



Development of a Specialized Schools and Programs Policy: Phase 2

To: Governance and Policy Committee

Date: 8 January, 2020

Report No.: 01-20-3799

Strategic Directions

- Transform Student Learning
- Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Policy Development Work Plan for the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy, as presented in this report, be approved.

Context

In June 2019, the Board of Trustees approved a policy review work plan for the Optional Attendance Policy (P013). This draft Policy proposes the removal of certain sections in the policy including alternative schools as well as specialized programs. As alternative schools are addressed in the Alternative Schools Policy (P062) and admission to specialized schools and programs is outlined in the Admission to Specialized Schools and Programs Procedure (PR612), staff also recommends that further clarity will be provided to the TDSB community through the development of a Specialized Schools and Programs Policy. The new Policy will be created to mirror the Alternative Schools Policy, in which clear definitions and policy directions for Specialized Programs will be established.

The Work Plan for development of the Policy (see Appendix A) is provided for Committee's consideration and approval. The Work Plan is supplemented by the preliminary draft provisions (see Appendix B), which are based on legislative requirements and operational requirements, consistent with the best practices of other school boards including Peel DSB and Chicago Public Schools (see Appendix C).

Action Plan and Associated Timeline

Subject to the Governance and Policy Committee and Board of Trustees directions, the draft Policy will be prepared in accordance with the Policy Development Work Plan and subsequently presented to the Governance and Policy Committee for consideration. The document will then be presented to the Board of Trustees for consideration and final approval.

Resource Implications

No additional resources will be required for implementation of the Policy.

Communications Considerations

The Policy will be communicated in accordance with the Policy Development Work Plan.

Board Policy and Procedure Reference(s)

- Optional Attendance Policy (P013)
- Alternative Schools Policy (P062)
- Optional Attendance Procedure (PR545)
- Alternative Schools Procedure (PR584)
- Admission to Specialized Schools and Programs (PR612)

Appendices

- Appendix A: Policy Development Work Plan
- Appendix B: Draft Provisions – Specialized Schools and Programs Policy
- Appendix C: Scan of Selected Ontario School Boards and Other Jurisdictions
- Appendix D: P046

From

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POLICY DEVELOPMENT WORK PLAN
Specialized Schools and Programs Policy

Date: [December 2, 2019](#)

All policies will be developed to ensure consistency with the TDSB's Mission, Values and Goals Policy (P002), the Equity Policy (P037) and the Board's Multi-Year Strategic Plan.

POLICY INFORMATION

Proposed Policy Title: **Specialized Schools and Programs**

Director's Council member responsible for development of the new Policy:
[Manon Gardner, Associate Director: School Operations and Service Excellence](#)

Phase I. APPROVAL OF POLICY RATIONALE

The rationale for the new Policy: [In the Optional Attendance Policy Review Work Plan approved by Trustees in June 2019, it was recommended that the provisions for Optional Attendance requests for regular schools/programs vs specialized schools/programs be separated and clarified. Currently, a proposed working draft policy to replace Optional Attendance is in the consultation phase. This draft has removed Alternative Schools and Specialized Programs. The TDSB already has a Policy for Alternative Schools and an associated Operational Procedure which outlines enrolment practices. It is recommended that a new policy be created to mirror the Alternative Schools policy, in which clear definitions and policy directions for Specialized Schools and Programs be established.](#)

This Policy Development Work Plan has been discussed with the Policy Coordinator:

Yes

No

Phase II. OBTAINING TRUSTEES' DIRECTIONS AND DRAFTING POLICY

This Policy Development Work Plan will be discussed at the Governance and Policy Committee meeting held on: [January 8, 2020](#)

Creating the Draft Policy

The draft Policy will be created and aligned with the current Policy Template (see Operational Procedure PR501, Policy Development and Management, Appendix A):

- Yes
- No

Detailed information on the proposed policy provisions, including findings of the policy equity assessment: [See Appendix B: Draft Provisions – Specialized Schools and Programs Policy](#)

As part of the Policy development, it is recommended to consider integrating the Policy with applicable provisions from P046, Directional Statements for Middle Level Education (Junior High School), Special Education Low Incidence Sites, Specialized Programs, and Optional French Programs. Other provisions from P046, including those related to optional French programs, would be considered and merged with related policies under review (e.g., the French-as-a-Second Language Policy (P080), Optional Attendance Policy (P013)).

- A review of leading practices for similar policies across jurisdictions has been completed and is included with this Work Plan. [See Appendix C](#)

Phase III. INTERNAL REVIEWS AND SIGN-OFFS

The draft Policy will include input from TDSB departments affected by the Policy:

- Business Operations and Service Excellence
- Equity, Well-Being and School Improvement
- Human Rights and Indigenous Education
- Leadership, Learning and School Improvement
- School Operations and Service Excellence

In addition, the following departments will be required to sign-off on the proposed draft Policy:

- Legal Services
- Governance and Board Services
- Government, Public and Community Relations

Following internal reviews and TDSB departments' sign-offs, the draft Policy will be submitted to Director's Council on:

A sign-off from the Director of Education will be obtained before proceeding with external consultations and/or Committee/Board approval.

Director of Education

Phase IV. EXTERNAL CONSULTATIONS

Are external consultations applicable to this Policy?

Yes

No (*Ministry of Education mandated policy or corporate policy without external stakeholders*)

Mandatory external consultations will include, at minimum:

1. Posting of the working draft Policy on the TDSB website for public feedback (45 days minimum)
2. Extending invitations for consultation to:

Student Senate

and

all Community Advisory Committees of the Board and conducting consultations with the Community Advisory Committees that expressed interest (either individually with each interested committee or collectively with representatives of all interested committees): [February-March 2020](#)

- Alternative Schools Community Advisory Committee
- Black Student Achievement Community Advisory Committee
- Community Use of Schools Community Advisory Committee
- Early Years Community Advisory Committee
- Environmental Sustainability Community Advisory Committee
- Equity Policy Community Advisory Committee
- French-as-a-Second-Language Community Advisory Committee
- Inner City Community Advisory Committee
- LGBTQ2S Community Advisory Committee
- Parent Involvement Advisory Committee (PIAC)
- Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)
- Urban Indigenous Community Advisory Committee

In addition to mandatory consultations, other external participants and projected dates of consultation(s) include:

- School Councils
- Professional Associations and Unions
- Other:

The following methods will be applied in the external consultations:

- Public meeting
- Facilitated focus group
- Call for public delegations
- Expert panel discussion
- Survey
- Posting on the TDSB website
- Other: email correspondence

Phase V. COMMITTEE/BOARD APPROVALS

Following external consultations and revisions, the working draft Policy will be presented to the Governance and Policy Committee on the following date: [April 2020](#)

Following recommendation by the Governance and Policy Committee, the new Policy will be presented to the Board on the following date: [May 2020](#)

Once approved, the new Policy will be added to the TDSB website.

Phase VI. IMPLEMENTATION

Following Board approval, the new Policy will be communicated through:

- Posting of the new Policy on the TDSB website through the Policy Coordinator
- Sharing with staff through the System Leaders' Bulletin
- Informing departments at staff meetings and channeling information to the school principals through respective superintendents
- Implementation of a broad communication plan for internal and external audiences, include summary of policy provisions and expected outcomes

Policy implementation will include:

- Conducting information/training sessions to TDSB staff affected by the Policy

The projected time period for conducting information/training sessions to staff will be: May – August 2020

- Initiate development of new procedures or review of associated procedures
 - [Revisions to PR612, Admissions to Specialized Schools and Programs](#)

DRAFT POLICY PROVISIONS: SPECIALIZED SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

RATIONALE

This Specialized Schools and Programs Policy (the “Policy”) was developed to support the Board’s ongoing commitment to offering a range of diverse program opportunities, and to support its commitment to improve access to Specialized Schools and Programs for all learners.

Guiding Principles:

- The Board is committed to supporting strong neighbourhood schools that are easily accessible and provide students with a wide variety of programs leading to all post-secondary destinations;
- Designated schools will provide focused, specialized programming that responds to student voice, choice and interest;
- Designated schools can also provide programming to broaden career choices and encourage innovation by engaging students in specialized learning opportunities;
- The Board will operate regional specialized schools/programs, where the delivery of specialized programs cannot be realized in a local school by bringing together system resources and student participants;
- The Board will continually review and assess our policies, procedures and practices to ensure that they promote equity, inclusion, and human rights, and make changes where necessary.

These guiding principles and policy directives were developed from the recommendations that were made through the Enhancing Equity Task Force consultations. They align with the *Director’s Response to the Enhancing Equity Task Force Report* which informed the Action Plans of the *Multi-Year Strategic Plan*, specifically the pillar of “Providing Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students.” Our commitment to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students requires that we review our policies and procedures related to access.

This Policy is aligned with the Equity Policy and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.

OBJECTIVE

To affirm the Board's commitment to providing focused specialized programming in both local schools and in regional specialized schools or programs, and to improving access for all students to these programs.

To ensure that the design, criteria and admissions practices of specialized programs do not reinforce or increase marginalization or oppression of any individual or group based on race, colour, creed, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, disability, socio-economic status, age, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, sex, gender Identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, citizenship, immigration status, family status, and marital status or body type/size or another factor as defined and covered under the TDSB Equity Policy (P037) and the Ontario Human Rights Code.

DEFINITIONS

Board refers to the Toronto District School Board, which is also referred to as "TDSB".

Designated school is the school identified by the parent's/guardian's residential address.

Local Specialized Program refers to a program within a school with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades) that is available to students registered or pre-registered at that school. The admissions process and criteria are established by the school, in consultation with Board staff.

Regional Specialized Program/School refers to a program/school with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades, etc.) that is available to students from across the district and that has an admissions process and criteria established by the Board.

TDSB is the Toronto District School Board, which is also referred to as the "Board".

RESPONSIBILITY

The Director of Education holds the primary responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the Policy. Within the Director's Office, the responsibility for the day-to-day management and coordination of the Policy is assigned to the Associate Director, School Operations and Service Excellence.

APPLICATION AND SCOPE

This Policy applies to students, parents/guardians, and staff, including principals, superintendents and school personnel involved in the establishment, administration, and monitoring of local specialized programs and regional specialized programs and schools.

POLICY

All schools are encouraged to provide programming that responds to the interests of its local communities and student voice. Schools may offer local specialized programs to students who are registered or pre-registered at their school. Where demand for the local specialized program exceeds available space, the school will develop admissions criteria that promote equity, inclusion and human rights, in consultation with Board staff.

Admission priority to regional specialized programs/schools will be given to students who are residents of the City of Toronto. These programs/schools are available to students within and beyond their designated attendance area. Only after all applicants that reside in the City of Toronto have been offered placement into regional specialized programs/schools will students from outside of Toronto be considered for placement.

The admissions criteria and application process to regional specialized programs/schools will be advertised by the Board on its website. Admission criteria by local specialized program will be advertised by schools on their school landing pages. Students will be selected for admission subject to the students meeting the required admission criteria for the specialized program(s)/school(s) as determined by the Board.

The Board will determine annually the available space in each regional specialized program/school based on enrolment projections for the regular program as well as other programs that may exist in the school. The number of students that each program/school can accept will be communicated to schools before any offers of admission can be made. The Board will be developing a central process for all applications.

Transportation will not be provided for regional specialized schools and programs.

Parents/guardians, on behalf of their children, or students who are 18 years or older, may apply to a maximum of two (2) regional specialized programs. In the case where a school may offer more than one regional specialized program or multiple streams within a program (e.g., the Arts), each program or stream requires a separate application (to a maximum of two).

Where identical regional specialized programs are offered at multiple locations, students will be selected based on standardized criteria, as determined by the Board.

A student can only be registered in one regional specialized program at one time, with the exception of the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program where the student can pursue the components of SHSM alongside their other courses of study.

SPECIFIC DIRECTIVES

The Director of Education is authorized to issue operational procedures to implement this Policy.

EVALUATION

This Policy will be reviewed at a minimum every four (4) years from the effective date.

APPENDICES

N/A

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

Legislation

- *Education Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 171 (1), par. 7.

Policies

- Optional Attendance (P013)
- Equity Policy (P037)

Procedures

- Optional Attendance (PR545)
- Admission to Specialized Schools and Programs (PR612)

Other Documents

- Director's Response to the Enhancing Equity Task Force Report
- Multi-Year Strategic Plan

Scan of Selected School Boards: Specialized Schools and Programs Policy

Policy Summary:

The TDSB has an [Optional Attendance Policy](#) (P013) and an accompanying [Optional Attendance Operational Procedure](#) (PR545) which includes provisions related to specialized programs. In addition, the TDSB's [Admission to Specialized Schools and Programs Procedure \(PR612\)](#) establishes admission practices for specialized schools and programs.

In a system-wide research study by the TDSB titled *Programs of Choice in the TDSB: Characteristics of Students in French Immersion, Alternative Schools, and Other Specialized Schools and Programs*, it was found that all schools offered a broad spectrum of curricular opportunities while some schools at the TDSB had strong leadership, music, technical or athletic programs that were not necessarily considered specialized according to the TDSB criteria. Meanwhile, some schools had other program opportunities that were unique to a school or supported an existing pathway, while others had a clearly articulated school or program focus area deemed specialized by the Board.

In accordance with PR612, schools and programs are considered specialized when they meet the following criteria:

- A written, clearly articulated specific program focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, information technology) is required. To be designated a Specialized School, this focus must apply to the whole school.
- In secondary schools, students must take a minimum of seven courses directly related to the school's particular program focus.
- Each school has developed specific admission criteria that must appear on their school website.

In the same study, upon reviewing the social composition of the students who attend specialized schools/programs, it was found that students in these schools or programs are more likely to come from families with higher socio-economic status, non-immigrant status, a two-parent family structure, and have parents with a high level of education. The TDSB's Equity Task Force recently identified specialized programs as an area where equity can be improved, particularly to better reflect the diversity of the TDSB population as a whole.

Through a scan and subsequent review of eleven (11) school boards, the policies and procedures reviewed all included similar definitions and offerings of specialized programs or schools. However, there were key differences across school boards regarding admission criteria/processes, equity considerations as well as the types and extent of program offerings.

Key Differences of Other Jurisdictional Policies:

Definition of Specialized Program

All school boards define or at least understand specialized programs to have certain characteristics. One school board (Peel DSB) defines specialized programs as any program with a specific curriculum focus (e.g., arts, athletics, information technology, design and construction, leadership), and has two categories of specialized programs: i) regional learning choices programs and ii) specialist high skills major programs. In another school board (York Region DSB), specialized programs is understood to include those which offer many different programs (e.g., IB, Arts, Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, Specialist High Skills Major) that help students gain skills and experience as well as explore different career pathways.

At the TDSB, a specialized program or school meets the following criteria:

- A written, clearly articulated specific program focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, information technology) is required. To be designated a Specialized School, this focus must apply to the whole school.
- In secondary schools, students must take a minimum of seven courses directly related to the school's particular program focus.
- Each school has developed specific admission criteria that must appear on their school website.

Boundaries

Given that certain alternative and specialized programs or schools may not necessarily be in close proximity of the student's residential address, admission to these schools or programs is often open to all students across all school boards. However, at one school board (e.g., Peel DSB), an exception includes those local schools with what the board deems "local school focus". In this case, if approved, a local school might choose to have a specialized focus where only students in their home school boundary can attend. Across most school boards, priority access to specialized programs is given to current students or students with a residential address in the city or region of the Board before offering to out-of-region students.

At the TDSB, the Board recognizes that parents/guardians and students may wish to apply to a school with specialized programming that does not exist in their designated attendance area, or that they may wish to apply to a specialized program that has additional entrance criteria in their designated school.

Admission Criteria/Process

In nearly all policies scanned, admission to a specialized school or program is based on evaluation of a student's academic performance, including auditions for certain arts and music schools or programs (e.g., Chicago Public Schools, Halton Catholic DSB, Peel DSB, Thames Valley DSB, Toronto DSB). Admission to a specialized or "gifted" program such as IB (where authorization is granted from the International Baccalaureate Organization) is based on student assessment. At most school boards when demand exceeds supply, a lottery process may be conducted for program entrance. One school board, which has been recognized for its leadership in equity (e.g., Chicago Public Schools), follows a similar approach but stipulates that students without entry level requirements may still be granted access if approved by the Director of Education. In another policy provision, the same school board sets minimum targets into these programs for students with disabilities.

In an effort to standardize its admission criteria/process and ensure integrity across school systems, one school board (i.e., Peel DSB) includes in its policy the requirement that the specialized programs criteria and process (including use of application form) be consistent for the same programs within the board. As fees sometimes do apply to programs specialized in nature (to be consistent for all programs of the same), one school board (i.e., Peel DSB) includes in its application packages a fee waiver opportunity for qualifying families who are in need of financial assistance. Additionally, this school board makes an intentional effort to ensure equitable opportunity and assessment on the basis of the full application criteria, certain application components such as teacher references are not to be part of the process. In one policy (Chicago Public Schools), principal discretion is explicitly prohibited: “this policy does not authorize principals of magnet schools and programs to exercise principal discretion in the student selection process.”

The TDSB, although silent on some of these elements in its procedure, aims to develop a policy which standardizes the admission criteria and process. In addition, certain elements of an application such as photographs of the student should not be used in the application process other than for the purpose of verification after the assessment/offer has been made.

Specialized Program Steering Committee and Working Groups

Some school boards (e.g., Peel DSB, Waterloo Catholic DSB) include provisions in their policies related to the establishment and role of a steering committee.

One school board (Peel DSB) establishes a steering committee to hear proposals for new programs and replications of existing programs to ensure continued success. The merits of each school’s proposal and system-wide factors including interest, equity of geographical access and standardization of assessment and program consistency are also considered. In addition to a steering committee, this school board utilizes a working group comprised of superintendents as well as principal representation routinely meets to ensure consistency in application process and criteria of similar programs; application and program fees; curriculum and program enhancements; and timelines.

At the TDSB, no such steering committee or working group exists but schools may be authorized to provide specialized programs. Program offerings and consistency of programs of the same vary across the system.

Development of New Specialized Programs and Timelines

At one school board (Peel DSB), the process to initiate new programming can begin with a suggestion from any stakeholder but requires that the criteria be met and the program proposal is Board-approved. All new programs must be approved by April for implementation in September of the following year – this allows for adequate program development, promotion and registration.

At the TDSB, specialized programs require authorization by the Board and approval/implementation timelines vary.

Central and School-Level Promotion of Programs

One school board (i.e. Peel DSB) focuses on two levels of promotion: i) central and ii) school-level. At the central level, the dates of all school information nights including those with “regional learning choices programs” (or specialized programs) are

published on the external website. Information about these programs are also sent to all schools, featured on board social media pages and promoted through at least one news release. At the local level, several measures can take place including: promotional visits to other schools within the board; promotional videos posted on the school and board websites as well as social media; information nights hosted at the school; and even booth or participation at community events. School teams are encouraged to work with central communications support to finalize their promotional plans. In an effort to ensure equity across the system, principals of regional learning choices programs are encouraged to invite all schools to host a promotional a promotional school visit and limit school visits to one or two weeks maximum.

At the TDSB, an external webpage displays the TDSB's specialized schools and program offerings. The procedure indicates that the admission criteria and selection process must be transparent and easily accessible to the public on the school's website.

Transportation

Most school boards do not provide transportation for students outside of boundary who opt to enrol in a specialized program (e.g., Ottawa Carleton DSB, Peel DSB, Toronto DSB, York Region DSB). Bussing is provided only if they meet the distance criteria established by the boards. In exceptional circumstances, some schools board offer an alternative process for out-of-area students (e.g., York Region DSB) based on executive and/or Board of Trustees approval or to best serve the needs of the school or program (i.e., Chicago Public Schools).

At the TDSB, transportation is not provided to specialized schools and programs for those out-of-area students.

Appeal/Second Review Process

At one school board (i.e., Peel DSB), principals are required that the review process for unsuccessful applicants is communicated to parents/guardians and students. If there is a request, the program's principal may review the application and admission criteria with the parent/guardian of the unsuccessful applicant. If left unsatisfied, parents may request, in writing, a second review conducted by the Superintendent of that school.

At the TDSB, there is currently no documented appeal/second review process although any request or complaint could be escalated through to the Superintendent and/or handled through the TDSB's Parent Concern Protocol.

School Boards Reviewed (11): Chicago Public Schools, Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB, Durham DSB, Ottawa Carleton DSB, Peel DSB, Renfrew County DSB, Simcoe County, Toronto DSB, Upper Grand DSB, Waterloo Catholic DSB, York Region DSB.

Toronto District School Board

**Policy P.046 CUR: Directional Statements: Middle Level Education (Junior High School),
Special Education Low Incidence Sites, Specialized Programs, and Optional
French Programs**

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