

**Éducation
et Formation
professionnelle
Manitoba**
Bureau de
l'éducation française



**FRENCH IMMERSION: FINDINGS OF
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR FOCUS GROUPS**

April 17, 2000

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Purpose

The Bureau de l'éducation française, a Division of the Department of Education and Training expressed an interest to better understand the perceptions of school administrators regarding the state of French Immersion in the province. To this end, five focus group meetings were held in Winnipeg with principals and vice-principals of dual track schools and French Immersion centres.

Methodology

The Bureau de l'éducation française recruited school administrators asking them to send a representative (principal or vice-principal) to the meetings. In total, five meetings were held over three days (February 23, 24, and 25, 2000).

Participants were asked to attend a two-hour session held at the offices of Prairie Research Associates Inc. (PRA Inc.). In one case, due to weather, a number of administrators from Northern Manitoba could not attend in person but participated through a conference call.

Each group was led by a moderator from PRA Inc. The issues and themes for the discussion were developed in consultation with the Bureau and were used to guide the groups.

The schools represented in these groups were both large and small, with some dual track schools having fewer than 50 and others having over 200 students in the Immersion stream.

Table 1 describes the participants in these groups. The groups with dual track administrators had discussions in English, while the groups with Immersion centre principals had them in French. In total, representatives from 25 of the 34 schools invited attended these sessions. There are 100 schools in Manitoba with a French Immersion program.

Table 1: Participants	
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Type of school	
Dual track	14
Immersion centres	11
Total	25
Location of School	
Winnipeg	10
Rural south	9
Rural north	6
Total	25
Level of school	
K to 6 (or less)	8
K to 8	7
5 to 8	2
S1 (or less) to S4	8
Total	25

Caution

The method used to conduct this research is qualitative. Unlike a quantitative approach such as a survey, we cannot suggest that these findings are 'representative' of all French Immersion principals. The method was chosen purposely in order to explore these issues in greater depth than would be possible in a survey.

Thus, the opinions expressed in this report are those of the 25 participants and caution should be used in extrapolating these findings to the population of principals as a whole.

Findings

The State of the French Immersion Program

The fact that 25 administrators took many hours out of their busy day to attend those meetings demonstrates the commitment of these principals to French Immersion. Most appreciated the opportunity to talk to other administrators, and find that they are not alone in dealing with the challenges created by French Immersion. All recognized the benefits of learning a second language. While some problems are great, these principals point to the commitment of teachers, administrators, students, and parents in the French Immersion program as its greatest strength for overcoming current and future challenges.

On-going Challenges

Challenges to French Immersion: French milieu

For the Immersion program to be truly successful, most principals recognized the need to create a French environment within their schools. For dual track schools, especially at the senior level, this is a goal that is difficult to achieve. Some principals felt that it is very important to expose students to as diverse a range of courses as possible (Band, Art, Physical Education, etc.). Even so, in most dual track schools, the use of the French language is relegated to the classroom. Without formal, institutionalized activities that require French, students have no opportunities to speak French outside the classroom.

Challenges to French Immersion: Administration issues

Many French Immersion principals spend much of their time defending the program both within schools (to other teachers and departments) and at the division level (to superintendents and trustees). Maintaining harmony between the two programs in a dual track school can be a challenge as teachers from the English program wonder why the French Immersion teachers have smaller classes or receive more resources per capita. Conversely, the French Immersion teachers may feel excluded, when their needs are considered secondary to those of the English program. While some report divisions to be wonderfully supportive of the program, other principals report the need to constantly explain and defend the program.

Challenges to French Immersion: Keeping satisfied parents informed and involved

In general, principals indicate that parents are satisfied with the program because if they weren't, they would hear about it. They tend to be more actively involved in school affairs than the non-immersion parents in dual track schools. However, overall parental activity is a function of grade rather than program: involvement being much greater at the elementary level than in high school.

Principals saw the parents' role as being political in lobbying provincial politicians, school division administrators and other parents for program support. Parent councils play different roles in different schools but are valuable as a sounding board for input on school affairs. With regards to Canadian Parents for French, principals noted this organization had a low profile in the city and in the south, but that in the north, it was more active.

Long Term Challenges

Threats to French Immersion: Maintaining student numbers

Whether or not the number of students in French Immersion is declining was up for debate. If enrolment is declining, most think it reflects a general student population decrease and is not unique to French Immersion. The unique challenge facing French Immersion was keeping students in the program.

French Immersion students are no longer the academic elite

At the elementary and middle school level, the students in French Immersion are no longer just the academic elite, they are a mirror image of students in the English-language program. As in the English-language program, the needs of all types of students must be addressed. The key difference compared with the English-language program is that fewer resources and supports are available to help the students with learning problems in French Immersion.

Parents blame the program for learning problems

That said, some parents of children at the elementary and middle school level, tend to blame the program for any problems their children might have. As a result, they are likely to move their child out of French Immersion and into an English-language program where the child's learning problems persist, but often educational supports are in place to help.

Senior high experiences greatest loss of students

Many noted that while a slow, but steady, decline in student numbers from K to 8 occurs, it is the move to senior high that results in the single greatest decrease of students in the program.

At the senior level, the biggest challenge is offering a variety of courses in French to meet the interests and needs of students. Given the small number of students at the senior high level, most dual track schools offer only the basic courses required for a diploma.

This has a two-fold impact:

- 1) Schools offer French Immersion courses in a single slot and students often have to give up other courses of interest in order to take French Immersion courses. Thus, French Immersion disadvantages students in terms of course options.
- 2) The courses offered through French Immersion tend to be the most challenging academically. Given the mix of academic skills of students now in French Immersion, courses like Pre-Calculus Math act as a barrier to students continuing in the French Immersion program.

Some parents focusing on preparing their child for post-secondary education believe that teaching core subjects (like Maths and Science) in French will hinder their child's success in university. Therefore, they encourage their children to reduce the number of courses offered in French to Français and Social Studies or to move into an English-language program.

Threats to French Immersion: A growing shortage of French Immersion teachers

One of the greatest threats facing French Immersion in the province is finding qualified French Immersion teachers. For French Immersion centres, this is a problem in specialty areas and subjects (Resource, Band, Industrial Arts, Home Economics, etc.), while dual track principals noted a particular difficulty in recruiting high school teachers in subjects such as Maths and Science. Rural and northern schools believe they face the greatest challenge in recruiting teachers. At least one such school will terminate its French Immersion program if they lose their Math-Science teacher, because they know that they cannot replace him.

Future of French Immersion: Meeting the challenges

There have been successes. Some thought the fact that the program has existed for 26 years in spite of cutbacks and new, competing programs, is an indication of its success. Principals of single track French Immersion schools thought their schools continued to be very successful. At least one dual track school had recently taken on the challenge of shrinking numbers at the senior level by offering a wider range of courses in French resulting in increased enrolments. Others have put in place 'reward' programs to encourage students to take more than the bare minimum necessary to receive their diploma. Other principals reported efforts to ensure a stronger French milieu in their school.

French Immersion and the Role of the Bureau de l'éducation française

The principals told us that the Bureau can help in many different ways. All these suggestions point to the Bureau filling the existing void in leadership. The principals noted that, while there may be individuals and specific groups within schools and divisions playing a leadership role, there is no province-wide leadership and certainly, no clear vision of the future of French Immersion.

The Bureau needs to help parents, schools, and divisions. One challenge for the Bureau will be meeting the diverse needs of the French Immersion schools whether they be dual or single track, as well as the needs of French language schools as they are not the same. The Bureau should address such issues both tactically and strategically.

Tactically, the Bureau should be involved in providing supports for the French Immersion program to ensure its long-term viability. Something as simple as informing schools that at the senior level, Maths is not required to receive a French Immersion diploma, would go a long way

to helping maintain numbers in high school. Ensuring that new curriculum is available in both French and English would help address concerns that French Immersion students are disadvantaged by their language choice. Providing principals and teachers with information and research that would help them combat ‘myths’ about second language learning, would help retain students in the program. Developing a support network for principals of French Immersion schools would help principals share problems and successes, and help each other meet the challenges that exist.

Strategically, the Bureau should be promoting the successes related to second language learning in French Immersion, not necessarily to the public, but to the schools, divisions, and parents. They suggested that this should be done in the context of the importance of learning a second language. The Bureau should be working within and across divisions to help build stronger programs (for example, by encouraging program consolidation or innovative uses of technology). Finally, leadership is clearly needed to address the coming teacher shortage.