

No end in sight for parents lining up overnight for school spots

Instead of a lottery system or online registration, parents say they want to retain control — and "if it means lining up early, so be it."

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A fire kept parents warm and the Super Bowl kept them entertained as they prepared to camp out overnight for a coveted kindergarten spot at Royal Vale in N.D.G. on Sunday. *PETER MCCABE / MONTREAL GAZETTE*


The annual February spectacle of parents lining up overnight in the snow to enrol their children in kindergarten is likely to endure, due to current issues with overcrowding and the will of parents, the English Montreal School Board says.

Officials hope that opening a new school annex will alleviate the overcrowding issue at some of the schools.

Normally a phenomenon reserved mainly for Royal Vale School, where parents have been queuing for 30 years, lineups sprouted outside at least five west-end schools over the weekend

— Edinburgh, Merton, Royal Vale, Gardenvue and Willingdon.

Parents shivered in the snow and freezing rain or idled in their cars to ensure their children would get one of the 17 to 40 spots remaining in each school's French-immersion kindergarten classes. Some parents at Edinburgh and Royal Vale camped out for three nights.

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"All schools in the west end, they're in the same boat as the French boards are — all schools are full, or nearly full," EMSB spokesman Mike Cohen said Tuesday. "They're bursting at the seams."

The lineups have spurred questions over whether the board should alter its registration process. The EMSB will review its system, as it does every year, Cohen said. But the process is largely decided by the governing board of each school, and past experience has shown parents opt for lineups.

Popular for its extracurricular activities and specialized science, math and Hebrew offerings, Royal Vale has 480 spots in its elementary school. Unlike most of the 35 mainstream elementary and 16 high schools in the board, Royal Vale has no boundaries, meaning anyone from Montreal can enrol their children, creating a wider pool of possible applicants. Last weekend a mini-tent camp housing nearly 40 people sprouted on the front grounds, with people huddling around a camp fire and watching the Super Bowl projected onto a white blanket.

"Every year we go to the principal and the governing board, they discuss (the lineups), and they decide to opt for the status quo," Cohen said. "Because the only real alternative is the lottery; beyond that, there are no real options."

This year and last were exceptional in that parents had to line up for three nights. But even after last year's wait, the school's governing board chose to stay with lining up because it gives determined parents the ability to choose by acting, as opposed to leaving it up to chance with a lottery system.

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"When the topic comes up, it seems that parents prefer to have control over their children's education," said principal Nathalie Lacroix-Maillette. "They want to be able to make the decision. If it means lining up early, so be it."

Using an online registration system was rejected as well, she said, because it would only award those lucky enough to get through in the first few seconds or minutes after the registration period opened, akin to fans vying for rock concert tickets.

Royal Vale had 40 spots available in its elementary school this year, as compared to 29 last year.

The board has proposed moving students out of the nearly empty Coronation School in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce and using that as an annex (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-wont-open-new-school-but-offers-plan-to-ease-west-end-overcrowding>) for one of the schools that is dealing with overcrowding. The board has proposed either Merton, Willingdon or Edinburgh use it as a junior campus for kindergarten to Grade 2. Students in Grade 3 to 6 would remain in the existing school, which means siblings could be separated.

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Nearly 400 parents at Edinburgh, in Montreal West, signed a petition saying they do not want that option, preferring to have modular classes installed or a school extension to keep children together. They say the school board should have addressed their overcrowding issues years ago.

The board has responded that modular classes are expensive and hard to attain.

A decision regarding the annex and modular classes is expected on Feb. 20, Cohen said.

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