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Parent camp-outs torpedoed as EMSB moves to online kindergarten registration

The pandemic has forced the school board to come up with a new plan because it's unsafe to have parents chatting around a campfire, toasting marshmallows.

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette
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Over the years, parents shivered in the snow and freezing rain or idled in their cars to ensure their children would get a spot in the school's French-immersion kindergarten classes. Above: Sarah Tino camped out in front of Royal Vale School in February 2020. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

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The decades-old tradition of parents camping outside Royal Vale School mid-winter to obtain a coveted kindergarten spot for their child has been assigned to the scrap heap.

Royal Vale and four other elementary schools where parents have caught the sleepover bug, or queue up extremely early, is part of a pilot project that will give parents the opportunity to book a registration appointment online.



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the English Montreal School Board to come up with a new registration plan because it's unsafe to have parents chatting around a campfire, toasting marshmallows.

"It's the end of an era," Royal Vale's principal, Mauro Zampini, said on a bitterly cold Tuesday morning.

"We need to progress and move with the times. Not everybody had the opportunity to spend three days outside and have babysitters for their kids."

The online registration plan was presented to Royal Vale's governing board this month and parents agreed it was time to make a change.

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"Obviously, no one wants to be (sleeping) outside in the winter, especially given the COVID-19 situation," he said.

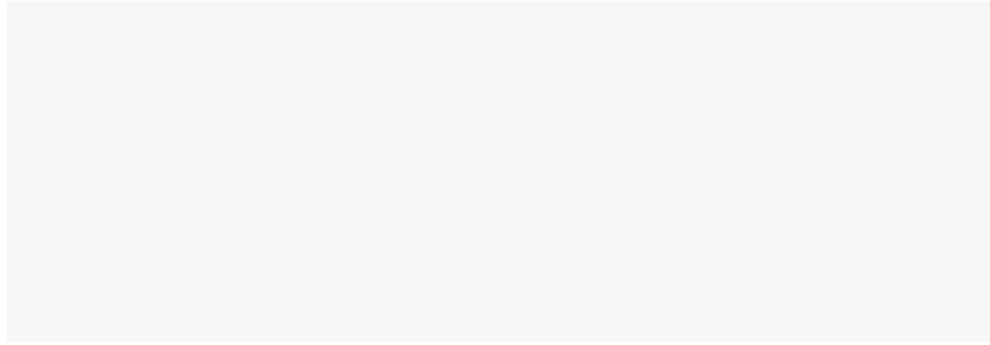
The other primary schools participating are: Merton in Côte-St-Luc, Edinburgh in Montreal West, Gardenview in St-Laurent and East Hill in Rivière-des-Prairies.

Parents can try to obtain an appointment to register starting Jan. 25 at 7 a.m. on the board's website. They will have to enter their names, address and their child's name.

Applications will be time-stamped and school officials will phone successful applicants a few days later with a designated appointment time to register their child the following Monday.

Kindergarten registration takes place from Feb. 1 to 5 at all other EMSB schools.

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The EMSB will install billboards on highways close to the schools to remind parents of the new procedure.

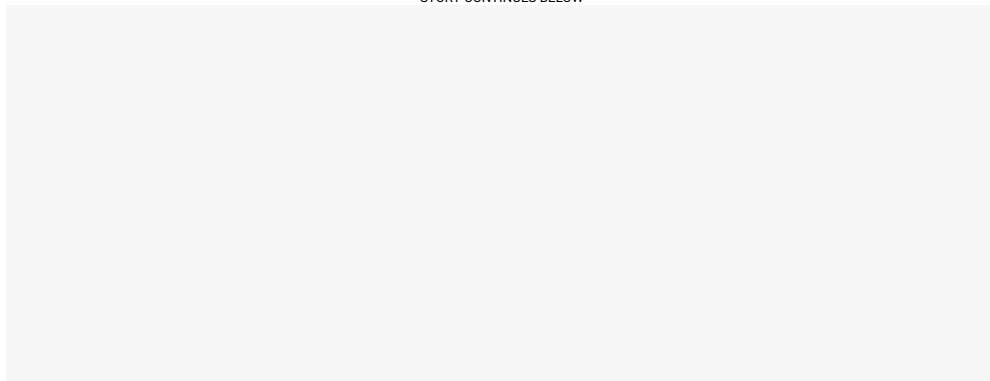
Parents have been queuing at Royal Vale School in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce for more than 40 years, drawn by a strong math and science program and popular after-school programs, such as a Jewish heritage class.

Royal Vale draws students from across Montreal because it doesn't have school boundaries.

Over the years, parents shivered in the snow and freezing rain or idled in their cars to ensure their children would get a spot in the school's French-immersion kindergarten classes.

More recently, the camp-outs have become more festive and technology has allowed football fans to stream the Super Bowl on Sunday night. Alumni would often turn up with hot chocolate and snacks to cheer them on and friendships were formed.

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But some single parents argued that the system was unfair because they were unable to stay overnight or had to work on weekends. In the early years, parents hired teenagers to reserve their place in the line.

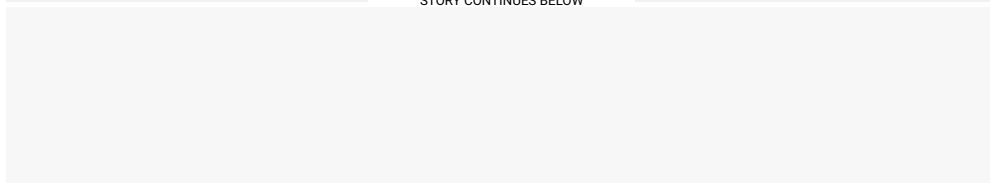
Board spokesperson Michael Cohen, who has worked at the EMSB for 22 years, said every year he would be inundated with phone calls from journalists asking when the board was going to change the registration procedure so parents wouldn't have to spend the weekend sleeping outdoors.

"The last few years, the calls started getting earlier and earlier, as soon as Friday," he said.

Every year, Cohen and his brother attend the Montreal Canadiens game on Super Bowl Sunday.

"Some years, I could barely watch the game because I was getting so many calls," he recalled.

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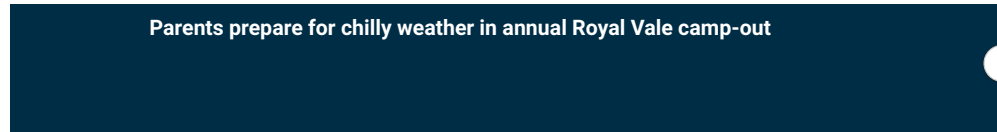
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The school board never felt the need to change the registration setup before the pandemic because Royal Vale parents were not lobbying for changes, said board chairperson Joe Ortona.

“This initiative was always parent driven and they policed their own sign-up list,” he said. “At a time we are discouraging social gatherings, I do not believe it would be prudent to have parents spending the weekend together in close quarters.”

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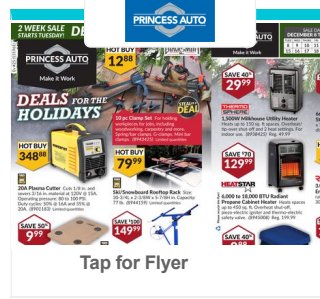
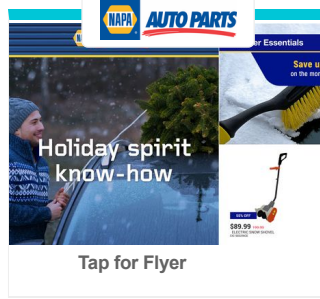
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