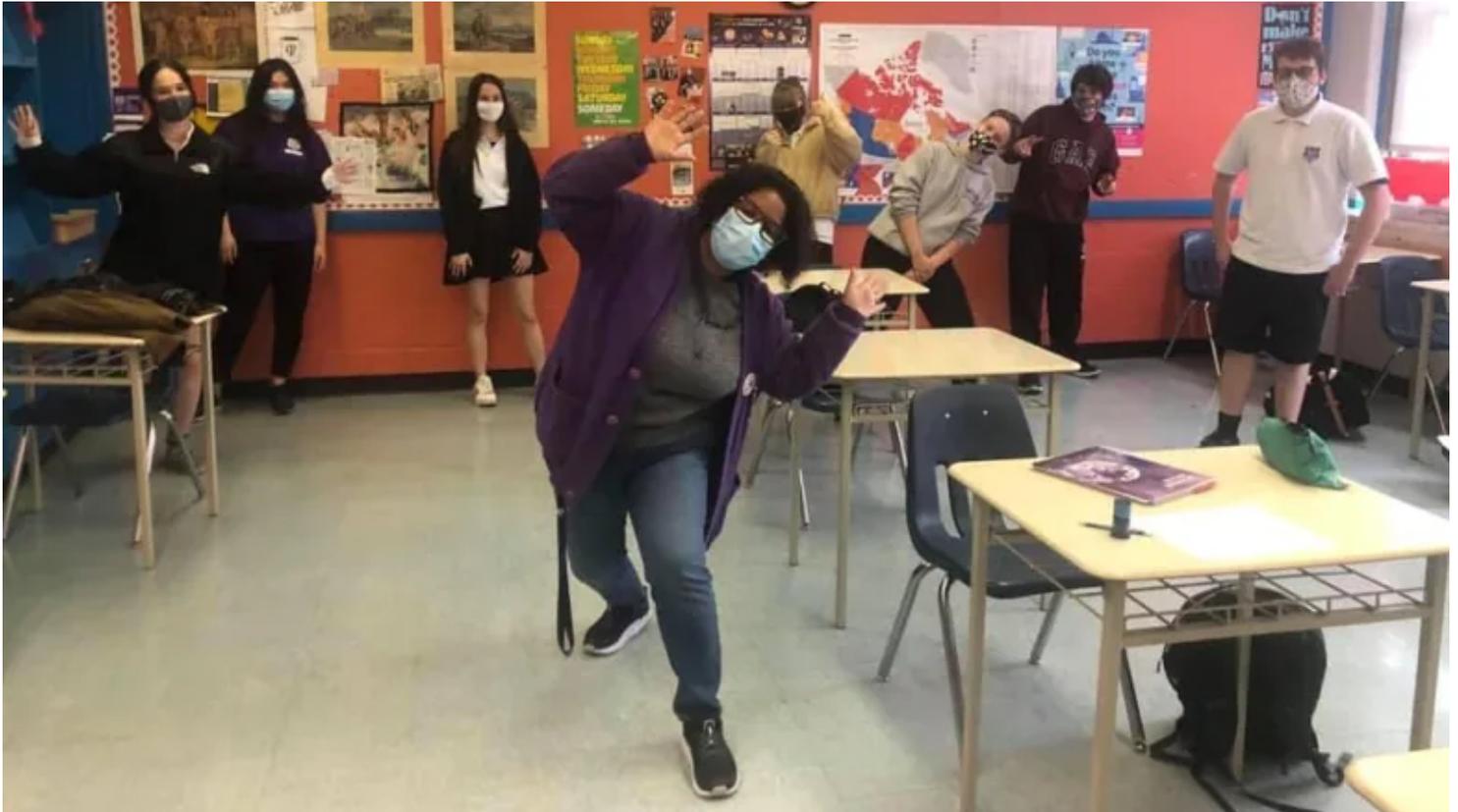


**COVID-19**[More](#) ▾Montreal • **First Person****In a school year like no other, my students were a source of joy**

The pandemic brought me close to quitting. Instead, we've emerged stronger

[Dr. Sabrina Jafralie](#) • CBC News • Posted: Jul 02, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: July 2



Sabrina Jafralie poses in the middle of her classroom in November, after a class discussions that made her feel joy for the first time this school year. (Submitted by Sabrina Jafralie)

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***This First Person article is the experience of Sabrina Jafralie, a teacher and a university course lecturer in Montreal. For more information about CBC's First Person stories,***

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I would like to acknowledge that I write this article on the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka.

When I became a teacher in 2001, I made a deal with myself. If I was not excited about the new school year, then it would be time to move on. And this year, I was close to moving on.

I was not lacking excitement. Rather, that excitement was overridden by anxiety and fear. This virus was stealing my joy of teaching. I was considered borderline high-risk of complications from COVID-19 and honestly, that just increased my fear.

Last spring, I just wanted to stay in my home, my self-made bunker, where I felt safer.

Then August came and the call was made — we would return to school. My doctor was supportive and encouraged me to return to the classroom.

The cherry on the cake was the effort made by my school administration to make things safer for us. They created dedicated entries and sanitization stations, labelled hallways and cut classes in half. My principal was prepared and dedicated to keeping the school community safe, and she was successful.



As the weather warmed up in May, Jafralie and her class spent some time learning outside. (Submitted by Sabrina Jafralie)

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I prepared for my return wearing my new, fashionable items: my mask, my goggles and hand sanitizer. And so the year began.

Initially, being back in school after the abrupt ending in March was odd. We didn't greet each other and the students in the same way. We were focused on teaching each other and students how to log onto the Google classroom, and keeping students apart. In some ways, it was just a prison. I did not enjoy it; I lost all of my joy and happiness. School was becoming a workplace when it used to be my family. I was bogged down by worry, and I was drained.

But then, when I least expected it, I felt joy. I was in a Grade 11 class, discussing and dissecting the social justice movement, the murder of George Floyd and summer protests. It was as though time stopped and we were not constrained by the masks or the goggles. Instead, it was just me and my kids. I was happy with our discussion, and to see the students becoming critical thinkers. I went home happy. Finally.

- ['Just keep swimming': How students and teachers in Quebec kept schools open despite the pandemic](#)

Other joyful moments followed. At school, our community adapted to the safety protocols, we became Google experts and we designed and re-imagined the curriculum to help students fall in love again with learning. We got COVID creativity. We learned how to put a spin on our traditions and recharge our Westmount High School purple heart community.

Another day, my Grade 10 students were overwhelmed with work and I was providing them with strategies for their mental wellness. The students said, "Dr. J, we need to talk. We cannot keep up with all of our work."

Let me be clear, I was not happy they were stressed out; the joy was watching my students advocate for themselves. These are 15- and 16-year-olds taking a stand and negotiating with their teachers what they need to be successful. I was, and am, proud.

Everything was finally looking up. I was happier and even excited. But despair was always lurking. It came from the indecisiveness and shifting plans from Quebec's Ministry of Education. Now, I have not faced a pandemic and neither has the Coalition Avenir Québec government. However, their flip-flop attitude and decisions destabilized our fragile joy many times.

This happened when the government announced that all students were returning to class to end their spring term. Time after time, the government was throwing in wrenches in our plans — destabilizing our school culture — once we had finally adjusted.

I want to make sure people understand that the Ministry of Education made decisions that impacted our safety from the comfort of their homes — all while I was out here trying to teach and keep students sane in a pandemic. This is unforgivable.



Jafralie and some students are seen at the graduation ceremony for the class of 2020, in October. (Submitted by Sabrina Jafralie)

But even the government could not stop the return of joy. As we planned how to celebrate our graduates, there was excitement on our faces. One of our brilliant guidance counsellors — Karen Allen, forever the optimist — was ready to celebrate. COVID-19 has nothing on our Karen.

This year, we successfully planned and executed our first-ever Grad Fun Fair! We knew we could not hold a traditional prom, but we wanted to celebrate with our kids. So we planned a spectacular alternative. There was a red carpet entry, a TikTok station, a dunking booth and food provided by former students.

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The activities were not the source of joy. It was the students. I listened to them testify to how hard we worked for them to make it a good year. This is priceless.

This year, we embarked on the new normal. This pandemic was a strong opponent, but it did not stand a chance against my school community. We, as a school and as teachers, got stronger. I am looking forward to more joy this coming September.

I dedicate this article to all of the teachers, administration, students and in particular my wonderful principal, Demetra Droutsas, who keeps us safe. Thank you.

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