

# Report of the French Second Language Task Force

February 2012



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## The Process

The terms of reference for the work of the Task Force were provided before the members met. They included the following mandate:

- Provide direction/options for outcome and program improvements to either the Grade 1 or Grade 3 Early French Immersion entry point or program, depending upon the option recommended and accepted by Government.
- Consult with the Ministerial Advisory Committee on French Second Language Review both before undertaking public consultations and once preliminary recommendations are complete.
- Review background analytics on student results for the Grade 1 versus Grade 3 entry points.
- Undertake public consultation on the entry point for Early French Immersion on behalf of the Government of New Brunswick.
- Review all briefs and materials presented to Government on the issue.
- Deliver a final report to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development by January 31, 2012.

The co-chairs met with the Minister and the mandate was summed up in two more precise questions. These questions were put to the public at every public meeting as well as to stakeholders during consultations.

1. What is best for the child who wants to learn a second language; grade 1 or grade 3 entry?
2. What do parents want?

Public meetings took place in November and December at 11 schools around the province from the following cities.

- Campbellton
- Miramichi
- Bathurst
- Fredericton
- Moncton
- Saint John
- St. Stephen
- Woodstock
- Oromocto
- Sackville
- Hampton

Furthermore, meetings took place with a sample of school staff including teachers and principals in each location (173 participants). Included in these groups were literacy leaders, Immersion teachers, English teachers, resource and methods teachers, and intensive French teachers. We also met with 43 students, mostly from high school but some from Grades 3 to 5 as well.

The Task Force met on two occasions with the Ministerial Advisory Committee on French Second Language Review before drafting its report and once the first draft of the report was in the works.

The Task Force members or co-chairs also met with a number of stakeholders including district superintendents, Dr. J. Douglas Wilms, Dr. Joseph Dicks, Dr. Ann Sherman, former minister Kelly Lamrock, district learning specialists and a representative of First Nations.

A web-based questionnaire was made available to the public for a period of 6 weeks. Over 350 people responded to the following questions:

- What are your language ability expectations of French Immersion?
- In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of a Grade 1 entry point versus a Grade 3 entry point? Please provide examples or observations.
- Please describe your experience with each of the French Immersion entry points (Grade 1 and/or Grade 3).
- What are the major challenges and/or benefits with the province maintaining the current entry point of French Immersion?
- Is the current goal of meeting the 70% advanced proficiency for the Grade 1 or Grade 3 entry points realistic? Please explain your choice.
- What specific barriers may relate to the government's goal of 70% of Anglophone students achieving the Advance proficiency in French Immersion?
- In your opinion, what is the ideal time for students to begin learning a second language and why?

The above questions were also used as a launch pad for all the consultations. They served the Task Force well as they created a context for discussion.

## Biographies of the members of the French Second Language Task Force

### **James E. Lockyer, co-chair**

Lockyer is a professor and former dean at the law faculty at the Université de Moncton, where he teaches trial advocacy, appellate advocacy, civil procedure and commercial law. Lockyer is a past president of the Law Society of New Brunswick and past member of the New Brunswick Law Foundation. He was a member of Moncton council from 1983 to 1987.

Lockyer served as an MLA from 1987 to 1999. He was attorney general and minister of justice for five years. He also served as minister of education, minister of supply and services and solicitor general. He was a member of various legislative and cabinet committees. He was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1987.

Active in community affairs, Lockyer is a former board chair of the Greater Moncton YMCA. He is a former member of the board of directors and executive of the Moncton Flight College. He was a vice-president of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation and vice-president of the Tree of Hope Campaign. He was chair of the organizing committee of the 2009 Ford World Men's Curling Championship. He spent many years as a member of the Canadian Forces Reserve.

### **Elvy Robichaud, co-chair**

Robichaud is a former teacher, principal and hospital administrator. He received his B.PhysEd, BA and MA at the Université de Moncton.

Robichaud served as an MLA from 1994 to 2006. He was minister of education from 1999 to 2001. He also served as minister of health and wellness for five years. He was minister responsible for the Office of Human Resources and the Culture and Sport Secretariat. A former official Opposition house leader, Robichaud served on a number of legislative committees, including the standing committee on procedure, law amendments and public accounts as well as the select committee on demographics.

Active in his community, Robichaud has been a Tracadie councillor, board chair of the Hôtel-Dieu Saint-Joseph in Tracadie, president of the New Brunswick Special Olympics and treasurer of Leisure New Brunswick.

## **Linda Lowther**

Lowther has 32 years of experience in education. In 2011, she retired as assistant deputy minister of the Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, where she held various positions in the field. Lowther was a teacher, a French co-ordinator within a school board, a curriculum consultant at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, director of French programs and senior director of public education.

In her senior positions with the Island's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Lowther was a member of the Task Force on Student Achievement and chair of the Kindergarten Transition Team. She helped with the deployment of the Pre-School Excellence initiative.

Her educational volunteer work included the founding of the Prince Edward Island French Immersion Teachers' Association and various executive positions with the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers.

## **Paul-Émile Chiasson**

Chiasson is the Education / Teaching English as a Second Language co-ordinator at the University of New Brunswick, Saint John campus. He received his BA and BEd from St. Francis Xavier University and a BA from Laval University. He later obtained his MA and PhD from the Université de Franche-Comté in France. He joined the faculty of arts, University of New Brunswick, Saint John campus, in 2004. He has taught the Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language program since its inception in 1998. He has been awarded departmental and faculty awards for teaching excellence.

Chiasson specializes in education and second language teaching. Author of several articles, he has conducted numerous workshops and training on English and French as an additional language in Korea, China and New Brunswick.

Prior to present role, Chiasson taught immersion and French core in school districts 6 and 8 for 27 years. He served as the French second language learning specialist in School District 8.

## The Context

A French immersion program was first attempted in 1965 in Saint-Lambert, Quebec, when a group of English speaking parents wanted their children to be able to communicate in French and reach out to other native French speakers.

French Immersion is a type of bilingual education in which students receive instruction in French for a significant portion of the school day. It is designed specifically for students whose mother tongue is not French. The approach used is often called "the gentle approach" as children learn the language through daily use in the classroom rather than by rote learning.

Lambert and Tucker (1972) found that parents choosing to enter their children in French Immersion were motivated by their desire to have their children:

- meet and converse with more and varied people;
- understand members of the other group and their way of life;
- develop friendships with members of the other group; and
- get good jobs.

French Immersion programs were widely introduced into Canadian schools, including in New Brunswick, in the 1970s to encourage bilingualism across the country. Now forty years later, immersion programs provide an alternative education stream for many students.

French Immersion entry points have changed a number of times in New Brunswick. In 2008, the Department of Education proposed the abolition of Early French Immersion in favour of an immersion program beginning in Grade 6 (Late Immersion). After a public outcry and a judicial decision a compromise was made to effect a change of the entry point from Grade 1 to Grade 3.

The present Government, as part of its election platform, promised to re-visit that decision within the first year of its mandate. This report is the result of that commitment.

Whether learning a second language, in this case French, is beneficial or not is no longer debatable. Regardless of the program, learning a second language provides many social and academic benefits, including a better understanding of French and French-speaking cultures, a facility for other languages, brain development that facilitates other learning, delays the onset of dementia, and provides a greater number of career options.

*The year French Immersion started in Canada: 1965*

*The average number of students in French Immersion in Canada each year: 328,000*

*The number of students in French Immersion in New Brunswick in 2000: 22,664*

*The number of students in French Immersion in New Brunswick in 2010: 17,454*

*Provinces with the largest % of students in French Immersion: NB, Quebec and PEI*

*Language proficiency expectations of participants in the process: >86% expect Intermediate plus or higher and >50% expect advanced or higher*

*French is spoken by about 128 million people in 54 countries. It is an official working language of the European Union, the UN, the International Red Cross, the International Olympic Committee and NATO.*

## Data Gathered from the Web Survey

Over 350 people filled out the online survey. Of those, less than half had children in Immersion. The first question asked about the respondents' language ability expectations of French Immersion. More than half (51.5%) expect an advanced level of proficiency and another 34.8% expect at least an intermediate plus level. A total of 86.3% of respondents wanted an intermediate plus or higher degree of proficiency. Clearly there is a high expectation of proficiency on the part of respondents.

The answers in response to the second question asking what are the strengths and weaknesses of a Grade 1 entry point versus a Grade 3 entry point were:

### Strengths of Grade 1 Entry Point vs. Grade 3 entry point

- Sponges/Ability to Soak Everything in/Early Exposure at 30%
- Learn basic concepts of both languages at once/think not translate/Learning a 2nd language is natural part of school at 16.3%
- Less inhibited/shy/resistant/self-conscious, more confident at 14.6%
- Better French accent/Less noticeable English Accent/pronunciation at 8.9%
- Build vocabulary at 4.0%
- Less streaming than Grade 3 Entry/More inclusionary/Less disruption and more social networks at 3.1%
- Inter provincial mobility for students at 1.4%
- Availability of similar curriculum and resources at 1.1%

### Weaknesses of Grade 1 Entry Point vs. Grade 3 entry point

- Need to lay strong foundation prior to introducing new language at 42.9%
- Streaming more pronounced/does not allow for early interaction 10.3%
- Parents do not yet have understanding of capabilities of own child 7.4%
- Fatigue by end of Grade 6/Exit Program at Disadvantage at 1.4%

In describing their experiences with each of the French Immersion entry points respondents with Grade 1 experience said that children were able to converse competently and had higher proficiency (17.9%), were more likely to be proficient later in life/keep it up/speak and not translate (6.2%), influenced work habits/concepts that helped later in school (3.5%), had positive experiences/ gains without losses (3.2%), better pronunciation/French accent (2.9%). The top negative points included worry/reality that they will not be/are not as proficient in English (4.4%), that streaming occurs – top students to FI/most pronounced (3.5%) and that it is a shock to go from English kindergarten to Immersion Grade 1 (2.9%).

Respondents with Grade 3 experience said that children were able to build a foundation in English first (20.8%), that students know themselves/more confident/understand school (4.1%), and that there is time for parents/teachers to assess (3.2%). Respondents also said that children may not want to try to start this late/ Discouraged/Reluctant (7.0%), that adjusting to the language distracts from success in other subjects (2.9%) and that the program is less universal/more elitist/streaming still occurs or more (1.8%).

Respondents identified many factors in identifying the major challenges and/or benefits with the province maintaining the current entry point of French Immersion. Challenges included:

- less opportunity to build vocabulary/lost time (15.5%),
- being more expensive due to lack of availability of similar curriculum (8.5%),

- lack of patience/can we afford to experiment/public support (7.3%),
- children less able to soak everything in (7.0%),
- streaming – by language/by ability/by economic background (4.7%),
- evidence does not support it/nobody else doing it (4.7%),
- loss of competitive advantage for Province/mobility (4.1%),
- needing enough FI teachers to sustain program (3.5%),
- more inhibited, shy, resistant and self-conscious (3.2%),
- unable to learn basic concepts of both languages at once (1.2%),
- split up families/friends with late entry due to school change (1.2%),
- more likely to enter francophone only stream (0.9%),
- those with less engaged parents will suffer, (0.9%), and
- less French spoken in school with K-2 FI removed (0.9%).

Benefits of maintaining the Grade 3 entry point included:

- the costs and burden of switching/desire for Stability (21.7%),
- strong foundation built prior to introducing new language (17.3%),
- good so far/stay the Course/need complete cohort for study (13.5%),
- parents have better understanding of capabilities of own child (5.0%),
- better than later entry points as an alternative (2.1%),
- pick one and keep it (2.1%),
- inclusion in K-2 classes/balanced classrooms (1.8%),
- frees up teachers/resources that could be used elsewhere (1.5%), and
- less likely than EFL (1) to drop out and return to system behind (0.9%).

When asked if the current goal of meeting the 70% advanced proficiency for the Grade 1 or Grade 3 entry points is realistic, 20.3% said no, 35.3% said yes while 19.4% said yes if certain issues were addressed such as the high school drop off due to lack of courses/university prep (7.1%), parents/home environment a barrier (7.1%), needing more resources and support (6.5%).

The above issues were further addressed in question six which asked what specific barriers may relate to the government's goal of 70% of Anglophone students achieving the Advance proficiency in French Immersion. Answers included money/resources/lack of support services (23.0%), lack of practice/community usage (17.3%), lack of French course offerings in high school/university preparation (15.5%), lack of parental support (14.3%), teacher ability/proficiency (8.4%), late entry/not starting in Grade 1 (8.1%), attitude/motivation/incentives (7.8%), changes to the system/politics (5.4%), starting too early (2.4%), streaming leads to struggling students that should not have been in program (1.5%) and needing more benchmarks/testing before high school (1.2%).

**The final question asked respondents what is the ideal time for students to begin learning a second language. Fifty-two per cent (52%) said the earlier the better, kindergarten or grade 1, while 28% said grade 3. Other options were suggested and each one of them generated less than a 5% response rate.**



## What We Heard

Notes were taken at all consultations and the analysis of those notes strongly mirrors the answers given to the questions available on line with a few modifications. Approximately 301 members of the public attended the eleven consultations. An intermediate plus or higher level of proficiency was expected by 84.6% of participants. Benefits and challenges of the two programs were similar but may have varied by a few percentage points.

The most notable differences came from instructional personnel (173 participated) who work every day with students. Teachers are, of course, very protective of their own field of expertise, with French teachers taking an earlier the better approach (grade 1). Yet, when pushed, many administrators and English teachers acknowledged that the best way to learn a second language was as early as possible. If they were promoting the status quo, it was with a view to other questions regarding the system as a whole.

Most educators agreed that streaming was an even bigger issue now. Because parents are more “sure” about their child’s abilities, the students entering immersion tend to be the stronger students. This is not a surprise to us. The same phenomenon happens in late immersion.

Immersion teachers pointed out the challenges they have had over the years in obtaining appropriate curriculum and resources. The majority of Immersion teachers noted that they wished they had had the same type of curriculum when they were teaching grade one and two. They also described the challenges experienced by students in grade 3 and 4 who were trying to learn math and other content area subjects without having had the base academic vocabulary in French they would have learned in grades one and two. Not that it was too difficult, but rather that the time in which to learn it and master the concepts created intense pressure on the students and teachers to cover the curriculum. This message then compounds the streaming issue as only the “best” students can keep up. Immersion teachers also spoke of the difficulty of finding reading resources that were of high interest with easy enough vocabulary for children in grades three and four. Children of that age are very conscious of being given anything that will look to young for them.

The public consultations were held in a “world café” style. This type of consultation ensures that everyone has a voice as participants are grouped at smaller tables and a facilitator guides the participants through the discussion. It allowed for all points of view to be put forward in a respectful manner. We asked all public consultation tables to report back at the end of each meeting if they preferred a Grade 1 or a Grade 3 entry point. Thirty-six of fifty-four 36/54 tables or 66% said Grade 1 or earlier.

Administrators and superintendents, as well as some people in the public are fearful of changing back to grade 1 because they fear chaos and change itself. In a time when there are many educational changes happening, we understand the concerns. However, we have faith that educators are resilient leaders who have the future of New Brunswick children in mind and who can, when given the opportunity, come up with creative, rather than reactive, solutions.

There were concerns expressed about the cost of Immersion programs. There is also little understanding of second language funding and the contribution made by Canadian Heritage to second language budgets. In a shrinking world and obvious global economy, the ability to speak two or more languages is often cited as one of the top competencies required in the job market. Investing in creating more competent French speakers makes sense.

On another note, a significant number of parents and teachers acknowledged that there was little, if anything, going on in French in grades one and two although there is supposed to be 30 minutes of activity. This, in spite of a Department survey of the system that concludes otherwise.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank, parents, educators, administrators and members of the public for their genuine participation in this process. Many comments were received on line and through email. Those who spoke during consultations did so because they cared and were committed.

We also spoke to 43 students in elementary and secondary grades. We thank them for their sincere passion and for their honest participation. It was evident that students in grade 4 from the grade 3 entry point were still at the initial stages of building vocabulary. It was also evident that high school students very much valued second language learning and wished more opportunities were offered to them. The high school students we met indicated they supported a grade one entry point in the same ratio as our findings with other groups i.e. 66+ percent. Many of the students in that group were clear, and some even adamant, that the grade 1 entry point was important, interestingly enough even more so than adults as the debate amongst students showed us.

Finally, it should be noted that there was a fear that the on line survey may have been overtaken by out of province respondents. It is suggested that this not happen and we are not concerned by that fear as the comments were not out of line with what we heard in person from New Brunswickers at public consultations.

## What the Research Says

As members of the Task Force, we were given access to many reports and studies and did some research of our own. It is important to note that we read all data that was provided to us including literacy scores, PISA results, enrolment data and trends, and reports done by previous authors involved in the debate. In some cases, we found information to be frustrating as it could be interpreted in many ways. In other instances, authors started from a deficit model rather than a strength model; looking at what was weak rather than what was strong and building from there. Our role here is not to cite the hundreds of pieces of literature but to sum up what we found.

Because our mandate was very specific to the entry point and improvements to the program, we concentrated on what the research says about the best age for learning a second language and what constitutes a great program.

### Is “the earlier the better” really better?

There are as many opinions as to when it is best to learn a language. Bista and Dicks (2009) in their reviews noted that researchers can have various points of view. Some say that adults or older students learn faster or better because they process syntax and complex problems more quickly, are learning for a specific reason and are thus more motivated.

Other researchers speak of a critical time, usually between ages 5 and 9, where children learn more naturally. Other factors such as the amount of time and exposure and the learning environment contribute to the level of proficiency acquired by the learner. We often saw the younger the better versus the older the better in the research debates.

We were asked to consider what is best for the child. In doing so, we note that most research on children learning a second language promotes the younger the better approach. Young learners tend to become more fluent, have more vocabulary and achieve a native like accent.

As importantly, we considered the fact that more children of various abilities are apt to become proficient if starting at an earlier age. Thus, learning a second language does not become only the domain of those already identified as highly successful. Instead, learning a second language gives a cognitive and cultural advantage to a wider number of students. Wesche notes: “early total immersion has particular appeal for contexts in which the societal goal is for a large proportion and broad range of children to develop functional skills in a second language.” Dicks said it best: “If we want students with the widest range of abilities to achieve a high level of bilingualism, we need to start early. ... These students often have the most to gain with regard to confidence and self-esteem, as well as the economic advantages that come from having such a valuable skill as bilingualism when they enter the workforce.”

Marty Abbott of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages was recently quoted as saying: “When you expose young children to another language, they really end up with a native pronunciation and intonation, which is harder to develop later on, and it also works a different part of the brain. We always talk about the cognitive benefit of learning another language at an early age, and there are also academic benefits, like increased proficiency in language arts.”

Task Force members were also specifically interested in the cognitive and cultural domains because they are two of the most important benefits of learning a second language. With the advances in brain research and about how children learn, we are most intrigued in the potential that learning a second language adds to a child’s abilities.

*In both behavioral and brain imaging studies, we found that the age of bilingual language exposure has a significant impact on children's dual language mastery. Remarkably, early age bilingual exposure has a positive impact on multiple aspects of a child's development; here, involving language and reading. Children who experience early, extensive, and systematic exposure to both of their languages quickly grasp the fundamentals of both of their languages and in a manner virtually identical to that of monolingual language learners... The field raised concerns that early bilinguals may be linguistically, cognitively and academically disadvantaged... On the contrary, young bilinguals may be afforded a linguistic and reading advantage...*

Laura-Ann Petitto

And, in the most recent issue of the national Canadian Parents for French newsletter, internationally respected researcher Joan Netten, clearly makes a case for an early entry point and says that Early French Immersion is the optimal entry point for the widest variety of student academic abilities.

Every other province and territory starts early immersion in kindergarten or grade 1 and most in kindergarten. From a practical point of view, curriculum can be shared or borrowed from other jurisdictions; resources are more readily available, and training programs are geared to the primary grades. Not a single other jurisdiction that we could find begins in grade 3.

### **What constitutes a great Immersion program?**

Wesche (2002) posed the question herself: "Given several decades of accumulated experience, what are the core features of a successful program? What do the successes and failures of experiments with immersion and content-based language instruction tell us about how second languages can be most effectively taught in school settings? Substantial research supports the following conclusions: Early starting age, intensity of instruction and continued exposure over many years, and learning of substantive school content as a vehicle for L2 (second language) learning."

Wesche also notes the importance highly fluent, including native speaker teachers, as well as the availability of appropriate source materials in the language, and parental – and ongoing political support.

She and other researchers prescribe well trained teachers and appropriate pedagogy which includes

- activities that are meaningful and contextualized;
- the development of all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing;
- the integration of language and content, where all teachers share the responsibility for the students' overall French language development;
- the integration of culture in content;
- opportunities for and the encouragement of spontaneous and frequent use of the language by students through student-teacher and student-student interaction;
- the use of multi-media resources;
- opportunities for interaction with French speakers both inside and outside the classroom; and
- continual assessment and evaluation of the students' language development and continuous adaptation to ensure appropriate language development.

As well as being qualified to teach at the appropriate grade level(s) and subject area(s), French immersion teachers must have:

- fluency in both oral and written French;
- a good understanding of immersion methodology;
- an understanding of French culture and its relationship to language; and
- the ability to communicate in English.

Thus, strong pre-service programs and continuous learning and growth opportunities need to focus on these elements. Provinces, boards and districts which emphasize the professional capacity of their teaching work force tend to do better.

Wesche and others also speak of the importance of leadership and support. For instance, Alberta and Manitoba have developed handbooks for educational leaders, Ontario is expanding French immersion programs across the province to give more high school students the opportunity to learn a second language, and Canadian Parents for French has developed a school self-assessment tool. The profile and support provided to any given program helps to improve its offering, whether it is literacy, music, technology or French. Communication, policies, accountability and professional development practices are but a few of the areas where leadership and support need to be demonstrated to make a program strong.

## Myth Busting

Over the course of this process, many comments were made to us that we feel have become entrenched myths. We thus feel that we need to make a few comments with regards to some of these.

- **Streaming**

One of the fundamental arguments made in changing the entry point to grade 3 was to prevent streaming. While it is true that there is less streaming in grades one and two at present, a vast majority of participants told us that there is significantly more streaming happening with a grade 3 entry point. In fact, when parents are more confident about their child's ability to succeed, they are more apt to have their child enter French Immersion. This is even truer in later entry points when students themselves have a say in the matter. With an earlier entry point, the group in Immersion tends to have more children with diverse abilities and the same applies to children in the English program.

The major solution to the streaming question is to address the needs of students; provide resources to assist students and teachers in both the English and the Immersion streams. With a review of support services in the province happening at the same time as this review and research indicating that students with learning challenges can thrive in Immersion if they have supports in place, it would seem logical to make ALL programs stronger.

- **Grade 2 provincial literacy assessment results**

The results of past and present literacy test have also been used to debate streaming. With regards to past test, we refer to Dicks (2006):

*"To determine if there was a streaming effect on students' literacy performance, the 2004-2005 Grade 2 reading assessment scores for Core English program students in schools with an EFI program were compared to those of students in schools that do not have an EFI program. Students in schools with an EFI program could be perceived as streamed while those in schools without EFI programs would be relatively un-streamed. For the 2004-2005 school year, results show that schools with EFI had an average of 62% of Core children meet assessment targets. Schools without EFI had 65% of Core students meet these targets. These percentages are not meaningfully different."*

We also looked at Grade 3 literacy tests results in Prince Edward Island and in Ontario to see if Immersion schools and non-immersion schools had results that would indicate streaming. Results did not correlate and could not be based on whether the school had an EFI program or not. Results there are likely based on a number of factors ranging from socio-economic factors to whether literacy coaches have worked with the schools.

As for the present, we were told that the province has invested heavily in two initiatives that should improve literacy scores. The introduction of an assessment tool before children enter kindergarten is a student based initiative that should help to provide early intervention while the introduction of literacy leaders is a teacher based initiative that can build capacity within the system. Indeed the single most important school related factor in student success is the teacher in the classroom. The more effective and knowledgeable the teacher, the more improvement one sees in students. The factor can be as much a one full grade level. Ensuring that all teachers are great literacy teachers can make a difference. Ontario has what is to be considered one of the best literacy leader/coach models and their provincial scores have made remarkable gains in the last few years. Lessons could be learned from the Ontario experience.

We do caution however that initiatives such as these take time to have an effect; they generally take three or more years to become well understood and entrenched and are not immediate fixes. If literacy scores in the upper grades are still of concern, then one needs to look at how long and how well sustained those initiatives have been in place.

- **Does the opinion of the “silent” mean consent?**

Some participants were insistent in their belief that those not participating in the process, either through the web or at public consultations, were happy with the status quo. There is no validity to making any assumption on the thoughts of those NOT participating. Research is quite clear on that matter.

- **The effects of learning a second language on first language**

Many participants wondered if learning a second language had detrimental effects on one’s first language. This question has come up so often since the introduction of French Immersion that the Education ministers in Atlantic Canada commissioned a review of the research on the topic in 2002. Bournot-Trites and Tallowitz reviewed dozens of pieces of research done on the topic and concluded that: “The effect of learning a second language (French) on the first language (English) skills have been positive in all studies done. Furthermore, the loss of instructional time in English, (first language) in favour of the second language has never been shown to have negative effects on the achievement of the first language.”

There were also suggestions that children had to or needed to master their first language first. There is no evidence based research that shows this requirement. It may be a question of opinion but certainly not one of fact. That being said, there is ample evidence that children with good language development (speaking skills) in their early years are more apt to develop good second language skills. In the Early Years Study 3, Dr. Fraser Mustard describes language pathways in even the youngest babies and the positive effect of having two languages.

Another interesting piece of research by Kovelman, Baker and Petitto shows that schooling in two languages afforded children from monolingual English homes an advantage in phoneme awareness skills. They state that early bilingual exposure is best for dual language reading development, and it may afford such a powerful positive impact on reading and language development that it may possibly ameliorate the negative effect of low socio-economic status on literacy.

There is also ample research on the transfer of skills that happens when children learn another language. This is often called Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis by researchers. The Manitoba Handbook for Leaders gives the following example. A learner who is read to as a child will understand the concept that meaning is found in the print and in the illustrations of the story. In French immersion, although the child may not understand all the vocabulary in the story, he or she understands that the purpose of reading is constructing meaning from text. The child in this case makes a transfer from his understanding of literacy in his first language to his understanding of literacy in the second language which results in first language enhancing competency in the second language. Conversely, a student who learns, for example, how to critically read a Web site using his or her second language, will transfer this ability to his or her first language. In this case, the transfer is from the second language to the first language and the second language enhances competency in the first language.

- **Giving the children some credit and since when should everything be easy?**

We heard from teachers and parents that it “might” be too difficult for children to learn a second language and that it “might” be good to wait and see if they are “capable”! Frankly, children are far more resilient than many adults give them credit for. Millions of children around the world are in situations where they speak two, three, four and more languages. It is a simple daily fact. In education, you often get what you expect and having high expectations of students should be a matter of course.

Researchers Sandra Weber and Claudette Tardif also note: “The fact that not understanding the teacher’s language seemed to be only a minor nuisance to the children could indicate that children are more tolerant of ambiguity than are adults. Even in their first language, young children are

accustomed to not understanding everything adults say. In addition, they do not feel as socially awkward about not understanding as adults might in a similar situation, nor are they as reluctant to ask for help. Not knowing everything, relying on adults and asking lots of questions are part of the socially accepted role of being a child. ... At the beginning of the year, the immersion kindergarten children often told us that they didn't understand French, but they were adamant in asserting that they did understand the teacher, who spoke almost exclusively in French. ... For most of the immersion students, the second-language feature quickly became a natural, normal aspect of classroom life, something they just took for granted."

- **Needing math and science to go to university so it should be taught in English**

Although we agree that math and science are important subjects, we would also argue that vital learning and innovation skills are increasingly being recognized as the skills that separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century from those who are not. A focus on creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration is essential to prepare students for the future. To do so in multiple languages is even better.

Those counseling students about high school program choices are often not trained in the new realities of the labour market and the program and course options that fulfill the needs of that market. Indeed high school students get most of their information from friends, parents and classroom teachers, few of whom have training in the human resource field. But, even when math and science are paths that should be pursued, taking the courses in French should not be seen as detrimental to university or college studies. Indeed thousands of students in Canada and millions around the world have entered post secondary programs in different languages and succeed very well.

In looking at the question in earlier grades, an interesting study by Bournot-Trites and Reeder compared the mathematics achievement of students enrolled in different kinds of French-immersion programs in Vancouver. In the regular immersion program, mathematics classes were taught in French up to grade 3, after which they were taught in English. In the new immersion program, mathematics classes continued to be taught in French in grades 4 through 7. Results indicate that students who continued learning mathematics in French performed better on mathematics tests (administered in English) than those who were taught in English after grade 3.



## The Real Question

The Department Policy 309 states, in 6.3, that Grade 3 entry students will reach an Advanced level of proficiency or better by the end of Grade 12. Nearly everyone, even those preferring late immersion, wants an “Advanced” level. So how do the majority of students get there?

As the research has demonstrated, many factors will influence the achievement of such a goal. Some of the factors cannot be controlled by the education system such as the amount of French spoken in a community. However, some factors can be controlled such as:

- **Time on task**

In looking at past data collected in the province, clearly students who start earlier have higher levels of proficiency. If past data showed that a bit more than 40% of Early French Immersion students and less than 10% of Late French Immersion students were reaching an Advanced level, how can we expect those starting in grade 3 to achieve the Advanced level?

An early Immersion program usually has over 8000 hours of instruction in French over the life of the program if starting at grade 1 or earlier. A grade 3 entry point, with little modification at the middle or high school would average about 6000 hours. This is a significant amount of instructional time. Returning to an earlier entry point is only part of the solution. Meeting and increasing time on task in the upper grades is also essential. For instance, most provinces require 25 to 50% in grades 11 and 12 for immersion students. New Brunswick does not meet even the 25% threshold. The Task Force was told that students generally took two courses in French in grade 11 and one in grade 12. That is 15% to 19% of the time over the two years depending on the credit system used.

- **Methodology, assessment and teacher training**

The Department should 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. Teachers need to keep up their skills in second language teaching as the research evolves. One particular area of interest is the understanding of academic language acquisition vs. social language acquisition in a second language context. Another area that always needs to be looked at is the training of first language teachers to teach in a second language context. Most graduates from a French university do not have this background.

Other areas of methodology that seem obvious include offering a linguistically rich learning environment, a variety of authentic learning situations and a space that allows for risk taking, approximations, errors, predictions and guesses. A child learns language through use. If the learner is preoccupied with errors, he or she will not take risks. Teachers need to learn how to create this space.

Many during the public consultations worried that the only measure of proficiency that has been documented was at the end of a student’s career; otherwise known as an autopsy instead of a diagnosis. Earlier and on-going assessments of proficiency would allow the system to adjust along the way. To give the system its due, we note that the grade 3 entry point students have been assessed. This should continue and teachers need to have the knowhow and tools to do the assessments. One example that could be used is the European Language Portfolio. 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. However, it could be another tool which links assessment to rubrics based on a solid curriculum.

- **Teacher language proficiency**

Policy 309 also states that teachers in the Immersion program should be at the Superior level. As the teacher is THE language model, it is essential that the teacher have an excellent grasp of the language both orally and in the written form. Most jurisdictions have developed bursaries and or programs to update the French language skills of teachers.

- **Course and program offerings**

The majority of participants in the process deplored the quantity and in some cases the quality of the course and program offerings as the students entered the upper grades. To make improvements would require changes in policies (for example the number of required courses in French), understanding what students and parents want (PEI developed a survey that could be borrowed), the development of high school courses (most jurisdictions have a number that could be adapted), language growth plans for the students and continuous assessment.

- **Support for struggling students**

It is our understanding that a strategy for adding support to the system is now in the works. It is essential to provide supports to immersion students so that they may remain in the immersion program. We understand how difficult it may be to find French speaking teachers with the skills to work with struggling students.

The Department could collaborate 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. (Dicks 2008)

There are specific programs offered in other jurisdictions for struggling Immersion students, especially in literacy. These could be examined and introduced where need be.

## Recommendation

The Task Force was asked to consider these following two questions:

1. What is best for the child who wants to learn a second language; grade 1 or grade 3 entry?
2. What do parents want?

The answer to both questions is the same: Grade 1. In fact, many wondered why not kindergarten as is the starting point in most other provinces.

### **Our Recommendation:**

**That the entry point for Early French Immersion be grade 1.**

Our recommendation does not preclude the Department from examining a kindergarten entry point in the future in light of the practices across the country.

We also recognize that supports need to be in place to sustain that position. It appears that there has been little planning to build capacity over the last decade or more. By capacity, we mean language proficiency capacity, methodology training capacity and curriculum development capacity among teachers and department personnel.

In the previous section, we described the factors that have a significant impact on any second language program but in particular an Immersion program. We suggest that initiatives can be put in place to support those factors. And, it is imperative to note that many of the following suggestions have been made previously in papers submitted by proponents of all sides of the debate. For instance:

For time on task as well as course and program offerings:

If students have not reached the advanced level of proficiency in the past, it could be argued that one major factor is time on task. Policy 309 states the minimum levels for all grades and we found very few schools that met the standards in our discussions with teachers. The standards themselves have diminished if one compares today's standards to pre-1994. Meeting the standards and starting earlier would be a first step towards adding the hours necessary for language proficiency.

High school students would take more courses in French but courses are often not offered and students are discouraged from taking them. What is understood is that Immersion in New Brunswick high schools is a maintenance phase. However, it is maintaining a grade 9 or 10 level at best and in very few cases. Krashen would suggest that continuously challenging the learner with more difficult concepts that build on previous language is necessary to build competency. Indeed this is true of most learning. Yet some schools offer, as the only available credit, a peer coaching class for high school Immersion students where they work with younger Immersion students. We would recommend that it is time to engage high school students and parents in examining how to improve the high school program and to break down the myth about taking math and science in English. We would also suggest that discussions occur with other provinces to see how they have addressed the high school challenge.

For teacher language proficiency:

Some provinces have put regular proficiency testing and upgrading requirements in place for teachers while, at the same time, putting bursary programs, summer programs or personal development programs in place to encourage teachers to keep up their language skills.

For teacher training:

Speaking French is an essential skill but so is training in second language methodology. Teachers in a second language setting require an additional skill set to communicate the language and subject content to their students.

For curriculum:

We heard over and over again how the new Grade 3 Immersion curriculum was extremely helpful to teachers who also wondered why they had never had quality curriculum when teaching Grade one or two. Immersion teachers in other grades wonder if they will have a quality curriculum in the future. Teachers told us that, at present, they cannot tell parents of Grade 4 students what the expectations are for their students as the curriculum is not yet ready. Curriculum describes outcomes and expectations. It directs planning, teaching and assessment.

It is our understanding that Immersion curriculum in subjects other than language arts is generally translated from English to French to mirror the provincial English curriculum. Although we agree that outcomes and expectations should be similar, simply translating ignores the fact that teaching and assessment methodologies can differ, that Immersion students may need to understand cultural differences and that many skills are easily transferable from one language to another.

We also acknowledge that there will be challenges. One that was noted by educational leaders is the issue of Immersion teacher recruitment. School districts and the Department could work together on a training and recruitment strategy. Strategies are developed by employers in many fields from joint advertising campaigns to bursary programs to partnerships with post secondary institutions. A good human resource plan could make a difference.

Another challenge, although not unique to French Immersion, but exacerbated by the lack of qualified French speaking personnel is the lack of support for struggling students. One reason streaming and class composition became a lightning rod in some areas was because there was no support for struggling Immersion students. Students were then put in English programs where resources were available. During consultations, there was general disappointment with regards to the lack of resources and supports across both English and Immersion streams. Now that resources in special education, resource and methods and other supports are further diminished in all programs, the Task Force urges the Minister to find an equitable model of resource allocation for struggling students. Struggling Immersion students need not automatically move to English programs. There is research (Rehorick 2006) that shows that struggling students can succeed in Immersion if the resources are there and every attempt should be made to support students within the Immersion program.

A particular challenge should Government pursue the Grade 1 entry point is the issue of students presently in Grade 1 or Grade 2. We would strongly recommend that these two grades be “grandfathered” into the Grade 3 entry point. Otherwise they will miss out on an early entry. Parents were fearful and adamant about this situation.

Finally, if Government is to accept what we and parents are saying and do it well by adopting some of the recommendations we note above with regards to recruitment, training, curriculum and support services, the Task Force would understand a 2013 implementation. As you will note in the next section, we are concerned with leadership around this topic and part of developing leadership is taking the time to do a job appropriately. Extending implementation by one year would allow for a renewed curriculum in the early years, recruitment and training programs for teachers, a better understanding of the benefits of Immersion by future leaders in the new school districts and so on.

Should Government not agree with a Grade one entry, it will be contrary to what parents have clearly requested. We also contend that all the issues above would still need to be addressed with a grade 3 entry point as the status quo will not fulfill the promise of Policy 309.

## General Task Force Concerns

### Leadership

What struck us as members of the Task Force is a real or perceived lack of leadership for second language learning; champions so to speak. The previous section noted some of the supports and challenges that exist with relation to Immersion programs in the Province. We wonder “who wakes up in the morning and thinks of the job of improving French Immersion”? Who speaks to the benefits of bilingualism?

The needs are great in curriculum development, professional development and training, recruitment and an overarching plan needs to be developed. Plans have been developed over the years in a variety of areas such as literacy, technology and so on. It is time to look at one for Immersion.

Leadership is also a question of advice and decision making. In 2008, there was no movement by the public to demand a change - none at all. The impetus for the change to the entry point to grade 6 and then to grade 3 came as a result of trying to find solutions to other problems. It was faulty logic. The desire to change the immersion program was bureaucratic and systemic. The change was policy driven and the final decision to choose Grade 3 as the entry point seemed to be a compromise picked arbitrarily.

Finally, leadership is about promotion of learning, in this case, the learning of a second language. When we examine the information and advice available to parents, educational leaders and the public, it is scant at best. Previous submissions to government offered excellent advice in this area. New Brunswick could look at Alberta Education for instance which has produced a comprehensive document for parents (Yes, you can help) <http://education.alberta.ca/media/3091402/yesyoucanhelp.pdf>, and a curriculum handbook for parents as well. It also partnered with the Language Learning Centre of the University of Calgary to produce a video describing the advantages of learning a second language. Advantage for Life provides an accessible overview of the cognitive, economic and social advantages that come with learning another language. It should be required viewing for all educators, especially leaders in the system. Manitoba has produced French Immersion in Manitoba; a Handbook for School Leaders. The fact that New Brunswick has such a high percentage of students in French Immersion needs to be celebrated and recognized as a strength of its system.

### Information for parents

Every single parent told us they wanted more information. Brochures and web sites give factual information to parents; percentage of time, subject areas and so on. What parents also want to know is what are the chances of their child succeeding (most do), what effects learning a second language will have on the first language (none or positive), if they should keep reading to their child in English (yes), when their English skills catch up (depends on entry point), if there is research on Immersion (yes), etc.

We strongly recommend a review of the print and online materials offered to parents and that such a review include consultation with parents with experience and parents without experience. More importantly, there should be a guide for parent information sessions that is provided to those leading such sessions with explicit and up to date information.

### Access in rural areas

It should be noted that parents in rural communities felt disadvantaged when Immersion was not accessible to their children. We were surprised by the significant demand from less populated areas. This issue is a difficult one to resolve and parents did understand the complexity of providing Immersion in smaller communities. However, every consideration should be made to an equitable offering as much as possible.

### Mobility between provinces

There was serious concern about mobility with regards to a Grade 3 entry point, especially in certain communities with more transient populations such as Oromocto. Every other province and territory starts early immersion in kindergarten or grade 1 and most in kindergarten. Mobility in or out of the province thus becomes a major issue.

## **Table of recommendations**

**That the entry point for Early French Immersion be grade 1.**

### **Supporting Recommendations**

**That a strategic plan for French Immersion be developed which includes at least the following elements:**

- **A teacher recruitment and human resource plan**
- **A review of time on task at various grade levels and Immersion high school graduation requirements**
- **A consultation with parents and students to determine a wider course selection at the high school level**
- **A training and professional development plan for Immersion teachers which includes at least a component for those needing to improve their French language skills, a component on second language methodology and a component for teachers to work with struggling learners in Immersion**
- **A timeline and plan for curriculum review in Immersion**

**That students be grandfathered into the grade 3 entry point during the transition phase.**

**That leaders in the system have the opportunity to better understand their role in the promotion of second language learning.**

**That all information to parents and the public about second language and immersion programs be reviewed. The information should be more complete, positive and more pro-active.**

**That Government look at a 2013 implementation in order to complete the above recommendations.**

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