

Dear School Trustees,

I am disappointed to hear that the Board is considering cutting the Late French Immersion (LFI) program in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools. The process by which this decision is being made is even more concerning. In this letter I will identify concerns about process, skewed information, and a lack of understanding necessary for good decision-making.

Process

The Quarterway School community was informed of this discussion Friday afternoon. This came quite a shock to our school particularly because the community was not informed of any prior discussion and because the final Board decision is less than one week away. Notably, this is amidst the busy holiday season. It is not possible for the community to process this information, get organized or utilize Board processes meant for community participation in this time frame. This time frame is shorter than the required notice to present as a delegation to the Board. Why is such a significant decision to end an academic program that has impact on students and families being made in such a rush and without any consultation?

In reviewing Board policies 2.17 Public Participation and 2.2 Approach to Governance, I question if the Board's actions are inconsistent with their policies. Policy 2.17 states,

“Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools” recognizes the value of public participation, values the wisdom of our community and is committed to creating appropriate opportunities for students, staff, Indigenous and broad community involvement through a meaningful engagement process.

The district also recognizes that public participation is an important step in the decision-making process that provides the Board an opportunity to make well-informed, data-driven and community inspired decisions.”

While I recognize that the Board may choose to an “Inform” level of participation, I do not see how not consulting with a community directly impacted by a decision is consistent with the espoused values of Transparency and Accountability, Respect, or Authenticity as stated in the policy. Further, the public participation goal of Inform is “To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solution”. In the situation of direct impact, I view the “Inform” level of participation inappropriate and disrespectful. Further, I respectfully submit that the Board does not appear to understand the unique value of the Late French Immersion program which is necessary information for balanced, objective, data-informed decision making.

In consideration of process concerns and lack of consultation, I note that the Board Governance policy (2.2) states that,

“Board leadership is guided by respectful consideration of diverse viewpoints, thoughtful gathering and meaningful interpretation of information...” and that “The Board maintains its approach to governance by its commitment to ...respectful, meaningful, and continuous public engagement (defined as: To hear, understand, and give voice to the views and aspirations of parents, communities, staff and other stakeholders in planning and policy development.”

Without public consultation and an analysis of the unique value of the LFI program, I question how the Board can fulfil its policy commitments as noted above.

I also question if the current decision-making process regarding LFI at Quarterway is consistent with Ministry of Education Policy. The Ministry of Education French Immersion Program policy states,

"Having established a program, school districts should promote the program and recruit students. Should the enrollment become insufficient, school districts should consult parents to find solutions. If there is no resolution to the problem, the district should give at least one year's notice to parents of any changes contemplated to permit full discussion and to allow parents time to consider alternatives for their children."

This same policy refers to French Immersion (FI) and Late French Immersion as separate program types with specific requirements for each program described in the Procedures section of policy. These unique programs have different requirements and involve differences in instruction. Given that FI and LFI are unique and different programs, have Trustees evaluated the differences in student needs and abilities in considering ending this program? From a process perspective, I argue that this information is integral to balanced, objective and data-driven decision-making. I also question why parents have not been consulted to find solution to perceived enrollment challenges.

Unique program attributes

I will share my perception of some of the unique attributes of LFI, however I do not presume to speak for all parents and respectfully note that others may have additional observations. Firstly, for students from Gabriola, LFI is the only program available for French language instruction unless parents take the ferry and drive their children to school daily at considerable expense. Not only are most elementary aged children too young to ride the ferry without adult supervision, but also many parents are uncomfortable with their young children walking from the ferry, through downtown to Pauline Haarer. Secondly, some parents prefer LFI noting some educational advantages (e.g., stronger language analysis abilities) and better developmental appropriateness for some children (e.g., late bloomers). Thirdly, LFI at Quarterway offers an excellent opportunity for children whose needs are not being met at their catchment school. This second start opportunity allows children who experience bullying or who seek a greater academic challenge a second chance at developing peer groups and to experience greater academic success. All of my children thrived at Quarterway LFI and I am grateful for the opportunity for them to advance their education in the program. I think it integral to evaluating the importance of this program to understand that it gives vulnerable students who may be succeeding in their catchment schools an opportunity to find success in public education. I question if any analysis has been done to evaluate the potential differences in student population of the 2 FI programs. This analysis should include assessment of neurodivergence and giftedness.

I ask Trustees to please consider, "why is it that parents and students choose to uproot themselves out of their catchments schools, their peer networks, and their routines to attend a different school for grade 6 and 7?" Why would they choose this life disruption? This alone speaks to the motivation, and for some desperation, to attend a different school.

PROGRAM CONCERN NOTED IN STAFF REPORT

Finally, I wish to respond to the justifications provided in the staff report for cutting the LFI program.

Enrollment

Reduction in student numbers in FI programs across the province was noted. A pattern in a general program is not justification for cutting a related but unique program. Although this pattern may be true for general FI, it cannot be said for the Quarterway LFI program based on the numbers provided in the staff report. Using the numbers from the report, 2023 was one of the highest years in terms of enrollment with 51 students. The current year 2024 is noted as having 45 students which is slightly higher than the overall average enrollment number of 44.1 (the mean achieved by excluding the anomalous inaugural year with only one class as per standard statistical practice). In addition, I do not see evidence for significant “consistent attrition from grade 6 to 7” as noted in the report. The average level of attrition across the year is 1.5 students with 2 years showing an increase rather than a decrease of students across the years. I also question including the COVID years in statistical analysis of overall enrollment given the district wide trend of lower in-class enrollment during that time.

Given lower interest in the FI program, what has the Board done to support or promote FI as per Ministry of Education expectation? I argue that a general FI program review to modernize this important academic program should occur. The North Vancouver School District conducted such a review approximately 10 years ago and could serve as a model.

Financial

The staff report notes a financial saving of \$420,722. This level of savings can only be achieved if every student in the LFI program can be found a placement in an existing class without going above class size and composition limits. Given the disproportionate numbers of students from particular schools (e.g., Gabriola and Cedar), I question if these spaces in other classes would be available. This also assumes that no children would leave the district seeking an alternative given the challenges that some students reportedly were experiencing in their catchment schools. Further, a significant portion of that savings would result from the overall school size reduction leading to the elimination of the VP position. While this savings may be realized from this change, the loss of the VP would impact the school as a whole including students with the loss of a FTE from the school discounting the claim that no current students would be impacted. If there are enrollment concerns, I am confident that Quarterway PAC would be eager to work together on promotion of the program as suggested by Ministry of Education policy.

Impact on NDSS

The enrollment challenges of NDSS are not caused by the LFI program. Further, given that several Quarterway LFI students are from Gabriola who are within the catchment of NDSS, cutting the LFI program will not solve the NDSS capacity problem. I would suggest that having all the academies at one location is a greater contributor to the capacity problem.

Impact on Current Students

In addition to all Quarterway students being impacted by the loss of a school FTE, there are also students in our district awaiting their time to join the LFI program. Some of these students could not get into FI

when the lottery existed. Others have always planned to attend LFI. There are students in our district that haven't been waiting for their turn to attend the program who will be disappointed by the closure of the program.

CONCLUSION

I fully understand that the Board must make difficult decisions and that not all decisions will be well received. If I thought that the Board fully understood the unique value of the LFI program and that consultation has occurred, I probably would not have written this letter. I ask that proper consultation occur including collaboration with Quarterway parents to increase enrollment before consideration of program cuts. I'll repeat the board policy statement: "The district also recognizes that public participation is an important step in the decision-making process that provides the Board an opportunity to make well-informed, data-driven and community inspired decisions" and will further argue that understanding why families choose this program is necessary to well-informed decision making. Program cuts should not be a hastily made decision.

In contrast to the suggestion that the LFI is a problematic, unsustainable program affecting a small group, I would like to reframe this portrayal. Instead, I offer that the Quarterway LFI program is a small program that solves several problems and in doing so meets student needs and supports students who may not thrive in a mainstream environment. This is personalized learning and success for all in action.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Stanley