



# Memorandum

vancouver school board



May 31, 2017

Item 2

TO: Education and Student Services Committee III

FROM: Adrian Keough, Director of Instruction  
Educational Programs, Learning Services

RE: **French Immersion Enrolment Update**

## INTRODUCTION/ BACKGROUND:

The Vancouver School District hosts a wide variety of Programs of Choice at both the Elementary and Secondary Levels. At the Elementary level, these programs include French Immersion, Montessori, Mandarin Bilingual, and Fine Arts Focus to name a few. All of these programs are popular options for families enrolling their students for the first time in Kindergarten (K).

The Early French Immersion (FI) Program has been in place in the Vancouver School District for approximately 35 years and is hosted in fourteen elementary and three secondary sites across the District. Two of the fourteen elementary sites are 'single track' annexes, (K-3 only) three are 'single track' K-7 elementary schools, eight are dual track: with both Early French Immersion and English programs, and one is 'triple track' (English, Early, and Late French Immersion). Some years, there has been more interest in this program than capacity allows, as is the case in most school districts in the Lower Mainland and across the province. This has sometimes resulted in waitlists of students who are hoping to get into a French Immersion Kindergarten class.

Recent changes to the District's class size and composition language have had a sudden impact on the number of French Immersion Kindergarten classes that can be offered for the 2017-2018 school year, meaning that the District has had to reduce by five the total number of FI K classes offered across the District. This report provides information and context on the situation and outlines future plans that will hopefully enable the VSB to maintain its commitment to strong and vibrant Elementary and Secondary French Immersion programs across the Vancouver School District.

## RECENT IMPACTS ON FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS IN VANCOUVER

Currently, there are over 5,300 students registered in French Immersion from Kindergarten to Grade 12. This accounts for over 10% of the District's entire student population. According to statistics listed on the Canadian Parents for French (CPF) BC-Yukon Chapter website (<http://bc-yk.cpf.ca/research-advocacy/enrolment-statistics/attachment/bc-yk-enrolment-stats/>), this percentage is comparable to or higher than other school districts of similar size:

| School District | Total enrolment (2015-2016) | Number of students in French Immersion (2015-2016) | Approximate percentage of total enrollment |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Vancouver       | 52,760                      | 5,313  | 10.1%                                      |
| Surrey          | 70,942                      | 3,398  | 4.7%                                       |
| Burnaby         | 24,891                      | 2,269  | 9.1%                                       |
| Coquitlam       | 32,961                      | 3,824  | 11.6%                                      |

This year (2016/17), there were 165 divisions (classes) of Early French Immersion students in Vancouver. For the 2017-2018 school year, there are currently 170 divisions allocated to schools, even with the reduction of the five Kindergarten classes mentioned above. There are also over 15,000 students registered in other French language programs such as Late Immersion (Gr. 6-7), Intensive French (Gr. 6-7), and Core French (Gr. 5-12).

Additional funding for all French Language Programs is provided through an annual grant from the Federal government and is based on a per pupil formula. This year's funding grant was approximately \$640,500. In addition, VSB received a growth grant of \$9,790 because the enrollment in French Immersion increased from the previous year. The purpose of this targeted grant is to provide funding for additional resources, professional development and cultural opportunities in the French language.

Over the past five years, the District has been able to offer between 19 and 25 French Immersion Kindergarten classes across the fourteen elementary sites. The number of FI K classes at each site each year varies because schools have to consider how many classes will be required for "neighbourhood" (English) Kindergarten classes, which fluctuates annually depending on the number of five year old students living in the catchment area and wanting to attend that school. Also, **when planning for the number of K classes required, school and district staff must ensure that there is enough space in the school to accommodate all students for the entire eight years of their elementary school career, not just the year in which those students are in Kindergarten.** Each time there is a new K class intake, that particular cohort will require enrolling classroom space in order to be accommodated each year until they leave grade seven.

This unfortunately can lead to waitlists of students who are not able to be accommodated in their first choice of schools for French Immersion Kindergarten. Analysis has shown that some of these waitlisted students will choose to try again to enter French Immersion at the Grade One level or beyond (i.e. Late French Immersion).

While there were actually fewer applicants to the Early French Immersion program this year than last (-52), there are an additional 124 students on the waitlist who at this point are not able to be accommodated due to a combination of reasons which are outlined below.

#### Restoration of 2001 Collective Agreement

Across the Vancouver School District there has been a decrease in the capacity to enroll Kindergarten students, including French Immersion Kindergarten, for the 2017-2018 school year. Also, after a site by site review by District staff, there were other schools with rooms that were considered to be "non-enrolling spaces" (i.e. music rooms, multi-purpose rooms, fine arts rooms) that were told that these rooms would be repurposed as enrolling classrooms next year. Additionally, the District has looked at spaces that are currently occupied by out of school

agencies such as daycare providers, etc. to see what impact their removal would have on the school community.

This has occurred because the VBE, like all other Boards of Education in BC, is implementing the restored class size and composition language of the 2001 Collective Agreement as required by the November 2016 Supreme Court of Canada ruling. As a result, lower class size maximums as well as revised class composition considerations are required in our elementary schools for the 2017/2018 school year. While the ruling is a positive one for teaching and learning in all of our classrooms, it also means that the number of students currently attending school in Grades K -7 will require more enrolling space (classrooms) next year. The redistribution of classroom space for Grades K to 7 thereby impacts the remaining space available for all types of Kindergarten intake.

Also, contract language specific to the union representing Vancouver teachers requires that Kindergarten classes not be multi-age groupings (combined with Grade 1), which has further impacted Kindergarten capacity in individual schools and across the District. This has contributed to the decrease in the number of available Kindergarten French Immersion spaces.

**Section 5 of the School Act provides that every student is entitled to receive an educational program that is provided in the English language. The School Act does not require that Boards of Education provide French Immersion or other choice programming. Choice Programs, such as French Immersion, are therefore based on available space.** This is outlined in VBE Policy JECC-R: School Students living within a defined catchment area have priority to attend their neighbourhood program as space permits. When there are more interested families than spaces available, there is a 'draw'. The District made the decision to enroll at least one English K class at each elementary school in order to ensure that spaces in the English program will continue to be offered at each grade in the future. Staff also had to consider whether space existed at neighbouring schools which would allow them to send students to a nearby school if not enough space existed at their catchment school. This has impacted all schools where there is more than one program (i.e. English and French Immersion, English and Montessori, etc.).

With a requirement to ensure that every five year old child who lives in Vancouver and wishes to attend their neighbourhood school has a place in an English program, along with the lower total number of available classrooms, the District has had to reduce by five the total number of French Immersion K classes for the 2017/18 school year. The five sites where a reduction occurred are:

| School           | # of FI K classes 2016-2017 | # of FI K classes 2017-2018 |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| L'École Bilingue | 3                           | 2                           |
| Hastings         | 2                           | 1                           |
| Lord Selkirk     | 2                           | 1                           |
| Lord Tennyson    | 3                           | 2                           |
| Trafalgar        | 2                           | 1                           |

All other sites with Kindergarten French Immersion maintained the number of Kindergarten divisions. As stated earlier in this report, the number of K French Immersion classes per school is analyzed each year, and it cannot therefore be assumed that this five class reduction will

necessarily continue in the future, nor can it be assumed that these five schools would continue to be impacted.

Even with these reductions, there are still a considerable number of K students who will not be able to attend their neighbourhood school for English and have been told that they will be attending another elementary school.

### Qualified French Immersion Teacher Shortage

It is critical to note that even if the District had sufficient enrolling classroom space to maintain the current number of French Immersion Kindergarten divisions, there are significant challenges associated with recruiting and hiring staff who are qualified to teach in this program. Almost all school districts in BC are struggling with the shortage of qualified French Immersion teachers. A CPF report (Spring 2015) <http://bc-yk.cpf.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/Falling-Behind-2015-Report-On-The-Shortage-Of-FSL-Teachers-In-BC-YK1.pdf> states the following:

*“CPF BC & Yukon conducted a survey and analysis to better understand the nature and the scope of the shortage .....*

*A key finding: Eighty-six (86) percent of school districts indicated that it is “very challenging” or “challenging” to fill all available French immersion teaching positions with qualified teachers.*

*The nature of the challenge varies from district to district. 78% indicated a lack of qualified applicants as a problem, 38% indicated geographic location, 31% indicated their inability to offer continuing contracts to candidates, and 22% indicated teacher pay/cost of living.”*

In Vancouver, it is a combination of most of the above. In terms of a lack of qualified candidates, one factor is the very small numbers of fluently bilingual teachers who are trained in French Immersion and are graduating from BC universities.

While it would not initially seem apparent that “geographic location” would be a factor in hiring when talking about the city of Vancouver, it is in fact a major consideration for many new teachers who can find much more affordable housing in other Lower Mainland school districts. Similarly, it is very difficult to entice qualified out of province teachers to come here because of the high cost of living in Vancouver.

The Vancouver School District has approximately 212 FTE French Immersion teaching staff at the elementary level alone. Before the start of the next school year, we anticipate having to fill at least 15 FTE of Continuing Contract French Immersion positions and another 8 FTE of temporary FI positions. **Even if physical space were available for the 5 additional K classes, it is doubtful that the district would be able to hire the teachers to teach those classes.**

As a District, numerous steps have been taken to attempt to secure the staffing required for our existing French Immersion classes, and the district continues to actively recruit qualified French Immersion teachers.

Examples of current recruiting and retention practices include:

- visits to local and national career fairs and universities (i.e. UBC, SFU, U Vic, U of Ottawa, U of Alberta, McGill, Montreal)
- establishing relationships with local universities which offer French Immersion teacher training; prioritizing their student teaching placements in our schools, visiting their university courses to answer questions and promote the VSB as a desirable employer
- advertising locally and nationally
- using third party organizations (i.e. Make A Future) to represent the VSB and recruit on our behalf at national or international venues that we cannot attend
- VSB supports core French teachers to attend the SFU 'boot camp' in order to enhance their French language skills
- VSB engages in 'early hiring' of French Immersion teacher candidates in order to secure them before they accept employment in other districts
- French Immersion teaching positions are posted as continuing contracts twice a year (rather than temporary) to encourage candidates to select VBE as the employer of choice

The district continues to use all of the strategies listed above and is always seeking new and innovative ideas. Regardless, it must be recognized that the limited ability to hire qualified French Immersion teachers does have an impact on our ability to further develop French Immersion programming. Opening new French Immersion classes when there are not qualified teachers to teach in them does not solve the problem. The district would not wish to open French Immersion classes without a qualified French Immersion teacher to teach those classes.

#### PLAN MOVING FORWARD

The Supreme Court Decision in November 2016 was immediately followed by negotiations between the Ministry of Education and the British Columbia Teachers Federation around the implementation of this legal decision. It was only when the agreement was reached between both parties in March of 2017 and the terms as they related to each school district were clarified that districts could begin to analyze the impact on their organizational planning and programming. For many districts, including Vancouver, this meant that the timeline was too short to implement large scale changes such as boundary reviews, relocation of programs or facility additions (i.e. portables). It was also felt to be too late in the year to ask rental groups such as daycare providers to move out of classroom space. This will be re-examined each year.

As part of the VSB 2021 Strategic Plan, a review of Programs of Choice (including French Immersion) was already scheduled to take place. This review will include an analysis of the locations of existing programs, as well as whether there are opportunities for expansion or a need to reduce certain programs in certain areas. In addition, and also part of the VSB 2021 Strategic Plan, staff will complete a catchment area review to analyze any boundary changes that may need to occur. It may be necessary to do a more in-depth school by school facilities review as well in order to look more closely at how space is allocated within each school. There may also be the need to review and revise certain VBE policies related to catchment areas, programs of choice, etc.

In addition, existing structures such as Committee III (Education and Student Services) and the Modern Languages Advisory Committee will continue to be venues where issues relating to French Immersion Programs within the VSB can be reported on and discussed with interested stakeholder groups. District Staff are also part of provincial discussions around the ability to offer high quality and appropriately staffed French Immersion Programs.

CONCLUSION:

**The Vancouver School District continues to be committed to offering a vibrant French Immersion program.** While the current situation regarding a smaller number of available spaces for families interested in French Immersion Kindergarten is unlikely to change for the start of the 2017-2018 school year, the District will be exploring a broader range of enrolment management options for next year and will continue to focus on hiring suitably qualified French Immersion teachers for existing positions. Should the appropriate conditions exist as discussed in this report, the district will give serious consideration to increasing program offerings in French Immersion for the 2018/19 school year.

This report is provided for information.