

**REACTION TO THE REPORT OF THE FRENCH SECOND
LANGUAGE COMMISSION TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION
NEW BRUNSWICK**

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We feel that the report submitted by the FSL commissioners is seriously flawed. We have serious concerns about the statistics related to drop out rates and are appalled at the one-sided reporting of qualitative data that focuses nearly exclusively on negative comments regarding Early French Immersion (EFI) .

Regarding the statistics, it appears that attrition (or drop-out, the word most often used in the report) has been calculated incorrectly in most cases. The percentages appear to have been calculated across cohorts (i.e., comparing the enrolment in EFI Grade 9 in 2006 with the enrolment in EFI in Grade 12 in 2006), rather than by following cohorts (i.e., the enrolment in EFI in Grade 1 in 1995, Grade 2 in 1996, Grade 3 in 1997, enrolment in Grade 12 in 2006). In order to determine attrition rates the same cohort has to be followed over time rather than comparing enrolment numbers for different cohorts as appears to be the case in the report.

In order to calculate declines in enrolment, the tables need to be followed diagonally, not vertically or horizontally. For example in the following table (TABLE 6) , the net change and % change are calculated vertically. This is not meaningful. In order to show % of change in enrolment one has to follow Grade 1, 1997 to Grade 2, 1998 to Grade 3, 1999 and so on. One has to follow the same intake of students from beginning to end. This does not appear to be the case. Vertical calculations using students enrolled in the same year are in fact meaningless.

EXCERPT FROM REPORT:

TABLE 6: Showing Average Declines in FSL Early Immersion Enrolments from Grade 1 to Grade 5, Between September 1997 and September 2006^a

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Grade 1	1,822	1,876	1,881	1,905	1,830	1,783	1,706	1,655	1,624	1,646
Grade 2	1,537	1,618	1,686	1,701	1,717	1,670	1,642	1,589	1,505	1,450
Grade 3	1,261	1,483	1,490	1,577	1,574	1,595	1,564	1,528	1,479	1,390
Grade 4	1,337 ^b	1,226	1,380	1,406	1,487	1,491	1,522	1,502	1,457	1,391 ^b
Grade 5 ^b	1,201	1,265	1,132	1,301	1,346	1,417	1,443	1,449	1,437	1,401 ^b
Net Change	621	611	749	604	484	366	263	206	187	245
% Change	- 34.1%	- 32.6 %	-39.8%	-31.7%	-26.4%	-20.5%	-15.4 %	-12.4 %	-11.5%	-14.9%

^a

Department of Education, "Summary Statistics: School Year 2006-2007, Policy and Planning Department, March 2007.

b

anomalies may be due to merging of middle immersion students – Department data does not differentiate

This also appears to be the case in Table 12 of the Report. The authors report a 69.7% retention for late French immersion (LFI) for 06-07 when in fact, if you follow the cohort, there is actually a 46% retention rate for LFI. The authors appear to have divided the number of students in Grade 12 LFI in 06-07 (711) by the number of students enrolled in Grade 6 LFI in the same year (1020). In order to calculate the attrition or retention rate one must use as a denominator the number of students who initially enrolled in LFI at grade 6 six years earlier in 2000. (Below are the original Table 12 and calculation of “Persistence” (retention) from the Report as well as a calculation which follows the 06-07 grade 12 students back to 2000 when they entered the program. These figures were available in Table 14 of the report. There were 1535 students in Grade 6 LFI at that time.)

TABLE 12: Comparing FSL Early and Late Immersion Registrations for Grades 9 through 12 between September 2004 and 2006

	2004-5		2005-6			2006-7	
	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	
Entry (G1/6)	1,655	1,161	1,624	1,045	1,646	1,020	
Grade 9	1,146	1,068	1,188	914	1,257	857	
Grade 10	973	988	1,031	953	1,131	806	
Grade 11	618	868		740	816		845 795
Grade 12	466	811	548	675	613	711	
% Persistence from entry	28.15%	69.85%	33.74%	64.6%	37.22%	69.7%	

CALCULATION BASED ON THE SAME COHORT (STUDENTS WHO ENTERED LATE IMMERSION IN 2000 AND STAYED WITH THE PROGRAM UNTIL 2006-2007):

Number of students entering LFI in 2000 = 1535 (See table 14 of the report)

Number of students remaining in LFI in 2006-07 = 711

Retention rate = 711/1535 = 46.3% (not 69.7%)

This statistic is particularly important as the authors cited the nearly 70% retention rate of Late French Immersion as a critical factor in their decision to opt for this program over Early immersion. The authors admitted that Early immersion had better results with regard to French proficiency but cited this 70% retention rate as defining variable of Late French Immersion. When the retention rate is calculated using the same cohort, in the accepted way, it is a very different result.

Aside from the above examples, there are several other tables that appear to have been treated in the same way and that should be re-analyzed. See for example:

Table 6, p.41

Table 7, p.42

Table 8, p.42

Table 11, p.46

Table 12, p.46

Another statistic that is reported in a peculiar way, is that in 2006 91% of EFI students failed to reach the goal of Advanced on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). This is **extremely** misleading for two reasons.

First, this percentage was obtained by dividing the number of students who took the test in Grade 12 by the number of students who started in the EFI program in grade 1 in 1995 (1469). The authors have mixed retention rates and test success statistics together to arrive at this figure. This is a highly unusual way to measure achievement and we do not know of any other study that has done this.

Second, the 91% is based on the number of students taking the OPI in 2005-06 and not 2006-07. Yet the total number of students used as the denominator is the 1995 number. (The 05-06 students would have begun in 1994 not 1995. The denominator should be the 1994 Grade 1 EFI enrolment, not 1995). Why the authors are using 05-06 numbers is not clear. Perhaps because this figure is lower than the 06-07 figure? If one takes the 06-07 figures, 15.9% of students took the Oral Proficiency Interview. This means that 84% (not 91%) of students for various reasons did not take the OPI – some did not do courses in grade 12 and were not eligible to take the interview, others chose not to do the test. There is no way of knowing if these students would have achieved advanced or not; presumably some would have and some would not have. In fact, of the 414 students who took the test in 2006, 234 received an advanced level which represents **56.6% who achieved advanced proficiency.**

Also related to OPI results is the way that the success of students in the Intensive French is reported. Intensive French students achieve a result of **Basic Low** which is described as arriving at the “ability to communicate with some spontaneity.” A student attaining this level in Intensive French is considered successful, whereas receiving this level or above in the other programs is seen as a failure. It is important to recognize that 100% of LFI students, 100% of EFI students, and 65% of core French reach this minimal level. Even students who have achieved levels far beyond this (Intermediate and Intermediate Plus)

and who possess much more communicative spontaneity related to many more topics of conversations, are seen as having failed to meet provincial standards.

With regard to the narrative and descriptive components of the document, we find the language used, in many cases, to be highly inappropriate for a research report that is supposed to be objective. Several sentences contain exclamation points like this one on page 38 “That Early French Immersion has its defenders and advocates is an understatement!”, (See also pp. 10, 37.40). We also noticed other value-laden statements. For example, the authors introduce comments with statements such as , “And finally one of the best”; “One district administrator very accurately summarized the views of **all** the FSL administrators throughout the province” (p. 33).: and “nicely summarized what the Commissioners have heard from other superintendents” (p. 36).

Another example of this inappropriate reporting comes in the way of a footnote which could be seen as insulting to any parent who contributed to the website forum initiated by the Commission. Essentially all of the comments showing support for EFI were summarily dismissed in the following footnote:

“On a web site (sic) which the Department of Education created and publicized in order that the Commission might receive feedback from parents Of over the 450 responses, the majority were in favour of the Early immersion program. Interestingly, a great many of these respondents identified themselves as belonging to an association and their theme was vitriolic opposition to the Commission’s supposed recommendation to cancel Early Immersion ... an overwhelming majority of these responses failed to provide any constructive thoughts ...” (Report, p.38)

This is extremely dismissive. It seems the report chose only to share the direct quotes from those who held negative beliefs about EFI. Comments from parents on this website such as, “I believe the experience in the program has been extremely worthwhile... I would strongly encourage the continuation of the early French immersion program with no major changes” (16/10/07) or from a former EFI students such as, “During my elementary school years I was very fortunate to have early immersion as an option and also very fortunate that my parents recognized the importance and value of this program” (30/10/07) were not included in the report, but were rather synthesized into one dismissive footnote.

We also feel obliged to react to the use of the term “drop-out” and the way that this is used in the Report. In the first instance, the term is used to refer to those Grade 1 students who transfer to the English program in Grade 2. These students transfer out usually because they are having difficulty in school and cannot receive the help they need

in the French Immersion program. This is an important piece of the picture that needs to be understood. It is not that they are “dropping out” because of some discontentment with the program itself.

The second use of the term refers to any student who does not take the Oral Proficiency Interview at the end of Grade 12. This is very misleading. In order to take the OPI students must take a Grade 12 French course. Many students take their entire Grade 10 year in French immersion, take 3 or 4 courses in grade 11 in French Immersion but do not do French in Grade 12 for a variety of reasons. Some of these are course availability, timetabling conflicts, teacher preference. Some opt to focus more on specific subject areas in English. This does not mean that their French Immersion experience was a failure or that they should be characterized as “drop-outs”. It would be extremely useful to conduct an Oral Proficiency Interview at the end of Grade 10 to see what percentage of students at that point achieve Intermediate Plus or Advanced. It would also be informative to know what percentage take French immersion courses in Grade 11 and Grade 12 but do not do the OPI.

A final comment relates to the issue of streaming. Dr. Croll stated in a recent newspaper article that there was not one bilingual methods and resource teacher in the Anglophone system. This is not accurate but it does point to a serious problem. Students experiencing difficulty in Early French immersion often have to transfer to the English system in order to get the help they need. This is creating an unnecessary streaming effect that needs to be addressed. Eliminating Early immersion and replacing it with Intensive French followed by either Late immersion or core French will not, however, solve the streaming problem. It will in all likelihood make it worse. We know that Late French Immersion is a demanding program academically. Students who do well in school, who are highly motivated and who show an aptitude for language will undoubtedly be encouraged to take part. The others will very likely choose the core French option. We see the potential here for a very serious streaming problem should the government implement this recommendation.

To conclude, we would like to point out that although the Second Language Research Institute of Canada is listed as one of the groups consulted in the preparation of this report, none of our written or oral responses was included. Moreover, with the exception of research promoting Intensive French, little if any research promoting the benefits of other language programs has been cited. In fact, there is a severe shortage of research-based findings in this report. A research list of consulted studies would be at a minimum a starting point. (Please see accompanying reference list.)

To summarize, this Report appears to contain grave errors in the treatment of statistical data related to attrition and retention. It also treats qualitative data in a manner that

deviates seriously from the standards of sound research practice. We feel, as a result, that this study is fundamentally flawed, and the validity of its conclusions and recommendations to be highly questionable.