

FRUSTRATION LOOMS OVER LACK OF FRENCH IMMERSION SPACES

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French immersion programming is in demand, both locally and nationally.

Over 1 million students are enrolled in French programming across Ontario — including many in Halton Hills — and the popularity of the immersion program has surpassed the ability of many boards to meet demand.

In an effort to make access to the program fair, the Halton Catholic District School Board uses a lottery system wherein students are allowed into the program's limited number of spots through a random selection process.

The policy has created a situation where some families have left the board, while others have had

their children separated into different schools. Others are simply denied access to the program.

"We've often said there's a loser and a winner. It's terrible — especially for siblings. As a parent, you want to provide both kids with the same opportunity and to deny one is heart-breaking to a parent," said Natalie Cambone, who has one child in the program and another one who she plans to apply to enter it in the near future.

In the last year, over 40 delegations have spoken in front of the board of trustees about French immersion issues. The vast majority have called for an ex-

pansion to accommodate the demand.

Trustees and staff have been sympathetic to the plight of parents. In December, the board approved a plan to add two additional French immersion classes per Halton municipality for the upcoming school year.

The fear is that in some communities this will still not meet the demand, and the same system of 'winners and losers' will continue.

"The issue is siblings are separated. My children right now are not in the same school. My daughter is in kindergarten in one school and then my son is at a different school. And let's say you don't get your child in the program, your children will continue to be separated and won't have the same opportuni-

ties," said Cambone.

There have been real consequences to the board due to a lack of spots.

A 2019 parent survey from the board revealed inadequate French programming was one of the biggest reasons families considered leaving the board.

The challenge to program expansion at HCDSB always centres on capacity issues. The board is growing so quickly that adding classrooms for a minority program like French immersion poses a serious challenge.

Ryan Merrick, the superintendent of facility management services, explains the spacing issues.

"If you look in Milton all of the schools are at 100 per cent [capacity] or higher. Take Our Lady of Victory or St. Peter, which are the

lowest utilization schools in Milton. They have a portable capacity of 12 at both those sites. If we did add two classrooms times eight grades, it would be 16 classrooms and you go above and beyond the portable capacity," said Merrick.

Parents who have spoken in opposition to French immersion expansion have specifically raised additional portables taking away from play space as their major issue.

Mary Cruden, with the advocacy group Canadian Parents for French, said the immersion program does not have to take away from English track students.

"A kid in French immersion doesn't take up any more space than a kid does in English. What we're talking about is how

we organize that space to meet the expectations of parents. In Canada, a bilingual country, it is a reasonable expectation to learn French — our second official language. So really what we're talking about is allocating the same level of resources and space to children in French immersion as we are to one in English. I don't see how one thing has to take from the other," said Cruden.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: For months parents have been speaking up at board meetings about their struggles and anxiety with the way the French immersion program is handled. We wanted to learn more about the reasoning for the passion around the program and what's being done about it.

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