Proposed changes to elementary French immersion program

Background Information

What are the main changes being proposed?
The main recommendations were included in the French Immersion Review Committee report:

- that the board implement 50% daily instructional time in grades 1 to 8 French immersion (FI), effective Sept. 2013
- that the board place an enrolment cap on all grade 1 elementary FI programs, maintaining the level of access (i.e. 25% of the total Peel board grade 1 enrolment) identified in the 2012-13 school year. The enrolment cap is to be reviewed by Dec. 2017.
- that the board consider the feasibility of appointing an administrator to facilitate the attraction and retention of French language staff
- that staff consider the organization of both single track and dual track FI schools as a part of the 2012-13 annual planning process and annually thereafter. A single track school offers only French immersion programs. All students in the school are enrolled in an FI program. Dual track schools offer both English and French programs. Several school boards currently use both models.
- that the board establish a committee to conduct a full review of the FI/extended French (EF) program at the secondary level during the 2013-14 school year

If the changes are approved, when would they be implemented?
If approved, the recommendations take effect September 2013.

Why is the board considering these changes?
The Peel District School Board continues to experience a high level of growth in FI programs. This growth makes it very difficult to sustain the program because of increasing demands on staffing, instructional time and space accommodation.

The board is considering the changes to help alleviate these increasing demands so that we can continue to provide Peel students with a high quality program—one that’s designed to provide students with the skills they need to communicate in a second language.

Why are we communicating with parents now?
- In 2010, board staff brought to the trustees’ attention the challenges facing the board as a result of the growth of the FI program. A report dated October 2010 stated: “The growth of the program is such that it is possible that we will eventually reach a point where it will be difficult to staff the program. We are recognizing the impact of increased preparation time on the capacity of schools to provide 85% of instructional time in French in grade 1. For FI programs, we must determine what percentage in grade 1 is optimal for Peel.”
- In June 2011, the board received a further update and agreed to establish a French Immersion Review Committee to meet during the 2011-12 school year to examine data and to consider the implications of the various options to manage the growth at the elementary level.
- The French Immersion Review Committee was established in October 2011 and met monthly during the 2011-12 school year.
- The committee was represented by all board departments, principals and trustees.
- In addition to data and information that was collected from all departments, current literature was reviewed, a parent survey was conducted and focus groups were held with FI teachers.
• Representatives from the committee met with executive members of Canadian Parents for French in December 2011 to provide the Terms of Reference and goals of the committee, met again in April 2012 to review department findings, and again this August to share the draft report.
• The draft report was brought to committee members during the first week of September 2012 and to the board of trustees on Sept. 11, 2012, for receipt.
• The culmination of this report reflects two years of intensive study by board staff in addition to proactive directions taken, such as opening new centres to accommodate enrolment growth, a review by Human Resources regarding best practices in attracting and retaining staff, and a ministry audit to ensure that the Peel board program is providing students with the percentage of instructional time identified by the Ministry of Education. The board is in compliance and it is recognized that the current level of 85% instructional time in French at the grade 1 level exceeds the ministry’s mandate.

**Why is the board considering reducing the instructional time from 85% to 50% in grade 1?**
The board is very proud of the FI program it has been able to offer over the years. It has been noted that the significant growth of the FI program has resulted in the need for additional quality staff and keeping up with that demand has been challenging.

Board staff now report that they may be unable to attract and retain sufficient number of quality teachers to fill positions in the FI programs and to provide occasional (supply) coverage for short- and long-term illnesses. Without sufficient qualified and quality staff, the program we are so proud of is at risk.

This is an issue that is shared by many boards across the province. Reducing instructional time in French in grade 1 will help ease these increasing demands on staffing.

**Why is space an issue when there are schools in areas of the board that have room, or are closing?**
Over the next 10 years the FI program is projected to grow overall by 10.6%. This is a result of the rapid growth of our grade 1 FI program. As those students move through grades, we will see an overall increase.

The ministry’s mandated full-day kindergarten program, together with the growth in the board, result in significant accommodation issues for all schools, especially those in the west, and north of Highway 401. Space available is most often found in the south of Mississauga.

Within 10 years, 15 schools will not have the space needed to accommodate their projected FI growth. Twelve new centres will be needed. This assumes that the enrolment patterns remain at the current level of 25% in grade 1. Anything above this rate will only increase the need for space.

The ministry monitors the use of all expenditures and will not fund capital projects for FI programs. To help address the board’s capital building priorities, schools will be closed to generate needed revenue.

**Can the recommendations be deferred?**
If the recommendations are to be in place for September 2013, the board must deal with them in a timely manner so that the process for registration can be fully communicated as in previous years. A delay would not allow for this.

If a delay of a year were to be approved, staff believe that the quality of the program is at risk due to the identified need for French qualified teachers, both permanent and occasional (supply), and due to increasing enrolment pressures at a number of FI sites.