



Local News

The hard lessons of homeschooling in a pandemic year

Parents in Quebec who chose to keep their children out of the classroom because of COVID-19 feel "completely cut off" — punished for their decision.

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Paula Girolami's home in Lachine has been transformed into a classroom for her sons Renato, left, and Domenico this pandemic year. "It basically felt like they were trying to make it as hard as they could," she says of her experience dealing with the Education Ministry. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Paula Girolami never intended to homeschool her children. But as the main caregiver for an elderly, immuno-compromised family member, she felt she couldn't risk her boys bringing COVID-19 back from school.

Last September, she reluctantly withdrew her sons, Domenico, 10, and Renato, 14, and took on the responsibility of ensuring they would make it through Grades 4 and 9 from their home in Lachine.

They were among nearly 7,700 Quebec children who were taken out of their traditional classes this year because of COVID fears, more than doubling the total number of children homeschooled in the province annually.

On the home front, her boys adapted well to learning at the house.

But in terms of getting support from Quebec's school system or Education Ministry on what she was

expected to teach and how to do so, it's been a time-consuming, frustrating fiasco, she said.

"As far as dealing with the schools, the school board, the Ministry of Education, it's been complete crap, excuse my language," Girolami said. She received some guidance and textbooks from the staff at

Lakeside Academy, part of the English Lester B. Pearson School Board. But for her son enrolled in the French system, there was no help, she said.

"It was like once we were homeschooling, we were completely cut off."

She had to search online to buy textbooks and teachers' manuals at a cost of more than \$600. She scoured the internet and homeschooling support groups and quizzed her friends with children still in school to figure out what she should be teaching.

"It basically felt like they were trying to make it as hard as they could," she said. "I didn't want to homeschool them, believe me — I'm not equipped. I didn't study education, I'm not a teacher. I just want them to follow as closely as possible what they should be doing so when they go back they'll be up to speed."

In line with regulations, she submitted extensive curriculum proposals in September and mid-term reports in March, but received no feedback. Her first interview with a representative from the ministry's homeschooling division was on April 9 — seven months after she enrolled her sons, and two months before the end of their school year.

Adding salt is the fact her sister's three children in Ottawa are receiving free online teaching, because Ontario is providing distance learning.

At the Toronto District School Board, for example, close to 80,000 of their 240,000 students opted for distance learning, requiring thousands of teachers. In Quebec, where a lack of resources was among reasons cited for not providing virtual learning, only students with a note from a doctor certifying they or someone in their household has a condition putting them at increased risk were deemed admissible for online learning.

Quebec's Education Ministry did not give figures on how many of its 950,000 students received a medical waiver to be taught at home, saying it's constantly evolving and the responsibility of the local school commissions. The English Montreal School Board reported it had 573 elementary and high school kids in medically mandated distance learning, representing three per cent of its 18,600 youth sector students and requiring 56 teachers and 21 support staff.

“All I’m trying to do is keep the elderly people in my family alive,” says Paula Girolami, explaining her decision to homeschool her sons Domenico, left, and Renato this year. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

The Lester B. Pearson School Board has 629 children in online learning, roughly three per cent of its 19,659 youth sector students, requiring 70 teachers and 25 integration aids. The Centre de services scolaire de Montréal, Quebec’s largest French school commission, didn’t provide figures, saying they have to come from the Ministry of Education. By a rough calculation, if all of Quebec’s school commissions combined reflect the EMSB and Lester B. Pearson’s ratios, as many as 30,000 children had virtual classes led by teachers this year.

Considering thousands had access to online classes, more aid should have been given to parents like her forced to homeschool their children, Girolami said.

“I think it’s an outrage. It feels like the Ministry of Education, and I know I’m not alone in this sentiment, is punishing us for making that choice.

“All I’m trying to do is keep the elderly people in my family alive.”

Girolami is among many COVID homeschoolers complaining the government is making it needlessly difficult to obtain a curriculum or submit progress reports. Some have been told they would have to return their child to class or face child services for failing to adequately fill out the paperwork. Others spent thousands on private online classes.

Many say they’re stuck in the middle of an ideological battle between the government and the relatively small cohort of full-time Quebec homeschoolers, when all they want is to get through the year.

“We COVID homeschoolers are not traditional homeschoolers,” said Politimi Karounis, a former lawyer who was part of a group of mothers who took Quebec’s Education Ministry to court last summer to demand some form of distance learning or curriculums to follow at home during COVID. “We like support, we like structure, we like textbooks. And we are really desperately seeking that. But for whatever reason, we were left to fend for ourselves.

“The 7,000 of us in the abyss of homeschooling would have appreciated any help.”

Politimi Karounis, left, with her lawyer at the Montreal courthouse in September, attempting to force Quebec to provide distance learning options to all families during the pandemic. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Part of the problem, explains Marine Dumond, president of the Quebec Association for Home-Based Education (ADEQ) that helps guide parents, is that COVID homeschoolers entered the system just as Quebec made the process “enormously” more complicated. In 2019, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge announced regulations for the roughly 5,600 homeschooled children were being tightened because many parents weren’t submitting the required paperwork, or ignoring calls from staff trying to ensure the children were getting an adequate education.

This year, the documentation required to indicate learning plans and educational progress is much longer and more detailed. ADEQ’s volunteers field hundreds of calls a week, three-quarters of them

related to trying to figure out the requirements of the ministry.

While ADEQ does not fault the government for being more stringent, Dumond said it's being overly strict on the level of pedagogical language required.

“Our position is the parent is not an educational professional,” she said. “As a parent-educator, they should just describe what is being done at the house, what the child is doing, what resources they are using. But as for the small steps of translating that into the vocabulary of education reform — it should be the ministry resource person who does that.”

Hampering the process further is the fact Quebec doesn't use set curriculums, allowing teachers or schools to set their own.

ADEQ's fear is if the government makes it too difficult, many parents, some of whom may have taken their children out of school because they were bullied or have learning difficulties, may go into hiding, where no one can track them.

“The argument is it's in the best interests of the kids,” she said. “But in some cases all it does is discourage families.”

In an email, Education Ministry spokespeople Esther Chouinard and Bryan Saint-Louis said “the ministry accompanies parents by giving assistance to those who require it. The Department of Homeschooling plays a counselling role” and the local school boards and service centres must offer support, including access to resources. In general, parents who need help will hear from a resource person within 72 hours. To deal with the rise of homeschooled children, which presently number 13,691, the government has increased the number of resource personnel from 20 to 67, the ministry noted. That works out to one counsellor per 240 children.

Girolami said the support promised by the ministry was not at all what she experienced.

“We didn't get a single response despite multiple inquiries over seven months. Basically we were operating in the dark.”

Heidi Ahrens and her husband, Erik Skeaff, say they were “made to feel like criminals” over a problem filling out paperwork for the Education Ministry on behalf of their 11-year-old daughter, Ramona. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Erik Skeaff and his wife, Heidi Ahrens, are teachers with more than 20 years of experience, including in the Quebec system, who have homeschooled their daughters for years, primarily in Colorado. Now in Quebec, their daughter Ramona, 11, an advanced violinist accepted into the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal, was granted a scholarship to study online with Avenues, a prestigious school based in New York City that normally costs \$56,000 U.S. a year.

Yet when they tried to fill out their mid-term report because Ramona is considered a homeschooled student, they were told it didn't meet requirements. Skeaff said they had several discussions with their ministry resource person, who was very helpful, yet still struggled to meet standards. Recently, the parents were told Ramona would have to be placed in a school within days or Quebec's child services department would intervene. They managed to get a stay based on compassionate grounds.

“What gets me is that we’re filling out all the educational requirements, our child is actually in a school, but we’re being made to feel like criminals because there’s a problem with the paperwork,” Skeaff said. He estimates it took him more than 20 hours on the internet to figure out what was required for the curriculum.

“The goals were almost impossible to figure out. And this is what I do for my job.”

To manage the bureaucracy and teaching requirements, Karounis, who pulled her elementary school-age children from class for fear of exposing her older family members, turned to the Quebec Online School. The private homeschooling support service provides two hours of classes a day with a teacher to roughly 10 fellow students in an online class, as well as learning modules and homework assignments. It also helps fill out the reports expected by the ministry. But it comes at a cost. Karounis estimates she has paid at least \$15,000 for the courses.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do it without them,” said Karounis, who ultimately lost her court battle with Quebec to provide online learning or curriculum aid.

She said she feels parents like her have been caught in a battle between traditional homeschoolers seeking the freedom to educate their children as they see fit, and the government trying to rein them in. Meanwhile, parents like her, forced into homeschooling by COVID-19, have been left alone.

“Instead of leaving us out in the cold, all these families who are just in it for this year, why not find a way to support them?” she said.

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