

Position Statement to the Commissioners of the Review of French Second Language Programs in New Brunswick

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This submission includes our positions on four key aspects of French Second Language programming: 1) the importance of choice, 2) the advantages and challenges related to various program options, 3) the accessibility issue, 4) outcomes and assessment procedures for second language proficiency.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE

We support the notion of choice and 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 the appropriate training, resources and 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 second language learning in New Brunswick. 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. It is important, we feel, that students and parents have this choice.

II. PROGRAM OPTIONS (ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES)

Early French Immersion

This program option has been proven to be most successful in building learners French second language competency while promoting high quality subject matter learning. In addition, and this is extremely important, 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. A great deal of research attention as well as pre- and in-service training has been given to the early immersion program (especially at the elementary school level and especially with respect to literacy) to ensure that teachers are equipped and qualified to teach in this program. (Please see attached document entitled “FSL Teacher Education.”)

Late French Immersion

Despite its positive results in terms of oral proficiency and its relative popularity for those not choosing the EFI option, this program option is best suited to students who are experiencing 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 forth extra time and effort in order to be successful.

This program is a good option for these students.

Core French

We are devoting the greatest amount of space to Core French since this is the program in which the vast majority of our students are enrolled. 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 competency and 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. The current results from the Core French program suggest that in many cases these fundamentals are not in place, certainly not at all levels. It appears that student interest and motivation is highest in elementary school and lowest at the secondary school. Our current research (Kristmanson & Dicks, 2007) shows that at the grade 5 level core French students express a high degree of interest and motivation in learning French. We do not have data from the secondary level but recent research on Core French coupled with attrition rates suggest that what begins as a very positive experience in elementary core French becomes something very different by the time students are in secondary school.

The lack of status awarded French and second language learning in general at the secondary level is problematic. Students must take core French at grade 10 but do not have to pass it. French is not compulsory

beyond that. In addition, core French at grade 9 and 10 is often taught by default – by that we mean by teachers whose first choice was not to teach in this program and who, consequently, do not have the methodology nor the motivation to deliver an exciting and effective program. Clearly, there are exceptions to this but in too many cases Core French is seen as the “parent pauvre”. No program can produce the intended results if the teachers involved are not well prepared to teach that subject, if they are not motivated to do so, and if they are not supported with resources and an overall school climate that values their contribution.

Intensive French

The implementation of an interactive balanced literacy approach to second language learning in the early years combined with the addition of an intensive semester at a later stage of elementary school appears to be an effective way to develop motivation and language proficiency of core French students at this level. Effective follow-up programs with qualified teachers, and program materials integrating high interest topics with a focus on communication, such as some of the commercial programs already approved by the Department of education at the Grade 6-10 level, need to be used in order to ***maintain*** this motivation and proficiency. There are still no data, however, indicating what language levels these students will be able to attain at the end of such an experience (Grade 12).

III. ACCESSIBILITY

Core French is accessible to all students of all abilities. The addition of Intensive French as a program enhancement does not change this situation, as some research and anecdotal evidence shows that this program is also highly accessible to children of a wide range of abilities. Recent experimentation seems to indicate the Accelerated Integrated Method (AIM) may also be accessible to most elementary school children, although no research is available at the present time to indicate the effectiveness of AIM either in terms of accessibility or development of language proficiency.

Late French Immersion

Although anecdotal reports suggest children who received an intensive language boost are coping better with respect to basic comprehension and communication skills, it needs to be underlined that this program requires a high degree of commitment on the part of both the student and the parent, LFI is not a suitable option for those students who have been struggling academically throughout elementary school. It is the least accessible option of the three program options.

Early French Immersion, as noted above, is also a highly accessible to children with varying strengths and weaknesses. That is not to say that a child will not experience difficulty in the EFI program in the same way that some children experience difficulty in their first language. However, with the exception of serious language processing issues, most children can successfully participate at their level within the EFI option. In order for this to happen, EFI 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. If it is decided that this support ***cannot*** logistically be provided to schools, then parents who are making the decision to choose EFI or the English program need to know up front that these sorts of resources will not be available at the school level to their children. The Department of Education is faced with an extremely important decision in this regard. We see three choices:

- 1) Maintain the status quo whereby EFI is not supported with adequate resources to allow students experiencing difficulty to remain in the program. (This will continue to have the effect of discouraging parents of children who might appear to have some learning difficulty from entering French immersion.)

- 2) Eliminate EFI and go with one of the later starting immersion options; thereby opening the door to a high degree of streaming.
- 3) Provide EFI with the resources it needs, in particular resource teachers who can work with students who experience difficulty so that they remain in the program and progress according to their ability as they would in the English program.

Clearly, if we want an accessible, effective FSL program for the largest number of children with the greatest range of abilities, the third option is the only real one.

IV. LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

Outcomes

Longitudinal data show that none of our programs is achieving the government's target oral proficiency levels at the end of Grade 12. A large majority of students in all three programs, however, is reaching a level of proficiency that is ½ level below the target.

According to the 2004-05 Report Card, Early immersion students are achieving the highest level of oral proficiency (83% **Intermediate Plus** or above) at the end of the public school experience. 96% of Late French Immersion students are meeting the **Intermediate** proficiency level. As the Intermediate Plus and Intermediate descriptions indicate, this is a totally reasonable and highly desirable

attainment for these students considering the nature of the test, and we would argue, represents an ability to function effectively in the second language.

76% of Core French graduates in 04-05 reached the **Basic-Plus** level and 38% reached **Intermediate**. In order to reach the NB government target of 70% of graduates able to function effectively in their second language, core French results will have to be improved. As stated earlier, qualified and motivated teachers, state-of-the-art resources, proper time allocation, and enhancements such as Intensive French will go a long way toward ensuring these improvements.

Assessment Instruments and Procedures

The main source of data to determine the success of French second language students is an oral proficiency interview (OPI) based on their ability to converse in a one-on-one situation with an adult they do not know. Although this oral proficiency test is considered highly valid and reliable, it is nonetheless a high anxiety test that relies on a “snap-shot” – a one-time measure that is then reported and interpreted as a valid portrayal of students’ French language competency over 12 years of schooling. Following are some specific concerns about this testing procedure:

1. The OPI is not complemented by any other form of language testing. The fact that it does not take into consideration listening, reading or writing skills is particularly problematic since the French immersion

program places a large degree of emphasis on literacy-related skills (the learning of the language through subject matter learning).

2. The OPI test is administered at the end of high school (Grade 12) when many students are no longer enrolled in any kind of intensive exposure to the French language. Even for students in the early French immersion program, it is possible that they have not taken any course in French for an entire semester before the test is administered.
3. The reporting of the oral proficiency results is often through a deficit lens which shows that students are not reaching the set language level targets rather than showing what they are capable of doing.
4. The reporting of results for immersion students does not take into consideration their ability to function effectively in highly demanding academic situations, only their ability to function in a one-on-one conversational environment with which they are often unfamiliar at this scholastic stage.
5. The oral and written proficiency of language learners should be tested at the Grade 5 and the Grade 8 level for all students in order to get a more accurate picture of what students are accomplishing at various stages of the French second language learning process.

6. Targets for oral communication ability as well as other language skills should be reexamined in light of the above statements and other models, such as the Common European Framework. Students' language should be explored as a way to capture the full range of their second language abilities.

V. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As Canada's only officially bilingual province New Brunswick should celebrate its linguistic duality. It should be proud that 25% of its students are enrolled in French immersion programs and 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 should be looking for ways to build on the important positive beginning experiences that students have in their most formative years. In summary, we would like to reiterate the following five key points from our submission:

1. Parents and students should be able to choose the program best suited to their personal and academic needs and French second language objectives.
2. Core French (with some attention to ensuring quality and effective use of time) and Early French immersion are the best options for our students.
3. Core French (and its enhancement component Intensive French) and Early French immersion (with appropriate support resources) are the programs that

are the most accessible to the widest variety of students.

4. Oral Proficiency Targets for Early French Immersion and Core French need to be re-examined in light of longitudinal results.
5. The second language competency profile of graduates needs to be broadened to include all components of language proficiency (reading, writing, listening and speaking) as well as students' ability to function at a high level in academically demanding environments in their second language.