

# ISSUES OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN QUEBEC'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN)

By Nadine Ciamarra and Patricia Lamarre  
With Patrick Donovan and Lorraine O'Donnell

The percentage of Quebec's population with French-English bilingual skills has steadily increased over the past decades, and this is the case for all Quebecers, regardless of language background (Turcotte, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Quebec Anglophone<sup>2</sup> youth, however, are the most bilingual,<sup>3</sup> and become bilingual at a younger age than Francophone or Allophone youth. The explanation is simple: Quebec's English-speaking parents have been able to rely on schools to develop their children's bilingual skills, thanks to French immersion and other enriched French-second-language programs (Lamarre, 1997, 2007, 2012; Magnan et al., 2018), and in some cases by crossing over to the French sector (Laperrière & Lamarre, 2006).<sup>4</sup>

**Parents want their children to be proficient in French to be able to access career opportunities in Quebec and hope that this will allow youth to stay in the province after they graduate** (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages [OCOL], 2019). Their concern is founded: in 2016, the "language spoken mostly at work" in Quebec was French at 80%, followed by English at 12%, while 7% of workplaces reported equal use of both languages (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2019). The need for French skills to thrive, work, and feel comfortable in Quebec has been clear to the province's English-speaking communities for some time. Already in the 1960s, pressure to improve the teaching of French as a second language (FSL) in English-language schools was evident (Lamarre, 1997).

<sup>1</sup> From 2006 to 2016, the rate of English-French bilingualism increased from 41% to 44% for the general population. In 2016, the highest rate of bilingualism was among youth, with 59% for 15-19 year-olds and around 65% for 20-24 and 25-29 year-olds (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2019).

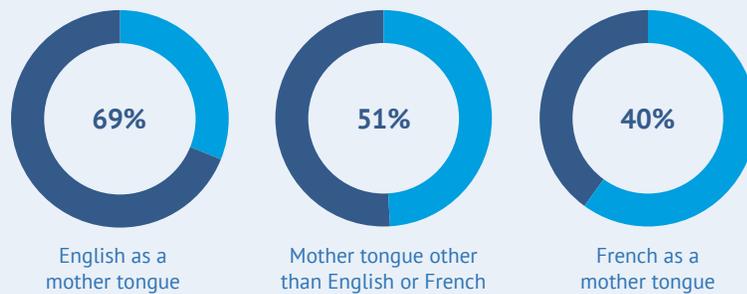
<sup>2</sup> Until recently, the provincial government defined "Anglophone" as someone for whom English is their first language learned and still understood. The statistics here reflect this definition of the English-speaking community, which excludes "Allophones" who are more proficient in English than French.

<sup>3</sup> Anglophones are more bilingual than Francophones, since the rate of English-French bilingualism was higher for people with English as a mother tongue (69%) than for those with a mother tongue other than English or French (51%) and for those with French as a mother tongue (40%) in 2016 (Turcotte, 2019). These statistics are for the whole province and include regions where the need for bilingualism is less present. When statistics for the greater Montreal area are consulted, the rate of bilingualism among the population with French as a mother tongue is much higher.

<sup>4</sup> Francophones generally develop their English-second-language skills later on as they enter the workforce or post-secondary education, whereas Anglophones acquire bilingualism at younger ages because of the range of French-second language (FSL) programs offered in English-language schools (Lamarre, 2012).

## Bilingualism in Quebec, 2016

Bilingualism is higher among Anglophones than Francophones.

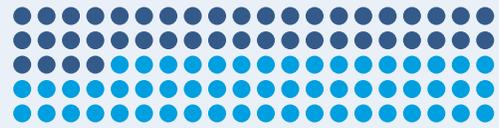


French immersion was a response to this need to raise a generation of bilingual English speakers. This is a form of bilingual education in which students receive instruction in French in English-medium schools in subjects such as history, music, geography, math, art, physical education, and science. Parents from St. Lambert, Quebec, proposed and eventually obtained a French immersion program on Montreal's south shore in the early 1960s (Lapkin et al., 1983; Melikoff, 1972). This French immersion model represented an exciting grassroots innovation in ensuring bilingualism. Quickly gaining popularity, it spread to other schools and school boards in Quebec, other provinces, and eventually the world. In Quebec, French immersion met with little administrative resistance after the mid-1960s, and by 1995 the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) stated that the teaching of French in Quebec's official language minority schools<sup>5</sup> was as important as the teaching of English and mathematics (ABEE, 1995). French immersion, which is just one of several streams for learning the language, is now offered in a number of elementary and secondary schools.

In other provinces, French immersion programs are sometimes accused of promoting elitism in schools, whereas in the Greater Montreal area, French immersion is just as popular in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods as it is in middle-class areas. Uneven rates of bilingualism within the English-speaking community, however, do follow social class lines. Students in poor socioeconomic areas may not acquire the same level of French-speaking skills as their counterparts from more affluent backgrounds (Lamarre, 2012). Yet, mastering the French language is fundamental for participation in Quebec's labour market, even in many blue collar or service industry jobs. Furthermore, offering a French immersion stream in Quebec's rural and remote areas with smaller schools can be difficult, if not impossible.<sup>6</sup>

The rate of English-French bilingualism increased from 41% in 2006 to 44% in 2018 for the general population.

# 44%



In the general population, the highest rate of bilingualism is among youth.

## 59%

15-19 years old

## 65%

20-24 years old

## 65%

25-29 years old

Source: ISQ (2019); Turcotte (2019)

<sup>5</sup> English-language schools in Quebec are legally recognized as official language minority (OLM) schools under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, with a mandate to protect and promote the vitality of Quebec's English-speaking minority. In this and other briefs in this series, the terms "English-language schools" and "OLM schools" will be used interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup> The development of French immersion in the English sector very quickly contributed to an important demographic change in the teaching staff of schools, as more native French language speakers were hired to teach. Surprisingly, Quebec is currently experiencing a high demand for French-second-language teachers (ABEE, 2016; OCOL, 2019). To deal with this teacher shortage, some English school boards "hire native French speakers who are not necessarily fully certified in second-language education because of a shortage of FSL teachers and the misconception that the ability to speak French is all that is required to teach French" (OCOL, 2019, p. 9).

Since the early 1980s, parents with the right to send their children to English-language schools have asked themselves if French immersion is enough to attain the level of bilingualism needed to thrive in Quebec (Lamarre, 1997). Many parents apparently think not, and choose to voluntarily send their children to French-language schools.<sup>7</sup> In the past, parents tended to send their children to French elementary schools and back to the English sector for secondary school. More recently, the trend to remain in French for secondary education has steadily increased. In 2015, 11.3% of all students with the right to attend an English-language school attended a French-language school (Olivier, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

All students in Quebec's English sector are now learning French, most in some form of enriched French/bilingual education program that goes beyond the required basic amount of time prescribed by the Ministère de l'Éducation. For example, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) offers five streams of French education targeting different competency levels (EMSB, 2021).

Providing all students with high-level bilingual skills is a challenge for English-language schools. In part, this is because of the wide range of linguistic profiles among students. Some students have limited French skills, while others have French as their mother tongue.

**Moreover, ABEE (2018) argues that schools have to go beyond providing language instruction and provide students with strong skills in “biliteracy and biculturalism.”<sup>9</sup>**

They suggest that more be done to foster students' sense of belonging to a shared Quebec culture through “authentic language learning experiences ... that immerse them in the French culture of Québec” (p. 17). Increasing contacts with students in French schools could support French-language development, as well as increased awareness and interest in Quebec's Francophone culture. Examples of pertinent initiatives in this direction are provided by the *Projet d'échanges linguistiques intra-Québec (PÉLIQ-AN)* exchange program and the *Option-études Châteauguay* program described in Côté et al. (2016, and in press).

English-language schools in Quebec face an important double challenge. They need to contribute to the vitality of the official language minority community, as well as

<sup>6</sup> The development of French immersion in the English sector very quickly contributed to an important demographic change in the teaching staff of schools, as more native French language speakers were hired to teach. Surprisingly, Quebec is currently experiencing a high demand for French-second-language teachers (ABEE, 2016; OCOL, 2019). To deal with this teacher shortage, some English school boards “hire native French speakers who are not necessarily fully certified in second-language education because of a shortage of FSL teachers and the misconception that the ability to speak French is all that is required to teach French” (OCOL, 2019, p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> In 2015, 76.3% of English mother tongue, 3.2% of French mother tongue, and 10.6% of Allophone students were admissible to English-language schools (Olivier, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> In 2015, 27.9% of English mother tongue students attended a French-language school (Olivier, 2017) (some by choice, some in consequence of provincial and federal legislation that defines who has the right to English-language schooling in Quebec).

<sup>9</sup> Biliteracy implies not only oral fluency in French and English, but also the ability to read and write in both languages at an advanced level. Biculturalism refers to the ability to take part and live with ease in a student's second official language (ABEE, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> For more on declining enrolment, see Brief no. 1 in this series.

prepare students to be bilingual, biliterate and comfortable in French-speaking environments so that they can integrate into society and the workforce and remain in Quebec (ABEE, 2016). To this double challenge must be added the need to provide students from all language backgrounds enrolled in schools with bilingualism skills. These challenges are costly ones for an English-language school sector already seriously affected by a decline in student numbers<sup>10</sup> and, consequently, with dwindling access to financial resources.

## References

- Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) (1995). *Language learning in the English schools of Quebec: A biliteracy imperative*. Presented to the Minister of Education of Quebec.
- Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) (2016). *Keep the door open for young English-speaking adults in Québec: Language learning in English schools and centres*. Presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports.
- Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) (2018). *Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil: Revisiting the 1992 Task Force Report on English Education in Québec*. Presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports.
- Bourhis, R., & Sioufi, R. (2017). *Assessing forty years of language planning on the vitality of the Francophone and Anglophone communities of Québec*. *Multilingua*, 36(5), 627-661.
- Côté, B., Lamarre, P., & Lavoie, J. (In press). Profiles of learners in a linguistic exchange program guided by intergroup contact theory: "Option-études Châteauguay" Québec. In N. Carignan, M. Deraïche, & M. C. Guillot (Eds.). *Commitment for a Pluralistic Society: Intercultural Twinings and other Practices*.
- Côté, B., Lamarre, P., & Razakamanana, A. N. (2016). *Option-études Châteauguay: Bilan de l'impact à moyen terme d'un programme de scolarisation commune d'élèves du secteur francophone et du secteur anglophone, sur les rapports intercommunautaires et l'identité*. *Minorités Linguistiques et Société*, 7, 170-194.
- English Montreal School Board (EMSB). (2021). *Secondary School Programs* [webpage].
- Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ). (2019). *Regard statistique sur la jeunesse : État et évolution de la situation des Québécois âgés de 15 à 29 ans 1996 à 2019*. Gouvernement du Québec.
- Lamarre, P. (1997). *A comparative analysis of the development of immersion programs in British Columbia and Québec: Two divergent sociopolitical contexts*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of British Columbia.
- Lamarre, P. (2007). *Anglo-Québec Today: Looking at Schooling and Community Issues*. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 185, 109-132.
- Lamarre, P. (2012). *English education in Québec: Issues and challenges*. In R. Y. Bourhis (Ed.). *New Canadian Perspectives: Decline and prospects of the English-speaking communities of Québec* (pp. 175-214). Ottawa: Canadian Heritage.
- Laperrière, A., & Lamarre, P. (2006). Rapport final. *Franchir les frontières: La traversée vers l'école de langue française des anglophones ayant-droits de Montréal*. Montreal: Centre d'études ethniques des universités montréalaises.
- Lapkin, S., Swain, M., & Argue, V. (1983). *French immersion: The trial balloon that flew*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- MacLeod, A., & Hasan, S. (2017). *Where our Students are Educated: Measuring Student Enrolment in Canada - 2017*. Fraser Institute.
- Magnan, M. O., Levasseur, C., & Grenier, V. (2018). *Educational issues and identity positioning among students enrolled in an English school board in Québec: A case study of three regions*. Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur.
- Melikoff, O. (1972). Parents as change agents in education. In W. E. Lambert & G. R. Tucker (Eds.). *Bilingual education of children: The St. Lambert experiment* (pp. 219-236). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL). (2019). *Accessing opportunity: A study on challenges in French-as-a-second-language education teacher supply and demand in Canada*. Government of Canada.
- Olivier, C. E. (2017). *Langue et éducation au Québec 1, Éducation préscolaire et enseignement primaire et secondaire*. Office québécois de la langue française.
- Turcotte, M. (2019). *Insights on Canadian society: Results from the 2016 census: English-French bilingualism among Canadian children and youth*. Insights on Canadian society - Statistics Canada.



This document was produced by the [Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network \(QUESCREN\)](#), a collaborative network of researchers, stakeholders, and educational and other institutions that improves understanding of Quebec's English-speaking communities and promotes their vitality. QUESCREN is housed at the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University in Montreal.

### Education Research Briefs

The Education Research Briefs are produced at the request of and in collaboration with QUESCREN's [Inter-Level Educational Table \(ILET\)](#). The series focus is priority issues and challenges within Quebec's English-language education sector, as identified by ILET.

### Credits for this Brief

Authors: [Nadine Ciamarra](#), M.A., Grad.Dip., and [Patricia Lamarre](#), Ph.D., with [Patrick Donovan](#), Ph.D., and [Lorraine O'Donnell](#), Ph.D

Management and production: [Lorraine O'Donnell](#) or [Patrick Donovan](#).

Linguistic revision: [Linda Arui](#)

Design template and layout: [Fabian Will](#)

To consult any of these references online, see a complete hyperlinked list of documents here:

<https://tinyurl.com/quescrenbriefs>

The Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise funded this research brief.

Secrétariat aux relations  
avec les Québécois  
d'expression anglaise

Québec

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of QUESCREN or the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise.

The Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise, the Government of Canada, the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities, and Concordia University provide financial support for QUESCREN.

Legal deposit - Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2021.

Canada



ICRML  
Institut canadien  
de recherche  
sur les minorités  
linguistiques

CIRLM  
Canadian Institute  
for Research  
on Linguistic  
Minorities



UNIVERSITÉ  
Concordia  
UNIVERSITY