

Parents prepare for chilly weather in annual Royal Vale camp-out

Tents, propane stoves and maybe a screen to watch the Super Bowl will be in use as school's coveted kindergarten spots go up for grabs.

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On Feb. 3, 2019, parents keep warm with a fire, and watch the Super Bowl in front of École Royal Vale in Montreal in anticipation of getting a place for their children starting kindergarten. *PETER MCCABE / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Liz Ostroff has rented a warm sleeping bag and Alex Aronson will borrow a tent, propane stove and a car

from his brother.

Days before kindergarten registration begins at the English Montreal School Board, the couple are preparing for the annual camp-out outside Royal Vale Elementary School (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-camp-out-at-royal-vale-school-for-precious-kindergarten-spots>) to secure a coveted spot for their 4-year-old daughter.

For the past 30 years, parents have slept outside in the dead of winter (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/parents-camp-out-at-royal-vale-school-for-precious-kindergarten-spots>) to give their child the best chance at securing a place at the popular French immersion school in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

The school will have three kindergarten classes this fall with 20 students each. But with siblings of current students getting priority, camping out at the school is the best way to get a spot.

Royal Vale has open boundaries, which means it accepts students from across Montreal.

The increasing popularity of French immersion schools in the west end means the annual camp-out is no longer restricted to Royal Vale.

Last winter, nervous parents lined up overnight outside Edinburgh School in Montreal West, Merton School in Côte-St-Luc and Gardenvue School in St-Laurent.

The lineups have spurred questions over whether the board should alter its registration process (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/no-end-in-sight-for-parents-lining-up-overnight-for-school-spots>). But each school largely decides the process, and past experience has shown parents opt for lineups, board spokesperson Michael Cohen said.

“We don’t encourage this. It’s a parent-driven initiative,” he said.

Although Aronson is prepared to camp out to secure a spot for his daughter, he feels the system is unfair to single parents, people with disabilities and parents who have to work over the weekend.

“The lottery system would be better,” he said. “I have the resources to camp (but those who can’t) are basically disadvantaged,” he said. “Public services should be offered fairly.”



Parents wait in line outside the Royal Vale School to get a chance to register their children at the coveted school in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in Montreal on Feb. 5, 2017. *DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The EMSB has taken some steps that should make kindergarten enrolment easier at some schools. Willingdon School in N.D.G. has opened a senior campus so there's more space in the junior school on Terrebonne St.

Although Edinburgh recently inaugurated modular classrooms, there will be only two kindergarten classes next September. Siblings have already taken some of the places.

Ostroff has been scouting out elementary schools for about two years and initially thought her daughter would be overwhelmed by the size of Royal Vale, which has students from Kindergarten to Grade 11.

But a second visit last fall persuaded her that her daughter would thrive there. The school has excellent math and science programs, Hebrew studies, competitive sports teams and extensive after-school activities.

"As she became her own little person, I realized it's an excellent school for my daughter," she said.

Earlier this month, Ostroff started a Facebook page for prospective Royal Vale parents to co-ordinate the camp-out and to get to know each other.

Lineup alumni are encouraging parents to be ready sooner than later and have offered to stop by with coffee. “Dads and some of the moms are concerned about how they will watch the Super Bowl,” she said.

In previous years, a parent has streamed the Sunday-evening NFL championship game and projected it onto a blanket.

While the EMSB’s west-end elementary schools are thriving, enrolment in most of its east-end schools continues to decline.

The [board closed St-Dorothy Elementary School](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-to-close-three-schools-in-east-end-montreal)

(<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-to-close-three-schools-in-east-end-montreal>), this month and last year the Quebec government transferred General Vanier Elementary School to a French school board to address overcrowding issues.

The EMSB’s trustee, Marlene Jennings, has suggested the board develop a new marketing strategy to attract east-end parents to its schools.

Changing demographics and Bill 101, which forces immigrants to attend French schools, have contributed to the decline in enrolment in English schools in the east end.

At the Lester B. Pearson School Board, kindergarten registration began on Monday and an official said the feedback he received from principals has been positive.

The board is projecting an increase in its student population at elementary schools in neighbourhoods with young families, such as Pointe-Claire and off-island suburbs.

Schools in neighbourhoods with aging populations, like Kirkland and Pierrefonds, will see their numbers drop over the next few years, said Mathieu Canavan, the board’s assistant director of educational services.

Back in N.D.G., Aronson hopes to pitch his tent Saturday morning. But he will drive past the school Friday night to see whether some parents have arrived early.

When sibling registration ends on Friday, the administration will post the number of available spots at 4 p.m.

Ostroff said she hopes parents don't start camping out before Saturday.

"Three nights is excessive," she said. "(It would be better) if we can all have an extra night in our warm beds."

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