

Cohabiting a better option to reduce French school overcrowding: EMSB chair

Pearson parents would never accept a move to R.D.P., governing board chair says

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Among possible solutions, EMSB chairperson Angela Mancini has suggested having overcrowded French schools "cohabitate" with EMSB schools to provide classroom space. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

While some English Montreal School Board commissioners are proposing [a swap of high schools](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-commissioners-to-propose-high-school-swap-instead-of-transfers) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-commissioners-to-propose-high-school-swap-instead-of-transfers>) to reduce overcrowding at east-end French schools, the board's chairperson maintains that cohabiting is a better short-term solution.

Sharing space at four EMSB schools would give the Commission Scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île 63 classrooms for next September and allow the EMSB to hang on to its buildings, Angela Mancini said on Monday morning.

Although the CSPI has said they need 156 classrooms, neither Education Minister Jean-François Roberge nor the CSPI expects the EMSB to give up 156 classrooms for the next school year, Mancini said.

"The urgency is for September 2019, so we have to try to help them out and if they were to build new schools, we would possibly never lose our schools. They're looking for us to alleviate some of the pressure in their schools."

On Sunday, the EMSB's vice-chair, Joe Ortona, and parent commissioner Pietro Mercuri floated the idea of swapping Lester B. Pearson High School in Montreal North with École secondaire Jean Grou, a CSPI school in Rivière-des-Prairies, where about 70 per cent of Pearson students live.

The commissioners say the swap would free up 1,000 student places and could allow the EMSB to hang on to three schools that [Roberge is threatening to transfer](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-government-tells-emsb-it-wants-to-take-three-schools) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-government-tells-emsb-it-wants-to-take-three-schools>): Gerald McShane Elementary and John Paul 1 Junior High School in St-Léonard and General Vanier Elementary in Montreal North.

Roberge has given the board [a June 10 deadline](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-has-a-deadline-to-save-east-end-schools-education-minister-says) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-has-a-deadline-to-save-east-end-schools-education-minister-says>) to propose other solutions.

Benny Berneti, the chairperson of the LBP governing board, said his parents were furious on Sunday after reading about the proposed swap on the Gazette's website.

"When I turned on my phone after my shift, I had 113 texts and emails from parents and staff members asking what's going on," he said. "I would never want to move my school to R.D.P."

Berneti said rumours about a swap have been circulating for the past two weeks and he blasted Ortona and Mercuri for raising the issue in the media without first consulting LBP's governing

board.

"You're putting stuff out there without consulting myself, my members or the school," he said. "We have been around for 40 years and have a great Sport-Études program. Why break something that's going so well?"

He said the school's capacity is 1,500 students, not the 2,000 places that Ortona claims.

"If the minister really wanted our building, he would have mentioned it a long time ago," he said.

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Berneti said he would have to speak to his fellow governing board members and parents before saying whether they would be open to sharing space with French students.

Mancini said she's not sure that Jean Grou parents would support a swap because their children would have to travel from R.D.P. to Montreal North.

She said she's open to other solutions and said commissioners will have to listen to suggestions from parents.

"If the community says they would prefer having the transfer of a building and reinforce the other schools, that's something we will have to take a look at," she said.

Mancini said it's important that the EMSB maintain its footprint in the east end, but acknowledged that cohabiting would be more difficult logistically than having Roberge transfer buildings.

"We're looking to find solutions that are not easy," she said.

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