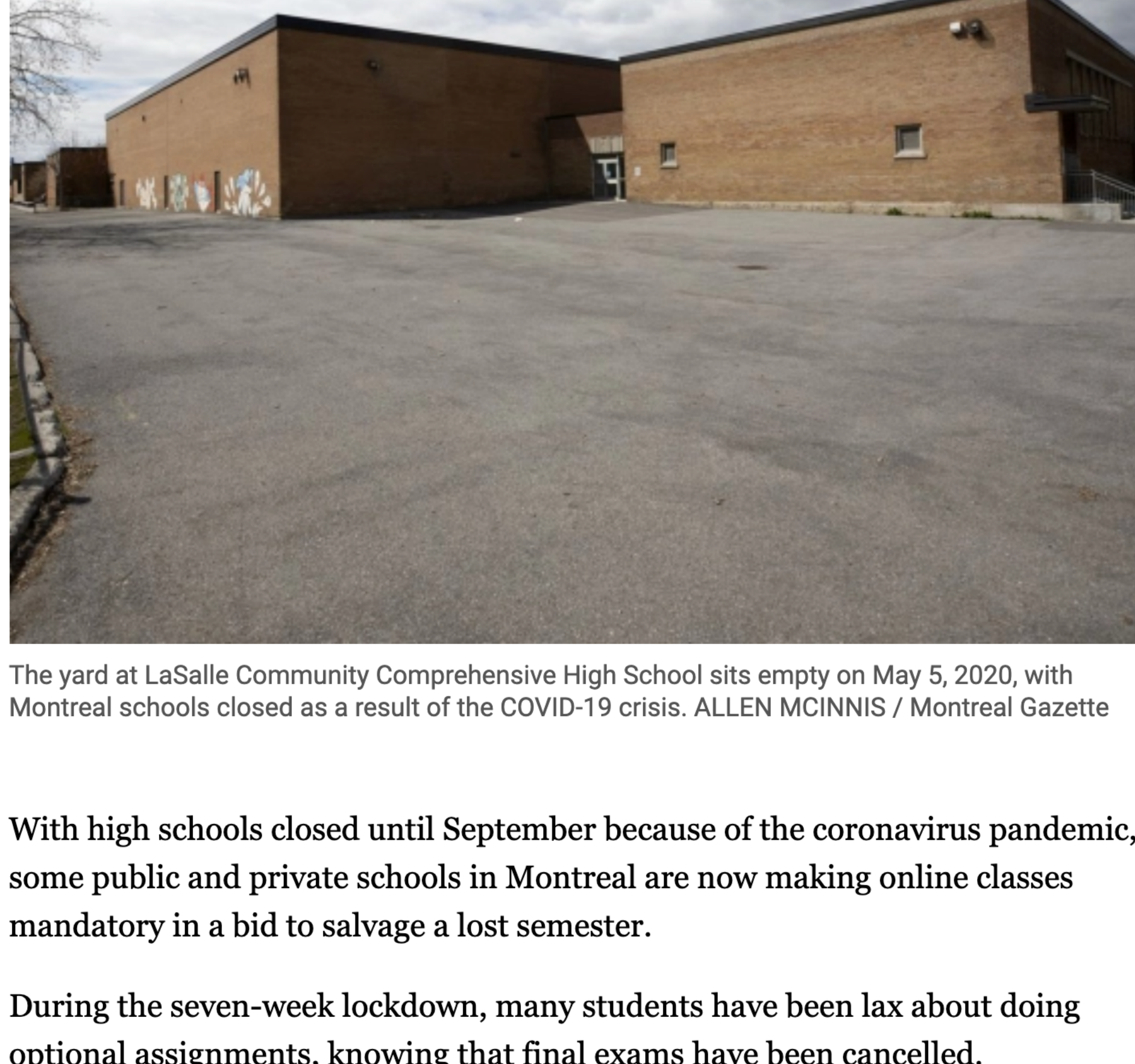


News / Local News

Montreal high schools aim to salvage lost semester with mandatory online classes

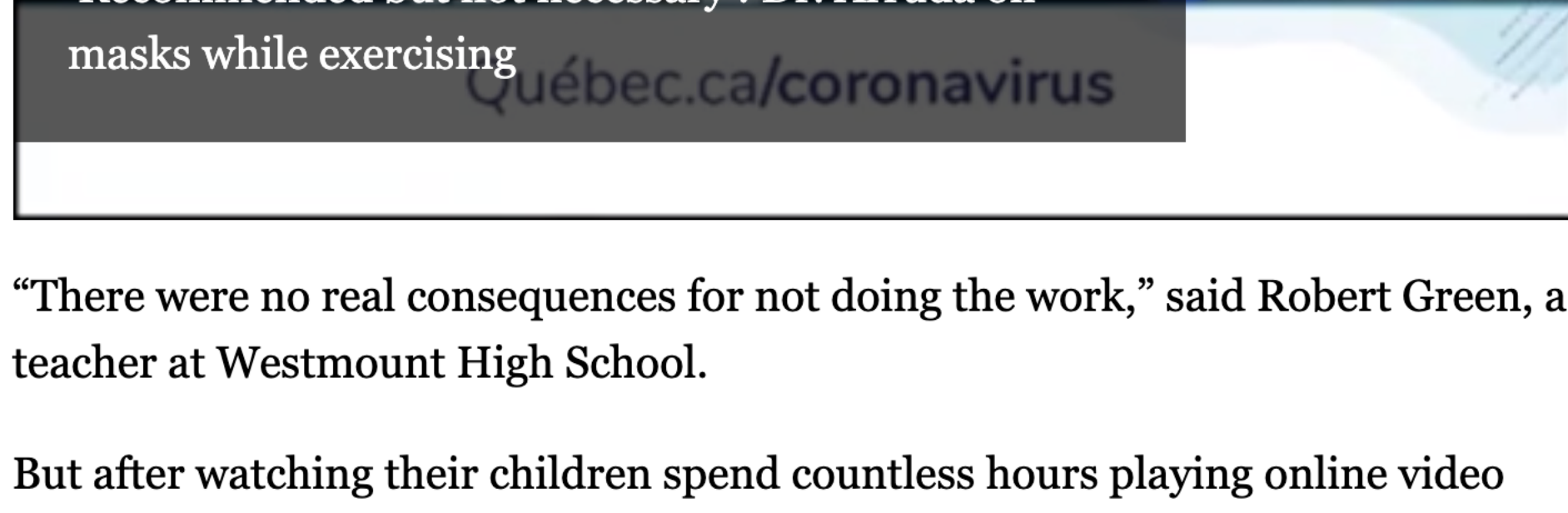
Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette
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The yard at LaSalle Community Comprehensive High School sits empty on May 5, 2020, with Montreal schools closed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. ALLEN MCINNIS / Montreal Gazette

With high schools closed until September because of the coronavirus pandemic, some public and private schools in Montreal are now making online classes mandatory in a bid to salvage a lost semester.

During the seven-week lockdown, many students have been lax about doing optional assignments, knowing that final exams have been cancelled.



“There were no real consequences for not doing the work,” said Robert Green, a teacher at Westmount High School.

But after watching their children spend countless hours playing online video games or chatting with friends, some frustrated parents have been pressuring schools to tighten the screws.

Over the past week, many students have received letters from principals saying online instruction is now compulsory.

Students at Collège de Montréal, a private high school downtown, have been told they must participate in online sessions with teachers and complete assigned schoolwork.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

During a news conference on April 27, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge [said school is obligatory](#) for students under 16. He said students have a responsibility to do the schoolwork and asked parents to ensure assignments are completed.

The schoolwork is especially important for students who were on the cusp of failing when schools closed after the March break, Roberge added.

“Just because we are closing the building, it doesn’t mean schooling is less important,” he said. “We can save the school year — not by giving diplomas for free, but by recognizing the efforts made to learn.”

Now that teachers know they’re not returning to the classroom, they will ensure students get the best online education possible, said Michael Cohen, a spokesperson for the English Montreal School Board.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“There’s going to be a concerted effort to work with students who need assistance over the next two months,” he said.

In a letter sent to parents this week, the principal at Lester B. Pearson High School in Montreal North said “assignments given until the conclusion of the school year will greatly impact the professional judgment of the teacher when determining whether a student has acquired the necessary competencies to be promoted to the next level.”

Wrote Steve Rebelo, the interim principal: “We especially advise students who had poor results in the first two terms to take advantage of this opportunity to consolidate their knowledge and to demonstrate that they have acquired the necessary competencies and skills to be promoted.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

In cases where students haven’t been struggling, their final mark will be based on work done in the first two semesters.

During the lockdown, educators who were inexperienced with technology have learned how to teach remotely. This week, teachers can take advantage of free 15- to 20-hour training sessions focusing on how to teach online courses and how to evaluate students from a distance.

However, not all school boards are increasing the workload.

At the Commission scolaire de Montréal, teachers have been instructed to review this year’s work on their return in the fall.

The Lester B. Pearson School Board has been directing students to online resources, like the province’s Open School program, and has supplemented learning by providing other educational material. Board officials are discussing whether to add more educational material in the coming weeks.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The fact that some public schools will be providing more schoolwork than others has ruffled the feathers of some parents and school board officials.

Royal West Academy, a member of the EMSB, has announced it will hold mandatory online classes starting Monday.

After that announcement made headlines, some parents contacted school boards asking why their children aren’t being provided with the same service.

“The school has a strong CEGEP preparatory reputation and is considered by parents to be equal to private schools,” Cohen said. “There’s an expectation not only on behalf of the parents, but the students who are willing to go the extra mile these next two months.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Cohen noted that many students at the board’s other high schools are also keen to do more work.

He said the board is waiting on clarification from the education ministry about what’s expected of teachers and students until the end of the school year.

“We hope to have a clearer message for our high schools in the coming days,” Cohen said.

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Note to readers: We know the speed and volume of coronavirus-related news is overwhelming and a little frightening. To help with that, we will dedicate a Montreal Gazette reporter each day to devote their time to synthesizing the most important coronavirus-related news, especially as it relates to life in Montreal and Quebec. [Follow the updates from May 6 here.](#) All our coronavirus-related news can always be found at montrealgazette.com/tag/coronavirus.

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