

## Addressing Attrition in French Immersion

### Article 1: Attrition at the Secondary Level

Source - Presentation to Minister Tom Christensen, October 2004

All French Immersion and Francophone programs face attrition. With only two entry points and many potential points of departure, this is simply inevitable. The following table details the grade-by-grade average attrition rates for BC French Immersion programs.

**Table 1 French Immersion Secondary Attrition - 1999-2004 (Percentage)**

Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
12.4	12.1	13.4	14	12

Source - Canadian Parents for French - BC & Yukon Branch

Attrition at the secondary level is a Canada-wide problem. Our attrition rates, according to our review of enrolment from 1995-2000 showed that secondary attrition in BC was much lower than Alberta, and slightly lower than Manitoba and Saskatchewan. (This review only dealt with the four western jurisdictions).

(One constant in the data is the much higher attrition rate in French Immersion programs amongst **boys**. This is true for Core French, Spanish and other language education programs as well. This is also true for attrition at the elementary level. Boys represent 47% of FI students in Kindergarten, but only 30% of FI students by Grade 12).

**Table 2 – French Immersion Secondary Attrition by Gender**

Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Boys	13.8	12.8	15.0	14.6
Girls	11	11.4	10.5	9

Source - Canadian Parents for French - BC & Yukon Branch

While BC's attrition rate is not bad comparatively, secondary attrition is a serious problem for French Immersion programs. On average only 55% of Grade 7 FI students get their Bilingual Dogwood. 35% of students leave in either Grade 10, 11 or 12. While these students have benefited substantially from French Immersion and may well be functionally bilingual, the loss in learning momentum is considerable.

What is compelling in reviewing district-by-district attrition rates over a period of years is just how high the standard deviation is among BC school districts. For example, in Saanich, a suburban Victoria School District with an average family income, only 15% of Grade 7 students leave the program before graduating. Other school districts see secondary attrition rates approaching 60%.

Aside from gender, the statistics do not provide much guidance based on regional or socio-economic factors to explain attrition rates in districts.

For example, while in general attrition is slightly higher in rural districts, this is largely due to regional population decline. Real attrition, when "economic attrition" due to mill closures and rural flights is taken out of the equation, average attrition between rural and urban districts is similar.

Neighboring districts frequently have wide variations in attrition rates. School District 61 (Greater Victoria) borders on Saanich and has a higher than provincial average Grade 7-12 FI attrition rate of some 54% from 1998-2003.

This research gives us cause for confidence in our capacity to reduce attrition rates significantly across BC. After all, if Saanich, Quesnel, Prince Rupert or Richmond can have low attrition so can other districts. **The establishment of a Provincial Advisory Committee to develop "best practices"** for FI programs could be very helpful to School District French Immersion programs in addressing the attrition problem.

The following measures which are supported by the financial recommendations in our brief could help direct increase graduation rates in FI programs.

**Measures that can reduce attrition include:** the advent of LFI programs which, by increasing the secondary FI population, increase options for students and expand the French Immersion communities at school; extra-curricular opportunities such as exchanges or CPF's new scholarship program with the University of Ottawa targeted to "Bilingual Dogwood" recipients provide incentives for students to stay in FI programs; the development of French-language distance education option in rural and remote School Districts; new post-secondary opportunities in French that provide an additional reason to continue through to Grade 12; the accessibility of bussing becomes important in Grade 8 and 9 as French Immersion programs are commonly centralized at one or two sites; changes in university entrance requirements that require language education validate the French Immersion experience and direct support to lower class sizes in senior programs.

There are 8 School District with average secondary attrition rates of 26% or less. As a result, we believe it is a reasonable target to reduce secondary attrition province-wide from 45% to 26% over ten years. **This reduction would increase the number of Grade 12 graduates by 759 in 2013.**

**A final note:** Second language education is mandatory from Grade 5 to 8 for all students. Core French is the subject of choice in most BC schools. However, only a small minority of students continue to pursue second language education beyond Grade 9. Only 1 in 6 Grade 8 Core French students take French 12. Here are the attrition statistics for Secondary Core French in BC schools.

**Table 3 – Core French Secondary Attrition - 1999-2004 (Percentage)**

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
40.4	24.5	21.4	63.7

*Source - Canadian Parents for French - BC & Yukon Branch*

## **Article 2: French Immersion Program Quality and Secondary Attrition**

*Source - The Funding of French Second Language Education in BC, October 2003*

There are wide variations in the options and hours of French in French Immersion programs across BC and the Yukon. This is usually related to the availability of specialist teachers at the secondary level. We are also seeking some standardized testing of FI students to review the level of French performance in our program.

Secondary attrition has leveled off in recent years in BC. However, it remains a key indicator of program quality. (For example, districts such as Saanich and Okanagan Skaha have specific policies that address attrition and have very low rates.)

A number of National and Provincial research projects have studied the issue of secondary school FI attrition. According to these studies, contributing factors include: lack of variety in course work, heavy work load, a forced choice between continuing in French Immersion or enrolling in other programs of choice, a perception that marks are lower in French, the lack of a post-secondary French language option in British Columbia and an unwillingness to travel to a more distant secondary school.

If we are going to increase the number of bilingual graduates, reducing current levels of attrition is an important means to achieving our goal. (Aside from increasing enrolment and program accessibility, it is virtually the only way.)

### **Saanich Fights Attrition**

- French Language Policy
- Modern Languages Steering Committee
- French Immersion Department Heads Committee
- Concurrent Core French program from Kindergarten
- Exchanges in Grades 7 and 11
- Mandatory Concours participation
- “Teacher experts” in French Immersion pedagogy
- Full promotion and endorsement of FI by District
- K Info evening co-hosted by CPF-Saanich and SD#63
- K-12 Gift Exchange to promote FI successes
- Bussing for all students, regardless of program (for a fee)
- Job recruiters (for bilingual positions) to schools in Grade 10, 11 and 12
- Student and parent exit surveys
- Rigorous process including cooling off period for leaving the program before graduation

*(compiled by Nancy Taylor, CPF-BC & Yukon and former President of CPF Saanich)*