

Lester B. Pearson schools: HEPA air purifiers already installed

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Local English-language schools are among the only educational building in the province where officials have no concerns about ventilation in classrooms.

That is because officials with the Lester B. Pearson School Board in November 2020 decided to purchase and install \$520,000 worth of purifiers in its schools, anticipating that cold days would force windows closed and put both students and teachers at greater risk of infection.

In doing so, the Pearson board went against Quebec's recommendations, and became the first board in the province – and one of the first in Canada – to install the purifiers.

"The recommendation at that point was that schools should keep their windows open at all times," said Carol Heffernan, the board's assistant director. "So, we made the decision to look at other alternatives."

In all, 420 purifiers were installed in some of the board's older schools, which do not feature mechanical ventilation. These include elementary schools like Edgewater and St. Patrick in Pincourt, Soulanges elementary in St. Télesphore, and Mount Pleasant in Hudson. Purifiers were also added in classrooms and public areas at the senior campus of Westwood High School in Hudson.

In newer schools across its territory, which stretches from Verdun to the Ontario boarder, which are equipped with mechanical ventilation, the board added MERV 13 filters, which can snag airborne particles as air circulates through the ducts.

Installing the purifiers was no easy feat. It involved perusing an ever-growing body of research about aerosol transmission from scientists across the world, working on calculations and sketches to determine the ideal

device position in each classroom, and even enlisting the aid of air quality experts at the University of Colorado to oversee the rollout.

Then, just a month after the installation, the board had to prove that the purifiers weren't dangerous, after Education Minister Jean-François Roberge and the Institut national de santé publique du Québec expressed concerns about the devices.

According to Heffernan, that involved monitoring classrooms where purifiers were running for 24 hours straight and ensuring that they weren't emitting any type of harmful gas.

"It was a lot of work," she recalled. "Not only did we have to worry about the financing and the logistical details, but we also had to prove that the purifiers weren't dangerous to students. It was a lot, but we were able to do it."

Heffernan speculates that the amount of work required to install the purifiers, the Education Ministry's stance on the devices, and the hefty price tag could explain why French service centres chose not to follow in the Pearson school board's footsteps.

The costs associated with the purchase and installation of the purifierx have been shouldered by the board thus far, but negotiations are ongoing. While the board is pushing the government to reimburse all its COVID-19 related expenses, Heffernan says they won't receive an answer until later this spring.

Regardless, of whether the board is reimbursed, Heffernan said officials have regrets about the initiative.

"If the purifiers prevented even one staff member or student from being severely ill and transmitting the virus to someone else, then it was worth it," she reasoned.