

Local News

The EMSB will comply with the government's order to reopen schools

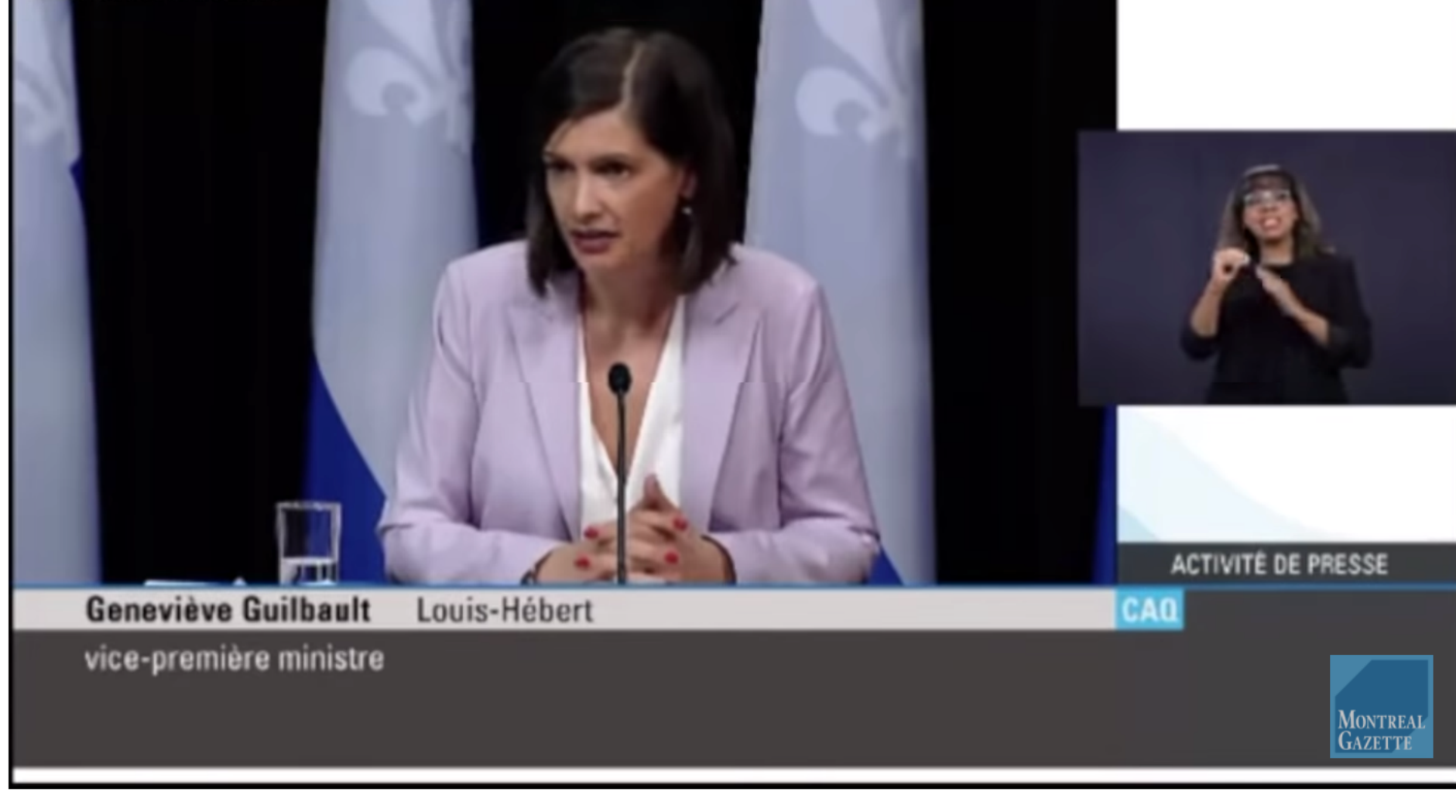
Kathryn Greenaway • Montreal Gazette
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Marlene Jennings JOHN KENNEY / Montreal Gazette

English Montreal School Board trustee Marlene Jennings wants to make one thing perfectly clear: Contrary to some media reports, the EMSB is fully prepared to comply with the government directive to reopen schools and daycares in the Greater Montreal region in the coming weeks.

Confusion erupted when it was interpreted that Jennings had said it would be her who decided when the EMSB schools were ready to open.



In fact, Jennings says that she had said EMSB schools were preparing to reopen, but if a school was not in a position to open on the scheduled date, the board would advise the government and justify the delay.

Jennings also said English school boards in Quebec have the constitutional right to manage and control their institutions, but in an interview with the Montreal Gazette she said that this “in no way contradicts the government’s authority to decide when the schools are to be closed or reopened and under what conditions and how many school days there are in a school year.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Premier François Legault announced Thursday the reopening of Montreal-area schools, daycares and businesses would be delayed by one week, to May 25.

Legault said the delay was necessary because the conditions to reopen had not been met. He said the biggest challenge was finding full-time workers to replace healthcare staff that were on sick leave and until that happened, he and public health director Dr. Horacio Arruda had agreed it was necessary to push back the reopening.

Montreal remains the hotspot for COVID-19 in Canada.

Jennings said there would be one exception to the board’s compliance. The Mackay Centre School and Philip E. Layton special education facility in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce will remain closed. Its students have severe physical and/or health challenges making it practically impossible to follow the strict COVID-19 pandemic distancing and hygiene protocols.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The task list is long when it comes to preparing a safe environment for returning students.

The good news, she said, is that soap and hand-sanitizer supplies are in place.

“We’ve evaluated the soap situation and we have more than enough,” Jennings said. “And we’ve purchased and received 24,000 bottles of hand sanitizer.”

What’s still being worked on is how to overcome the challenges presented by aging buildings.

“Some of these schools have only one washroom per floor and not all the sinks are in working order,” Jennings said. “We also have to look at the corridors. Are they wide enough for two-way traffic? If not, do we create one-way hallways?”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

And classroom sizes matter.

“In some cases, the room isn’t big enough to accommodate 15 students (the limit recommended by the government),” she said. “So we reduce it to eight or nine desks and then have to find the storage space to put the extra chairs and desks.”

A survey was sent to parents in order to calculate how many of more than 11,000 students plan to return. The deadline is Sunday. So far, around 9 per cent of respondents say their children will return. Jennings expects that number to increase.

On the school-bus front, distancing measures allow only one child per bench

vehicle disinfecting will also take place.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Jennings said that bus arrivals and school-start times were already being staggered at certain schools before the pandemic and that the practice will be expanded.

So far around 500 teachers have said they would not return, be it because of age, pregnancy or underlying health condition. High school teachers will be brought in if there is a shortage.

kgreenaway@postmedia.com

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