

FSL LITERATURE REVIEW

# CORE FRENCH & FRENCH IMMERSION



## DURHAM DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE REVIEW Executive Summary

Implications resulting from rising enrolment in the French Immersion (FI) program prompted Durham District School Board (DDSB) to review French as a Second Language (FSL) programming as a whole. The data obtained from this review will inform planning and decision-making for the board and will provide community members with a big-picture context in which these decisions must be made.

The overarching question to be informed by the review is this: How should the DDSB best move forward to meet the Ontario Ministry of Education goals of FSL programming while ensuring high quality inclusive education for all students?

FSL programs are intended for the development of French language proficiency among non-francophones, the majority of whom are native English speakers. In 2016-2017, 46% of Canadian students were enrolled in an FSL program. In Ontario in 2016-2017, 51.9% students were enrolled in an FSL program – roughly 12 % in a French Immersion program, 39.8% in Core French. The DDSB offers two of the most common models: Core French and French Immersion with entry at Grade 1. Other boards offer additional models such as Extended French and Late Immersion among others.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2013a) expressed its vision for French education in this province: “Students in English-language school boards have the confidence and ability to use French effectively in their daily lives” (p. 8). Three main goals support this vision:

1. Increase student confidence, proficiency, and achievement in French as a second language (FSL).
2. Increase the percentage of students studying FSL until graduation.
3. Increase student, educator, parent, and community engagement in FSL. (p. 9)

All school board decisions should be filtered through these three goals.

A revised Ontario FSL curriculum came into play for elementary students in 2014 and for secondary students in 2015. These curricula emphasize authentic and spontaneous communication and encourage innovative pedagogy as opposed to more traditional grammar and translation.

In common with many Canadian jurisdictions, the DDSB is facing challenges regarding its FSL programs:

- overwhelming French Immersion enrolment that has implications for the viability of English schools, and for equity of education for all
- inconsistent standards of language proficiency of students and teachers
- a lack of qualified FSL teachers in all programs
- a scarcity of teaching tools and resources designed for diverse FSL learners

## **Growth of French Immersion**

In Ontario, enrolment in FI grew 5.7% annually over 11 consecutive years. Between 2011 and 2014, the DDSB saw a 14% increase in elementary FI enrolment. Growth has continued since 2014. In the 2016-2017 school year, 1068 DDSB students entered the Grade 1 FI, and 324 students remained by the end of Grade 12. (The pattern of attrition is consistent with that of other Ontario school boards.)

The popularity of FI has led to inter-related challenges.

School boards including the DDSB struggle to accommodate rising FI in relation to steady or declining English-track enrolment. Dual-track schools include both English and French programs. There are many advantages to this model, such as flexibility and allowing students to remain in their neighbourhoods. However, when FI enrolment overbalances English enrolment, it can become necessary to combine grades, sometimes up to three grades, to make up a viable English class. This situation has pedagogical and logistical implications.

An alternative is for boards to offer single-track English or FI schools. While this option is advantageous in promoting exclusive use of French, it often requires boundary changes and can raise transportation issues (subsidized or not) and community tension.

FI growth contributes to issues of equity and inclusiveness. Research consistently shows that FI programs include fewer students with special education needs, more English Language Learners, and fewer multi-grade classes. FI students tend to come from more economically advantaged neighborhoods compared with their English-track counterparts.

FI programs can segregate by ability (based on Early Years Evaluation scores), which grows with advancing grades. Students who do well in FI tend to remain there while those who struggle often move to the English Core program. The attrition of FI students means that the program caters to a more and more select group.

Some boards have limited access to FI through capping and lotteries. Practical factors such as school capacity and teacher availability significantly influence this approach although it counteracts universal accessibility.

Costs associated with FI are also equity issues. Two examples are transportation and the Diplôme d'études en langue Française (DELFT). Withdrawing free transportation to FI schools curtails costs but exacerbates equity of access. The Toronto District School Board and the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board have adopted this option. The administration of the DELFT and the training of teachers to be DELFT markers are added costs. DDSB spent \$49,459.60 on administering and scoring the DELFT exam to 303 students in 2019, up from \$24,263.05 for 208 students in 2018. Some school boards have applied a student fee, which offsets costs and discourages an impulsive application. However, this may act as a barrier to

access, as would a policy of capping the number of applicants through a first-come first-served application process.

In summary, on the one hand, FI offers the ideal of choice and advantages. On the other, its actual implementation can accentuate inequity and undermine the vision of universality of public education.

## **Proficiency**

Conceptions of language proficiency has shifted to a more authentic, student-centered model that emphasizes real-life application, innovative pedagogy and engagement. The Ontario Ministry of Education has emphasized that *all* students should be welcomed into FSL programs, and that learning supports should be in place to encourage their success. As FSL classes become more diverse, diverse resources and staff support become more pressing needs.

The more widespread adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CERF) and the DELF exam are providing clear and consistent standards of achievement for students and for teacher hiring.

## **A lack of qualified FSL teachers in all programs**

Perhaps the most pressing and widespread challenge for FSL education is placing qualified FSL educators in permanent and occasional teacher, Education Assistant (EA) and Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) positions. Every school board report referenced in preparing this report identified this issue as a persistent problem.

The UGDSB (Upper Grand District School Board) review conducted in 2015 identified administrators' biggest problems as hiring for single-section and part-time assignments, getting an adequate number of daily occasional FSL teachers, and qualified FSL teachers across the board. In secondary schools, a consistent offering of content subjects in French is difficult because it depends on the subject specialties of current staff, which can vary from year to year.

Despite vigorous recruitment strategies, there is a persistent gap between supply and demand of qualified FSL teachers. Standards of proficiency are inconsistent across Faculties of Education and school administrators. The Ontario Public School Board Association (OPSBA) found that on average, approximately one quarter of FSL teacher applicants do not meet French language proficiency standards established by individual boards. Less attractive working conditions impedes retention of FSL teachers. Core FSL teachers report feeling unsupported, disrespected and marginalized in their schools.

FSL educators have expressed the desire to participate in locally relevant, non-evaluative professional development.

## **A scarcity of teaching tools and resources designed for diverse FSL learners**

FSL teachers generally but emphatically FI teachers from across Canada, cite a lack of time (73%), a lack of resources (71%) and coping with growing demands of the work environment (57%) as their greatest challenges. FSL teachers in Ontario stated that their greatest challenges were the lack of suitable teaching resources followed by students' attitudes towards learning French. These challenges are interconnected.

FSL teachers find that they need to create their own materials to meet the needs of a more diverse classroom. This is an exhausting enterprise, especially considering that, 37% of Ontario FSL teachers are in their first year of experience. It also leads to inconsistency in quality and approach within a school and across a school board.

### **Work arounds**

Ontario school boards share similar challenges in dealing with FSL. One proactive approach is to counteract the popularity of FI by making Core French more appealing to students and parents. Some strategies include integrating Core French with other subjects to create a more holistic/authentic learning experience and offering more experiential learning opportunities such as summer camps, contests, and technology-enhanced programs.

Other approaches seem more pragmatic ways to respond to FI enrolment. These include capping enrolment, shifting to more single-track schools, and limiting transportation.

An energetic approach to recruitment and retention of FSL educators continues across the province, indeed, the country.

### **Conclusion**

The DDSB aims to provide high quality, inclusive education to *all* its students. This review of the board's FSL programs illuminates some of the challenges for the board in achieving this goal.