

## The Montreal Gazette

### Unschooling: No classes, no schedule, no tests

*While most of Quebec's school-age children will soon spend their days in class, others will stay home. Their parents have tossed out the curriculum and will let their kids choose what to learn.*

Published Aug 16, 2014

MONTREAL — When other 5-year-olds line up for their first day of school, weighed down by backpacks half their size, the Boudreault twins will likely still be sleeping, or eating breakfast in their pyjamas.

While the kindergartners meet their first teacher and are assigned a locker and a desk, on Un-Back to School Day Damien and Joshua might do some gardening with their mom, or read a comic book. And for the rest of the year, as the schoolkids work through their textbooks and weekly tests, half-hour PE classes and detentions, these free-range kids might go to the museum, kick around a ball, play on their iPad, or build a whole universe out of Lego.

It's hard to tell, says their mom — you see, it's up to them.

Two of a growing number of so-called “unschoolers” in Quebec, the boys won't have a classroom, textbooks or exams. And they won't have a teacher this year, or possibly ever.

Unlike parents who home-school their kids — teaching them math and grammar at the kitchen table — unschoolers like Marie-Ève Boudreault vow not to teach their kids anything.

It's up to the children to teach themselves, whatever their passions dictate, when they want and how they want. The parent simply “facilitates.”

“Even if the teachers and other students do their best under the circumstances, the school system seems like an obstacle to learning and is often a waste of time and talent. It's a kind of prison,” says Boudreault, who lives outside of Quebec City. “We don't force adults to work, but we force children, and this force-feeding causes plenty of learning difficulties, if it doesn't take away their desire to learn altogether!”

Though statistics are hard to come by, especially since unschoolers often don't register their children with the local school board, it's clear the appeal of unschooling is growing in a province where bullying is endemic and one-third of students drop out of school sooner or later.

But alarm bells are ringing at the Quebec Education Department, eager to crack down on clandestine schools and all those illegally opting out of the curriculum. And academics worry that despite their parents' best intentions, the unschooled may simply be uneducated.

**‘Like a nightmare job, or prison’**

Imagine a job in which your work is micromanaged by your boss. You're told exactly what to do, how to do it and when to do it. You are required to stay in your seat until your boss says you can move. Each piece of your work is evaluated and compared, every day, with the work done by your fellow employees.

Thus begins a recent blog post in Psychology Today by Peter Gray, a professor at Boston College and a staunch proponent of unschooling.

Gray calls this the most tedious and stressful kind of job, and too often it is what school is like for kids, he says — only they can't quit.

Whether they're comparing school to a nightmare job or to prison — both impose a dress code and strict times for eating and walking, while emphasizing silence and order — unschoolers assert that it's the authoritarian nature of schools that stamp out children's natural creativity and enthusiasm. While school imposes a one-size-fits-all model that ultimately fits few, the thinking goes, learning should be personal and self-directed.

This idea of “unschooling” first emerged in the 1970s with John Holt, an elementary school teacher-turned-author, who came to believe that the fears of schoolchildren — of being wrong, of being ridiculed, of not being good enough — and the compulsory nature of classes impeded their natural ability and passion for learning.

In one of his books, he calls for a “children's underground railroad” to help them escape compulsory education.

Around the same time that the Conservative Right began to home-school their children to bypass the teaching of evolution, for example, anti-establishment parents, ascribing to Holt's beliefs, began to think of schools as places where children were forced to conform and become good workers — not critical thinkers.

There are now Christian and Muslim home-school associations throughout the United States, and of the estimated 2 million children being home-schooled in that country, about 10 per cent are unschoolers.

Here in Canada, the experience and acceptance of unschooling as a form of home-schooling has been very uneven.

In Alberta, parents can choose the study programs and can opt out of provincial achievement tests. It is the duty of the school boards to support them, including reimbursing them for books and games, and a teacher checks in on them twice a year.

Parents in Ontario, meanwhile, are expected to notify the local school board of their intention to home-school their children, but the board will only investigate if it believes a child is not being properly educated.

In B.C., home-schooling is the full responsibility of the parent. It is not supervised by a teacher, or required to meet provincial standards.

In Quebec, however, parents are legally required to register their children at the local school board after they turn 6, and are expected to follow the curriculum.

That doesn't mean they do.

### **Home-schoolers vs. unschoolers**

Marika Reid-Gaudet believes that far from creating uneducated children, unschooling allows children to discover themselves and delve deeper into their interests — not those imposed by the school.

Her son Loic, now 18, left school — and the curriculum — after Grade 1, choosing to focus on philosophy, history and Japanese.

“My role was to bring him to a Chinese buffet — no, an international buffet — where the child is exposed to so many things to taste and experience,” said Reid-Gaudet, who is also president of the Association québécoise pour l'éducation à domicile. “Then he will affirm his own tastes and passions, and in the end, we see the individual emerge. It makes for young people who know what they like and don't like, and are not blasé about learning.”

Loic was among the first cohort of free-range Quebecers, she says, but interest in unschooling is increasing. While the Quebec Education Department puts the number of home-schooled children in 2012-13 at 1,114 — up from 788 in 2007-08 — based on regional associations of home-schoolers, Reid-Gaudet said she believes the number is more like 8,000.

The discrepancy lies in the number of unschoolers and home-schoolers who don't sign up with the local school board and are therefore off the Department's books — like Loic.

Christine Brabant, one of few researchers to study the phenomenon in Quebec, believes there are at least 1,000 school-age children who are not signed up with any school board, and many of them are unschoolers.

Brabant, who did her Masters and PhD on home-schooling and currently teaches at the Université de Montréal, notes that the legal exception made for home-schooling — article 15.4 of the law on public instruction — was designed to appease religious groups when the school boards were deconfessionalized in 1988.

But since then, others have chosen to home-school their children for other reasons, either to forge close family ties, or as a response to problems in the school system: large student-to-teacher ratios, bullying, lack of services for children with special needs, or simply the fact a child is not progressing well, and is asked to adapt to a school that does not adapt to her.

But if some think they've found in unschooling the panacea for all educational ills, the little research that has been done on the academic performance of unschoolers suggests otherwise.

### **Testing unschoolers**

Sandra Martin-Chang, a professor at Concordia University, is one of few non-partisan researchers to investigate the success of home-schooling, by comparing 37 children at public schools in New

Brunswick and Nova Scotia in 2012 to 37 children home-schooled in those provinces, among them 12 who were unschooled.

She found that the home-schoolers who followed the curriculum were half a grade ahead of the public schoolers in math and 2.2 grades ahead in reading. But the unstructured home-schoolers — unschoolers — had lower scores on all seven academic measures.

Reached in Montreal this week, Martin-Chang said the sample size of her study was admittedly very small. But the results fit with everything we know about the importance of having knowledgeable teachers teaching children things they can't or won't necessarily learn for themselves.

“There is no empirical evidence to suggest that unschooling is beneficial to learners ... especially when it comes to reading,” Martin-Chang said. “It’s difficult and non-intuitive. The research on unschooling is non-existent, but we have lots of research on guided learning, scaffolding, expert vs. non-expert teaching and all of it points to the fact that learning by doing is great, but learning by doing with an expert is better.”

Martin-Chang says the definition of unschooling changes depending on whom you ask. The idea of a child doing his own research at home then showing up at an aerospace centre and asking questions is appealing to be sure. (That’s the model for “This is Daniel Cook,” a kids’ show on CBC.) But she says she has met radical unschoolers who refused to teach their children the alphabet out of a sense they needed to learn it on their own.

“I’ve worked with 7-year-olds who don’t know the alphabet. And that’s heartbreaking,” she says. “I’ve spoken to people who say, ‘If you see something interesting, don’t point it out to your child.’ They say, ‘My child didn’t start reading until they were 12, but then they read with passion and purpose.’ But their child has missed out on all those years of print exposure, and it’s very difficult to make up for it.”

She says there are aspects of the unschooling model worth adopting. A child’s education should be as customized as possible. Teach them the ABCs through whatever they are interested in, be it baseball or princesses.

But, Martin-Chang continued, we can also learn from our experience of summer vacation — two months of unschooling for the entire country — when IQs go down and reading skills deteriorate. She likens the radical unschoolers to those well-intentioned but misguided parents who choose not to vaccinate their children based on one study that has now been thoroughly debunked.

“Only unschoolers don’t even have the one study.”

### **Quebec cracking down**

Perhaps with the radical unschoolers in mind, the Quebec Ombudsman’s office has launched its own investigation into home-schooling in the province. But it wouldn’t discuss the scope of its investigation or what prompted it.

Education Minister Yves Bolduc, for his part, in June set up an inter-ministerial committee to crack down on those bypassing the education system, either in clandestine schools or at home. The committee will cross-reference data from the Health Department — the names of all children under

18 with medicare cards, for example — with the names of those enrolled with the school boards to see who's not in their sights.

“It's zero tolerance for those who are doing home-schooling but not following the curriculum,” Bolduc's spokesperson Yasmine Abdelfadel said this week, adding that all possible solutions are on the table, including legislative measures. “All children in Quebec have to follow the ministry's program.”

For Marike Reid-Gaudet and Christine Brabant, however, the enforcement of a more uniform education would be a step backward. Unschoolers may fall behind in some academic subjects for a while, says Reid-Gaudet, but they get ahead in others, and by the time it counts — at the end of elementary school, and when they are 18 — they have caught up, and they have also had time to follow their passions. Loic, for example, could easily spend five hours a day learning Japanese, she said, and now he's planning to live in Japan.

A survey of adult unschoolers by Peter Gray and Gina Riley, published in *Psychology Today* in June, lends credence to those assertions. Based on the experience of 75 respondents, mostly from the U.S., who were unschooled for part or all of their childhood, they found that 83 per cent went on to some form of higher education, and 44 per cent had received or were studying for a Bachelor's degree or higher, despite the fact that most of them never received a high school diploma. Gray and Riley also asked respondents whether their chosen career had anything to do with the interests they decided to pursue as children. Some 77 per cent of them described a clear relationship.

“Unschoolers, unlike those in school, have to discover their own interests because nobody is telling them what to do,” Gray explained. “They find their passions and then very often pursue them as careers in adulthood.”

Reid-Gaudet has been lobbying to set up a free school, also called a democratic school, in Quebec — where students are free to design their own curriculum — such as those that exist in B.C., Alberta, Ontario and the United States.

But the lobbying has been arduous in a province that exerts more control than its counterparts over education.

“We have a system in Quebec with one way of looking at education and that's it,” she said. “It's atrophied and we're 20 years behind.”

Marie-Ève Boudreault's twins, for their part, knew the alphabet in French and English by the time they were 3. If she does sign them up as home-schoolers, she will try to do it with an English school board, so they can continue to learn in English — an option unavailable to francophones at school. Rather than cracking down on unschoolers, says Brabant, the minister should consult with experts and offer Quebecers a wider range of choices.

She says unschoolers present a false dichotomy: big bad school vs. total freedom to learn. Teachers now try their best to foster more active learning in class, to encourage kids to move and be creative. There are specialized programs for kids who want to concentrate in music or dance, literature or sports.

But there are few options for families who want to participate more fully in their children's education, she says. Unlike in other parts of Canada and the United States, there is no part-time schooling, for example, where parents might teach their children French and geography but send them to school for math and science.

And there is no unschooling — radical or not.

“We can't give parents carte blanche,” Brabant said. “Every child needs a quality education. But these are delicate questions because they touch on parents' and communities' freedom to choose their vision of education. If the parents are educated, and are very present in a stimulating environment, unschooling can be very good. But if it's in a culturally poor house, with no books, no outings, no computer, with low-level language, and kids left on their own at home, that's the other extreme.”

Rather than crack down on home-schoolers, the Education Department should provide guidelines to the 72 school boards responsible for policing it, Brabant said. Each one currently interprets the law as it sees fit — some have explicit protocols, while some administrators call the youth protection department as soon as they get wind of a child who is not following the curriculum, Brabant said. That explains why many unschoolers don't register their children at all, she added. The Education Department should consult with parents and teachers and see what's being done elsewhere to pick up best practices and avoid the worst, Brabant said. And the government should capitalize on the last 20 years of experimentation — on and off the books — to make school and unschool better.

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