

QUILCHENA PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Quilchena Elementary School
5300 Maple Street,
Vancouver, B.C.,
V6M 1Z1

Chairperson and members of Committee III
Vancouver School Board

October 12, 2005

Dear Members of the Committee:

Re: Task Force on French Immersion and Input from Quilchena PAC

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to the Committee this evening. Unfortunately, due to the short notice provided for the agenda item for this meeting, and my absence from Vancouver due to a long-standing business commitment, I am unable to attend. I have asked PAC representatives to attend and present this submission on behalf of the Quilchena Elementary PAC. I should also add that we are surprised that this meeting is going ahead as scheduled. Generally speaking, a 5:30 pm meeting time is problematic for parents. The particular strains of this week, and the need to make alternate child care arrangements, has exacerbated this problem.

We realize that, should the report be approved this evening, there will be opportunities for parents, PAC's and other stakeholders to have input into the decisions regarding the future of French Immersion (FI) in the Vancouver School District. However, we are concerned that some decisions will be precluded by then, and we wish to be on the record at this stage. This letter briefly summarizes nine key issues from the perspective of our PAC.

1. There are some serious flaws in the four principles that the Trustees gave as 'directions' to the Task Force in June 2005. These four principles are not theoretically consistent with one another or with the current overall trends and direction of FI in the District. They are also not at all consistent with current educational research and evidence, and they need to be revisited during the consultation process.
2. Even if one accepts these four principles, the discussions and planning to date do not address the current demand and need at the kindergarten and Grade 1 levels for more FI spaces. These spaces should be created across the city, in areas in which there is demand and/or in which parents and the VSB believe the school and community environment can be enriched with an FI offering. We believe that the cap on FI in kindergarten

needs to be raised (or removed altogether) so that the needs and wishes of Vancouver families can be met within the public school system, and in order to maximize the long-term learning for children and families who choose this educational option. Increasing the numbers at the primary levels of intake will also, in the longer term, strengthen the program at the intermediate and secondary levels.

3. Over the past two years, Quilchena has had significant excess demand for FI than can be accommodated in the school. We have consistently asked the Board and VSB Management to create a long-term, sustainable plan for FI in this District that is comprehensive, and moves away from the incremental, patchwork approach of recent years. While the efforts to date are appreciated, they fall short of what the children of Vancouver schools need, and they fall short of what all of us, as stakeholders, are capable of 'delivering to them' in this regard.
4. A major problem in FI is the continual layoffs of teachers without sufficient seniority only to have them rehired several months later, but often at the expense of their previous school assignments. This policy is detrimental to children and school communities, and serves the interests of no parties. We are asking the Task Force to bring forward recommendations that provide for stability and continuity of teaching staff in FI.
5. The 'direction' from the Trustees to put new emphasis on Late FI is interesting, but, with respect, misguided. The proposal to increase intake at the Grade 6 level in "Late Immersion" rather than at the K level would be unfortunate, for these are, in reality, very different programs for different kinds of children. The scientific literature shows conclusively that Late Immersion is a successful option only for the academically strong and for independent learners (a select group of children). (In contrast, virtually all learners are candidates for Early FI.) The drop out rate from Late Immersion is higher than that of Early Immersion. Encouragement of this option increases attrition rates and promotes an 'elite' program. This is not what any of us want.
6. We would like to address the 'direction' from the Trustees regarding the preference for (two class) dual track schools over single track schools. As a (one class) dual track school, we are, in many way beneficiaries of the dual-track program – chiefly, that it maintains a neighbourhood school function. We also demonstrate that even a one class, dual track works. However, single track FI schools are preferable for important pedagogical, social and economic reasons. Costs are duplicated. Resources are placed into the creation of new programs (that are inherently weaker for at least the early stages) rather than strengthening existing ones. Teachers openly speak to the benefits of single track FI schools. These consequences are hard to defend when research shows that there may a

better way. We do not believe that there has been sufficient understanding or explanation of the differences between the two, and in particular, that this debate has been facilitated at the school level so that parents can see the benefits and drawbacks of each system. At Quilchena, as a one class dual track system, we believe there are intermediate grade issues where debate at the school level with parents would be constructive. There can also be much wider discussion of annex options that would provide for program dispersal across the city, and address other issues at the intermediate levels. We therefore strongly suggest that this 'principle' be revisited during the consultation process and by the Task Force.

7. Those stakeholders with the largest investments in the outcome of these deliberations – those whose oldest child is under 5 years old and are not yet in the system - need representation in this process. The FI families already 'in the system' are inclined to not participate in the discussion as their children and siblings have priority. We encourage the Committee to consult with this important constituency.
8. Greater special education resources and learning assistance need to be provided in order to stem attrition and to address the perception of FI being a 'club' within the public school system.
9. Finally, from the perspective of our school the catchment policy is clearly not working. Over the past few years, Quilchena has consistently had about twice the number of applications for the spaces available. The catchments were created to balance the spaces available with demand, but in our case (as in others) this has not proven to be true. Boundaries are then changed 'on the fly', creating inconsistencies and uncertainty for families and undermining the credibility of the FI program, and access to it. We fully understand the tough job at hand of trying to 'match' supply and demand. However, we hope that the Committee will invite the Task Force to be more creative in approaches to matching supply and demand, and to ensuring the sustainability of the system over the years.

Thank you for your time this evening, and to your dedication to this broader exercise. We look forward to participating further in the weeks ahead.

On behalf of the Quilchena Elementary PAC,

Barbara Grantham
Chair