

NB French Second Language Program Evaluation

We have developed and now offer for consideration, recommendations specific to each issue on which this evaluation focused as well as a number of recommendations that cut across issues.

Our recommendations take into consideration the important requirement for the Department of Education to provide a stable environment for the students, teachers and administrators of the current program.

Recommendations Associated with Issue 1: What is the most effective French Second Language Program (FSL) organization that can be used to achieve the goals for FSL instruction in New Brunswick?

We recommend that officials of the Department of Education act to preserve as many conditions as possible of the entry point features of the present program. Specifically, it is our recommendation that both early and later entry points be maintained.

Our recommendation should not be interpreted to suggest that we are or are not recommending maintaining entry point features as they currently exist (i. e. grade 1 and grade 6). The Department may, at some time, be required to respond to challenges that preclude offering these specific grade entry levels. One such condition may well be fiscal pressures now experienced and anticipated by the Provincial government. One outcome of these pressures could well be restraints on Public sector programs.

Rather, our recommendation focuses on the evident benefits of and broad support we noticed for early exposure to the immersion program, with the added option of allowing for a later entry opportunity.

We recommend increased time on task activities, specifically focussed on strengthening oral skills, in both the core program and the immersion program. These were the most frequently perceived areas where program strengthening is warranted. Increasing these features of the FSL program could improve success in retaining students through grade 12 as well as improving the results on the oral proficiency exam administered by the Department.

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Recommendation associated with Issue 2: “What viable alternatives are there to the current programs in terms of improving every student’s FSL proficiency with respect to entry points and cost efficiency?”

Various conditions especially those related to fiscal conditions, could arise that require the officials to adjust the FSL program. In such circumstances, we recommend that serious consideration be given to implementing the Grade 3/ Grade 6 immersion entry option as outlined in Alternative 1, which we assessed, along with the core FSL arrangements as outlined in Alternative 2. The core FSL features of Alternative 2 include compulsory French language arts to Grade 8 with full year instruction in Grades 9 and 10. As we point out in our report, we detected limited support for many alternatives, including this one. Nevertheless, we consider the following as the advantages of this adjustment:

- Students will have the opportunity for an additional two years of educational performance before initial decisions concerning immersion entry will have to be made. This period will allow for a more comprehensive assessment of their immersion performance potential and for remedial measures to be implemented (in the student’s first language) where warranted;
- The additional two years of instruction in the students’ first language should result in increases in performance assessment scores in those areas where current early entry students now demonstrate lower levels of performance than their non-immersion counterparts;
- This adjustment allows for a second immersion entry point (as does the present structure);
- Any cost savings due to implementing this adjustment could be allocated for assessment and diagnostic resource materials such as early grade diagnostic tools for immersion students; and
- Non-immersion students who choose to continue with the core French program into Grades 9 and 10 will receive increased FSL instruction over the levels now offered to them, thus increasing the time on task and oral proficiency instruction features of the current program.

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Recommendations associated with Issue 3: “How valid and reliable are the assessment programs currently in place?”

In our view, there is sound evidence to conclude that the Department wide assessment programs now in place, (namely the Grade 12 Oral Proficiency Test and the Grade 6 French Second Language Proficiency exam) are valid and reliable. While there are areas in which these instruments can be considered to be lacking, we consider these to be of limited consequence. Further, we conclude that there is not sufficient reason, including cost effectiveness, to increase the level of system wide proficiency testing through the present methods of administration.

We recommend strengthening the range and level of testing aids available to assess individual progress and performance. The improved aids should also be focussed on allowing FSL students and teachers to identify specific weaknesses.

We recommend an improved system of FSL program monitoring. The areas that should be included in the strengthened monitoring system are the following aspects of FSL program delivery, as a minimum:

- Teacher proficiency and to a lesser extent competencies related to second language pedagogy and subject matter expertise. While we noticed that teacher proficiency was periodically raised by selected groups as a weakness of the FSL program, we could not consistently find valid and reliable evidence to support this perception. It is the responsibility of the Department to monitor adherence to Policy 309 conditions that ensure the conditions concerning Teacher competency are met;
- Time on task adherence to Policy 309;
- Adequate resource and methods availability for immersion students;
- Pupil Educator Ratios, especially at the school level; and
- Curriculum adherence and consistency throughout the Province.

As monitoring and accountability are in our view, closely related management conditions, we recommend clarification of roles and responsibilities associated with the FSL program accountability.

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Recommendation associated with Issue 4: “What kind of assessment procedures can be used to provide a valid and reliable evaluation of FSL program offerings?”

We recommend increased and more effective in-class and teacher led assessments of FSL students. Beyond more and a broader range of assessment materials, additional assurances are required concerning the validity and reliability of assessment materials now being applied at an in-class level.

Recommendations associated with Issue 5: To what extent are the identified objectives for the French Second Language Programs met?

We recommend clarification of the FSL program objectives as they relate to target OPE scores associated with FSL program success at the Province wide level. At the present time many groups involved in the Program, directly and indirectly, claim that the Department does not have defined thresholds for the OPE results which would determine reasonable results.

We recommend that Department officials define a target relating to FSL program retention both at the core and immersion levels. As well, we recommend that Department Officials adopt and monitor a strategy designed to achieve the retention target.

Recommendations associated with Issue 6: What is the impact of the current FSL programs on the total population of anglophone students in the province?”

We noticed widespread and negative comments concerning the perception of a streaming effect within the non-immersion program. We were unable to collect sufficient data and information to allow us to conclude on the degree to which any or all of the conditions reflecting this streaming effect occur or to what magnitude. However, we note that officials of the Department agree that some of these conditions may be occurring in selected locations and to some degree.

In our view, the Department must examine this situation more thoroughly and where warranted, act to reduce these conditions.

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We recommend immediate activities to determine the following:

- Aspects of the immersion program which could benefit the French language instruction in the core program. Where more effective instructional aids and teaching resources are identified in the immersion program, activities should be initiated to transfer these and their use to the core program;
- Pupil – Educator Ratio (PER) differences between the immersion and non-immersion programs, especially at the school level. The Department must identify a maximum PER for the non-immersion program at the school level which, in the opinion of Department officials, will ensure that each student receives an adequate amount of instructor attention; and
- Specialist learning resources available to non-immersion program instructional environments. The Department must ensure that a reasonable resource standard exists at the school level for both programs. In our view “reasonable” should reflect well thought out conditions that are based on the standards applied in other provinces.

Additional Recommendations

We recommend an improved communications strategy and program associated with many aspects of the FSL program. Specifically, we recommend that Department officials define and implement enhanced communications associated with the following:

- Program goals and objectives. We found the current goals and objectives to have the support of most of those involved, directly and indirectly, in the FSL program. At the same time, we detected significantly lower levels of understanding of these goals among parents of non-immersion students in comparison to the parents of immersion students. Concurrently, we noted that parents of the immersion students have a series of expectations concerning the benefits of the FSL program to their children that go beyond the stated goals of the program. These broader objectives, many of which in our view are of an educational and social development nature, may not always be subservient to the stated goals and objectives of the FSL program. We suspect that these broader goals may often shape the expectations parents

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of immersion students place on the program. More attention to communicating the goals of the program, especially during the parent information sessions that are used to acquaint parents with the FSL programs prior to the immersion entry points, could improve these situations. As well, efforts to reinforce these goals at an ongoing level, well after immersion entry points, will assist the situation;

- Average class size. We received many comments suggesting that immersion classes were smaller than those housing the non-immersion classes. The perception exists that the smaller class size allows for a more effective learning environment;
- Resources available to respond to learning challenges students experience in the immersion and the non-immersion programs. We encountered comments concerning the perception that many parents have concerning the level of specialist resources in the immersion program. It appears that many parents of non-immersion students are of the belief that this contributes to outcomes relating to streaming. (I.e. Students with learning difficulties cannot receive the remedial attention they require while registered in the immersion program. Thus, the belief is that they are counselled out of the immersion program and become students of the non-immersion program, thereby increasing the size of and the number of students with special needs in the non-immersion program.) At the same time, some parents and teachers of immersion programs strongly support the strengthening of specialist resources for remedial and prescriptive activities for students who are experiencing learning challenges;
- Compliance of various program features with Policy 309. Given the comments we received concerning Time on Task and the teaching qualifications of instructor groups (we found no sound evidence to support the perception that teaching skills are lacking), we recommend that these levels of compliance be included in a strengthened communications strategy;
- Guidelines associated with responses to in-class behaviour problem situations. Again, we noted a number of comments from non-immersion parents relating to the number of such situations and the perceived impact of these in the in-class learning environment; and

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- Longitudinal information concerning the frequency with which persons who have completed the immersion program actually gain employment in a situation where conversing in French is a defined requirement of employment.

We recommend improved use of Internet and web based technologies to provide the additional assessment and diagnostic resources that the FSL program requires. We understand that the capability exists for the Department to capture a voice or voice/video record of interactive dialogue between the student and the evaluator. The Department should explore the possibilities of including in this web-based initiative an oral skill assessment service for all FSL students. Oral skill assessments could be provided for Province-wide Competency Testing and at an “on demand” level. There are a number of options for developing and delivering this type of oral skill assessment service, which would have to be part of the examination the Department conducted in determining the feasibility of implementing this recommendation.

Some of these include:

- Working within web enabled service initiatives now being considered by Service New Brunswick;
- Structuring a relationship with private sector participants to develop and deliver this improved level of service;
- Determining appropriate measures to control costs associated with the “on demand oral skill assessment” aspects of the service. This may involve a user contribution arrangement; and
- Linking the initiative with a broader based concept to improve web based education services to teachers, students and their parents.

We consider that the above are the most important initiatives that the Department should consider as a result of this evaluation. We recognize that various groups attach urgency to the adjustments they believe are necessary to improve the FSL program. Realistically, Department officials should be accorded the opportunity to undertake any additional research and consultations necessary to conclude on these recommendations and implement those that are judged to be warranted and feasible. We further understand that implementing many, if not each of the above

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recommendations, will include fiscal considerations. Finally, we strongly recommend that Departmental officials adopt a strategy of implementing an “improvement package” of change in the FSL program, rather than a “piece meal” approach.

It is our understanding that the Fiscal 2000 – 2001 budget will be finalized towards the end of this year. This may be too soon to allow for all the information and considerations that must be applied to conclude on our recommendations and the concurrent “package” of improvements that may be implemented. Accordingly, we recommend that Departmental officials establish September 2002 as the earliest for implementing any adjustments in the FSL program.