

Education minister is playing political games, EMSB vice-chair says

After minister rejected proposal to cede space at the Galileo Adult Education Centre, EMSB has until Wednesday to come up with a new plan.

MICHELLE LALONDE, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/MICHELLELALONDE](https://montrealgazette.com/author/michellelalonde)) Updated: May 1, 2019



The education minister "seems to be playing this game where he ... doesn't want to tell me the right answer, he just wants to tell me my answer is wrong and to go back to the drawing board," EMSB vice-chair Joe Ortona said. *CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The vice-chair of the English Montreal School Board says Quebec's education minister is playing political games by rejecting the EMSB's offer to give underused space at a Montreal North adult education centre to a space-squeezed francophone board.

EMSB vice-chair Joe Ortona released a detailed timeline of events to the Montreal Gazette to show that ministry officials were well aware of the EMSB's proposal to give up about 75 per cent of the space at Galileo Adult Education Centre to the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'île (CSPI) since early February and were favourable to it in principle all along.

But in mid-April, after parents of [special needs adults at the school and opposition politicians raised concerns about the move](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-rally-wednesday-to-stop-emsb-from-moving-special-needs-school) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-rally-wednesday-to-stop-emsb-from-moving-special-needs-school>), Education Minister Jean-François Roberge [suddenly rejected the idea](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/education-minister-calls-out-emsb-over-school-transfers) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/education-minister-calls-out-emsb-over-school-transfers>).

"The minute he started to get tough questions about it, he came out and said this wasn't his idea and he didn't know and this shouldn't be on the table. But actually the ministry knew since February, because they were calling us every two or three days to ask us how the discussions were going with CSPI."

Ortona notes the minister has the power under the Education Act to choose which schools should be transferred from one board to another for space reasons, but doesn't seem to want to make the hard decisions, after the backlash over [his decision to transfer Riverdale High School](https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-to-close-riverdale-high-school-building-will-go-to-francophone-system) (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-to-close-riverdale-high-school-building-will-go-to-francophone-system>), in Pierrefonds to a francophone board.

"He seems to be playing this game where he ... doesn't want to tell me the right answer, he just wants to tell me my answer is wrong and to go back to the drawing board," Ortona said.

Ortona said ministry officials instructed the EMSB in December to make proposals to help the CSPI, which needs 156 new classrooms by August 2019 to meet demand. Meetings between EMSB and CSPI officials began in January.

Hoping to keep as many of its elementary and high schools intact as possible, the EMSB came up with a proposal to turn over space currently occupied by the Galileo Adult Education Centre in Montreal North to the CSPI, which would free up about 60 classrooms.

Galileo has a Social Integration Services Program (SIS) for about 140 adults who experience difficulties of a psychological, intellectual, social or physical nature. The school also offers basic French and English language courses and high school completion courses to adults, as well as a satellite campus of the Rosemount Technology Centre, which offers vocational training to adults.

The idea was to move most of Galileo's programs to EMSB facilities in the east end. The SIS students and the Basic English program would be moved to the St-Pius X Centre, four kilometres away, and the academic program could move to a school in St-Michel. The building has the capacity to accommodate 1,075 full-time students. In the 2017-2018 academic year, it had the equivalent of 500 full-time students.

Ortona said ministry officials were made aware of the proposal on Feb. 8 and "seemed pleased." They asked at that time whether the EMSB could offer additional space at some of its east end elementary or high schools.

The EMSB director general responded that the board is required by law to hold an 18-month public consultation before moving any youth sector school, so this would not meet the CSPI's urgent needs for space by August. Moving an adult education centre like Galileo, however, only requires a 30-day consultation period, and that proposal would give 57 classrooms to the CSPI.

On March 18, EMSB Chair Angela Mancini, vice-chair Ortona, and director general and deputy director general met with their CSPI counterparts and finalized the proposal to transfer part of the Galileo Centre building to the CSPI, Ortona said.

The council voted to launch a 30-day consultation process about the Galileo Centre proposal on April 10.

But ministry officials have now told the two school boards to submit a new plan by Wednesday, to be discussed with the minister on Friday. Ortona said that will be difficult, since closing elementary or high schools require an 18-month consultation with the community.

The Galileo plan is the "only proposal that would give the CSPI a building by September, which they so desperately need, and still it's the only proposal the minister says no to."

"The minister wants us to basically give up a school (by September), which legally we cannot do, to avoid the political backlash of him taking a school that he legally can."

Meanwhile, a petition is circulating on Facebook asking the education minister to build an English language public high school in the borough of Rivière-des-Prairies—Pointe-aux-Trembles or give the EMSB a building to service the needs of the EMSB students who live in that borough.

The EMSB has three English language elementary schools in RDP—PAT with 1,400 students in the borough, but no English language high school. The petition notes that the anglophone students who go to those schools must travel to Montreal North, St-Léonard or Rosemont to attend English high schools.

Ortona supports the idea of the EMSB swapping one of its larger underused school buildings for one of the CSPI's smaller, overcrowded schools.

"The school is more important than the building. If the school stays open, but in a smaller building in the same neighbourhood, I think that's better than losing the school and displacing the kids, and then the English community loses its footprint in those communities."

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