

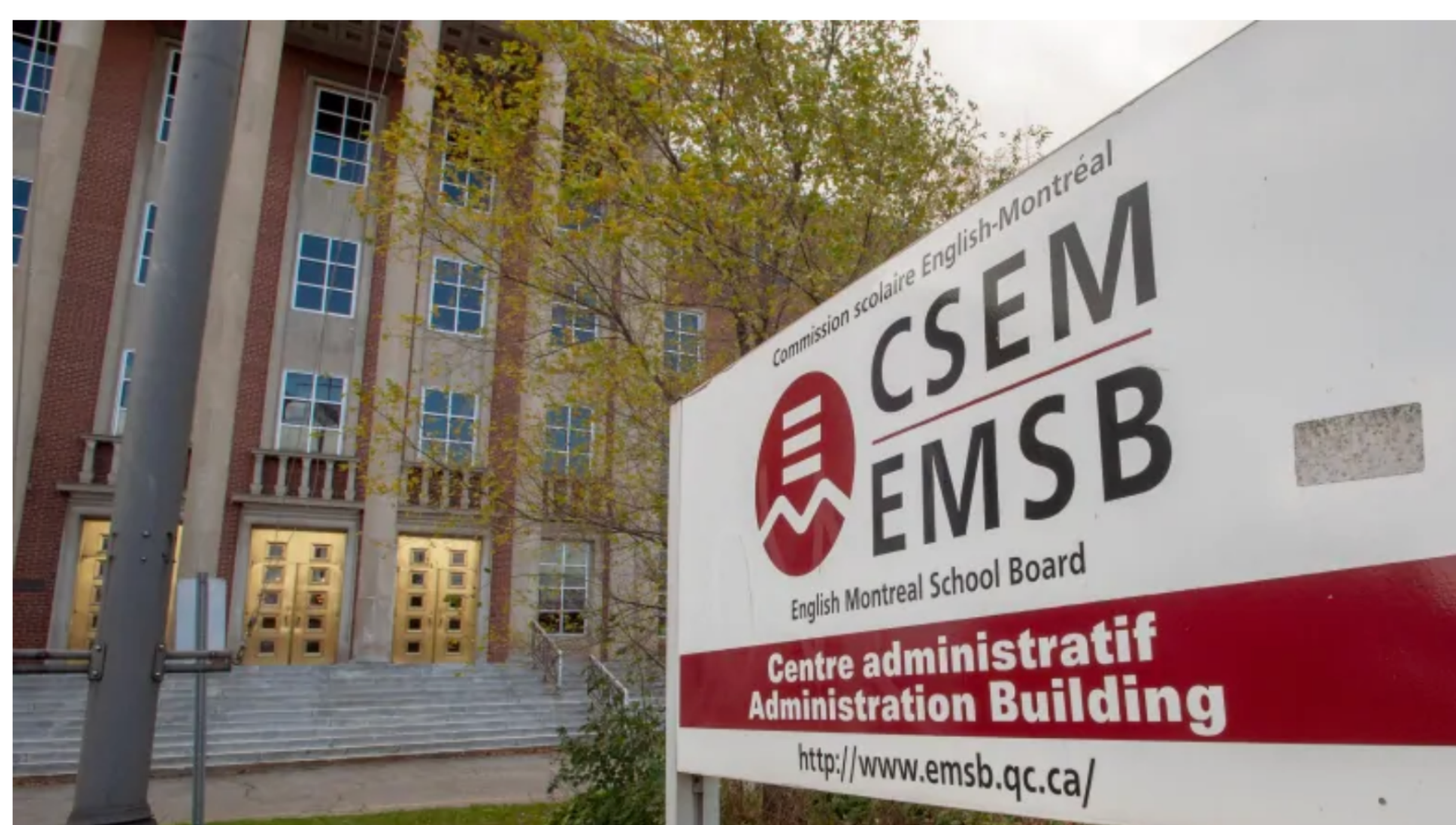
Montreal

EMSB will decide for itself when it's safe to reopen, trustee Marlene Jennings decrees



Only 1,008 parents have told the EMSB they will send their kids back to school on May 19

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The EMSB's plan falls in line with a statement issued by the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA) last Friday. (Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press)

6 comments

The English Montreal School Board will decide when to reopen elementary schools, even if it means politely defying a Quebec Education Ministry order to resume classes on May 19, its provincially appointed trustee suggested Wednesday.

The EMSB will determine which school buildings and centres it can safely open and when, according to a motion put forward and adopted by trustee Marlene Jennings at an administrative meeting Wednesday.

"I want to make it clear that our school board is not telling the Quebec government and the Minister of Education to go play in the street," said Jennings, whose [mandate was renewed](#) for another six months by the education minister at the start of May.

The board's administration and staff are working closely with the ministry to "do everything we can to open as many schools as we can by the deadline which the government has set for the island of Montreal," she said.

Jennings' decision falls in line with a [statement issued](#) by the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA) last Friday.

"There are still far too many unknowns that compromise the ability of school boards to safely and effectively reopen schools," said QESBA.

However, [the provincial government has said](#) English school boards in the province do not have the power to delay opening their elementary schools, despite the boards' concerns that resources won't be in place to ensure the safe return of students amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

- [English schools want flexibility about when to reopen, but Quebec government says no](#)

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge's deadline still stands — May 11 for schools in most of Quebec's regions and May 19 for schools in the greater Montreal area.

12 student limit to 72-seat bus

When it comes to reopening, there is still much to do in the coming week and a half, the EMSB's director general, Ann Marie Matheson, told the board Wednesday.

Beyond reorganizing classrooms and schools so students and staff can maintain a safe distance from one another, she said, transportation is a concern as buses that once carried 72 students will now only carry 12.

Matheson said much of the reorganization has begun, but there's more to do as schools install handwashing stations, figure out how many students can be in a room and find places to store all the unused desks and chairs.



The retired MP for NDG-Lachine, Marlene Jennings, was appointed trustee of the English Montreal School Board in November 2019, and her mandate was renewed for six months earlier this week. (Sean Henry/CBC)

On top of that, more than 500 teachers have applied to be exempt from returning to work, she said. All those requests are being assessed in collaboration with the province's workplace health and safety board, the CNESST.

"We're putting in place everything we can to prepare for now," said Matheson, but she said there are still details that have yet to be clarified by the Education Ministry.

"There's still much information that we don't have."

Thousands of parents decline to send kids back to school

In preparing for the reopening, both Matheson and Jennings said it is important that more parents fill out a survey that was sent out in recent days as the responses will help schools and the board determine how best to proceed with reopening.

So far, more than 3,700 parents say they don't want to send their elementary school-aged children back when classes resume.

- [Lanaudière public health director postpones reopening of schools, daycares in Joliette until May 19](#)

The EMSB sent out 11,379 surveys to the parents over the weekend, though some parents say they didn't receive the email until Wednesday morning.

As of 3 p.m. Wednesday, 4,721 surveys were returned. That represents a participation rate of 41.5 per cent, Jennings said.

Of those, a mere 1,008 parents have agreed to send their children back to school.

Jennings is encouraging all parents to fill out the survey, to ensure the board and schools "will be able to provide a healthy and safe environment for your children."

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