

# Montreal's religious and ethnic schools reposition to stay relevant



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When it came time for Shelley Sherman to choose a school for her three children, the St-Laurent

woman barely gave it a second thought.

Sherman and her husband had attended United Talmud Torah elementary school and Herzliah High School, and they wanted their children to have the same Jewish education that they had benefited from.

Their grandparents had come to Montreal from strong Jewish communities in Europe, and it was important that their children develop a strong Jewish identity.

“We wanted our kids to learn Hebrew, like we did, we wanted them to visit Israel and learn about charity and caring for others — not just in the Jewish community but the whole world,” said Sherman, whose daughter now teaches at Talmud Torah.

“Knowledge of the holidays and a having a third language are excellent things to have.”

For decades, many members of Montreal’s Jewish community and immigrants from countries like Greece and Armenia were drawn to the city’s religious and ethnic schools because they taught religious education, cultural customs and a third language that was often spoken by the first generation of immigrants.

The school day is often longer, and there’s tuition to consider — these schools operate in the private system — but parents like Sherman felt it was important to maintain those ties.

However, over the last 15 years, changing demographics, poor facilities, high tuition fees and a desire of parents for their children to learn more French have contributed to a decline in enrolment in many non-orthodox Jewish and ethnic schools, especially at the elementary school level.

Above all, some Jewish parents have been questioning the value of a Jewish education, worrying that if their child was in Judaic studies during the day, they were missing out on other important subjects like arts and advanced math, according to a 2004 study that looked at attrition rates

from Jewish elementary to Jewish high schools.

“There was this perception that if you were spending X amount of hours in Judaic studies that you weren’t getting the arts, sports or science,” said Monica Mendel Bensoussan, who co-chaired the committee.

To try to stem the decline, many Jewish day schools and ethnic schools have been selling or renovating buildings, consolidating students under one roof and updating their educational facilities and programs to attract new pupils.



Director general Sébastien Stasse poses with a class of children at École Alex Manoogian in St-Laurent. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

“We are all facing many challenges,” said Chris Adamopoulos, director general of École Socrates–Démosthène, a Greek school with several buildings in the greater Montreal region.

One of those challenges is the desire of some students to expand their

horizons by attending English and French private schools or an English public school.

Chloe Ginsberg, 17, and her friend Emily Sarid both attended Akiva, a Jewish elementary school in Westmount. The girls say they have strong Jewish identities and a good grounding in the Jewish religion. But when it came time for high school, they decided against attending a Jewish institution.

Instead, they opted for Royal West Academy, a public school in Montreal West that selects its students and draws pupils from across greater Montreal.

“I was interested in getting new perspectives and being in a new environment and meeting other students who weren’t Jewish,” Ginsberg said.

Sarid, 17, believes you don’t have to go to a Jewish high school to stay in touch with your Jewish identity.

“I don’t think my friends who went to Jewish school are more passionate about Judaism than I am,” she said.

Morton Weinfeld, a professor of sociology at McGill University, said there has been a shift from non-orthodox Jewish day schools to non-religious private schools at the high school level because some parents think their children may get a better educational experience.

“It’s not a rejection of Jewish identity or community but simply a strategic decision about what might be in the best interests of the child,” said Weinfeld, the director of Canadian Ethnic Studies.

If the (anglophone) Jewish and ethnic communities continue to decline, Weinfeld suggested that some of the schools will start to decline and may have to merge.

Still, he believes these schools still have a future in Montreal.

“There will be a future but perhaps a smaller one,” he suggested.

There are a number of other religious and ethnic schools in and around Montreal, whether Catholic, Muslim or language-based such as the Alexander von Humboldt German International School in Baie-d’Urfé.

Administrators of four such schools agreed to speak with the Montreal Gazette about some of the challenges they face and the steps they’re taking to ensure they remain relevant in their communities down the road.

## École Alex Manoogian



Sébastien Stasse, director general of École Alex Manoogian, drops into a classroom comprised of Syrian refugees at the St. Laurent school. From left: Christelle Arslanian, Pamela Anti, Margrita Mekrdjian and Cyntia Arslanian. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

After teaching for 15 years at a private Armenian school in St-Laurent, Sébastien Stasse was looking forward to taking a year-long sabbatical in

2011.

The first Armenian school to open in Canada, in 1974, École Alex Manoogian had fallen on hard times and was on the verge of closing because it had only 150 students. Enrolment was plummeting as students moved to other Armenian schools, and morale among staff was low.

“We lost half of our students because of bad administrative choices which led to poorer quality of teaching compared to other Armenian schools,” Stasse recalled. “It was hard to see the kids leave.”

But before Stasse left for his sabbatical, the school’s administration made him an offer he couldn’t refuse — the director general’s job, with carte blanche to make the changes he felt were necessary to turn things around.

Stasse and his team hired new teachers, improved teacher training and boosted their numbers by recruiting Iraqi and Syrian refugees. The school also opened welcoming classes to help new immigrants learn French.

As well, he recruited students with special needs such as autism, dyslexia and behavioural problems.

“About 60 per cent of our students have special needs,” Stasse said. “Twenty per cent are coded, 20 per cent need help from a special education teacher and 20 per cent are in a classe d’accueil.”

Five years after he took charge, the school now has 300 students.

After immigrant parents told Stasse they wanted their children to speak French without an accent — so they could more easily enter Quebec’s job market — the school reduced the hours of English instruction and boosted the level of French.

Parents pay about \$3,000 annually for their children to attend the school, which has classes from kindergarten until Grade 8, allowing students to finish their secondary years in local French high schools.

The school runs a \$400,000 deficit each year, which is covered by the Armenian community, donors and fundraising.

“We had no choice but to roll up our sleeves,” Stasse said.

## Talmud Torah / Herzlich High School



Monica Mendel Bensoussan, chairperson of the building project, at the construction site of the new Herzlich High School in the parking lot of the Snowdon YM-YWHA. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Monica Mendel Bensoussan was a Grade 8 student at Herzlich High School when she became friends with her classmate Naomi Azrieli, the daughter of David Azrieli, a successful Montreal entrepreneur and philanthropist.

As adults, the women stayed in touch and became leaders in the Jewish community — Mendel Bensoussan as president of Talmud Torah/Herzlich’s board of directors, and Azrieli as chair of her family’s

foundation.

About 10 years ago, with its enrolment dropping and its schools aging, the Herzliah community began to dream about building a new high school.

A core group of philanthropists were on board, but the school's administrators felt they needed to make changes to their "product" before proceeding, said Mendel Bensoussan, the immediate past president of the board of directors.

"When things aren't going well, those responsible take a step back and we made some very tough decisions in terms of our teaching staff and product," she said.

They adopted a new model of teaching called Challenged Based Learning, which focuses on why students are studying a subject.

They let some teachers go, hired some younger ones and also hired a dean of academics who provides staff with ongoing professional development.

In 2010, the administration announced it would close the St-Laurent campus of United Talmud Torah / Herzliah because of declining enrolment and financial difficulties and consolidated students at its Snowdon site.

The next year, after briefly flirting with the idea of merging with JPPS / Bialik, another Jewish day school system, the schools announced they would continue to operate separately.

"We spent a lot of years working on the product and then went back to those philanthropists and said: 'Are you still with us?'" said Mendel Bensoussan, who is the chairperson of the building project for the new high school.

About two years ago, she contacted her old friend Azrieli and the two women, along with some of the donors, had a brainstorming session over

coffee to discuss the new high school.

After making a more formal presentation to the foundation's Canadian and Israeli board of directors, the Azrieli foundation agreed to make a \$15-million donation for a new high school, which is being built in the parking lot of the Snowdon YM-YWHA in the heart of the Jewish Community Campus. The school has set a \$50-million fundraising goal for the project and has already raised just over \$30 million.

Tuition fees are \$8,000 for Talmud Torah and \$10,000 for Herzliah; the goal is to increase enrolment at both schools.

Herzliah has 450 students, and the new building will have a capacity of 550 when it opens in the 2017-18 school year. The school network has rebranded as "Les écoles Azrieli schools" but each school will maintain its name.

Dr. Laurence Kutler, head of school at Talmud Torah / Herzliah, said many Jewish families in Montreal want their children to have a "strong Hebrew and Judaic foundation that focuses on the pursuit of justice, integrity and lifelong learning in Jewish studies."

"We pride ourselves on the fact that we are creating the Jewish leaders of tomorrow," he said. "Parents want their children to have a sense of belonging in the community, in school and after."

**École Socrates-Démosthène**



Eirini Tourkomanoli instructs a Grade 4 class at École Socrates-Démosthène in Côte-des-Neiges. The school has 1,300 students in its five-campus network. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

More than 100 years ago, Montreal's small Greek community opened the city's first Greek school to ensure that new immigrants maintained their language, culture and religion. About 25 children attended the school when it opened in a church basement in 1909.

As thousands of Greek immigrants settled in Montreal after the Second World War, the school continued to grow.

By the time Chris Adamopoulos arrived at École Socrates as a physical education teacher in 1981, the school had 500 students in two buildings and was set to expand to the West Island, South Shore and Laval, where hundreds of Greek families had migrated to from Montreal.

Apart from teaching the regular curriculum in French and English, students learned how to read and write in Greek during an extended

school day.

“Up until the 1980s, maintaining strong ties with the Orthodox faith, the Greek language and Greek culture was extremely important,” said Adamopoulos, director general of the Greek elementary school, now called École Socrates–Démosthène, following a merger five years ago with a Greek school in Laval.

Many Greek parents were thrilled with the trilingual education their children were receiving, especially given the relatively low tuition fees of between \$1,000-\$1,500 and that transportation costs were covered by the province.

However, a series of government funding cuts to the school beginning in 2007 and continuing in 2013, when Quebec pulled the plug on transportation funding, forced the school to raise tuition and charge about \$800 for busing.

“The cuts had a severe, drastic and catastrophic impact on a lot of private schools,” Adamopoulos recalled.

“Overnight, we lost about 20 per cent of our clientele and many families went to public schools. These are young families with mortgages who are trying to get established.”

Today, the school has 1,300 students in its five-campus network in Laval and greater Montreal and fees are about \$4,000 annually.

Like many of the city’s ethnic schools, it must juggle the different demands of parents to ensure it remains relevant in its community.

“We have an older generation of parents who think the Greek program is important,” he said. “We also have younger parents who want just the basics. They want the kids to speak a bit, to understand the language so they can speak to grandma and understand things when they go to Greece.

“We are going to try to prolong, as much as possible, the watering down of the Greek program.”

## JPPS / Bialik High School



Grade 4 students at JPPS elementary school pedal as they work at their bicycle desks. Teacher Joëlle Elhyani sits at a kidney-shaped desk that allows students to get close.  
*MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

When students at JPPS elementary school headed home at the end of February, they did more than just say goodbye to their teachers — they bid farewell to their school building on Van Horne Ave.

On the first day of March, students arrived at their new school located in the building that houses Bialik High School in Côte-St-Luc.

After years of declining enrolment, the JPPS / Bialik school network decided to sell the elementary school building on Van Horne and reposition itself as a K-11 campus on Kildare Rd.

Changing demographics mean there are fewer anglophone Jewish families in the west end, and high tuition fees are driving some families to nearby public schools, like Merton and Royal Vale in the English Montreal School Board.

“There are less Jewish youth in Montreal than there was 20 to 30 years ago,” said Avi Satov, Bialik’s principal.

“Parents are still committed to installing Jewish values but we know it’s more competitive in terms of what’s available. The cost of going to private school is an issue for many middle class families.”

Fees at JPPS are between \$8,000 and \$9,500. Fees are \$13,000 at Bialik, which has 325 high school students. Satov said he hopes to increase that number to 375 over the next five years.

The sale of the Van Horne building allowed administrators to carry out major renovations to JPPS / Bialik, including new bathrooms, a robotics lab and newly designed elementary school classrooms. Bicycle and standing desks are available so that fidgety students can move while they learn.

Teachers have abandoned their traditional desk in favour of a kidney-shaped one that allows students to sit close to them on cushioned milk crates.

Both schools offer the International Baccalaureate program, which offers students a global perspective and a better understanding of the world.

Before classes begin at JPPS each morning, teachers dim the lights and students close their eyes and spend a few minutes doing a mindfulness meditation, which teachers say helps students relax and stay focused on the day ahead.

JPPS principal Marnie Stein said the school’s enrolment increased this year following the move after years of decline.

“We have thought of every type of learner and arranged classroom space to accommodate them,” she said. “We hope parents see us as a viable option offering something distinct and unique.”

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