Only those children whose weight was 10 per cent or more below the normal for their height and age might receive free milk.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, mere physical deficiency did not suffice. Proof of indigence, as certified by the parish priest or local charitable agency representative, was also required to qualify for the programme.<sup>76</sup> While the distribution period was considerably lengthened towards the end of the decade, the strict and humiliating eligibility regulations remained in force throughout the thirties.

Fulfilment of the second aspect of the service's mandate, the provision of shoes and clothing, also entailed the development of a system of regulation and control, as well as collaboration with local charity authorities. During the 1934–35 school year, the CSSS established a central social filing index and adopted investigative casework methods to screen cases of absenteeism for lack of clothing.<sup>77</sup> Truant officers and the special investigators of the commission's research and statistics division carried out in-home visits of the poverty cases referred to the service by school personnel or members of the public. In their determination of the validity of the claims and the extent of need, these agents were called upon to distinguish between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor. This categorization of the indigent was inherent in nineteenth century poor law doctrine and prevalent in Quebec Catholic philanthropic circles.<sup>78</sup> The "deserving" cases were thereafter recommended to parish priests and local charitable organizations for aid.

The work of verification of material need, delivery of goods and the followup surveillance of those aided to ensure their appearance in school, seems to have pre-

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75. AMCSC, Circulaires, "Lettre circulaire de V. Doré à la direction des écoles," 16 January 1934. Beginning in 1934–35, it appears that certain weak, sickly children recommended by the school medical inspectors could also participate, to the measure that service funds permitted. Teachers were urged to make a "judicieuse" selection of beneficiaries and they were forbidden to substitute children to those on the list who were absent. *Ibid.*, "Lettre circulaire du Bureau du SSSC à la direction des écoles," 26 November 1934.

76. The CSSS relied on the recommendations of these agents concerning the recipients of free schoolbooks. CECM, "Rapport du Comité d'Hygiène," 29 September 1933 in "LDD de la CP."

77. "Rapport annuel du SSSC," 1934/35, pp. 3–4.

78. Truant officers at times demonstrated astonishing harshness in their judgements and treatment of parents and children, not hesitating to threaten parents perceived as negligent. See for example, AMCSC, RHCA, J.-M. Brosseau, "RHCA pour le District Ouest," week of 6 November 1933; E.-B. Brunelle, "RHCA pour le District Centre," week of 28 September 1936. Studies of the depression era in Canada indicate that such traditional attitudes towards the poor persisted in official circles, despite the emergence of a professional social work ethic which claimed to abandon the judgemental and punishing approach to dependency. See, for example, James Struthers, "Two Depressions: Bennett, Trudeau and the Unemployed," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 14 (Spring 1979), pp. 70–80; Roger E. Riendeau, "A Clash of Interests: Dependency and the Municipal Problem in the Great Depression," *ibid.*, pp. 50–58; Elwood Jones, "Dependency and Social Welfare," *ibid.*, p. 2.

occupied the service's limited and already busy investigatory staff.<sup>79</sup> Yet there is also evidence of a growing concern with the psychosocial and moral aspects of child welfare. As Alice Lebel indicated in the service's 1934–35 annual report, CSSS inquiries concerning aid recipients permitted school authorities and educators to study "des misères qui seraient autrement inconnues."<sup>80</sup> The later 1930s saw a growing collaboration between the CSSS and other child welfare agencies.<sup>81</sup> The home visits to control assistance "abuses" may in fact be seen as a springboard to the broader and more intrusive investigation of the family environment by school and community social service agencies which would occur in the 1940s.<sup>82</sup>

Prejudicial conceptions of poverty clearly influenced the treatment of aid recipients at the MCSC. Yet the structural and regulatory limitations of the canteen and clothing provision programmes were in large part dictated by severe financial constraints. Locally administered, the service was also, in the main, locally financed. Maintenance of the milk programme depended upon subsidies from various organizations, primarily private charities (Table 3). The Fédération des oeuvres de charité canadiennes-françaises and its anglophone equivalent, the Federation of Catholic Charities, provided the lion's share of canteen funding. Milk suppliers were also called upon to contribute a remittance varying between one-half and three-quarters of a cent per half-pint furnished during the period. The MCSC itself contributed one-third of the cost of the service's staff salaries. From 1937, when the CSSS was reorganized under the name of the Catholic School Social Service Bureau,<sup>83</sup> the MCSC contributed a substantial fixed annual grant. Other groups and individuals, including the Provincial Dairy Commission and the city of Montreal, also participated in canteen financing during the 1930s. However, neither these subsidies nor the general increase in grants was equal to the need and the service recorded deficits during the first years of its existence.<sup>84</sup>

The service's clothing programme was even less well-endowed. Periodic and limited grants from commission coffers had been used since 1931 to clothe and provide shoes for a certain number of the most deprived children, on the president's authorization.<sup>85</sup> Private contributions allowed the CSSS to continue this form of assistance

79. See the truant officers' reports for the period.

80. "Rapport annuel du SSSC," 1934/35, p. 5.

81. Cooperation with the Colonie de Vacances Jeanne d'Arc (summer camp for girls), the Bureau d'assistance aux familles, the juvenile court and other organizations.

82. For a critical view of the nature and techniques of social services in Quebec during the 1940s, consult L. Groulx, "Le service social confessionnel."

83. The new French name was Bureau des oeuvres sociales scolaires Catholiques. The service thereby gained a greater budgetary and administrative autonomy, although its administrative committee was responsible to the MCSC and its expenditures had to be approved by the commission president and treasurer. CECM, "LDD," 15 November 1937.

84. Before 1937, the MCSC absorbed these deficits. See the canteen's "Bilan financier" for the period and Table 3.

85. AMCSC, Service des études, Manuels scolaires fournis gratuitement, V. Doré to Marie Claire Laroche, 5 October 1933.

**Table 3**  
**Source of Funding, Free Milk Programme at the MCSC, 1933–1940**

Year	Sources Of Revenue (\$)					City of Montreal	Others	Total
	FOCCF <sup>1</sup>	FCCI <sup>2</sup>	CILQ <sup>3</sup>	Dairies	MCSC			
1933–34	n.a.	n.a.	—	4,545.67	2,010.36	—	n.a.	—
1934–35	4,800.00	1,000.00	1,000.00	5,599.98	5,153.84	—	35.00	17,588.82
1935–36	8,100.00	1,000.00	1,000.00	6,051.36	4,112.33	—	25.00	20,288.69
1936–37	9,000.00	1,000.00	1,000.00	5,639.70	3,557.04	—	—	20,196.74
1937–38	9,500.00	1,000.00	1,500.00	6,569.74	3,750.00	—	1,039.17	23,358.91
1938–39	12,500.00	2,500.00	1,500.00	10,825.31	3,750.00	1,744.22	931.44	33,750.97
1939–40	12,500.00	2,500.00	1,500.00	13,122.99	4,750.00	1,500.00	984.52	36,857.51
1940–41	12,500.00	2,500.00	1,500.00	8,351.00	4,000.00	1,500.00	1,317.49	31,668.49

1. Fédération des Oeuvres de charité canadiennes-françaises.

2. Federation of Catholic Charities Inc.

3. Commission de l'Industrie Laitière de la Province de Québec.

Sources: AMCSC, Service des études, (4) Organisation scolaire. (6) Nutrition (bureau)—Bureau des oeuvres sociales scolaires catholiques et cantines scolaires—Rapports financiers 1935 à 1961, Rapports annuels 1932 à 1962, "Bilan financier des cantines scolaires," 1934/35–1940/41; *ibid.*, BOSSC—Subventions, CECM, "Relevé des subventions versées au BOSSC d'après les états financiers annuels," 6 April 1962; MCSC, *Financial Reports*, 1933/34–1940/41.

on a limited scale.<sup>86</sup> However, with the exception of the sum of \$500 allocated by the MCSC in 1935 for the purchase of clothes, shoes and eyeglasses, the service did not dispose of revenues specifically for this purpose before the end of the decade. Beginning in 1939–40, commission grants financed shoe provision through the new programme, *L'Aide à l'Écolier*.<sup>87</sup>

The service's free milk distribution benefitted a significant and growing number of pupils during the depression years. From some six thousand schoolchildren during the programme's first year of operation, the number of participants rose to nearly eleven thousand—some 10 per cent of commission clientele—in the peak year of 1940–41 (Table 4). Those eligible for the programme evidently reaped profits: as for cattle reared under experimental feeding methods, the growth and weight gain of canteen beneficiaries were proudly noted in the service's annual reports.<sup>88</sup>

Yet the statistical record of CSSS activities also documents an alarming reality. The total number of schoolchildren underweight by 10 per cent or more far exceeded the number of free milk recipients. Between 1934 and 1936, nearly one out of five enrolled pupils was classified in this underweight category (Table 4). Yet less than 50 per cent of this group were selected for the programme. During the second half of the decade the proportion underweight decreased, so that in 1940 there were nearly half as many as at the peak in 1934–35. Nevertheless, that year, 11 per cent of the children enrolled still showed a serious weight deficiency. Were those children who were refused access to the programme actually able to pay for the daily half-pint? Examination of the quantity of milk sold during these years suggests that this was not the case. The expansion of the programme clientele was, according to the CSSS director, less a result of an increasing number of "deficient" and "deserving" schoolchildren than of an increase in available revenues.<sup>89</sup>

Qualitative testimony to the programme's enduring inadequacies is provided by the results of an inquiry conducted by the direction of studies among teaching personnel in autumn 1937. The remarks added to questionnaires by some school principals provide a glimpse of the children behind the statistics. While few questioned the utility of the canteens for many children who would not otherwise be milk consumers,<sup>90</sup> the criteria used to select programme participants was frequently the target of attack. As one teaching nun stated: "J'ai vu défaillir par la faim des enfants qui n'étaient pas encore de dix pourcent inférieurs au poids normal, et qui pour ce motif ne pouvaient être secourus par les cantines scolaires."<sup>91</sup> Others evoked the inherent pathos of the

86. See "Rapport annuel du SSSC," 1936/37.

87. AMCSC, Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, *Vêtements aux indigents, Correspondance générale 1934 à 1936*, A. Lebel to V. Doré, 10 November 1936; "Rapport annuel du BOSSC," 1939/40, p. 3.

88. "Rapport annuel du SSSC/BOSSC," 1934/35–1940/41.

89. See the service's "Rapport annuel," 1938/39–1940/41.

90. AMCSC, Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, response of James Lyng to "Questionnaire au Personnel enseignant," 1937.

91. *Ibid.*, response of Soeur St-Joseph-de-Sion.

**Table 4**  
**School Canteen Operations at the MCSC, 1933–1941**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>	<b>Distribution days</b>	<b>Beneficiaries<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Underweight students<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Half-pints free of charge</b>	<b>Half-pints sold</b>	<b>Total consumed</b>
1933–34	220	70	6,050	n.a.	369,500	552,346	921,846
1934–35	218	90	6,620	22,590	475,793	385,282	861,075
1935–36	216	92	7,599	19,965	536,881	396,425	933,306
1936–37	217	92	7,831	17,782	513,284	357,217	870,501
1937–38	217	87	7,884	n.a.	528,154	491,022	1,019,176
1938–39	213	105	9,327	n.a.	725,999	928,754	1,654,753
1939–40	216	120	9,019	11,340	798,140	1,200,864	1,999,004
1940–41	216	143	10,973	12,401	1,010,992	1,356,293	2,367,285
1941–42	217	160	9,176	n.a.	775,498	1,833,504	2,609,002

1. Students benefitting from free milk distribution during the school year.

2. Students showing a weight deficiency of 10 per cent or more, according to the weighing reports.

Sources: AMCSC, "Rapport annuel du Service Social Scolaire Catholique/Bureau des Oeuvres Sociales Scolaires Catholiques," 1934/35–1941/42.

situation created by poverty and rigid eligibility requirements. When a large number of poor students desiring milk were unable to purchase it, they were reduced at the time of milk distribution “à contempler d’un oeil d’envie leurs camarades mieux favorisés.”<sup>92</sup> Anomalies such as the case of one sufficiently underweight child receiving milk while two or three of his siblings in similar need did not, also abounded.<sup>93</sup> Thus many of the school personnel asked that greater latitude be accorded to school principals or to the medical inspection staff in the choice of students.<sup>94</sup> Others went even further, suggesting that a noontime lunch or snack be added to the half-pint.<sup>95</sup> But in the context of the austerity reigning at the MCSC, a plan of school lunches—as existed in the United States under federal government auspices—proved impossible.<sup>96</sup>

The daily half-pint undoubtedly constituted too little for too few. At the end of the decade, school medical authorities reported that some 13 per cent of MCSC pupils were still suffering from malnutrition. This represented only a slight improvement over the midthirties high of 15 per cent.<sup>97</sup> This constituted a stinging indictment of the CSSS canteen programme, certainly, but it was also a telling comment on national, regional and local policies which provided relief, and of a labour market offering salaries at levels below standards of subsistence.<sup>98</sup>

As for the clothing programme, it too reached but a fraction of the needy. The CSSS could only afford to serve as an intermediary between schoolchildren and local charitable organizations. During the 1934–35 school year, the service claimed to have secured assistance for 1,264 of the 1,595 cases referred to its office. But the following year, during the crucial month of November alone, over three thousand cases of children absent for lack of clothing were detected.<sup>99</sup> While two-thirds of these students were back in class “convenablement habillés” in January 1936—largely as a result of

92. Ibid., response of Frère Maximilien.

93. Ibid., response of Soeur Marie-Gatienne.

94. See, for example, response of Soeur St-Joseph-de-Sion, and that of Sister Margaret Mary.

95. For example, response of James E. Barry.

96. Since the early 1930s, however, hungry children in several English-language schools of the commission snacked on bread rolls supplied by the Canadian Progress Club. AMCSC, Service des études, microfilm reel no. 58, Cantines scolaires, Fournisseurs, Charlotte K. Penner to J.-M. Manning, 24 April 1933. Introduced during the 1930s under FERA and WPA auspices, the United States national school lunch programme had a budget of \$12 million in 1940. R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture* (New York, 1953), p. 58. In London, England, charity-subsidized lunches date back to the nineteenth century. Tax-supported feeding of schoolchildren was authorized by a British act of parliament in 1906 and began in London under county council auspices in 1909. See David Rubinstein, *School Attendance in London: A Social History* (Hull, 1969), pp. 81–3.

97. AMCSC, “Rapports des médecins-inspecteurs,” 1935/36–1939/40. See also note 24.

98. As Alice Label noted in 1936, “Les allocations de chômage suffisent à peine aux besoins de familles et ... les enfants sont les premières victimes de ce déplorable état de choses.” “Rapport annuel du SSC,” 1935/36, p. 2.

99. Ibid., 1934/35, p. 4; and 1935/36, p. 5; This situation prompted the commission grant of \$500 in 1935, which purchased clothing and other necessities for some 189 pupils.



Christmas season charity — a considerable number of new cases continued to be reported over subsequent months.<sup>100</sup> That year, Alice Lebel was obliged to admit defeat in the never-ending battle with poverty. She predicted that despite the combined efforts of the CSSS, the teaching personnel and charity agencies, “il y aura chaque année un nombre considérable d’enfants d’âge scolaire, surtout les enfants de chômeurs, qui seront privés des bienfaits de l’éducation parce que non suffisamment vêtus.”<sup>101</sup> For Lebel, these children outside of school control represented a religious and social menace, inclined to juvenile delinquency and vulnerable to the lure of material aid offered by Protestant and “Communist” charitable associations.<sup>102</sup>

As late as 1938–39, the situation of children absent from school for want of clothing had improved little. That year some 1,871 cases were reported to the CSSS office. Of the 1,262 judged “deserving,” less than half, some 520, received assistance.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, many other cases were not even reported because the direction of studies knew that the service lacked the funds to remedy the situation.<sup>104</sup> The continued need prompted the creation in 1939–40 of a commission-subsidized programme, L’Aide à l’Écolier, which distributed some one thousand pairs of shoes and rubber boots during its first year of operation.<sup>105</sup> Yet in 1940, at least 14 per cent of all the MCSC’s truancy cases were still the direct result of indigence.<sup>106</sup> The investigations of the CSSS revealed in addition that if many “chefs de famille” now had jobs, there was little apparent improvement in family welfare.<sup>107</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Great Depression forced the Montreal Catholic School Commission to modify its role in child welfare. Extreme poverty among schoolchildren, as reflected in widespread malnutrition and illness, an alarming rate of absenteeism due largely to a lack of shoes and clothing and the inability of many children to afford school fees, interfered with the commission’s mandate to dispense instruction to a mass clientele. Education, health and welfare could no longer be considered as separate categories. Existing relief provisions were clearly inadequate. As a result, local school authorities ultimately took the initiative to transform their aid policies and to develop new modes of social intervention. The school’s new and broader responsibilities required innovation in the provision of social services. While continuing to rely heavily on the human and material resources of private charity, school officials employed emerging social work

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100. *Ibid.*, 1935/36, p. 6.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

103. AMCSC, BOSSC et CS, *Rapports annuels*, A. Lebel to Armand Dupuis, 31 July 1939; “Rapport annuel du BOSSC,” 1938/39, p. 3.

104. *Ibid.*

105. “Rapport annuel du BOSSC,” 1939/40, p. 3.

106. Compilation based on data contained in CECM, “Rapport annuel des contrôleurs d’absences,” 1940/41. See also note 11.

107. “Rapport annuel du BOSSC,” 1940/41, p. 2.

techniques in their aid programmes. The long-standing fee remission policy for indigents was simultaneously expanded and systematized and, in 1934, the commission created a social service agency to provide free milk and clothing to needy children. However, insufficient funding, provided largely by local and philanthropic sources, narrowly circumscribed the effectiveness of these aid programmes. MCSC assistance efforts proved hopelessly unequal to the magnitude of distress experienced by their predominantly lower-class clientele during the thirties. Comparative case studies of other school systems, both in Quebec and elsewhere, are needed. Yet given the commission's avant-garde position among Quebec's Catholic school commissions and the gravity of the problems it faced, it appears likely that the MCSC's response to the depression placed it among the leaders in school welfare ventures.

To appreciate the significance of the MCSC initiatives fully one must look beyond the depression decade. Poverty did not disappear with the outbreak of the Second World War, nor did the commission's social service agency. In 1944, the school canteens and the Catholic School Social Service Bureau gained permanent status and were incorporated as allied agencies of the MCSC. Still headed by Alice Lebel, the bureau was reorganized "sur un plan professionnel" in 1946. Social workers and health care professionals were hired to serve as liaison agents between the school, the family and community services.<sup>108</sup> At the Montreal Catholic School Commission, an improvised response to socioeconomic crisis thus paved the way for social work's entry into the school system.

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108. AMSCS, BOSSC et CS, Rapports annuels, *Bonheur et santé de l'écolier: l'apport de 30 ans!, 1931-1961* (BOSSC brochure, n.d.).