

Louis Riel School Division French Immersion Review

Executive Summary

LRSD French Immersion Review

LRSD's French Immersion (FI) model is a total immersion 'French milieu setting' where all subjects are taught in French and ELA learning begins in Grade 2. Approximately 30% of LRSD students are enrolled in 12 FI schools, which is higher than the province as a whole. In addition, those choosing FI is increasing.

Given FI's popularity and projected increasing enrolment, LRSD wanted more information about the Division's FI model and to investigate why families are choosing this option. However, the Review was not an evaluation of French Immersion programming in LRSD, rather it brings together current research about FI with the voice of FI staff, students, and families.

LRSD French Immersion Review sources were:

- ✳ A review of literature about FI (2006 – 2015);
- ✳ Web survey of FI staff, students, & parents;
- ✳ 9 pair interviews and 1 focus group with students in Grades 6, 8, and 12 from 4 selected schools;
- ✳ 4 focus groups with staff from selected schools;
- ✳ Data provided by LRSD on the communities served by FI and English Language schools; and
- ✳ Attrition data provided by the Province of Manitoba.

The Review's reach suggests confidence in the findings, as web survey response rates were high (78% for staff, 82% for students, and 60% for parents) and were corroborated by other sources.

Literature Review Findings

Certain themes emerged from an examination of the Canadian literature since 2006:

- ✳ Families place their children in FI because they believe it will provide greater job opportunities;
- ✳ Children from French/English bilingual households were more likely to be enrolled in FI than were students from English-only homes;
- ✳ On a national level, children enrolled in FI tend to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, but this may not be characteristic of all provinces;
- ✳ Nationally, there may be more females than males enrolled in FI, although this research is dated and poorly sourced;

- ✳ While FI enrolment is increasing, literature addressing reasons for this are noticeably absent;
- ✳ Research suggests Allophone students were being discouraged from participating in FI, even though these students performed as well as their English-speaking counterparts;
- ✳ Age of entry into the program, degree of language instruction, total cumulative time spent in the target language and pedagogical approach have been the variables that support students proficiency in language acquisition;
- ✳ Students with academic challenges, including language impairments, benefit from FSL learning and this does not put them further at risk of poor academic success;
- ✳ Students most commonly attrition out of FI at high school entry;
- ✳ Some of the reasons teachers leave FI were inherent within the teaching profession, but others were specific to second language learning; and
- ✳ About half of FI students attending university took courses in French, although it is not clear how many attended a French university.

French Immersion Review Findings

Reasons for Enrolment

LRSD families believe FI will improve their child(ren)'s future possibilities, particularly their employment options.

My parents wanted me to learn French because they did not have this privilege. (Student)

Who is Enrolled in FI in LRSD

- ✳ Three quarters of students (77%) reported that someone else in their home/family spoke French;
- ✳ Communities served by FI schools in LRSD are not more socially advantaged or disadvantaged than those served by English language schools;¹
- ✳ LRSD FI population is 54% female and 46% male, while in English Language schools it is 47% female and 53% male;
- ✳ 69% of parents and 83% of staff did not believe that FI is better suited to female students;

¹ N.B. These data refer to communities that make up the catchment of each of LRSD schools, and does not reference the socio-economic characteristics of the students enrolled in these schools.

Who is Enrolled in FI in LRSD (con't)

- Information from staff focus groups and the popular press suggested increasing FI enrolment could be influenced by French Immersion graduates choosing this option for their children. 23% of LRSD parents completing the survey had attended FI;
- Information from various sources suggested that being of French-speaking heritage may influence families' choice to place their child(ren) in FI. LRSD serves communities that have traditionally included families of French-speaking heritage.

Immersion graduates are putting their children in immersion. That speaks a lot to the program. It is expanding because of the experience of people now putting their children in the program. (Staff)

FI and Newcomer Students

While community profile population-based data indicates that the communities served by FI and English Language schools have approximately the same percentage of the community population whose home language is not English, FI schools (2.2%) have a lower percentage of EAL funded students than do English Language schools (11.2%).

FI Model and Achievement

Students, staff, and parents affirmed LRSD's FI model. Students expressed confidence in their French skills – 79% indicated they spoke and read (77%) well, while 69% felt they wrote well. Parents also felt the same. However, students' use of French in school and on the school grounds decreases by grade level.

I am very happy that LRSD is focused on keeping milieu programs versus dual track. (Parent)

FI in the Inclusive Classroom

My son has been seeing a speech therapist for a few years ...We feared that FI may be too much for him considering he is still kind of learning English language due to his speech impediment. It has had the opposite effect as his French is much more understandable than his English. (Parent)

Staff believed FI was suitable for students with special learning needs (76%), but their opinions were split regarding the suitability of FI for students with first language literacy challenges (53% believe it is suitable, while 38% do not) and about the supports available for students with special learning needs.

In English Language schools, 5.7% of the population receive Level II or Level III funding. This is compared with an average of 0.8% LRSD FI schools. The divisional average is 3.6%.

Attrition From FI

Attrition patterns of students in and out of FI in LRSD are different than other urban school divisions and the province, explained partly by the different access points for late FI programs. Transition into Grade 7 is when LRSD loses the most students out of FI.

FI Students and Post-Secondary Education

Students completing the survey were not so sure of their post-secondary plans. While 27% planned to go to a French college/university, 42% were unsure. 39% believed they would take courses in French at an English college/university.

Questions Arising

Areas for further inquiry result from questions arising from the LRSD FI Review:

- Collecting information about the socio-economic backgrounds of those enrolled in FI would provide a better understanding of the make up of this population;
- Collecting information about students who leave FI could help answer questions about why students leave, thus informing FI practice and highlighting what can be done in order to address attrition;
- Analysis of enrolment by gender over the past 10 years would determine if findings regarding enrolment by gender are similar to the past. This would also allow for analysis of attrition by gender to determine if male and female students leave FI at different rates and for different reasons. This may also inform whether FI pedagogy in LRSD is as supportive of males as it is of female learners and whether further inquiries into supporting male students in FI are warranted;
- Collecting information about the heritage, languages spoken at home, other family members who are French-speaking, and whether parents attended FI may help determine if these are influencing increased enrolment;
- Investigating lower percentages of funded Level II, III, and EAL students in FI would provide more information about the diversity of students in FI. Other indicators of diversity (ethnic, linguistic, and social) also warrant further investigation; and
- Staff attitudes toward the suitability of FI for all learners and their perceptions of support warrants further inquiry.