



La Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique

**French first-language and second-language education in British Columbia:
Context, challenges and community**

Submitted by the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique
to the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages

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Context

French first-language and second-language education is thriving in British Columbia, with demand far outstripping capacity, despite a political and cultural climate that at first glance would appear not to be favourable.

BC is a fundamentally multilingual society, with large immigrant communities, particularly from Asia, and Indigenous communities, all looking to preserve their linguistic heritage, albeit for different reasons and through different ways. This environment, and the sometimes sensitive relations between groups within it, can also have practical ramifications on French-language education programs.

For example, in May 2016, the Haida Gwaii School Board decided to cut French immersion from its Skidgate school, where three languages – English, Haida and French – were taught.¹ This decision, confirmed by the school trustees at a public meeting in June,² appears to have been based on the goal of reconciliation. The School Board Chair read out Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is worth mentioning that Haida Gwaii has two official languages, English and Haida, which explains why the Haida and francophone minorities have an urgent need to preserve their linguistic heritage.³

The relationship between both official languages and Indigenous languages can also be one of mutual support. The Association des Francophones et Francophiles du Nord-Ouest, a member of the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique, has been quite successful with a trilingual⁴ flashcards program for children and teachers in the villages of Prince Rupert and Hazelton, made possible with the support of each village's respective Indigenous communities.

Mandarin-language education programs⁵ bring up other issues: China's growing political importance, Canada's position as a Pacific Rim economic power, and recognition for an immigrant community by granting its language official status.

¹ http://www.affno-cb.ca/Images/les_affnouvelles_juin_2016.pdf

² http://www.affno-cb.ca/Images/affnouvelles_sept_2016.pdf

³ http://www.ocol-clo.gc.ca/fr/cyberbulletin_newsletter/2012/avril

⁴ English, French and Sm'algayax in Prince Rupert, and English, French and Gitksan in Hazelton.

⁵ Bilingual (50/50) or immersion (100/0 or 80/20 initially) programs.

Countries, great and small, strive to promote their national interests through culture, including through programs to teach their national languages. Examples of this would be L'Alliance française, the Goethe-Institut and the Cervantes Institute. Regarding the Coquitlam School Board's Mandarin-language program, the curriculum was developed by the Chinese government through the Confucius Institute under a memorandum of understanding signed with the Province in 2008.⁶ This relationship with the Chinese government benefited the school board financially.⁷

Having Mandarin programs in a number of provincial school boards⁸ has sparked calls for the French immersion program to be abolished, claiming that Mandarin is more useful than French to BC children, since the province's future rests in the Pacific Region. This utilitarian argument is behind what is sometimes heard from the Chinese community—that the community's demographic weight, scale of investments and links with China warrant Mandarin being given special status. In both cases, this approach reveals a conception of Canada far removed from one based on the two official languages.

More generally, we can say that this tendency of a large segment of the Canadian population to pit official languages policy against multiculturalism – and unconsciously, old-stock against new Canadians – which dates back to the 1970s,⁹ lives on and is enjoying renewed legitimacy in light of globalization. To counter this last point, learning French as a second language needs to be promoted as a gateway to learning other languages, tying Canada to the phenomenon of globalization, while also remaining a key component of Canada's identity.

Challenges

As we already know, receiving a French first-language education is a constitutional right, while learning French as a second language is not. As a result, they have two different statuses. Identifying with the francophone community is vital to the first, but missing in the second. Obviously there is a fundamental difference between the two in terms of

⁶ <http://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/school-boards-ok-with-china-paying-for-b-c-curriculum>

⁷ <http://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/confucius-and-the-coquitlam-school-district>

⁸ Burnaby, Coquitlam, Richmond and Vancouver.

⁹ <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp>

intent. That said, both programs have certain points and characteristics in common, such as a significant decline in primary school enrolments over time, and a shortage of post-secondary programs in French, pushing students to continue their education in English.

We believe that efforts to develop and enhance a French-language learning continuum are vital to the future of the language, including

- support for early childhood education
- adequate funding for primary and secondary programs
- expanded post-secondary programs

Community

The link between the visibility, health and vitality of the francophone community and French-language education programs is worth highlighting. For young francophones born in one of the provinces or abroad, having a community where their language is a daily reality is necessary to complete the identity-building process started in French-language schools. For young people learning French as a second language, having a local francophone community anchors their learned language in a tangible reality. Based on anecdotal evidence compiled by Canadian Parents for French Ontario, immersion programs physically located near a francophone community may have better outcomes.

Our province's francophone community, unlike many others across Canada, is not a local one. There is no city, town or neighbourhood with a significantly large concentration of francophones. This community, Canada's fourth in terms of size, is spread out across the province with a provincial average of 1.5%. While not a local community, over the years it has become a community of interests, nurturing a collection of organizations, institutions, meeting places and events. These make up the backbone of the francophone community, and francophone schools are vital to its sustainability.

However, community associations and francophone schools are experiencing financial challenges that threaten the successes and progress made in recent years. Schools in the francophone school board need funding so that the Board can carry out its provincial mandate of providing an education of comparable quality to that of the majority.¹⁰ Francophone associations need to see their funding increase for the first

¹⁰ <https://www.csf.bc.ca/nouvelles/une-nouvelle-etape-de-franchie-pour-la-cause-juridique-menee-par-le-csf-et-la-fpfc/> [IN FRENCH ONLY].

time since 2001. Because funding has been stagnant, francophone associations are showing signs of serious exhaustion, as seen by a reduced capacity to rise to new challenges, meet new needs and reach new target groups. Francophone communities are, and remain, the federal government's best partner for achieving its official languages objectives. Their exhaustion should set off alarm bells for the government.

Conclusion

French-language learning programs depend on Canadians agreeing to a conception of Canada that includes two pan-Canadian languages, English and French, as well as Indigenous and Inuit languages that are locally focused. This linguistic conception is worth all the effort and investment needed to maintain it. In the final analysis, francophone minority communities are necessary for the success of French-language learning programs, as the young people who pass through these programs are the future of Canada's communities and identity that has been developing over generations, an identity we will be celebrating in 2017.