

The Globe And Mail

'We want to be bilingual!' 'We love French!'; As the province's Liberal government abolishes early immersion, English parents are taking to the streets to loudly oppose the move

Monday, March 31, 2008
Page: A9
Section: National News
Byline: Ingrid Peritz
Dateline: FREDERICTON
Illustrations: Illustration

FREDERICTON -- Not so many years ago, when English parents in New Brunswick held rallies to protest about French, it was to complain there was too much of it.

But across the province this month, from Saint John to Moncton to the capital of Fredericton, hundreds of anglophones have massed together with a passionate rallying cry: We want more French, not less.

They wave placards proclaiming: "We want to be bilingual!" and "We love French!" They stand on the steps of the New Brunswick Legislature giving anti-government speeches in both official languages.

These New Brunswickers are the children of Pierre Trudeau's vision of a bilingual and bicultural Canada. And the focus of their protest is the ticket they think gets them there: early French immersion.

The Liberal government of New Brunswick has decided to abolish early immersion, and will begin phasing it out this fall. The move has triggered an unexpectedly fierce backlash in Canada's only officially bilingual province.

Four decades after French immersion was conceived as an educational "language bath" to teach children a second tongue, it's being defended as a Canadian birthright. Parents who have taken to the streets, fired off letters to the editor and joined Facebook campaigns in New Brunswick say it's not just a boost for their children's future, but a bridge across the province's language divide.

"Canada looks to New Brunswick for its language integration. We need to integrate the two languages, not separate them," said Gail Arseneau, a Fredericton nurse who has two children in immersion but whose kindergarten-age son won't have access to the program come fall.

"Isn't that why we decided to be the only bilingual province? Because we can be, and we should be?"

The parents' message has been gaining traction. Former New Brunswick premier Bernard Lord, who has just completed a national report on bilingualism, calls the action a mistake. Official Languages Commissioner Graham Fraser says the government's decision to end early immersion is a disappointment.

"I think it's unfortunate that this tool and opportunity - which has proven very successful in other

jurisdictions - is being eliminated," he said in an interview.

Research is conclusive that the earlier the better when it comes to teaching young minds a second language.

"One of the things that worries me is that at the symbolic level, the only officially bilingual province is abandoning an approach that has a 45-year history and has proven to be very successful," Mr. Fraser said.

The government of Shawn Graham insists it is committed to bilingualism but disagrees with the parents about the best way to get there.

A report that fuelled the government's decision found that New Brunswick children weren't staying with the immersion program, and weren't graduating with proficient French skills. So, Education Minister Kelly Lamrock decided to shake the system up.

Beginning in the fall, parents will no longer be able to enroll their children in either early French immersion or regular French classes. The children will have no French instruction from Grades 1 to 4, then they will be required to take five months of intensive French in Grade 5. After that, children will be able to choose either late immersion or enhanced French classes.

"Why don't we just simply teach French universally to all children the same way?" Mr. Lamrock asked in an interview.

The reform also targets what Mr. Lamrock sees as another failing of the existing system. He says immersion is skimming off the best students, leaving non-immersion classes with a disproportionate number of students with learning and behavioural problems.

"All the kids who struggle end up in one class," Mr. Lamrock said.

They're failing to become bilingual and helping drag New Brunswick to the basement of overall Canadian literacy scores, he said.

All students will have to take French until Grade 12, with a goal of making 70 per cent of New Brunswick high-school graduates bilingual.

Several academics hotly dispute the findings that

justified Mr. Lamrock's decision and call the report statistically flawed. They argue the government should fix French immersion rather than eliminate it.

"We're missing the boat," Mrs. Arseneau said at her home recently, where her older children proudly showed off their French skills.

"They're making French-immersion a scapegoat instead of fixing the real problem."

Beyond the pedagogy question, some worry the government's action will exacerbate relations in a province where language tensions are never far below the surface. For some, the change is a symbolic demotion of French, the mother tongue of a third of the province.

"We've reached a level of understanding in New Brunswick that is quite remarkable. The rest of Canada should see how we've made it work. But we have a history here. It's a sleeping bear. Don't poke it," said Donald Savoie, a veteran political scientist with experience in both Ottawa and New Brunswick.

"We see early immersion as a major contribution to our *bonne entente*," says Prof. Savoie of the University of Moncton. "If you play with that balance you have to be very careful. It doesn't take much. Don't wake the bear."

People like Prof. Savoie still recall when French-speaking Acadians were told to "speak White," before the province was declared officially bilingual under the leadership of Premier Louis Robichaud in 1969.

Some anglophones fought back and accused the government of "robbing Peter to pay Pierre." Anglophone resentment at the perceived gains of French-speaking Acadians flared up occasionally, translating in the late 1980s and early 1990s into support for the Confederation of Regions protest party.

Some of that hostility risks resurfacing with some parents when their children are forced to take intensive French in Grade 5, observers warn.

"This is a time bomb," said Geoff Martin, an expert on New Brunswick language politics at Mount Allison University.

French immersion produces scenes like the one that unfolded recently at Park Street Elementary School in Fredericton. Bantam-sized children with names like Maggie, Brandon and Emily sat on the floor listening rapt to their Grade 2 teacher instruct math fractions - never easy at the best of times. Yet the pupils seemed oblivious to the fact that they were learning fractions in French, a language that wasn't their mother tongue.

"Bravo Scott! Bravo Aidan!" the teacher said after hands shot up and answers were given correctly.

More than 300,000 Canadian children are enrolled in immersion, a program that's more popular in New Brunswick than any province outside Quebec.

Park Street Elementary, located in an upper-middle-class area in North Fredericton, had to turn families away for lack of space this year.

French immersion has been described as the most scrutinized education change in Canadian history. Now, New Brunswick is set to become a laboratory to test what its early elimination will do for a new generation of schoolchildren.

History of immersion

French immersion has been described as the most studied educational change in Canadian history. Like the Canadarm, insulin and the goalie mask, it is also a made-in-Canada innovation.

The language bath

The so-called language bath was born in the 1960s when three mothers from suburban Montreal decided their children weren't being taught adequate French in conventional classes. The women enlisted help from experts like famed neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield and, in 1965, Canada's first French-immersion kindergarten class got under way at the Margaret Pendlebury School in Saint-Lambert.

Participation rates

French immersion courses are offered in every province in Canada, enrolling 309,000 students or nearly 8 per cent of all eligible students nationwide. Participation rates climb to 36 per cent in Quebec and 26 per cent in New Brunswick, according to Canadian Parents for French.

Favouring early learning

Fred Genesee, a psychologist at McGill University and world authority on immersion, says research is conclusive that children learn a second language best at a young age. "Early immersion is more effective than late immersion. It gets kids when they are more receptive to learning," Prof. Genesee said. Children's "neuro-cognitive" abilities also favour early learning. "We know it can work," Prof. Genesee said. "If it's not working in New Brunswick it's not about the program - it's about how they're delivering the program."

Teaching a second language early also tends to favour the appreciation of the other culture. Delaying teaching until Grade 5 risks sending a message about French, Prof. Genesee said. "It's like saying you're going to teach math in Grade 5 - it's not so important."

Demographics

Statistics Canada has found that students in French immersion tend to come from better-off families than non-immersion students. According to a 2004 report, more girls enrolled in French immersion than boys, and children in immersion had higher reading scores than their non-immersion peers.

Ingrid Peritz

Across the country

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Relative to population, French immersion is more popular in New Brunswick than any province outside Quebec.

French immersion enrolment totalled 309,032 in the years 2005-2006, representing 7.7 per cent of all students who were eligible to enroll.

TEACHER SHORTAGES

The following chart is drawn from the State of French-Second-Language Education in Canada 2006. It provides a summary of the findings of FSL teacher supply at the time².

Elementary Immersion Secondary Immersion

B.C. Mixed views Mixed views

Alta. Adequate Adequate

NWT Inadequate Adequate

Sask. Inadequate Inadequate

Man. Inadequate Inadequate

Ont. Inadequate Inadequate

Que. Inadequate Inadequate

N.B. Inadequate Adequate

N.S. Adequate Adequate

PEI Inadequate Inadequate

Nfld./Lab Adequate Adequate

WHY THE SHORTAGES?

A survey in the 2006 report asked 22 districts from across the country³:

"What are the reasons you expect fewer qualified ... teachers to be available than needed?" ...

Too few new graduates; 90%

Teacher retirements; 43%

Increase in school pop.; 14%

FSL qualified do not teach FSL; 57%

Program changes; 33%

Other; 10%

... in New Brunswick two districts responded to the

survey. Both cited "too few new graduates." One of the two also cited "FSL qualified do not teach FSL" Nfld./Lab. and "Other."

Notes: 1. Nunavut does not offer immersion. 2. There is no education faculty in the Northwest Territories. 3. The survey chart includes some 2005 data

RICHARD PALMER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL;
SOURCE: CANADIAN PARENTS FOR FRENCH

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The Globe And Mail

Immersed in immersion

Monday, March 31, 2008

Page: A12

Section: Letter To The Editor

Byline: Carol Town

Dateline: Hamilton

Source: assistant head of ESL, Sir John A. Macdonald S.S.

Hamilton -- You assert as fact the myth that kindergarten is the best age to start French immersion programs. "Solid research" does not confirm this phenomenon, even if "common sense" might. In fact, results are inconclusive, but many researchers agree that 8 to 11 is the optimum time to begin a second language.

Studies of Canadian French immersion programs have shown that students who begin immersion in Grade 7 do as well or better by the end of high school as those who begin earlier. Why? Because children need to learn to read in their first language first. Eight-year-olds have developed cognitive skills that actually enhance their ability to learn another language.

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The Globe And Mail

Immersed in immersion

Monday, March 31, 2008
Page: A12
Section: Letter To The Editor
Byline: Ingrid Strauss
Dateline: Victoria

Victoria -- It would be comforting to think that New Brunswick may have realized what other provinces have not - that French immersion programs have turned into publicly funded private schools for elites. Consider:

French immersion classes have significantly fewer children with learning and behaviour problems than their English program counterparts. Problem students are quickly channelled into the English stream.

Immersion classes are more frequently demanded, and provided, in higher- income neighbourhoods. Class sizes in French immersion, particularly middle to higher grades, are often smaller.

Enrolling a child in a second-language program is enriching for both the student and the family. It shouldn't, however, be provided by public funds at the expense of other students in the public system.

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Immersed in immersion

Monday, March 31, 2008
Page: A12
Section: Letter To The Editor
Byline: Alex Fancy
Dateline: Sackville, N.B.

Sackville, N.B. -- Thank you, for reminding the New Brunswick government that our national embarrassment will also be "a grave national setback" if they do not rescind the decision to cancel early French immersion (Immersion Delayed, Immersion Denied - Editorial, March 29).

For pointing out to our leaders that the program needs reinforcement, not elimination, and that provision of "a wide enough range of high-school subjects ... offered in French" would be very helpful. For encouraging them not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

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The Globe And Mail

Immersion delayed, immersion denied

Saturday, March 29, 2008
Page: A22
Section: Editorial

The speed with which small children can pick up a language is hardly disputable. Countless people on this planet observe it every day. Again and again, solid research has confirmed the phenomenon.

Yet the government of the only province in Canada that has declared itself officially bilingual is acting in defiance of this gift of nature. This month, New Brunswick announced that it will wind down the French immersion program in the early grades of Anglophone schools.

Kelly Lamrock, the province's Education Minister, has accepted the recommendations of a two-person commission that reported in February. The commissioners concluded that the dropout rate was high, and that the eventual linguistic results were unimpressive. They not only recommended phasing out immersion but also the removal of French as a core subject in the early years of elementary school.

Instead, there will be compulsory "intensive French" in Grade 5, for a minimum of 270 hours, with optional French thereafter. Although this intensive program is good in itself, it was only designed as a second-best, for thinly populated areas of Canada where there is little demand for French immersion. Mr. Lamrock and Dr. James Croll, one of the two commissioners, have acknowledged that early immersion is better.

Nor is it a matter of money, Mr. Lamrock has said. That leaves the basis for his decision unclear.

The report assembles some numbers and quotes numerous dissatisfied comments from various quarters. But there is a striking lack of analysis, which makes it hard to glean the commissioners' reasoning. They do not explain why so well-founded a concept as early immersion is not, in their view, working in New Brunswick.

"There has always been a lot of talk," said the other commissioner, Patricia Lee, when the report came out, "that by putting children in early immersion that they're going to come out on the other end and be functionally bilingual and be able to walk into any job, and a lot of parents have gone on that premise for many, many years."

That sounds as if Ms. Lee is refuting a straw man. Parents who place their children in French immersion make a serious commitment. Of course, all of us forget things, if we do not continue to use what we have learned. But if a wide enough range of high-school subjects are offered in French, students will indeed "come out on the other end" as functionally bilingual adults.

The real problem in New Brunswick appears to be that the government is not willing to train and hire enough qualified teachers.

New Brunswick, like the island of Montreal, is one part of Canada where bilingualism can be a lived reality, and French immersion is a program in which our country leads the world. It will be a grave national setback if the Fredericton government does not change its mind.

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The Globe And Mail

Anger mounts over French immersion cuts

Friday, March 28, 2008
Page: A5
Section: National News
Byline: Chris Morris
Dateline: FREDERICTON
Source: The Canadian Press
Illustrations: Illustration

FREDERICTON -- New Brunswick's Liberal government is facing a serious political test as opposition intensifies over the decision to scrap early French immersion in the province's schools.

About 400 parents and children demonstrated in front of the provincial legislature yesterday, some carrying signs suggesting Education Minister Kelly Lamrock should be dumped rather than early immersion.

"It's an absolute outrage," said Fredericton resident Philip Vanicek as he marched with his three children. "We're going to be the only province in Canada not to have early French immersion? It's just unbelievable."

Premier Shawn Graham's government decided this month to eliminate the early- immersion program, which begins in Grade 1, in favour of an intensive French program for all students in Grade 5.

In Grade 6, pupils can go into French immersion or the English core program, but French will be a major subject throughout the English curriculum.

The government wants 70 per cent of graduating students to be bilingual by 2012, a key goal in the only officially bilingual province.

Currently, only a small percentage of graduates are functionally bilingual, and the N.B. school system consistently scores in the bottom ranks in Canada in most other subjects.

Mr. Lamrock was booed and jeered as he appeared on the steps of the legislature to address the angry crowd.

Mr. Graham did not appear, although protesters called for him to come out and speak.

Inside the legislature, most questions on the subject were handled by Mr. Lamrock, although Mr. Graham finally stood and told the Conservative Opposition that change is needed. "The status quo is not an option," he said.

While early immersion is popular in the cities where it is offered, few rural areas have access to the program and most children in the province end up in the English core program.

Mr. Lamrock said he doesn't understand why so many people are defending a program that reached only about 20 per cent of the province's children.

He said he is willing to take the political heat. "While

I understand the symbolic importance of early immersion, I am not going to walk out of here in four years and say, 'Hey, we're last in the country in education, but I didn't cause any trouble for anybody.'"

"I have lived the bilingual experience of New Brunswick, and defend it as passionately as anybody. But I recognize when our rhetoric doesn't match our accomplishments."

Many of the parents said the government acted on flawed advice and inaccurate statistics.

They said it would be a disgrace for New Brunswick to scrap a program many believe offers the best opportunity for English-speaking children to learn French.

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