

Quebec a laggard in protecting children with food allergies: association



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A Quebec allergy awareness organization says schools should do more than just tell parents not to pack nuts and other allergens in school lunches. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / THE GAZETTE*

To ban or not to ban?

That should not be the question when it comes to protecting children from potentially life-threatening food allergens at school, says an association that next week will launch an allergy education and prevention pilot project in more than 150 Quebec schools.

There are just too many allergens to ban them all, said Dominique Seigneur, director of communications at Allergies Québec.

“When a child walks into a school, the question shouldn’t be, ‘Does he have peanuts or not?’” said Seigneur, who has a daughter with multiple food allergies.

“The questions should be, ‘Is there a protocol in place? Does everybody know about the allergies? Is an EpiPen available? Does everybody know how to deal with an allergic reaction?’”

She made the comments Thursday after Quebec’s biggest school board clarified its position on peanuts and tree nuts.

Confusion about the Commission scolaire de Montréal (CSDM) policy is a sign that Quebec lags behind most other provinces when it comes to ensuring the safety of children with allergies, Seigneur said.

Most other provinces compel every school to have policies in place to address food allergies, including providing instruction to staff, she noted.

Schools taking part in Allergies Québec’s pilot project will get “prevention kits” that explain how to document allergies among students, prevent allergic reactions, identify reaction symptoms and what to do in the case of a reaction.

Seigneur said the association would meet with provincial officials in the coming months in the hopes of rolling out a similar program across all Quebec schools.

In a letter sent home with students this week, the CSDM said that “to reduce the risk of allergic reactions, we ask parents to not include foods containing nuts and peanuts, two of the most common allergens, in the lunch box.”

But lunch monitors will not inspect lunch boxes to weed out the two allergens.

Trying to impose a ban “could create a false sense of security” for parents, since it would be impossible to guarantee that the allergens are not present in the lunchroom, said CSDM spokesperson Alain Perron.

In the past, some lunch monitors took it upon themselves to “police lunch boxes” and confiscate items containing allergens, as well as junk food deemed to contravene the board’s healthy-eating policy, Perron said.

To avoid such unauthorized actions, the board last year told schools they could not ban certain foods nor monitor lunch contents, Perron said.

When that became public in May (http://plus.lapresse.ca/screens/318d6ece-e6ec-449e-9f1f-1aba09db5f91%7C_0.html), it left some parents wondering if the board no longer discouraged peanuts and tree nuts.

Allergy policies differ from board to board.

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB) does not have a board-wide policy asking parents to refrain from sending anything that contains peanuts and nuts in lunches.

However, in schools where children have allergies, principals can send letters to parents telling them that avoiding peanut/tree nut products in lunch boxes is appreciated, EMSB spokesperson Mike Cohen said.

But it’s just a request, not an obligation, and lunch monitors will not check lunch contents.

“You can’t properly police every lunch box in every school,” Cohen said. “In some schools, you have several hundred students having lunch at the same time.”

The Lester B. Pearson School Board also does not ask parents to avoid allergens in lunches.

However, the board’s food and nutrition policy allows individual schools to be “nut-controlled,” said board spokesperson Jim Hendry.

“Some elementary schools may choose to provide, within their capabilities, an environment which is nut-controlled,” a section of the policy states.

Hendry said “it remains at each school’s discretion to implement, via consultation with the school and the governing board, any bans based on allergies to such items as peanuts.”