

COVID-19

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Local News

# Montreal COVID-19 school cases now rising nearly 1.5 times faster than last fall

*Elementary school students returned to class on Jan. 11 and those in high school on Jan. 18. During this period, a little over five weeks, the number of COVID-19 cases reached 3,989 as of Monday.*

Aaron Derfel • Montreal Gazette  
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The EMSB showed off newly installed air purifiers at Pierre Elliott Trudeau Elementary School on Jan. 11, 2021. The purifiers — which have also been installed at the Lester B. Pearson board's schools — could potentially reduce transmission of the coronavirus, including of the variants. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Since Montreal schools reopened in the middle of January, students and staff have tested positive for COVID-19 at a rate almost 50 per cent higher than during the fall semester, newly compiled statistics by the public health department suggest.

In the 3 1/2 months Montreal schools were open from September to mid-December, authorities counted a total of 8,094 COVID-19 cases among students and staff. That worked out to a monthly average of 2,312 cases.

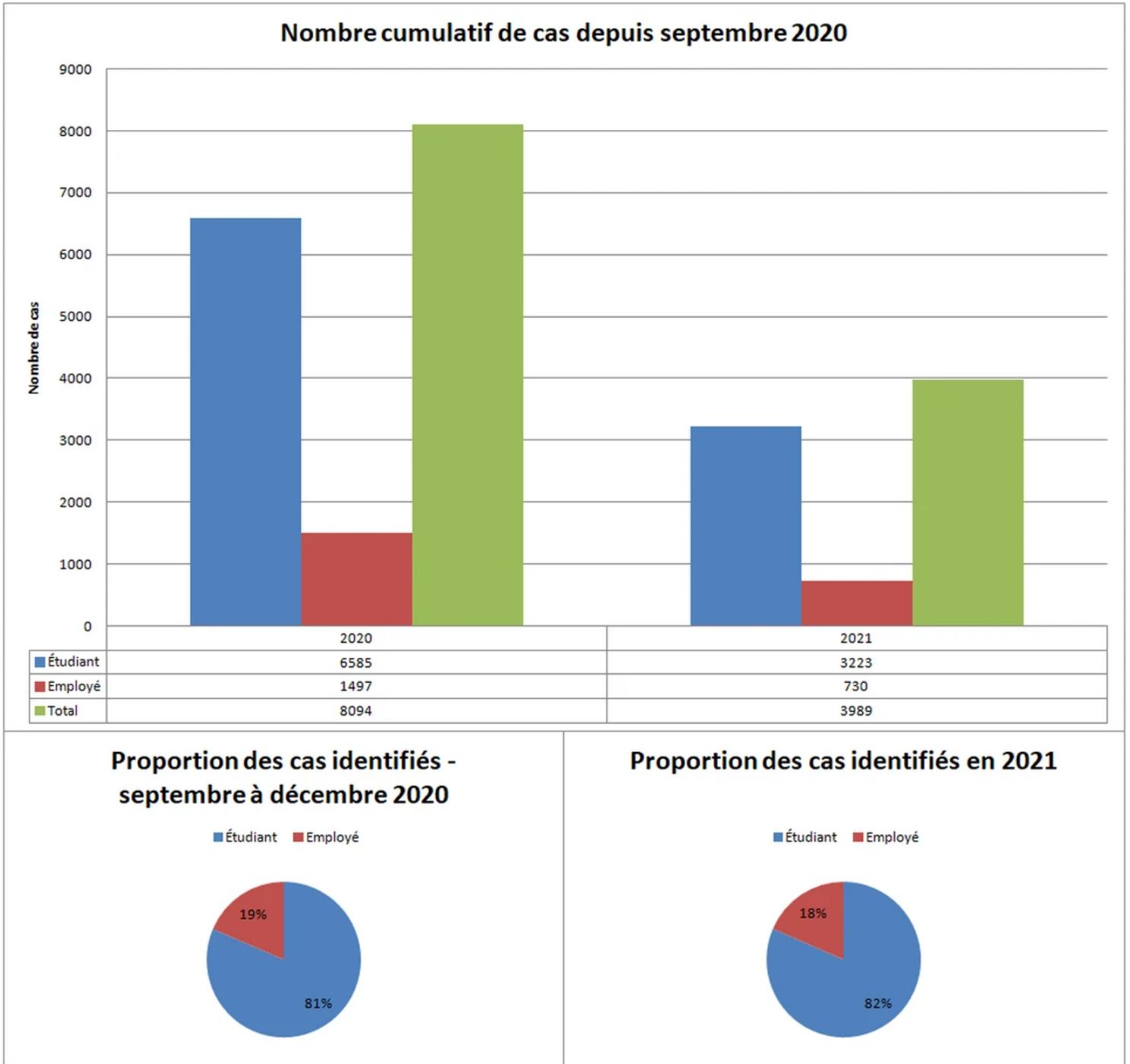


Elementary school students returned to class on Jan. 11 and those in high school on Jan. 18. During this period, a little over five weeks, the number of COVID-19 cases reached 3,989 as of Monday.

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Source: Direction de santé publique de Montréal

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“Yes, absolutely,” Bignami said. “I actually think the safe assumption is that B.1.1.7 is already in most schools.”

Since last week, three Montreal schools — Collège Stanislas in Outremont, Yechiva Yavne in Côte-St-Luc and, on Wednesday, École des Grands-Êtres in St-Laurent — have closed temporarily due to COVID-19 outbreaks in which the B.1.1.7 variant has been detected as probable in some cases. The variant was discovered in the U.K. in December and is considered to be at least 50 per cent more contagious, and more lethal as well.

On Wednesday, the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) released COVID-19 projections for the months of March and April that take into account for the first time the potential impact of the B.1.1.7 strain and a possible connection to schools.

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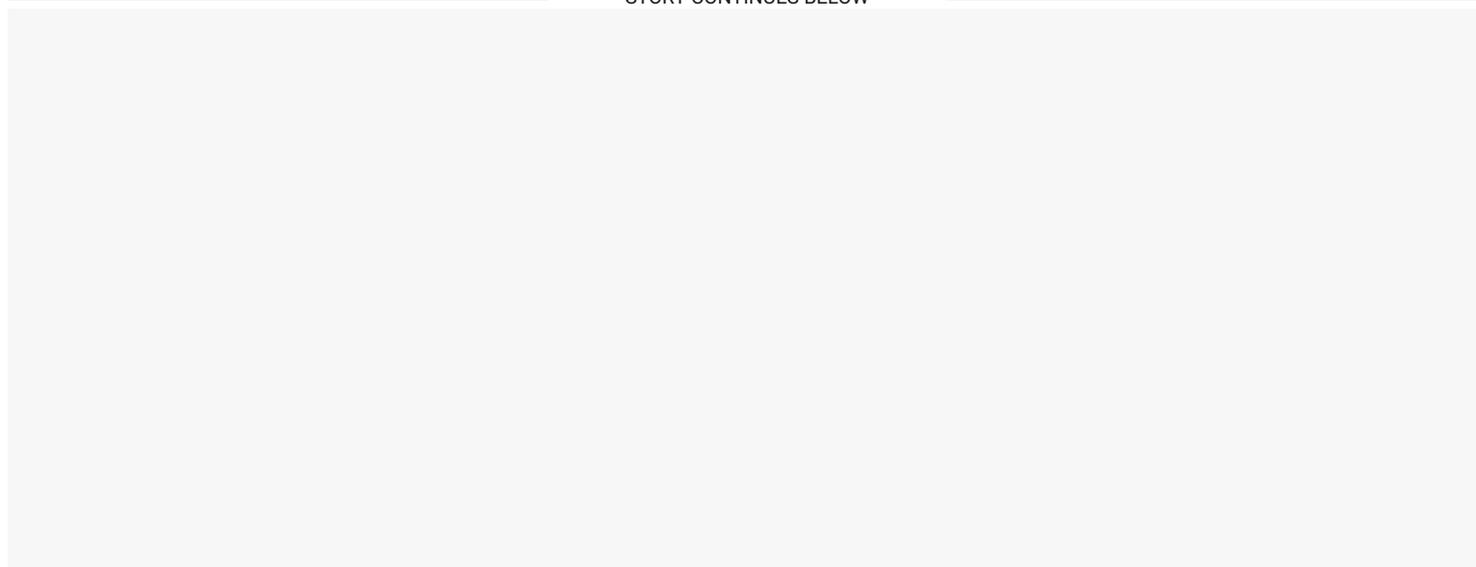
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model predicts a potential increase in cases of the variant in six- to 17-year-olds linked to school contacts.”

Still, Bignami criticized the INSPQ for basing its projections entirely on the degree of public compliance — strong or average — to the government’s pandemic restrictions, and not also probing school contacts.

“The modelling is looking at the impact of people not following the measures,” Bignami said. “They’re only looking at adherence to public health restrictions and they are not looking at contacts in schools. That’s a huge problem, because basically what you’re saying is, ‘Let me look at the variable which fits the government narrative.’”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



The Montreal Gazette obtained figures from both the English Montreal and Lester B. Pearson school boards that show a sharper increase in COVID-19 cases so far during the winter semester compared with last fall.

The EMSB reported a total of 200 COVID-19 cases among students and staff from mid-January until Feb. 12, compared with 338 in the last four months of 2020. Lester B. Pearson posted 129 positive cases from Jan. 4 to Feb. 14, compared with 166 from Sept. 11 to Dec. 16.

Although the Centre de services scolaire de Montréal (CSSDM) provided the Gazette last November with COVID-19 statistics on short notice, spokesperson Alain Perron declined to share new figures to compare cases in 2021 with those last year. Perron urged a reporter to file an official access-to-information request for the data — something that could take weeks to fulfil during the pandemic.

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Both the EMSB and Lester B. Pearson have installed air purifiers in most of their classrooms — a measure that could potentially reduce transmission of the coronavirus, including of the variants. The Centre de services scolaire de Montréal — under the direct control of the Education Ministry — has not installed air purifiers.

In the absence of figures from the CSSDM, it would not be possible to compare the incidence of COVID-19 in English-language schools that have air purifiers with the French-language schools that don't have any.

Carol Heffernan, assistant director general at Lester B. Pearson, said the reaction among students and staff to the installation of air purifiers has been universally positive, especially given the emergence of the B.1.1.7 variant.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The variants now circulating in Montreal “would be more of a concern, absolutely,” Heffernan said, had Lester B. Pearson not acquired the air cleaners.

Joe Orton, chair of the EMSB, said he's “confident that the end result of this is going to show that the air

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