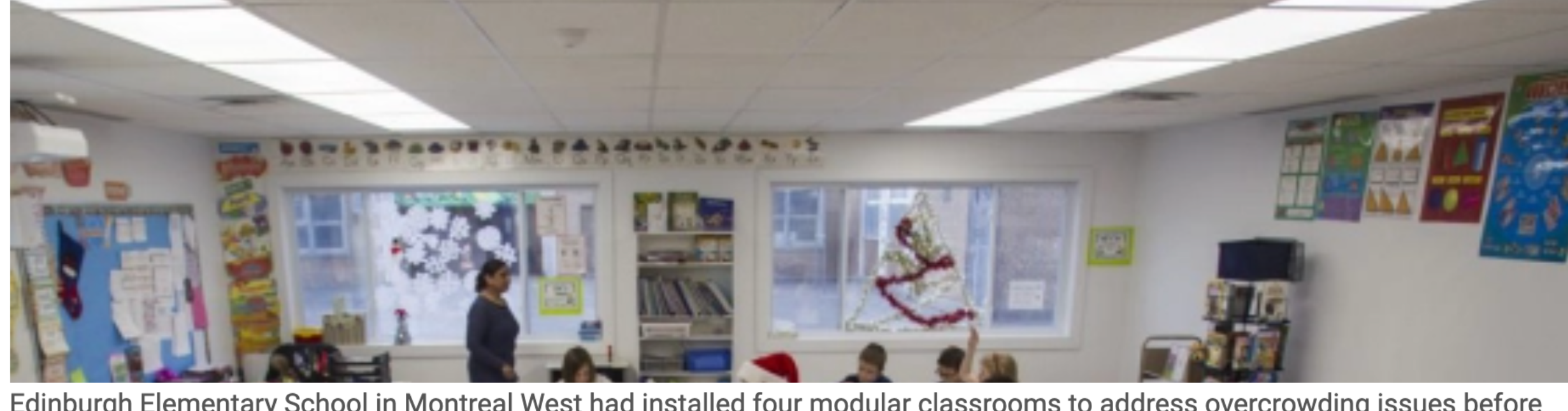


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## High levels of uncertainty about Quebec children returning to school

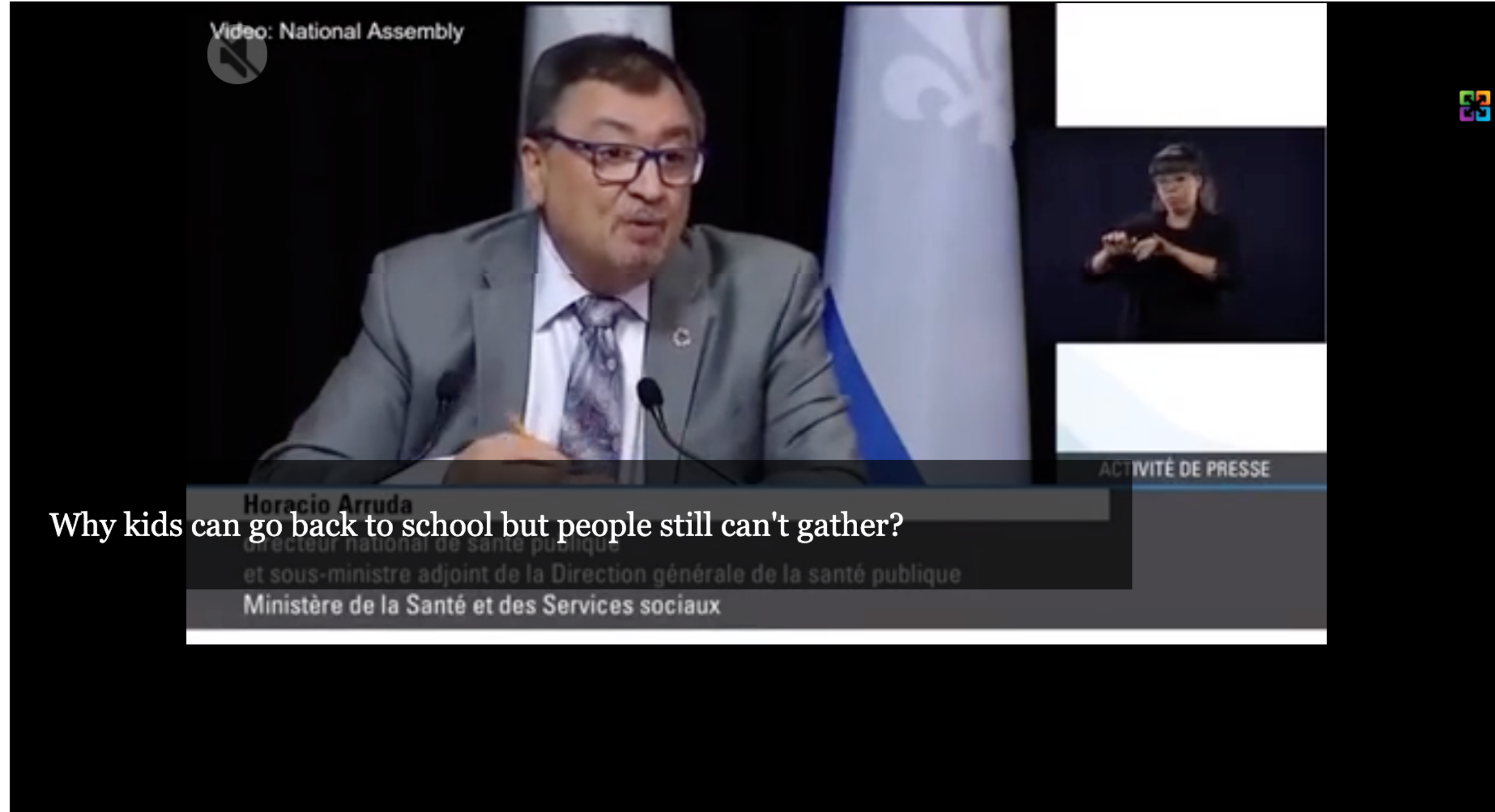
René Bruemmer · Montreal Gazette  
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Edinburgh Elementary School in Montreal West had installed four modular classrooms to address overcrowding issues before the COVID-19 crisis, as shown in this photo from Dec. 17, 2019. JOHN KENNEY / Montreal Gazette

As Quebec wrestles with how to [return its elementary-age children to class](#) and high schools struggle to teach students online, parents and school administrators are complaining of high levels of uncertainty and a lack of co-ordination.

At the elementary level, the health of students and staff is the main worry. Parents of [high school children](#) trying to motivate listless teenagers to learn without the social structure of a classroom fear online education is failing to teach the curriculum.



Quebec's elementary school children are scheduled to be the first in Canada to return to classes on May 11. Schools are set to open one week later in the Montreal region, circumstances permitting, due to its status as the coronavirus epicentre of the nation. High school students will not return until the fall.

Elementary teachers and administrators are determining how to ensure social distancing and hygiene among their rowdy clientele. They will also have to subdivide classes to a maximum size of 15.

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Because each school is unique, administrators are being left to determine the best course of action, with the guidance of the provincial education ministry, said English Montreal School Board spokesperson Mike Cohen.

“Every school is different — some are huge and full to capacity, others have barely 100 students and plenty of free space,” he said.

Parents have to advise schools on whether or not their children will return so schools can figure out their needs. Cafeterias, gymnasiums and libraries may be used as additional classroom space since they won't be serving their usual purposes.

“We are lucky in that we have three weeks to plan these things out,” Cohen said.

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The ministry is also providing directives on safety measures for all schools. All students will move on to their next year and there will be no formal exams.

In a letter to parents, the Lester B. Pearson School Board noted that its schools will comply with all health recommendations regarding frequent cleaning and personal hygiene, with hand sanitizers supplied at every school and daily reminders for children to wash their hands.

For those who choose to stay home, all children are expected to follow the school's work plan online and will be provided with digital equipment if they don't have access at home.

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There was no mention of students wearing masks, but they are advised to avoid people with health issues or those who are over the age of 60 when out of school. Schools are still figuring out how many of their staff will not come to school due to age or health concerns and will have to be replaced.

At the high school level, attempts at online learning have been widely criticized for a lack of suitable learning materials and disparities among schools.

A letter to school administrators from the ministry of education notes that “secondary school students must be able to finish acquiring essential knowledge by the end of the school year.”

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But teachers, administrators and parents have complained the “learning kits” provided by Quebec's education ministry lack solid information or are complicated to navigate.

Several private school students have been receiving online courses taught by their teachers. Their public school cohorts, meanwhile, were directed to educational YouTube videos or vague assignments that failed to motivate many teens who were aware none of the work counted for marks and were lured instead by the easy escape of Netflix.

“We are fully aware that our current offer of ‘online workshops’ is currently variable, depending on levels, orders, school boards and disciplines,” FACE School wrote in a letter to parents.

It noted as well that in line with ministry objectives, it is not intending to complete its regular curriculum, but rather to “maintain a work routine and consolidate certain skills.”

The fact that different public schools are providing different options is also causing frustration. Royal West Academy, a member of the EMSB, announced to parents Wednesday it would start holding mandatory online classes on May 11 and students would be evaluated. Other schools are not doing that.

Commissionnaire de Montréal communications director Alain Bergeron noted that schools have been

Cohen stressed that the ministry and school boards are in uncharted territory, online resources have improved greatly and many parents have expressed satisfaction with the materials. Students having trouble are strongly encouraged to reach out to their teachers, as are their parents.

Students have an obligation as well, Cohen said.

“This really is an honour system — parents can't sit on top of their kids,” Cohen added. “Students should realize that they're cheating themselves if they don't take advantage of this. There has to be some accountability from the students on their own.”

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