

Parents want more time to discuss senior campus for west-end school

"It has not been possible to carefully consider all options ... given this very short timeline," parents wrote to the EMSB, which votes Wednesday.

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“This is a major decision that impacts so many different parts of our kids’ lives, logistically and educationally,” said Willingdon School parent Elizabeth Hunt, who started the petition, with her son Xavier Browne-Hunt, 9. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

A group of parents at a popular French immersion school in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce want the administration to put the brakes on a proposal to open a senior campus (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/n-d-g-s-willingdon-school-keen-on-annex-to-move-grade-5-6-classes>), saying many of their concerns have not been addressed.

About 114 parents have signed an online petition (<https://www.change.org/p/willingdon-governing-board-request-for-consultation-regarding-willingdon-annex-proposal>) asking for a broader public consultation that would look at other options to deal with the influx of students.

The English Montreal School Board is scheduled to vote Wednesday night on a proposal for a senior campus in a former elementary school (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/emsb-wont-open-new-school-but-offers-plan-to-ease-west-end-overcrowding>) on Coronation and Somerled Aves., about two kilometres from Willingdon School (<http://willingdon.emsb.qc.ca/>).

In the petition addressed to the school’s governing board, the parents say they want “a thorough and transparent study into suitable alternatives that could address the concern of possible future overcrowding without compromising the school’s neighbourhood focus.”



The English Montreal School Board is scheduled to vote Wednesday night. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

“We believe that it has not been possible to carefully consider all options in order to make the wisest and most-informed decision given this very short timeline,” they say.

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Administrators and teachers at Willingdon say taking over the former St. Ignatius of Loyola school (<https://stig.ca/>) will increase its student body and help maintain programs such as music, science, computers and resource help.

Parent Elizabeth Hunt said she created the petition because she feels that the process has been rushed and she doesn't have enough information to make an informed decision.

"This is a major decision that impacts so many different parts of our kids' lives, logistically and educationally," said Hunt, who works as a facilitator and runs public consultations for governments.

Willingdon's population has jumped by more than 100 students over the past five years. There are 552 students at the school on Terrebonne St. and the school is operating at 90 per cent capacity. The additional students mean that two classes are sharing the gym and a kindergarten

class shares space with the extended day program. Kindergarten students have gym outside or in a smaller space in the school.

The school is proposing to move its Grade 5 and Grade 6 students to a senior campus, which has two kitchens that could be used for science and health classes. It also has access to soccer fields and green space.

Hunt said she moved close to Willingdon so her two children could walk to school. "This is an essential part of our day, of our routine and our quality of life in the neighbourhood," she said. "I am not necessarily opposed to this thing, I just don't know enough about it. The letter was sent out to parents on Jan. 29 with a decision on Feb. 20."

In mid-January, the EMSB offered the Coronation Ave. site to Willingdon and to two other schools experiencing overcrowding: Edinburgh (<http://edinburgh.emsb.qc.ca/>) in Montreal West and Merton (<http://mertonschool.ca/>) in Côte-St-Luc.

When Edinburgh and Merton turned down the offer, the administration at Willingdon fast-tracked a proposal to be ready for the board's vote Wednesday night. Parents were sent a PowerPoint presentation (<http://willingdon.emsb.qc.ca/documents/2018-2019%20Documents/2019-02-06-Come%20GROW%20with%20Us.pdf>) explaining the benefits of the plan and were invited to an information session. Some parents visited the Coronation site last week.

Willingdon principal Carmen Nicholas said the administration did as much consultation as possible given the time frame imposed by the school board.

"We collected 140 feedback forms from the parents and have included the feedback (and our conditions) in our brief," said Nicholas, adding that 100 per cent of the teachers have voted in favour of the senior campus.

"It takes time for a building to be ready for September. We have renovations, an inspection and have to buy furniture for the whole building."

If the senior campus does not open in September, the school will lose two of the six rooms it uses for specialist programs because of increased enrolment, Nicholas said. The six classrooms include two for the library, a computer lab, science room, music room and a resource room.

“These programs are what makes Willingdon what it is,” she said. “We thought this was an opportunity for us to thrive instead of struggle.”

Hunt said the parent community is divided about the proposal. Some parents want a senior campus because it will give the older students more autonomy. Others fear they may lose the music room or other enrichment programs if enrolment continues to increase, she said.

Some parents who walk to school with their children are dead set against the senior campus. “I feel a community school has to be centred in the community where you can access it on foot,” said parent Jamie Near, who has two children at Willingdon and a third child who will start school in two years. “We won’t be able to walk to the new location and a lot of families are in the same situation.”

At present, students attending two alternative high schools, Outreach and Focus, are using the building on Coronation Ave. Those students would move to the James Lyng building in St-Henri if Willingdon sets up a senior campus.

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