

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.