

# Montreal's English school network opens doors to French students

To ease overcrowding, the Lester B. Pearson board will welcome immigrant students at two of its West Island high schools in January.

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Catherine Harel-Bourdon, head of the Commission scolaire de Montréal, says more schools will need to be built to accommodate the 5,000 new students the CSDM is expecting over the next five years. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The Lester B. Pearson School Board is planning a warm welcome for French-language students who

will attend classes at two of its high schools in January.

Most of the students who are being moved to [Riverdale and Lindsay Place high schools](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/french-school-board-might-borrow-lester-b-classrooms-to-relieve-overcrowding) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/french-school-board-might-borrow-lester-b-classrooms-to-relieve-overcrowding>) are immigrants enrolled in French integration classes with the Commission scolaire Margueurite-Bourgeois.

The move to the anglophone schools is necessary because of [severe overcrowding at the French school board](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/overflowing-francophone-schools-will-use-space-in-anglophone-network) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/overflowing-francophone-schools-will-use-space-in-anglophone-network>) on the [West Island](https://domain.com/tag/west-island) (<https://domain.com/tag/west-island>).

“It’s not going to be us versus them — they’re all students and we are all Quebecers,” said Carol Heffernan, the Pearson board’s assistant director general.

“We have desks for the kids but we still have to coordinate the schedules like when buses will arrive, gym period and the cafeteria times.”

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge said Tuesday he wants to see more co-operation between English and French boards to help solve overcrowding issues in French schools.

The CSMB’s high schools are so crowded that 60 new immigrants are receiving French instruction starting at 3:30 p.m., after classes in some schools are dismissed.

About 12 of the board’s 14 high schools are full and the board is operating 123 classes above its capacity.

“What is not acceptable is to have jammed schools, schools where there is no place to deliver professional services, with no cafeterias, no computer room or library and, a kilometre away, a school with five, six, 15 or 20 classes empty,” Roberge said.

The principal of Riverdale High School said the new students will use six classes at the high school in Pierrefonds.

“We want them to feel welcome; we want them to feel like part of the school,” Mat Canavan said. “We can give them a hallway with six classrooms and an

office so they can be together in that spot.”

He has notified parents and said he hasn't receive any negative comments.

“The bottom line is they're all kids and we are all professionals,” Canavan said. “It will be nice to have life in the building with more students.”

To ease overcrowding problems in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, the Commission scolaire de Montréal is renting Place Borden, a former seniors residence that used to belong to the English Montreal School Board. The school is on the same piece of land as École Marc Favreau, which is full, said Alain Perron, a spokesperson for the CSDM.

The CSDM does not need other space in EMSB schools this school year, Perron said.

Over the past few years, the CSDM has had three pre-K classes at Ste-Dorothy, an EMSB elementary school in St-Michel and the sharing of space is working out well, Perron said.

But Catherine Harel-Bourdon, head of the CSDM, said sharing schools with the anglophone sector is not as simple as it sounds. Some English schools that are half empty need major renovations and would not be able to accommodate her students. Other English schools that are in neighbourhoods where the CSDM is facing overcrowding are already full. And some English schools in the east end of Montreal are in a territory covered by another school board.

Ultimately, Quebec needs to construct new schools to accommodate the 5,000 new students the CSDM is expecting over the next five years, Harel-Bourdon said. “That's not counting immigration or residential development.”

The EMSB says it's open to sharing space with the CSDM, but only if classes are not needed for its own students, said board spokesperson Michael Cohen.

The EMSB offered the CSDM St. Raphael School in the north end, but the French board turned down the offer.

Although Quebec's Education Act stipulates governing boards must be consulted about sharing space, the government has the power to pass a law that would allow for the transfer of school buildings between boards.

When Premier François Legault was education minister in 2000, his government gave Emily Carr Elementary School to the CSDM and forced its students to share a school with Francesca Cabrini Elementary School, which is now Pierre Elliott Trudeau. The decision, which was made to solve overcrowding problems in Rosemont, led to a court challenge and caused acrimony among the English parents because the decision was announced two weeks before classes began.

Cohen said the education minister must understand it's important to consult parents about changes to schools. "We are willing to help but there has to be a process in place," he said.

Roberge said sharing space is temporary, and that the long-term solution is a better distribution of schools between the francophone and anglophone networks.

Eventually, he said, a permanent transfer of some buildings could happen, but such an operation would have to take place "in a respectful manner for both networks."

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