

# Learning is an 'oasis' for kids at Montreal Children's Hospital

As most kids head back to school, young patients get hour-long sessions with hospital's teachers to focus on learning rather than treatment.

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Teacher Sarah Adair works with Bryanna Frank in the dialysis unit at the Montreal Children's Hospital Friday Aug. 24, 2018. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Sarah Adair walked into the hospital for her first day of work this school year and saw her former student, fresh from a checkup of his new heart.

The boy stayed in the Montreal Children's Hospital for a year as he waited for a heart transplant. Adair was with him every day: "I was his Grade 2 teacher for the whole school year," she said. Then this summer, he got a new heart.

"Seeing this student with his mom, walking freely with no cords or machines or hospital beds, just being a regular kid with that freedom" — Adair sighed as she told the story — "it's what any teacher wishes for their student."

Adair is one of five teachers who go bedside-to-bedside at the Montreal Children's Hospital, leading lessons for children who come to the hospital for cancer treatments, dialysis and other regimens that call for a longer stay.

"We represent stability and something that's predictable in their lives," Adair said.

Medical personnel come and go constantly from the children's rooms. Teachers visit each student for a one-hour-long session, and in that brief span, a child can focus on themselves and their own learning, Adair said.

"It was almost an oasis. School was a precious time in his day and everyone knew that at 11 a.m., that was school," Adair said.

Employed by the English Montreal School Board and the Commission scolaire de Montréal, the hospital's teachers instruct elementary and high school students. They teach English, French and math — but like everything about education at the hospital, they are flexible, leading a science lesson or another subject if the child needs.

"There's that positive outlook of getting out of the hospital and picking up where you left off. It kind of cements the idea that this is a step towards many other steps down the line," said Peter Tsatoumas, another teacher at the hospital.

The differences between teaching in a school and teaching in a hospital emerge in overall approaches and daily details alike.

Students can't share textbooks because it could cause cross-contamination, so Adair and Tsatoumas mostly use online resources.

The children are often hooked up to wires and tubes; the job isn't one for the easily unsettled. Adair once taught a handwriting lesson to distract a child while they had their blood tested.



Teacher Peter Tsatoumas reads with 8-year-old Mario Futia in the dialysis unit at the Montreal Children's Hospital Friday Aug. 24, 2018. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

With the commotion caused by nurses and other staff doing their jobs, there's little privacy. Sometimes, parents take advantage of the respite offered by a lesson to take a nap in the room, Tsatoumas said.

"When you're a classroom teacher, you're sort of the boss. It's your classroom and chances are nobody's watching you," Tsatoumas said. "Here, you're part of the team."

"Sometimes, you don't know what your day is going to be like until you arrive and talk to the other professionals: see who you can visit, how they're doing," Adair said.

As the school year goes on, the teachers try to establish a regular schedule with each student. But flexibility and creativity guide everything they do. If a child has homework, it's often because parents want to push the child intellectually, or the child craves it. Exams are determined on a case-by-case basis in collaboration with the school board.

"It's really not fair to evaluate what they produce. I think we're always having to adjust to: what are they able to do, what's a fair request to have this child do," Tsatoumas said.

Tailoring their teaching to fit each student is a "luxury" and a "privilege," Adair said, something that teachers who prepare lessons for dozens of students don't have.

But the work "isn't for everyone," Tsatoumas said. In the handful of years that Tsatoumas has worked in hospitals, a child he worked with died.

"It's made me a more grateful person," said Adair, who has young children herself. "I try to appreciate the moment, and health and togetherness, that freedom to leave the hospital at the end of the day."