

Quebec / News / Local News

# Rituals change at Merton School, but 'a child in distress will be a top priority'

*The Côte-St-Luc elementary school has been seeking ways to protect teachers' safety and students' comfort.*

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette

Aug 26, 2020 • Last Updated 16 hours ago • 4 minute read



Merton School principal Rosana Caplan says she has given a disposable gown to every teacher at the Côte-St-Luc elementary school, "so they don't have to feel torn between comforting a student and their own safety." Changes at the school include colourful pictograms about proper hygiene, and a line of red tape dividing the hallways to keep students from bumping into each other. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

When students at Merton School walk into the schoolyard Monday morning, their principal and teachers will greet them enthusiastically. But several other [back-to-school rituals](#) will be very different this year, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

[Instead of a friendly hug](#), teachers will greet youngsters with a warm smile from behind a mask, while trying to remain two metres away.



Inside the elementary school in Côte-St-Luc, colourful pictograms encourage students to engage in COVID-19-friendly greetings, such as a foot bump, a wink or a wave.

"We have done everything in our power to ensure everything is ready and clean and organized. We are so excited to see them all," principal Rosana Caplan said in an interview.

Much has changed in the world of education since the pandemic closed schools across Quebec in March. Caplan has read about best practices she hopes will keep her teachers, her students and herself safe.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

For the foreseeable future, students will use hand sanitizer when entering the school and teachers will be on hand to do a visual inspection, looking out for signs of fever, a cough or excessive tiredness.

Students who have symptoms of COVID-19 will wait in an isolation room in the school office until they're picked up by a relative.

Elementary and high school students will notice other changes Monday when [classes resume at English public schools](#) across greater Montreal.

A line of red tape divides the hallways to keep students from bumping into each other, and arrows instruct them what side of the corridor to walk down. Water fountains have been covered with garbage bags, so students will have to find room in their school bag for a water bottle.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Students at Merton who have been lucky enough to [experience flexible seating](#), such as floor mats, group desks, standing desks and wobbly chairs, will have to get used to a more traditional classroom.

Desks have been placed in rows, and Plexiglas screens will be affixed to the front of teachers' desks.

Grade 5 teacher Janet Rodger said the new configuration would present challenges for teachers who are used to standing or sitting beside students as they type on a laptop or work out a math problem.

"It's like returning to the more traditional way of teaching," Rodger said. "I usually move around. We will see how it goes."

To try to ensure teachers are safe, the English Montreal School Board has delivered 210,000 masks, 21,000 clear visors, 4,000 sanitizer bottles and 4,000 gowns to its schools.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

A disposable gown will be donned by teachers who need to comfort a distressed or anxious student.

"I have given all the teachers a gown so they don't have to feel torn between comforting a student and their own safety," Caplan said. "I'm prepared to replace those as needed. A child in distress will be a top priority for all of us, regardless of the situation."

She has urged her teachers to leave a change of clothing in their classroom in case they don't have time to put on a gown before consoling an upset youngster.

Caplan also reached into her own pocket to purchase clear masks for teachers so hearing-impaired students can better understand what the teacher is saying.

Over the past few days, she has been in touch with many parents to update them on the latest protocols and listen to their concerns.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Some want their children in a particular class or with a close friend. Others have inquired about class sizes and are very concerned about the air quality.

"All the windows and doors will be open," Caplan said. "Once we close them, we are counting on the school board and the government. We know they know the importance of good ventilation, and I trust they will be taking the appropriate measures to help us."

Although the Quebec government is only requiring students in Grade 5 and up to wear masks in the hallways and other common areas of schools, some Merton parents are planning to send their children to school with masks that they'll wear in the classroom.

"Children have gotten used to wearing masks and they would be comforted by wearing them," Caplan said. "I think a good number of them will."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

For the first two weeks, parents and other volunteers will not be permitted to enter the school, for safety reasons.

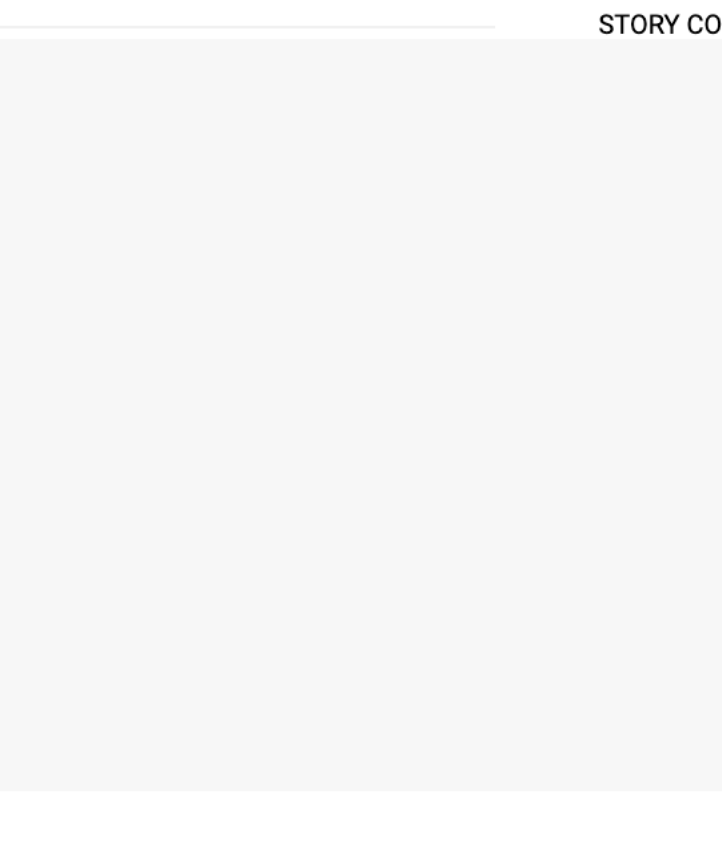
"We will evolve and adjust as we see how things are working out," Caplan said. "The best plans have to meet the reality."

Caplan added that she and her staff will do their best to create a sense of normalcy for the students and help them manage anxious thoughts.

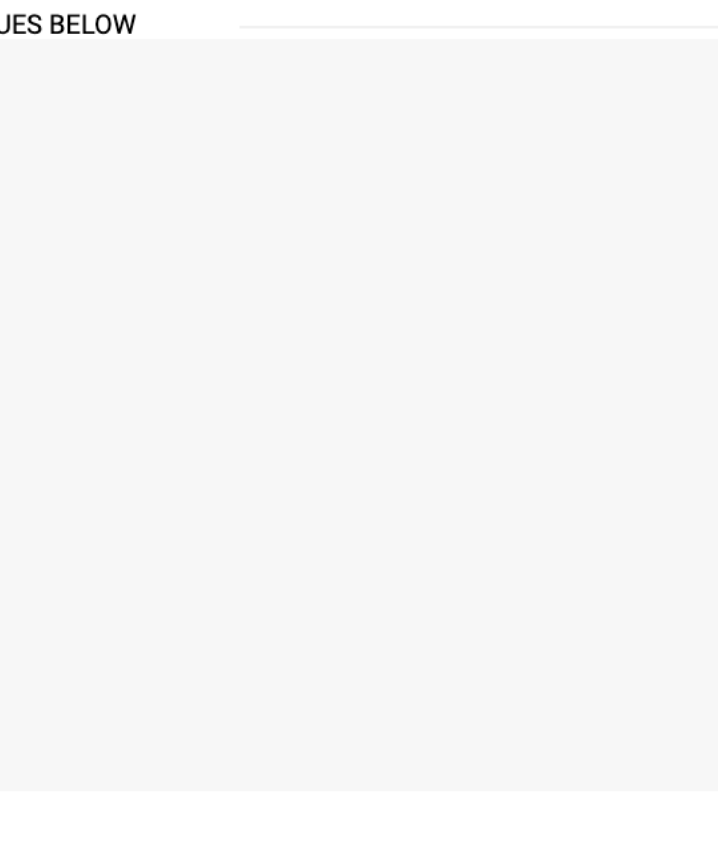
"We have discussed making room for humour," she said. "We want to convey a sense of calm and safety."

[kwilton@postmedia.com](mailto:kwilton@postmedia.com)

## MORE ON THIS TOPIC



**Back-to-school plan inadequate, Montreal doctors and scientists say...**



**Back to school: Montreal working on plan to manage COVID-19...**

All our coronavirus-related news can always be found at [montrealgazette.com/tag/coronavirus](https://montrealgazette.com/tag/coronavirus).

Sign up for our email newsletter dedicated to local COVID-19 coverage at [montrealgazette.com/coronavirusnews](https://montrealgazette.com/coronavirusnews).

Help support our local journalism by [subscribing to the Montreal Gazette here](#).