

Fredericton
08 March 2008

The Honourable Shawn Graham
Premier
Province of New Brunswick

Dear Premier Graham,

As Director of the Second Language Research Institute of Canada (L2RIC) and a professor of second language in the Faculty of Education at UNB, I feel it imperative to provide you with this feedback on the recent FSL Review Report.

I would like to thank the Minister of Education for his invitation to meet with him to discuss the Report and the future of FSL education in NB, and to present my concerns about the Report and the recommendations it contains, as well as my keen desire and openness to offer whatever assistance I can through our research institute.

The advice and recommendations that are provided below are based on my best judgment as an academic with long experience in the field of FSL education as a student, a teacher, a school district consultant, and a university professor. These comments are offered in the best interest of improving FSL proficiency for the widest range of students.

I have no personal vested interest in this issue. I do have, however, a professional obligation to ensure that I have done my utmost to inform you of what the research says and to make you aware of serious problems with the FSL report that has been presented to your Minister of Education.

I also wish to reiterate my offer to provide whatever assistance I can to help resolve these issues. We have expertise and resources at the L2RIC that we are currently directing toward NB schools and we wish to continue using these resources in the most effective way to improve FSL programming in NB. We are open to discussing how we might continue to cooperate with the Department of Education and school districts to make this happen.

The « Streaming » Issue

We recognize that there is a problem in the anglophone school system at the elementary level with regard to French Immersion students who experience difficulty. Here is what we know to be true related to this problem :

- i) There is a tendency to transfer students out of French immersion quite readily when these students experience difficulty rather than working with them in the FI program and using the « transfer out » option as a last resort once all other possibilities for remediation have been explored.
- ii) The « transfer » problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are very few resource teachers in French Immersion.
- iii) Grade 2 is a particularly busy time for transfer from FI to the English program.
- iv) Students who seem to be having difficulty in Kindergarten in English are less likely to be enrolled in French Immersion.

Because of the early age of the children who enter the program, Early French Immersion has the potential to be the most equitable of all Immersion options. The later one begins to learn a second language in school, the more streaming becomes a reality. Middle Immersion and late Immersion programs are more cognitively demanding and tend to attract students who have already experienced success in school. Consequently, second language experts have been arguing for many years that students in Early French Immersion need to be supported in their learning so that the « transfer out » problem is corrected.

This support can take different forms. Apart from the lack of resource teachers, there has developed in French Immersion a culture whereby students are often transferred to English when they have difficulty without adequately attempting to address the problem in the French Immersion classroom. The classroom teacher, the parents, and the student working together can often resolve problems and transfer out is not necessary, nor is the intervention of a resource teacher. Unfortunately, parents and school administrators and others often resort to the transfer option when it is not necessary.

We at the Second Language Research Institute of Canada are willing to work with the Department of Education, other SL researchers, specialists in the field of special education, teachers and parents to find a solution to this problem. To claim that bilingual resource teachers and teaching assistants are not available and therefore we must abolish the Early French Immersion program is a drastic, unnecessary and damaging way to proceed; particularly since other alternatives have not been explored. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that such a move would significantly improve the classroom composition situation. In fact, the data indicate that if Early French immersion were eliminated, the number of students with special education plans would drop from an

average of 5 per class to 4 per class. While any classroom teacher would welcome this reduction, this cannot be seen to be a substantial improvement over the current situation. Essentially, we would lose a highly effective French immersion program and still have a huge problem with regard to inclusion and classroom composition.

We feel that New Brunswickers have the intelligence and the creativity to solve this problem. We need to work together to find solutions that will work in our context given our restrictions – linguistic, pedagogical, financial, and otherwise. If the will is there, we can do this.

We propose therefore :

- 1) that the Department of Education consult with school district personnel, school administrators, French immersion teachers, special education experts, second language experts to examine the issue of transferring out of French Immersion in order to establish a consistent procedure for dealing with students who have difficulty and to establish clear guidelines as to when, as a last resort, transfer should be considered.**
- 2) that the Department of Education consult with special education experts and second language experts including practising teachers to determine what the specific needs are for students in Early French Immersion who are experiencing difficulty, particularly at the end of grade 1.**
- 3) That the Department of Education consult with the Faculties of Education of the University of New Brunswick , Université de Moncton, Saint Thomas University and others to see what the possibilities are for providing courses that would give bilingual teachers the expertise they need to work as resource teachers in the French Immersion context.**
- 4) that the Department of Education explore how resource teachers and teaching assistants who are not bilingual could nonetheless play an effective role in working with French Immersion teachers and FI students.**
- 5) that the Department of Education explore how teachers currently working in the NB anglophone school system and who are bilingual can be used more effectively with respect to students who need assistance.**
- 6) That the Department of Education explore options other than the TA/ Resource Teacher combination to address the problem. For example, a team that works with several schools might include a bilingual coordinator who has a Masters degree and a number of teachers who have « additional qualifications » in special education – not a Masters degree but an expertise**

similar to the « additional qualifications » that Ontario College of Teachers recognizes.

- 7) That EFI begin in Kindergarten in NB as it does in the other Canadian provinces.**

The Language Competency Issue

We at the Second Language Research Institute feel obliged to clarify certain inaccuracies in the report and in statements that have been made in relation to the report. We provide this information as professional expert advice. We know that neither you as Premier nor your Minister of Education would want to make a decision as critical as this on the basis of inaccurate information or falsehoods.

First, the FSL Review has incorrectly calculated the retention/attrition rates for EFI and LFI leading to a very misleading picture of how the two programs are doing with regard to keeping students until grade 12. (Please see the attached document for a detailed analysis of these inaccuracies). **The most problematic statistic, however, is the one that claims that LFI has a much higher retention rate than EFI (69.7% retention for LFI compared to 37% for EFI). This has been wrongly calculated by using the wrong cohort group for comparison purposes. The correct figures are 43% for EFI and 46% for LFI.** Minister Lamrock is on record stating that EFI is a better program with regard to its competency levels but that LFI retains a much higher percentage of students. Unfortunately, the Minister was misled by statistics in the report that were improperly calculated. We know that you would not want to make a decision based on such a mistake. In case you wish to question our criticism, you may wish to consult with other experts in statistics. We know of at least three at different universities who have reached the same conclusion regarding the data. Regardless, the reported retention rates in the 40% range for both programs are problematic.

These 40% retention figures are based on the numbers of students who are enrolled in a French Immersion course at grade 12. These figures do not take into account the many students who enroll in courses in FI at grade 11. The reasons for students not enrolling in an FI course at grade 12 are varied and complex (availability of courses, preference for a particular teacher in one program or the other, timetabling issues, a sense that their French is good enough and they can focus on something else ...) To view these students as « dropouts » and by extension, program failures is not fair to them or to their teachers. It may be, however, a reflection of a high school system that does not provide the kinds of opportunities or encouragement needed for FSL students to continue. That we need to

improve the status and the place of FSL at the high school is something with which we totally agree.

We need to make more students see the value of staying with their French program until the end. We need to improve the quality of our course offerings. We have made several suggestions about this in our 2006 report (Rehorick and Dicks). We have also, through the Department of Canadian Heritage, produced a document (Plan 2013) that addresses these concerns and that outlines a number of concrete proposals. We would be willing to provide whatever assistance we can to help improve this situation at the high school level.

We at L2RIC are working with schools now on related issues. We have seconded teachers and are paying these teachers' salaries to work with us to improve the literacy programs in French Immersion programs. We have worked with teachers at the elementary and middle levels last year and this year. We are working with students with difficulties in writing at the intermediate level and we are including the English/core program teachers in our research at the middle school level. We are investing a great deal of our efforts and resources in improving literacy at all levels including working with students with difficulties.

We are also conducting research on intensive French and have results that show that students possess very high levels of motivation and increased willingness to communicate in their second language at the end of the IF experience. We are interested in researching how the earlier cohorts are now doing at grade 10 with respect to attitudes, WTC and proficiency. We see IF as having excellent potential for enhancing the core French program.

We are interested. We are involved. We are doing something. We are willing to continue to be involved as partners in FSL education.

We propose therefore :

- 1) That a special committee be formed to examine how FSL at the high school level in particular can be improved such that more students recognize and appreciate the value of a second language, that there be a greater variety of course offerings, that the quality of courses be improved. This committee would be composed of interested stakeholders including the Department of Education, UNB (L2RIC), school districts, teachers, parents, and high school students.**

- 2) **That the Department of Education examine retention/attrition rates at the high school level on a district by district basis. This would allow one to determine what school districts who have better retention rates are doing to keep students in FI at the high school level, and to determine what is contributing to attrition in those Districts that have lower retention rates. A plan could then be put in place to work with Districts to ensure that retention rates are at an acceptable level across the province.**

The Overall FSL Programming Issue

This is a huge and complex part of the educational system in NB. We feel it important to provide our expert advice on a couple of programming issues emanating from the report. We choose these in particular because we have heard or read statements from the Minister that could easily be misinterpreted by those who do not fully understand the research and underlying principles.

First Language Development and Second Language Learning

Perhaps the most important of these misleading statements is that of « a good grounding » in English is needed before learning French. French Immersion and other similar language Immersion programs are designed for non-native speakers of the language who do not have formal literacy instruction in that language. In French Immersion classes, for example, in many parts of the country, including New Brunswick, we find students whose first language is not French – many speak English as a first language but others may come from families that speak a different first language in the home. Thus, the underlying principle of French Immersion (or any language immersion) is that students will develop literacy skills (the ability to read and write) in their second language from the very beginning of schooling.

The key point regarding first language development is that students' first language needs to be supported outside of school. Parents should provide language-rich activities whenever possible: read to them every day in their first language; encourage them to be a part of conversations when appropriate, expose them to other media such as music, television, movies in their first language; encourage various sorts of language games in their first language. This is what is meant by a “good grounding” in the first language in an immersion context. Unfortunately, this term “good grounding” has been interpreted by some to mean that students must be able to read and write in their first language before being able to be fully successful in French Immersion. This is not the case. In fact, if this were the case, in some places in Canada where French Immersion classes are composed of students from a wide variety of first language backgrounds, schools would have to provide formal literacy instruction in a dozen different first languages or more.

Some confusion also occurs with regard to this issue because in delayed entry programs such as Late French Immersion or Middle Immersion, more highly developed literacy skills in the first language will be helpful to students learning to read and write in their second language. However, with regard to spontaneous oral communication and fluency, early starting learners have a distinct advantage in the long term despite not having any formal instruction in English in the early years.

The research on the development of literacy skills in French in French Immersion and the subsequent development of literacy skills in English is clear and consistent. Students in French Immersion develop high levels of literacy in both languages. There is no negative effect of learning to read and write in the second language on the first language. On the contrary, research points to positive effects.

We propose therefore :

That the Department develop a comprehensive, informative document on 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 Alberta Learning <http://www.cpfalta.ab.ca/Learning/experts.htm> and especially the guide *Yes You Can : Information and Inspiration for French Immersion Parents*.)

Core French and Intensive French

The core French program has been much maligned in this report and in other reports on FSL. I would like to point out that despite reports to the contrary, a great deal of work has been done recently at the elementary and middle school levels on core French programming. New curriculum documents and new resources have made the learning of French as a second language at these levels much more interesting and engaging. The

materials are established at the elementary levels. New materials are just making their way into middle school classes. These materials in the hands of qualified and motivated teachers can and do produce good results. Research we have conducted at L2RIC shows that students who have completed grade 1-4 core French have very good attitudes and high levels of motivation to learn French as a second language. One of the world's renowned second language scholars, Dr. Fred Genesee of McGill University, underscores the value of early second language learning, particularly as it relates to the development of tolerance and understanding of other linguistic and cultural groups. These are at least as important as second language proficiency, especially in an officially bilingual province like ours.

There also is the issue of intensive language learning and intensive French in particular. Somehow, the media have interpreted intensive French as being a more intensive language learning situation than Immersion. This is simply erroneous. Immersion and especially EFI is the most intensive form of second language learning available in the school system. Also the results of Intensive French have been presented in the Report in a way that can lead to confusion. It is reported for example that students move up 4 levels. In fact, they move from novice-low to basic-low - which is 1 level. (In order to measure and report on progress over such a short period of time, single levels were broken down into three sub-levels.) This is a very good result after five intensive months of French but still is the very beginning stages of spontaneous language. How these students will fare in high school is not a sure thing. Whether they will opt to continue French studies in high school is also unclear. The proposed follow-up to intensive French is also of grave concern especially the potential effects on LFI of making math and science optional. This could result in a program that has only French language arts and social studies taught in French (80 mins per day in middle school) : This would hardly be an Immersion situation. Intensive French shows a great deal of promise and provides core French students with a strong language boost that has the potential to have a positive effect on proficiency if it is implemented effectively and if the core French or Late French Immersion experience which follows is designed properly. There are a number of conditions here, however, and opting for Intensive French, an unproven entity, over an established and tested Early immersion program would be a very big risk to take with regard to our students' learning.

We propose therefore :

1) that the Department of Education maintain exposure to French as a second language for all students at the elementary level.

2) that the Department expand Intensive French throughout the core French program and that the Department institute a plan to provide inservice to core French teachers on Intensive French teaching at grade 5 and on how to enrich

classes after the intensive experience to maximize students' proficiency in core French.

2) that the Department follow up the Intensive French students at grade 10 to assess motivation, willingness to communicate, desire to continue FSL studies, and second language proficiency.

3) that LFI remain an option after core French but that the intensity of the LFI program not be reduced to 80 mins per day, but rather be maintained at the level currently stipulated in Policy 309.

Administrative Support for French Second Language Programs

Currently there is one consultant at the Department of Education responsible for all FSL programming. This is too much for one person to handle. The Commissioners recognize this in their report and we agree.

We propose therefore :

1) that the Department increase the professional staff dedicated to FSL programming

2) That the Department establish an advisory committee for FSL programs comprised of representatives including Department of Education, UNB (L2RIC), parents, school districts, cultural groups, and business groups.

In conclusion, we feel, Mr Premier, that you and your Minister of Education have an excellent opportunity to do something extremely positive for FSL education in NB. We believe that this can be done with a three-pronged approach :

- (1) develop a concrete plan to make Early French Immersion the inclusive program that it can and should be,
- (2) continue the very good work begun with Intensive French in the core program to increase proficiency in that program, and
- (3) work on FSL at the high school level to increase student interest and the status of French as a second language.

Developing a work plan to address these vitally important issues, with clear targets for improvements and built-in assessment at key stages, will ensure that NB has a FSL program that will be recognized by experts across the country, as well as by those interested in moving to or moving back to NB, as being the very best in the country. A strong Early French Immersion program is a vital component in attracting professionals and skilled workers to this province. To eliminate it would be to deliver a serious blow to

the self-sufficiency agenda that you are working so diligently to promote and develop. To strengthen it and our FSL programming in general would strengthen the province as a whole.

Finally, the following knowledgeable and respected individuals and groups, among others, have expressed concern about the recommendation to eliminate Early French Immersion :

Dr. Fred Genesee, McGill University

Dr. Rodrigue Landry, Université de Moncton

Mr. Graham Fraser, Federal Commissioner of Official Languages

M. Michel Carrier, Provincial Commissioner of Official Languages

The Consortium of Canadian University Professors Advising the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers

The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers.

Their collective wisdom and experience should not be ignored when a final decision is made regarding the recommendations put forward by our two commissioners.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph Dicks, PhD

cc Honourable Kelly Lamrock, Minister of Education
 Honourable Greg Byrne, Minister for Population Growth
 Honourable Jeannot Volpé, Leader of the Opposition
 Honourable Madeleine Dubé, Education Critic, PC Party of NB