



A COLLISION OF CULTURE, VALUES, AND EDUCATION POLICY: SCRAPPING EARLY FRENCH IMMERSION IN **NEW**

A CBC NEW BRUNSWICK Forum broadcast live on March 27, 2008, from Moncton's Capitol Theatre provided a cathartic moment for parents angry at Education Minister Kelly Lamrock, who was linked into the discussion via satellite from Fredericton. Two weeks earlier, Minister Lamrock had declared in a press release that bilingualism was changing from an optional skill pursued by a few to an expectation for all children. His new French-second-language (FSL) plan called for the elimination of the Grade 1 Early French Immersion (EFI) Entry Point in favour of a Grade 5 Late Immersion Entry Point. Judging by the frequent outbursts throughout this panel discussion, many in the audience disagreed with this change.

This event made fractious school closure meetings seem tame by comparison. The hooting and hollering drowned out an intriguing 'FSL policy joust' between panelists, Douglas Willms (Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy) and Joseph Dicks (Director of the Second Language Research Institute of Canada). An internationally renowned Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) expert, Willms braved the gauntlet of hecklers to share his position on the streaming effects caused by EFI. His statistical analysis suggested that, although EFI benefited a few, it negatively affected the majority of children, who are enrolled in English Core programming – in other words, EFI was a 'private school within a public system', which resulted in an unequal distribution of students with learning disabilities and behavioural issues in English Core programming, putting these children at a disadvantage in terms of achievement. This data, combined with the Croll-Lee Report (a review of New Brunswick's FSL programs submitted to the Minister on February 18, 2008, concluding that EFI was not meeting its FSL proficiency objectives, nor was it sustainable because of dwindling enrolment and a high dropout rate.),¹ built a case for Minister Lamrock's decision to eliminate EFI prior to the start of the 2008-2009 academic year.

The Moncton Forum showcased the passion and polarization caused by the government's proposed changes. On one hand, a government was taking measures that it felt were necessary for more equitable student academic outcomes, and on the other, an outspoken segment of citizens

was vehemently protecting the status quo. In Canada's only officially bilingual province, this was more than a difficult policy decision – it erupted into a collision of culture and values.

From an ideological standpoint, this fractious six-month debate about French Immersion's place in the public school system could recur anywhere in Canada. But in this case, it also touched upon New Brunswick's unique bilingual culture and heritage and fuelled a contentious dispute that included rowdy public protests (at least by Canadian education sector standards). The resulting court challenge and subsequent court-rendered consultation process culminated in a final revised decision – uncharted territory that could influence FSL program delivery models across the country.

Soon after the Moncton showdown, Willms released a policy brief – *The Case for Universal French Instruction* – where he positioned EFI in the context of segregation, or "the separation of people of different social classes, ethnic or racial groups, or sexes into different schools, neighbourhoods, or social institutions."² This provocative assertion irked many parents with children enrolled or soon-to-be registered in EFI – many of whom were EFI graduates themselves. Had they made enrolment choices for their kids that were harmful to other children? Were they actually supporting a form of segregation? What about their right to have a choice? Willms argued that "school choice is not a right when it has a negative effect on the educational provision of other children, especially those who are most vulnerable" and that "the most fundamental choice of parents in a public school system is the right to enrol their children in a school where they can learn with their peers."³

In a well-documented public quarrel that ensued, Joseph Dicks published a response to Willms' contentions, questioning why an approach to boosting support mechanisms for existing EFI students with special needs was not considered. "The fundamental choice of parents in a public school system is to enrol their children in a school where they can learn to the best of their ability. It is the duty of all adults involved to ensure that the appropriate supports are put into place so that each child can reach his or her full potential including the most vulnerable, the most capable, and all students in between."⁴



EN BREF La décision, le printemps dernier, d'éliminer l'immersion précoce en français au Nouveau-Brunswick a déclenché un débat public et des revendications politiques locales rarement associés au secteur éducatif canadien. Dans la seule province officiellement bilingue du Canada, c'était plus qu'une décision politique difficile – elle a engendré une collision des cultures et des valeurs. Le débat portait sur des questions d'équité et de droit de choisir. Ceux qui appuyaient l'action du gouvernement prétendaient que l'immersion précoce en français perpétuait l'iniquité en sélectionnant les élèves plus favorisés sur les plans scolaires et économiques, alors que les opposants soutenaient que les parents devraient détenir le droit de choisir les programmes susceptibles de mieux préparer leurs enfants à un avenir prometteur. La contestation judiciaire et le processus de consultation ensuite imposé par le tribunal ont culminé dans une décision révisée finale – un terrain inconnu qui pourrait influencer sur les modèles de prestation de programmes semblables à l'échelle du pays.

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Inequities arise from the fact that students who do well in EFI remain there, while those who struggle are almost always moved to the English Core stream. "There are absolutely no extra human resources to fix this type of problem," said Dicks, "If you really want EFI to be an inclusive program, you have to make sure that you have the support in place to make it a success – you can't just say that there's segregation and elitism."

In Willms' view, the EFI situation in New Brunswick tipped a precarious balance that he called 'a tolerable equilibrium' – a balance that society is willing to accept between those who want to entrench educational advantage into their social class groups and those who want to close this gap. When this equilibrium gets out of balance, one side or the other makes a case for change. According to Willms' data, EFI caused significant inequity, thereby making a fragile equilibrium no longer tolerable. He measured enrolment rates in EFI and Core English by socio-economic (SE) group. Those from the highest SE group were nearly twice as likely to enrol in EFI as those from the middle group, who were twice as likely as those in the lowest group. Well over half of all children enrolled in EFI were from the two wealthiest SE groups, leading Willms to suggest that this divide was "comparable to or larger than the divide between non-Hispanic whites and African-Americans in the U.S."⁵

The 'tolerable equilibrium' theory could also apply to publicly-funded charter schools or subsidized language, religious, and cultural schools throughout Canada. In this case, New Brunswick's Department of Education was eliminating an FSL pedagogy that has been offered in Canada for over 40 years – but it was the politically-charged cultural and linguistic baggage that thrust this policy decision into the public eye, and the government was caught in the fallout of a hasty, poorly communicated policy plan with a wide-ranging effect on the province's education system.

Some pundits speculated that this decision was not based on student outcomes at all, but on easing the significant financial burden of delivering EFI as an additional programming option for the Anglophone school system, especially in a 'have-not' province that maintains a parallel education system for the Acadian Francophone minority.

Canadian Parents for French (CPF) questioned why EFI

had to be purged entirely – why 'the baby had to be thrown out with the bath water'. A Pan-Canadian EFI support network kicked its advocacy efforts into high gear with a barrage of official statements condemning New Brunswick's new FSL plan. It was a rare occasion that a non-weather-related New Brunswick story drew a national focus for a prolonged period of time. Considerable ink was spilt on the usual 'two solitudes' hyperbole that often accompanies French Immersion debates on the national media stage, while exhaustive research and editorial spin wars were filling the pages of New Brunswick's dailies.



PROFICIENCY AND ACCESS ISSUES COULDN'T BE CLEARLY

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AND HOW BILINGUAL SHOULD THEY BECOME?

The discussion points varied. Many valued the attainment of an advanced level of French proficiency because it was as good as a 'golden ticket' to a shrinking pool of good public and private sector employment opportunities – especially in rural, natural resource-dependent communities – and the most effective delivery model to develop this vital skill was in the process of being eliminated. While Willms' data and the Croll-Lee Report purported that the most vulnerable in society were disadvantaged so that others could reach this coveted advanced level of French proficiency, Diana Hamilton (Assistant Professor at Mount Allison University) had the opposite interpretation: "Students who are the most vulnerable are arguably the ones who have the most to lose," she said, referring to the 30 percent of students enrolled in EFI in 2007-2008 from the two lowest socio-economic groups, who would otherwise lose the opportunity to attain an advanced level of proficiency with the elimination of EFI.⁶

CPF New Brunswick President Alison Menard blamed poor program promotion for the fact that there weren't more children from lower socio-economic backgrounds enrolled in EFI: "I've been to the FSL school information sessions and it's like you're talking about a dirty little secret. They're [school administration] almost afraid to be per-

ceived as coaching or encouraging somebody to make a decision one way or the other, and so their answer to that is to just not provide information, and that's why we're seeing fewer people choose the program, even though it's universally available."⁷

Dicks echoed this concern and called for the development of a "comprehensive, informative document on EFI for parents that includes, among other things, a clear statement on what is meant by a 'good grounding' in one's first language as far as success in French Immersion is concerned."⁸ He felt that "parents had the right to know what level of proficiency to expect from their children's FSL program" in order to make informed enrolment choices.

Proficiency and access issues couldn't be clearly separated, as the two fundamental questions surfacing from the socio-economic enrolment gaps identified in EFI programs revealed: Just who has the right to become bilingual? And how bilingual should they become? The Lamrock plan set a target for 70 percent of all high school graduates to function effectively in speaking their second official language.⁹ Proficiency targets for the newly proposed Late Immersion model would be at the Intermediate Plus level rather than at the advanced proficiency level attained by 42 percent of

EFI graduates in 2008.¹⁰ Critics were skeptical of the oral proficiency promises in the Minister's plan and quipped that there would be fewer fluently bilingual graduates, but many more who could order a 'double-double' in French, and not much else.

New Brunswick is the only province in Canada to have its own standardized oral proficiency levels (see Table 1). There is "no standard national assessment tool for establishing oral proficiency outcomes for graduates of FSL programs, like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is a widely used tool in European countries for tracking progress and acknowledging language qualifications"¹¹ (see Table 2). So in effect, it is difficult to measure the success or shortcomings of most French Immersion programs delivered across Canada in terms of the level of oral proficiency that education systems should be striving to achieve.

Beyond linguistic competence, for many activist parents, this issue also had a lot to do with maintaining respect for and access to the province's Acadian culture: "We've come so far in this province," said Mount Allison University Biology Professor Matthew Litvak. "When you look at how well the Anglophones and Francophones get along compared to

TABLE 1 New Brunswick Second Language Oral Proficiency Scale – Performance Descriptions

(<http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/eval/oralprofgr12.pdf>)

Level	Performance Description
Intermediate Plus	Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to special fields of competence as well as subjects of current public interest. Normally does not have to grope for words. Often shows a significant degree of fluency and ease in speaking, yet, under pressure, may experience language breakdown. May exhibit good control of language structures, but be limited in overall language production; or, conversely, may demonstrate ample speech production, but have uneven control of structures. Some misunderstandings will still occur.
Advanced	Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal, and in all informal conversations, on practical, social, and academic or work-related topics. Can describe in detail and narrate accurately. Can discuss abstract topics and ideas as well as events; can support opinions and hypothesize. Accent may be obvious but never interferes with understanding. Control of grammar is good and speech is fluent. Sporadic errors still occur, but they would not distract a native speaker or interfere with communication.

TABLE 2 The Common European Language Framework

(http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/main_pages/levels.html)

The CEFR defines levels of language proficiency along three broad levels of language performance: Basic, Independent and Proficient. These broad bands are further broken down into six global levels of performance against which to measure progress in language learning:

Basic	Breakthrough (A1): able to meet limited needs in highly predictable and easily recognizable transactional situations by relying on a very finite rehearsed, lexically organized repertoire of situation-specific phrases.
	Waystage (A2): able to communicate in simple and routine tasks relating to a limited range of common social situations, requiring a direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.
Independent	Threshold (B1): able to participate simply but effectively in the range of social situations necessary to normal everyday transactional and interactional needs in a range of contexts.
	Vantage (B2): able to hold more than one's own in social discourse, e.g. effective argument in discussions, and using one's greater awareness of the language for purposes of self-correction and planning.
Proficient	Effective Operational Proficiency (C1): able to engage in fluent and spontaneous conversation, carry out complex work tasks and pursue university studies in the target language.
	Mastery (C2): able to speak with precision, appropriateness and ease.



thirty years ago, we attribute this to French Immersion, which has created a dialogue within our province and a tolerance to protect the linguistic minority.”¹²

So whether parents were scared of losing a learning option, employability skills, or access to Acadian culture for their children, their fear resulted in a rapid social media mobilization that could serve as a blueprint for how to leverage technology to organize opposition to or support for any education policy decision.

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Within a week of the announcement to scrap EFI, thousands of people signed up on the *Save Early French Immersion in Canada’s ‘Bilingual’ Province* Facebook account, which proved instrumental in organizing a protest on the legislature. Busloads of parents from every corner of the province descended upon Fredericton on March 27th. Smaller gatherings occurred in unique ways, like the *Tintamarre* (or ‘loud racket’ – an ancient Acadian tradition) in Sackville, where families banged pots and pans on a frigid March 19th afternoon. Litvak filmed this protest and posted it on *YouTube*. The media latched on to this quirky home video, and from that point on, a prolonged ‘virtual *Tintamarre*’ influenced the twists and turns that soon followed.

Just prior to moonlighting as fervent blogger-activists, Litvak and Hamilton were shorebird biologists with two children enrolled in EFI who uncovered ‘bad math’ in the calculations comparing EFI and Late French Immersion students’ attrition rates, proficiency levels, and cost-per-pupil – all were used by Minister Lamrock to justify his new FSL plan. They posted their concerns on the web and a wave of similar critiques soon surfaced, including a letter from 21 mathematics and statistics professors from UNB who wrote to the provincial Ombudsman to draw attention to these inaccuracies.¹³

“We were just directing people to information,” said Litvak. “There’s no doubt that we were concerned about a policy decision being made based on poor data. The government was asking us to take a leap of faith about something that is fundamental to the future of our children and to the cultural fabric of New Brunswick. This was a real fear on our part and stimulated us to go into the education literature and many reports.”

Litvak then developed the *Immersion Delayed is Immersion Denied* blog, which evolved into a hub for parents to share analysis of complex policy papers and media editorials – which were emanating daily – in a much more efficient manner than organizing a series of face-to-face gatherings to review information and plot advocacy strategies. *La Maison* blog offered similar content to visitors as well as some comic relief with biting satirical ‘photo-shopped’ images of Minister Lamrock, Premier Shawn Graham, and Willms; some lawsuits are still pending. Dicks recognized

that the widespread use of social media by EFI parents made them “the most informed individuals on French Immersion programs anywhere in the country, if not in the world.”¹⁴

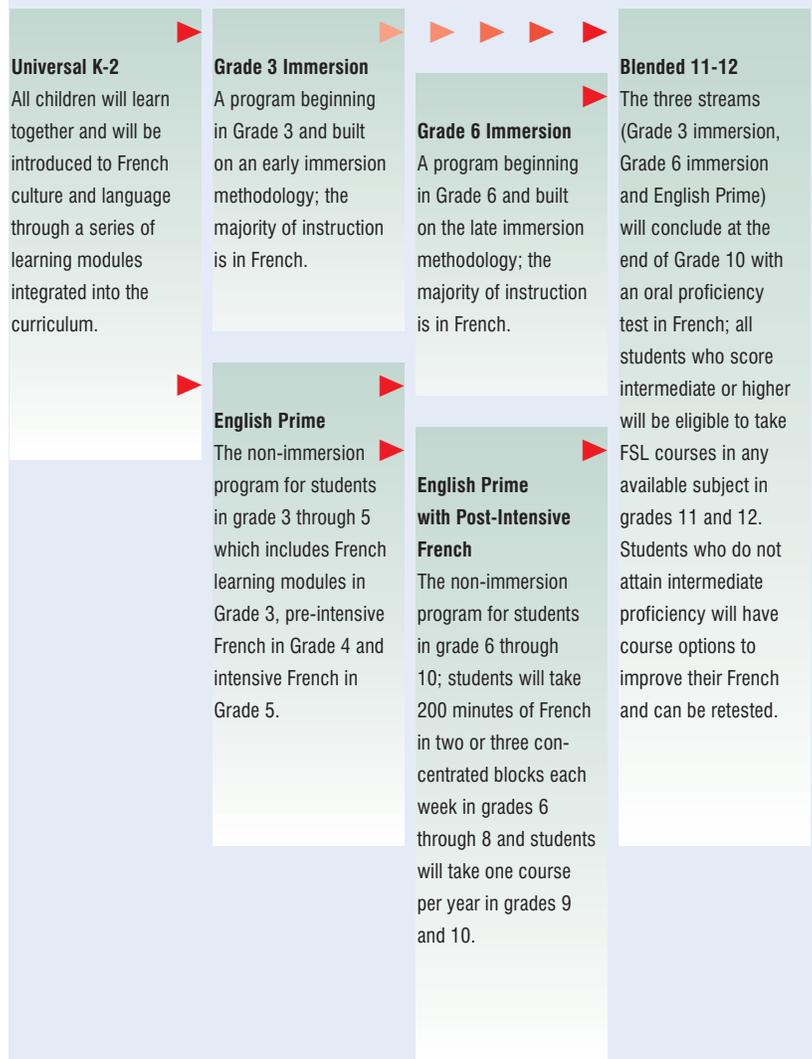
Menard described the tenacity and tone of the more traditional protest activities that were occurring ‘offline’ such as “groups of parents who had sit-ins at their local MLA offices every single Monday. They brought coffee; they were polite, every single Monday.”

But the combination of these advocacy tactics, online and offline, were not enough to sway a rethink of Minister Lamrock’s resolute vision, so a group of parents formed Citizens for Educational Choice and mounted a court challenge to slow down the new EFI plan. On June 11, Justice H.H. McLellan quashed the Minister’s decision to phase out EFI and ordered him to make a revised final decision “after an appropriate opportunity for interested citizens and organized groups to be heard.”¹⁵

On August 5, after a hurried one-month consultation during which Minister Lamrock was able to build some consensus and trust among stakeholder groups, he released an improved FSL model, which included Universal K-2 English Core, with students then streamed into either a Grade 3

FIGURE 1 Government of New Brunswick
An Improved French Second Language Model for a Quality Education System

www.gnb.ca/cnb/promos/efi/chart-e.asp



Immersion or English Prime with an Intensive French component in Grade 5, followed by Grade 6 Immersion and English Prime with Post-intensive French (See Figure 1).

The implications and results of this political compromise won't be known for several years and will be closely monitored by researchers and policy analysts alike. Nicole Thibault (Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers) feels that, on the plus side, this six-month debate put a renewed focus on FSL in Canada: "Decision-makers are seeing EFI as another way to increase literacy time. They are starting to think that there is a possibility for broad inclusive immersion programs rather than just for the elite. This all requires a mind shift by a lot of people to see languages as a benefit to lifelong learning. The world is multilingual and we need to be multilingual too."¹⁶

Willms' 'intolerable equilibrium' has snapped back, halfway at least; less radical changes to the original EFI program have made changing the status quo more tolerable for many New Brunswickers. Testing the limits of this equilibrium became a tool for change, no matter what side of the argument citizens supported. **I**

MAX COOKE is the Director of Communications for the Canadian Education Association.

Notes

- 1 See <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/comm/FSL%20Report.pdf>
- 2 J.D Willms, *The Case for Universal French Instruction*, (April 2008) Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy, University of New Brunswick. Accessed at [http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pdf/pbrief_case_for_french_instruction_\(28_Apr_2008\).pdf](http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pdf/pbrief_case_for_french_instruction_(28_Apr_2008).pdf), 2.
- 3 Ibid., 1.
- 4 J. Dicks, *The Case for Early French Immersion – A Response to J. Douglas Willms*, (Second Language Research Institute of Canada [L2RIC], University of New Brunswick, May 5, 2008), 2. Accessed at <http://www.unbf.ca/L2/Resources/PDFs/CaseEFIRevised.pdf>
- 5 Wilms, 2.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Interview by author, 8 August 2008.
- 8 J. Dicks and P. Kristmanson, *An Alternative Plan for FSL in New Brunswick*, (May 2008) (Second Language Research Institute of Canada [L2RIC], University of New Brunswick, May 2008), 7. Accessed at <http://www.unbf.ca/L2/Resources/PDFs/AltPlan5.pdf>, 7.
- 9 New Brunswick Department of Education, *When Kids Come First*, 6 May 2007, 24. Accessed at http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/comm/4578_report_E.pdf
- 10 See <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/comm/FSL%20Report.pdf>
- 11 Canadian Parents for French, *The State of French-Second-Language Education in Canada 2008*, 12. Accessed at <http://www.cpf.ca/eng/pdf/resources/reports/fsl/2008/FSL2008.pdf>
- 12 Interview by author, 18 July 2008.
- 13 See <http://hamlit2008.googlepages.com/>
- 14 Interview by author, 28 August 2008.
- 15 <http://hamlit2008.blogspot.com/2008/06/small-ryan-v-new-brunswick-minister-of.html>
- 16 Interview by author, 9 October 2008.

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