

Good news, bad news of 3 extra days of summer for EMSB students

The EMSB decision to start school after Labour Day is welcomed by students, but left some parents with extra days of child care to plan.

MONIQUE POLAK, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/MONIQUE-POLAK-SPECIAL-TO-THE-MONTREAL-GAZETTE](https://montrealgazette.com/author/monique-polak-special-to-the-montreal-gazette))



"We were surprised the two boards didn't co-ordinate. But by sheer luck, another campsite became available," said Stephen Wark, who had to rebook a camping trip with his children Ben and Naomi. *KAYLE NEIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Ben Wark was chuffed when he learned his school would not be starting this year until after Labour Day.

"My dad told me last week that we're getting three extra days. That means there's time for one last hangout. Or maybe my dad will take us to a movie to celebrate the last day of summer," said Wark, 16, who is going into Grade 10 at Westmount High School.

Ben's sister Naomi, 13, who will be in Grade 8 at Royal Vale School, reacted to the news with mixed feelings. "I heard about it in July at a birthday party. I was a little bit confused. Usually we start in the last week of August. But then I was like, 'Yay!' " she said.

This year, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) decided to break with tradition and begin classes on the Tuesday following Labour Day. That means that close to 20,000 students at more than 60 Montreal area elementary and high schools will enjoy three additional days of summer vacation. On the other hand, students at the Commission Scolaire de Montréal (CSDM) will return to the classroom on Wednesday, Aug. 28. Students at both school boards will complete 180 school days by June 2020, as required by Quebec's Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

"To us, it's not a story," said EMSB spokesperson Mike Cohen. "Every year, our human resources department sits down with the Montreal Teachers' Association to determine the schedule. This year, Labour Day happens to come earlier than usual. This is the not first time in the 21 years of the EMSB that we've had a school year that started in September," Cohen said.



Stephen Wark and children Ben and Naomi had originally planned to go camping with his girlfriend and her children, but the CSDM and EMSB start dates unexpectedly differed. *KAYLE NEIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

But it is a story to the students — and to their parents, some of whom have had to scramble to adjust their plans. Ben and Naomi's father, Stephen Wark, said he was "mostly delighted" when, in June, he consulted the school board calendar and noticed the late start. "I thought, 'Now we can plan a vacation that runs through the end of August and still have Labour Day weekend to get ready for school.'" So Wark, a video game designer, went ahead and booked a campsite at Mont-Tremblant for himself, his children, his girlfriend Carol Mose and her two sons, for the last week of August.

Wark had to cancel the reservation when he learned that Mose's boys, who attend CSDM schools, had to be back in the city before Labour Day. "We were surprised the two boards didn't co-ordinate. But by sheer luck, another campsite became available," said Wark.

Cohen said that it is purely accidental that the EMSB and CSDM generally start on the same date. "We don't concern ourselves with other boards," he said. So far, Cohen said he has had only one email inquiry from a parent regarding the date change.

Alain Perron, a spokesperson for the CSDM, echoed Cohen's words. "Every school board chooses its own start date," he said. Perron declined to comment about how his board's earlier start date might please parents — or displease students.

Montreal psychologist Joe Flanders acknowledges that a later start than usual to the school year can present a challenge to some parents, especially those with younger children who may require extra babysitting on days they might otherwise have been back in the classroom.

"The end of summer holidays is a very challenging time for parents," said Flanders, who treats adults as well as children. "In many cases, summer camps end a little before school starts, and there's a lot of juggling. Plus parents have to face their own ramping up this time of year. In many organizations, including mine, August is a quiet period. People really hit the accelerator after Labour Day," he said.

But despite the challenges associated with keeping youngsters busy for three more days, Flanders is in favour of the later start to the school year. He believes there is value in marking transitions. "It's psychologically healthy to have landmarks in which we can plant our experience. Labour Day weekend is special because it's long and transitional. People often want to mark the end of summer, perhaps by being with friends or going to the lake," he said.

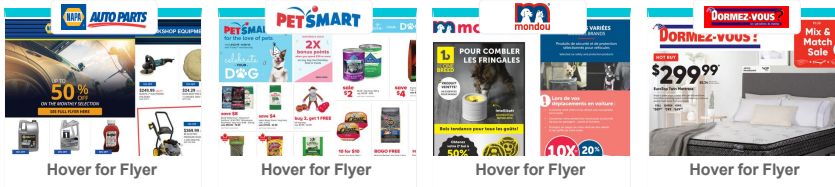
For Ben and Naomi Wark, taking in a movie with their dad will be a way to mark that transition. Naomi is holding off on buying school supplies until her teachers distribute the list of what is required. Not Ben. "I used my own money to buy four mechanical pencils at the dollar store," he said. "I bought them because I like to draw, but also because I like having fresh pencils for the new school year."

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