
2021 Review of the *Official Languages Act* of New Brunswick

Report on second-language learning



"A different language is a different vision of life." – Federico Fellini

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Report on second-language learning**

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Message from the commissioners



We are pleased to present to Government and to the people of New Brunswick our report on the learning of our two official languages. It has been an honour and a privilege to lead this exercise to improve both the *Official Languages Act* and second language learning in our province. This report focuses on our recommendations to improve access to and learning of both official languages for all New Brunswickers. Our recommendations with respect to the *Act* itself were presented in a recently released complementary report entitled “*Report of the 2021 Review of the Official Languages Act of New Brunswick – Organization, Communication and Commitment*”¹.

We live in a plurilingual society, where connecting to one another is easier than ever before. The world is becoming increasingly globalized, and second language learning provides various individual and collective advantages. Our province, like the rest of the world, is changing at a fast pace while dealing with unique social, economic, and demographic challenges.

In that context and considering New Brunswick’s official bilingualism and our increasingly diverse population, we must strive to ensure that learning French or English as a second (sometimes third or fourth) language is an opportunity available to everyone. Moreover, it is important to recognize that second language learning is a life-long journey.

We know that language issues can raise passions because they are at the heart of our identity as individuals and as a province. For this reason, we are grateful for the sincerity and consideration with which participants have shared their experiences and ideas. Thank you for the opportunity to engage in candid and respectful discussions, and to learn from caring, hard-working, and open-minded people.

Since we are Commissioners from different linguistic backgrounds, we had to reflect on our personal perception of the situation of bilingualism in New Brunswick. Having had the opportunity to work so closely together over a period of several months, and to engage in often difficult conversations with so many New Brunswickers, we have each developed a greater appreciation for those who hold different opinions and priorities, and whose values have been shaped by their own unique

1 Finn, Yvette and McLaughlin, John. 2021. “[Report of the 2021 Review of the Official Languages Act of New Brunswick – Organization, Communication and Commitment.](#)”

cultural histories. What every group and individual seems to want, we believe, is fairness within a context of greater linguistic harmony, and we feel that until we create such a socio-cultural ecosystem, our children and youth will be at a disadvantage.

Although the pandemic precluded us from hosting in-person meetings, virtual technology allowed us to speak with a variety of stakeholders and experts from across the province. We heard from people from both linguistic communities in an independent and non-partisan manner. We greatly appreciated the organizations and individuals who presented their briefs, thereby providing us with valuable insights to inform our recommendations. We also thank the thousands of participants who submitted their comments online or by mail during this important exercise.

In considering our recommendations, we ask that decision-makers remain cognizant of the tremendous strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on our various institutions and government departments. This is especially true for our public-school system, which has continued to operate under extremely difficult conditions, and within an environment of constant change. We would urge Government to approach these recommendations cautiously, for while we see urgency in particular situations, we also believe that a light touch would be more likely to garner long term success.

If acted upon by Government, we believe the recommendations in this report will strengthen the province's ability to embrace language learning from birth through adulthood and will enhance the opportunity for all New Brunswickers to enjoy the benefits of communicating in both official languages. Together we can foster greater understanding and respect. We can build stronger connections between the two linguistic communities, and we can strengthen New Brunswick's cultural diversity, social fabric, and economic success. We offer this report in celebration of New Brunswick's unique status as the only officially bilingual province in Canada.



Judge Yvette Finn



John McLaughlin

Executive summary

New Brunswick prides itself on being Canada's only officially bilingual province. For more than fifty years, this unique status has been championed by political, business, cultural and academic leaders as a way of promoting our province in a manner that none other can do. This status is not simply an idea or marketing tool, but rather one that is entrenched in New Brunswick's *Official Languages Act* and the *Constitution of Canada*, thereby by assuring our citizens of equal rights in their interactions with Government. It also lets the world know that when it comes to the English and French languages, our province means business.

Our companion document, *Report of the 2021 Review of the Official Languages Act of New Brunswick: Organization, Communication and Commitment*, which was released to the public on December 15, 2021, explores the genesis and evolution of the *Act*, and offers recommendations to improve its goals and commitments. Clearly, much has been achieved over the past several decades to improve the delivery of services in both official languages to the people of our province.

Being a bilingual province, however, requires more of us as a people than owning and implementing a piece of legislation. One could wrongly assume that the majority of New Brunswickers are able to communicate in both official languages, but that is far from reality. According to Statistics Canada's 2016 Census, only 33.9% of New Brunswickers consider themselves bilingual. While 73.2% of Francophones report that they speak both official languages, that is the case for only 15.7% of Anglophones. This means there are still large numbers of individuals from both linguistic communities who do not speak or understand their second official language.

This report will provide recommendations for helping all citizens of our province to continually improve their ability to communicate freely with each other, at a minimum conversational level, thereby allowing them to fully participate in everything our province has to offer. We hope that our recommendations will boost language competencies for all who have that as a goal, thereby allowing New Brunswickers to take full advantage of our province's rich cultural, social, economic, employment and political opportunities.

The *Official Languages Act*, which focuses on institutional bilingualism rather than personal bilingualism, is not intended to require, support or promote second language learning for New Brunswickers, and we have therefore chosen to deal with this topic as a separate but complementary mandate of our review. It is clear to us that many of the challenges, frustrations, and divisions between our two linguistic communities could be alleviated if each New Brunswicker could develop stronger proficiency in both official languages.

We are convinced that second language learning efforts should reflect the needs of all New Brunswickers, across all stages of life, and throughout every community. This includes a group that is sometimes forgotten in the recurring debate around how to teach languages to our children and youth: the many thousands of adults who, for various reasons, did not develop strong proficiencies in school, and who now find themselves disadvantaged and not knowing where to turn.

All too often it is the public schools that bear the burden (and frequently the blame), for not producing bilingual citizens. It is true that the education system does have a captive audience

for thirteen developmentally important years, with every New Brunswick child and teenager being obliged to attend school. Our teachers, however, carry extreme expectations into their classrooms, with second language instruction being only one of them. It seems clear to us that society as a whole must collectively support, champion, and participate actively in the complex process of becoming a truly bilingual province.

We have organized our report around four themes, the first being general findings relevant to our province as a whole (which implicate all New Brunswickers), followed by insights and recommendations around three stages of life: preschool, Kindergarten to Grade 12 education, and life beyond high school. Our report offers recommendations to address the following challenges:

- confusion over what it means to be “bilingual” in New Brunswick, including a lack of clarity about an expected minimum level of language proficiency as described by a standard and credible rating scale;
- a need to introduce young children to second language learning opportunities, while respecting the theory of play and activity-based programming and experiences;
- the debilitating impact on student language learning of intergenerational linguistic tensions;
- a lack of appreciation for the benefits of mastering a second language;
- a need for cross-cultural interaction, understanding and appreciation;
- policy-driven language-based mobility barriers to transfers into and within the New Brunswick public school system;
- a need to balance the benefits and potential threats inherent in technology-rich school programs;
- insufficient funding and programming to address the language learning needs of newcomers;
- a lack of data about public school students’ second language proficiency levels;
- a long-standing two-tiered structure in the province’s Anglophone education sector, which results in stronger students in the French immersion program, and most of those with academic, behavioral, socio-emotional and mental health challenges enrolled in the English Prime program;
- a shortage of qualified French-speaking teachers in both linguistic sectors;
- a need for more accessible, affordable, engaging and effective second language learning opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed, for newcomers to the province, and for all other adult New Brunswickers working towards their own personal goals;
- A critical need for second language training opportunities by many front-line employees under the responsibility of Service New Brunswick and the Department of Health, including third-party professionals such as paramedics and nursing home employees.

While we have not shied away from pointing out significant challenges that have developed organically over many generations, we do not in any way assign blame. We offer solution-oriented insights and recommendations to very real problems, some of which are uncomfortable to face and speak about, but all of which must be exposed and attended to. This is not simply an appeal to Government, but one for all New Brunswickers, for surely our province will be stronger, more vibrant, and increasingly prosperous if we all commit to that which makes us truly unique.

Commissioners' mandate

In February 2021, we were appointed by the Premier to lead the review of the *Official Languages Act* (the Act). In addition, we were given a complementary mandate to identify ways to help New Brunswickers improve their learning of both official languages. This report provides the results of our research and consultation on this topic.

The focus areas of the second language learning review were the following:

- Improve the access to and the quality of second language instruction in the public education system, from early childhood to adulthood.
- Improve second language instruction and best practices throughout all stages of life, with a focus on language training for the unemployed and underemployed.
- Help define New Brunswick's role as a bilingual, open society that values social, cultural, political, and economic freedoms, as well as the protection of the vulnerable.

This included exploring issues such as:

- Ensure that as many students as possible in both the Anglophone and Francophone school systems graduate with a conversational proficiency in their second official language.
- Align early childhood through Grade 12 language learning programs with general employer expectations, as well as matching assessment and evaluation tools in the education system with those for entry into the public service.
- Make specific recommendations for improving second language instruction and best practices for Early Childhood Education, Kindergarten to Grade 12 public schools, post-secondary education and adult education programs, with a focus on language training for the unemployed and underemployed.

The *Education Act*, which governs the public education system, makes provisions for distinct language-based institutions, a concept that is also enshrined in the Constitution of Canada. While second language learning does not fall within the scope of the *Official Languages Act*, we feel strongly that learning both official languages is an important tool for achieving its goals. In short, that act requires speakers of both official languages to deliver on its aspirations.

Methodology

CONSULTATION PROCESS

To fulfill our mandate, we established an engagement strategy that was rigorous, inclusive, non-partisan and conducive to candid and respectful dialogue.

In the first few weeks after our appointment, we put together a working group and designed the following consultation framework and tools:

- A website (BilingualNB.ca; NBbilingue.ca) which provided information to New Brunswickers as well as an invitation to participate in the discussion.
- A background paper, with issues to ponder, was posted online.
- An online questionnaire designed to gather public input.
- A mailing address and an email address established to receive submissions and briefs.
- Virtual meetings held with a wide range of stakeholders to hear their presentations and comments.

The timeline and activities for the review were as follows:

- **Public launch** – The consultation was launched on May 3, 2021. Advertisements were placed in major daily and weekly newspapers and on social media.
- **Consultation** – In the first phase of the process (May to August), an online questionnaire was made available to the public. We also held a series of meetings with stakeholder groups and experts to hear different points of view. These meetings were held primarily via videoconference due to the COVID-19 pandemic and held in camera to allow for honest and open discussion with the participants.
- **Analysis, research, and writing** – The second phase (September to December) was dedicated to analysis of the information collected, research, and report writing. A report analyzing the responses to the online questionnaire, prepared by researcher Gilbert McLaughlin, was received. Additional meetings were held with stakeholders to obtain specific information and a more in-depth understanding of the issues and ideas.
- **Final Report** – The work of the Commission will be completed when both reports are tabled and made public.

PARTICIPATION

The interest of New Brunswickers in language issues is evident, as shown in the table below.

Participation data
<p>Number of respondents to the online questionnaire*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• English: 4,437 respondents (72.1%)• French: 1,169 respondents (19.0%)• English/French: 550 respondents (8.9%) <p>Total: 6,156 participants * According to the official language of choice indicated by the respondent</p>
<p>Number of emails received in the inbox of bilingualnbbilingue@gnb.ca:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• English: 71 emails• French: 16 emails• English/French: 2 emails <p>Total: 89 emails</p>
<p>Number of briefs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• English only: 6• French only: 17• English/French: 8 <p>Total: 31 briefs</p>
<p>Number of meetings: We held over 80 meetings with more than 200 individuals and representatives from 52 stakeholder groups.</p>

We heard from a wide range of stakeholders, including community organizations, public service employees, officers of the Legislative Assembly, members of all political parties, former premiers, post-secondary institutions, school administrators and teachers, parents, youth, and newcomers.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics used in the report are from the 2016 census since the results of the latest Statistics Canada census will not be available until later in 2022.

Consultation – What was said

Our consultation took two forms, an anonymous online survey, and an opportunity for New Brunswickers to meet with the Commissioners or to submit their thoughts in writing. While the survey results revealed a breadth of opinions ranging from complete support to outright rejection of official bilingualism, its anonymous nature made it impossible to engage in discussion about obvious tensions, frustrations, and suggestions for improving our province's linguistic habitat. Perhaps the greatest benefit of having conducted the survey, however, is that it caused us to take very seriously the fact that large numbers of individuals have negative experiences and perceptions about bilingualism, and that we as a province must not sweep those concerns under the carpet.

Government, we believe, has the important job of listening to these concerns in an open and nonjudgmental manner, and of addressing these issues through a strategic, informed, and resolute manner. We can no longer be afraid to discuss these tensions openly and in a solution-oriented spirit, for they are very real, and the more they are suppressed, the more insidious and damaging they can become.

To be clear, however, while we heard the voices of those urging us to reject official bilingualism, we will not be doing so. Our mandate is to recommend actions to strengthen New Brunswick's position as the only officially bilingual province in Canada. Consequently, our recommendations are about affirming and strengthening rather than rejecting and dismantling, and we remain committed to New Brunswick's defining but fragile sociolinguistic structure. We believe our province is made stronger by embracing, championing and continuously improving our commitment to its two official languages.

Despite the longstanding and often bitter debate around official bilingualism, there is reason for optimism. We have found, through dozens of face-to-face conversations with New Brunswickers from both linguistic communities, that even those with firm positions on bilingualism have been open to respectful and honest discussions, and to attempts at understanding alternative points of view. We asked provocative questions and encouraged discussions that got to the heart of linguistic tensions. We were appreciative of the trust placed in us, that things said would be treated in confidence, and that nobody would be judged for speaking their own personal truths. In that context, we did not meet any individuals so entrenched in their positions that they were not prepared to discuss critical issues in an open and authentic manner, nor did we meet any who did not care about the experiences and challenges facing fellow New Brunswickers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

We had lengthy discussions with large numbers of individuals who hold and promote positive views on bilingualism, but who sometimes feel their goodwill attitudes are drowned out by the persistent negative noise that has permeated the discourse for generations. At the same time, we met with groups considered by many to hold extreme views, groups that feel they must advocate relentlessly and loudly for the linguistic rights of the people they represent, but when we sat down with them and had honest and deep discussions about language tensions, we generally found an openness to more moderate tones. We were encouraged that the majority of our discussions were with genuinely concerned New Brunswickers who also recognize that our collective fingerprints can be seen as we try

to uncover evidence of what has caused the often intergenerational mistrust, cynicism and negativity around official bilingualism.

The majority of participants acknowledged that in the New Brunswick context, second language learning is important. Much of the discussion centered around access to employment, particularly with government positions, which are frequently seen as an entitlement for New Brunswickers. We heard about the heartbreaking reality of family members having to leave the province because they are not bilingual, and of many others who are bilingual but who choose to pursue careers elsewhere.

There was discussion of the multiple benefits of learning a second language, such as the ability to communicate and better understand others, a deeper appreciation for a different culture, a springboard to learning more languages, and even employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors. Many felt strongly that achieving a conversational proficiency in the province's two official languages is important for New Brunswickers of all ages, so they can better avail themselves of opportunities within the province. One participant expressed it this way: *"We should be a continuum of human beings in pursuit of lifelong language learning."*

"We should be a continuum of human beings in pursuit of lifelong language learning." – Education Professional

What is not clear, however, is the way forward. Key themes that emerged from the consultation include:

- A lack of accessible, affordable and effective language learning opportunities for unilingual adults.
- A desire for all New Brunswickers to achieve a comfortable conversational level of their second language proficiency.

- An acknowledgement that second language learning must be a life-long journey, and that the school system, though one obvious resource, cannot alone ensure bilingualism.
- A lack of understanding of what it means to be "bilingual."
- A need for clarity and standardization around second language proficiency testing in the school, post-secondary, and employment contexts.
- Frustration over real and/or perceived linguistic barriers to employment in the provincial public service.
- Different second language needs, resources, and local contexts in individual communities around the province.
- A need for strong second language programming, with realistic goals, for all students in the public education system.
- An end to the *de facto* streaming that currently occurs in the Anglophone school system which creates serious imbalances in classroom teaching and learning environments.
- A need for authentic and engaging social and cultural opportunities throughout life which encourage Francophones and Anglophones to interact, practise their second language skills, and enhance mutual understanding and respect. As one participant suggested: *"We need to get the cultural dynamic back on the radar as a project of society. We've lost that as bilingualism became a debate about jobs and separate school busses."*

"We need to get the cultural dynamic back on the radar as a project of society. We've lost that as bilingualism became a debate about jobs and separate school busses." – Concerned New Brunswicker

- A realization that if all New Brunswickers developed a conversational proficiency in their second official language, many of the current issues around the *Official Languages Act* and its implementation would become irrelevant.
- An awareness that Indigenous languages, which are threatened with extinction, require immediate attention, thus adding an important new element to the discussion on language learning beyond the province's two official languages. While this is outside the scope of the Commissioners' mandate, it is seen as being critical to protecting and promoting New Brunswick's linguistic and cultural evolution.
- An acknowledgement that changing demographics in the province, such as an aging population and an influx of newcomers who speak many languages other than English or French, are adding a new dynamic as New Brunswick's social, cultural, economic, and political landscape continues to evolve, and as new linguistic priorities emerge.
- A belief that language and culture are intimately connected and, in an ideal world, evolving identities would be embraced rather than feared. As one participant put it: *"Identity is like a calculator with no minus button. You just keep adding to it without giving anything up."*

"Identity is like a calculator with no minus button. You just keep adding to it without giving anything up." – Senior Government Official

- A recognition that second language learning as an issue is distinct from the *Official Languages Act*, but many see it as a tool to help achieve the goals of the *Act*.

One recurring theme that emerged was a need for strategies to reduce tensions that exist between the two linguistic communities. One participant remarked that *"We need a vision for our province where every person feels heard and valued, and that they belong"*. That

sentiment indeed captures the overall tone of our discussions with so many New Brunswickers over the past several months. Most people acknowledged that long-standing linguistic tensions mean we have a long way to go to achieve that vision.

"We need a vision for our province where every person feels heard and valued, and that they belong." – Concerned New Brunswicker

The drive on the part of the Francophone community to protect and promote the French language and Acadian culture is often seen by Anglophones as a threat to greater opportunities, particularly in accessing meaningful employment within their home province. At the same time, many Francophones have deep concerns about the loss of their language within the context of an English-speaking majority. These factors have caused some people, from both linguistic communities, to become protective of their rights, or perceived rights, and in many cases to become mistrustful of "the other."

Further, certain participants spoke about their hesitancy to discuss language issues that are important to them for fear of being labelled overly militant or anti-bilingual. They feel this apprehension around open and productive dialogue causes tensions to fester, and to only emerge when like-minded individuals come together, thereby deepening an already acrimonious environment. This is seen as subversive to efforts at generating social cohesion, not just between the two official linguistic communities, but among all New Brunswickers from many cultures, heritages, ethnic backgrounds, and language groups. As one participant remarked *"We live in a province where we can't even talk about these things. It's not normal. If we're so fragile to begin with, then we're doing something wrong."*

"We live in a province where we can't even talk about these things. It's not normal. If we're so fragile to begin with, then we're doing something wrong." – Concerned New Brunswicker

We heard from some participants that a contributing factor to linguistic tensions is an anxiousness on the part of some unilingual government employees working in rural areas who rarely if ever are placed in a position of having to serve clients in the other official language. While effective language training would ultimately mitigate this situation, it will take time for unilingual employees to develop stronger second language proficiencies and, in the meantime, rural participants see a need for patience and understanding.

While there are indeed those groups and individuals who hold extreme views on minority language rights and bilingualism in general, virtually all New Brunswickers who spoke in person to the commission favour a moderate

approach, one that is welcoming and respectful of both communities, one that envisions a truly bilingual province where all New Brunswickers have equal opportunities for success. As one participant put it, *"There are militants on both sides, but the majority of New Brunswickers are in the middle"*.

"There are militants on both sides, but the majority of New Brunswickers are in the middle". – Senior Governmental Official

Many have called for strategies to bring people together, to get to know each other, to better understand each other's priorities, and to find a comfortable place where harmony can exist. Unfortunately, the noise around official bilingualism makes it difficult to hear these voices for collaboration and unity. In the words of Shirley MacLean, New Brunswick's Commissioner of Official Languages, *"Apprenons à nous comprendre... Let's understand each other!"*

THEMES FROM THE ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Thousands of respondents provided their opinions through our online questionnaire. It is worth noting that this was not a statistically representative survey of the province's general population. Qualitative content analysis, however, allows for the identification of the following emerging themes²:

- **Early years** – Calls for more government support for improving cultural awareness, assistance for parents to get language training, for educators to have access better language-based resources, and for quality preschool immersion programs.
- **Public schools** – Calls for language-based extra-curricular activities, language training for parents and teachers, targeted programs

in rural areas, strengthening and stabilizing French immersion programs, consistency between the two linguistic sectors, reducing costs for French learning materials, and even the removal of duality in education.

- **Barriers to adult learning** – Concerns about the value of second language learning, access to affordable learning opportunities, opportunities to maintain skills, perceptions that it is too late for adults to begin learning a second language, and linguistic insecurity.
- **Connections between communities** – Calls for opportunities for Anglophones and Francophones to come together to better understand each other, strategies to ensure government programs create equity between

2 McLaughlin, Gilbert. 2021. *"An Analysis of Feedback from the Web 2021 Questionnaire in the Context of the Review of the Official Languages Act and Second Language Learning in New Brunswick."*

the two communities, promotional efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of bilingualism, and strategies to build respect for all New Brunswickers.

- **Perception regarding tensions around official bilingualism** – Calls for alleviation of tensions related to real and perceived inequities, access to government jobs, feeling forced to learn another language, and real or perceived discrimination against unilingual New Brunswickers.

Recommendations

GENERAL FINDINGS

In today's world, the ability to learn and speak multiple languages is considered an important personal asset. With increased mobility and a more integrated global economy, communities that were once isolated are now connected to people from other cultures and backgrounds. Being bilingual or plurilingual better equips individuals with not only language skills but also important social skills needed to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such skills include the ability to be more perceptive of others, to be more empathetic and to communicate more effectively.

Education systems in many different countries and economies are emphasizing the importance of teaching and learning foreign languages, so much so that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed the PISA 2025³ Foreign Language Assessment Framework⁴. For the first time, PISA 2025 will assess foreign language skills on

a global scale, which will allow us to interpret and to produce policy-relevant analyses based on the performance of 15-year-old students around the world⁵.

At the national level, data shows that 84% of Francophones and 65% of Anglophones think that learning both official languages contributes to a better understanding among people⁶. Additionally, increasing numbers of students across Canada enrol in second language learning programs. For example, over the last two decades, French immersion enrolment increased by 59%⁷.

For decades, both linguistic sectors have included second language learning as part of the curriculum, and various programs also exist to provide language training for adults. According to Statistics Canada, the linguistic capacity of New Brunswick's population can be illustrated as follows:

French-Speaking Population	English-Speaking Population	Bilingual population
234,055 (31.8%)	499,970 (67.9%)	249,955 (33.9%)

Further, available data indicates that 73.2% of French-speaking and 15.8% of English-speaking New Brunswickers can speak both languages.

Continuum of language learning from birth to adulthood

In its desired perfect state, learning both official languages should take place on a developmental continuum that responds to each person's strengths, needs, and learning styles. Learning

3 The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.

4 <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/foreign-language/PISA-2025-FLA-Framework.pdf>

5 <https://www.oecd.org/education/what-matters-for-language-learning-5e06e820-en.htm>

6 Vox Pop Labs Inc. on behalf of PCH, 2018. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/official-languages-bilingualism/publications/statistics.html#a2>

7 Statistics Canada, 2003-2017. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/official-languages-bilingualism/publications/statistics.html#a2>

a new language takes time and dedication. We believe that most people can learn a second language at any stage of life when the right tools and supports are in place to meet their needs.

That said, many adults reported to us that they are extremely shy about practising their second language skills in public, as they are afraid to make mistakes or “look stupid,” and this hesitancy is amplified by their lack of confidence that they are even capable of mastering the language at their age. This group is often forgotten in discussions and planning around second language learning, and we feel strongly that their unique needs must be addressed in a sensitive but effective manner. It is fine to say every student will graduate with an ability to speak both languages, but what about those who never had the benefit of strong language instruction in school, and are now attempting to navigate this bilingual province on their own? They must not be forgotten.

Levels of bilingualism – understanding one’s language proficiency

In our discussions with New Brunswickers, it became clear that most people were not quite sure what being “bilingual” really meant. They raised valid concerns about whether their own proficiency levels are sufficient to succeed in their personal, social, and professional lives. In our opinion, we must bring clarity to this issue.

We also learned that different scales are being used to assess language proficiency depending on where and for what purpose these tests were administered. One tool might be used in public schools, another at post-secondary institutions, and yet another in the workplace. The lack of common language and a clear understanding around proficiency levels and language expectations is creating unnecessary confusion.

Each phase (early childhood, public school, post-secondary education, and the workplace), is a building block and an opportunity to explore, learn, strengthen, and maintain competencies in English and French. Motivation for language learning is a key factor of success. When the need or desire to learn another language arises, it is never too late to start, and we hope the recommendations that follow in this report will allow New Brunswickers to achieve success wherever they find themselves on this lifelong journey.

(Translation) “[...] *second language learning is most meaningful when learners are placed in authentic situations where oral communication is at the heart of these situations... [...] These authentic communicative situations must be embedded in the learning continuum from birth to high school graduation.*”⁸ – District Education Council

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a globally accepted tool that describes how learners progress through various developmental levels and can help to better understand them. It is currently being used in New Brunswick’s public schools and we are suggesting it be accepted as a standardized tool for our province to track individuals’ trajectories of their evolving language proficiency.

This learning, teaching and assessment tool was designed “*to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency*”⁹. In our context, “foreign” applies to “second” or “additional” language proficiency. Moreover,

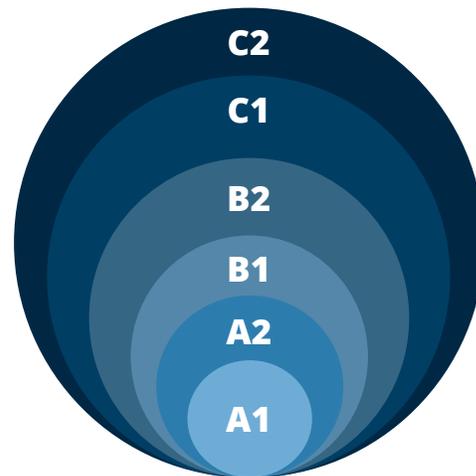
8 Brief submitted to the Commissioners by the Francophone Nord-Est District Education p. 18.

9 Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

the CEFR is recognized and recommended for use by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)¹⁰.

The CEFR describes second language proficiency at six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. Each of which considers three components:

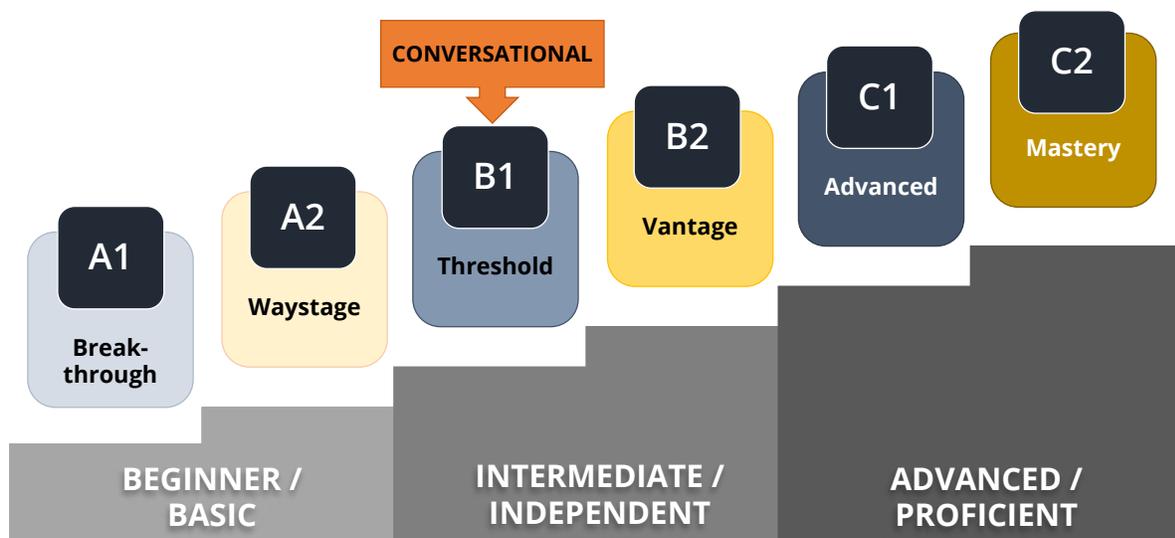
- understanding (i.e. listening and reading)
- speaking, and
- writing.



Source: Council of Europe¹¹

It is widely accepted that a “conversational” level is designated at the B1 level, as illustrated below.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Levels



We contend that we need a language-based systems alignment in the province. The Common European Framework of Reference would be a good model for government to use as part of all its language learning offerings, across the lifelong experiences of its citizens. One of the main advantages of the framework is that it

enables learners and workers to be aware of their language proficiency and to follow their improvement over time.

¹⁰ The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) [https://www.cmec.ca/136/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages_\(CEFR\).html](https://www.cmec.ca/136/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages_(CEFR).html)

¹¹ Council of Europe. *The CEFR Levels*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

Recommendation 1

That Government, across all its institutions, adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) in the New Brunswick context as the standardized tool to inform programs related to second and additional language learning.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

“Between birth and entry to formal schooling, children acquire the ability to use language to understand others and express their ideas, intentions, observations and emotions. [...] Language is a powerful vehicle for relating with others.” (McCain, 2020).

Lifelong learning is nurtured in the earliest years when children and families have access to a range of high-quality, play-based early learning experiences. These experiences set the stage for future learning and success in life.

The acquisition of language is one of the more remarkable achievements of early childhood. The stimulation of language and communication is the foundation of literacy and is critical to children’s early personal development. It is never too early to begin learning another language, and if approached properly, it can be fun and an effective tool to nurture healthy child development. Further, research has shown that the associated cognitive and social benefits will last a lifetime. In addition, exposing a child to another language from an early age cultivates creativity, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, and aids in the achievement of important developmental milestones. Children who are exposed early to other languages display more positive attitudes to the cultures associated with those languages. The experience of learning a language introduces them to the world in ways they might otherwise not have experienced.

During the consultation process, many early childhood experts highlighted the importance of collaboration between families, educators, and communities in providing environments

where bilingualism and plurilingualism can thrive. They cautioned, however, against efforts to formalize the teaching of second languages in early learning centres, which are intended to be activity and play-based environments rather than settings of direct instruction. There is a clear call to avoid the “*schoolification*” of early childhood learning environments, but rather to expose children in authentic ways to additional languages through cultural activities and approaches.

Many referred to the work of Professor Rodrigue Landry on ethnolinguistic vitality, education in minority settings, and bilingualism. Research shows the vital role of families, educators, and community supports acting together to counterbalance¹² the effects of the dominant linguistic landscape of an area.

Parental engagement

Parents, as their child’s first educators, play a fundamental role in a child’s optimal development, including their language development. Many New Brunswick parents want their children to have the lifelong cultural and intellectual advantages that come from being bilingual; however, their ability to introduce another language to their children may vary depending on the family situation and the linguistic landscape of their local community.

12 Landry, Rodrigue and Deveau, Kenneth (2010). « [École et autonomie culturelle : Enquête pancanadienne en milieu scolaire francophone minoritaire](#) »

Regardless of parents' bilingual capacity, their support makes a tremendous difference in their child's success. Parents do not have to be fluent in the language the child is learning to create an encouraging and active learning environment. With support, they can provide many opportunities for authentic experiences, and in this current technological era, they have access to a wide range of online tools and resources. Some parents could benefit from community supports in accessing learning environments and fun activities whereby children can be exposed to other languages and cultures as early as possible.

Early learning and childcare

Early learning and childcare facilities play an important role in language acquisition and in the development of cultural identity. The early learning sector comprises licensed facilities across the province that offer services for children from birth to age 12.

In New Brunswick, about one in five children aged 0 to 12 years old is enrolled in a licensed childcare facility. The following pictogram illustrates the enrolment in these facilities by age category. It clearly indicates a perceived shortcoming of the field. For a variety of reasons, the majority of New Brunswick's children do not benefit from the programs and services offered by this important sector.

Enrolment Rate in Licensed Childcare Facilities



Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Childcare facilities, which are privately owned and publicly supported, use one of two language-specific curriculum frameworks provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. *New Brunswick's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum*, which is used in Anglophone centres, promotes diversity and embraces various cultures and languages. The

Francophone curriculum, *Curriculum éducatif pour la petite enfance francophone du Nouveau-Brunswick*, includes language acquisition as it relates to learning French for children who only speak English or another language (*francization* and *refrancization*). Beyond these curriculum experiences, there are no other specific

guidelines or program requirements with respect to second or additional language learning in early learning and childcare settings.

Some Anglophone stakeholders proposed the inclusion of French second language instruction in early learning centres as an integral program component. Others, however, pointed to implementation challenges considering the shortage of trained early childhood educators, let alone those who can function in both official languages.

It is encouraging to note that grassroots-led prototype projects are ongoing in two Anglophone Early Learning Centres as part of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD)'s "Language Learning Opportunities" initiative. One project aims to create fun and engaging environments by providing basic French professional development to Early Childhood Educators, creating links through school and family partnerships, and introducing high-quality French language materials to the children. The other prototype focuses on sparking curiosity about the French language through inquiry and investigations. These types of local innovations should be encouraged and supported as early learning centres embrace their role in second language learning.

The priority of the Francophone sector is to protect and promote the Acadian culture and to nurture a strong sense of belonging to the French language community. The linguistic emphasis in the early years is described in the new "*Lignes directrices sur le développement linguistique et la construction identitaire des jeunes enfants*" (Guidelines for language acquisition and cultural identity learning environments)¹³, which have been developed in response to the significant changes being experienced in the Acadian

and Francophone community. For example, in traditionally Francophone areas, there is a much more diverse population than in previous years, as well as an increase in exogamous couples (i.e. mixed language), and newcomer families where French is not the language used at home.

Since most children in New Brunswick do not attend licensed facilities, parental engagement as well as community support is crucial to help families in their efforts to expose children to different languages.

Community supports

There are many local services and organizations that could be rallied in the effort to expose young children to both official languages. These include:

- provincial institutions
- municipalities
- community and business organizations
- youth groups
- schools
- public libraries
- church groups
- media outlets.

Concerted efforts are necessary to raise awareness and to leverage existing resources and technologies. For example, the province of New Brunswick has a network of 63 public libraries which enrich the social, cultural, and economic vitality of our communities by opening doors to lifelong learning for all. In addition, there are 13 family resource centres around the province, many in isolated rural communities, offering a variety of free programs and activities for parents and their children aged zero to six. Many other groups provide a wide range of services to infants and preschoolers. Elements of language exposure could be included in their mandates.

13 Government of New Brunswick. 2021. *Lignes directrices sur le développement linguistique et la construction identitaire des jeunes enfants*

Coordination is necessary to take advantage of community partnerships to promote bilingualism and offer learning activities and cultural experiences in both languages.

Recommendation 2

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) review the early childhood curriculum frameworks to include cultural exploration and oral exposure to languages for preschoolers in a way that is respectful of the research on early years language acquisition and the preservation and promotion of the linguistic minority community.

Recommendation 3

That EECD develop after-school programs and activities that will nurture cultural exploration and increase oral exposure to languages for children, in a playful and fun manner and in a way that is respectful of the preservation and promotion of the linguistic minority community.

Recommendation 4

That EECD (Anglophone sector) expand the prototype projects included in the Language Learning Opportunities initiative to other sites in the Province and continue to learn from these prototype early learning centres and share the successes across the province.

Recommendation 5

That Government provide coordination and leverage existing infrastructure, such as public libraries, to expose children to both official languages in all communities across the province.

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As Commissioners, we wish to acknowledge the high-quality public education system that exists in New Brunswick. Our province repeatedly scores well on international and national assessments of literacy, math and science, and although our overall student achievement tends to trail behind a number of other provinces, New Brunswick students continually outperform those in many other highly developed nations around the world. Further, we believe the strength of an education system should also be based on factors other than those which can be quantified through standardized testing.

Our education system is known for including all students in regular classrooms, regardless of their physical, sensorial, cognitive, or socio-emotional needs. On top of this, our province has a complex web of second language learning programs, particularly in the Anglophone sector, which is unlike any other province or territory in Canada. Further, New Brunswick is known worldwide for its commitment to the teaching of important global competencies, such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability and citizenship, all traits that are critically important for success in the twenty-first century, but which are very difficult to measure in a standardized fashion.

These factors should be considered when making judgments about the quality of our school system. In the field of student assessment, there is an old saying: *Not everything that matters can be counted, and not everything that can be counted matters.*

Teachers and others working in the education system face tremendous challenges, with high expectations from the public, limited time to achieve these expectations, constantly changing priorities and plans, and a chronic barrage of criticism from many different quarters. We are impressed with the significant achievements our teachers and education leaders are able to produce in the face of these challenges. While our report will point out areas for improvement, we wish to state clearly and up front that flaws in the system reflect structural defects much more than do any shortcomings of the people entrusted to deliver on often unrealistic goals. Decades of constantly changing plans and strategies have created significant instability in the system, and our goal is to draw attention to those things that to us, and to many who have spoken with us, require thoughtful but deliberate continuous improvement actions.

It is a common mistake to speak about second language learning in New Brunswick's public schools as if it were one monolithic endeavour. Across the two distinct linguistic education sectors there are numerous programs, each with their own clientele, their own goals, and their own approaches to teaching and learning. The two linguistic communities, each of which has well-established locally governed school systems, reflect needs and priorities that are unique, not just to their individual sectors, but also to the regional realities in which schools operate.

Students in urban areas generally have access to more language programs, more qualified teachers, more community supports, and more social opportunities to practice their second language than do their peers in smaller communities¹⁴. Francophone students in Fredericton, for example, have greater exposure to English influences than do those in the Acadian Peninsula, while Anglophone students in a place like Bathurst, have more opportunities to use their developing French skills than would students in St. Andrews. Clearly, a cookie-cutter approach to teaching the second official language is not appropriate in a linguistic ecosystem as complex and diverse as New Brunswick's.

[Translation] *"Considering the different realities in New Brunswick, we must quickly come to the conclusion that second language learning is a rather asymmetrical phenomenon in New Brunswick. The contexts are very different from one region to another, from one linguistic group to another, and we must therefore not fall into the trap of thinking that one formula will work for all learners from one language to another."*¹⁵

Our review revealed different strengths, opportunities, and recommendations appropriate for each linguistic sector, and our report will therefore speak to them separately. That said, there are certain findings that apply generally to both sectors, and consequently, they suggest opportunities to improve language learning that transcend linguistic structures and that call for greater involvement and commitment from the broader community.

It is important, when considering this section of the report, to keep in mind the education-related mandate that was accepted by our

14 Salinas, D. (2021), « The socio-economic gap in foreign-language learning », *PISA in Focus*, No. 116, OCDE Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/953199e1-en>.

15 Brief submitted by the DSFNE District Education Council, *Mémoire du Conseil d'éducation du DSFNE*, p. 17

Commissioners: *to make recommendations on how to ensure students leave New Brunswick's high schools with a minimum of a conversational level of communication in both official languages.* The goal is not to strive for all students to become fluently bilingual, but to have adequate language competencies to communicate with a degree of confidence and relative ease at a conversational level in both official languages.

If all New Brunswick students could develop these competencies, it is believed each would be on a path to continuous second language improvement beyond high school. Further, an overall enhanced bilingual population would make it easier for government employees to be able to deliver on the fundamental promise of the *Official Languages Act*, which is to ensure citizens can be served in the official language of their choice.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The impact of linguistic tensions on student learning

Many respondents to our consultation spoke of the debilitating impact of long-standing linguistic tensions on second language learning in this province. We, as commissioners, have deep concerns about negative messaging to which our students are exposed, even those of a subtle nature, and how these can impact learners' motivation to speak and understand a second language.

In their 2020 paper entitled "*Examining Students Co-Construction of Language Ideologies through Multimodal Text*"¹⁶, Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng and Kelle L. Marshall explore the connection between students' investment in their language

learning and the language ideologies upon which they draw. The research was specific to New Brunswick's French immersion program as situated within a dual education system, and more broadly embedded within a provincial culture of language-based ideological discourse. While we did not review further research on this topic, it seems obvious to us that if children and youth grow up in homes and communities where negative messages are pervasive, one might expect students to be less motivated to fully engage in second language learning, or to appreciate the many benefits that speaking multiple languages can bring.

In our opinion, robust efforts are required to reduce these tensions. We support opportunities like cross-cultural dialogue, education on official bilingualism and the *Official Languages Act*, and effective public communication about the many advantages of learning additional languages. Specifically, New Brunswickers would be well served if they came to appreciate the very real benefits that tower above access to government jobs, which in many cases seems to be at the heart of the tensions.

In her 2019-2020 annual report, Shirley MacLean, New Brunswick's Commissioner of Official Languages, wrote about the need for greater understanding between the two linguistic communities. "*That sentiment of vibrancy of a language exists for all of us; English and French,*" she wrote. "*Without even knowing it, we have strong feelings for our cultural ties; where we came from, music that we identify with, recipes that awaken a memory of Christmases past – because it has been made by family members for many years. We are all the same in this way, and we need to foster understanding and respect of our*

16 Bokhorst-Heng, W., & Keating Marshall, K. (2019). Informing research (practices) through pedagogical theory: focus groups with adolescents. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(2), 148–162. doi:10.1080/1743727X.2018.1449195

*respective cultures.*¹⁷ Commissioner MacLean sees opportunity and hope through this sharing of cultural identities.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) recently released a report entitled *How Language Learning Opens Doors*¹⁸, which speaks to the value of learning a foreign language in school. The study, which involved 15-year-old students from around the world, found that *“overall, expectations for completing tertiary education and working as a manager or professional are higher among students who are learning at least one foreign language at school compared to those who are not”*¹⁹.

Particularly alarming in this study is that, considering the documented benefits, Canadian schools provide fewer opportunities than many other nations to students in this age group to learn a foreign language, with English and French in Canada being considered “foreign languages” depending on the first language of the student. Given the aspirational benefits outlined in this study, a concerted effort to engage all New Brunswick students in second language learning could very well have a significant impact on their future expectations, and this, we would suggest, could impact positively on our province’s economic prosperity.

On a related note, many New Brunswickers have expressed puzzlement over why it is so difficult to teach our students to speak two languages, when other countries around the world achieve this without the kind of commotion

that we have experienced for over fifty years. While we do not pretend to know the answer to this question, it would seem to us that we might more easily achieve our linguistic goals if longstanding fears, mistrust, and suspicions did not constantly bubble beneath the surface of official bilingualism.

One theory that was presented to us was the concept of “*linguistic capital*”²⁰, which describes how a majority group can feel threatened by the potential for the minority to surpass them in positions of influence. This fear of the minority, which is perceived as gaining advantages by being able to speak both languages, creates and perpetuates deeply rooted social tensions. Further, it was suggested, within this context, there is also a “*learned helplessness*” whereby individuals feel powerless because they are not bilingual, and the accompanying anxiety undermines their success in their second language learning. Negative attitudes inform intergenerational messaging that impedes even the most robust of school language learning efforts. We found this perspective to be informative in that it underscores the intensity with which linguistic tensions are manifested and propagated through society.

17 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of New Brunswick. *Annual Report 2019-2020*, page 10.

18 OECD (2020), *How language learning opens doors*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/foreign-language/opens-doors.pdf>

19 *Ibid*, page 5.

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. John B. Thompson (ed.), Gino Raymond & Matthew Adamson (trans.). Cambridge: Polity, 1991. pp. vii + 303. Bourdieu describes linguistic capital as a form of cultural capital, and specifically as the accumulation of a single person’s linguistic skills that predetermines their position in society as delegated by powerful institutions. Relations of power are reflected through language when one’s language is considered legitimate, allowing access to economic and social opportunities such as jobs, services, and connections.

Recommendation 6

In order to minimize the impact of linguistic tensions on students' commitment to second language learning, that the provincial government, through the proposed Department of Official Languages, seek ways to encourage open dialogue and authentic social interaction among New Brunswickers.

Recommendation 7

With the goal of raising students' expectations for their future success, that EECD actively promote the benefits of second language learning for all New Brunswick students.

Need for targets

A recurring theme emerging from the review process has been the lack of clarity around what the school system should try to achieve. In the Anglophone sector there are different linguistic targets for different French second language programs, and as is clear from student testing, few students achieve those targets. In the Francophone sector there does not appear to be any second language targets for students, and even if there were, there is no standardized provincial assessment to capture data or

trends. These points will be explored further in sections of the report devoted specifically to each linguistic sector, but it is worth noting, in a general way, that realistic second language targets are required for all students, Anglophone, Francophone and Allophone (those who speak neither English nor French). Unless all New Brunswickers develop a comfort level in understanding and communicating in both English and French, we will be a bilingual province in name only.

Recommendation 8

That the Minister of Education & Early Childhood Development establish one clearly defined target for second language proficiency, so that all New Brunswick students leave high school with at least a conversational level of second language competence based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Linguistic insecurity

In the course of our review, it became apparent that while many New Brunswick high school students feel confident in their ability to read, write, and comprehend their second language, they are extremely uncomfortable conversing in it outside of the classroom. Several students told us they were shy, afraid of "looking stupid," or being made fun of, and hesitant to make mistakes. The feelings associated with linguistic insecurity appear to be widespread among even our academically strongest and most outgoing students, and indeed in the adult population as well.

Being anxious about not rising to the standard of native speakers, or not matching the local style of speech, is a reasonable reaction for those feeling vulnerable and outside of their comfort zone. It is our opinion that real gains can be achieved if students have opportunities outside of their regular schooling to practise their second language in a safe but structured environment. Many New Brunswickers have suggested that student exchanges between the two sectors, either in person or virtually, would bring much needed atmosphere of authenticity to language learning efforts.

[Translation] “There should also be more opportunities for students from the Francophone and Anglophone systems to interact and discuss”²¹.

Recommendation 9

That the two education sectors collaborate to create authentic interactive learning opportunities for students. This would enhance cross-cultural understanding and respect and would provide students with structured and engaging opportunities to overcome the discomfort of practising their second language skills. We further recommend that each sector create opportunities within their own schools and communities to address the discomfort that currently exists.

Language learning portfolios

Effective assessment of student performance is one of the most important components of a quality education program. Students have everything to gain from knowing, at any given time, how well they are doing in any program of study, and this is certainly the case with second language learning. It is important for students to track their own progress over time as they gain independence and fluency while proceeding through the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference.

We are therefore recommending that every student in the school system, in both linguistic sectors, be provided with a language learning portfolio with which to track their progress. This portfolio would include “can-do” statements by which students would identify their strengths,

thereby generating autonomy and an awareness of where they need to go next. These language learning portfolios would be mandatory for all students.

Resources such as these already exist in the school system, but they are only used where individual teachers choose to include them in their programs. The Second Language Research Institute of Canada, which is located at the University of New Brunswick, has done extensive work in the development of language learning portfolios, and the Council of Europe has created the European Language Portfolio for students. All of these resources are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference, which in our opinion, is the gold standard in assessing language proficiency.

Recommendation 10

That EECD mandate the use of language learning portfolios for all students in both linguistic sectors. These resources must be aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference.

Admission based on language

The *Education Act* (sections 4 and 5) provides the legal framework as it relates to language-based organization of the dual system, as well as entitlement based on language proficiency.

Also, EECD’s *Policy 321: Admission Based on Language* provides direction on, among other things, the placement of pupils in Anglophone and Francophone school districts. In accordance

21 Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick. 2021. *LLO-NB : Vers une vraie collaboration de nos deux communautés de langues officielles*, p. 12.

with this legislation, placement is generally based on the “sufficient linguistic proficiency” of a student, however there is no standard definition of “sufficient proficiency” for educators to use when determining a student’s eligibility for placement in a particular linguistic sector. We

fully support the principle articulated in the *Education Act* regarding language-based eligibility to enrol in one of the two education sectors, however we feel it is important that there be an evidence-based tool and a transparent process to guide decisions.

Recommendation 11

That the EECD develop provincial criteria and a standardized assessment tool for determining the eligibility of students to enrol in a school district based on their linguistic proficiency.

It was also brought to our attention that the *Education Act* lacked clear direction regarding situations where a unilingual family living in a remote homogeneous community wants to enrol their child in a local school organized in the other language. For example, an Anglophone family on Miscou Island, or a Francophone family in Grand Manan would technically not be

allowed to enrol their child in a neighbourhood school. According to the *Act*, these children would have to travel extremely long distances to attend a school in their language, and although these are uncommon occurrences, we feel it is necessary to amend the legislation to address these situations.

Recommendation 12

That EECD amend the *Education Act* to allow enrolment in the local school in instances where a child does not meet any of the established language-based criteria under the legislation.

The use of technology

One of the recurring topics we encountered from both online and in-person respondents was that of technology, and how it holds great promise for facilitating language learning in the school system. We found this to be an intriguing idea, and while nobody really knows where emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) will bring us over even the next five years, it is clear that the technological landscape is rapidly evolving throughout society, including in our schools.

Language learning applications are already helping people achieve their linguistic goals beyond their formal education experiences. Translation technologies, for example, make it easy for two people to communicate even if neither speaks nor understands the other’s language. Virtual learning already provides

students with high quality second language instruction in classes where it would be difficult to find qualified Francophone teachers. EECD’s Anglophone sector has created an engaging, effective, and very popular learning platform called FLORA²², which stands for French Language Opportunities for Rural Areas.

Furthermore, through virtual meeting platforms like TEAMS, it is now possible for teachers to broadcast their instruction from one classroom to another, creating an authentic and engaging learning experience for students who do not have access to a French-speaking teacher. Through our discussions with Department officials, it is clear to us that New Brunswick is well on its way to harnessing the power of technology to improve student learning despite provincial demographic challenges.

22 Government of New Brunswick. <https://flora.nbed.nb.ca/>

“Success in creating AI would be the biggest event in human history. Unfortunately, it might also be the last, unless we learn how to avoid the risks.” – Stephen Hawking

We agree with those who see great potential for language learning through the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence tools. A review of readily available research, however, uncovers certain ethical and societal concerns that deserve attention before commitments are made to embrace what on the surface might appear to be the answer to current challenges. Various experts have identified the following risks, among others, in the use of artificial intelligence in schools:

- **Data bias:** Algorithms that power artificial intelligence tools are created by humans who may have biases, values or attitudes that could be incongruous with those of the public-school setting. Algorithms may perpetuate kinds of racial, cultural, gender, religious, and other biases that schools have been working hard to eliminate from their classrooms. Some researchers have pointed out that AI tools have largely been created for the worlds of commerce and industry, but very little has been developed with public schools, teachers and students in mind. This is an extremely important distinction that is worthy of careful thought.
- **Privacy:** Student data must be strictly protected in public schools, and diligence must be deployed to ensure privacy breaches do not occur through the use of new and often untested applications.
- **Educational inequity:** Artificial intelligence tools lack some of the important human factors that exist between teachers and students, such as empathy, personal connection, relationship building, and an understanding of students’ socioeconomic and cultural realities. While AI may be seen as a quick fix for a shortage of qualified teachers, its indiscriminate use could lead to an inferior kind of education system if the human touch is absent.
- **Workforce impact:** Serious concerns have been raised about the possible negative impact on jobs if AI becomes a substitute for human teachers. Technology should add value to the learning environment but should not replace teachers, as they are critical to knowing and building relations with students.
- **Translation vs. language learning:** Technology already plays an important role in translation from one language to another. It is relatively simple for two people to communicate through translation devices, even though they do not speak each other’s language. The problem with this approach is that simple translation is not the same as the rich experience of learning to understand and speak a new language, using higher order thinking skills, reading nonverbal cues, and stretching one’s ability day by day until an independent language use is achieved.

Recommendation 13

Recognizing the noteworthy benefits of technology in education, before any decisions are made to deploy new and emerging artificial intelligence tools to improve student’s language learning outcomes, a rigorous risk assessment exercise be undertaken, and appropriate mitigation strategies be deployed.

Language learning for newcomer students

Over the course of our review we repeatedly heard that if newcomers to Canada are to thrive and remain in our province, they must feel empowered to build their own futures, not just with the help of generous and supportive New Brunswickers, but through the personal autonomy that comes with the use of their own continually improving skills and talents. One of the most important assets they can acquire is the ability to understand and communicate in at least one of New Brunswick's official languages. This topic will be explored further in the section of this report dealing with adult learning, but it goes without saying that the provision of strong language learning programming is also paramount for the success of newcomer children and youth.

We have been told by various leaders in the education system that funding in this regard, while having increased over time, remains insufficient to meet the burgeoning demand, and it is consequently impossible to offer the kind of programming that will truly help students thrive. While the Anglophone sector has developed and implemented strategies and resources that support a shift towards culturally and linguistically diverse schools, dedicated staff at the central office and in the school districts remains thin. Solid support for newcomers is provided for the first few years after arrival, but the true need is for five years of incremental programming, leading to solid transition plans

for life beyond high school. This important post-high school transition is extremely important, yet, there is little support for the unique needs of this cohort.

The Francophone sector, we have learned, does not have the kind of fulsome programming that exists in Anglophone schools. There are neither fully dedicated staff at central office to develop programs and to lead their implementation, nor are there sufficient personnel at the district and school levels to support the growing number of newcomer students.

Over time there has been a shift in the nomenclature when referring to the learning of languages by newcomers to a country or region. Where the field was once known as "second language learning," it is now deemed appropriate to speak of "additional language learning," since many newcomers already speak multiple languages. This may seem like a frivolous point to some, but to newcomers it is symbolic of the extent to which the receiving culture accepts and celebrates the personal assets they bring with them as they attempt to build a future in a new land. We suggest that New Brunswick's education system, in both linguistic sectors, transition to this important phrasing when speaking of language learning for newcomers.

Recommendation 14

That EECD increase funding and strengthen the programming of English as an additional language and French as an additional language for newcomer students in both linguistic sectors. Program development should be based on data that reflects the actual needs of newcomer students, and should support central office curriculum and program development, as well as strong district and school-based implementation measures.

Graduation requirements

One suggestion that was frequently discussed during the consultation process was to make second language proficiency a graduation requirement for all students before they leave high school. In essence, the proposal is that all students in the Anglophone sector would be required to demonstrate conversational proficiency in the French language in order to receive their high school diploma, and students in the Francophone sector would need to do the same with their English competency. This approach, it is believed, would encourage students and their parents to take second language learning more seriously, since apathy and resistance are sometimes seen as a barrier to improvement. On the other hand, some participants rejected this strategy as they feel it uses language learning as a weapon or threat, rather than as a positive process of self-improvement.

While we appreciate that this suggestion is well intended, we also fear it could further entrench bitterness in the provincial discourse around bilingualism. Many respondents to the online survey spoke of being “forced” to learn a second language, and their resentment sometimes reflects the insecurity and anxiety they harbour around their ability to succeed and perform. Further, given the inequity caused by various factors at play in the education system (such as lack of qualified teachers in many parts of the province, the predominant language make-up of some rural communities, and the myriad of second language learning programs that have evolved over time), many students would be disadvantaged as they attempt to achieve a proficiency level that the system has failed to nurture and support. Therefore, because we feel the system is not ready for such a move at this time, we are declining to recommend graduation requirements based on second language proficiency.

NEW BRUNSWICK’S FRANCOPHONE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The myth of bilingualism in Francophone New Brunswick

It became obvious through our discussions that there is a myth about bilingualism in the Francophone community. It is a widely held belief that most Francophones, by virtue of living in an English-language dominant world, can understand and speak English to the point that they can experience success in their personal and career-related lives. We have been told repeatedly that this is not the case. Many Francophones living in predominantly French-speaking communities have very limited English language skills.

It is true that in many areas of New Brunswick, Francophone students learn to understand and speak English not just through their school studies, but also by virtue of the overwhelming English influence in a dominant majority language

setting. Most students, we have been told by education leaders in the three Francophone school districts, develop a conversational level of English with a modest amount and intensity of formal instruction. In fact, concerns in some parts of the province are more about students strengthening their French first language skills than about learning to speak English.

There is a widely held concern among Francophone school and community leaders that too much emphasis on English language learning will contribute to more linguistic and cultural assimilation. Some schools, we are told, have focussed much of their attention on providing French-language instruction to Anglophone students whose parents are rights

holders, who enter the Francophone system by virtue of their charter rights to attend school in French.

That is not to suggest, however, that well planned and executed English instruction is not needed in the Francophone school system. Many students who live in areas such as the northwest of the province and the Acadian Peninsula have little exposure to English, and indeed many adults in these regions consider themselves to be unilingual Francophone. We have heard from some parents of school-aged children that they are worried about their children's futures if they do not learn to communicate well in English. These parents reject the notion that all young people will learn to speak English simply by cultural and linguistic osmosis.

[Translation] "*Teaching a language should not be neglected because it is not the language of the system in which it is taught – i.e. teaching English should be just as important as teaching French in a Francophone school, and teaching French as important as teaching English in an Anglophone school*". – Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick²³

Some schools in predominantly Francophone regions do offer an *Intensive English* program at the Grade 5 level. This is intended to boost second language competencies for students who have very limited English skills and who are surrounded almost entirely by Francophone language influences. We believe this is a good approach, because it recognizes the unique needs of students in specific communities, and it does not attempt to teach all children across the province in the same way, whether they need it or not.

Recommendation 15

That the Francophone school districts continue to support those schools that deem it necessary to offer the Intensive English program. Further, it is recommended that programs be tailored to address the different realities of communities, capitalizing on available resources and supports that may be unique from one setting to another.

23 Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick. 2021. *LLO-NB : Vers une vraie collaboration de nos deux communautés de langues officielles*, p. 12.

Francization and linguistic actualization

[Translation] “Schools in the Francophone minority context are welcoming an increasing number of young people with a wide range of language practices. Some students come from immigrant families with rich language skills in other languages. Others come from homes where English is most often spoken. As recent research shows (Gauthier, 2020), the mission of French-language schools will evolve to make room for this diversity”.²⁴

As mentioned above, under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, a parent, for example, has the right to have their child educated in a French-language school if at least one parent was educated in French²⁵. This means that eligible children are allowed in Francophone schools even if they speak little or no French. Additionally, allophone newcomer students (those who speak neither French nor English), require support to learn French as an additional language and succeed in school. Considering this diversity, and in accordance with the Government of New Brunswick’s *Linguistic and Cultural Development Policy*²⁶, the Francophone education system offers supplementary programs, such as *francization* or language actualization. These programs, which focus on the development of French language skills and vocabulary, help

this growing clientele face challenges related to the acquisition and transmission of the French language. This is typically offered to children aged 4 to 5 prior to beginning kindergarten, as well as students up to Grade 2 as part of their regular classroom activities. The program also includes family activities designed to support children’s language development.

We were told that there is a need for more of these programs and services, which must be created by experts in teaching French as an additional language. Programs and resources are required for students up to Grade 12, and they must align with the Common European Framework of Reference. We were also told that the growing need outstrips available funding and resources. In some school districts, the federal funding available for minority language education and second language instruction²⁷, which was previously invested in Intensive English programs, is now used to cover *francization* and language actualization costs.

We fully recognize the increased need for francization and linguistic actualization, which is particularly important in areas where the two linguistic communities coexist, and where there are more exogamous families and newcomers.

Recommendation 16

That EECD provide Francophone school districts with additional resources to ensure effective and quality delivery of francization and linguistic actualization programs for kindergarten to Grade 12 students in need of French language supports.

24 Marianne Cormier, Ph. D. Faculté des sciences de l’éducation. Université de Moncton. <https://www.umoncton.ca/formation-continue/fr/node/199>

25 The first language learned and still understood by one parent is French; one parent received their elementary school education in French; or one sibling attended or is attending a French language elementary or secondary school in Canada.

26 Government of New Brunswick. 2014. *The Linguistic and Cultural Development Policy – A Societal Project for the French Education System*.

27 CMEC. *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction*

The need for data

There is clearly a lack of statistical data in the Francophone sector to illuminate the extent to which students are meeting relevant targets, and subsequently, which schools in which regions of the province need to implement unique and targeted English language interventions.

None of the Francophone school districts or senior EECD personnel were able to provide any publicly accessible data to indicate a baseline if the Minister were to establish an English language goal for all graduates of Francophone sector high schools. There are neither district-based nor wide-scale provincial assessments of students' competencies in this respect. There is a

compulsory high school English course, but this does not appear to be related to a recognized language competency rating scale.

More than one education leader in the Francophone sector suggested that a large-scale provincial assessment of English competency would be of little value because they feel virtually all students would demonstrate appropriate proficiency. But is this really the case? Without credible data, we cannot really understand the extent of the challenge, and if we truly want all New Brunswick high school graduates to have a conversational level of second language competence, we simply cannot make decisions based upon informal observations.

Recommendation 17

That the Francophone sector of the EECD develop and implement an English language assessment program to better understand the extent to which their students can understand and communicate in English. The primary purpose of this assessment would be to capture province-wide data, disaggregated by school and district, to allow for supports to be deployed where necessary.

NEW BRUNSWICK'S ANGLOPHONE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Structural inequities in the Anglophone sector

Over the past several decades, the public discourse around French second language learning in New Brunswick's Anglophone school system has almost exclusively focused on French immersion. For many years our government and educational leaders have grappled with how to improve French language competencies for our students. This has resulted in a steady stream of consultations about where to position French immersion programming, with what intensity to deliver it, and which subjects should and should not be taught in a second language.

We are keenly aware that our current review and report will undoubtedly be seen by many as "just one more" study with additional changes likely on the horizon. The ongoing debate about French

immersion, and the subsequent adaptations to the program, have generated weariness among teachers, cynicism within government and the general public, confusion among parents, and discouragement among French second language specialists who are forced to defend a program they have worked very hard to build and nurture through decades of assault and change.

It is time for this exhausting and unconstructive cycle to end. The critical question is not about how to structure and implement French immersion programming, but rather about how to provide quality second language instruction to *all* students. The sad reality is that within the debate over French immersion, many thousands of students have been left out of

the equation, and their futures may well have been jeopardized. Our consultation and research have led us to one overwhelming conclusion: New Brunswick needs one strong, authentic, and engaging French second language program of studies for all students in the Anglophone sector.

“Our consultation and research have led us to one overwhelming conclusion: New Brunswick needs one strong, authentic, and engaging French second language program of studies for all students in the Anglophone sector.” – Commissioners McLaughlin and Finn

A number of important points are worth noting when discussing French second language learning in the Anglophone sector.

❖ **There is a myth that French immersion does not work.** The fact is that if New Brunswick’s goal is to ensure all Anglophone sector students leave high school with a conversational level of French, then those who stick with the French immersion program are almost all successful in achieving this standard. Large-scale provincial assessments conducted by EECD indicate that over 90% of students who complete the French immersion program achieve at least an *Intermediate* level of French, and subject matter experts agree that this translates into a conversational level of proficiency, or B.1 on the Common European Framework of Reference.

Seen in that light, French immersion has been a very effective program. Some have called it “a failure,” however, because established achievement goals for the program are much higher than simple conversational proficiency. Many believe these targets are simply unreasonable. Currently, the published target for oral proficiency for French immersion

students is *Advanced*, which requires a much stronger fluency and technical skill than what is needed for conversational competence.

It is common for education systems to set aspirational proficiency targets in response to a “raise the bar” approach to academic excellence. In essence, school systems want to strive for the highest possible achievement goals in areas like literacy, numeracy, science and, indeed, in second language learning as well. The downside of this approach is that real and documented incremental progress towards lofty achievement goals are often seen as failing efforts when these targets are not reached. All too often, the school system is deemed a failure rather than one that is constantly striving to nurture greater success over time. An aim of a *conversational level* of French proficiency, as was described in the mandate provided to the Commissioners, is more reasonable than the current standard, and in fact it is already being achieved, at least by those students enrolled in and who remain in French immersion through the end of Grade 12.

- ❖ **Many students who begin their studies in French immersion exit the program before they finish high school.** Recent data from EECD indicates that for every cohort of students who enter early French immersion, about 20% leave the program by Grade 12²⁸. Many of the people we spoke with attributed this to either a lack of course options at high school, a desire to study core subjects like math and sciences in English, or a combination of both.
- ❖ **More than 60% of Anglophone sector students are not enrolled in French immersion, and as a group, their French language competencies are extremely low.** For a variety of reasons, many parents choose

28 Based on EECD’s summary statistics (Years 2017-2017 to 2020-2021)

to enrol their children in the English Prime program, and they therefore do not benefit from French immersion instructional and educational experiences. These students follow a different French second language path through their elementary, middle, and high school years. Despite the best efforts of teachers and curriculum developers, provincial assessments indicate that only 3% of English Prime students achieve a conversational proficiency level of French by the end of Grade 10, which is the last year that French second language is mandatory. For those students who continue in this program to Grade 12, 30% achieve a conversational level of French; however, by that point the cohort size has diminished considerably, and it is impossible to draw broad conclusions about the program's overall effectiveness. Clearly if a conversational level of French is the vision for all Anglophone sector graduates, then this extremely large number of students needs something different than what they have been getting.

❖ **Almost all students with significant learning, behavioral, physical, and mental health challenges are registered in the English Prime Program.** Although all French second language programs are intended to be inclusive in nature, there remains a serious classroom composition challenge, one that has been spoken of for many years, but has never been fully addressed. The skewed distribution of students with higher needs, often in combined class settings, has created a serious contrast in the learning environments between typical French immersion and English Prime classrooms.

It is hard for us to believe that this imbalance is not leading to an inferior learning trajectory for many students in the English Prime program. In an education system

that promotes itself as among the most inclusive in the world, it is troubling to find this structural imbalance which, in essence, creates a *de facto* streamed system. To be perfectly candid, our academically strongest students are overwhelmingly in the French immersion program, and virtually all of those who struggle are in the English Prime program. This situation is inconsistent, in spirit if not also in directive, with EECD's own *Policy 322: Inclusive Education*, which states:

"Inclusive public education:

- Is universal – the provincial curriculum is provided equitably to all students and this is done in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate peers in their neighborhood school." (Section 5.1)

and that:

- "Inclusive education practices are not only necessary for all students to develop and prosper, but also critical to building a society that is inclusive of all people and their basic legal, civil and human rights." (Section 5.3)

In their joint submission to our commission, *Canadian Parents for French New Brunswick* and *Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick* addressed this concern. They contend that with the proper supports, students who struggle in French immersion classes can be successful, but that without this help, their parents often choose to remove them from the program. "*The issue of access as it relates to students of varying abilities is a critically important one,*" they write. "*Students who struggle in early French Immersion are able to succeed in that program when appropriate*

support is provided. This is critical to the success of French Immersion but also to the fundamental premise of equality of opportunity.”²⁹

“Students who struggle in early French immersion are able to succeed in that program when appropriate support is provided. This is critical to the success of French immersion but also to the fundamental premise of equality of opportunity.” – SANB and CPF Brief

We take this point seriously, and we agree with these two important partners in the education system. Unfortunately, as many teachers and school administrators pointed out, French speaking educational, behavioral, mental health and physical support personnel are simply not available to help struggling French immersion students. The documented and very drastic shortage of French-speaking teachers across Canada makes it difficult to staff basic classroom positions in both the Anglophone and Francophone sectors. At this juncture, it simply seems out of the realm of possibility to think a significant cohort of French-speaking education support teachers can be recruited to help struggling students in the French immersion context.

On another note, the extremely low French language competencies of students in the English Prime program is cause for great concern. Whereas French immersion as a program is successful with most of its students, the English Prime program is clearly not. It could be argued that many of the students in this cohort, particularly those with learning, social and emotional challenges, would benefit greatly from strong second language competencies if they opt to seek careers in the trades, hospitality, and other service industries. It is perhaps this group of

students who need strong French language skills the most, yet in successive governments’ ongoing quest to find the right placement for French immersion, they have simply been overlooked.

Virtually all educators we spoke with expressed great concern about the two-tiered structure that French immersion has created. Many suggested that a large number of parents decide to enrol their children in French immersion based as much on the make-up of the classes as it is on the desire to immerse them in a French speaking environment. In one program we find many of the highly motivated, academically strong, reasonably well-adjusted students, while in the other we find large numbers of vulnerable students, many of whom struggle to stay focused in class, to regulate their behaviors, and to keep up with curriculum outcomes.

We were told multiple times that any recommendations about French second language learning must consider this reality, which many students, teachers, and education leaders have pointed to as an unfair structure with debilitating impacts on student engagement, learning and overall success. Proof of this streaming effect is evident in New Brunswick’s own provincial assessment results where French immersion students consistently outperform English Prime students in literacy, math and science, often with achievement gaps that should draw alarmed attention to the inequalities created by the current structure.

One school administrator shared this stark observation about the current model: *“We have 35 students who we give food assistance to, and 31 of them are in the English Prime Program. No*

²⁹ Canadian Parents for French New Brunswick & Société de l’Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick. September 2021. [French Second Language Learning in New Brunswick – A position paper submitted in the context of a review to the New Brunswick Official Languages Act, page 5.](#)

matter which way you look at it, this is a 'haves' and a 'have-nots' program, and it's been that way for as long as I've been teaching."

"We have 35 students who we give food assistance to, and 31 of them are in the English Prime Program. No matter which way you look at it, this is a 'haves' and a 'have-nots' program, and it's been that way for as long as I've been teaching." – Elementary School Administrator

In their submission to our Commissioners, *Canadian Parents for French New Brunswick* and *Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick* shared important research about critical features of successful second language programs. The following information has been taken directly from their submission:

"Successful second language learning programs require exposure to and opportunities to use and reuse the language being learned. According to Dicks (2018), the most successful second language programs maximize these six key pillars..."

- 1) Frequency: Contact occurs regularly (daily if possible).
- 2) Intensity: Contact lasts all day long if possible.
- 3) Extensiveness: Classes extend over many weeks, months, and years. The sooner one begins the more extensive the exposure can be.
- 4) Meaningful communication: Learners have something interesting and important to watch, to listen to, read about, speak about, and write about.
- 5) Motivation: Motivated learners perceive the language being learned as important and useful and view bilingualism/multilingualism as a positive personal achievement.

- 6) Teaching effectiveness: Successful teachers are highly proficient in the language, knowledgeable about and appreciative of the culture, possess excellent teaching skills generally, as well as the specific knowledge and skills for teaching in their particular second language setting.

To the extent that any one of these pillars is missing or not fully realized, a language program will be less effective than it might be otherwise. "

We found this research to be very instructive as we contemplated our recommendations for improving French second language learning in the Anglophone sector. It helps us better understand why the French immersion program has been so successful with students who remain in it. This program rests comfortably on all six pillars identified by Dr. Dicks, a New Brunswick professor and researcher who is widely esteemed for his knowledge and experience in this field. At the same time, it causes us to contemplate the systemic inequity when over 60 percent of New Brunswick's Anglophone sector students are in second language programs that, in many ways, merely scratch the surface of these pillars.

The classroom composition issue was officially documented in a 2018 Auditor General's report entitled *"Improving Student Performance: A New Brunswick Challenge,"*³⁰ in which then-Auditor General, Kim Adair-MacPherson, made the following observations:

- In the 2016-2017 school year, 93% of the students with Personalized Learning Plans were in the English program, compared to only 7% in the French immersion program.

30 Report of the Auditor General – 2018 Volume II. January 2019. *"Improving Student Performance: A New Brunswick Challenge"* <https://www.agnb-vgnb.ca/content/dam/agnb-vgnb/pdf/Reports-Rapports/2018V2/Chap2e.pdf>

These plans are developed on an individual basis to ensure students with significant challenges are being served in as effective a manner as possible.

- Within the Anglophone education system, there are four times more combined classes in the English program than in the French immersion program. This is significant because, as the Auditor General pointed out: *“Typically, combined classes are more challenging for teachers because they include students from more than one grade level taught in the same classroom by the same teachers.”*³¹

❖ **There is a critical shortage of qualified French-speaking teachers to adequately staff the current second language programs.** Every Anglophone school district in the province reported significant challenges in recruiting and retaining strong French-speaking teachers for the myriad of programs they are expected to offer:

- Early French Immersion
- Pre-Intensive French
- Intensive French
- Late French Immersion
- Post-Intensive French

This shortage, we were told, has resulted in school districts hiring teachers with a lower level of French proficiency than is required, or hiring uncertified French-speaking personnel who do not have standard teaching credentials but who serve as teachers in the absence of qualified staff. The situation with substitute teachers is reported to be dire, with many schools forced to engage non-Francophones to fill in when the regular classroom teacher is away, sometimes for a day or two, but for longer periods as well. Participants in a recent focus group with school administrators indicated that most of the time when their

French immersion teachers are going to be absent, they must prepare lesson plans to be taught in English because of the extremely low likelihood of securing a French-speaking substitute teacher.

This shortage is not limited to the Anglophone sector. Interviews with various education officials in the province’s Francophone sector have revealed a significant challenge in recruiting qualified French-speaking teachers to staff their schools. One Francophone district superintendent recently made a public plea for French-speaking teachers, or aspiring teachers, to join their team, since the demand for classroom teachers and substitute teachers far outweighs the supply. Further, senior education officials from across the country have spoken for several years about the need for more French-speaking teachers to staff their various programs. Clearly this is a national problem which is heightened in New Brunswick due to our emphasis on both French first language and second language instruction.

❖ **Change must be well planned.** In considering recommendations, we are acutely aware of the Auditor General’s cautions about abrupt changes to the education system. One of her key findings was that *“Frequent changes in education strategy create instability and shift focus away from educating students”* (p.15). She noted that by 2018 there had been three significant structural changes to the French immersion program in the previous 10 years, and that the province had implemented five different provincial education plans in 15 years. She also found that successive governments had rushed many of these reforms without proper planning, resources, or consideration of qualified teacher shortages. Abrupt changes to the French immersion program, she wrote,

31 *Ibid*, page 68.

“create instability in the Anglophone sector” (p.17), and she concluded with the following frank recommendation:

2.59 prior to implementing major changes that impact student performance, including changes to the French immersion program, prepare a detailed implementation plan with:

- *a realistic time schedule;*
 - *consideration of all supports that need to be in place for the change to be successful, such as human resources, curricula, teacher training, tools and methodologies;*
 - *adequate funding; and*
 - *a comprehensive risk assessment of the change’s impact on operations and other ongoing initiatives at department, school district and school levels as well as risk mitigation strategies.*
-

We completely agree with Ms. Adair-MacPherson’s position on this, yet at the same time, in order to address the serious inequities inherent in the current French second language structures, we see a need for certain short-term changes to occur. This will be the challenge facing New Brunswick’s elected officials and education leaders: to begin immediately to address the gaps that exist between the French immersion and English Prime groupings so that all students have similar opportunities to develop their second language and other skills, but to do so in a strategic manner that is supportive rather than disruptive. This is indeed a delicate balance, but it is one that must be achieved if it is to be done properly, while respecting the students and teachers involved. Without both factors firmly established, it is ultimately our students and their futures that will be compromised.

While we do not presume to describe in detail a particular program that should be offered, we are cognizant of the challenges listed above, and we would hope the Department would approach this in a measured and strategic manner. Program design, which is the responsibility of EECD’s curriculum development team, must be based on current

research into most promising practices. Therefore, further study is needed prior to the Department acting on the multifaceted recommendation below. Our hope is that this recommendation will allow all New Brunswick Anglophone sector students to study together, to be immersed in language-rich learning environments, and to each achieve a conversational level of French proficiency by the time they graduate from high school.

Some may see this as a rejection of French immersion, but it is not that at all. We propose a strong, authentic, and immersive second language program of studies available to all, so that every student in the province can benefit from the kinds of success that to now have been achieved by less than half of New Brunswick’s children and youth. It is important to note that our use of the term “immersive” in this context is not to be confused with the current “French immersion” model, but rather is intended to describe an overall program approach which fully engages students for significant periods of time in their second language development.

A common program for all would logically offer less time studying French than the current French immersion model, but it would be

significantly more prolonged and intensive than what is currently offered to English Prime students. It must be immersive in both time and pedagogical approach, with a critical feature being authentic language-rich experiences so as to promote strong conversational proficiency. In order to accommodate those students who wish to go beyond regular program outcomes, high schools would need to offer options for additional higher level French language coursework, much as is now the case for those who opt to deepen their learning of such disciplines as advanced math, science, music or art.

- ❖ **A need for solid data on second language achievement.** The Anglophone sector deploys a number of French second language provincial assessments at various grade levels. That said, there is no one oral proficiency assessment that all students are expected to undertake, and when provincial achievement data is released to the public, it is done with caveats because so many students do not participate. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about school, district and provincial achievement levels, and it would be important that a new assessment program be developed if we are to track our province's progress towards a new language proficiency goal.
- ❖ **The debate over math and science.** A number of French immersion parents have indicated their preference for math and science courses to be taught in English. Some choose not to enrol their children in French immersion because of this, while others do place their children in that program despite their deep concerns. We are told that the program placement decision facing parents of very

young children is one of the most difficult they have to make. Those who opt for French immersion sometimes feel helpless in not being able to assist their children as they explore new mathematical and scientific concepts. Further, they express concern that their children's progress might be impeded by studying these important content areas in a language they are just learning to understand and speak. As one respondent put it, *"In our drive to have all our children bilingual we will have some of them left behind and some of them not having performed to the highest level that they could have."*

"In our drive to have all our children bilingual we will have some of them left behind and some of them not having performed to the highest level that they could have." – Concerned New Brunswicker

Several teachers and school administrators told us that for many students, math and science is too challenging for them in the French immersion program, and because of this, parents often remove their children from that environment. Others suggest that many of our academically strongest students may not be flourishing to the extent they might if they were studying math and science in their mother tongue. They suggest that if such a change were made, New Brunswick might score on par with Canadian jurisdictions that regularly outperform our province on national and international standardized assessments.

At the same time, there is a body of research that describes how learning a second language can have a positive impact on mathematics and science outcomes, and vice versa³². As laypersons attempting to understand the research around content-driven French

32 In their submission, Canadian Parents for French New Brunswick & Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, on page 10, cite the BBC article entitled *"The amazing benefits of being bilingual"* (2016) and the Harvard University article entitled *"Bilingualism: Start early, and earn all your benefits!"* (2019).

immersion programs, we do not feel qualified to take a position as to the positive or negative effects of studying math and science in a language a student is just learning. That said, we are far from convinced that, given the province's sociolinguistic habitat, it makes sense to continue to teach these subjects in French. It is not lost on us that many students

decide to leave French immersion in high school so they can study these important subjects in their mother tongue. We have chosen not to take a firm position on this, however, but rather to recommend that further research needs to be conducted as the EECD plans its future French language programming.

Recommendation 18

That EECD create an authentic, immersive, language-rich French second language learning program for all students, keeping in mind the following critical features:

- the program is implemented according to a well-established and reasonable implementation timeline that minimizes disruptions and instability in the overall school system
- the program eliminates the two-tiered structure that currently exists which silos the French Immersion and English Prime programs
- the program focuses on rich language learning experiences, with opportunities for students to practise their French in authentic activities and settings
- the program includes a French language assessment program to better understand the extent to which students can understand and communicate in that language. The primary purpose of this assessment would be to capture province-wide data, disaggregated by school and district, to allow for supports to be deployed where necessary.
- the implementation plan includes a strategy for increasing the available supply of French-speaking teachers
- the program allows for differences in delivery, depending on the demographics of communities, their various assets and strengths, and the availability of qualified teachers
- the program is sufficiently resourced to ensure success
- the program offers opportunities for students to pursue higher level and advanced studies in French language at the high school level
- the program is informed by both research into the impact on mathematics and science achievement when these are studied in a language just being learned by students, and a survey of student, parent, and teacher positions on this topic.

Policy on language of instruction

We anticipate that if the above recommendation is approached strategically and with careful planning, it may take a number of years to be fully implemented. In the meantime, and for

as long as the French Immersion and English Prime programs exist, we recommend that the policy regarding placement of pupils in language programs be reviewed.

As noted earlier in this report, the *Education Act* provides the legal framework as it relates to languages in terms of the organization of the dual system, and entitlement based on language proficiency. We have identified gaps that need to be addressed with respect to the method used to determine a student's placement in the English or French school district. Our recommendation #11,

which suggests the development of provincial criteria and a standardized assessment tool, is intended to help address these gaps.

EECD's *Policy 321: Admission Based on Language* provides direction on, among other things, the placement of pupils in French Immersion based on their language proficiency. This policy states:

The French Immersion Program is provided exclusively for students who wish to develop a degree of proficiency in their second official language.

There is no parental right to register a student who is already able to function in the French language in a French Immersion program. Such a placement would be counter to the student's right to appropriate instruction and may cause undue disadvantage to the other students in the program. (Sections 5.2 and 5.3)

The *Education Act* and Policy 321 are consistent with the landmark 1983 court decision known as the "*Richard Decision*"³³. However, the interpretation and application of this policy, which is not agreed upon by both the Anglophone and Francophone sectors, but for different reasons, sometimes become a barrier to learning the official languages in some situations.

Our province has experienced many demolingistic changes over the years, and as a result the education system is faced with unforeseen situations when it comes to the placement of a student in the English sector in French immersion. Examples include students who speak both languages and want to transfer from the French sector to the English sector in immersion, or when they move to New Brunswick and want to enrol in the French immersion program. Another example is for a child of a rights-holder parent enrolled in the Francophone sector, whose poor French proficiency causes their lack of success in school, and who wants

to transfer to immersion in the Anglophone sector, in order to succeed in school but also to reach a sufficient level of proficiency in French.

As we can see, the reasons for these requests for placement in immersion rather than in English Prime vary for different students. Therefore, a strict application of Policy 321 may disadvantage and create an unfair situation for students whose placement in programs should be consistent with their learning needs and to the extent possible, with the wishes of their parents.

While the *Education Act* authorizes superintendents to make decisions about the most appropriate placement for students in their districts, their hands are tied in that they do not have the right to place a student who already speaks French in the French immersion program, regardless of the student's actual language ability. It makes no sense to us to assert that these students' needs are better met in the English Prime program, where the level of French instruction is far below their individual skills and needs.

33 *La Société des Acadiens du Nouveau-Brunswick Inc. and Association des conseillers scolaires francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick v. Minority Language School Board No. 50* (1983), [48 N.B.R. (2d) 361] at 408:

We propose that as long as the French immersion program continues to exist as a separate structure, placement in this program should be based on the best interests of the student. In

addition, it is essential that a process be put in place to ensure that decisions about appropriate placement are not simply an administrative exercise.

Recommendation 19

That EECD review the *Education Act* and *Policy 321 – Admission Based on Language*, and revise any relevant provisions to clarify access to the program in a manner that is consistent with the best interests of the student involved, while respecting the language-based eligibility rules for enrolment in this sector of education, and to include a mechanism for resolving specific situations in a timely manner.

Language learning prototypes

In recent years, EECD has worked with 11 schools and two early learning centres to help them develop improvement practices to strengthen French language learning in their institutions. These projects, which are unique to each community, build upon local assets and address specific needs, and will serve as prototypes that others can attempt to replicate according to their own unique situations. We are impressed with the ingenuity that has been shown by these schools and early learning centres, and with their

commitment to action research and strategic planning as they pursue their projects. Whereas the initiative is still in its early stages, and the COVID-19 pandemic has created understandable implementation challenges, there are no results yet to indicate levels of success for each of the projects. We are encouraged, however, with this grassroots approach, and how staffs and their stakeholders are working together to identify workable strategies to nurture stronger French language proficiency in their students.

Recommendation 20

That EECD champion and support individual schools and early learning centres in developing French language improvement strategies that make sense in their own local setting, and that these ideas be shared widely with others around the province. This initiative could be supported by partnering with research bodies located in the province's post-secondary institutions.

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR NEW BRUNSWICK'S ADULTS

As expressed in the section above, there are many opportunities for improving second language learning in the public education system. Schools are the only real venue where virtually all members of a public cohort can be provided with a comprehensive instructional program, and therefore the K-12 sector often becomes the focus for planning around how to build a truly bilingual population. It is unfair, however, to place the entire burden on New Brunswick's schools to produce bilingual citizens. Language learning should be a lifelong journey

of continuous improvement, with people finding an entry point to programs and supports at any age, regardless of their proficiency level, even if they are beginners. In this light, it is important that a transition to and through adult language learning be firmly established in our province.

If at some point in the future all high school students graduate with at least a conversational level in their second official language, we strongly suggest they will need to take ownership for maintaining and hopefully improving their proficiency levels. Without opportunities to

practise their skills, however, they might easily regress, and we will continue to face the same challenges that currently exist with so many of our citizens disadvantaged in their employment, social, political, cultural, and economic lives. In that light, while we acknowledge that Government has a responsibility to support language learners throughout life, and the school system must do its part in helping all students develop a conversational proficiency in their second language, graduates and adults have perhaps the most important role to play. They must assume personal responsibility to make themselves increasingly competitive when seeking employment or other social and cultural opportunities.

Our review uncovered a sense of entitlement among some New Brunswickers, particularly with regard to provincial government jobs, and while we understand the frustrations of those who feel disadvantaged because they do not meet language requirements for certain positions, we believe that nobody has an inherent right to a job simply because they are a New Brunswick resident or taxpayer. As is the case in all careers, prospective employees have a responsibility to ensure they are as competitive as possible, and when it comes to bilingualism, our position is that individuals must build on the skills they develop through their schooling, just as they would in enhancing their technology, literacy, math or science skills when any of these are requirements of the position being sought.

We recognize there are certain shortcomings in the provincial government's approach to designating language requirements for posted job positions, as well as with a lack of clarity around language assessments and proficiency levels. We have addressed these concerns in our companion document on the review of New Brunswick's *Official Languages Act*. That said, even when these challenges are addressed, there will still be language requirements for

certain positions in the public service, and if individuals wish to obtain these jobs, they have a personal obligation to make themselves qualified. The public education system should not be considered an immediate gateway to any kind of employment, but rather an institution to nurture basic competencies across a wide spectrum of disciplines and personal attributes that can be strengthened throughout one's adult life depending on their interests, goals and needs.

At this point, we feel it is necessary to reiterate an important point made earlier in our report. There are many unilingual adults in this province, both Anglophone and Francophone, and they have expressed to us how they feel disadvantaged when trying to access employment, government services, and cultural opportunities that seem outside their identities. These adults did not have the benefit of the quality second language K-12 programs we are recommending, and they should not be simply regarded as collateral damage along the journey to the province's goals for bilingualism. Many want to begin to learn their second language, but they do not know where to begin, how to access quality and affordable programs, or even if they have the ability to succeed in what has always been an area of personal challenge. We contend that Government has an obligation to help them find a pathway to success.

Proposed Department of Official Languages

In our companion report on the review of the *Official Languages Act*, we recommended the establishment of a Department of Official Languages, to be headed by a Deputy Minister reporting directly to the Premier (who has the legislated responsibility for the *Official Languages Act* and its implementation). While we recognize that language learning is not incorporated in the *Act* itself, we do see it as an important tool in helping to achieve the goals

of this important piece of legislation. With more bilingual current and future public servants, our government would have an easier time fulfilling the commitment of offering equal services in both official languages. Further, more New Brunswickers being able to understand and speak their second official language will bring us ever closer to being a truly bilingual province.

With that in mind, we recommend that the proposed Department of Official Languages assume responsibility for developing and implementing all government sponsored language training programs beyond those within EECD's mandate. Essentially, once students leave high school the new entity would generate opportunities for those who wish to continue to improve. Further, those adults who currently struggle with their second language abilities would find support through the new department. It would be a one-stop shop for New Brunswickers to access all information about all second language programs and opportunities.

We recognize the complexity of the challenge faced by officials at the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL), and we are impressed with the programs they have been able to offer which, as we understand it, are targeted to specific clients, such as unemployed New Brunswickers. That said, many people, including the underemployed, are either unaware of or not eligible for these programs. Some respondents to our online survey spoke about the difficulties of re-entering the workforce or progressing in their careers because, at least in part, they are not bilingual. This situation is particularly urgent for parents

who feel the pressure of supporting their families. Additionally, we heard from many respondents that there are real or perceived barriers to participation in existing programs, including:

- Lack of knowledge of opportunities
- Inability to pay for language training programs
- Difficulty in accessing programs (i.e. transportation, inconvenient time of day or week)
- Lack of personalized learning opportunities
- Cynicism that the program will help them improve their second language proficiency

The proposed department would develop programs that serve more people than those who currently qualify under their official employment action plans through PETL. Many New Brunswickers have indicated a need for a broad, accessible, and affordable support program in place throughout our province. We believe Government's responsibility should be to lead, but not to bear the entire responsibility for language training and improvement. New Brunswick's municipalities, public and private institutions, and the business community should all rally around this important cause. The economic, social, and cultural benefits of bilingualism enhance all our lives, and while it is the responsibility of Government to provide leadership, it is everyone's responsibility to participate with genuine commitment, goodwill, and a desire to help each other.

Recommendation 21

That the proposed Department of Official Languages assume responsibility for overall coordination of made-in-New Brunswick language assessment and learning programs for adults. In doing so, it should leverage existing resources and expertise located in various communities by creating a collegial and coordinated environment where everyone is working toward the same goal.

Language Centres of Excellence

It is our opinion that post-secondary institutions could play a key role in offering research-based language assessment and training programs for adults who wish to improve their skills. We would suggest that our universities and colleges could become centres of excellence, whereby employers could sponsor their employees who wish to participate in rich and authentic training opportunities, or where individual New Brunswickers could seek training, either virtually or in person, to enhance their proficiency. These centres could also serve as a resource hub for communities and organizations, such as multicultural associations, new settlement agencies, or others with an interest in helping clients learn one or both of New Brunswick's official languages. We would suggest these language centres be established under the guidance of the proposed Department of Official Languages, and that federal funding sources should be explored.

One suggestion we received was to establish a new language learning program for recent high school graduates to fully immerse themselves, for extended periods of time, in predominantly English- or French-speaking regions.

Recommendation 22

That the proposed Department of Official Languages work with various post-secondary institutions to establish centres of excellence to assist with the provision of authentic language learning programs for adult New Brunswickers, and to engage in research to inform future provincial direction.

Immigration

New Brunswick, like all other Canadian jurisdictions, is actively recruiting newcomers to Canada, with the hope that they will choose to remain in our province and contribute to our evolution as a more diverse and multicultural society. Many immigrants do not speak either English or French, and we have a responsibility to help them with their language acquisition so they can fully participate as members of

Communities and post-secondary institutions would play an important role in this model. This program might be subsidized by government, including possible funding from the federal Department of Canadian Heritage, and could involve periods of time living with host families to make the experience authentic, immersive, and culturally relevant. We see real promise in this suggestion as it would address the dual goals of strengthening second language skills while also promoting cross-cultural friendship and understanding. This program could be coordinated by the centres of excellence.

We believe our post-secondary institutions would be well positioned, through these centres of excellence, to engage in new research around second language learning for adults. In this respect, New Brunswick could emerge as a global leader in identifying new approaches and findings which would inform policymaking domestically and abroad. We have been told by experts in the field that there is lack of data in this area and, given its unique status as Canada's only officially bilingual province, New Brunswick could establish itself as a true leader.

our provincial family. The sense of personal confidence and control that will come from being able to understand and communicate in at least one of our official languages is critical to their successful integration into our society.

We have been told that it is often the children who learn their new languages quickly in schools and in their communities. Therefore, they

sometimes bear the burden of translating for their parents, who do not so readily develop their English or French proficiencies, and this can place significant pressure on children to be active participants in matters that are more appropriately conducted by adults.

On a related note, New Brunswick has a goal of ensuring a third of its newcomers speak French so they can thrive in Francophone regions of the province, thereby strengthening the vitality of that linguistic community. This is particularly important given the ongoing demographic shift from rural to urban areas of the province, and the resulting shortage of workers in predominantly Francophone regions. While this is an important goal, New Brunswick must ensure there are quality language training programs in place, particularly for adult newcomers who have little to no proficiency in either English or French,

and for newcomer high school graduates who require a different kind of ongoing support, given their higher level of competence than that of their parents.

The federal government has a responsibility in providing language training to immigrants; however, there are a number of newcomers who we are told are not eligible for their programs. There is a need for synergy between the federal and provincial governments, as well as agencies that support newcomer families, to ensure language learning opportunities are available to all who need them. We recognize the excellent work currently being done by various entities; however, we feel they would all be better served by a coordinated and appropriately funded language learning plan for newcomers to the province.

Recommendation 23

That the proposed Department of Official Languages work with the federal government and various provincial agencies to ensure newcomers to New Brunswick receive the appropriate English and/or French language training necessary to thrive and remain in our province.

Language learning for priority groups

In our companion document regarding the review of the *Official Languages Act*, we spoke of the challenges to provide and receive services in the language of choice in areas of the province with an overwhelming unilingual demographic. This has created difficulties when New Brunswickers wish to access services in the other official language, particularly in the areas of health care, senior care, and government services provided in regional offices and centres around the province. We appreciate that the current situation will not change overnight, and we suggest a strategic approach to help employees in these fields become more bilingual over time, thereby improving the overall linguistic nature of the entire province and making the goals of the *Act* more attainable.

With that in mind, we are proposing that Government, working with third-party service providers, municipalities, regional governance structures, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations, offer meaningful second language training programs designed to meet the needs of prioritized front-line employee groups in entities that are subject to the *Act*.

Recommendation 24

That Government, through the proposed Department of Official Languages, lead the development and deployment of authentic, accessible, and relevant language training programs for government and implicated third-party front-line employees, and to prioritize the following fields: Service New Brunswick staff, ambulance personnel, health care workers, and nursing home staff.

Conclusion

For more than 50 years since New Brunswick first became officially bilingual, many important strides have been made to improve second language learning, particularly at the public-school level. Against the backdrop of linguistic tensions, however, these gains have not come easy, and it is hoped that the recommendations contained in this second report related to New Brunswick's official languages will generate important discussions and actions. While a significant number of New Brunswickers are considered bilingual and are therefore well positioned to fully engage in cultural, social, career, economic, and political endeavors and experiences, sadly a large proportion of our citizens do not enjoy that same language proficiency. As a result, they may feel disadvantaged and disillusioned, and find themselves unable to capitalize on the full breadth of our province's rich opportunities and experiences.

With that in mind, we have focused our review on those challenges and improvements that could help us realize a goal of all New Brunswick residents being able to communicate, at a conversational level, in both official languages. We believe this is a lofty but achievable goal, and we offer the following suggestions which we feel Government should consider as it leads us on a journey of continuous improvement:

- Initiating and encouraging thoughtful, solution-oriented dialogue to deal with the linguistic tensions that can easily impede second language teaching and learning.
- Providing preschool children with exposure to languages and cultures that are different from their own.

- Strengthening, and in some cases redesigning, second language learning programs in public schools, so that all children receive the instruction they need to achieve a conversational proficiency in both official languages.
- Improving "additional language" programs for child, youth, and adult newcomers in a manner that is appropriate for their different needs.
- In partnership with municipalities, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations, providing affordable and accessible quality language training programs to New Brunswickers who wish to improve their levels of proficiency.
- Creating and championing opportunities for Anglophones and Francophones to come together in informal but meaningful ways, with the goal of furthering cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect.

We are proud to live in a province with such a rich cultural and linguistic heritage, and we believe this unique reality can become a true asset in our province's quest for greater prosperity. As Canada's only officially bilingual province, we have opportunities available to us that do not exist so readily elsewhere, and our capacity to seize these opportunities will be greatly enhanced with the emergence of a truly bilingual population. We urge all New Brunswickers to tune out the acrimonious noise around bilingualism, to think about the benefits of understanding and speaking multiple languages, and to make an honest effort to support one another in pursuit of their individual goals. We are convinced, after interacting with so many fellow New Brunswickers, that the vast majority of us want harmony, a fair deal, and equal opportunities for ourselves and our loved

ones. Improving one's ability to communicate in our two official languages is, in many ways, a very good place to start.

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