

The Greater Victoria School District celebrates and embraces French language pathways that provide the opportunity for students to become functionally bilingual and gain an understanding of French cultures. With 20% of students registered within the French Immersion program, our District takes a strategic approach to ensure the greatest accessibility of French language learning opportunities for its students and parents. In an effort to maximize access for students, there are three entry points to the immersion program: kindergarten, grade one, and grade six (late immersion). In addition to this, the District also offers a distance education program to create flexibility for high school students to pursue the completion of a dual Dogwood. Both local students and students throughout the province engage in this distributed learning model.

Currently, nine of twenty seven elementary schools, five of ten middle schools and five of eight secondary schools offer an immersion pathway for students in Victoria. There has been consistent growth in the French Immersion program since the introduction of two kindergarten classes in the early seventies. Demand for the program continues to grow. Kindergarten enrollment between 2009 and 2013 grew by approximately 48%. Victoria has the largest number of students participating in French Immersion in the province. The availability of both space and qualified teachers, in addition to an equitable registration process, are the primary challenges with respect to the maintenance of such a large immersion program.

Increasing accessibility of French Immersion programs in response to an increasing registration demand requires the ability to analyse registration demand by geography, make future enrollment projections for both dual and single track schools, and the ability to determine the current and future availability of physical space in existing dual track and single track buildings. Currently, for example, eight of the nine dual track elementary schools in Victoria have reached or exceeded 100% student capacity, thus limiting future growth in established dual track schools. The evaluation of future enrollment projections and the availability of space take place every year in order to determine the greatest accessibility to French Immersion in kindergarten, grade one, and grade six for our community. This is accomplished while also balancing accessibility of neighbourhood students to the English program and educational opportunities for all students. The ninth school is the latest addition to our immersion program, helping to increase accessibility to French Immersion. It physically had the space to add the program, and also demonstrated a consistent historical enrollment demand to help ensure program viability in future years. This proactive analysis places a large demand on District staff and must also be duplicated for pathway middle and secondary schools on an annual basis.

Recommendation:

Create flexibility within, or increase French federal funding allocation model to allow for a greater allowance for District staff to plan for expansion and meet current program demands.

An annual and ongoing challenge is the ability to staff the French Immersion program. The District works to recruit immersion teachers by way of online advertising, facilitating long distance interviews with technology, and proactively connecting with local universities and practicum students. In addition to this, mentorship opportunities for new immersion teachers with experienced immersion teachers are often extended. Despite these efforts, Victoria does not receive enough French immersion teacher applications to meet the demand.

An established language threshold is in place that prospective immersion teachers must meet before moving forward in a common hiring practice for all teachers. In addition to the lack of French Immersion teacher applications, many of the applicants who do apply do not meet the minimum language threshold. This scenario is further compounded in our dual track secondary schools where prospective teachers not only need to meet a language threshold, but must also have additional areas of specialization such as science, history, and French language arts. The District places high value on the strong language ability of its French immersion teachers as it translates to the integrity of the program. Often, university graduates from French Immersion teacher education training programs learn that their university training isn't recognized by all school districts as a result of not meeting minimal language requirements.

The noted scenarios create obstacles in hiring teachers in a timely manner when needed to fill positions in schools. This also further establishes fierce competition between school districts in hiring enough immersion teachers to staff their programs, not to mention the ability to hire enough immersion teachers to the Teacher on Call list for when immersion teachers take family, medical or educational leaves. French Immersion teacher candidates repeatedly accept job offers from other school districts who either do not have a formal language requirement, or who maintain a different language threshold as part of their hiring practice. Recently, some school districts are recruiting and offering jobs to immersion teachers before even finishing their teacher training programs.

Recommendation:

Advertise and establish more teacher-training programs with a specialization in French Immersion.

Further create incentives by way of bursaries for prospective immersion teachers to follow this career pathway.

Create bursaries for qualified French Immersion teachers to pursue special education degrees to support inclusion for all students in French Immersion.

Expand elective choices for B.Ed. students to pursue French courses to augment fluency before entering into the work force.

Provincially establish a common French immersion language threshold and assessment practice recognized by post-secondary institutions, school districts and the Teacher Qualification Service (TQS) for French immersion.

Standardize French Immersion teacher requirements across provinces.

Provincially coordinated French resources or a web-based platform for teachers to share resources connected to all curricular areas.

Many parents have informally articulated the desire to have their children learn French and seek the benefits of learning a second language. Not all parents want, however, the commitment of French immersion and its requirement for students to study specialized subjects like math, science and social studies in French. In addition to this, parents have informally articulated that they struggle with the choice of registering for Early French Immersion when it is the first entry point into the school system for their children. Another frustration often articulated is waiting for the introduction of Core French until the fifth grade. If the delivery of a quality Core French program began in kindergarten, alongside the addition of intensive French opportunities beginning in grade six, perhaps the demand for French Immersion would be more manageable for school districts while simultaneously increasing French Language opportunities for all students.

Recommendations:

Provincially require the delivery of Core French to begin in kindergarten.

Embed French language courses and French language methods courses as part of generalist teacher training programs for elementary and middle school teachers.

Provincially establish a common Core French language threshold and assessment practice recognized by post-secondary institutions, school districts and the Teacher Qualification Service for Core French.

The Greater Victoria School District has recently amended its registration process for parents wishing to register their children for the Early French Immersion Program. A “first come, first serve” process for French Immersion registration was re-examined as a result of very early morning line ups and over-night camp outs. The question was raised with respect to equitable access to French Immersion programs in a public education setting. Stakeholders were consulted through a French Advisory Committee and a lottery system was introduced in accordance to whether or not the registrant has a sibling in the school, is a catchment, out-of-catchment, or out-of-district student. In an attempt to create the greatest opportunity to access the program, parents can also select alternate choices to their immersion catchment school. This in turn facilitates the opportunity to fill as many Early French Immersion seats as possible. Despite in-catchment waitlists in many dual track schools, kindergarten French Immersion seats are available to

students every year in the District. Few parents take the opportunity to enrol in a French Immersion program outside of their community.

French language learning opportunities are clearly valued by students and parents in Victoria. A provincially coordinated effort by all stakeholders is required to facilitate school districts in British Columbia with the ability to create and augment French language learning opportunities for its students. The provincial establishment of French Immersion and Core French teacher qualifications, varied quality French language opportunities for students beginning in kindergarten, and French focused teacher training programs, would collectively help to address the need to deliver quality French language programming.