

October 31, 2015

OPEN LETTER to the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

c/o: chat@ocdsb.ca

RE: Proposed Changes to French Instruction for Kindergarten and Primary Early French Immersion

We commend the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) for providing full access to all students for their early French immersion and middle French immersion programs, quality core French programs and attention to enrolment, retention and inclusion to Grade 12 in all FSL programs. OCDSB's work in adopting the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference and the DELF is advancing French Second Language education significantly in the province of Ontario.

However, the current proposal for reconfiguring French immersion is not consistent with the large body of research on best practices. We, therefore, recommend that the OCDSB maintain 100% French in Grade 1 immersion and consider improving the current configuration by doing 100% French to the end of Grade 3. The changes to core French in JK/SK may improve French proficiency outcomes in the core French program but, to our knowledge, there is no existing research on this configuration.

In Ontario, we are guided by the "FSL Framework for French as a Second Language in Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12" and our first goal is to:

"Increase student confidence, proficiency, and achievement in FSL".

Over many years, detailed research by leading Canadian academics has established that immersion programs with the best results in French proficiency have these three elements: intensity, total time in French and an early start. Intensity means front-end loading the beginning years of the program with 100 % of instructional time in French. This is called 'full immersion' and has been the approach of the OCDSB, the majority of Ontario English school boards and every English province across Canada over many years.

The reduction of French in grade 1 immersion from 100% French to 60% and grade 2-3 immersion from 80% to 60% removes the intensity element and erodes the current early immersion program. The proposed configuration will be 'partial immersion'. While it is true that the proposed configuration will meet Ontario Ministry of Education minimums for immersion, research shows that partial immersion programs do not achieve the same levels of French proficiency as full immersion programs. Contextually, Ottawa is unique as it has unlimited opportunities for students to use their French outside of the classroom and a strong imperative for students to become bilingual. However, it is what happens in the classroom that provides the foundation for achievement in French and OCDSB students preparing for future work and post-secondary opportunities require the highest possible level of proficiency in French.

The OCDSB 2007 research report and current FSL Fact Sheet state that early French immersion students “perform as well as, or better than, comparable students in the English/core French program” on “various system-wide tests” and applicable research references are noted in the report. Math in French can make parents uncomfortable. However, research tells us that early full French immersion students have better math and English results on EQAO than partial French immersion students. One of the sources of parent anxiety is not being able to support their child with math homework. This is most effectively overcome through intervention by the teacher in school and by parents being encouraged to do numeracy activities at home and to set up good homework routines not by doing math instruction in school in English.

The elimination of math in French in the elementary program restricts the provision of math and science courses in French in secondary and reduces opportunity for immersion students to do more than the 10/30 credits for their immersion certificate. Immersion students wishing to pursue work and post-secondary education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) need a high level of confidence and proficiency in French in these subject areas and that is developed through math and science credits in French through the secondary years.

One of the benefits claimed in the consultation materials is that OCDSB will be better able to support special needs students if English instructional time increases. On the contrary, research shows us that identification of special needs can be effectively done in kindergarten in the home language of the child and that effective early intervention can be done in French immersion with the learned strategies being transferrable to English (and the home language). We recognize that it is a challenge in all Ontario school boards to provide resources for assessment and follow-up to fully support special needs students but that is not related to the language of instruction in the classroom.

Another benefit claimed is that “this model ensures parents have the opportunity to review their child’s progress and individual abilities prior to making program pathway decisions”. We are concerned that this gives the impression that only students with certain abilities can be successful in French. The Ministry documents, the FSL Framework and Including Students with Special Education Needs, both dispel this myth. FSL programs are for all students and the ‘ability’ language further perpetuates the myth.

Another benefit claimed is that the proposed configuration will be more inclusive of boys, English language learners and special needs students. However, the current uptake of immersion at OCDSB at 68% is by far the highest in Ontario English boards which indicates that it is already including a broad based group of students. The breakdown of immersion students by gender, ELLs and identified special needs was not provided during the consultation. While it is true that there will be 100% participation in immersion in JK/SK, we will not know if the proposed grade 1 immersion program will be more inclusive for several years and making program changes that negatively impact proficiency outcomes for all students rather than intervening directly with underrepresented groups is a concern.

The consultation information on core French says the proposal will support further development of proficiency in core French. We believe that is possible with the increased intensity in JK/SK but to our knowledge this configuration has not been researched vis-à-vis proficiency outcomes and other very significant indicators of a successful core program, such as retention to Grade 12. With only 40 minutes per day of French in Grades 1-8, we wonder if the content, intensity and hours of instruction will be sufficiently rich to maintain and build on proficiency achieved in JK/SK.

We truly do appreciate the leadership of OCDSB in French Second Language education, in preparing students for post-secondary opportunities in French and in advancing Official Language Bilingualism. The value of offering FSL programs that support the best possible French proficiency outcomes for all students is abundantly clear in the national capital region. We recognize the organizational challenges that all Ontario boards face with full day kindergarten, the primary cap and the many other constraints under which you work to improve student achievement. In both immersion and core, student achievement (proficiency) in French should be the driving force in decision making about configuring the programs. It is our view, based on a large body of research, that while the core French program may experience improved proficiency outcomes, immersion students who are becoming the majority in the OCDSB will not.

We are hopeful that your demonstrated commitment to achieving excellence in FSL education will result in enhancements to immersion that will maintain and improve the proficiency outcomes for OCDSB graduates and will align with the established best practice of 100% front-end loaded full immersion in primary grades.

Sincerely,

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