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**Student Interest Programs Policy (formerly Specialized Schools and Programs Policy): Phase 5**

**To:** Governance and Policy Committee

**Date:** 27 April, 2022

**Report No.:** 04-22-4284

**Strategic Directions**

* Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students

**Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy, renamed ‘Student Interest Programs Policy’, be approved.

**Context**

Executive Summary

The Toronto District School Board offers a variety of schools and programs that foster creativity, global connections, real-world context for the provincial curriculum and support the success of students. While these specialized programs have provided opportunities and benefits for some students, barriers to access – including admission processes, entrance criteria and geography – have limited these opportunities for a significant number of students. Through the new Student Interest Programs Policy – previously the Specialized Schools and Programs Policy – **all** students will have equitable access to both local and centralized programs that support their interest and success.

This policy was developed following extensive consultation and feedback from students, parents/guardians, staff, and the broader community, as well as a review of best practices, system data, and TDSB enrollment trends and aligns with the commitments made in TDSB’s Multi-Year Strategic Plan (2018) our system-wide efforts and our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation. The changes and decisions outlined in the Policy are intended to address the decade-worth of data that consistently shows that not all students have benefited equitably from our specialized programs.

The Board offers two main types of specialized programs: centralized programs and schools which offer a specific focus, such as the arts, athletics or skilled trades, and require specialized infrastructure, facilities, scheduling, staffing, and support; and local programs, which may be school-wide or grade-specific in elementary and in secondary may be opted into through course selection. Centralized programs and local programs may have the same theme or focus but the difference is the students that they serve. Centralized programs and schools are available to all students in the city of Toronto through a centralized application. Local programs support the interests of students already attending the school, either living in-area or having applied through the Out-of-Area Admissions process.

A number of updates to the policy will improve access and remove long-standing barriers, while maintaining high quality education and achievement and student engagement. Admissions will move away from demonstrated strength and/or ability and, instead, will prioritize a student’s interest in a particular program or school. A unified and consistent application will be implemented to streamline the process and promote fairness. In order to make all programs more equitably accessible, the number of applications will decrease from two schools/programs to one in the second year of implementation. More than 80% of applicants through Optional Attendance opted for only one choice for Specialized Schools or Programs in 2020.

It must also be emphasized that growing and supporting diverse and engaging local school programs is a Board priority, so that students have access to diverse, high quality courses and learning at their local school and are not solely reliant on  acceptance to a specialized program. This is the focus of the Secondary Program Review, which is currently considering the TDSB’s secondary school program and how schools provide a more well-rounded complement of course offerings and options where all students have local choice and access.

For those who are interested in specialized learning opportunities, the Student Interest Programs Policy will ensure access to programs that support student engagement and success. The Board is committed to continually reviewing policies, procedures and practices to ensure that they promote equity, inclusion and human rights practices and enhance learning opportunities for all students.

Background Information re. the creation of the Student Interest Programs Policy

Providing Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students is a key pillar of the Board’s Multi-Year Strategic Plan. Its focus is to ensure that all schools offer a wide range of programming that reflects the voices, choices, interests, identities and experiences of students.

Under this umbrella, in June 2019, the Board of Trustees approved a policy review work plan for the Optional Attendance Policy (P013). It was proposed that the section in the policy involving specialized programs be developed into a standalone Specialized Schools and Programs Policy in which clear definitions and policy directions for specialized programs would be established and would create consistency in practices across the Board.

Prior to the development of this work plan, a review of the Board’s specialized schools and programs had been raised through the Enhancing Equity Task Force in 2017. One of their recommendations stated:

“***Ensure equitable educational access, experiences and opportunities for all students in all schools.***

* Examine ways to improve access to resources and supports so that schools can offer a variety of specialized programs to all students;
* Review the impact of the Optional Attendance policy in terms of barriers to accessibility of programs;
* Ensure that the Optional Attendance policy maintains a fair and transparent process for applications and selection into available programs.”

And, in the Director’s Response to the Enhancing Equity Task Force Report:

“We do not recommend phasing out optional attendance, specialty schools/programs…. However, we will examine our policies, procedures, and practices to determine whether they are creating and/or exacerbating inequity and we will work to increase access and opportunity so that those programs are more reflective of the TDSB student population.”

“Data, including student census data, enrolment data, and school climate information, will be used to review and establish an equitable admissions policy, including admission/audition requirements for our specialty schools and special programs. We will also create operating procedures and monitoring mechanisms for this policy to ensure system-wide consistency. We will review all specialized schools and programs to ensure equitable access, increased opportunities, and improved outcomes. These programs will be expanded where necessary to reflect current and future student needs.”

Following extensive consultation in 2021 and 2022, and reported to the [Governance and Policy Committee on February 9, 2022](https://pub-tdsb.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=10257), a number of tensions and challenges were identified related to the demands for specialized programs and schools and its intersection with the Secondary Program Review, which is focused on growing and supporting strong local schools.

Tensions:

* Admissions and programming based on ability vs. interest
* Specialized programming misaligned with Secondary Program Review and the building of strong local community schools

Challenges:

* Specialized programming as a means of “upstreaming”
* Limitations of the current application process
* Renaming the programming

Specialized programs have provided opportunities for students for years, but we must now confront the barriers to access and ensure that all students have the same opportunities and the same access to those programs. As a result, the proposed policy aims to improve access and remove long-standing barriers, while maintaining the same high quality specialized education.

**Proposed Student Interest Program Policy**

The new Student Interest Program Policy was developed through ongoing staff review and dialogue; extensive consultation with students, parents/guardians, community members over a period of three years (due to the COVID-19 pandemic); research best practices; system data; enrollment trends; and recommendations from past reports. The following sections outline the rationale for the new Student Interest Program Policy followed by recommendations to further explore the complexities surrounding school choice at the TDSB.

The Policy focuses on two key areas: centralized programming and local programming and aims to support accessible and inclusive community schools that provide educational programs for the diverse needs of its students.

Centralized Programming

Centralized programs and schools are offered to all students to support programs with a specific focus (e.g., the arts, athletics, skilled trades, etc.) that require specialized infrastructure, facilities, scheduling, staffing and support.

The focus of TDSB centralized programs and schools is to offer, develop and deliver programming for students that will foster and affirm students’ intersecting identities, creativity, global connections, real-world context for curriculum and will support the success of all interested students. Programs will move away from a model that only accepts those with demonstrated strength and/or ability and will provide access to students who have expressed interest.

All programs of study for TDSB centralized programs and schools will have flexibility to accommodate all students, including English Language Learners and those with Special Education experiences and/or requirements. It should be noted that students still cannot be registered in a centralized program or school while still participating in French Immersion, Extended French or Special Education Intensive Support Programs due to the scheduling and program requirements.

Over the next year, we will engage in program coherency studies for all of our areas of specialization to better understand and ensure that centralized programs meet the criteria outlined in the Policy.

In order to offset the imbalance that has been created in the secondary school system, we must reflect on the ways through which students opt to not attend their local designated school by address. Programs that can be offered in most schools will not be offered as centralized programs and used as pathways away from local schools.

**Equitable Access:  Setting Interest-Based Admissions Criteria**

“Admission criteria to some of the specialized programs and schools may not be responsive to the wide range of talents and skills that our students have. This results in some students being excluded from certain programs. For example, Arts programs may not recognize all forms of dance under current admission criteria.”

During the public consultation, much of the policy feedback related to concerns around the application process and the admissions criteria. This feedback included concerns about the level of proficiency that was required in our current application processes:

* “Specialized programs use screening tools / application processes which disadvantage many families.”
* “How can everyone have access to these programs?”
* “No lotteries or jumping through hoops. French Immersion is accommodated based on student interests. Why can’t Specialized Programs?”
* “In order to address systemic and historic barriers for children of colour - in particular Black and Indigenous children - admission process should consider broader student context beyond, for example, a portfolio. As we know from COVID data, racialized families are more likely to experience poverty, food and housing insecurity and other inequities, for example access to health and child care. These barriers limit participation in fee-based extracurriculars. Admission processes that address inequities will need to consider alternative approaches that meaningfully disrupt the status quo.”

There is further research to support this concern.

“Selecting pupils on the basis of academic achievement tends to create great social differences between schools. It also increases the link between socio-economic status and performance – it tends to accelerate the progress of those who have already gained the best start in life from their parents – and is also associated with stronger performance at the top end of the scale in mathematics and science. So academic selection needs to be used with caution because of the risks it poses to equity.”

It is essential to reset our admissions practices to ensure access to programs to students who have not had access to private lessons or outside learning opportunities beyond the expectations of our elementary curriculum.

Admissions Process for Centralized Programs and Schools

Starting in the fall of 2022, all applications to centralized programs and schools will be done through a centralized online application. The online application and the application requirements for all programs will be available through the TDSB website and support materials and resources will be made available for all students and their families. The application timelines will be clearly and broadly communicated to all families in the TDSB and will occur prior to the application timelines for Out-of-Area Admissions (formerly Optional Attendance).

Admissions criteria for TDSB centralized programs and schools will be interest-based. Students will have accessible applications in which students can share their passion, interest and motivation. Students will no longer:

* be charged application fees
* be required to submit report card marks / learning skills
* participate in entrance examinations / performance tasks
* submit mandatory audition materials

Depending on the programs, students may be asked to submit:

* statements or expressions of interest
* reflections or demonstrations of creativity
* practice schedules and coach letters (High Performing Athlete program only)

Students meeting the base requirements of application will be considered for a random selection process if demand exceeds available spaces. Priority access will be given to students self-identifying as representing currently and historically underserved communities and students who are residing in the City of Toronto. Every year, the TDSB will examine students’ demographic data within centralized programs and schools to create learning environments that are made up of student demographics that are representative of the wider TDSB student population. Based on this review, there may be adjustments made to the priority groups and the number of priority seats set aside each year.

Once the selection process has been completed, acceptances will be communicated via email through the online application system and all applicants will receive notification on the same day. Successful applicants can accept (or decline) offers of admissions online; the current school and the requested school will be informed of offers and acceptances.

Number of Application Choices

Many students are only able to consider applying to the centralized program or school that is closest to their home, giving an advantage to students/families who are able to travel/commute or may have fewer responsibilities outside the school day.

To make the application process more equitable, we are setting the number of applications to one school/program. By only having one application choice, students are able to focus on their preferred location or program. There will be fewer applicants to each program location since all students will only be submitting a single application.

In 2020, over 80% of the students applying to a school through Optional Attendance only applied to one school. Specialized Schools and Programs application and Optional Attendance data from 2020, showed only 18% of students in Grade 8 submitted multiple applications.  (see Table 1).

Table 1: Optional Attendance Applications for September 2020

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Percentage of Student Applications (Number of applications) | Number of Schools/Programs  Applied For |  |
| 73% (6,777) | 1 school/program |  |
| 4% (362) | 1 regular and 1 specialized school/program |  |
| 4% (402) | 2 regular schools |  |
| ***13% (1235)*** | **2 specialized schools/programs** | 2 spec. prog. applications  18%  total |
| ***4% (413)*** | **3 schools/programs**  *1 regular school & 2 spec.*  *2 regular schools & 1 spec.* |
| ***1 % (110)*** | **4 (or more) schools/programs** |

It is recognized that some program locations do not receive as many applications as other locations. As part of the application process, applicants will be asked if they would like to be considered for any spaces that may remain unfilled after the acceptance process. Our goal is to ensure that as many program seats as possible are filled by interested students.

**Skilled Trades-Based Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) Programs**

In some Secondary schools, students are able to access Ministry-funded programs associated with specific skilled trade-related sectors of the workforce. Many schools do not have the facilities to offer similar programs. Facilitated Access to Skilled Trades (F.A.S.T.) SHSMs will make accessing these valuable programs easier for students from across the city.

This application falls outside of the centralized programs application process for several reasons:

* SHSMs are established as local programs and are designed to support students attending the local school.
* Centralized program applications are for the new school year (September admission) while a transition to a skilled-trades based SHSM could be facilitated at a semester transition point.
* There is a shortage of students accessing skilled-trades based programming in secondary schools. Making access easier is an investment in our schools and in our students.

Central Staff associated with SHSM programs will help link students to skilled-trades based SHSM programs where space is available. The list of programs that can be accessed through the F.A.S.T. process will be updated each year as space permits.

**Strengthening Local Schools**

The system cannot look at the Student Interest Programs Policy without considering the need to enhance and strengthen the programming that is available in all of our local schools. While there may always be some desire or need to attend a school other than the designated school by address, this need should not be due to a perceived deficit in the programming at the local school. All local schools are able to provide the secondary school programming that is required to support students applying to any post-secondary program. The Secondary Program Review, which is currently underway, is working to address this and allocate resources towards the development of schools with a more well-rounded complement of course offerings and options in schools with enrolments of 1,000.

All of our secondary schools are staffed and able to provide excellent programming in these areas for all students. Post-secondary preparation in any of these areas will more than support our students, along with the extra-curricular opportunities affiliated with the instructional areas that will enrich student experiences in more than 100 secondary schools.

Local Programs

In order to best support the interests of students and the local community, schools can establish local programs for their students. In elementary schools, local programs will be school-wide, or grade specific. In secondary schools, students will opt to participate in local programs through the course selection process.

Courses offered as part of a local program are to support interest and are not to be based on enrichment, acceleration or streaming. There will be a limit to the number of courses offered as part of a local program in any given year to help ensure that students are integrated into the larger school community.

Schools will continue to be encouraged to respond to the interests of students and the local community and to find creative ways to make student learning more meaningful, connected to the global competencies and relevant to students. The process of creating a local program will be outlined in further detail in the Operational Procedures and will involve consultation and collaboration between the local community, the school staff and the Learning Network Superintendent.

Work is underway to provide additional support and professional learning for all schools wishing to introduce Advanced Placement courses at the Grade 12 level for interested students. Learning opportunities such as Advanced Placement should be made available for more students in more of our schools across the system.

**Implementation – Next Steps**

Move Forward on Secondary Program Review

Until the provincial moratorium on school closures is lifted and the Secondary Program Review can be actioned, some schools will remain under enrolled and will continue to struggle to offer depth and breadth of programming.

Further to the Secondary Program Review mandate, the TDSB must review the distribution of centralized programs and schools across the TDSB and actively investigate the creation of new programs in areas of the Board where there is currently little or no access to programs of interest. Funding and the re-prioritization of resources is required to truly provide equity of access and opportunity for all students and to ensure that centralized programs are available in all areas of the TDSB. Resources must be allocated to support the development of strong, focused and intentional programming at school communities. It is proposed to use the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) to identify where new programming may be required as well as the funding necessary to begin such programming.

Staff will undertake program feasibility studies associated with potential new locations for Arts-focused programs and High Performing Athlete programs, to better serve students in all areas of the city.

Undertake Program Coherence Studies

Many specialized programs were created organically and locally, but it is essential that we review them from a system perspective, through a consistent and critical lens.

Over the next two years we will initiate several program coherence studies to review the programs of study in various centralized programs to ensure that the programs meet the new expectations for centralized programs.

Year 1:

* Math Science and Technology
* Cyber Arts
* High Performing Athletes
* International Baccalaureate
* CISCO/Nortel
* Law in Action Within Schools (LAWS)

Year 2:

* Integrated Technology
* Leadership Pathway
* Africentric Program

Some current specialized programs may require shifting to local programs. Additionally, some historically local programs may meet the requirements to become centralized programs.

Review Curriculum with Anti-Oppressive Lens

Part of our recommendations for the implementation of the Student Interest Programs Policy includes an important review of curriculum based on an equity and anti-oppression framework and in keeping with Truth and Reconciliation, ensuring that content and subject matter is relevant to underserved student demographic groups. Schools that have been selected to host centralized programs must be leaders in the system, ensuring that all students are welcome and see themselves reflected in the curriculum and content delivery.

In support of the Director’s Student Learning Strategy for Combating Hate and Racism, all schools offering centralized programming will be required to offer two of the three proposed courses for the 2023-2024 school year (to students within the centralized program, and those in the regular program of the school). Additionally, we will investigate ways for schools to have First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada (NAC2O1) offered for the 2024-2025 school year as a substituted alternative to Canadian History Since World War I (CHC2D1).

Create Arts Task Force

A cross-disciplinary Arts curriculum task force will be established to review the traditional Arts curriculum to support the decolonization of the Arts in all of our secondary schools and to make recommendations around the structure of Arts-focus programs.

Some of the existing Schools/Programs have operated with highly specific areas of focus (majors) and the areas have admissions rates that have varied dramatically. Certain areas of the arts have facilitated very high acceptance rates while other areas have been very difficult to gain admissions to (see Table 2).

Table 2: Arts Majors and the Overall Acceptance Rates (2022 Application Data)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Arts Major** | **Number of Applicants** | **Overall Acceptance Rate** |
| **Musical Theatre** | **74** | **89 %** |
| **Drama** | **118** | **80 %** |
| **Dance** | **94** | **77 %** |
| **Film** | **102** | **64 %** |
| **Instrumental Music** | **130** | **54 %** |
| **Contemporary/ Visual Arts** | **406** | **20 %** |

Arts Schools/Programs will need to shift the structure of programming towards a more general admission process. In Grade 9, students will be given more opportunity to experience various forms of art education. In advancing grades, students will have the opportunity to focus on specific areas of the arts that are of greater interest. Focus and specialization will still occur, but after a period of exploration and investigation. The programs will be designed to have admissions that better accommodate applicants with experience/interest in Contemporary and Visual Art, reflecting the largest number of applicants.

There is significant evidence to support that early tracking or sorting of students promotes further systemic inequities and does not promote positive outcomes for all. The two current elementary Arts-focus centralized schools operate with different entry grades. With only two such learning opportunities in the system, there is very limited access and the Arts task force will be asked to investigate the optimal grade ranges for Arts centralized schools.

Focus on Student Engagement

Over the next three years, we are recommending a student engagement focus centred around students from currently and historically underserved communities who are, and who are not, engaging in centralized programs and schools. Direct responses and feedback on student sense of inclusion and representation within the schools and programs is imperative in measuring progress, growth and development.

Staff will additionally look to amend and modify admissions practices for centralized programs and schools that have overserved certain demographic communities. As noted in an earlier section, additional priority school spaces will be added through the Operational Procedures to increase the access to opportunities and resources that have been systemically held back from students underrepresented in centralized programs and schools.

Implement STEM, Science and Math Action Plans

Work is required to support the growth and implementation of strong STEM programming in all of our secondary schools. Additionally, strategies to support the growth and strength of our local Math and Science departments is essential to ensure that all students have the opportunities for extensions to their learning (e.g. participation in competitions/contests, resources and links to outside enrichment opportunities for all, meaningful field trips and experiential learning opportunities).

Through collaboration with the Central department overseeing the development of the STEM, Science and Math Action Plans, our schools will be involved in the creation of Science and Math hubs where exemplary practices can be shared and staff can be supported with the introduction of new opportunities for learners from across the system.

Examine External Centralized Programs - International Baccalaureate (IB)

At this time, the TDSB supports one external centralized program. The International Baccalaureate program follows a curriculum and evaluations that are set by an external body. The program is built around accelerated programming in grades 9 and 10 (called Pre-IB) so that students can spend Grades 11 and 12 working on the extensive International Baccalaureate curriculum.

In order to meet the accelerated content and the rigour and demands of the program, the International Baccalaureate admissions process has included Grade 7 report card, the Grade 8 Interim report card and a written personal response.

There are numerous challenges with offering a centralized program that is dictated by an external partner. There are additionally several challenges around the costs associated with the program.

We will initiate a study into how:

* admissions criteria can be amended to better reflect the equity priorities of the TDSB,
* students who have historically faced more barriers in the pursuit of post-secondary education can be prioritized for admissions.

Further work will be done looking into the International Baccalaureate program, considering what benefit it provides, to who and what the outcomes exist for participating students.

Advocate for Free Access to the TTC

Transportation continues to be a barrier to access for many students in the TDSB. While Trustees continue to pursue requests with the Toronto Transit Commission for free access for all students,  the cost of travel to schools and programs remains a barrier to access for many of our most marginalized students.

Closing Thoughts

While the Student Interest Programs Policy (PXX) is centrally concerned with access of opportunity for all TDSB students across the school board, it addresses only a part of a larger issue on equity of access for the breadth of learning that is made available through opportunities offered within the policy.

Policies are tools for change, but there are other mechanisms that are required over the next four years until this policy, and the Out-of-Area Admissions Policy, are reviewed.  In order to effectively address the inequities within the system, this policy needs to work in concert with a variety of policy areas around equity of learning opportunity including; Special Education, Academic Pathways as well as working in coordination with the Urban Indigenous Education Centre, the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, the Equity Department and Equity of Access for All Students in the TDSB as articulated in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan.

**Action Plan and Associated Timeline**

Subject to the Governance and Policy Committee’s approval, the policy will be presented to the Board of Trustees on May 25, 2022 for final approval.

Upon approval of this policy, the associated Operational Procedures will be finalized and brought to the Governance and Policy Committee in June 2022 for information for implementation in September 2022.

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 centralized programs or local programs, based on criteria determined centrally and local programming needs (September 2022 and onwards)
* The setting of enrollment limits for centralized programs and schools (October 2022)
* Applications and programming for centralized programs and schools starting using standard, interest-based 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)

**Resource Implications**

As the implementation process continues, further information will be provided. At the current time we anticipate costs associated with professional development, the running of a centralized application process, and the development of communications and public relations materials.

**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 centralized programs and schools;
* Central communication and support will be provided to all administrators regarding the new Policies and Procedures;
* Central communication will be sent to families regarding centralized 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 centralized programs and schools.

**Board Policy and Procedure Reference(s)**

* Optional Attendance Policy (P013)- Out-of-Area Admissions Policy
* Admission to Specialized Schools and Programs (PR612) - under revision

**Appendices**

* Appendix A: [Final Draft PXX: Student Interest Programs Policy](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1doU9p9ATx5lOF9mHwnBcCj0eJAvD6D3T/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs) (April 27, 2022)
* Appendix B: [2021-2022 Local Secondary School Programs](https://docs.google.com/document/d/104kjSGimszyJlKf05tp5FHVQB8NSMLC6cxtuEx0g_Ts/edit)
* Appendix C: [PXX Work Plan Specialized Programs Policy](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Yy8je476WjLuri7AumWRckis1kbmzkyT/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=104617008131398665257&rtpof=true&sd=true)  (December 2, 2019)

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