

October 12, 2005

To the Trustees

You may be wondering why a Secondary School is making a presentation about class sizes at the Kindergarten level. The reason is simple. Your decision regarding in-take to FI at K directly affects the numbers in high school - in 8 years later. The decision your predecessors made to remove the cap from K intake directly affects the class numbers of students at Kitsilano between the Grades of 8 and 12 now.

Since we are the parents who lobbied hard for the cap to be removed those many years ago, it is a bit of a puzzle as to why we are here lobbying for it all over again. It is our contention that current strength of FI is due to increases that were allowed over the years. Those increases were lobbied for by parents and still have not met demand.

Limiting K intake directly impacts the success of FI in high school. Parents and educators are aware of the natural attrition that happens between the Grades of K and 7. In order to have viable class sizes in high school we need to have higher numbers at the lower grades. If the class sizes are too small it leads to the unfair accusation that the program in high school is "elitist" or it leads to its complete failure as the necessary prerequisite courses can not be taught. The accusation of elitism is patently unfair because it is the political decision to limit K intake that has created the situation in the first place.

The proposal to increase intake at the Grade 6 level in "Late Immersion" rather than at the K level would be unfortunate. The scientific literature shows conclusively that late immersion is a successful option only for the academically strong and for independent learners. A true elite. The drop out rate from Late Immersion is higher than that of early immersion. If you encourage this option you are setting some children up for failure and ultimately promoting an elite programme. This is not what any of us want.

Neither FI nor the regular classroom can function if it applies only to the academically strong candidate. Both types of classroom need a combination of all types of student in order to be healthy and viable.

Studies have shown that children really only need one quality in order to succeed in FI – they need to be verbal. If they are gifted they don't do any

better in FI than they do in the regular classroom – these children need a special program. We have several such programs in Vancouver and their needs are being addressed separately.

A verbal child will succeed in FI regardless of their academic standing.

Studies have shown that learning a second language from an early age

1. has a positive effect on intellectual growth
2. cognitive development is enriched and enhanced
3. it leaves students with more flexibility in thinking, greater sensitivity to language, and a better ear for listening and
4. it improves a child's understanding of her/his native language

It is our contention that parents put their children in early FI because they believe these findings are correct. Rather than penalize parents for making this choice the Trustees might consider focusing their attention on the regular classroom. Set the bar higher – focus on numeracy and literacy and raise the standards there. Then parents would truly have a choice between two equal programs and the numbers between the two programs would undoubtedly stabilize.

In Late Immersion, parents often choose the program because the program is academically challenging and they realize their child can use a greater challenge but they are not “gifted”. The benefits of FI continue and at this older age students:

1. gain the ability to communicate with more people
2. the study of another language opens the door to other cultures, helping the child understand and appreciate people from other countries

We believe that the Late Immersion option should be available to students but not at the expense of Early Immersion.

At any level, if the child returns to the regular program, parents and educators are aware that students carry with them the language skills that they have learned. Even if they do not continue beyond Grade 3 they are more comfortable with second language learning in Grade 8 because of their exposure to French in the early grades.

We understand that some of you feel that French Immersion is a district program that is not an entitlement to all students. We would like to point out that FI is a district program unlike any other. It is the largest district program other than the regular program.

In our opinion, the crowning glory of Vancouver's school system is our city's "cultural belief" in the value of neighbourhood schools. Because of its nature, FI deserves to have a neighbourhood design. If you emphasize Late Immersion over Early Immersion and continue to have only one location for Late Immersion you weaken the FI system. You force children to move to new schools in the middle of their elementary schooling. You set the system up for failure.

Finally we would like to address the thinking that FI schools need to be dual track schools. We have never heard a single FI teacher, parent or child declare that this is a preferable system over the single-track system. In fact, if you ask the people who teach FI they will expound on what they could achieve if only they had their charges in a single-track environment. Again, for some reason, this kind of thinking sets the system up – if not for failure – at least to ensure that it will have to thrive under less than favourable circumstances.

Also, the dual track system is not beneficial to the regular system. With dual track you have split classes in all schools and the duplication of resources.

We ask that the Trustees and the VSB acknowledge:

- that a cap on K does directly threatens the strength of the entire program in the future due to attrition.

We further ask that the Trustees and the VSB:

- lift the cap on K for 2006-7 and beyond,
- in order to correct the mistakes made in September of this year, to offer parents whose children did not get into K this year an opportunity to go into Grade 1 next year,
- have a blend of single track and dual track FI schools, and
- encourage Early Immersion over Late Immersion schools.

Thank you,

Wendy Massing and Ingrid Bjerkelund, Kitsilano PAC Co-chairs