

Montreal

Quebec high schoolers head back to the daily grind after long break from going to class

Students will now have to be tested immediately if they show any COVID-19 symptoms

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Rebecca Malaka says she's relieved her two boys, Thorin Malaka, 16, and Talon Malaka, 15, are headed back to school because then she knows exactly where they are all day. (Kwabena Oduro/CBC)

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Rebecca Malaka owns a cleaning business and isn't able to work from home during the pandemic.

So she's among those in Quebec who are relieved to see her teenagers heading back to school on Monday after a month at home.

"It's so nice to know where my kids are going to be," she said. "I know when they're leaving the house in the morning, I know when they are coming back at the end of the day. It's less stressful all round."

Her son, Talon, is happy to be returning to class as well as he doesn't enjoy online learning — something he's been forced to endure for about a week.

"It's mostly on us to teach ourselves, kind of, and with our phones right there, you are not really motivated to open your textbook and learn," he said.

The usual holiday break was extended across Quebec, with elementary students headed back to class a week before the older kids. Most students were expected to attend school online instead, some only for a few days before and others for more than a week.

New safety rules aren't enough, advocate says

There will be some new rules in place when Talon heads back class. Students will now have to be tested right away when they show any COVID-19 symptoms.

They will also be removed from class if a member of their family shows symptoms and is awaiting test results.

Olivier Drouin, founder of the website COVID Écoles Québec which traces cases in schools, has two daughters heading back to school this week. Given the recent epidemiological trends, he's not feeling any relief.

"Montreal is on fire," he said on Sunday. "There are lots of cases. The level of community transmission is high, and if I had my say, they would not go back tomorrow."

Drouin has been advocating for extra measures, such as deploying rapid testing in schools. Rapid testing as a preventative measure would be more effective than waiting for symptoms to appear, [he has said](#).

- **ANALYSIS** [Quebec pins all its hopes on the vaccine, but experts say action is needed on multiple fronts](#)

No more homemade masks

Students in high school will be required to wear medical-grade masks. The EMSB confirmed they have all their supplies ready.

Thorin Malaka, a 16-year-old student at Laurier Macdonald, said he understands the situation in Montreal is worrisome, but remains confident in his schools protocols

"I feel safe with them, like with the mask, we have always been good with it," he said.

"My class is already half the size so most of my classes have like 10 people max in them."

Elementary school-aged children returned to classrooms across Quebec a week before high school students. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press)

Small classes are not a global norm, according to Heidi Yetman, president of the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers.

"We are still teaching classrooms of 32 to 34," she said. "It makes no sense to me. I cannot understand. I do not understand."

Then there's the time students spend outside of the classroom, wandering the halls or riding buses, said Drouin, who is among those who worry kids aren't able to maintain a safe, physical distance from others at all times.

"Public transportation and lunch time supervision, I would say, are two of the loopholes in our strategy to try to reduce the risk in schools. It's highly risky in both those areas," he said.

- [Rapid tests coming to 2 Montreal high schools with hopes of detecting COVID-19 faster](#)

Yetman feels the same way, watching has kids keep a safe distance inside the classroom and then abandon the rules the minute class ends.

"As soon as students leave the class, those bubbles don't exist anymore," she said. "They hang out at recess. They go on school busses with different people."

Based on a report by Kwabena Oduro

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