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## EMSB bets on French instruction to shore up numbers

By P.A. Sevigny

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Although it's only been a couple of weeks since the city's young people began to make their way back to school, numbers indicate that the city's three major anglo school boards are still struggling to find the students they need to fill up their classrooms. While French-language schools must resort to setting up trailers in their school yards in order to provide more classrooms for their already over-crowded schools, several English language schools have seen their numbers drop by almost 40 percent over the past five years with no end in sight.

While some west-end schools are managing to hold their own despite the shifting demographics that affect their immediate communities, other schools such as the EMSB's John F. Kennedy High School that's located deep in the city's Villeray Borough must deal with a 50 percent drop in its enrollment that's barely over 300 students compared to the nearly 600 students who attended the school back in 2010. Although the Lester B. Pearson School Board managed to keep their Lakeside school open for another year, Lakeside is on life support with a total of 492 students in a building designed for well over 1000 students. Based upon the school board's own numbers, only 19,000 primary and high school students went back to school last week as compared to the 25,000 who were in school back in 1998.

As the sagging numbers indicate that Quebec's language politics still dominate primary and secondary education for multiple thousands of families in both the city and in the rest of the province, the city's EMSB (English Montreal School Board) has come up with an innovative plan to use language as the means to attract the thousands of students they need to fill empty classrooms and maintain their place within their own communities.

"We're very proud of the quality of French language instruction our students receive," said EMSB Chairman Angela Mancini. "Bilingualism is a passport to the world. If we want our children to remain in the province of Quebec, we must provide them with the tools necessary to pursue a career here."

During the first day at school, a massive new banner spelling out "Être bilingue, c'est gagnant!" was hanging over NDG's Royal Vale school's main entrance as well as over the entrance of similar primary schools throughout the city. As the system maintains its promise to produce fully bilingual students by the end of their primary school cycle, Mancini believes the school board's new emphasis upon its intensive French (Second Language) program will convince the multiple thousands of families with children (presently over 10,000) who have English language eligibility to send their children back into the English school system in order to get a fully bilingual education.

Although the EMSB (along with five other English-language school boards) is already recognized as being a leader among the province's 10 best school boards, the latest research indicates that immersion students perform as well as native French students on reading and oral comprehension tests. Regardless of what program they attend, their linguistic skills are generally not considered to be an obstacle to their effective use of French in an academic or any other kind of similar

environment. As bilingualism carries a number of cognitive, cultural and socio-economic benefits, bilingual students are known to have enhanced problem-solving skills that improve their education and help to provide better job opportunities on the open market.

Ironically, and due to Bill 101, only students with English language eligibility will be eligible to be accepted into the EMSB's new immersion program as opposed to the province's French-speaking school boards who continue to provide only a single hour of English-language instruction per week.

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