**SUMMARY OF WRITTEN COMMENTS/FEEDBACK FROM THE PUBLIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

A summary of responses to the question: **“You have indicated that you are planning on enrolling your child in an early French Immersion program. Can you explain why you have made this decision?”**

Several themes emerged from the set of responses provided by participants in the questionnaire. These are described below and listed in order of prominence in the data.

 Respondents cited an enhancement to future prospects as a significant theme in support of a decision to enrol their child in an early FI program. These prospects include greater opportunities in postsecondary education, career, and travel. The acquisition of the French language is considered a valuable skill to facilitate these enhanced opportunities.

“Knowledge of French language is an asset no matter which career my child chooses and is an absolute necessity in some spheres/jobs.”

“Having a second language opens up so many doors in the future.”

 Of roughly equal prominence in the response set is the theme of a parent/guardian having some prior or existing relationship to the French language. This may be due to family, culture or previous enrollment in a French language program. In some instances, respondents indicated that their own proficiency in the French language would be a support to their child during enrolment in the French Immersion program.

“French Canadian family background.”

“I am fluent in French and both my husband and my parents and I will be able to offer her support in French learning”.

 The theme of the early French Immersion program offering an enriched educational experience to students was also salient in the data. This theme incorporates the ideas of a challenging program, positive impacts on learning and brain development, and increased engagement in learning that result from enrollment in the program. Related to this theme was the notion that the respondent’s child had the capacity to manage the demands of learning French as a second language in an immersion program.

“I also feel the increased study time and learning a second language creates a more intelligent and studied child”

“I think it is important for children who have an aptitude for language to be exposed to more than one language in their development. Early language learning has been proven to strengthen flexibility of thought and overall brain development in the long term. My son has shown above average development in English language from very early on. I believe that a second language will further challenge him.”

 The topic of learning a second language, or learning French, as a reason in and of itself, was also well represented in the data. This theme captures the notions of the importance of bilingualism, without qualification, and the valuable opportunity the availability of this program represents to bring about acquisition of a second language. What distinguishes this theme is the focus on the language, irrespective of any additional benefits that may result from its acquisition.

 “I want him to have every opportunity to speak another language fluently through our public school system.”

“It is a gift to offer a child a second language.”

“We strongly feel that by enrolling our daughter in an early French Immersion program she will have a better opportunity to be successful in acquiring a second language.”

 Of more modest prominence in the response set is the theme of siblings enrolled in the French Immersion program. Respondents communicated a desire to keep their children in the same school and to ensure younger children are afforded the same opportunities and perceived benefits of the FI program as their older siblings.

“ Her siblings are currently enrolled in FI…and we would also like to keep all siblings in one elementary school.”

“My two older children are enrolled in French Immersion and I want my youngest to have the same opportunity.”

 Respondents cited the fact that French is one of Canada’s two official languages as a reason for enrolling their child in an early French Immersion program . This theme encapsulates the notions of Canadian culture and a Canadian identity, and how one’s ability to speak both French and English are supportive of these constructs.

“As a Canadian, I find that it will be better for my child to learn both of the official languages of Canada.”

“I feel strongly that to be bilingual (English and French speaking) is deeply rooted in our Canadian culture”

 Lastly, the theme of starting early to ensure acquisition of a second language was found with moderate representation in the data. Responses captured by this theme appear to address the entry point of the program as a particular focus, which is logical given the nature of the question. Respondents by and large wrote about the perceived benefits of early enrollment in a French Immersion program.

“It is well-established that the neural networks for language are more plastic in early life, and thus it is quite critical to introduce new languages early in development.”

“I believe that introducing different languages for my child earlier on will provide a stronger foundation for languages and the love of learning languages for the future.”

 Summary of the responses to the question: **“You have indicated that you are not planning on enrolling your child in an early French Immersion program. Can you explain why you have made this decision?”**

 Several strong themes arose with respect to not choosing French Immersion programming based on factors related to the high value placed on community schools, on keeping siblings together, and on closer and local school locations. While a number of respondents were clear in describing the possible benefits of their own position, only a few cited their child’s interest as a factor considered.
 Beyond pragmatic issues around proximity and community, a strong theme arose among respondents suggesting their position or belief that English language learning should be a priority. A larger category emerged supporting the view that English language instruction was “most important”. One cluster of responses emphasized the importance of English language instruction suggesting that a “deeper learning of English” should come first.
 When supporting French Immersion programming in a general sense, respondents still suggested that the primary language should focus on English, on “the basics”, and on “deeper learning” (factors possibly being seen as marginalized within French Immersion environments). In this regard, respondents focussed on proficiency in English ahead of the goals of developing bi-lingual program choice or bi-lingual skills. Respondents were also clear in their valuing of developing first language proficiency ahead of pursuing instruction in a second language. A number of respondents also suggested they might be supporters of a later entry when stating that Grade 1 was “too early” to begin given the challenges with identifying a child’s “learning style” or “linguistic” disposition.
 Another cluster of responses suggested that Core French was “enough”, that French Immersion was not necessarily beneficial because it was “not necessary in the workforce”, that it “divides and segregates” kids, because it lacked “benefits”. Some respondent were therefore fairly clear in articulating that their intention to avoid French Immersion programming has a lot to do with its perceived utility and value.
 Other respondents suggested that the French Immersion program was of poorer quality with respect to availability of teaching staff and with respect to its being perceived as contributing to lower achievement in the sciences and mathematics (due to issues with terminology acquisition across languages).
 Of those respondents who avoided making judgments about the program generally, they were clear about the importance of feeling capable of supporting their child’s learning (viz. which they identified they could not do due to their lack of French language skills themselves). A number of respondents cited program incompatibility as a reason for not planning to select French Immersion (i.e. with self-contained gifted programming).

**Summary of the responses given to option 1**

The majority of all responses were not in favour of placing a cap on enrollment in French Immersion (FI) or using a lottery system. Many of the comments suggested that this action would be “inequitable” and all students have a “right” to access. It was suggested by some respondents that Canada is a bilingual country and therefore all people should have access to learning both languages. Other respondents expressed concern over what might happen to children who have siblings that were already in the FI program.

*“I think there should not be a cap on French Immersion as I believe all children and families have the right to choose what program they are interested in.”*

*“Introducing any caps will result in some families left outside the program and unfair accessibility of government education.*”

*“I have 2 children... If my 2nd child (age 3) is put in a lottery and does not get into the fi program it will create a lot of issues for my family - having 2 kids in 2 different schools., as well as great disappointment.”*

A small number of comments were in support of a first come/first serve model or placing a cap on the FI program. They felt a cap was a method which would ensure the viability of the English program. If a cap or lottery system was put in place, it was suggested by a number of respondents that children should be placed in the lottery or chosen for the program based on their academic merit.

*“Students should have sufficient English skills to ensure they don't fall behind before enrolling in the FSL program. Enrollment should be based on aptitude and performance rather than lottery.”*

*“The students with an aptitude for language learning and with the highest potential for success in a French Immersion program, should be the ones offered the limited number of enrollment positions...If there is going to be a limit on the number of spots, they should be provided to the students who a) have the academic strength to manage the extra workload and 2) are committed to completing the program.”*

Some responses suggested the English program was perceived as an “inferior” program. Respondents were concerned of the impact these perceptions had on their child and would like these misconceptions addressed.

*“By capping the early entry program and allowing a lottery system it enables the viability of the English language program. Many many parents select early French immersion programs to manage expose to 'behaviour' in a classroom.”*

Comments were made about the intensity of the program. The respondents were split as to whether or not the current model of 50/50 was sufficient or whether the time spent using the French should be increased or decreased. Often, the respondents would support their justification with personal experiences.

*“From firsthand experience, and through research I collected as part of completing my French Specialist, there is clear data to support the benefits of second language instruction from a very early age as being the optimal time for learning and mastery of that language... It is those early years of instruction that provided such a strong foundation that later helped me complete my BA in French, as well as become a French immersion teacher. We should be offering Halton students a top notch French program as well, which means more hours of instructions, early on.”*

*“My son started school in FI…. I found the 50/50 French to English ratio to be too high. I don't speak French and was unable to help with homework. ”*

Some comments were made about the entry point into the FI program. Some comments were in support of other school boards which start FI in kindergarten. While other responses wanted to delay the start of the program over concerns about English language acquisition.

*“The children should become proficient and fluent readers and writers before entering in the French immersion program, so therefore I feel grade younger than grade 3 is too young for FI.”*

*“The most successful FI programmes (in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto) provide more intensive French language instruction at the K/ primary level (90%+).”*

Starting core French was also suggested as an option to increase the students’ exposure to French at an early age.

**Summary of the responses given to option 2**

Overall, preferences were unified around the central themes of the high desirability of neighbourhood/local schools, on retaining choice, and on avoidance of problematic implications (e.g. separating siblings or compatibility with self-contained programs). Effect on the JK/SK transition to grade 1 was also noted as a considerable factor of importance. Views on the options appeared somewhat polarized with considerable support and displeasure with French Immersion program options being expressed. Supporters of French Immersion also appeared to look favourably on increased intensity, where those who emphasized the importance of English track programs were frequently inclined to see local schools to be of highest priority.

**Schools as hubs in communities**

 A large segment of respondents identified schools as hubs in communities – places both considered and desired to be maintained as “local”. A strong recurring theme arose in the comments consistent with the desire for retaining a sense of community (and thereby the preservation of local schools) with the prevailing assumption that single track models are inconsistent with the sense of community desired. One respondent put it this way: “single track schools divide communities and they divide families”. One added: “place-based instruction is very important; a holistic approach to education values the relationships and connections that are created within the immediate community”. While the theme of community hub and desire for local schools was strong, the occasional voice identified commented that single track schools can “enhance the circle of community”. Other factors raised included the idea that local schools encourage more activity via students walking to school and as a corollary to that, that the wider expectation was that dual track (when considered a more local option) would also save on transportation costs and because bussing is seen as having negative community and environmental effects.

 A number of respondent comments sought clarity about the further implications of this option with respect to their own interests. In terms of single track schools particularly, respondents frequently noted the negative impact of a program change that would then automatically entail a change in schools (due to the absence of English track programming at the same site). With respect to the latter point, a number of respondents suggested that since stakes of program selection would be higher (because the impact of change in program is greater), fewer parents may be willing to “try it on”. Generally, ideas related to the negative implications of a change in program under a single track option were responded to strongly, with a number of respondents calling it “a disaster” for families.

**Option 2 considered a more workable alternative to capping**

 Although a number of concerns were raised with respect to a single track only option, such as commitments to bussing, proximity to home, many respondents felt that single track was a better option/alternative to capping. Consideration of grandfathering siblings and family needs with respect to multiple children were also noted and there was some resistance to the idea that program choice entailed school choice in a single track model. In general, respondents also seemed somewhat polarized on the potential for single track only schools. Some preferred the option as a “lesser evil” than capping, some called it “the most viable” and yet others noted their “right” to have an English program in their neighbourhood because that was why in quite-a-few cases they “chose to live [there]”. The evident polarization was notably captured by one respondent’s comment that “there is no one ‘good’ option for the majority”. It was largely suggested that dual track schools should remain neighbourhood schools for all, that dual track schools were “richer” and more diverse, although a few dissenting voices suggested that the single track option provided a superior, more diverse, environment.

**Polarized views on implications but preference for convenience and choice**

 Respondents provided some polarized views on whether dual track or single track schools were more “better”. Several supporters of dual track options considered the integration of English and French programs within a building to be consistent with neighbourhood dynamics in that regardless of programs, kids from the same neighbourhood would have opportunities to engage and interact socially at school. One respondent added that the dual track culture is not “all that great” due to existing separations and differences in dual track populations which was noted by several other respondents so clearly experiences in that regard are varied.

 A number of respondents focussed on these socialization aspects stating that single track schools will “separate kids and neighbourhood friends”, creating -- as one respondent stated -- “have and have not schools”, with another likening the separation to a form of “segregation”. Yet another respondent added the single track model was elitist [although some others offered that a similar “elitist” critique exists in dual track school populations already]. Regardless of position, however, most respondents held positions that seemed to retreat to notions of fairness and equity of access based on their particular allegiances. Due to “optional” nature of French Immersion program, it was sometimes suggested that the program should not, therefore, be allowed to infringe on the English program.

 Respondents also had some questions pertaining to the some unknowns about implications of the single track only option. For example, one respondent asked whether there is enough demand to support single track in all communities. Others questioned implications on bussing and transportation, resting often on the predominant assumption that single track models would entail more bussing needs.

 Overall, convenience to families and choice dominated the responses and there was considerable agreement about the importance of quality education and program, quality and ease of recruiting high quality teachers, and with minimal disruption to families.

**Summary of the responses given to option 3**

The open-ended responses to the third option were overwhelmingly against a middle-entry (grade 4) Immersion program. Contrary to the responses for Option 4 (as discussed below), the vast majority of the responses did not comment on the dual-track aspect of this option, but rather used their response to weigh in on the implications of a middle-entry point to French Immersion as it impacts on student learning.

In terms of a middle-entry point, many respondents cited “studies” and “research” alluding to the idea that the earlier a child is exposed to language, the better it is for their overall comprehension, ability to communicate and accent. Despite several references to this being recognized as “fact”, no respondents provided specific academic references. Based on the nature of these responses, there seems to be little awareness of any academic research to support a middle-entry point for students. Many respondents felt that any grade later than grade 1 would be too late for their children’s French language acquisition, with some parents also calling for French Immersion to start even earlier (i.e., Junior or Senior Kindergarten). In addition, many of these respondents also felt that in grade 4 there would be “higher academic demands” and that imposing an 80% intensity French Immersion program at this time would be “setting our children up for failure”.

Some respondents expressed the idea that a middle-entry point would further exacerbate the problem of only “strong” students entering the program, whereas the Board should be seeking to provide “students of all learning profiles” a chance to thrive in a French Immersion program.

Though the majority of the comments in this section were firmly against a middle-entry point, there were a significant number of responses that were in favor of this option. Some respondents recognized that by the time a student reaches grade 4, s/he can more adequately handle the transition in the school day and having two different teachers. Some respondents also recognized that this middle-entry model has traditionally worked well for the Halton Catholic District School Board and wondered if we shouldn’t see the same success here. Many respondents also recognized that a middle-entry point would empower students to take a more active role in the decision as to whether to start an immersion program or not. Indeed, some parents offered that a mid-entry point would be ideal for informed decision making, especially if the Core French program were available to all students starting in Grade 1. At the very least “all students should have at least one year of Core before deciding”.

With respect to intensity, there were many comments focusing on this as the primary issue surrounding this option. The majority of respondents were uncomfortable with an 80% intensity model. Many articulated that they were fine with a middle-entry point, “but not at that intensity level. 80% of the day is too much for a grade 4 student who has come from – maybe – an hour of French a week”. There was also concern over “math being taught all of the sudden in French”. Indeed, there were several calls in the comments to keep mathematics and science instruction in French.

The other pertinent issue to this option was the dual-track school model. While a majority of comments did not address the dual-track feature, some did provide feedback both for and against this model. Many respondents felt strongly that a dual track model would be most beneficial as all students should “have the right to attend their home school in an English school board in Ontario”. Furthermore, some respondents felt that there were “too many social issues” at play in the junior grades and by this time, “social groups are firmly established” that would not support a further transition into a different school. Conversely, some parents voiced opinions against dual track schools, as they felt that if French Immersion is offered in the same school “many parents will still force their kids into FI even if [their child] doesn’t want it”.

Also of note, there were several respondents who identified as members of the Pineland community who used their response to question how a change to a mid-entry, dual-track model would affect their school. Of these, many welcomed the idea of Pineland reverting to a dual-track school and wondered “why this option wasn’t on the table two years ago”.

Many parents felt that this option would discourage kids from enrolling in French Immersion whereas some felt that this option was “the best…for ensuring viability of English, as parents are less likely to use FI to deal with behaviour”.

**Summary of the responses given to option 4**

In examining the responses to option 4, a great majority of the comments center around the idea of a single-track school as a delivery model for French Immersion. The responses to this delivery model were incredibly polarized, as many respondents felt that this was “absolutely the best option” and that “single-track schools are the only way to go”. More respondents however felt that single-track was “the worst idea”, “totally unfair to students and families” and “elitist”.

For those who were in favor of single-track schools, they recognized that the culture of the school itself was more positive than a dual-track school. Dual-track schools are often given to being “overly competitive” between students in the English and French Immersion streams, and there is rarely – if ever – any “cross pollination” between social groups of English and French Immersion students in these schools. Some respondents in support of a single-track model said that although they did not agree with middle-entry, they would support this option for the single-track aspect.

In all, there were more comments against single-track schools than there were against dual-track schools in the previous option. The respondents who voiced their feedback against single-track French Immersion schools cited many reasons. Many respondents remarked that students should have the right to attend their neighbourhood school. Respondents from smaller communities, where perhaps only one school could be supported, did not like the idea of single-track, as it virtually guarantees that regardless of English or French Immersion program, many students would likely have to be sent even further out of their community unnecessarily. Issues with families – especially in terms of siblings at different schools – played into many respondents’ comments that this was not a good option for families, and when families are faced with many different pick-ups and drop-offs, “this option only plays to the very affluent who can afford to arrange this for their kids”.

There were also several comments responding to the mid-entry point coupled with a single- track school. Some questioned what would happen to thriving schools after grade 3, assuming they lose a significant part of their school population. Further to this, many did not like the idea of Grades 4-8 schools only, assuming this is how single-track, middle-entry schools would operate. There were also some comments that called for single-track to be implemented “only when FI dominates”.

A significant number of parents responded that this option would cause them to seriously consider moving, or to “find another school, private or otherwise” to enroll their child where they could be offered early entry into French Immersion. A few others noted that French Immersion is an optional program, whereas English is not. These comments stressed that English families “should not be the ones that have to accommodate – they [French Immersion families] should” instead of “targeting English kids”.

There were a great number of comments that were concerned with – even more than with option 3 – uprooting students in grade 4 from their “home school”. Respondents commented that socially, this is a difficult transition at a difficult time for many students.

Again, as with Option 3, there were several comments around the level of intensity offered in this option. Many respondents stated that they simply do not like this level of intensity. Some commented that they would consider this option, but not at this intensity level, though some stated that if this was the only option, they would still select French Immersion, but they would not like it – particularly because of the intensity.

Also as with Option 3, there were several comments about an early immersion model being better for students and their acquisition of language. Some parents who identified as having a child with an IEP liked the middle-entry aspect of this option, but wondered about support form an EA at a single-track school.

Overall, many respondents had a difficult time seeing that this option was most beneficial to students, and deemed it “simply about logistics – not student learning”. As one respondent further stated: “If you deal with the problems in the English stream, then less parents will opt for French Immersion”.

**Summary of the responses given in the final comments section**

A majority of the comments in this section was from participants reinforcing ideas shared in the other sections. As a result, there may be limited new data presented in this section.

A large number of comments were made against the idea of using caps. The comments suggested that caps were unfair and did not provide access to all families who wanted to enroll in French Immersion (FI). There was also concerned about what would happen to siblings or families who had students already in FI if caps were introduced.

*“The important thing is siblings. Splitting up siblings in different schools doesn't aid in building a school community and deters from the family life. Having a system where it is first come first serve or lottery is also not fair.”*

If caps were introduced, some comments suggested that students should only be granted access to FI if they demonstrated an academic strength or went through a screening process.

*“In a public education system, it's only fair to offer certain programs like FSL to students with the competency and commitment. They should also have to maintain a certain grade to remain in the program.”*

A great deal of comments were also made about a perceived hierarchy or status for students enrolled in FI particularly in dual track schools. The comments expressed concern about the negative impact this has on the student enrolled in English programs because of the perceptions and the distribution of resources. Other comments suggested more emphasis needs to be placed on the viability of the English program.

*“There is a very valid perception that fewer special needs students and fewer behavioral issue students attend French Immersion schools because of the added learning skills required to learn another language. This encourages families to withdraw from English programs to escape the distractions more than the desire to acquire a French language skill. In dual track schools this would serve to separate students within the walls of the building and cause additional social conflicts.”*

*“*My biggest concern is the viability of the English program as I have not chosen FI for my kids*.”*

Support for both dual and single track schools was given. No clear preference was given based on frequency of support. Supporters of single track schools liked that the focus would be on one type of education and that all students would have the same program. Supporters for dual track schools wanted their children to be able to attend a neighbourhood school and have the opportunity to switch from a French to English program (if needed) without having to switch schools.

*“I believe that single track schools make the most sense. I have seen the differences in the immersion programs at dual tracks and single tracks and it can be pretty drastic. Resources available, the level of French and expectations are a lot higher in ST schools.”*

*“Many people purchase their homes in neighbourhoods based on the available schools. Changing the designation of a school means bussing and upheaval with one group (FI or English Only) getting the short end of the stick...It is simply not fair. Dual track allows for both streams to exist peacefully.”*

For the majority of comments concerning when FI should begin, an earlier start of kindergarten or Grade 1 was considered better than a later start. Only a few comments showed support for a later FI entry point. Some comments supported strengthening the core program French program and having it start earlier than Grade 4.

*“The earlier children start learning a second language, the better. FI in Kindergarten or Grade 1 is the best possible start.”*

*“Every school in Halton region should offer Core French starting in Grade 1. This is why I liked the pilot program that started in Halton in 2014/15. I hope that it will be implemented.”*

Comments expressed concerns about finding qualified teachers and the difficulties that might be experienced if the enrollment in FI continues to grow.

*“The main concern is finding qualified teachers. I think more focus needs to be put in that area in order to address these concerns.”*

Finally, comments expressed frustration about the length of survey, lack of information about the choices presented, lack information about the FI program (such as demission/attrition) and the frequency in which the board raises this issue.