



Specialized Schools and Programs Policy: Consultation Update

To: Governance and Policy Committee

Date: 9 February, 2021

Report No.: 02-22-4257

Strategic Directions

- Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students

Recommendation

It is recommended that update on the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy Consultation be received for information.

Context

The purpose of this report is to provide Trustees with an update on the development of the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy.

Due to the overwhelming number of responses and the complexities associated with the feedback from the survey, webinars, focussed conversations and the public consultation meetings, staff require more time to develop a draft policy that facilitates the best outcomes for students in the Board. The final report will be ready for the April Governance and Policy Committee cycle and will not affect the implementation plans for September 2022. More detailed timelines are included towards the end of this report.

In this latest round of consultation, we were able to engage with many more communities. Early scans of the survey results highlight who participated; there were over 3,500 completed survey responses (see Table 1) providing comparable voice and representation from all four Learning Centres (see Table 2) from families and

staff who had both participated in Specialized programming and from those who had not. (see Table 3).

Table 1: Breakdown of Online Survey Participants

Showing interest, 7,800 community members accessed the survey. Note - not all participants completed all sections of the survey.

3,688 respondents completed the survey:

- Parents- 2,574 (97% current parents)
- Students- 572 (48% elementary, 52% secondary)
- Teachers- 365
- Principals- 32
- Trustees and Other Staff- 96
- Other- 49

Table 2: Postal Code Data - Participation by Learning Centre

(Where Postal Code Data was provided by participants)

Learning Centre	Webinar Total	Survey Total Parents	Survey Total Students
LC 1	307	391	99
LC 2	388	439	116
LC 3	311	327	93
LC 4	303	779	74
TOTAL	1309	1936	382

Table 3: Attendance at Specialized School and Programming

Attendance at Specialized School or Program	Yes	No
Staff - Does your school have a specialized program? Or Is your school a specialized school?.	52%	48%
Students - Do you attend a specialized program or school?	54%	45%
Families - Do you have a child(ren) attending a Specialized School or Program?	32%	68%

The richness of the response data from diverse voices across the board has emphasized two major “tensions” and three challenges that require additional time to work through and address. These include:¹

Tensions:

1. Admissions and Programming based on Ability vs. Interest
2. Specialized Programming misaligned with Secondary Program Review and the building of strong local community schools

Challenges:

1. Specialized Programming as a means of “Upstreaming”
2. Limitations of the Current Application Process
3. Renaming the Programming

Rethinking the role and purpose of Specialized Schools and Programs is foundational in better aligning our practices with the Board’s Equity priorities as outlined in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan.

Tensions:

1. Admissions and Programming based on Ability vs. Interest

Historically, admissions based on ability invariably involve criteria that systemically advantages some students and disadvantages others (as examples: auditions, entrance examinations, prior report cards). In order to make specialized programming more accessible, entrance criteria and specialized programming must be shifted to become more inclusive.

However, no conclusion can be made on admissions criteria based on the feedback to date. Many survey respondents commented that the application to Specialized Schools and Programs should include some form of merit-based criteria while others believed that looking at the best fit for the student and their interests should come first. There was also no clear direction on the use of a lottery for admissions. Nonetheless, if a lottery is to be used, respondents agreed that it should be a transparent process.

¹ Definitions for some terminology related to Specialized Schools and Programs can be found on pages 1 and 2 in the Draft Policy (see Appendix A).

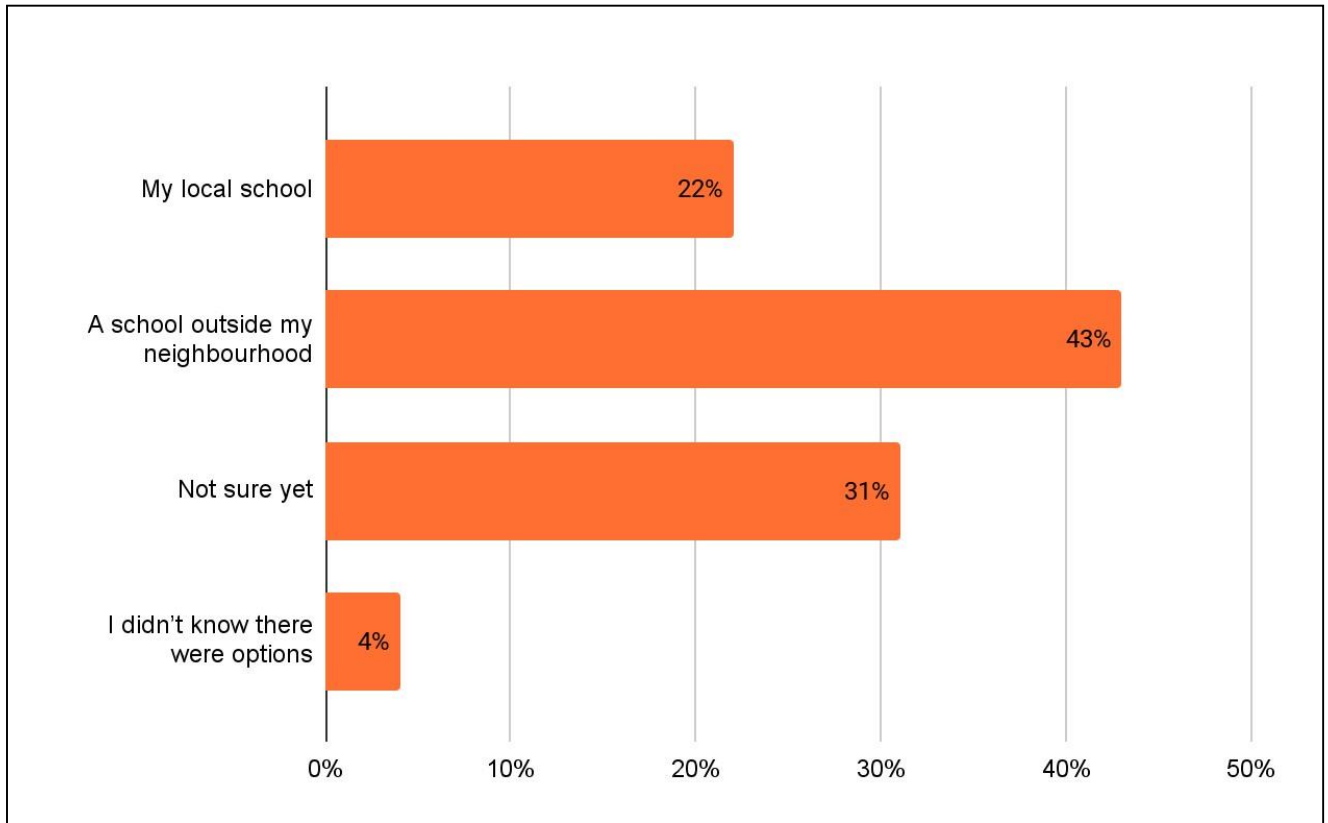
2. Specialized Programming misaligned with Secondary Program Review and the building of strong local community schools

Survey respondents supported local schools as a grassroots solution to ensuring school programming is reflective of the desires of the local neighbourhoods. Families commented that in some cases students have to travel far distances to attend a Specialized School or Program. Families and staff commented that there is a lack of Specialized Schools and Programs within racialized communities across the TDSB. Respondents noted that Specialized Schools and Programs should be in all quadrants of the city - spread within each Learning Centre or Network.

Feedback heard during the webinars emphasized the notion that Specialized Programming potentially undermines public perception and confidence in the “regular” programming that is available in local schools. A common concern shared through the webinars was that families feared that not being admitted into Specialized Math/Science & Technology programs would inhibit or limit access to related post-secondary opportunities.

Additionally, both Specialized Schools/Programs and Out-of-Area Admissions (formerly Optional Attendance) draw students away from their local school. It is important that future procedures provide a balance between choice/options and active support of local school programming. Survey results from students in grades 5 to 8 highlighted this sentiment noting that 43% of student respondents indicated they plan to attend high school outside of their neighbourhood, 31% were not sure yet and 4% were not aware options existed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Do you know where you want to go to High School? (elementary students who responded)



Challenges:

1. Specialized Programming as a means of “Upstreaming”

Through focused conversations with participants and community groups, it was heard that accelerated and enriched programming is being accessed as an alternative to Academic Pathways in our Secondary school system.

The ability for all students to have access to rigorous academic programming that may be outside of their catchment area is important to many respondents. However, through survey and webinar feedback, it is apparent that many families are not aware that such options exist.

Programming in our Board-Wide Specialized Schools and Programs must be looked at through the same critical lens as Academic Pathways. Additionally the associated Procedures must be carefully crafted to support the development of Local Specialized Programs while ensuring that new programs are not developed for the purposes of “Upstreaming”.

2. Limitations of the Current Application Process

With the current application process, students can apply to two Specialized Schools/Programs at **specific school sites**. As a result, several Specialized Programs remain well below potential capacity with unfilled seats while other Specialized Programs (with the same focus) are in high demand, leaving many applicants without programming options.

Given the feedback and enrollment trends, a new application process (online and centralized) needs to be developed to help ensure that more students are able to access desired specialized programming where it is available, perhaps mirroring the French Immersion application process. And, all application information should be communicated across the system, board wide with specific outreach strategies dependent on neighbourhoods.

3. Renaming the Programming

Through feedback and focused conversations, it has been heard that the nomenclature of “Specialization” conjures the notion of “better” and “elite”. Rebranding the programming will help to support and establish the newly developed program philosophy.

Action Plan and Associated Timeline

Feedback from the live consultation webinars, the online/paper survey submissions and feedback provided via email will be considered and shared with the Senior Team. In consultation with TDSB Staff in a variety of program areas, a revised draft of the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy will be written, best addressing the tensions outlined and described above. The Policy will be developed so that students are afforded equity of access and opportunity in strong Specialized Programming. The revised draft will be presented to the Governance and Policy Committee, and subsequently to the Board of Trustees.

April 27, 2022 - Governance and Policy Committee - Final Consultation Report and presentation of the Out-of-Area Admissions Policy (P013) (formerly Optional Attendance) and the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy (PXX). If approved, the Policies will be presented to the Board of Trustees on May 25, 2022.

June 1, 2022 - Governance and Policy Committee - The revised Out-of-Area Admissions Procedure (PR545) and the revised Specialized Schools and Programs Procedure (PR612) will be shared for information and subsequently shared at the June 29, 2022 meeting to the Board of Trustees.

In preparation for implementation in September 2023, subject to approval, the following processes will be established over the course of the academic school year in accordance with the new Policy and Procedures:

- The designation of current Specialized Programs as either Board-Wide Specialized Programs or Local Specialized Programs, based on criteria determined centrally and local programming needs (September 2022)
- The setting of enrollment limits for Board-Wide Specialized Schools and Programs (October 2022)

- Applications and programming for Specialized Schools and Programs starting using centralized admissions criteria and a centralized online application form (November-December 2022)
- Applications to attend a school other than your designated school by address through Out-of-Area Admissions using a centralized online application form (January 2023)
- Application process for schools to introduce Local Specialized Programs for their local students (January 2023)

Resource Implications

No financial resources will be required for the development of the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy at this time.

Communications Considerations

In collaboration with the WebTeam, Central Guidance and Communications:

- TDSB Website will be updated to reflect the new Policies and Procedures including the timelines and the consistent application criteria and process for Specialized Schools and Programs and Out-of-Area Admissions;
- Central communication and support will be provided to all administrators regarding the new Policies and Procedures;
- Central communication will be sent to families regarding Specialized Programming opportunities and outlining the changes and related timelines; and,
- Webinars and videos will be developed to support families and schools with the newly developed online application process for Specialized Schools and Programs and for Out-of-Area Admissions

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

PXX - [DRAFT Specialized Schools and Programs Policy](#)

From

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DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

March 4, 2020

Toronto District School Board

Policy PXX

Title: **SPECIALIZED SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS**

Adopted: [date of approval of the policy]
 Effected: [date when the policy came into effect]
 Revised: [date when the policy was amended]
 Reviewed: [date when the policy was reviewed]
 Authorization: Board of Trustees

1. RATIONALE

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

2. OBJECTIVE

To affirm the Board’s commitment to providing focused specialized programming in both local schools and in district-wide 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.

3. 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.

Specialized Programs are programs that address the needs of groups of students with a particular curriculum or career interest (e.g., the arts, business studies, the

environment, pure and applied sciences, technological education, etc.). The TDSB will establish two types of Specialized Programs:

a) 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 at that school.

b) District-wide Specialized School/Program refers to a school/program with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades, etc.) that is available to students from across the district.

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

4. 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.

5. 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 district-wide specialized schools/programs schools.

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

6. POLICY

6.1. Guiding Principles

The following 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:

- The Board is committed to supporting strong local schools that are easily accessible and provide students with a wide variety of programs leading to all post-secondary destinations;

- Local schools will provide focused, specialized programming that responds to student voice, choice and interest;
- Local schools can also provide programs to broaden career choices and encourage innovation by engaging students in specialized learning opportunities;
- The Board will operate district-wide specialized schools/programs, where the delivery of specialized programs cannot be realized in a local school by bringing together system resources and student participants; and
- 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.

6.2. District-wide Specialized Schools/Programs

- 6.2.1. District-wide specialized schools/programs are schools/programs with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades, etc.) that are available to students from across the district.
- 6.2.2. All district-wide specialized schools/programs will have standard admissions processes and criteria established by the Board.
- 6.2.3. District-wide specialized schools/programs will be available to all students. Admission priority will be given to students who are residents of the City of Toronto.
- 6.2.4. Only after applicants that reside in the City of Toronto have been offered placement into district-wide specialized schools/programs will students from outside of Toronto be considered for placement. If the number of applications from students who reside in the City of Toronto exceeds the number of available spaces, no offers will be made to students who reside outside of the City of Toronto.
- 6.2.5. The admissions criteria and application processes to district-wide specialized schools/programs will be posted online and made publically available on the Board's website. The criteria will promote equity, inclusion and human rights.
- 6.2.6. The Board will determine and review the number, scope and location of district-wide specialized schools/programs.
- 6.2.7. The Board will determine annually the available space in each district-wide specialized school/program based on enrolment projections for the regular program as well as other programs that may exist in the school.

- 6.2.8. The number of students that each school/program can accept will be communicated by central staff to school principals before any offers of admission can be made.
- 6.2.9. All applications will be processed using the Board's centralized online application system.
- 6.2.10. Transportation will not be provided for district-wide specialized schools/programs.
- 6.2.11. Parents/Guardians, on behalf of their children, or students who are 18 years or older, may apply to a maximum of two (2) district-wide specialized schools/programs. In the case where a school may offer more than one district-wide specialized program or multiple streams within a program (e.g., the Arts), each program or stream will require a separate application (to a maximum of two).
- 6.2.12. Where similar district-wide specialized programs are offered at multiple locations, students will be selected based on standardized criteria that promote equity, inclusion and human rights, as determined by the Board. Central staff may work closely with school principals to review district-wide specialized program offerings across the Board on an annual basis to identify similar programs and develop standardized criteria.
- 6.2.13. A student can only be registered in one district-wide 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.

6.3. Local Specialized Programs

- 6.3.1. Local specialized programs are programs within a school with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades) available to students registered at that school.
- 6.3.2. All schools are encouraged to provide programming that responds to the interests of its local communities and student voice.
- 6.3.3. All local specialized programs will have standard admissions process and criteria established by the school principal in consultation with the school superintendent and central staff.
- 6.3.4. The selection process for local specialized programs will coincide with the school's course selection process. For incoming students, including incoming Grade 9 students to a secondary school, the selection process can only commence after the student has accepted a placement at that school.

- 6.3.5. Local school principals, in consultation with the school superintendent and the Board's central staff, will determine and review the number and scope of local specialized programs.
- 6.3.6. Local school principals, in consultation with the school superintendent and the Board's central staff, will develop admissions criteria that promote equity, inclusion and human rights. The criteria will be used when demand for the local specialized program exceeds available space.
- 6.3.7. Admission criteria for local specialized programs will be posted online and made publicly available by schools on their school websites.

7. SPECIFIC DIRECTIVES

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

8. EVALUATION

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

9. APPENDICES

N/A

10. 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
- Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Program Requirements, Ministry of Education, 2016