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# English sector students and teachers return to school in Montreal

*“I’m feeling excited and optimistic — it’s time we all get back and get into a new, normal routine,” EMSB school psychologist says.*

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette  
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A parent checks a child's school bag on first day of school Monday at Bancroft Elementary School on St-Urbain St. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Cheryl Wiltzer walked into the schoolyard at Bancroft Elementary School with a spring in her step, a smile on her face and boundless enthusiasm.

After five months at home, she and thousands of other teachers and students returned to class on Monday at English public schools in greater Montreal.

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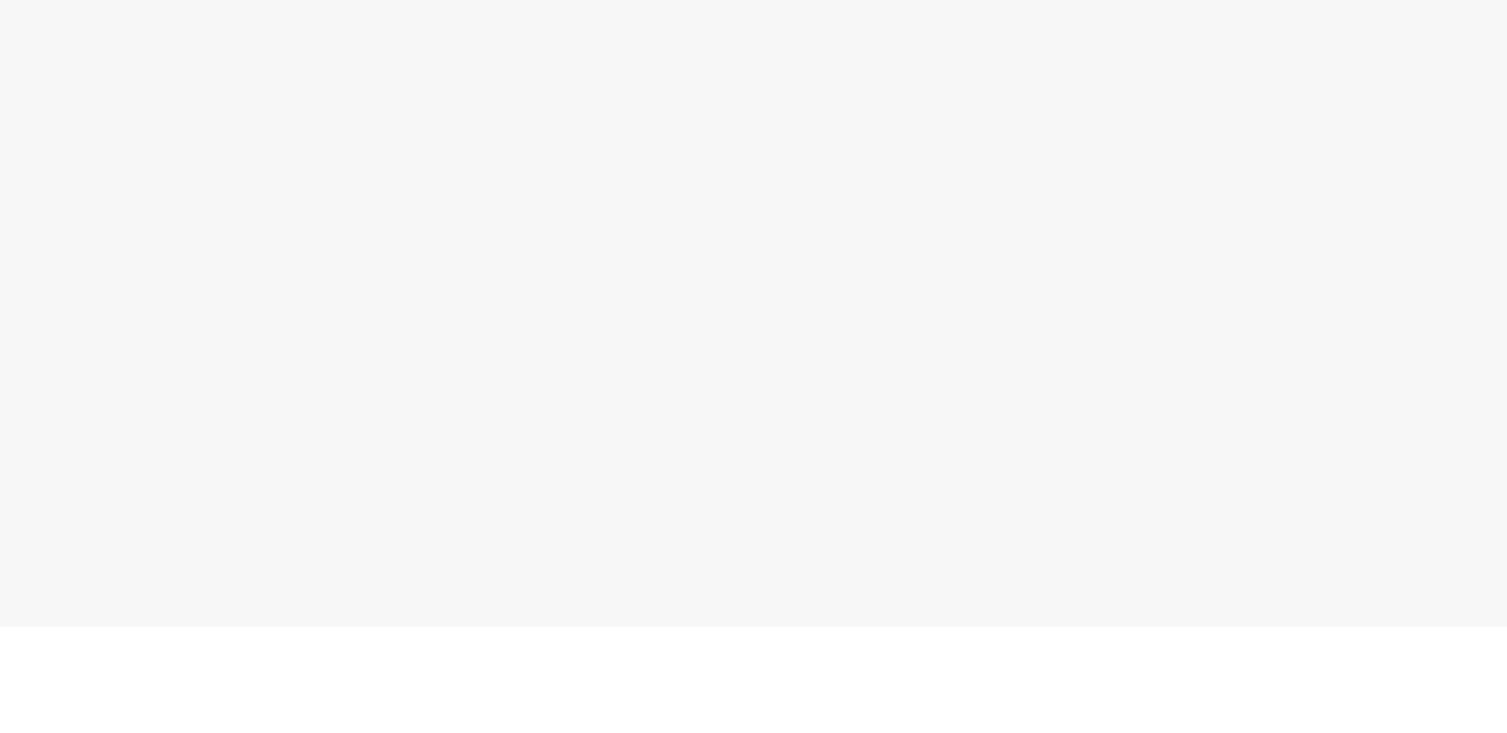
“I’m feeling excited — it’s time we all get back and get into a new, normal routine,” said Wiltzer, a school psychologist with the English Montreal School Board.

“It’s important to be optimistic and teach students how to be resilient. It will be wonderful for them to see their friends and have some consistency and predictability in their life again.”

Grade 5 student Maya Carneiro agreed with that assessment.

Like many students interviewed on Monday, Maya, 10, said she was bored staying at home and is happy to back at her school in the Plateau Mont-Royal, where she can see her friends more frequently.

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Jason Bernier, a Grade 10 student at MIND, an alternative high school in the Bancroft building, said it was difficult to stay motivated during online classes.

“It was hard to concentrate looking at the screen and doing Zoom calls,” he said. “I hope we won’t have to go back to online school again.”

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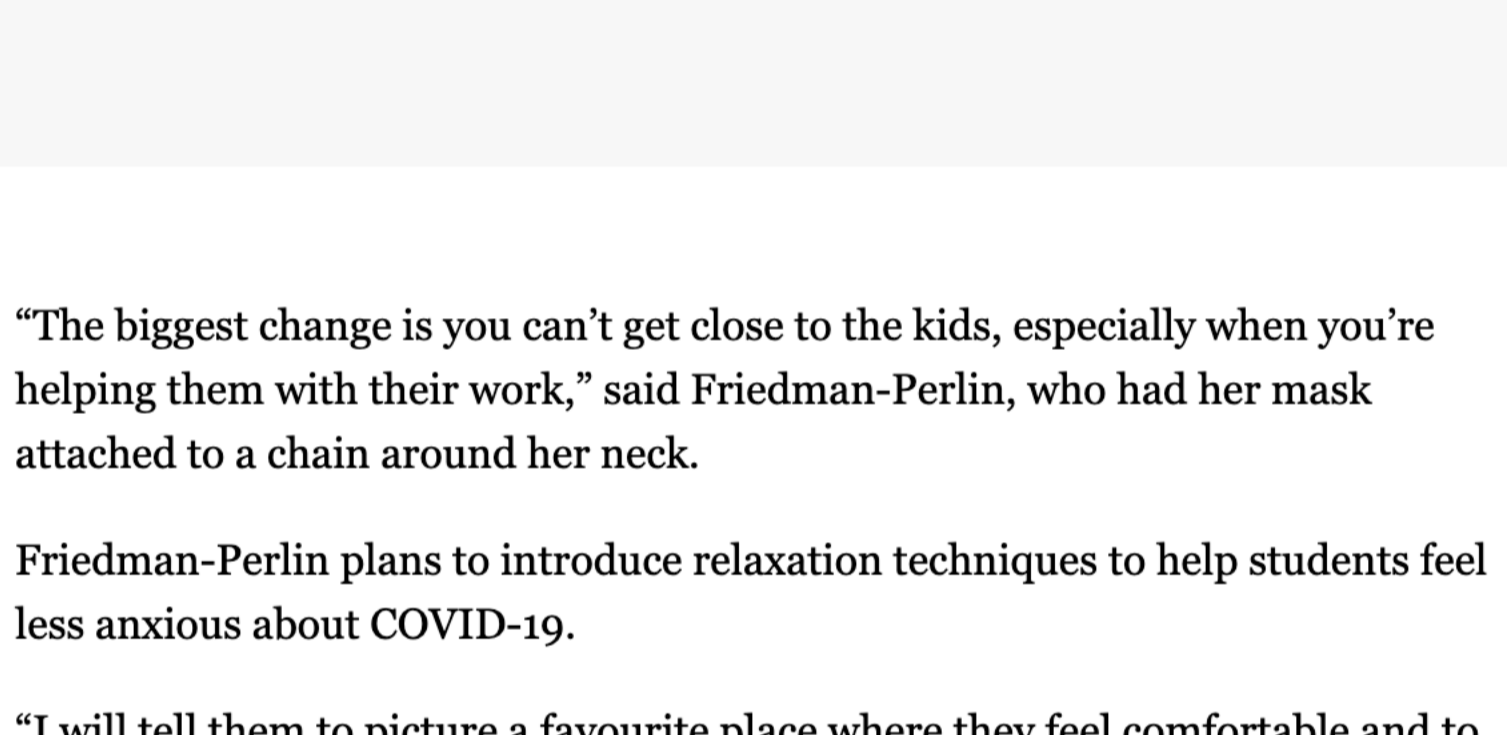


Students are seen through individual acrylic shields at the Marie-Claire Academy in Montreal, on Monday, August 31, 2020. PHOTO BY PAUL CHIASSON /The Canadian Press

To try to ensure teachers are safe, the EMSB has delivered 210,000 masks, 21,000 clear visors, 4,000 sanitizer bottles and 4,000 gowns to its schools. Teachers will don the gowns if they need to comfort a distressed student.

Donna Friedman-Perlin, who teaches Grade 4, said teachers will have to remind themselves to remain two metres away from their students.

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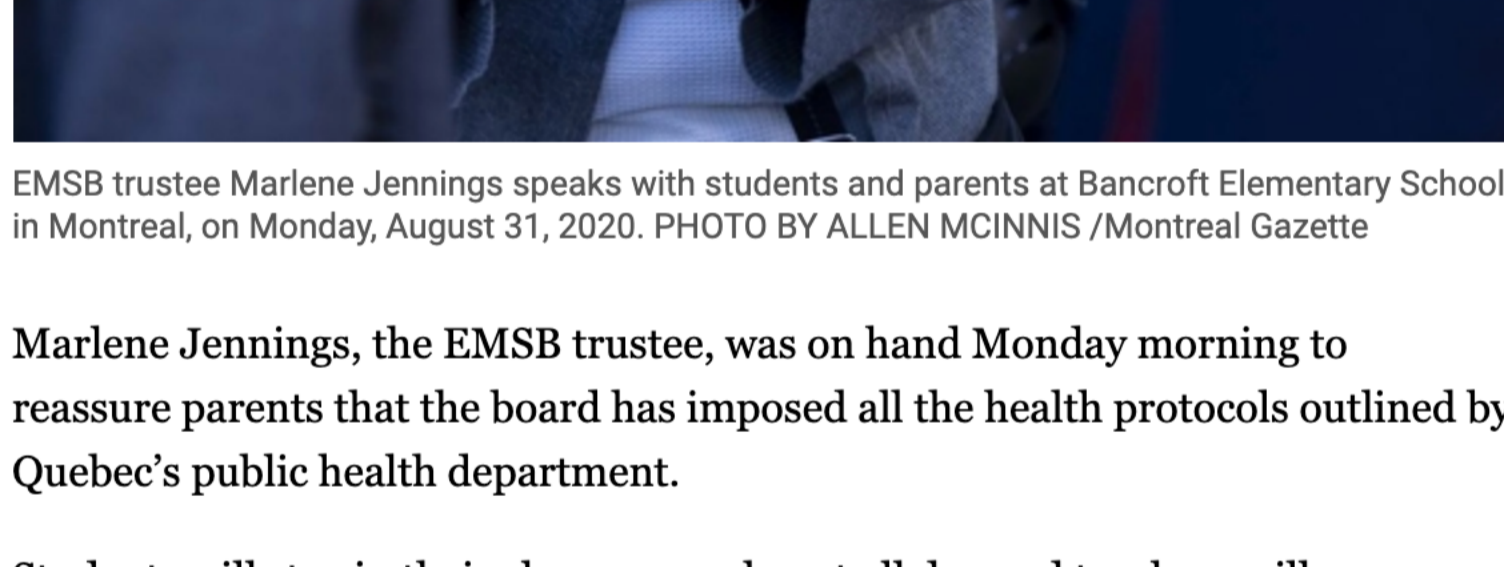
“The biggest change is you can’t get close to the kids, especially when you’re helping them with their work,” said Friedman-Perlin, who had her mask attached to a chain around her neck.

Friedman-Perlin plans to introduce relaxation techniques to help students feel less anxious about COVID-19.

“I will tell them to picture a favourite place where they feel comfortable and to use their senses to feel relaxed,” she said.

Although many teachers have concerns about contracting COVID-19 in the classroom, Friedman-Perlin said she hopes there won’t be an outbreak in the school.

“We have the protocols in place and hopefully it will work out well,” she said. “You have to still live your life; you have to go on. I’m excited to see the kids and I think it’s good for them socially.”



EMSB trustee Marlene Jennings speaks with students and parents at Bancroft Elementary School in Montreal, on Monday, August 31, 2020. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Marlene Jennings, the EMSB trustee, was on hand Monday morning to reassure parents that the board has imposed all the health protocols outlined by Quebec’s public health department.

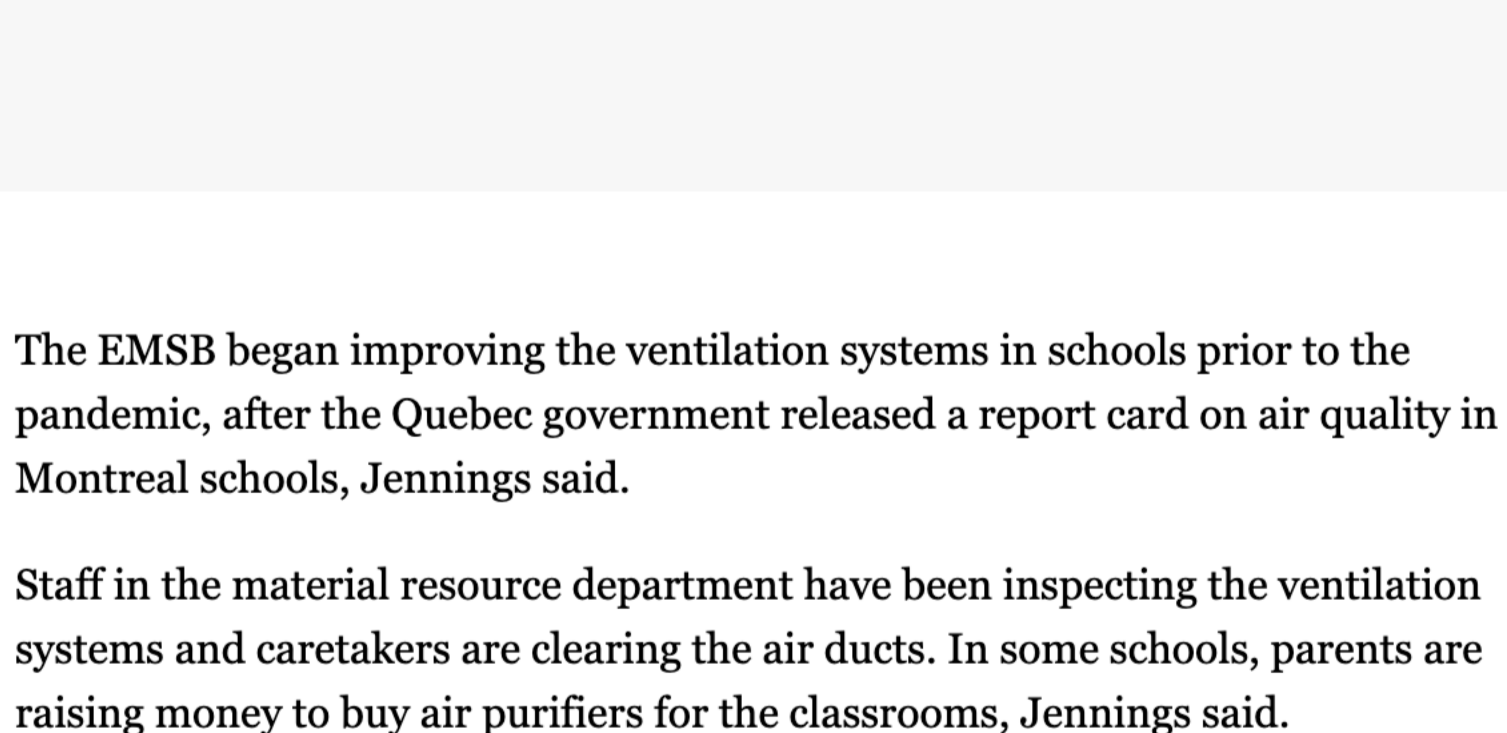
Students will stay in their classrooms almost all day and teachers will move around the school. Students will be encouraged to wash their hands frequently.

“When I went to school, I washed my hands after going to the bathroom,” Jennings recalled. “This is a whole new level of hygiene.”

About 400 EMSB students will remain at home this school year and participate in a household school that begins Sept. 8. Students were selected because they, or a household member, have a health condition that makes them vulnerable to COVID-19.

The EMSB has refused to say how many teachers have been given medical exemptions from teaching in person. Some teachers have sought medical exemptions for health reasons or because they’re worried about the air quality in old buildings.

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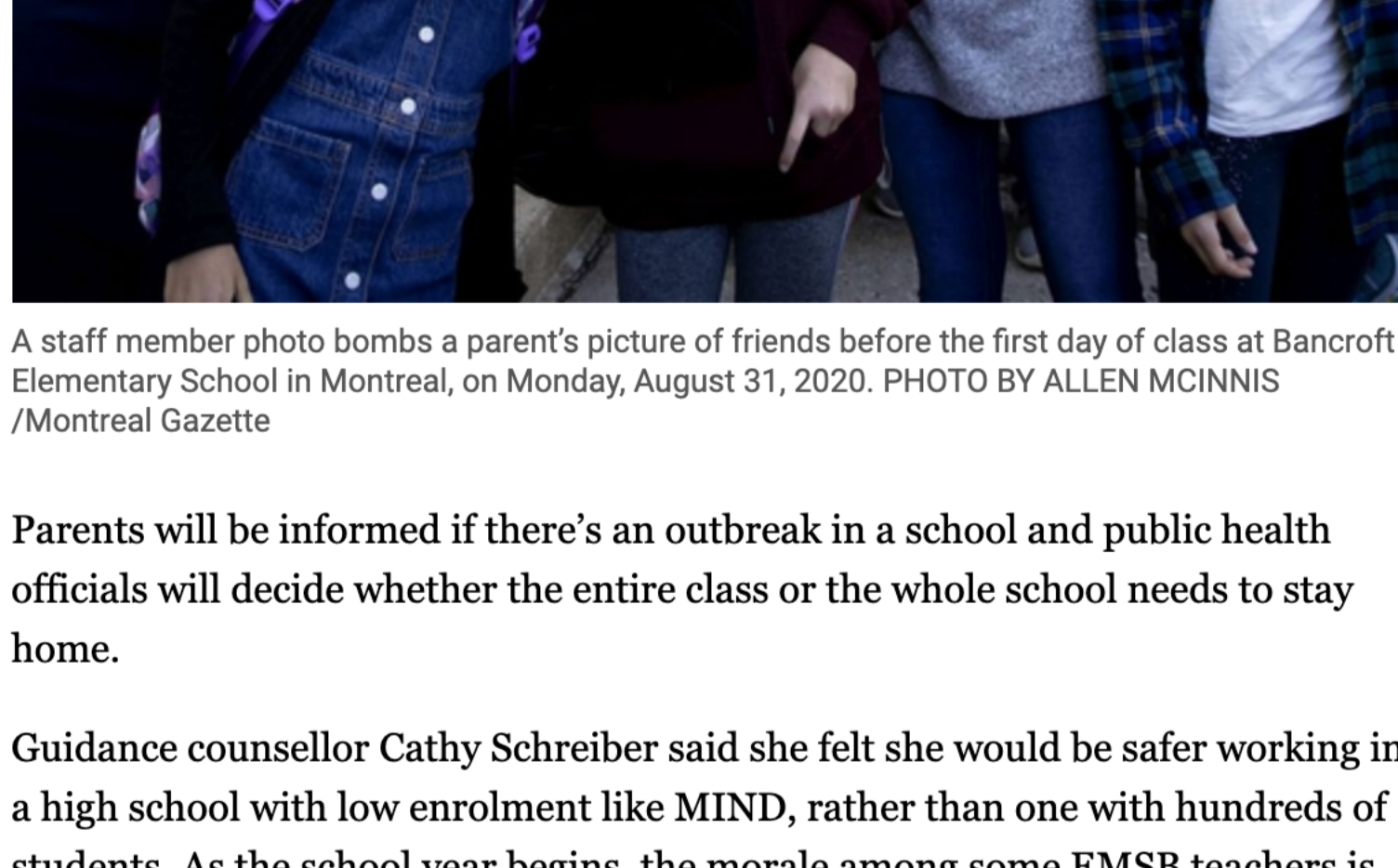
The EMSB began improving the ventilation systems in schools prior to the pandemic, after the Quebec government released a report card on air quality in Montreal schools, Jennings said.

Staff in the material resource department have been inspecting the ventilation systems and caretakers are clearing the air ducts. In some schools, parents are raising money to buy air purifiers for the classrooms, Jennings said.

The board has been sending emails to parents and teachers updating them on protocols and steps the board is taking to keep teachers and students safe.

Although many parents want the option of remote learning for their children,

## MONTREAL GAZETTE



A staff member photo bombs a parent's picture of friends before the first day of class at Bancroft Elementary School in Montreal, on Monday, August 31, 2020. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Parents will be informed if there’s an outbreak in a school and public health officials will decide whether the entire class or the whole school needs to stay home.

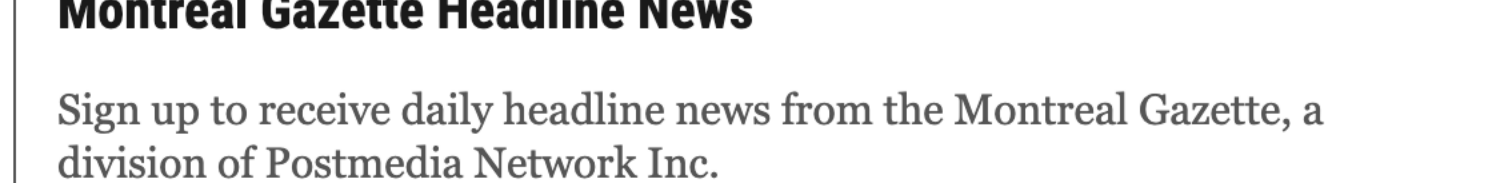
Guidance counsellor Cathy Schreiber said she felt she would be safer working in a high school with low enrolment like MIND, rather than one with hundreds of students. As the school year begins, the morale among some EMSB teachers is low because they’re concerned about their safety and the health of family members, she said.

“This is uncharted territory,” Schreiber said. “You prepare for the best, but in the back of your mind you are thinking (will school continue?). Hopefully, it all works out.”

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