



Local News

Analysis: COVID-19 variant threat grows amid more school closures

"From September through the middle of March, we hadn't had to close one single school. Now we've closed four in a week," EMSB's Michael Cohen said.

Aaron Derfel • Montreal Gazette
Mar 19, 2021 • 1 hour ago • 3 minute read •  10 Comments





John F. Kennedy High School students read at their desks during class last November. The school will close until March 29 after a student and staff member tested positive for what is probably the B.1.1.7 COVID variant. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

The Quebec Education Ministry reported on Friday that schools across the province shuttered another 145 classes due to COVID-19 — the highest increase in days — and most likely the result of exposure to the more transmissible variants.

On Friday afternoon, the English Montreal School Board announced John F. Kennedy High School in St-Michel will close until March 29 after a student and staff member tested positive for what is most likely the B.1.1.7 variant. John F. Kennedy is the fourth EMSB school to shut this week.

'Innovative' vaccine pilot project to get ahead of variants in Montreal



“The variant is the reason why we’ve had to close the schools,” Michael Cohen, a spokesperson for the EMSB, told the Montreal Gazette.

“From September through the middle of March, we hadn’t had to close one single school. Now we’ve closed four in a week.

“There’s no question it’s the variant, and it’s not us closing the schools,” Cohen added. “It’s Santé publique who have taken a very prudent position. We don’t disagree with it all, by the way. But when

they see the variant, they're acting very quickly. We report to them every day our numbers. We understand why they're doing this. There's no brush back from us on this."

The other three EMSB schools are Michelangelo International Elementary in Rivière-des-Prairies, Lester B. Pearson High School in Montreal North and MIND High School in Plateau-Mont-Royal. (Although the EMSB invested \$1.75 million to purchase air purifiers for 30 of its 55 buildings, it didn't in the four

schools that have closed. Those four were considered to have adequate ventilation, so it's not known whether extra air purifiers would have made a difference.)

Montreal didn't confirm any new variant infections beyond the current 327 on Friday, but it did report that the number of presumptive cases rose by 89 to a cumulative total of 1,298. Those cases await genetic sequencing to determine the variant, and the odds are that most are the B.1.1.7 type, which first arose in the U.K., and is considered to be at least 50 per cent more contagious and more lethal than older strains.

2.1 - Nombre de cas présumptifs de variants de SRAS-CoV-2 sous surveillance au Québec selon la RSS ▪ INSPQ, March 19

Les cas présumptifs sont basés sur le criblage des cas positifs de SRAS-CoV-2 et n'incluent pas les cas confirmés présentés au tableau 1.1.

RÉGION SOCIO-SANITAIRE (RSS)	CAS PRÉSUMPTIFS
01 - Bas-Saint-Laurent	3 +1
02 - Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean	2
03 - Capitale-Nationale	215 +11
04 - Mauricie et Centre-du-Québec	18 +2
05 - Estrie	40 +4
06 - Montréal	1 298 +89
07 - Outaouais	134 +11
08 - Abitibi-Témiscamingue	58
09 - Côte-Nord	
10 - Nord-du-Québec	
11 - Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine	
12 - Chaudière-Appalaches	73 +13
13 - Laval	329 +19
14 - Lanaudière	129 +10
15 - Laurentides	189 +8
16 - Montérégie	115 +9
Inconnu	125 +5
Hors Québec	2
Ensemble du Québec	2 730 +182

Source: INSPQ

It has now become clear Montreal is yet at another turning point in the pandemic, as public health authorities seek to slash transmission of the variants in schools. In a pilot project starting next week, authorities will inoculate the parents of children attending schools and daycares in parts of Côte-St-Luc, Côte-des-Neiges and Snowdon, where up to 26 per cent of new cases are linked to B.1.1.7.

After first ruling against giving shots to teachers on Thursday, Dr. Mylène Drouin, head of the public health department, reversed course Friday, announcing the vaccine will be available to all “school personnel in direct contact with students.”

***PROJET PILOTE VACCINATION VARIANTS**
#COVID19 (1/2) Le #vaccin sera disponible pour les parents des #écoles ou #garderies des voisinages ET pour le personnel scolaire en contact direct avec les enfants. Tous seront avisés par leur établissement scolaire pour la prise de RDV.*

— Dre Mylène Drouin, directrice santé publique Mtl (@Santepub_Mtl) March 19, 2021

But EMSB chair Joe Orton argued that more workers should be vaccinated. “In-school administrators, custodial staff and volunteers who are in the buildings regularly should be on the list as well,” he said in a statement. “Based on the documentation we received earlier today, that is not the case.”

The EMSB has learned that parents will be vaccinated whose children attend Coronation Elementary School, Project Mile End Alternative High School and Sir Mortimer B. Davis Social Affairs School in Côte-des-Neiges as well John Grant High School in Côte-St-Luc.

In total, 25 public and private schools will take part. But parents whose children go to Merton School can't understand why they don't qualify. The Côte-St-Luc primary school shut classes last month because of suspected variant cases.

It would appear that in trying to solve the problem of heightened transmission of B.1.1.7 in schools, the public health department might have inadvertently caused heightened anxiety among parents excluded from the pilot project. But given the still-limited supply of vaccines and other priority groups, Drouin had to draw the line somewhere for now, and that's three postal cod zones: H3S, H3T and H3W.

In the meantime, the variant has started spreading in schools far beyond Montreal, including in Gatineau, where École Saint-Paul closed despite being in an orange zone.

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