



(Wikipedia photo)

Teacher recruitment in France applauded by Surrey parents, trustees

Percentage of Surrey students in French Immersion has been declining for years, as program hasn't grown with demand: advocate

AMY REID / Mar. 29, 2018 12:25 p.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS

Surrey school trustees and parents alike are celebrating the news that the province is ramping up efforts to recruit — and retain — French-language teachers in B.C.

It was announced on March 28 that Education Minister Rob Fleming is leading a recruiting trip to Europe to deal with a shortage of French teachers in B.C. schools.

The province is spending \$40,000 to send a group including Fleming and deputy minister Scott MacDonald on a trip to France, Belgium and the Netherlands April 3-6. Vancouver School Board superintendent Suzanne Hoffman and B.C. Teachers' Federation president Glen Hansman are also going, with their organizations paying their expenses, the ministry said in a release.

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Fleming intends to sign government-to-government agreements in France and Belgium to promote teacher and student exchanges.

See more: [Education minister off to Europe to recruit French teachers](#)

The shortage of French Immersion teachers is a national issue, said Mary-Em Waddington, who is president of the Surrey chapter of Canadian Parents for French (CPF).

But in Surrey the situation is particularly dire, she noted, estimating there is an average of 500 children on the French Immersion wait list annually.

Of the district's 121 elementary and secondary schools, 15 have French Immersion programs.

"In Surrey, they say there's no capital space and we don't have French teachers. It's a big picture issue," she said. "The good news is they're putting some money behind the problem."

News about the Fleming's trip to Europe comes after \$400 million in new funding was revealed in the NDP's B.C. budget in February, which includes \$31.29 million in new funding for recruitment and retention of French-

language teachers.

See also: [‘Significant waitlists’ for early French Immersion programs in Surrey](#)

Waddington said recruiting French-language teachers is tough in Surrey, but retention is equally challenging. A study is underway that surveys French teachers who choose to leave Surrey.

“I expect the answers that are going to turn up to be because they couldn’t get their own child into French Immersion, or because the program is unstable and whenever the school gets too full — which is all of them — (the French Immersion program) moves somewhere else, which disrupts their commutes and other things,” Waddington told the *Now-Leader*.

Another struggle of Surrey’s existing French Immersion program is a lack of supports for both students and teachers, according to Waddington.

“They have to do the same work of their English peers, with the added work of translating everything,” she elaborated. “There’s often not enough support for teachers or students in French Immersion. It’s disappointing because things like learning disabilities or other issues arise, and the specialty supports are not available and children are often counselled out of French Immersion.”

Waddington said Surrey’s Woodward Hill Elementary has a “hugely successful” program, and parents move to that area “thinking, naively, it’s their neighbourhood school so they can get their kids into the French program, then they get completely shut out.”

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That school, she said, went from two French Immersion kindergarten classes to one this year, which is mostly filled by siblings who are grandfathered into the program because a sister or brother is already in the stream.

Other French Immersion programs — such as a short-lived one at Cougar Creek Elementary that ends this June — were “bound to fail,” said Waddington, because the district sets up French Immersion where space is free — not necessarily where demand is.

Waddington lives in the Clayton area of Surrey and has two children: One who is in Grade 8 French Immersion, the other who is now in post-secondary after graduating from the program.

Getting her daughter into French Immersion in 2004 was easy, she recalled, as demand was low at the time and capacity was high all those years ago.

“I feel very lucky, and that’s why I volunteer with CPF, because we need to increase access,” said Waddington. “Look at the Sooke School District, which per capita is growing faster than Surrey and has more portables than Surrey. They have a 33 per cent rate of students in French. We have five. Five per cent. That number keeps getting lower. As population keeps growing with 1,000 new students a year, the percentage gets lower and lower and the district has not been able to add new space.”

The advantages to learning French are many, she said, not the least of which is that it’s the nation’s second official language.

“There are benefits of learning additional language in terms of neurodevelopment, decreased rates of dementia and other issues when you’re older,” noted Waddington. “It can also help secure a much better job when you graduate, and you can get paid more money due to that job. And, you can travel across Canada and work anywhere.”

Waddington noted the 2016 Supreme Court ruling on class size and composition was a “double-edged sword for Surrey” because it left the district scrambling to find enough classroom space for its students across the city, let alone French programs. All told, the district had to find 168 new classroom spaces, meaning the district was forced to convert “non-educational spaces” like computer labs into classrooms.

See also: [Surrey must create 168 new classrooms, hire 300 teachers by September April 28, 2017](#)

The lack of available space for French Immersion is what the district “always comes back with” during advocacy efforts to grow the program, Waddington said.

Surrey Board of Education Chair Laurie Larsen agreed that space and qualified teachers are hard to find — and that the court ruling exacerbated the space problem.

“One of challenges is having adequate space to grow French Immersion in the manner we’d like,” Larsen told the *Now-Leader*.

A February 2018 report on kindergarten choice programs in Surrey highlighted the “significant pressure” the district is under to provide necessary classroom space for choice programs.

“We actually sent a team to Quebec in collaboration with the Vancouver School Board to recruit French teachers,” Larsen said. “And we’ve been to the universities doing recruitment. We’ve been very fortunate to have a really proactive HR hiring recruitment person that’s been really on the ball.”

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Larsen said she’s encouraged with the provincial NDP government’s recent French Immersion and funding announcements, adding that Minister Fleming seems to understand the overall space crisis in Surrey.

“I am hopeful that in the next little while we’ll have some very good news for Surrey,” she added. “Some projects are on hold and we know we’ll hear about them soon.... We need money. We need constant replenishing of those schools and funds just to get to an even place. Hopefully with this government we will get that.”

Glyn Lewis, executive director of CPF BC & Yukon, said it was a “good day for bilingualism in Canada” when Fleming’s trip was announced.

“We are incredibly pleased the federal government listened to the pressing needs of our education system,” Lewis said in a release, noting the organization looks forward to working with the ministry to “optimize the flow” of new French-focused funding.

“The message to school districts is this: Help is on the way,” he added.

With files from Black Press

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