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Allison Hanes: Preparation, panic and parenting amid coronavirus fears | Montreal Gazette

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The return from March break puts Quebecers' patience to the test as anxiety about COVID-19 heightens.

ALLISON HANES, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/AHANES2014](https://montrealgazette.com/author/ahanes2014)) Updated: March 9, 2020



Quebec is opening dedicated centres for the testing of possible COVID-19 cases, including at the old Hôtel Dieu hospital. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Nothing causes ordinarily reasonable people to panic like a potential threat to their precious children.

As Montreal school kids head back to class after March break this week — many returning from parts unknown — the local response to the global coronavirus emergency is about to be tested like never before. And since our holiday week falls so early, it could become a template for the rest of Canada in coming weeks.

There are only a handful of cases in Quebec (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-has-new-suspected-coronavirus-case>) of COVID-19, a novel infection that has sickened more than 111,000 worldwide, and there has been no transmission here (yet). Nevertheless anxiety is palpable among parents after one of the busiest travel periods of the year. Tense debates are raging — on social media, in conversations and beyond — about whether to isolate those potentially exposed over the March break in order to protect children.

Families want — and need — clear guidance at this critical moment. Without it, the result could be the very phenomena public health officials have warned against and so far kept at bay: hysteria, overreaction, suspicion and mistrust.

The Quebec government announced Monday it will open dedicated centres for the testing of possible COVID-19 cases, including in the disused emergency room of the old Hôtel Dieu hospital on Pine Ave. at St-Urbain St. in Montreal. But Health Minister Danielle McCann said to call Info-Santé at 811 (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/coronavirus-quebec-to-open-three-clinics-to-screen-for-covid-19>) before going to any health facility with coronavirus concerns.

Local health officials ordered high school students in the Beauce (https://www.tvanouvelles.ca/2020/03/06/des-eleves-de-sainte-marie-en-isolement-volontaire?fbclid=IwAR0IjNjZPQOLbOmqOAVPbp7gtFuOSjYpGo_in3jVnT1tvmPC_hHaiXzk6l), who travelled to Italy during the March break into quarantine for 14 days. Italy has seen a surge of cases and now the entire country is under lockdown. (<https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/health-pmn/movement-restricted-across-italy-in-new-coronavirus-crackdown-pm-conte/wcm/b436730b-5358-45f8-abe9->

[92c99db3ac23](#))_But the rapid reaction in the Beauce has upped the stakes elsewhere, prompting some parents to question why similarly robust action isn't being taken targeting travellers more generally, especially since all Quebec's cases so far have originated abroad.

There is much recrimination about why some school trips to Europe went ahead in this climate of uncertainty, when others were pre-emptively cancelled. And there is finger-pointing between families who decided to stay home for March break versus those who kept their vacation plans. This hand-wringing may foreshadow a rough week ahead for school administrators, who will have to allay the worries of parents — both rational and irrational.

The [English Montreal School Board distributed a message Sunday night](#)

(<https://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/articles/to-all-emsb-stakeholders-students-staff-parents-and-community-members>)_from director-general Ann Marie Matheson urging parents to keep their children at home and contact 811 if they have visited China, Iran, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Italy and Singapore. “This is whether your child exhibits flu symptoms or not,” it reads. “Info-Santé will provide the necessary instructions if quarantine applies to you.”

Mike Cohen, a spokesman for the EMSB, said the statement took all weekend to draft, in collaboration with public health and education ministry officials. But it's more of a request than an order.

“We're asking parents and we're asking staff to do the right thing,” Cohen said. “We're putting the onus on them.”

Earlier wording encouraged parents to report travel to affected countries to school principals. And Cohen acknowledged that if children talk about recent trips to high-risk zones, it may prompt querying calls home.

“It's going to be a challenging time,” Cohen said. “This is nothing any of us have dealt with before.”

The EMSB's message was a welcome and proactive response to the growing angst among parents. The Commission scolaire de Montréal finally weighed in Monday afternoon after many

waited and fretted. The CSDM encouraged (<https://csdm.ca/nouvelles/covid-19-le-point-sur-la-situation/>) those who have visited high-risk areas **AND** are exhibiting symptoms (their emphasis) to stay home and call 811 for instructions.

(Prediction: Info-Santé is going to be experiencing a higher than usual call volume.)

The Lester B. Pearson School Board in the West Island

(<https://boardsite.lbpsb.qc.ca/news/post/coronavirus-information>) offered similar advice but also warned: “We share a responsibility to not spread misinformation nor act in a way that may be perceived as hurtful to our fellow colleagues or students or have the effect of making them feel unwelcome in our schools and centres.”

Parents are right to be scared. But they also must avoid freaking out.

Early data collected about the coronavirus seem to indicate (<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51774777>) children and women are less seriously affected than elderly folks or men. Experts caution there could be other factors at play, such as the closure of schools in China, Japan and Italy, so it's too soon to let down our guard.

But asking questions and keeping abreast of the latest information from credible sources is constructive; heaping judgement on others is counterproductive. Keeping your kids home if they've recently visited an area where the coronavirus is propagating is the responsible thing to do. The widespread closure of schools would have profound implications on all children; it would be a travesty if it were due to the self-interest of a few.

Fear may still be more potent than COVID-19 itself, but this is no time to throw caution to the wind. The only defence we have is buying time to understand the coronavirus and develop a vaccine (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-long-will-it-take-to-develop-a-coronavirus-vaccine?fbclid=IwAR2sCNOmIMS5u9JzU5pqqk8nTsmwDwK7Er2ZzXxele4C5lSkVoWo5EPV1CFA>).

Somewhere between panic and apathy a balance must be struck. Finding it in the midst of an evolving emergency is difficult, especially when our children are involved.