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Quebec

Quebec school ventilation system is adequate and safe, minister says

The majority of Quebec schools rely on natural ventilation in classrooms but the arrival of COVID-19, which is transmitted by airborne particles, means classrooms can become hazardous places, experts say.

Philip Authier • Montreal Gazette
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"In the context of the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that the quality of air is adequate in all schools," says Quebec Education Minister Jean-François Roberge. PHOTO BY RYAN REMIORZ /THE CANADIAN PRESS

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measures are in place in nearly all of Quebec's schools, enough to say they are safe despite the spread of COVID-19.

Releasing a report on the state of ventilation systems in 4,000 school buildings, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge noted systematic air quality measures are in place in 96.55 per cent of establishments. That includes system maintenance, replacement of filters and the inspection of exhaust systems.



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Roberge, however, also asks all service centres and school boards to conduct new carbon dioxide tests starting Dec. 1 to guarantee levels in the air in classrooms meet recommended standards and to proceed immediately with adjustments if they do not.

The level of CO2 is considered an indicator of the quality of ventilation in classrooms. Most Quebec schools currently rely on natural ventilation augmented by the opening of windows where possible.

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The report says little specifically about CO₂ levels but Roberge said air quality norms are being respected in 99.55 per cent of establishments, either through mechanical ventilation or natural. Maintenance of existing systems is 97.5 per cent complete.

“The data collected reveals the level of progress in the installation of air quality control measures in school establishments is adequate,” Roberge said in a statement.

“I want to reassure the population, our school environments are healthy and safe. In the context of the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that the quality of air is adequate in all schools.”

Over the last few weeks, experts and the opposition parties have expressed concerns about the quality of air in Quebec’s schools, especially in the wake of new studies about the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the air.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

An unofficial study conducted undercover by the COVID-STOP group revealed 75 per cent of the 25 classrooms tested had ventilation problems with CO₂ levels over the recommended levels.

Health Minister Christian Dubé has expressed concerns about the quality of the air, particularly in the coming winter. He admitted earlier in November that Quebec should have prioritized school ventilation long before the pandemic and a plan should have been developed “a long time ago.”

Roberge has been on the ropes for weeks over his handling of the issue, but has defended himself saying he ordered the analysis on June 29. He also says the Coalition Avenir Québec government has invested \$1.6 billion in school renovations, plus \$20 million more to ventilation maintenance.

The report also says the analysis of random levels in schools is 99.3 per cent complete, an inventory of materials that possibly contain asbestos fibres is 99.1 per cent complete and the installation of CO₂ detectors in schools heating with oil and gas is 98.31 per cent complete.

This story will be updated

pauthier@postmedia.com

twitter.com/philipauthier



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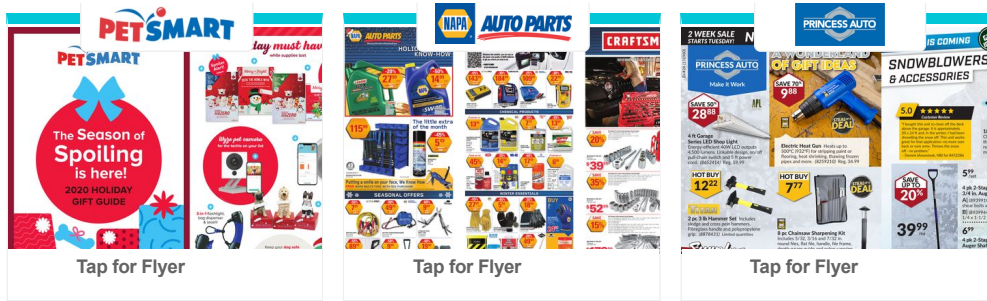
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