



## Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages

CPF BC & YK Submission

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Bonjour,

Mon nom est Glyn Lewis, et je suis le Directeur général de Canadian Parents for French BC & YK.

First, I would like to welcome the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages to Vancouver, and to thank you for hosting today's discussion.

In the few minutes I have, I would like to share a few stories of our shared accomplishments, and recommendations for improvement.

To help give context let me quickly begin with the origins of our organization, **Canadian Parents for French**. *The past, they say after all, is prologue.*

In the mid 1960s, a group of Anglophone parents in St. Lambert, Quebec decided their children would be better off knowing both French and English. The Quiet Revolution was shifting the balance of power and bilingualism, these parents rightly recognized, would be a much-needed asset moving forward. French up to that point was poorly taught to Anglophone Quebecers. This small group of parents (I should note they were all mothers) solicited the help of two academics and – **after great persistence and lobbying** – convinced the local school board to create the first ever “French immersion” program. Cunningly, the parents billed it as a ‘pilot program’. Experimentation, it turns out, really was all the rage in the mid 60s.

Word spread quickly and more parents -- mostly Anglophone -- took it upon themselves to lobby local school boards for their own French immersion programs.

It may be hard to fathom today, but these parents were often met with stiff, if not downright hostile, opposition. The Premier of Alberta at the time publicly denounced French. An entire school board on the Sunshine Coast quit in protest to the introduction of French immersion in their community. Vitriol spewed on call-in shows and in the newspaper editorials. As one early advocate for French immersion recounted, “It felt like the country was coming apart at the seams and we were trying to stitch it back together; one French program at a time.”



Since the inaugural pilot program in St. Lambert in 1965, **one million** Canadians have participated in the French immersion program from St. John's to Haida Gwaii and as far north as Yellowknife.

Here in B.C., the first program opened in 1968, at the request of then *Franco-Columbian Federation*, in the Maillardville area of Coquitlam.

A few days ago, we put out a media release announcing that **52,540** British Columbia K-12 students are now registered in French immersion, just shy of **10%** of the entire student body. In addition to those 52,000, we have another 180,000 students learning French through the basic, "Core French" program.

How far we've come in 48 years!

Looking a bit further north, there are **670** Whitehorse students currently enrolled in the French immersion program or **13%** of the entire Yukon student population.

This past year, with the support of Canadian Heritage and Radio-Canada, we launched a project to track down and interview some of our French immersion, Core French, and Francophone graduates. The project, called ***Where Are They Now? Où en sont-ils?*** captured personal stories which we've archived on our website and shared with the current generation of students.

We include stories of students like **Melissa Luther**, who learned French in Richmond, developed a love for travel and culture and is now a top Brand Strategist with Lululemon. Another student, **Zeynin Juma**, learned French in Calgary, went to France on a student exchange in university, and one day met a French man in a bank line-up who is now her husband. And stories like my own. I graduated in Burnaby and after university moved to the Plateau where I made an amazing group of friends and experienced a whole other side to our country. I now work for an organization that supports and promotes bilingualism because, in all her wisdom, my mom enrolled me in French immersion not so many moons ago.

As a Vancouverite, thanks to French Immersion, I've been able to work and live in any part of our country and be part of the national conversation in both official languages.

We know learning French is a gift that opens so many doors. It also brings our country closer together and helps young Canadians live up to their fullest potential.



Every student who participates in a French program deepens the roots of bilingualism in this country. The socio-cultural and the social-political impact cannot be overstated.

Every five years, or so, our organization commissions a public opinion poll on the support for bilingualism in B.C. In 1982, **51%** of British Columbians thought learning French was an asset. By 2015 **75%** agreed – a 24% increase in support over 30 years. Moreover, support amongst British Columbians for our two Official Languages has increased **13%** in the past seven years alone!

And yet, in spite of all this success, there are many challenges.

First, we have problems with **access**.

In roughly 20 B.C. communities right now there are more families trying to get a spot for their child in a French immersion program than there is space. In other words, demand is exceeding capacity. **This, unfortunately, leads to program capping, wait lists, and lotteries.** You have likely heard of stories of parents in Salmon Arm camping out 2, 3, and even 4 nights to gain one of those limited French immersion spots or perhaps of parents who host “call parties” using multiple cell phones in communities, like Surrey, where the French immersion registration is completed by telephone on a first-come-first-serve basis. It can actually be harder to get your kid into French immersion than a ticket to that final Tragically Hip concert.

The result is that access to popular French immersion programs -- for far too many children -- comes down to chance. This is a great injustice to thousands of students who are turned away every year, and a disservice to the national quest for bilingualism.

Unlike native Francophone programs, French second language programs like French immersion and Core French are not constitutionally guaranteed. These are considered, “*programs of choice*” and are offered at the discretion of local school districts. In B.C. there is provincial legislation requiring school districts to offer a second language from Grades 5 to 8 but it is up to the community to decide on the language of choice.

This puts parents in the unique position of having to lobby, community-by-community, for a program that enables young Canadians to become proficient in both Official Languages.



Traditionally, our levers in advocating for the creation of a new French program have been two-fold: Federal French funding (the carrot) and local parental pressure (the stick).

Unfortunately, the funding envelope for French language education has remained static for well over a decade yet during this time the demand for

French has skyrocketed. Since the financial pie has not grown and there are more mouths to feed, so to speak, each school district is getting less and less of a share despite growing enrolment.

As such, one of our more powerful levers has become impotent. There is no new funding set-aside in B.C. for the creation of new programs. We can no longer argue that a school district will receive additional resources if they create a new French program. We have lobbied the provincial government for many years to tweak their funding formulas to recreate a financial incentive. Again and again they have demurred. Despite the objectives outlined in the Official Language and Educational Protocol (OLEP) and the bilateral agreements, our provincial government has not joined us in making participation and growth a priority.

From our perspective, one of the most important considerations for the new Roadmap should be to **create and lock in funding for growth**. This would greatly enable local parent advocates to effectively lobby for new programs, where there is the demand. No child should be turned away.

## The second significant challenge we face is the **French Teacher Shortage**.

For 18 consecutive years, French immersion enrolment has increased in almost every single school district. Whenever a new program is created, it needs at least three things: a classroom, a qualified teacher, and books. The responsibility to manage classroom space rests with the local school district. Whether in English or French immersion, the district administers student placement, so classroom space, normally, is manageable. What is beyond the control of a school district is the supply of qualified French teachers. Two years ago, our CPF BC & YK Branch commissioned a report on the shortage of qualified French teachers. Here are two key findings:

- **86%** of school districts that offer French immersion indicated to us that it is “Challenging” or “Very Challenging” to hire enough qualified French immersion teachers. The teacher



shortage is now the number one reason why school districts find themselves unable to expand or create new French immersion programs.

- According to a 2007 UBC study, **78%** of elementary school **Core French** teachers and **71%** of middle school teachers do not feel comfortable speaking French. This speaks to the quality of Core French, the lack of language proficiency of Core French students, and the very high attrition rates witnessed at the high school grades.

Again, this is an area the next Roadmap could and should address. Here are the recommendations we have put forward to the Provincial Government, the post secondary institutions, and the Federal Government.

There are certainly more.

- Improve, expand, or offer different French immersion teacher training programs.
- Make high school and post-secondary students aware of the acute shortage of French teaching positions to encourage them to pursue a career as a French teacher.
- Create incentives for teacher training in French.
- Create labour mobility agreements between provinces and standardized teacher certification requirements to facilitate out of province bilingual teachers to work in BC-Yukon.
- Increase recruitment of French-speaking teachers from abroad.
- Increase authentic language immersion opportunities for post-secondary students and teacher candidates and provide bursaries to encourage attendance.
- Improve the teaching of Core French by creating specialist positions for Core French at the elementary and middle school levels.
- Add the certification requirement for all new teachers to take one second language methodology course.

Third, we need to **create more authentic linguistic and cultural experiences.**

There are many excellent examples of local Francophone organizations hosting rich socio-cultural events, programming and activities that we promote, to parents, educators, and students. These experiences are invaluable portals for young British Columbians and Yukoners to use French in a meaningful way and experience the vibrancy of the French language and culture beyond the classroom walls. Such experiences inspire young students to continue with their language education.



Nevertheless, we believe much more can be done to immerse western Canadian students in authentic socio-cultural and socio-linguistic experiences.

This includes:

1. Greater work and educational exchanges to French speaking communities across Canada and around the world,
2. Creating deeper links between FSL and French First Language youth, and
3. Enabling greater employment mobility between English and French speaking regions of the country.

On the whole, the bilingual project in Canada has been a great success.

According to the 2011 Census, 296,000 British Columbians self-identified as being able to speak both French and English, making French one of the most commonly known languages in our province. Quite a remarkable feat when you consider our geographic distance from Ontario and Quebec.

In closing, we greatly appreciate all the support from the Federal Government and the Senate Standing Committee on Official Languages over the years.

It would not be a stretch to claim that we are a proud, welcoming, and diverse nation because of our multilingualism and multiculturalism.

We look forward to being part of this enterprise for many great years to come.

Sincerely,

Glyn Lewis  
Executive Director, Canadian Parents for French BC & YK