

# The State of French-Second-Language Education 2012

## FACTSHEET FOR PARENTS

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.

Roughly 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 in the field of FSL education, attended the Roundtable and developed comprehensive recommendations and success indicators. Participants outlined the need for policies, inclusionary practices and appropriate support to enable fair 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 Canada'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 weeded out from immersion and placed in the English stream. [Graham Fraser, Opening Remarks, CPF Roundtable June 2012]

There are many myths about French immersion that often cause children who have any kind of learning disorders to be 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. [Genesee 2012]

### MYTHS

You may be told:

- That your child should master their first language before learning a second, [Bourgoin 2012]
- That learning a second language will jeopardize your child's first language, [Bourgoin 2012]
- That learning more than one language would be overtaxing for your struggling learner. [Bourgoin 2012]
- That if your child has trouble learning their native language, they will have trouble learning two languages simultaneously because the neuromachinery responsible for language learning will break down or have further trouble learning a second language. [Genesee 2012]
- That your child will be illiterate if not removed from French immersion.
- That there are no effective interventions or resources for struggling students in FSL programs.

It is not easy for parents to challenge Board of Education administrators who believe these misunderstandings. They decide who gets tested for learning difficulties and are responsible for organizing support for identified students. They also hold the purse strings and determine the programs to which special education money is directed.

### CHALLENGING MYTHS WITH FACTS:

Despite these myths, there is no evidence to support the belief that students who are at risk for poor academic performance are at greater risk in immersion than in English-only programs. The challenge is not usually for academically challenged learners, but rather for the adults around them to create a learning environment in which these children's potential can be fully realized. [Genesee, 2012] Research shows that:

- Second-language learning does not negatively affect the first language because students rapidly catch up once English is introduced, furthermore many students surpass their peers by Grades 5 or 6.
- Language skills learned in French can and do transfer to English.
- Children with language impairment performed the same whether in immersion or non-immersion programs.
- Research shows that there is notable improvement in special need student performance in French immersion when appropriate assistance is provided. [Bourgoin 2012, Genesee 2012]
- Existing standardized tests can identify students at risk for reading difficulties much earlier than grade 2 or 3, affording an opportunity for earlier academic assistance [Genesee 2012]
- Research shows that effective interventions do exist. These interventions can include (but are not limited to) such techniques as allotting extra time for revision and completion of assignments; grouping work together in different ways; using students'

knowledge of existing language(s) to support learning French; and bringing more oral communication into the classroom for both regular assignments and tests, particularly for dyslexic children.

- There are also successful interventions for students who require a different learning environment in which to succeed. One example is the Calgary Board of Education's French Immersion Learning and Literacy Program which supports students with learning disabilities within the French immersion setting. It helps each child gain skills, knowledge, and competencies to reach their academic, social, and emotional potential. Teams of teachers share skills and collaborate to meet students' individual need; assessment of student progress is ongoing, and accommodations are made to meet specific needs and learning styles.

- Parent involvement is a key component of the program, with parents providing a wealth of information about their children's strengths and weaknesses and reinforcing learning strategies at home. Students are taught to identify and advocate for their own needs since most of them will continue their FSL education in a regular classroom. BRIMS
- See the articles by Brims, Hardy and Mady in The State of FSL Education in Canada 2012 at [www.cpf.ca](http://www.cpf.ca)

#### **PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS KEY**

Although it may be difficult, you can be a strong advocate for your child's inclusion in French immersion and other FSL programs. By meeting teachers, principals and school district decision-makers you can assist with changing policies and practices which exclude or fail to provide appropriate academic support for struggling immersion and core French students.

You can help to change educators' beliefs about struggling learners in FSL programs by challenging myths with factual information:

- about their second-language learning achievements;
- about the benefits of establishing more inclusive classroom practices;
- and about special education interventions that help learning disabled students to achieve at the same level in French immersion as they would in the English program.

## **CPF CAN 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 Minister 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](http://www.cpf.ca).