

Can French Immersion offer an appropriate quality education for students with diverse learning needs?

Information for educational professionals, consultants and specialists.

French immersion is a program open to all students. Like students in the regular English program, French immersion students display a wide range of abilities and needs. Alberta Education promotes inclusive education across different types of schools and programs.

Inclusion means that all students have equitable opportunities to be included in the typical learning environment or a program of choice. Inclusive



schools recognize and celebrate diversity, value all students and staff, and see differences as valuable resources to support learning. The French Immersion program can provide a welcoming environment and the same supports for students with diverse learning needs as other programs.

Professionals (psychologist, speech pathologist, reading clinician, etc.) are often asked to counsel the parents of students with diverse learning needs. Once it is understood which supports are required for a student, these professionals support the teacher in meeting that student's particular needs. However, it is not their role to advise parents not to enroll their child in, or to withdraw their child from, a French Immersion program. This decision should be made by the parents in consultation with the school administrator.

Research and experience demonstrate that very few students cannot benefit from learning in a French Immersion program (Edwards 1989; Keep 1989; Wiss 1989; Ali Khan 1993; Rousseau 1998). A student's ability to succeed in a French Immersion program depends upon many factors, including motivation, support and environmental factors. If appropriate supports are



in place, students with a variety of learning needs can succeed in French Immersion.

Which types of needs can be met in a French Immersion Program?

Oftentimes, adult attitudes and expectations are more limiting than the student's ability to learn French (McCull 2005). Diversity in French Immersion should be expected. Many students can learn French, even if they have been diagnosed with a disability.

Students with **learning disabilities** can often thrive in French Immersion. As these difficulties are pervasive (i.e. they will exist regardless of language of instruction and in all languages learned by the student), the student is not likely to struggle more in French Immersion than he or she would in an English-only program. Skills and strategies learned to overcome learning or reading difficulties are transferable from one language to another, meaning that interventions can benefit both the student's languages.

Students with **cognitive disabilities** can also benefit from learning another language in an immersion setting if they are provided the appropriate supports. These students will

learn more slowly and may require targeted or specialized supports, but they will also enjoy benefits from developing fluency in French.

Students with **behaviour difficulties** or **AD/HD** often require behavioural interventions, but their ability to learn another language is not usually impaired. Behaviour issues may be addressed using strategies similar to those used in other programs. *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools* is an excellent resource to help schools provide universal, targeted and/or specialized supports for improving students' behaviour. Alberta Education's resource entitled *Focusing on Success* can help teachers support students with AD/HD.

Students who are **gifted** can benefit from the opportunities that French Immersion education presents. However, these students may require targeted supports in order to best meet their needs.

French Immersion may *not* be appropriate for students with a significant language delay or disorder in their first language. However, where speech therapy is warranted, the skills students gain are transferable from one language to the next, so requiring speech therapy is not a reason for avoiding French Immersion (Baker 2000.)

Additionally, French Immersion may not be appropriate for students with significant hearing impairments, unless these can be mitigated, such as by adjusting the educational environment (e.g., by installing an amplification system or other equipment.)



What types of support can educational consultants and/or specialists offer to French immersion programs?

Educational consultants and specialists play the same role in French Immersion as in other programs. They can assess the student, they



provide the teacher with advice and support, and they can make recommendations regarding ways of supporting the student's learning. As Alberta moves to a more inclusive education

system, reports should provide teachers with specific implications for the classroom to assist with programming and planning to meet the student's needs based on the Alberta program of studies. Both academic and social

Which assessments can be done in English and which ones should be done in French?

Assessments that test students' abilities, such as IQ tests, should be provided in the student's first language in order to get the most accurate results. If the student is being assessed prior to receiving formal English Language Arts instruction, the clinician should take this into consideration when comparing results with other students on measures that require reading in English.

To ensure accurate results, assessments that test students' academic skills should be given in French, the language of instruction. Many of these assessments can be done by teachers or other qualified staff in the school.

Should students who are struggling be moved out of the French Immersion program?

A transfer to an English-only program is often considered for students experiencing learning or behaviour problems. This is a decision that must



be made by the parents in collaboration with the school administrator. The transfer of students from an immersion program to an English-only program in most cases results in no improvement in the children's academic

success, nor in their behaviour. Researchers have encouraged the development of strategies for working with students with special education needs within the French immersion program rather than encouraging these students to transfer (Ali Khan 1993; Cummins 1984; Demers 1994; Halsall 1994; Keep 1993; Murtaugh and Dirren 1992). Demers states that as a result of transferring to the English program, the loss of self-esteem and the disruption of the immersion



student's peer grouping may cause a worsening of the learning or behaviour problem. Transferring a student with a learning disability out of French immersion may in fact be taking away that individual's opportunity

to become bilingual. Educational specialists and consultants can help support teachers and students so that they can be successful in the French Immersion program and therefore become bilingual.

Conclusion

Research shows that a wide variety of students can be successful in French Immersion. Diverse learning needs can be met in French Immersion



programs through appropriate supports that meet all students' needs. This can be accomplished with the support and understanding of educational consultants, specialists and other professionals who can contribute to the success of all students attending French Immersion programs.

For more information or to consult Alberta Education's wide array of resources to support teachers, visit: <<http://education.alberta.ca>>.

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Diversity in French Immersion



Can French Immersion offer an appropriate quality education for a student with special needs?

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