

Table of contents

Introduction	4
Belonging	7
Education	13
Mobility.....	19
Mental Health	25
Conclusion	31



In October 2017, the Foundation of Greater Montréal published *Vital Signs of Greater Montréal's Children*, a report that presents recent data on various aspects of the lives of 0-to-17-year-olds in the metropolitan area. From the very beginning, the multisectoral committee that was formed to produce this report recognized the importance of involving children in the proceedings. The committee envisioned the direct participation of children as part of an inclusive process, allowing them to share their views about their reality as residents of Greater Montréal.

**How do children in Greater Montréal see their city?
What do they like?
What do they want to change?**

There are many reasons for this approach: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989, recognizes the right of children to express themselves on subjects that pertain to them. International experience also shows that involving children in understanding local issues and identifying solutions is beneficial for children and their communities alike. However, children are rarely considered full actors in the processes that affect their sphere of life. We sometimes act “on behalf of” children, but rarely “with” them, overlooking their possible contribution.

This report presents a synthesis of the results from the initiative, which was carried out between April and October 2017 by two researchers: Natasha Blanchet-Cohen and Juan Torres, from Concordia University and the Université de Montréal respectively. Many thanks to them for a report that constitutes a very important contribution to the overall project that is *Vital Signs of Greater Montréal's Children*.

Good reading

Yvan Gauthier

Yvan Gauthier, President and CEO
Foundation of Greater Montréal

Introduction

Our participatory approach incorporated the involvement of children in Greater Montréal by:

- identifying issues related to their living environment and their community
- analyzing the data available on these issues
- developing courses of action

Fifty-four young people age 9 to 17 from various local organizations participated in the project (see Table 1):

Table 1. Number and gender of participants

	girls	boys	ages
C-vert	8	1	15-16
Walkley Community Center	2	8	13-17
Centre François-Michelle	3	3	13-15
St Willibrord School	7	8	9-10
Saint Columba House	3	3	14-17
SEUR Project	2	6	15-16

- **Walkley Community Center** : This not-for-profit organization based in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood is the result of a collaboration between the City of Montréal, Prévention NDG and the Comité Jeunesse NDG.
- **Centre François-Michelle** : This school welcomes youth with mild intellectual disabilities and whose potential is slowed by neurological or physiological conditions, language difficulties, or problems with perception or motor functions.
- **C-Vert Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (HM)** : This urban ecology program run by the YMCAs of Quebec aims to train young environmental leaders age 14 to 16 by involving them in real community projects. C-Vert MHM is one of seven C-Vert programs in Quebec.
- **A group of young Syrian refugees** : Comprised of a group of students from Pierre-Laporte secondary school, the group was formed as part of Projet SEUR (sensibilisation aux études, à l'université et à la recherche), which sensitizes students to studies, university and research and is sponsored by the Université de Montréal.
- **Saint Columba House** : This organization based in Pointe-Saint-Charles promotes justice through personal and collective empowerment, education and social action.
- **St. Willibrord primary school** : Belonging to the New Frontiers School Board, this school is located in Châteauguay on the south shore of Montréal and has a high representation of indigenous students.

The initiative involved several activities:

- **Discussion groups** : A fundamental component of the process was group sharing on a variety of subjects, including the best and worst parts of the neighbourhood or city. The discussion also covered education, sense of belonging, mobility and mental health. Drawing pictures and identifying keywords enabled the youngsters to express themselves in different ways.
- **Individual projects** : The children were asked to express themselves on a chosen topic of interest using the medium of their choice. Examples of what they made include videos showing glimpses into their daily lives, interviews with peers and songs with lyrics that reflect their concerns. The works were then discussed by the group, furthering reflection on the most important elements in the lives of young people in Greater Montréal.
- **Visioning game** : For each group, the process finished with a meeting where the participants filled out a questionnaire and engaged in a role-playing game where they projected themselves 25 years into the future. The game involved identifying the conditions that would allow Montréal, in the year 2042, to become the best city for children.

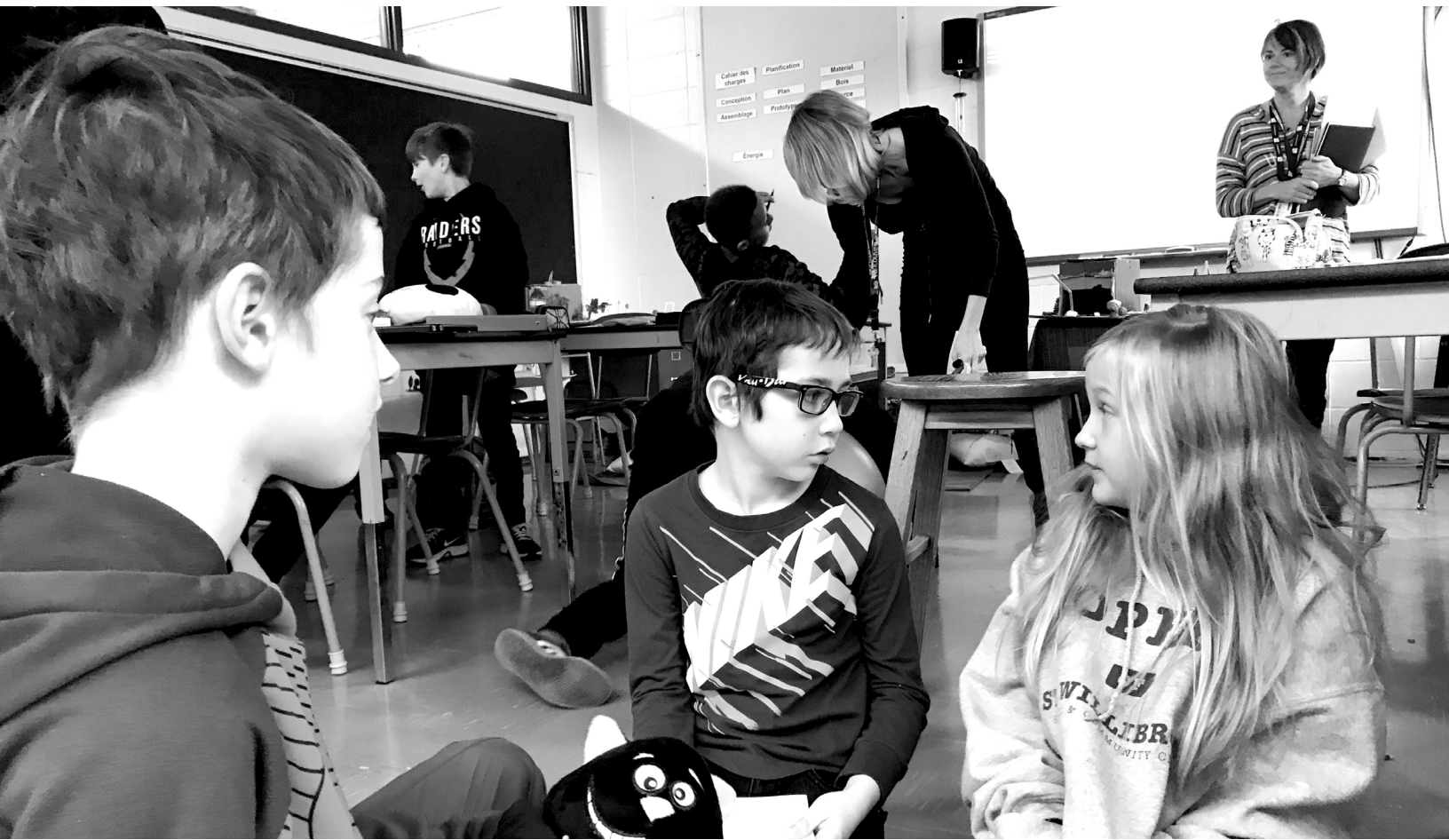
The discussions with the young people were recorded and transcribed to facilitate their analysis. The drawings and other objects produced by the participants were also numbered and analyzed. The analysis was conducted using a qualitative approach, based on the themes predetermined in the development framework for Vital Signs of Greater Montréal's Children (education, sense of belonging, mobility and mental health). Data about the themes were presented to the young people. The themes proved to be quite relevant as an analytical framework, given their complementarity and the responses they stimulated among the youngsters.

The following pages present a summary of our analysis in the form of thematic information sheets. While each section is rich in content, the maximum interpretive power is gained from reading them as a whole, allowing the reader to connect the multiple facets of young participants' everyday lives.



BELONGING

THE PRIDE OF LIVING IN MONTRÉAL



Introduction

The discussions we had with the young participants in our project underscored the importance of the sense of belonging. The topic was brought up in various ways, referencing the physico-spatial dimension of place just as much as the relational dimension of social interactions and symbolic elements of a “youth” identity. These variations in the idea of belonging turn out to be directly linked: for example, the sense of belonging within a particular place often depends on the presence of peers and whether they are able to see themselves there as a group, simultaneously united and distinct.

What we heard in the youth people’s testimonies surrounding the topic of belonging revealed anxiety about the desire to be included on one hand, and the exclusion they feel in certain contexts on the other. We also observed that economic inequality in Montréal neighbourhoods can have a negative influence on youth participation.

One thing is clear: the young people who participated in our research are eloquent when it comes to their hopes of becoming full members of their community by facing challenges brought about by authority figures often thought to be unfair.

"Community it's a place, it's a town and everyone lives in it, and they all work together. But sometimes people go to school, and people think that they don't belong."

GIRL, 9,
ST. WILLIBROD SCHOOL

"In Montréal in general, girls talk to each other in different languages, English, French, it's diverse... There are a lot of programs available—compared to the north where there are fewer opportunities—there are restaurants from every country, there's the subway. Montréal connects."

GIRL, 15, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTRE

"There are young people who do bad things and who don't have a choice... Inequality of opportunities among young people, injustice depending on what neighbourhood you come from. There are some neighbourhoods that get way fewer services and less attention than others."

BOY, 17, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTRE

Belonging as described by the youth

Montréal: a welcoming diversity

The various groups of young people who participated in our project agreed on a powerful notion: Montréal is a diverse city, and they are proud to contribute to this diversity since it is seen as a valuable resource. They underscore the variety of origins, traditions, cultures and ways of life of Montrealers, while also highlighting their peaceful and tolerant coexistence.

Interestingly, many young people talked about a type of “normalization” or standardization of difference: every day, whether at school or in their neighbourhood, they mingle with people that embody this cultural diversity, and this happens in a very natural way. Cultural diversity is thereby demystified, facilitating connections between teenagers. There is a “youth” culture that unites our participants, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. The participants who were born abroad have an advantage within this diverse context, or at the very least, find these conditions to be conducive to their integration into their new city (which is difficult on many levels).



“What I like most is listening to music, the Centre François-Michelle, the variety of restaurants. The culture and the fact that we can celebrate things in peace. We can do what we want and help others as well.”

BOY, 15,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

“In my new neighbourhood the whole world is there, we’re Filipino, upstairs they’re Québécois, next door they’re Vietnamese, and beside them they’re Italian. It’s really mixed.”

BOY, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE

"We are all tied to each other, so it could be anybody you know. And even if you don't know the person, they are gonna listen to you. And even if you don't live in the same place, you see them at school, you spend so much time, so you build strong bonds with these people."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

Attachment to variable circumstances

The sense of belonging described by the participants in our study varied in both intensity and territoriality: some youngsters stated that they identified with their neighbourhood or a related symbolic element (a library, a street, a bus line, etc.); for others, their association depended more on an assortment of locales throughout the city (their school, a shopping centre, a sports facility, etc.).

These variations depend of course on the varying profiles of the participants, who are recruited sometimes through local community organizations, sometimes through broader networks. Regardless, attachment to a place either nearby or distant was generally founded on the same principles: the ability to be among peers, voluntarily, in a familiar setting, participating in rewarding activities. The relational dimension is part of an identity construction process that allows for growth and a sense of belonging.

We can tell from the young people's comments that they have an interest in the city and its neighbourhoods and an appreciation for their differences and history. Of all the urban sectors, the downtown core is probably the area that provokes the greatest contrast in opinion: sometimes it is considered to be a lively, accessible area, where they go to do many things, particularly to partake in leisure activities (movies, shopping, etc.); but at times it is also depicted as a threatening, dangerous place, and in certain cases is off-limits due to parental restrictions.

Belonging to a community is also shaped by codes of conduct, clothing styles (low pants, particular hairstyles or hair colours), language and spatial markers specific to youth (bus lines, fast food places, etc.). The fact that this sense of belonging is often codified shows that young people want to integrate but also want to stand out from the crowd in their own way.

"I don't like the rush of downtown, and there are a lot of buildings, accidents. I like it better where it's calm and safe to go out, like in my neighbourhood."

GIRL,
PROJET SEUR

"All over the place, that's where we've had experiences. There are only stories here, like what has happened in our lives [...]. On this rock is where everything took place, it was here where we shared our secrets, everything was here."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

"They see you walking at night and they suspect you of everything, they have nothing to do. I know young people who have been arrested lots of times; they're walking in Walkley at midnight and [the police] think they're a bad guy. It's prejudice. If they would just stop arresting people like that, Montréal could be a lot better. It's really just the police."

BOY, 17,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

A relationship with authority in need of change

An important factor in terms of belonging is the relationship with authority figures, embodied by adults (such as teachers, shopkeepers and police) in places where young people find themselves on a daily basis. On a number of occasions in our discussions with the youth, they expressed a feeling of powerlessness in the face of a system that is too rigid (at school, for example, as explained in the summary sheet on education). The sensation that they are being watched and the distrust they observe in the eyes of adults are experiences which, while perhaps subtle, are real and felt to be forms of exclusion. This feeling is exacerbated when interactions with authority figures are contentious: many of the teens we met with described discriminatory comments and behaviour in relation to their age as well as their appearance.

Participants expressed significant apprehension with regard to the police, with a number of youth feeling immediately written off or even threatened when interacting with them. The frustration grows even more when the youth feel deeply wronged, such as when they have been victims of racist speech and behaviour. There were in fact numerous anecdotes that made reference to profiling by age and appearance, often when the youth were either somewhere or doing something that they enjoy, such as hanging out in a public space.

"I find that some kids are not nice if you are Kahnawake kids they say we are not important and that made me mad. We told the teacher and she did nothing."

BOY, 9,
ST. WILLIBRORD SCHOOL

Community as an essential space

Considering how we were able to reach our participants, it is probably not surprising that we collected very positive testimonials about community organizations. That being said, beyond the words of appreciation, our research allowed us to see the importance of spaces and moments of interaction between youths that are external to the school system. Within community organizations, participants share experiences and challenges. Moreover, they share intentions and often mobilize with the support of adults, which fosters rewarding intergenerational relationships.

On a number of occasions, the youths suggested making community organizations known to more young people, who in their opinion are unaware that these resources exist. The importance of the activities taking place in community organizations appears all the more significant given that many participants believe them to be places of affirmation, exploration of interests and personal talent, which is thought to be uncommon or even non-existent in their schools.

What do parents think? Our research cannot tell, save only to point out that the youth had permission, even encouragement, from their parents to participate in the daily activities of their community organization.

Belonging | My friends.
My culture.
"Mohawk."

I don't feel that
Kahnawake belongs.

- Too far.
- Difficult to get there

Courses of action: towards a Montréal that young people love

- Create numerous accessible opportunities for young people to be engaged in their communities, and include them in decision-making processes
- Recognize that young people are distinct groups in terms of age, talents, aspirations and diversity
- Train adults in positions of authority (particularly in schools and police forces) to use approaches that are more empowering and less stigmatizing toward teens
- Allocate a portion of the city's cultural programming and sports budget to activities exclusively for teens, while still including them in the general offer of activities
- Enhance, reinforce and develop community organizations with a mandate to help young people thrive

EDUCATION

A DESIRE FOR SCHOOLS THAT REFLECT MONTREALERS



"What I don't like is the fighting and bullying of defenseless people. A lot of young people are bullied at school."

BOY, 15,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

"School is a part of our daily lives. We go there every day and it also has an effect on our mental health."

GIRL, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE

"I think primary and secondary education needs to be changed so that it teaches young people different values, forms of respect, how to be a good citizen and to be a good person in general."

BOY, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE

Introduction

During our sessions with the youth, the topic of education was of great importance, and with good reason! We realized that young people spend a lot of time and energy on their studies, both at school and at home. Moreover, the school, being a pivotal location in the daily lives of children and teenagers, shapes a significant portion of their interpersonal and even intergenerational exchanges.

On multiple occasions, we heard the young people talk about everyday stress related to expectations about performance but also to bullying, which is experienced in various forms and levels of intensity.

Overall, the perspectives shared among teens point to a desire to make the school more like them, so that it reflects and supports both their individual diversity and the distinct character of their age group. They often told us that they would like the school and teaching programs to be adapted to students' needs, interests and talents. They want the school to be a place (literally and symbolically) that is inclusive, supportive and open to the diverse representation embodied by the youth.

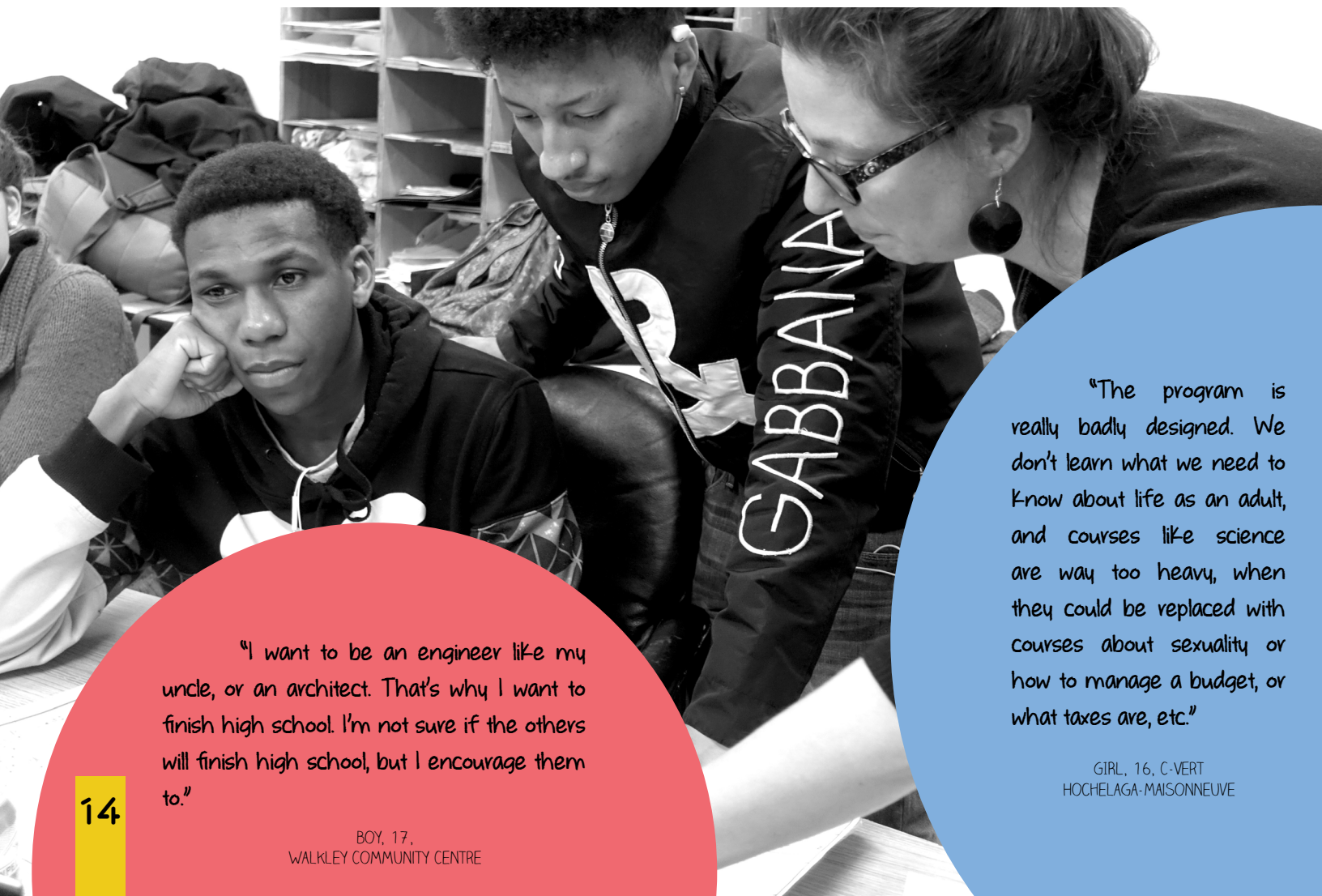
Education as described by the youth

A rewarding component of young people's lives

Whether they live in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, the Sud-Ouest borough or in the suburbs, the participants in our study strongly agree: education is important not only to their intellectual development, but also to their social and emotional development. Acquiring the skills necessary to have a good professional career, or even to integrate socially and become actors in their own communities, are among the reasons that seem to motivate young people to continue with school.

For participants who were not born within Canada, education is a way to integrate into their new city, which would not be possible without the friendships they form with their peers. For other young people who are born in Canada but have immigrant parents, school presents an opportunity for social mobility: access to a socioeconomic status better than that of their parents.

That said, despite the valuation of education, many of the testimonies describe a number of frustrations about school. Some of the youth shared, for example, the desire to adapt the school and its programs in such a way as to make them better equipped as citizens.



"I want to be an engineer like my uncle, or an architect. That's why I want to finish high school. I'm not sure if the others will finish high school, but I encourage them to."

BOY, 17,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

"The program is really badly designed. We don't learn what we need to know about life as an adult, and courses like science are way too heavy, when they could be replaced with courses about sexuality or how to manage a budget, or what taxes are, etc."

GIRL, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE

"In the morning at school I am cranky because I have problems sleeping I have lots of stuff on my mind."

BOY, 9,
ST. WILLIBRORD SCHOOL

A rather stressful life at school

An important element in our conversations was the stress and pressure felt at school. Most of the young people said they felt overwhelmed, even crushed, by a curriculum that is designed to standardize, creates a workload that is too heavy for their liking, and puts little value on their creativity.

Activities outside of school seem to offer a space that favours diversity and engagement, but some youth say they do not have enough time to get involved, while others do not have the resources to participate, given that these activities are not always free of charge.

Feelings of isolation and discouragement are often expressed by young people who are having trouble in school and find it difficult to raise their grades, unable to benefit from the resources they need. Some of them change schools, sometimes far too often, while others leave school to start working due to insurmountable pressure and an educational environment that does not help them to succeed.

This feeling of discouragement seems to have an impact on girls in particular. Our research showed the magnitude of stress and depression among teenage girls in correlation with the pressure and feelings of isolation resulting from a rigid educational framework. Many female participants state that they are underestimated and have encountered gender discrimination from teachers and other school staff; others say they have been victims of racist speech in an environment which supposedly does not tolerate such comments from students.

"I know a lot of young people who dropped out after age 16 and started working instead. One day, a teacher called me an idiot."

BOY, 15,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

"Even at school sometimes the teachers are like 'oh, the guys are handsome' but for the girls it's like 'you don't do anything,' all that."

GIRL, 15, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE



"For us it's not because of the work, it's more the teachers. They don't know how to act with students. Like, they suspend everyone...no but it's true. Like, you were drinking juice on the second floor... That, that bugs me."

GIRL, 16,
PROJET SEUR

"This year they had a student council meeting...and they made a ton of recommendations, and the school council rejected them all at once, like they know better what's good for us, and then they adopted measures that upset the entire school... adults refuse to listen to what we have to say."

GIRL, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA-MAISONNEUVE

Tension in the relationship between young people and adults at school

An important element with respect to education is the tension between young people and adults—students and school staff—in a power relationship that has been difficult for many of our participants.

The testimonies show us that these young people do not share the same priorities as school staff, whether it comes to the organization of the school environment or the decisions that affect the school as a whole. They feel neglected in an educational framework that is inflexible and poorly adapted to the realities of young people, in spite of the presence of participatory bodies such as student councils.

It seems that young people's viewpoints are not taken seriously, their feelings even less so. Thus, the frustration grows and the intergenerational gap persists in a context where school staff and adults in general disregard the rights of the young people.

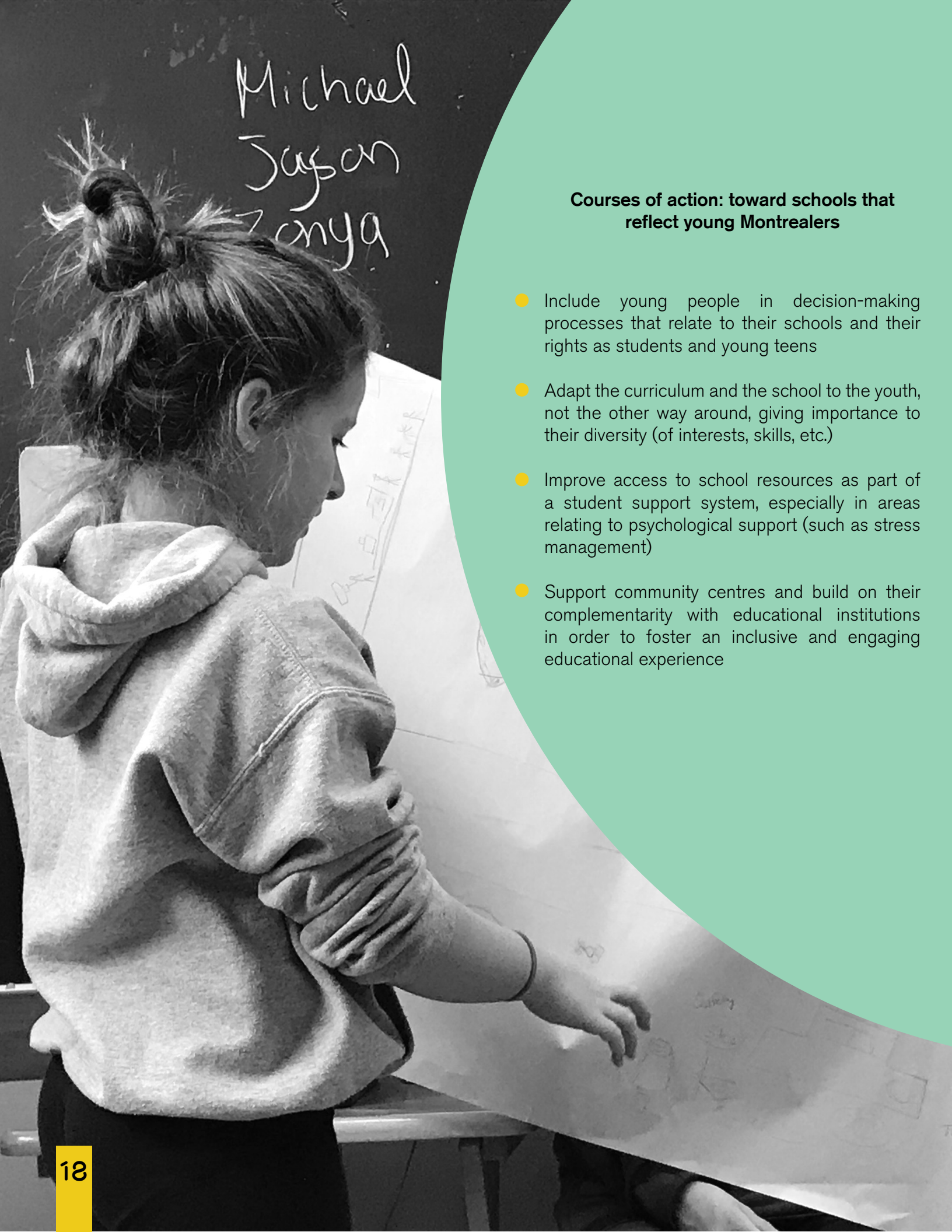
Education in the community: a door to growth

Despite the rapport at school, problematic on multiple levels, young people give high importance to education. They consider community centres, for example, to be a source of encouraging and highly rewarding educational opportunities. This did not surprise us, since we had met the majority of our participants through various community centres. That being said, we concluded that community spaces offer complementary and alternative educational spaces that allow youngsters to express themselves, obtain valuable experience, develop skills, and above all, "be themselves." There they can play sports, meet friends, and discover common interests. The community centre's more flexible and less stressful structure certainly fosters this type of environment, which is greatly appreciated by our participants.

Sometimes from the same neighbourhood, sometimes from different corners of the city, young people go to these community centres after school. There, they mingle in a diverse environment, they feel at home, and they learn and discover themselves as young Montrealers.

"There are a lot of services available when we need help. Especially youth organizations, they're open to everyone, like Pathways to help with your homework, the YMCA for sports, youth centres to interact with other young people. It's fun."

GIRL, 15, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTRE



Michael
Jason
Zanya

**Courses of action: toward schools that
reflect young Montrealers**

- Include young people in decision-making processes that relate to their schools and their rights as students and young teens
- Adapt the curriculum and the school to the youth, not the other way around, giving importance to their diversity (of interests, skills, etc.)
- Improve access to school resources as part of a student support system, especially in areas relating to psychological support (such as stress management)
- Support community centres and build on their complementarity with educational institutions in order to foster an inclusive and engaging educational experience

MOBILITY

ACCESS TO MONTRÉAL AND ITS RESOURCES



"It's not great for teens, since there are always delays with the buses."

GIRL, 15,
PROJET SEUR

"What I like about Montréal is that I can take public transit everywhere, but there's also a lot of construction, car accidents, lack of safety."

BOY, 15, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTRE

"North Montréal is pretty far, but I went with my friends on the subway. My mom trusts me enough so she lets me take the subway by myself. She came with us the first time, but after that she said we were allowed."

GIRL, 14,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

Introduction

Transit was an important topic for the participants in our study. It is sometimes experienced in a positive way, such as when travelling with friends, but also in a negative way, such as having to wait for the bus for too long in an unpleasant environment, or when they feel strangers are looking at them.

The ability to move around independently (without being accompanied by a parent) was highly valued by our participants, with many of them talking about it with a sense of pride. Such independence often corresponds with a knowledge of a variety of places spread throughout the metropolitan area.

That said, one thing became clear during our discussions with the youths: mobility is an aspect of everyday life that goes beyond simply travelling between particular destinations. It generates interactions with other people (parents, peers, strangers, etc.) at different times of day and night. It is considered to be part of school life and, moreover, as a means of connecting to the neighbourhood and the city.

"We have buses and they're really not that expensive. But a lot of people get to school late because of the STM. It happens a lot. There is a problem with the STM, there are a lot of potholes and nobody fixes them. And in Walkley there's a lot of construction, they move the bus stops, a lot of buses are late, and the bus shelters are always dirty and smelly."

BOY, 14,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

"I take the street near my house almost every day, and how you feel walking down it really depends on the time of day. Or take downtown, my parents have always asked, if you're going there you're not going alone, at night you don't stay on the sidewalk and that."

GIRL, 16, C-VERT
HOCHÉLAGA-MAISONNEUVE

Mobility as described by the youth

Variable mobility options depending on place and time

From what we were told by the project's participants, we know that the daily transit experience varies greatly from one person to another according to factors related to the individual (such as age) but also environmental factors, such as the neighbourhood where they live or the location of their destinations. Consequently, some young people depend entirely on their parents for car rides and limit their commutes to the trip between school and home; others, however, move around the metropolitan area independently, to various destinations, covering large areas, with the help in particular of public transportation services.

It should be noted that variations in the availability of mobility resources are felt by young people not only depending on location (points of origin and destination) but also on time (of day, of the week, of the year). Commutes that happen outside of rush hour—during evenings or weekends—often prove to be difficult in terms of the frequency of public transportation services and the perceived level of safety (public places are not as well-lit and there are fewer people around). However, it is generally during these "off-peak" hours that young people want to get around, to go to places of entertainment, for example.

Public transit: a love-hate relationship

Public transit is a valuable resource for teens allowing them to get around independently not only between school and home, but also when engaging in activities they enjoy, after school and with friends. Taking the bus or subway by themselves is a milestone of personal growth that distinguishes teenagers from younger children. Still, while the ability to get around using public transit is highly valued, it remains that descriptions of the user experience are often tinged with resentment.

When we asked the teenagers to tell us what they liked the most about Montréal, they often said "the subway." Shockingly, when we asked the opposite question to know what they liked the least, the answer was the same. The feeling of ambivalence towards the subway, and towards public transit in general, comes from a feeling of captivity: in the absence of alternatives, young people must at times deal with long waiting periods, numerous transfers, in unpleasant locations, while on the receiving end of disapproving looks, all of which lengthens their commute both objectively and subjectively.

"I don't like the subway, it's boring and you always feel judged by other people."

GIRL, 15, C-VERT
HOCHÉLAGA-MAISONNEUVE

"I don't like how there are drivers who get mad, like drivers who go beep beep because there are cars blocking the way. They're not patient with people."

BOY, 15,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

"There are police who arrest people for walking in the street. There's a white guy who does something wrong, and then there's a black guy walking in the street and he gets arrested. It's not fair."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

Active transportation is important, but at times difficult

We noted several instances where participants expressed interest in walking and cycling as an alternative means of transportation more sustainable than driving. Walking, specifically, is part of everyday life for most of the participants. Still, they also expressed frustration about the challenges of going by foot. The cohabitation of pedestrians with other road users (especially motor vehicles) is an important issue. This cohabitation often occurs in areas where pedestrians are not given priority; in other words, where teenagers feel ignored.

The inadequacies of walking environments are not limited to the absence of buffers that separate motor vehicles from pedestrian or cycling pathways, but also to the lack of upkeep: holes in the sidewalks, garbage, deviations due to construction zones... these are signals that adolescents interpret as being proof of a lack of concern towards them.

Aside from these physical factors, the tiresome nature of active transportation—of walking in particular—also relates to social context. Some participants stated that walking exposes them to aggression, whether it is from their peers (in the form of bullying) or from adults. In that regard, interactions with police are an unpleasant source of stress for certain young people. They reference situations where they were discriminated against, with experiences differing according to their age, appearance (skin colour, clothing), location and time of day.

"I nearly died once, because cars don't pay attention to cyclists. Lots of young people don't go by bike because of that. And there's a lot of construction."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

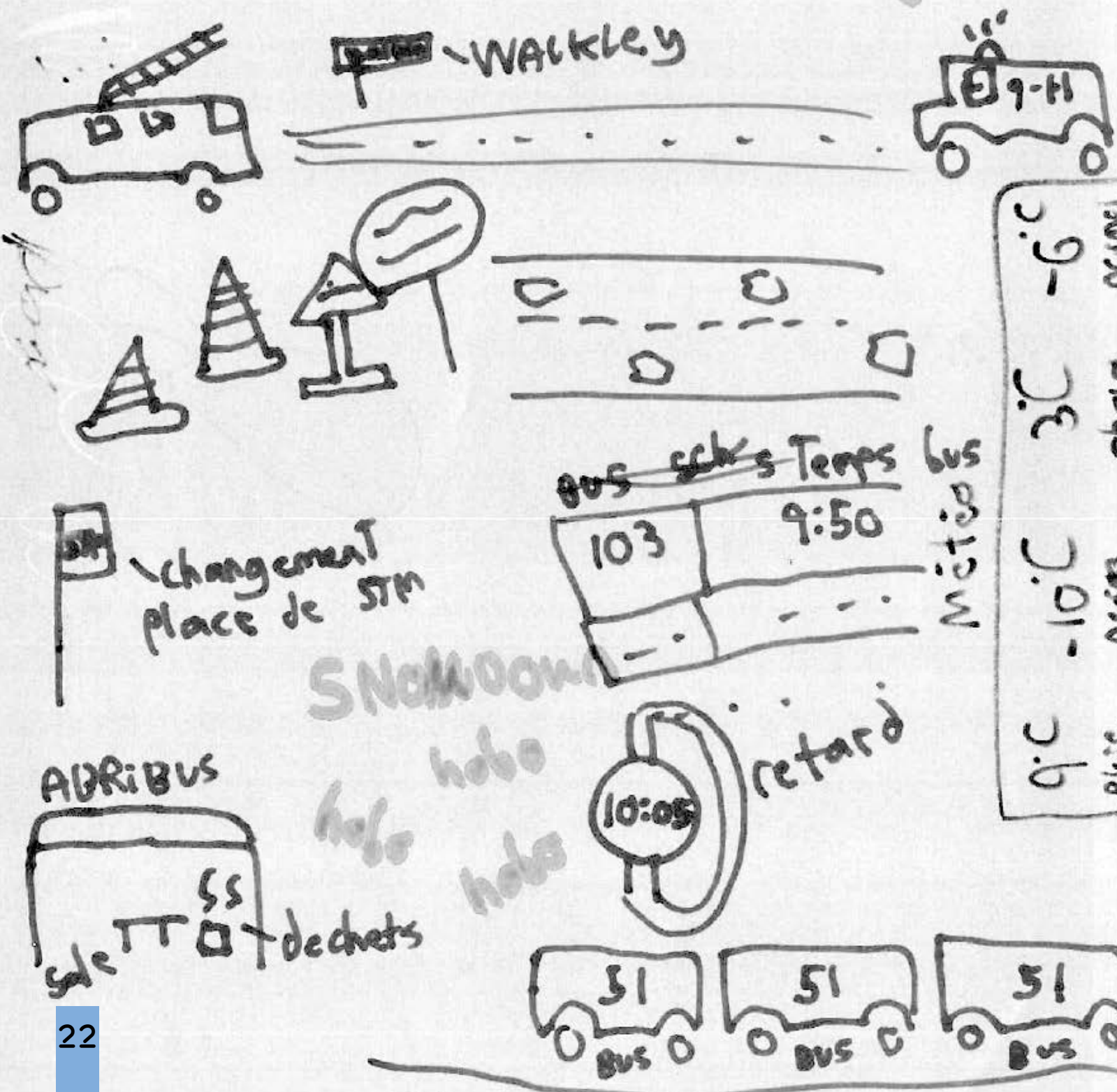
"Sometimes it's hard to be outside, especially for kids, they get beaten up and robbed, and they get bullied."

BOY, 15,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

En retard à l'école car STM

Nid de poules profonds

Patrouilles ~~STM~~ SPVM



9°C -10°C 3°C -6°C

Beyond the destination: the journey as quality time

Finally, although the mobility experience of young people and their views on the issue may be contrasting and ambivalent, this does not discount the fact that the commute offers valuable time for socialization. The participants in our study spoke enthusiastically when they described trips with friends, to leisure destinations (movie theatres, the park, a sports complex), to do a school-related activity (the library, a café to do a group project), or simply to go hang out. These trips among friends are important moments for young people.

It should be noted that the mobility experience in the suburbs is different from the experience of those who live on Montréal Island. Children from the suburbs for example highlight the lack of public transportation and safety.

That being said, regardless of the geographical context, for teenagers the use of transit—specifically when they are with their peers—is a gesture that affirms their identity and learning as they take full advantage of the city's resources.

"I like the subway because I like going to stations with my friends, and I often take the subway to go to my dance class."

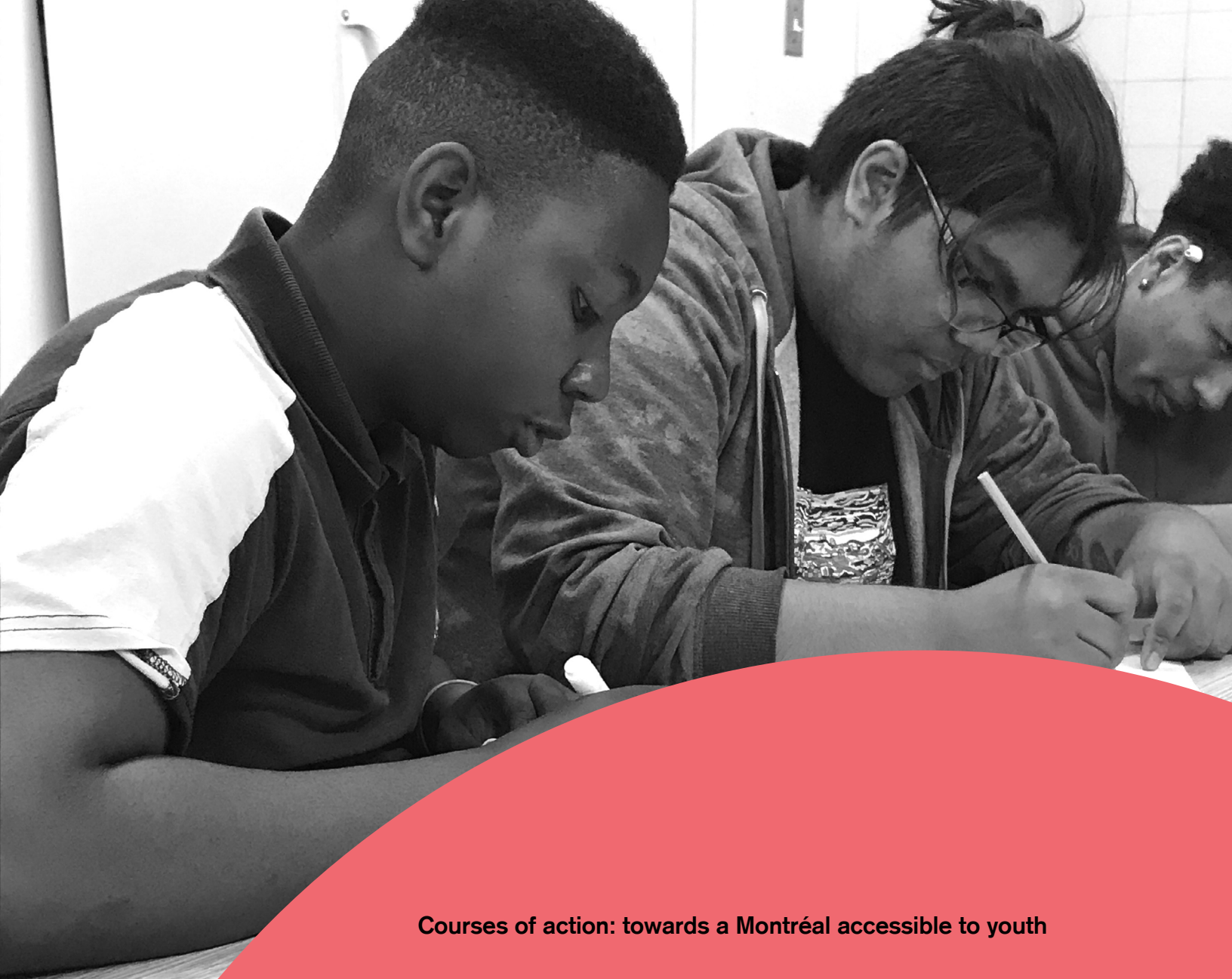
GIRL, 14,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

"I like the subway, no need to take the bus, and you can go to community organizations that help young people, parks, libraries, or La Ronde to have fun."

BOY, 14, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTER

"We want to have a new metro in Chateauguay in the future, and we want trees and signs so that no one gets lost."

BOY, 9,
ST. WILLIBROD SCHOOL

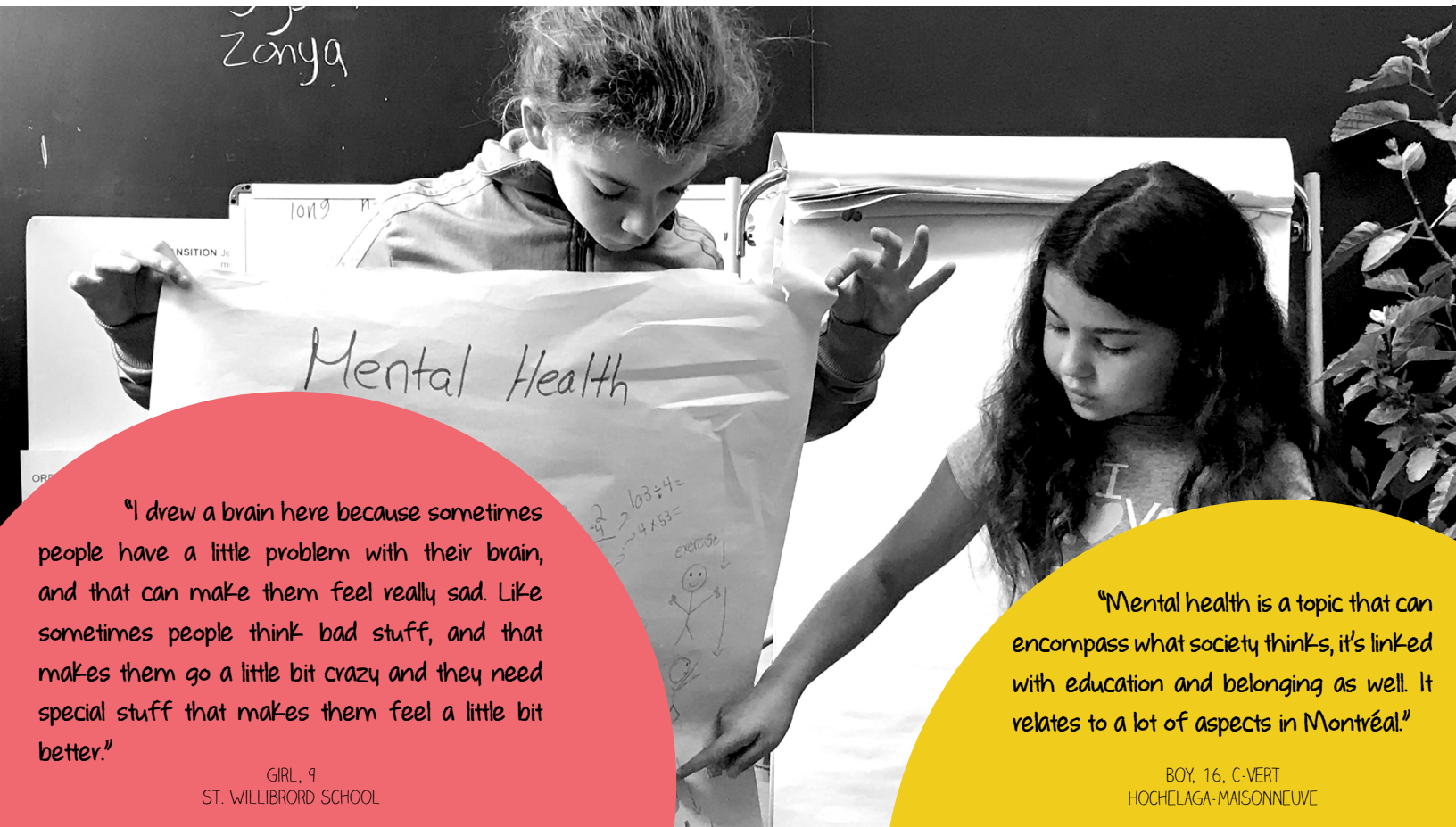


Courses of action: towards a Montréal accessible to youth

- Create environments that are conducive to and safe for walking and cycling, in both central and peripheral neighbourhoods
- Expand the availability of public transportation services (routes, frequency) and revise the fee structure with teens in mind
- Improve the experience of young people as public transit users, pedestrians, and cyclists, particularly by increasing the availability of intermodal options
- Create synergies with key actors in the everyday mobility of young people (drivers, the school, municipalities, parents) to improve its coherence

MENTAL HEALTH

STRESS AND DISTRESS AMONG MONTRÉAL YOUTH



"I drew a brain here because sometimes people have a little problem with their brain, and that can make them feel really sad. Like sometimes people think bad stuff, and that makes them go a little bit crazy and they need special stuff that makes them feel a little bit better."

GIRL, 9
ST. WILLIBRORD SCHOOL

"Mental health is a topic that can encompass what society thinks, it's linked with education and belonging as well. It relates to a lot of aspects in Montréal."

BOY, 16, C-VERT
HOCHÉLAGA-MAISONNEUVE

Introduction

The meetings we had with the young participants in our study showed that mental health is a theme of concern and, contrary to what we believed, is one that stimulates open dialogue. In talking about stress and psychological distress as a starting point, the youth described a feeling of general malaise affecting several aspects of their lives: school, family, and even their peer groups.

Bullying has proven to be a widespread phenomenon with many faces, not only among our participants but also among their peers, who we also talked to during our project. The number of young people who face bullying on an everyday basis surprised us all.

The comments made during our discussions with the youth do show that there is a collective awareness about mental health problems and the need for intervention. The youth share a desire to act, specifically by breaking isolation through reinforcing connections among young people and leveraging more empathetic relationships with adults.

Mental health as described by the youth

To be alone in the face of stress-related problems

The various groups of young people we met with insisted on one thing: they feel alone and vulnerable in a number of situations, whether it is when walking in the street, or facing difficulties at school, or simply in relating to others.

Indeed, the youths underscore the omnipresence of stress in various aspects of their lives. They describe different strategies for avoiding challenging situations, such as not being alone in the streets after nightfall or not going to certain places that are reputed to be unsafe (parks or areas around certain subway stations). Still, stress remains a pressing issue that creates a feeling of vulnerability, or even depression, among some youth. This feeling is exacerbated to the point where young people feel they are not being taken seriously, faced with problems normalized by adults.

In talking to the youth, we came to understand that they want adults to be more empathetic. They would like for us to put ourselves in their place in order to understand that the stress they live with is real and has a negative impact on their lives.



"I already feel a high level of stress during exams. I'm also shy when I have to present or do something in front of a lot of people."

GIRL, 13,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

"I know a lot of people who were afraid to say they were being bullied and felt like they were living in a vicious circle because if they talked about it, it would fall back on them and it would just keep happening, so they just kept quiet and waited for it to pass."

GIRL, 15, C-VERT
HOCHÉLAGA-MAISONNEUVE

"I live in Anjou. What I don't like are the fights, the attacks against defenseless people. I like when children and residents live in peace. When there's no bullying, aggression or violence."

BOY,
CENTRE FRANÇOIS-MICHELLE

When difference adds to distress

A sense of well-being can vary according to "external" factors (such as the neighbourhood), but also to individual factors such as sex, sexual orientation, physical abilities or socio-economic status. Through our discussions with the youth, we concluded that girls find themselves under particularly stressful circumstances relating to their physical appearance. A number of participants indicated that they have a difficult relationship with their bodies in a context where the media presents and perpetuates rather non-inclusive beauty standards. This often results in negative body image and an experience of discrimination that erodes their self-esteem and generates a feeling of distress, at times quite acute.

Young people with disabilities feel especially vulnerable, worried about being attacked or bullied in public places. This is evidence of a type of generalized space for bullying, felt by young people not only at school and its surroundings, but also in other places and at different times. Some youths even talked about situations where constant bullying at school led to dropping out, resulting in isolation and depression.

"There are a lot of young people who are unhappy with their physical appearance, especially girls. And society influences a lot of young people, like media manipulation, how we need to be, how we need to look so that we're like everyone else."

BOY,
PROJET SEUR

"I know a lot of young people who drop out, especially in underprivileged neighbourhoods like Montréal-Nord. They don't have a choice because they have to work."

BOY, 15, SAINT COLUMBA HOUSE
COMMUNITY CENTRE

The weight of a rigid and imposing framework

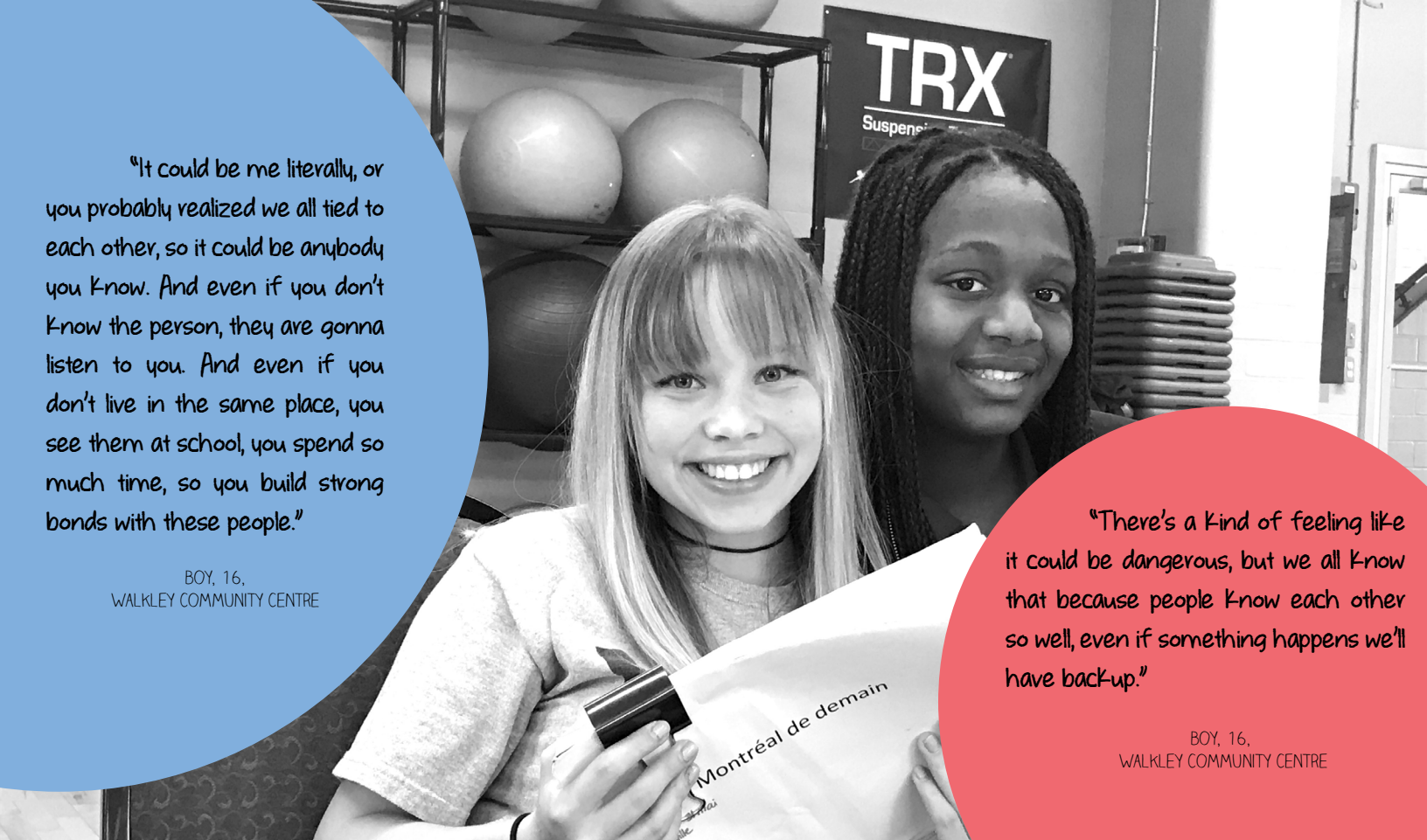
Our discussions with the youth highlighted that they feel a lot of pressure from those around them (particularly adults) about what they should be. The framework weighs on them to such an extent that it does not leave room for the diversity of young people, of their aspirations or the ways in which they would like to be seen. Our participants talked about norms in physical appearance, which they do not yet understand but that they nevertheless subject themselves to: for boys, it's having "abs," and for girls, it's being "proportional." In some cases, the youth are so unhappy with their bodies that they would like to change them. For others, the inability to conform to beauty standards, and the absence of support to help them overcome these issues and accept themselves, translates into real psychological distress.

These feelings and behaviours are indicative of anxieties that are embedded in young people and society as a whole. As noted with regard to the other topics (presented in the other information sheets), young people feel crushed by a rigid framework that is not very inclusive and seeks to create uniformity: girls who look like models, robot citizens. The powerlessness felt in the face of such frameworks, over which young people have no control, seems to feed an everyday stress and at times cause distress.



"I think it's a lot of weight on our shoulders. You know, you look at yourself in the mirror and you're not happy with what you see, you always want to change something, you're never really happy with what you have. I think it's also a cause of depression in girls, they hate themselves so much physically to the point where they want to change."

GIRL, 16, C-VERT
HOCHELAGA MAISONNEUVE



"It could be me literally, or you probably realized we all tied to each other, so it could be anybody you know. And even if you don't know the person, they are gonna listen to you. And even if you don't live in the same place, you see them at school, you spend so much time, so you build strong bonds with these people."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

"There's a kind of feeling like it could be dangerous, but we all know that because people know each other so well, even if something happens we'll have back-up."

BOY, 16,
WALKLEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

Friend circles: a protective and supportive environment

Despite the rather worrisome statements made with regard to youth mental health, our initiative helped us to understand the importance of community spaces as protective environments that help young people to feel less alone and more supported. Through various recreational activities, the young participants share their experiences and their challenges and use each other to be able to confront their problems. The feeling of solidarity and community that reigns in such environments is particularly reassuring, as described by participants from all corners of the city. Evidently, such gatherings contribute to fostering a sense of inclusion and pride, which causes young people to feel important in their communities and become engaged.

The youths acknowledge the need for adult support in the improvement of their well-being. Still, in the absence of sufficient professional support, young people often rely on their peers and benefit from networks they create at school and beyond.

Youth also value the support of their neighbours, whether they are in central or suburban neighbourhoods. For youth living in more underprivileged areas, the bonds among neighbours seem to be particularly important in terms of support against the risks of bullying and distress.

"I like mandalas, it helps you when you feel stressed out. After school with my friends, we always do mandalas. We like them."

GIRL, 9,
ST. WILLIBRORD SCHOOL



Courses of action: towards a healthier Montréal for youth

- Develop listening mechanisms in order to improve understanding of the issues and difficulties faced by youth and be better equipped to intervene
- Improve access to mental health resources (counsellors, aid workers, nurses, psychologists)
- Involve youth in the creation of media images that are more representative of them
- Promote media images that emphasize the value of difference and diversity among youth rather than uniformity
- Create more public awareness about bullying, stress and other dimensions of the lives of youth that have an effect on their mental health (including their sexuality)

Conclusion: towards a youth-friendly Greater Montréal

The project we undertook with the youth of the Greater Montreal region has shown the importance and necessity of listening to their needs. Age, gender, place of residence and ethnic origin are all contributing factors that shape their experience and appreciation of Montréal and the resources it has to offer. Through their words, their drawings, their role plays and their projects, these young people paint a rich and nuanced portrait of their life in the city, complementing the quantitative depiction found in the report entitled *Vital Signs of Greater Montréal's Children* (2017). Here are a few key findings that emerged from the initiative:

- **Ambivalence towards Montréal.** The comments from the youth revealed that they have an appreciation for the metropolis (especially in comparison to other cities) but also feel a certain malaise, a sense of exclusion linked to the lack of welcoming spaces adapted to their needs, preferences and aspirations.
- **Links between space, identity and environment.** In listening to what the youth had to say, we are able to understand the importance of their relationship to certain places, often very specific and well-located. Life in a given environment influences how young people behave, dress and interact with others. Their place within their community has repercussions on their identity, their feeling of belonging and their involvement.
- **Interdependence between the facets of young lives.** From a youth perspective, the themes discussed are deeply connected, even indistinguishable. Mental health, for example, is contingent upon the school system, which is perceived to be rigid, stressful and homogenizing. Mobility options have an impact on the school experience as well as on connections to the neighbourhood and sense of belonging. This observation highlights the inherent risk of work being done in silos and the compartmentalization of collective action done on behalf of children.
- **The impression that adults do not take them into account.** Regardless of the theme, the youth complained about adults' lack of consideration. They agree that communication with adults is weak and difficult. Young people feel misunderstood, stigmatized and often ignored, which contributes to a persistent feeling of isolation and a generational divide.
- **The importance of the community environment and peer groups for growth.** Confronted with the inflexibility of the many structures surrounding them, young people have an appreciation for community organizations, where they can form friendships with peers and establish connections with adults by playing active roles through collaboration and helping others. These spaces are seen as real sanctuaries, facilitating discoveries about themselves and their surroundings while encouraging growth through rewarding and engaging participation.

For Greater Montreal to adapt to the needs and aspirations of young people in the spirit of “child-friendly cities,” what is required are efforts to encourage and create spaces where youths can express themselves, share and create. This involves creating opportunities and offering various channels and forms of expression that will allow young people to discover their voice, share their viewpoints on challenges, and propose solutions for creating the Montréal they want. A city shaped in the image of its children and teenagers can only be the result of a collective, daily, engaged effort to make Montréal a better city for everyone.

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