

In last week's column, I illustrated, via the experiences of two families, the dramatic difference in responses to school closures in Quebec between the public and independent schools. The private schools, secular and parochial, immediately committed to mandatory remote-learning schedules approximating in-school routines, with a minimum of five hours a day devoted to instruction, assignments and class participation. Work has been assessed and graded as usual, ensuring ongoing motivation and focus. The public system, which took weeks to inform parents of their lockdown policy, took a different, rather laissez-faire tack. Remote learning was rejected, except for a scant support hour here and there.

Schoolwork was not mandatory; no progress was expected; there was to be no testing or (downward) grading. Communications from the school board provided parents with vague guidelines for homeschooling that were of little concrete help. Individual teachers made themselves available for consultation, but none were obliged to. I anticipated feedback expressing resentment against those privileged enough to afford private schools. In fact, of numerous responses, almost all lauded the private schools as a good model the public school system should have, and could have, followed. Of numerous responses, almost all lauded the private schools as a good model (--image--)

(--image--)

One Toronto public school parent wrote to say their situation was exactly the same as the Montreal parent's I had described, observing that "within the same school board, and even within the same school, there is a total lack of consistency with respect to what teachers are — or in most cases, aren't — doing. It is nothing short of chaotic, with some students getting no online learning whatsoever (the case for her son), some getting two 30-minute sessions each week, while other students — the lucky ones — might get an hour of online learning a day." Her son's teacher told her the union directed teachers to do no online teaching, even though the board had approved it. She expressed bitterness over what she perceived as systemic "lack of accountability or oversight." I found stories about U.S. public schools whose performance was indistinguishable from our private schools. One public school teacher in South Carolina described his school district as "shut down in one sense, but in another it's bustling as never before." Teachers "are expected to find ways to include and serve special-education students, nonnative English speakers, students in poverty and many others. The cancellations and lockdowns haven't diminished teachers' work but increased it." A reader with children in a New Jersey public school sent me a letter parents received from the district superintendent, setting out rules and expectations, which included mandatory remote attendance, assessments of student work, and maintenance of a grade structure. (--image--)

A mother in Caracas, Venezuela, helps her daughter to do homework on April 23, 2020, while they are confined to their home during the second month of quarantine.

Leonardo Fernandez Vilorio/Getty Images

An Ontario secondary school educator took up a defence of Ontario's policy. She wrote that Ontario's public schools can't do teleconferencing with students owing to "privacy" and "safety" issues around Zoom. She noted there are rural families without Internet access, and poor families whose children have no devices, so fairness demanded a uniform policy that didn't disadvantage anyone. These seem weak arguments to me. There are other, more secure teleconferencing tools than Zoom. And the minister of education could easily have expedited tablet delivery to those in need, while harnessing cooperation from Bell or Rogers to provide something similar to Telus's "Internet for Good" program that is bringing "critical connectivity" to needy students in B.C. and Alberta. These seem weak arguments to me (--image--)

(--image--)

The bottom line is that, if there had been a political will to achieve excellence in "deliverology," to borrow a favoured government trope, we'd not have seen this yawning chasm between private and public school students' learning experiences. My columns last week dealt with schools in Montreal's English sector. Since then I've had the opportunity to chat with David Bowles, president of the Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés (FEEP), representing nearly 200 francophone private schools. Bowles is also the director-general of Collège Charles-Lemoyne on Montreal's South Shore (2,600 students, two campuses). They've been remote-educating 100 per cent of their students. Private

schools are 50 per cent subsidized in Quebec, which means a high-quality education can be had for \$5,000 a year. As a result, about 20 per cent of Montreal and Quebec City francophones attend them. So while in Ontario, where unsubsidized private school can cost \$30,000 a year, independent schools serve a privileged class, in francophone Quebec it is a middle-class phenomenon. Here, therefore, a greater percentage of the student population than in Ontario has been well served academically. (--image--)

Candace Kirkham of Vanier, Que., does yoga in the empty parking lot of a closed mall, while her daughter, Tryxie, works on homework, on April 27, 2020.

Wayne Cuddington/Postmedia News

Bowles had to lay off 50 non-teaching employees out of 250 staff, as his and other private schools are not eligible for the crisis-generated Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS). The sports complex on the principal Charles-Lemoyne campus, normally a healthy source of revenue, is empty. He can't charge parents for unused school-bussing, yet by contract must still pay the idle drivers. Bowles expects Charles-Lemoyne will weather the storm, but others may not. Semester report card for Ontario and Quebec: Private schools – A; Public schools – D. Reward for private schools' high performance: layoffs, diminished enrolments, possible closures. Consequence for public schools' poor performance: none. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](https://twitter.com/BarbaraRKay)

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Kelly McParland: The WHO, and Dr. Aylward, owe Canadians honest answers