

School boundary, French immersion proposals raise ire of parents

By Peter Richardson

Centennial Hylands Public School played host to a public information session last Wednesday regarding the Upper Grand District School Board's North Dufferin Boundary Review and French Immersion (FI) Feasibility Study.

The session was attended by a number of board staff, trustees, school principals and numerous parents, with the purpose being to gather further public input on the introduction of a FI programme in Shelburne, and the required school district boundary changes required to facilitate the programme.

Programme spokesperson Heather Imm, the Senior Planner for the Board, chaired the session and outlined the proposed boundary changes and the preferred option for implementing the FI programme at Centennial Hylands school.

The meeting was the second in the ongoing process of locating a suitable venue for the programme and restructuring the County's northern boundaries to allow for the relocation of students and the repurposing of the schools involved.

Currently, the FI students are accommodated in two schools in Dufferin and one in Erin. Princess Elizabeth Public School in Orangeville (PEPS) and Mono Amaranth Public School (MAPS) house grades JK through Grade 8, while all high school students attend Erin from Grades 9 through 12.

Due to both the elementary schools experiencing overcrowding and despite new enrolment caps of 90 JK students for 2017, the Board was tasked with exploring options for the introduction of FI in the Shelburne area.

In finding a school suitable, an emphasis was placed on regular track enrolment trends, available school capacity, potential for the site to accommodate growth, having a central location, walkability for students and any site constraints.

Based on this, the Board is proposing that the FI programme be housed at Centennial Hylands and that, to facilitate this, approximately 160 existing CHPS students be moved to Primrose Elementary School, thus allowing for an initial 115 French Immersion students at CHPS.

This moves some existing students, at PEPS and MAPS, to be relocated to Shelburne and thus alleviate the aforementioned overcrowding, beginning in September of 2017.

Studies showed that this option ticked off the most boxes in the Board's list of location criteria and served to bolster the enrolment at the underutilized Primrose location.

The proposal was not without considerable opposition from the community at large.

As had been the case in the first meeting, in September, of this year, many parents were upset with the prospect of having to move their children to a different school.

Much of the opposition centred around the distress this would cause their children, and the community they currently were a part of, in their existing schools.

Many brought up the potentially long bus rides that would become necessary, sometimes exceeding an hour in duration, as being too burdensome for young children and the subsequent changes, required in after school care, being not only inconvenient, but inordinately expensive for the parents.

One young mother, whose family had moved to Shelburne specifically because their child would be able to walk to and from school, indicated that after school care would now become a necessity for her family, while another stated that her after school costs would now double if her child was forced to attend Primrose.

Parents explained that everything from school friendships, to after school activities and parent involvement in school activities would be adversely affected by the Board's planned solution.

Especially concerned were parents who worked in Toronto and Mississauga while living in Orangeville and would now have to travel an extra 30 minutes to Shelburne to pick up their children, before returning home to Orangeville.

One parent, who spoke at an earlier meeting on October 6 summarized many of the concerns as follows:

?As a parent of a student currently in Grade 7 at Centennial Hylands, I STRONGLY OPPOSE any change to the current boundaries. To force [my child] to switch to Primrose or any other school in order to accommodate FI students not currently attending Centennial Hylands is unacceptable.

?This would deprive all current Grade 7 students from graduating in their home school. It would force my son to ride on a different bus than his older siblings and have a longer bus ride. FI students are the minority and should not cause such disruption to current students and families. FI is a choice made by parents with the foreknowledge of placement location issues.

?We pay outrageously high taxes, most of which go to the education system. Parents of current Centennial students should have the final decision regarding this issue and should NOT be overridden by any panel that may be considering other issues such as government funding and enrolment numbers rather than the best interests of students and education. DO NOT approve the proposed boundary change?

Although emotions ran high at the meeting, tempers remained calm as speaker after speaker rose to condemn the Boards proposal and ask that they search for another solution.

Many wanted to know why the FI could not be accommodated at Primrose and forego moving any CHPS students at all.

In response, Ms. Imm stated that, based upon their 10 year projections, Primrose would not be able to sustain the projected enrolment for the programme, citing the septic system capacity as one of the deciding factors in that assessment.

Other parents brought up the possibility of choosing an earlier discussed proposal where students from JK to 3 would attend Centennial Hylands, while Grades 4 through 8 would go to Primrose.

Many of the same concerns were voiced by both, the parents whose children were, currently, in the FI programmes at Princess Elizabeth and Mono Amaranth and those whose children attended Centennial Hylands.

Despite the Board putting a cap on the opening JK enrolment in the programme at 26 students, several parents were concerned about the availability of sufficient native French speaking teachers in the school system, while others noted that hiring ads were currently being run for French teachers, when the programme was, supposedly, only in the review process.

This prompted the speculation that the whole review process was simply public relations and that the decision was already ?fait accompli.?

Ms. Imm responded that the hiring was unrelated to this discussion and that since a number of students would be moving from the Orangeville and Mono schools it was reasonable to expect that some teachers would also be reassigned, though additional hiring would certainly be required at some venture.

The deadline for interested parties to submit their comments and recommendations to the Board was Wednesday and a Final Boundary Review Report will be presented to the Business Operations Committee on November 8.

The final decision of the Board will be made on November 22.

For further updates or to review all the documentation and comments, readers can go to the Board's website, at www.ugdsb.on.ca/ndbr.