

A clever tweet: “We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm.” So true. Pandemic privilege comes in many forms. One that preoccupies me is the disparity in parental burden in homeschooling children. Private school parents live on a yacht, public school parents in a rowboat. This is a tale of two Montreal families. One is my daughter Joanne’s, whose older daughter, Toby, attends a classic preppy high school; the younger, Noa, is in her final elementary year at a private parochial school. The other family is that of a young friend, Lara, whose three children, aged five to 12, attend a good public school in a middle-class neighbourhood under the auspices of the English Montreal School Board (44,000 students). Joanne’s story: Shutdown was announced on a Friday. By Monday morning both girls’ entire schedules were posted and they were told to be online by 8:30 a.m. Noa spends five hours a day on Zoom. In addition to her regular learning, she can choose amongst art, math, “mindfulness” and other clubs to attend. Toby is online six hours a day, continuing with group projects, taking quizzes and submitting assignments. Zoom class discipline is as rigorously monitored as in the classroom (Joanne sometimes hears the teachers chiding the kids when their focus strays.) Classes are mandatory. When Noa turns off her camera, or has not done her homework, Joanne gets an email from the teacher. Noa also has a dress code (no tank tops, for example). Toby attends weekly school-wide assemblies. The virtual-school web page lists all resources and updates. Both girls are keeping up with their second and third language instruction at real-school levels. By Monday morning both girls’ entire schedules were posted (--image--)

(--image--)

Although Toby’s band practice has been discontinued, music classes are still operative; the teacher is now giving assignments on Garage Band, a music-composition app, and other creative exercises for building beat with voices and household objects. Her gym teacher does daily workouts with them, and they are expected to log their physical activity time. All teachers are available and responsive to student or parental inquiries. Kids who were in academic support programs still get extra tutoring sessions. The goal is to maintain grade level at a minimum, along with a continuing sense of community spirit. “I am not homeschooling at all,” Joanne says. While the girls are “at school,” Joanne’s days are spent working from home, providing quality nutrition to her family and delivering for Meals on Wheels to self-isolating seniors. Lara’s story: “At first we were given no direction and just told to relax, which seemed kind of fun for the kids, but terrifying for me as a parent.” For two weeks, Lara heard nothing from the school or the school board. In the third week she was notified that she would receive links to resources. The links were “generic,” Lara said, and not related to her children’s specific curricula. Looking through them was like “wandering in a maze.” Some offered programs you could register for, but demanded a fee. Others were program “teases” that were not yet available. They “really did not help at all.” They ‘really did not help at all’ (--image--)

(--image--)

Her children have no schoolbooks to work with, except what happened to be in their backpacks the final day of school. Their textbooks are online, but difficult to interface with, so they must print them out (expensive!). Lara is their teacher, because the teachers are not allowed to teach online. Since schoolwork is not mandatory, there are no tests, no assignments, and no grading. Also no motivation to progress, a problem for Lara. Her children now receive one Zoom encounter with an actual teacher per week, and some homework is being emailed to them. But it is less challenging than it would be if it were mandatory. Her children are bored and not always gracious about receiving instruction from Lara, because she is not their teacher. Their French is suffering, because Lara’s French is rudimentary, so they are not motivated to speak it to her or each other. As for art, music and gym, they are entirely on their own. The EMSB has no expectation that high school students will have made sufficient progress for advancement to the next grade in the fall. Marks that appear on the final report will be guesstimates. (--image--)

A closed schoolyard is seen through its fence in Montreal on April 27, 2020. Quebec is reopening its daycares and elementary schools starting May 11 outside greater Montreal and the following week inside Montreal. Secondary schools will remain closed.

There are probably not many parents who are homeschooling as conscientiously as Lara. In fact, when I described Lara's typical day struggling to educate her kids to Joanne, she joked, "I would have given up after 24 hours. I am no Lara. In fact Laras are making us all look bad."The point of this comparison is not to stir up resentment against those who can afford private school. The private schools did what the EMSB public schools could have done — without the bells and whistles, but at least the essentials — but chose not to. What's done is done this time. If we're faced with another such challenge in the future — and that's sadly all too conceivable — the public school boards must up their game plan.It will be interesting to see how both systems handle reopening next month: elementary schools outside greater Montreal are reopening May 11, and those in Montreal will reopen the following week, although attendance will not be mandatory. High schools will remain closed until September. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](https://twitter.com/BarbaraRKay)

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