

PROGRAM REVIEW: EQUITABLE ACCESS

Prepared for
The South Shore Regional School Board

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Table of Contents

	<u>Page No.</u>
Background	1
Recent Improvements	1
A General Observation	2
Access to French Immersion	3
Recommendation #1	3
Support for the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programs	3
Recommendation #2	4
Recommendation #3	4
Availability of Course Options and Unique Programs in Smaller High Schools	4
Recommendation #4	5
Recommendation #5	5
The Potential of Distance Education	6
Recommendation #6	6
Access to Regional Alternate and Special Programs	6
Recommendation #7	7

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Background

The South Shore Regional School Board initiated a Program Review in 2005 with the expectation that a school utilization study would be completed as a component of the review. Part 1 of the utilization study was the preparation of a discussion paper (released in November, 2007) and Part 2 was a public consultation process. After the consultation was completed in early February, 2008, the School Utilization Report Part 2 was received by the Board on February 27 and released immediately as a public document. This report on equitable access follows from the school utilization process and is the final component of the Program Review.

One of the early outcomes of the overall Program Review was the release of a Phase I Interim Implementation Report in the fall of 2006. This Report contained a set of “General Principles” one of which was the following:

All students to have access to the following at their respective levels and according to any guidelines: Late French Immersion, Alternate and Transition programs, Community-Based Education, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Reading Recovery. The availability of these programs should be within the eastern, central and western areas of the South Shore Regional School Board.

This principle established an expectation that equitable access should be given greater attention as the Program Review progressed.

With this expectation in mind, one of goals of the school utilization study was to address the question, “How can student access to the Board’s special or alternate programs be made more equitable?”. During the 7 public meetings and other meetings to consult with representatives of school staffs and school advisory councils, there was an opportunity to express concerns and offer suggestions for improvement regarding equitable access. Also, several regional and school administrators were consulted because of their particular involvement in the delivery of programs for which equitable access may an issue. The contents of this report are based primarily on the input received during these various consultations.

Recent Improvements

Upon completion of the first phase of the Program Review, two lists of observations and recommendations formed the basis of the Program Review Phase I – Final Report. Several of the observations and recommendations emphasized the need to improve various staffing allocations to support program delivery in schools. Since that report was released in June of 2006, the SSRSB has taken steps to respond constructively by increasing staff allocations in designated areas of need, thus reducing some inequities directly. The most direct improvements were the allocation of teaching positions at the elementary level by class rather than formula, the addition of mathematics mentors in every P-9 school, and the allocation of literacy/technology mentors, library staff, and full-time administrative assistants in every school.

A question about guidance in the elementary schools should be noted. One of the observations from the Program Review states “that elementary schools require on-going and consistent support from qualified guidance counselors”. Consequently, the number of elementary guidance positions was increased this year by 3.5 full-time-equivalent positions. Now that the added positions have been in place for a year, whether or not this increase has been sufficient and equitably distributed should be assessed.

A General Observation

The number of concerns and the level of concern about equitable access expressed during the consultation process were not as high or as widespread as was expected by this consultant. Only a few public comments at the public meetings and very few private submissions were related to equity issues. During the public meetings the discussions most directly related were about the challenges faced by small high schools to minimize the number of students transferring to Park View Education Centre, either for a perceived broader range of course options or for the International Baccalaureate program. It is more accurate to say that the concerns expressed or issues raised through the consultation process were specific to individual programs and school-based situations. In other words, the concerns were, for the most part, localized to programs or schools, rather than regional in nature.

The program-specific and school-specific equity issues are introduced in the sections that follow, along with recommendations for consideration by the SSRSB and its senior staff.

Access to French Immersion

One of the observations made in the Program Review Phase I – Final Report was “that the current model of offering enriched French programs within the South Shore Regional School Board is not equitable to all students”. This inequity is most obvious in the availability of French Immersion in the school system.

Middle level French Immersion is offered in Grades 4-6 at Bridgewater Elementary School and Late Immersion is offered in Grades 7-12 at Bridgewater Junior-Senior High School. Late Immersion is offered in Grades 7-9 at Hebbville Academy and Grades 10-12 at Park View Education Centre. The same arrangement for Late Immersion is in place in Grade 7-9 at South Queens Junior High School and Grade 10-12 at Liverpool Regional High School. Intensive Grade 6 French is offered at Dr. J. C. Wickwire Academy. Although it has a different pedagogical approach than Immersion, the Grade 6 students are able to advance to French Immersion in Grade 7 at SQJHS. With these arrangements in place, continuity of French Immersion exists in 2 high school feeder systems in Lunenburg County and one in the Liverpool area of Queens County. Obviously, the school enrolments in these areas of the SSRSB region are sufficiently large to support a French Immersion program.

No French Immersion is offered in the feeder systems of North Queens Rural High School and New Germany Rural High School. The most likely reason is that the enrolments of the elementary and secondary schools are not large enough to ensure a minimum number of students to justify the startup and continuation of a French Immersion program.

Intensive Grade 6 French is offered for the first time this year at Lunenburg Junior-Senior High School, instead of French Immersion, and the students go on to the Core French program in Grade 7. A few students from Riverport and District Elementary School transferred to LJSHS in September to access the Intensive Grade 6 French program.

French Immersion is being discontinued in the feeder system of Forest Heights Community School. Apparently because of a school-based decision, French Immersion is being phased out at Chester and Area Middle School. It is offered this year in Grade 9 which means that the program offered presently at Forest Heights Community School

can be sustained for only for 3 more years and for only one group of students. French Immersion has never been offered at Bayview Community School.

The enrolments of Chester and Area Middle School and Forest Heights Community School are in the same range as the schools in the Liverpool, Bridgewater and Hebbville-Park View feeder systems. There is no reason to suggest that the enrolments will not support a French Immersion program in the area of Chester and there are no obvious obstacles that might prevent the SSRSB from addressing this inequity constructively.

As noted in the “background” section at the beginning of this paper, one of the expectations from the Program Review is that French Immersion should be available within the eastern, central and western areas of the South Shore Regional School Board. Accordingly, the following recommendation is offered for board consideration.

Recommendation #1: It is recommended that the South Shore Regional School Board give direction and authorize the appropriate resources to offer Middle Level French Immersion at Chester and Area Middle School, if there is sufficient interest from families to justify the program. Furthermore, it is recommended that Late French Immersion be offered at Forest Heights Community School for those students who wish to continue French Immersion in high school after Grade 9.

Whether or not the existing Immersion programs should be accessible first to students in the school where it is being offered or to the students across the eastern, central or western sub-systems in which the school is located has not been formally addressed through a board policy. The matter did not surface as a major issue during the consultations so it may not need attention. It is simply raised as an unanswered question at this point.

Support for the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programs

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program at Park View Education Centre (PVEC) has been operating successfully for over 25 years and is offered in no other high schools in the region. The Advanced Placement (AP) program has been operating at Bridgewater Junior-Senior High School for approximately 20 years. In recent years, AP has been implemented and continues to be offered at Forest Heights Community School and New Germany Rural High School. The possibility of offering AP at Liverpool Regional High School during the next school year is being considered.

There is a fairly common perception that the IB program at Park View Education Centre traditionally has received a greater level of support than the Advanced Placement (AP) program in the other high schools of the region. This perception was first expressed formally as an observation in the Program Review Phase I – Final Report: “The current model of offering enriched programs (IB/AP) in high schools within the SSRSB is not equitable to all students”.

The SSRSB has taken positive steps to reduce the inequity. At the provincial level, the Board and its senior staff have argued that the Advanced Placement program should have the same level of financial support and should be “officially” recognized as a senior high school enrichment program to the same degree that the IB program is supported and recognized. Also, the Board increased the funding for AP from \$4,000 in 2006-07 to

\$24,000 for this present school year---this figure is supported by some revenue from the Department of Education to cover the costs of the AP examinations.

The Department of Education provided a revenue amount of \$60,000 to support the IB program for this school year and the SSRSB added \$32,700 to match an annual expenditure of \$92,700.

Comparing the Board's own support for the 2 programs, it contributed approximately \$22,000 to AP this year and \$32,700 to IB. A more comprehensive comparison would include such factors as the number of students served and the relative costs of each program.

Although some steps have been taken, there is more to be done to ensure that the level of board support for Advanced Placement is in line with the board support for the International Baccalaureate program, assuming that the Board wishes to support these two enrichment programs equitably. The following recommendations are based on this assumption.

Recommendation #2: It is recommended that the level of board funding support for the Advanced Placement program be adjusted on a per student basis for each of the high schools to match the level of board funding support for the International Baccalaureate program at Park View Education Centre. The adjusted amount per student should take into account the relative costs of the two programs.

Recommendation #3: It is recommended that the South Shore Regional School Board continue its lobby efforts with the Department of Education to have Advanced Placement recognized and supported as a viable enrichment program for smaller high schools that do not have sufficient enrolments to support the International Baccalaureate program.

As with other courses and programs, insufficient enrolments may prevent Advanced Placement from being sustained in a small high school. This matter is addressed in the section below entitled, "Distance Education".

Availability of Course Options and Unique Programs in Smaller High Schools

Smaller high schools face difficult challenges in trying to offer the basic courses required for graduation and an appropriate range of course options. The challenges include trying to match teacher qualifications to courses taught and to give students the full complement of courses they have requested. The same challenges also make it difficult to offer special or unique programs.

Access to a greater choice of course options and to unique programs in a larger high school affects a smaller school negatively because of the tendency for students to transfer to the larger school, thus reducing the smaller school's enrolment even more. In the SSRSB system, this is most evident in the number of transfer requests to Park View Education Centre from the neighboring high schools. Student transfers to PVEC have to be controlled carefully if the smaller school enrolments are to be protected. Those making the decisions must try to balance individual student needs and interests with the need to keep the enrolment declines to a minimum. With no effort to find this balance, the effects of declining enrolment on the ability of a small school to deliver programs become even more severe. Trying to strike this balance is most apparent in the administration of the Board's student transfer policy.

The present Student Transfer Policy (#975) says very little about the rationale or criteria on which student transfers will be allowed. It states that

The South Shore Regional School Board expects students will attend the school that serves the area in which they live. Students will not be permitted to attend schools that do not serve the area in which they live without an approved student transfer. The South Shore Regional School Board may permit student transfers under exceptional circumstances, in accordance with established procedures.

The remainder of the policy covers the procedures for application, consideration and appeals of decisions.

The Superintendent of Schools is responsible for the administration of the Student Transfer Policy and for reporting regularly to the Board on this administration. The Superintendent, in consultation with school administrators, regional staff, and the board, has developed some criteria that are becoming more commonly understood and accepted, criteria that try to address the issue of finding the balance raised above.

Based on the fact that no rationale behind the Student Transfer Policy is stated and the fact that criteria have been informally adopted over the last couple of years, it is timely and appropriate that Student Transfer Policy #975 be updated. Thus, the following recommendations are put forward.

Recommendation #4: It is recommended that the Student Transfer Policy be expanded to include principles and criteria that would define the rationale behind the approval or denial of student transfers. The principles should include a statement regarding the importance of finding a balance between meeting the needs and interests of individual students and protecting small school enrolments from significant decline. Another principle should define the expectation that student transfers approved for individual program or course requirements should be monitored to see that the reason for the approval remains valid. The criteria for approval should provide clarity or specifics to define the term “exceptional circumstances” in the present policy and, at the same time, the policy should allow room for the Superintendent of School to exercise professional judgment after consulting with school principals and regional staff.

Recommendation #5: It is recommended that school and public consultation have high priority in the expansion of the Student Transfer Policy. This particular policy and its implications regarding the availability of transportation for approved transfers are of significant interests to families and students. It is important that they have an opportunity to help shape the policy revisions. Furthermore, open communication can be valuable in helping families and students understand the complex issues and contradictory expectations involved. With greater understanding comes a higher level of acceptance.

Administrative control over student transfers under the expectations of a revised board policy is not the only way to minimize the number of student transfers from small high schools. The number of transfer requests can be reduced by offering courses and programs that can satisfy the demands and diverse needs of the students. As noted above, there are major barriers to be overcome that require additional financial resources, but the benefits to students of keeping small enrolments stable have to be weighed in the balance.

The Potential of Distance Education

One of the most common ways to widen the courses options for students in small high schools has been through “distance education”. Distance education allows students to take courses independently online to supplement the courses available at their local high school. Distance education has been available in some areas of Nova Scotia for about 2 decades now and continues to serve a valuable function. Given that the internet platforms, connectivity, wireless service, and technology have advanced exponentially in the past 5 to 10 years, surely there are new options to be considered to move beyond what can now be called traditional distance education. The following scenario is offered to spark discussion about new possibilities.

With wireless video and audio technology working instantly and freely through worldwide internet platforms, business meetings occur daily with the participants located around the globe. Participants in a room in Halifax can connect by audio and video to participants in China and others in India as if they are all in the same room. They can see and hear each other speaking instantaneously and simultaneously, observe a demonstration or exchange ideas on a “smart board”, and share documents electronically. If business offices in different countries or continents can do this easily, why cannot students and their teachers in different schools be connected just as easily?

Now, in at least one school board in Nova Scotia, the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP), some students are connected through video conferencing so that students in different schools can take a single course from the same teacher. This method for providing a course to a few students who would otherwise not have access has been in operation for over a decade in the CSAP. This and similar methods in other Nova Scotia school boards should be studied carefully to design new options for program delivery among schools.

This idea of offering courses among schools may have potential to deliver more Advanced Placement courses in the small high schools. Whereas only 3 students may wish to take a particular Advanced Placement course at North Queens High School, there may be 5 students at New Germany High and 4 at Forest Heights who would like to take the same course. Surely the barriers of distance can be thrown aside with wireless technology.

These preliminary thoughts prompt a recommendation.

Recommendation # 6: It is recommended that the South Shore Regional School Board undertake a study of the use of distance education in Nova Scotia and other provinces for the purpose of expanding how distance education is used in the SSRSB region presently.

Access to Regional Alternate and Special Programs

During the public consultation process, no major equity issues were identified specifically with respect to any of the region’s alternate and special programs---the Alternate Middle Level and Senior Level Programs, Adult Education, the new O2 program in the high schools, the Skills Trades Exploration Program (STEP) at PVEC, and Verge House at BJSHS. Likewise, equity issues did not surface during the private conversations with those who administer the programs. These conversations were more about trying to operate with limited resources, getting new programs implemented effectively and trying gain more specialist services for the students.

Some positive comments were noted about the level of student transportation support provided by the SSRSB. One transportation situation that might be described as an inequity exists in the eastern area of the region. The Board provides transportation to students attending the Alternate and Middle Level Programs in Liverpool and Bridgewater, but does not for those attending the same programs in Mahone Bay. The following recommendation to address this inequity is self-evident.

Recommendation #7: It is recommended that the same provision for transportation be provided for all students attending the Alternate and Middle Level Programs in Mahone Bay as is provided in the other areas of the region.