



# The Case for Early French Immersion

## A Response to J. Douglas Willms

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In July 2007 the New Brunswick Department of Education commissioned a review of French second language programming in New Brunswick. The Minister of Education, Kelly Lamrock, appointed two commissioners, James Croll and Patricia Lee, neither of whom is an expert in the area of second language education.

On February 27, 2008 the Commissioners released their report. To the disbelief of informed readers, the report presented a totally one-sided view of Early French Immersion (EFI) programming in New Brunswick. The views of second language experts, and other key informants such as the Commissioner of Official Languages, who spoke about the benefits of EFI as well as the problems that need to be addressed, were not included in the report. Years of research on EFI demonstrating its effectiveness with regard to French proficiency and overall literacy were also ignored.

Subsequent analyses of the Croll-Lee report by professors from the Math and Statistics Department at UNB Fredericton, as well as other professors at UNB, Mount Allison, and Université de Moncton, clearly demonstrated that there were serious errors in the way statistical data were presented. Major conclusions about the relative value of late immersion over early immersion were based on analyses that were improperly reported.

On March 14 2008, two weeks after the report was released, the Minister of Education announced his intention to implement all the major recommendations of the report, including the elimination of EFI.

Consequently, New Brunswick, Canada's only officially bilingual province, will be the only province without an EFI program. In fact, it will be the only Canadian province not to have any French second language programming from Kindergarten to grade 4.

The decision to eliminate EFI appears to be based on three unproven assumptions:

- 1) EFI is a major cause of students in the Anglophone system not achieving desired educational outcomes.
- 2) The new Intensive French program will produce 70% of students with Intermediate proficiency or better.

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- 3) Intermediate proficiency in French is sufficient for students who wish to use French effectively in social, educational and work-related situations.

This brief uses most recent NB Department of Education test data and second language research findings to show that these assumptions are false and, consequently, the radical decision to eliminate the EFI program is both unnecessary and unwise.

## Findings

- New Brunswick results on PISA (the Program of International Student Achievement conducted by the OECD) for Anglophone school districts are very similar to the results of students in the other Atlantic Provinces
- On average, there is no meaningful difference in the percentage of students meeting objectives on Grade 2 core English literacy tests in schools that have EFI compared to schools that do not, suggesting that there is no streaming effect.
- Eliminating Early French Immersion would result in one less student per class on a Special Education Plan (3.4 students compared to 4.3 students)
- Girls and boys are enrolled in French Immersion in near equal numbers in New Brunswick.
- 85% of Early French Immersion students achieved Intermediate Plus proficiency and 42%, Advanced proficiency.
- 46% of Late French Immersion students achieved Intermediate Plus proficiency and 9%, Advanced proficiency.
- Most Intensive French students achieve a Basic-low level of proficiency after five months of intensive French at grade 5.
- There is no evidence available that Intensive French students reach Intermediate proficiency by the end of high school.

**The fundamental choice of parents in a public school system is to enroll their children in a school where they can learn to the best their ability. It is the duty of all adults involved to ensure that the appropriate supports are provided so that each child can reach his or her full potential.**

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## How are New Brunswick students faring?

In his brief, *The Case for Universal French Instruction*, Doug Willms reports that New Brunswick students are performing considerably lower than the Canadian average on the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

However, PISA results also reveal that Canada is doing extremely well internationally. Even the lowest scoring provinces in Canada are doing well by international standards. In fact, among 31 countries, only Finland performed significantly better than Canada in reading; only Korea and Japan performed significantly better in mathematics; and only Korea, Japan and Finland performed significantly better in science.

In this context of extremely high performance internationally, New Brunswick is performing below the Canadian average, but similarly to other Atlantic provinces in all three areas tested: Reading, Mathematics and Science. There is no significant difference between NB Anglophone students' reading scores on the 2000 PISA test and the scores of Newfoundland and Labrador or PEI. There is no significant difference between NB and any of the other Atlantic Provinces on Math scores. NB and PEI science scores are significantly lower than NL and NS.

In subsequent PISA tests (2003 and 2006), New Brunswick students' performance improved with respect to other Atlantic Provinces. 2003 results show that NB was ahead of PEI on Mathematics, Reading and Science assessment. In 2006 NB was ahead of PEI on two science subtests as well as Reading, and was ahead of PEI and NS on Mathematics.

Since NB Anglophone students perform similarly to students in other Atlantic Provinces that have EFI programs representing a much smaller percentage of the overall school population, it is difficult to attribute NB students' performance to the streaming effect of EFI.

## Does French Immersion lead to segregation?

Willms defines segregation as "the separation of people of different social classes, ethnic or racial groups, or sexes into different schools, neighbourhoods, or social institutions. The separation does not necessarily occur through intentional public policies or limited access; it can be the result of several economic, social and political forces."

French Immersion is an integrated part of the New Brunswick system. EFI students attend the same schools as English program students, classes are usually set up adjacent to the equivalent English grade level class, students participate in the same school-based cultural and recreational activities, recess and lunch periods are common to students in both programs, and some teachers teach in both programs. French Immersion is a choice that is open to all parents in NB. It is difficult to see how the term segregation applies in this context.

There is, however, a degree of streaming that occurs in schools that offer EFI. In this case, it would appear that streaming is affected by public policies (or lack

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thereof) as well as economic and social forces. It is unfortunate that Willms did not explore these factors in his brief, as the causes of streaming are ultimately critical to understanding it and resolving it.

Willms suggests that there are five dimensions to this streaming: behavior, ability, social class, special needs and gender.

With regard to gender, the difference in the numbers of boys and girls in Early French immersion is very small. One can hardly consider either gender to be “segregated” in a class where there are 9 students of one gender and 11 of the other.

The other four dimensions are in fact all related. Children with special needs either have problems related to ability or behaviour or both, since the two are often connected. It is also the case that more students who experience difficulty come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding these complex interrelationships and providing teachers with the resources to address them are crucial to student success in any classroom or educational setting.

More to the point, however, the question of whether EFI itself causes streaming is not answered. Students on special education plans are found in larger numbers in non-immersion classes, and according to Willms (2008), a higher percentage of students from upper socioeconomic groups enroll in EFI. However, this does not mean that there is something inherent in the EFI program that causes this to occur. Some vitally important questions to ask are: Why do more parents of lower socioeconomic background not choose Early French Immersion for their children? Why are 17% of students in NB schools on a modified instruction program? How are these students diagnosed? What are the root causes of these problems? What resources are available to address them? How many students transfer out of EFI and why? What procedures and resources are there to assist these students so they can remain in EFI? These are vitally important questions that cannot be answered by simply blaming EFI, nor dismissed by eliminating EFI.

The issue of streaming is complex. PISA results show that socioeconomic background was less of a factor in Canada than in most other countries with regard to test results (Bussière et al, 2000). Also, engagement has been found to be a more important variable than socioeconomic background with regard to student success on PISA. Kirsch et al (2002) define engagement in reading in terms student interest in reading, student attitudes toward reading, the time students spend on reading in their free time and the diversity of materials students read. These authors point out that students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds who are highly engaged in reading obtain higher average reading scores in PISA than students from high or medium socioeconomic backgrounds but who report to be poorly engaged in reading.

Although socioeconomic background itself may not be the defining variable in school success, it is important in the present context to address the streaming issue in order to make EFI the inclusive program it should be. Parents of children who are more likely to find school academically challenging should see EFI as a real option for their children. EFI offers the best chance for children of a wide range of academic abilities to become bilingual because it focuses primarily on language development in the

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early years and does so in a natural way, very much like the way students learn their first language. Learning French in Late French Immersion, however, occurs in conjunction with learning complex subject matter and is more challenging for students academically. The longer one waits, therefore, the more one disadvantages students who are experiencing difficulty in school, many of whom are of lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Is Early French Immersion successful?

The Oral Proficiency Interview is the established measure of French second language proficiency in New Brunswick. This interview is only offered at the end of Grade 12, however, and is used to provide a global assessment of students' oral performance. It does not measure the wider range of abilities in reading, writing, and oral production that students have developed in a wide range of subject areas over 12 years of French immersion.

The limitations of this assessment procedure are well understood. Currently, the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education (CAMET) has established a steering committee and a working group of experts to study and adapt the European Language Portfolio as a more comprehensive tool for measuring students' second language abilities. This tool is multifaceted and will provide a much more complete picture of student abilities. In the meantime, however, we are limited to the Oral Proficiency Interview results as far as NB students' French competency is concerned.

Based on the most recent results, Early French Immersion has 42% meeting Advanced proficiency and 85% meeting Intermediate Plus; Late French Immersion has 9% meeting Advanced and 46% meeting Intermediate Plus; and less than 1% of core French students meet Intermediate Plus. The Intermediate Plus level, described below, constitutes a minimal threshold level for bilingualism. This level is roughly equivalent to the B2 level on the European Language Portfolio.<sup>1</sup>

**Intermediate Plus:** *Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to special fields of competence as well as subjects of current public interest. Normally does not have to grope for words. Often shows a significant degree of fluency and ease in speaking, yet, under pressure, may experience language breakdown. May exhibit good control of language structures, but be limited in overall language production; or, conversely, may demonstrate ample speech production, but have uneven control of structures. Some misunderstandings will still occur.*

The effectiveness of EFI has also been demonstrated in numerous studies across Canada. These studies compare French competency results in EFI to later starting

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<sup>1</sup> The NB OPI level descriptions can be found at p.86 of the Report Card 2005 at <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/anglophone-e.asp>.

The European Language Portfolio level descriptions can be found at [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main\\_pages/levels.html](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?M=/main_pages/levels.html)

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programs, and compare English and other subject matter results of students in EFI to students in the English program. Findings have consistently found advantages for EFI students over later starting students in the area of oral fluency and spontaneity, and positive cognitive effects. No negative effects on first language development or other subject area performance such as Math or Science have been reported. (For summaries of this research, see, for example, Canadian Council for Learning, 2007; Genesee, 2007; Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002; Turnbull et al, 1998; Rebuffot, 1993; Harley, 1986.)

Regarding high school enrolment in French Immersion, it is true that some students feel that if they complete their education in English they will be better prepared for studies at an English university, and some view the last two years of immersion as 'maintenance' years. The former is often a misguided concern that switching to English at university will be too difficult. The latter is related to a lack of choice of courses in many cases. Unfortunately, with the government's intention to make Math and Science courses an optional part of immersion offerings at the high school level (subject to resource availability, which often means eliminating them), there will be even less choice.

Willms notes that "There has been one study by Statistics Canada that compared the reading literacy results of immersion to non-immersion students based on the results from PISA 2000 (Allen, 2004). The *average* score for New Brunswick EFI students (550) was slightly higher than the national average (534), and the same as the average score of all students in Alberta, the top-performing province."

I would like to point out another interesting finding of the Allen (2004) study: "when gender, socio-economic background and parents' education are each taken into account (individually), French immersion students still outperform their counterparts in non-immersion programs. No one of these factors alone explains the high performance of these students. "

This is particularly important because it suggests that, rather than socioeconomic background, something specific to the experience of learning a second language may be contributing to EFI students' superior performance. One explanation can be found in research such as that of Bialystok (2001) who reports cognitive advantages for bilingual students compared to monolinguals.

Willms concludes this section by addressing the question of the success of EFI in relation to starting age and eventual attainment in French. He writes:

"Is learning a second language early better than later?" The answer is clearly "yes". But can children who begin to learn French at a later age also achieve success? The answer is also clearly "yes".

I, and the vast majority of second language experts, would agree on both counts. However, as usual, the devil is in the details. The most recent test data show that 95% of LFI students reached Intermediate proficiency but only 9% reached the Advanced level. It is commonly understood in the second language acquisition research community that later starting programs can and do work, but the eventual level of attainment will be lower for most students than if those students began ear-

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lier. By way of comparison, 42% of EFI students reached the Advanced proficiency level.

Willms refers to research on adult immigrants' success in learning English or French as support for the later-starting model. The situation of the adult immigrant learner in a context of survival in a majority language setting is very different from that of middle school students learning a minority language. Apart from differences in attitudes and motivation, there is the issue of out of school exposure to the second language and the regular need to communicate in a variety of contexts in that language.

If we want students with the widest range of abilities to achieve a high level of bilingualism, we need to start early. The so-called universal programs that Lamrock and Willms propose will hurt students who are academically weak the most as far as becoming bilingual is concerned. This would be most unfortunate since these students often have the most to gain with regard to confidence and self-esteem, as well as the economic advantages that come from having such a valuable skill as bilingualism when they enter the workforce.

## Will universal French instruction be successful?

Willms states that "The most fundamental *choice* of parents in a *public* school system is the right to enroll their children in a school where they can learn with their peers." I disagree. I would argue that the fundamental choice of parents in a public school system is to enroll their children in a school where **they can learn to the best of their ability**. It is the duty of all adults involved to ensure that the appropriate supports are put into place so that each child can reach his or her full potential including the most vulnerable, the most capable, and all students in between.

Willms goes on to say, "School choice is not a right when it has a negative effect on the educational provision of other children, especially those who are most vulnerable." The implication is that by choosing EFI parents and students are negatively affecting the schooling of those who do not choose EFI. While there may be research from other countries where segregation is a reality to support this, there is no direct evidence to support this assertion in the NB context. As seen earlier, PISA results for students in other Atlantic Provinces that do not have the streaming effect of EFI are very similar to NB Anglophone students. Also, an initial analysis of Core English students' literacy performance suggests that streaming is not having the universal effect that critics of EFI are claiming.

To determine if there was a streaming effect on students' literacy performance, the 2004-05 grade 2 reading assessment scores for Core English program students in schools with an EFI program were compared with those of students in schools that do not have an EFI program. Students in schools with EFI programs could be perceived as streamed while those in schools without EFI programs would be relatively un-streamed. For the 2004-05 school year, results show that schools with EFI had an average of 62% of Core children meet assessment targets. Schools without EFI had 65% of Core students meet these targets. These percentages are not meaningfully different. This analysis is based on one year (the most recent for which data are publicly available) and one grade, but it clearly points out that streaming is not having

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the universal negative effect being attributed to it. Given the efforts the government has put into early years literacy in the past several years, it would be very interesting to look at these data for other grades and in subsequent years to more clearly understand the situation.

Willms concludes that “The results in this paper show clearly that the streaming problem associated with EFI cannot simply be fixed by adding more resources.” There are two problems with this conclusion.

First, there is no evidence that streaming is responsible for our performance on PISA relative to other regions of the country, or that it is having a negative effect on students’ literacy performance.

Second, there is no evidence presented that the problem of streaming cannot be fixed. In fact, the reasons for streaming were not addressed at all in Willms’ brief. Surely, the first step in addressing a problem is to attempt to understand the reasons for its existence. We know that there are misunderstandings about how EFI works, about its effects on literacy and first language development, about whether or not problems can be addressed within the program. Addressing these issues, which would involve adding resources such as a comprehensive program to educate parents and teachers, would be a basic first step in dealing with streaming. This streaming problem is unnecessary and unfortunate, since those students who are least likely to succeed in academic programs arguably have the most to gain from an early start to French second language acquisition.

Willms maintains that some French instruction during the formative years would be useful for all students. I agree and I share his concern about streaming in the Late French Immersion (LFI) program. However, given the lack of an early immersion option, this streaming effect will likely be exacerbated. Based on what we know about the nature of LFI and previous experience with that program, the more academically inclined students will continue to choose the LFI option. We can also expect a big jump in the numbers enrolling in that program when children now denied access to EFI reach Grade 6. The Post-Intensive French program will likely be made up of a larger percentage of students who are less academically able.

According to the most recent Oral Proficiency Results, 9% of LFI students achieved Advanced proficiency by grade 12. Willms prediction that more than 35% of LFI students will achieve Advanced proficiency after the introduction of a five-month Intensive French program is optimistic to say the least. The only program that has those kinds of results is EFI with 42% of students attaining Advanced proficiency. This is clear evidence for the advantage of an early start to learning French.

Regarding Intensive French, Willms predicts that “Under the new system, many of these students will achieve Intermediate proficiency in French, and some may pursue an Advanced standing.” There is absolutely no evidence upon which one can base this prediction. If everything is done according to plan – teachers are given excellent professional development, appropriate curriculum materials are identified and developed, school programs for out of class French activities are implemented, student and teacher motivation is high - there is a possibility that a reasonable percentage of IF students may achieve an Intermediate level. We know, however, that cur-

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riculum planning and curriculum implementation are typically two very different realities. Advanced proficiency from such a program will be a very elusive goal indeed.

Finally, Willms addresses the question of whether the elimination of EFI will lead to an improvement in literacy skills of all children. He expresses no doubt that eliminating EFI will be successful in achieving this; yet, he goes on to identify a number of critical variables that affect literacy but that have nothing to do with EFI per se: “quality teaching at the appropriate level, a positive classroom environment, adequate learning time, and the engagement of students and their families... Also, many children in New Brunswick face challenges associated with poverty, and therefore need extra resources, especially during the primary school years.”

The question of why more NB students are not achieving desired outcomes is, to borrow one of Willms’ phrases, “broad and deep and has many dimensions to it”. There is no evidence that EFI is contributing to poor literacy development, but there is every indication that the diverse factors noted above play a major role. Eliminating EFI would be an unnecessary and unfortunate step. We would be much further ahead if we spent our energies addressing the systemic problems in our educational system in order to improve overall literacy development for all students, including measures to make EFI the inclusive French program it should be. EFI is the one French second language program that has proven its ability to produce high levels of bilingualism, and when the appropriate supports are in place, to do so for students from the widest range of backgrounds, including the most vulnerable.

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## **About L2RIC**

The Second Language Research Institute of Canada (L2RIC) at the University of New Brunswick plays a pivotal role in second language (L2) education in Canada and abroad. It is involved in diverse facets of L2 education including teacher preparation, research, bilingual program evaluation, and policy development.

This brief may be accessed electronically through the L2RIC website at [www.unb.ca/second-language](http://www.unb.ca/second-language)

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