

The State of French-Second-Language Education 2012

FACTSHEET FOR EDUCATORS (FSL TEACHERS)

Canadian Parents for French hosted a Roundtable on Academically Challenged Students in French Second Language (FSL) Programs in June 2012 to initiate a dialogue amongst stakeholders, educators and policy-makers, to develop joint recommendations for more inclusionary practices, and to move the issue of equitable access for all students in Canada from discussion to action.

Approximately forty representatives from the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, ministries of education, school districts, faculties of education and researchers, as well as national associations active in the field of FSL education, attended the Roundtable and developed comprehensive recommendations and indicators of success. Participants outlined the need for policies, inclusionary practices and appropriate specialist support to enable equitable access and to meet the needs of academically challenged students.

THE CONTEXT

Every Canadian child should have the opportunity to become bilingual so he or she can participate fully in this country's economy, governance and society. However, the reluctance of school boards and school authorities to adapt to the needs of students with learning disabilities in immersion has created an unfortunate dynamic. These children are often systematically weeded from immersion and placed in the English stream. For those who remain, little support is available in school and at home, and parents are left to find remediation and support on their own. [Graham Fraser, Opening Remarks, CPF Roundtable June 2012]

The challenge is not usually for the children, but rather for the adults around them.

Genesee 2012

Learning disabilities affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization, or use of social, physical, or verbal information. People with learning disabilities have average (or greater) thinking and reasoning abilities and are often creative. 5 to 10 per cent of Canadians and 50 per cent of special education students have learning disabilities, which are often accompanied by ADHD, anxiety disorder, executive function disorder, or giftedness. [Harding 2012]

THE SITUATION

Myths about French immersion are abound, and children who have any kind of learning disorder are often excluded from immersion programs for fear of compounding their problems, despite research showing that at-risk students can become bilingual and attain levels of first-language and academic ability commensurate with their learning challenges. "The challenge is not usually for the children, but rather for the adults around them. Research evidence shows that language-acquisition systems of at-risk students are extremely powerful, even when they do not function normally. The challenge is how to create a learning environment in which these children's potential can be fully realized." [Genesee 2012]

YOU CAN CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Teacher education programs do not often provide training about academically-challenged students studying French as a second language. As a responsible educator, you are understandably hesitant to include students whose learning needs you can't meet, but

- Research shows that effective interventions do exist. They include demonstrating techniques, using manipulatives, supporting oral language with writing, judicious use of students' first language, pre-teaching vocabulary, rephrasing and restating, using simpler language, teaching explicit strategies, and pacing lessons. Other strategies include highlighting text; modifying text; modifying grading systems; varying the length of assignments; chunking tasks; using a variety of assignments; giving extra time to finish a task or test; allowing students to hand in draft assignments early, receive feedback, and revise; and offering oral instead of written tests. [Mady 2012; Harding 2012]

FACTS ABOUT LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN FRENCH IMMERSION

- second-language learning does not negatively affect the first language;
- students rapidly catch up once English is introduced and that many students surpass their peers by Grades 5 or 6;
- skills in French can and do transfer to English;
- struggling learners are at no greater disadvantage in second-language programs and have the ability to learn two languages despite their difficulties;
- struggling readers experience similar problems if enrolled in English-only programs;
- existing standardized tests can identify students at risk for reading difficulties much earlier than grade 2 or 3; and
- there is notable improvement of special need student performance in French Immersion post-intervention [Bourgoin 2012, Genesee 2012]

- Research shows that FSL teachers who receive relevant info and training become capable of creating and running effective, inclusive classrooms.
- Research also shows that the learning strategies used in inclusive classrooms are useful for all students, not just those with special need and, although French immersion teachers are very busy these strategies do not necessarily take more time.
- You will find more information about inclusive classrooms in The State of FSL Education in Canada 2012 and the full Roundtable Proceedings (both documents are available at www.cpf.ca).

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Don't forget that the parents of struggling FSL learners are one of your greatest resources.

- They are motivated, active participants in their child's education; they understand their children's strengths and can help you to anticipate what may challenge their children.
- Individual learning strategies can be applied and supported at home which can help parents to become confident enough to step back and let areas of strength develop.
- Homework tasks that used to cause stress and tears can become manageable. Parents still have to manage timelines and tasks at home but their children have learned strategies from you and are able to work with confidence.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Ask your school district to provide professional development and/or to free up funds for FSL teachers to participate in relevant in-service development opportunities offered by faculties of education.

WHAT CAN CPF DO TO HELP ...

CPF's parent advocates will support your efforts by promoting the Roundtable recommendations at all level of the education system, from schools and school districts to ministries of education and the Government of Canada.

... WITH CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

CPF advocates for ...

- ... school boards to offer methodology training to all FSL teachers on second-language acquisition for academically challenged students.
- ... curricula that acknowledge and provide alternative strategies to assist academically challenged students in FSL programs.

... WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CPF advocates for ...

- ... provincial and territorial governments to be encouraged to create a program that increases the number of French immersion teachers capable of responding to academically challenged students.
- ... provincial and territorial governments to increase the professional development opportunities for FSL educators working with academically challenged students.

... WITH PERCEPTIONS

CPF advocates for ...

- ... the realistic development of communications and outreach campaigns to show that FSL education is accessible to all learners at all levels based upon research evidence. (Provincial/territorial governments)

... WITH RESOURCES

CPF advocates for ...

- ... a useable framework to be developed at the Ministry of Education level to systematically support academically challenged students in French immersion and French-second-language programs.
- ... the creation of a national and regional virtual resource centre. It must be user-friendly, relevant, accessible to all stakeholders, bilingual, and evidence-based.

... WITH POLICY

CPF advocates for ...

- ... provincial and territorial governments to allocate special education funding to school boards based on student need, not on enrolment numbers.
- ... school boards to be accountable for how English and FSL funding is applied.

... WITH RESEARCH

CPF advocates for ...

- ... the establishment of a research clearing house with succinct and accessible synopses of critical, relevant research findings on language and academic development of special needs students.
- ... the citation of research in policy and curriculum design, methodology, and documents.

For more information and resources on CPF advocacy please visit our website at www.cpf.ca.