



**THE  
STATE OF FRENCH  
SECOND LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION IN CANADA 2012  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS  
AND FRENCH SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS**

# ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS AND FSL PROGRAMS: The State of French Second Language Education In Canada 2012 Executive Summary

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## ON OUR WEBSITE

Full Proceedings of the CPF Roundtable on Academically-Challenged Students in FSL Programs  
<http://cpf.ca/en/research-advocacy/research/the-state-of-fsl-education-in-canada>

Selected Bibliography  
<http://cpf.ca/en/research-advocacy/research/the-state-of-fsl-education-in-canada>

FSL Enrolment Statistics 1999-2000 to 2010-2011  
<http://cpf.ca/en/research-advocacy/research/enrolmenttrends/>

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## PREFACE



I am the parent of a student enrolled in French-second-language (FSL) education, and I want good things for my son. I want him to be given every opportunity to excel in his second language. I want him to open his mind to new cultural experiences and different ways of thinking about, and talking about, things that are important to him. I want him to challenge himself and to truly consider all of his options as he enters the career world. I want him to know his country, and the different peoples who helped to make Canada what it is today.

I want all this for my son, not because I am a member of Canadian Parents for French, but because I am a parent. And doesn't every parent want the same things for their own? Parents want to see our children succeed. We want to see our children take steps towards becoming independent, thoughtful, and engaged citizens. Part of what we can do to help get them there is to give them the chance to broaden their linguistic and cultural horizons by studying French as a second language in school.

Unfortunately, not every parent in Canada is currently able to see this vision for their children unfold. Academically challenged students in particular face obstacles to access when it comes to FSL. Too many FSL programs are closed off to these students, when these are the very programs that might be able to help such children really shine.

Without sufficient understanding of the programs, many school administrators, school board officials and Ministry of Education representatives needlessly erect barriers to access for students with learning difficulties. This is particularly troublesome when one considers that Early French

Immersion has been found to be the most suitable program for the widest range of student academic ability. Put another way, that means the majority of students — including many of those with academic challenges — can succeed in becoming bilingual, especially when adequate resources are in place to help with student academic development.

The misconception of French Immersion as a gifted program is so widespread that school officials can hardly be blamed for underestimating what their students are capable of. So it is time for us to get the message out, so that these administrators and policy-makers can take steps to widen access to French Immersion and other FSL programs for all students. I ask parents across Canada to join me in letting their local school boards and Ministries of Education know that:

- **Academically challenged students are not differentially handicapped in FSL programs.** Keep the doors open to all students so that they can benefit from all that comes with being bilingual.
- **FSL programs need to be sufficiently resourced in order to lead to student success.** Like with any other program, FSL programs must have the tools they need to help all students make the most of their education.

Let us help our students be all that they can be — join CPF in demanding better access to quality FSL programming for every child in Canada.

**Lisa Marie Perkins**  
**National President**  
**Canadian Parents for French**

# INTRODUCTION



## CANADIAN PARENTS FOR FRENCH (CPF) HOSTED A ROUNDTABLE ON ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS IN FRENCH SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS (FSL) LIKE CORE FRENCH, EXTENDED FRENCH AND FRENCH IMMERSION, TO NAME THREE, IN OTTAWA IN JUNE 2012.

The goals of this event were to initiate a dialogue amongst stakeholders, educators and policy-makers; to develop joint recommendations for more inclusionary practices; and to move the issue of equitable access for all students in Canada from a place of discussion to a place of action.

Approximately forty representatives from Canadian Heritage, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, ministries of education, school districts, university faculties of education, researchers, and national associations active in the field of FSL education attended the Roundtable. Participants developed comprehensive recommendations and indicators of success, outlining the need for policies, inclusionary practices and appropriate specialist support to enable equitable access and to meet the needs of academically challenged students.

Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages, set the context in his opening remarks.

Mr. Fraser feels strongly that every Canadian child should have the opportunity to become bilingual so he or she can participate fully in this country's economy, governance and society. However, the reluctance of school boards and school authorities to adapt to the needs of students with learning disabilities (LDs) in immersion has created an unfortunate dynamic.

Children who have any kind of learning disorder are often excluded from immersion programs for fear of compounding their problem. The school's automatic response is to remove him or her from immersion—as if second-language learning were the cause of the difficulties. The result has

been that children with any kind of LD have been systematically weeded out of the immersion stream and placed in the English stream. The school, school board, ministry of education or the media then complains that immersion is an “elitist” program.

By embracing diversity, Canada has recognized the potential of all Canadians, encouraging them to integrate into society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs. But celebrating diversity does not only mean honouring one's country or language of origin—Canadians must also reflect on what makes a society diverse. Canadians should work strenuously to eradicate all forms of discrimination in our society, so it is important to not stay silent when Canadian students are subjected to discrimination in school because of how they learn. Transferring a learning-disabled student out of French immersion could take away that individual's opportunity to become bilingual.

“I believe all Canadian children should have the opportunity to become bilingual. As an inclusive society in a bilingual country, we must understand the importance of inclusion in French immersion education and leave no child out,” Mr. Fraser said. “We must establish a new paradigm. As parents and educators, that is our challenge—not our children's.”

In this report you will find summaries of presentations by researcher and practitioners, recommendations directed to decision-makers and educators. A full Roundtable report including complete versions of presentations, selected references and a list of Roundtable participants can be found on the Canadian Parents for French website: [www.cpf.ca](http://www.cpf.ca)





## Nancy Wise: Access to Special Education for Exceptional Pupils in French Immersion Program: An Equity Issue

Nancy Wise is a Doctoral Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario

**M**s. Wise, who has worked as a special education teacher for 32 years — 19 of which have been in a French immersion setting — focused on exceptional students in elementary French immersion in Ontario. Exceptional students have special education needs that have been formally identified by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). They have learning disabilities and may have other exceptionalities.

In most publicly funded English-language school boards, parents may enroll students with learning disabilities in either regular English or French immersion programs. There are no provincial screening procedures, so no child is ineligible for French immersion. All school boards must ensure that instructional and assessment practices are in place to meet special educational requirements.

Ms. Wise noted that despite this requirement, exceptional students do not have equitable access to special education programs and services. School authorities present persuasive (though unsubstantiated) arguments suggesting that the child's educational needs would be best met in the English program and often advise parents to switch their children's program for special education support. Vulnerable parents are often advised that providing both French immersion programming and special education services constitutes a duplication of programs, known as "double dipping."

Transferring out of immersion often requires changing schools, which is disruptive for both parents and students who agonize over being separated from siblings and

friends. There is little evidence that the performance of exceptional pupils in French immersion programs compares unfavourably with that of their peers in the regular English program. Ultimately, this practice weakens the regular English program and perpetuates the elitist status commonly attributed to French immersion.

### **Lack of incentives to accommodate exceptional students**

Ms. Wise suggested that many stakeholders are interested in maintaining this discriminatory practice. Governments and politicians benefit from international recognition of "the great Canadian success story" — French immersion's effectiveness in promoting functional bilingualism.

Parents may lack incentive to change the status quo. They want their children to have every advantage that a bilingual education affords. Some ignore exclusionary practices because they fear that exceptional students will have a detrimental effect on their children's academic achievements. Ms. Wise said that some parents tell her they have found the ideal classroom and refer to French immersion as the "poor man's private school."

Educators also lack incentive to promote more inclusionary practices. French immersion educators work with a disproportionate number of English-speaking, highly capable, well-behaved students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Many believe that French immersion is an enrichment program geared to the academic elite and complain about students "who really shouldn't be in the program." These teachers feel inadequately

prepared to meet the diverse learning needs of exceptional pupils.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's 2001 French as a Second Language curriculum requires school boards to provide exceptional students with appropriate programs and services in French immersion. The current exclusionary practices have not been questioned, suggesting a contradiction between policy and practice. Clearly, the provincial government expects that the educational needs of exceptional FSL students will be addressed, and Ms. Wise believes that it is quite reasonable for Ontario taxpayers to expect the needs of exceptional pupils to be met in the publicly funded immersion programs.

**It is quite reasonable for Ontario taxpayers to expect the needs of exceptional pupils to be met in the publicly funded immersion programs.**

### **The impact of federal and provincial funding models**

Federal funding supports provincial and territorial FSL initiatives to promote functional bilingualism in Canada's two official languages. The Canadian government has negotiated bilateral agreements with each province and territory and has committed to contributing more than \$24 million annually for FSL programs in Ontario between 2009 and 2013.

The Ontario government provides publicly funded English-language school boards with per-pupil grants to offset the additional costs of FSL programs. The specific allocation for FSL programs in Ontario was \$241.7 million: school boards received \$292.90 per core French student, \$333.72 per extended French student, and \$373.32 per immersion student.

National and provincial monies are combined and allocated to district school boards based on enrolment figures. As more funding is allocated for students in French immersion, it may be more advantageous to retain exceptional students in FSL programs and provide them with the necessary supports even though there may be additional costs to this inclusionary approach.

Special education funding, provided exclusively by the provincial government, uses a different model. The \$2.52 billion (2011–12) Special Education Grant (SEG) is designed to assist school boards meet the diverse needs

of exceptional pupils. The Special Education Per-Pupil Amount (SEPPA) assumes that all school boards have a baseline of exceptional pupils whose needs must be addressed. This means that unlike French funding — which is tied to enrolment in FSL programs — SEPPA is based on total enrolment in a school board. Although some Ontario school boards have a greater incidence of students with special needs, this does not impact current funding allocations.

### **Application of funding allocations**

Ontario school boards are not required to report publicly on spending national or provincial FSL monies. Ms. Wise cited a 2008 CPF report suggesting that this needs to be examined to ensure that funding is used solely for its designated purpose and that school boards are not syphoning funds to support other initiatives.

Although public reporting of SEPPA expenditures is required, there is considerable flexibility with respect to its application. Every school board in Ontario has the flexibility to funnel the SEPPA allocation into the regular English program rather than providing funding to schools offering French immersion.

### **Recommendations**

- Stakeholders must end their inaction, as maintaining the status quo could result in class action lawsuits.
- The Ontario government must commit to tying SEPPA allocations to the number of exceptional pupils requiring support, not to student enrolment in each school board.
- School boards must account for SEPPA funding whether the students are enrolled in regular English or French immersion.
- FSL teacher education and professional development opportunities must support teacher efforts to meet the learning needs of exceptional pupils.



## Fred Genesee: The Suitability of Immersion for All Learners: What Does the Research Say?

Fred Genesee, PhD, is a Professor in the Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montréal, Québec

Dr. Genesee noted that bilingualism provides advantages not only on national and global scales but also at a personal level. Arguably, children with learning challenges would benefit inordinately from learning another language because it is a significant job skill. Despite this, there is still reluctance to raise and educate children bilingually, especially children with learning challenges — a whole sector of the student body is excluded from those advantages. In effect, Canada has a publicly funded school system that offers enriched forms of education but it restricts access to it. We have a school system within a school system where some kids get full resources for learning and some kids don't. There are serious ethical as well as legal issues here. Can we justify publicly supported French immersion education and not give full access to all resources needed to succeed?

The issue is complex because it's not simply a matter of showing that these children can do well. There are pedagogical issues that need to be addressed, and research has a significant role to play. Identifying these children reasonably well so that we can give them the additional support is not a straightforward issue for second-language learners. Are certain forms of immersion more suitable to some children? Is core French more or less effective than immersion for children with certain kinds of challenges? Are there some students for whom there really are more impediments to their success than there would be in mother-tongue programs? We don't know because we haven't really done as much research as we should have, said Dr. Genesee. What kind of additional support do we give them? Is the support provided in the first language, in the second language or bilingually? What competencies do teachers need to provide support?

### Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds

Children from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds struggle with school compared to children from higher SES backgrounds. However, students from low SES backgrounds in immersion perform just as well in English-language development and academic achievement as do students from the same SES backgrounds in English-language programs. At the same time, they function much more confidently in French than students in the English-language program.

### Students with lower academic ability

Research shows that low levels of general intellectual ability put students at risk for low achievement in any school program. However, below-average students in immersion perform at the same level as do below-average students in English-language programs.

### Students at risk for language impairment

Language impairment is a clinical diagnosis for children who are developmentally normal, but who have difficulty learning language — they differ from their age mates vis-à-vis communication skills, acquisition of grammar, comprehension, etc. They are at risk academically because their language skills are not as strong as those of their peers and they often have trouble learning to read.

The commonsense view says that if children have trouble learning their native language, they will have trouble learning two languages simultaneously. The belief is that the neuromachinery responsible for language learning will break down or have further trouble learning a second language. But, although the machinery may not be



working at 100%, it will work the same way whether learning one or two languages. Research finds that children with language impairment performed the same whether in immersion or non-immersion programs. This is powerful evidence to indicate that the neurocognitive machinery that allows a child to learn language — even when it's not fully functioning — is capable of bilingualism.

### Struggling readers

Reading impairment is a clinical diagnosis for children who have difficulty learning to read; it is specific to reading and the children have no other learning problems in other areas of development. Second-language students are not at greater risk for reading impairment despite the commonly held belief to the contrary. They may struggle to learn to read more than children in an English-language program because they don't know the language, not because of clinical problems.

**In effect, Canada has a publicly funded school system that offers enriched forms of education but it restricts access to it. We have a school system within a school system where some kids get full resources for learning and some kids don't. There are serious ethical as well as legal issues here. Can we justify publicly supported French immersion education and not give full access to all resources needed to succeed?**

These children are at risk of receiving delayed support. When a child in French immersion is not learning to read in French, the tendency is to wait until the end of Grades 2 or 3 before determining that the child has a reading problem. By then, the child has often fallen behind in other academic subjects and developed a negative attitude to learning and his ability to learn. This is unfortunate, as the sooner children are identified and get help, the more likely they are to overcome this difficulty and avoid subsequent academic difficulties.

Researchers estimate that between and seven and ten per cent (and perhaps as high as 20%) of students have reading impairments or difficulties. Dr. Genesee explained that research demonstrates that reading acquisition involves a significant amount of

cross-linguistic transfer. Skills such as print awareness, letter-sound knowledge, phonological awareness, decoding skills, vocabulary, and background-cultural knowledge transfer from the first to second language. Findings to date show correlations between the first-language predictors in kindergarten and Grade 3 French reading scores. This means that there is information in the results of the child's first-language testing in kindergarten for predicting French reading ability four years later<sup>1</sup>.

### Summary

Dr. Genesee concluded his presentation by summarizing three key findings:

- There is no evidence to support the belief that students who are at risk for poor academic performance are at greater risk in immersion than in English-only programs.
- At-risk students can become bilingual and attain levels of first-language and academic ability commensurate with their learning challenges. The challenge is not usually for the children, but rather is for the adults around them. Evidence shows that language-acquisition systems of at-risk students are extremely powerful, even when they do not function normally. The challenge is how to create a learning environment in which these children's potential can be fully realized.
- Researchers can identify at-risk learners early and provide additional support early.

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This is the same conclusion reached by Renée Bourgoin







## Renée Bourgoïn: Myths, Policies, and Research: The Case of a New Brunswick Grade 3 French Immersion Entry Point

Renée Bourgoïn is a Doctoral Candidate at the Second Language Research Institute of Canada, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick

In the 2008-2009 school year, reforms to French second-language programs in New Brunswick eliminated the Grade 1 entry for French immersion programs and implemented a Grade 3 entry point based on the following assumptions:

- The later start allows students to develop solid literacy skills in their first language (English). Traditionally, New Brunswick students had not performed as well in Canada-wide literacy tests, and the government wanted to boost those scores.
- A more heterogeneous group in immersion programs would boost overall performance.
- It would be easier to provide early interventions for all students in an English-only environment.
- Parents would be better equipped to decide on the optimum program for their children at the end of Grade 2 instead of the end of kindergarten.

### Myths

This programming change reinforced some myths around French immersion: that students should master their first language before learning a second, that learning a second language will jeopardize the first language, and that learning more than one language is overtaxing for struggling learners. Unfortunately, some inside the education system, from policy makers to teachers, perpetuated these myths despite research showing that second-language learning does not negatively affect the first language, that students rapidly catch up once English is introduced and, that many students surpass their peers by Grades 5 or 6, and that skills in French can and do transfer to English. Research also shows that

struggling learners are at no greater disadvantage in second-language programs and have the ability to learn two languages despite their difficulties, and that struggling readers would experience similar problems if enrolled in English-only programs.

These myths led Ms. Bourgoïn to explore the reading experiences of 60 students transitioning from Grade 2 English to Grade 3 French immersion to determine if at-risk and non-at-risk students exhibit similar reading profiles in both languages. She also researched how at-risk and non-at-risk students differ in their knowledge and use of reading strategies in English and French. The group included at-risk, high-performing, and average readers. Seven had French as their third language, one was First Nations, three had speech impediments, three were being tested for learning disabilities, and ten were receiving literacy support. Other student characteristics included Asperger Syndrome, ADHD/ADD, and intellectual delay.

### Early identification of at-risk readers

All students were tested in English in kindergarten: at the beginning of the year for initial sound and letter naming; in the middle of the year for initial sounds, letter naming, nonsense words, and phoneme segment; and at the end of the year for letter naming, nonsense words, and phoneme segments. Ms. Bourgoïn used statistical analysis to determine if English scores could indicate future successes in French. Findings show that letter naming at the end of the year was the most significant predictor of French reading by the end of Grade 3.

French letter naming at the beginning of Grade 3 was the best predictor of French reading by the end of Grade 3.<sup>1</sup>

### **At-risk readers make progress in FSL, especially with remediation**

Students were tested for fluency and comprehension at the end of Grade 2 (in English) and at the end of Grade 3 (in French). English outcomes for at-risk students in Grade 2 demonstrated progress throughout the year, although not reaching the same levels as the high-performing students. After being in French for a year, the students followed the same profile with both groups progressing.

Notably, even in November — after just three months in the program — there is a difference between the performance of at-risk students who received remediation and those who did not. Early intervention is better than a “wait and see” approach.

**Early identification should lead to additional supports. Teachers need to focus on sound work to provide targeted intervention to the at-risk learners who do not have a well-developed metacognition. Teachers should be given additional training so they can provide the necessary support.**

### **French second-language learning does not jeopardize at-risk students**

This research also considered how these students continued to read in English (fluency and comprehension) in Grade 3. With only 30 minutes of English per day, both groups progressed as per the earlier profile. This supports research showing that second-language learning does not jeopardize at-risk students.

### **Reading strategies**

Ms. Bourgoin looked at the strategies that learners employ when learning to read in English and French. At the end of Grade 2, students were asked how they understood and remembered what they read. The at-risk learners, who had been in literacy classes for three years, were generally not aware of strategies to help them, while high-performing students could use and articulate reading strategies. When the same questions were asked of Grade 3

French immersion students, those from the high-performing group reported being able to transfer lessons learned in one part of the curriculum to reading. At-risk students were not aware of self-monitoring strategies. Classroom teachers can help promote successful strategies.

### **Conclusions**

Students’ progress in French follows a similar pattern to progress in English. French immersion is not over-taxing for at-risk learners, and learning a second language does not negatively impact their English development.

Teachers need to know about the similar reading profiles for the two streams and recognize that it is possible to identify students at risk of reading difficulties in kindergarten — even before a child moves to French immersion.

Early identification should lead to additional supports. Teachers need to focus on sound work to provide targeted intervention to the at-risk learners who do not have a well-developed metacognition. Teachers should be given additional training so they can provide the necessary support.

Because students continue to progress throughout the year, teachers, parents, and administrators should not be too eager to move children out of French immersion. This study shows that much growth occurs from November to June. Time is needed to develop competencies.

In conclusion, Ms. Bougoin noted a review of the New Brunswick program has recommended a return to the earlier entry level for French immersion, but the government has yet to decide a course of action.

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s Note: This is the same conclusion reached by Fred Genesee



## Denise Harding: Exceptional Learners: Honouring and Accommodating a Different Way of Learning

Denise Harding is a Partner and Academic Coach, Evoke Learning\*\*

**D**enise coaches students from Grade 7 to post-secondary. She is also the mother of a French immersion student with a learning disability and, since her daughter's identification in grade school, has had to struggle to keep her in French immersion.

### Exceptional Learners: learning disabilities

Learning disabilities affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization, or use of social, physical, or verbal information. People with learning disabilities have average (or greater) thinking and reasoning abilities and are often creative. Five to ten per cent of Canadians and fifty per cent of special education students have learning disabilities, which are often accompanied by ADHD, anxiety disorder, executive function disorder, or giftedness.

### Exceptional Learners: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a lifelong, genetic, neurobiological disorder that interferes with an individual's capacity to regulate activity level, inhibit behaviour, or attend to a task at hand. Characteristics of ADHD behavior include avoidance, procrastination, indecisiveness, and impulsiveness. Students with ADHD have a difficult time sustaining effort and managing energy, so the quality of their work and their energy levels are inconsistent. These students tend to be out-of-the-box thinkers and can be quite outgoing. Parents and teachers need to be reminded that although a lot of the behavior looks like choice, it is not.

### Exceptional Learners: executive function disorder

Executive function is an umbrella term for the complex

cognitive processes that serve ongoing, goal-directed behaviours. The disorder is dormant at birth and unfolds over time. Some students with executive function challenges outgrow many of the associated characteristics and behaviours, although this tends to take longer for boys. It has a huge impact on students' performance because it affects their organization, working memory, and attention. These students experience difficulty when asked to put their electronics away, sit still, and pay attention.

These children also experience difficulty processing instructional language and face challenges with motivation because they are disengaged in the classroom. Their self-esteem is affected by being labelled. They encounter problems with reading, writing, spelling, and processing information.

### The student experience

Many of the children Ms. Harding sees in her practice tend to drop French as soon as possible because of the difficulty they experience with the reading- and writing-based curriculum. Students with learning challenges who have trouble concentrating in the first place have great trouble sitting through classes that emphasize rote memorization and rapid recall. In French, students often conjugate verbs and do dictée, which they find boring and unrelated to the "real world." Some students already have trouble processing instructional language in English and even more difficulty doing so in French as a second language with its emphasis on rote learning. Executive function challenges add to the problem.

Too often classroom teachers lack knowledge about non-traditional learners, and IEPs do not necessarily address

\*\* A private organization offering academic coaching and consulting services for students aged 12+ and their families.

their needs. Ms. Harding asked, “How you say ‘My daughter is bored in your class’ in an IEP?”

### The Parent Experience

Parents are counselled repeatedly to remove their children from French immersion. Having fought their way through elementary school, parents then have to navigate and negotiate their way through high school.

Little support is available in school and at home. Parents are often left to find remediation and support on their own. They feel guilty and may question their decision to keep their child in French programs. “It’s often easier to leave than it is to challenge the system,” said Ms. Harding.

**Little support is available in school and at home. Parents are often left to find remediation and support on their own. They feel guilty and may question their decision to keep their child in French programs. “It’s often easier to leave than it is to challenge the system.”**

Misinformation abounds at the school and administration level. Ms. Harding recalled that she was advised to remove her child from French immersion by the principal who said that her child would be illiterate because she would be struggling in two languages.

### Coaching

Coaches partner with their clients to help them maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaching honours the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Ms. Harding tells her students that they are not broken — they are the experts who will tell her what is going to work. Students learn about their neurobiology and what gets in the way of their learning.

Coaching helps exceptional students identify the issue, plan their own strategies for success, and set goals. It reinforces why the student wants to reach the goal and in the process, helps to build confidence and develop organizational skills. It tracks problem solving to fine-tune what works and what doesn’t. Coaching also addresses emotion, stress, and anxiety. Students are provided with resources and tools for support and to foster their independence.

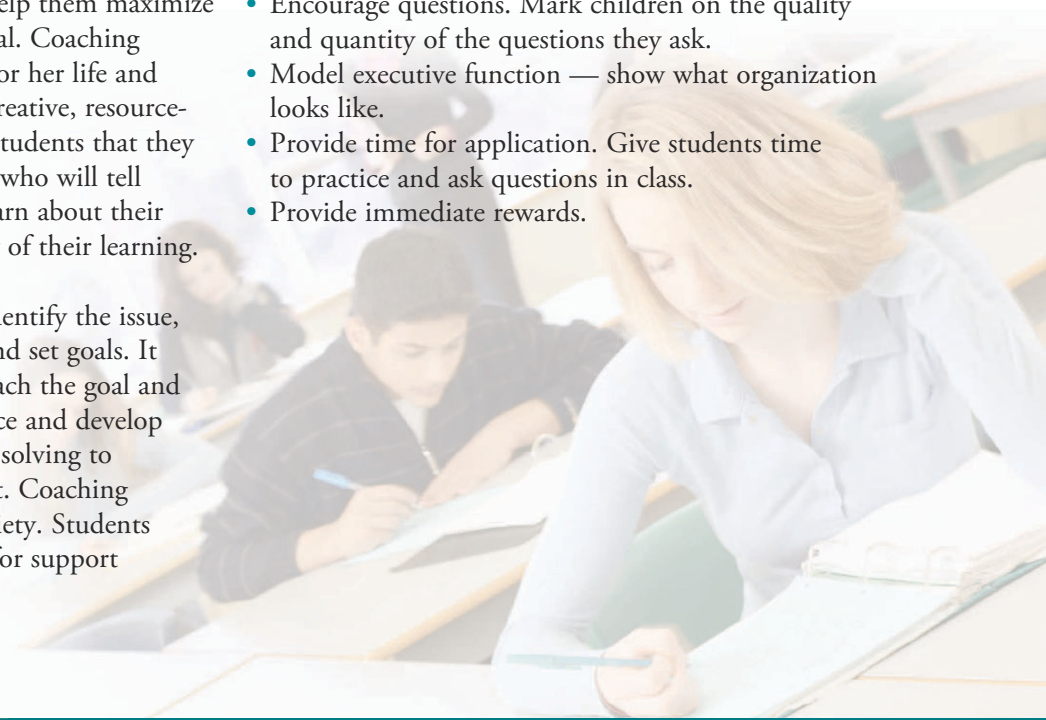
### Interventions and Resources

Punishment does not change neurobiology. If a student is late handing in an assignment or is off track, giving a zero, deducting marks, or taking away a privilege does not help. Giving the student choices within boundaries does help. Choice translates to engagement.

Technology helps students organize and learn. Rather than spending 45 minutes conjugating verbs, use an app. Rather than memorizing dictée, pull it up on Google. Rather than copying an assignment from the board, take a picture with a smart phone. Kids love using technologies and thrive when given engaging, “hands on” assignments.

Teachers and schools can suggest other successful interventions:

- Provide accommodations. Memory aids show the steps in solving a problem; they do not give the answer.
- Allow extra time to finish a task or test.
- Give practice tests and reviews.
- Demonstrate study strategies — reading notes is not enough for some students.
- Allow students to hand in draft assignments early, receive feedback, and revise.
- Link success to effort.
- Break down tests by giving a page at a time or writing parts of the test over the course of a day.
- Give oral instead of written tests. Many children (particularly dyslexic children) have strong oral communication skills.
- Encourage questions. Mark children on the quality and quantity of the questions they ask.
- Model executive function — show what organization looks like.
- Provide time for application. Give students time to practice and ask questions in class.
- Provide immediate rewards.







## Callie Mady: Closing the Window to Open the Door: Preparing for More Inclusive French-Immersion Classes

Callie Mady, PhD, is a Professor at the Schulich School of Education, Nipissing University, Nipissing, Ontario

**R**esearch tells us that Anglophone students can achieve in French immersion: their French-language speaking skills exceed those of students in core French and their receptive skills are comparable to those of Francophones.

Dr. Mady said that examining the students in these studies really tell us that French immersion attracts and retains the brightest students, those of higher socioeconomic status, and those without additional learning challenges. Systemic barriers to equitable access to this program exist — nationally, provincially, at the board level. Administrators, curricula, and teachers also present barriers to inclusive French immersion programs. To improve access, we must first identify some of the barriers before trying to “close the window and open the door.”

### Barriers to access

Canada does not have a national French second language curriculum. This means that not all Canadian students have an equal opportunity to study French as a second language. No mechanisms exist to address this on a national level. Ministries of Education do not have specific policies saying that students with learning difficulties should be included in immersion or FSL programming. Some provinces, such as British Columbia, have policies allowing some students exemption from obligatory second language courses. Boards of Education control points of access and choose whether to offer early, middle, or late immersion — or none. Boards of Education can also control admittance to French immersion. A school board document — *How can you tell if your child will be successful in French*

*immersion* — identifies characteristics of a successful French immersion candidate:

- strong skills in his or her first language, is verbal and likes to talk
- enjoys books, imitates easily, and has a good memory
- is confident, is a risk taker, and enjoys new challenges
- demonstrates a successful transition from home to school.

Dr. Mady noted that some of these characteristics are five times more likely to describe females than males. These recommendations might make parents hesitate to register their children in French immersion, particularly if they are boys or have shown learning challenges.

Board of Education administrators wield considerable power. They determine which students get tested for learning difficulties and organize support for identified students. They hold the purse strings and determine the programs to which the money goes. Although administrators may not be second-language educators, their beliefs can impact those of teachers.

The curriculum may also present a barrier to equitable access. Most high schools have only an academic stream for French immersion and the curriculum does not offer advice about how teachers can best support their students.

Teachers can be a barrier to inclusive programming, although they can also be a great support. Some teachers discourage students with challenges from enrolling in French immersion and influence administrators and

parents if they believe that a student will not succeed. Many teachers do not get the supports they need to help academically challenged students succeed, which allows them to maintain their negative beliefs.

### One student's story

In kindergarten, a speech therapist noticed that “Bob”\* had difficulty pronouncing certain sounds. Bob’s mother worked with him to improve his speech but, when she wanted to put him in French immersion, the kindergarten teacher and principal would not recommend it. She enrolled Bob in French immersion anyway.

In Grades 1 and 2, Bob’s mother noticed that he had difficulty reading and writing and brought it to the attention of his teachers, neither of whom had noticed difficulties. In Grade 3, the principal laughed when Bob’s mother asked to have him tested, because Bob was not a behavioural problem. Bob had learned strategies to compensate for his learning difficulties, and his teachers did not recognize his need for additional support.

**Many teachers do not get the supports they need to help academically challenged students succeed in the French immersion program, and that lack of support allows them to maintain their negative beliefs.**

Private testing revealed that Bob has a severe learning disability under the umbrella group dyslexia — his reading out loud could not be understood in either language. However, in terms of comprehension, he scored at the 95th percentile. Bob’s mother gave the test results to the school and suggested strategies to help Bob. Both the teacher and principal refused and the superintendent backed them up. Bob’s mother moved him to the English stream.

When Bob entered high school, the special education department recommended that he withdraw from core French, but his parents disagreed. A change of core French teachers in Grade 9 led to a very successful year for him.

### Opening the door to greater inclusion

Sharing information is one way forward. Those participating in the roundtable are aware of these issues, but

many teachers and teacher-candidates are not. Research shows that if teachers believe that academically challenged students should be included in French immersion and FSL programs, they are more likely to make accommodations for them. For example, after a six-week exposure to research showing that academically challenged students can benefit from French immersion programs, teachers and teacher-candidates at a CASLT professional development program were prepared to change their views and include these students in French immersion programs.

Teachers need to adopt classroom strategies to help students with learning disabilities, but research shows that they are not well equipped to do so. Interestingly, these strategies help *all* students. Although French immersion teachers are very busy and may hesitate to take on additional work, these strategies do not necessarily take more time. They include demonstrating techniques, using manipulatives, supporting oral language with writing, judicious use of students’ first language, pre-teaching vocabulary, rephrasing and restating, using simpler language, teaching explicit strategies, and pacing lessons. Other strategies include highlighting text, modifying text, modifying grading systems, varying the length of assignments, chunking tasks, and using a variety of assignments. Dr. Mady referenced the work of Katie Arnett who found that changing the environment (preferential seating, room arrangement, and signals to focus attention) also worked well in core French.

Dr. Mady concluded that “by identifying the barriers we will be better able to address them with the goal of moving forward to greater inclusion of students with learning disabilities.”

\* Not his real name



## Susan Brims: Meeting Student Needs in French Immersion: Learning and Literacy Programming

Susan Brims is the Principal at École Banff Trail, Calgary Board of Education, Calgary

The Calgary Board of Education has a Learning and Literacy (L&L) program in Grades 4-6. The French Immersion L&L program supports students with learning disabilities within the French immersion setting. Its goal is to help each child gain skills, knowledge, and competencies to reach their academic, social, and emotional potential.

### Profile of the L&L student

A typical L&L classroom comprises five to seven children with specific learning disabilities and children from the general school community. All students understand that everyone is different, learns differently, and has different strengths. Teachers work with the class on relationships.

The program looks specifically for children who are having difficulty but enjoy learning in a second language. Students should have a good oral language base and show evidence of at least average thinking and reasoning skills. Most have significantly delayed achievement in English and French literacy, with inadequate progress in emergent/early literacy skills in kindergarten to Grade 3. While some students have emotional, behavioural, or mental health concerns, their primary need is support for literacy learning.

### Program Overview

French immersion L&L uses the Universal Design for Learning<sup>1</sup> tenets for curriculum planning and delivery. Assistive technology used in the L&L classroom has moved the entire school in the direction of Personalization of Learning, as mandated by the Calgary Board of Education. Because the school board allots two additional teachers for

this program, the school decided on a Grade 4-5 combined class and a single Grade 6. The teachers co-teach, providing small group and individual support.

### Key Components of the Program

**Collaboration** is very important to this program. Teacher teams bring individual strengths (special education background, technology, curriculum). Each L&L student has a specifically designed **IPP** specifically with SMART goals, strategies, accommodations, and transition plans.

**Assessment** is ongoing and frequent and involves students, which helps develop self-advocacy skills. Monitoring students' performance is important for demonstrating and communicating progress and adjusting teaching approaches. Accommodations include modified expectations and assignments, additional time, and assistive technology — scanners, printers, Smart Boards, digital cameras, video recorders, etc. Students focus on their strengths and learn that using technology is OK.

**Parent involvement** is key. Parents have access to the information needed to understand, make decisions, and find resources. Parents are active participants in and make meaningful contributions to their child's education. Children receive consistent, ongoing messages from home and school about expectations for their academic performance and behaviour.

**Self-advocacy** skills help students learn about themselves as learners. With teacher support, they create personal academic goals and strategies to attain them. This is especially important for students transitioning to Junior

<sup>1</sup> See full report at [www.cpf.ca](http://www.cpf.ca)



High. Students are encouraged to create a brochure or CD about themselves as learners to give to their teachers at the beginning of the school year.

**Transition planning** is achieved through articulation meetings with the receiving teacher/school. Although there is no L&L program for high school, teachers collaborate in planning and implementing transition plans, which maintains continuity. Parents are actively involved in planning, and students are better prepared for the expectations of the new environment. The IPP accompanies the student, communicating strengths, needs, and successful strategies. Most Junior High schools support students through regular classroom and resource teachers. This is why self-awareness and self-advocacy is so important.

**Parent involvement is key. Parents have access to the information needed to understand, make decisions, and find resources. Parents are active participants in and make meaningful contributions to their child's education.**

### Student Perspectives

Some of the positive outcomes for students include increased self-esteem and improved interactions. Students reported that they feel like they are part of the group. Generally, academic outcomes improved, and students redefined their perceptions of themselves as learners.

*"I have excelled in my reading because of all the helpful strategies and all the practice I get at home helps a lot too."*

*"L&L helps me get better marks because I can have more time on assignments."*

*"My computer is helpful. The reason I have this is because I need help and they gave it to me. I appreciate that."*

### Parent Perspectives

Parents recently described the favourable experiences of having their children in the L&L program:

**Respect and understanding:** *Students are taught that not everyone learns at the same pace and that everyone has different personal strengths.*

**Personal strengths:** *The program strongly reinforces areas of strength and aptitude and focuses on areas of improvement. This helps build self-confidence and develop skills beyond grade level. Students grow more comfortable requesting help and began to understand the need for time to think about and plan a project before starting.*

**Learning and study strategies:** *Students developed learning and study habits that can be applied to any level of study.*

**Understanding:** *L&L strategies can be applied at home because we, the parents understand our children's strengths. We can now try to anticipate which aspects of life may challenge them and are confident enough to step back and let areas of strength develop.*

**Reduced stress:** *Homework tasks that used to cause stress and tears are now manageable. Although we still have to manage timelines and tasks at home, the children now possess strategies and work with confidence.*

**Mentorship and leadership:** *A combined Grade 4-5 grouping and small group projects allow students to help one another.*

### Administrative Challenges

The Board and administration also face challenges:

- Identification often happens in Grade 3 when the child has had limited exposure to English reading and writing.
- Measurement tools for quantifying academic progress have not been normed for a French immersion population.
- Some of the software available has limited French capabilities.
- Parents need convincing that their child won't be "labelled" by the program.
- Transportation: Parents not always willing for their child to travel up to an hour each way to the only school in the city offering French immersion L&L.
- Changes to the specifics of current identification/place-ment processes could arise as school boards in Alberta move toward a single inclusive education system, relying less on categories of special education needs and more on personalization for all students.



# RECOMMENDATIONS



## CPF ROUNDTABLE ON ACADEMICALLY-CHALLENGED STUDENTS IN FRENCH-SECOND-LANGUAGE PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS DEVELOPED BY PARTICIPATING STAKEHOLDERS

### KEY FOCUS AREA 1: RESEARCH

#### Recommendations

- That a research clearing house be established with succinct and accessible synopses of critical, relevant research findings on language and academic development of special needs students.
- That national, provincial/territorial/territorial, and private funding agencies dedicate funds for research on special needs students and second-language learning. The funds should be between 7 and 10 per cent of funding to reflect the rate of learning disabled students in the student population.
- That research is cited in policy and curriculum design, methodology, and documents.

### KEY FOCUS AREA 2: RESOURCES

#### Recommendations

- That a useable framework be developed at the Minister of Education level to systematically support academically challenged students in French immersion and French-second-language programs.
- That a virtual national/regional resource centre be created. It must be user-friendly, relevant, accessible to all stakeholders, bilingual, and evidence based. It is not a wiki.
- That Ministries of Education develop standards for inclusion in FSL programs and for professional development for administrators.

### KEY FOCUS AREA 3: PERCEPTIONS

#### Recommendations

- That a realistic communications/outreach campaign be developed to show that FSL education is accessible to all learners at all levels based upon research evidence. (Provincial/territorial/territorial governments).

### KEY FOCUS AREA 4: POLICY

#### Recommendations

- That provincial/territorial governments allocate special education funding to school boards based on student need, not on enrolment numbers.
- That federal and provincial/territorial governments create a Charter of Rights for exceptional students' equitable access to FSL programs.
- That school boards be accountable for how English and FSL funding is applied.
- That all stakeholders put forward these recommendations to their respective government representatives.

### KEY FOCUS AREA 5: PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

#### Recommendations

- That provincial/territorial governments be encouraged to create a program that increases the number of French immersion teachers capable of responding to academically challenged students.
- That provincial/territorial governments increase the professional development opportunities for FSL educators working with academically challenged students.
- That provincial/territorial and territorial governments require school districts to devise and implement a plan promoting FSL programs as integral to the core business of public education.

### KEY FOCUS AREA 6: CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY

#### Recommendations

- That curricula acknowledge and provide alternative strategies to assist academically challenged students in FSL programs.
- That school boards offer methodology training to all FSL teachers on second-language acquisition for academically challenged students.

# GLOSSARY

**Academically-challenged student** refers to those with learning disabilities for purposes of this report.

**Accommodations** are services or supports used to enable a student to fully access the subject matter and instruction. An accommodation does not alter the content or expectations; instead it is an adjustment to instructional methods.

**Assistive technology** is any item, piece of equipment or product system used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of students with disabilities.

**Dictée** is a spelling test in French.

**Exceptional students** generally refers to gifted and special need students. The term is restricted to special need students for the purposes of this report.

**Learning Disabilities (LDs)** are specific neurological disorders that affect the brain's ability to store, process, retrieve, or communicate information. They are invisible and lifelong. LDs can affect different aspects of learning and functioning. LDs can be compensated for through alternate ways of learning, accommodations, and modifications.

**IEP (Individual Education Plan)** describes the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course, and/or any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations.

**IPP (Individualized Program Plan)** is a concise plan of action designed to address students' special education needs and is based on diagnostic information that provides the basis for intervention strategies.

**IPRC (Identification, Placement, and Review Committee)** decides whether a student is an exceptional pupil and, if so, what type of educational placement is appropriate. The parent(s)/guardian(s) as well as a student who is sixteen years of age or older have the right to attend the IPRC meeting and may request that the IPRC discuss potential programs that would meet the student's needs. On the basis of these discussions, the IPRC can recommend the special education programs and/or services that it considers to be appropriate for the student.

**Manipulatives** are items that students use to support hands-on learning. They provide visible models that help students solve problems and develop concepts. Examples include markers, toothpicks, and coins.

**Personalization of Student Learning** is an approach whereby staff, parents and community work in concert to guide students in assessing their own talents and aspirations and planning pathways toward individual goals.

**SMART Goals** are part of an IEP that meets the specific child's needs. SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time Limited.