

May 7, 2025 Public Budget Meeting – Public Questions and Responses

In relation to transportation, could you also clarify whether students from Collettville who opt to transfer to other schools would be picked up on the same routes where Collettville students currently are not?

- Students would transfer to their neighbourhood or catchment school. Bussing is only provided for students outside of our walking limits: grades K-3 are 4 km and grades 4-12 are 5 km. No bussing is provided for students choosing to attend schools outside of their catchment. Transportation is the parent's responsibility if a student is attending a school outside their catchment or neighbourhood.

If so, how would this impact overall busing capacity and operational costs?

- Our overall number of students riding the buses would be reduced. Currently, 6 buses go to Collettville. Cost savings would be realized through reduced staffing and maintenance costs.

Can you please confirm that students living beyond the School District's walking distance policy (4km/ 5km) will be bussed to Collettville next school year?

- Students who are living beyond our walking limits (4 kms/5 kms) to their neighbourhood or catchment school, not Collettville School, will have busing. A transfer bus will be available at either MSS or Central, and bell times will be adjusted to accommodate.

How does the district plan to ensure equal access to French Immersion for families without reliable transportation?

- We would encourage those families to reach out to the school principal to explore options. All families within walking limits potentially have similar challenges getting their children to school, regardless of FIM or not.

Has the impact on low-income or rural families been assessed?

- Yes. For students outside of the walking limits to their neighbourhood or catchment school (not Collettville) will be provided with busing. There will be one transfer bus from either MSS or Central.

Is there a long-term plan to maintain or expand French Immersion in Merritt?

- There is grant funding through the province for French Immersion growth. The numbers are declining in French Immersion, so there are no plans for expansion. Enrollment would need to increase for expansion. Mr. Sambrook has done a wonderful job in helping to rebuild our Kindergarten numbers. We only had 6 Kindergarten students for 2024-2025. However,

Kindergarten numbers are trending low across all of our Merritt schools for 2025-2026 based on numbers to date, including Collettsville. We no longer have classes that start out at 22-25 students at Collettsville.

Was the Ministry of Education consulted about how this aligns with provincial bilingual goals?

- Busing is not a core service per the Ministry of Education and Childcare. French Immersion programming is still offered K-12.

What steps will be taken to involve families, staff, and the broader community in future decisions?

- We hold public budget consultation meetings each year. This year they were held on April 16 in Merritt and on April 17 in Princeton. We also met extensively with our Rights Holders and partner groups (including staff representation). We look forward to increased engagement as we move forward. This year, we had the most people ever attend our budget consultation sessions in both Merritt and Princeton. We also provided live-streamed options for both meetings.

Given the reported 5.35% decrease in enrollment across SD58 and the resulting \$500,000 reduction in government funding, can you please provide enrollment numbers for all SD58 schools over the past 10 years and not just Collettsville?

- We will pull the data and include it in the board package for May 14, 2025.

Are you getting rid of MSS French Immersion?

- As explained in the meeting, MSS French Immersion program will continue with combined classes. Enrollment determines the number of grades that are combined. Students will take the courses in person and still be able to receive their dual dogwood.

Will bell times be adjusted to accommodate students who are walking?

- Yes, bell times will be adjusted to accommodate the transfer bus and those walking to Collettsville.

Big changes like discussing closing an elementary school, getting rid of MSS French immersion, getting rid of bussing to Collettsville should be open publicly available meetings.

- There is misinformation in this statement that has been answered in other questions. You may be looking at the list of possible mitigation strategies that were not recommended. We held public meetings both in person and online for our public consultation on our budget in both communities. There is a delay from when we finish the meeting and when it finishes rendering to YouTube, allowing comments to continue to be posted. As a result, we posted the questions to

our Facebook page and provided answers. Moreover, Chair Swan asked at the start of the meeting that any further questions be submitted by this Friday and will go in our Board Meeting Package for May 14, 2025. In addition, we will also include the questions and answers in our board package from YouTube and Facebook.

Are school counsellors being reduced?

- No, we have maintained our school counsellors. They are almost double the ratio required by our Collective Agreement.

At what point will the School District determine which school they are closing and how will that decision be made?

- Chair Swan provided notice of a motion to explore school closure. It is a long (one-year) process with required steps from the Ministry, as Chair Swan explained. Merritt Central is our oldest school, but we have three schools with surplus capacity.

How does Collettsville's enrollment decline compare percentage-wise to other schools in the district?

- We will need to pull the data and do an analysis, but it would not be an apples-to-apples comparison. Most students who leave our French Immersion program remain in one of our other schools unless they leave the community entirely. Overall, we are down collectively approximately 100 students across our district over the last five years. There are a combination of factors leading to the decline – lower birth rates, aging communities (average age in Merritt is 46.5 and average age in Princeton is 48.5), and families leaving due to business closures or reduction in staffing/hours. We have conducted exit interviews with some of the students and families who have left the program to understand how to better support FIM students in staying in the program.

Will there be a working group to address parent concerns collaboratively?

- A budget working group and public consultation meetings were held. We have responded to our parents' emails and shared the concerns with the entire board of trustees. If you have not reached out already, please do so. Please also consider attending your school's Parent Advisory Committee to support your child's school and ensure parent voice.