

Expanded pre-kindergarten off to slow start at Montreal's French schools

Two of the three French school boards told the education minister their schools are so overcrowded they can't open even one new pre-k class.

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The Commission scolaire de Montréal, Quebec's largest school board, only has space for four new pre-kindergarten classes starting in September. *TED S. WARREN / AP FILE PHOTO*

The Legault government's much-vaunted plan to increase pre-kindergarten places (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/caq-begins-process-to-create-pre-kindergarten-classes-for-quebec>) in Quebec is off to a slow start in French schools on the island of Montreal.

Two of the three French school boards told Education Minister Jean-François Roberge last week that their schools are so overcrowded they couldn't open even one pre-k

(<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/pre-kindergarten-classes-risk-hurting-subsidized-daycares-workers>)_class next fall.

"We are having trouble accommodating our existing students and we are getting more and more students each year," said Gina Guillemette, a spokesperson for the Commission Scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys, which covers the western half of the island.

At present, the board has 23 pre-k classes in nine schools. "They asked us if can we open more next year and we said no."

The Commission scolaire de Montréal, Quebec's largest school board, only has space for four new classes starting in September.

The English Montreal School Board has been given funding to open 13 new classes (<https://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb/articles/emsb-pleased-to-be-adding-13-new-pre-k-classes-for-2019-20>), and the Lester B Pearson Board is hoping to open 19 new classes, the largest increase in the province.

"We are calling our principals to see where there is space and to see if we can bus the kids there," said Carol Heffernan, the Pearson board's assistant director general.

She said pre-k classes give four-year-olds a head start before they enter kindergarten.

"There is a bit more of a structured curriculum compared to a daycare," Heffernan said.

"There's still going to be a lot of play because children learn through play at that age."

A spokesperson for the Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-Île, which covers the eastern tip of Montreal Island, said a surge in the number of new students means they have no space to open any new pre-k classes this fall.

Several factors, including lower student-teacher ratios in underprivileged areas, an increase in immigrants and asylum seekers, and more residential development in the east end means the board's schools are packed.

Last year, the Education Ministry revised its projections for the 2021-2022 school year, estimating that the board could have 2,000 more students than previously forecast.

"We have an urgent need for space for students who have to attend school, so we can't open any new pre-k classes next fall," said Valérie Biron, a board spokesperson.

EMSB chairperson Angela Mancini said space restrictions in the west end of Montreal mean most of the new classes will be in schools in the central and eastern part of the board's territory. "Our educators are doing a wonderful job welcoming these young children to our system," she said in a statement on Wednesday. "It is important that we maintain some control of where these classes are added in the coming years."

On Sunday, the operators of the province's network of public daycares voiced their opposition to tabled legislation (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/caq-begins-process-to-create-pre-kindergarten-classes-for-quebec>) by the Legault government that would establish universal pre-kindergarten classes across Quebec.

The province's two largest daycare organizations — representing operators as well as workers — are also raising concerns that the government's proposed investment of up to \$700 million a

year to set up pre-kindergarten classes will end up hurting subsidized daycares, known in French as Centres de la petite enfance.

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