

8

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF FRENCH IMMERSION STUDENTS



The Importance of Recruitment and Retention to Program Success

Increased bilingualism among our young people is an important issue, given that interest in foreign languages is on the rise in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States and Europe. Currently, Canada has fewer bilingual people than does Britain, which ranks lowest among the European countries for second language skills. Today, in Canada, the proportion of bilingual Francophones and Anglophones in the 15 to 19 age group is around 24%. One of the objectives of *The Next Act: New Momentum for Canada's Linguistic Duality – The Action Plan for Official Languages* (Privy Council Office, 2003) is to double the proportion of high school graduates with a functional knowledge of their second official language by 2013.

French immersion is one of the four official programs offered in Manitoba schools. Fortunately, for many school divisions/districts throughout Manitoba, the French Immersion Program is already well established, making the dilemma of establishing new French immersion schools less problematic than it once was. Program quality and the ability to attract and keep students go hand-in-hand; so much so, that one measure of the success of a French immersion program is the number of students it can attract and retain.

Since recruitment and retention of French immersion students are as vital to the success of the program as its quality, and since these aspects are inescapably intertwined, administrators should monitor enrolments and enrolment trends at all levels and work to address issues of recruitment and retention.

Factors Pertaining to Recruitment

Obadia (1995), in the *Journal de l'immersion Journal* discusses the importance of the French language spoken by millions of people around the world. He recognizes French immersion offers Canadian children an opportunity to acquire two world languages. Obadia emphasizes that “Parents and school boards should look at



immersion programs from the educational values that they bring to Canadian children” (p. 9). Furthermore, parents should be made aware of the advantages offered by an education in an immersion program. Knowledge of these advantages may have a great impact on recruiting new students to the French Immersion Program.

Factors that may positively influence recruitment of French immersion students are:

- a desire for a French language education;
- an increased openness to acquire and experience other languages;
- the similarity between the two languages (Note: French is 27 percent lexically similar to the English language and there is a 39 percent overlap of cognates between French and English.);
- enhanced extra-curricular activities in French;
- a greater understanding of Canadian identity and multiculturalism;
- availability of French resources across Canada;
- perceptions that knowing French is valuable in the global economy and society;
- desire for greater job opportunities;
- possible economic and social advantages; and
- parental desire for the child to have advantages the parent did not have.

In a presentation by Rick Parnell at the *French Immersion Administrator’s Workshop* in Edmonton (January 2000), he explained:

...while public education is not a business, and education is not a product that you can put a price on... I think we would all agree that public education has some intrinsic value, and that the perceived value is likely to differ from family to family. I think you would also have to agree that the choices the family makes with respect to education will affect and reflect family values and quality of life. **These differences in values and perceptions are what defines the market for a particular education offering**, just as differences in values and perceptions define that market for commercial goods and services. (p. 108)

Successful recruitment strategies consider the needs of families in the community. Parents will determine the best educational program for their child based on a variety of factors. According to Parnell, there are six broad factors to consider:

- technical – quality of education and facilities;
- psychological – perceptions, fears and beliefs;
- demographic – financial stability, family profile: ages and background;
- economic – perception of future financial benefits;

- political – predisposition toward the place of the French language in Canada and the world; and
- cultural – connection between multilingualism and culture or roots.

Each individual must find sufficient value in one or more of these areas to incline him or her to choose a particular program. The weight that is placed on these areas varies from individual to individual as well.

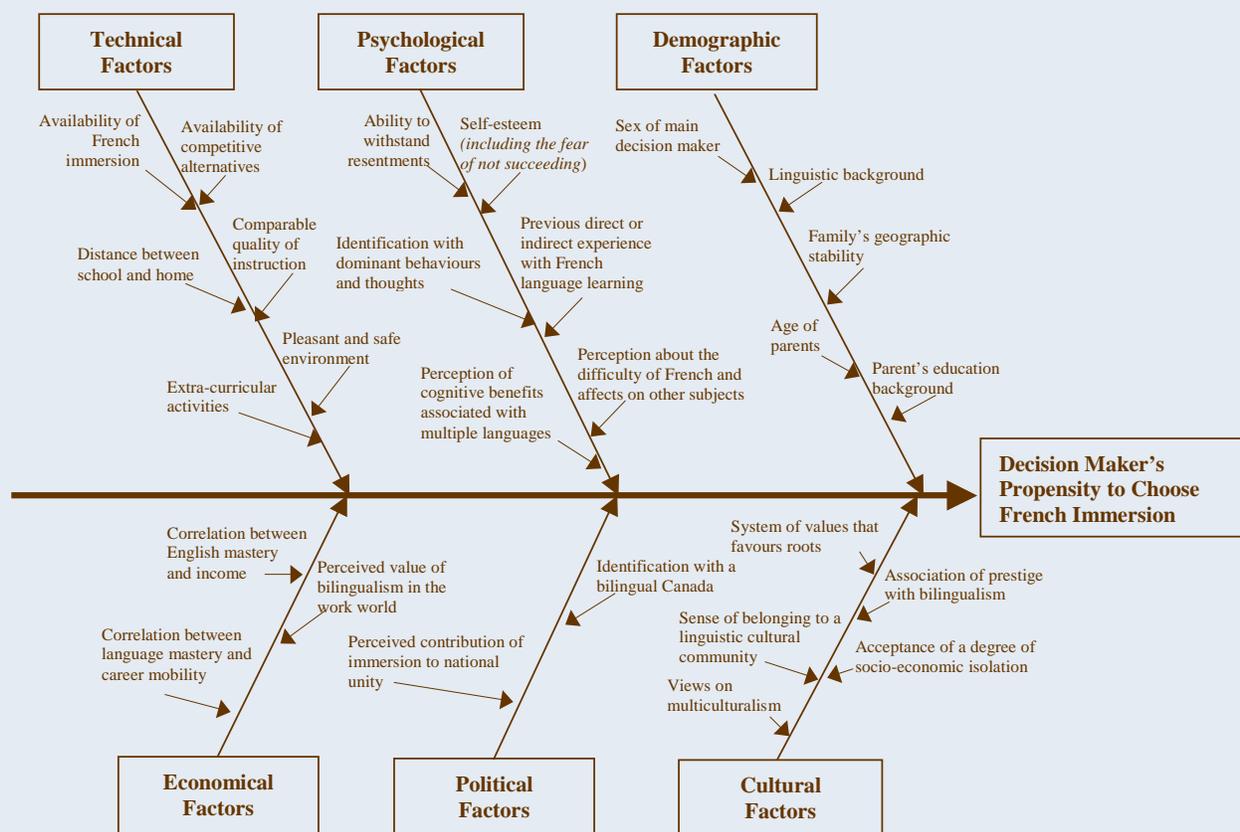
The figure on the following page offers a sense of the complexity of the decision as it relates to the French Immersion Program. To maximize the attractiveness of the French Immersion Program to new students, the program must be considered for its strengths in each of these categories. Promotional efforts must be oriented as well to increase general public awareness of the French Immersion Program.

Challenges that Influence Recruitment

Administrators should also be aware that there are various challenges facing parents that may influence recruitment of French immersion students:

- the accessibility to the school in which French immersion is offered – distance and busing fees may deter parents;
- parents may fear that their child’s English skills may suffer;
- there may be competition from other program choices of interest to parents within the same vicinity;
- parents may adhere to the myth that certain subject areas may suffer if learned in French. For example, some parents may believe that mathematics should not be learned in French;
- there may be concerns on the part of parents who are not themselves proficient in French, that they will not be able to help their child with homework;
- parents may believe the myth that the program is only for select students;
- some parents may have concerns that the child may lose his or her cultural identity;
- for students eligible for late immersion, some may be apprehensive that French immersion is too hard, or that they will not be well prepared to study in English at college or university.

Factors Considered When Parents Decide on a French Immersion Program



Source: Parnell. (January 2000).



Factors Pertaining to Retention

Retention is a major issue for the viability and success of the French Immersion Program. Parents always have the option of sending their children to alternate programs and recruitment of new students does not ensure retention of those students. Parents who first enroll their child in French immersion should feel assured that their child can continue in the immersion program until the end of Grade 12 if the student so wishes. Retention may become an issue if the child is experiencing some difficulty. Teachers and administrators must ensure that appropriate services are in place for special needs students, and they must debunk the myth that transfer to an English program will remediate the problem. In the Senior Years, the attraction of other programs may pose a challenge to retention. Students and parents must be informed of the advantages offered by an immersion education. Students in the Senior Years are in the position to understand the values of fluency in a second language and the myriad of possibilities that bilingualism opens to them. School administrators and teachers must work diligently to provide a quality program deserving of educating French immersion graduates.

Obadia and Thériault (1997) looked at the perceptions French coordinators, school principals and French immersion teachers in British Columbia held regarding the

rate of attrition and the reasons students left the French Immersion Program. They concluded that the junior-high level is particularly prone to a higher drop-out rate. The main reasons for students leaving the program are academic difficulty, limited choice of subjects and peer pressure. The researchers documented the types of strategies being undertaken by administrators and educators to lower the attrition rate and recommended possible strategies to reduce French Immersion Program attrition. The strategies involved collaboration with parents and students.

The following list of strategies designed to promote retention was inspired directly from Obadia and Thériault's work.

1. Communication

- meet with students, teachers, and parents;
- provide opportunities for students to interact with other immersion students;
- increase communication between Early, Middle, and Senior Years teachers;
- coordinate information and discussion sessions for transition between grade levels;
- open communication channels between school divisions/districts, teachers and parents;
- create a well-planned communication process;
- demonstrate public visibility of Board support for the French Immersion Program;
- organize information sessions for parents and students;
- identify and involve French-speaking parents that can support the French language;
- provide information for parents on the French Immersion Program at the pre-school level;
- assure ongoing information; and
- form a parent-help support group.

2. Transition years

- encourage communication between sending and receiving schools and postsecondary institutions;
- organize visits from French secondary schools and postsecondary institutions;
- invite graduates of the French Immersion Program into the class;
- participate in bilingual expositions; and
- implement activities which facilitate transition.

3. Academic and program

- maintain the minimum requirements of French immersion courses in the Senior Years to obtain a French Immersion Diploma;
- offer as many French course options to create an enriching and dynamic experience;

- offer a timetable that allows more choices;
 - offer the French Immersion Program in neighbourhood schools;
 - offer other points of entry whenever possible;
 - maintain quality of instruction;
 - ensure that the program is learner-focused, and that students are allowed to progress at their own rate; and
 - recognize and design activities for individual learning styles (communication experiential approach, cooperative strategies, differentiated instruction, buddy-reading activities, etc.).
4. Teachers, staffing, immersion teaching
- remain current on educational research and practices;
 - develop strategies to recruit and hire best possible staff; and
 - provide more training to in-service teachers into immersion methodology, second-language teaching and theories.
5. Extra-curricular activities, exchanges
- offer extra-curricular activities and other opportunities such as exchanges and sociocultural activities with other schools;
 - provide opportunities for correspondence with French first language speakers; and
 - organize interactions with the French community.
6. Learning difficulties and special services
- develop and implement policy and practices to support students experiencing difficulties;
 - collaborate with parents to provide early identification and intervention for pupils who are having difficulty; and
 - offer special services in French: bilingual resource support and library services, French learning assistance and teacher assistants.
7. Promotion of a French immersion school culture
- assure the visibility of the French language in the school;
 - maintain high quality of instruction with a heavy cultural component which will help to illustrate the value of French as an official language; and
 - make bilingual announcements on the PA system.
8. Other suggestions
- share the vision for the program;
 - establish French pre-school programs in your school;

- establish French before and after school programs;
- establish French daycares in the school or neighbourhood; and
- encourage French story-time in local libraries.

Challenges that May Influence Retention

School authorities must be aware that retention at the Early and Middle Years may be compromised by:

- difficulty experienced by the student in understanding, speaking or reading French;
- a parent’s frustration with not being able to understand French;
- the child not being able to read English early in his schooling;
- poor relations between the student and the immersion teacher, or the parent and the immersion teacher;
- a student’s emotional or behavioural challenges;
- lack of French language support services;
- the level of support and information provided to parents; and
- too quickly transferring a student from the French Immersion Program to the English Program without exploring other options.

At the secondary level, retention may be affected by:

- breadth and variety of courses and programs available in French (e.g., fewer optional credits offered in French or fewer sciences);
- less time for optional credits because of the additional language arts credit;
- perception of heavier workload in French immersion;
- unfounded concerns about needing English vocabulary at the postsecondary level, especially in science or math;
- disappointment or boredom with the program;
- few opportunities to speak French either in class or in the community;
- parent’s perceptions of the level of fluency already attained;
- perception that better grades are easier to achieve in the English Program;
- location of the program in relation to proximity of home;
- reputation of the school in which the program is housed;
- peer influence;
- degree of students’ satisfaction with their current level of proficiency in French and their expectations about using French in the future;
- goals and perceptions regarding postsecondary education; and
- perceptions of the value of French in the global economy.



Promotion of the French Immersion Program

The following article by Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau taken from the *Winnipeg Free Press* (October 29, 2006 section B, p. 2), emphasizes advantages to be gained through the French Immersion Program.

French language a real tour de force around the world

By Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau

In a recent survey on attitudes toward bilingualism, carried out by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 72 per cent of Canadians said bilingualism was important, a sharp increase from the 56 per cent years ago. What's more, 84 per cent of Canadians said they believed that speaking French would help them get a good job.

The link between employability and bilingualism is not a Canadian phenomenon. Bilingualism is a growing trend the world over. What Canadians probably don't realize is that internationally, French is doing much better than is widely believed – even by the French themselves.

It would be ridiculous to pretend that French is competing with English on the international stage. Yet during the two years we spent researching our book, *The Story of French*, we had some surprises. Travelling to some 15 countries, what we saw convinced us that French is not only doing better than most people think – it is a global language, the world's other global language.

It's simply false to pretend that French is on the decline. The number of French-speakers in the world has tripled in the last 50 years, to 175 million. French is the world's ninth-most-spoken language, but it's still the world's second international language after English, and the only other language taught in all countries of the world.

French far outweighs Spanish, Arabic or even Chinese for its number of students: 100 million. The International Federation of Teachers of French has 80,000 members, a small proportion of the world's two million teachers of French – 10,000 of whom are in the U.S.

French is second only to English for the number of countries where it is an official language – 33 compared to 45 – and for the number of international institutions where it is used, including the UN, the EU, the International Monetary Fund, the International Red Cross Committee, Interpol, and the International Labour Organization.

At the recent Summit of Francophonie – often described as a French-language Commonwealth – only half of the organization's 53 members are former French colonies. Ten members of the Francophonie are European, and another 11 European entities have observer status (not all members are countries).

Outside of the Francophonie, Algeria has 15 million French-speakers, while 15 per cent of the population of Israel is francophone (mostly Jews from North Africa and France). With 1.5 million native speakers, French ranks as the fourth important native language of the United States.

More importantly, French-speaking networks are rapidly developing across the planet, not in competition with English, but parallel to it.

Under the auspices of the Agence universitaire francophone, (itself under the umbrella of the Francophonie), some 525 French-language universities have created official links. The agency dispenses 2,000 scholarships per year to encourage academic research in French. In a surprising development, many francophone networks now bypass France almost completely. When Morocco wanted to create an MBA program in the 1980's, it turned to Sherbrooke University in Quebec, where the first such program in French was created.

The same is happening in the business world. When Franco-Ontarian businessman Paul Desmarais (of Power Corporation fame) wanted to expand his empire in Europe, he turned to Belgian business tycoon Albert Frère. In recent years, French businesses have been out-sourcing to countries where there is less costly French-speaking labour, like Tunisia, Morocco and Senegal.

If Canadians think French is becoming passé in the business world, they should think again. The world's second-largest engineering company is SNC-Lavalin of Montreal. The world's main nuclear power for civil energy is France. North America's biggest printer is Quebecor. The world's second distributor, after Wal-Mart, is French Carrefour. The world's second aviation company is Airbus, and Montreal is one of the world's three most important centres for aviation.

French cinema has more viewers abroad than at home.

Quebec films have been regularly beating Hollywood productions at

box offices in the last few years. Francophone music and literary festivals are multiplying across the planet. While France is not the shadow of what it used to be in literature, francophone literature, particularly from Africa and the Caribbean, is being used more and more in French departments across the U.S., as the backbone for black studies... in French.

The planetary exchange in French is impressive, and we were surprised by the high status both Canada and Quebec enjoy in this system. In Canada, Quebec is often derided for its language protection measures and Law 101 is considered oppressive, at best. But in the rest of the French-speaking world, Quebec is heralded as a model to follow in language protection.

Even the French look to Quebec for ideas on how to keep French vocabulary contemporary without systematically resorting to English. The Quebec bank of terminology, which contains references to one million terms in French, gets 50 million hits per year, mostly from Europe, a striking success when you compare that to the two million that the French Academy receives.

One of the most surprising threats to French today is, in fact, coming from the French, most of whom seem to think their language is irremediably on the decline.

Canadians seem to know better.

Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau. "French language a real tour de force around the world". *The Winnipeg Free Press*, Focus, Sunday, October 29, 2006, p. 82.

Reprinted with permission from Julie Barlow.

Messages Specific to Promoting French Immersion

The first *Official Languages Act* in 1969 confers upon the Government of Canada the duty to help make our two official languages, English and French, accessible to all Canadians.

In promoting the French Immersion Program, the key message should include the benefits of learning an additional language, the reasons for learning French as an additional language, and basic points about the program itself: accessibility, quality, continuity, extra-curricular opportunities, and outcomes.

Lazaruk (in press) presents a review of the literature on French second language education in Canada. The review is divided into four sections. In the first section, the authors look at students' proficiency in French. They review studies which investigate the gap between oral and written French and the comparison of the number of hours of instruction in French compared to the intensity of the instruction. The second section reviews studies pertaining to English competency and the learning of subject material. Studies show that neither is compromised for French immersion students. The third section explores the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and the fourth section refers to the cultural and economic benefits of learning French.

A compilation of research suggests that learning French offers students significant linguistic, academic, and cognitive benefits. These may include:

- increased achievement in reading and math;
- improved literacy. Skills and strategies used in reading and writing processes are transferable from first to second languages and vice versa;
- increased cognitive skills, such as mental flexibility, creativity, divergent thinking and higher-order thinking;
- improved knowledge of first language through comparison and contrast with the second language;
- important lessons in local and global cross-cultural understanding by increasing opportunities for travel and study abroad;
- an expanded view of the world;
- teaching and encouraging respect for other peoples; and
- expanded opportunities for meaningful leisure activity (travel, reading, viewing films).

Things to consider when organizing an information night for parents:

- Why are we having an information meeting?
- When should the meeting be held to maximize attendance?
- Who is invited?
- How will we advertise?
- What should be included on the agenda?
- Who should be involved in the program?
- What should we place in the information package?

Local CPF chapters have access to a manual on how to organize a parent information night. Contact your local chapter or CPF Manitoba at <http://www.cpfmb.com>

How to Provide Program Details

Providing detailed information directly by the school or division/district may include:

- organizing parent information nights;
- offering school Open House or tours on request;
- publishing school newsletter articles;

- providing Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth brochure *What do I want for my child?/Qu'est-ce que je veux pour mon enfant?*;
- publishing newspaper supplements or articles in community newsletters;
- updating the division's and school's Web site and ensuring there are links to other sites such as Canadian Parents for French (<http://www.cpf.ca>) or Canadian Parents for French Manitoba (<http://www.cpfmb.com>);
- having well-informed teachers and school staff;
- showing or circulating an audio-visual presentation, a DVD or PowerPoint presentation on French immersion: the benefits, how it works, a classroom in action, student and parent testimonials;
- organizing open houses for parents and students at the Middle and Senior Years schools offering immersion; and
- providing opportunities for events such as meet-your-fellow-student evenings in which immersion students from Early or Middle Years schools can meet with immersion students in Middle or Senior Years schools to learn more about the program at the next level and what the school has to offer.

The community could be involved in several ways. Bilingual adults, for example, could be invited to school meetings to talk about the value of learning French or their experiences in using French in their daily lives. Or, the school could provide speakers or detailed information for local radio and TV talk and community digest shows.

Involving parents, students and graduates in providing more specific information includes:

- speakers at parent information nights;
- speakers at school assemblies;
- testimonials on DVDs, pod casts;
- school tour guides;
- speakers at pre-school meetings, service clubs, etc.; and
- local Canadian Parents for French (CPF) chapter support and materials.

Strategies for Promoting the French Immersion Program

Parents and students can be informed through several routes: direct communication by the school or division/district, communication through the community, and testimonials by current and past immersion parents and students.

Suggestions for direct communication via school or division/district:

- divisional or school brochure, introducing the French Immersion Program and other programs made widely available in the community (this may include the distribution of the brochure prepared by the Bureau de l'éducation française Division *What do I want for my child?/Qu'est-ce que je veux pour mon enfant?*);

When using testimonials, quotes, or in other ways featuring students in media for public use (videos, brochures, Web pages, etc.), administrators in schools and divisions/districts must ensure that written parental consent has been received. Written consent of the individual is also required when quoting, filming or otherwise representing adults. School administrators are advised to consult school division/district policies and to seek legal counsel as necessary.

What do parents of young children need to understand about immersion to feel comfortable with the program?

- French immersion Kindergarten is no more stressful than English Kindergarten.
- English will be used to address their child's safety concerns.
- Their child will not be expected to speak French all of the time for the first couple of years.
- Literacy skills transfer between languages.
- Giving another language to their child is one way to equip him/her for the future.
- They will receive information on how to help with homework and support their child when they themselves are not proficient in French.
- There are programs in place to support the needs of all students.

Produce a video: What better way to promote your school than through video? Tape typical school activities, “tour” the school, explain the advantages of each program and show them in action. Show students using French with ease in the classroom.

- French Immersion Program information on the division/district and the school Web sites;
- billboards, banners or large portable signs placed at schools or on the sides of major thoroughfares;
- school announcements inviting students to seek more information about late immersion or continuing immersion in junior and senior high school;
- local Canadian Parents for French (CPF) chapter support and materials (this may include use of a promotional campaign called French for Life);
- circulation of the school’s annual report; and
- current research about French immersion shared in school or divisional newsletters.

Suggestions for communication via the community:

- Welcome Wagon, the Chamber of Commerce and city/town publications and Web sites advertising educational choices;
- newspaper advertisements or supplements delivered to homes;
- realtors who know about the educational choices offered in your school or division/district (They are frequently the first contact newcomers have with the community);
- posters, brochures or flyers sent to preschools, playschools and daycares, and placed in public health facilities, libraries and community centres frequented by parents of young children;
- announcements placed on public notice boards and in community bulletins;
- public service (no cost) announcements placed on radio and TV;
- the media invited to special celebrations at the school or to meet exchange students or attend some other equally newsworthy event;
- human interest stories in community newspapers about students’ or graduates’ achievements, experiences, or aspirations; and
- participation in community parades, displays at trade fairs, and malls.

Organize workshops for parents: Well-informed parents mean an effective home-school relationship and more successful students. Offer workshops for parents on new curriculum, how to develop good study habits, etc. Consider the special needs of immersion parents who have little or no French language proficiency.

Involve the parents: One of your best promotional tools is satisfied parents and students. Word of mouth is a very effective way of promoting your school. Parents also often have skills or connections that may be helpful in realizing your promotional strategies: layout skills, graphic design, Web site development, printing services, media contacts, etc. Perhaps one of your parents would volunteer to write regular school news items for the local weekly paper or distribute brochures.

How to Develop a Comfort Level with Our Parents

Even when parents and students are well informed, some doubts may remain. French immersion administrators should take the additional step of providing opportunities for parents and students to become more comfortable with choosing or continuing in the French Immersion Program. Several suggestions can be made:

- provide workshops for parents on a variety of related topics;
- model a French immersion class for parents;
- provide opportunities for parents to observe and to be involved in the classroom and school;
- ensure parents are informed as their children move through the grades;
- provide information with regards to French classes for adults;

- provide parents with a collection of resources on French immersion, second language learning, etc.;
- ensure teachers are supportive and understand and can respond to parents' concerns;
- invite “experienced” immersion parents as speakers at meetings;
- invite students to entertain at community events;
- invite older students and graduates to speak at meetings and to visit Middle and Senior Year schools;
- ensure ongoing support and information through the local Canadian Parents for French (CPF) chapter; and
- encourage parents to become members of Canadian Parents for French (CPF).

Quality programs and good communication go hand-in-hand. Even good programs can not afford to be complacent. French immersion student recruitment and retention must be part of the annual school cycle.

References

Alberta Learning. (2002). *Handbook for French immersion administrators*. Edmonton: Alberta Learning

Barlow, J., & Nadeau, J.-B. (2006, October 29). French language a real tour de force around the world. *Winnipeg Free Press*, section B, p. 2.

Canadian Parents for French Manitoba. (2006). *French for life*. Access: <http://www.frenchforlife.ca>

Government of Canada (Privy Council Office). (2003). *The next act: New momentum for Canada's linguistic duality – The action plan for official languages*. Ottawa: Government of Canada.

Lazaruk, W. (in press). Linguistic, academic and cognitive benefits of French immersion. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*.

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. (2004). *What do I want for my child?/Qu'est-ce que je veux pour mon enfant?* [Brochure]. Winnipeg: Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. Access: http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/parents/fr_programs/

Manitoba Education and Training, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. (1999). *Curriculum policy for the French immersion program* (2nd ed.). Winnipeg: Manitoba Education and Training, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. Access: <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/policy/frenchimm/>

- Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. (2002). *French immersion in Manitoba*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Education Training and Youth, Bureau de l'éducation française Division. Access: http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/french_imm/fr_imm_mb.html
- Obadia, A. (1995). Thirty years of French immersion programs in Canada. Are they adding value to children's education? *Journal de l'immersion Journal*, 18 (3), 6-9. Access: <http://acpi-cait/pdf/journaux/V18N3.pdf>
- Obadia, A., & Thériault, C. (1997). Attrition in French immersion programs: Possible solutions. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 53 (3), 506-529.
- Parnell, R. (2002). *Marketing French immersion in Alberta*. Notes for presentation at French Immersion Administrators' Workshop. Edmonton, Alberta. In Alberta Learning (Ed.), *Handbook for French immersion administrators*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Learning.