Parents in Support of French Immersion

Please consider the following issues when evaluating the scenarios proposed by the HDSB and completing the online “English and French Immersion Program Delivery” survey. **Last day for completing the survey is next week Friday, January 29, 2016.**

http://www.hdsb.ca/Programs/Pages/EnglishandFrenchImmersionProgramDelivery.aspx

The **four scenarios** presented by the Board have **significant implications** for the delivery of FI in Halton and the configuration of **ALL schools currently offering FI**. Proposed changes include:

- Changing the entry point for FI
- Capping, and/or
- Making FI only available in single or dual track schools.

**Entry Point for FI**

**Early Entry:** Research shows early entry FI is the optimal start point for learning French as a Second Language (either JK/SK or grade 1). Early entry is inclusive of the most diverse set of learners. For an overview of the pros and cons of various entry points check out the following article: [http://on.cpf.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/Optimal-Entry-Point-for-FI-Joan-Netten-University-of-Moncton-Revue-2007.pdf](http://on.cpf.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/Optimal-Entry-Point-for-FI-Joan-Netten-University-of-Moncton-Revue-2007.pdf)

Early immersion is the most common model in Canada because research consistently shows that learning language is easier for younger children. A wide range of children can be very successful in early entry FI.

> “Early immersion provides the most diverse range of students with the greatest access and the greatest length of exposure to French. There are generally no entry requirements for early immersion and it is parents who make the decision to enroll their children, for a variety of reasons” *(French Immersion in Manitoba a Handbook for School Leaders, 2007).*

**Mid and Late Entry:** When FI has a later entry point (grade 4, 5 or 7) the choice to enter the program is more student-driven. This has benefits but it also has documented **streaming effects:** Students who chose FI in grade 4 (or later) entry programs are more likely to have strong language acquisition skills, high academic achievement, be mature and want to be challenged.

A grade 4 entry with an 80% French and 20% English split is not only harder for students, it is also a tricky starting point for teachers. There are fewer teaching resources available to teachers for use with students starting FI at this age. The primary teaching tools currently in use cannot simply be transferred to grade 4 students, who are more mature and advanced in their thinking and interests.

**Dual vs. Single Track Schools**

There is data that shows both types of schools to be an effective way to deliver French Immersion. They each have pros and cons, and success may depend on how individual schools are run. However, for a dual track school to be effective, both the English and the French Immersion Programs must have adequate numbers of students and gender balance to be viable and healthy.
Parents in Support of French Immersion

**Ideal Dual Track School:** Close to home, each student gets the program they choose, both programs have strong numbers of students (for example, 30-40 students per grade per program with equal boys and girls). There would be appropriate support for every student in every class (for example, adequate learning resources, access to special education resource teacher, and teacher assistant as required).

**Reality (HDSB):** In some dual track schools the enrolment for the English program is very low. For example, Pilgrim Wood PS and Maplehurst PS have 13 and 10 students, respectively, in the grade 1 English program. HDSB data shows 12 out of 13 English programs with fewer than 15 grade 1 students are in dual track schools. Low numbers like these mean those English classes may be combined with another grade, for instance a grade 1 and 2 split class. Some schools have required a grade 1, 2 and 3 split class. The split class scenario continues as the students move up through the grades. This is a major challenge for the English program, and a disadvantage to the students in it.

Many schools have trouble supporting two tracks. A school needs no less than 60-80 grade 1 students if half (or more) of the families want English and half (or less) of the families want French to make a dual track model work. The reality is that in many dual track schools have more than half their families choosing FI, resulting in their English program with not enough kids for one single class.

However, there are some very strong single track English schools in Halton. For example, John T. Tuck has a 13% uptake for FI and Alton Village has a 19% uptake. Why do some single track schools have very small numbers of students leaving home schools FI while others have much larger numbers? Has the Board analyzed these strong English programs and utilized the knowledge to strengthen struggling English track programs?

**Capping**

Capping is one way to limit the number of children who can enter a program. There are many methods of capping but the board has not specified how it would cap the FI program or at what proportion. It is hard to judge the scenarios without knowing how many spaces would be available for grade 1 FI. Will the board choose to cap FI enrolment at 25% or 40% of grade 1 students? Will they use a lottery system?

If capping is put in place, will HDSB apply one cap across the board or will it vary according to demand? Access to FI may be easier in some parts of Halton if a single cap is used. Oakville currently has an average FI uptake of 46% compared to 34% in Burlington, 35% in Milton, and 24% in Halton Hills. More families in Oakville choose FI, thus more families in Oakville may be shut out of FI in the future.

There are also striking differences in the number of children who enrol in FI based on whether their “home” school is single vs. dual track: In Oakville, the average FI uptake is 74% among grade 1 students whose home school is dual track and 39% for those who leave single track English home schools after SK to attend FI. Because dual track schools have the highest uptake, if capping is applied, more families living in the catchment area of a dual track school will have their child shut out of FI. Thus, if your “neighbourhood school” is dual track, your child may be less likely to get into FI.

Capping produces “winners” and “losers” in a community. This issue will look very different at single track versus dual track schools. At a dual track school a family whose child does not get into FI has to take English
Parents in Support of French Immersion

alongside other families who did ‘win’ out on the capping lottery. This creates a divisive atmosphere. Also, keeping siblings together is an important requirement for many families. Capping could mean that not all of your children will be in the same program or at the same school.

Primary Core French vs. FI
Primary Core French and Primary French Immersion are completely different programs. Core French program lacks the intensity needed to develop the French language to the same level of proficiency. Research shows the importance of intensity in the acquisition of a second language. 40 minutes a week (Primary Core) vs. 750 minutes (Immersion) is not comparable.

Teacher Recruitment
The HDSB has stated that difficulty recruiting qualified French teachers, especially specialized high school teachers, was part of the reason they formed the Program Viability Committee. There has been no data showing how many teachers we need or anticipate needing in the future. Principals are not required to keep track of reasons why candidates are not selected. Limiting access to the FI program due to recruitment issues is premature. The HDSB needs to quantify and objectively define the problem.

The French as a Second Language Study report was published by HDSB in November 2013. According to this report, a long-term recruitment plan was supposed to be devised to address the hiring issue. It is unclear what changes have been made and whether a more aggressive recruitment and hiring process – an HR matter, could solve the problem without overhauling the FI program.

Teaching Staff
What will happen to primary FI teachers if FI starts in grade 4? Will these qualified teachers remain and teach FI at higher grades? Will they move over to teach Primary English, Core French or FI at another Board? This is a massive pool of teachers. French teachers are scarce, we want to ensure that we keep those we have and that they continue to teach French Immersion.

The Process
Thus far, all 4 proposed options focus on changes to the FI program and none is on modifications to struggling English programs? There are many precedents for merging English track programs. In some neighbourhoods, fewer students will be impacted compared to what will happen if half the families who want FI are excluded due to capping. To meet the HDSB goal of enhancing English program viability more grade 1 English students are needed in some areas. However, achieving this goal by limiting access to an existing viable FI program that educators, researchers and parents value is not the only solution.

If the goal is to reduce enrolment into the FI program to bolster enrolment in the English track and ease hiring pressures, alternative solutions or approaches could include the following:

1. Higher intensity French in grade 1 (80%). We understand the pressures faced by the HDSB to build viable English programs at some schools. A higher intensity in grade 1 may have a “natural” capping effect as
Parents may not want to commit a higher intensity French program before English literacy skills are developed.

2. In keeping with the rationale outlined in alternative #1, introduce FI in Junior Kindergarten (early) with a delivery model of 80% French. Intensity may decrease gradually to 50% for grade 7 and 8. The grade 1 50-50 delivery model is appealing to parents but it is not the best model from a language acquisition perspective.

3. Pilot alternative models of offering FI. Evaluate, then modify or change as necessary before expanding across the region. A major program overhaul is disruptive to families and communities, costly and cannot be undone easily.

4. Study and evaluate the successful single track English schools within the HDSB (e.g., John T. Tuck, Alton Village). These schools have lower uptake rates for FI compared to the regional average and they have enough students to build multiple grade 1 English classes.

5. Adopt a mixed model of single and dual track schools. For example, use single track schools in areas where the demand for FI is consistently high.

6. Seek FI teachers outside of Ontario. Ensure French qualified staff within the board are being utilized and address shortcomings in hiring practices that allow other boards (e.g. TDSB) to hire qualified teachers sooner.

7. Once the two year B. Ed. programs are implemented, develop HR processes to interview and review candidates once they have fulfilled a portion of their course, including practical experience and include conditional employment offers.

8. Entice more families to consider the English program by promoting it more positively and/or enhancing the program in a way that appeals to parents’ desire to give their children a chance to explore subjects in greater detail or to gain a competitive edge (e.g., enriched math, pilot new science and technology programs).

9. Offer variable solutions to address the demands in different communities. In each area the demand for FI, the physical limitations of the school buildings, the distances to schools and between schools and the size of the SK class can be used to determine the best method of delivery. Small numbers of schools could be considered together as a cluster, and within that cluster both English and FI programs would be provided, meeting the needs of all the students in the community with viable programming. Limiting delivery to one choice (dual or single track) reduces the Board’s flexibility in meeting the needs of students.

10. Expand the boundaries for older schools with aging neighbourhoods to get more English students and/or reduce the number of English programs in areas with low Grade 1 English enrolment. This will result in fewer but stronger English programs while still offering the choice for FI. This may mean converting to single track schools for both English and French.