

Home-schooling centre is a textbook case of community and passion

These kids are like any others you'd come across on a Friday afternoon, except on one bureaucratic level, many of them are invisible.



HAYLEY JUHL, MONTREAL GAZETTE

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A few elementary-school-age children are playing street hockey in a damp drizzle that hasn't decided whether to be snow or rain. Their puck is a firmly packed snowball that they smack around, mostly on

the wide sidewalk or against the brick of a factory-style building.

Inside, the hallways are industrial and bleak except for a bright mural at the end that announces: “Communid e.”

These kids are like any others you’d expect to come across on a Friday afternoon, with this exception: on one bureaucratic level, many of them are invisible.

By Quebec Ministry of Education numbers, there are 345 home-schooled children on the island of Montreal. But by some anecdotal accounts, there are many more who are not registered with their local school boards, who learn under the radar at kitchen tables, home offices and in home-schooling support centres like this.

Communid e founder Sonya Olthof, 47, knew early in her parenting career that she wanted to home-school. Twelve years ago, when her son Eli was a baby, she and a friend were talking about another child’s classroom struggles when the friend said: “It sounds like he doesn’t belong at school.”

“That illuminated for me the possibility that you don’t have to go to school. I was always interested in alternative education and self-driven learning, and I had quite a lot of experience with passion-driven projects. Here’s one of them,” she says, sweeping her arms to indicate the workroom, which is big enough to build a sailboat. It’s lined with tools, art supplies and sewing machines. On the thick wood table is a mosaic in progress with three large letters: C-O-M.



Communidee founder Sonya Olthof knew early in her parenting career that she wanted to home-school. She and her children spend two days a week at the centre and three learning at home. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Beyond the workroom is a large, bright area for studying and playing, a nook with a sofa and comfy chairs and a full kitchen with a long family-style dining table. It's Communid e's seventh anniversary in this St-Henri building; they were in a different location for two years before. About 80 children from 50 families are members of the centre, which offers activities and support for people who choose to educate outside the government system. (Other local groups include Groupe de soutien  cole-maison dans l'est de Montr al,  ducation en famille Sud-Ouest, Instruction en famille Grand Montr al and Le R verb re in Ch teauaguay.)

Olthof's second son, Tomek, was born two years after Eli. "Basically as soon as I was healed from the delivery, we started the community with the website and park outings and museum outings."

She wanted to have a full-time centre set up by the time her children were school age. "They were four and six when we opened the full-time centre. I'm glad I got things started early, because I wasn't trying to join something — I was trying to build something from the ground up."

She and her children spend two days a week at the centre and three learning at home. The boys are autonomous in most of their subjects. They are expected to be ready to start studying at 9 a.m., and as soon as their scholastic to-do list is done, they can spend their time however they like. They do a book club together, practise lines for a *Communid e* play and read French aloud.

“It’s not like I’m tuning out on the computer, but there is some amount of that where they can study at their desk and I can ... well, wash the dishes, usually.”



Five-year-old Naomi meticulously places a tile on her mosaic project at *Communid e*, a St-Henri centre that offers activities and support for people who choose to educate outside the government system. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

All children over six years old are required by Quebec to be registered with a school board, even if they will be learning at home. At the English Montreal School Board, the first person a potential home-schooling parent will meet is Tracy Mangal, a former secondary-school teacher who has been the EMSB’s home-schooling consultant since 2012. She meets with 20 to 30 new families each year, learning why they’ve chosen to home-school, advising them on available resources and discussing curriculum.

She and the families sit down together again in February to make sure they’re on the right track and to help them adjust if their child has fallen behind. There is testing at the end of the school year, but Mangal says home-

schooled children sometimes have trouble with traditional testing because “they might not have been exposed to the format.”

If the child falls behind, they can be ordered to return to school. If parents refuse, the Education Act allows for the family to be reported to the Department of Youth Protection. In extreme cases, foster care may be an option.



Communidee mosaic instructor Ricardo Ruiz helps out mom Miriam and seven-year-old Samira while Naomi works under the table. “Every year we do a survey of the kids and ask them what theyâre interested in,” says Communidee parent Rosalind Barrington Craggs. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Mangal says some parents turn to home-schooling because they are nervous about entrusting their children to a stranger for the whole day, or they might have had a bad experience with a teacher or a school.

Sometimes “they just need to talk through it and we might find a school that will work for them.” Sometimes she doesn’t see them again. “I don’t chase anyone down. There are people who sign up and then disappear.”

Rosalind Barrington Craggs's children, 14-year-old Clara and 13-year-old Thomas, were registered as home-schooled in Vancouver before they moved to Quebec. In B.C., Barrington Craggs says, part-time day programs are offered to those who want them as well as curriculum support and money to help pay for things like music education, sports education or educational supplies. Quebec does not offer financial compensation.

Barrington Craggs gives her children the choice every year, and every year they opt to continue their education at home.

"I saw through the preschool years how learning happened. I watched the process, and how it never failed when they wanted to learn something. 'Oh, you want to learn about the Inuit? Let's look this up and off we go.' It's a lovely journey, and at some point you decide to get a handle on something concrete, but you continue the investigative journey.

"I've always had my left eye on the (school board) curriculum," says Barrington Craggs, 46. "When they were little, I'd look at the curriculum and say, 'Oh, we did that already.' Then I'd look the next September and, 'Yup, we're good.' Math is the thing that is the most structured and I'm the most keen to be sure they're near the age level they would be at school."



Stellie, right, reads with Lydia, left, and Naomi at Communidee. All children over six years old are required by Quebec to be registered with a school board, even if they will be learning at home. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Amendments to the Education Act that will come into force this summer, ahead of the 2018-19 school year, promise a sea change. Bill 144 clarifies the framework in which parents operate, gives Quebec more powers to oversee and standardize home education, and allows officials to take action if they feel a child's situation needs to be regularized. It also makes adjustments to the Health Insurance Act, which would make it possible for school boards to cross-reference school rolls with RAMQ records.

A Quebec-wide advisory panel has been created to make recommendations on the specifics of the regulations, including creating a guide for school boards and parents on good home-schooling practices. Olthof sits on that panel, and says she and many other members of Communid e will proactively register their children with a school board this fall.

Members of the Association qu b coise pour l' ducation   domicile, a non-profit organization that lobbies for home-schoolers, "are working like demons on lobbying and contacting other groups and building bridges," Olthof says. "We're all pretty implicated and talking politics these days. We want freedom of education.

"We're going to register and then take it to the next level. If they don't like our math, we'll ask them to explain why."

Olthof's son Eli has a firm handshake and engaging smile. After greeting a stranger in the workshop, he says to his mother: "I'm going to be going fencing soon, by the way." She nods and says: "Just check in before you leave."

"They've filled their schedules with tons of sports and music and arts and all kinds of things," Barrington Craggs says. "Every kid in there has a passion. If they went to school, they'd lose that time for their passions."

**CommuniDée 2011-16**from **Sonya Olthof**

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Refuting three common beliefs about home-schooling

Kids are “missing out” by being home-schooled.

“We built our own skating rink in the park,” says CommuniDée’s Sonya Olthof. “See that hole in the wall? We put a hose from the tap and built our own skating rink. Then we built a Zamboni out of a cooler.”

Last summer, the children at CommuniDée built an eight-foot magnifying glass, put a sheet of plastic over it, then put water in it. They used it to fry an egg and roast marshmallows in the park. They’ve also built a large community garden and composter.

Rosalind Barrington Craggs lists large-scale field trips they’ve organized, to Vermont, Quebec City, Ottawa, and biking and camping trips. They run a model UN with the help of a volunteer who used to run one at Dawson College.

“Every year we do a survey of the kids and ask them what they’re interested in,” Barrington Craggs says. “When people bring in their own energy and ideas, we can all feed off it.”

Kids need to be with people their own age.

“Our teen group has about 20 kids and we have a day carved out for them where their parents don’t even come. A couple of parents are here running activities just with them,” Olthof says. “If we can hold onto those kids, if they

stick together and build on that ... the social need will be met. The academic need is rarely the motivation for kids to go to school, especially if there's the support from the government we expect to get. I remember when I saw Tomek turn into a helper, and help a little kid out, I was like: 'What is this? OK, he's a big boy now, it's official.' "

A parent must have a teaching certificate.

Olthof has an undergraduate degree in psychology from McGill and worked as a bookkeeper before having kids. Barrington Craggs taught graduate students, but says wryly that with children, "we don't use the lecture format too much."

Kitchen-table discussions at Communid e can go like this, Olthof says: " 'Oh, my son was crying over his math homework.' And someone will say, 'Well, we've got this other math program that we're trying and my kid really liked it.' We talk about what's working for our kids, and while some of us have an education background, some of us don't, but we do have an expertise when it comes to our own children, and we have the sensibility and the freedom to change course when something isn't working."

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