

Hanes: School libraries are breaking the code of silence

Students are socializing, learning teamwork and playing games in the library. So, yes, sometimes it gets loud.

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Psst! You don't have to whisper in the library anymore.

At least not at Nesbitt School, in the heart of Vieux-Rosemont.

While classes still come to check out books, they also visit to build things with LEGO, play board games, do group work and experiment with technology.

In other words, this once-quiet sanctuary is being opened up for other purposes, like teamwork, socializing and even play. A transformation is taking place across the English Montreal School Board (<https://montrealgazette.com/tag/emsb>) to enliven, modernize and make the most of its libraries.

Nesbitt principal Nicholas Romano said the changes are based on the ever-evolving concept of the “library commons.”

“The library, with time, is starting to be used for non-traditional work,” he explained. “So activities are being run out of the library. Games are taking place as well. Students are engaging in learning through play in the library space.”

And, yes, sometimes that means it can get pretty loud.

“If you walk into the library when it’s being used in that particular fashion, what you see is an environment that’s not so quiet, where kids are laughing, where kids are talking, where students are engaging in asking questions with the staff,” Romano said. “It’s not the traditional quiet space that most of us were used to. ... It’s a space that is much more alive.”

Of course that’s not to say there’s no room left to curl up with a book or flip through the stacks.

On Tuesday morning, a Grade 2 class gathered on a big rug for story time with school librarian David Ramirez.



Nesbitt School librarian David Ramirez likes storytime, but “the library is not only a place for reading, but for many other needs the students might have.” *PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

“The library is a place not only for reading, but for many other needs the students may have. For playing, because one of the purposes of the library, its mission, is to be a place for leisure, not only for academic purposes,” Ramirez said.

The EMSB has librarians or library technicians in each of its schools. It has the highest ratio of library staff to students in Quebec. This emphasis on libraries is an attribute the EMSB will highlight at Nesbitt Friday morning when local authors, sports personalities and journalists (including yours truly) will serve as a “living library” for students, telling stories and answering questions.

Among his many duties, Julian Taylor, a librarian in the board’s Educational and Technology services department, helps schools turn their libraries into technological hubs.

“We’re having 3D printers put inside the library. ... That’s actually one of the ideal places to put it. It’s a communal space where everyone will have access to it,” Taylor said. “It will allow students to really push their creativity to the

next level — in the library. We want students to have more experiences beyond just writing up a paper. Maybe they want to make something physical for their project or just for themselves.”

Some school libraries also have vinyl cutters and robotics kits.

“Students can play with them, not just, ‘Hey, I’m having fun!’ but experiment with it, get comfortable with it, so when they’re doing it for their class project or with their group, they have that mastery so they can move forward and they can take the bigger risks,” Taylor said.

Alissa Marguerite Rossellini, another board-level librarian, said the EMSB has a vast collection of digital resources in its [virtual library](http://www.virtuallibrary.emsb.qc.ca/resources.html) (<http://www.virtuallibrary.emsb.qc.ca/resources.html>), including audio books, films and online newspaper subscriptions, which are accessible 24/7.

“So the library is not something that is just open during the school day, but after school, on the weekend, on the go, on their phone,” Rossellini said.



Principal Nicholas Romano looks at some books in the Nesbitt School library — but notice the LEGO that’s just as important to students’ experience. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

With a diverse and inclusive collection of books offering students both “mirrors and windows” — to process their own experiences and empathize with those of others — Rossellini said school libraries are also increasingly a refuge.

“That’s very close to my heart and it’s really, really important, especially with so many students suffering from anxiety now. The librarian is there,” she said. “This is a place where everyone is accepted. It’s a safe space to be yourself and explore who you’re becoming.”

In his previous position as a vice-principal at Laurier Macdonald High School in St-Léonard, Romano was involved in the metamorphosis of the library there. They stocked it with board games and created quiet zones with comfortable seating so students can sit, or even lie down, with a book.

“And at lunch time right now, you can find anywhere from 100 to 120 kids in there, studying, going onto computers, playing games,” Romano said. “We started up a chess club to go along with the idea of tabletop games that are going on in the library. So the life there is just something else. You walk in, you don’t think you’re in a library.”

The reimagining of Nesbitt’s library is still a work in progress.

“There’s some thought that has to go into how the space is going to be used and it’s not something I can do alone and it’s not something I want to do alone,” Romano said.

“Because as much as this is a school I’m a part of, it’s not my school. It’s a school that belongs to all of us so it has to be a shared project, a project where the staff has to feel they have some say. It’s very important that it meets their needs. Because in the learning commons, the teacher is not just a teacher, a teacher is also a learner.”

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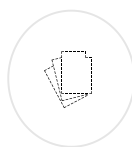


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