

School camp-out: Warm spirits as parents queue for EMSB kindergarten spots

Parents have been queuing in front of Royal Vale for these coveted places for decades; now the practice has spread to other west-end French-immersion schools.

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Sarah Tino camped out in front of Royal Vale School in N.D.G. this weekend to secure a place in kindergarten for her daughter. Parents jokingly referred to one another by the number assigned to them in line, Tino said: "Hey, 17!" or "Hey, 33!" *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Jovial is a big word to describe the mood of a parent who has spent the previous night or two outside in the cold, dozing fitfully in a car or shivering under blankets in a tent.

And yet the parents who camped out this weekend in front of the English Montreal School Board's Royal Vale, Merton and Edinburgh schools to ensure places for their offspring in a 2020-21 kindergarten class when registration opens Monday morning were remarkably good-humoured and cheerful on Sunday.

Parents have been queuing in front of Royal Vale for these coveted places for decades; now the practice has spread to other west-end French-immersion schools, including Merton in Côte-St-Luc and Edinburgh in Montreal West.

It has been colder some years than the minus 11 that was reached overnight Saturday. Still, said Sarah Tino, who spent the night with her husband camped out in front of Royal Vale in a borrowed tent — in sleeping bags under “a ton of blankets” and over yoga mats — “it was freezing cold.”

Cold as it was, Tino says it's worth it to guarantee her daughter a place.

Families with siblings get priority at EMSB schools and, accounting for sibling registration, there are 35 kindergarten spots available at Royal Vale for the 2020-21 school year. The couple's five-year-old daughter, Everly Guerin, is No. 33.

Parents jokingly referred to one another by the number assigned to them, Tino said, as in “Hey, 17!” or “Hey, 33!”

Some alumni of the Royal Vale camping-out experience brought pizza, cupcakes, samosas — and empathy. “They feel our pain,” Tino said.

In front of Merton School, a fire pit and a borrowed propane heater warmed the 10 or so parents sitting in a circle, mainly on camping chairs. Although most had not met before, a camaraderie born from long hours spent together was evident.

“The best part is getting to know each other,” said Michael Levy.



Mike Bouchard warmed up fellow parents with some music as they waited in line over the weekend at Montreal West's Edinburgh School. "I like the fact that I can do something to help my son," Bouchard said. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

There are 40 kindergarten spots in two classrooms at Merton. With sibling registration having taken place, 18 spots are left — Levy's twins are Nos. 18 and 19 on the list — and there is also a waiting list of five. By Sunday afternoon, there were 23 names on the list — down from 25 because some parents put their names on multiple lists and had dropped out.

Parents at Royal Vale held their places by remaining on site. At Merton and Edinburgh, a system of rotating shifts had been put into place. So congenial was the atmosphere that some turned up even when they weren't scheduled, or stayed long past their assigned shifts.

Some parents slept in their cars. Josh Akerflug rented an RV, which cost \$150 for three days, and parked it across from Merton School. He said he and his wife were drawn to the school for their son, five-year-old Nate, because of its reputation and its proximity to their home. "This is the school we want to send our son to," he said.

Parents snacked on everything from muffins and bagels to croissants, danishes and potato chips, and drank coffee, water and juice. On Saturday,

Côte-St-Luc opened the chalet in a nearby park to make bathrooms available to the parents in front of Merton. On Sunday afternoon, Mayor Mitchell Brownstein, a Merton alumnus himself, stopped by.

The parents at all three schools used social media to stay connected; all the parents on the list at Edinburgh were connected through WhatsApp, for instance.



Five-year-olds Ethan Rosenshein, left, and goalie Ben Cytrynbaum pass the time Sunday in front of Merton School, where their parents took shifts over the weekend. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

As for the inconvenience of spending hours sitting outside on a chilly winter weekend, many were philosophical.

“You sacrifice a weekend,” said Giuseppe Alfonsi, whose four-year-old son, Nicola, is one of the eight children on the list for Edinburgh. “But then you are set” for future years, because you know your children can attend the school you want them to attend.

“I don’t find it onerous,” he said.

Mike Bouchard, who turned up for his shift at Edinburgh on Sunday wearing a one-piece snowsuit and a warm hat with earflaps and carrying a guitar,

said: “I like the fact that I can do something to help my son.”

As Matt Dinsmore’s four-year-old son, Logan, played in the snow in front of the Hudson Ave. school, Dinsmore said: “I don’t mind the idea of queuing up. It feels very Canadian.”

The idea of a lottery to assign the spots has been floated by some, but he said he finds camping out in front of the school preferable — and more fair.

“If this is a way to ensure a spot for our son in a school where we want him, I’m fine with that. It’s also an opportunity to meet with other parents who will be with us for the next six or seven years.”

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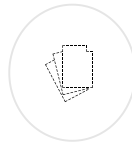
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