



Program Committee  
Thursday, December 11, 2025  
EC-340D & Virtual Meeting

**AGENDA: 6:00 p.m.**

1. Call to Order/Roll Call
2. HWDSB Land Acknowledgement
3. Approval of the Agenda
4. Review of the Committee Workplan
5. Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy & Elementary French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process (Final Report)
6. Adjournment

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## PROGRAM COMMITTEE

December 11, 2025

### **Review of the Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy & Elementary French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process (FINAL REPORT)**

Submitted By: Sheryl Robinson Petrazzini, Director of Education

Prepared By: Jamie Nunn, Associate Director, School Improvement, Learning Services  
Michelle Lemaire, Superintendent of Program, Equity and Innovation  
Sally Landon, Manager, Research and Analytics  
Brian Goodram, Principal, Westdale Secondary School

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#### **Recommendation:**

That the *Review of Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Programs Strategy and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process* report prepared by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. be received, and that staff be directed to develop Guiding Principles to support consideration of the recommendations. These Guiding Principles will be presented to the Committee in February 2026 for review, discussion, input, and a recommendation for approval.

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#### **Background:**

On June 10, 2024, the Board of Trustees passed the following Motion:

*The Elementary Program Strategy, including the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process, and the Secondary Program Strategy be reviewed over the next year to ensure alignment with the Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP), that both strategies meet the needs of HWDSB students and ensure balance, fair and equitable distribution of resources delivered in a fiscally responsible manner.*

Together, the consultant and staff will ensure that human rights and equity, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-oppression are considered throughout the review and include consultations with the community. Staff will provide updates on the review process to the Board of Trustees throughout the process. The review was expected to take at least one year.

### Status:

Staff competitively procured the consulting services of R.A. Malatest & Associates to conduct the review. The review encompassed the Program Strategy Review Scope as approved by the Program Committee on October 21, 2024. In collaboration with the consulting firm, staff completed each step of the detailed workplan for this project within the timelines outlined below:

Phase	Focus	Timeline	Status
<b>Phase 1</b>	Project Planning and Scoping	November 2024 – January 2025	<b>Complete</b>
<b>Phase 2</b>	Primary Data Collection	February – May 2025	<b>Complete</b>
<b>Phase 3</b>	Analysis & Validation	September – November 2025	<b>Complete</b>
<b>Phase 4</b>	Report of Consultant's Findings and Recommendations	December 11, 2025	<b>Complete</b>

### Extensive Consultation

Malatest gathered extensive input from our community to inform the recommendations contained in their final report. A total of 4,361 parents/caregivers, 326 students, and 2,087 staff completed surveys. In addition, the consultants held 18 focus groups and conducted 21 individual interviews through the fall of 2025, including a dedicated in-person focus group with the Indigenous Education Council (IEC) and a virtual session with community organizations. School visits were conducted at Bellmoore Elementary School, Bernie Custis Secondary School, and Westmount Secondary School to capture a range of school experiences, accompanied by additional focus group sessions with students at each location. A supplementary parent focus group was also held at Prince of Wales to address gaps in representation from the spring survey.

### Validation Meetings

Since the time of the last report, the consultant hosted a variety of validation meetings with interested parties who had engaged in large focus groups. These validation meetings were intended to provide Malatest an opportunity to confirm the information that was shared by participants, prior to the development of their final recommendations. Last month, we also welcomed families to engage with Malatest through the online Engage platform to ensure the feedback Malatest heard was accurate as they finalized recommendations to the Board of Trustees. These validation meetings were a new step in our consultation process and reflective of staff using our Human Rights Impact Assessment Tool to continue to find ways to respectfully and accurately reflect community input.

### Final Report

Malatest has completed a detailed report summarizing 10 Key Findings and 27 Recommendations ([Appendix 2](#), Malatest Consulting) to help improve the HWDSB Elementary Focus Programs (6 recommendations), Secondary Program Strategy (15 recommendations) and the French Immersion Program (6 recommendations). As indicated in the Final Report, many of the recommendations articulated in this review could introduce considerable changes for a number of involved parties, including students, staff and parents. The consultant has not identified timelines for the possible adoption of the recommendations; however, based on experiences communicated by other school boards implementing similar changes, they have recommended

the need for a phased approach as well as extensive consultations with the various communities to be impacted by such changes. Staff will require time to develop an action plan to review, modify or implement the recommendations in a strategic manner to best meet the needs of every student.

### **Next Steps**

Staff propose the following timelines:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
December 11, 2025	Program Committee receives Malatest's Final Report and directs to staff to develop Guiding Principles to consider the recommendations.
February 19, 2026	Program Committee reviews and discusses the guiding principles drafted by staff, and makes recommendations to Board of Trustees for approval.
Between March and May 2026	Once approved by trustees, staff would use the Guiding Principles to evaluate the recommendations.
May 2026	Program Committee receives a staff report on the proposed implementation of the recommendations (for implementation in the 2027-2028 school year).

### **Financial Implications:**

In the 2024-2025 budget, Trustees approved \$150,000 in one-time funding to support the Program Strategy review. In addition to the approved budget, additional funds from the Learning Services budget has been spent to support an expansion of the consultation conducted with additional focus groups, 1:1 interviews and two jurisdictional scans, including French Immersion and Transportation policies.

### **Strategic Directions:**

#### **Upholding Human Rights, Safety & Well-Being**

*We will support all students and staff to feel safe and secure in our classrooms and school communities.*

#### **Providing Equitable Quality Education**

*We will offer equitable quality educational opportunities to improve student engagement, learning and achievement for future-readiness.*

#### **Collaborating with Students, Families & Communities**

*We will build reciprocal relationships and partnerships to enhance access and engagement for students, families, and communities.*

#### **Building a Sustainable Education System**

*We will adapt to a rapidly changing world through responsible fiscal management, investing equitably in accessible and sustainable facilities, and supporting a robust workforce.*

#### **Reinforcing Indigenous Educational Wellness & Reconciliation**

*We will honour our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships among Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partners, and by cultivating intergenerational healing and wellness in a restorative education system.*

December 5, 2025

# HAMILTON-WENTWORTH DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Review of the Elementary Program  
Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy,  
And the French Immersion Location  
Strategy & Application Process



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## Executive Summary

Highlighted below are the key findings associated with the *Review of Elementary Programs, Secondary Programs and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process* conducted by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (Malatest) during the period from January 2025 to December 2025. It should be noted that the review was based on considerable input and feedback from a wide cross-section of voices from the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). In total, this review includes a synthesis of information provided by in excess of 7,000 individuals who participated in the research by either completing a survey, participating in a focus group, or exchanging information in one-on-one interviews with the Consulting team.

It should be emphasized that the Program Strategy Reviews are based on the review of information gained through multiple lines of evidence, including surveys and focus groups, but also through the analysis of administrative data as well as insights from other Boards/jurisdictions in terms of program directions that they had adopted. Finally, the conclusions and recommendations presented are that of R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. and may not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of HWDSB.

### Key findings

***The “concept” of additional experiential learning opportunities is not unique to HWDSB as many other Boards offer similar programs at the elementary and secondary levels.***

In the process of completing this review, a number of other Ontario jurisdictions were studied to ascertain the extent to which these boards offered additional experiential learning opportunities to elementary and secondary students similar to HWDSB’s Focus and Specialized Programs. In general, we found that most boards had very similar programming, including specialized programs associated with athletic, arts and vocational programs.

These boards provide such programming much for the same reasons as in HWDSB, namely, to enhance the educational experience and to attract students who would go elsewhere if such programs were not available, as well to provide a way to engage and retain students who may be at risk of program completion if such programs were not available.

***Most, but not all, Focus Programs and French Immersion Programs have been growing at the same rate (or higher) as the total student population.***

In general, the review found that most of the elementary Focus programs as well as the French Immersion program offered by the Board have experienced steady enrolment growth, which demonstrates a relatively strong demand for these programs. However, the review also identified several programs in which enrolment growth was declining, which could be evidence of lack of demand and/or limited awareness of these program offerings.

***Most Focus Programs and Specialized Programs are highly regarded by students and parents enrolled in such programs, but support for these programs is much lower among parents who do not have a child in such programs and a number of staff questioned the value of such programs.***

In completing the review of the three Program Strategies, it confirms that in general, there is a high degree of parent satisfaction with the program offerings among parents who have a child(ren) enrolled in such programs. While satisfaction was highest among parents who had children enrolled in the French Immersion Program (80% citing satisfaction with the French Immersion), parents were also generally satisfied with the secondary Specialized Programs (69% satisfied) as well as the elementary Focus Programs (64% satisfied among parents with a child in an elementary Focus Program).

However, support for these programs was considerably lower if the parent did not have a child in the program. For example, only one third (33%) of parents who did not have a child in an elementary Focus Program believed these programs meet the needs of all HWDSB families (compared to 64% of parents with a child enrolled in a Focus Program). Similarly, 65% of parents with children that were not enrolled in a Specialized Program were satisfied with secondary programming (compared to 76% of parents with a child enrolled in a Specialized Program). Finally, 65% of parents with children not enrolled in French Immersion supported the program (compared to 95% of parents with children enrolled in French Immersion).

Staff who taught in schools that offered elementary Focus Programs were of the opinion that such programs did not benefit all students. This could be expected since elementary Focus Program enrolment represents only 1% of HWDSB's elementary student population. Staff questioned whether such programs could be equitably accessed given their predominate location in one region of the Board, and the limited awareness of such programs among HWDSB parents.

***Student participation in Focus Programs, some Specialized Programs, and French Immersion is skewed towards students from higher socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods.***

While data is unavailable as to the family income of students who are enrolled in these programs, it was possible to estimate the likely SES characteristics of students enrolled in such programs based on their neighbourhood residential location. Using data from the 2021 Census, it appears that students enrolled in elementary Focus Programs, some secondary Specialized Programs, and the French Immersion Program are originating from neighbourhoods in more affluent regions of Greater Hamilton with an overall higher SES score than that of the Board average. This inequity in access is likely the function of several factors, including transportation challenges and parent knowledge about such programs as well as the application process used to gain entry to some programs which may disadvantage certain sub-populations.

***There are “transition challenges” facing several of the Focus Programs and the French Immersion Program.***

Notwithstanding the high levels of student and parent satisfaction with several of the Focus Programs reviewed, it appears that there is a disconnect in terms of retaining students in either HWDSB and/or to transition them into corresponding secondary programs. For example, only 59% of students in elementary Focus Programs transitioned to a grade 9 school in HWDSB (compared to the all-student average of 81%). This could be reflective of the lack of linkage between the elementary Focus Programs and the secondary Specialized Programs.

With respect to the French Immersion Program, it was noted that only 1 in 3 Grade 8 French Immersion students will transition to secondary French Immersion. While the drop off in transition for such students is not unusual, in that all boards studied had such drop off, program discontinuation in HWDSB is highly correlated with travel time to the two secondary schools that offer French Immersion. French Immersion elementary students located relatively close to a secondary school that offered French Immersion had French Immersion transition rates almost double that compared to students who would have further distances to travel.

***While parents and students are encouraged to identify what new programs they would like to see offered in HWDSB, there is no formal mechanism to collect parent/student voice and no framework to guide the development and placement of new programs.***

Based on interviews and discussions with staff and parents it appears that at the school level, parents and students are often encouraged to identify what new programs should be offered, especially with respect to secondary Specialized Programs. However, there is no formal Board-level mechanism to collect this feedback. Moreover, while many programs are developed locally as a result of a local champion, there is a lack of strategic direction as to how these programs reflect local labour market conditions and/or have

transitions to appropriate post-secondary programs. This “bottom up” approach can lead to inequities in terms of the number and types of program offerings, as such programs may be concentrated in certain schools or regions where there are parent and staff champions for such programs.

The review also noted the challenges of the “top down” approach, where the Board has placed programs in certain underserved areas. The review noted that in certain instances (e.g., International Baccalaureate Program at Glendale, Aviation Program at Sir Winston Churchill), programs were met with modest enrolment, and according to staff this was in part because the Board did not first determine whether they were aligned with community interests or local industry need. Ideally, future program offerings will take into consideration both parent/student interest for such programs as well as strategic decision-making to ensure that there is an alignment with local labour market conditions, transition pathways (to post-secondary or vocational) as well as equitable access for students (geographic distribution).

***There is a considerable variance in terms of the incremental cost associated with provision of these Focus Programs and Specialized Programs.***

Information provided by HWDSB suggests that there is a wide range in terms of the additional costs incurred by HWDSB to provide these Focus Programs and Specialized Programs, as well as many Focus or Specialized Programs with associated fees incurred by families. For example, for the elementary Focus Programs examined, most (with the exception of the Mandarin program) had very modest additional costs per student enrolled in such programs. However, when examining several secondary Specialized Programs, there are substantial incremental costs associated with having lower class sizes, transportation and other program costs. In review of the sustainability of some programs, consideration will need to be given as to the extent to which these program costs will continue to be sustained, especially for those programs with stagnant or declining enrolments.

***There are concerns as to the equity and sustainability of the French Immersion as currently structured.***

While the review of the French Immersion Program found that there was a high level of satisfaction with the program among students and parents who were involved in the program, satisfaction was lower among parents who did not have a child in French Immersion, as many of these parents felt that the program was “exclusionary” and that the program resulted in a different learning experience for those students in French Immersion versus those students in the English stream. Administrative data provided by the Board confirms that the proportion of Special Education students and those students with other non-gifted IEPs was lower among French Immersion Program students as compared to the Board average.

A key issue raised in the review of French Immersion was around the sustainability of a program that accounted for approximately 9% of all elementary student enrolment. Board staff noted the challenges in securing qualified staff for the number of positions required. The review also found that there was “uneven” proportion of instruction provided in French across schools, with some schools struggling to meet minimum Ministry standards while other schools could offer additional instruction in French. Students and parents also noted that in many instances, absences of the French instructors resulted in instruction being provided in English as the supply teachers were not French qualified.

***Other Boards examined in this study have effectively imposed limits on the size/scope of their French Immersion Programs which should also be considered by HWDSB.***

The staffing challenges faced by HWDSB in terms of having a sufficient number of French-certified teachers is not unique to this Board. Other boards consulted as part of this study echoed these challenges and had implemented certain measures as a result, including enrolment caps, later entry point, standardizing the proportion of instruction in French and limiting the subjects taught in French to better align their capacity to provide a quality French Immersion Program with the level of enrolment. Many other boards struggle with staffing enough French-certified teachers, and the Ministry of Education data suggests that the demand will continue to outstrip available supply for the coming years as such studies have noted that the demand for French Immersion teachers in Ontario will outstrip supply by a 2:1 basis over the next five years. In the light of this supply constraint, HWDSB should consider similar policies to help ensure that the Board can continue to provide a high-quality French Immersion Program.

***Adoption and implementation of program recommendations should occur in a phased approach and include dialogue with involved parties.***

Malatest has identified a total of 27 recommendations to help improve the elementary Focus Programs (6 recommendations), secondary Specialized Programs (15 recommendations) and the French Immersion Program (6 recommendations). Many of the recommendations articulated in this review could introduce considerable changes for a number of involved parties, including students, parents and staff. While Malatest has not identified timelines for the possible adoption of such recommendations, experiences communicated by other boards implementing similar changes underscored the need for a phased approach as well as extensive consultations with the various communities to be impacted by such changes.

## Acknowledgements

R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (Malatest) wishes to acknowledge the considerable support provided by HWDSB staff in the completion of this Review. This review benefited from the support and guidance provided by the following HWDSB staff. These included:

- Meshel Baines, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent of Quality Math Instruction and Implementation & Equity, and to the Superintendent of Program, Equity, and Innovation
- Matthew Gerard, Associate Director, Business Services and Treasurer of the Board
- Brian Goodram, Principal, Westdale
- Jagoda Kirilo, Senior Manager, Business Services
- Sally Landon, Manager, Research & Analytics
- Michelle Lemaire, Superintendent, Program, Equity & Innovation
- Jamie Nunn, Associate Director, Learning Services
- Allison Reynolds, Manager, Corporate Communications
- Beth Woof, Coordinating Principal, Program Strategy Review

We would also like to acknowledge HWDSB educators, principals & vice principals, managers, Executive Council, staff, Trustees, families, students and community partners who lent their voices and invested in sharing their perspectives with Malatest. The results of the review reflect the views and opinions of **more than 7,000 students, parents and staff** who participated in the research through the completion of surveys as well as other in-depth data collection through interviews, focus groups and online engagement activities.

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## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

<b>DELF</b>	Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française (French Language Studies Diploma)
<b>DSB</b>	District School Board
<b>ELD</b>	English Literacy Development
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language
<b>FI</b>	French Immersion
<b>FSL</b>	French as a Second Language
<b>HWDSB</b>	Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
<b>HWCDsb</b>	Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board
<b>IB</b>	International Baccalaureate
<b>IEC</b>	Indigenous Education Circle
<b>JK</b>	Junior Kindergarten
<b>MYSP</b>	Multi-Year Strategic Plan
<b>NYA:WEH</b>	Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton
<b>OSSLT</b>	Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test
<b>OYAP</b>	Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program
<b>PSE</b>	Postsecondary education
<b>SAGE</b>	Scholastics, Arts and Global Education
<b>SHSM</b>	Specialist High Skills Major
<b>SK</b>	Senior Kindergarten



# PROJECT OVERVIEW

## **1.1 Background and objectives**

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB, Board) approved the Elementary Program Strategy in November 2016 which is based on seven key vision statements that prioritize equity of access and outcomes for all students. The vision statements act as the foundation for decision making surrounding curriculum, programs, facilities, resources, and special education delivery in the Board's elementary schools. The Elementary Program Strategy offers an overview of the Board's programs and strategies to inform daily work at all schools within the HWDSB and lays out the Board's vision for program delivery from Kindergarten to Grade 8. The Elementary Program Strategy calls for a review of Programs every two years. The last review occurred in October 2021, examining its six elementary Focus Programs. After this review, the Board maintained original direction provided in the Elementary Program Strategy.

The Secondary Program Strategy was approved in June 2013 to support the implementation of the Board's vision, provide a future foundation for secondary programming, and support the Multi-Year Strategic Plan at the time. The Secondary Program Strategy has been followed by all HWDSB schools for the past 12 years.

The French Immersion Location Strategy & Application Process was approved by the Board in 2016. The French Immersion Location Strategy & Application Process has been followed by all HWDSB schools for the past eight years.

HWDSB contracted R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (Malatest) to review the Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy, and the French Immersion Location Strategy & Application Process to ensure alignment with the Board's current Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP); to ensure they meet the needs of HWDSB students; and to ensure balance, and a fair and equitable distribution of resources delivered in a fiscally responsible manner.

## **1.2 Organization of report**

While the focus of the report is on the Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process, there have been additional considerations included in each section. For example, where appropriate, the review also examined transportation issues for each program as well as other programs that were examined as part of the broader Program Strategy Review. In general, the overarching findings in each section have been summarized under the "Key Takeaways" discussion and the Consultant's recommendations for each program area are also presented at the end of each section where appropriate.

In this context, the Report is structured as follows:

**Section 1: Project Overview.** Discussed in this section are the key objectives of the review, the various methodologies utilized for the review, and limitations associated with the review.

**Section 2: HWDSB Overview.** Contained in this section is a description of student enrolment in elementary and secondary programs offered by HWDSB as well as a description of the regional classification of HWDSB Wards as they align with four defined regions. This analysis also compares HWDSB enrolment growth to that of other selected Boards.

**Section 3: Review of the Elementary Program Strategy.** In this section, the six Focus programs offered in selected elementary (K-8) schools are described and analyzed. These include the Hockey Program, Mandarin Program, SAGE, SAGE Quest, and the two Sports Academy programs (Basketball, High Potential). In addition, other program areas were also examined including the Instrumental Music and Special Education Programs, although these programs were not examined to the same extent as were the Focus Programs. This section also contains information as to the state of staff satisfaction with facilities.

**Section 4: Review of the Secondary Program Strategy.** Similar to the Elementary Program Review, the Secondary Program Review included an in-depth examination of Secondary Special Programs including ArtSMART, Audition-Based Program of the Arts, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program, Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) Programs and a number of other special secondary programs (Co-op, Cosmetology, etc.).

**Section 5: Review of the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process.** Detailed in this section are the key findings associated with the review of HWDSB's French Immersion Program. This section also contains information pertaining to Core French and also includes a comparison of HWDSB's French Immersion Program to that of other selected Boards.

**Section 6: Summary.** Highlighted in this section are the key findings associated with the review of the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board's Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy, and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process. Where appropriate, findings have been presented at a system level which is intended to identify system-wide issues associated with the design and delivery of the reviewed programs. In addition, specific conclusions regarding specific elementary, secondary and French Immersion Programming is also highlighted in this section.

### 1.3 Research approach

Malatest conducted a thorough review of HWDSB's program documentation and administrative data to provide important secondary information and quantitative data on the Elementary Program Strategy, the Secondary Program Strategy, and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process.

Following this, a scoping consultation with HWDSB's Executive Council members was conducted. Executive Council members were invited to provide key insights on the priorities for the program strategy reviews during a two-hour meeting. The input generated during this discussion informed the development of the research questions for the review and guided the design of the subsequent data collection instruments as well the general direction that the review should follow.

Subsequently, three scoping consultations were conducted with HWDSB families (one focus group with parents and two focus groups with students in Grades 7 to 12) to identify and refine the key topics to be addressed in the data collection instruments.

Using the information collected to date, Malatest designed a 20- to 30-minute questionnaire in consultation with HWDSB. The questionnaire was designed to address the key priorities defined during the scoping consultations and to meet the informational needs of HWDSB. The questionnaire was comprised of closed-ended questions, semi-closed-ended questions, and a limited number of open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to collect information from HWDSB staff, parents/caregivers, and students on the following sections:

- Elementary Program Strategy:
  - Overall perceptions of elementary Focus Programs
  - Perceptions of other specialty elementary school programs within HWDSB
  - Perceptions of the school environment within the Board
- Secondary Program Strategy:
  - Overall perceptions of secondary Specialty Programs
  - Perceptions of the school environment within the Board
- French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process:
  - Overall perceptions of the French programming (Core and French Immersion) offered by HWDSB

The questionnaire was circulated to system and school staff, parents/caregivers and students (with parental consent) by email. The questionnaire was in the field for approximately six weeks. The response rates by groups are listed below:

- Parent/caregiver survey: In total, 4,361 parents/caregivers of elementary and secondary students responded to the survey, representing a 9.2% response rate.
- Staff survey: In total, 2,087 system and school staff responded to the survey, representing a 30.8% response rate.
- Student survey: A total of 326 students from Grades 5 to 12 responded to the survey, representing a 0.95% response rate.

Malatest worked with HWDSB to develop a sample of interested parties for key informant interviews. The interviews were conducted both in-person and virtually and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. To guide these interview discussions, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to examine perspectives on the successes of the Program Strategies, alignment of the Program Strategies with the Multi-Year Strategic Plan, challenges and gaps within the program offerings, and suggested areas of improvement. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with key interested parties.

Malatest also collaborated with HWDSB to identify 18 key groups to participate in focus group discussions. Groups ranged from education centre staff, union presidents, system principals, school principals and vice-principals, parents/caregivers, students, members of the Parent Involvement Committee and community organizations. The focus groups were conducted both in-person and virtually and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. To guide these discussions, Malatest developed a moderator's guide to investigate a variety of topics, such as successes of the Program Strategies, alignment of the Program Strategies with the Multi-Year Strategic Plan, satisfaction with the program offerings, gaps and challenges in the program offerings, and areas for suggested improvements.

Malatest conducted four school visits of various HWDSB elementary and secondary schools, including Prince of Wales Elementary, Bellmoore Elementary, Bernie Custis Secondary and Westmount Secondary. During these school visits, Malatest conducted key informant interviews with school administrators and focus groups with parents and students. School visits also included an administration-guided tour of the school facilities where some of the innovative elements of school programs were identified.

Jurisdictional scans were also completed to gather information on the French Immersion Programs and transportation policies of four other Ontario school boards (Halton District School Board, District School Board of Niagara, Peel District School Board, and Waterloo Region District School Board). For each school board, Malatest referenced information from their publicly available program documentation and transportation policies. Additionally, three school boards (Halton DSB, Peel DSB, Waterloo Region DSB)

participated in a key informant interview with respect to their French Immersion Programs, to supplement the information found online. To guide these interview discussions, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore how the Board delivers their French Immersion Program, any challenges with its delivery and any upcoming changes to the program.

Malatest also worked with HWDSB to obtain administrative data related to program and board enrolment, program resources (such as costs and staffing), student and staff outcomes, and program policies and procedures.

At the end of the study, key findings (prior to recommendations) were shared on the HWDSB website via the Engage platform. Up to December 3, 2025, a total of 42 individuals provided feedback as to the key findings. The majority of the feedback confirmed the overall findings as reported by Malatest.

A key element of the review was to establish the extent to which these programs were equitably accessed by students and parents from a range of socio-economic statuses from across HWDSB. As the Board does not collect data on household income, highest level of education or other household SES data for students and families, this analysis was computed on the basis of mapping family postal codes to appropriate census neighbourhoods. The analysis then examined the average household characteristics (as of the 2021 Census) for that neighbourhood to assign average household income and other measures to these students/parents. While such analysis will have limitations, it does provide some insights as to the likely socio-economic status of students/parents who are accessing elementary Focus Programs, secondary Specialized Programs and the French Immersion Program on the basis of the neighbourhood in which they reside.

## **1.4 Data cleaning and analysis**

Malatest reviewed the survey data for anomalies and to ensure that survey responses were complete. Any potentially identifying information in open-ended and semi-closed-ended responses were removed.

Frequencies (such as percentages) and statistical testing were used to analyze the survey data. Where appropriate, statistical tests<sup>1</sup> were used to compare various respondent groups on the same survey questions. All comparisons mentioned in the report were statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher Freeman Halton tests, Fisher's exact tests, and chi-square tests at  $p < 0.05$  were used to determine whether the proportion of participants selecting a positive response to the question (such as "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree") differed between respondent groups.

<sup>2</sup> To account for repeated testing (which can inflate the likelihood of finding statistically significant results), a Benjamini-Hochberg correction was applied to all p-values as the last step of analysis. Only comparisons that remained significant after the correction was applied were included in the report.

Unless otherwise stated, percentages reported for survey results indicate the proportion of participants selecting a positive response to the question, such as “somewhat agree”, “strongly agree”, or “yes” if a yes/no scale was used. As the percent positive is being reported, this does not directly imply that the remaining proportion of responses were negative as there were other response categories such as “neutral”, or “maybe”. Where small sample sizes exist, the valid number of responses (valid n) have been reported to provide caution to the reader.<sup>3</sup>

Three open-ended questions were selected for further analysis,<sup>4</sup> and coding schemes were developed to capture the common themes appearing in responses.

Administrative data was cleaned and provided by HWDSB, or values were provided directly by HWDSB. Where applicable, Malatest performed additional data cleaning on administrative data provided by HWDSB prior to analysis to remove extreme outliers on continuous variables (such as volunteer hours, number of absences).<sup>5</sup> Analyses conducted by Malatest on administrative data included frequencies and statistical tests<sup>6</sup> to compare various groups, where appropriate. All comparisons mentioned in the report were statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .<sup>7</sup>

Interview and focus group data were analysed through inductive and deductive analysis supported by an analysis plan in which key information was linked to the relevant research questions and areas of inquiry. The data were coded and analyzed by first using pre-established themes and conceptual categories identified in the analysis plan (deductive). Additional themes were identified during analysis and added as needed (inductive). Focused and axial coding were employed to identify sub-themes within the main themes.

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<sup>3</sup> The valid n includes the total number of respondents who were asked the question and provided a valid response to the question. Reported n values exclude respondents who selected response options like “I don’t know”, “not applicable”, or “prefer not to answer”.

<sup>4</sup> This included: “What, if anything, could be done to better align the school your child (or children) attends with the values of HWDSB?” (asked of parents), “You indicated that you do not support French Immersion Programming nor believe it is a valuable program, please tell us why.” (asked of parents), and “Are there any additional programs that HWDSB should consider implementing? If so, please indicate.” (asked of elementary parents).

<sup>5</sup> Values were identified as outliers if they were greater than the mean (average) plus three times the standard deviation (equivalent to identifying values in the top 0.3% of values), and outliers were replaced with this value. For example, if the mean number of missed classes is 3.02 and the standard deviation of missed classes is 8.71, values are considered outliers if they are greater than  $3.02 + (8.71 \times 3) = 29.15$  classes. Any values above 29.15 classes would be replaced with 29.15 classes in the dataset. This substitution of outlier values is intended to reduce the effect of extreme outliers on analysis results.

<sup>6</sup> Chi-square tests, t-tests, and ANOVAs at  $p < 0.05$  were used. Chi-square tests were used for categorical variables (such as pass/fail), while t-tests and ANOVAs were used for continuous variables (such as number of classes, number of absences).

<sup>7</sup> To account for repeated testing (which can inflate the likelihood of finding statistically significant results), a Benjamini-Hochberg correction was applied to all p-values as the last step of analysis. Only comparisons that remained significant after the correction was applied were included in the report.

## 1.5 Research limitations

The following limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results:

- Publicly available resources were used to examine the French Immersion Programming and transportation policies. Malatest conducted interviews with key parties at three out of the four boards that were included in the jurisdictional scan. However, DSB Niagara declined to participate in an interview.
- HWDSB uses an opt-in consent process for research activities led by external consultants. As such, obtaining consent for students to complete the student survey was challenging and led to a lower-than-expected response rate. Malatest and HWDSB made significant efforts to facilitate consent, providing parents/caregivers with the opportunity at the end of the parent survey to provide consent for their child to participate in the student survey. However, this yielded a very low response rate (less than 2% of parents overall provided consent), leading to only 116 completions from students that received parent consent through the parent survey.
- As a closed sample list was not available, the survey was circulated online as an open link, which does not allow for checking whether an individual has completed the survey more than once. Other data (such as comments provided to open-ended questions, submitted emails and phone numbers) were used to assess the dataset for potential duplicates, and only the first submission was kept if additional duplicates were identified.
- Responses from some groups are over- or under-represented in the survey. Among secondary schools, there was a disproportionately high number of parent and student survey responses from Westdale Secondary School and Westmount Secondary School. Additionally, student voice was extremely underrepresented in the survey, with an overall response rate of less than one percent, and less than five survey participants per school for most schools. Malatest and HWDSB communicated with school administrators about the survey, to collect input from under-represented groups through other qualitative means (interviews, schools visits, focus groups) after the survey concluded.
- Administrative data was limited to the most recent school year only (2024-2025) for many analyses and reported values, which may not represent previous years and does not allow for observation of trends. Data from previous years is reported where it has been provided by HWDSB, or where it was publicly available from provincial sources. Note that provincial data was only available up to the 2023-2024 school year, and was not yet available for the 2024-2025 school year at the time of writing this report.



- As noted previously, to assess the family SES characteristics of students who are accessing programs, the analyses using administrative data relied on an estimation process that utilized 2021 neighbourhood census data. In this context, some of the estimates may lack precision if the family does not share the same characteristics as the neighbourhood in which they reside, and given the time since the last census was conducted, some neighbourhoods may have experienced significant changes over the past five years.



# OVERVIEW OF HWDSB

HWDSB has 81 elementary schools, serving 37,859 students. The enrolment in HWDSB's elementary schools has grown by 2.6% between 2019-2020 and 2023-2024 (see Table 1 below). This growth slightly exceeds the growth of the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic School Board, which grew by 2.0% during the same period.<sup>8</sup>

HWDSB has 13 secondary schools, serving 14,882 students. The enrolment in HWDSB's secondary schools has grown by 6.9% between 2019-2020 and 2023-2024 (see Table 2 below). This growth exceeds the growth of the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic School Board, which grew by 2.6% during the same period.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1. Elementary enrolment by board**

School Board	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	5-year growth
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	36,620	35,210	36,035	36,930	37,565	2.6%
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB</b>	19,150	18,985	19,020	19,115	19,540	2.0%
<b>DSB Niagara</b>	26,135	25,910	27,215	28,115	28,870	10.5%
<b>Halton DSB</b>	46,085	45,615	45,640	45,915	45,630	-1.0%
<b>Peel DSB</b>	115,290	112,070	108,965	107,575	106,530	-7.6%
<b>Waterloo Region DSB</b>	45,140	44,015	44,110	44,585	44,425	-1.6%

Based on provincial data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-elementary-schools>.

**Table 2. Secondary enrolment by board**

School Board	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	5-year growth
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	13,935	13,860	14,290	14,580	14,900	6.9%
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB</b>	11,050	10,905	10,910	11,075	11,335	2.6%
<b>DSB Niagara</b>	12,055	12,215	12,540	12,755	13,405	11.2%
<b>Halton DSB</b>	20,075	20,135	20,725	21,300	21,555	7.4%
<b>Peel DSB</b>	42,670	43,105	42,600	42,855	42,385	-0.7%
<b>Waterloo Region DSB</b>	20,325	20,570	20,740	20,800	21,095	3.8%

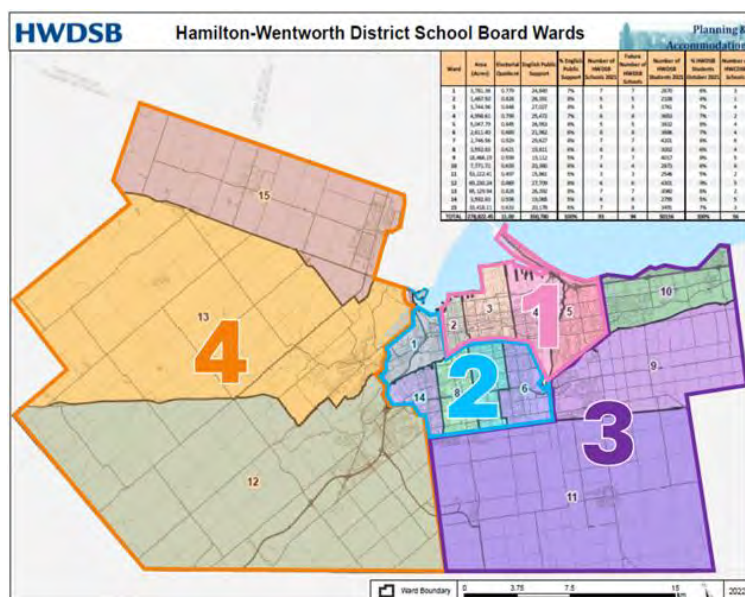
Based on provincial data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-secondary-schools>.

<sup>8</sup> Based on provincial data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-elementary-schools>

<sup>9</sup> Based on provincial data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-secondary-schools>

The geography served by HWDSB is represented by 15 Wards. For the purposes of analysis, these Wards have been broken down into four regions. Regions were determined by grouping Wards with similar ratings of social risk.<sup>10</sup> The map in Figure 1 defines the four analysis regions.

**Figure 1. Regional groupings of HWDSB Wards**



Region	Ward
Region 1	Wards 2, 3, 4, 5
Region 2	Wards 1, 6, 7, 8, 14
Region 3	Wards 9, 10, 11
Region 4	Wards 12, 13, 15

<sup>10</sup> Social risk was calculated by HWDSB using Statistics Canada Census data. It creates demographic profiles of schools based on data from neighbourhoods in which students live. The index is used along with other data to determine resource and support allocation to schools.



# REVIEW OF ELEMENTARY PROGRAM STRATEGY



**MALATEST**

### 3.1 Overview of the Elementary Program Strategy

The current Elementary Program Strategy was approved on November 10, 2016. It provides an overview of the programs and supporting strategies to inform the daily work in HWDSB's schools. The Strategy covers several key elements, including the Focus Programs, Instrumental Music, Intervention/Special Education, and facilities.

**Focus Programs.** HWDSB elementary schools offer a wide range of learning opportunities to prepare students for success in high school and beyond. The Focus Programs are optional experiential learning programs. Students from across the Board can apply and be accepted if space is available. The elementary Focus Programs currently in existence as of the 2024-2025 school year are:

- Hockey Program at Tapleytown Elementary
- Mandarin (Language Transition Program) at Cootes Paradise Elementary
- SAGE at Strathcona Elementary
- SAGE Quest at Kanétskare Elementary
- Sports Academy: Basketball at R.A. Riddell
- Sports Academy: High Potential at R.A. Riddell

**Instrumental Music.** The Elementary Program Strategy includes Instrumental Music programming for students in Grades 7 and 8. The Strategy outlines the provision of band instruments, appropriate instructional facilities, and qualified educators to promote equitable access for students in these grades and enables them to make informed decisions regarding music programming in secondary.

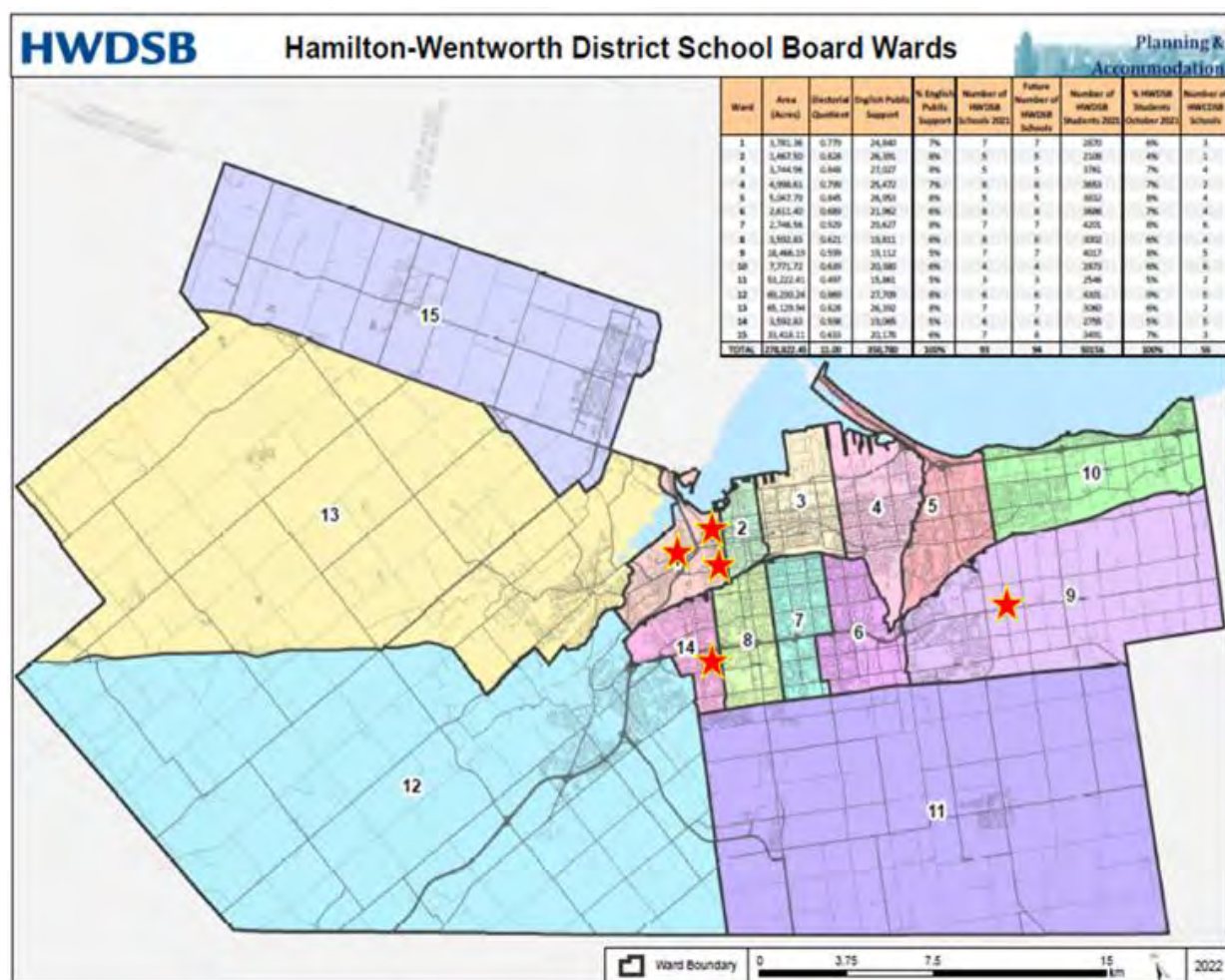
**Interventions/Special Education.** The Elementary Program Strategy also defines the Interventions/Special Education provisions for elementary schools. Specifically, the Strategy outlines that wherever possible, Interventions/Special Education will be offered to students in their home school. There will be pathways to help support students transition into a Secondary program. The Strategy outlines the shared spaces designated to support student needs, such as an assessment and intervention space, Student Success space, gym or fitness space and a designated sensory or calming space.

**Facilities.** Finally, the Elementary Program Strategy informs HWDSB facilities plan by helping to define and guide the achievement of the Ministry standard benchmarks for schools in order to ensure that, over time, all schools will reflect conditions and environments that support student learning and teaching spaces.

## 3.2 About Focus Programs

HWDSB's Focus Programs are designed to provide students with enhanced learning opportunities in specialized areas, such as arts and globalized education, athletics and language. There are five elementary schools that offer Focus Programs. The Focus Programs are located primarily in the western part of urban Hamilton (defined as Region 1), with the exception of one Focus Program (Hockey Program at Tapleytown Elementary; see Figure 2 for a map and Table 3 for program locations).

**Figure 2. Location of Focus Programs**

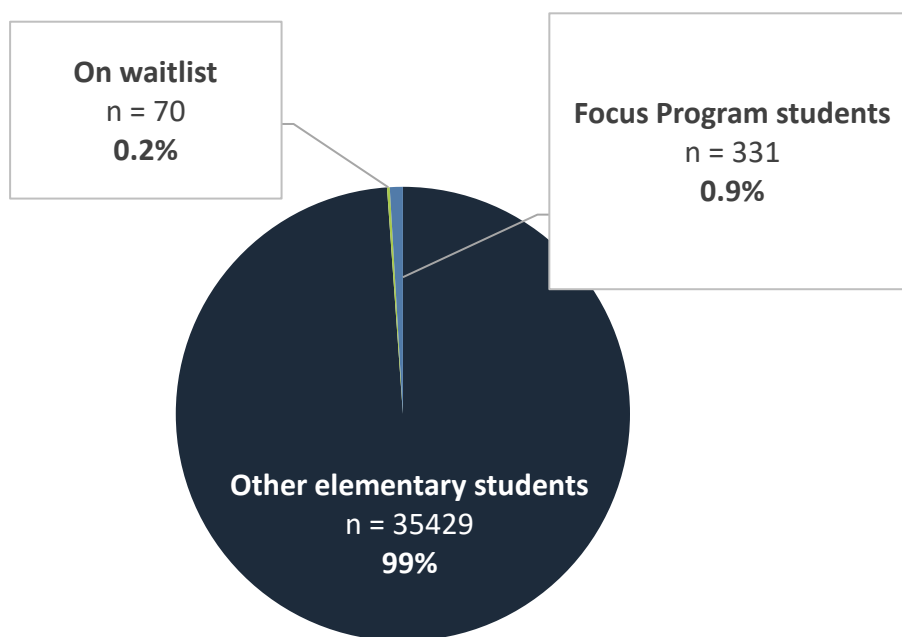


**Table 3. Location of Focus Programs**

Program	School	Ward	Region
<b>Hockey Program</b>	Tapleystown	9	3
<b>Mandarin (Language Transition Program)</b>	Cootes Paradise	1	2
<b>SAGE</b>	Strathcona	1	2
<b>SAGE Quest</b>	Kanétskare	1	2
<b>Sports Academy: Basketball</b>	R.A. Riddell	14	2
<b>Sports Academy: High Potential</b>	R.A. Riddell	14	2

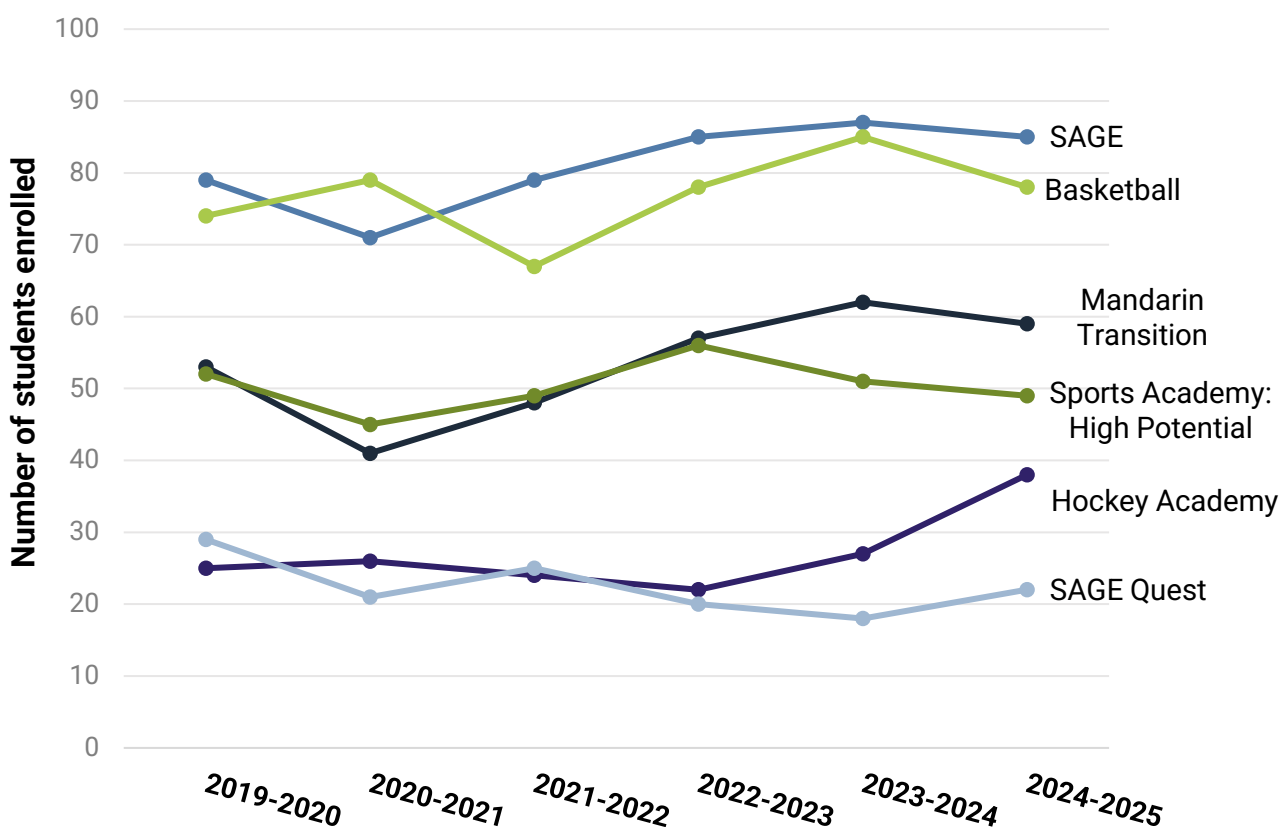
The Focus Programs are open to enrolment for elementary students across HWDSB, however no transportation is provided if students reside out of the school's catchment area. In total, 331 students were enrolled in a Focus Program in the 2024-2025 school year, corresponding to less than 1% of the total elementary student population. According to the 2024-25 waitlists, there were 70 students on the waitlist, which represents 0.2% of the total elementary student population (see Figure 3 below).

**Figure 3. Enrolment in Focus Programs, 2024-2025**



Enrolment in Focus Programs has grown by 6% since 2019, which is almost three times the enrolment growth for Kindergarten to Grade 8 (which saw 2.6% growth in enrolment from 2019 to 2025), indicating high demand for these learning opportunities (see Figure 4 for enrolment numbers).

**Figure 4. Historical enrolment in Focus Programs<sup>11</sup> (2019-2025)**



<sup>11</sup> Enrolment data is shown by program for the 2019-2020 to 2024-2025 school years. Note COVID-19 may have impacted enrolment during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years.

The waitlist has increased by 90% for the 2025-26 school year. As illustrated in Table 4, there has been more demand than available spots for the sports programs (Hockey, Sports Academy: Basketball, and Sports Academy: High Performance), as well as SAGE and SAGE Quest. Conversely, the Mandarin Language Transition program has generated the lowest interest over the past two school years, with a greater number of spots available than number of applicants.

**Table 4. Number of openings and applicants for Focus Programs**

Program	2024-2025		2025-2026	
	# of spots available	# of applicants	# of spots available	# of applicants
<b>Hockey</b>	18	21	9	21
<b>Mandarin Language Transition Program</b>	14	2	13	9
<b>SAGE</b>	19	15	13	66
<b>SAGE Quest</b>	8	9	8	23
<b>Sports Academy: Basketball</b>	29	60	29	36
<b>Sports Academy: High Performance</b>	26	61	29	75
<b>Total</b>	114	168	101	230

Data was only available for the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 school years. Purple-shaded cells indicate the number of applicants exceeds the number of spots available for the program.

Some Focus Programs require parents to pay fees. The fees paid by parents help to offset the program costs to the Board. However, parent survey data suggests that fees are a barrier to participation for many families, leading to inequity of access. The fees by program for the 2024-25 school year (where applicable) include:

- Hockey Program: \$750.00
- Sports Academy: Basketball Program: \$150.00
- Sports Academy: High Potential Program: \$150.00

The incremental costs (i.e., the amount coming from the core education funding that is not provided by the Ministry) of HWDSB's Focus Programs were also examined (see Table 5). In the 2024-2025 school year, the six Focus Programs received a total of \$30,000 in funding support (or \$5,000 each). The incremental cost per student for each Focus Program was calculated based on the number of students enrolled in a Focus Program. The program with the highest incremental cost per student was SAGE Quest (\$263.16) and the program with the lowest incremental cost per student was the Sports Academy: Basketball Program (\$64.94).

**Table 5. Focus Program incremental cost per student**

Program	Program funding support	# of students	Incremental cost per student
<b>Hockey Program</b>	\$5,000	38	\$131.58
<b>Mandarin (Language Transition Program)</b>	\$5,000	45	\$111.11
<b>SAGE</b>	\$5,000	65	\$76.92
<b>SAGE Quest</b>	\$5,000	19	\$263.16
<b>Sports Academy: Basketball</b>	\$5,000	77	\$64.94
<b>Sports Academy: High Potential</b>	\$5,000	50	\$100.00

Data provided by HWDSB. Note that these costs do not account for differences in class sizes that could account for possible differences from regular program stream students.

It should be noted that the incremental cost per student calculation was provided by HWDSB and takes into account the program enrolment numbers, however it does not take into account the difference in class sizes.

Available information on class sizes from the 2024-2025 school year (Table 6) shows that some Focus Programs (i.e. Hockey Program, Mandarin Program, SAGE, SAGE Quest) are running some or all classes at a lower class size than the average class size for that school and grade.

**Table 6. Class sizes of Focus Programs (2024-2025)**

Focus Program	Grade	Focus Program class size	Average class size by grade of Focus Program school	% Difference
<b>Hockey</b>	Gr. 7	20	25.9	-23%
	Gr. 8	19	25.9	-27%
<b>Mandarin Language Transition Program</b>	JK & SK	16	28.8	-44%
	Gr. 1, 2, 3	23	19.8	+16%
	Gr. 3, 4, 5	23	25.0	-8%
<b>SAGE</b>	JK & SK	22	20.0	+10%
	Gr. 1 + 2	18	20.5	-12%
	Gr. 2, 3	17	20.5	-17%
	Gr. 4, 5	27	30.0	-10%
<b>SAGE Quest</b>	Gr. 6, 7, 8	21	24.5	-14%
	Gr. 6, 7, 8	21	24.5	-14%
<b>Sports Academy: Basketball</b>	Gr. 6	28	24.5	+14%
	Gr. 7	25	24.5	+2%
	Gr. 8	24	24.5	-2%
<b>Sports Academy: High Performance</b>	Gr. 7	25	24.5	+2%
	Gr. 8	24	24.5	-2%

Percent difference indicates the extent to which Focus Program classes are smaller (negative values) or larger (positive values) than the average non-Focus Program class within a Focus Program school. Purple-shaded cells indicate Focus Program classes that are operating at smaller than average class sizes.

In this context, the Board should review the incremental costs in consideration of programs with small class sizes that cannot be stacked or combined with other classrooms, such as the Mandarin Language Transition Program, to examine whether the Board is subsidising programs with small class sizes. Moreover, these incremental costs do not account for any instances of courtesy transportation of Focus Program students, and since some Focus Program school administrators mentioned that courtesy transportation is often requested by families of Focus Program students, this may require further investigation by the Board.

HWDSB is not the only regional board to offer Focus Programs in elementary.<sup>12</sup> However, according to staff and committee members, the types and locations of the Focus Programs were largely chosen as a result of local interest and the presence of a “school champion” capable of supporting the program. They noted that there was no strategic plan developed to guide the overall implementation of Focus Programs. Because the Focus Programs were established many years ago, staff also questioned whether the current program offerings still reflect the needs of all HWDSB families. Staff shared that the Focus Programs were initially developed to add to HWDSB’s program offerings and provide experiential learning opportunities that would attract new students from other neighbouring boards. However, HWDSB has grown at a higher rate than its neighbouring coterminous board, the Hamilton Catholic District School Board (HWDSB: 2.6% vs. HWCDSB: 2.0%, from 2019-2020 to 2024-2025), suggesting that it is attracting more students than HWCDSB.

Although HWDSB may be growing at a higher rate than its coterminous board (HWCDSB), the administrative data demonstrates that some Focus Programs have very low retention rates, meaning that many students within these programs are leaving to attend secondary school at other boards. According to administrative data, only about half (59%) of students in a Grade 8 Focus Program in 2023-2024 continued to an HWDSB secondary school in 2024-2025 (compared to 81% of all Grade 8 students in the board). Among the four Focus Programs that are offered up to Grade 8, transition rates varied substantially by program. The Basketball program had the lowest retention rate (36%) of all Focus Programs. Staff noted that many students in the Basketball Focus Program were likely leaving to attend Hamilton’s Catholic school board due to the proximity of R.A. Ridell Elementary to St. Thomas Moore Catholic Secondary School, which has a well-established basketball program with multiple competitive teams at various grade levels. Other Focus Programs, including Hockey (63%), Sports Academy: High Performance (71%), also had lower than average retention rates. SAGE Quest retained all students within the board for Grade 9 in the following school year.

A summary of the Focus Program key metrics are presented in Table 7. Overall, Focus programs serve a very small proportion of HWDSB students (less than 1% of the elementary student population). Many Focus Programs do not lead to substantial retention into an HWDSB secondary school. All of the sport programs have a below-average retention rate compared to the elementary student average, with only one Focus

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<sup>12</sup> Other regional boards that offer experiential learning opportunities similar to the Focus Programs include Peel District School Board, York Region District School Board, Toronto District School Board, and Durham District School Board.

Program that served to retain all students within the Board (i.e., SAGE Quest). Although the waitlist has grown slightly over the past two years, the demand for Focus Programs is still very low relative to the overall elementary student population. This could however be a function of limited awareness of such programs among parents in HWDSB.

**Table 7. Summary of Focus Program key metrics**

Focus Program	Enrolment (2024- 2025)	Retention from Grade 8 to Grade 9	Waitlist (2025- 2026)	Demand (2025- 2026)
<b>Hockey Academy</b>	38	Lower than average	Yes	Moderate
<b>Basketball</b>	78	Lower than average	Yes	Moderate
<b>High Performance</b>	49	Lower than average	Yes	Moderate
<b>SAGE</b>	85	-	Yes	Moderate
<b>SAGE Quest</b>	22	Higher than average	Yes	Moderate
<b>Mandarin Language Transition Program</b>	59	-	No	Low

### 3.3 Do the Focus Programs meet the needs of HWDSB students?

Although parents of Focus Program children and some staff believed that the programs help to engage students, enrich the educational experience and provide opportunities for students to excel, the administrative data demonstrates that there is no difference in student outcomes. Specifically, data from 2024-2025 suggest that students in a Focus Program had equivalent student outcomes (i.e., absences, suspensions) as students who were not enrolled in a Focus Program.

While many staff recognized the considerable effort from school administrators and educators to run a Focus Program, substantial concerns were expressed about whether these programs serve all students' needs, are clearly communicated to families, and are accessible to all.

Survey results from parents and staff suggest that Focus Programs do not meet the needs of most families in the Board. Only a moderate proportion of parents (64%, n = 97) with students enrolled in a Focus Program believed that the Focus Programs reflect the needs of all families within the Board. Parents without students enrolled in a Focus Program were less likely to believe that the Focus Programs reflect the needs of all

families (33%). Surveyed staff in Focus Program schools also held similar perspectives, as only 30% (n = 100) of staff believed Focus Programs reflect the needs of all families, and 44% of all surveyed staff believed the Focus Programs meet the needs of all elementary students.

Moreover, some staff and parents raised concerns that these programs benefit only a limited subset of students within the Board. Specifically, the sports programs (Hockey, Basketball, and High Performance) were seen as offering enhanced opportunities, such as additional gym time and expanded athletic experiences, that are not equally available to students in other schools. For other programs such as SAGE and SAGE Quest, some staff questioned why the learning approach and global education lens were limited to these programs. They noted that while this model was innovative when first introduced as a Focus Program, they viewed it as an approach that should be integrated more broadly and made accessible to all students across all classrooms. The inclusivity of the Mandarin Language Transition program was also questioned, as staff explained that there are many other prominent language groups represented at Cootes Paradise that receive support through the English as a Second Language (ESL) coordinator at the school and do not have a Focus Program dedicated to supporting their transition to the English language.

“Why do we have an ESL program for Mandarin speakers, and not other language groups, like Arabic?”

**–HWDSB Staff Member**

Concerns were also raised regarding the lack of clarity surrounding Focus Programs, with staff and parent feedback indicating that these programs are not well understood. For example, some parents mistakenly believed the Focus Programs were a weekend or after-school program. Additionally, staff noted that even though Focus Programs are a system-level initiative, they are staffed and delivered at the school level. They expressed this can lead to a disconnect between the programs’ intended purpose and how they function in practice. They also mentioned that the ambiguity around the program produces confusion about who is qualified to teach them, leading to difficulties finding available teachers within the Board or needing to recruit externally to find qualified

educators to teach these programs. This ambiguity leaves substantial room for individual interpretation by teachers and parents, resulting in further deviation from the programs' original intent. For example, the Mandarin Language Transition Program was originally intended as an ESL program, however some staff expressed that it has transformed into a Mandarin immersion program.

Parents also expressed that there were several barriers to enrolling in a Focus Program. Many parents who considered but did not enrol their child in a Focus Program cited transportation as a primary barrier (43%). Many parents also noted commute time (30%) and switching to the Focus Program school (29%) as reasons for not enrolling. According to administrative data from the 2024-2025 academic year, the vast majority (72%) of students enrolled in a Focus Program were from out of catchment, suggesting the families who enrol their children in a Focus Program may be better able to manage longer commutes and transportation challenges. Parent responses from the survey similarly indicated a majority (60%) of Focus Program students get to school by car. The next most common mode of transport reported was walking or biking (31%), and only 7% of Focus Program parents indicated their child(ren) receives HWDSB transport. Satisfaction with HWDSB transport was low (42%), though this rating was only from seven families who receive HWDSB transport.

Another main barrier to enrolment was the limited information about Focus Programs. Just under one third (30%) of surveyed parents who did not have a child enrolled in Focus Program expressed that the lack of information was a barrier to enrolment. Focus group discussions with staff, parents and students also demonstrated that many families had a limited understanding of Focus Programs. As noted earlier, some staff expressed the opinion that families often believed that the Focus Programs were after-school programs. Although schools release information over SchoolMessenger, post information on websites, and hold information nights, some staff expressed that communications about Focus Programs could be improved in several ways. This includes enhancing the website experience for parents, as well as developing a comprehensive marketing strategy for all programs to attract students both within the board and from outside the board.

### 3.4 Do Focus Programs align with the values and beliefs of HWDSB's strategic plan?

Most parents of current Focus Program students believed the programs supported HWDSB's strategic plan.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, support for Focus Programs was much lower among parents of other elementary students not enrolled in a Focus Program.<sup>14</sup> Notably, only 100 parents who participated in the survey had a child currently enrolled in a Focus Program, corresponding to less than 4% of all parent survey participants.

Opinions on Focus Programs greatly differed between parents, depending on whether their child was enrolled in a Focus Program or not. Parents of current Focus Program students were three to nine times more likely to believe that the Focus Programs are:

- Supportive of HWDSB's strategic plan,
- Important to ensure quality education,
- Delivered in a fiscally responsible manner,
- Equally accessible for all interested in enrolling.

#### HWDSB's Strategic Directions

- **Upholding Human Rights, Safety & Well-being**  
We will support all students and staff to feel safe and secure in our classrooms and school communities.
- **Providing Equitable Quality Education**  
We will offer equitable quality educational opportunities to improve student engagement, learning and achievement for future-readiness.
- **Collaborating with Students, Families and Communities**  
We will build reciprocal relationships and partnerships to enhance access and engagement for students, families, and communities.
- **Building a Sustainable Education System**  
We will adapt to a rapidly changing world through responsible fiscal management, investing equitably in accessible and sustainable facilities, and supporting a robust workforce.
- **Reinforcing Indigenous Educational Wellness and Reconciliation**  
We will honour our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships among Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partners, and by cultivating intergenerational healing and wellness in a restorative education system.

<sup>13</sup> Responses ranged from 60% to 89% positive (n = 89 to 100).

<sup>14</sup> Responses ranged from 30% to 66% positive (n = 1496 to 2034).

Among surveyed staff, 45% agreed that Focus Programs align with HWDSB's Strategic Directions. While some staff did believe Focus Programs encourage greater student and parent engagement (56%) and enrich students' educational experience (66%), only a minority of staff considered Focus Programs to be equitable (25%) or fiscally responsible programs (32%).

"I believe that the Focus Programs are the single biggest source of inequity at HWDSB."

**–HWDSB Staff Member**

During focus group discussions and interviews, many staff also expressed that the way that the Focus Programs are delivered contributes to inequity across schools and segregation within schools. They observed that students in Focus Programs mostly interact with other students in the program, with little connection to peers outside the program. Moreover, some of the Focus Programs generate activities geared specifically towards students in the program (e.g., field trips for SAGE students), which further perpetuates the segregation and sense of entitlement within schools. Many staff also relayed the requirement for greater time and financial commitment from parents for some Focus Programs can have a tendency to exclude some families from being able to enrol their children.

"I would hate to be a student at R.A. Riddell that didn't play sports."

**–HWDSB Staff Member**

Many staff also highlighted that the Focus Programs lack diversity, expressing that Focus Programs tend to cater to a specific kind of student. In efforts to take a more equitable approach to Focus Program enrolment, HWDSB moved from an application-based acceptance to a lottery-based acceptance for Focus Programs. However, the administrative data suggests that some Focus Programs are still not representative of HWDSB's population. In the 2024-2025 school year, administrative data demonstrates that relative to HWDSB elementary students who are not in Focus Programs, racialized students are under-represented in most Focus Programs. Focus Program students are also more likely to be from neighbourhoods with higher median household income when compared to the median household income of the neighbourhood where the Focus Program is located. Moreover, students in the sports-related Focus Programs come from neighbourhoods with some of the highest household incomes relative to the median and average household income of the Hamilton Census Metropolitan Area (see Table 8). These findings suggest that students enrolled in Focus Programs are coming from more affluent households or are travelling from outside the catchment area of the Focus Program school from wealthier neighbourhoods. In support of the latter, 72% of all students enrolled in a Focus Program during the 2024-2025 school year were attending the school from out of catchment.

**Table 8. Average household income of Focus Program students versus neighbourhoods of Focus Program schools**

School	Focus Program(s) offered	Median neighbourhood household income of Focus Program students	Median household income of school neighbourhood (2020)*	Average household income of school neighbourhood (2020)*
<b>Tapleytown</b>	Hockey Academy	\$114,243	\$91,000	\$105,600
<b>R.A. Riddell</b>	Basketball, High Performance	\$139,634	\$108,000	\$131,600
<b>Strathcona</b>	SAGE	\$80,310	\$54,400	\$73,300
<b>Kanétskare</b>	SAGE Quest	\$79,705	\$73,000	\$107,800
<b>Cootes Paradise</b>	Mandarin Language Transition Program	\$109,958	\$71,000	\$85,700
<b>Hamilton Census Metropolitan Area</b>		-	\$91,000	\$116,800

Table presents the median and average household incomes by neighbourhood. The median neighbourhood household income of students enrolled in each Focus Program during the 2024-2025 school year is compared to the median and average household income of the areas in which Focus Program schools are located. Neighbourhood household income of Focus Program students was provided by HWDSB. \*Based on census tracts of where Focus Program schools are located, from Statistics Canada.<sup>15</sup>

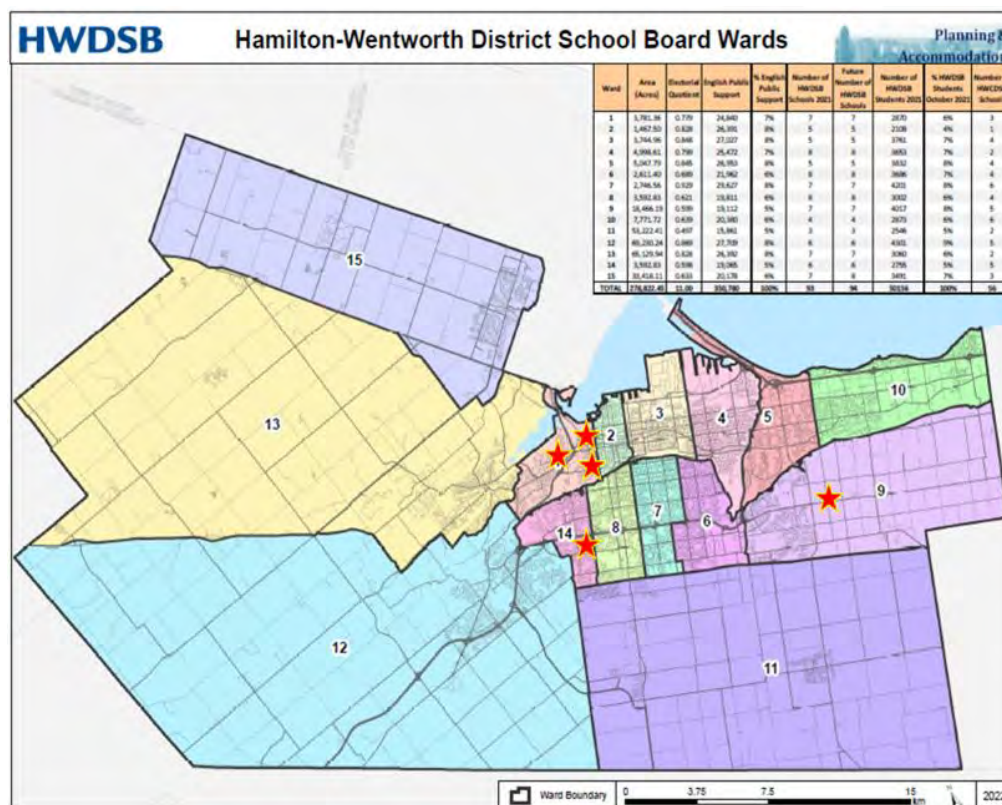
<sup>15</sup> Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023.  
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed October 12, 2025).

Feedback from focus group discussions and interviews with staff also suggested that the communications about Focus Programs may not be reaching all families equally, as the way the information is presented and delivered might be less accessible for certain historically underserved groups. They also highlighted that children from historically underserved groups may lack an advocate to guide them through the Focus Program application process, which can be especially challenging for families with limited English proficiency.

### 3.5 How can Focus Programs be better aligned with the values and beliefs of HWDSB's strategic plan?

Focus Programs are primarily located in the western region of urban Hamilton (Wards 1 and 14), with the exception of the Hockey program (Ward 9; see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Location of Focus Programs**



As noted earlier, the administrative data demonstrates that just under three quarters of students enrolled in a Focus Program are travelling from out of catchment. Conversely, parents that have chosen not to enrol their child in a Focus Program cited transportation and commute times as primary barriers. Collectively, these observations suggest that the geographic distribution of the Focus Programs is limited, and families that have the means to transport their child to the Focus Program school are better able to access these opportunities.

Many staff expressed that the geographic distribution of the Focus Programs has limited who can participate in these programs. Staff also acknowledged that Focus Programs were previously developed based on local interest and the availability of a teacher to champion the program. However, in the absence of a systematic approach, this has led to inequitable access of these programs. Staff also stated that this non-strategic approach has led to an assortment of Focus Programs that may no longer be reflective of the current needs of all HWDSB families.

Staff believed that Focus Programs could be better aligned with HWDSB's Strategic Directions by ensuring that there was a more equitable distribution of Focus Programs across the Wards. Staff also expressed that the types of Focus Programs should be examined to ensure that they are reflective of the needs of all families and that important factors such as whether the program is preparing students for success in secondary and beginning to teach the skills required for success in the workforce, should also be considered.

Although HWDSB adopted a more equitable lottery-based admissions process for Focus Programs, the administrative data demonstrates that families from low-income neighbourhoods and racialized groups are underrepresented in Focus Program enrolment. Many staff were concerned that there was limited representation from historically underserved groups and suspected that communications about Focus Programs were not reaching historically underserved groups, possibly due to how information is circulated or the challenges of navigating the application process. Moreover, some staff expressed concern that a lack of information may lead to a bias about who can apply to these programs. It was suggested that more awareness and information can help counteract stereotypes and challenge beliefs so that parents, students and staff can fully understand the program, and help staff encourage all students who are interested in enrolling in a Focus Program.

Although parents did not directly comment on how Focus Programs could be better aligned with HWDSB's Strategic Directions, parents of elementary children<sup>16</sup> were asked what additional programs they would like to see implemented. One quarter of parents expressed that they would like additional athletics programs in their school such as soccer, swimming, and volleyball. A similar proportion of parents also expressed a desire for the current elementary programs to be expanded to additional schools or to additional grades and ages. Arts programs (such as music, drama, and dance) and STEM programs were also commonly mentioned.

A minority of parents expressed a desire for offerings that can benefit all students instead of a select few, such as school clubs and orientation events similar to those conducted by some Focus Programs:

"I'd be curious about taking the model of some of these Focus Programs, and building in some of the successes into non-focus schools so that all students could benefit. For example, we have learned that [R.A.] Riddell does an amazing welcome BBQ/orientation for incoming students - how nice! But why only for them? The same focus on health & wellness could be more widely applied across the Board so that more students benefit."

**–HWDSB Parent**

"I would like to see lunch/after school clubs coming back to provide all students with different additional programs."

**–HWDSB Parent**

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<sup>16</sup> Out of 3504 parents of elementary students who participated in the survey, 933 (27%) provided a response to the open-ended survey question, "Are there any additional programs that HWDSB should consider implementing?".

Some parents also suggested offering programs that may appeal to high-risk students and students who are less engaged in school:

“For kids that are not ‘academic’, alternative ways to have youths engaged in society would be a good option, like co-ops all the time maybe. Some kids do not like learning in a classroom environment.”

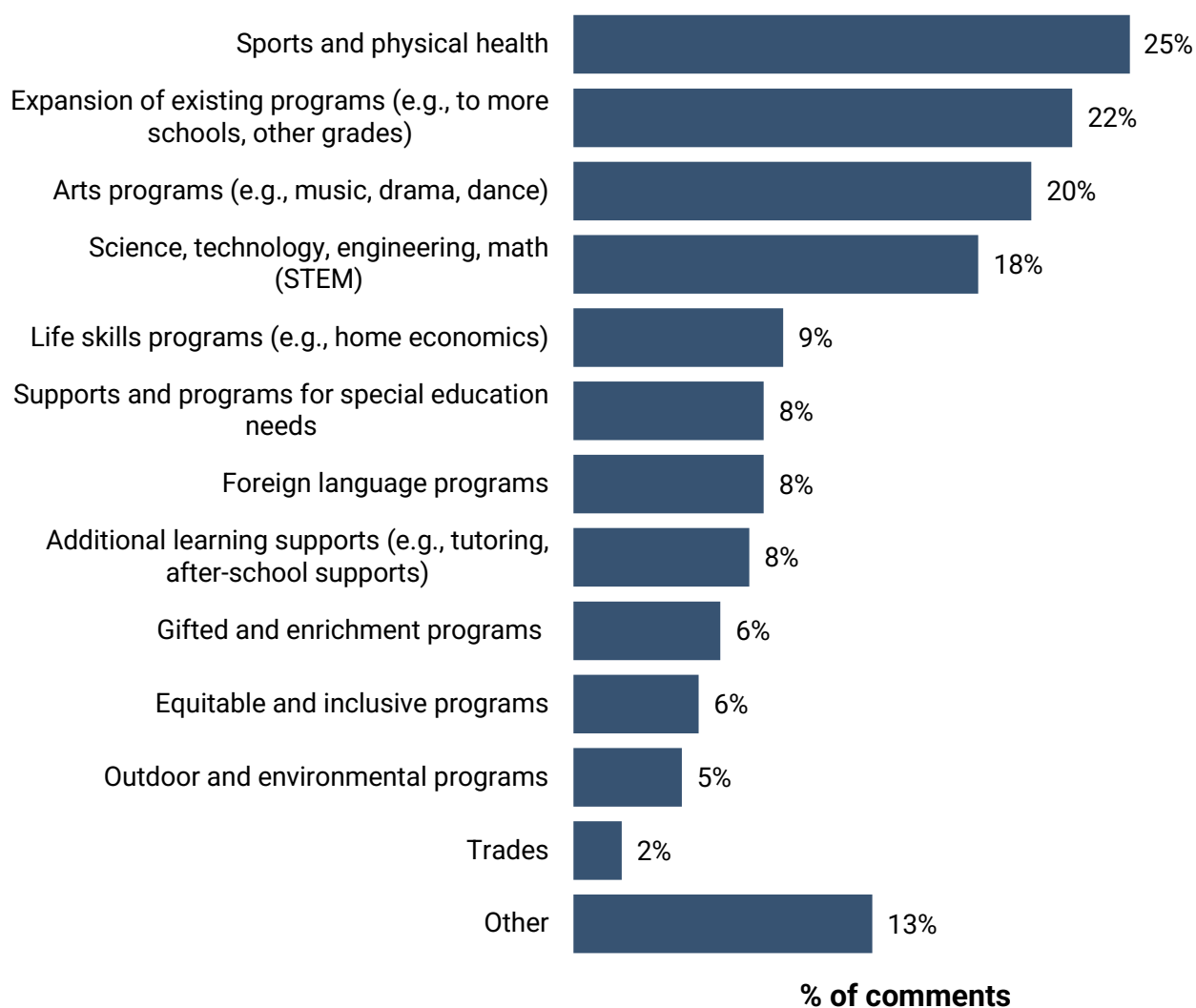
**–HWDSB Parent**

““[I would like to see] learning disabilities programs [and] programs that attract and support students identified as at the highest risk in the board[’s] Disproportionality Report.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

Highlighted in Figure 6 are parent opinions as to what additional programs they would like to see in their school. It should be noted that the Board does not appear to have a process to identify what programs should be developed and implemented as elementary Focus Programs. Given this, the feedback below should be explored by the Board through further discussion and engagement with families.

**Figure 6. Parent feedback on additional elementary programs (n = 933)**



Text comments received to the question, “Are there any additional programs that HWDSB should consider implementing?” were reviewed and categorized into themes of responses. Percentages represent the proportion of comments associated with each theme. Note percentages will not sum to 100%, as each comment could be assigned more than one theme.

### 3.6 Special Education Program

HWDSB's Special Education Program was identified as a part of the Elementary Program Strategy in 2016. As a result, the current Elementary Program Strategy examined the Special Education Program as it relates to the shared spaces designated to support student needs, such as an assessment and intervention space, Student Success space, gym or fitness space and a designated sensory or calming space.

According to survey results from parents who indicated their child receives a special education service, the majority believed the Special Education Program is important for ensuring quality education at HWDSB (84%), however perceptions of the Special Education Program were split, with approximately half of these parents believing the program meets their child's needs (57%), is equally accessible (46%), and is delivered in a fiscally responsible manner (47%).

Additionally, open-end comments<sup>17</sup> from the staff survey highlighted issues with the Special Education Program that lead to gaps in how many students can be supported, what students receive support, and the quality of supports that can be provided to students in the program:

"There are not enough support staff to support all of the [...] special education students in HWDSB. These students are not being supported consistently due to the staff always being redeployed to other roles since we have a shortage of educators throughout the board. The students are unfortunately getting disservice and are not receiving what they deserve."

**–HWDSB Staff Member**

The Special Education Program also provides HWDSB families with specific services based on their child's needs. These services include the Autism & Neurodevelopmental Services, Behaviour Analytic Services, Psychological Services, Speech and Language Services, Blind and Low Vision Itinerant Teacher Support, and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services. Parents' satisfaction with these services was also divided, with just over half of respondents expressing satisfaction with each service. Areas which experienced below average parent satisfaction scores are highlighted in Table 9.

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<sup>17</sup> Refers to comments received to the following question: "Please tell us why you disagreed with the previous statement(s)? (*"The ESL/ELD and Special Education Programs reflect the needs of students [in the elementary system] using these programs"*)"

**Table 9. Satisfaction with Special Education Programs**

	Speech and Language Services (n = 85 to 105)	Behaviour Analytic Services (n = 21 to 29)	Psychologica l Services (n = 27 to 35)	Autism & Neurodevel- opmental Services (n = 54 to 77)
The [program] aligns with HWDSB's Strategic Directions	66%	68%	67%	54%
The [program] meets my child's (or children's) needs	68%	67%	68%	55%
The [program] is equally accessible to all who need this service	46%	54%	41%	35%
I believe that the [program] is delivered in a fiscally responsible manner in the Board	53%	52%	52%	37%
The [program] enriches my child's (or children's) educational experience	71%	76%	71%	68%
The [program] encourages greater student or parent engagement in education in the Board	54%	72%	60%	48%

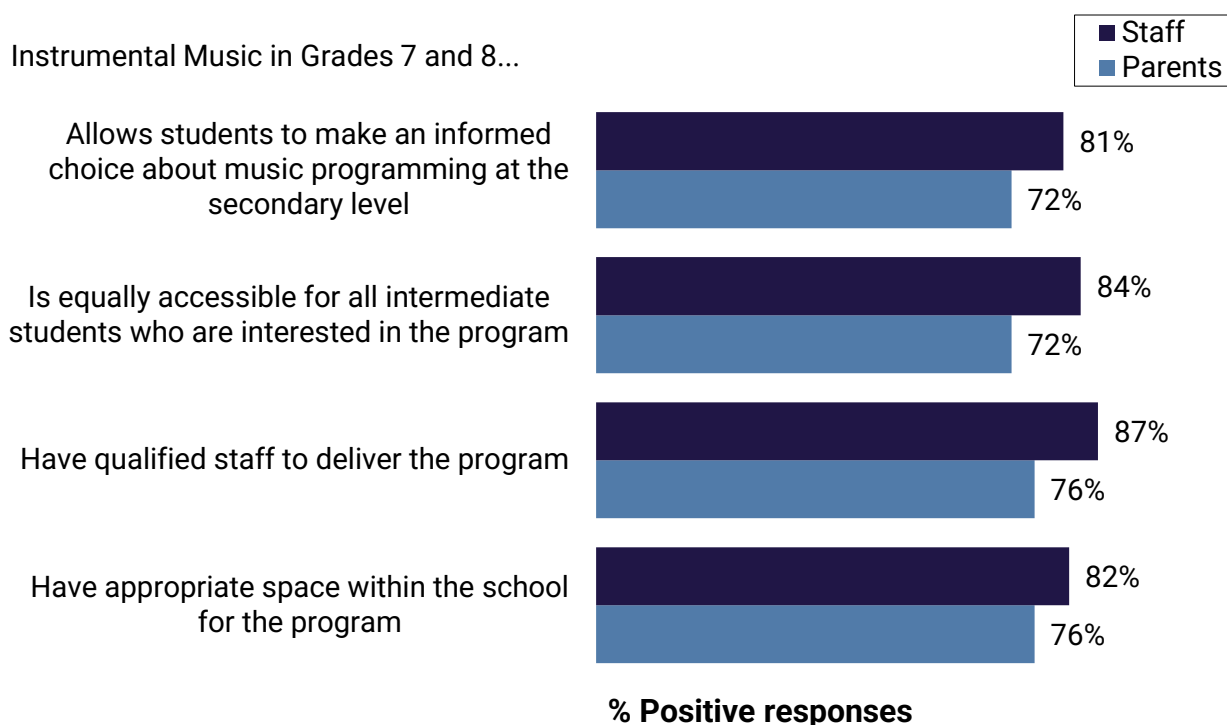
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services and Blind and Low Vision Itinerant Teacher Support were also surveyed, but were not reported on due to an extremely low number of survey responses. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting a positive response option (such as "somewhat agree", "strongly agree"). Percentages where less than half of parents were satisfied are shaded purple.

Staff also expressed that the Special Education services have evolved over time since the Elementary Program Strategy was developed, and that the services have been adapted to meet the changing needs of the HWDSB students. A community advisory group also echoed that they work closely with the Board to support the Special Education Program and noted that the services are often established in response to student needs while working closely with staff to ensure that these services can be feasibly implemented in the classroom environment.

### 3.7 Instrumental Music Program

HWDSB's Instrumental Music Program was identified as a part of the Elementary Program Strategy in 2016. As a result, the current Elementary Program Strategy examined the Instrumental Music Program offered to all Grade 7 and 8 students at HWDSB schools. According to survey results, parents and staff have a positive perception of the Instrumental Music Program. As shown in Figure 7, parents and staff expressed that the program has qualified staff, has appropriate spaces in the school, is equally accessible for interested students, and allows students to make an informed choice about music programming in secondary.

**Figure 7. Staff and parent perceptions of the Instrumental Music Program**



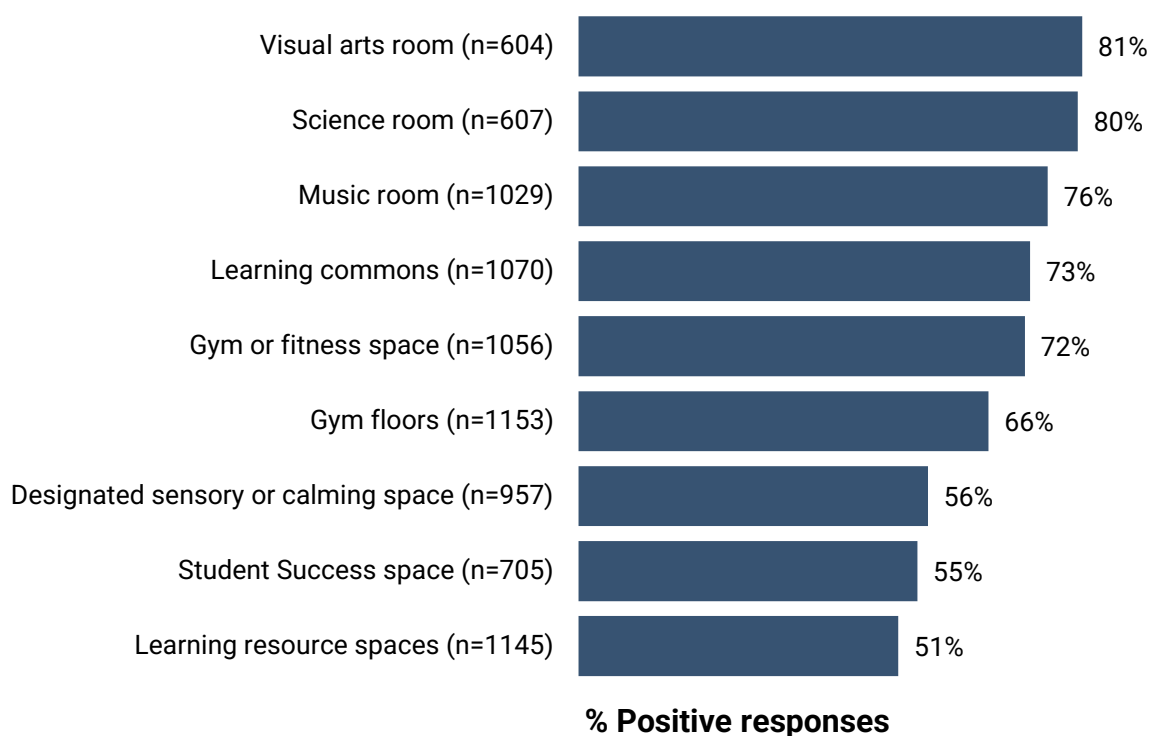
Staff n = 871-1020. Parent n = 1126-1208.

The only challenge raised was concerning the difficulties around finding enough qualified staff to teach the program, as some staff mentioned that it can be difficult to find an educator who can teach multiple instruments.

### 3.8 Facilities

HWDSB's facilities are another relevant piece of the Elementary Program Strategy, as it defines and guides work towards the Ministry standard benchmarks for schools in order to ensure that, over time, all schools will provide conditions and environments that support student learning and teaching spaces. Findings from the elementary staff surveyed suggest that most believed school spaces contribute to the learning environment (81%) and are important for providing a quality education (84%). Just under three-quarters of elementary staff also believed that the spaces generally reflect the needs of students (73%). When asked to rate their satisfaction with individual spaces, most staff were satisfied, though this varied by room or facility area (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Elementary staff satisfaction with school facilities**



### 3.9 Key takeaways

Although Focus Programs may help increase student engagement and enrich the educational experience, the current approach to Focus Programs lacks alignment with some of the Strategic Directions in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP). Specifically, staff believed the Focus Programs were the biggest source of inequity at HWDSB, expressing that the current distribution of Focus Programs lack equity of access and fiscal sustainability. According to the administrative data, there has been relatively high

demand for Focus Programs over the past six years (with enrolment in Focus Programs growing at almost three times the rate of enrolment in K to grade 8). However, only a very small proportion of HWDSB families have access to the Focus Programs. The demand (i.e., proportion of students on the waitlist) for the Focus Programs is low relative to the size of the overall elementary population, likely as a result of lack of awareness or barriers to access. Administrative data on retention rates also demonstrated that students enrolled in Focus Programs were more likely to leave HWDSB to attend secondary school at another board, particularly those enrolled in the sports programs.

Parents who had a child enrolled in a Focus Program were nine times more likely to believe that Focus Programs were fiscally responsible, whereas only a minority of staff and non-Focus Program elementary parents believed the same. The Board provides Focus Program schools with a \$5,000 fund to support Focus Programs. The incremental per student cost was calculated based on the number of students enrolled in a Focus Program. The Focus Program with the highest incremental per student cost was SAGE Quest, and the program with the lowest incremental per student cost was Sports Academy: Basketball Program. However, cost data provided by HWDSB does not incorporate information on Focus Program class sizes. As such, HWDSB should review the incremental costs in consideration of programs with small class sizes that cannot be stacked or combined with other classrooms, such as the Mandarin Language Transition Program, to examine whether the Board is subsidising programs with small class sizes. Finally, the Board should also examine what incremental transportation costs are occurring from Focus Program students that have requested courtesy transportation who would otherwise not receive transportation if attending their home school.

Feedback from staff and parents suggest that there is confusion around what these Focus Programs are, with many parents expressing they were unfamiliar with the Focus Programs or believed them to be weekend or after-school programs. Parents also expressed that transportation and commute times were a primary barrier to enrolling their children in a Focus Program. As transportation for Focus Programs is not provided by HWDSB, parents must find a way to get their child to the Focus Program school if they reside outside the school's catchment area. As just under three quarters of students attending a Focus Program were coming from out of catchment, this suggests that many of the students enrolled in a Focus Program have the means to be transported by their families. The families of children enrolled in Focus Programs also tended to be from higher socioeconomic neighbourhoods, and there was an underrepresentation of racialized groups in most Focus Programs.

In order to better align Focus Programs with the Strategic Directions of HWDSB's MYSP, staff expressed that the geographic distribution of the Focus Programs could be

improved to increase equity of access for all students. Staff also believed the types of Focus Programs could be reviewed to ensure they reflect the current needs of all HWDSB families and to ensure they are providing students with the skills needed to succeed in secondary and beyond.

When asked about potential additional program offerings in elementary, one quarter of parents that provided feedback to this survey question indicated interest in additional athletic programs, such as soccer, swimming, and volleyball. A similar proportion expressed a desire to see current elementary programs expanded to more schools or grade levels. There was also strong interest in having more arts programming in elementary (e.g., music, drama, and dance), as well as STEM-focused programs.

Other elements of the Elementary Program Strategy Review included key pieces such as the Special Education Program. Results demonstrated that while most parents recognize the program as essential for quality education at HWDSB, parent perceptions on its effectiveness, accessibility and fiscal sustainability were mixed. Parent satisfaction with the Special Education Program services were also divided, warranting further investigation to understand these findings in more depth. Additionally, some staff reflected on how the Special Education Program and its services have evolved since the Elementary Program Strategy was originally developed, expressing that the services had been adapted over time in response to student needs. A community advisory committee echoed the responsiveness of Special Education services at HWDSB, and highlighted the importance of strong partnerships between the community and the Board.

Findings on HWDSB's Instrumental Music Program suggests that parents and staff hold a positive perception of the Instrumental Music Program, noting that it is staffed by qualified educators, has appropriate space within schools, is accessible to interested students, and supports informed decision-making for secondary music pathways. The only concern identified was the difficulty in securing sufficient staff, as it can be challenging to find teachers capable of teaching multiple instruments.

### **3.10 Recommendations**

*Given the high level of parent support for Focus Programs, and the presence of similar programs in other Boards, there is no need to discontinue such programs in HWDSB. However, the Board should implement several changes to elementary Focus Programs to address inequities in terms of access. The recommendations include:*

- Recommendation 1.** *The Board should establish a formal process through which new Focus Programs can be introduced. Such a process should include a mechanism to canvas parent (and student) interest, as well as ensuring that programs are equitably distributed across all regions of HWDSB. Contingent on demand, any new Focus Programs should be established in Wards with little access to existing Focus programs, including Wards 11, 12, 13 and 15.*
- Recommendation 2.** *The Board should establish a criteria (for example, a criteria based on enrolment, class sizes, staffing and other incremental costs) that would initiate the closure of a Focus Program. The programs that should be examined for closure include SAGE, SAGE Quest and the Mandarin Language Transition program. However, there may be a need to increase opportunities for students in Arts (e.g., music, drama, and dance) and STEM programs. HWDSB should explore community feedback about desired Focus Programs before establishing any new program offerings.*
- Recommendation 3.** *The Board should consider the relocation of the Hockey program to a location that has better access to an arena.*
- Recommendation 4.** *Given the limited transition of elementary Focus Program students into secondary programs, the Board should establish what elements of the elementary Focus Programs should continue at the secondary level to help ensure students can remain in HWDSB.*
- Recommendation 5.** *The Board should determine a per program budget that can support a marketing strategy for the Focus Programs to increase general awareness of such programs as well as to broaden equity group participation.*

***Recommendation 6.***

*Given that the elements of the Elementary Program Strategy were reviewed holistically with a broad focus on all program offerings, the Board should consider conducting a distinct in-depth review of certain areas, such as the Special Education Program. Moreover, as elements of the Program Strategy have evolved over time to meet the needs of the students (e.g., some of the Special Education Program supports are different than what was originally stated in the 2016 Elementary Program Strategy), it is recommended that HWDSB review elements of their Strategies periodically in between the global Program Strategy reviews.*



# REVIEW OF SECONDARY PROGRAM STRATEGY

The current Secondary Program Strategy was approved on June 10, 2013. It outlines a tiered model of programming, where the tiers are intended to help meet the goal of supporting the needs of all learners, regardless of program requirements. The Tier 2 Specialized Programs are based on student interest and intended to allow some schools to offer Specialized Programs in a variety of areas. Students in Tier 2 programs do not receive transportation by HWDSB. The Tier 3 Specialized Programs are intended for a few students at a limited number of school sites. These programs require specialized facilities, equipment, or funding. Students in Tier 3 Specialized Programs receive transportation provided by HWDSB. These Tier 2 and Tier 3 secondary Specialized Programs currently include:

**Table 10. Secondary Specialized Programs in HWDSB**

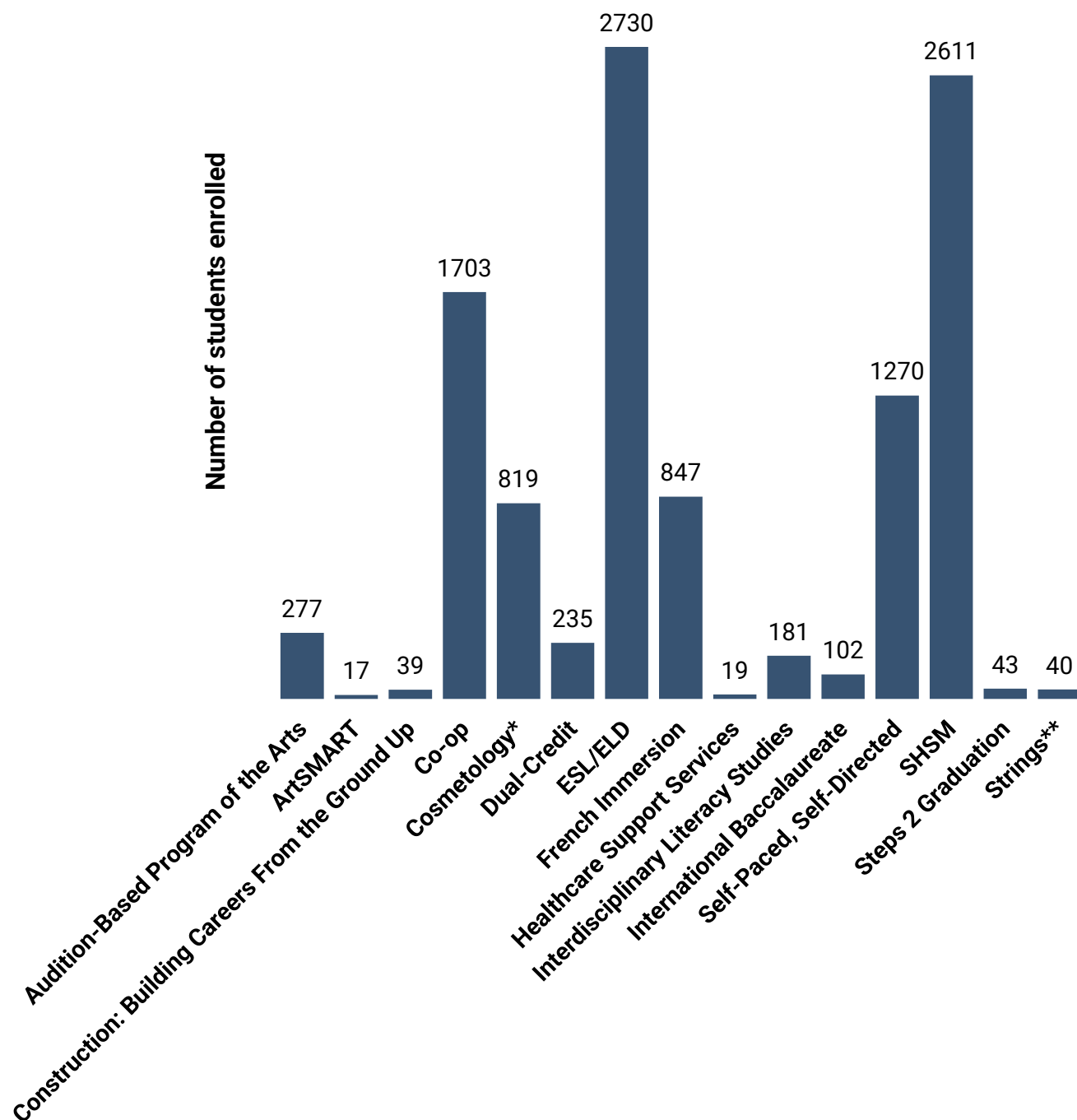
Specialized Programs	HWDSB transportation provided
Cooperative Education	No, within school catchment area only
Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)	No, within school catchment area only
ArtSMART	Yes
Audition-Based Program of the Arts	Yes
Construction - Building Careers from the Ground Up	Yes
Co-op	No
Cosmetology	Yes
English as a Second Language or English Literacy Development Program (ESL/ELD)	Yes
French Immersion	Yes
Healthcare Support Services Program	Yes
International Baccalaureate Diploma Program	Yes
Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton (NYA:WEH)	Yes
Self-Paced, Self-Directed Programming	No, within school catchment area only
Steps 2 Graduation formerly known as Work In Progress Program (WIPP)	Yes
Strings	Yes
Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM): Arts & Culture, Aviation & Aerospace, Business, Construction, Energy, Environment, Health & Wellness, Horticulture & Landscaping, Hospitality and Tourism, Information & Communication Technology, Justice, Community Safety & Emergency Services, Manufacturing, Non-Profit, Transportation	Yes

Overall, it appears there is a high level of participation in secondary Specialized Programs. As highlighted in Figure 9, enrolment in ESL/ELD programs was highest with over 2,700 students, followed by the Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) programs (with over 2,600 students)<sup>18</sup> and the co-op programs (with 1,703 students). Overall, across all programs (excluding ESL/ELD and the Self-Paced, Self-Directed program at Westmount), there were over 11,000 secondary students enrolled in a Specialized Program during the 2024-2025 school year. Although enrolment numbers for some programs could not be accounted for, this suggests a high level of interest in secondary Specialized Programs, with over 60% the total secondary student population enrolled in a program.

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<sup>18</sup> Represents enrolment in all SHSM programs.

**Figure 9. Enrolment in secondary Specialized Programs (2024-2025)**



Based on data provided by HWDSB. Note that students can be enrolled in more than one secondary program.

\*Represents the number of students who enrolled in at least one cosmetology-related course.

\*\*Enrolment in Strings is based on anecdotal information.

## 4.1 Do the specialty programs meet the needs of HWDSB students?

Most parents and staff felt that the Specialized Programs enhance students' educational experiences,<sup>19</sup> with staff also noting that the Specialized Programs can boost engagement, confidence, leadership, and preparation for future career pathways. Overall, many secondary parents were satisfied with the Specialized Programs offered at HWDSB.<sup>20</sup> Perceptions of the Specialized Programs, the satisfaction with these programs, and the impact on student outcomes are explored in the subsections below, where sufficient data were available.<sup>21</sup>

### 4.1.1. Audition-Based Program of the Arts (Glendale)

Parents reported that the program strengthened their children's artistic abilities, confidence, and leadership skills.<sup>22</sup> Staff shared similar impressions, noting that students showed improvements in their artistic skills, engagement at school, leadership, and confidence.<sup>23</sup>

During the 2024-2025 school year, 277 students were enrolled in the Audition-Based Program of the Arts.<sup>24</sup> Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB secondary students, students in the Audition-Based Program of the Arts had accumulated more credits on average (particularly at the Grade 11 and 12 level),<sup>25</sup> were more likely to be on track to graduate on time, and were also more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). Additionally, students in some grades had missed fewer classes and days of school when compared to other HWDSB students of the same grades.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Most parents (69%) and staff (77%) believed the secondary program offerings enhance educational experiences for students.

<sup>20</sup> Secondary parents were satisfied with their child(ren)'s secondary programming (69%).

<sup>21</sup> There was insufficient data on: Healthcare Support Services Program, Language courses, Steps 2 Graduation, and Strings.

<sup>22</sup> Parents survey results: Artistic skills (89%, n = 28), confidence (89%, n = 28), and leadership skills (86%, n = 28)

<sup>23</sup> Staff survey results: Artistic skills (94%, n = 78), school engagement (96%, n = 78), leadership (87%, n = 75), and confidence (89%, n = 76).

<sup>24</sup> A proportion of students enrolled in the Audition-Based Program of the Arts are out-of-board students.

<sup>25</sup> Glendale arts program Grade 11 and 12 students accumulated an average of 29.27 credits, 6.38 more credits when compared to the average of all other Grade 11 and 12 HWDSB students (22.89 credits).

<sup>26</sup> Glendale arts program Grade 9 and 10 students missed 19.98 days of school on average, 4.19 fewer days when compared to other HWDSB students in the same grades (average of 24.17 days). Glendale arts program Grade 11 and 12 students also missed 1.97 fewer math classes when compared to other HWDSB students in the same grades (6.09 classes versus 8.06 classes).

#### 4.1.2. ArtSMART (MacNab)

Although the number of survey responses from staff was very low, staff believed that ArtSMART helped strengthen students' confidence, leadership, and artistic skills. They also believed that it supports them to pursue their future career or postsecondary pathway of choice.<sup>27</sup>

In the 2024-2025 school year, 17 students (primarily in Grades 11 and 12) were enrolled in the program. Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students, MacNab arts program students had accumulated more credits on average,<sup>28</sup> but had also missed over 12 more days of school on average.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.1.3. Construction Building Careers from the Ground Up

Although the number of responses received from parents was limited, parents generally viewed the Building Careers from the Ground Up program positively, noting benefits such as access to a wider variety of courses, increased confidence, stronger physical skills, and a head start on future careers. Fewer parents felt the program helped improve grades or leadership skills.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4.1.4. Co-op

In the 2024-2025 school year, 1,703 students were enrolled in the co-op program. As the vast majority (98%) of these students were in Grades 11 or 12, analyses using administrative data considered students in these grades only. When compared to other HWDSB students in Grades 11 and 12, students in a co-op program were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, were more likely to be on track to graduate on time, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). Co-op students had also accumulated more credits<sup>31</sup> and volunteer hours<sup>32</sup> on average. However, co-op students had missed

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<sup>27</sup> Staff survey responses: Staff believed that ArtSMART program helps improve students' confidence (92%, n = 13), leadership skills (92%, n = 13), and artistic skills (92%, n = 13), and may also help students with pursuing their future career (85%, n = 13) or postsecondary pathway of choice (85%, n = 13).

<sup>28</sup> MacNab arts program Grade 11 and 12 students accumulated an average of 29.79 credits (n = 14), 6.83 more credits when compared to the average of all other Grade 11 and 12 HWDSB students (average of 22.96 credits, n = 10787).

<sup>29</sup> MacNab arts program Grade 11 and 12 students (n = 14) missed an average of 32.75 days of school, 12.34 more days than the average of all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (average of 20.41 missed days of school).

<sup>30</sup> Parent survey results: agreed the program lets their child(ren) take a wider variety of courses (83%, n = 24), build confidence (79%, n = 24) and physical skills (71%, n = 24), and get a head start on a future career (71%, n = 24). Fewer parents believed the program was beneficial for improving grades (48%, n = 23) or leadership skills (50%, n = 24).

<sup>31</sup> Co-op students in Grades 11 and 12 had accumulated an average of 27.32 credits, 5.16 more credits when compared to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (average of 22.16 credits).

<sup>32</sup> Co-op students in Grades 11 and 12 had accumulated an average of 45.52 volunteer hours, 36% (or 12.11 hours) more than all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (average of 33.41 hours).

more classes<sup>33</sup> and nearly seven more days of school<sup>34</sup> on average, and were more likely to have received at least one suspension.

#### 4.1.5. Cosmetology

Although the number of responses received from parents was again limited, parents believed that the program was most helpful in strengthening their child's artistic skills, grades, school engagement, and confidence. While staff believed the program supports students' future career and postsecondary pathways, fewer parents shared this perspective.<sup>35</sup>

Students were identified as a Cosmetology student if they had taken at least one cosmetology course. During the 2024-2025 school year, 819 students were enrolled in one or more cosmetology courses. Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB secondary students, students who had enrolled in a cosmetology course were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, were more likely to be on track to graduate, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). However, they also had accumulated fewer volunteer hours on average,<sup>36</sup> had missed more classes<sup>37</sup> and nearly 12 more days of school<sup>38</sup> on average, and were more likely to have been suspended at least once.

#### 4.1.6. Dual Credit

During the 2024-2025 school year, 235 students were enrolled in a Dual Credit class. As over 99% of students in a dual credit class were in Grades 11 or 12, administrative data comparisons considered students in these grades only. Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students, those taking Dual Credit classes were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, had accumulated more credits<sup>39</sup> and

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<sup>33</sup> Co-op students in Grades 11 and 12 had missed an average of 7.95 English classes and 9.61 Math classes, while other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students had missed an average of 6.39 English classes and 7.74 Math classes.

<sup>34</sup> Co-op students in Grades 11 and 12 had missed 26.23 days of school on average during the 2024-2025 school year, 6.92 more days when compared to the average of all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (average of 19.31 days).

<sup>35</sup> Parent survey results: Most parents believed that the Cosmetology program is beneficial for improving their child(ren)'s artistic skills (84%, n = 19), grades (83%, n = 18), engagement in school (83%, n = 18), and confidence (80%, n = 20). 68% of parents (n = 19) believed the program helps their child(ren) decide on a postsecondary pathway, and 47% (n = 19) believed the program increases the likelihood of their child(ren) getting into their postsecondary pathway of choice.

Staff survey results: Most staff believed the Cosmetology program helps students get a head start on a future career (100%, n = 19), decide on a postsecondary pathway (94%, n = 18), and get into their postsecondary pathway of choice (94%, n = 18).

<sup>36</sup> Cosmetology students had accumulated 18.8 volunteer hours on average, 27% (or 6.96 hours) less than the average of all other HWDSB secondary students (25.76 hours).

<sup>37</sup> Cosmetology students had missed an average of 10.58 English classes and 12.25 Math classes, while other HWDSB secondary students had missed an average of 7.26 English classes and 8.49 Math classes.

<sup>38</sup> Cosmetology students had missed an average of 33.22 days of school during the 2024-2025 school year, 11.88 more days when compared to the average of all other HWDSB secondary students (21.34 days).

<sup>39</sup> Students taking a dual credit class had accumulated an average of 28.79 credits (n = 235), 5.95 credits more than the average of all other HWDSB students in Grade 11 and 12 (22.84 credits, n = 10393).

volunteer hours,<sup>40</sup> and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). However, program students had missed more Math classes<sup>41</sup> and more days of school<sup>42</sup> on average.

#### **4.1.7. English as a Second Language (ESL), English Literacy Development (ELD)**

Parent and staff opinions of the ESL and ELD programs were limited in number but overall positive. Parents felt the programs were especially helpful for improving their children's language skills, grades, confidence, and access to a wider range of courses. Staff shared similar views and additionally believed the programs boost school engagement and support students in accessing their postsecondary pathway of choice.<sup>43</sup>

During the 2024-2025 school year, 2730 secondary students were enrolled in the ESL or ELD program. Discussions with staff highlighted that students entering ESL/ELD program typically join outside of the regular September start date and often join shortly after moving to Canada. It was noted by staff that these factors can have a substantial impact on academic outcomes. The administrative data indicates that on average, students in the ESL/ELD programs were less likely to have passed the OSSLT, were more likely to have been suspended at least once, had accumulated slightly fewer credits,<sup>44</sup> and had missed more classes on average.<sup>45</sup> Students in the ESL/ELD programs were less likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12).

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<sup>40</sup> Students taking a Dual Credit class had accumulated an average of 47.68 volunteer hours, 36% (or 12.66 hours) more than the average of all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (35.02 hours).

<sup>41</sup> Students taking a dual credit class missed 11.49 Math classes on average (n = 230), while all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students missed an average of 7.96 Math classes (n = 10012).

<sup>42</sup> Students taking a dual credit class missed an average of 25.14 days of school (n = 230), 4.82 more days than the average of all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (20.32 days, n = 10012).

<sup>43</sup> Parent survey results: Most parents expressed ESL/ELD programs were beneficial for improving their child(ren)'s language skills (93%, n = 15), grades (86%, n = 14), and confidence (80%, n = 15). Parents also indicated the programs let their child(ren) take a wider variety of courses (93%, n = 14). Staff survey results: Nearly all staff agreed that the ESL/ELD programs improve language skills (98%, n = 46), confidence (96%, n = 46), grades (87%, n = 45), and engagement in school (47%, n = 46). Staff also believed the programs help students get into their postsecondary pathway of choice (91%, n = 46).

<sup>44</sup> ESL/ELD students accumulated an average of 16.09 credits, 2.43 fewer credits when compared to the average of all other HWDSB secondary students (18.43 credits).

<sup>45</sup> ESL/ELD students missed 8.61 English classes and 9.8 Math classes on average, compared to an average of 7.19 missed English classes and 8.46 missed Math classes among all other HWDSB secondary students.

#### **4.1.8. Experiential Learning Activities (excluding SHSM)**

The experiential learning activities include: co-operative education, Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), and Robotics/Electric Car (or similar equivalent).

Among the 115 parents who indicated their child(ren) had completed one of the above activities, most had children who participated in a co-op (51%). Some had participated in Robotics/Electric Car or equivalent (24%), OYAP (5%), or other experiential learning activities (18%). Across all experiential learning activities, most parents were satisfied (76%). However, among the 18 students who indicated completing an experiential learning activity in the survey, only 67% were satisfied.

The administrative data on student outcomes within experiential learning activities was only available for OYAP. During the 2024-2025 school year, 654 students were enrolled in OYAP. As over 99% of students enrolled in OYAP were in Grades 11 or 12, administrative data comparisons considered students in these grades only. Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students, OYAP program students were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, had accumulated more credits<sup>46</sup> and volunteer hours,<sup>47</sup> were more likely to be on track to graduate, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). However, program students had missed more days of school on average,<sup>48</sup> and were more likely to have received at least one suspension.

#### **4.1.9. French Immersion**

Please refer to the section on [French Immersion](#) for results.

#### **4.1.10. International Baccalaureate (IB; Westdale, Ancaster)**

Opinions from staff on the program were moderately positive. They believed it was most effective in helping students pursue their preferred postsecondary pathways, build confidence, and begin preparing for future careers. On the other hand, staff did not perceive IB as beneficial for expanding course options or enhancing students' artistic or physical skills.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> OYAP program students accumulated an average of 29.12 credits, which is more than six credits when compared to the average of all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB (22.56 credits).

<sup>47</sup> OYAP program students accumulated an average of 48.43 volunteer hours, 37% (or 12.98 hours) more than the average of all other HWDSB secondary students (34.45 hours).

<sup>48</sup> OYAP program students missed 23.16 days of school, 2.91 more days when compared to the average of 20.25 days of school among all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB.

<sup>49</sup> Staff survey results: Staff were most likely to believe the program helps students get into their postsecondary pathway of choice (82%, n = 88), increases their confidence (80%, n = 86), and helps students get a head start on a future career (77%, n = 87). Staff considered the program least beneficial for course variety (31%, n = 83) and improving artistic (16%, n = 73) or physical skills (19%, n = 69).

During the 2024-2025 school year, 102 students were enrolled in IB. Administrative data indicates that relative to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students, IB program students accumulated more credits on average,<sup>50</sup> were more likely to be on track to graduate on time, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). Additionally, all students in IB passed the OSSLT, compared to the board average pass rate of 68% for the 2024-2025 school year.

#### **4.1.11. Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton (NYA:WEH)**

This section of the Program Strategy Review initially embarked on reviewing NYA:WEH, a program listed in the 2012 Secondary Program Strategy. NYA:WEH, and the Indigenous Education Program in HWDSB, has since evolved to look differently in today's context. Recognizing the distinct space between being accountable to the Board of Trustees and practicing ethical engagement grounded in respect, responsibility, and reciprocity with the Indigenous Education Circle (IEC), Malatest's observations, findings and recommendations will be shared with the Indigenous Education Circle first, for their review and consultation, before bringing it to the Program Committee and then, the Board of Trustees, at the appropriate time. This will allow Two-Row Relational Accountability, ensuring that both governance structures – that of HWDSB's and of the IEC's – are honored without compromising Indigenous protocols.

#### **4.1.12. Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program**

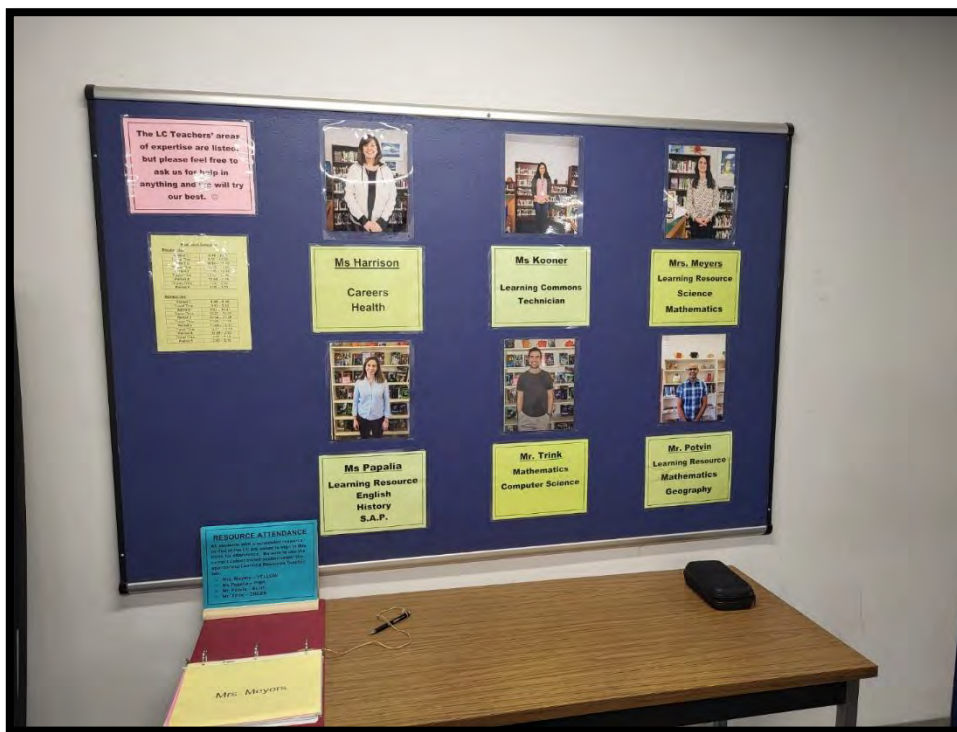
The Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program at Westmount allows students to learn as fast or as slow as they would like and allows students to dig deeper into subject areas of particular interest. From a teaching standpoint, this means that a Grade 11 student could be taking some Grade 10 courses, some Grade 11 courses, and some Grade 12 courses depending on their own progress in each subject. Under this model, students may take longer or shorter to complete programs than is the case in traditional secondary schools. The program builds students' time management skills and supports students to seek out their own learning. The program offers various opportunities and supports to students, such as self-directed learning days, teachers as advisors, and the Innovative Learning Commons.

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<sup>50</sup> IB program students accumulated an average of 22.85 credits, or six more credits on average compared to all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (22.91).

**Self-directed learning days:** Designated school days (two days a month) that allow students to manage their own learning under the supervision of an advisor teacher. Attendance is required, and students use these days to work independently on their academic tasks, plan their schedules, and make progress on their courses at their own pace.

**Teachers as advisors:** Teachers are assigned a student in Grade 9 and they serve as an advisor to that student until the time that they graduate. The teacher advisor meets with the student regularly and helps monitor the student's progress, provides guidance, and supports them in planning and completing their schoolwork.



**Learning Commons:** The Learning Commons brings together library and learning resource staff to provide academic support to all students throughout the day with the goal of being a flexible space to allow students to learn in a space that best suits their needs. It offers a variety of resources for student use, and students may leave their classroom with teacher permission to work in the Commons, returning before the period ends with a stamp in their agenda to indicate their visit. The Learning Commons is also regularly staffed by teaching staff who can provide one on one guidance to students for specific subjects on an appointment and/or drop-in basis.

Admission to the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program is an application-based process. While Westmount Secondary is considered a system school, the application and selection process is managed by the school. The program accepts applicants from across HWDSB, however transportation is the responsibility of the family. Students can enter the program in Grade 9, but there are no opportunities to apply to the program beyond the Grade 9 entry point. Although a comprehensive review of programs that are similar to Westmount's Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program was not part of the scope, Ontario schools with models similar to the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program include Toronto Catholic District School Board's Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School<sup>51</sup> and the Toronto District School Board's School of Experiential Education.<sup>52</sup> Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School uses a self-directed, self-paced model with flexible scheduling and individualized learning. The School of Experiential Education does not offer self-paced learning like Mary Ward or Westmount, however it has a flexible high-school structure with small class sizes and a project-based or discussion-based approach to learning.

According to focus group discussions with students and parents, there is a commonly held misconception that admission to the program is based on academic achievement. Parents and students not enrolled in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program believed they had to have high marks to get into the program. Additionally, just under half (44%) of surveyed staff expressed that the Self-Paced, self-Directed Program impacts perceptions of school quality and equity, and discussions with staff also suggested that other schools (particularly those in the neighbourhood such as MacNab) face challenges with enrolment and experience difficulties with offering well-supported programming. Contrary to these beliefs, the admissions criteria is based on the learning skills of the student and was developed by the Board. The Board website states that students who should consider the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program are those who are autonomous, organized, self-disciplined, able to communicate effectively, and able to accept constructive feedback and engage in self-evaluation and self-reflection.

Entry to Westmount is via an application process which is managed by the school. Although the school does not consider academic achievement to be the main criteria for acceptance in the program, focus groups completed with students and parents indicate there was a perception that acceptance to the program was closely tied to marks and prior good attendance.

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.tcdsb.org/o/maryward>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Find-your/Schools/schno/2831>

For example, among current Westmount students they noted:

“I knew that to get into the school, I needed to have good marks and attendance.”

**–HWDSB Student**

“They want to make sure that you can work on your own, and that you can get your courses done – you had to demonstrate that you were motivated to learn!”

**–HWDSB Student**

In discussion with parents from other HWDSB schools, many noted that they perceived Westmount as a school more suited to gifted students, although there was also a number of parents who noted that they were unaware of the school and its learning model:

“I am not sure what the Westmount model is, we got lots of information about our nearby secondary school, but I did not know about this school or learning approach.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

During the 2024-2025 school year, 1,270 students were enrolled in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program at Westmount. Despite having a number of open spots each year, the program consistently receives a high volume of applications (approximately 500 applications for the 2024-2025 school year). According to staff, the application process is managed by the school and is a very time-consuming process. Staff expressed that using a lottery-based approach to admissions would reduce the significant time required to process applications.

Students in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program demonstrated better outcomes than other secondary students in HWDSB (more likely to have passed the OSSLT, more likely to be on track to graduate on time, and more likely to have graduated if in Grade 12). Students were less likely to have any suspensions and had also accumulated more credits<sup>53</sup> and volunteer hours<sup>54</sup> on average, especially at the Grade 11 and 12 levels. However, those in Grades 11 and 12 had higher rates of absence than other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Westmount students are more likely to graduate on time suggests that the program costs at Westmount are comparable to other secondary schools in that there is no additional teaching time required to accommodate different learning styles.

According to administrative data, the student population at Westmount is different from the other HWDSB schools. There is a higher representation of students from racialized groups at Westmount compared to other HWDSB schools. There is also a higher proportion of students from neighbourhoods with above-average income (>\$100,000). Westmount is the only HWDSB school that does not have special education classes. The Self-Paced, Self-Directed program is attended by 3% of students with non-gifted exceptionalities (versus the Board secondary average of 7%) and 6% of students with gifted exceptionalities (versus the Board secondary average of 2%). According to school administrators, there would be interest in running special education classes at Westmount if space was available.

Given the above average outcomes for Westmount students, there is merit in examining what program elements should be considered for adoption by other secondary schools across the Board. For example, in discussions with school administrators, it was noted that the concept of having Self-Directed Learning Days has been adopted by some other secondary schools. Although some schools already implement Self-Directed Learning

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<sup>53</sup> Grade 11 and 12 Westmount students had accumulated nearly 5 credits more on average when compared to all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB (27.48 credits versus 22.71 credits).

<sup>54</sup> Grade 11 and 12 Westmount students had accumulated 68% (or 23.3 hours) more volunteer hours (57.34 hours) when compared to all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB (30.04 hours).

<sup>55</sup> Grade 11 and 12 Westmount students were absent for an average of 27.51 days during the 2024-2025 school year, compared to 20.0 days among all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB.

Days and teachers as advisors, there may be additional opportunities to explore how these promising or best practices (Self-Directed Learning days, teachers as advisors) from Westmount can be more formally established and supported throughout other HWDSB schools.

Given its designation as a system school, it is unclear as to why the application and acceptance process is school-managed. Given the large number of applications to the school, this is an onerous task that is currently managed by internal school resources. Furthermore, Westmount is a desired school (as evidenced by the high number of applications to the school). As such, consideration should be given as to how students can transfer into Westmount after the single Grade 9 entry point by keeping a proportion of available spots available for students who would benefit from this model but have missed the Grade 9 entry point. Adopting a lottery-based system for applications that meet the Board-established program requirements would also contribute to a more diverse student population.

#### 4.1.13. Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM)

Staff opinions of the program were overall very positive. Many staff agreed that the program helps students decide on and get into their postsecondary pathway and get a head start on their future careers. They also noted that it increases students' engagement in school, improves academic performance, and builds both confidence and leadership skills.<sup>56</sup> Satisfaction with specific SHSM programs is shown in Table 11, where sufficient data were available.

**Table 11. Satisfaction with SHSM programs**

SHSM Program	Parent Satisfaction	Staff Satisfaction
Arts & Culture	84% (n = 37)	91% (n = 43)
Construction	76% (n = 25)	<i>Insufficient responses</i>
Health & Wellness	76% (n = 25)	90% (n = 20)
Hospitality & Tourism	<i>Insufficient responses</i>	93% (n = 14)
Information & Communication Technology	<i>Insufficient responses</i>	31% (n = 13)
Transportation	<i>Insufficient responses</i>	87% (n = 15)

Results are only shown for SHSM programs that have ten or more valid survey responses for at least one respondent group (staff or parents). Percentages represent the proportion of survey respondents who selected "satisfied" or "very satisfied" to the question, "Please rate your level of satisfaction with [SHSM program your child is enrolled in]" in the parent survey, or "Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following SHSM programs" for the staff survey.

<sup>56</sup> Staff survey results: Staff agreed the SHSM programs helps students decide on their postsecondary pathway (89%), get into their postsecondary pathway of choice (71%), and get a head start on their future career (89%). Many staff also expressed the SHSM programs increases students' engagement in school (83%), improves grades and academic achievement (80%), and builds confidence (91%) and leadership skills (88%).

Similarly, although there were a limited number of responses, parents whose children completed the experiential learning component of their SHSM program expressed satisfaction with the experience.<sup>57</sup>

In the 2024-2025 school year, a total of 2,611 students were enrolled in a SHSM program. Enrolment was highest for Arts & Culture (515 students), Health & Wellness (506 students), and Construction programs (362 students), and lowest for Aviation & Aerospace (2 students) and Horticulture & Landscaping (7 students). Although enrolment may be low for some SHSM programs, they can still run with smaller numbers because SHSM students take their required credits in regular classes alongside non-SHSM students, with SHSM content embedded.

SHSM students demonstrated positive outcomes. When compared to other Grade 11 and 12 students in the board,<sup>58</sup> SHSM students were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, had accumulated more credits<sup>59</sup> and 62% more volunteer hours<sup>60</sup> on average, were more likely to be on track to graduate on time, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). However, SHSM students had missed more classes<sup>61</sup> and missed more days of school<sup>62</sup> on average.

According to discussions with Board staff, the establishment of SHSM programs can create logistical and planning concerns due to a variety of factors. Primarily, it was noted that the Board may be informed about a new SHSM program in the later stages of planning, thus obliging the Board to take a reactive approach to ensuring that the infrastructure required to run a SHSM program are accounted for within capital investments. Moreover, Board staff expressed that some of the SHSM programs require lead time to order the equipment, consider the installation of such equipment, take the essential steps to ensure all health and safety requirements have been met, and review or obtain the appropriate insurance coverage to mitigate any potential liability for the more technical SHSMs. However, when the Board receives limited notice to support a school in establishing a SHSM program, it can be very challenging to complete these important steps within such a short timeframe.

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<sup>57</sup> Parent survey results: Majority of parents were satisfied with the experiential learning component of the SHSM program (82%, n = 38).

<sup>58</sup> As over 99% of students enrolled in a SHSM program were in Grades 11 or 12, administrative data comparisons considered students in these grades only.

<sup>59</sup> SHSM students accumulated an average of 27.63 credits, 4.65 more credits than the average of all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB (21.44).

<sup>60</sup> SHSM students accumulated an average of 49.55 volunteer hours, 62% more volunteer hours (or 18.91 hours) more than the average of all other Grade 11 and 12 students in HWDSB (30.64 hours).

<sup>61</sup> Data on missed classes was only available for English and Math classes. SHSM students missed an average of 8.16 English classes and 9.42 Math classes, while all other HWDSB students in Grades 11 and 12 missed an average of 6.13 English classes and 7.57 Math classes.

<sup>62</sup> SHSM students missed 23.97 days of school, 4.73 more days when compared to the average of all other HWDSB Grade 11 and 12 students (19.22 days).

Some Board staff were also concerned that the lifecycle of these programs were not being fully considered. The Ministry funding received for SHSM programs can be limited to a certain timeframe, and after this funding ends, the maintenance, of any equipment or facilities purchased to run that SHSM becomes the responsibility of the Board.

## **4.2 Do Specialized Programs align with the values and beliefs of HWDSB's strategic plan?**

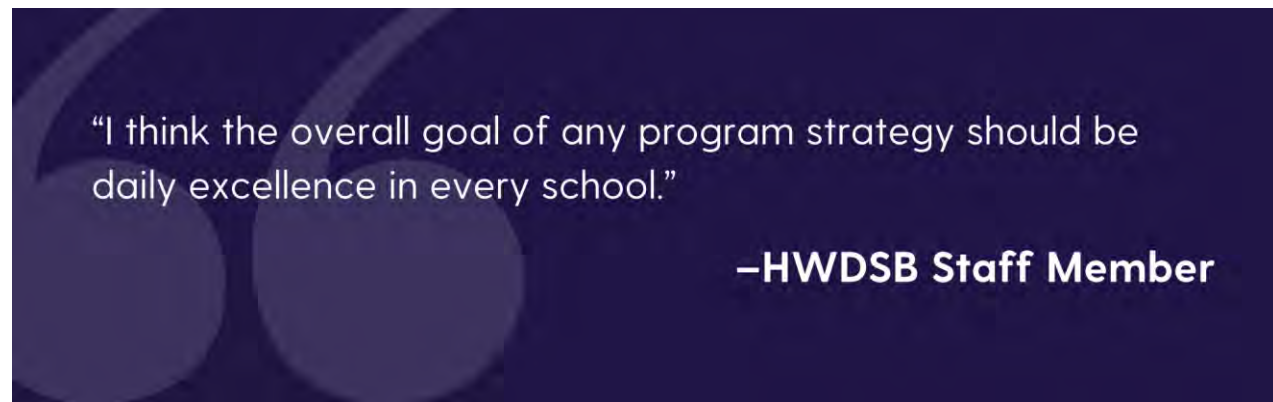
Just over half of parents (59%) and staff (57%) believed the programs reflect the needs of the Board's various populations, but fewer believed the programs are equally accessible, available, and inclusive (35% of parents, 46% of staff).

### HWDSB's Strategic Directions

- **Upholding Human Rights, Safety & Well-being**  
We will support all students and staff to feel safe and secure in our classrooms and school communities.
- **Providing Equitable Quality Education**  
We will offer equitable quality educational opportunities to improve student engagement, learning and achievement for future-readiness.
- **Collaborating with Students, Families and Communities**  
We will build reciprocal relationships and partnerships to enhance access and engagement for students, families, and communities.
- **Building a Sustainable Education System**  
We will adapt to a rapidly changing world through responsible fiscal management, investing equitably in accessible and sustainable facilities, and supporting a robust workforce.
- **Reinforcing Indigenous Educational Wellness and Reconciliation**  
We will honour our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships among Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partners, and by cultivating intergenerational healing and wellness in a restorative education system.

These results were echoed in the discussions with staff and community advisory committees. Many expressed that the access to secondary specialized programs was limited in certain areas, especially the more rural areas of HWDSB. Many staff believed that this geographic distribution of programs was creating a dichotomy of “haves” and “have-not’s”, where certain schools are particularly well-served by a number of Specialized Programs, whereas other schools have very few or no non-SHSM Specialized Programs. They believed that a more equitable geographic distribution of Specialized Programs would allow all regions equity of access and would help improve the current situation, noting that this geographic distribution could be arranged into multiple Centres of Excellence that are strategically placed so that they could be accessed by all regions within a reasonable (<1 hour) commute.

Although staff saw the value in having Specialized Programs, they also expressed the importance of balancing the provision of Specialized Programs with universal quality education, as they believed these Specialized Programs should not be offered at the expense of the education provided to all students.



“I think the overall goal of any program strategy should be daily excellence in every school.”

**–HWDSB Staff Member**

Among secondary parents whose children were not enrolled in a speciality program, 31% expressed they were not aware the Board offered such programs. A similar proportion of staff (34%) also indicated lack of awareness of the programs among families as an issue. Focus group discussions with parents and students also suggests that there is a general lack of awareness around the variety of Specialized Programs. Many parents and students knew about the Specialized Programs in their school but lacked awareness about any of the other secondary Specialized Program offerings in other schools. Some parents also mentioned there are many barriers to participation in these programs, noting that the programs their child was interested in was too far of a commute or that it was not financially feasible to participate in these Specialized Programs.

Comments<sup>63</sup> received from surveyed parents who did not believe the Specialized Programs are equally available often noted they or their children were not aware of the programs, or noted challenges related to transportation and commute times to the schools hosting these programs:

“Rural students have no way to reach these programs in order to participate. My child would have loved to do the Co-op program for Health Care Support but was unable to, because they have no access to public transit because we live in a rural area of Hamilton.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

“No one has provided all the SHSM options to my teen and she got pigeon-holed into taking one of the SHSM offered at [her school]. She has since found out about all the other options and is disheartened that the options were not discussed with her when she went to the guidance office. There should be better communication/marketing to Grade 9 students on all available options throughout HWDSB.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

“There are distance barriers for many. Auditioned programs are inequitable by nature as they cater to those who can afford to have prior experience. Music, art, drama and dance are not affordable to many families - especially in our current economy.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

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<sup>63</sup> Refers to comments received to the question, “In what ways do you think these specialty programs are not equally available to all who are interested in enrolling?”

“These programs are hard to access for most students, unless there is a parent who is very good at navigating the board systems. The board is hard to work with and understand. The online tools are all very difficult to use.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

Staff also believed that some of the Specialized Programs were reactionary to current trends and did not always consider the future workforce needs within the region. Staff also expressed that the types and locations of Specialized Programs were not generated through a balanced and systematic approach at the Board level. Instead, there has been a blend of top-down and bottom-up approaches, resulting in a mix of locally developed programs and Board-directed program placements. Although the locally developed programs are often very successful and led by a “local champion,” they would benefit from being integrated into a broader strategic vision led by the Board. The Board-directed placements (e.g., the Aviation Program at Winston Churchill, International Baccalaureate program at Glendale) were introduced by the Board to support a school community without first assessing local interest or determining whether they align with community or local industry needs. According to staff, this has historically resulted in a program that does not have high enrolment and eventually end up closing due to lack of interest.

Moreover, it was highlighted by staff how important management buy-in is for shaping program viability. Staff perceived that certain system-supported Specialized Programs (particularly when they are “sister” programs in the same subject area) had unequal buy-in at the Board level and disproportionate resources and/or supports provided at the school level. For example, the Glendale Audition-Based Program of the Arts held multiple information nights and audition nights, whereas ArtSMART received very little publicity and communication to the families and did not hold an information night. Staff also believed that this has negatively impacted school-level dynamics, where “sister” programs have ended up in an unintended competition with each other. Instead of functioning as complementary offerings within a unified Board-led system of program offerings, programs begin to compete for students and resources.

The administrative data<sup>64</sup> also demonstrates that some Specialized Programs have low enrolment from certain equity groups. Key highlights from the assessments of equity indicators<sup>65</sup> are detailed below (Table 12). For all results, see Appendix 1.

**Table 12. Key highlights from the assessments of equity indicators**

Specialized Program	Under-representation
International Baccalaureate Program	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities
ESL/ELD	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities
OYAP	Students from racialized backgrounds
SHSM	Students from racialized backgrounds

Board staff also believed that a part of ensuring equity group participation in these Specialized Programs begins with proper education and awareness for school administrators, teachers and families to help counteract the potential stereotypes on beliefs that exist about who these programs are intended for. With proper education and awareness, the Board can help counteract stereotypes and challenge beliefs by dedicating time to providing program information, so that both parents, students and staff can fully understand the program, and staff can help identify students that would be suitable for these Specialized Programs.

Although most parents (52%) did not foresee any difficulties with keeping their child enrolled in their Specialized Program, transportation and commute time were commonly raised as potential difficulties and concerns among parents and staff.<sup>66</sup> Similar concerns arose among parents who did not have students enrolled in a Specialized Program.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Analyses to assess equity could only be done for select programs and equity indicators that were identified in the administrative data provided by HWDSB. Analyses used data from the 2024-2025 school year, and results therefore reflect this time period only.

<sup>65</sup> Programs were assessed on the following equity indicators:

- Median annual household income of student's neighbourhood: Neighbourhood is used as a proxy for household income of students' families.
- Social risk was calculated by HWDSB using Statistics Canada Census data. It creates demographic profiles of schools based on data from neighbourhoods in which students live. Data on social risk is used along with other data to determine resource and support allocation to schools. Higher percentiles reflect greater social risk, and is typically associated with lower outcomes.
- Students with non-gifted exceptionalities: Excludes students with "Gifted" exceptionality types. Examples of non-gifted exceptionalities include learning disability, intellectual disability, deafness or hard of hearing, autism, etc.
- Student race: Self-reported data collected during HWDSB's identity survey. 26% of HWDSB's student population provided race data.
- Student gender: Self-reported data collected during HWDSB's identity survey. 26% of HWDSB's student population provided gender data.

<sup>66</sup> Transportation was identified as a potential difficulty by 57% of staff and 20% of parents with a child enrolled in a specialty program. Commute time was identified as a potential difficulty by 47% of staff and 16% of parents with a child enrolled in a specialty program.

<sup>67</sup> Among parents who did not have students enrolled in a specialty program, 19% identified transportation as a concern, and 12% identified commute time as a concern.

Among students in secondary programs receiving HWDSB transportation, responses from the parent survey suggest similar proportions of students primarily get to school by car (28%) or receive HWDSB-provided transportation (32%). Satisfaction with HWDSB transportation among parents of secondary students receiving HWDSB transport was moderate (58%).

Administrative data on transportation costs was only available for a limited number of Specialized Programs (Table 13). Transportation costs per student ranged from \$749.70 per year to \$2,643.41 per year, with variations in costs being largely associated with the percentage of students who are transported by taxi (versus bus or public transit).

**Table 13. Transportation costs for select Specialized Programs**

Program	% of students in program receiving HWDSB transport	# of students transported	% of students transported by taxi	Total transport costs	Cost per student transported
<b>Audition-Based Program of the Arts</b>	31%	223	34%	\$539,978.80	\$2,421.43
<b>ArtSMART</b>	4%	11	0%	\$8,246.70	\$749.70
<b>ESL</b>	14%	343	4%	\$326,746.13	\$952.61
<b>International Baccalaureate</b>	12%	12	25%	\$31,720.90	\$2,643.41

Transportation costs were available for a limited number of programs only. Data provided by HWDSB.

Finally, just about half of parents and staff believed the secondary Specialized Programs were delivered in a fiscally responsible manner (48% of parents; 46% of staff). To explore the fiscal sustainability of these Specialized Programs, administrative data on the incremental costs of secondary Specialized Programs was examined. The incremental costs represent the amount coming from core education funding that is not provided by the Ministry. The incremental cost does not include the costs covered by the program fees. The only secondary Specialized Program with a program fee is IB. These fees include:

- IB diploma students: \$2,400 (or \$600/semester) over the two years of the Diploma Program.
- IB course students taking a minimum of 2 courses: \$400/semester.
- IB course students taking one standalone IB course: \$200/semester

HWDSB provided the incremental costs of four Specialized Programs.<sup>68</sup> The incremental cost per student for these four Specialized Programs was calculated based on the total incremental program cost and the number of students enrolled in a Specialized Program. The programs with the highest incremental cost per student were ArtSMART (\$10,308.63) and IB (\$5,647.90). The program with the lowest incremental cost per student was Audition-Based Program of the Arts (\$72.70). It should be noted that the incremental cost per student calculation was provided by HWDSB and takes into account the staffing costs, incidentals cost and enrolment numbers.

**Table 14. Incremental cost per student for certain Specialized Programs**

Program	Total incremental program costs	# of students	Incremental cost per student
<b>ArtSMART</b>	\$175,246.70	17	\$10,308.63
<b>Audition-Based Program of the Arts</b>	\$20,000.00	277	\$72.20
<b>International Baccalaureate Program</b>	\$417,238.42	74 <sup>69</sup>	\$5,647.90

Incremental costs were available for a limited number of Specialized Programs. Data provided by HWDSB. Note that calculations for Audition-Based Program of the Arts does not take into account the difference in class sizes as the classrooms contain students that are not enrolled in the program (i.e., stacked classes).



<sup>68</sup> SHSMs, OYAP, ESL and ELD receive funding from the Ministry.

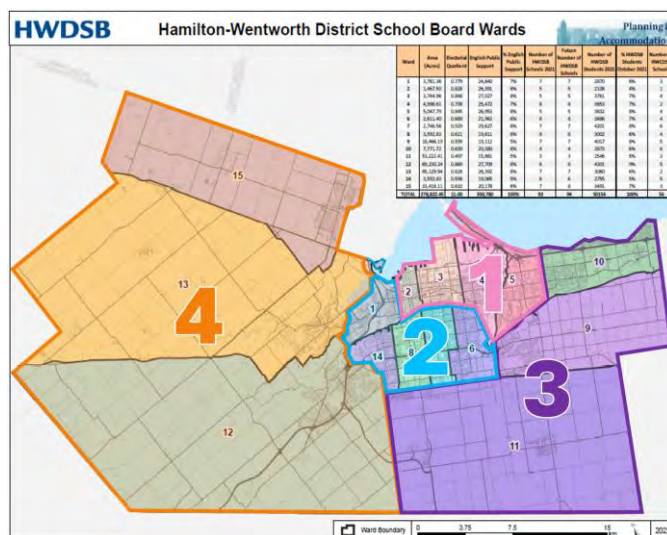
<sup>69</sup> The number of students in IB represents the Full-time Equivalent (FTE) students, and not total enrolment. There are 74 FTE students in IB.

### 4.3 How do geographic locations and program offerings of schools impact equity and perceptions of school quality?

For analyses by geographic location, four regions were defined by grouping wards based on geography and socio-economic status characteristics provided by HWDSB. The regions are as follows:

**Table 15. Ward groupings and analysis regions for secondary schools**

Analysis region	Wards	Approximate areas	Secondary schools
1	2, 3, 4, 5	North Hamilton	Bernie Custis, Sir Winston Churchill, Glendale
2	1, 6, 7, 8, 14	South Hamilton	Westdale, Sherwood, Nora Frances Henderson, Westmount, Sir Allan MacNab
3	9, 10, 11	Glanbrook, Stoney Creek	Saltfleet, Orchard Park
4	12, 13, 15	Ancaster, Dundas, Flamborough, Waterdown	Ancaster, Dundas Valley, Waterdown District



Administrative data from the 2024-2025 school year provided by HWDSB revealed that student outcomes vary by region. Namely, secondary schools in Region 1 (corresponding approximately to North Hamilton) tend to have poorer outcomes relative to secondary schools located in other regions, particularly Regions 3 (Glanbrook and Stoney Creek) and 4 (Ancaster, Dundas, and Westdale).

Among secondary schools in Region 1, on average, students had accumulated fewer total credits<sup>70</sup> and volunteer hours,<sup>71</sup> were less likely to be on track to graduate on time (based on total credits accumulated), and had fewer Grade 12 students who graduated. Region 1 had a higher proportion of students who failed the OSSLT, and students had missed more classes<sup>72</sup> and more days of school<sup>73</sup> on average. The proportion of students who had been suspended at least once was highest in Region 1,<sup>74</sup> and among students who had received at least one suspension, the average number of suspensions was also higher for students in Region 1.<sup>75</sup>

The key finding of this regional review is that students in Region 1 are experiencing below-average outcomes. This information should be used in terms of allocation of program funding and could help with the possible discussion of additional programs that may be beneficial to students in this region.

## 4.4 Key takeaways

According to the administrative data, Specialized Programs are well-represented in terms of enrolment, with thousands of students enrolled across offerings such as the SHSM and co-op programs. In total, there were over 11,000 enrolments in Specialized Programs in the 2024-25 school year, representing a substantial proportion of the secondary student population. Although not all programs were accounted for in the administrative data, this indicates a high level of interest in Specialized Programs. Moreover, the Specialized Programs were well regarded by parents and students, and were believed to enrich the educational experience. However, according to parents and staff, the Specialized Programs lack alignment with some of the Strategic Directions in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP). Specifically, fewer staff and parents believed that the Specialized Programs were equally accessible, available, and inclusive for all HWDSB families.

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<sup>70</sup> Secondary students in Region 1 had accumulated an average of 17.3 credits, 1.7 to 2.6 fewer credits when compared to students in Regions 2 (19.0 credits), 3 (19.2 credits), and 4 (19.9 credits).

<sup>71</sup> Secondary students in Region 1 had accumulated an average of 20.3 volunteer hours, 7.46 to 11.03 fewer volunteer hours when compared to students in Regions 2 (27.81 hours), 3 (27.76 hours), and 4 (31.33 hours).

<sup>72</sup> Secondary students in Region 1 had missed 1.61 to 3.87 more Math classes and 0.54 to 2.14 more English classes on average when compared to students in Regions 2, 3, and 4.

<sup>73</sup> Secondary students in Region 1 had missed an average of 32.54 days of school, 5.66 to 11.7 more days when compared to students in Regions 2 (26.88 days), 3 (24.98 days), and 4 (20.84 days).

<sup>74</sup> The proportion of students in each region with at least one suspension is as follows, from Region 1 to 4: 6.19%, 5.17%, 4.29%, 2.13%.

<sup>75</sup> Secondary students in Region 1 who had been suspended at least once averaged 1.92 suspensions, 0.28 to 0.37 more suspensions on average when compared to students in Regions 2 (1.64 suspensions), 3 (1.61 suspensions), and 4 (1.55 suspensions) who had been suspended at least once.

Concerns from staff about the accessibility and inclusivity of these programs were explored further in interviews and focus group discussions. Many staff and a community advisory committee expressed that the geographic distribution of Specialized Programs affected the accessibility of these programs, particularly for the rural areas of HWDSB. Many staff expressed that the current geographic distribution of programs creates a divide between “have” and “have-not” schools, with some schools offering numerous Specialized Programs while others have very few or no non-SHSM programs. They suggested that a better geographic distribution of programs could improve equity, which could potentially be achieved through the creation of multiple Centres of Excellence placed strategically to allow access within a reasonable commute.

Staff also indicated that the development and placement of Specialized Programs have not always been guided by a long-term, strategic vision. Some programs were described as reactionary to current trends rather than aligned with the region’s future workforce needs. It was observed that program development has emerged through a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes, resulting in a combination of locally driven initiatives and Board-directed placements. While locally developed programs often thrive with the presence of a local champion, these efforts would be strengthened by integrating them into a broader, Board-led strategic framework. Conversely, Board-directed program placements have sometimes been introduced without assessing community interest or alignment with local industry needs, leading to low enrolment and eventual program closure. The importance of consistent management buy-in was also highlighted as critical to program success. In some cases, “sister” programs in similar subject areas were perceived to have experienced unequal support at the Board level, leading to disproportionate resources and/or supports at the school-level. It was reported that this uneven distribution led to unintended competition between programs that were meant to operate as complementary offerings within a cohesive system. Staff believed that a systematic and equitable approach to resourcing would help ensure that programs are supported consistently and can function cohesively across the Board.

Overall, just under half of parents and staff believed the Specialized Programs were fiscally responsible. The incremental costs for certain Specialized Programs were examined using administrative data from the 2024-2025 school year. The incremental cost per student for certain Specialized Programs was calculated based on the total incremental program cost and the number of students enrolled in a Specialized Program. The Specialized Program with the highest incremental per student costs was ArtSMART, and the program with the lowest incremental per student cost was the Audition-Based Program of the Arts. It should be noted that the incremental cost per student calculation was provided by HWDSB and takes into account the staffing costs, incidentals cost and

enrolment numbers.<sup>76</sup> Incremental costs for some Specialized Programs were not available.

Findings also indicated that many parents and students lack awareness of the full range of Specialized Programs available across HWDSB schools. While they were familiar with offerings at their own secondary school, awareness of Specialized Programs at other schools was generally low. This gap in knowledge was reflected in survey feedback, where a substantial portion of secondary parents whose children were not enrolled in a Specialized Program reported being unaware that such options existed, and a notable proportion of staff identified that limited awareness was an issue. Aside from the barrier of lack of awareness, some parents also highlighted the other barriers to participation in these programs, noting that the programs their child was interested in was too far of a commute or that it was not financially feasible to participate in these Specialized Programs such as the IB Program.

Lack of awareness and misperceptions existed about other Specialized Programs, such as the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program. It was found that, despite Board-established criteria focusing on learning skills rather than academic achievement, HWDSB families often held misconceptions that high marks and good attendance were required for admission to the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program. Some parents perceived Westmount as a school for gifted students, while others had been unaware of its unique model. Moreover, just under half of surveyed staff believed the program influenced perceptions of school quality and equity, and some parents expressed concerns about barriers such as transportation and the program's impact on enrolment at other schools. Data from interviews and focus groups with students in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program suggests that this program offers relevant promising or best practices that could be beneficial to other HWDSB schools. Specifically, the Self-Directed Learning Days, teachers as advisors, and the Innovative Learning Commons were largely unique to the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program.

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<sup>76</sup> Calculations for the Audition-Based Program of the Arts does not take into account the difference in class sizes as the classrooms contain students that are not enrolled in the program (i.e., stacked classes).

## 4.5 Recommendations

*Specialized Programs are well regarded and desired by students and parents, demonstrating merit in continuing such programs. The recommendations include:*

- Recommendation 7.** *To ensure better geographic distribution, HWDSB should consider equitably rebalancing programming into strategically located hubs, or add to current programming in Wards with fewer Specialized Programs, such Wards 15, 13, 12, 10, and 9, contingent on demand.*
- Recommendation 8.** *Given the additional resources that are required to run certain Specialized Programs, HWDSB should consider the relocation or closure of Specialized Programs with consistently low enrolment and small class sizes. These include:*
- Firstly, as enrolment in ArtSMART is low, HWDSB should consider closure of the program. However, there may be a need to increase opportunities for students in Performing Arts programs at MacNab or other schools given the high level of demand, in the Audition-Based Program of the Arts which is currently at capacity. HWDSB should also explore community feedback about other desired Arts programs before establishing any new program offerings.*
- Secondly, although the IB program has just over 100 students, the viability of continuing the program at Ancaster is low due to limited enrolment. HWDSB should consider the closure of the IB program at Ancaster and determine whether there is sufficient interest to maintain the IB program at Westdale or consider moving the IB Program to a location where interest would be higher and lead to greater enrolment.*
- Recommendation 9.** *The Board should establish a framework with guiding principles as to how new Specialized Programs are developed and launched, including how they formally capture student/parent voice, and align with local labour market and/or postsecondary education requirements.*

- Recommendation 10.** *The Board should establish a criteria (for example, a criteria based on enrolment, class sizes, staffing and other incremental costs) that would initiate the closure of a Specialized Program.*
- Recommendation 11.** *The Board should provide equitable support, resourcing, and buy-in for Specialized Programs, and provide information and education to staff to help challenge belief systems.*
- Recommendation 12.** *The Board should determine a per program budget that can support a marketing strategy for all Specialized Programs to help increase awareness among students and parents.*
- Recommendation 13.** *HWDSB should endeavor to review elements of the Strategy periodically between comprehensive global reviews.*
- Recommendation 14.** *A lottery system for the Self-Directed, Self-Paced Program at Westmount should be established for all qualifying students.*
- Recommendation 15.** *HWDSB should examine the feasibility of opening a Special Education Program at Westmount by conducting a needs assessment to evaluate student needs, available capacity, and resources.*
- Recommendation 16.** *The Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program at Westmount should be better promoted across the Board.*
- Recommendation 17.** *Although Westmount is a system school, it is not available to students beyond Grade 9. Westmount can better function as a “system school” by developing processes that enable at-risk students to transfer in, with additional support staff assigned to the school.*
- Recommendation 18.** *Enrolment at Westmount should be centrally managed by the Board, necessitating additional Board resources to be assigned to this centrally managed process.*
- Recommendation 19.** *Although some schools already implement Self-Directed Learning Days and teachers as advisors, HWDSB should consider how these promising or best practices from Westmount can be more formally established and supported throughout HWDSB schools.*

- Recommendation 20.** *HWDSB should consider transportation subsidies to support students in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program with exceptional need, and work with school administrators to define these criteria for exceptional need.*
- Recommendation 21.** *The Board should consider conducting a separate review of the System Alt Ed program to explore whether the supports for students are sufficient and responsive to their needs.*



# REVIEW OF THE FRENCH IMMERSION LOCATION STRATEGY AND APPLICATION PROCESS



**MALATEST**

The current French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process was approved on November 10, 2016. The current strategy defines the delivery of a continuous French Immersion Program from Grade 1 through secondary school. The Strategy outlines the entry point in Grade 1 via a system-wide application process, with guaranteed placement in the program. The application process for French Immersion is open to all current Senior Kindergarten students enrolled in HWDSB schools. Families complete an online application form during the Fall prior to Grade 1. Applications that are submitted by the deadline have guaranteed placement in the French Immersion Program. Once applications are reviewed, HWDSB notifies families of their assigned French Immersion school, and parents must confirm acceptance to hold their spot.

Late applications are accepted after the deadline, but placement depends on available spots. Students will be accepted at the school closest to the student's home address, based on their French Immersion boundary if spots are available. Transportation is provided to students who accept a spot at their French Immersion catchment school according to the HWDSB transportation policy. If no spots are available at their French Immersion catchment school, the student will be placed on a waitlist and be offered a spot at an out-of-catchment school with space however no transportation is provided. Other criteria used for placement in a school provides consideration to factors such as sibling priority, and the balancing English and French enrolments at dual track schools.

The Strategy states that French Immersion may be offered in single-track or dual-track schools, depending on system accommodation needs. The Strategy outlines that late applications and students from outside the HWDSB are accommodated dependent on available space. Late entry (after Grade 1) is dependent upon review of the students' records or confirmation of an equivalent background in French.

## **5.1 Overview of the current FI/FSL model in HWDSB**

Programming for French as a Second Language (FSL) in HWDSB consists of French Immersion, which starts in Grade 1, and Core French, which starts in Grade 4. Extended French<sup>77</sup> is not offered in the Board. French Immersion is offered at 18 elementary schools (two of which are single-track French Immersion schools<sup>78</sup>) and two secondary schools (both are dual-track English and French schools). At the elementary level, as

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<sup>77</sup> Extended French is an FSL program offered in some boards, where instructional time in French must be at least 25% in each grade of the program, and students must accumulate a minimum of 1260 hours of French instruction by the end of Grade 8.  
<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/curriculum/elementary-fsl/grades/extended-g5/context/programs>

<sup>78</sup> École Élémentaire Michaëlle Jean and Norwood Park.

stated above, transportation using community stops<sup>79</sup> is provided to students attending the designated French Immersion school in their catchment area. Transportation requirements are sizeable for French Immersion students, as just under 40% of elementary French Immersion students attend their French Immersion catchment school. Transportation is also provided to secondary French Immersion students.

Based on information from the HWDSB website, the Board strives to exceed Ministry mandated requirements for French Immersion Programming at the elementary level. These mandated levels dictate that 50% of the total instructional time must be in French and that students receive a minimum of 3,800 hours of French instruction by the end of Grade 8. HWDSB notes that they strive to provide students in Grades 7 and 8 with French instruction that represents 50% to 60% of total instructional time which is more than the mandated 50%.<sup>80</sup>

### 5.1.1. French Immersion

Enrolment in French Immersion has remained relatively consistent since 2019, ranging from approximately 9-10% of the Board's elementary student population, and from 6-7% of the Board's secondary student population (see Table 16). Up until the most recent academic year, the number of Grade 1 students waitlisted for French Immersion has remained consistent and relatively small, suggesting that demand for the program has remained relatively consistent in the Board as well.



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<sup>79</sup> According to HWDSB's transportation policy, a community stop is a common area for student pickup and drop offs which may include, but are not limited to: parks, schools and places of worships.

<sup>80</sup> [www.hwdsb.on.ca/elementary/programs/french-as-a-second-language/french-immersion/](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/elementary/programs/french-as-a-second-language/french-immersion/)

**Table 16. Approximate enrolment in French Immersion from 2019-2020 to 2024-2025 academic years**

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
<b>ELEMENTARY</b>						
Approximate # of French Immersion students*	3652	3620	3655	3583	3657	3681
Total # of students in the board‡	36664	35342	35978	37044	37736	37859
% of students enrolled in French Immersion*	9.96%	10.24%	10.16%	9.67%	9.69%	9.72%
# of waitlisted Grade 1 students	10	9	15	10	12	60
<b>SECONDARY</b>						
Approximate # of French Immersion students*	974	1018	1041	989	965	939
Total # of students in the board‡	14102	13992	14088	14498	14950	14882
% of students enrolled in French Immersion	6.91%	7.28%	7.39%	6.82%	6.45%	6.31%

\*French Immersion enrolment numbers are approximate, provided by HWDSB.

‡Number of students in the board obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-elementary-schools> and <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/enrolment-by-grade-in-secondary-schools>.

Number of waitlisted students was provided by HWDSB.

Retention of students from elementary to secondary French Immersion varies substantially by school, with retention rates ranging from 13% to 54% within the most recent school year. Notably, retention rates dropped for all elementary schools from the 2023-2024 school year to the 2024-2025 school year. Although it was not possible to calculate an average program retention rate for the overall Board based on the data provided, the retention rate from Grade 8 French Immersion to Grade 9 French Immersion is estimated to be approximately 32% for the 2024-2025 school year.

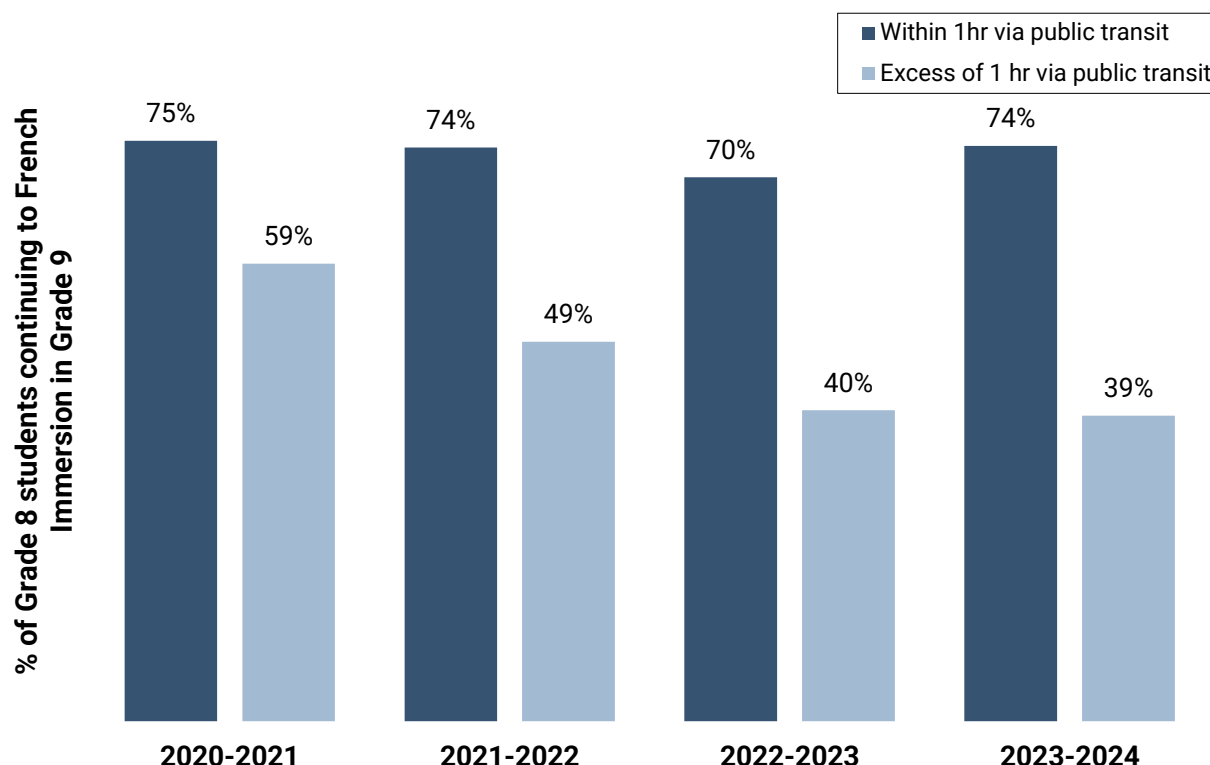
Analysis was undertaken to establish the extent to which proximity of the elementary school to the nearest secondary school that offered French Immersion influenced FI retention, as shown in Figure 10, students in elementary schools located within 1 hour of public transit to/from the nearest secondary school that offered French Immersion experienced transition rates that were markedly higher than for those students whose elementary school was more than 1 hour away using public transit.

Further analysis was also undertaken to examine transition rates from students in single track FI schools versus dual track. Analysis of the data suggests that there were no major differences in transition rates on the basis of elementary school type (single track versus dual track) although some of the transition could be a function of distance (Michaëlle Jean is more than 1 hour away via public transit to the nearest French Immersion high school whereas Norwood students would be less than 1 hour commute time from the nearest French Immersion secondary school).

When transition rates were assessed by secondary school, transition rates were higher for elementary French Immersion schools whose designated secondary French Immersion school is Westdale Secondary. Between 2020-2021 and 2023-2024 academic years, the average transition rate into Westdale Secondary for French Immersion was 75%, while the average transition rate into Sherwood was 54% during the same years.

The analysis of French Immersion transition rates suggests that transition rates from elementary to secondary programs have generally remained unchanged for students in close proximity to FI secondary schools. However, transition rates for students located further away from their nearest French Immersion secondary schools have been declining continuously in between 2020-2021 and 2023-2024, as transition rates have declined from 59% in 2020-2021 to only 39% in 2023-2024 (Figure 10. ).

**Figure 10. Retention in French Immersion Program from elementary to secondary (Grade 8 to Grade 9)**



Data was provided by HWDSB. Percentages represent the approximate proportion of Grade 8 French Immersion students from the previous school year who remained in the French Immersion Program in Grade 9 the following year. As the mode of transportation provided by HWDSB for secondary French Immersion is public transit when time on transit is 1 hour or less, elementary schools were grouped by approximate transit time from the school to their designated secondary French Immersion school (Sherwood Secondary School or Westdale Secondary School, estimated using Google Maps). Elementary schools with an estimated transit time under 1 hour include: Benetto, Dalewood, Kanétskare, Lawfield, Norwood Park, Sir William Osler, and W. H. Ballard. Elementary schools with an estimated transit time in excess of 1 hour include: Frank Panabaker South, Eastdale, Guy B. Brown, and Michaelle Jean.

As Grade 8 to 9 transition rates for French Immersion students were not available for other school boards, the ratio of elementary to secondary French Immersion students was used as a proxy indicator (see Table 17). In the 2023-2024 school year, HWDSB had 0.24 secondary students in French Immersion for every elementary student in French Immersion (or 4.08 elementary students per secondary student), suggesting that for every four elementary students in French Immersion, only one will continue with the program in secondary. Elementary to secondary ratios for DSB Niagara and Halton DSB suggest these boards have better retention of French Immersion students between elementary and secondary, with 0.30-0.39 secondary students per elementary student (or 3.36 to 2.58 elementary students per secondary student) during the same academic year. Comparatively, Peel DSB, Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB, and Waterloo DSB may have lower

elementary to secondary transition rates than HWDSB, with 0.13-0.15 elementary students per secondary student (or 7.67 to 6.54 elementary students per secondary student). It should be noted that Peel, Waterloo and Halton DSB's all recently introduced new changes to their respective French Immersion policies which have yet to impact transition rates as the rates presented below are based on older program models and not the newly introduced program models.

**Table 17. Comparison of elementary to secondary French Immersion students by board**

School board	# of elementary FI students	# of secondary FI students	# of secondary FI students per elementary FI student	Ratio of elementary to secondary FI students
<b>2023-2024</b>				
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	3,655	895	0.24	4.08:1
Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB	1,340	205	0.15	6.54:1
DSB Niagara	2,675	1,035	0.39	2.58:1
Halton DSB	7,190	2,140	0.30	3.36:1
Peel DSB	12,620	1,645	0.13	7.67:1
Waterloo Region DSB	6,435	870	0.14	7.40:1
<b>Average of comparison boards</b>	-	-	<b>0.22</b>	<b>4.60:1</b>
<b>2022-2023</b>				
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	3,560	695	0.20	5.12:1
Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB	1,355	155	0.11	8.74:1
DSB Niagara	2,650	1,055	0.40	2.51:1
Halton DSB	7,440	2,420	0.33	3.07:1
Peel DSB	13,310	1,835	0.14	7.25:1
Waterloo Region DSB	7,625	845	0.11	9.02:1
<b>Average of comparison boards</b>	-	-	<b>0.22</b>	<b>4.53:1</b>

FI = French Immersion. Uses provincial data on French as a Second Language enrolment.<sup>81</sup> The ratio of elementary to secondary students in French Immersion is used as a proxy indicator for retention in French Immersion between elementary and secondary school.

<sup>81</sup> Data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/french-as-a-second-language-enrolment>

During the 2024-2025 school year, 61% of elementary students enrolled in French Immersion were attending a school outside of their catchment area. Although far fewer secondary students were enrolled in French Immersion during the same period, the proportion of French Immersion students attending an out of catchment school was similar (66%).

### 5.1.2. Core French

In the 2024-2025 academic year, at the secondary level, 3648 students (20% of all secondary students) were enrolled in Core French. Participation in Core French substantially dropped after Grade 9 to a minority of secondary students, likely because only one French credit is required for graduating with the OSSD.

**Table 18. Percent of HWDSB students enrolled in Core French (2024-2025)**

Grade	% of students enrolled in Core French
9	75%
10	17%
11	7%
12	3%

Based on data provided by HWDSB.

Based on provincial data,<sup>82</sup> secondary enrolment in Core French in the Board has fluctuated. 26% of all HWDSB secondary students were enrolled in Core French during the 2023-2024 school year, and 13% were enrolled in the 2022-2023 school year.

## 5.2 How does the French Immersion Program align with the strategic directions of HWDSB?

As noted previously, HWDSB has a very open French Immersion Program, as the Board will accommodate all students who wish to enrol in French Immersion without placing restrictions on the number of students who can enrol in the program each year. In comparison to other studied Boards, the entry point for French Immersion at HWDSB is also generally earlier than other regional boards.

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<sup>82</sup> Data obtained from <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/french-as-a-second-language-enrolment>.

### 5.2.1. Equity of access to the French Immersion Program

Although HWDSB has a policy that supports access to French Immersion for all, the student characteristics suggest that the French Immersion option is not being pursued equally across all students.

For example, administrative data from the 2024-2025 school year suggests disproportionalities in the population of French Immersion students. Relative to HWDSB elementary and secondary students who are not in French Immersion, students in French Immersion were significantly more likely to be from neighbourhoods with higher average household incomes (above \$140,000 annually).<sup>83</sup> Additionally, boys and non-binary students, students from racialized groups, and students with non-gifted exceptionalities (such as a learning disability or physical disability) were under-represented in French Immersion.

Staff echoed the concern that while the program should be open to all students, there were barriers in terms of providing such access. Most staff (74%) believed all students should have the opportunity to access French Immersion, but less than half (40%) believed the French Immersion Program is readily available to all students interested in taking it.

Perceptions of the application process were only slightly positive among elementary parents, with a little over half believing that all interested students are able to take French (58%), that the application process ensures siblings are enrolled in the same school (66%), and that students looking to enrol after the Grade 1 entry point are fairly assessed (54%).

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<sup>83</sup> In particular, students in secondary French Immersion were more likely to be from neighbourhoods with average household incomes above \$160,000 annually.

Among parents who indicated they do not support the French Immersion Program, some open-ended comments<sup>84</sup> raised the opinion that the program is exclusionary or creates inequities (35%). For instance:

“It creates a tiered education system. Most parents want to put their kids in [French Immersion] because it ‘weeds out’ challenging kids who can’t ‘handle’ the [...] setting. They believe it’s a superior education.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

“Students with behavioral challenges are not allowed in the program, making it solely for the elite.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

“In the schools that offer both English and French Immersion, the kids in the English program are often looked down upon. My children have both faced hardships from ‘not being in the French Immersion Program’ from both other students and their parents.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

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<sup>84</sup> Refers to comments received to the question, “You indicated that you do not support French Immersion Programming nor believe it is a valuable program, please tell us why.”

In terms of access, given the limited size of the waitlists for French Immersion, it does indicate that the French Immersion Program is available to all those who are interested. However, the greater proportion of students coming from higher income households does suggest that the program is being under used by certain historically disadvantaged groups, which may indicate gaps in program awareness or in the guidance provided by HWDSB regarding which students would benefit from the French Immersion Program.

### **5.3 What is the quality of the FI program?**

This review examined the quality of the French Immersion Program using several metrics. These included overall satisfaction with the program (parents, staff, students), student outcomes, as well as other metrics such as proportion of instruction in French, and ability to staff French Immersion positions with French-certified instructors.

#### **5.3.1. Satisfaction with FI program**

Elementary and secondary parents were overall satisfied with the French Immersion Program (80%) and the amount of French instruction provided (75%). However, responses indicated many parents desired more opportunities for their child(ren) to speak French outside the classroom, as well as additional parent resources to support their child(ren) in learning French at home.<sup>85</sup> Among students currently in French Immersion, most indicated they enjoy learning French (67%, n = 89).

Notably, while most parents (72%) were supportive of French Immersion as a valuable program in the Board, a lower proportion of staff (66%) held a similar opinion. In addition, less than half of staff (39%) believed French Immersion students were well-supported in their transition from elementary to secondary.

#### ***Dual-track versus single-track schools (elementary only)***

Staff in single-track schools were much more likely to indicate in the survey that students receive high quality French instruction, with 92% agreement (n = 26), while only half of staff in dual-track schools (54%, n = 241) expressed the same opinion. However, there were otherwise no differences in perceived advantages and outcomes among responses from parents and staff when comparing single-track and dual-track schools.

Many staff (54%) and parents (55%) believed French Immersion should be offered in both dual-track and single-track schools, though parents with children in single-track schools

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<sup>85</sup> Only 36% were satisfied with French learning opportunities outside the classroom, and 40% were satisfied with the existing resources and supports for parents looking to support their children in learning French.

were significantly more likely (than parents of children in dual-track schools) to support delivery of French Immersion in single-track schools only.<sup>86</sup>

In terms of outcomes associated with single track versus dual track schools, there was little data to support whether one model performed better than the other. For example, administrative data suggested that there were no differences between dual-track and single-track students on the basis of school attendance or suspensions. As noted previously, transition rates between 2019 and 2024 from Grade 8 to Grade 9 for single-track schools were not appreciably different from the transition rates experienced by students attending dual-track schools. Given the moratorium on school closures imposed by the Ministry of Education in 2017 and the inability to initiate a new Pupil Accommodation Review, the review of HWDSB's French Immersion Program did not include a more fulsome examination as to whether single-track or dual-track delivery models should be pursued by the Board, as it would not be feasible at this time to complete the steps needed to transition a school into a to single-track French Immersion school.

### ***What are the motivations for enrolling in French Immersion?***

Many parents chose to enrol their child(ren) in French Immersion to provide more opportunities in the future for their child(ren) (91%), to learn both official Canadian languages (71%), and to challenge their child(ren) at school (58%). A fair proportion of parents also enrolled their child(ren) because they believe students in French Immersion will receive more focused attention or a better learning experience (40%).

Some parents (46%), staff (51%), and students (29%) believed French Immersion improves academic outcomes. Approximately half of parents (48%) and staff (47%) believed French fluency increases students' likelihood of getting into their first choice postsecondary institution, while a slight majority (58%) of students expressed the same.

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<sup>86</sup> 44% of elementary single-track French Immersion parents were in support of delivering French Immersion in single-track schools only, compared to 18% of elementary dual-track French Immersion parents.

In focus group discussions, some parents noted that families would choose the French Immersion option as a way to avoid having their child(ren) attend an elementary school that they deemed to be of lesser quality than the French Immersion school.

“I know of many parents on my street who put their child in a French Immersion Program because they did not want the child to come to this school.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

“It’s known that if you want to have your child go to a different school out of your neighbourhood, enrolling in French Immersion is the way to do it.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

Some parents who opted for French Immersion also noted that they felt that the French Immersion classrooms provided a better learning environment for their children.

“Because French Immersion is harder, I think that our child is pushed to do more than they would if they were just in an English classroom.”

**–HWDSB Parent**

Some school administrators also acknowledged that French Immersion may inadvertently contribute to streaming students out of the program.

“We are challenged to provide learning support in French to some students, as the number of Learning Resource Teachers who are French qualified is very low... That means often students who are having learning challenges may feel that they need to go to the English stream to get the needed supports.”

**–HWDSB School Administrator**

Among parents of students who are not enrolled in French Immersion, many indicated they had never considered enrolling their child in the program (73%) and that French Immersion is not offered at their child(ren)’s current elementary school (72%). Some parents also believed French Immersion may not be the best learning environment for their child(ren) (60%).

Some parents shared in the open-ended comments of the survey<sup>87</sup> that French has limited practical value (such as for jobs, daily life in provinces where English is the primary language; 32%), and believed being in French Immersion would negatively affect learning in other core subjects and skills (such as reading, writing, math; 20%). A minority of parents (13%) also believed the program to be of poor quality (e.g., qualifications of teachers, ability to provide quality French programming, etc.).

Staff most often reported students transferring out of French Immersion due to encountering learning challenges in the classroom (79%) or needing additional supports that are not available within the program (63%). Other common reasons for leaving the French Immersion Program observed by staff included behavioural challenges (53%), students feeling a lack of belonging (50%) and wanting to be with their friends who are not in French Immersion (48%), and transportation issues with attending the program at an out-of-catchment school (49%).

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<sup>87</sup> Refers to comments received to the question, “You indicated that you do not support French Immersion Programming nor believe it is a valuable program, please tell us why.”

### 5.3.2. Student outcomes

Out of 215 Grade 12 students in French Immersion during the 2024-2025 school year, 182 (84%) took a DELF test. Of those students who took the test, the majority (84%) challenged it at the B1 (Intermediate) level, with the remaining (16%) opting for the B2 (Upper Intermediate) level. Overall, 90% of students who attempted a DELF test passed. Pass rates were similar between test levels (93% of students passed the B2 test, and 90% passed the B1 test). Relative to Core French students, French Immersion students were more likely to have passed the DELF, particularly when comparing pass rates for B1 test-takers (see section on [Core French](#) for details on DELF pass rates of Core French students).

Administrative data from the 2024-2025 academic year indicates that suspensions were less likely among French Immersion students, and French Immersion students had better attendance during the school year, missing an average of 4.5 fewer days of school compared to non-French Immersion students.<sup>88</sup> In addition, secondary students in French Immersion were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, have more credits<sup>89</sup> and volunteer hours<sup>90</sup> accumulated, and be on track to graduate on time. Grade 12 students in French Immersion were also more likely to graduate than non-French Immersion Grade 12 students. These findings suggest better outcomes for students enrolled in French Immersion, however, as it was noted that the demographic profile of French Immersion students are different from that of the general student population, it is unclear as to whether these positive outcomes are solely the function of the French Immersion Program, or could be reflective of the different socio-economic background of the students in French Immersion, who would have likely achieved similar high outcomes even if not enrolled in French Immersion.

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<sup>88</sup> French Immersion students (elementary and secondary) averaged 16.23 absent days during the 2024-2025 school year, compared to 20.77 absent days among non-French Immersion students.

<sup>89</sup> Grade 11/12 French Immersion students in particular had accumulated over 20% more credits than non-French Immersion Grade 11/12 students on average (28.03 credits versus 22.77 credits).

<sup>90</sup> Secondary students in French Immersion had accumulated 34% (or 8.65 hours) more volunteer hours compared to non-French Immersion secondary students (33.68 hours) versus 25.03 hours). This difference was even more pronounced when comparing students in Grades 11 and 12 only, with French Immersion students having 63% (or 21.88 hours) more volunteer hours on average (56.35 hours versus 34.46 hours).

### 5.3.3. Impacts of staffing challenges on French instruction

While HWDSB staff are generally supportive of the French Immersion Program as two-thirds (66%) of surveyed staff indicated they perceive French Immersion as a valuable program in the Board, there were concerns regarding the impacts of staffing challenges on French instruction and the sustainability of the French Immersion Program at current levels of utilization. For example, less than half of staff (48%) who participated in the survey believed French instruction in French Immersion is high quality.

Concerns regarding the quality of French Immersion Program stem from several issues including:

- Inability to recruit sufficient numbers of French-certified teachers to meet the demand of the current model of French Immersion Programming.
- High absences among French-certified teachers due to the requirement to remain in a French assignment for 5 years.
- Considerable variance in the proportion of French taught in HWDSB schools.

#### *Staffing challenges*

In focus groups with Board and school administrators who were responsible for French Immersion Programs, it was noted that the Board was unable to recruit the number of French-certified teachers to support both French Immersion and Core French Programs. Administrators pointed out that as of the start of the 2025-2026 school year, several French Immersion classrooms had to be staffed with English-speaking instructors due to the inability to fill these positions with French-certified instructors. Administrators also noted that absences of French-certified teachers posed additional challenges, as the pool of French-certified supply teachers was extremely limited.

This issue of the French Immersion staffing challenge was corroborated by staff, as less than one in five (17%) of staff surveyed believed the current staffing resources are sufficient for meeting the demands of the French Immersion Program.

The issue of shortages of French-certified instructors is not unique to HWDSB. In terms of the other Boards contacted as part of this review, they voiced these same issues – that they could not find sufficient numbers of French-certified teachers and that French-certified teachers absences were difficult to cover with qualified supply teachers.

At the provincial level, there have been numerous studies and reports that have documented the considerable gap in terms of Ontario having sufficient numbers of French-certified instructors. For example, a 2021 study funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education noted that in order for Ontario to meet the French language instruction

demand, the number of French-certified teachers needed to grow by more than 1,050 per year, which is considerably higher than the 550 French-certified teachers who are currently certified each year.<sup>91</sup> Recent reviews of Ministry and other educational materials suggest that French language staffing challenges remain and are projected to worsen as the pace of retirements quicken in the coming years.<sup>92</sup>

A further issue compounding HWDSB's ability to recruit sufficient numbers of French-certified teachers could be related to current hiring practices, as it was explained by HWDSB staff that employment offers to new teachers are made later than other boards. This unfortunately means that many teachers will accept teaching positions in other boards as they cannot wait for the confirmation of an offer from HWDSB.

### ***Absences of French Immersion teachers in HWDSB***

According to discussions with student and parents, when French Immersion teachers were absent, the replacement teacher was not always a French-certified teacher. Students and parents reported that some French Immersion classrooms went months without a French teacher, expressing that it left them feeling behind in their level of French acquisition. In discussion with Board staff, the difficulty in finding a French-certified supply teacher was echoed, primarily resulting from the limited availability of French-certified Occasional and Long-Term Occasional lists.

### ***Variance in the proportion of instruction taught in French***

Information from the Board notes that the French Immersion Program strives to deliver French Immersion instruction above the Ministry mandated levels (3,800 hours or 50% French instruction in elementary). Although the Board notes that it has set targets by grade level (see Table 19), it is unclear what target is being achieved across all grades. Board staff noted challenges in terms of estimating the proportion of instruction in French, as data is limited in terms of actual instruction provided due to lack of French language staff to deliver the targeted instruction, and limited data from the schools as to "optional" French instruction that may be provided.

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<sup>91</sup> [www.ontario.ca/page/report-shortage-teachers-ontarios-french-language-education-system](http://www.ontario.ca/page/report-shortage-teachers-ontarios-french-language-education-system)

<sup>92</sup> [ontariodirectors.ca/application/files/4417/4647/3537/CODE\\_ON\\_Education\\_Staffing\\_Crisis\\_April\\_2025.pdf](http://ontariodirectors.ca/application/files/4417/4647/3537/CODE_ON_Education_Staffing_Crisis_April_2025.pdf)

**Table 19. Target % of instruction in French by Grade**

Grade	Target % of instruction in French
1	68%-85%
2-3	68%-80%
4-6	68%-80%
7-8	50%-60%

The focus groups provided additional insights as to the possible variance in terms of French Language instruction provided. Some school administrators noted that they were struggling to provide even the minimum targets, and that absences of French qualified teachers severely affected their ability to meet established targets. In contrast, some other school administrators noted that they were less affected by such absences, as they had French-certified instructors who were teaching both English and French, and could deploy such teachers to teach more French as required.

Parents also highlighted some of the differences in the amount of French being taught in the schools. One parent noted:

“I had hoped that my school would have more instruction in French, when I talk to another parent whose daughter is in another FI school, she told me that she thinks almost 70% of subjects are being taught in French, and that the school promotes French for extra-curricular and after school events... We don’t have any of that in our school!”

**–HWDSB Parent**

Variance in the proportion of French language instruction is also problematic for equitable delivery of the French Immersion Program. A variance in the proportion of French instruction would lead to inequities in terms of the quality of French Immersion instruction provided to all students.

#### **5.3.4. Is HWDSB's French Immersion Program being delivered in a financially sustainable manner?**

In general, assuming no differences in class sizes between French Immersion and non-French Immersion Programs, the only cost associated with French Immersion would be the cost associated with transportation for students attending their French Immersion catchment school. The total transportation costs for French Immersion students was provided by HWDSB. These costs represent the cost of transportation and are not incremental in all cases, as students may otherwise be eligible for transportation regardless of participation in the French Immersion program. In 2024-25, HWDSB spent a total of \$2,974,169.00 on transportation in French Immersion, or \$1,195.00 per student transported.

Just under half of elementary parents (41%) and staff (44%) believed the current French Immersion Program is delivered in a fiscally responsible manner. In terms of administrators, several voiced concerns with the sustainability of the Board's current French Immersion policy. For example, it was noted:

"I am not sure our French Immersion Program is sustainable. We have some FI schools growing very quickly in terms of enrolment, while other schools have classes going empty... We can't continue to just add to the French Immersion Program if we are draining students from other schools."

**–HWDSB School Administrator**

"We treat French Immersion as an entitlement, but is that the right policy? We have Core French that should provide good French instruction, so do we need to have so many of our students in French Immersion, especially when many drop out of the program in Grade 9?"

**–HWDSB School Administrator**

## **5.4 What is the quality of the Core French Program?**

Similar to the analysis of the French Immersion Program, a review of the Core French Program was also completed although the scope of the review was more limited compared to the French Immersion review. The review included examination of overall satisfaction with the Core French Program as well as an assessment of the quality of the program using available administrative and survey data.

### **5.4.1. Satisfaction with the Core French Program**

The results of the parent survey suggest that there is only a modest level of satisfaction with the Core French Program offered in HWDB, as half (53%) of elementary and secondary parents surveyed were satisfied overall with the current Core French programming. However, perceptions of Core French were moderately positive. For parents (64%), staff (65%), and students (53%), one of the primary perceived advantages of Core French is its contribution to developing students' appreciation of French culture. Over half of parents (55%), staff (51%), and students (61%, n = 71) also believed Core French would make students more competitive and improve their job prospects.

### **5.4.2. Other indicators of Core French Program quality**

Core French is mandatory for elementary students up to Grade 8. For secondary students, one French credit is required for the OSSD, which many students will choose to take in Grade 9. Core French at the secondary level is therefore optional for most Grade 10 to 12 students. As such, this section excludes Grade 9 students from all comparisons.

Assessing the quality of the Core French Program is challenging with the available administrative data. However, the data provided by HWDSB indicates that secondary students in Grades 10 to 12 enrolled in Core French perform better than those not taking the program, though secondary students taking Core French are not experiencing the same outcomes as French Immersion students.

In the 2024-2025 school year, 150 (33%) out of 455 Core French students in Grades 11 or 12 took a DELF test, with most test-takers (64%) opting to take the B2 test (see Table 20). Overall, 74% of Core French students who attempted a DELF test passed, though the proportion varied by test level. Core French students were less likely than French Immersion students to pass the DELF.

**Table 20. DELF test level and pass rates for Core French and French Immersion students**

DELFL test level	Core French		French Immersion	
	% of students taking each test level (n = 150)	% of students who passed	% of students taking each test level (n = 180)	% of students who passed
<b>A2 (Elementary)</b>	21%	84%	0%	-
<b>B1 (Intermediate)</b>	64%	74%	84%	90%
<b>B2 (Upper Intermediate)</b>	15%	77%	16%	93%

Data reflects Grade 11 and 12 Core French and French Immersion students from the 2024-2025 academic year only. Data was provided by HWDSB.

Administrative data from the 2024-2025 school year suggests Core French secondary students have better outcomes than students not taking any French (Core or Immersion), but poorer outcomes relative to French Immersion students. Compared to students not taking any French, Core French students were more likely to have passed the OSSLT, to be on track to graduate on time, and were more likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12). Core French students had also accumulated slightly more volunteer hours on average.<sup>93</sup> However, when compared to French Immersion students, Core French students were less likely to be on track to graduate, were less likely to have graduated (if in Grade 12), had missed more classes<sup>94</sup> and days of school<sup>95</sup> on average, and had accumulated fewer credits<sup>96</sup> and volunteer hours.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Grade 10-12 Core French students had accumulated an average of 6.22 more volunteer hours when compared to Grade 10-12 students not taking any French (35.12 hours versus 28.9 hours).

<sup>94</sup> Grade 10-12 Core French students had missed an average of 8.23 English classes and 9.21 Math classes, while Grade 10-12 French Immersion students had missed an average of 7.36 English classes and 7.71 Math classes.

<sup>95</sup> Grade 10-12 Core French students had been absent for 2.65 more days on average than Grade 10-12 French Immersion students (22.42 days versus 19.77 days).

<sup>96</sup> Grade 10-12 Core French students had accumulated 4.12 fewer credits on average when compared to Grade 10-12 French Immersion students (20.21 credits versus 24.33 credits).

<sup>97</sup> Grade 10-12 Core French students had accumulated 8.77 fewer volunteer hours on average when compared to Grade 10-12 French Immersion students (35.12 hours versus 43.89 hours).

## 5.5 French Immersion & French as a Second Language (FSL) delivery models used in other school boards

To better understand alternative French Immersion delivery models, French Immersion and Core French Programs in four other boards were reviewed. The basis for the board selection was developed in consultation with HWDSB and included the following boards:

1. **Halton DSB, Waterloo Region DSB.** These boards were selected because they shared some similar characteristics to HWDSB, and had recently enacted changes to their French Immersion/Core French Programs.
2. **DSB Niagara, Peel DSB.** These boards were selected given their proximity to HWDSB.

As part of the review, the research team reviewed publicly available documentation with respect to FSL models used in these boards, and conducted interviews with French Immersion coordinators in each board.<sup>98</sup>

Of the four school boards examined in the jurisdictional scan, two (DSB Niagara and Halton DSB) provided FSL programming exclusively through French Immersion and Core French, aligning with the model used by HWDSB. The other two boards (Peel DSB, Waterloo Region DSB) also offered Extended French. Entry points for French Immersion in the comparison boards were either Grade 1 or Grade 2 (see Table 21). Notably, for the two boards with a Grade 2 French Immersion entry point (Halton DSB, Waterloo Region DSB), the entry point for Core French was Grade 1, which is substantially earlier than the provincially-mandated Grade 4 entry point.<sup>99</sup> Waterloo Region DSB adopted the Grade 2 entry point for French Immersion for the 2024-2025 school year,<sup>100</sup> and the Grade 1 entry point for Core French for the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>101</sup> Halton DSB adopted the Grade 2 entry point for French Immersion for the 2018-2019 school year,<sup>102</sup> and the Grade 1 entry point for Core French around 2014.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Niagara DSB declined participation.

<sup>99</sup> <https://etfo-ots.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Grades-4-8-FSL-Curriculum.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.wrdsb.ca/french/french-program-review/>

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.wrdsb.ca/french/french-programs-at-the-wrdsb/>

<sup>102</sup> Only an indirect source could be found: <https://www.oakvillenews.org/local-news/halton-district-school-board-stops-grade-1-french-immersion-program-8480737>

<sup>103</sup> Only an indirect source could be found: [https://www.insidehalton.com/news/grade-1-core-french-program-expanding-at-halton-public-school-board/article\\_1850d8ca-324d-53cc-9288-9f97174fc4f4.html](https://www.insidehalton.com/news/grade-1-core-french-program-expanding-at-halton-public-school-board/article_1850d8ca-324d-53cc-9288-9f97174fc4f4.html)

**Table 21. Comparison of FSL delivery models**

School board	French Immersion entry point	Core French entry point	Extended French
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	Grade 1	Grade 4	No
<b>DSB Niagara</b>	Grade 1	<i>No info available</i>	No
<b>Halton DSB</b>	Grade 2 (2016)	Grade 1 (2014)	No
<b>Peel DSB</b>	Grade 1	Grade 4	Yes, starting in Grade 7. Students who left French Immersion are ineligible.
<b>Waterloo Region DSB</b>	Grade 2 (2024)	Grade 1 (2023)	Yes, starting in Grade 9. Only students who have completed elementary French Immersion are eligible.

Year of implementation is included in parentheses if the information was available.

Application and placement policies for French Immersion varied by board (see Table 22). Halton DSB is similar to HWDSB in that no enrolment caps or lottery system are used. However, both Peel DSB and Waterloo Region DSB use enrolment caps and a lottery system. Peel DSB caps French Immersion enrolment to 20% of the total projected Grade 1 enrolment number, while Waterloo Region DSB caps enrolment based on maximum class sizes, such that a waitlist is created if the number of applicants exceeds the maximum class size. Peel DSB implemented the use of enrolment caps and a lottery system in the 2013-2014 school year following a French Immersion review conducted in 2012.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the enrolment cap was reduced from 25% to 20% around 2021.<sup>105</sup> Waterloo Region DSB's enrolment cap is based on provincial class size regulations,<sup>106</sup> which was most recently updated in 2024.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.peelschools.org/documents/8be1ef4f-fd95-4f01-b0a1-d5d59d1085b0/Elementary-FI-Program-Review.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> An exact year could not be determined. [https://www.peelschools.org/documents/e2bb3356-c2bd-4a34-bfa9-d41baebbd129/16.4\\_ElementaryFrenchImmersionReview.pdf](https://www.peelschools.org/documents/e2bb3356-c2bd-4a34-bfa9-d41baebbd129/16.4_ElementaryFrenchImmersionReview.pdf)

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.wrdsb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022-06-20-COW-Package.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/120132>

Although HWDSB and Waterloo Region DSB give priority entry into French Immersion for younger siblings of current French Immersion students, Peel DSB does not. In an interview with Peel DSB, representatives stated priority admission for younger siblings in French Immersion was removed in 2021 following a consultation with their Human Rights department, which determined that placement procedures allowing priority entry for siblings was inequitable. To ensure equity for every applicant, since 2021, each French Immersion applicant is considered as a separate individual.

HWDSB and Waterloo Region DSB have flexible French Immersion boundaries, meaning families are permitted to enrol in French Immersion at another school in the board (such as in cases when no spots are available at the family's designated French Immersion school). Conversely, Peel DSB does not permit flexible boundaries for French Immersion, and students are expected to attend their catchment French Immersion school if they accept a spot in the program. In all boards (except DSB Niagara, for which no information was found), if a student resides within the catchment area of a school and otherwise qualifies for transportation despite their enrolment in the French Immersion program, they remain eligible for transportation. However, when boards have flexible boundaries, transportation is not provided to students who accept a placement at an out-of-boundary school.

**Table 22. Summary and comparison of application, placement, and transportation policies for French Immersion**

School board	Enrolment caps used	Lottery system used	Sibling priority	Flexible boundaries	Transportation
<b>Hamilton-Wentworth DSB</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Provided only to students within the French Immersion catchment area of the school. Transportation is not provided to students who accept a placement at an out-of-boundary school.
<b>DSB Niagara</b>	<i>No info available</i>	<i>No info available</i>	<i>No info available</i>	<i>No info available</i>	<i>No info available</i>
<b>Halton DSB</b>	No	No	<i>No info available</i>	<i>No info available</i>	Provided only to students within the French Immersion catchment area of the school.
<b>Peel DSB</b>	Yes, the cap is set at 20% of the projected Grade 1 enrolment number. (2013, ~2021)	Yes (2013)	No (2021)	No	Provided only to elementary students within the French Immersion catchment area of the school
<b>Waterloo Region DSB</b>	Yes, each Grade 2 French Immersion class has a maximum size. Additional students are only admitted if there are enough applicants to form another class.	Yes, in cases when demand exceeds available spots.	Yes	Yes	Provided only to students within the French Immersion catchment area of the school. Transportation is not provided to students who accept a placement at an out-of-boundary school.

Year of implementation is included in parentheses if the information was available. Sibling priority refers to whether younger siblings of students currently enrolled in French Immersion are given priority entry into French Immersion. Flexible boundaries refer to whether students are permitted to enrol in French Immersion at another school (such as in cases where no spaces are available at a family's designated French Immersion school).

In discussions with representatives from these other boards, it was noted that these boards faced very similar challenges with respect to offering a quality French Immersion Program. Key themes that emerged from these interviews can be summarized below.

1. **The instruction in French Immersion Programming suffers due to increasing demand and lack of available French-certified instructors.** All representatives contacted noted that their boards were facing challenges in terms of attracting and retaining sufficient numbers of French-certified instructors to meet the demand for French Immersion.
2. **Some boards have implemented policies to cap French Immersion enrolment to help ensure that the program can sufficiently staff French Immersion.** As noted previously, given province-wide shortages of qualified French-certified instructors, some boards (Peel DSB, Waterloo Region DSB) have established caps on French Immersion enrolment. Other boards (Halton DBS) have opted for a later entry point (Grade 2) for French Immersion as it was expressed that a later entry may result in fewer students opting in at that entry point and would help ensure that families who had a strong interest in French Immersion would enrol. It should be noted that since these new entry points were recently established, it was too early to observe any change in transition rates.
3. **Boards that have implemented enrolment caps have offered enhanced Core French, likely to accommodate families unable to enrol in French Immersion.** For boards that implemented enrolment caps for French Immersion (Peel DSB, Waterloo Region DSB), they have introduced enhanced Core French programming as a possible option for families who were unable to gain placement in the French Immersion stream.
4. **Boards that have implemented changes noted that they had a long transition period.** All boards contacted as part of the review noted that the changes that were adopted by their boards had a longer transition period allowing for time to adjust to the new models. Many also talked about “grandfathering” clauses for contentious program changes (such as the removal of the sibling policy by Peel DSB).

## 5.6 Key takeaways

The result of this review suggests that HWDSB has a very open French Immersion Program which has led to a program that has been consistently accessed by a high proportion of parents and students over time. Enrolment in French Immersion has remained relatively consistent since 2019, ranging from approximately 9-10% of the Board’s elementary student population, and from 6-7% of the Board’s secondary student

population. In general, the number of Grade 1 students waitlisted for French Immersion has remained consistent and relatively small, suggesting that the Board has generally been able to meet the demand for French Immersion over the past five years.

While the Board has provided the quantity of French Immersion requested by families, there are mixed sentiments on the quality of the French Immersion Program desired by students, parents and staff. There are numerous findings that would suggest that there are concerns that the current French Immersion Program demand exceeds the capacity. These include the following:

- Relatively low levels of satisfaction of the quality of HWDSB's French language content, less than half of staff (48%) who participated in the survey believed French instruction in French Immersion is high quality. This is not to imply that there are issues with instructors, but more importantly, that there are not enough French-certified instructors to provide quality French instruction (both for French Immersion and Core French). The reported high variance of French language instruction across schools would also suggest challenges in providing an equivalent level of French instruction to all students enrolled in the French Immersion Program.
- The proportion of students progressing from elementary to secondary French Immersion is average, but other boards have done better to ensure that elementary French Immersion students continue with their French Immersion studies in secondary schools. This could reflect more restrictive elementary FI enrolment policies that reduce the proportion of students who are enrolled in elementary French Immersion but who would have no intention in remaining in the French Immersion Program once they graduate to secondary schools.
- School administrators are challenged to staff French programs (both Immersion and Core French) with French-certified instructors. Parents noted this challenge as well, expressing that there have been long periods in which French Immersion classes have not been staffed by French-certified instructors. Among the French-certified instructors, Board staff explained that French-certified teachers have high absences rates given the demands to remain in the French assigned position for a minimum of 5 years, and the inability to fill these absences with French-certified replacement teachers.

There is no easy solution to address some of the capacity issues associated with the French Immersion Program. Information available from the Ontario Ministry of Education suggests that demand for French Immersion instructors is outpacing domestic supply by a 2:1 margin. This staff challenge is not unique to HWDSB, all boards contacted as part of

this review noted that they were facing the same challenges in terms of attracting and retaining French-certified teachers. HWDSB is also affected by hiring policies that impair the ability to quickly fill vacancies for such instructors as a result of their hiring timelines.

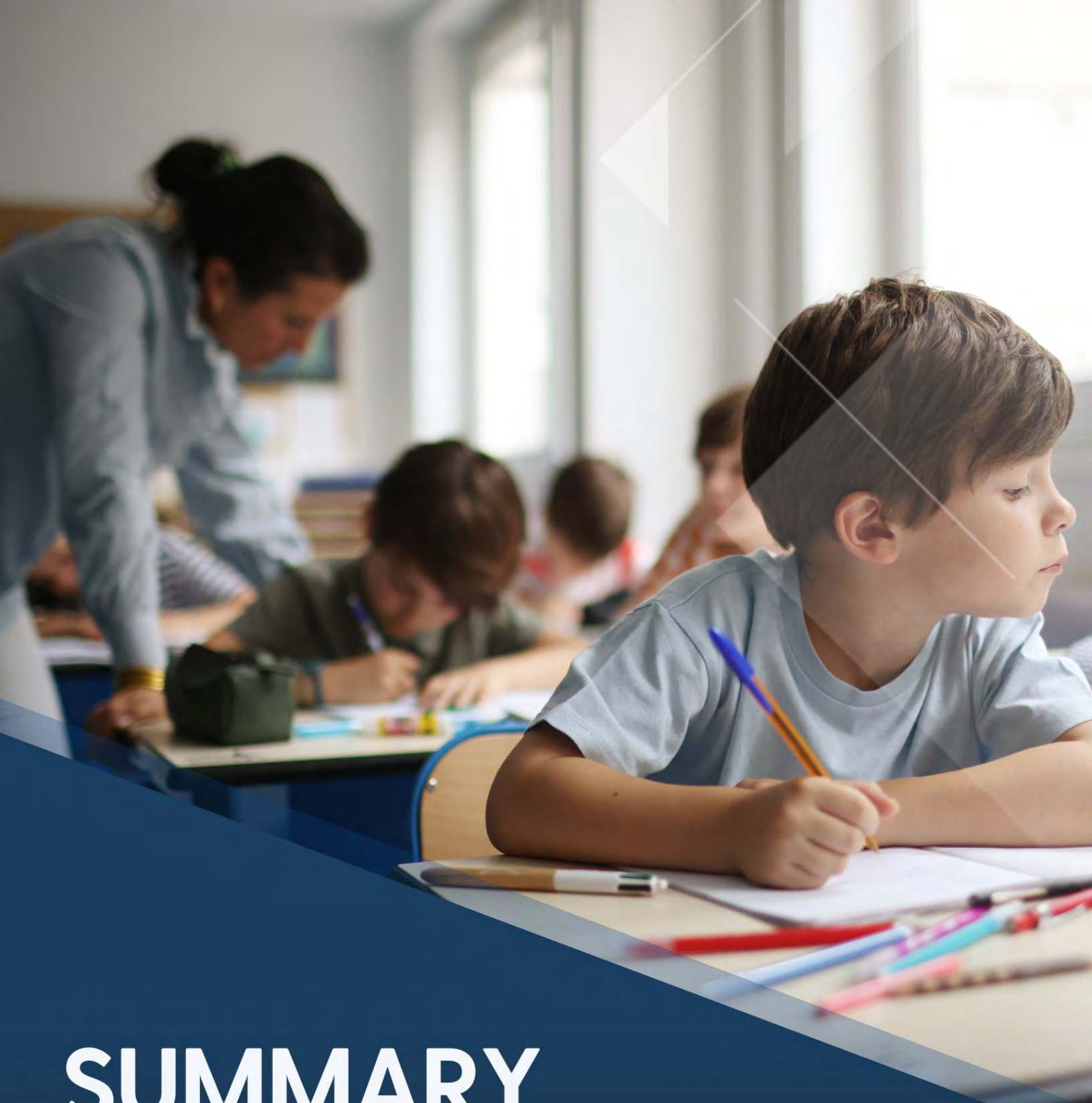
Other boards consulted as part of this review have adopted policies that would effectively serve to limit the demand for French Immersion. While some boards have implemented board-wide caps on enrolments to limit French Immersion Programs, others have modified their entry points to French Immersion (Grade 2 entry) which means fewer students transferring into the French Immersion Program from other schools.

There are also concerns that the French Immersion Program has created a “two-tiered” education system. Analysis of the socio-economic profile of the neighbourhoods in which French Immersion students reside indicate that they are predominately from higher income families with lower educational risks. Focus group discussions also suggested that some parents are using French Immersion Programming as a way to choose schools in which they wish their child(ren) to attend and circumvent the assignment to their English catchment school.

The results of the review highlight that transition rates from elementary to secondary are strongly associated with distance from the elementary French Immersion school to the secondary French Immersion school. Given that only 1 in every 4 elementary French Immersion students progress to secondary French Immersion, this could play a significant factor in the decision to remain in the French Immersion Program. Although the study did not have the ability to talk to such students directly to understand their decisions as to why they did not continue in French Immersion at the secondary level, it would be important to better understand the reasons for such students leaving the program (i.e., quality, concerns about grades for PSE admission).

## 5.7 Recommendations:

- Recommendation 22.** *Given the challenges in terms of providing a uniform quality French Immersion Program, the Board should implement policies that will better align French Immersion Programming with available capacity. This could include a board-wide cap on elementary enrolments, establishing the French Immersion entry point to be at Grade 2, standardizing the proportion of instruction in French Immersion in line with the Ministry mandate, and/or considering which subjects should be taught in French (i.e., excluding math and sciences from being taught in French).*
- Recommendation 23.** *In cases where demand for the French immersion Program exceeds the capacity to offer the program, retain the lottery system to determine acceptance into the program.*
- Recommendation 24.** *The Board should establish processes to be able to monitor and report on the proportion of French language instruction provided to French Immersion by school to ensure that all students are receiving equivalent amounts of instruction in French.*
- Recommendation 25.** *The Board should consider enhanced Core French Programs in elementary grades to provide some additional French language instruction to students who may not be able to access the French Immersion stream due to enrolment limitations. This could include, for example, having Core French language instruction starting prior to Grade 4. Providing earlier Core French would help to offset a Grade 2 entry point to French Immersion, should the Board consider this change.*
- Recommendation 26.** *The Board should examine current hiring practices and timelines that may affect the Board's ability to recruit certified French language instructors.*
- Recommendation 27.** *The Board should undertake additional research to establish whether the proportion of elementary students who would continue to secondary French Immersion would improve if secondary French Immersion was offered in at least one other location. This could include exit surveys with non-transitioning students as well as more consultations with families who are currently in elementary French Immersion.*



# SUMMARY

Highlighted below are the key findings associated with the review of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's Elementary Program Strategy, Secondary Program Strategy, and the French Immersion Location Strategy and Application Process. The synthesis of the key findings are presented at a system perspective, although where appropriate, findings specific to a particular strategy have also been highlighted.

***Student enrolment in Focus or Specialized Programs vary, with very limited enrolment in elementary Focus Programs but high levels of registration in secondary Specialized Programs and French Immersion Programs.***

Overall, student participation in HWDSB's Focus and Specialized Programs vary. While it is estimated that less than 1% of elementary students are enrolled in an elementary Focus Program, student registrations in secondary Specialized programs and French Immersion is markedly higher. For example, it is estimated that student registrations in secondary Specialized Programs (excluding ESL/ELD and Westmount's Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program) represent over 60% of the Board's secondary student population. Similarly, total enrolment in French Immersion represented 8.7% of the total student population in 2024-2025. This suggests that while changes to the elementary Focus Programs will have only modest impacts on most students and families, changes identified for secondary Specialized Programs and the French Immersion Programs will likely generate considerably more reaction given the significant numbers of students, staff and families affected by such changes. This context should help guide the Board in terms of communications and possible implementation of proposed recommendations.

***Overall, there is a high degree of parent and student satisfaction with the program offerings reviewed, although this view depends on whether they have a child in one of these programs.***

In completing the review of the three Program Strategies, it confirms that in general, there is a high degree of parent satisfaction with the program offerings among parents who have a child(ren) enrolled in such programs. While satisfaction was highest among parents who had children enrolled in the French Immersion Program (80% citing satisfaction with the French Immersion), parents were also generally satisfied with the secondary Specialized Programs (69% satisfied) as well as the elementary Focus Programs (64% satisfied among parents with a child in an elementary Focus Program).

However, support for these programs was considerably lower if the parent did not have a child in the program. For example, only one third (33%) of parents who did not have a child in an elementary Focus Program believed these programs meet the needs of all HWDSB families (compared to 64% of parents with a child enrolled in a Focus Program). Similarly, 65% of parents with children who were not enrolled in a Specialized Program were satisfied with secondary programming (compared to 76% of parents with a child

enrolled in a Specialized Program). Finally, 65% of parents with children not enrolled in French Immersion supported the program (compared to 95% of parents with children enrolled in French Immersion).

Student support for these programs is also evident through the generally high demand for such programs. For example, enrolment in Focus Programs has grown by 6% since 2019, which is almost three times the enrolment growth for Kindergarten to Grade 8 (which saw 2.6% growth in enrolment from 2019 to 2025). Similarly, the Board has witnessed high and consistent enrolment in secondary Specialized Programs as well as the Board's French Immersion Program.

***Staff have mixed opinions about the elementary Focus Programs and secondary Specialized Programs, citing concerns around whether these programs reflect the needs of all families.***

In contrast to the relatively high degree of parent and student satisfaction, staff had mixed opinions about these programs. Although staff believed that these programs added to the educational experience, they expressed concern that the programs were not meeting the needs of all HWDSB families. For example, only 44% of staff believed that the elementary Focus Programs met the needs of HWDSB students. Just over half (57%) of staff also expressed that the secondary Specialized Programs meet the needs of all HWDSB families.

Overall, while staff generally were supportive of the concept of Focus Programs and Specialized Programs, concerns voiced by staff centred on the types and locations of such programs, as many staff felt that the Focus Programs and Specialized Programs may not necessarily reflect the current needs of HWDSB families and that these programs were not equally accessible by all students.

***The review identified that the geographic distribution of Focus Programs and Specialized Programs provide certain areas with a high proportion of opportunities compared to other areas with few or no Focus and Specialized Programs.***

Analysis of the location of the elementary Focus Programs confirms that most Focus Programs are primarily located in the western region of urban Hamilton (Wards 1 and 14), with the exception of the Hockey program (Ward 9). As for secondary Specialized Programs, with the exception of IB at Ancaster (Ward 12), nearly all secondary Specialized Programs are located in Wards 1-8, and 14. As transportation is not provided for students to attend the Focus programs, nor is it provided for some of the Specialized Programs, the geographic distribution of programs coupled with the transportation barriers limits participation in such programs especially for those located at a distance from where the programs are offered.

***Student participation in Focus Programs, some Specialized Programs, and French Immersion is skewed towards students from higher socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods.***

While data is unavailable as to the family income of students who are enrolled in these programs, it was possible to estimate the likely SES characteristics of students enrolled in such programs based on their neighbourhood residential location. Using data from the 2021 Census, it appears that students enrolled in elementary Focus Programs, some Specialized Programs, and the French Immersion Program are residing in more affluent regions with an overall higher SES score than that of the Board average. This inequity in access is likely the function of several factors, including transportation challenges and parent knowledge about such programs.

***While parents and students are encouraged to identify what new programs they would like to see offered in HWDSB, there is no formal mechanism to collect parent/student voice and no framework to guide the development and placement of new programs.***

Based on interviews and discussions with staff and parents it appears that, at the school level, parents and students are often encouraged to identify what new programs should be offered, especially with respect to secondary Specialized Programs. However, there is no formal Board-level mechanism to collect this feedback. Moreover, while many programs are developed locally as a result of a local champion, there is a lack of strategic direction as to how these programs reflect local labour market conditions and/or have transitions to appropriate post-secondary programs. This “bottom up” approach can lead to inequities in terms of the number and types of program offerings, as such programs may be concentrated in certain schools or regions where there are parent and staff champions for such programs.

The review also noted the challenges of the “top down” approach, where the Board has placed programs in certain underserved areas. The review noted that in certain instances (e.g., International Baccalaureate program at Glendale, Aviation program at Sir Winston Churchill) programs were met with modest enrolment, as the Board did not first determine whether the programs aligned with community or local industry needs. Ideally, future program offerings will take into consideration both parent/student interest for such programs as well as strategic decision-making to ensure that there is an alignment with local labour market conditions, transition pathways (to post-secondary or vocational) as well as equitable access for students (geographic distribution).

***The rationale for establishment and maintenance of some Focus Programs and Specialized Programs needs to be revisited.***

It was noted that the rationale for the development of a number of the elementary Focus Programs and secondary Specialized Programs was to add additional experiential learning opportunities to attract and retain students in HWDSB. However, this review noted that HWDSB has been growing more quickly than that of the corresponding Catholic school board, which suggests that HWDSB is successfully attracting and retaining more students than the Catholic board. However, the relatively low retention rate of elementary Focus Program students from Grade 8 to a HWDSB secondary school (59% among Focus program students versus HWDSB average of 81%) does suggest the need to examine why such students leave the Board after completion of an elementary Focus Program, particularly within the sport-related Focus Programs.

***Parents and students noted that it was not easy to find information about the Focus Programs and Specialized Programs offered at HWDSB.***

Results suggest that a significant proportion of parents and students are generally unaware of range and breadth of Focus or Specialized Programs offered by the Board. While parents and students noted that they were knowledgeable about the programs offered in their local secondary school, they were generally unaware of the Specialized Programs at other schools. Among secondary parents whose children were not enrolled in a Specialized Program, 31% reported that they were unaware such programs were offered, and 34% of staff also identified limited awareness as a concern. In the absence of a unified communication plan, families typically receive information only from their child's school, leaving them unaware of additional program options available across HWDSB. Similarly, awareness around focus programs was generally low. While HWDSB often circulates this information by SchoolMessenger, posts information on the websites and holds information nights, elementary parents expressed a lack of knowledge about the various Focus Programs available throughout HWDSB, with just under one third (30%) of parents expressing that lack of information was a barrier to accessing the focus programs. Staff suspected that information about these programs may not be reaching all families equitably, and the way it is presented can be difficult for some historically underserved groups to understand or navigate. This lack of clear, accessible communication impacts some families—particularly those with limited English proficiency or without strong advocates—and participation may suffer as a result. In response to this issue, staff believed that enhancements could be made to communications by increasing the accessibility of the communications for historically underserved groups, improving the website navigation experience and developing a comprehensive marketing strategy for all programs that helps to attract students from across and external to the board.

***The French Immersion Program instruction suffers as a result of the inability to hire more French-certified teachers.***

While the Board has provided the quantity of French Immersion requested by families, there are mixed sentiments on the quality of the French Immersion Program desired by students, parents and staff. There are numerous findings that would suggest that there are concerns that the current French Immersion Program demand exceeds the capacity. For example, among staff, less than one-half surveyed (48%) believe that the French instruction is of high quality and parents question the amount of French instruction provided in their French Immersion school. The relatively modest transition of elementary French Immersion students to secondary French Immersion is also concerning. In terms of staffing, the Board noted the difficulty in finding sufficient numbers of French-certified teachers, and that many French Immersion classrooms could not be staffed by French-certified teachers. Other boards consulted as part of this study echoed these challenges and had implemented certain measures as a result, including enrolment caps, later entry point, standardizing the proportion of instruction in French and limiting the subjects taught in French to better align their capacity to provide a quality French Immersion Program with the level of enrolment. Many other boards struggle with staffing enough French-certified teachers, and the Ministry of Education data suggests that the demand will continue to outstrip available supply for the coming years. In this context, consideration is needed to how HWDSB can implement certain changes to the program delivery to ensure they are delivering a quality French Immersion Program.

***More research is needed to conduct in-depth assessments of certain elements of the Program strategies.***

The three Program Strategies encompass a variety of different program offerings at the elementary and secondary levels. Some elements of these Strategies (i.e., the Special Education Program in the Elementary Program Strategy, the System Alternative Education Program in the Secondary Program Strategy) are substantial programs with distinct research requirements. As such, the scope of the current Program Strategy Review was able to focus only on high-level insights, rather than undertaking an in-depth program-specific analysis. HWDSB may consider reviewing these programs separately as part of a dedicated review to better understand the extent to which these programs are meeting the needs of parents and students across HWDSB.



# APPENDIX



**MALATEST**

## Appendix 1. Equity of access for secondary programs (2024-2025 school year)

Secondary Program	Median annual household income (HHI) of student's neighbourhood	Social risk <sup>†</sup> of student's neighbourhood	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities <sup>‡</sup>	Student race*	Student gender*
<b>Audition-Based Program of the Arts</b> (n = 277)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$80,000-\$119,00 over-represented	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	Racialized groups under-represented	Non-binary students over-represented, males under-represented
<b>ArtSMART</b> (n = 17)	<i>Sample size too small to conduct test</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	Non-binary students over-represented
<b>Co-op</b> (n = 1703)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$80,000-\$119,999 over-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk < 50 <sup>th</sup> percentile over-represented, neighbourhoods with social risk > 50 <sup>th</sup> percentile under-represented	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities over-represented	Racialized groups under-represented	<i>No significant differences</i>
<b>Cosmetology</b> (n = 819)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$70,000-\$99,999 over-represented	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	Racialized groups under-represented	Female and non-binary students over-represented, males under-represented
<b>Dual Credit</b> (n = 235)	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	Male students over-represented, females under-represented
<b>ESL/ELD</b> (n = 2730)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$120,000-\$159,999 over-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk between 0-75th percentile over-represented	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities under-represented	-	Non-binary students under-represented
<b>French Immersion</b> (n = 847)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI > \$160,000 over-represented, neighbourhoods with average HHI < \$100,000 under-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk < 50th percentile under-represented	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities under-represented	Racialized groups under-represented	Female students over-represented
<b>International Baccalaureate</b> (n = 102)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI < \$49,999 or > \$160,000 over-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk < 50th percentile under-represented	No students with non-gifted exceptionalities	-	<i>No significant differences</i>
<b>Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)</b> (n = 654)	<i>No significant differences</i>	<i>No significant differences</i>	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities over-represented	Racialized groups under-represented	Male students over-represented
<b>Self-Paced, Self-Directed (Westmount)</b> (n = 1270)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$100,000-\$159,999 over-represented, neighbourhoods with average HHI between \$50,000-\$99,999 under-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk < 25th percentile under-represented, neighbourhoods with social risk between 50th-74th percentile over-represented	Students with non-gifted exceptionalities under-represented	-	<i>No significant differences</i>
<b>Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM)</b> (n = 2611)	Neighbourhoods with average HHI > \$130,000 over-represented	Neighbourhoods with social risk below 25th percentile are under-represented, neighbourhoods with social risk above 75th percentile are over-represented	<i>No significant differences</i>	Racialized groups under-represented	Male students under-represented, female students over-represented

Statistical analyses could only be conducted for programs where administrative data identifying students in a given program was available. All data was provided by HWDSB.

<sup>†</sup> Social risk was calculated by HWDSB using Statistics Canada Census data from 2021. It creates demographic profiles of schools based on data from neighbourhoods in which students live. The index is used along with other data to determine resource and support allocation to schools. Higher percentiles of social risk are typically associated with poorer outcomes.

<sup>‡</sup> Examples of non-gifted exceptionalities include learning disability, intellectual disability, deafness or hard of hearing, autism, etc.

\*Student race and student gender were collected from a self-report student survey conducted by HWDSB. 26% of HWDSB's student population provided race and gender data

## **Appendix 2. List of all recommendations**

- Recommendation 1.** *The Board should establish a formal process through which new Focus Programs can be introduced. Such a process should include a mechanism to canvas parent (and student) interest, as well as ensuring that programs are equitably distributed across all regions of HWDSB. Contingent on demand, any new Focus Programs should be established in Wards with little access to existing Focus programs, including Wards 11, 12, 13 and 15.*
- Recommendation 2.** *The Board should establish a criteria (for example, a criteria based on enrolment, class sizes, staffing and other incremental costs) that would initiate the closure of a Focus Program. The programs that should be examined for closure include SAGE, SAGE Quest and the Mandarin Language Transition program. However, there may be a need to increase opportunities for students in Arts (e.g., music, drama, and dance) and STEM programs. HWDSB should explore community feedback about desired Focus Programs before establishing any new program offerings.*
- Recommendation 3.** *The Board should consider the relocation of the Hockey program to a location that has better access to an arena.*
- Recommendation 4.** *Given the limited transition of elementary Focus Program students into secondary programs, the Board should establish what elements of the elementary Focus Programs should continue at the secondary level to help ensure students can remain in HWDSB.*
- Recommendation 5.** *The Board should determine a per program budget that can support a marketing strategy for the Focus Programs to increase general awareness of such programs as well as to broaden equity group participation.*

- Recommendation 6.** *Given that the elements of the Elementary Program Strategy were reviewed holistically with a broad focus on all program offerings, the Board should consider conducting a distinct in-depth review of certain areas, such as the Special Education Program. Moreover, as elements of the Program Strategy have evolved over time to meet the needs of the students (e.g., some of the Special Education Program supports are different than what was originally stated in the 2016 Elementary Program Strategy), it is recommended that HWDSB review elements of their Strategies periodically in between the global Program Strategy reviews.*
- Recommendation 7.** *To ensure better geographic distribution, HWDSB should consider equitably rebalancing programming into strategically located hubs, or add to current programming in Wards with fewer Specialized Programs, such Wards 15, 13, 12, 10, and 9, contingent on demand.*
- Recommendation 8.** *Given the additional resources that are required to run certain Specialized Programs, HWDSB should consider the relocation or closure of Specialized Programs with consistently low enrolment and small class sizes. These include:*
- Firstly, as enrolment in ArtSMART is low, HWDSB should consider closure of the program. However, there may be a need to increase opportunities for students in Performing Arts programs at MacNab or other schools given the high level of demand, in the Audition-Based Program of the Arts which is currently at capacity. HWDSB should also explore community feedback about other desired Arts programs before establishing any new program offerings.*
- Secondly, although the IB program has just over 100 students, the viability of continuing the program at Ancaster is low due to limited enrolment. HWDSB should consider the closure of the IB program at Ancaster and determine whether there is sufficient interest to maintain the IB program at Westdale or consider moving the IB Program to a location where interest would be higher and lead to greater enrolment.*
- Recommendation 9.** *The Board should establish a framework with guiding principles as to how new Specialized Programs are developed and launched, including how they formally capture student/parent voice, and align*

*with local labour market and/or postsecondary education requirements.*

- Recommendation 10.** *The Board should establish a criteria (for example, a criteria based on enrolment, class sizes, staffing and other incremental costs) that would initiate the closure of a Specialized Program.*
- Recommendation 11.** *The Board should provide equitable support, resourcing, and buy-in for Specialized Programs, and provide information and education to staff to help challenge belief systems.*
- Recommendation 12.** *The Board should determine a per program budget that can support a marketing strategy for all Specialized Programs to help increase awareness among students and parents.*
- Recommendation 13.** *HWDSB should endeavor to review elements of the Strategy periodically between comprehensive global reviews.*
- Recommendation 14.** *A lottery system for the Self-Directed, Self-Paced Program at Westmount should be established for all qualifying students.*
- Recommendation 15.** *HWDSB should examine the feasibility of opening a Special Education Program at Westmount by conducting a needs assessment to evaluate student needs, available capacity, and resources.*
- Recommendation 16.** *The Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program at Westmount should be better promoted across the Board.*
- Recommendation 17.** *Although Westmount is a system school, it is not available to students beyond Grade 9. Westmount can better function as a “system school” by developing processes that enable at-risk students to transfer in, with additional support staff assigned to the school.*
- Recommendation 18.** *Enrolment at Westmount should be centrally managed by the Board, necessitating additional Board resources to be assigned to this centrally managed process.*
- Recommendation 19.** *Although some schools already implement Self-Directed Learning Days and teachers as advisors, HWDSB should consider how these promising or best practices from Westmount can be more formally established and supported throughout HWDSB schools.*

- Recommendation 20.** *HWDSB should consider transportation subsidies to support students in the Self-Paced, Self-Directed Program with exceptional need, and work with school administrators to define these criteria for exceptional need.*
- Recommendation 21.** *The Board should consider conducting a separate review of the System Alt Ed program to explore whether the supports for students are sufficient and responsive to their needs.*
- Recommendation 22.** *Given the challenges in terms of providing a uniform quality French Immersion Program, the Board should implement policies that will better align French Immersion Programming with available capacity. This could include a board-wide cap on elementary enrolments, establishing the French Immersion entry point to be at Grade 2, standardizing the proportion of instruction in French Immersion in line with the Ministry mandate, and/or considering which subjects should be taught in French (i.e., excluding math and sciences from being taught in French).*
- Recommendation 23.** *In cases where demand for the French immersion Program exceeds the capacity to offer the program, retain the lottery system to determine acceptance into the program.*
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- Recommendation 26.** *The Board should examine current hiring practices and timelines that may affect the Board's ability to recruit certified French language instructors.*

**Recommendation 27.**

*The Board should undertake additional research to establish whether the proportion of elementary students who would continue to secondary French Immersion would improve if secondary French Immersion was offered in at least one other location. This could include exit surveys with non-transitioning students as well as more consultations with families who are currently in elementary French Immersion.*