

**A Review of French Immersion**  
and  
**Recommendations**  
**Regarding Future Development**  
in  
School District #72  
(Campbell River)

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## **Overview**

French Immersion (F.I.) programs began in the Campbell River School District nearly three decades ago in response to parent interest in this optional new form of education in British Columbia. From a modest start at Pinecrest Elementary, the program has grown in both a ‘single’ and a ‘dual’ track format to include five locations housing approximately 750 students. District 72 F.I. Program locations, as in most Districts in B.C. were chosen by virtue of available space rather than because of any particular design. As a result, Willow Point School is 100 students over capacity while Ecole Des Deux Mondes is well under capacity.

District 72 enrolment has been in decline for five years (from 7300 to 6300 students) and long term projections indicate that enrolment will stabilize at 5400 students by 2013. While nearly 2000 fewer students will be enrolled in 2010 in comparison to a decade earlier, the numbers of Aboriginals, ESL, and French Immersion students will continue to increase. When Special Education students are also considered, more than half of Campbell River’s student population will be enrolled in a specialized program by 2010. The implications of this phenomenon as well as the southern shift in locations of students will be profound. There will be several locations with abundant space within five years, while other nearby schools will remain over capacity. The mismatch between space and program will place severe strain on Campbell River’s budget, which has the potential to create a situation where student programs may have to be reduced in order to maintain excess school facilities. Accordingly in June 2006, the Board of Trustees commissioned a report on French Immersion programs for students by directing the Superintendent to undertake a review which would provide a backdrop for future decisions concerning placement and support for French Immersion.

This review and recommendations are based on:

- 35 years administrative experience by the author
- direct observation

- historical review of Campbell River programs
- opinion from parents, teachers, school leaders, and advocacy groups
- a review of program alternatives in B.C. and Canada
- data regarding projected enrolment trends and teacher availability

and the following research reports:

- Allen, J.P.B., Cummins, J., Mougeon, R., & Swain, M. (1983). The development of bilingual proficiency. Unpublished second year report. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- BC Ministry of Education Report on Supply and Demand
- CEA Information Note (1992). French Immersion Today. Toronto: Canadian Education Association/Association canadienne d'éducation.
- Dicks, J. (1992). Analytic and experiential features of three French Immersion programs: early, middle and late. The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 49, 37-59.
- Dicks, J. (1994). A comparative study of the acquisition of French verb tense and aspect in early, middle and late French Immersion. University of Ottawa
- Hammerly, H. (1989). French Immersion: Myths and Reality. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.
- Harley, B. (1994). After Immersion: Maintaining the momentum. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 15, 229-244.
- Hart, D., Lapkin, S., & Swain, M. (1988). Early and middle immersion programmes: Linguistic outcomes and social character. Toronto: The Metropolitan School Board.
- Hurd, M. (1993). Minority Language Children and French Immersion: Additive Multilingualism or subtractive semi-lingualism? The Canadian Modern Language/La Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 49, 514-525.
- Krashen, S., Long, M., & Scarcella, R.C. (1979). Age, rate and eventual attainment in second language acquisition. TESOL Quarterly, 13, 573-582.
- Lapkin, S., Hart, D., & Swain, M. (1991). Early and middle French Immersion programs: French language outcomes. The Canadian Modern Language Review/La revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 48, 11-40.

- Lapkin, S. & Swain, M. (1990). French immersion research agenda for the 90s. The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 46, 638-674.
- McVey, M., Bonyun, R., Dicks, J., & Dionne, L. (1990). Early, Middle or Late? Ottawa Board of Education students in Three French Immersion Programmes in Grades 6 and 8. Ottawa: Ottawa Board of Education Research Centre.
- Parkin, M., Bonyun, R., & Unitt, J. (1989). Middle Immersion Study 1988, Ottawa: Ottawa Board of Education Research Centre.
- The State of French Second Languages in Canada 2001, Canadian Parents for French.
- Turnball, M., Lapkin, S., Hart, S., & Swain, M. (1998). Time on task and Immersion graduates' French proficiency. In Lapkin, M. (Ed.) French Second Language Education in Canada: Empirical Studies. (pp. 31-55). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

### ***French Immersion Teacher Availability***

For the past fifteen years, the number of available French Immersion teachers has been in decline. Part of this decline was relative to the teacher shortage in Quebec, partly to the number of French Immersion programs in Canada, partly to issues relative to personal leaves (e.g. pregnancy, travel), partly to the few people being trained in post-secondary education faculties, and partly to the current unattractiveness of teaching as a profession. With regard to the latter, very few of any district's French Immersion graduates have chosen teaching as a profession. (Ministry of Education Supply and Demand Report)

In an attempt to acquire appropriate staff Human Resources personnel from District 72 have attempted the following:

- recruiting sessions at BC universities
- advertisements in provincial and national newspapers
- listings on teacher job find web sites
- recruiting sessions in Quebec, New Brunswick, and Ontario

As a result, the District's Human Resources personnel have been able to fill every available French Immersion position with a qualified teacher. However, should more than one of the 30 French Immersion teachers need a TOC, a French-speaking TOC cannot be guaranteed. No change in the number of available French TOCs or Elementary French Immersion teachers is foreseen in the future.

Provincially, the French Immersion teacher acquisition problem is somewhat more severe than can be observed locally. Advertisements are still appearing in provincial newspapers for French Immersion teachers. According to the Ministry of Education, some districts have programs in jeopardy as a result of unqualified staff or insufficient numbers of teachers. About 10% of the districts in BC do not offer French Immersion. F.I. teacher shortage is frequently cited as one reason why these districts do not offer the program.

The shortage of French Immersion teachers is well documented by the BCTF, the Canadian Parents for French in their 2001 *Report on the Status of French Immersion*, and in the 'Supply and Demand' study commissioned by the Ministry in 2000. Further to a review of provincial needs, it was determined by the BC Teacher Supply and Demand Consortium that French Immersion teachers were one of five areas of dire need by districts (the others include special education, applied technology, math and science).

Some have suggested that District 72 hire unqualified teachers for French Immersion, as well as other positions, in order to deal with the historical shortage. Such a decision would be counterproductive as once a teacher is hired by a jurisdiction they may transfer to other assignments within the District. Accordingly it is unwise to hire any teacher because of a specialty if that teacher is not also highly skilled as an educator. To acquire French-speaking unqualified teachers to deal with immediate need is to create a long-term problem which cannot be effectively remediated. Such a decision would, in the long term, jeopardize quality of both F.I. and other programs in School District 72.

### ***Program Alternatives in BC***

French Immersion is not universally offered in all districts in BC. Where it is offered, there are two different types and at least double the number of opinions about the effectiveness of either option. The two types are early (Kindergarten) or late (Grade 6 or 7) that may occur in a “dual” or “single” setting. Early French Immersion is typically available in most larger school districts (+ 10,000) in BC. Several large districts, however, are contemplating staffing immersion at grade 1 rather than kindergarten in order to address issues relative to class size and teacher availability. The Vernon School District (22), for example, has a popular early French Immersion program in an exclusive format at a stand-alone school. It is interesting to note that this program began as a dual-track program, but as a result of declining English enrolments became a French Immersion school in 1994. At its peak, it served 700 elementary F.I. students but now provides for 500. A second elementary dual-track program has since been created in Vernon as a result of capacity issues at the single track school. Parents of F.I. students in Vernon are strongly supportive of the single track program and prefer this option.

The South Okanagan, and a few districts in the lower mainland and Vancouver Island, offer late French Immersion (grade 6) in a dual-track school. Parent satisfaction for these programs is reported as high as these programs continue to increase in size.

While parents in one community support late immersion or single tracking, such concepts may not be popular in others. In 2001, for example, parents in the Central Okanagan were uniformly opposed to late immersion programs as the only option for the provision of F.I.. Many parents, however, indicated that late French Immersion could be added as another option, if adding it would likely mean that more students would participate in French Immersion. Parents also suggested that some current low enrolment F.I. programs might be the best locations for late immersion. When it came to dual versus single tracking, parents were uniformly supportive of maintaining Central Okanagan’s dual tracking even if it meant that some schools were going to become extremely overcrowded.

### ***Program Alternatives in Canada***

Every program alternative offered in B.C. is also offered elsewhere in Canada. One glaring exception is noted however and that relates to Middle Immersion (starting at Grade 4). Middle Immersion is proving very popular in eastern Canada and has seen substantial growth in the last decade. According to the Canadian Education Association's (C.E.A.) 1992 report, parents who prefer middle immersion or late immersion state that they want their child to receive a good foundation in English before starting a second language. This was especially important for parents of children whose first language is not English or French. The CEA provided opinion that by the time a child was nine, any learning problems would have been assessed and parents would be in a better position to decide about the child's academic program. A study by Parkin, Bonyun and Unitt, (1989) reveals that some parents choose middle immersion over late immersion because they feel that extra-curricular pressures on older children are too great. The study also indicated that parents seem to feel instinctively that middle immersion is the best option. When asked their reasons for choosing middle immersion for their child, some parents simply answered that "early immersion was too early and late immersion was too late" (Parkin, Bonyun, & Unitt, 1989, p. 15).

From an educator's point of view, there is evidence that later entry into immersion programs generally attracts students who are more motivated to learn French. This may lead to a higher retention factor and a stronger commitment on the part of students and parents (CEA, 1992). For school boards, middle immersion may be more cost effective than early immersion, as fewer teachers and resources may be required. With tight fiscal policy, this is of particular concern for boards that must face the question: 'If we can afford only one immersion program, which one should it be?' (Wesche, quoted in Lapkin and Swain, 1990, p. 639).

### ***Theories about Immersion Entry Points and Language Outcomes***

It may seem obvious at first that the learners who accumulate the most hours of instruction in French will acquire the highest proficiency levels, and therefore early immersion beats middle immersion and late immersion in terms of language outcomes. However, it seems equally logical that older learners, with higher cognitive skills and more experience in formal instructional settings, will learn faster than younger learners and could eventually attain the same level as the earlier starters using less time and fewer resources. Krashen, Long & Scarcella (1979) maintain that older children acquire a second language faster than younger children, but that child starters outperform adult starters in the long run. They postulate that older children learn faster than younger children, but that the younger children learn better in terms of long-term acquisition. Various empirical studies have been conducted in an attempt to find an answer to these questions to confirm or deny this hypothesis.

### ***Comparative Evaluations of Early, Middle and Late Immersion Programs***

#### **Hart, Lapkin & Swain (1988)**

In a large-scale study, the researchers studied minority language children enrolled in partial middle French Immersion programs (starting at grade five) in Metropolitan Toronto. On several subtests of the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, “early immersion students who report understanding a third language and those from homes where a third language is used at least half the time, on average obtain lower scores on the reading subtest and to a lesser extent, the vocabulary subtest” (Hart, Lapkin & Swain, 1998, quoted in Hurd, 1993, p. 517). The researchers attribute the outcome differences to literacy skills, which they consider an aid in the learning of a third language.



**Parkin, Bonyun, and Unitt (1989)**

The researchers evaluated Ottawa's middle immersion program (entry in grade 4) when the first cohort reached the sixth grade, and compared the results to the same school district's early immersion and French Immersion programs. The main focus of this study regarded language outcomes and the feasibility of merging students from both programs in grade 7. The sixth-grade middle immersion cohort, consisting of two classes (about 40 students) was matched with grade 6 early immersion classes with similar reading scores. To expand the database, the evaluation also added data from a third grade 4 middle immersion cohort, which consisted of five classes in three schools, and whose results were found to be similar to the first cohort. Information was gathered through questionnaires, the tracing of student progress and the collection of standardized test scores.

The middle immersion cohort's French production skills were comparable to the early immersion cohort in areas such as vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and the use of communicative strategies. However, the middle immersion groups scored lower in listening comprehension and on a cloze test, and made more tense sequence errors in both oral and written work. As a consequence, the investigators advised caution when merging programs.

**McVey, Bonyun, Dicks and Dionne (1990)**

As a follow-up and expansion to the study by Parkin et al. (1989), McVey et al. compared Ottawa's different French Immersion programs among the varying entry points to core French programs. Achievement in grades 6 and 8 was investigated for two cohorts. Sample classes were observed and tested in both the classroom and the language laboratory. Data collection included tests for oral and written French production skills, mastery of French verb skills, and pedagogical patterns related to program type.

Results indicated that the overall French proficiency of the middle immersion students was between that of the early immersion and late immersion students, a finding which the researchers deem "not particularly surprising" (p. 49), given the relative amount of instruction in French. They also noted that the three programs

differed in pedagogical orientation as well as in students' language proficiency, and that the introduction of middle immersion did not substantially reduce the proportion of students in the other immersion programs.

**Lapkin, Hart, and Swain (1991)**

The researchers analyzed their data from a 1987 evaluation of an early versus middle immersion evaluation, with a focus on language outcomes and implications for decision-making. Their sample involved four boards and 26 grade 8 classes in the Metropolitan Toronto area. The middle immersion group was in a partial (50 percent French/50 percent English) program. The data collection involved numerous tests of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French.

Results showed that the early immersion groups outperformed the middle immersion groups by far on the speaking ability test, with the exception of capacity to state and support an opinion. Early immersion students also outperformed the middle immersion students on tests of reading and listening comprehension, although the differences were less marked. Middle immersion students also showed weakness in grammar and syntax on writing tasks. An interesting finding of this study is that early immersion performance on test measures of reading, listening comprehension was closer to francophone standards than middle immersion performance was to early immersion.

**Dicks (1992)**

Dicks noted that previous studies demonstrated a persistent advantage for early immersion students over middle immersion and late immersion students on more experiential tasks and particularly those measuring oral fluency. He inferred that the difference between outcomes may be linked to a difference in classroom technique and set out to determine the degree of analytic (focus on form) and experiential (focus on meaning, communicative) dimensions in Early, middle and late immersion programs in the Ottawa Board of Education. Using a total of fourteen classes, with eight at the grade 6 level and six at the grade 8 level, he collected data using a modified version of the COLT – The Communicative Orientation of Language

Teaching scheme, an observation instrument first developed by Allen, Cummins, Mougeon and Swain (1983). Results showed that the early immersion classes were the most experiential, and late French Immersion the least. Middle immersion programs demonstrated a considerable degree of variation from grade 6 to grade 8.

**Dicks (1994)**

In an expansion of his 1992 report, Dicks engaged in a comparative study of the acquisition of French verb tense and aspect in early, middle and late immersion programs. He set out to examine the inter-language development of the three program variants as it related to students' French verb tense use. He concluded that all three programs were working effectively as reflected in the superior performance by grade 8 students in all three programs on two tests. He also found that two groups of later-starting students were performing at a level which was closer to their earlier starting peers on analytic written tasks.

**Turnball et al. (1998)**

In this study, Turnball et al. discussed the issue of total instructional time in French and its impact on immersion graduates' proficiency in French. Their analyses examined a large merged database derived from evaluation studies conducted in western (Calgary, Saskatoon, Kelowna), central (Sudbury, Nipissing, Toronto, Peel) and eastern Canada (P.E.I., Newfoundland, Halifax). Tests measuring listening, reading, writing and speaking skills were used to compare the language outcomes of students in early, middle and late immersion. Most classes were tested at the end of grade 12.

The investigators' analysis indicated that the early immersion students outperformed students from middle and late immersion programs on selected measures of listening and speaking ability. However, the researchers found that while there was a relationship between earlier starting point and language outcome, the correlation is not linear. In other words, the differences in performance were not directly related to the differences in time on task. In addition, late immersion students outperformed middle immersion on some test measures, a result which the researchers explain may

be due to the fact that the late immersion students had recently received more intensive instruction in French.

The investigators caution against interpreting their results as support of late immersion over early or middle immersion. They affirm that due to self-selection processes, the late immersion students may be the most motivated of the three groups.

### ***Research Conclusions Regarding Early, Middle, or Late Immersion***

Research provides a broad spectrum of conclusions. Each program has both benefits as well as drawbacks. The vast body of research only points to five conclusions that can be made from numerous studies of French Immersion programs. Research does not provide an answer as to the superiority of either dual or single tracking F.I. programs.

- Middle and late immersion students are faster at acquiring certain analytic language skills than early immersion students.
- Early immersion students tend to graduate from their program with better oral and listening skills than middle and late immersion graduates.
- Some of the differences between middle and late immersion students' performance compared to early immersion students on experiential tasks may be related to a difference in classroom teaching techniques within programs.
- Minority language children seem to benefit more from middle immersion than from early immersion as a result of their literacy skills.
- French language outcomes of middle immersion students by grade 8 generally appear to be between the outcomes of early and late immersion students.

### ***Beyond the Data***

The results of these studies indicate that most early immersion students, upon entry into grade 8, have an advantage over middle immersion students in terms of oral and listening skills. As it is “well known that even under optimum conditions, French Immersion students seldom reach a completely native-like proficiency in French” (Hurd, 1993), what is the most appropriate entry level which produces the highest French language outcomes?

To fully answer this question, one must gain an understanding of what happens to French Immersion graduates once they reach the high school level, as “ultimate French language outcomes” refers to immersion students’ French proficiency levels upon graduation from elementary or junior high school. Harley (1994) affirms that most immersion students discontinue their program at the post-secondary level. However, even before that point, it is difficult to maintain students’ interest in French Immersion when an attractive host of program options in English seduce students away from French Immersion. Hammerly (1989) affirms that the time spent on early immersion “is wasted on the majority of students”, since few maintain their exposure to or use of French once their program is completed. He argues that this misuse of time could be avoided by introducing French through middle immersion, whereby students are not only cognitively more suited to second language instruction, but also more motivated to learn the language and more likely to follow through with their studies.

To field test the validity of the research findings and to assess the practical impact of Hurd (1993), Harley (1994) and Hammerly (1989), interviews were held with 10 current and retired superintendents from across Canada. Without exception, respondents, many of whom had extensive experience with French Immersion programs, indicated that there is little difference between the academic skills of students enrolled in early, middle or late French Immersion. All, however, indicated that early immersion students had the best accents and pronunciation of the three

models. In their collective opinion, early Immersion students approached, but did not equal, the skill of native French speakers. The respondents sampled included:

John Cyr	Director General (Retired 2005)	Central Quebec School Board Sillery, QC
Don Goodridge	Superintendent of Schools (Retired 2004)	School District No. 39 Vancouver, BC
Jim Hopson	Director of Education (Retired 2005)	Buffalo Plains School Division No. 21 Regina, SK
Kevin Kobus	Deputy Minister of Education	Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board Barrie, ON
Rob McPhee	Superintendent of Schools (Retired 2006)	Elk Island Public School Regional Division No. 14 Sherwood Park, AB
Peter Moffatt	Director of Education (Retired 2005)	Grand Erie District School Board Brantford, ON
Bruce Sheppard	Director of Education (Retired 2006)	Avalon West School District No. 9 Bay Roberts, NF
Jim Thorburn	Superintendent	School Districts No. 10, 12 & 13 Woodstock, NB
Ron Weston	Superintendent of Schools	Interlake School Division No. 21 Stonewall, MB

### ***Partner Group Opinion about the Future of French Immersion***

Following are the opinions of the District's nine partner groups and various individuals provided to the author during the week of September 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

#### **District Parent Advisory Council**

Seven representatives of the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) met with the author on Monday, September 9<sup>th</sup>. While a wide range of topics were discussed, concern was noted that a long term solution for French Immersion has not been established by the Board. Some felt *“that because of the Board's lack of vision”*

parents of students in this program, as well as parents in the English program are unsure of their location from year to year. Members of the DPAC also noted that:

- resentment is apparent in some parents of English students toward the parents of French students as a result of the overcrowded environment in Willow Point and George Park;
- parents appear more upset about program changes than students;
- students do not graduate in F.I. because of too many program alternatives, and too few students are enrolled in F.I. subjects;
- bussing is an important feature of the program;
- a long term solution needs to be adopted by the Board
- change is very difficult for the community but is required;
- changes is best if it happens to some one else;
- while the present program is preferred, there may be support for single track alternatives;
- good programs should be used as models for all programs rather than basing decisions on fiscal concerns;
- one parent provided a brief which is attached in the Appendix.

#### **Canadian Parents for French**

Six representatives of the Canadian Parents for French (CPF) met with the author on Monday, September 9th. All six representatives felt that it was important that F.I. be given a strong commitment by the Board to grow and prosper. CPF representatives were articulate about concerns surrounding the F.I. programs and above all wanted the Board to know that the program is more important than the form, i.e., F.I. must be maintained. Whether it's dual or single track, early or late is a secondary matter.

CPF identified the same issues as the DPAC as areas of concern. While they too hoped for the maintenance of the present program, they believed that there would be some merit in a single track program.

### **Campbell River Principals and Vice Principals Association and Principals of French Immersion Schools**

Seven administrative personnel from various elementary, middle, and secondary schools were interviewed on Monday and Tuesday, September 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. A variety of issues relative to enrolment, program design, program costs, and program future were discussed. All respondents acknowledged the high cost of small enrolment programs and offered opinions about potential remedies. Respondents valued the French Immersion program but were concerned about accommodation issues in light of projected decreased enrolment. All agreed that any form of F.I. program would be appropriate as long as the program remained.

### **Tony Fantillo**

Tony is the retired Director of Modern Languages. Tony expressed strong support for French Immersion and hoped that it would continue in as many formats as possible. He acknowledged the teacher shortage but did not express a preference for single or dual track as a future option.

### **Public Meeting**

Nineteen parents and teachers attended a two hour session at the Board Office on September 12<sup>th</sup>. The author posed three questions and asked for responses in a focus group format. In response to the first question, “What is right about the F.I. program in District 72?”, respondents agreed that access is the best part, noting that there are two age entry points, a choice of program location, and a choice of program type (single or dual track). With regard to the question, “What needs fixing in the F.I.



program in District 72?, respondents provided a range of opinion that included both personal concerns as well as systemic issues. Some of the opinions included concerns about:

- split classes
- large class sizes
- portables
- the 1 year ‘late immersion’ program at the elementary level
- the yearly pressure to recruit students for late immersion program
- the need for continued bussing
- the shortage of teachers
- too many ‘knee jerk’ decisions by the Board
- the need for a French speaking administrator in each school
- the reduction of F.I. enrolment in high school
- the neighbour vs neighbour infighting at dual track schools

The last question focused on, “What should be the future of French Immersion?”

While some respondents felt that it was necessary to keep the three elementary schools as is, most felt program preservation in any form was the desired future. All respondents felt that a long term solution should be the highest priority and all respondents recommended the need to keep parents in the “communication loop” regarding any program changes.

#### **District Education Leadership team and Senior Management**

An opportunity was provided to sample opinions of the six senior management personnel and eight members of the district educational leadership team. All

respondents expressed strong support for the French Immersion program, but expressed concerns about:

- teacher availability
- declining District enrolment
- the need for a long term solution

Respondents did not express opinions in favor of either dual or single track programming but acknowledged that any alternative needs to be cost neutral. Respondents acknowledged the low participation of aboriginal and special needs students in French Immersion.

#### **Campbell River Teacher's Association**

Nineteen members of the Campbell River Teacher's Association (CRTA) provided opinions on French Immersion with a focus on the future of same. Both French and English teachers expressed pride in the F.I. program and hoped that it would remain in its present form. They acknowledged however, that precise format was less important than program retention. They were aware that the District is declining in enrolment and were aware that facility adjustments will need to be made. Some respondents felt that the grade 6 late immersion should be retained while others indicated that starting at grade 5 or 4 may be more appropriate. Several of the attendees noted they had dual roles at the meeting as they were both teachers and parents of children in F.I.

#### **Canadian Union of Public Employees**

An opportunity was provided to meet with two members of the union executive. While CUPE has no official position, they were supportive of the District making a long term decision which encourages neighbourhood development.

### **S.D. 72 French Immersion Observations**

French Immersion is an important addition to the district’s program options and does provide the opportunity for nearly 750 students to have a bilingual experience. While involvement is high in French at the elementary level, there is progressively less participation by students in French Immersion programs at the middle and secondary. This phenomenon may not be a result of format or content problems in French Immersion, but because secondary-aged students, like all other high school students, wish to participate in the many course options available in Phoenix and Carihi. As a result, students in French Immersion may be more bilingual at grade 6 than they are in grade 12. Additionally, graduate outcome surveys indicate that very few graduates of French Immersion pursue careers or further education involving French as a second language. (CPF, 2001)

#### **French Immersion Graduates vs same cohort enrolment in Grade 6**

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Gr 6, Six Yrs Earlier</b>	<b>Graduates</b>
1996/97	45	18
1997/98	49	14
1998/99	58	24
1999/00	75	26
2000/01	97	39
2001/02	81	22
2002/03	74	23
2003/04	63	23
2004/05	63	23
2005/06	55	28

Parents of children involved in French Immersion must make a commitment to support their children in an optional school program, a commitment that must become greater as their children progress from grades K to 12. This parental support and involvement pays off as French Immersion students are frequently observed on the honour roll and actively participate in many extra-curricular activities. Few French Immersion students are suspended from school for inappropriate behaviour and nearly 100% of French Immersion students graduate on time.

While some argue that parent commitment is the reason for the success of students in the French Immersion programs it is important to note that aboriginal and special education students are under-represented in the French Immersion population. In English education, nearly 15% of the students require some special support, as the district employs over 100 education assistants to deal with special needs students. If the French Immersion program had a similar abnormalcy rate as may be observed in the English program, one would expect that there would be 10 to 12 education assistants assigned to French Immersion special needs children. As there are virtually no special needs children in French Immersion, there are few teacher assistants assigned to French Immersion students. Clearly, there is more at ‘play’ in the academic performance of a French Immersion students than parental commitment.

FSA testing shows that French Immersion students outperform their English counterparts in all SD 72 schools. While some would contend that students become better in English as a result of French Immersion, the reality is that students starting French Immersion were not equal at the outset to their peers in the English program. As a result of special education and aboriginal student under-representation as well as unequal developmental skills of the participants at program onset, the French Immersion program may in reality be more of a “gifted and talented” education program than a bilingual training program.

French Immersion is also a popular choice by parents who are looking for options for students. While no quantifiable data is available, many believe that the French Immersion program allows the district to compete with private schools for students in high socio-economic areas.

No opinions were provided in the research or from respondents to suggest any weaknesses with the SD72 French Immersion program. Indeed the program is strong and well respected locally and provincially. The less than desired graduation rate from French Immersion is universal in Canada and is not likely to be remediated unless requirements for post secondary are changed or incentives for enrolment in post secondary programs are provided to French Immersion students.

Problems do exist with French Immersion however these are principally structural and to a lesser extent financial. As the Board has more program locations than can be maintained, French Immersion and small English education programs are becoming progressively more expensive. It is important to note that French Immersion is no more expensive to operate than a standard English program. Indeed, after the application of federal funds for French Immersion materials, library books and inservice, the Board receives the same amount of money for both. But equity of costs only holds true when French Immersion program costs are compared to schools supporting the identical numbers of English students.

A French Immersion program of 400 students operates at the same expense as an English program of 400. However, a French Immersion program of 400 students is far more cost effective than an English program of 200. The issue is not the type of program, but the costs involved in financing multiple small sites and classes. If, for example, the 480 Elementary Immersion students in SD 72 were in two large stand-alone elementary schools, they would be so cost effective that they would actually underwrite the costs of small English only programs. Because dual-track programs are composed of two smaller independently staffed programs, they do require significantly more district resources.

In addition to the small school sites for French Immersion, a structural problem regarding overcrowding at both Willow Point and Georgia Park must be solved. Both schools are beyond capacity while other Campbell River schools are under enrolled. Additionally opinion provided by parent groups, leadership groups, and the Canadian Parents for French indicated that French Immersion programs, because of the requirement for parent commitment, are more successful in terms of enrolment in high socio- economic areas than in low socio-economic areas. For this reason, it may be prudent to attempt to “grow” French Immersion programs in those areas of the school district.

Further to a review of opinion, research, and available program alternatives one of several long term options should be considered by the Board.

Program options for consideration:

- reduce the size of the French program in dual track schools
- reduce the size of the English program in dual track schools
- add several portables to each site and let each school expand according to demand
- eliminate early immersion at Kindergarten and start at grade one
- eliminate early immersion and start at middle or late immersion
- create two stand alone French schools

### ***Option Evaluation***

#### **Reduce the size of the French Immersion program in dual track schools**

Program reduction is typically accomplished by limiting enrolling students in the Kindergarten program. While such a practice would appear as an option that would please some parents in the English program, most F.I. students live near in the catchment area of the schools that they attend or in the neighbouring catchment areas (see Appendix 1)

Reducing F.I. enrolment will solve F.I. overcrowding, but will increase the number of students wanting enrolment in English. The net effect would be to create added stress at Georgia Park, create one or two empty portables at Willow Point, and shift the French Immersion enrolment problem to an English enrolment problem.

Reducing F.I. enrolment may save the District some money but will not solve issues relative to overcrowding.

#### **Reduce the size of the English program in dual track schools**

This procedure would best be effected by limiting enrolment in the English program. The predicted effect would be that the French program would grow in dual track

schools at the expense of the English program. Over time, it is likely that two small and expensive English programs would co-exist beside large French Immersion programs at Georgia Park and Willow Point, a situation which would be the reverse of the present dual track format but still with the same enrolment and cost issues.

**Add portables to each site and let each school expand according to demand**

Opinion has already been provided to the Board regarding the minimum supportable size of an elementary school in Campbell River (N=250). Despite this fiscal reality, some of those sampled during the consultation process felt that the best size elementary schools should be between 100 and 200 students, while others believe that elementary schools should be somewhere between 250 and 400 students. The body of research does not support smaller schools over larger schools, and finance departments typically dictate the ideal number for an elementary school according to breakeven point. It is interesting to note that the minimum financial break even point is achieved by only five of Campbell River's 15 elementary schools.

While many will choose to temporarily ignore the financial data, satisfaction results from the Ministry of Education's yearly surveys indicate that larger elementary schools (and middle and high schools) are more satisfying to students than small schools. The reverse opinion, however, is provided by parents.

Program expansion according to demand will place some stress on existing facilities particularly for washroom and gym space. Program expansion at Willow Point and Georgia Park will require the district to review the viability of other nearby schools as these locations are downsized. Adding portables to one school while closing a nearby school may result in a significant credibility problem for the Board.

**Eliminate Early Immersion at Kindergarten and start at Grade One**

Once students start school at a given location they tend to stay. By having all students enroll in an English Kindergarten, and then transfer to a French Immersion grade 1, significant numbers of students would be reduced from French Immersion. The effect would be greater if they had to transfer schools. The net result would be to slightly reduce enrolment pressure at Georgia Park and Willow Point. Over time it is

likely that French Immersion would have a smaller presence in SD 72. This decision would save money but would not solve the overall problem created by supporting large numbers of small schools.

**Eliminate early Immersion and start French Immersion at middle or late Immersion**

Like the elimination of the Kindergarten program, starting F.I. in grade 4 or 6 would have profound implications for the enrolment of students at the elementary level. Effects would obviously be felt at all three elementary locations with significant declines in enrolment expected at Georgia Park and EDM. Middle or late Immersion does not mean that the F.I. program will decrease overall in size, but that there may be more interest in F.I. in later years. The Okanagan Skaha District, for example, offers only late immersion. Instead of decreasing participation in F.I. at the secondary level, this District actually maintains a strong enrolment. In Okanagan Skaha 4.37% of the elementary population participates in F.I. while 6.47% of the secondary population choose this option. In SD 72, 12.32% of the elementary population choose F.I. while 5.16% of students are still enrolled in secondary.

**Create two stand alone French Immersion schools**

There is no research to indicate that dual track or stand alone French Immersion programs are better or worse for the education of students. Single or dual tracking is not an educational issue, but an issue of political will. What usually stops the creation of stand alone French Immersion schools is the “back lash” of English parents in a designated cohort area.

SD 72 has the French Immersion population base to create two stand alone F.I. schools. Further, the creation of two schools may permit the expansion of service to include middle immersion, and a second late immersion alternative. Both of the later would lead to an increase in the number of F.I. students in attendance in secondary programs. Stand alone schools could save the District significant money, but creating at least one new location could have significant political cost.



# **Appendix 1**

**The location of Elementary French Immersion  
students in Campbell River**

# **Appendix 2**

**Written Opinion Provided by  
Parents and Advocates**

# **Appendix 3**

**Consultation Schedule and  
Public Address Sheet**