
Building a better education system:

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEW BRUNSWICK'S ANGLOPHONE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Introduction

In April 2023, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) announced that a steering committee would be tasked with identifying improvements that can be made in the anglophone education sector, both in English Prime classrooms and French language learning, including the French immersion program.

The executive steering committee was jointly chaired by two individuals: the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Educational Services Division (Anglophone) and the Executive Director of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA). This committee comprised a diverse array of members, representing various sectors, including educators, students, parents, school districts, district education councils, and other prominent stakeholders and rights holders.

To fulfill its mission effectively, the committee established two distinct working groups, each with a specific focus. One of these groups dedicated its efforts to improving the English Prime program, while the other concentrated on enhancing French language education. Both working groups were entrusted with the responsibility of engaging extensively with stakeholders to collect input and formulate recommendations, which would subsequently be presented to the steering committee.

In July, a public report was released outlining several short-term recommendations, and implementation began in fall 2023. Since that report's release, the working groups and executive steering committee have been focused on additional ways to strengthen the system.

There have been numerous efforts aimed at addressing the challenges within the anglophone system, and many have produced some excellent ideas that translated into measurable improvement in both the way the system functions and student outcomes. While these approaches were successful, the focus has always been on addressing specific challenges rather than a wholesale examination of the complete system.

As the OECD has articulated in its 2030 project, we are facing unprecedented challenges – social, economic, and environmental – driven by accelerating globalization and a faster rate of technological developments. At the same time, those forces are providing us with myriad new opportunity for human advances.

Profound and ongoing transformations are reshaping how we live, learn and work. New Brunswick students will need to be prepared for jobs that have not yet been created, for technologies that have not yet been invented, to solve problems that have not yet been anticipated.

Nothing less than transformation of our system will be required to support students to prepare for this reality. The foundation of our work lies in our shared responsibility to seize opportunities and find solutions to ensure students in today's system can master foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy as well as skills such as problem solving, teamwork and communication.

Recently, the anglophone school districts and EECD have agreed to work urgently on collective priorities: literacy, numeracy, and well-being. These areas were present in all district improvement plans and reinforced by recent data trends. These focus areas are present throughout the long-term recommendations.

This marks the beginning of a long-term effort to transform the system in partnership with those who work as teachers, administrators, and support staff. This transformation must be done with parents and students, and with the communities that are counting on the next generation of learners. It is anticipated that it could take up to five years to fully implement these recommendations due to budget, staffing, and collective agreement implications.

**The following recommendations have not been ranked or organized in order of importance.*

CREATE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE LEARNERS THRIVE

RECOMMENDATION: Move to address the emerging critical concern of chronic absenteeism and reinforce a culture of learning by working with school districts and stakeholders to draft a provincial action plan on school attendance.

School attendance is a strong predictor of student outcomes, yet there is no consistent approach to managing student attendance and chronic absenteeism across the province. Chronic absenteeism is becoming a significant issue in the anglophone sector and there have been consistent calls to address this by administrators, educators, families, and even students themselves.

The establishment of a province-wide action plan would allow school districts to have a consistent approach on the importance of attendance with the goal, over time, of improving regular student attendance and recommitting to a provincial culture of learning.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop a new classroom composition model and a reasonable timeline to implement an improved inclusive and equitable system.

One of the areas in our education system that needs the most reform is around how we plan and structure our schools and classrooms.

Our system is built around a maximum number of students per classroom. Depending on the grade level, there could be anywhere from 21-29 students in a classroom, and this is reinforced through a negotiated collective agreement. There is currently no mechanism that takes the individual needs of students into account when staffing a classroom.

What if we looked at the system a little differently?

What if our classrooms respected class size maximums but also were staffed considering the needs of the students who make up those numbers by recognizing that at times a student may require more services? This would help balance classrooms and ensure that all students have access to an appropriate level of support. It could also help the system better support vulnerable students and minimize perceived and real workload discrepancies between English Prime and French immersion classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION: Leverage technology to enhance learning and personalization

One thing was clear throughout the consultation phase, and in the results of the public survey: our education system should be finding ways to incorporate more modern technology and tools in classrooms, while ensuring that it does not dramatically increase screen time for students. We need to look at how we utilize advancements in technology to better support learners, while ensuring we encourage its responsible usage. Like other sectors, technology is revolutionizing education by providing young learners with innovative tools and resources that enhance their classroom experience. Students have access to a vast array of information at their fingertips, which is enabling them to explore subjects in greater depth and

breadth. The development of new interactive educational applications and software are helping students learn through immersive experiences, which makes learning more engaging and enjoyable. Technology can also help facilitate more personalized learning, allowing educators to tailor lessons to individual student needs and provide instant feedback, fostering academic growth. Through online collaboration and communication tools, students can connect with peers worldwide, fostering a global perspective and enhancing their digital literacy skills.

A FOCUS ON LEARNING

RECOMMENDATION: Place a focus on middle school learners aged 11-14, by working to identify actions and programs to improve academic engagement, achievement, and well-being.

Over the years there have been several efforts that have focused on targeted improvements in elementary and high schools, but middle school students who are in a crucial stage in their mental, physical, and social development have not been a provincial focus for some time.

Adolescents who feel a sense of community and belonging are more likely to make positive and productive choices. We heard numerous respondents indicate a need for support in key skill areas for striving learners, and also about the importance of co-curricular, extra-curricular and afterschool experiences. They emphasized a need beyond the school, to support healthy habits and positive relationships. Adolescents who feel a sense of community and belonging are more likely to make positive and productive choices.

Youth, themselves, identified a need to hold learners accountable to attend, participate and demonstrate their learning prior to moving to the next grade. This means that we should be rethinking our approach to moving students forward without the necessary foundational skills (sometimes referred to as “social promotion”). Several respondents, including families, students, and teachers, encouraged holding students accountable by establishing clear expectations and boundaries.

RECOMMENDATION: Establish a clear plan (benchmarks/goals) for strengthening French language learning in New Brunswick’s anglophone K-12 system, including expanding course options and opportunities for high school students, and exploring options for students to enter French immersion with greater flexibility based on readiness.

With the *Evolving French Language Learning* (EFL) project having wrapped up, many are wondering about future goals for French language learning in New Brunswick. To keep moving forward it is important to establish new benchmarks/goals in several areas including addressing K-3 English Prime French language learning and Intensive French, increasing course offerings and learning opportunities for high school learners, and expanding opportunities for learners in rural areas.

We also need to look at ways to make it easier for students who have been learning French in other jurisdictions to continue their language development in New Brunswick. This is becoming more and more important as our population grows through in-migration. Students who have been learning French in other jurisdictions should have the opportunity to continue their language development journey without being restricted by our traditional entry points.

ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITIES

RECOMMENDATION: Encourage movement and getting outside, including embedding 30 minutes of physical education for K-8 daily in addition to outdoor education opportunities.

One thing we clearly heard during the preceding months was the importance of physical activity and movement. Some of the feedback from consultations supported the idea that 20 minutes of cardiovascular movement first thing in the morning helps decrease anxiety and increases the ability to learn. Another expert indicated that outdoor learning decreases stress, both for children and educators.

Schools and community members must promote the value of physical and outdoor education on a learner's overall quality of life. Well-planned physical education develops persistence, safe risk-taking, and confidence, and improves attention.

It was suggested in some of the engagement sessions that the department work with school districts to determine if students are getting the suggested amount of physical activity daily and if not, to examine the challenges and develop a solution. Lessons can be learned from Wabanaki Cultures where much learning occurs on and through the land. Wabanaki Peoples have deep knowledge of the ecosystem, and learning from them can help all students to develop appreciation for the natural environment. Creative delivery methods could be considered. For example, a physical education lead could offer and facilitate a planned program virtually (this was done during the pandemic), or partnerships could be developed or expanded with Indigenous communities and organizations to support this approach.

It was strongly suggested we seek ways to increase opportunities to expand outdoor learning to help students connect with the natural environment and build community and culture.

RECOMMENDATION: Have the recently announced Centre of Excellence for Language Learning develop a communication and support plan to help families and communities assist children in their success in French immersion.

Through various engagement sessions over the past year, it was identified that families often do not know how or do not feel confident supporting learners in French language learning. This feedback came from families of learners in both the French Immersion and Intensive French programs. This lack of confidence could create hesitancy to enroll children in French Immersion or other French language programs.

This is an important issue that can be addressed by engaging language learning experts and advocates - including post-secondary researchers and experienced educators, coordinators, and specialists - to identify and create a plan to assist families with supporting language learning at home.

This could also be augmented by having the Centre of Excellence for Language Learning, in partnership with the Secretariat of Official Languages develop and execute an awareness campaign about benefits of language learning that could celebrate the successes of language learners from multiple programs and pathways.

ENSURING THE RIGHT EXPERTISE IN CLASSROOMS

RECOMMENDATION: Improve retention and recruitment of qualified teachers and specialized health service professionals in education.

Our education system cannot reach its full potential without qualified teachers; in New Brunswick, that means having, at a minimum, a bachelor's degree in education.

As with other professions and sectors, the pandemic has caused a shift in education from an employment perspective. It has become harder to recruit and retain qualified teachers, which results in the system becoming more reliant on individuals who apply for a temporary local teaching permit to function. A local permit allows someone who is not a professionally trained and certified teacher to be hired on a temporary basis when a qualified teacher cannot be found.

The goal of our education system must be to have a well-qualified, professional teacher in every classroom. This means that we need to develop and implement a comprehensive retention and recruitment strategy to bring in and keep as many qualified teachers as we can.

We also need to ensure we increase the number of specialized health services professionals we have working within the education system. We know there are not enough speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and occupational therapists working within the sector. These professionals have highly specialized skill sets that are necessary to ensure individual learners are supported in the most appropriate way for them to be successful. A specific retention and recruitment strategy for these roles should be undertaken or a plan should be developed to consider engaging more private sector practitioners to deliver services through the public system.

RECOMMENDATION: Support educational assistants in receiving dedicated training, professional learning, and opportunities to further collaborate with teachers.

The working groups and executive steering committee reviewed feedback about the importance of educational assistants (EAs) in our classrooms. There were calls for increases in the number of EAs, as well as ensuring they have more opportunities for training and development. Respondents also raised the need for EAs to have more opportunities to plan and collaborate with teachers. While there is some time available at the beginning of the year allocated for this, there was a clearly expressed need to have more flexibility in scheduling to plan with teachers, as learner needs change throughout the year.

RECOMMENDATION: Ensure teachers who work with early readers have specific training designed to maximize the development and outcomes of these students.

The ability to read is a foundational skill that is crucial to success in the educational system and society. There was considerable positive feedback in the strength of the new reading materials as part of the Building Blocks of Reading, however respondents indicated that reading gaps with older learners have a significant impact on the learning environment. We need to do more to ensure that those teaching language arts in grades where there are emerging readers have a solid grasp on assessment and instruction of early reading skills. This will be achieved by making specific training available for teachers at all levels of experience and by providing the necessary onboarding to ensure the desired outcomes. This must be followed up by ensuring the system is held accountable for delivering results.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop and implement equitable access to professional learning for educators in resources, strategies, and interventions to best support each learner in English Prime and French language classrooms.

When it comes to inclusion, much of the focus has been on English Prime classrooms, however challenges also exist within French language learning classrooms. This has led to consistent calls for more training, resources, and supports to ensure the fullest inclusion of each learner within those classrooms.

We heard we should consider applying resource strategies and interventions that are used in English Prime classrooms to French language learning classrooms. This would ensure that French language learning educators have improved access to resource strategies and interventions that have proven to work effectively for diverse learning needs. We have an increasingly diverse profile of learners in all classrooms and sharing more effective approaches, regardless of the program, is essential.

Additional training and development opportunities were identified to support teachers in French language learning classrooms. They included:

- professional learning, training, and the development of a plan to support the implementation of the French Language Opportunities for Rural Access (FLORA);
- expert developed professional learning in resources, strategies, and interventions to best support the inclusion of each learner in French additional language classrooms;
- and French language training and supports for Early Childhood Educators, particularly in the development of a K-3 French framework- based around play, music and interaction.

OUR COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATION: Create, with partners where appropriate, a detailed scope and implementation plan as well as an accountability framework for each of the recommendations included in this document no later than March 31, 2024.

In most cases, the recommendations identified and described in the preceding pages will take some years to implement. Budget and resource impacts will need to be considered and, in some cases, working with partners to consider policy, regulation and collective agreement implications will be necessary to fully recognize the intentions of the Steering Committee's vision.

Given this, EECD should continue working with stakeholders and rights holders regularly to continue building trust and tap into their expertise and commitment to strengthen our Anglophone education system in New Brunswick. It will be important that a well-thought-out implementation plan be developed for each individual recommendation.

Conclusion

As we reflect on the above recommendations, it is important to think about what are we trying to achieve.

Our primary goal is to create an inclusive, equitable, and innovative education system that empowers every learner to reach their full potential. At the same time, we want to encourage a lifelong love for learning and prepare learners to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

Our mission is to provide a high-quality, student-centered education that fosters intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and global citizenship. We will achieve this by nurturing a diverse and inclusive community of educators, students, and parents, working collaboratively to inspire lifelong learning and prepare students for success in an ever-changing society.