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My Pandemic Year: Educators have changed how they teach, and they're exhausted

"Our workload has doubled" at Westmount High and other Quebec schools, high-school teacher Jeff Kosow says.

Brendan Kelly • Montreal Gazette

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"I'm petrified that I'm going to get (COVID-19)," says Jeff Kosow, who teaches physical education and leadership at Westmount High School. "I'm an asthmatic. I have my pump with me all the time. I feel I'm in a category that's a dangerous zone." PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

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Everyone has a story to tell. My Pandemic Year is a series in which Montrealers from all walks of life talk to Brendan Kelly about how the COVID-19 pandemic radically changed their worlds in 2020.

Jeff Kosow wants to make it clear that he's not complaining. But this Westmount High School teacher does want people to understand what a tough year it has been for teachers.

COVID-19 rules for Quebec's reopening schools



“Our workload has doubled,” said Kosow, who teaches physical education and leadership at Westmount High. “Not only do we teach our regular classes ... with the masks and the attention to detail with sanitizing, but now, as soon as I get off the phone with you I have to prep an online leadership class and that’s completely different (from the in-person class). I’ll have to put a Google slide presentation together. There’s not enough hours in the day for teachers. I’m not looking for sympathy, but I think the public should understand.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

feel for the room. It's very difficult. Things have been thrown at us constantly. You have things coming up all the time. Bubble classrooms are shutting down all the time because there's a COVID positive test and teachers are still expected to not skip a beat. That's extremely exhausting, it's frustrating and it's stressful. On top of that, I have two kids, my wife and I'm trying to balance a home life. It's tough."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Then there's the fear of catching the virus.

"I'm petrified that I'm going to get it," said Kosow. "I'm an asthmatic. I have my pump with me all the time. I feel I'm in a category that's a dangerous zone."

Not to mention the endless cleaning. Cleaning the classrooms before the kids come in, after they leave. It's also tough to wear a mask all day when teaching.

"My throat is toast (by the end of the school day)," said Kosow.

Again, Kosow wants to underline that it's tough, but he's doing all right. But he sees the impact on the teachers he knows.

"Teachers are burning out, teachers are taking mental-health days," said Kosow.

It isn't easy for the kids, either, adds Kosow. He describes students sitting in classrooms with their winter coats on because the windows are wide open in an effort to bring in fresh air and hopefully make the rooms safer.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“That’s not a way to learn,” said Kosow. “And kids don’t have lockers now, so the Grade 10s and 11s are like vagabonds, they’re carrying their stuff everywhere they go.”

Teaching gym during a pandemic presents some unique issues. Kosow has tried to focus on sports that involve less physical contact, like badminton, and there’s also the stress of convincing everyone to keep on their masks.

Kosow agrees with Premier François Legault that it’s essential to make every effort to keep the kids in school. He’s just emphasizing that it’s been a bit nuts this year. Part of that nuttiness, Kosow believes, is because the teachers and school administrators often learn of government decisions at the last minute and he feels there’s not enough consultation with folks working on the front lines in the schools.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Kosow has nothing but praise for his school’s administration, but he’s not as ready to give an A+ to the provincial government and its Ministry of Education.

“Many of the decisions seem way out in left field,” said Kosow. “My principal and the staff are finding things out from the news, from the press conferences. Why aren’t we informed a little bit earlier? Give us time to learn how to do it. Things are literally popping up out of nowhere and a lot of times we’re scratching our heads”

Maybe the thing Kosow is saddest about is the fact his students can no longer do any extra-curricular activities at school.

“The kids are suffering,” said Kosow. “There’s no sports. There’s no clubs. At 3:05, everyone’s out of the school within three minutes. Goodbye! It’s a dead zone. We used to have basketball, volleyball, soccer. It’s brutal. There’s kids who need their basketball. That was their outlet. That’s what kept them coming to school. The after-school basketball program. Being on a school team. Being in the music program. My kids played soccer, softball and badminton. It’s very depressing. It’s devastating.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

In short, there aren’t a lot of silver linings, which is why Kosow and his colleagues were so absolutely delighted this fall

when Westmount High alumna Kamala Harris became the first woman and the first person of South-Asian descent to become vice-president of the United States.

“We could not have asked for a better-timed pick-me-up,” said Kosow. “I taught Eugenie Bouchard, she’s a Wimbledon finalist. I taught Marco Scandella, he plays in the NHL. I scored a goal on Jake Allen in floor hockey, he plays on the Montreal Canadiens. Leonard Cohen, probably the most famous Westmount High graduate up until the new No. 1, Kamala Harris. She used to walk into the school, now she’s walking into the White House.”

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