

Vancouver School District's Presentation to the Senate Committee on Official Languages

My name is Nancy Brennan and I am the Associate Superintendent of Learning Services with the Vancouver School District. I am well-acquainted with French Immersion and other French language programs, having been a French Immersion student, teacher and school administrator. I have also held a variety District positions where I was responsible for hiring, supervising, resourcing and maintaining French Immersion programs in other Lower Mainland school districts.

In Vancouver there are currently 14 elementary schools and 3 secondary schools which host Early French Immersion programs. We also have 2 Late French Immersion elementary schools and 3 Intensive French elementary schools. There are over 5,000 students registered in these three types of programs. In a district with a total enrolment of just over 50,000 students in Kindergarten through Grade 12, this means that approximately 10% of our students are in French language programs.

The first elementary school site for French Immersion in our district was L'Ecole Bilingue which opened in 1974. After that, programs were added at 13 other District sites. Four of these sites are single track- French only schools and the rest are dual track (both English and French programs). The secondary sites are Churchill, Kitsilano and Vancouver Technical.

Enrollment in each of these programs is by application, and if necessary, a draw for Kindergarten placements. Parents submit applications online for their preferred schools (up to three) in January of the year that their child is scheduled to start Kindergarten, and are notified in February as to whether they have obtained a place for their child in either their preferred school or another location. Those students who are not successful in obtaining a space are waitlisted. As spaces become available (until Sept 30 of their grade 1 year), they may be removed from the waitlist and offered a space.

Like other school districts in BC, the Vancouver School District has seen a steady increase in public interest in French Language programs, particularly Early French Immersion, since the program started. However, over the last five years our enrolment numbers have remained stable and we do not anticipate any future growth or expansion of the program. All existing programs are full and we don't currently have the teaching capacity required to offer additional sites and spaces. Each year for the past ten years we have registered approximately 500 new Kindergarten students and

unfortunately have had as many as 200 more students on a waitlist for these programs. Small numbers of those on the waitlist will be able to enter the program in Grade 1, but many are not able to find a space and therefore remain in the English neighbourhood program, or another choice program, and perhaps apply to Late Immersion or Intensive French in Grade 6.

As is the case in many other school districts, we also see significant declines in numbers of students who remain in the French Immersion program at the secondary level, as students choose to pursue other options such as Mini schools, specialty academies, etc. In 2015-2016, we had 570 students in Grade 1 French Immersion, 389 in Grade 7, and 197 in Grade 12 French Immersion.

We also have more than 16,000 students taking Core French courses, but again, these numbers decline as French goes from being a mandatory course in the elementary schools to an optional program at the secondary level. In grade 5, we have over 3,000 students taking French, in Grade 9, 1800 and in grade 12, 471 students.

As mentioned earlier, although early immersion is a sought after program in the Vancouver School District, we like other school districts in British Columbia struggle to hire enough qualified teachers to maintain our current level of French Immersion programming, and cannot at this point foresee a time when we would be able to expand the program. There are a variety of strategies that we have in place to attempt to meet the current demand. These include:

- Attending teaching job fairs regularly in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and BC (UBC, SFU, UVic).
- Meeting individually with UBC's graduating group of French Immersion teacher candidates
- We have an ongoing (permanent) posting for French Immersion On Call teachers on Make a Future and other similar websites & we interview year round. We also interview candidates from Ontario/Quebec via Skype on a regular basis
- In March of every year we advertise "Continuing Contract" French Immersion positions. This is full-time, guaranteed work and with this posting we are looking to attract teachers from other districts and provinces as well as secure the new graduates from the various universities' French Immersion programs
- We encourage our French Immersion teachers to accept practicum students and then work with the schools' French Immersion Principals and Vice-Principals to

encourage those teacher candidates who have had successful practicum experiences to apply, sometimes before they have even completed all of their coursework.

- Of the people we don't hire for French Immersion because they do not meet our required fluency levels, but are hired for English On-Call teaching (and are almost fluent), we encourage them to work on their French and be reassessed at the board level in the future. There are a number of teachers in this category.

We have also discussed other strategies that may become necessary in the future, including:

- Attending still more job fairs in Ontario, Quebec, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Atlantic Canada.
- Expanding the number of continuing, fulltime positions offered
- Offering paid, intensive French professional development to current On-Call Core French staff who are almost fluent
- Covering to cost of the flight and other costs associated with the 3-week French summer program in Quebec City. This program is offered for teachers who are almost fluent and Federal grants cover only part of cost
- Offering tuition rebates for French Immersion teachers who agree to work for a specified number of years in the French Immersion program
- Providing rental subsidies with reciprocation agreements prior to hire.
- Presenting to Gr. 6/7 French Immersion classes and talking to them about maintaining their French in high school and the opportunities for them as possible future French Immersion teachers

In each of the districts in which I have worked, parents often express frustration with the fact that there are not enough spaces for all of the children who wish to be in a French Immersion program. In Vancouver in particular, we often hear that with many of our schools operating at less than full capacity, we should be able to open more Immersion programs. Physical space is not as much of an issue for us as it may be for other districts.

Rather, it is the ability to be certain that the teachers who are teaching in this program speak French with native-like fluency and that they understand and model strong second language teaching practices. These two qualities are difficult to find in British Columbia when there are only a finite number of graduates each year who would meet this criteria. It is very important to our district that we be able to offer the highest

quality program possible and this means having rigorous standards for both teacher fluency and teacher experience.

Add to this the high cost of living in Vancouver which makes it difficult to attract teachers from other provinces, and the tendency of some Immersion teachers for whom English is their first language to leave the program after a few years because of their perception that it would be easier to teach in English (better access to resources, etc.), and you can see that just maintaining the number of qualified teachers that we have now is a full time job. However, we continue to look for innovative ways to provide these important programs for our students and would welcome any support or suggestions that could be provided through the recommendations of this committee.