

Open Letter to the Honourable Kelly Lamrock, Minister of Education, Province of New Brunswick

From the Consortium of Canadian Universities Advising the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers

The Honourable Kelly Lamrock
Minister of Education
New Brunswick, Canada
Place 2000
P. O. Box 6000
Fredericton, NB
E3B 5H1
Canada

Dear Minister Lamrock,

As university educators actively involved in French second language research, teacher education, program development and evaluation, we are jointly writing this letter to express our grave concerns about certain proposed changes announced pursuant to the recent "Review of French Second Language Programs" in New Brunswick. We are particularly concerned about the recommendation to eliminate French as a second language programming in the early years, especially the **Early French Immersion** program.

Research conducted over four decades has consistently shown that **Early French Immersion** is the most successful program option in building learners' French second language competencies while promoting high quality subject matter learning. In fact, since the late 1970s, French immersion education has been an important component of efforts to promote bilingualism in New Brunswick as well as other Canadian provinces. Various studies have highlighted that the level of French proficiency attained by immersion students depends on the age of first instruction and the extent of French instruction. Total-immersion students tend to outperform partial-immersion students on all types of tests. Early-immersion students show higher degrees of proficiency in reading, listening comprehension, oral production, grammar and writing than late-immersion students. Early-immersion students also tend to outperform delayed- (or middle-) immersion students on some French tests. Research also shows that Early French Immersion does not have a negative effect on students' first language development. In fact, studies show that there is a positive effect. It is not surprising that, in a recent article, the **Canadian Council for Learning** argues that French Immersion, and particularly **Early French Immersion**, is the most effective means for non-Francophone students to become bilingual.

Moreover, a great deal of time, energy and money has been devoted to curriculum development as well as teacher education in the **Early French Immersion** program (especially at the elementary school level and particularly with respect to literacy). In fact, this is the only immersion program that benefits from resource materials that are suited to the learners' interests and lan-

guage level. Due to the popularity of Early French Immersion programs across Canada, publishers have responded to the needs of the school system by producing high quality materials across a wide range of subject areas. This is not the case for later entry points, where students often struggle with resources that are either not age-appropriate (designed for younger learners) or too difficult linguistically (often designed for Francophones of the same age).

In addition, research has shown that **Early French Immersion** is the most accessible immersion program in that learners of varying abilities can succeed at their level within the context of this learning environment. This is not to say that a child will not experience difficulties in the **Early French Immersion** program in the same way that some children experience difficulties in their first language. However, **Early French Immersion**, like the regular English program, needs to be supported with training, resource materials and resource personnel that can help learners who are struggling. Teachers, administrators and parents need to be able to rely on the presence of this kind of support so that they do not feel the need to choose the “drop out of immersion” option.

We are not suggesting that other program options should not be available to students. In fact, we would argue that program choice is important, depending on the nature of the learner and the expectations of the parents. However, it is important to recognize that these other program options will not produce the same high level of proficiency as **Early French Immersion**.

Late French Immersion, for example, is a very good option for students who are achieving success in school. Beginning to learn academic subject matter in a second language at this stage of development requires well developed academic skills, high self-motivation and a willingness to put in the extra time and effort to achieve success. This program is a good option for these students.

We also know that **Core French** is an effective program option when the fundamentals are in place: 1) the time allotted for the subject is actually used for that purpose; 2) the teachers possess an appropriate level of French competencies and have received solid preparation for teaching French as a second language; 3) the materials and corresponding activities reflect the latest and best practices in communicative language teaching. Recent research conducted in New Brunswick (Kristmanson & Dicks, 2007) shows that, at the grade 5 level, **Core French** students express a very high degree of interest and motivation in learning French. It is difficult to see how eliminating this positive French second language learning experience at the elementary level will contribute to higher levels of interest and proficiency. Rather, the implementation of an interactive balanced literacy approach to **Core French** in the early years, combined with an intensive semester (Intensive French) at around grade 5, would appear to be an effective way to increase motivation and language proficiency.

With regard to Intensive French in particular, we would like to point out that research on this program is promising but quite limited. The 5-month intensive semester does appear to be an effective means of enhancing **Core French**. Indeed, assessment of student language proficiency at the end of the grade 5 intensive semester indicates that students are achieving at the Basic-Mid range – not comparable with the Intermediate to Advanced levels that immersion produces, but a clear improvement over **Core French**. However, there is no long-range data on the effectiveness of **Intensive French**. At this point, we do not know of any research evidence that indicates whether students who take **Intensive French** will maintain or improve their proficiency in the long run or whether this proficiency will wane over time. This kind of long-term research is a critical component of any informed decision-making on French second language programming.

In conclusion, based on the published research and our experience and background as researchers, we believe that parents and children should be able to choose the French second

language program that best suits their needs and objectives. By the same token, the choices provided should be quality ones that are well supported with appropriate resources and well-prepared teachers. We do not believe that there is a “one-size-fits-all” second language cloak that can adequately cover the wide range of needs, abilities and desires with respect to learning French as a second language in New Brunswick, or anywhere for that matter. Some parents and students will want the advanced proficiency that French immersion provides. Others will be content with a functional level of proficiency that a solid **Core French** program, and in some cases an Intensive French enhancement, can provide. We feel it is vitally important for students and parents to have this choice.

As Canada’s only officially bilingual province, New Brunswick should celebrate its linguistic duality. It should be proud that nearly one-third of its elementary students are enrolled in **Early French Immersion**, and it should be looking for ways to increase that percentage. It should be proud that it offers a **Core French** program starting at Grade 1, and it should be looking for ways to build on the important and positive beginning experiences that students have in their most formative years. And of course, it is important to seek ways to improve what we are doing. However, we must always be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

It would be a gigantic mistake and a huge step backwards for New Brunswick to decide to eliminate the **Early French Immersion** program. As a province that is looked to for leadership in bilingualism, we fear to think what the ramifications would be for French second language programs in other provinces should New Brunswick take this drastic step. We strongly urge you, Mr. Minister, to listen, not just to us, but to the research evidence that unequivocally supports **Early French Immersion** as the best French second language learning option for the widest range of students.

Respectfully,

Joseph Dicks, PhD, University of New Brunswick

Thierry Karsenti, PhD, University of Montreal
President of the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers

Monique Bournot-Trites, PhD, University of British Columbia

Lace Marie Brogden, PhD, University of Regina

Diane Dagenais, PhD, Simon Fraser University

Gestny Ewart, PhD, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface

Peter Heffernan, PhD, University of Lethbridge

Lucille Mandin, PhD, University of Alberta

Sylvie Roy, PhD, University of Calgary

Miles Turnbull, PhD, University of Prince Edward Island

Paula Kristmanson, PhD, University of New Brunswick