



Local News

# 'What was the rush?' End to Quebec high school in-class mask rule seen as premature

*The change, coming Monday, 'seems stupid,' according to one teacher, while a pediatrician says, "I personally think it's not the time to do it."*

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette  
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Masked students work at their desks during French class at John F. Kennedy High School in Montreal Tuesday November 10, 2020. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

With COVID-19 cases increasing and the Christmas holidays just around the corner, teachers and infectious disease doctors are baffled by Quebec's decision to allow high school students to remove masks while in class starting Monday.

“Winter is the time colds happen and people get sick — it seems stupid,” said Lev Berner, a science teacher at Vincent Massey Collegiate in Rosemont. “We’re so close to being out of the woods and close to being able to let our guard down a little bit.”



Masks are still required on school buses and in common areas, such as hallways and stairwells.

Quebec public health director Horacio Arruda has justified the lifting of the mask mandate in classrooms, saying COVID cases in secondary schools are low and the vaccination coverage is high among 12- to 17-year-olds.

As of Tuesday, about 76.4 per cent of Montreal students ages 12 to 17 had at least one dose of a vaccine, <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/what-was-the-rush-end-to-quebec-high-school-in-class-mask-rule-seen-as-premature?fbclid=IwAR2I4wLSIGQSoVNX...> 2/8

while 71.4 per cent were fully vaccinated.

But with cases rising in Quebec and Ontario, and some European countries on the cusp of a fifth wave, infectious-disease doctors and epidemiologists are questioning whether it's wise to lift the mask mandate.



"I personally think it's not the time to do it," says Dr. Earl Rubin, a pediatric infectious diseases specialist at the Montreal Children's Hospital. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

"We do know masks are one of our protective mechanisms to prevent the ongoing transmission," said Dr. Earl Rubin, a pediatric infectious diseases specialist at the Montreal Children's Hospital.

"I personally think it's not the time to do it," he said.

Rubin said he understands the government is trying to strike a balance between keeping the community safe and lifting restrictions in places where cases are low, such as high schools.

Students in elementary schools, where children are unvaccinated, will have to continue to wear masks in

class, as will CEGEP and university students.

Once students remove masks, high school teachers should open windows for about five minute every hour and “ask principals what they’re doing to make sure the air quality is good and there’s good ventilation, said Dr. Nimâ Machouf, an epidemiologist at the Université de Montréal’s school of public health.

Some teachers are relieved they won’t have to police masking in the classroom, but others are perplexed about why Quebec is changing the mask mandate for high school students when their younger siblings (under 12) are still not vaccinated.

Over the past week, cases of COVID-19 in the 0-12 age group increased by 30 per cent, according to a government health institute. Most breakthrough infections occur when fully vaccinated people are exposed to the virus at home.

“Things are going so well in high schools... so why are we making this change now?” asks Heidi Yetman, president of the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

“Things are going so well in high schools; there are very few cases — so why are we making this change

now as we start to head toward more indoor activity?" asked Heidi Yetman, president of the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers.

Many teachers will remain at their desks and refrain from moving around the classroom if students are unmasked, she speculated.

Berner said he's thankful that some of his students plan to remain masked on Monday.

To keep himself safe, he will keep the windows open and instruct students to wear their school sweaters if they're cold. He also won't be straying far from his desk.

"I will tell them to put on a mask and come and see me," he said in an interview.

After wearing masks on and off for more than a year, most students are not bothered by having to sport a mask all day, he said. "The kids are not miserable," he said. "They understand the importance of it."

The English Montreal School Board has notified parents about the coming change, adding that any student who wants to continue wearing a mask can do so.

Board spokesperson Michael Cohen said some teachers are questioning why the change is being made so close to the Christmas holidays.

"We have a teacher shortage; what if teachers get COVID and have to be off for 10 days to two weeks?" Cohen asked.

"What was the rush? We have the holidays coming up. Students will be going to stores, restaurants, the Bell Centre and Florida. They usually come back from the holidays sick."

Rubin said he's not sure when it will be safe for Quebec to lift all mask mandates in schools.

"If the numbers were like in July, where we had 100 cases in the province and very few in Montreal, I would say: 'Go for it,'" he said. "I just don't think it's the time in the face of increasing numbers."

Quebec recorded 716 new COVID cases Friday, the first time cases have been above 700 since September.

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