

French Second Language Programs in British Columbia and Yukon: Summary of Findings

Xiaoyang Luo, Research Assistant & Policy Analyst – Summer Student
Canadian Parents for French, British Columbia & Yukon Branch
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Introduction

Canadian Parents for French BC & Yukon has collected information about French second language programs in school districts across the province to better support its advocacy efforts. Through an analysis of enrolment and attrition trends, supplemented by a survey of district language coordinators, CPF BC & Yukon is able to offer some insight into the current state of FSL programs, common obstacles to French second language program delivery, and the creative solutions that school boards use to overcome these obstacles.

Methodology

Enrolment statistics were collected from the British Columbia Ministry of Education and the Yukon Department of Education, with support from the CPF National office. Attrition statistics were calculated based on enrolment numbers.

In June 2013, CPF BC & Yukon conducted a survey to examine the challenges that school districts face and to identify the best practices that they have developed regarding student enrolment and retention and teacher recruitment and retention in French second language programs. A link to the online survey was sent to the representatives responsible for French programs at each BC school district that offers French immersion and to a representative at the Yukon Department of Education.¹

Eighteen school districts responded to the survey. Due to the relatively small sample size, the results are not generalizable to all school districts; however, the survey findings do offer some insight about common obstacles to French second language program delivery and the creative solutions that school boards use to overcome these obstacles.

¹ The list of survey questions is provided in Appendix A of the full report.

French Second Language Programs

In the 2012-2013 school year, 58 of 60 BC school districts offered Core French in public schools, and 46 of those school districts also offered French immersion. French immersion student enrolment has been steadily increasing despite a decline in total enrolment; however, Core French enrolment has been declining at a faster rate than total enrolment since 2005.

French Immersion Highlights

British Columbia

- 47,857 students enrolled in French immersion programs in 2012-2013, accounting for 8.5% of the total public school student population
- 28 school districts offered Late immersion entry, 40 school districts offered Early immersion entry, and 19 school districts offered both programs
- Since 2003, French immersion enrolment has grown by 42.8%, while total enrolment has fallen by 8.2%
- The highest attrition occurred between Grades 7 and 8, where 648 French immersion students (15%) did not continue on to Grade 8 in 2012-2013

Yukon

- In 2011-2012, 579 French immersion students constituted 11.5% of the total student population
- French immersion enrolment has increased by 53.6% between 2003 and 2012, while total enrolment has fallen by 8.5%
- The highest attrition in terms of number of students occurred between Grades 7 and 8, where nine students did not continue onto Grade 8 French
- The highest attrition rate was for Grade 11 at 28.6%

Core French Highlights

British Columbia

- 187,964 students enrolled in Core French in 2010-2011, making up almost one third (32.5%) of all public school students
- All but two school districts offer Core French in public schools
- Between 2003 and 2011, Core French enrolment has declined by 16.3%, while total enrolment has declined by 5.8%
- The Grade 8 to 9 transition is where the program loses the majority of its students, as 14,755 Grade 8 (45.5%) students did not continue on to Grade 9 French in 2010-2011
- The highest attrition rate in Core French occurred between Grade 11 and 12, where 63.1% of Grade 11 Core French students did not go on to finish Grade 12 French in 2010-2011

Yukon

- In Yukon, 38.4% of students were enrolled in Core French in 2007-2008
- Between 2003 and 2008, Core French enrolment dropped by 28.5%, while total enrolment decreased by 7.0%
- The highest attrition in 2007-2008 occurred for Grade 8 students entering Grade 9, where 47.3% did not continue on to Grade 9 French
- The preceding year, the highest attrition rate was in Grade 12, where 68.2% of students did not continue on to Grade 12 French

Survey Highlights

French Immersion

BC Students

- The majority of surveyed school districts identified a lack of physical space and a lack of qualified teaching staff as a challenge to increasing student enrolment in French immersion programs
- Almost all of the surveyed school districts (94.1%) reported using parent information meetings and school or district websites to promote French immersion programs to new students
- One school district with among the five highest proportions of students in French immersion cited visiting elementary schools and giving presentations about the FI program as an effective promotion strategy
- Eleven school districts (64.7%) identified a lack of French immersion electives in higher grades and a lack of flexibility in high school timetables as challenges to retaining existing students
- School districts with high attrition cited a lack of qualified teaching staff, competition with other district programs, and difficulty in providing academic support to students as challenges to student retention
- Common best practices to tackle student attrition include consultations with parents and students, field trips and extra-curricular activities, academic support, and student exchanges.
- Schools districts with low attrition identified behavioural support as a best practice for student retention

BC Teachers

- A small majority of school districts (58.8%) identified a lack of qualified applicants as a challenge to recruiting French immersion teachers
- Five school districts (29.4%) also mentioned the inability to offer continuing contracts to candidates as a challenge to recruiting candidates
- Six school districts (35.3%) selected proactively providing classrooms to teacher candidates on practicums as a best practice for recruiting French immersion teachers
- 29.4% of school districts indicated that a partnership with a university was an effective way to recruit candidates

- A common challenge to teacher retention is a lack of job protection for new French immersion teachers, who sometimes find jobs in other school districts while they are temporarily laid off
- Many school districts identified best practices related to professional development, networking, and mentorship opportunities to increase teacher retention
- Given the lack of job security for French immersion teachers in some districts, many districts identified the ability to offer continuing contracts or protect teachers from lay-offs as best practices in teacher retention

Yukon Students

- The supply and demand for French immersion programs is balanced; the French immersion program in its current capacity should be able to accommodate future students if enrolment trends remain stable
- Yukon public schools use parent information meetings, traditional media, school and department websites, and relationships with French organizations to promote the French immersion program to new students
- Challenges to student retention include a lack of interest among students, a lack of flexibility in high school timetables, limited senior course availability, and different priorities in senior grades as challenges to student retention
- Best practices to increase student retention include parent information meetings, consultations with parents and students, academic and educational support, extra-curricular activities, student exchanges, counseling with regard to course selection and students' challenges, and French experiential courses

Yukon Teachers

- Contractual obligations for term-based and temporary assignments create a challenge to recruiting and retaining French immersion teachers
- Effective teacher recruitment strategies included advertising and offering a competitive salary and good working conditions
- Professional development, training, and pedagogical resources and support are best practices in teacher retention

Core French

BC Students

- The two most common challenges to student retention are a lack of interest among students and a lack of qualified teaching staff
- Other challenges to student retention include conflicting schedules at the secondary level, and competition with other language courses
- Ten school districts (58.8%) reported using French extra-curricular activities to enhance their Core French program
- Other best practices to increase student retention include offering student exchanges to Core French students, using teaching methods such as the

Accelerative Integrated Methodology (AIM), or having French immersion teachers help teach Core French classes

BC Teachers

- Ten school districts indicated that a lack of qualified applicants was a challenge to recruiting Core French teachers
- One finding that may explain the lack of language proficiency among Core French teachers is that most Core French teachers are not specialized at the elementary or middle school levels
- 35.3% of school districts identified proactively providing classrooms to teacher candidates on practicums as a best practice in recruiting Core French teachers
- Three school districts indicated that partnerships with universities were a best practice in teacher recruitment
- The challenges surrounding Core French teacher retention varied across school districts. Challenges include the small size and cold climate of the community, the fact that Core French specialist positions were limited to the high school level, declining enrolment, and contractual issues.
- In order to alleviate the problem of low language proficiency among Core French teachers, some school districts organized language classes, workshops, and study groups for specialist and non-specialist teachers
- Other best practices include professional development, mentoring, and continuing contracts

Yukon Students

- The Department of Education representative identified competition with other language programs and a lack of a graduation requirement for French as challenges to student retention
- In addition, other language courses do not assume a certain level of proficiency, such that students who have had difficulty in lower levels of French tend to switch to another language when possible
- Strategies to enhance the Core French program for students include French extra-curricular activities, student exchanges, competencies assessments, Intensive French implementation, and annual cultural activities

Yukon Teachers

- The representative noted that isolation, limited course offerings, and smaller schools created challenges to teacher recruitment; the above items, in addition to contractual obligations for term-based and temporary assignments, also posed a challenge to teacher retention
- Best practices for Core French teacher recruitment include advertising, competitive salaries, and good working conditions
- Best practices to increase teacher retention include professional development and training, pedagogical resources and support, and networking

For a more detailed analysis, including regional and district-level enrolment and attrition, please refer to the full report at <http://bc-yk.cpf.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/FSL-Programs-Report.pdf>