

Executive Summary

Towards the Full Implementation of the French Immersion Program

Supporting Students on their Pathway to Becoming
Proud, Engaged, Confident, Plurilingual Global Citizens

This executive summary provides a synopsis of the provincial data based on the 2013-2014 *French Language Education Review* (The Review), an initiative of the Bureau de l'éducation française Division (BEF) to further support the full implementation of the French Immersion Program in Manitoba. The data was obtained by surveying 105 schools and 22 school divisions offering the French Immersion Program. The goal of the Review was to ascertain the degree of success in the full implementation of the French Immersion Program across the province. The analysis of the data provides insight regarding **how well students are doing, what factors influence student success and what should be prioritized going forward.**

How well are students doing?

French Immersion schools reported their perceptions of student success based on five indicators that embody the vision of the French Immersion Program which revealed that 72% of schools perceived that most if not all of their students achieved an appropriate level of linguistic competency in both French and English; 53% maintained that their students were aware of their own cultural identity and were open to other languages and cultures; 43% felt that their students were confident in their ability to speak French in various public settings; 24% perceived their students as having the confidence and interest to participate in French activities organized in the francophone community; and 23% felt students value the learning of languages as a key to global citizenship and see themselves as lifelong language learners. These outcomes are all interrelated and need ongoing focus and attention in order to support students on their pathway to becoming plurilingual and integrating the French language as a natural part of their everyday lives.

What factors influence student success?

The factors influencing these results are described and explained through the overall analysis of the successes and challenges within each of the four key areas of the survey. The schools' self assessment in each of the four key areas revealed that schools perceived their greatest successes in the areas of *Student Enrolment Trends* (85%) and *Educational Staff and Professional Learning* (80%). They also felt that they were relatively successful in the areas of *Validating Students' Linguistic and Educational Experience* (62%) and *Creating a French Immersion Setting* (58%). It is important to note that all four key areas leading to the full implementation of the French Immersion Program are interrelated and certain challenges encountered in one key area may influence the degree of success achieved in another key area.

In the first key area, *Creation of a French Immersion Setting*, the overall exposure to the French language was identified as a success. The majority of schools perceived that the intensity of French instructional time offered to students was sufficient to create an immersion setting from K to 8 with some exceptions at the Senior Years due to the difficulty of providing optional courses in the French language, particularly in rural and remote areas. In addition, the difficulty in hiring teachers and French speaking specialists such as physical education, music, art and library also impacted the intensity of instructional time in French. However, it became apparent through further analysis that creating a linguistically rich French environment posed the greatest challenge within schools. Most schools indicated that they had difficulty providing and maintaining a truly French Immersion environment especially in the dual track setting. Results also revealed that a number of school areas required a richer French milieu and more

visibility of the French language. Furthermore, the data revealed a smaller percentage of bilingual staff by position within dual track schools as compared to single track schools, limiting students' exposure to the French language. When considering the analysis of the data from this key area, **creating a linguistically rich environment** should be prioritized in order to maintain students' interests and motivation in speaking and learning French.

The analysis of the data in *Validating students' Linguistic and Educational Experience* revealed that schools are generally successful in this key area, but the degree to which they validate students' linguistic and educational experience is inconsistent. Schools reported that their teachers *always* (31%) or *often* (51%) focus on language acquisition while teaching content. However, in order for students to develop their linguistic competencies more actively through all subject areas and throughout the school day, the 31% (always) needs to increase. The data also revealed that most activities offered to students are academic in nature and mainly take place in the *français* course. Cultural activities were frequently offered while social, citizenship and transition activities were less prevalent. Across K to 12, the Program expected outcomes for students (develop language proficiency, confidence, engagement, intercultural awareness and identity, and awareness of the Francophonie and participation in the francophone community) are being addressed to varying degrees but do not appear to be consistently targeted in the different subject areas nor through the various other school activities, thus not always intentionally supporting the development of these competencies in students. When considering the data from this key area, **focusing on language acquisition and consistently targeting the student expected outcomes** should be prioritized in order to ensure students' academic success, engagement and motivation as well as to nurture students' identity as plurilingual learners and speakers.

In the key area of *Educational Staff and Professional Learning*, schools and school divisions were successful in empowering their educational staff in delivering a strong program. The data indicated that a high percentage of K to 12 teachers participated in professional learning activities related to the French Immersion Program, but a lower level of participation from school principals and other non-teaching professionals was noted. Schools further reported that the development of reading skills as well as the development and assessment of students' oral proficiency were the two main professional learning priorities from K to 12. In addition, the data revealed that most French Immersion schools encountered challenges in hiring qualified staff for all positions, and that the limited number of qualified applicants was the main challenge. This issue particularly impacts rural and remote school divisions whose schools are predominantly dual track. This limited number of potential candidates impacts the four key areas and the ability to fully implement the French Immersion Program. This also highlights the need for retention of current teachers as this may eventually affect the quality and accessibility of the Program and in turn impact student enrolment. When considering the data from this key area, **recruitment and retention of personnel** should be prioritized as a crucial piece in maintaining stability within the program and ensuring its strong delivery in fostering student success.

In the key area of *Student Enrolment Trends*, divisions are experiencing success as French Immersion enrolments are increasing across the province and enrolment levels continue to grow every year. These increased enrolments often mask the challenges of student retention as there is a loss of approximately half of the French Immersion students as they move through the school system from K to 12. Despite this unsettling statistic, schools perceive themselves as being successful as they continue to experience increased enrolments and the losses do not seem to be viewed as critical. However, success needs to be measured by both analysing the increase in enrolments as well as the losses within student cohorts. School divisions have also indicated that the main challenges influencing retention are student learning difficulties in Grades 2 to 4, while attrition during transition years and lack of options at Senior Years account for losses in Grades 8 to 12. Furthermore, transition initiatives that would improve retention rates were mainly limited to Middle Years students, and initiatives for other K to 12 transition points should be considered. In addition, most schools and some school divisions promoted the French Immersion Program through a range of activities that mainly targeted students and parents of existing

students at the Early and Middle Years. However, up to this point, newcomers have seldom been targeted. When considering the data from this key area, **strategies to retain students** should be prioritized in order for students to continue to develop necessary language competencies to use French throughout their lives as plurilingual members of society.

When school divisions were asked to provide an overall assessment regarding the degree of success in the implementation of the French Immersion Program, 75% perceived themselves as being *successful or very successful*. The degree of success achieved in each key area varies due to the unique context of each school division as well as each regional context: urban, rural, and north.

What should be prioritized going forward?

Keeping in mind these factors from the 4 key areas and the goal of improving student success, one must continually reflect on how to improve student results by asking the question: **How do we sufficiently engage students in learning and using French so that they acquire the necessary language competency to communicate effectively, become confident in their linguistic abilities, and see the relevance of French in their lives as they live as plurilingual members of society?** As we work towards the full implementation of the French Immersion Program, overall program success will be determined by how successfully key initiatives are targeted where challenges have been identified in supporting students in the continual development of their French language proficiency, academic success and their plurilingual identity.

As we attend to the evolving needs of the French Immersion Program in Manitoba, the analysis of the data suggests that the following priorities should be targeted to maintain and improve the results:

Creating a linguistically rich environment

Given that the setting is the foundation necessary to ensuring success for all students, a more concerted effort must be made to improve the French Immersion setting in all schools, and even more importantly in dual track schools. This is accomplished by establishing high visibility and use of the French language throughout the school by all staff and students. Nurturing students' language acquisition in all areas of the school would enhance students' engagement and motivation as well as help them develop pride and confidence in their French language competencies.

Focusing on language acquisition

The entire premise of the French Immersion Program is based on the philosophy of learning language through content in authentic and meaningful academic, cultural and social situations; therefore, a more systematic focus on language is necessary to improve students' language accuracy and proficiency. To nurture language acquisition, all teachers must specifically attend to language while teaching content on a consistent basis and make this part of their classroom culture. Student confidence and engagement are further achieved through the development of fluency and accuracy. A common understanding of pedagogical and assessment practices among educators is also essential for students' language to evolve. Literacy development in French is a priority and the BEF encourages the use of the integrated approach; a methodology that strengthens students' French language proficiency and supports student literacy and understanding of content.

Consistently targeting student expected outcomes

To further support language acquisition and prepare students to sustain their bilingualism, educators need to more consciously and consistently target the student expected outcomes (develop language proficiency, confidence, engagement, intercultural awareness and identity, and awareness of the Francophonie and participation in the francophone community) as they work through all curricular areas. Ensuring that all outcomes are targeted specifically in all subject areas as well as other enrichment activities is crucial in providing students with an enriched school environment. In addition, a

clear and common understanding among educators of how to enrich academic and linguistic learning for students by means of classroom, school, and community activities in all of the categories (academic, cultural, social, citizenship and transition) is essential.

Recruiting and retaining personnel

The sustainability and the growth of the French Immersion Program rely on the recruitment and retention of educators with the necessary competencies; language skills, cultural knowledge and second language methodology as well as succession planning. To increase the supply of qualified bilingual teachers and administrators, provincial stakeholders must address this issue in a concerted way through productive dialogue and collaboration. School divisions should also consider initiatives to retain current French Immersion teachers. If the hiring of teachers with all of the required competencies proves difficult, school administrators need to ensure that once hired and throughout their career, teachers gain the required skills and knowledge by attending various types of professional learning. In addition, administrators need opportunities to keep up to date with current research and issues in French Immersion and to dialogue with other French Immersion administrators to address the specific needs of the program. Subsequently, they are better equipped to provide leadership in the school community. Furthermore, encouraging current French Immersion teachers to consider administrative roles in the future and supporting them in acquiring the appropriate skills would ensure succession in leadership roles

Retaining students

Since attrition poses a challenge to Program stability, a concerted effort is required to retain more students in the French Immersion Program. While it is understandable that some losses are inevitable the reasons for student attrition should be tracked and analysed on a continual basis as most other losses are avoidable. Implementing strategies that reduce attrition when students are struggling or during transition points are important, however developing student confidence, engagement, and identity are also factors that have yet to be fully integrated and may also impact student retention from K to 12. A proactive approach is recommended whereby all these factors are targeted so that students wish to remain in the Program. It is by supporting students in the co-construction of their identity as French learners and speakers that they will develop a better understanding of themselves, will make ongoing progress in language proficiency and will see the relevance of French in their lives. As their identity evolves through varied social, cultural and academic interactions as well as through significant and relevant use of the language, they will want to make learning French a lifelong endeavour. Guiding and supporting students in this way throughout their French Immersion experience is vital in retaining them in the French Immersion Program.

Conclusion

Improving student success and increasing student retention in the French Immersion Program can only be ensured through strong leadership that considers the vision of the Program and implements initiatives in the four key areas that focus on the program outcomes. This can be achieved through fostering language development in all content areas to improve language proficiency for all students as they move from K-12. It is through ongoing conversations and assessments of language acquisition that students will gain a better understanding of their language competencies as well as be provided with opportunities for continual improvement inside and outside the classroom. This can also be achieved through developing student identity, engagement, and confidence in order for students to see the relevance of French in their lives and wish to continue to use and learn French today as well as in the future. Fostering student engagement will impact student confidence in communicating in French in real and meaningful ways and empower them to use the language in their daily lives for academic, social, and cultural endeavours and support students in the development of their plurilingual identity. With a leadership that fully values language learning and guides the whole school community, students will be able to become proud, engaged, confident, plurilingual global citizens.