

Canadian Parents for French

**Provincial and National French
Second-Language Education
Stakeholder Consultations**

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Introduction

After some brief words of welcome, the plenary session opened with a short documentary-style video. The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages presented a series of sound bytes to capture what today's youth think of learning French as a second language. The crew hit the streets of Toronto and asked people if they would be interested in learning French if they had the opportunity. Every student the crew spoke with responded enthusiastically in favour of learning a second language. They said having linguistic duality was integral in understanding different cultures and different ideologies. Some students characterized knowing both French and English as something that sets Canadians apart from Americans and said that it is extremely beneficial for those entering the ever-increasingly demanding workplace. The crew also asked the interviewees what made them lose their interest in learning French. The overwhelming majority blamed the dryness of most curricula, which is not taught in a meaningful, fresh, and exciting way. When asked whether they knew of French media outlets and to name some reputable French personalities, most of the students balked, unable to name any.

The conclusion the Commissioner's office drew from the documentary was that the will was there, but that learning French was not being presented in a real, significant, useful manner. This needs to change.

Ted Karp, the executive director of the Canadian Parents for French, addressed the purpose of the Ontario Symposium on Official Languages. Participants were there to come up with practical regional and provincial strategies. They were asked to attend because of their influential roles in the fields of culture and the arts, business, and education. Karp then provided a quick overview of what had been discussed at the national Symposium on Official Languages, which took place at the beginning of March.

Karp used the analogy His Excellency, John Ralston Saul (one of the symposium's keynote speakers) had put forth to the audience. Saul cited the last 30 years in Canada as an "opening act" in the unfolding drama of linguistic duality in the country. He said it was important to acknowledge the significant strides educators, the government, and the public had made to ensure a general awareness of the importance of having both French and English under one's belt. The statistics indicate that Canada is succeeding: StatsCan reports that 86 per cent of people in the country are pro-bilingualism. But now the challenge is to move into the second act of the play and making widespread bilingualism a reality.

Karp wrapped up his introduction by going over the challenges and strategies that came out of the national Symposium. He then asked people to shift their focus to a provincial agenda.

Education

Question 1: Students and learning

What are the first steps to be taken in marketing bilingual education to students at all levels—from elementary to high school entry, from high school graduation to post-secondary education and life-long learning—and making it a genuine experience to learn a second language? How can resources and support from outside the classroom be mobilized to enrich FSL instruction and capture the magic of bilingual education?

Recommendations

- Develop a clear national strategy with corresponding and supporting strategies from every level of government.
- Develop a communication plan that celebrates success and includes an impact study, marketing, and advertising plan, taking advantage of the Internet and centres where people can access career counselling and share experiences.
- Lobby and advocate—“get the word out” using many different voices including learners, teachers, and politicians. Use Canadians of all ages and diverse backgrounds.
- Network across business, and the public and private sectors.
- Develop official provincial and federal mission statements, with congruence and agreement on general principles, and commitments to bilingualism and French education.
- Create a national FSL education strategy and congruent strategies at other levels, with clearly articulated goals, identifiable resources, and well-researched, quantifiable results.
- Design a Web site, electronic portals or physical centres to act as “clearinghouses” for information on French education, cultural and employment opportunities, events, et cetera.
- Promote CRTC leadership in cross-promoting French and English media.

Discussion

Each table presented the results of its discussion, the most pressing point being the issue of communication. Participants agreed that discussion is needed on the topic of bilingualism in all aspects of society. The notion that learning a second language is valid and valuable must permeate all groups: teachers, students, parents, government, and the entire community at large. If there is a grassroots push to market the benefits of learning French, supporting the push will become second nature to the population. An educator from London, Ontario cited the example of a national high school rowing competition that took place in the city. All the signage, all the documents, and all the correspondence at the meet were in English. To make the meet more inclusive, a small group of teachers suggested they ask some of the French immersion students to act as ambassadors—to guide and help the French-speaking students. Another example of bombarding the public with information came from the same school in London: the teachers and students work together to condense what is learned in their core French classes and create a brochure, which ultimately the class passes out at the mall to let people know what they’re doing.

So even in a bastion of English dominance such as south-western Ontario, students are helping tout the importance of linguistic duality.

Another participant raised the issue of access to information and resources. Many educators have no idea how to access the government funds available for promoting and teaching French. This results in second language teachers who are less willing and able to take risks with the way they instruct, which ultimately results in the students not retaining the language because they are bored. The group stressed the importance of bringing a second language into context by taking classes on field trips or setting up exchanges. Unfortunately, the legal issues surrounding these more practical applications make the execution tricky.

The attendees also were in unanimous agreement about using guidance counsellors more consistently as a resource. Counsellors are crucial in underscoring how vital bilingualism is to the students when giving them career advice. They could promote French co-op placements, emphasizing how useful it can be to be multilingual when they eventually hit the job market. This requires that schools set up a network of potential bilingual co-ops for the students, so the option is there if the student feels so inclined.

The group reiterated the importance of getting the message out not only to parents who would naturally consider more intensive French training for their children, but also to those who would not explore the option to begin with. The approach has to be like a carpet-bombing: it is not only important to teach French for the hour each day in the classroom, it is also important to find and take every avenue available for exposing young people to French outside the classroom. This puts their ability to use the language to a much truer test than exams and quizzes. An educator brought up the Saint Patrick's Day parade and asked why schools were not seizing the opportunity to expose students to French cultural traditions when appropriate. A parent whose children are in a dual track school in Toronto said she was surprised to find out that many other parents were not even aware of the bilingual option at that very school. Teachers, administration, and the school board need to coordinate their media efforts so that everyone knows what is available for their young ones.

This discussion led to the greater issue of overall awareness. One of the administrators in the room mentioned that she has received countless calls about pre-school options in French—parents asked where they could go for information and who they should speak with. A strategy the group came up with was to expand parents' awareness by having a system-wide access to information. This would require the school board to create a central data bank that could be publicly accessed by anyone seeking information on French language education.

Some of the parents in the room expressed concern about signing their children up for classes taught in French. They said it can be nerve-wracking to commit their youngsters to something that might not be the right fit for them or might eventually become too difficult to juggle with other more pressing family obligations. In response to this apprehension, some of the participants stated it would be helpful to loosen the structure in which the language is taught, and remain flexible, all while maintaining the quality of the education. That way, parents will not feel as if they have locked into a commitment they cannot see through until the end of the year.

Discussion moved to the possibility of acquiring a second language as the student grew older. Those in the room agreed that students should have the option of picking up classes in French at any point throughout their academic career. If the curriculum were meaningful, contextual, and important, students would be more likely to seek it out on their own. The group was unanimous in its opinion of how the culture should be presented to the students. One participant said, “Carnavale and tourtière are out. Expose the kids to the same things they like in English, only do it in French. What about teaching them through pop stars, rappers, and graffiti artists? It has to go beyond the stereotypical impression people have of French culture.” She categorized student exchanges and music videos as ways of presenting the culture in a modern, relevant light. Those at the conference thought this concept should be taken further. Another strategy mentioned was looking into awarding high school students for their bilingual studies with certificates, and pushing Canadian post-secondary institutions to recognize classes taken in French. Parents complained that sports accomplishments were lauded and celebrated at the high school level, whereas students’ linguistic accomplishments flew below the radar. They said it needed to be presented as a concrete benefit at the end of the high school experience.

Participants agreed that marketing required well-trained teachers within a supportive atmosphere. That atmosphere must include support from school boards, all levels of government, and communities. It is also important to convince teachers of the advantages they have as FSL teachers and their students have as bilingual graduates. Any marketing campaign must also sell the importance of French language education to administrators, principals, and district education offices, convincing them that French language instruction is “more than worth the trouble.”

A participant stressed the importance of acknowledging that second language instruction creates a special set of needs, but balancing that with clear demonstrable proof that it is accompanied by worthwhile “payback.”

The best advertisement for FSL, another said, is a successful and happy student. This requires the creation of consistent, high-quality programs with adequate funding for non-classroom events, such as cultural outings and exchanges.

Another major challenge is in creating supportive environments for parents, which may, in some cases, mean giving them the confidence to go against the advice of English-language instructors who want to discourage them from enrolling their children in immersion programs.

The smaller groups identified a number of major challenges:

- Parental awareness needs to be increased. Change parental attitudes by demystifying FSL education and changing parental attitudes.
- More support is needed from English teachers toward French programs in Kindergarten and Junior Kindergarten.
- More funding is needed for promotion and awareness of the benefits of French education.
- Some community attitudes toward French programs are negative.
- There is poor marketing of French to older students, especially at the high school level. This leads to poor retention of students.
- The buy-in from all levels of government—particularly provincial governments—is lacking.

- Adequate funding is required to access the richness of French experiences in other places/provinces.
- There is a failure to provide young people with opportunities to recognize the value of French at many levels.
- The difficulty, particularly in Central Ontario and larger urban centres, is to situate French in a multicultural society and to promote bilingualism to newer Canadians who want to retain their own cultures too.
- Many learners and teachers have negative attitudes about their own experiences of learning French—these are the best “billboards” for promoting French instruction, so it’s critical they have positive experiences.

Participants agreed on the importance of ensuring that all marketing addresses “the big picture,” with consistent, well-expressed, well-circulated ideas that were “slick and professional,” while being “au courant” and appropriately targeted to their audiences.

There was also wide agreement on the need to create a bank of easily accessible information about how functional bilingualism could improve job choices, career expectations, and enrich life experiences. Once this information is available, it should be widely disseminated. Europe has a well-coordinated cooperative Clearinghouse of Modern Languages that has enjoyed great success in promoting various languages across national borders. A similar model could be used to coordinate information and integrate the experiences of Canadians in different parts of the country.

Participants also discussed the importance of creating part-time and seasonal jobs for students in French, and for using their existence as a promotional tool. The current curriculum’s required community service component should also include opportunities in French.

Participants next discussed the second part of the question: “How can resources and support from outside the classroom be mobilized to enrich French language education?” The first group talked about the challenges it had come across with respect to resources and how to make good use of them. One of the biggest challenges the instructors in the room had come across was simply getting their hands on francophone material to place in English classrooms. They said the content varied significantly between the two languages. As a result, the group suggested that instructors and school boards start using TVO’s French programming as a resource. Participants went back to their initial point of presenting French language and culture in an authentic way and thought TVO’s programs would be an excellent vehicle for this. Some said that the government is working to homogenize French and English curricula, which they saw as a logical and very helpful move. Another challenge brought to the table was that obtaining books in French was difficult, because sometimes even when the content is the same, the publishing houses are different. So when it comes time for school representatives to choose materials for the year, they cannot get their hands on French books, as those publishing houses do not collaborate with English schools and therefore do not have anything on display. The instructors at the conference said a simple solution would be to get the publishers to send brochures and other literature on what was available. Everyone involved concluded that the solution was easy access across the board.

The second table echoed the same points, but putting more emphasis on extracting the resources from the community. They said it would be beneficial to coordinate with French language groups within the community so that English speakers would know when a cultural event was going on, be it a concert, parade, dance, or theatrical production.

In small groups, participants again discussed the importance of encouraging more student involvement in “lifelike” experiences outside the classroom, such as public speaking, sports, trips, outdoor programs and exchanges. Personal and professional enrichment for French teachers is also important, they agreed. They also stressed the need to make technologically relevant teaching materials and learning resources available.

Participants also repeatedly stressed the importance of “Canadianizing/ bilingualizing” existing programs, so that core subjects can be offered in both languages, rather than just offering French as language-study option or immersion programs. Ideally, interested students should be able to take core courses in a second language—even if they are not in an intensive French program. Not only would this enrich the students, it would improve the overall quality of the courses being offered in French by increasing the resources devoted to them and create positive experiences for non-immersion students, which would help counter negative attitudes.

A participant stressed that it is equally important to present French language resources and opportunities in English, as that will allow those who are not already functionally bilingual to explore learning options and better understand the advantages of bilingualism and FSL.

Participants also agreed on the importance of taking advantage of local French cultures and integrating cultural activities from those communities into French and English-language education.

Participants identified a number of challenges:

- The barrier between English and French, and French and French immersion—often within the same school—needs to be broken down.
- There is a lack of accessibility to French media and a failure to cross-promote across the different language media. Radio Canada is rarely promoted on English CBC, nor do most schools take advantage of French media that are available, especially radio and French ethno-cultural programming.
- Francophone centres and French language collections within school and public libraries are underutilized.
- Teachers and students need to be engaged so they can access French language and cultural enrichment experiences outside the classroom. This requires better awareness and funding.
- There is poor awareness of resources, and poor accessibility.
- There is little opportunity for students to use their French in experiences outside school.
- There is a failure to articulate clear goals and expectations so that resources can be applied expediently and intelligently.

Question 2: Teachers and instruction

What are the prospects for attracting and training the next generation of competent, enthusiastic FSL instructors, and for ensuring that they have the resources and support that they need to succeed?

Recommendations

- Ensure that Minister Pettigrew's fund provides direct grants for teachers who choose FSL with an accompanying commitment that those receiving the grants will teach FSL for a particular period of time
- Offer incentive salaries or bonuses for teachers of FSL; such programs are already in place for subjects such as computers and shop.
- Implement mentoring and matching programs, pairing teachers with community members, young teachers with more experienced teachers, and linking teachers in different parts of the country.
- Improve awareness of professional development opportunities, including cultural, sports, and arts events, and improve access through funding and use of more coordinated information.
- Promote career counselling for students that encourages them to consider FSL instruction as a viable option.
- Develop coherent, consistent, and engaging training for FSL teachers.
- Develop programs that acknowledge and reward good teaching of FSL.
- Explore the possibility that the federal government could directly transfer grants to FSL training organizations.

Discussion

The first group of participants said the prospects were not good unless the school boards found ways to boost the supply of French-speaking graduates throughout Canada, as well as improve the environment for current French teachers. Some of the other challenges presented were how to increase the number of hours given to FSL instructors, how to acknowledge their credentials, and raise their salaries, and lastly, how to set up different and innovative teaching models.

The second group presented similar challenges. They complained of an aging and retiring teacher population, and an unstable teaching system for FSL instructors because of the constant need for them to move around within the board and teach in different schools. There is no incentive for teachers to take on the demanding task of teaching French. They said these challenges, compounded with the fact that the teaching profession is regarded as rather "unsexy," amounted to the perception of second language teachers as being the lowest of the low.

The group decided that one strategy would be to make the teachers feel respected and valued within the community. A tangible way of showing this appreciation would be for the school to pay for advanced qualification courses the teachers might want to take. If someone else was footing the bill, instructors would have a far greater incentive to attend them, hone their skills,

and subsequently, be more motivated to come up with fresh ways of teaching students. Something must be done at the ministerial level so that schools have the financial support they need to keep teachers effective and students engaged.

A number of participants noted the lack of clear succession plans as a major obstacle to rational planning for French education. The lack of a clear vision for the replacement of teachers deprives the system of vibrant, diverse youthful voices, at the same time as it creates a sense of “burn-out” among existing teachers that leads to attrition. Lack of vibrancy and enthusiasm from teachers is reflected in the experience of learners.

Not only is it difficult to attract qualified, competent, and energetic new teachers, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the level of quality that already exists.

Better resource centres are needed, both as a teaching resource and a way of improving how French language teachers feel about themselves. French teachers feel like second class citizens within the teaching community. Many administrative decisions, either intentionally or unintentionally, reinforce that by making decisions that devalue French teachers, such as indicating French language instruction as “spare” on teaching schedules, failing to provide adequate office space and support, and treating French teachers as “supply” teachers.

Participants agreed on a number of obstacles to attract and train new teachers:

- Poor teaching environments, including lack of physical and pedagogical resources and lack of respect for teachers and programs;
- Poor, inconsistently and uncoordinated training standards and opportunities for FSL teachers, trainers and mentors;
- High turnover of FSL teachers; and
- Lack of clear succession plans for dealing with attrition.

French will never be considered a “real” subject, participants agreed, as long as it is forced to share classrooms and receive resources as an afterthought. It should be clear that French teachers have the right to the same respect, support, and resources as other teachers.

The development of mentorship programs would not only be a great tool for encouraging student confidence and excitement around FSL, a participant said, it would also provide positive reinforcement and role-modelling for young teachers. Isolation is one of the biggest challenges faced by French teachers, particularly in rural areas where there is not a large local francophone population.

Question 3: Public opinion and community context

What are the dimensions of a community-based campaign to promote FSL instruction and support Canada’s Vision for 2013 objectives? What are the first steps, and who should be involved?

Recommendations

- Involve and support parents.
- Make French a mandatory subject throughout high school.
- Instigate a community liaison committee comprised of representatives from education, the business community, the arts and cultural community, and regional and provincial governments.

Discussion

Both groups that discussed this question agreed the biggest challenge would be to identify barriers within the multifaceted school system. They identified the most powerful decision-making group as being the parents and concluded that the only way to tackle any of the perceived problems would be to get them on board. One of the participants said, “A lot of parents ask themselves, ‘I don’t speak French, so what do I do about my kids?’” CPF has already started reconciling the rift in understanding that can occur between unilingual parents and their bilingual children. They are now offering French conversation courses so that parents feel moderately comfortable in the language. The other systemic barrier brought up was making French compulsory throughout high school, like math or science. These issues need to be brought to the Minister of Education’s attention if there is to be prompt action.

One idea that came out of the group was to put together a liaison committee that would meet three or four times annually. The committee would include members from all sectors of society: educators, business people, and those involved in arts and culture. This would ensure the committee stays on target and does not duplicate efforts. The group concluded that it had a much greater chance of success if people at the regional and provincial level were involved, and if they presented their ideas and concerns in a passionate and engaging manner. Having everyone pitch in is key to making it a viable and relevant project.

Question 4: Institutional support and accessibility

What major program and policy changes would enhance FSL instruction across Canada? What are the first, most practical steps that can be taken to build a more effective, more accessible system, and who should be involved?

Recommendations

Participants agreed on a two-pronged strategic approach:

- Seek feedback from employers, the business community, the public service commission, universities and colleges, and other interested parties about their requirements for bilingual graduates, in order to attain a workable, consistent national definition for functional bilingualism.

- Create a national forum to develop national strategy (involving the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC)), which will determine outcomes, indicators, and supports and clearly establish that policy implementation is tied to funding.

Participants also made a number of suggestions:

- Make FSL a requirement for graduation from high school.
- Offer more core courses in French.
- Test for proficiency, using the Public Service Commission test to make it more relevant.
- Seek feedback from the Public Service Commission, employers, universities, and colleges on their interpretation of functional bilingualism.
- Find alternative ways to grant French education credits, similar to the granting of music credits for successful completion of Royal Conservatory of Music studies.
- Tie funding to the implementation of policy, and to results.
- Establish many entry points to allow widespread access.
- Establish benchmarks, similar to those used for ESL.
- Institute a certificate program that would recognize French proficiency.
- Align federal and provincial goals.
- Establish a full-time FSL provincial ministry co-ordination team

Discussion

Participants determined that the lack of policy about optional FSL education within the Ontario Ministry of Education presents a major challenge. This lack of commitment trickles down to the school boards and results in uneven rules and regulations. For example, many schools have different policies on enrolment caps and who is granted access to FSL. Some participants said they had problems with transportation to the schools offering the level of bilingual instruction they want to expose their children to. They also outlined the lack of support for students in need of extra help and how learning problems, however slight, could mean the difference between a unilingual and a bilingual child.

Participants elaborated on the issue of enrolment caps. Stating that she was in favour of caps, a participant said, “It’s impossible to engage a language class of 32. Twenty-five students is manageable—32 is not, at an academic level. As a teacher, that is my Number 1 concern. If I had fewer students, I would be able to get to them, to reach them, but instead, I lose kids, because they don’t speak in class. And once they’ve failed, you can’t get them to take French again. They aren’t engaged or motivated enough to take it.”

The group next discussed the dire lack of respect for French language teachers, saying that there is not a policy for detailing how much they should be paid for their exhaustive efforts. The issue of communication was brought up again and the participants said they wanted to develop a concrete plan to transmit the benefits of learning a second language, specifically in relation to math and science, two courses that are touted as being able to “open doors” for students in the future. They said French is just as important in making students marketable and should be perceived and treated as such. The group conceded that it was up to French instructors to be clear

about what they need—resource-wise, support-wise, and otherwise—and then vocalize those needs to obtain the materials they need to teach in the most effective way possible.

The participants moved on to strategies that would help remedy the problems. The group suggested, once again, that school boards and teachers broaden the scope in which French is taught, taking students outside a classroom context and developing policies that would make FSL co-op placements easier to set up. They also wanted to see more exchanges and more recognition at the university level, whether it is rewarded through picking up a half credit or an advanced placement. The CPF promised to investigate the possibility of introducing a special French certificate that would be recognizable to post-secondary institutions, or having the students take a test upon graduation to prove their proficiency and be celebrated for it.

Other long-term strategies included looking at Canadian programs that have a high success rate producing students who are fluent, or at the very least, functional in French. Once this was established, the federal and provincial governments should launch a powerful public campaign to promote, support, and advocate the goal of a bilingual country. They could pepper public space with posters celebrating the positive effects and benefits of bilingualism, as well as develop policies that support access to French schools, culture, and materials. Participants stressed the need to let provincial leaders know that they are parents who are seriously concerned, not a group of naysayers with gripes about the system.

The overwhelming concern was how to better involve the teachers, because they represent the first line of delivery to the students. They are the ones who instruct, motivate, initiate, and counsel. The group suggested the school boards hire French second language consultants to analyze each board's methods of teaching, particular school policies, and the student population, and then identify what can be done to teach the language most effectively. Participants noted that consultants could be extremely helpful because they would have the time to do a proper analysis of how the school functions, rather than further encumbering the already overworked second language teachers. The consultant would ultimately draw up a plan of action, including benchmarks and goals to make the measures of success tangible.

Participants made a parallel between the effectiveness of this winter's federal flu campaign and asked how they could adapt some of the same techniques to meet their goal of bilingualism. Although they conceded the two challenges were different beasts, if they were to mirror that commitment to educate people, a similar strategy could prove effective. The group said the most effective part of the campaign was how widespread it was: the federal government set up flu shot stations and plastered communities with educational advertisements.

The group then went back to the matter of simple access: transportation. One of the teachers said, "You should not have to spend two hours on a bus to learn how to be bilingual. Transportation is a major factor in the number of people who take French immersion." Another participant highlighted another problem with accessibility, "At one point, the school took kids out of their core French class so they could receive their remedial math class. This should not be happening. The message we're sending is 'you're not going to need French, focus on math'". She concluded her anecdote by saying it is impossible to teach kids a language if they are not going to class.

Participants agreed the most practical step is to get the message out that French is an integral part of a valuable education and that it is an essential component of the educational system, like math, English, or the sciences. By adopting that point of view from the very beginning, the rest falls into place naturally. One teacher explained her approach to make French important to her students: “The angle I sometimes take is I tell them there’s only one country in the world where you can graduate from high school and manage with only one language: the United States. I tell them we are an enlightened group of individuals in our class. The patriotism slant can be effective. It opens their minds and expands their thought process.”

The second group to address this question agreed that inconsistency was one of the greatest obstacles to policy and programs. Inconsistencies exist in entry points from board to board and in program delivery issues, such as number of hours. While it is important to have different opportunities and versions of programs to address the needs of particular regions or learner groups, it is also important to have transparent, consistent standards. Alternative programs will also lead to a strengthening of core programs and the attainment of the overall goal.

Right now, it is impossible to even locate FSL as a priority within the education agenda. While it is laudable for the federal government to set a national target, it is even more important for provinces to state their unequivocal support for FSL, and to set clear, attainable, demonstrable objectives.

There is a lack of identified outcomes for students in the current system, participants complained. Aiming to double bilingual graduates is a good goal, but may not be observable. Some participants argued that the primary policy issue needs to address the definition of “functionally bilingual.” One participant disagreed, noting that the government had already applied criteria to determine that nearly a quarter of graduates were bilingual, and discussion should simply focus on how to increase that number. Others noted that the government had simply based its estimate on self-declarations from census notices, which are neither reliable, nor helpful in determining policy.

Other challenges were identified:

- High school requirements are a key issue; French should be a graduation requirement.
- Special education and other programs should not be given priority over FSL.
- Access to programs, particularly French immersion, is not adequate or consistent.
- Capping programs must focus on capping classroom size, not capping enrolment at entry points for immersion programs.
- A clear definition for “functional bilingualism” is lacking. It should include definitions for entry points, number of instruction hours, alternative programs, and testing or measurement modalities.
- The clear message that French is a priority is lacking.
- There is inconsistency in the level of French that students and teachers possess.
- There is a need to improve resources for and support of core French programs, which will be the greatest source of future bilingual graduates.
- Each provincial Minister of Education needs to bring French competency issues to CEMC.
- There is a discrepancy between federal expectations and provincial actions.

- There is a need to improve accountability regarding how money earmarked for the promotion of French language education is actually spent.
- There is a need to address the retention of FSL after Grade 9.
- Current core French programs are not achieving their goals and need to be improved.

In developing strategies for policy change, participants agreed the first step was broad consultation with “interested parties,” to ascertain that they need bilingual graduates, what they want from bilingual graduates, and what their definition of bilingual encompasses. These consultations need to be tied to a group of outcomes so that appropriate policy can be developed to attain them.

An explicit pan-Canadian strategy is needed to support exit outcomes, a participant said. The development of policies for teacher standards, exit outcomes, and instructional parameters should be included within the strategy. All interested parties (districts, provinces and the federal government) must share what they are doing and how, and must establish baselines on a national level. This will require motivating and engaging the involvement of the provinces, since it is not something that can be mandated by the federal government.

Participants agreed that the strategy must include outcomes and indicators and provide access to the supports that achieve them. Once agreements are made, it is imperative that they be tied to funding.

It is important, they agreed, to take opportunities to ask educators how to build programs that are more effective and how to address basic issues of accessibility. These accessibility issues include everything from intellectual appropriateness of programs to practical physical levels of access, such as transportation to schools offering particular programs, access for students with special needs, and the appropriateness of the teaching environment itself.

If the goal is to double the number of bilingual graduates, one participant stressed, that means a clear focus on improving the basic program for all students, instead of just enhancing programs like immersion. It’s unconscionable that access to a part of the Basic Curriculum should be an issue. It continues to be one because of the failure of the provincial government to make a clear and coherent commitment to bilingual education, and the resulting failure of many school districts to give French instruction the resources and attention it deserves.

The facilitator observed that, while the federal government says it wants to increase the number of bilingual Canadians, there is not necessarily alignment between its desire and the provinces’. There must be a reality check so that policy makers come to understand that French is not an academic discipline, it is a second official language. It should not be taken as a subject at school, but should be available as a language tool for teaching the entire curriculum.

While some participants wanted to press forward with program changes even before a national strategy was developed, others stressed that a comprehensive national plan would be the framework within which the provinces and, ultimately, the districts could move forward. It would allow them to define what is needed to accomplish the overarching goal: things like better classrooms, training, and ongoing professional development.

One participant underlined the importance of judging what the provinces do, not what they say. The federal government needs assurances about concrete policy and program directions before releasing any funding. It is not practicable for them to directly oversee the use of the funding, so the federal government should clearly articulate that future funding is tied to the appropriate use of existing funds and the attainment of desirable outcomes. Recent health agreements have been contingent on accountability, so it should be possible to use the same approach with education.

Several participants expressed frustration that past funding for French education had been allocated to other areas by school boards.

Forums at regional or board levels should also be encouraged, a participant said. At the local level, it is easier to engage other stakeholders and to promote a “culture change” that will lead to greater recognition of the value of French language education.

Since the federal government cannot directly send money to education, participants agreed that it is important to find innovative approaches that involve appropriate third parties. One suggestion was that the National Library could identify appropriate French library resources. Federal funds could be used to purchase the identified books and other resources, which could, in turn, be donated to districts or particular libraries.

Large provinces like Ontario should have an FSL coordinator whose full-time job is to oversee FSL. Ideally, the coordinator would be familiar with FSL, and be provided with the resources to undertake the necessary changes and implement appropriate supports.

A participant stressed that French education should be viewed as an entitlement, not a privilege. All Canadians should have the right to graduate bilingual and everyone should have a fair and equal shot at it. Issues such as access and transportation need to be addressed, so that quality French education does not become something that only the children of wealthy parents can afford.

Business

Question 5

Is there scope for ongoing collaboration between the business and education sectors to increase the proportion of high school graduates with a working knowledge of both official languages? If so, based on the initial list of strategies developed at the National Symposium, what are the most promising opportunities for early action?

Recommendations

- Provide a wage supplement for bilingual student placements.

- Create ongoing dialogue between all partners (employers, students, parents, schools).
- Develop better publicity about the advantages of being bilingual or hiring bilingual students.
- Develop a broad-based strategy for collaboration and communication with businesses.
- Hold fora at local, provincial, and national levels to develop relationships/ partnerships and contacts between sectors.
- Appoint regional/ school district co-ordinators to make the connections, foster partnerships, and “spread the good news.”

Discussion

This question was discussed briefly, as many of the points led back to what had already been tackled in the previous questions. The participants went directly to the strategies that might prove effective in promoting early action and collaboration between various business and education groups. One CPF member recalled a guest speaker series she and a large group of Grade 7 students participate in. The lectures are open to a wide selection of youngsters in Toronto district schools. At a recent event, a City TV journalist talked not about her success in the industry because of her bilingualism, but how her lack of bilingualism has adversely affected her career. This teacher said that these sorts of testimonials from the “other side” have been more effective in demonstrating the benefits of a second language than success stories. The series has described the missed chances, the regrets, and the obstacles people face when they only have one language, especially in a career such as journalism, in a country such as Canada. She said this strategy highlights the golden opportunity students have and drives home the futility of bypassing this opportunity. The teacher said that the number of students who attend these events varies. She stressed that French is a skill, something that places a bilingual candidate a few notches above unilingual ones for the job market.

One of the other teachers chimed in the practical reasons why students cannot participate in French co-op placements. He said although it is a great idea to get students out and test their skills in a practical environment where they are paid, teachers need special qualifications to teach co-op. The French teachers would need that certification on top of what they already have in order for this to become a viable option, and then spend hundreds of hours going into the community to canvas and set up a network of businesspeople who would be willing to participate.

The second group to discuss this question noted that one of the greatest challenges to business–education collaboration is communication. It is not always clear how to make contact and who the appropriate contact people are within business and the academic sector. In addition, a participant said, “We speak completely different languages; sometimes we just completely fail to understand each other.”

The key contacts in schools are guidance counsellors. However, in many schools these positions have been eliminated. Where there are counsellors, they are often not bilingual themselves or do not have a good understanding about FSL. Participants agreed that well-informed supportive guidance counsellors would be invaluable liaisons between business and schools.

Other participants warned that there might be a tendency to balk at close collaboration with business, because some educators feel strongly that business already has too large a voice in influencing academic and training issues.

It is important to acknowledge differences between urban and rural districts and the additional challenges smaller rural districts might face in accessing collaborations with business, a participant observed. There must be equitable access to opportunities across all schools.

We should also acknowledge that time is a challenge, participants said. Effective collaboration requires people and dedication, which means it will cost money. It is important to promote the value of FSL to business, as well as the value of working together. This means promoting the ideological importance, while also stressing the demonstrable, practical “bottom-line” advantages.

The following key challenges were agreed upon:

- There is a lack of understanding of how business and education can mutually benefit from collaboration and the importance of clearly defining the expectations and limits of the relationship.
- There is a need to identify and access connections.
- There is a need to identify teams with shared sense of needs, goals, and values (Human Resources people from business and guidance counsellors from schools).

Students also need to see that French is an advantage for them in the job market, a participant said. It is important for businesses to identify their needs, then for schools to coach students so they see the value of FSL.

A participant argued that anyone wanting to sell FSL to businesses would have to think in business terms. That means convincing businesses there is a demonstrable ROI in hiring students who speak French. This means conducting quantifiable research, as well as collecting success stories. These should be passed on to students as well.

Arts, Culture, and Sports

Question 6

Is there scope for ongoing collaboration between the arts, culture, and sport sector and the FSL education community to increase the proportion of high school graduates with a working knowledge of both official languages? If so, based on the initial list of strategies developed at the National Symposium, what are the most promising opportunities for early action?

Recommendations

- Develop an FSL component of les Jeux Francophonies (or perhaps a parallel event).
- Twin schools to share arts and cultural experiences, and to engage in sports and cultural exchanges.
- Profile famous successful bilingual Canadians from business, sports, and the arts.
- Avoid the use of voice over translations on television.

Discussion

The group once again came up with a few key words to outline the challenges. They mentioned acceptance, relevance, and awareness, points that had been the common thread for all the questions discussed throughout the day. Many agreed it was difficult to see a good collaboration being forged between the arts, culture, and sports communities as well as the education community, mainly because of the rampant cutbacks in those very sectors within the schools. One participant said, “The way the arts are being considered in the education system is not favourable. Because of the cutbacks in arts, it’s difficult to use this as an avenue. In Ottawa, there are signs on everyone’s lawns that say ‘My Ottawa Includes Culture’ because the cutbacks are so bad. My little boy goes to a French immersion school and he had his first music teacher put on a Christmas pageant for the first time in six years.” She explained how successful and well received the pageant was, mainly because of a special act dedicated to songs in French. The music teacher and one of the French instructors collaborated to teach the children Christmas carols in both languages. The group agreed this was a great example of how to fuse the arts and language instruction. In light of this story, participants thought a good strategy would be to set up a mentorship program in which children could explore the arts or sports in another language. That way, they learn a basic lexicon as well as a skill or artistic specialty. This might lead to students making strides independently and eventually organizing exhibits, theatre productions, and other practical applications of what they have learned through the mentor.

One of the final anecdotes was about a young speaker a school brought in to talk to the children. He learned French and was excellent at gymnastics, and ended up touring with the Cirque du Soleil. The teacher said she wished she had the youngster come in right before it was time for the students to sign up for French courses because there was a palpable buzz when the boy left.

The last few points dealt with the overarching issue of giving people a reason to learn French. One educator found that people are running out of reasons to go through the arduous process of acquiring a second tongue. Without a viable reason to learn French, many simply will not. But if school boards and teachers can manage to link the language with compelling fields of study and other subjects then the students will be able to connect with a rationale and have a reason to get excited about studying a second language. Sometimes all it takes is a small shift in context.

Participants in the second discussion group agreed on the value of developing something like les Jeux Francophonie for FSL. Fun and student engagement are important components of educational success. All agreed that the broad range of sports and cultural events at les Jeux Francophonie were excellent opportunities for promoting French. Some participants stressed the

importance of expanding the existing games to include FSL, rather than creating a parallel event. One participant observed that there is sometimes animosity toward FSL participants, and suggested that there needs to be the introduction of some English component to the Games so that they “get some payback” from FSL participants.

Participants also recommended designating famous or successful personalities as “champions,” bilingual leaders, or spokespeople. They would provide role models and share the benefits they had experienced from being bilingual. Profiles could be developed of prominent people whose success was driven by their second language. These profiles could be used as part of advertising and promotional campaigns in the mass media, as poster campaigns, or even be staged as touring events.

There should be more access to funding, participants agreed, so that it is possible for French and English cultural groups to present arts and cultural events together, and that specifically target bilingual cultural events. This not only helps the FSL students, but also improves the image and visibility of French and reinforces the value of linguistic and cultural diversity—especially if events focus on multi-ethnic FSL activities.

A participant suggested that Katimavik or other programs like it could be used as a parallel organization to promote bilingualism.

Cultural and sports exchanges should be encouraged and funded, participants said. They should begin by encouraging the building of relationships across communities in different parts of the province, then between provinces and even to French communities outside of Canada. These types of events also provide opportunities for enrichment and engagement of teachers and parents in the participating schools, as well as the host communities.

Participants also recommended setting up programs to twin schools: small communities to large communities, French language to English language schools, schools in predominantly anglo areas to those in other provinces with large French communities, immersion schools to French language schools, or to English schools with core FSL.

Some of the great challenges facing French language educators, a participant stressed, are the lack of opportunity to celebrate French, isolation, and the lack of good role models. She encouraged the adoption of creative and innovative approaches that build bridges to what already exists. The challenge is to create avenues that translate real-world experiences in French into promotional tools for French education.

Conclusions/Closing

Ted Karp thanked participants for their hard work, and invited any of them who could commit to taking specific actions to come forward.

Michelle Sokovnin, CPF (Ontario) President, said that, as a parent group, CPF will stress the importance of equitable access with all its implications each time it has an opportunity to meet with the Minister or senior ministry officials. That encompasses transportation, caps on entry points, resources, and remedial support. In addition, she committed to promote accountability, transparency of funding, and the design of a certificate component for French proficiency.

Canadian Parent for French (Ontario) will also commit to discussing the improvement of working and learning conditions for French language students, since teachers and students are partners in education with parents. She invited participants to bring issues forward they want CPF to raise. “What benefits kids,” she stressed, “benefits society. Well-educated citizens are bilingual citizens.”

A participant from the Ontario Modern Languages Teachers Association (OMLTA) said the association is committed to improving the working conditions for French core education. It will soon release the results of its recent survey at the next OMLTA conference, and will share the results with teachers’ associations. It intends to address the insufficient number of French teachers and to document teaching conditions. In addition, it is creating a CD-ROM that contains profiles of teachers in Ontario who teach FSL and other modern languages, including how they came into the field, the benefits of teaching modern languages, and many of their positive experiences.

Karp stressed the importance of incorporating FSL teaching into the planning structures for new schools, so that the component does not continue to be incorporated as an afterthought.