

LESSONS LEARNED

After 52 years of helping students, EMSB counsellor Lew Lewis is getting ready to retire. He speaks to *Katherine Wilton* about his experience — and offers some advice for parents.

Like many educators and psychologists, Lew Lewis was intrigued by Dustin Hoffman's depiction of an autistic savant in the Academy Award-winning movie *Rain Man*.

When the movie was released in 1988, little was known about autism or how to treat the disorder.

Lewis, 77, began his career in student services at the former Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal in 1972, a time when students with communication difficulties, like the film's main character Raymond Babbitt, would have been labelled quirky or idiosyncratic.

"When I started, I didn't know much about (autism) except it was a term in a text book," Lewis recalled.

These days, with the broadening of the diagnostic criteria, about 750 of the English Montreal School Board's 200,000 students are on the autism spectrum.

"It's an astonishing statistic," Lewis said. "There has been a dramatic increase between 2002 and 2019."

Another 750 students have auditory, visual or physical issues that require support from the student services department.

Lewis has been a fixture at the school board building on Fielding Ave. in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce for decades. But after 52 years in education, he is retiring as the director of student services, a post he has held since 2001.

Lewis sat down with the Montreal Gazette to discuss the improvements in student services and offered advice to parents whose children are navigating a confusing world dominated by social media.

When Lewis worked as a psychological and vocational counsellor between 1968 and 1972, he would see students in 12 schools. Today, the same counsellors are assigned to only a handful of schools.

Back in the 1970s, the PSBGM had six psychologists for 65,000 students. Today, the EMSB has 15 psychologists for 200,000 students.

When Lewis started working at the board there was only one speech language pathologist, whereas today the EMSB has 15, even though the student population has dropped by more than two-thirds.

As the number of students diagnosed with special needs has increased, Lewis has hired myriad specialists who can modify or adapt a learning method to suit a student's needs.

He has hired behaviour management specialists, special education workers and psychologists, all of whom possess soft skills such as empathy, a strong work ethic and an ability to accept feedback, he said. "You can't train people to be like that," he said.

The board has also begun using assistive technology, such as software programs and new apps, to improve reading and writing skills for students with dyslexia, developmental delays and learning disabilities. The new tools have contributed to an uptick in the EMSB's high school graduation rate, which at 92.4 per cent is the highest in the province.



"We get hijacked by our thoughts," Lew Lewis says. "If you fail a math test, it doesn't mean you're not good at math or a bad person." *ALEXIA MONTREIL*

One of his proudest achievements was setting up the board's Mental Health Resource Centre in 2011. The team of professionals was set up after student services staff noticed an increase in anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation among some students. The team increases mental health awareness in schools and tries to reduce the stigma. Two years ago, Lewis hired a psychiatrist to work 10 hours a month, helping staff understand and deal with students struggling with mental health issues.

Teachers and student service staff continue to see more cases of anxiety, depression and self-harming among students. In a couple of instances, children as young as seven or eight have expressed suicidal thoughts, Lewis said. "They say: 'I'm not happy; I'm no good,'" he recalled.

The proliferation of social media and an unhealthy attachment to cellphones has exacerbated mental health problems such as anxiety, Lewis speculated. They have also contributed to an increase in texting, sexting and cyberbullying.

He worries that too many students are communicating on their phones instead of having direct human contact and he fears some students are less interested in extracurricular activities, meeting friends or taking up a hobby.

A psychiatrist recently told him that students are so busy with school and social media that they have no time to be bored, no time to sit back and relax or play with a sibling. "They're either texting or responding (to a text)," he lamented.

Lewis encouraged parents to set

guidelines for social media use in the home. "If we're having supper, the phones are put away," he suggested. "If all parents in the community do it, it's easier to enforce."

He also suggested parents introduce the practice of mindfulness, which can teach students to acknowledge negative thoughts, but not be consumed by them.

"We get hijacked by our thoughts," Lewis said. "If you fail a math test, it doesn't mean you're not good at math or a bad person."

Some schools have introduced a mindful moment during the day to try and reduce stress. "The kids love it; they're more relaxed and less anxious."

Other students fret about their grades and worry about the type of job they will have in a rapidly changing economy, Lewis said.

"When I went to school, we all got jobs," he said. "You graduated and went to university or learned a trade. It was much simpler in terms of employment."

The EMSB's longtime spokesperson, Michael Cohen, said Lewis is one of the most unique people in the English public education system.

"He is a gentleman," Cohen said. "He is a very good listener and someone who always has constructive advice to offer. Like many others, I would often end up in his office for a meeting and the next thing I knew he was saying all the right things to make my day that much better."

When asked whether he had advice for parents, Lewis said parents should refrain from solving all their children's problems.

"Life is full of disappointment

and setbacks," he said. "When you struggle with something, you learn from it."

As he prepared to leave the EMSB building for the last time in December, Lewis gave a shout out to the board's teachers, who are not lasting as long in the classroom because it has become so stressful.

"You can have two kids with autism, one or two with behavioural problems and two with learning disabilities," he said. "To teach all the children, (write up) individual education plans and be on the firing line in front of the class every day? They are incredible."

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IN BRIEF

Last Quebec City KFC/PPK shuts down

About 20 Kentucky Fried Chicken (Poulet Frit Kentucky) restaurant employees working at the fast food chain's last Quebec City outlet abruptly discovered on Sunday they were out of a job, the company shutting down the restaurant only four days after Christmas. And the union representing those workers is denouncing the firings not only for the timing, but for the lack of notice. The Wilfrid-Hamel Blvd. outlet was the last in the Quebec City region, which was once served by 14 outlets. Union president Guy Gendron said that unlike other occasions when the chain's restaurants have closed, no offer of relocation was made to the employees of this last outlet. He added that one of the employees had been with the company for 34 years. Gendron said the union had asked the company at the end of October to make its intentions on the outlet's future clear, but had been unable to get an answer. The company did not reply to a request for comment from Presse Canadienne.

One dead, one injured in snowmobile crash

A man in his 20s died Sunday afternoon after the snowmobile he was riding as a passenger crashed into a tree near Métabelchonan-Lac-à-la-Croix in the province's Lac-St-Jean region. The incident occurred around 2:30 p.m. on a trail located about nine kilometres south of the Laurentian Autoroute, said Sgt. Marie-Michèle Moore of the Sûreté du Québec.

"According to our preliminary investigation, the driver of the snowmobile lost control (of the vehicle) while approaching a curve and struck a tree," she said. The passenger, who was later declared dead in hospital, and the 19-year-old woman driving the snowmobile had to be transported from the scene by sled. The driver suffered serious but non-life-threatening injuries. Both she and her passenger appeared to have been wearing their helmets at the time of the impact, police said. The provincial police investigation into the crash is continuing.

DRAW RESULTS: SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2019

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Beaudin-Pilpa family \$100.00	Lavinias, Vincent \$150.00	RepairWare / Eulogik \$200.00	All my guardian angels \$200.00	Lori M \$100.00
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Brock, Jacob \$25.00				my sister Theresa \$125.00
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