



# PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF FINDINGS: TRANSPORTATION OF FRENCH IMMERSION AND EXTENDED FRENCH STUDENTS IN ONTARIO

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## INTRODUCTION

Canadian Parents for French (CPF) is the national network of volunteers that values French as an integral part of Canada and is dedicated to the promotion and creation of French-second-language learning opportunities for young Canadians.

Canadian Parents for French - Ontario is the provincial branch of the national organization and has over 30 local chapters throughout the province supporting the needs of students and parents who want their children to learn both Canada's official languages.

We participate in a collaborative capacity with our partners and other stakeholders in French as a second language education and in a consultative capacity using evidence-based research and data acquisition.

## BACKGROUND

In 2001, CPF-Ontario undertook a survey of all English school boards in Ontario to determine the level of transportation available to students enrolled in French immersion and extended French programs across the province.



At that time, it was clear that lower levels of service made access uneven, making it difficult if not impossible for some students to attend these programs. One study showed a dramatic drop of 40% in enrolment over six years when service was reduced. Subsequent data showed that improved transportation to the same program had a positive impact on enrolment. The CPF Ontario Study was presented to the Ontario Minister of Education, the chair of the Education Equality Task Force, and the federal Ministers of Intergovernmental Affairs and Canadian Heritage.

Shortly afterwards, *The Discussion Paper on Equity in Transportation* was released stating that data should be submitted on all students, including French immersion students, from home to the school of attendance.

## METHODOLOGY

This year, CPF-Ontario updated this information. We reviewed Ministry allocations and Effectiveness and Efficiency reports; surveyed CPF chapter contacts; and compared data obtained on enrolment with data collected by CPF-Ontario from a variety of sources:

- school boards across Ontario
- the CPF-Ontario Study on Transportation to French Immersion and Extended French Programs in Ontario School Boards, 2001
- *The State of French-Second-Language in Canada 2006* report
- *Bus Them and They Will Come*
- presentations made to Ontario School Boards
- information received from parents of students in these programs.

This report is a summary of our findings as they relate to transportation to French as second language education programs in Ontario along with recommendations for the Ontario Minister of Education's consideration as a step in the ongoing consultation process identified in the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Minority Language Education and Second Official Language Instruction (2005-06 to 2008-09).

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## FSL ENROLMENT IN ONTARIO

The Federal Action Plan set an objective of doubling the number of functionally bilingual high school graduates by 2013. Subsequently, the *Ontario Ministry of Education's Action Plan: Regular Programs and Additional Strategies (2005-06 to 2008-09)* set a provincial goal to increase student participation and retention in FSL programs. The Ministry also outlined the expected outcomes of improved access to all FSL programs and increased capacity of English-language school boards to deliver French immersion programs.

Listed below are the latest student enrolment figures available from the Ministry, which serve as an early indicator of progress made to date and identify current trends in enrolment in the French-Second-Language (FSL) programs presently offered in the province.

### Student enrolment in FSL programs in Ontario

(Source: Ministry of Education Ontario)

	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006
Core French	871,280	861,251	852,723	841,033
Extended French	32,140	33,720	34,697	31,064
French Immersion (FI)	115,652	114,792	115,770	121,659
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,019,072</b>	<b>1,009,763</b>	<b>1,003,190</b>	<b>993,756</b>
<b>FSL Enrolment</b>				
Eligible enrolment	2,072,589	2,039,586	2,034,065	2,028,469
<b>FI as a % of</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>5.7%</b>	<b>6.0%</b>
<b>Eligible Enrolment</b>				

### Immersion/Extended French in Ontario

(Source: CPF (Ontario) data collection)

	2005-06	% increase	2006-07	% increase	2007-08
Elementary sites	631	1.6%	641	4.4%	669
Secondary sites	231	1.7%	235	1.3%	238
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>862</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>876</b>	<b>3.5%</b>	<b>907</b>
<b>number of sites</b>					

Overall, French immersion or extended French programs have been expanded to 45 additional sites since 2005-06 representing an average rate of annual increase of 2.6%.

While the increase in the number of sites and the increase in enrolment in FI/EF are encouraging, we know that the demand for these programs and potential enrolment is much higher. According to the *Canadian Council on Learning 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes Toward Learning*, 25% of parents surveyed said they did not enrol their children in French immersion because they did not have access to the program.

## ACCESS AND TRANSPORTATION

In Ontario, 62,000 out of 121,659 (51%) of French immersion students are transported daily. This number does not include secondary school French immersion students. In some boards (mostly rural and northern), almost all FI students depend upon transportation to access French immersion. The reality for most students in rural and northern Ontario is that without transportation, they would not be able to attend school. The situation is no different for French immersion.

In our review of the boards, it was clear that some boards understand this clearly and provide this service. However, this is not the case in every board. Currently, school boards set their own transportation policies. There are no provincial guidelines with respect to who is eligible for transportation, walking distances, transfers, maximum ride times, or maximum length of time a child may be expected to ride a bus. The lack of a provincial transportation policy means that there is inequity from board to board and real obstacles to enrolment for many students who would otherwise choose to take these programs.

Good transportation contributes to strong enrolment, keeps class sizes healthy, and means there are enough high school students in French immersion to ensure adequate course selection. Boards with poor transportation or a complete lack of it contribute to low enrolment at the elementary and secondary levels in French immersion and core French programs.

“Since they operate only in selected centres, French Immersion programs are wholly dependent on the ability of students to get to the sites. The argument for providing transportation to such programs in most school boards is based on program viability and program equity. Without transportation, programs are threatened or become the preserve of the privileged.” *Norbert Hartmann, Chairperson of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board Co-management Team, January 30, 2007 report*

For the past few years funding has been based on the amount that boards received in the previous year plus a per cent increase. An additional increase is allocated if there has been a rise in enrolment; however, in a time of declining enrolment this has not been significant.

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The current provincial funding policy is that the transportation allocations to the school boards will not be reduced even if enrolment drops. As a result, in school boards where French immersion or extended French students have not traditionally been bused, there is little financial incentive to introduce transportation for them because these additional enrolments will not make up the shortfall in general enrolment and therefore no additional transportation funding will be forthcoming. Therefore, students who would otherwise enrol in French immersion are not doing so.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Despite additional funding for transportation in recent years, service for all students has declined in many school boards in Ontario. Although many boards share common practices when it comes to their English program students such as walking distances and the length of bus rides, this is not the case for the French immersion and extended French students. However, it appears that there have been very few improvements when it comes to the level of service for the students despite the increase in funding from the Ministry.

In general, bus rides are longer. Pick-up points are further away and earlier. JK students are expected to walk out to highways, stand in unsheltered areas, and wait on dark, unlit highway shoulders for buses.

The situation for French immersion and extended French students is even more pronounced. In our survey, 12 of 15 chapter contacts reported no change or a decline in the level of service. Policies differ widely from board to board and even within boards. Many do not include French immersion students in their policies, while in others, urban and rural students do not have the same access to transportation. Some urban students are reliant on public transit at their own expense to access a program. Many rural students are dependent on a “Piggy Back” system, which means that their spot is only available until an English program student is allotted that seat. “Collective pick-up points” is another system where parents/guardians drive to a central location to meet a bus.

Ride times differ significantly: 8 of 15 chapters reported children spending two to three hours daily on the bus, with three of those reporting rides that lasted three hours a day. The remaining 7 chapters reported rides of 15 to 30 minutes each way, or up to an hour each day. In order to accommodate busing schedules, start times, lunch hours, and dismissal times are all compromised and students often miss a portion of their instructional time. They often arrive two-and-a-half hours after waking – hungry, tired, and unable to concentrate. This is disruptive to the classroom environment and causes learning and behavioural issues. For many parents of young children this

length of bus ride is simply too long to expect of any child. With other children, work, and daycare commitments, parents face a choice of either not enrolling their child in FSL programs or driving them to the programs themselves.

Access to high school programs is clearly a problem. All 15 chapters reported access, although inadequate, to elementary FI programs. Only 9 reported access to secondary school programs. Some indicated that the access to high school programs depended on whether the students lived on a public transit route.

It is worth noting that two boards that offered FI in 2001 now report that there is no program available.

Transportation systems differ widely from board to board. In the best cases, board-provided access is the same for French immersion and extended French as it is for English. The remainder fall under one of the following:

- “Piggyback” Service was mentioned by a number of boards. This is a system where boards will let FI students ride the bus if there is space available. It is uncertain and unpredictable and space can be forfeited if another student from the English program is put on the route.
- “Collective pick-up points” require parents to drive to a central location to meet a bus. Boards provided public transit tickets in many cases, but not always and not consistently across the board.
- Shared busing is between boards. Surplus busing is similar to Piggyback Service.
- Surplus funding means that there will be transportation if the board is in a surplus position with respect to transportation funding. This service could be withdrawn on short notice.
- Shuttles are often used. Regular routes bring students to their home school. They then take a shuttle from that school to the school that offers French immersion or extended French. Multiple transfers from one bus to another presents security risks. Most of these systems require timetabling adjustments to accommodate bus schedules.

In the best cases, boards allowed JK and SK students who would be attending FI in Grade 1 to enrol and access transportation to the French immersion school so they would not have to change schools between SK and Grade 1. This is very reassuring for both students and parents. In some cases, students could be enrolled in the program, but parents had to drive. In other cases, they had to enrol in their local school in English at which point they could then access transportation. In the best cases (50%), boards now start French immersion in either JK or SK as a best-practice model that addresses the transportation issue and eliminates the need to change schools.

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Loss of instructional time: Many of these longer routes are late, arriving after the bell. Some secondary school students are required to take a shuttle from one school to another in order to take French beyond Grade 9. This requires travel time and results in lost instructional time.

Early pick-up and late drop-offs: Students get picked as early as 6:30 a.m. and get dropped off as late as 5:30 p.m.

## CONCLUSION

Two boards have shown improvements in transportation but in both cases, challenges still persist. Two other boards have dropped their FI programs since 2001. Most boards (40) in Ontario recognize the need to provide equitable transportation to this program at the elementary level. The remaining boards either provide partial service or no transportation. Access is uneven and a significant problem at the secondary level. In order to be fully equitable, inclusive, and accessible transportation to these programs must be reliable, stable, and predictable. The level of service needs to be the same as the level offered to students in the English program. The absence of guidelines has resulted in very different policies across the province. As such, we offer the following recommendations to the Ministry of Education with respect to the transportation of FSL students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Ministry of Education Ontario:

1. Collect current data on all students, including French immersion, from home to the school of attendance.
2. Collect current data on the bus routes including walking distances, pick-up and drop-off times for all students, including those in French immersion to determine the maximum, minimum, and average bus ride times for all students.
3. Develop a province-wide transportation policy that gives clear guidelines as to walking distances, pick-up locations, time limit, and distance that any student may be expected to ride a bus.
4. Clearly state that this policy be inclusive of all FSL programs: French immersion, extended French, and core French.
5. Design a funding formula for transportation that reflects the total enrolment of the board, the needs of the students, and **full access to FSL programs**.
6. Provide sufficient funding to transport all students safely and efficiently.
7. Require accountability and transparency of transportation allocations.