CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY (CSELP)

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Response to Questions from the Golden Zone, Rock Mountain School District #6

Dear Dr. Carriere,

Thank you for the opportunity to address some follow up questions stemming from our external review of the Golden Zone of the Rocky Mountain School District. Our responses follow the questions below and while these are given with our best intentions and in good faith, it must be remembered that some questions were not part of the original mandate given us by the Board of Education, Rocky Mountain School District #6.

The mandate given to the "Centre For The Study of Educational Leadership and Policy" (CSELP) was to assess the implications of enrolment and capacity trends for existing configurations for French Immersion and English program delivery in the Golden Zone and to make recommendations for consideration by the Board.

Based on the examination of present and future enrolment and financial data it was concluded that existing program arrangements in the Golden Zone are not sustainable. We are of the belief that there is currently an imbalance between English and French Immersions programs and that further decline in enrolment along with a diminished fiscal base will, if left unattended, further exacerbate this imbalance.

To consider the issue as a French Immersion matter only, is to deny the first responsibility of the Board of the Rocky Mountain School District to provide a quality education for all students within its jurisdiction. The problems related to both French Immersion and English programs chronicled in the CSELP report are extant and include, among others, declining enrolment; a declining fiscal resource base; the matter of providing first class learning opportunities for all students; a sometimes divided professional culture; and, how program growth and/or decline in some schools, cause unanticipated problems for others. The recommendations given in the *Final Report: External Review of the Golden Zone* were designed, in a systemic way, to maintain the possibility of achieving excellence in educational programs and services without compromising the effectiveness of current initiatives. It is only by

understanding, respecting and accommodating the ecology that these variables engender that sustainable solutions can be achieved.

Questions

1. The Golden Chapter of Canadian Parents for French submitted to a report detailing alternative options and an action plan to implement those options. Do you think the recommendations that they suggested would work in our district?

The CPF report is concentrated on retaining and improving the current Early Immersion model. The mandate of the CSELP report was to gather information about the sustainability of broader range of educational programming. In the CSELP report it was confirmed that the Golden zone is its own very unique context. Parent and teacher groups from all schools and communities in the zone were consulted, and their perceptions noted. The action plan contemplated by the CPF chapter does not represent the same scope of consideration, as the Board of Education must take into account. The CSELP report concluded that keeping the same arrangement for French programming was not in the best interest of the community, as in this arrangement some families are well served where a significant number of others are not. The recommendations to introduce French to all students at the Primary level, and then offer the choice of either French Immersion or a quality Core French program at Grade 4, so that all students continue to experience quality learning of French as a second language, makes better use of existing resources and is more equitable and accessible. The unique school configurations of Golden (one Primary school in town, one Intermediate, and Nicholson and Field communities outside of town), augment the need for such equity of access.

In short, the mandate given by the Board was not all about French Immersion. It was one which asked CSELP to review and make recommendations relative to all programs configurations.

2. On page 30 of the report you state low enrolment in the program means that the regular program has to compensate costs accrued by the immersion program. What are specific examples of the costs?

As a percentage of the total enrolment, French Immersion at Alexander Park Elementary school represents 43%. At Lady Grey (Grades 4-7), the percentage enrolled in French Immersion drops to 31%, whereas at Golden Secondary School French Immersion accounts for 18% of the total student population. Retention in French Immersion is an issue. Low enrolment in the program means that the regular program has to compensate costs accrued by the Immersion program. (page 31)

In the current configuration, staffing separately for French Immersion classes and for English program classes adds up to approximately one additional FTE than if all the students were in the same program. Having all students in the same program at Primary in the future will therefore, produce an efficiency of one FTE in the Primary school (APES). At the Intermediate and Secondary, as a few students leave the French Immersion program every year, smaller numbers create pressure on staffing, as it is difficult to always create classes to capacity in both programs. A Grade Four at Intermediate start creates 30 spaces instead of 22 at Kindergarten. There is more chance to keep numbers healthy at the Intermediate and Secondary levels.

Another issue surfaces in the Special Education area. As students encounter learning difficulties, they tend to drop out of French Immersion and transfer into the English Program. These are added costs for the English program and also tend to make the French Immersion program more costly because the student numbers are reduced. For example page 29 of the Final Report shows that a disproportionate number of Special Education students are served in the English program as compared to the French Immersion Program. As a result, a disproportionate amount of the costs are borne by the English Program. The Board has to consider these factors so that equity and fairness in the distribution of resources are seen to be evident.

3. Did you research or do you have any research on how other districts are dealing with declining enrolment and running dual track programs.

As small districts experience declining enrolment, the chances of them sustaining dual track programming from Kindergarten up diminishes. In Rocky Mountain, the Intensive French program has been added in Invermere and Kimberly because it promises excellent learning outcomes in French by the end of Secondary School without the strain of dual track programming from Kindergarten up. Golden has been unique in its commitment to FSL programs and this is a very positive thing. Other small districts have never been able to contemplate such a commitment. Nevertheless, it is also a good thing that the Board has called for this review and has approved recommendations that will sustain a choice of quality programming for all future students.

4. Do you think that if we (the district) promoted the FI program and had clear policies in regards to attrition and entrance into the program, that this would change the current program or make it more successful? If we ensured all parents who registered their children in Kindergarten in the Golden Zone

were given clear information on both programs, do you think there would be more interest in the program, not only in Kindergarten but later years as well.

> *Good communication is always positive. The revised programming will need to be very clearly communicated and promoted as well. However, this does not solve the inability of the Board to sustain the current model.*

5. Do you think allowing children from the English stream into the FI program at later grades than Kindergarten and grade 1 rather than just in kindergarten and grade one will work. In your research did you come across much research about the success of students who start in a FI class with no French back ground at a later age…i.e. an English student going into FI at grade 4.

> *This practice has never been encouraged past Grade One, because of the strain on students joining others who already appear fluent, and the strain on the teacher to meet these students needs along with all the other students still learning the language. Having said this, individual cases may occur where one student, in exceptional circumstances, perhaps with support at home, may want to take this challenge. Practically speaking, not many parents would even consider this, and so numbers would never to large enough to make a difference. However, 30 spaces at Grade 4 gives more students (30 spaces) from the 3 schools an opportunity to make a conscious choice. These students would then be more likely to stay in the program until Grade 12.*

6. If we had full classes in the elementary years with 24 students in them right through to high school, would this be considered sustainable. Again this refers to allowing the English stream to enter FI in the later years.

> *The short answer is YES providing the starting point for French Immersion occurs in Grade 4. This matter is one that has been covered in previous responses and in the Final Report to the Board (see chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations).*

7. We don't currently have a district policy on FI at the primary level. Do you think that this lack of policy has an impact on the numbers of kids that enter into and stay with the high school FI program. Do you think if the district had clearer policy that that would keep enrolment up?

> *It would be an excellent idea for the Board of Education to create a French Programs Policy, including French Immersion, Intensive and Core French. This would help to address such matters as communication, registration, and processes for supporting Special Needs students within the programs at both elementary and secondary levels.*

8. Did you research much about the success of including children with special needs/learning assisted/behavioural needs in a FI program.

Please see the attached excerpt from the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers, where we draw your attention to an article by Dr. Fred Genesee from McGill University (from page 13). Inclusionary practices and differentiation of instruction to best meet the needs of all students is an ongoing focus for Professional Learning for all schools and all programs in the country right now. We strive to do what we can to ensure success for all students. French Immersion programs must do the same, no matter whether a Kindergarten or Grade 4 or later start. The vast majority of children are very cognitively capable of learning 2 or more languages. Students with learning challenges in certain areas, whether in Fr Immersion or not, need adaptations and modifications based on their needs. The standard of our support needs to be the same.

In the current situation in Golden, a significant number of students seemed to return to the English program at the change of schools, between Grades 3 and 4. In the recommended Grade 4 start, inclusionary practices and good communications with parents and students must meet the challenge of creating a program for all students. This is a high priority in the Recommendations of the report.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to these questions and clarify aspects of the Report.

Sincerely,

Fred Renihan
Centre for the Study of Educational Leadership and Policy

Attachment 1

The Future of Immersion Education

Fred Genesee, McGill University

Genesee addressed two issues: the establishment of equity in access to FI and the need for research to better understand individual student differences in FI. Reflecting on the work done on the St. Lambert Early French Immersion project, Genesee described a context in which research played a role, findings were disseminated, and the research focus was on student outcomes, with some research addressing individual learner differences.

Most FI programs exclude students with learning challenges on the assumption that these challenges are exacerbated in FI. Excluding students with special needs has resulted in inequitable access to FI. In most FI programs, students with learning challenges have no or inadequate support services and are therefore forced or counseled to drop out on the assumption that these challenges relate only to the first language. This situation results in inequitable access to bilingual competence, despite official policies of bilingualism and globalization.

Genesee raised concerns about this practice of exclusion. First, it is a discriminatory practice embedded in informal policies for publically funded programs. Second, it appears hypocritical that FI cannot meet learners' special needs while ESL programs accommodate learning challenges for non-Francophone students. Third, Genesee suggested that the legal rights of these FI students are being violated, as individual needs are not being met. Fourth, the inequitable access to programs limits our education system, weakening it in the context of globalization. Genesee concluded by stating that FI was spawned in an era of national unity, but that the world has evolved since then.

Being bilingually competent has gone beyond the context of Canada's dual linguistic reality into a world where multilingual and cultural competence are increasingly required. Genesee outlined some research challenges for FI. In addition to increased funding and improved information dissemination, research is needed on individual differences in L2 learning, including specific foci on learning outcomes and at-risk students owing to poor reading skills or cognitive or language development. Research is also needed on instructional practices to meet the needs of at-risk students. Finally, professional development opportunities are needed to better prepare teachers for individualized education.