

# French immersion, robotics and flexible seating boost EMSB enrolment

After closing 18 schools in the last 20 years, the board now plans to open a new elementary school in N.D.G. by 2020-21.

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Updated: January 8, 2019



Grade 5 students use alternative seating arrangements at Edinburgh School in Montreal West. ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE

During the five years Michael Rodger's son has attended Edinburgh School, the administration has had to be creative in finding classrooms to accommodate a surge in enrolment at the popular French immersion school in Montreal West.

The library lost half its space, music classes are held on a stage in the gym and the science teacher no longer has a classroom, so walks from class to class pushing a cart full of experiments.

Teachers can only use the staff room during lunch hour because it's often occupied by students receiving tutoring.

"The demand for a French immersion program has skyrocketed and parents are clamouring for places," said Rodger, chairperson of the school's governing board.

"We have had to turn away students. Our official capacity is 330 and we are near 400."

While Rodger says the right decision was made to accommodate as many students as possible, the space crunch is not sustainable in the long term, especially with the aging building requiring renovations, he said.

To find more space for students within Edinburgh's boundaries, parents have asked the English Montreal School Board to open an annexe at Mountainview School, a seven-minute walk from Edinburgh in neighbouring Côte-St-Luc.

The EMSB has not made a final decision but has come up with another solution that would have been unthinkable years ago.



Nine-year-old Dante Delabastide-Saltarelli uses a stationary bicycle desk at Edinburgh School in Montreal West.  
*ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

After closing 18 schools over the past 20 years because of declining enrolment, the board is planning to open a new elementary school (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/n-d-g-alternative-schools-to-make-way-for-francais-plus-primary>), in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce by 2020-21. It will offer students more French instruction than they would receive in a French immersion school.

Students who enrol in the new program, Français Plus, will receive French instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 4, two years more than in French immersion, and receive 50 per cent

English and French in Grades 5 and 6.

The board hopes the new school will interest parents whose children are attending crowded French immersion schools in the west end or French public schools, said Joseph Lalla, the school commissioner for Montreal West and N.D.G.

"I'm getting inquiries every two or three days — it's very encouraging," he said of the school, which will be located in a former elementary school on Coronation Ave. near Somerled Ave.

The building houses two alternative high schools and the board is proposing that those students move to James Lyng High School in St-Henri.

Problems with overcrowding (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/french-schools-are-overcrowded-but-these-mobile-classrooms-might-help>), which have plagued Montreal's French elementary schools for years, are now surfacing in some EMSB French immersion schools in the west end.

Merton School in Côte-St-Luc is over capacity, Willingdon School in N.D.G. is almost full and Roslyn School in Westmount (<https://domain.com/tag/westmount>) is packed.

In an effort to boost enrolment at its elementary schools, the EMSB has updated its academic programs by introducing robotics and emphasizing science in some of its schools (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/new-way-of-teaching-picks-up-steam-in-emsb-schools>).

Two years ago, the board launched a publicity campaign to promote the benefits of bilingualism. The slogan — "Être bilingue, c'est gagnant!" — has been displayed outside schools and from EMSB buildings to try to persuade parents to choose its schools over French schools.

Parents also love the sense of community and parental involvement that exists in many English elementary schools, said Mauro Zampini, the principal at Edinburgh.

"Many young families have moved into the area and the majority of kids walk to school," said Zampini. The French immersion program is successful and the students do very well when they write the ministry exams."



Students in a Grade 5 French class use alternative seating arrangements at Edinburgh School in Montreal West.  
*ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

A lack of classroom space meant Edinburgh only opened two kindergarten classes this school year. With siblings getting priority, there were only 12 places available when registration opened last February. To secure some of the coveted spots, parents began camping outside the school the night before registration.

“The first campers arrived at 10 p.m. and it was very cold,” Zampini recalled, adding that about 46 people camped overnight. “Some stayed so they could get on the waiting list. You can imagine how disappointed they were, especially when they live so close.”

Several students who failed to get a spot were offered busing to Willingdon School.

“There is a lady who lives across the street from (Edinburgh) and her child is bused to Willingdon,” Zampini said.

He said he expects parents to camp out again in February for registration. Parents have been camping [outside Royal Vale School \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-camp-out-at-royal-vale-school-for-precious-kindergarten-spots\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-camp-out-at-royal-vale-school-for-precious-kindergarten-spots) for years, but last February was the first time it happened at Edinburgh.

Apart from updating their academic programs by emphasizing robotics or science, many EMSB schools are paying increased attention to the physical and emotional needs of children, said Rosana Caplan, the principal at Merton School.

“There’s an increase in use of mindfulness and children are not required to be sitting at their desks all day,” she said.

Many schools have adopted flexible seating, which allows students to use a bicycle or standup desk, sit in a wobbly chair or work on a floor mat.

She credits the EMSB for “encouraging professional development and directing budgets to the right places.”

This has resulted in increased technology in public schools and more services for students with special needs, such as new software that helps them read and write, or the use of noise-cancelling headphones.

“They did the right thing in looking how we can improve our practices and make public schools places where people want to be,” she said.

Merton School has 325 students this school year, up from 287 when Caplan arrived three years ago.

She expects she won't be able to accommodate all the students who hope to attend Merton next year.

Kindergarten registration at the EMSB is Feb. 4-8. Sibling registration is the week before.

The proposal to open a new Français Plus school will be discussed at a special board meeting on Jan. 9. A final decision will be made Jan. 16.

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