

EMSB can't give up youth sector schools by September, board says

Commissioners at the English Montreal School Board are proceeding with a proposal to move 140 special-needs students from the Galileo Adult Education Centre.

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Parents and students of Galileo Adult Education Centre attend a meeting at the English Montreal School Board office on April 10, 2019. CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Commissioners at the English Montreal School Board are ignoring suggestions from Quebec's education minister (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/education-minister-calls-out-emsb-over-school-transfers>) and are proceeding with a proposal to move 140 special-needs students (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/education-minister-is-playing-political-games-emsb-vice-chair-says>) from the Galileo Adult Education Centre.

The board is scheduled to hold a public consultation on May 16, and commissioners will likely vote on the move at a special board meeting on May 21.

The proposed move is part of an EMSB plan to help solve an overcrowding problem at the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île (CSPI), a French school board in the east end that needs 156 classrooms for the 2019-2020 school year.

But negative media coverage about the controversial move has unsettled some CSPI parents, and that board's chairperson has told the EMSB that the Galileo building (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-rally-wednesday-to-stop-emsb-from-moving-special-needs-school>) in Montreal North does not meet their needs.

Instead, it has requested that the EMSB transfer a youth sector school in St-Léonard for the fall of 2019 and transfer a second St-Léonard school in 2020. The CSPI has also requested a third school outside of the St-Léonard territory.

Dante, with about 256 students, and General Vanier, with about 190 students, are two EMSB elementary schools in St-Léonard with low enrolments.

The uncertainty over whether Education Minister Jean-François Roberge will transfer schools has caused panic among some anglophone parents who are worried that their child's school will be closed come September.

The EMSB cannot legally offer the CSPI a youth sector school for this fall, because the Education Act requires an 18-month consultation process on school closures, said Joe Ortona, the board's vice-chair. He said EMSB parents are not prepared to bypass the consultation process.

This means it's possible that Roberge may transfer EMSB schools to the CSPI to ensure that francophone students have enough classroom space in the east end next fall.

Although Ortona and other EMSB commissioners were elected on a promise not to close schools, he said he understands the situation on the ground has changed and that the French board desperately needs space.

"I think we have to be consulting our community," he said. "There's space there, and the CSPI needs space. Cohabitation is really not looking like a feasible option."

Roberge had given both boards a May 1 deadline to come up with a joint plan to solve the overcrowding problem, but so far the EMSB has only offered Galileo, which has a Social Integration Services Program for adults with special needs. "I don't expect we are going to have a joint plan," Ortona said.

The CSPI and Roberge's spokesperson did not want to comment on Wednesday.

The EMSB says it understands that moving special needs students can be difficult, but said several schools serving that population have made successful moves, including [the Mackay/Philip E. Layton school, which moved to a new building](https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/hanes-new-school-for-mackay-centre-philip-e-layton-a-labour-of-love) (<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/hanes-new-school-for-mackay-centre-philip-e-layton-a-labour-of-love>) in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce last fall.

The board is blaming commissioner Sylvia Lo Bianco for riling up Galileo parents by saying the commissioners had no plans to consult them and for giving a tour of the school to two National Assembly members, including the Liberal education critic.

Lo Bianco, Galileo's school commissioner, said it was her duty to inform parents about a proposal to transfer the program.

Frank Pettinicchio, a parent whose son attends Galileo, said the EMSB is forcing Roberge's hand by refusing to merge schools.

"They're going to force the minister to make a decision and they're going to look like they have been victimized," he suggested.

Pettinicchio said the board could free up space for French students in St-Léonard by merging John Paul I junior high with Laurier Macdonald High School.

"These are two schools that are half empty with the same program," he said. "Why aren't they being merged? We have a civic and moral duty to help the French on the other side."

Pettinicchio suggested politics could be behind the refusal to close youth sector schools in the EMSB. Several sources have told the Montreal Gazette that Patricia Lattanzio, the EMSB's commissioner for St-Léonard, is planning to run for the federal Liberal party nomination in the Saint-Léonard-Saint-Michel riding and doesn't want to upset voters.

Lattanzio said she has not made a final decision on whether to seek the nomination. On Wednesday, Ortona denied rumours that he's interested in replacing Lattanzio at Montreal city hall if she makes the move to federal politics.

Parents in St-Léonard understand the French board needs classroom space, but they want to avail themselves of the 18-month public consultation process, Lattanzio said. "Each and every one of my schools (governing boards) has said that," she said.

Roberge has scheduled a conference call on Friday with senior representatives of both boards to discuss their plans.

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