

# The Challenges of Success

*Managing the growth of French immersion*

BY KIM ARNOTT



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**A**BOUT 55 EAGER STUDENTS WILL have entered grade 1 at E.W. Foster elementary school in Milton this September. Fifty of them have chosen to enrol in the school's French immersion (FI) program, while only five will study in English.

The imbalance between the programs is startling, but not unique to this school. Another Milton elementary school has 35 of its 38 grade 1 students enrolled in the FI program. And across the Halton District School Board, at least eight dual-track schools are anticipating grade 1 English classrooms with a dozen or fewer students.

"It's a real dilemma. It's a sign of success of the program that FI uptake is so high and so many parents want it," says Stuart Miller, associate director with the Halton board. However, the increasing popularity of the program is threatening

the viability of English programs in some of the board's dual-track schools.

Faced with triple-split grades in some English classrooms and the need to phase the English program out of a Burlington school that could no longer sustain it, the board recently established a committee tasked with recommending ways to keep both programs viable. "We're trying to determine how to run both programs, provide the choice of FI but still have a sustainable, quality English program for kids," said Miller.

The Halton board is not alone in its struggle to manage the surging popularity of the FI program. For more than a decade, the number of FI students in Ontario has grown steadily. In 2002-03, FI students made up 5.58 percent of total enrolment. By 2009-10, that number had expanded to 7.44 percent, and in 2012-13 it grew to 9.05 percent.

“The growth of FI is positive, and a reflection of the fact that more and more parents understand the cognitive, cultural and employment benefits of learning and becoming proficient in both official languages,” says Betty Gormley, executive director of the Ontario branch of Canadian Parents for French.

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But accommodating “torrid growth” in the program has subjected students in the Upper Grand District School Board to multiple boundary and accommodation reviews in recent years, says Mark Bailey, chair of the board. “Enrolment is increasing to the point where some of our neighbourhoods are up to 50 percent enrolment [in FI],” he notes. Faced with the possibility of another disruptive, divisive and time-consuming round of reviews, Upper Grand trustees also recently established a committee to look at managing the popular program. “Everything’s on the table,” says Bailey.

In considering its options, the committee will have to struggle with what Bailey calls “two competing values.” Should FI remain open to all students who wish to enrol? Or should a cap on numbers be used to maintain viable English programs within most neighbourhood schools? “The goal of this French review is to sort out the value of equity of access versus the value of community schools. There are no easy answers,” he says.

Three years ago, Peel trustees voted to cap the number of students entering FI at 25 percent of grade 1 enrolment. A lottery process was created to fill the available spaces, with unsuccessful students placed on a waiting list. For this school year, about 33 percent of Peel’s grade 1 students sought entry to the FI program. More than 700 kids will be turned away. “I guess this is the reason why the cap of 25 percent was put in place, because we were experiencing this sort of growth year over year,” says board superintendent Jeff deFreitas. “It is a fair and transparent process and there is good communication to parents. But for the parents who are put on a wait list, there is disappointment.”

While a hard cap on FI numbers is one of several options up for discussion in the Halton community, the board is hoping its new primary core French initiative may lead to a natural decrease in FI demand. Rather than waiting until grade 4 to begin to learn French, primary students will now be offered 40 minutes per week of instruction starting in grade 1. Launched at 24 schools last year, the program is expected to be offered board-wide by the 2017-18 school year.

By spreading the required 600 hours of core French instruction into the younger grades, the board hopes to build student enthusiasm for the subject, as well as satisfy parents who’ve said they want to see their kids begin learning the language at a younger age. The board is also optimistic that the program may increase the number of students selecting the English stream in dual-track schools.

The program has been received with enthusiasm and appears to have resulted in a small decrease in FI uptake, but Miller admits the data are not yet sufficient to determine a trend. The idea may be spreading, however. “One of the many questions we will be asking ourselves: If we strengthen our core French program and increase confidence that it offers many of the same benefits and outcomes that parents attribute to French immersion, could we expect reduced interest in FI?” asks Bailey.

If boards are betting on primary core French to curb the growth of FI, they’ll ultimately be disappointed, predicts Gormley. “Parents choose French immersion because they want their children to reach the highest level of French proficiency they can within the school system,” she says.

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While Canadian Parents for French is supportive of offering French instruction at a variety of entry points, Gormley says research has clearly demonstrated that French proficiency is directly correlated to the intensity of the program. “The Halton District School Board has a responsibility to explain the differences between these programs very carefully to parents, as well as the current evidence-based outcomes for the program,” she says.

Despite an eagerness on the part of trustees to speed up the implementation of Halton’s primary core French program, Miller has had to put on the brakes with warnings about the challenges facing the board in finding enough qualified French teachers to staff classrooms. It’s a familiar refrain, and one echoed by boards across the province. And unfortunately there’s no relief predicted for school boards, who can expect to see the supply of available teachers tighten even further in the coming years.

Annual graduation rates of about 10,000 new Ontario teachers will be cut roughly in half with the new two-year teacher education program that begins this year. The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) is estimating that only about 2,000 new teachers will enter the job market in 2016, rising to about 5,000 a year for 2017 and 2018.

Recent years have already seen improving employment opportunities for teachers, and particularly for those with French-language qualifications. The unemployment rate for newly

graduated French teachers dropped to 11 percent in 2013-14, down from 17 percent just a few years earlier.

“The employment market’s been changing quite dramatically in Ontario and it’s going to be changing some more,” says OCT research consultant Frank McIntyre. “We will be going through a period where the boards will have to be doing very vigorous and proactive recruiting.” With fewer graduates entering the market, he suggests, boards might look to entice back teachers who moved to other provinces for work in recent years, or recruit those who left teaching but may be interested in returning to an improved job market.

Dealing with the growing demand for FI and the pressure it puts on school boards will likely require a combination of different strategies, Halton director of education David Euale recently told that board’s trustees. But there’s a consensus that the high level of interest in the program is not a blip or bubble but rather a development that’s here to stay — and to be managed.

“I don’t think it’s a trend, which is a good thing. It means that people want their kids to have a second language,” says Stuart Miller. “And I wouldn’t argue it should go away. My preference would be that all kids have the ability to learn a second language and even a third language.”▲

**Kim Arnott** is a Hamilton-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Education Today.