

Quebec

COVID-19: Quebec to re-examine ventilation issue in schools

"We have a different environment and we have asked for Santé Québec to come up with an update," Health Minister Christian Dubé says of new World Health Organization data on aerosol transmissions.

Philip Authier • Montreal Gazette
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Short-term temporary ventilation measures in schools, such as installing specialized equipment, will proceed in the meantime, says Quebec Health Minister Christian Dubé. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

QUEBEC — The government is re-examining the ventilation issue in schools and other establishments now that new information on aerosol transmission of COVID-19 — particularly indoors in the winter months — is known.

But Quebec has also warned that although a new vaccine produced by Pfizer and BioNTech that appears to be 90 per cent efficient is good news, it won't be possible to inoculate everyone at once, so citizens have to keep up their efforts to stop the spread.



Christian Dubé Facebook

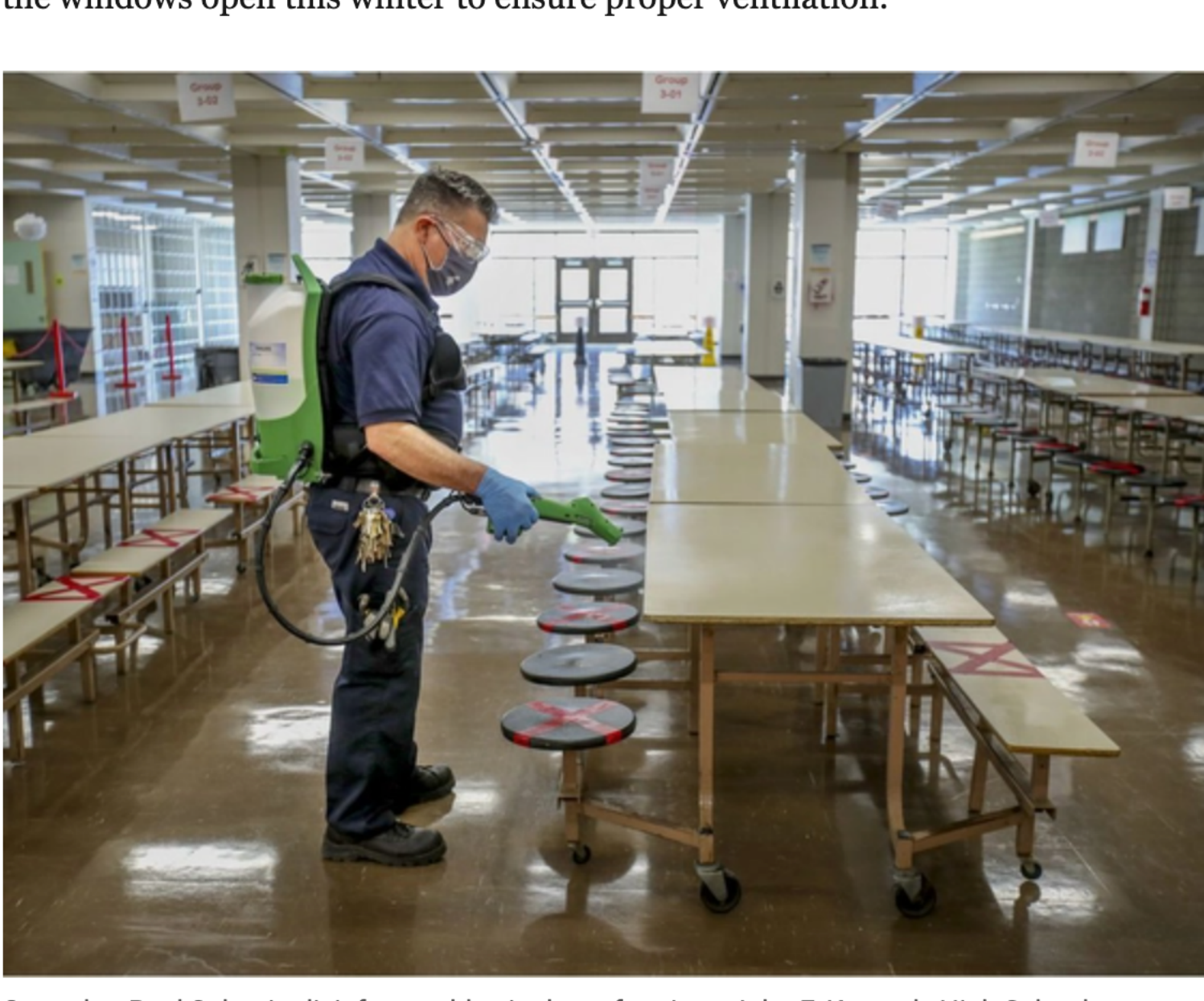
"Conditions have changed," Health Minister Christian Dubé said Tuesday at Premier François Legault's pandemic news conference in reference to new World Health Organization data on aerosol transmissions, which Canada has embraced.

"We have a different environment and we have asked for Santé Québec to come up with an update."

Dubé said as was the case in the first wave when it became apparent some CHSLDs needed air-conditioning last summer, short-term temporary ventilation measures such as installing specialized equipment will proceed in the meantime.

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It's not soon enough for some Quebec parents who are being told by service centres to bundle up children so they can sit in classrooms in older schools with the windows open this winter to ensure proper ventilation.



Caretaker Paul Saletnig disinfects tables in the cafeteria at John F. Kennedy High School on Tuesday. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Some school boards, including the Lester B. Pearson board, are dipping into their own budgets to purchase equipment.

The opposition parties in the legislature pounced on the ventilation issue, saying it is another example of the government not foreseeing events in time.

"We won't give N-95 masks to all the students, there are not enough," said Québec solidaire co-spokesperson Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois earlier. "I'm sorry, but opening the doors and windows will not be enough. We need more measures to better ventilate our schools."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Noting Tuesday's new data showing an additional 38 pandemic deaths, [Liberal Leader Dominique Anglade](#) cast doubt on the government's readiness.

"We're going through the same situation (as in the first wave)," Anglade told reporters. "It is hard to fathom. We knew that ventilation was an issue, we knew that cleaning was an issue. We mentioned this actually back in June. We're now in November."

Later, answering a question at the pandemic news conference, the director of public health, Horacio Arruda, repeated that in his view schools are not the only driver of fresh infections as some have asserted.

"I think it's a mix of things," Arruda said. "It's schools, workplaces and the community."

He added even if ventilation improves, that will not replace the essentials of distancing and handwashing.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"If everyone now puts energy into ventilation and forgets the other aspects, we are going to have more outbreaks," Arruda said.

The ventilation debate roared to life as the Legault government again had to face the reality that the pandemic is not going away — particularly in regions outside of Montreal and Quebec City.

Legault said five regions in particular are facing worrying outbreaks: Saguenay —Lac-St-Jean, Lanaudière Nord, Mauricie, Centre du Québec and the Gaspésie.

Legault said he would have liked to loosen some restrictions in red zones — where restaurant dining rooms, gyms, concert halls and theatres are closed — but the situation has not improved enough.

The restrictions will remain in place until Nov. 23 as planned.

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"Unfortunately, we have to continue to be cautious," he said. "It also gives us a chance to see our friends and family at Christmas. We are going to do everything we can to be able to allow families to have small parties."

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people have to respect the measures."

He said the good news is that despite the pandemic, 97 per cent of students are in school and 97 per cent of workers are back at the jobs they had in February. Quebec is still doing better at fighting the virus than some other countries.

Legault made the comments as Quebec reported 1,162 new cases and 38 more deaths Tuesday.

He welcomed news of the new vaccine from Pfizer and said Quebec is in negotiations with Ottawa to get its share. Ottawa announced later that Canada has reserved 56 million doses of the vaccine in addition to another 20 million already ordered.

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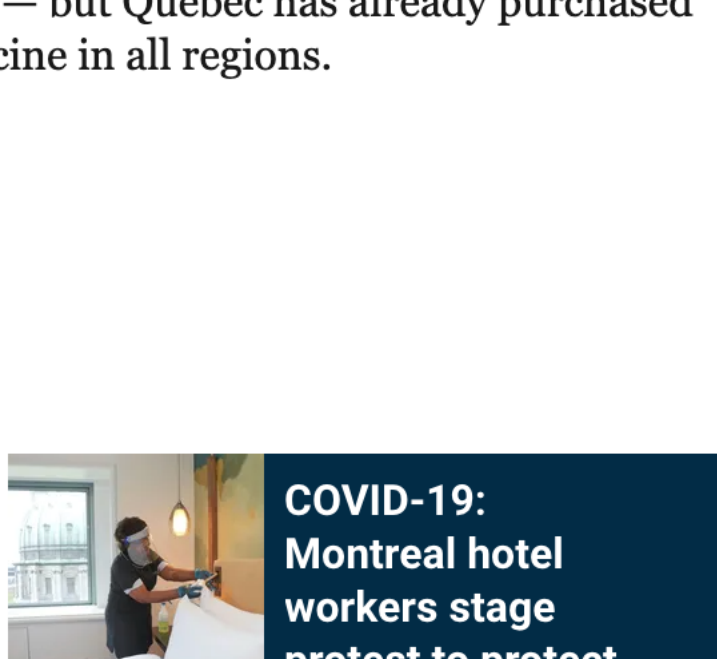
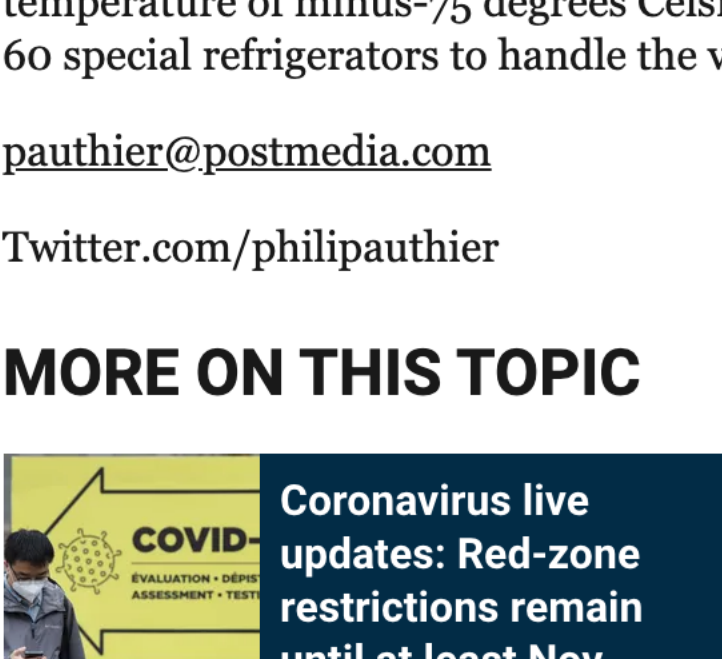
"It's good news, but it's going to take several months before we are able to vaccinate the population," Legault said. "So we have to hang in there for several months."

Dubé said the logistics ahead are daunting — the vaccine has to be kept at a temperature of minus-75 degrees Celsius — but Quebec has already purchased 60 special refrigerators to handle the vaccine in all regions.

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