

# Quebec identifies three schools to be taken away from EMSB

"We count on you to rapidly inform the parents," Education Minister Jean-François Roberge says in a letter to chairperson Angela Mancini.

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EMSB commissioners are to hold a special meeting on school transfers on Monday. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE FILES*

The Quebec government has identified three schools in the east end of the island that it intends to take away from the English Montreal School Board to

## resolve an overcrowding problem at a French-language board.

In a letter that arrived at the EMSB on Thursday, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge says his government will order the transfer of General Vanier elementary school (<http://gvanierelem.emsb.qc.ca/about.asp>) and John Paul I junior high school (<http://www.johnpauli.emsb.qc.ca/about.html>) in St-Léonard and Gerald McShane elementary school (<http://www.geraldmcshane.emsb.qc.ca/>) in Montreal-North to the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île.

“Considering our current orientations, we count on you to rapidly inform the parents as well as the personnel of the schools concerned,” Roberge says in the letter, a copy of which was obtained by the Montreal Gazette.

The letter is addressed to EMSB chairperson Angela Mancini, who did not respond to messages on Thursday.

A message posted late in the day on the EMSB's website (<https://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/articles/emsb-shocked-disappointed-potential-loss-three-schools>) said Mancini plans to comment on the matter on Friday. As well, it says the board's elected commissioners will hold a special meeting on the school transfers at its headquarters on Fielding Ave. on Monday evening.

Roberge's missive doesn't give the school board an option, saying instead he intends to invoke a section of the Education Act that gives his government the power to transfer ownership of school buildings between boards, and on whatever date the government decides, if it deems it to be in the public interest.

However, the letter invites the EMSB to present its “observations” to the Education Ministry concerning the presence of special-needs students in the affected schools, siblings attending the same schools and any challenges relating to the “transfer of students from elementary to high schools.”

The minister has given the school board until June 10 to submit its observations.

The news of Roberge's letter had the effect of a bombshell.

Antonio Zaruso, whose daughter attends Grade 2 at General Vanier, said there were “inklings and suspicions” for a while that the government had its

eye on the school because it was rumoured to be looking for facilities south of Métropolitain Blvd. to transfer to the other board.

General Vanier has 192 students, several of whom have shadows because they need special attention, he said. Zaruso has been a parent representative on the school's governing board for two years.

"We're losing a fantastic school," he said.

"This is the heart and soul of what is a close-knit community. It hurts me."

Besides having good teachers, Zaruso said, General Vanier "is like a big family. Everybody knows everybody, everybody knows about everybody's kids. You're committed to the school community. ... My kid wants to go to school every day."

Zaruso said he blames Bill 101, which prevents new immigrants from enrolling their children in English public schools, for dwindling enrolment in the English sector while French schools are bursting at the seams.

"It's symptomatic of the siphoning off of all these different schools," he said. "In another 10, 15 years, there will not be any more public English language schools."

But Zaruso also charged that the elected officials at the EMSB have to take the blame for "dropping the ball" in the stand-off with Roberge.

Tensions have escalated publicly between Roberge and the EMSB in recent weeks over the issue of transferring EMSB schools to the Pointe-de-l'Île board.

But Zaruso said the elected officials at the EMSB knew the predicament they were in for at least a year and didn't bring it to the parents to make what he called "hard decisions" together about which schools to offer.

"They kept it under wraps," he said, adding that the board seemed to not take the minister's threats seriously.

"It's like they decided to play a game of chicken with the minister, and they lost," Zaruso said.

The EMSB had recently offered to hand over all or part of its Galileo Adult Education Centre (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/plan-to-transfer-adult-students-with-special-needs-angers-families>) to the Pointe-de-l'Île

board, which would entail moving 140 special-needs adult students who learn life skills at the centre. However, Roberge rejected what he called the “involuntary and harmful displacement of young adults who have special needs.”

Nevertheless, the EMSB was pressing ahead with the proposal. The board has planned a consultation on May 16 to hear from the population of the Galileo centre and has said it plans to make a decision on the move on May 21.

Roberge’s letter, which notes that the Pointe-de-l’Île board has no classroom space for 3,000 students in the next school year, is unclear about the future of the Galileo centre.

The letter doesn’t reiterate Roberge’s opposition to displacing special needs adults. Instead, it calls the EMSB’s offer of the Galileo centre “insufficient.”

“While the proposal made by your school board to the (Pointe-de-l’Île board) could seem to respond to part of the needs,” Roberge’s letter says of the Galileo centre, “it remains, however, insufficient.”

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