

THREE APPROACHES TO WRITING SCHOOL PROGRAMS WITH OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITIES

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School programs are state-sanctioned texts that prescribe what students must learn in a discipline, such as history (von Heyking, 2019). In Canada, provinces and territories have used different approaches to writing school programs, some of which respond better than others to the concerns of official language minorities. The level of responsiveness depends on the capacity for official language minority representatives to gain a seat at the provincial program-writing table. History and social studies programs (which contain a mix of history and social sciences) are particularly important for official language minority students (ABEE, 2018). They enable students to learn about rights enshrined within the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, including the rights of official language minorities under section 23 to access and manage schools to ensure their group’s vitality. Canada’s Supreme Court has interpreted these rights (section 23) as implying that a “**province... can impose appropriate programs in so far as they do not interfere with the legitimate linguistic and cultural concerns of the minority**” (Arsenault-Cameron v. P.E.I., 2000, para. 53). Accordingly, provincial ministries of education are *responsible* for addressing the concerns of the official language minority in their province about the history/social studies program. This research brief outlines three approaches to writing school history programs that vary in their responsiveness to official language minorities’ concerns in Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta—my research sites in recent years.

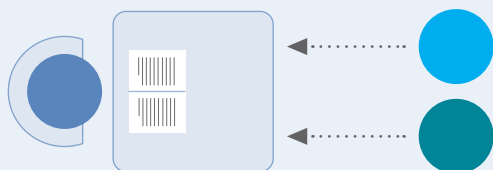
In 2016, history teacher John Commins wrote an op-ed published in *The Gazette* arguing for a separate history program for Anglophone students in Quebec. After 27 years of teaching, and having participated in the vetting process for the previous program, Commins was dissatisfied with the depiction of English-speaking minorities in the draft of the Secondary III and IV *History of Québec and Canada* program. He argued that “our community’s diverse roles in Québec’s past are either ignored or, even worse, characterized as being in perpetual opposition to the French-speaking community” (para. 3). Commins’ assertion was later confirmed by school board reports, scholarly analysis, and teachers’

criticisms (Bradley & Allison, 2021; EMSB, 2018; Moisan, 2021; Zanzanian, 2021). While Commins had pointed to the need for Quebec’s Anglophones to get “a separate program as Franco-Ontarians have done” (para. 8), he did not fully acknowledge any legal leverage that might be mobilized to gain representation at the program-writing table. That leverage exists in section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and its jurisprudence. Other Canadian provinces have developed approaches to writing school programs that are more aligned than Quebec’s with the Supreme Court’s prescription to “not interfere with the legitimate linguistic and cultural concerns of the minority.”

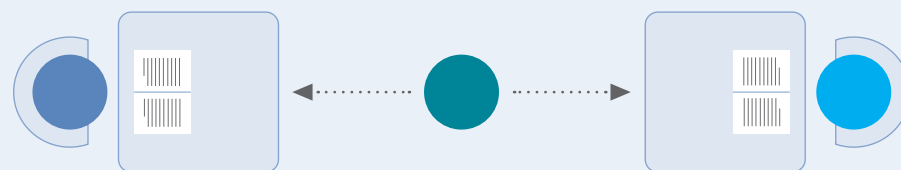
Comparing the history or social studies programs in Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta reveals three approaches to accommodating official language minorities’ concerns: 1) advisory, 2) dual, and 3) partnership (see Infographic 1). In response to these approaches, official language minorities have reacted on a continuum from backlash to acceptance of the resulting programs. The more the approach involved partnerships with minorities, the more acceptance was likely.

**Infographic 1:
Tables and Chairs**

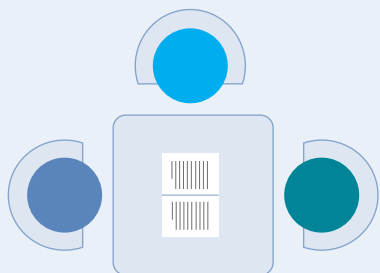
Outside the Table (Advisory Approach) = Quebec



Two Tables (Dual Approach) = Ontario



One Table, Three Chairs (Partnership Approach) = Alberta



- Linguistic Majority Representative
- Linguistic Minority Representative
- Indigenous Representative
- Seat at the Writing Table

Quebec's advisory approach provokes backlash from English-speaking minorities

Prior to the 1970s, Quebec's English-speaking minorities directly influenced the school programs for both Protestant and Catholic schools within the denominational school system (Lanouette, 2004). The Parent Commission's review of the province's education system recommended abolishing these separate programs. The resulting Parent Report (1964) proposed that all students follow the same program to "teach history as objectively as possible" (p. 179). Since the 1970s, Quebec's ministry of education has followed this recommendation (Larouche, 2014), leading to a decrease in influence for Anglophone representatives, leading to a decrease in influence for Anglophone representatives (Ciamarra et al., 2021), who now have only a consultative role in program writing, similar to Indigenous representatives. For example, between 2013 and 2017, Anglophone representatives participated in rounds of consultations to advise on the production of the *History of Québec and Canada* program (MEQ, 2017). These meetings led to some changes (Bélair-Cirino & Noël, 2019), including the addition of Quebec English-speaking author Mordecai Richler alongside Francophone artists living between 1945 and 1980. However, **this advisory approach, in which the official language minority held only a consultative role with no direct involvement, produced a program that was heavily criticized.** English-speaking communities' diversity was misrepresented, according to criticism published in the press (e.g., Commins, 2016), in a survey (Green, 2017), and in a report commissioned by the English Montreal School Board (EMSB, 2018). Teachers continued to criticize the program after its implementation (McKell, 2022).

Ontario's dual approach led to relative satisfaction among Francophone minorities

Since the 1990s, **distinct programs have been produced for Anglophone (English-speaking/French immersion) and Francophone students in Ontario** through the enactment of a French version for most curricula in the province (Yamatualé, 2002). In this dual approach, separate project managers oversee the French and English versions of the program. The Ministry of Education has a distinct "French-Language Program and Policy Unit [which leads] the ongoing cycle of program review and revision" (OAGO, 2020, p. 66), and hires employees to oversee and write programs for Francophone students. French and English project managers also consult other stakeholders, such as Indigenous leaders, for feedback (St-Pierre, 2018). Both writing teams have discretionary power to include specific learning outcomes targeted to their student population (Brunet & Gani, 2020). Such discretionary power has led to a distinct interpretation of historical actors, events, and issues within each Grade 7 *History of Canada* program, such as the "Conquest" of New France or the 1839 Durham Report (OME, 2018a, 2018b; see *Table 1*). Based on my preliminary analysis, **the Francophone version of the Grade 7 history program shares approximately 80% of the English version's content.**

Scholars have criticized the English version of Ontario history programs for their lack of Francophone-minority representation (Bolduc & Poulin, 2017). However, there has been little to no criticism about the representation of Francophone minorities within the Francophone version. **Overall, the dual approach and direct involvement of official language minorities appears to foster contentment.**

Table 1:
A distinct interpretation of some historical actors and events by French- and English-language writing teams exists within Ontario's dual approach.

The British Conquest of New France	
English version	French version
Different groups responded in different ways to the shift in power in Canada from France to Britain. (OME, 2018a, p. 144)	La conquête et le passage subséquent du régime français au régime anglais ont engendré une nouvelle dynamique des rapports entre les communautés et les groupes au Canada et scellé le destin des langues en Amérique du Nord. (OME, 2018b, p. 144)

Lord Durham's report	
English version	French version
How would you characterize French-English relations at the time of the Durham Report? (OME, 2018a, p. 154)	Les conclusions de Lord Durham sur le manque d'histoire et de culture des Canadiens français étaient-elles fondées? Pourquoi? (OME, 2018b, p. 153)

Alberta's *partnership approach*: From equal partners, to reform, to recovery

The Alberta social studies program implemented in 2005 (under review as of 2023) was the result of unprecedented partnerships that emerged in the 1990s. To respond to student mobility across Canadian jurisdictions, Western provinces and territories collaborated to produce one common school program in social studies (and other disciplines) (Wallner, 2009). This collaboration gave rise to innovation (Gani, 2022), such as bilingual hiring practices leading to **the inclusion of Francophone, Indigenous, and Anglophone social studies program writers** (Gillis, 2005). For the first time in Canadian history, these groups worked as “equal partners” in crafting learning prescriptions (WCP, 1999, p. 3). The common program was never implemented because of a conflict over production timelines, but the bilingual hiring process and *partnership approach* was adapted to Alberta.

The *partnership approach* resulted in the inclusion of learning mandates related to the appreciation of Francophone and Indigenous perspectives from kindergarten to Grade 12 (Alberta Education, 2005; LearnAlberta, 2007; Pashby, 2013). The social studies program, implemented in 2005, was embraced by Francophone minorities. However, in 2021, a reform of Alberta's social studies program was heavily criticized for marginalizing minority perspectives, while previous partners such as Francophone representatives lamented the loss of the partnership approach for writing learning outcomes (French, 2021). That backlash led to measures to include more Francophone voices in the production of the new social studies program, which subsequently reduced Francophone critique of the reform (French, 2022).

Conclusion

In line with judgments from the Supreme Court of Canada, ministers of education need to authorize and approve programs that account for official language minorities' concerns. Methods to address these concerns are a major challenge in the 21st century, especially when less involvement by minorities in program-writing processes increases the probability of backlash against the final version. Ministries of education can consider official language minorities' concerns in at least three distinct approaches:

- they can consult with them, as in Quebec;
- they can delegate power to minority representatives to write their own version of the program, as in Ontario; or
- they can hire a program-writing team where minorities and majorities sit as equal partners, as in Alberta.

Each of these approaches has its (dis)advantages and, most importantly, involves different ways of centring the voices of official language minorities in the decision-making process.

However, **the further away minorities are from the program-writing table, the more likely they are to contest the finalized program** (see the case of Quebec and, more recently, Alberta).

Still relevant today, a 1998 report from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages concluded that:

virtually all provincial Departments of Education have developed sections devoted to the program needs of official minority language education. However, it remains an open question whether adequate mechanisms are in place in all provinces to ensure that members of the minority population have a sufficient voice in the development of these programs.

Ensuring these mechanisms are in place and working properly is vital.

Anglophones in Quebec have the right to a program that adequately represents their perspectives and concerns. Existing jurisprudence relating to Section 23 in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Freyne-Gagné, 2022) and program-writing approaches enacted in Ontario and Alberta support this point.

Given this, the Government of Quebec may want to consider following the example of other provinces, and take proactive measures to enhance the input of its English speaking minority in Quebec's history education program development.

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