



Helena Lombardi gets a hug from her mom on the first day of school at St. Monica Elementary on Tuesday. Students and staff were excited about returning, but there was some trepidation due to rising COVID-19 numbers, St. Monica principal Silvana Crigna said. *PIERRE OEBENDRAUF*

Back to class, not quite back to normal

'Let's just be glad the kids are in school,' EMSB chair says as students stream in

RENÉ BRUEMMER

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 on Tuesday.

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.

"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."

After the confusion and rapid changes of last year, Shyena

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 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.

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.

"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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Pearson board ordered to pay \$29K after school 'seriously failed' bullied girl

JESSE FEITH

Montreal's Lester B. Pearson School Board has been ordered to pay a mother \$29,400 after a Quebec Court judge ruled it failed a young student who was severely bullied by her peers.

In a judgment rendered in June, Judge Louis Rivérin ruled the school board ignored its own anti-bullying policy and did little to help the 13-year-old beyond suggesting she change schools.

"The facts of this case demonstrate that even if a school and school board have adopted the best of plans, if the people in authority do not apply them, these plans are only words," Rivérin ruled, "which have no more value than the paper and ink on which they are printed."

The incidents at the heart of the case happened in the fall of 2017. The student's name is protected by a publication ban and the school is not identified in the ruling.

According to the decision, the student was subject to bullying

from the beginning of the school year, to the point of often faking being sick to avoid going to school at all.

That November, things reached a breaking point when she received a text message saying she would be beaten up and "taken care of" the next day. The threats also circulated among other students on social media.

The next day, the student went to school with the intention of telling a teacher or the principal about the bullying. But she was intercepted on the football field instead, where a group of students circled her.

The student who had threatened her mocked and insulted her in front of everyone, the ruling says. She told her if they weren't at school grounds she would beat her to the point of needing an ambulance, then poured water over her head.

In tears and drenched, the student went to the school's assistant principal to explain what had happened. The student's mother was



Lester B. Pearson School Board must pay \$15,000 in damages and \$14,400 in tutoring fees to the mother of a girl who was bullied. *GRAHAM HUGHES*

called in and it was suggested the student be transferred to another school, which the mother accepted.

But the ruling notes the meeting lasted only 10 minutes, during which the school never presented any options besides changing schools.

"In the court's opinion, the school administration seriously failed in its obligations (during that meeting)," the ruling says.

"(The assistant principal) received a 13-year-old child in her office who had just been severely humiliated and bullied in front of her peers. This child is emotional, in tears, soaked from head to toe," it adds. "If ever there was a time

not to make a decision and have a school transfer form filled out, this was it."

Because there weren't any suitable spots in other schools, the transfer never went through and the student's mother opted for a private tutor instead.

As part of the proceedings, the student in question was called to testify before the court. She was still clearly scarred by what happened, the judge noted, and wondering why — despite not having done anything wrong — she was the one who ended up needing to leave the school.

"(She found) herself cut off from her environment, following the life she is now deprived of on so-

cial networks," the ruling noted, adding that she no longer felt comfortable going anywhere where she might cross the students who bullied her.

"This is the exact kind of situation the (anti-bullying) plan aims to prevent."

Stressing the school board should have done more, the court ordered it to pay the student's mother \$29,400: a total of \$15,000 in damages and \$14,400 to cover the cost of the private tutor.

Reached for comment on Tuesday, the school board said it takes the issues of violence and bullying seriously.

It said it will use the ruling as an "additional element" while reviewing its practices and policies in light of a recent task force report on equity, diversity and inclusivity.

But it also questioned some of the court's conclusions.

"One must be very careful before condemning the actions of the school administration, as the factual reality of this case is much more complex than what emerged from the evidence raised during the court case," wrote communications director Darren Becker in an email response.

"These are outstanding members of the administration and the board has full confidence in them."

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