



## COMMENTARY

# GROWTH IN BC'S IMMERSION PROGRAM LIMITED BY A RETURN TO CAPS AND LOTTERIES

Canadian Parents for French - British Columbia & Yukon

The popularity of French-second-language learning in BC has been increasing for many years. Over the past five years, French immersion enrolment has increased by almost 23%, and the number of French immersion Grade 12 graduates has increased by just over 29%.

Approximately 250 public schools in 45 of BC's 60 school districts are offering French immersion programs to 41,002 students. Several school districts are offering basic core French from kindergarten, and the two largest urban school districts (Surrey and Vancouver) have implemented intensive French programs beginning at Grade 6.

French-second-language programs in BC received \$9.16 million in federal funding for the 2007/08 school year.

While enrolment in French immersion continues to grow, it is not showing the spectacular growth of a few years ago. This is not because interest is waning – just the opposite. Growth is slowing because there just aren't enough classrooms to accommodate everyone who wants in. Access to French-second-language programs is once again experiencing restrictions in many areas, for many reasons. Rapid growth in immersion enrolment over the past five years has led to the re-imposition of caps and lotteries.

Richmond School District cut one early French immersion class and one late French immersion class in 2007. It is proposing to cut an additional two early French immersion classes in September 2008. The rationale is that the demand is greater than classroom space and teachers will allow. Parents are required to participate in a district-wide lottery to determine who gets in. Naturally, this bothers many parents. Three years ago, Richmond parent Cindi Pillay moved to a neighbourhood where she knew one of five French immersion elementary schools was located. Imagine her anger when finding out she would have to participate in a new district-wide lottery to determine if her daughter would be accepted into the program. After the lottery took place last January, "I received the acknowledgement letter in the mail, advising [me that] my daughter did not get a spot and also that she is #29 on the wait list."

Paul Varga, a parent in Penticton, was also an unwilling participant in a lottery to register his son in the district's popular late French immersion program. "Our initial decision to place our child in French immersion was not made lightly. We would hope our trustees respect our wishes and treat it with the same gravity, and not leave one of the most important decisions of our child's educational career to chance."

"Here in Powell River, we are raising our children in a small, rural town. However, in their future, they will still need to compete with students and individuals who have completed the types of language programs of choice that new research indicates improves brain development. As parents choose the educational program for their kindergarten or Grade 1 children, they must look to the future 12 years and beyond."  
– **Toni Bond, President, CPF-BC & Yukon Powell River Chapter**

"From our perspective, we know the interest is out there for early immersion. We know we could have the numbers for a kindergarten/Grade 1 split class. But the benchmark of 44 students or two full kindergarten classes is impossible for our small community.... We don't think attrition in and out of the valley is that great that two classrooms would be needed. We still believe that French immersion would be a huge benefit to this valley and it would not cost the school board additional money based on 25 students."  
– **Sheena Fraser, parent, Pemberton, BC**

"EFI was turned down with the rationale that it would be too disruptive to the schools. The board accepted [the Superintendent's] recommendation in spite of vociferous opposition from parents, teachers, and one of the principals at the board meeting. What this seems to indicate is that French immersion has become a victim of its own success and school districts are loathe to see too much change in their schools' makeup."  
– **Sheena Fraser, parent, Pemberton, BC**

"The logistics attached to the move from our location as a single-track school to the possible move and reconfiguration into a dual-track school is something that is not sitting very well with our parent group. The school district has come forward and said that they support FI in the valley but that they do not have a plan in place as the program grows."  
– **Naomi Barclay, CPF-BC & Yukon Cowichan Valley Chapter**

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*continued*

Far too many school districts embrace the notion that because French immersion is not an entitlement but a program of choice, they are under no obligation to find positive, creative approaches to emerging challenges.

Richmond Assistant Superintendent Jim Martens states, "*should the FI program be allowed to continue to grow in an unlimited manner, it could have repercussions on the English track.*"

Thus, the resistance to opening new FI programs or expanding existing programs is almost as great as ever. Parents in Pemberton, a short hop from Whistler, which will be hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, and in Powell River have campaigned long and hard for several years to have early French immersion programs, but have been repeatedly denied because trustees are demanding two full kindergarten classes in areas with low school-aged populations.

Happily, some school districts are creating new opportunities and expanding their offerings of FSL programs. In Vancouver, fall 2008 will see one new class (30 students) in the intensive

French program, a grade 3/4 French immersion MACC (Multi-Age Cluster Class for gifted learners), and a new EFI kindergarten/Grade 1 program on the downtown east side of the city. North Vancouver will be expanding its LFI program to another site and will open its third French immersion secondary school in September 2009.

This year, the Coast Mountain School District began the only online *Sciences Humaines 11* and *Applied Digital Communications 11* (French) courses for immersion students, through its North Coast Distance Education School.

In 100 Mile House, the local CPF Chapter appealed the superintendent's decision not to run FI to Grade 10 next year, with only 8 students projected. The school board decided that starting in September 2008, French immersion will run at the high school through to Grade 12, and in 2011, it will grant "Double Dogwoods" to its first class of bilingual high school graduates in the 25 years since French immersion began in the district.

"Assistant Superintendent Martens noted the continual increase in requests for kindergarten enrolments for FI and stated that to ensure the long-term sustainability of a high-quality FI program, the lottery should continue. He expressed concern that should the FI program be allowed to continue to grow in an unlimited manner, that it could have repercussions on the English track."

– **Board Meeting Minutes, Richmond, BC (May 20, 2008)**

"Trustees commented that the decision to implement a system allowing limited access to the FI program was taken by the board after extensive discussions with staff, parents, and the community. The draw system is considered fair and equitable and permits the board to sustain the quality of the FI program in Richmond."

– **Board Meeting Minutes, Richmond, BC (May 20, 2008)**

"(Some) think we're trying to dismantle the French immersion program and that's the farthest thing from our mind," assistant superintendent Jim Martens said in an interview. "What we're trying to do is make sure we keep it as strong as possible within our ability to recruit and retain teachers."

– **Richmond**

"Teachers doing their practicum in Richmond will quickly learn that EFI (early French immersion) is being reduced district-wide. Naturally, this would not only create job uncertainty for existing teachers but [would] also compromise any "marketing" efforts to recruit new, qualified teachers."

– **Andrea Thomson, CPF-BC & Yukon Richmond Chapter**

"We have been fortunate to attract dedicated teachers for the FI programs and at our latest CPF meeting and information meetings for kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 6 registration, it was great to note the emphasis being put on ensuring the continued success of School District 83's district-wide French immersion programs. Parents who have a student enrolled in any of the FI programs are eligible for sibling priority registration, which means you only have to line up once. As parents we are very grateful for all the advantages of FI and how it turns our children into bilingual students!"

– **Blaine Carson, president, CPF-BC & Yukon Salmon Arm Chapter**

"We feel using a lottery system to be an abdication of the trustees' responsibility to ensure our educational system reflects the needs of its students. Our initial decision to place our child in French immersion was not made lightly. We would hope our trustees respect our wishes and treat it with the same gravity, and not leave one of the most important decisions of our child's educational career to chance. Do trustees decide which schools to close on the basis of a lottery? Was the decision to apply for funds to reconstruct Penticton Secondary School made by drawing cards from a deck? Are district administrators' salaries decided by rolling dice? We are confident the trustees made these decisions by carefully considering all the facts and making a reasoned decision. As parents, we have put the same careful consideration into the decision to enrol our child in the French Immersion program."

– **Paul and Shirley Varga, parents, Penticton, BC**