

West Shore schools face growth spurt

'Massive explosion' in requests for French immersion classes

BY LINDSAY KINES, TIMESCOLONIST.COM JANUARY 25, 2012

A booming school population on the West Shore and growing demand for French immersion classes continues to drive change in the Sooke school district.

Millstream Elementary in Langford will launch a new French immersion track this fall to help meet a "massive explosion" in requests for the program, superintendent Jim Cambridge said.

Students enrolled in the French stream now account for about 10 per cent of the district's population, up from five per cent just five years ago.

The district hopes that making Millstream a dual English-French school will ease pressure on Colwood's École John Stubbs Memorial, a kindergarten to Grade 9 school and the only elementary currently offering French immersion in the district's Belmont zone.

École John Stubbs enrolled four immersion kindergarten classes this year and expects another four next fall. With only one to two Grade 9 immersion classes departing each year, "there's a capacity issue at John Stubbs obviously that needs to be addressed pretty well immediately," Cambridge said.

The district plans to free up additional space at École John Stubbs by moving two Grade 9 immersion classes and a Grade 9 English class to Belmont Secondary School next year.

The changes mesh with the district's plan to eventually realign all its schools to match those in other districts. Elementary schools soon will include kindergarten to Grade 5 students, middle school will cover Grades 6 to 8, and high school will run Grades 9 to 12.

Belmont principal Carl Repp said the addition of Grade 9 classes at the school will open up exciting opportunities. Students will benefit by getting an additional year in various sports and music programs, while the school will be able to fill out a number of its elective introductory courses with both Grade 9 and 10s.

The switch also gives the district a chance to get the Grade 9 to 12 model up and running in the Belmont zone before opening two new high schools in Colwood and Langford, Repp said.

The district hopes to open the new schools within the next four years.

But Marion MacBean, whose daughter is in Grade 7 at John Stubbs, questions the wisdom of adding more classes to aging and overcrowded Belmont Secondary.

"I think they should have waited until these two new schools are in place before they started adding more students," she said.

The district remains under constant pressure. It adds about 300 students a year and projects that its 9,000 population will grow by 55 per cent over the next 15 years.

"It's new people moving to the community, but it's also a changing demographic," Cambridge said. "There seems to be a price point for housing that's quite affordable for young families.

"We also know that one of the most attractive things to young families is other young families. Parents tend to want to live in a community where there's other kids their child's age.

"We don't see this trend changing very much right now and we have to prepare for it."

Cambridge noted that the number of babies born in the district jumped by more than 30 per cent last year, to about 800 from 600.

"That's pretty huge," he said.

The district is offering a number of information sessions tonight for parents of students heading into kindergarten in the Sooke school district in September.

The sessions begin at 7 p.m. at École John Stubbs, Millstream Elementary and Poirier Elementary.

kines@timescolonist.com

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