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Brownstein: Every week has been Mental Health Week for students

Not enough support available, psychologist says

Bill Brownstein • Montreal Gazette

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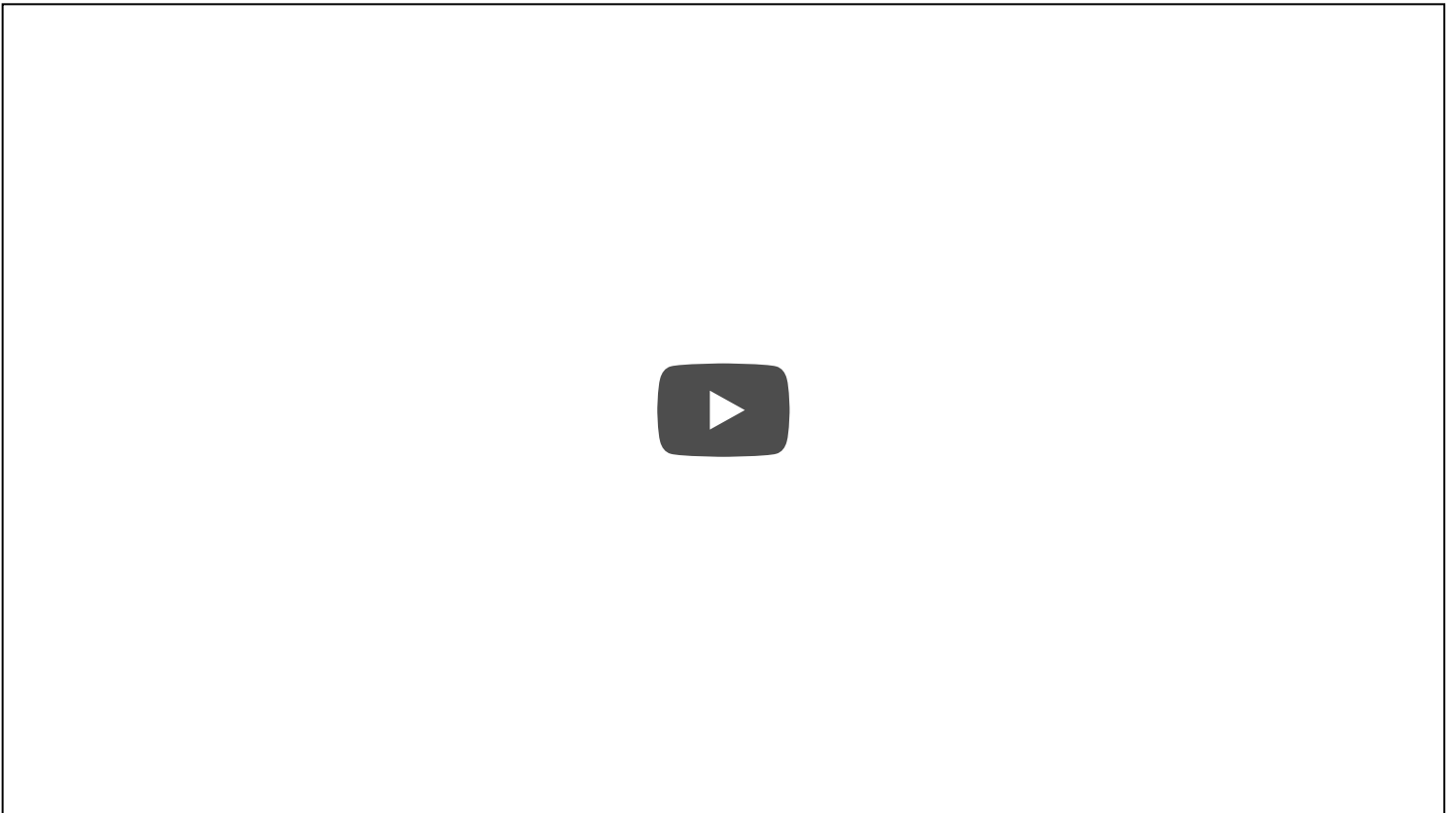
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"There is not enough mental health support available" for children, says school psychologist Despina Vassiliou. "There are currently long waiting lists to see a psychologist or psychiatrist both in the public and private sectors." PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Mental Health Week gets underway Monday, but the harsh reality is that pretty much every week over the last year of the pandemic has been devoted to that theme. Certainly in the case of students, who have had to deal with a dizzying mix of going from no school, to some school, to full-time school, to doing online schooling at home.

There have rarely been such disruptions in our times, and many may wonder how elementary and high school students have been coping and what the future holds for them.



Regardless, Despina Vassiliou, a psychologist with the English Montreal School Board and coordinator of its Mental Health Resource Centre, seems somewhat hopeful.

"It's been an interesting year, that's for sure," Vassiliou understates. "But most students will become

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overcome the challenges they are facing with this pandemic.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

What is particularly concerning to Vassiliou is the lack of support services for those in need.

“There is not enough mental health support available. There are currently long waiting lists to see a psychologist or psychiatrist both in the public and private sectors.”

All the same, the emphasis is on positivity at the EMSB, with its theme for this week being COVID Time Capsule: Hope for the Future. While there have been countless obstacles, the feeling is that most students have not only dealt well with the pandemic but have become stronger as a result.

Efforts by the EMSB’s Mental Health Resource Centre to offer workshops to its staff and parents for coping with crisis situations for students relating to the pandemic have helped.

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“The idea is that parents and staff can learn from the workshops to better help the students to find more help if needed and to carry out various mental health awareness activities,” says Vassiliou, who also serves as a psychologist for the EMSB’s John Caboto Academy in Ahuntsic and St. Monica Elementary School in N.D.G.

While worried about how students would deal with returning to school after various lockdowns, Vassiliou and her colleagues were quite struck by the impact the pandemic had on its staff.

“The first thing we noticed when we came back to the schools was just how stressed the staff was with all the different changes and what they had to do,” she says. “We were obviously concerned about the students, but many appear to be thriving in being back in school and having a structure. The teachers, however, were quite anxious about having to deal with safety procedures and worrying about their students as well as dealing with their own issues at home.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“But the good news is that the teachers are managing to pull it all together. Yes, everybody is wearing masks. Yes, there are bubbles. But when you walk into our schools today, it really is like you’re walking into a regular classroom.”

While elementary students are in school weekdays, it’s a different situation for high schoolers, who alternate every other day in spending time in class and in online learning from home.

“Some kids are doing well with the online learning, some are doing well with the 50-50, but some really need to be in school for the structure. A lot has to do with the pandemic issues they are facing, but some

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new ones.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“We’re seeing many more issues of anxiety and difficulties in concentrating, and, sadly, a lot more suicide ideation — a lot more talk about suicide even among the very young as well,” she says, including even kindergarten students in this group.

“That’s definitely one of our biggest concerns. But I should mention that 95 per cent of the time it’s usually younger kids who don’t know how to express their frustrations and are using the wrong words to describe difficulties they’re having in school by saying: ‘I want to die.’ So we go in and try to figure out what’s happening. Most of the time it’s really about the lack of a coping strategy and dealing with kids not being able to handle their emotions.”

Toss in behavioural issues dealing with a lack of social interaction or with the stress of their parents relating to everything from sleep difficulties to job losses, and it can be akin to negotiating a minefield.

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“Hopefully by going through what they have, they will become more resilient and they will learn coping strategies. So if anything else comes up, they will be better able to deal with it. It’s through adversity we learn things about ourselves and move forward to provide us more hope for the future.”

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