



## The Case for Universal French Instruction

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In March 2008 the Department of Education in New Brunswick announced sweeping changes to the public education system affecting French second-language education for all Anglophone students in the province. The changes seek to bring at least 70% of the children in the province to the Intermediate level of French proficiency, while improving students' scores in literacy, mathematics, and science. Currently, 19% of the children enrolled in Anglophone schools follow a program of early French immersion that begins in grade 1, 7% follow a late French immersion program that begins in grade 6, while 74% follow a core English program that entails about 30 minutes of daily instruction in French. The proposed universal French program will offer an intensive French instruction program for all Anglophone students in grade 5. Thereafter, students can follow a late immersion program or a core English program with enhanced French instruction.

New Brunswick is the first province to introduce universal French instruction.

The need for change appears to be based on three assumptions. One is that the current system is not achieving the desired educational outcomes for all Anglophone students in the province. The second assumption is that the current system segregates children in terms of their social class background and ability, and this has a detrimental effect on children's learning. The third assumption is that the approach to French instruction has not been successful in bringing a significant number of children in the province to the Intermediate level of French proficiency. This policy brief uses current enrollment data to examine the evidence on these three issues.

### Findings

- About 40% of New Brunswick youth fail to achieve at least Level 3 on the international assessments conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. This is considerably higher than the Canadian failure rate of 28%.
- The segregation associated with French immersion is broad and deep, with several aspects to it.
- If students with special needs were equally distributed among all classes, each teacher would on average have 3.4 students with special needs. However, in schools that have early immersion programs, the average in core English programs is about 5.7 students.
- Only 12% of children from the lowest social class group are enrolled in early French immersion, compared with 41% of children in the highest social class group.
- Girls are more likely than boys to enroll in French immersion programs.
- About 20 to 25% of New Brunswick Anglophone youth achieve an Intermediate or Advanced level of oral proficiency in French.

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. 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.

## How are New Brunswick Students Faring?

Findings from the 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that 40% of New Brunswick youth fail to achieve at Level 3 or higher in their reading skills at age 15. This compares with about 28% of Canadian youth. The international assessment of youth literacy skills has five levels, and those who score below Level 3 have diminished chances of pursuing post-secondary education, while those below Level 2 are at risk of not completing secondary school. The results for the 2003 and 2006 PISA assessments, which emphasized mathematics and science skills, were similar (HRSDC & Statistics Canada, 2007). Among the ten provinces, New Brunswick youth scored in second-last place in mathematics and in last place in science. Results from the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP), an assessment program conducted by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), also suggest that students in New Brunswick do not do as well as their counterparts elsewhere in Canada.

The other three Atlantic provinces have also scored poorly on these national and international assessments, although Newfoundland and Labrador has maintained literacy scores that are slightly higher than those in the other three provinces. Some of the literacy gap is attributable to differences in the socioeconomic background of families, but even when these factors are taken into account, the children in New Brunswick do not fare well.

## Does French Immersion Lead to Segregation?<sup>1</sup>

Arguments about whether Early French Immersion (EFI) or Late French Immersion (LFI) result in a segregated school system have focused mainly on the exclusion of children with special needs. However, the segregation associated with French immersion is much broader and deeper. There are at least five dimensions to it.<sup>2</sup>

**Segregation of children with special needs.** On average there are about 17% of children in the Anglophone sector on special education plans throughout the school year. Data from the Department of Education suggest that only about 7% of these children are in French immersion classes. The class sizes in EFI classes are slightly smaller

than in Core English (CE) classes (19.5 vs. 21.3 students in schools with EFI). If students with special needs were equally distributed among all classes, each teacher would on average have 3.4 students with special needs. However, given the segregation of these students in CE classes, the average in CE is approximately 4.3 students. The problem is exacerbated, however, in schools that have EFI programs: in these schools the average in CE classes is about 5.7 students. It is this discrepancy that is felt by many teachers in the CE program.

**Segregation along social class lines.** I have divided all families of children enrolled in NB schools in 2007-08 into five socioeconomic groups, based on their family income, level of education, and type of occupation.<sup>3</sup> Each group includes 20% of the population of students enrolled in EFI and CE in grades 1 to 5.

Figure 1 shows the enrollment rates in EFI and CE by socioeconomic group. Compared with children from the middle socioeconomic group, those from the highest socioeconomic group are nearly twice as likely to enroll in EFI. In contrast, those in the lowest socioeconomic group are about half as likely to enroll in EFI. Well over half of all children enrolled in EFI are from the two wealthiest socioeconomic groups.

When one compares levels of socioeconomic status of those in EFI to those in the CE program, the divide is comparable to or larger than the divide between non-hispanic whites and African-Americans in the US.<sup>4</sup>

**Segregation by gender.** Girls are more likely than boys to be enrolled in French immersion. In a typical class of 20 children in EFI, there are on average about 11 girls and 9 boys, while the ratio is reversed in CE classes. This is arguably small, but one needs to consider also that boys are more prone than girls to being struggling readers.

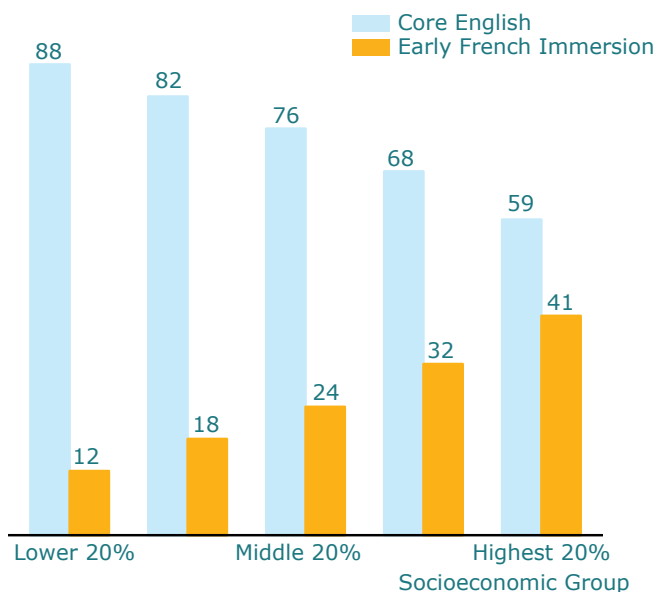
**Segregation by ability.** Parents' decisions to enroll their children in EFI are based in part on their desire for their children to become bilingual, but also on their perception of their children's likely success in the program. To discern the extent of segregation associated with children's ability,

<sup>1</sup>The term 'segregation' is used in the literature to refer to 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.

<sup>2</sup>The current data do not include indicators of First Nations status or immigrant status. Thus, we do not have adequate data to infer that there is segregation associated with ethnicity. However, given the large differences in SES between EFI and CE students, I expect that there are disproportionately fewer First Nations students enrolled in EFI.

<sup>3</sup>The data pertain to student enrollments in 2007-08. The measure of SES was derived from Canadian Census data. The use of census data to estimate socioeconomic status is not ideal; whenever possible researchers prefer measures obtained directly from parents. If direct measures of family socioeconomic status had been used in this research, it would likely show an even stronger relationship between EFI enrollment and socioeconomic status than observed with these data.

<sup>4</sup>About 28% of CE students are in the bottom quarter of the socioeconomic distribution, while only 20% are from the top quarter. In contrast, only 13% of EFI students are from the bottom quarter of the socioeconomic distribution, while 39% are from the top quarter. These results are remarkably similar to the ratios of African-Americans to non-Hispanic whites in the US (Iceland & Wilkes, 2006).



**Figure 1.** Enrollments in EFI and CE by social class group

data on children's skills prior to grade 1 are required, and the Department has only recently begun to collect these data. However, data for nine NB schools with EFI programs were collected by UNB-CRISP. Table 1 shows the average scores and standard deviations on the Early Years Evaluation for over 900 children that entered EFI and CE programs in 2004 and 2005. The scale for each domain ranges from 0 to 3. It also shows the percentage of children in each program that scored below 1.0 in each domain. These children are vulnerable in the sense that without a concerted effort on the part of parents and school staff, they are at risk of falling behind their peers in their literacy skills.

In all five domains of early development, children enrolled in EFI have significantly higher scores. Moreover, the percentage of vulnerable children in CE classes is more than twice that of EFI classes. The differences are most pronounced for the measures of cognitive and language skills, which are important predictors of academic success.

**Table 1.** Assessment results for children enrolled in kindergarten in 2004-05 and 2005-06 in nine schools offering Early French Immersion.

	Core Program (N = 558)			Early French Immersion (N = 358)		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percent with Scores Below 1.0	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percent with Scores Below 1.0
Awareness of Self and the Environment (General knowledge)	2.36	0.60	12.0	2.56	0.45	5.3
Social Skills, Behaviour, and Approaches to Learning	2.19	0.52	10.0	2.26	0.46	5.6
Cognitive Skills	2.07	0.81	15.1	2.46	0.57	3.9
Language and Communication	2.38	0.61	14.1	2.64	0.43	2.2
Physical Development	2.46	0.49	12.2	2.64	0.34	3.4

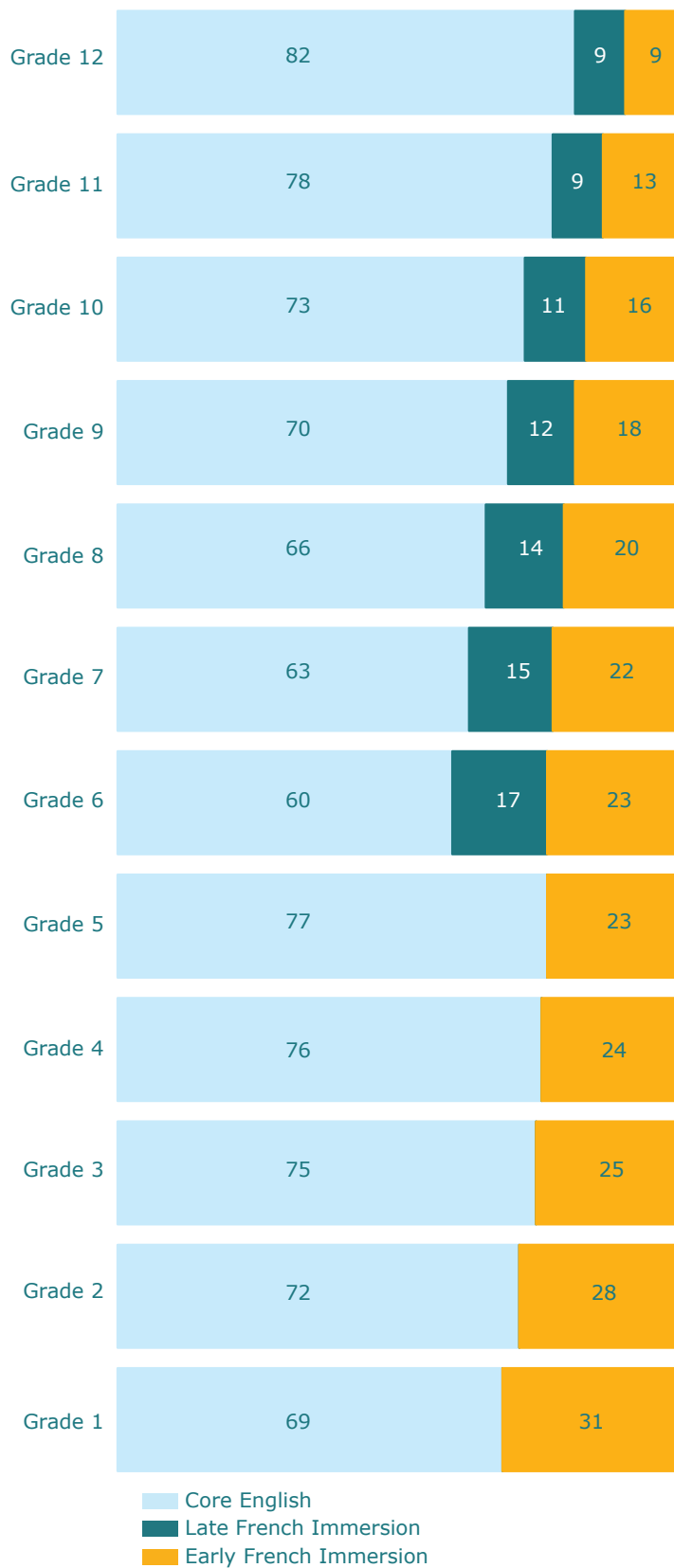
**Segregation based on behaviour.** Table 1 also shows the percentage of children who had very low scores on the measure of Social Skills, Behaviour, and Approaches to Learning. Children with very low scores on this scale typically have problems associated with inattention, physical aggression, or anxiety/depression. The difference between the two programs in the percentage of children with low scores – 10% compared with 5.6% – is important as it indicates that the majority of children with behaviour problems at this age do not enroll in EFI.

### Does Streaming Matter?

In every country that participated in PISA, the socioeconomic composition of schools had a significant effect on student achievement. When children with lower ability or children from lower socioeconomic groups are concentrated in particular schools or classes, they tend to have much lower performance than when they are in mixed ability classes (Willms, 2004). Children from higher socioeconomic groups tend to do well in any setting. Consequently, countries that practice early streaming, such as Germany and Austria, tend to have a disproportionate number of children with very low PISA scores, while countries without streaming, such as Finland, tend to have superior scores (Willms, 2006). Many countries which practice early streaming are attempting to overhaul their school system to delay streaming until the later stages of secondary school.

### Is Early French Immersion Successful?

A report commissioned by the Department of Education found that only about 20 to 25% of the students that enrolled in EFI in the mid-1990s persisted in French Immersion through to grade 12 and presented for the Oral Proficiency Assessment (Croll and Lee, 2008). Nearly all of the students that completed the program achieved Intermediate proficiency, but less than half of them achieved an Advanced level or higher. The authors did not have data on the success rate at the end of grade 10 as the Oral Proficiency Assessment was not offered at that grade level.



**Figure 2.** 2007-08 Enrollment by program (percentage by grade level)

The current enrollments rates in EFI, LFI, and CE programs are shown in Figure 2. Although one cannot discern what the success or persistence rates of students who recently enrolled in French immersion will be in 10 years, the current enrollment patterns support the findings of Croll and Lee. About 27% of grade 10 students and 18% of grade 12 students are currently enrolled in French immersion programs. It would be fair to presume that most of the students that stay in immersion programs through to grade 10 have at least an Intermediate level of proficiency. Croll and Lee noted that the two main reasons cited by students for not completing the immersion program were that they wanted to complete their education in English to better prepare for studies at an English university, and that they viewed the last two years of immersion as 'maintenance' years.

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. The data did not allow the author to control statistically for the ability of students when they entered elementary school.

The question about the success of EFI has also been framed as "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". Among students who entered LFI, the percentage attaining at least the Intermediate level was about 90% in four of the years between 2002 and 2006. However, a smaller proportion – on average about 10% – achieved an Advanced level of proficiency. Results for Canada from the International Adult Literacy Survey indicate that adults who immigrate to Canada learn either French or English quite rapidly, especially during the first five years (Willms, 1999).

### Will Universal French Instruction be Successful?

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. 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 results in this paper show clearly that the streaming problem associated with EFI cannot simply be fixed by adding more resources. If I were to have designed the current reform I would likely have offered intensive French one year earlier, and might have maintained some French instruction during the formative years. However, I would also have proposed having only one program during the middle school years, thereby delaying any direct form of streaming until secondary school.

For the children who would have otherwise enrolled in EFI this fall, there is little risk of them not being successful: they are a select group to begin with; they will have a more solid base in their first language at the end of grade 4; they will receive the intensive French program in grade 5 prior to enrolling in LFI; the school culture will be stronger during the elementary and middle school years; and they will have a more intensive program of French instruction during secondary school. Their success rate in achieving Advanced oral proficiency may in fact be higher than the current rate of about 35%. If it is lower, it will undoubtedly be higher than the success rate of the current LFI graduates, which is about 10%.

As for those students who would have enrolled in the CE program next fall, there is no contest. Under the new system, many of these students will achieve Intermediate proficiency in French, and some may pursue an Advanced standing. Even if the new program is only partially successful in achieving the Department's goals, there will be a dramatic increase in the overall percentage of students achieving an Intermediate standing in French.

The broader question is whether the changes associated with the new program will lead to an improvement in the literacy skills of all children and a decrease in the percentage of children who fail to make the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn. For most children this occurs by the end of grade 3. I have no doubt that the reform will be successful in these terms; there are many examples of reforms where eliminating or delaying streaming resulted in improved academic performance.

But will it be enough? The development of literacy skills requires quality teaching at the appropriate level, a positive classroom environment, adequate learning time, and the engagement of students and their families. Data from PISA and other studies suggest that New Brunswick has a well-qualified and dedicated teaching force. However, the amount of 'learning time' children receive day-to-day and over the course of the school year deserves attention. Also, many children in New Brunswick face challenges associated with poverty, and therefore need extra resources, especially during the primary school years. Some children will need a 'second-chance' program if they are still 'off track' at the end of grade 2. The bold move to offer universal French instruction needs to be accompanied with other reforms aimed at improving the literacy skills of children during elementary school. The success of New Brunswick children, especially those who are most vulnerable, will also need the continued support of parents from all walks of life.

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## About CRISP

The Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP) is a multi-disciplinary research organization dedicated to conducting policy research aimed at improving the education and care of Canadian children and youth, contributing to the training of social scientists in quantitative research methods, and supporting low-income countries in their efforts to build research capacity in child development.

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