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Local News

# Hoping for normal: Kids return to school across Quebec

Other than the masks and happy cries of "no more bubbles!" it looked like a back-to-school day like any other at St. Monica Elementary on Tuesday.

René Brummer  
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Adrien Borgia, 7, and Damien Borgia, 10, arrive for their first day of the new school year at St. Monica Elementary School on Tuesday August 31, 2021. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

Other than the masks and happy cries of "no more bubbles!" it looked like a back-to-school day like any other at St. Monica Elementary in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Tuesday.

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Older students screamed the names of long-lost friends while anxious parents pried the hands of shy youngsters from their grasp, then peered through the chain-link fence as they went off into the world.



As the students streamed back to St. Monica, they joined 1.3 million elementary and high school students returning to class at roughly 3,000 private and public schools across the province.

Students and parents were hoping for a return to normal. For the most part, administrators said they would be able to give it to them. But the school psychologists waiting to answer parents' concerns out front, and the live band and English Montreal School Board mascot (a giant bee) meant to ease youngsters' worries, underscored the fact that [COVID-19 is still prevalent](#).

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"It's mixed feelings," EMSB chair Joe Ortona said. "In June, we were really expecting it would be a normal return to school, and that's not the case, and I understand that everybody's disappointed.

"Let's just be glad the kids are in school right now and that they're able to be in class with their friends."

For students like Jayda Watts-Simeon, who was home-schooled last year to avoid school lockdowns and health risks, the important part was being in Grade 2 and moving up to the second floor, with the big kids, and maybe sharing classes with three of her friends.

"I'm excited," she said. "I'm just super excited."

So was her mother. "I'm a little bit worried about her getting back into the group setting," said Chelsea Watts-Smith, who was studying at Concordia from home last year while home-schooling her daughter. "I think everyone has a better understanding of how to structure their days. But I think we're all a bit more comfortable with the new normal."

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After the confusion and rapid changes of last year, Shyeena Moore said she was hoping for a return to relative stability, after also home-schooling her child Shaleena through Grade 1.

"I just want a very consistent and well thought-out and planned school year," Moore said.

With the eradication of classroom bubbles and a return to [extracurricular activities](#), administrators say this year should have more of the consistency parents are seeking for their children, and themselves. But questions remain about [what will happen in the case of COVID-19 outbreaks](#), particularly now that children freed from class bubbles will be interacting with many more of their peers.

EMSB commissioner Julien Feldman said he has fielded many questions from parents concerned about what form of teaching will be available for students who can't return to class because of their own health issues or those of family members. It's still not clear if the Education Ministry will offer virtual learning options.

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There is excitement for the return among staff and students because there are no more bubbles and children can resume extracurricular activities and outings, St. Monica principal Silvana Crigna said. But the elation is tempered by the knowledge COVID-19 numbers are rising.

"I think the best way to look at it is, we're learning with normalcy, and being vigilant," she said.

Quebec will be distributing rapid tests to schools in COVID-19 hot zones where vaccination rates are relatively low, including St-Michel, Parc-Extension, Montreal North and the Chomedey sector of Laval, [La Presse reported](#) Tuesday. Children will not be tested without their parents' consent.

School psychologist Renée St-Pierre noted reading resources dealing with mental health issues aimed at children have been distributed to school libraries, as well as guides for teachers and counsellors to help explain to children how to deal with feelings of anxiety or frustration or suicidal thoughts, all of which saw an increase during the pandemic. This year should be easier, St-Pierre said, because students, parents and staff have a better idea of what's coming.

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"Last year we didn't really know what to expect," she said. "What we saw was an increase in [mental health issues](#) in both elementary and high school students. So the mental health resource centre has decided to be a bit more proactive this year, looking at building the social and emotional skills of the kids."

Parents concerned about their child's mental health should contact their school psychologist, St-Pierre said. They can also help by teaching their kids coping skills, such as deep-breathing exercises.

Most parents at St. Monica, however, were just happy to see their kids getting back to a relative normal.

"I'm feeling great about it. I'm excited," said John Cloutier, father of 12-year-old Michael, who is going into Grade 6. "People are doing the right thing. The science is always changing, but it's important kids are going back to school. They have an amazing principal who does a great job of communicating things with us and co-ordinating things.

"There's a balance, but I feel that having them in school is better overall. So I'm feeling good about it."

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