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Local News

5 Quebec educators honoured with Prime Minister's Award

"This class is purely life skills," a personal-development teacher says. "Let's have a conversation. Let's look each other in the eye."

Hayley Juhl • Montreal Gazette
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Sacred Heart School of Montreal teacher Erika Rath with her students. Sacred Heart School of Montreal

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of the world. She also means in practical ways, like when she doesn't understand the newest form of social media.

"It empowers them to teach adults," says Rath, who teaches a personal-development class to grades 7 to 11 at Sacred Heart School. Rath is one of five Montreal-area teachers who were recently honoured with Prime Minister's Awards for teaching excellence.

"Just because we're the teacher, we're standing in front of them, doesn't mean we know everything. If I make a mistake, I say I'm sorry and it's so powerful to let them know we make mistakes, too. It creates genuine relationships."

There are no grades and no tests for her personal-development class, which is attended by every student in the school. The class is not mandated by the Education Ministry and she has the freedom to make adjustments based on the students' needs.

"This class is purely life skills. Let's have a conversation. Let's look each other in the eye," Rath said. "It's a forward-looking class, but I have to first look back. I think about my adolescence, and it was a hard time for me. That time isn't easy for anybody, but there are extra challenges now. I want to help give girls strategies to face adversity."

She invites guest speakers to discuss life after high school, résumés, mental health, sex education, "but sometimes the students will email me to say they need a study period or to talk about a current event. I'll give that to them."

The Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence honour educators for their achievements and commitment to their students, especially in a digital and innovation-based economy.

There are robots and recipes in Rachel Primeau's Grade 2 class at École des Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens. When she and her students cook together once a month, they're also practicing reading: they read the recipes, write them out and critique them. When they garden together, they read the seed packets and measure the spaces between the plants. When there is conflict, they address it with plays they write and perform.

Primeau's multi-platform approach to learning success, which includes "real things," earned her a PMA for teaching excellence. She keeps track of children's improvement by how many words they understand in a short text and how quickly they can read it. "If you're watching a movie that's too slow, you aren't

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She videos the children reading aloud at the beginning of the school year and shows them the video when they enter Grade 3 so they can see their improvement. “They have such a smile. It’s a gift for their life.”

The children’s play involved a robot entering a village where it learned lessons about getting along. The students programmed the robot and the class smartboard to make the play completely interactive.

“The kids became so good, almost better than me” at programming, Primeau said. “They figured out they could operate five robots with one iPad and created a robot dance. They were so proud.”

The other Montreal-area teachers honoured are:

Joseph Romano, John Caboto Academy, Grades 1-6, who uses sports to help students reach their potential and for advocating for students with special needs.

Jennifer Cyr, École François-La Bernarde, preschool, whose teaching methods are “focused on inclusion and attention to each child’s individual needs, and her educational publications, which have found a large audience in Canada and abroad.”

Doreen Hogue, Garderie éducative La Rose des vents (Terrebonne), who is committed to helping her under-5 charges explore their worlds. Her greatest achievement is “helping children to make a smooth transition into kindergarten.”

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