

Hello parents:

Below are my thoughts and some questions on various aspects of the issue. Some of the arguments that can be used with the board can also be used with the ministry.

The Fundamental Problem That Has Led to the Current Crisis:

When the school board set up the French Immersion program, what it calls a "District Program" it did so without considering both equity of access and necessary program support, two important factors. Both of these can be addressed by providing transportation. The fact that transportation was not determined to be part of the original package but rather depended on courtesy seats and keeping old buses on the road has led to the current situation. The program was initiated and then allowed to grow on a shaky foundation, as the board itself admits, on an "unsustainable" busing provision and the "expectation" on the part of parents that it would likely continue even though they knew it was not guaranteed.

Quite often, parents, in their eagerness to get an FI program started in their school board, will agree to assume responsibility for getting their children to the magnet school. They don't realize at the time that there is not only a built-in unfairness in this structure, but it is also set up for failure, eventually, since it is very difficult to maintain critical mass if the program is accessible only to those families who are able to drive their children or arrange some other way to get them there without board support. So as well as built-in unfairness, there is built-in potential to fail. In a perfect world, parents, staff and trustees would have insisted on transportation being part of the plan so as to protect the future of the program and also to adhere to the concept of equity of access in public education.

In this case, the program did indeed thrive because there was temporary board support through courtesy seats and keeping the old buses on the road. Meanwhile, the board did not manage, for whatever reason, to secure the funds from the ministry that it would need to continue the level of bussing it had been providing. The board saw the crisis coming, but somehow the funds that were needed to continue were not secured. So when the old buses could no longer be used, the board reverted to its stated policy which said that parents were responsible for getting "out of boundary" children to their schools. However, by providing unsustainable bussing to this "District Program" in particular, a French Immersion program, the board has exacerbated what was already a serious problem. If there were no bussing at all, it had a problem of maintaining program viability in terms of attracting enough students to maintain critical mass over the long term. Now, because students have been able to enroll based on the "unsustainable" bussing and the "expectation" that it would likely continue, the board has created several new problems. The questions I have, related to these new problems, speak to the process leading up to this recent decision. Parents should ask the board for answers on the following legitimate concerns. They might have an argument for flawed process as well as poor board planning in the first place.

#### 1) Social and Academic

How much consideration has been given to the adjustment required by a young student if he/she transfers back to the English stream? Depending on how a program is set up in a given school board, there is usually a lag in English skills resulting in a

catching up period for a child who switches to the English stream before a certain grade. In our board, a student was deemed to have caught up by about grade six. But we have 100% French for grades one to three, inclusive, with English being introduced at grade four and gradually increased with each grade until it is about 50/50 French/English by grade seven. So depending on the program in Parksville, there is probably at least some lag time, perhaps significant, for the student transferring. Along with the academic issues, there are also social adjustments for the student who leaves friends behind and also feels somewhat inadequate in terms of being behind the others in English skills.

## 2) Impact On the FI program and the School

Has the impact, not just on the FI program, present and future, but also on the school that houses it been thoroughly examined in the event there are significant numbers leaving that school this September and in the future and fewer entering this fall and in the future? What about class sizes and teacher allotments there? What about enrolment there? Of course, there will be that critical mass issue that will affect the FI class make-up with the distinct possibility of more split classes and the downward spiral that that sets in motion in terms of keeping the program viable. For convenience, I will paste in here a section of my first e-mail wherein I gave more detail on the downward spiral phenomenon:

"The programs at those schools mentioned in the article are indeed in big trouble if they lose busing. Gradually, enrollment slips, critical mass then becomes an issue, more split classes follow that, and before we know it, parents who can actually get their children to the school start questioning the viability of the FI program (they especially hate triple splits) and start choosing not to enroll their youngsters, and so we have a downward spiral until the school board questions whether or not this program should be kept at all since it is seeing declining enrollment. There is a school board in Ontario where this is exactly what happened. The board, since it did not want to provide transportation, opted for what it called the "neighbourhood model" for FI wherein programs were established at more schools in order to get the program closer to at least some of those who wanted to participate. But the critical mass was not there; so what I described above occurred and the board started closing down programs that were failing. They moved some of them but did not provide any busing; so students who had already begun the program were left high and dry unless their parents could now provide a way to get them to the other school."

## 3) Impact On the Neighbourhood Schools, the Students and the Teachers in the Event of Returning Students

Has the effect on neighbourhood schools (the so called "in boundary" schools for these FI students) been thoroughly examined if there is a sudden influx of FI students applying for a change of enrolment to their closest schools? What is the effect on class sizes and the teacher allotment for those schools?

In addition, how much thought has gone into the effect on the other students in the English stream class in terms of attention from the teacher if you have not one student switching back but several in one class? Also, what is the impact on the returning students as well from having the teacher's time stretched if several are returning in the same year? Has thought been given to the teacher who must deal

with the extra work in helping these children adjust academically and socially?

The above questions, to me, speak to the issue of thorough planning on the part of a board before it embarks on a move that has so many far reaching consequences. To what extent has the board examined all of the complex issues and considered all of the possible results that can occur from its decision? Responsible decision making would weigh all the various consequences against the board working harder at finding a way to get students to a program to which they and their parents have already made a significant commitment.

#### A Possible Solution—the Program Support Argument And the Equity of Access Argument By Way of the Home School Designation

According to the board, 'cross boundary' students account for 18% of ridership, while FI students account for 5%. Surely the board can afford to continue transporting the relatively small number of FI students who are attending what the board calls a "District Program," but who for transportation purposes are currently being lumped in with all the other cross boundary students? This could be justified under the rationale of Program Support. There are boards in Ontario who bus their FI students under that very rationale. They realize that these programs must be centralized in order to achieve "critical mass," and consequently they must be supported by transportation since they are beyond reasonable walking distance for a large number of students. Quite simply, FI can not be strong or in some cases even survive without transportation support. As I mentioned above, this support should have been an integral part of the planning for the program. It was not. Instead, for the purpose of busing eligibility, the board simply chose to consider the students "out of boundary" rather than "District Program" students who require board support in order to participate in a program set up by the board and supposedly offered to all. Quite simply, this is the board's program. Once it is established, the board has a responsibility to support it, and that means transporting the students to the magnet site.

The board calls the program one of choice, but the flaw in that thinking is that it is a choice which is limited to those families who can get the child to the school that hosts the program. It is not a choice that is available to all, fairly, even though all families pay taxes to support public education. While there are parents who are able to drive their children to school, is it fair to have this program subsidized through education taxes by parents who can not drive them and hence are denied a real choice? They pay their taxes too, but their choice has been removed unless they can find a way to get the child to the school. So there are two really good reasons for a board to designate the FI school as the "home school" for the purpose of transportation eligibility. They are equity of access and program support.

Equity of access is surely a basic tenet of public education anywhere, not just in some school boards. If a board wants to offer a program, and often boards are very proud of the "choices" that they can give parents, then they need to make sure that the children who wish to participate are given equity in that choice. It has to be part of the planning if the board claims to be offering public education. Surely, it is unfair, by anyone's standards, to measure the walk distance, used to determine busing eligibility, from a student's residence to the nearest school if that is not where his/her program is taking place. The argument that parents were told at the time they applied for a "cross boundary enrolment" that transportation was not guaranteed does not wash. The board admits in its own published statements that it has allowed an "expectation" of busing

to develop over the years. It must accept responsibility for having done that, for allowing a program to increase by 65% based on the expectation on the part of parents that transportation could continue. Accepting responsibility for that does not mean cancelling the busing and leaving many students high and dry part way through a program, any program, but especially one in which there is a significant adjustment involved when switching to English due to the catching up factor. As I mentioned earlier, this adjustment is not just academic; it is also social.

The second reason for the 'home school' designation is Program Support that ensures program viability at the beginning and into the future. Both of these, support and equity, are addressed by providing transportation. As an example of the thinking that does provide both support and equity, one trustee in our board many years ago when the board was contemplating introducing FI, has been quoted as saying, "If we are going to give them the program, then we have to give them wheels. Otherwise, it isn't fair, and it won't work." He knew what he was talking about. This board's policy not only has the potential to eventually cause the demise of the FI program, but it also creates unnecessary academic and social problems for some students who must switch to the English stream because of the board's recent decision to fall back on that policy.

At the risk of being repetitive, I have to say that the responsible solution is not simply to remove busing to balance the transportation budget. There is more than fiscal responsibility involved here. There is responsible handling of programming from the outset (which did not occur) and responsibility for the academic and social effects of pulling the rug out from students who have embarked on a specific academic program when the mistakes made by the board finally come home to roost, so to speak, as they have done. What is the board doing about the mess it has created? The academic future of these students and the future of the program itself must be addressed by the school board and by the Ministry of Education!

Parents should continue to advocate unceasingly to have the FI school designated as the students' home school based on the above arguments. It has been done in other jurisdictions. In some cases, it was automatic with the planning for the program. In other cases, it resulted from determined advocacy on the part of parents. They should not give up, particularly when it just makes so much sense. Parents must say to the board, "Provide equity of access in public education by measuring my child's walking distance to the school that he/she actually attends, and support the programs that you establish in your board, thereby protecting the academic and social well being, present and future, of the students in your care."

## Other Questions For the Board and the Ministry

### 1) OLEP FUNDING

In terms of other appeals to the ministry and to the board that might help with the cost factor, parents should ask both the board and the ministry about the OLEP (Official Languages in Education Program) funding that comes to boards through the provincial ministries as a result of agreements between each ministry and the federal government. How much is coming to this board (CPF B.C. and Yukon probably have a copy), and could the board justify using some of that to help provide equity of access

and program support through transportation for these students? With all the funding that is provided for French programming in this country, this program should not be left to flounder. This is an officially bilingual country and the OLEP says that every child in Canada should have the opportunity to learn his/her second official language, and it is well known that immersion is the most effective method of learning another language.

The board does not want to take money from other areas of education, but perhaps it makes sense to use FSL funds to save an FSL program. Don't know about BC, but in Ontario, parents can ask for an accounting of the spending of education funds and boards must give it. Perhaps parents should ask for a detailed account of the spending of all FSL funds that the board receives, if the board continues to say it can not afford to bus FI students. Also, boards should keep in mind that when programs see reduced enrollment or fail completely, FSL funding to the board goes down along with the enrollment. It is in the board's best interest to keep children in the FI program. In addition, the fact that FI is an Official Language program in an officially bilingual country, in and of itself, should take it off that "out of boundary" list thereby properly reflecting its importance to the country and the extra funding that it consequently receives. It should be well supported and encouraged, and all children should have the right to participate.

## 2) Equity of Access and the Ministry

Another question for the ministry would be, "What is the ministry's stand on equity of access in its public education system?" Does it subscribe to that concept? If so, will it send a memo to school boards reminding them of the importance of this concept when providing programming? I am almost certain that all ministries of education in this country would have a position on that. It does not have to be in the B.C. School Act for it to be considered a basic tenet of public education.

## 3) Transportation Funding

Has the Board appealed to the ministry to update funding for transportation? If not, why not? If so, what was the rationale given by the ministry for keeping funding at 2002 amounts?

## What Else Can Parents Do For the Opening of School?

While it is important to pursue all avenues to turn this decision around, I believe that at the same time, parents should look to anything that will at least help to mitigate the problems they face currently, especially with school starting soon. So below are some other things to consider:

### 1) Courtesy Seats

Re courtesy seats, has the board indicated that priority will be given to those students trying to get to their program over those who live within the walk limit of their schools of attendance but would simply like a ride to school? I can see that, since walk distances are so great, many English stream students have a legitimate reason for asking to grab an empty seat, but surely, those for whom walking to their

program is impossible rather than difficult would receive priority.

## 2) FI Students Who Are Eligible For a Bus to Their Closest School

Has there been a calculation showing which students if they went back to their closest schools would be eligible for a ride anyway to that school? Surely there is an argument for granting those students transportation to the FI school since they are eligible anyway for a bus. I realize that the newly established routes might not be able to accommodate all of the students in this category, but it just might keep a few students in the FI program without any additional cost to the board--in other words "revenue neutral." My experiences with this type of issue tell me how complex it actually is. It is difficult to accurately assess the additional cost of bussing FI students. The board can not just add up all the FI students who take a bus to school. It has to subtract 2 categories of students from the calculated additional cost:

- a) those who would require a bus anyway to their closest school
- b) those for whom that FI school is already their closest school but outside the walk limit. I realize that the latter category will continue to get a bus in this instance since they are in the neighbourhood catchment area, but an argument can be made, I believe, for bussing those in the first category

### Elementary Busing in General

As far as elementary transportation is concerned in our board, we have been told by trustees that bussing for elementary FI is a non issue since the board buses so many elementary students. It was explained like this: If the FI centres were to close and all students went back to their closest schools, the board would be bussing just as many students but different students to different schools, and since the cost is putting the student on the bus at all rather than how far he/she travels, there would be no savings. Now, I'm sure part of that calculation results from our board having comparatively short walking distances for elementary; so it might not apply here to the same extent with the long walk distances in this board. But it might be worth asking about.

Good luck to all of you! If you have a question that you think I can answer, please get in touch.

Fran Sutton –National Board member

