

CLASS CONSCIOUS

In what has become a long-standing tradition, parents line up outside Royal Vale School on Sunday hoping for a chance to register their children. “It’s a strong social environment and the quality of the education is great,” one mother told Katherine Wilto

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Tara Kleen and her husband, Marc Perez, knew they had found the right elementary school for their daughter Myriam when they attended the open house at Royal Vale School last fall.



They loved the enriched math and science program, the school’s cultural activities and its music and art programs.

“It’s a strong social environment and the quality of the education is great,” Kleen said on Monday.

But ensuring Myriam obtained one of the coveted spots at the N.D.G. elementary school would come with a price.

One of the parents would have to line up outside the school in the middle of winter to guarantee their daughter received one of the 32 kindergarten spots.

While Kleen stayed home with their three children, a warmly dressed Perez turned up at 1 a.m. Sunday and discovered he was 24th in line. Some parents began lining up about 10 a.m. on Saturday.

Perez said the parents were extremely cold overnight Sunday when the temperature plummeted to -20 C. He was forced to retreat to his car to warm up and take a nap.

“It was tough, a snowstorm came out of nowhere,” Perez said.

But he and the other parents distracted themselves for a few hours by watching the Super Bowl, which Perez had streamed on his computer.

On a Facebook group for N.D.G. parents, offers were made for deliveries of coffee, home-made cookies and use of a nearby bathroom. Lineup alumni spoke of the friendships they'd forged waiting in line in Februaries past and cheered on the new crew with positive messages.

Royal Vale is part of the English Montreal School Board and parents have been lining up for decades to obtain a kindergarten spot. About 800 children are enrolled, from kindergarten to Grade 11.

Perez said there was great camaraderie among parents who spent the weekend outside. "There were people from Switzerland, Pakistan and India," he said, all relatively new arrivals who had heard about Royal Vale's reputation.

Board spokesperson Michael Cohen said the EMSB has no plans to change the registration procedure at Royal Vale.

He said the lineup is a parent driven initiative and he said parents with whom he has spoken don't want the school to adopt a lottery for registration spots.

"The parents know if they show up early, they will likely get a spot," he said. "They don't like sleeping out but they prefer this system. A lottery can mean their child doesn't get in."

Cohen said some parents are attracted to the school because of its Hebrew program and its extensive list of extracurricular activities.

Royal Vale has open boundaries, which means parents living in other areas of Montreal can send their children to the school provided they drive them. The school has no busing. When the doors finally opened just after 6 a.m. Monday, some Royal Vale parents were on hand with coffee and doughnuts for frigid parents.

Perez said he broke down when the principal finally called number 24 just after 8 a.m.

"I started crying," he said. "We set our minds to it and we made it. We beat the elements."