

EMSB transfers: A new beginning for students, teachers and parents

As EMSB students return to school Tuesday, many will be housed in new buildings after their schools were transferred to a French school board

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John Paul 1 Junior High School principal Libby Amato, right, and vice-principal Véronique Carrié get ready for new school season in their new premises in the Laurier Macdonald High School building on Thursday, Aug. 29, 2019. **PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE**

In early July, two weeks after her students had left their school for the last time, Libby Amato was tasked with giving a tour to French school board administrators who would be taking it over.

During her 12 years as principal of John Paul 1 Junior High School, Amato has had countless meetings with parents, teachers and students. But her meeting with Antoine El-Khoury, the director general of the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île (CSPI), was among the most difficult.

The building was one of two schools that [Quebec's education minister transferred](https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/roberge-a-hard-decision-on-school-transfers) (https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/roberge-a-hard-decision-on-school-transfers) from the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) to the CSPI this summer, to help solve overcrowding problems in the east end. General Vanier Elementary School was the other.

During the tour, Amato tried to keep a stiff upper lip as she and two teachers showed off the school, which her students had left in pristine condition.

"They were thrilled they were getting the building — they kept saying: 'Oh, mon Dieu, c'est bien beau, c'est bien organisé,'" Amato recalled.

Despite his delight at obtaining a new building for a crowded high school in St-Léonard, El-Khoury was gracious and understood the awkwardness of the moment.

Amato managed to keep her emotions in check, but when she faltered, El-Khoury and his staff quickly acknowledged her pain.

"I'm so sorry this is happening; you have such a beautiful school," Amato recalled them saying.

The meeting with El-Khoury ended on a positive note.

"We didn't part as enemies, we parted as friends," she said. "All kids deserve a good place to learn."

Amato told El-Khoury that she and her staff would recreate the family-type atmosphere in their school's new building, which they will share with students at Laurier Macdonald High School.

So when John Paul 1 students start school on Tuesday, they will see many familiar faces. Along with Amato, the school's teachers, secretary and caretaker have also made the move to the building in St-Léonard. Students will be sitting in the same desks, while the canvas and wood murals that teachers and students had made together will still adorn the walls.

"When you walk into the building, it feels so familiar," Amato said of their new digs at Laurier Macdonald. "It feels like our home — just that we have changed our address."

The transfer of the two buildings has been a wake-up call for the English school community and has forced the EMSB to consider merging some of its low enrolment schools. Buildings that are no longer needed will be transferred to the CSPI or the Commission scolaire de Montréal, boards that are experiencing a surge in their student population, according to the EMSB's Long Range Planning Committee.

"The message was that our numbers are decreasing, immigrants have to go to French school and there is competition with private schools," Amato said. "It made everyone open their eyes and say let's look at our structures and our schools and maybe join schools to make a stronger community."

Parents and students react to EMSB school transfers



The emotional scenes at John Paul 1 will probably play out at other EMSB school in the coming year as the board prepares [to consolidate its school network](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/school-closings-mergers-will-be-focus-of-emsb-meeting-wednesday-night) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/school-closings-mergers-will-be-focus-of-emsb-meeting-wednesday-night>). Across its territory, the EMSB had eight elementary schools with fewer than 200 students during the last school year, according to the EMSB's enrolment numbers.

In order to have a say in which buildings it will retain, the board has launched [a Major School Change consultation](https://az184419.vo.msecnd.net/emsb/emsb-website/en/docs/2019-2020/consultations/3-emsb-major-school-change-consultation-2019-2020-1.pdf) (<https://az184419.vo.msecnd.net/emsb/emsb-website/en/docs/2019-2020/consultations/3-emsb-major-school-change-consultation-2019-2020-1.pdf>), that will affect schools in the northeast area of the EMSB territory that overlap with the CSPI. Some low-enrolment schools in St-Léonard, Montreal North, northern St-Michel, Anjou and Rivière-des-Prairies could close or be merged with other schools.

As part of the process, the EMSB Parents Committee, school governing boards, unions and borough officials will be consulted and asked for feedback.

The board may hold a town hall to hear from east-end parents before commissioners make final decisions in January.

In June, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge welcomed the EMSB's school change initiative, [saying he](https://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/articles/emsb-deeply-disappointed-with-decision-to-transfer-two-schools-to-cspi) (<https://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/articles/emsb-deeply-disappointed-with-decision-to-transfer-two-schools-to-cspi>), "hopes they will see it through so that this kind of crisis never happens again. We can all agree that empty classrooms benefit no one, and that we would all gain from a full review of the EMSB's real estate assets."

Like many east-end parents, [Maria Corsi was panicked](https://montrealgazette.com/news/emsb-proposes-major-changes-in-schools-parents-express-anger) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/emsb-proposes-major-changes-in-schools-parents-express-anger>), when she discovered in the spring that her children's school, Pierre de Coubertin Elementary School, was on a list of buildings that Roberge suggested could be transferred to the CSPI.

Corsi was unaware of the overcrowding issues at the French school board and was alarmed that English schools could be transferred so suddenly.

"I quickly realized this was only the beginning and in the long term they would be back for more (schools)," Corsi said.

In an attempt to contact and mobilize as many parents as possible, she created a Facebook page called [Save our East End Schools](https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Save-our-East-End-Schools-320817705481035/) (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Save-our-East-End-Schools-320817705481035/>).

"There was a lot of anxiety and people asking how did we get here," she recalled. "There was a lot of talk about Bill 101 because immigrants can't go to our schools (which has resulted) in dwindling numbers. That became a big topic of discussion and it was a wake-up call."

Although the campaign failed to halt the transfer of General Vanier and John Paul 1, the page created a forum for parents to ask questions, propose solutions and commiserate about the declining enrolment in English schools.

Parents react after EMSB special meeting



Between 2015 and 2019, the four elementary schools in St-Léonard — General Vanier, Dante, Honoré Mercier and Pierre de Coubertin — have seen their population drop from 1507 to 1266, a 16-per-cent decrease. As of last June, there were only 131 kindergarten students registered in the four schools.

Corsi said you don't have to look far to see how demographic changes in St-Léonard have contributed to low enrolment in English schools.

Many young Italian families have moved north to Laval and as the older generation passes on, the local parks are now full of immigrant children who are required by Quebec law to attend school in French.

An influx of refugees has also contributed to high enrolment at many French public schools. Last year, the CSPI had three elementary schools with 700 students and another with 1,000. At the same time, General Vanier had 197 students in a building with a capacity for 422.

Before children returned to school on Tuesday, the staff and parents at Pierre de Coubertin held a meet-and-greet so parents and students attending General Vanier could get to know each other.

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Although the schools will remain independent for the coming year, the students will share recess and hopefully participate in joint activities and projects, Corsi said.

"Nobody chose this situation, nobody chose to have their school transferred to the French sector," she said. "The kids have to come first no matter what."

Sue lasenzanaro has two children at General Vanier and said they're happy that their friends and teachers will be joining them at the Pierre de Coubertin building.

"They're a little nervous and are asking whether the other kids will be OK with them being there," she said.

lasenzanaro said that she is disappointed that EMSB commissioners kept low-enrolment schools open for so long, while many French schools were overcrowded.

"The problem was increasing slowly over the years," she said. "I have spoken to people who have children at French elementary schools and they constantly tell you how they're overloaded and bursting at the seams. We just wish it had been handled more proactively. Now, we have to be reactive."

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