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Brownstein: School snow days ain't what they used to be

Are kids getting soft? Are their parents? Or is it school administrators?

Bill Brownstein • Montreal Gazette
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Jibran Khan pulls his sister Mira through Trenholme Park in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce borough of Montreal Tuesday Feb. 16, 2021. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Are our kids getting soft? Are their parents? Or is it school administrators?

What was with Tuesday's snow day? All it took was a piddly 17.2-centimetre snowfall — according to Environment and Climate Change Canada — to cancel most schools in the Montreal area.

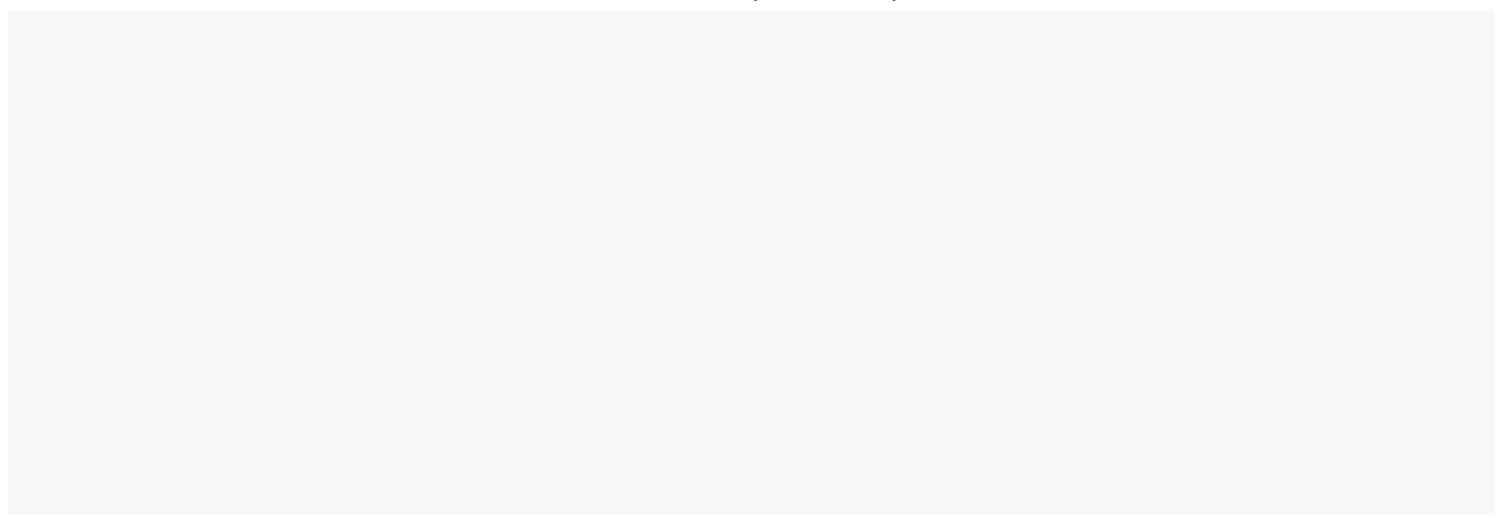


In our day ... in the last century, we had to endure snowfalls 10 times that amount — if memory serves, which it probably doesn't. Sometimes with even hail, sleet and locusts tumbling from the skies, too. And we would gather by the family transistor radio — because the fierce winds cut off our power — at 6 in the morning and we would pray for news that our school would be cancelled, even for a half-day.

But noooo!

And so we had to navigate our way — on wet feet to boot — through snowbanks as big and as daunting as any Tremblant mogul, because there were no school buses operating. And with temperatures hitting minus-50 — Celsius or Fahrenheit, it didn't matter — our brains were as frozen as our feet and faces. And this was April!

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But did we emerge any tougher as a consequence?

Not necessarily.

Mike Cohen, the English Montreal School Board's communication and marketing specialist, can relate. But times change.

"In years past, there were snow days when the EMSB didn't cancel, but the Lester B. Pearson board and Commission scolaire de Montréal did, and it caused a kerfuffle," Cohen says. "People were asking why one board cancelled, but not the others."

"We all basically started in the morning, looking at the forecast with our directors-general. Then they would consult with the transport companies, who were very concerned about picking up elementary-school students. We then made the call, which was sometimes obvious, sometimes not."

"But the problem was that it was being done piecemeal. So, in the last couple of years, all the boards kind of agreed we would caucus together early in the morning and make a decision that would apply to all boards. When we'd all announce we were closing, the private schools, like dominoes, start cancelling."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Which explains why most schools were closed Tuesday.

The EMSB directors-general were up at 4:30 a.m. Tuesday and were heeding the Environment Canada forecast. But at that time, the forecast looked like it was going to be much worse than it turned out to be.

So at 5:30, the blanket decision to cancel was made.

"It wasn't only the drive to school we thought could be problematic, but, more importantly, the pickup," Cohen notes. "We gauge public opinion on our Facebook page, which we did at 6 a.m. We had thousands of comments, and the vast majority were in favour of cancellation."

In retrospect, Cohen wishes the boards had a crystal ball, which would have indicated that driving and weather conditions were better than first forecast. But he does concur there were fewer snow cancellations back in the day.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



"It was not only the case in our day. I've been with the school board for 22 years, and there was one period where I believe we went nearly 10 years without a snow day. There were times when others closed and we didn't, and parents would complain."

Bottom line: With social media so prevalent today compared to the pre-computer dinosaur days of the last century, school decision-makers tend to opt on the side of caution.

Adds Cohen: "As much as we had embraced cancellations in our day, I don't think it's the same now. Kids aren't as excited, because they've missed so much school due to the pandemic. And high-school kids are only coming every second day. It's a whole different ball game today."

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sucked. I didn't think there was that much snow for them to cancel. I love school, but apart from learning, what I really love is seeing my friends there. It's been tough going so long without seeing anybody other than my family. Don't get me wrong: I love my family, but my friends are special."

Evangeline's sister, Marilena, 14, in Grade 9 at Royal West, was not so miffed. "It gave me a day to relax. Tuesday was supposed to be an online day for me, so even though it was cancelled, I would have been

home anyway. Still, I was surprised, because it really wasn't that big a storm."

bbrownstein@postmedia.com

twitter.com/billbrownstein



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