

PROGRAM VIABILITY OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH PROGRAMMING: CONSULTATION WITH PARENTS

A Report to the Halton District School Board

March 2016

Background, Objectives & Methodology

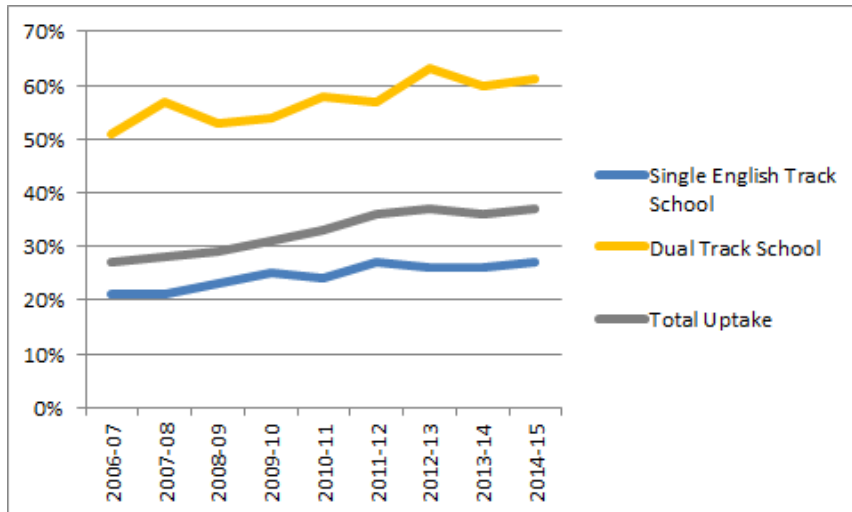


Issues facing the Halton District School Board

HIGH UPTAKE IN FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMING

- Impact on English program enrolment as a result of high French Immersion (FI) uptake i.e., small English enrolments at some school locations
- Ability to recruit sufficient numbers of qualified and fluent elementary French teachers
- Ability to sufficiently recruit subject specialist staff with FSL qualifications for French Immersion in secondary schools

Senior Kindergarten to Grade 1 French Immersion Uptake



Class sizes by type of school in HDSB

	No. of Elementary Schools	No. of Schools with under 15 Gr. 1 students in English program	Student Enrolment
Single Track English	51	1	23323
Dual Track with Gr. 1 FI	22	12	13803
Dual Track without Gr. 1 FI	7	0	2843
Single Track FI	6	0	4056
Totals	86	13	44025

HDSB's response & community engagement methodology

PROGRAMING VIABILITY COMMITTEE (PVC)

- A committee has been set up to examine different options for moving forward with dealing with the impact high FI uptake is having on both French and English programing.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- The PVC has sought feedback from the community via an online community questionnaire, information sessions and a series of community focus groups.

IPSOS PARTNERSHIP

- Ipsos was commissioned to conduct the community focus groups.
- The PVC publicised the focus groups and invited parents to express an interest in the groups. The PVC then randomly selected 12-15 participants for each focus group.
- Ipsos was responsible for moderating, analysis and reporting of the focus groups.
- The focus groups were conducted between February 16th and March 10th 2016. Each group lasted 90 minutes.

Composition of focus groups

	No. sessions by location	No. participants
Parents of children attending single track English elementary schools	2 groups in Burlington 1 group in Oakville 1 group in Acton	29
Parents of children attending the French Track of a dual track elementary school	2 groups in Oakville 1 group in Burlington	23
Parents of children attending single track French Immersion elementary schools	2 groups in Oakville	13
Parents of children attending the English track of a dual track elementary school	1 groups in Georgetown 2 groups in Milton 1 group in Burlington	31
Interested and engaged parent stakeholders & parents of children attending single track French Immersion elementary schools	1 group in Burlington	20

Focus group objectives

FEEDBACK ON 3 KEY THEMES

- The focus groups began with discussions around the following 3 themes:

Theme 1: Capping or limiting enrolment in a specific program

Theme 2: Early vs Mid Entry into FI

Theme 3: Dual Track vs Single Track FI schools

FEEDBACK ON 4 OPTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

- Feedback was also sought in relation to the 4 prospective options identified by the PVC:

Option 1: Grade 1 (early) French Immersion remains a 50% French 50% English delivery model, but entry to FI will be capped (method of capping to be determined at a later date).

Option 2: Grade 1 (early) French Immersion model remains at 50% French and 50% English, however, all FI programs will be delivered in single track FI schools. French Immersion will be phased out of dual track schools and no new dual track schools will be considered. The location of the single track schools will be determined at a later date.

Option 3: French Immersion will commence at a later entry point (mid entry); Grade 4. This will result in the delivery model of FI moving from a 50% model to at least an 80% French Immersion model. In addition the delivery of FI will occur in dual track schools only.

Option 4: French Immersion will commence at a later entry point (mid entry); Grade 4. This will result in the delivery model of FI moving from a 50% model to at least an 80% French Immersion model. In addition the delivery of FI will occur in single track FI schools only.

Note on the interpretation of findings

- The main objectives of the focus groups were to provide parents with an opportunity to receive more information on the challenges facing HDSB and to discuss and deliberate on the options for moving forward.
- The value of the exercise is providing an in-depth understanding of the factors and interplay between factors that shape opinion.
- It is worth noting that due to the small number of people taking part and the fact that random sampling / statistically weighting have not been applied, the findings cannot be extrapolated to the population at large. This should be borne in mind when reading and interpreting the findings.

Detailed findings



Setting a cap was the least preferred option

- This view was broadly shared among *all* parents who took part in the focus groups, regardless of which language program or type of school their children attended.
- **A cap was seen as unfair.** All children should have a right to an education of their choosing. Further, it would be unfair for a child who is genuinely interested and able to succeed in FI to lose out on a place to a child that is going into FI for the “wrong reasons” and drops out from the program later on.
- **A cap could potentially add to perceived elitism of FI in the community.** Parents of children in the English stream in particular felt that there is a perception in the community that FI is a better quality program, it is for the “good” kids and that it is pushed by principals and teachers on parents with the “good” kids.
- **A cap would potentially divide communities.** This was seen as a potential outcome from the cap adding to the elitism of FI.



You may be one of the ones that actually, your child would excel in the program. And because of the cap, your child won't be able to do it. In that aspect, I think it's unfair.



Education is the right for the kid. Doesn't matter if it's English or French. But if my kids, they're willing to learn French, I don't expect a cap from the school board.



Capping's a really tough one. I think in areas like Peel, there's been a lot of divisiveness, and a lot of communities in Halton as well over this issue and the whole notion of capping scares me a little bit because it would be really hard I think, you know five families living side by each, I pulled your yellow ticket but I didn't pull your green ticket sorry.

First come, first serve was seen as the least worst option of a bad choice

- Parents of children in FI were fairly vocal in preferring a first come, first serve system because they would do whatever it takes to get their children into FI.
- Although it was acknowledged that the lottery system is more fair to those who are unable to queue for a spot, there was a clear sense that there is something **intrinsically wrong about leaving a child's education up to the luck of the draw.**
- A lottery system also led to concerns of creating **awkward situations for parents with multiple kids** in terms of logistics or relationships between siblings. Grandfathering system would solve this issue but compound the unfairness of a cap.
- The few positive comments made in relation to the **cap** were that it is an **“easy”** solution from an administrative point of view and it will likely **“fix”** the problem.
- There was some awareness that a cap has been implemented in other areas. This led to calls for more information to parents on the outcome of this or at least for the PVC to consider this in their decision-making.



It really scares me because I want it and what if I don't get it. So it scares me, because I would sleep over night in a sleeping bag just to, you know, get that spot. You know that's me-parent! Like I've lost control.



Especially if you have a family, where you have different ages, so your two older sisters are privileged to have the French immersion, but sorry, you were not, because the system changed and you were capped, you're left out. That doesn't work.

Opinion was divided on when FI should begin

Grade 1

With 50/50 French to English programing split

- Studies showing that **early exposure to languages is best** were cited as the main reason for support for early entry.
- Parents who had a very strong preference for their children learning French tended to gravitate to this option. Indeed, these parents tended to call for an even earlier entry point such as in other boards where FI starts at senior kindergarten.

Grade 4

With 80/20 French to English programing split

- **Mid-entry allows a more informed choice on FI.** In contrast to SK, children can be more involved at G4 in the decision to study FI while parents and teachers are in a better position to judge a child's ability to succeed in FI.
- **Mid-entry would solve what some see the issue of** parents entering their children to **"try FI out" and high attrition with FI** which leads to instability in the system. Parents with children in English programing tended to voice this opinion. These parents were strong proponents of more selectivity based on ability to succeed in FI (such as the gifted program). This view also led to support for increasing the intensity of French programing.
- Meanwhile, those who had children in FI and who came across as less adamant on their children studying FI were **concerned that a higher level of intensity** would have an impact on their child's **grasp of the English language**, their own ability to **help with homework in "harder" subjects** such as maths and science and their child's **ability to switch back to English for harder subjects in high school.**
- Core French was seen as complimentary to a mid-entry point by parents of children in the English program and those who had children in FI and who came across as less adamant on their children studying FI.
- Core French however did not provide enough exposure to the language to satisfy parents with a strong view on their children taking FI.

Opinion was divided on when FI should begin

SUPPORT FOR GRADE 1 ENTRY



There is some research that does suggest that kids pick up languages more easily, if it's introduced at a younger age, but three and four is optimal. By the time they get to grade one, you're starting to get on the back side of that window. So the earlier language is introduced, the more likely they'll be able to speak that language, as though it's their first language.



I've heard with the early entry, the language skills, they develop them so easier the younger they are. I think the earlier that they get into the programme that could benefit the kids.

SUPPORT FOR GRADE 4 ENTRY



It also allows the child some input. At grade one, they don't understand what French immersion is, and I think it's nice to include children in the decision.



With the core French starting in grade one, you'll also have an idea of how your kid learns a language. Your kid could be a really smart kid, but not learn languages well.



I put her in grade one because I thought I can always take her out. I didn't know in kindergarten what kind of learner she was. So I think I'm pro grade 4 entry, for the kids' sake, for just seeing how they learn before you throw this other thing at them

Single track schools were seen to be better at fostering a cohesive school community

- **Single track schools with a specific focus on French** – that could include French assemblies and French signs which are currently seen as somewhat lacking in current schools – **would create a more immersive environment** for pupils.
- Single track schools are believed to be **easier to administer by principals** as there is no need to divide resources.
- Having a focus on French was perceived to be **beneficial in unifying teaching staff, parents and pupils**. This stemmed from a belief that in some schools there was little interaction between English and French sides.
- Single track schools tended to be favoured by parents with very strong views on their children studying FI. These parents were generally willing to bus or drive their children for a better FI program.
- Some parents with children in the English program were also in support of single track FI schools: they felt that this would lead to parents giving FI more consideration; willingness to travel was seen as an indication of a genuine interest in French; and attributed high uptake to the fact that FI is too readily available in dual track schools.



The only benefit that I can see would be the kids that are in French. Because then their community is totally immersed in French. The whole school is focused on French.



I would encourage a single track model. I know it's tricky for a lot of families who maybe have learners that would achieve more success if both programmes were available at the school, but I think from a funding perspective, from a community perspective in terms of a shared community at the school, a shared parent body vision, teaching teams, resource perspective, trying to, you know, even encourage extra-curriculars or the assemblies, or whatever you're going to do at your school. My experience has been when it's offered in a single track dynamic, there's much more success in achieving that.

Meanwhile, **dual track schools** were preferred because they create communities around schools

- **Dual track schools allow children to walk to school.** This was important from a logistics standpoint but also because of a desire to live in neighbourhoods where all the children know each other and walk to school together.
- This option tended to be favoured by parents for whom community schools were important; those with multiple children who may not all be enrolled in FI; those who bought their house to be within the catchment area of a specific school; parents who had children in very small English streams and were therefore concerned that their school would be turned to a single track FI school.
- **All in all, there was no clear consensus on whether FI should be offered in single track or dual track schools.**



For people who have multiple children, their children may not be all the same. Maybe French immersion is a good fit for one child, and not another. So it allows you to hopefully to stay in the same in the neighborhood school. So I prefer dual track schools, it just gives people more choice, without having to leave their neighborhood school.



While you say single track gets rid of all these problems, schools are going to have to become single track French immersion. So that means my school, literally my kids can walk to in five minutes, could become that single track French immersion school. Then I have to put my kid on a bus. So that's why I like dual track, because then you go to your community school.

Feedback on the 4 options very much reflected the findings on the key themes

1 ● **Setting a cap**:: Least preferred option in all the groups

2 ● **Early FI entry delivered via single track schools**:: Generally preferred by parents who had a very strong view on their children taking FI, wanted a more immersive environment for their children and were willing for their children to be transported to school for a better quality education.

3 ● **Mid FI entry delivered via dual track schools**:: Tended to be preferred by those who were supportive of community schools, parents of children in the English program that called for more selectivity based on ability of child to succeed in FI and / or those who were worried that their school may be turned to a single track FI school.

4 ● **Mid FI entry delivered via single track schools**:: Even among the small number who admitted that this would likely bring down FI uptake, it was still not the preferred option when compared to Option 3 because of concerns on the impact on transportation.

Other key points that emerged in the discussions

Review HDSB teacher hiring practices

- In some groups, it was mentioned that HDSB has protracted timeframes for hiring teachers which means that many accept offers from other Boards instead. There were calls for dealing with this issue.
- Related to this point, it was felt that more needs to be done to ensure that students are aware that there is a high demand for French teachers in Ontario to boost supply of FI teachers.

Better information to parents on FI

- There were calls for more information for parents on the qualities in children that lead to success in FI, FI attrition rates and whether FI had a positive impact on children's future. Some went further and called for the Board to make a clear stance to dispel the "myth" that FI is better schooling.

Promote other specialist subjects

- Parents with children in the English program often saw FI as an "optional" specialist subject offered by the (English) Board. They wished to see the Board offer options for specialisation in other languages such as Mandarin, Spanish or Arabic that were perceived to be more useful in a globalised economy or other subjects such as music, arts or science.

A long-term solution based on sound evidence

- Several parents who attended the groups had children who have moved schools multiple times already. There was also a general perception that boundaries are constantly being redrawn by the Board. There was strong appetite for a long-term solution that will provide children with stability throughout their schooling years and based on hard evidence of what works from experiences in other boards (as opposed to listening to the loudest voices in the community).