

An Alternative Plan for FSL in New Brunswick

Joseph Dicks and Paula Kristmanson
University of New Brunswick

Context

The Government of New Brunswick has decided to make changes to its Anglophone educational system in order to (1) increase the percentage of students achieving a functional level of bilingualism, and (2) resolve the problem of students not achieving the desired educational outcomes. We agree with the Government that these two objectives are important for the improvement of the delivery of education in New Brunswick schools.

The first objective, to increase the numbers of students achieving functional bilingualism (recently defined by the NB Department of Education as reaching the Intermediate level or above on the New Brunswick oral interview scale), is being addressed through the implementation of Intensive French (IF). We fully support this initiative and based on past research know that it has a positive effect on students' French proficiency in the short term. French programming both prior to and as a follow-up to IF will be crucial factors in the longer-term success of this initiative. As will the identification and development of curriculum materials and the provision of teacher training.

The second objective, to resolve the problem of students not achieving the desired educational outcomes, has been immediately addressed by deciding to eliminate Early French Immersion (EFI). We feel that this decision is extreme and unnecessary. The argument that streaming caused by EFI is the major cause of this problem is not supported by evidence. We do believe, however, that EFI should be made as inclusive as possible and we encourage and offer to assist the government of NB to take the measures that are require to make this happen.

Rationale for Alternative Plan

All three options- Early French Immersion (EFI), Late French Immersion (LFI), and Intensive French (IF) offer unique opportunities for students to reach a certain level of bilingualism. However, because the government has made it clear that it will not support all three options, we feel obliged to propose an alternative plan.

The EFI program is the only program that has consistently had approximately one in three students reaching Advanced proficiency. We feel it is extremely important to continue to offer a program option that provides the opportunity for students to reach this level of bilingual success.

The Intensive French program has good results in the short term. We believe, however, that Intensive French could be improved to make Intermediate proficiency a much more attainable goal if there were prior French instruction in K-4 and more French language learning opportunities for secondary students.

We also believe that the government's decision to eliminate EFI could result in a substantial increase in the enrolment in Late French Immersion (LFI), and, consequently, produce a serious streaming issue at the middle school level based on academic ability.

We are, therefore, proposing an alternative plan that represents a compromise regarding French Immersion programming.

This plan seeks to address three major concerns of the government regarding FSL instruction and its impact on the school system at large:

- 1) it contains mechanisms to substantially increase the percentage of students achieving at least an Intermediate level of bilingualism
- 2) It contains measures to eliminate streaming at the grade 6 level after Intensive French, and to reduce the problem of streaming at the Grade 1 level in EFI
- 3) it reduces the number of FSL program options thereby freeing up teachers to work in Intensive French

In reaching our decision about the structure of this plan we were guided by the following principles:

- 1) the need to provide a program option that offers the greatest opportunity for bilingualism for students of the widest range of abilities, including students who may struggle academically
- 2) the need to have a program that provides the potential for a large number of students to reach Intermediate proficiency, with the possibility of attaining a higher level should they choose optional courses at the secondary level
- 3) the need to have an option for a significant number of students to reach Advanced proficiency in French
- 4) the importance of learning French and having contact with French culture at an early age

Consequently, we propose the following alternative arrangement that involves maintaining the EFI program with some adjustments, as well as establishing an enhanced French second language learning experience for all students who are not in EFI.

ALTERNATIVE PLAN

This plan involves two programs – one leading to Intermediate proficiency and the other to Advanced proficiency. Both involve early exposure to FSL and continuation until Grade 12

Program A. Intermediate Proficiency

This route targets Intermediate proficiency according to the NB Oral Proficiency Scale or Level B1 of the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

Key Features:

1. An elementary core French program beginning at Kindergarten and continuing to grade 4 using a contextualized and interactive method such as the Accelerated Integrated Method (AIM).
2. An Intensive French semester at Grade 5
3. An enhanced middle years Intensive French follow-up from grades 6-8
4. A core French program from grades 9-12 that includes one basic French language course per year and an optional course for students who wish to further their French language proficiency.

Program B: Advanced Proficiency

This route targets Advanced proficiency according to the NB Oral Proficiency Scale or C1 of the European Language Portfolio.

Key Features:

1. A French Immersion experience in Kindergarten.
2. Early French Immersion at Grades 1 - 3 (90% in French).
3. EFI at grades 4 and 5 at 80%
4. EFI at grades 6-8 at 70%
5. Bilingual high school at grade 9 and 10 at 50%
6. French maintenance at grades 11-12 at 20%

ALTERNATE FSL PROGRAM PLAN

Intermediate Proficiency	Advanced Proficiency
<p>Grades 9-12 Post-Intensive High School French One required course and one optional course per year</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>	<p>Grades 11-12 French Language Maintenance (20% French) Minimum of 1 Course in French each semester</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/> <p>Grades 9-10 Bilingual Program (50% French/50% English) 2 Math, 1 Social Studies, 1 Science, 1 French</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>
<p>Grades 6-8 Post-Intensive Middle School French</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>	<p>Grades 6-8 Middle School EFI (70% French)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>
<p>Grade 5 Intensive French</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>	<p>Grades 4-5 Elementary EFI (80% French)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↑</p>
<p>Grades K-4 Core French using contextualized and interactive methods (e.g., AIM)</p>	<p>Grades K-3 Primary EFI (90% French)</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND RATIONALE

In order to improve French second language education in New Brunswick, we provide the following ten recommendations for the Department of Education.

Recommendation 1

Move the entry point for EFI to Kindergarten as of September 2009 with a focus on the development of French language skills. This would make the New Brunswick EFI program entry point the same as that of the other Canadian provinces. It would also help parents and children adjust to schooling in French, and would help parents decide if they really wish to pursue this option at Grade 1. It could also alleviate some of the problems of streaming that occur as a result of students being prematurely identified in English Kindergarten as not suitable for an EFI program.

Recommendation 2

Require parents who decide to continue to enroll their children in **EFI** at Grade 1, as of September 2009, to sign a document that outlines the basic principles of EFI, including parental responsibilities. Signing will indicate that parents are committed to working with their child, teachers, and school administrators to ensure the program works for their child. The document would include an explanation that the Department of Education also commits to provide the resources for students to succeed within the EFI program and that transfers to the English program will only be considered in exceptional cases when all other solutions have been tried and when, in the judgment of French second language and special education learning specialists, a move to English is warranted.

Recommendation 3

Develop a government policy to include and retain as many children as possible from a wide range of backgrounds in the EFI program. This policy should involve a short-term and a long-term plan to address the problem of insufficient support for students in the EFI program who experience difficulty.

Short-term initiatives could involve the following:

- a) Consultation with French second language learning specialists and teachers who have been working with this issue to identify the

areas of greatest need and existing “best practices” in this area. One example is to have Anglophone resource teachers working with the classroom teacher to develop a plan for the EFI student while a substitute teacher takes the class for a day or half day this model was used very effectively in School Districts 6 and 18.

- b) Collaboration with the Faculties of Education of the English and French universities in the province to design a short-term, intensive summer program for FSL resource teacher training. One model that could address the problem is a special education team approach whereby a special education Master teacher would work with a team of resource teachers who have special qualifications in special education obtained through an intensive summer program.

A longer-term approach would involve the following:

- a) Providing existing resource teachers working in schools that offer French immersion incentives to develop and/or improve their skills in French.
- b) Providing all pre-service and in-service teachers with training in aspects of special education in order to be able to respond more effectively to those with learning challenges in their classrooms.
- c) Providing all pre-service and in-service teachers receiving training in dealing with second language learners in their classrooms.

Recommendation 4

Develop a comprehensive, informative document on Early French Immersion for parents that includes, among other things, a clear statement on what is meant by a « good grounding » in one’s first language as far as success in French Immersion is concerned. This statement should make it absolutely clear that formal instruction in literacy in one’s first language (i.e. knowing how to read and write) is not a condition for success in French Immersion. In fact, the statement should indicate that research demonstrates that students who learn to read and write in their second language attain levels of first language literacy that are as high or higher than unilingual students. (See for example <http://www.cpfalta.ab.ca/Learning/experts.htm> at Alberta Learning and es-

pecially the guide *Yes You Can : Information and Inspiration for French Immersion Parents.*)

Recommendation 5

Maintain and enforce regulations concerning the development of French literacy skills in grades K-3 with 90% intensity of instruction in French. A strong base in literacy in French in grades K-3 is essential for subsequent development of strong literacy skills in English beginning in grade 4.

Recommendation 6

Adopt, at grade 5, Intensive French preceded by a well-designed K-4 core French program and followed by an enhanced middle school program. At the high school level, offer one compulsory and one optional French second language courses each year.

Recommendation 7

Phase out **Late French Immersion** beginning Sept 2009. This will eliminate the streaming based on academic ability that occurs in this program. It will also result in a common FSL experience for all students seeking an Intermediate level of proficiency in French. This would also free up teachers and resource specialists from the middle school level to work in Intensive French and its follow-up or in EFL.

Recommendation 8

Provide French second language teachers with opportunities for on-going professional development to enable them to become aware of the latest developments in teaching strategies. A particular focus on a contextualized and interactive approach for the early years core French program (e.g., Accelerate Integrated Method – AIM) and Intensive French would be required. The development of oral fluency and accuracy, as well as the complementary roles of reading, writing, listening and speaking should be an integral part of this professional development.

Recommendation 9

Adapt and adopt the European Language Portfolio as the primary means of assessing students' competency in their second language from the very beginning of their second language learning in school. This portfolio, which focuses on learner self-assessment supported by evidence, allows students

and teachers and others including prospective employers to determine levels of competence in the four language skill areas and in oral interaction.

Recommendation 10

Design a system of on-going evaluation of the Grade K-4 core French program, of grade 5 IF, and of the post-IF courses. Measure students language competency using an adaptation of the European Language Portfolio beginning in Kindergarten. Interview students, parents, teachers, administrators, and learning specialists to determine strong areas and areas of programming to improve. Set clear, reachable targets for improvement on a yearly basis.

CONCLUSION

We believe that combined with the extra-curricular bilingual activities that the Minister of Education is planning to include in the school system, the proposed combination of two early starting programs that include options for intensive language learning experiences will enable the province to meet the goal of 70% of students graduating from high school with a minimal level of proficiency in French. The addition of a contextualized and interactive program (e.g., AIM) at the elementary level and optional courses in French at the secondary level provide support for the Intensive French experience. Most students should reach an Intermediate level given this three-pronged approach. Highly motivated and capable students will be able to pursue Intermediate Plus proficiency.

The EFI immersion experience will allow for many students to reach Advanced levels of oral proficiency and develop high levels of literacy as well. This program has been in existence for over 35 years and benefits from a wealth of curriculum development, high quality resources aimed at younger FSL learners, established pedagogy for the preparation of new teachers and for on-going PD. Recent initiatives focusing on literacy in the early years are making an impact on the quality of EFI teaching and learning

We also believe that eliminating LFI will solve the problem of streaming by ability that occurs at grade 6, and will allow for teachers to be re-deployed in a similar grade and in a program that is not too different from their current experience.

The recommendations regarding the importance of communication and commitment on the part of parents and students on one hand, and teachers,

administrators, learning specialists and other professionals on the other hand are critically important to addressing the problem of streaming and transfer-out of EFL.

We believe this alternative plan represents the best possibilities for improving bilingualism and providing a quality education for all New Brunswick children in the Anglophone system.

APPENDICES

AIM information

<http://www.aimlanguagelearning.com/>

NB Oral Proficiency Scale Levels (Intermediate, Advanced)

The NB OPI level descriptions can be found at p.86 of the Report Card 2005 at <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/anglophone-e.asp>.

European Language Portfolio Levels (B1, B2, C1)

The European Language Portfolio level descriptions can be found at : http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main_pages/levels.html