

For sweltering students, new Edmonton francophone junior high is welcome news



JANET FRENCH

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Published on: March 31, 2017 | Last Updated: March 31, 2017 6:00 AM MDT



Pierre Asselin and his children Olivier, 10; Geneviève, 13; and François, 16, pose Thursday outside Ecole Joseph-Moreau, 9750 74 Ave. *BLOOM, DAVID / POSTMEDIA*

Outfit selection is a daily adventure for the 270 students at Ecole Joseph-Moreau.

Will they fry or freeze in their windowless classroom, as an ancient boiler churns heat through the patchwork maze of building additions?

It was with delight, then, that families and staff learned this month the Catholic junior high will be the first francophone school in Edmonton to move into a brand-new building — hopefully by September 2020.

“It’ll be huge for the students,” Pierre Asselin, president of the school council and parent of three kids, said Thursday. “What it will allow is for us not to lose our students to competitive schools.”

A replacement for Joseph-Moreau is one of six major Edmonton school construction projects the provincial government has announced it will fund (<http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/new-alberta-schools-to-be-announced-by-education-minister-premier-in-spruce-grove>) during the next four years.

The announcement was a coup for the Greater North Central francophone Education Region (Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord), which often feels like a poor cousin to the much larger public and Catholic school systems when school construction dollars are divvied up.

Francophone schools boards across Canada scrounge space wherever they can by leasing abandoned schools, community halls, empty bank offices and basements in long-term care homes.

“We do whatever we need to get things going,” Centre-Nord superintendent Robert Lessard said.

Catholic junior high students in Centre-Nord attended Maurice-Lavallée high school in Bonnie Doon until that building became too crowded. In 2009, the school district began leasing the former Ritchie Junior High building at 98 Street and 75 Avenue, a public school that closed in 2008. Centre-Nord bought the property in 2016.

Although the building was substandard, it was one of few options close to the high school, Lessard said. Comprised of four structures built in 1913, 1954, 1956 and 1975, the district sealed off the asbestos-filled 1913 portion of the building. They can’t knock it down because the main boiler is inside.

Ten of the 14 classrooms have no natural light, moving between classrooms is awkward and the library is housed in a converted gym, he said.

Asselin, whose middle daughter is now in Grade 8 at Joseph-Moreau, said the building lacks a room large enough to serve as a cafeteria or a kitchen, has a substandard wood shop and little for students to do in the schoolyard save for a basketball court.

Asselin said it's hard to convince his French-speaking friends to enrol in francophone schools when other districts have buildings in far better shape closer to home.

The Constitution entitles francophones to an equivalent education system, said Asselin, who is a lawyer. French school buildings in Edmonton are not on par with public and Catholic facilities, he said, which prompted parents to threaten to sue the school board and provincial government.

Getting the funds for Joseph-Moreau is a symbolic win for francophones, he said.

"We've been really pleased with the NDP government's approach to the French community," Asselin said. "They've delivered for us."

The \$15-million rebuild will house 500 students, and will be adjacent to the existing structure, so as not to disrupt classes during construction, Lessard said. A group of students and parents is already working with an architect on the design, which will hopefully include some "green" elements, such as solar panels, and retain as many historical pieces of the 1913 Ritchie school as can be salvaged, he said.

"People here have been waiting for a long, long time. We're very overdue."

jfrench@postmedia.com (mailto:jfrench@postmedia.com)

Twitter.com/jantafrench (http://Twitter.com/jantafrench)