

Sections

 Search

The Gazette

 My Account 

[Arts](#) [Life](#) [Puzzles](#) [Comics](#) [Healthing](#) [Driving](#) [ePaper](#) [Remembering](#) [Newsletters](#) [Manage Print Subscription](#)

[Opinion](#) / [Columnists](#)

Allison Hanes: English Montreal School Board plays up its French initiatives

The EMSB is celebrating French as kindergarten registration approaches, and wants to counter any perception "that the English community is unilingual."

Allison Hanes • Montreal Gazette

Published Jan 09, 2024 • Last updated 6 days ago • 4 minute read



"I'm very lucky to have had a bilingual education," says cellist Stéphane Tétreault, whose talent was detected early at FACE School. He credits his fluent bilingualism to his time at FACE and later Royal Vale, which are run by the English Montreal School Board. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Stéphane Tétreault's mother made a fateful decision to send him to kindergarten in English at Montreal's FACE School, which opened two important doors in his life.

The first was that the strings teacher at the fine-arts public school recognized potential in the young boy and did everything in her power to convince him to take up the cello at age seven, two years before students typically choose their instrument.

The other was that even though Tétreault came from a French-speaking family and only spoke French, his mother used her eligibility to put him in the English program at FACE. There were no places left on the French side of the school, a joint project between two language-based Montreal school boards.

Today, Tétreault, age 30, is a gifted and award-winning cellist who became the first soloist-in-residence at the Orchestre Métropolitain, has performed under famed conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and tours the

world playing with the best symphonies and musicians. He is also perfectly bilingual, which he credits to his time at FACE and later Royal Vale, which are run by the English Montreal School Board.

“I’m very lucky to have had a bilingual education. I feel very lucky to travel in various countries and be able to feel at ease and comfortable in English. It’s a luxury, especially in a career that brings me to travel quite a bit,” Tétreault said in an interview just before the holidays. “I feel very grateful to be at least fluent enough in both languages, but also to have had such a rich education, a diverse education. It’s been really a blessing in my life.”

He may be among the rare francophones who have eligibility, but Tétreault has been chosen to exemplify the English Montreal School Board’s mantra “Être bilingue, c’est gagnant!” as it launches a month’s worth of events celebrating French, leading up to the annual kindergarten registration period.

A news conference — en français — to be held Tuesday at Dante School in St-Léonard will highlight the EMSB’s French offerings, which include second-language, bilingual and immersion programs. Joe Ortona, chair of the EMSB council of commissioners, said it’s important to show parents who have a choice of where to enrol their kids that they can have the “best of both worlds” in English schools.

“I think it’s important in this time especially to showcase that our schools teach a very high level of French. You get a quality education within our public system and we’re very proud of that. Our results show that,” he said. “We also want to break this perception within francophone Quebec that the English community is unilingual or that the English community rejects French in any way. We don’t. We’re actually proud of the French that we teach. And parents demand it.”

This is the second year in a row the EMSB has focused on French as it begins its recruitment drive. There will be musical performances and cultural activities in French at English schools throughout the month of January, with an emphasis on teaching language through the arts. There will be a French podcast, special francophone guests and a daily advent-like calendar showcasing Québécois culture.

Although it already employs many francophone Quebecers, the EMSB hired nine French instructors from France in 2023, for a total of 12 in the past two years, to address the teacher shortage.

Since Bill 101 was passed in the 1970s, Quebec has restricted access to English schools to those with legacy rights: children with a parent or siblings who did the majority of their education in English

anywhere in Canada. About 300,000 Quebec children are eligible today, according to the 2021 census. But a growing number have been choosing French schools instead, as parents seek an equilibrium between ensuring their kids acquire enough French to thrive in Quebec and maintaining ties to the English-speaking community.

A study by the Office québécois de la langue française released last month showed that the share of students who are eligible for English education but attended French schools nearly doubled in 20 years, rising from 18 per cent in 2000 to 32 per cent in 2021. But Ortona said it depends on the location.

“Our enrolment is pretty steady when you look at the overall numbers,” he said. “In some areas it’s increasing and in some areas it’s decreasing. And so overall it’s balancing out, but it’s not actually steady at all when you look at it district by district.”

Ironically, the Quebec government’s recent efforts to protect and promote French with Bill 96 may push some parents back to English schools.

College students now need an eligibility certificate to be guaranteed one of the capped spots in English CEGEPs. But the government has been denying the documents to young adults who already graduated high school in French, arguing they’ve forfeited their rights.

“In a way, that is good for us, because it boosts our enrolment. But it’s sad that people feel they have to take these steps because their children’s post-secondary studies could be in jeopardy,” Ortona said. “I’ve actually heard of some parents who decided to transfer their kids out of the French system or out of private schools and make sure to get the English eligibility papers by transferring their kids to English schools.”

But fear need not be the main motivation. The reasons to go to English schools include their French programs, a bilingual education and the sense of a community.

“Our schools have the highest success rates and lower dropout rates,” Ortona said. “So we’re actually doing something right in education, and they should be looking at that and trying to emulate those things and incorporating them into the French system instead of trying to overhaul the system and trying to impose that on us as well.”

ahanes@postmedia.com

RECOMMENDED FROM EDITORIAL