

Parents wary as teachers prepare return to school

KATHERINE WILTON

After a seven-week lockdown, many Quebec teachers returned to their classes on Monday to prepare for the reopening of elementary schools outside the greater Montreal area.

But it appears numerous parents don't want their children to be the first students in Canada to return to school during the coronavirus pandemic.

At the New Frontiers School Board, only 32 per cent of students at six elementary schools in the Châteauguay Valley are planning to return next week.

"We had 517 say no and 241 said yes," according to Rob Butters, the board's director-general. "There's fear of (their child) becoming ill or bringing the illness home."

Some parents are concerned with the different points of view being expressed in the media about whether it's safe to return to school, Butters said.

"Some families are in a routine and they're comfortable with on-line learning and will work with their children that way," he said.

Many parents who plan to send their children back to school told the board they would drive them to avoid having them take a school bus.

The reopening could be delayed if public health authorities decide to alter the date or their position on the matter, Butters added.

The Quebec government has decided that students who reside outside the 82 municipalities comprising the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal (CMM) — including Montreal Island, Laval, the South Shore and parts of the North Shore — can return to class because the numbers of COVID-19

cases in the outer regions are small.

Daycares outside the CMM will also open next Monday.

The following week, elementary schools and daycares in the greater Montreal region are scheduled to open as long as the COVID-19 situation remains under control.

On Monday, the English Montreal School Board said it will aim to reopen schools on May 19 but will proceed cautiously because of the large number of COVID-19 cases in its territory.

At present, close to 80 per cent of the 14,599 cases of COVID-19 in the Montreal area are in EMSB territory, including Montreal North, where cases have been increasing, the school board says.

The board warned parents in an email that their children will notice many changes when classes resume as measures are put in place to ensure social distancing rules can be followed.

The classrooms will be organized into several two-metre-by-two-metre "personal spaces" for the children and the teacher.

No more than 15 children will be permitted in any classroom and some students could be moved to the library, science room or to nearby high schools if space is limited.

Students might not have their usual teacher and could be placed in multi-age groupings, the school board says.

Only core subjects will be taught, meaning there will be no gym or specialist classes, like music and art.

Students will remain in their personal space during school hours and at lunchtime.

Students must bring their own lunch, snacks and water bottles. Water fountains will be off limits.

Recess will be staggered and children will stay with their classmates. Play structures will be closed. Parents will not be allowed to enter the schools or volunteer.

The Commission scolaire de Montréal issued much of the same information to its parents Monday, but added students may wear protective masks if parents feel it is necessary. Teachers may also wear masks, Premier François Legault said during his COVID-19 press briefing in Quebec City.

Reopening schools during a pandemic is a major undertaking, and Legault asked parents to be patient if things don't go smoothly. Teachers over 60 could be replaced by student teachers if boards are short-staffed, he said.

During the briefing, Legault admonished the Quebec English School Boards Association for saying it would decide when it was safe for schools to reopen.

"The responsibility of the school boards and the people in charge of schools in the English community is to open schools when we say it's the right time," he said firmly. "They cannot decide that no schools will be open for the anglophones."

Meanwhile, high schools across the province will remain closed until September.

At Westmount High School, teachers have been given a designated time to collect their materials and have been instructed by the administration to not gather or loiter inside the building, according to teacher Robert Green.

Teachers have also been recruited to pack up the contents of student lockers. Items are to be placed in garbage bags and handed to students at the doorway on a designated day, Green said.

Other schools are planning to contact students so their belongings can be collected.

kwilton@postmedia.com

