

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY BILINGUALISM IN ONTARIO'S SCHOOLS

Report of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association –
Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de
l'Ontario

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Nathan Lachowsky
e-mail: president@osta-aeco.org
phone: 519.410.1384
website: www.osta-aeco.org

This report was carried out by the 2005–2006 Executive Council:

Nathan Lachowsky	President
Anthony Luna	1st Vice–President
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Dan Moulton	English Public Board Council President
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We would also like to thank the students of the province who provided input, opinion and experience that was essential to the accuracy of the report.

We hope that this report will offer insight as to how French-language instruction and delivery can be improved for all of Ontario's students.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

March 2006

Minister of Education
The Honourable Gerard Kennedy

On behalf of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association – l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario, I am pleased to present you with our report entitled "Culture and Community: Bilingualism in Ontario's Schools". This report comes from student body in all of Ontario's four branches of publicly funded education. It addresses the challenges that French-language school boards face and issues in French as Second Language programs offered in English-language school boards.

With a minority status in the province, students in French-language school boards are disadvantaged by many factors outside of their control. Low enrolment, the difficulties of student retention, assimilation and less choice in French-language post-secondary schooling are challenging obstacles that French-language school boards must continually address. The Ministry of Education has taken steps to minimize the impact of these factors; however, still more must be done to ensure a high quality of education in French-language school boards.

Many students in English-language boards want to achieve bilingualism; they recognize the value of speaking Canada's two official languages. The current curriculum fails to consistently graduate bilingual students. The scheduled 2007 review of French as a Second Language curriculum will be an excellent opportunity for improvements to be made.

"Culture and Community: Bilingualism in Ontario's Schools" is divided into two sections: French-language school boards and French as a Second Language. Each section addresses critical issues that we have identified and offers recommendations so that improvements can be made.

Ontario's students deserve opportunities to succeed in French. This report will offer new perspectives on improvements that Ontario can make to French-language education to ensure that the strength and passion of our French communities and culture continues to inspire young people across the province.

Pursuing Excellence in Education,



Nathan Lachowsky
President, OSTA-AÉCO

PREFACE

Bilingualism in Canada is an invaluable skill; it provides for expanded cultural awareness, increased access to the global economy and allows encounters with a greater variety of perspectives. Ontario supports bilingualism by providing our youth with exposure to the French language in a number of ways, including the education system. Although there is still a strong francophone presence in Ontario, its population is slowly declining.

In 1998, the francophone voice was increased with the creation of French-language school boards. Although French-language schools had existed beforehand, they were governed under a subsection of the local English-language school board. The establishment of French-language school boards gave francophones in Ontario the right to administer their own education system. French-language school boards face additional challenges as they serve a linguistic minority. There have been many programs implemented to assist these school boards, but much work has yet to be done to ensure the survival of the francophone community and equality for all.

In English-language schools, it has become mandatory to follow a certain number of French courses throughout the student's educational experience. French as a Second Language programming has provided students with basic knowledge of the French language, but improvement is necessary to ensure students are able to use their newfound skills.

Ontario's education system strives to provide Franco-Ontarians a strong education system and to teach French to students in English-language school boards. Co-operation in the provincial government has already resulted in several initiatives to support French. Ontario's students are united in their desire to see the French-language remain a strong part of their education system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Culture and Community: Bilingualism in Ontario’s Schools” addresses challenges in delivering education for the French–language school boards of Ontario as well as outlining areas of improvement for the French as a Second Language curriculum offered in English–language school boards.

The report is divided into two sections: French–language school boards and French as a Second Language. Eight recommendations are presented for French–language school boards that address specific challenges that French–language school boards face. An additional seven recommendations in the French as a Second Language section address the difficulties associated with delivering a strong second language program.

This report provides a student perspective on the importance of French education in Ontario. “Culture and Community: Bilingualism in Ontario’s Schools” aims to ensure that all students, regardless of their language of instruction, receive a high–quality education and that French continues to be a relevant and available pursuit for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

French-language School Boards

1. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that all Ontario students have access to an education in a French-language school board supplemented by support networks.
2. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that School Boards strive to incorporate aspects of Francophone culture and heritage into all subject areas.
3. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education allot funding for the development of textbooks and learning resources specifically targeted for French-language school boards.
4. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that proper funding be provided to French-language school boards to adequately promote their schools.
5. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education provide increased transportation to French-language school boards and work in partnership to reduce the current difficulties.
6. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that more programs be introduced to connect students within one school board in order to create a strong sense of identity and community.
7. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that French-language school board students be provided with the same resources and the equal opportunity for success as their English-language counterparts by adjusting funding to compensate for all additional challenges.
8. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Politique d'aménagement linguistique focus on support strategies for exceptional children in consultation with individual school boards, granted additional support funding from the Ministry of Education.

French as a Second Language

1. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that French as a Second Language programs promote the values of bilingualism and encourage all students to pursue bilingualism.
2. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that students who are enrolled in Extended or Immersion French programs at a school outside their boundaries be provided transportation on the same basis as students with the school boundaries.
3. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that Core French instruction begin no later than Grade One in all schools.
4. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that open French courses be made available to students as a part of the regular school day or as a night school course in conjunction with other schools.
5. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that a wider selection of courses be available in French at the senior high school level.
6. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that all French as a Second Language programming place equal emphasis on oral communication, reading and writing skills and create more opportunities for students to practice their French.

FRENCH SCHOOL BOARDS

THE RIGHT TO A FRENCH EDUCATION

Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees Canadians a right to education in either of Canada's official languages. In Ontario, that means children with Franco-Ontarian parents or heritage have a right to education in French. French education is currently delivered by twelve French-language school boards.

Despite the challenges that French-language school boards face, they have continually improved the quality of French education in the province. A combination of the School Board's programs, external exposure to English and the realities of a minority population result in bilingual students. French as a Second Language programs in English-language school boards have not had the same success in graduating bilingual students.

All students in Ontario's education system should have an equal opportunity to become bilingual. Consequently, all students in Ontario should have the right to attend a French-language school board. There are clear benefits to the students and the larger Franco-Ontarian community. Faced with ever-increasing assimilation pressures, declining population and a shortage of professionals, the Franco-Ontarian community is in need of new French advocates to ensure its survival.

The *Education Act* currently permits students whose families do not meet the criteria outlined in the Charter to attend French-language schools under certain conditions. The committees responsible for determining admission should be encouraged to allow students to attend French-language schools. Additional support must be made available to students not entitled to French-language education who attend French-language schools to ensure their success.

1. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that all Ontario students have access to an education in a French-language school board supplemented by support networks.

INSTRUCTION

French-language school boards differ from English-language school boards beyond the language of instruction. Therefore, the educational experience of students in French-language school boards must reflect that difference. Although students in French- and English-language school boards must learn the same concepts, French-language school boards must promote a Franco-Ontarian identity amongst students at the same time.

French-language school boards must integrate francophone culture and heritage with

the curriculum they are delivering. This can be achieved by showcasing important accomplishments of francophones as well as discussing issues of particular importance to francophone culture and heritage in all subject areas. The integration of francophone culture into the daily lives of students will help foster the development of a strong Franco-Ontarian identity.

2. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that School Boards strive to incorporate aspects of Francophone culture and heritage into all subject areas.

High-quality learning resources are needed to support a strong Franco-Ontarian identity amongst students. If student and teacher resources are made available for daily use, the values of French culture and heritage will become a part of the learning process.

3. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education allot funding for the development of textbooks and learning resources specifically targeted for French-language school boards.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The large regions covered by French district school boards presents many critical challenges. While school boards have adapted their administrative methods to suit their conditions, it is imperative that the necessary monies and resources be made available to ensure equal opportunities for success for students. Geographic and demographic factors should not compromise the quality of the education students receive.

Promotion

During the kindergarten recruitment period, French-language school boards must communicate the importance and existence of their schools within communities. Parents are often not aware of the possibility of a French education for their child. It would be beneficial for French school boards to promote their schools to all applicable regions via public media outlets.

The importance of promoting French education cannot be underestimated due to the ever present assimilation pressures that Franco-Ontarians face. The Commission nationale des parents francophones' national early childhood development support plan states:

“It is important to interest parents very early in the Francophone [education] system, since the birth of a child, particularly the first, marks a moment of long-term determining choices.”¹

¹ La Commission nationale des parents francophones, “Plan national d’appui à la petite enfance”, unpublished, January 2002.

The Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC) and the Association des conseillères et des conseillers des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO) characterize schooling as “the first line of defense against assimilation”.² Promoting French-language education is essential not only for the schools, but for the larger Franco-Ontarian community.

4. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that proper funding be provided to French-language school boards to adequately promote their schools.

Students must enroll in French-language school boards at the beginning of their education as switching between English- and French-language school boards partway through elementary schools is challenging experience academically, socially and emotionally.

Transportation

As French-language school boards serve a fixed population dispersed across a large region, they are faced with greater transportation costs. They must accommodate a greater number of students who live farther away than their English counterparts. As well, students that attend French-language schools are from several municipalities and therefore busing cannot be shared as effectively with English-language school boards.

In cases where French-language school boards can provide their own system, they do so at an increased cost. Students are often subjected to bus rides exceeding one hour each direction in order to reduce the number of buses needed. Despite this cost-saving measure, transportation is still very expensive. The difficulty increases at the secondary level where schools serve even larger geographic areas. “In certain cases, the transportation hardship is enough to convince some parents to send their children to a closer English-language school.”³ Students should not be denied the opportunity to a French-language education because of transportation challenges. For exceptional students, the transportation hardship is even more pressing.

5. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education provide increased transportation to French-language school boards and work in partnership to reduce the current difficulties

² Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques and Association des conseillers(ères) des écoles publiques de l'ontario, « French-Language Education and the Education Funding Model In Ontario: A Brief to the Education Equality Task Force”, July 2002.

³ Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques and Association des conseillers(ères) des écoles publiques de l'ontario, « French-Language Education and the Education Funding Model In Ontario: A Brief to the Education Equality Task Force”, July 2002.

Network and Community

As a minority group in Ontario, francophones continually struggle to preserve their language and culture. The francophone culture consists not only of speaking the language, but to understand, value, and promote an identity and culture specific to Franco-Ontarians. One of the most important aspects for students studying in a French-language school is a feeling of belonging. For students living in a community with a significant Anglophone presence, the school offers not only a learning environment but is also their primary exposure to French speaking communities.

It is important to ensure that students appreciate and maximize their time spent at school. More programs unifying schools within a school board are encouraged, as they provide students with the opportunity to network with similar student in the proper environment.

6. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that more programs be introduced to connect students within one school board in order to create a strong sense of identity and community.

For Franco-Ontarians, schools are their major community centres because the French population is not always large enough to sustain other community organizations. Without a place to speak French outside the home, or to meet other francophones, schools and their communities are vital to fostering a strong sense of Franco-Ontarian identity.

ENROLMENT & STUDENT RETENTION

One of the most significant issues for French-language school boards is the enrollment and retention of students. The promotion of French-Language schools is essential, not only for the survival of schools themselves, but also for the Francophone communities.

French-language school boards lose students to English-language school boards for a variety of reasons. Some are beyond the control of French-language school boards, while others have the potential to be resolved. More specialized programming and resources are available for exceptional children in English-language school boards.

English-language schools usually have more resources to support struggling students. There are many community programs and facilities provided in English that are available to English speaking schools. These alternatives are not available or offered in the French language. In the case where French is the second language of a child, parents feel as though French is an unnecessary challenge to their child's learning.

Transferring from a French-language school board to an English-language school board

is more likely to occur after elementary school. Again a number of factors contribute to this decision. Some choose English–language education due to proximity; others see greater opportunity for extra–curricular activities, specialized programming and involvement within the community. As French–language schools are sometimes the only French–language centres, they often do not have the resources for the variety of extra–curricular learning experiences that many English–language schools provide. As well, students who plan to pursue post–secondary education in English sometimes feel as though learning in French will place them at a disadvantage in their future learning.

The focus must not be keeping students in French–language school boards; rather it should be on providing the same quality education, support services, extra–curricular activities and community involvement opportunities for students in school boards of either language.

7. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that French–language school board students be provided with the same resources and the equal opportunity for success as their English–language counterparts by adjusting funding to compensate for all additional challenges.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

French–language school boards have faced an increased challenge in providing special education to their students. French–language school boards encounter similar challenges to that of English–language school boards; however, they are often exaggerated by the unique issues present in a French–language school board.

Merely identifying exceptional students comes at an extra cost for French–language school boards. This is because boards have neither the qualified staff nor the tools in French necessary to diagnose students. Without these critical resources, French–language school boards are forced to procure these services from outside agencies.

The distance between schools also poses a challenge to French–language school boards. It is difficult to coordinate sharing staff and resources between several cities. As well, dealing with several municipalities makes it harder to develop programs that utilize community resources and integrate students into community life.

French–language schools are often one of the only French organizations in communities. They face limited access to social and health services, treatment programs and community centers. As opposed to their English counterparts, French–language schools are often solely responsible for providing the support that exceptional children need at a heightened cost.

Lower enrollment numbers in French-language schools as well as the dispersion of the population means that there is a lower concentration of students who need specialized education. Schools have difficulty finding enough students to run a class; the separation between schools often makes it impractical to send all exceptional students to a central school.

There are significantly less learning resources available in French than are available in English. French-language school boards struggle to find appropriate resources to support students with varying needs. Once located, cost is often a barrier to procuring such resources.

Oftentimes, students receive more specialized support in English-language school boards because they already have resources in place and there is a larger network of community organizations available to provide relief. Parents who are forced to choose between a French education and the specialized care their child needs are required to compromise either their child's development or their child's Franco-Ontarian identity.

8. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Politique d'aménagement linguistique focus on support strategies for exceptional children in consultation with individual school boards, granted additional support funding from the Ministry of Education.

FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

As one of Canada's official languages, French has an important role in Ontario's Education System. Schools in Ontario provide a variety of options for students wishing to pursue French studies: Core French, Extended French, and French Immersion. The curriculum recognizes the importance of learning French and acknowledges that the French language and culture is an extremely vital aspect of our Canadian culture and history.

The curriculum aims "to provide students with fundamental communication skills in French" and "to develop and refine students' ability to communicate in French". The curriculum sets these goals as the "the minimum expectations." Unfortunately, the curriculum is does not meet the needs of students who are striving to achieve bilingualism. The course options that are available to students now are not sufficient to develop bilingual graduates.

Students often realize the very real benefits of bilingualism too late to pursue French course options such as Extended and Immersion programs. French as a Second Language programs should educate students as to the advantages of bilingualism and promote opportunities to use French and encourage students to pursue French education. Encouraging bilingualism in young students will foster an appreciation and respect for the French language and will be of greater long term benefit to students.

9. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that French as a Second Language programs promote the values of bilingualism and encourage all students to pursue bilingualism.

There are a variety of reasons that compel students to drop their French studies. The pressure students face to obtain high marks, coupled with the myth that students will do better in English-language courses leads some students to drop their French courses or take a French course that is below their level in their final years of high school. Many students do not have space in their timetable for French courses as they need to fulfill admission requirements for their post-secondary programs. In this case, French no longer remains a priority.

Although there is a certificate granted to students who complete Extended or Immersion French, this certificate is not widely recognized by employers. Students debating whether to continue in their Extended or Immersion French programs do not believe the certificate to be of any value in terms of securing employment or proving a standard of bilingualism.

Students must be encouraged to complete their French programs at the high school level and to continue at the post-secondary level. In secondary schools, this can be accomplished by increasing awareness of the certificate throughout the province and other incentives.

A major difficulty concerning French as a Second Language programming is ensuring that all students have access to the French as a Second Language courses they want. Although Core French is mandatory throughout elementary school and Grade 9, the number of courses offered after that point decreases significantly. Core French courses do not always have the numbers to run.

Extended and Immersion French programs are usually offered in only a few schools per board. Students who are not in the boundaries for the schools with Extended or Immersion programs are expected to cover all or some of the costs for transportation. This is an unfair barrier to students wishing to receive their education in French.

10. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that students who are enrolled in Extended or Immersion French programs at a school outside their boundaries be provided transportation on the same basis as students with the school boundaries.

CORE

As they stand in most Ontario schools, Core programs are ineffective. For many students, the course is repetitive and frustrating. Some students only take the course to fulfill the credit requirement. These students often resent the requirement as they cannot see how they will be able to use the French they are learning. The attitude of students means that they are less likely to retain the French they do learn. There must be a concentrated effort to ensure these courses are meaningful and relevant for students. This can be achieved by increasing the oral communication aspects of the course.

Core programs must place greater emphasis on oral communication. Focusing on verbal skills prepares students to converse in the language and use their knowledge in a real life situation. As well, verbal communication serves as a broad base from which students can learn other aspects of the language.

There is a significant amount of research to show that the earlier children start learning additional languages, the more likely that child will succeed in the language. Currently, the recommendation is that Core French begin in the fourth grade. Some schools do offer French before Grade Four; however, this is not the case in all schools. Students should learn French in the best circumstances possible: this means starting instruction

as early as possible. Beginning instruction early also provides maximum opportunity for students to choose Extended or Immersion streams of French programming.

11. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that Core French instruction begin no later than Grade One in all schools.

Although the curriculum includes open courses at the secondary level, they are not widely offered by schools. Regardless of a student's post-secondary plans, French is a useful and important skill. Open level courses would make French accessible to a greater number of students.

12. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that open French courses be made available to students as a part of the regular school day or as a night school course in conjunction with other schools.

EXTENDED & IMMERSION

Extended and Immersion French only vary in the number of courses a student is taught in French. Students enrolled in these courses throughout high school become very familiar with the French language in written, listening and reading comprehension. However, unless they practice it thoroughly outside of school, they rarely become confident communicating verbally.

Students in Extended and Immersion French programs have a very limited course options if they wish to take courses taught in French in their last years of high school. In fact, some students cannot complete Extended or Immersion program requirements as they cannot take their prerequisite credits for post-secondary education in French. In order to allow students to complete Extended and Immersion programs and to encourage students to continue French at a post-secondary level, there should be a wider selection of courses available in French.

13. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that a wider selection of courses be available in French at the senior high school level.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Common to Core, Extended and Immersion French programs is insufficient opportunity for students to practice their communication skills. Often the only time they speak in French is during rehearsed oral presentations or when addressing the teacher. This does not allow students to develop the ability to converse freely in French.

Despite the numerous opportunities for exchanges, summer work programs and other immersion experiences, these programs are not always adequately promoted amongst

students. As well, financial pressures and other commitments often prevent students from participating in such programs. Although these types of experiences are incredibly beneficial for students learning to speak French, they are not accessible to all students. As well, students also need avenues to practice their French within their own communities on a regular basis.

French as a Second Language programs that create opportunities outside the classroom for students to communicate in French graduate students who are more confident in their verbal abilities. Interaction between French as a Second Language students from different grades or schools is a simple way in which this can be facilitated. In addition, there may be opportunities to volunteer in a French setting depending on the demographics of the community.

Absent opportunity to interact with other French speakers, students must be given a way in which they can practice their French. Computer software that allows students to test and practice their oral communication skills is one way that students can practice French routinely.

14. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that all French as a Second Language programming place equal emphasis on oral communication, reading and writing skills and create more opportunities for students to practice their French.