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Quebec / Local News

Roberge orders English school boards to resume in-class teaching

EMSB says it plans to maintain the hybrid model for Secondary 4 and 5 students in six of its largest schools until the end of the school year.

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Quebec Education Minister Jean-François Roberge has written a letter informing school boards of a new government decree stipulating that staggering attendance in classrooms is "not allowed anymore." PHOTO BY RYAN REMIORZ /THE CANADIAN PRESS

QUEBEC — Education Minister Jean-François Roberge is ordering English school boards to resume full-time teaching in classrooms at their high schools whether they want to or not.

Roberge told reporters he has written a letter informing boards of a new government decree stipulating that staggering attendance in classrooms is “not allowed anymore.”



“They will have to come back to school every day,” Roberge said at a news conference.

“This is, in fact, mandatory. It does not depend on school boards or school service centres or private schools. Each kid has the right to go to school every day.”

Roberge’s comments follows decisions by a number of English boards to ignore orders to reopen Secondary 4 and 5 classrooms full time.

Some school boards haven’t complied with the directive because they’re worried about the health risks of cramming large numbers of students into classrooms during the third wave of the pandemic.

In the last few days, the English Montreal School Board, Lester B. Pearson School Board and Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board have decided to either stagger the return or maintain the hybrid model of in-person and distance learning.

The Quebec English School Boards Association says some boards need the flexibility to decide what's safest for students, teachers and school staff.

"We are very concerned with the health care risks of bringing everyone back," said Russell Copeman, executive director of the QESBA.

The education community was stunned with the government's unexpected announcement last week that all high school students must return to school five days a week.

"School boards are pretty large cruise ships and they don't spin on a dime," Copeman said. "The system is reeling with all these changes and yo-yoing."

Maintaining class bubbles in Secondary 4 and 5 is difficult because students in those grades take course options, such as physics, that require them to mix with students in other classes.

When school resumed in September, the Education Ministry gave schools the option of creating class bubbles (closed groups) or allowing the hybrid model for older grades, EMSB chairperson Joe Ortona noted Wednesday.

Despite Roberge's remarks, Ortona said the EMSB will continue to maintain the hybrid model for Secondary 4 and 5 students in six of its largest high schools, until the end of the school year.

Those secondary schools are: Royal West Academy, Westmount, Laurier Macdonald and Lester B. Pearson high schools, Marymount Academy International and LaurenHill Academy.

"Restructuring the school (calendar) at this time of year and creating new groups is not in line with recommendations from public health," he said in a news release.

"Some of our schools' timetables and teacher workloads were created based on the hybrid option. Changing from this model would involve having to make changes to student courses."

The Laurier board, which covers English schools in Laval, the Laurentians and Lanaudière, has said it will maintain the hybrid model of in-person and distance learning and will monitor the situation daily.

Board officials, unions and teachers have expressed concerns about having all students back in school given the increase in COVID cases in Laval, among the highest per capita in the province.

"The three regions (covered by the board) are all red zones, but some zones are deeper red than others," Copeman said. "The situation in Laval is not the situation in Rawdon."

Authorities in Laval closed a French high school on Monday after 425 students were placed in isolation. There are 22 active cases at École Mont-de-La-Salle, the principal said in a message to parents.

A decision will be made over the weekend on whether the school will reopen after the Easter holidays or if students will continue with distance learning.

People 60 and over in Laval can now book an appointment for a COVID-19 vaccine.

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