

Using Data to Develop a Comprehensive Improvement Strategy in French-Language Schools in the Province of Ontario, Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe how the use of data has created a stronger focus for sustained success in the publicly-funded French-language education system in the province of Ontario, Canada.

We will present the context of French-language education in Ontario, explain its main challenges, present the Ministry of Education's approach and the logic model used to develop policies and initiatives designed to specifically address these challenges, show how evidence was used in the development and monitoring of policies and programs, and discuss what remains to be done to ensure the vitality and sustainability of this education system that is operating in a linguistic minority setting.

The education system in Ontario

In Canada, elementary and secondary education falls under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. The Canadian constitution was amended in 1982. One aspect of this constitutional reform was to provide legal protection for minorities of the two official languages (English and French). Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, part of the 1982 Canadian Constitution documents, guarantees the French or English linguistic minority citizens of a province the right to instruction in their own language. Canada's current population is 32,700,000, of which 23% identify themselves as French speaking, the vast majority residing in the province of Quebec. Ontario's population is 12,700,000, 4.5% (600,000) of which are French speaking.

In Ontario, Canada's largest province, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the system of publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, in accordance with the priorities and goals set by the provincial government. The ministry is responsible for issuing curricula, for setting requirements for student diplomas and certificates, and for providing funding to school boards for instruction and operations. In 2007-08, the government's investment in elementary and secondary education (4 to 17 years old) will be equivalent to US\$ 15.7 billion.

In 1998, following a series of important education reforms in Ontario, 72 publicly funded autonomous school boards were established across the province: 60 English-language and 12 French-language. Of the 12 French-language boards, 8 are designated as "catholic" and 4 as "public" or non-denominational. These boards serve about 90,000 students from Junior Kindergarten (age 4) to Grade 12 (age 17), and oversee immense territories, from 2,000 to 26,000 square miles. These boards serve 403 schools: 312 elementary and 91 secondary. The vast majority of these French-language schools are small: 67% of secondary schools have less than 300 students, as do 77% of elementary schools.

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed a Strategic Direction in 2005 which featured three key goals :

- Improving student achievement
 - By 2008, at least 75% of Grade 6 students will perform at or above the standard on the provincial reading, writing, and mathematics assessments (was 55% in 2002-2003).
- Closing the gaps in student achievement
 - 85% of students will graduate from high school within one year of normal graduation in 2010-2011 (was 68% in 2003-2004).
- Increasing confidence in publicly-funded education.

Context of French-Language Education in Ontario

In addition to meeting government expectations for student achievement, the French-language education system faces additional challenges associated with its situation in a linguistic minority setting. The recruitment and retention of students are crucial to ensuring the system's and the community's vitality and viability. The Canadian constitution provides access to publicly funded education for the French-language minority in Ontario and other provinces and territories outside the province of Quebec. This constitutional right to education in French is granted to parents who attended a French-language school in Canada, or whose first language spoken and still understood is French. These people are referred to as "right holders". A significant proportion of rights holding parents marry or have a conjugal relationship with persons of a different linguistic background (i.e. one French-speaking parent and one English-speaking parent). Their children have a choice to attend school in French or in English. Analyses of student enrollments show that about 30,000 of the estimated 120,000 students whose parents hold a constitutional right to French-language education for their children do not attend French-language schools in Ontario.

There are many additional factors that increase the likelihood of assimilation of the francophone minority in Ontario -- with changing social and demographic trends, many families move from rural regions to large urban settings, and declining birth rates among groups that have been established for many generations mean the increase in population is driven mainly by immigration. Immigrant children who can demonstrate an acceptable level of proficiency in the French language can be admitted to French-language schools through a special admittance committee. It is expected that French-speaking newcomers and migrants from other provinces could contribute to the sustainable development of the province's francophone communities. However, only 1% of Ontario immigrants enroll in French-language schools. Few services exist to welcome, inform, and direct them to the French-language school system, and they tend to adopt English once they establish themselves in the province.

The problem of retention of students in the French-language system is exacerbated by the movement of students into the English-language system, which may be related to a perception of better academic choices, or of linguistic advantages for post-secondary studies and in the work place. The students transferring from the French system to the English system are referred to as "cultural drop-outs", and add to the loss of students who drop out, for various reasons, of the school system altogether.

Approach and Logic Model

The Ontario Ministry of Education used a multi-faceted approach to address system-wide education improvement for its 2 million students since 2003. It relied on:

- Restoring *Respect* to the profession and the education sector (by eliminating tax credits for parents sending their children to private schools, increasing the influence of education stakeholders in education policy-making)
- Ensuring *Labor Peace & Stability* (with four year province-wide collective agreements, so that system leaders and educators can focus on student achievement rather than labor relations issues);
- *Pressure & Support* (ambitious targets for improvements in student achievement and graduation rates over time, while increasing per pupil education funding by 28% over 5 years)
- Building the *Will & Skill* of educators.

Within the Ontario Ministry of Education, the French-Language Education Policy and Programs Branch leads collaborative efforts within the French-language system to drive improvement. The logic model behind the Branch’s approach to driving about improvement can be summarized as follows:

Key Elements to Bring About Change

Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Change
		Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Confusion
Vision			+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Anxiety
Vision	+	Skills			+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Slow Progress
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives			+	Action Plan	=	Frustration
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources			=	False Start

Winning conditions for positive change require that a clear vision be expressed, that players develop the necessary skills, that incentives to encourage engagement and achievement be provided, that resources be made available, and that a thorough action plan be developed and implemented. If any of these five conditions is missing, confusion, anxiety, slow progress, frustration or a false start will result.

In order to address the issues specific to the French-language education system, consultations were held first with stakeholders from the French-language community to identify the main challenges associated with ensuring the vitality and sustainability of this educational system. An overarching language planning policy (Politique d’aménagement linguistique) was then developed and adopted, supported by a strategy of targeted investments in staff, programs, and facilities. Finally, a culture of evidence gathering and reporting was instilled throughout the system, helping policymakers to use evidence in the development of policies and programs, in the measurement of progress made, and in decision-making with regards to the next steps to take. All boards were required to develop information management systems compatible with the Ministry’s system and to foster a culture of results-based management.

FRENCH-LANGUAGE PLANNING POLICY

In 2004, the Ontario Ministry of Education adopted a French-Language Planning Policy ⁽¹⁾ to support French-language schools in Ontario in the implementation of their constitutional mandate, to:

- Recruit and retain children of rights holders;
- Offer high quality education to students to become competent and responsible citizens, empowered by their linguistic and cultural identity;
- Transmit French language and culture;
- Contribute to the vitality of the French-language community.

More specifically, the objectives of the Policy are to:

- Foster the well-being of current and future generations by promoting and expanding the francophone milieu in which the students are educated to meet their linguistic, educational, and cultural needs;
- Help young people reach their full potential in school and in society;
- Deliver high-quality instruction adapted to the French-language minority setting;
- Increase the capacity of learning communities, including school staff, students, and parents, to support students' linguistic, educational, and cultural development throughout their lives;
- Expand and enrich the francophone environment through solid partnerships among the school, the family, and the community as a whole;
- Increase the vitality of educational institutions by focusing on student retention and increased enrolment, thus contributing to the sustainable development of the French-language community in Ontario.

Implementation of the Policy

Each of Ontario's 12 French-language school boards, in cooperation with parents and community organizations, is required to develop a local language planning policy that promotes the fulfillment of the French-language school's mandate and increases the educational system's capacity to protect and enhance the French language and culture. Based on a rigorous analysis of its individual situation and needs, each school board plans targeted interventions, which include, for example, teaming up with early childhood service providers and implementing programs for the intake, assessment, placement, and integration of students who – for linguistic, cultural, or academic reasons – are not immediately able to follow the regular programs offered.

The anticipated outcomes of the Policy are three-fold:

- *for students* – increased capacity to acquire oral communication skills to maximize learning and identity building;
- *for school staff* – increased capacity to work in a minority setting to support the academic learning and identity building of every student;

- *for school boards* – increased capacity to maintain and increase student enrolment to contribute to the vitality of French-language schools and the broader francophone community.

To assist with the implementation of the Policy, a series of tools were developed to provide direction and monitor progress, both at the provincial and at the board levels. An Accountability Framework for French-Language Education serves as a strategic planning and monitoring tool following results-based management principles, and aligned closely with the objectives and anticipated outcomes of the French-Language Planning Policy. The framework includes a series of outcomes (Table 1), which focus on improving student performance, closing achievement gaps, increasing public confidence, improving oral communication, maximizing learning and the construction of a French-language cultural identity, maximizing the ability of school staff to work in a minority setting, improving recruitment and retention rates, and finally, improving the internal capacity at Ontario’s Ministry of Education. The targeted outcomes are supported by quantitative and qualitative indicators to draw a broad picture of the French-Language education system in the province, and to monitor progress in certain areas identified for particular investments or interventions.

Table 1 : Accountability Framework for French-Language Education in Ontario.

Specific Outcomes	Indicators
1.1 Better Performance (Grades 6 to 12)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements in results to province-wide standardized tests administered in Grade 6 (Reading, Writing, Mathematics), Grade 9 (Applied and Academic Mathematics), and Grade 10 (Literacy). • Increase in high school credits earned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French-language school results to province-wide standardized tests. • Percentage of students who earn 16 credits in Grade 10.
1.2 Closing the provincial gaps	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of students who earn their Ontario High School Diploma (OHSD). • Improvements of low performing elementary schools. • Reduction in the achievement gap between boys and girls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation rate. • School performances to standardized tests. • Results to standardized tests, by sex.
1.3 Public Trust	
Improvements in the levels of satisfaction of parents and students towards learning, school life, and the way in which they are welcomed and supported.	Surveys.
2.1 Oral Communication	
Ongoing improvement in the students’ oral communication skills.	Grades 1, 3, 6, and 8 report cards.
2.2 Maximize learning (when there are gaps unique to French-language students)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in the achievement gap between French and English language students to standardized tests. • Increase in the percentage of high school students who pass the national tests in mathematics and science. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French-language school results to province-wide standardized tests. • National test results.
2.3 Maximize the construction of an identity by students	
Increase in the percentage of students who graduate from French-language high schools, reflecting evidence of strong cultural identity construction.	Self-evaluation tool.

<p>3 Maximize the ability of the staff to work in a minority setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in the number of temporary certification issued for teachers and principals working in French-language schools. • Decrease in staff turnover in French- language schools. • Increase in the number of graduates of faculties of education who choose to work in a French language- school. • Increase in the percentage of teachers and principals who believe that they have the skills required to work in a minority setting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of temporary certifications issued each year. • Information on staff turnover. • Information on graduates from faculties of education. • Self-evaluation tool.
<p>4 Recruitment and Retention Rate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the ability to attract new students who have rights to a French-language education. • Increase in the ability to retain students. • Increase in critical mass of students enrolled in French-language schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of recruitment in target population. • Rate of retention JK-Grade 12. • Number of students in Ontario French-language schools.
<p>5 Capability of the French-Language Education Policy and Programs Branch (FLEPPB)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment of the actions of the FLEPPB with the priorities of the Ministry of Education. • Increase in satisfaction rate of school boards and school authorities in response to support provided by FLEPPB in actualizing priority initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey of FLEPPB staff. • Survey of school boards.

Associated with the Accountability Framework is a series of scorecards compiled for each individual school board (Figure 1). The scorecards provide a snapshot of each of the indicators for a given school board, in comparison with other school boards, grouped by regions or across the province. The scorecards allow the individual school boards to rapidly identify their areas of strength and those in need of improvement, particularly compared to other school boards, therefore providing an opportunity for discussion regarding investments and program implementation.

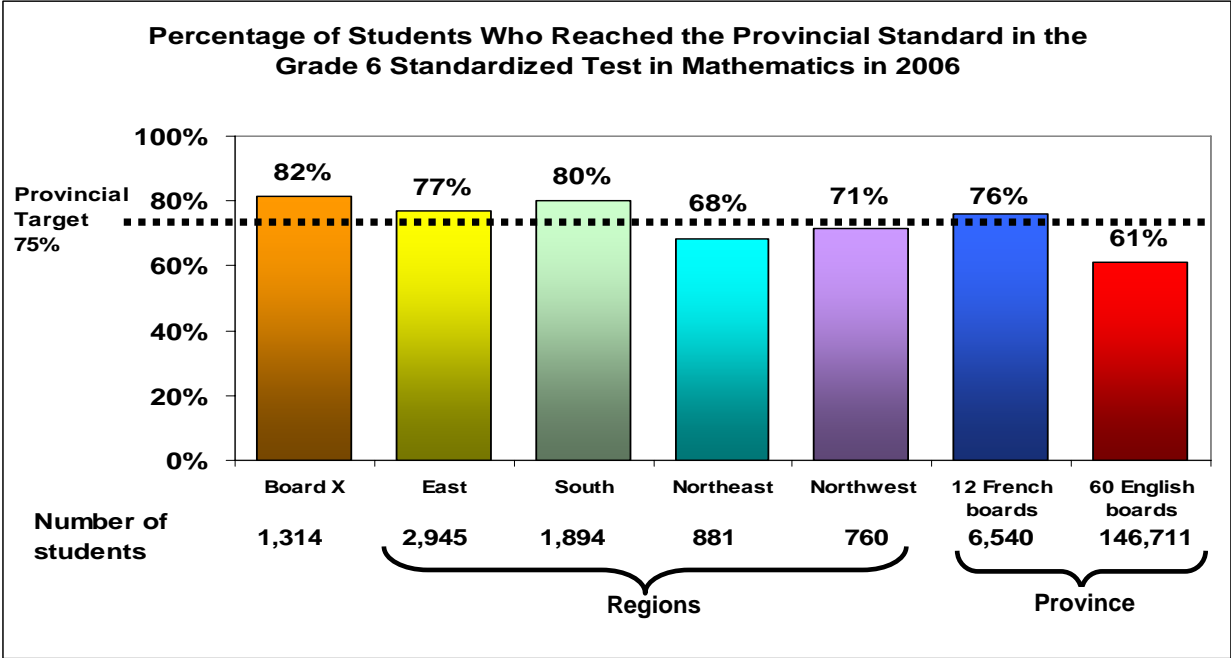


Figure 1: Model of scorecard for a school board for a given performance indicator.

All French-language school boards now use the same accountability framework and scorecards to report to their trustees and other stakeholders on their progress. Many school boards have now refined the scorecard model to compile results at the school level, allowing them to pinpoint more accurately the schools or local areas that require additional attention.

Additional contextual information about individual school boards is provided by a socio-demographic profile derived from census data for the population served by the boards and the individual schools. This profile of the population includes information about age and family structure, language spoken at home, income, levels of education, ethnic background, religion, employment, and other factors.

The Ministry conducts annual visits to each of the school boards in order to gather feedback and offer support to senior board administrators with regards to issues associated with the Policy's Accountability Framework. The issues discussed include student achievement, recruitment and retention, staff professional development, and development of specific programs. Areas of improvement are identified and action plans are developed.

Finally, a Permanent Task Force to Enhance Francophone Student Success was established in 2005, chaired by the Minister of Education, to advise the government on key issues unique to French-language education in Ontario. The 22 members of the Task Force are leaders representing the various French-language stakeholder organizations in the province. Most importantly, it is increasingly becoming a forum to enhance the solidarity of the linguistic minority in focusing on measurable outcomes to achieve collectively.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWED, AND HOW IT WAS USED IN DECISION MAKING

Sound education policies, programs and initiatives should be supported by data and research. As a result of consultations with stakeholders and analyses of the evidence available, several types of investments, as well as curricular and program changes were made to improve the French-language education system. We will highlight three examples of interventions unique to the French-language education system that were data-driven. These three examples were selected because they relate to three intended outcomes of the Language Planning Policy : targeted respectively towards students, school staff and school boards.

- Improving student outcomes in the early years in French-language schools;
- Addressing the high number of unqualified teachers in French-language schools;
- Improving retention and recruitment of children of “rights holders” in French-language schools.

1) Improving student outcomes in the early years in French-language schools

✓ *What the evidence showed*

In 1996, the Ontario government established the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAIO), an arm's-length agency of the provincial government mandated to conduct province-wide assessments at the primary, junior and secondary levels to measure student achievement against curriculum expectations. The data are widely used as an additional tool to guide improvements in education at the student, school, district and provincial levels. Each year, reading, writing and mathematics assessments are administered to Grade 3 and Grade 6 students. Math tests are administered to Grade 9 students enrolled in the applied and the academic streams. Finally, a literacy test, which is also a high school graduation requirement, is administered to Grade 10 students.

In 1998, at the time of creation of the 12 French-language school boards, the performance of French-language students on provincial assessments administered in early grades was noticeably lower than English-language students. These lower results were interpreted as evidence of the challenges faced by a young population threatened by assimilation, in the acquisition of the language communication skills necessary to thrive in a minority setting.

✓ *How it was used in decision-making*

French-language education stakeholders identified the need to enhance early childhood programs in a linguistic minority setting to close the gap in student outcomes in the early years.

A targeted ongoing investment of US\$ 8.7 million was allocated by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2000-2001 to help improve learning outcomes for Francophone students. In recognition that the time of entry into the school system also corresponds to the period of language skills acquisition, especially for students in a linguistic minority setting, the 12 French-language school boards used this targeted enhancement to transform Junior and Senior Kindergarten (ages 4 and 5) from half-day to full-day programs throughout the French-language system.

✓ *Outcomes*

In 2001, the gap in student outcomes between grade 3 French-language and English-language students in reading, writing and math was on average of 10% provincial assessments, and as high as 21% in math. Five years later, with the second cohort having benefited from a full day Junior Kindergarten program, the gap in grade 3 provincial assessments has decreased to an average of 2.3% : 6% in reading, 9% in math, and French-language students now outperform their English-language counterparts by 8% in writing. Grade 3 average student achievement has increased by an impressive 18.3%, from 44% to 62.3% in 5 years in French-language schools, compared with a 10.7% increase from 54% to 64.7% in English-language schools.

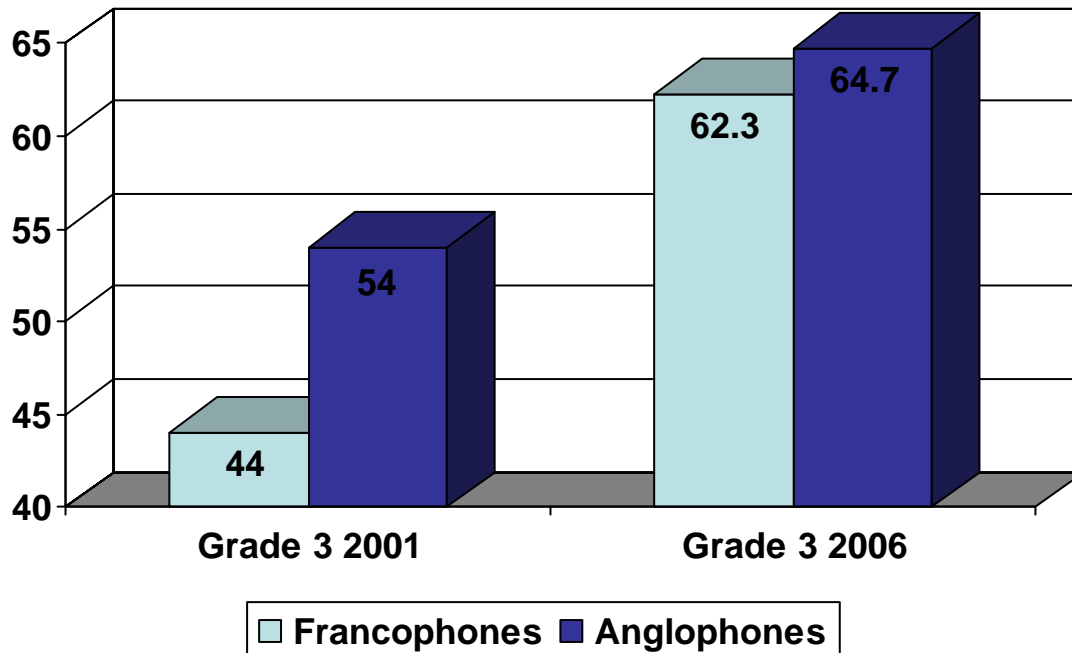


Figure 2 : Percentage of grade 3 students in Ontario meeting curriculum expectations on average in reading, writing and math, as measured on provincial assessments administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office

2) Addressing the high number of unqualified teachers in French-language schools

✓ What the evidence showed

Because of its situation in a minority setting, the Ontario French-language education system faces challenges in recruiting the required number of qualified teachers. While the population of teachers with the skills to teach in a minority setting is already relatively small, the French-language system has to compete with English-language school boards who need teachers to deliver the regular mandated French courses and the popular French immersion programs. In 2002-2003, the French-language education system counted 5,592 teachers, of which 279, or 5%, were granted special Ministry permission to teach without the otherwise required qualifications.

✓ How it was used in decision-making

Compounding to the original shortage of qualified teachers, the province of Ontario has made sizable investments to create new teaching positions in its elementary and secondary schools, and in particular in French-language schools. The availability of timely data on the shortage of teachers prompted the Ontario Ministry of Education to intensify its efforts to increase the number of graduates from teacher education programs for French-language schools.

In order to facilitate the acquisition of required qualifications for individuals interested in teaching in French-language schools, the Ontario Ministry of Education supported the

implementation of a new part-time Bachelor of Education program in partnership with the two Faculties of Education in Ontario offering French-language pre-service programs. In addition to attracting new teacher candidates interested in a second or third career in education, these part-time programs allow teachers employed by French-language boards under exemption provisions to complete within two years a Bachelor of Education, and therefore obtain the required qualifications. Instruction is provided mostly through videoconferencing and on-line curriculum, while candidates must still complete their practicum as per requirements of the Ontario College of Teachers.

✓ *Outcomes*

Figure 3 shows that while the number of teaching positions filled by French-language school boards has steadily increased since 2002-2003, reaching a cumulative total of 683 new teachers positions by 2006-2007, the number of teachers working under exemption provisions has declined from 279 in 2002-2003 to 215 in 2006-2007. This represents 3.4% of the total of 6,275 teachers working in the French-language system in 2006-2007, compared to 5% in 2002-2003.

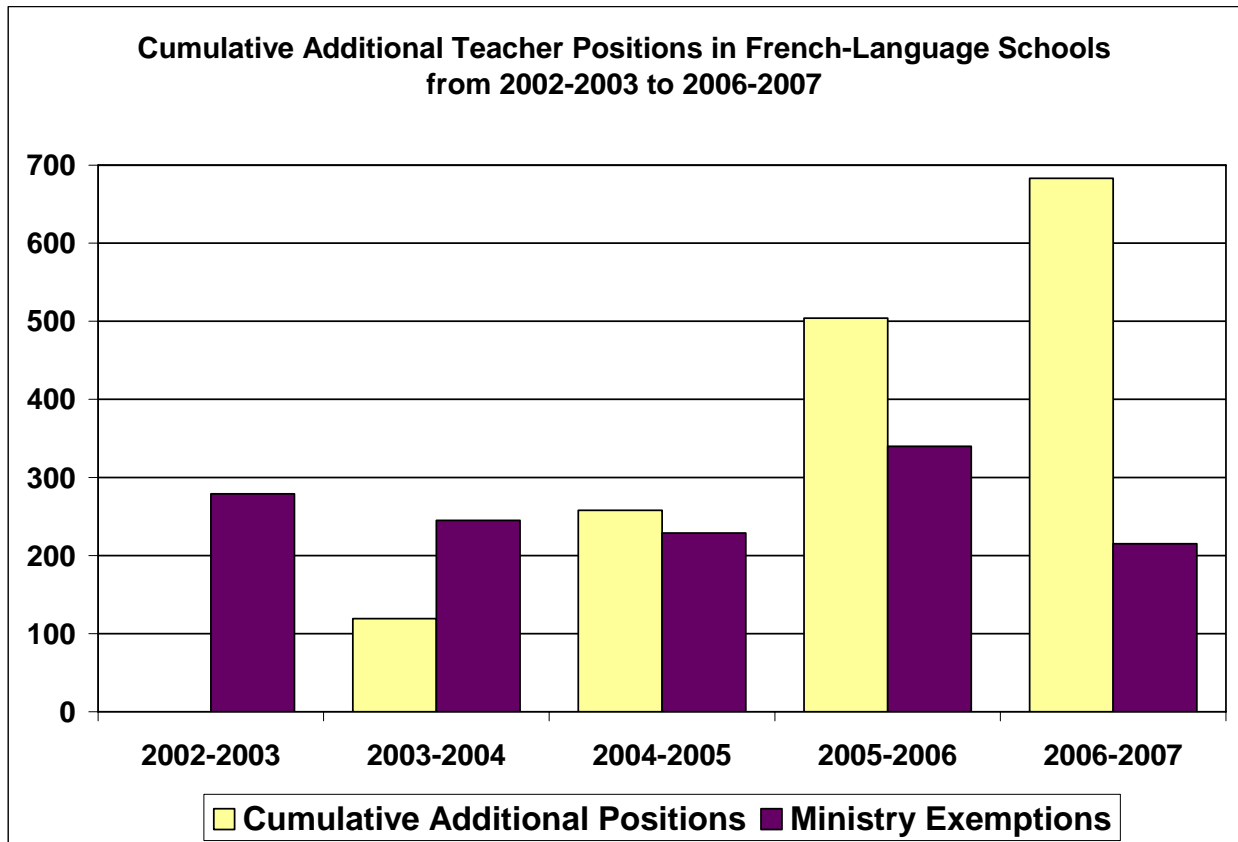


Figure 3: Number of new teacher positions compared to the total number of teachers working under Ministry exemption provisions.

3) Improving retention and recruitment of children of “rights holders” in French-language schools.

✓ *What the evidence showed*

A central issue to the vitality and sustainability of the French-language system is the retention of students, both within the school system as a whole to ensure academic success, but also within the French-language school system to ensure the acquisition of a French-language cultural identity. Analyses of student enrolments show that the proportion of students enrolled in French-language schools in Ontario continuously declines from Junior Kindergarten through Grade 12, with a particularly sharp decline during the transition from elementary to secondary school.

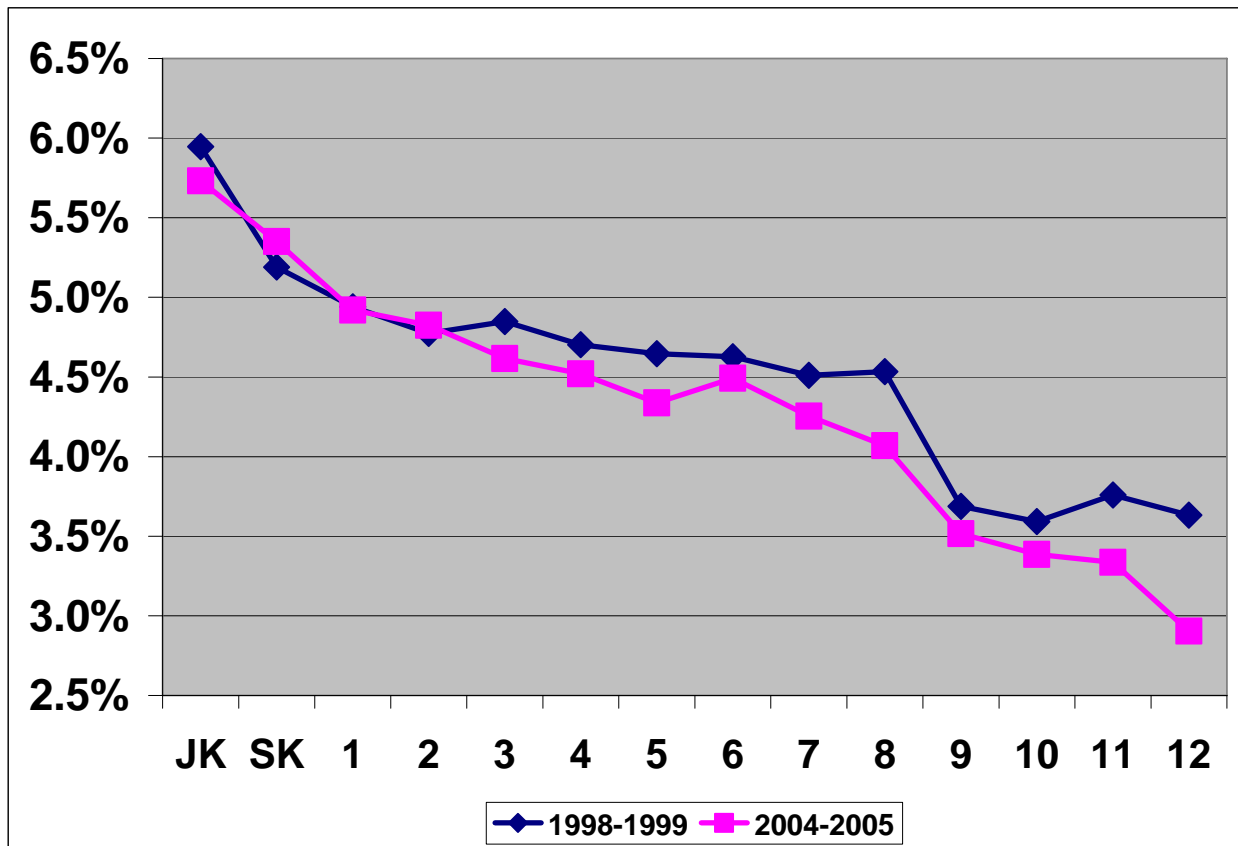


Figure 4 : Proportion of Ontario students enrolled in French-language schools per grade, in 1998-1999 and in 2004-2005

If French-language schools retained the proportion of total Ontario students enrolled in French-language schools in Junior Kindergarten, throughout Grade 12, it would serve an additional 30,000 students --- which represents the estimated number of children of French-language education “rights holders” enrolled in English-language schools.

Factors such as the limited availability of unique course offerings and extra-curricular activities in relatively smaller French-language secondary schools, the extensive length of travel time to

French-language secondary schools, the absence of French-language secondary schools in some regions (or the occasional sharing of facilities between a French-language minority program and an English-language majority program within the same facilities), the perception of better opportunities for graduates of English-language secondary schools for post-secondary studies or to secure employment in the work place, were commonly identified by French-language education stakeholders as contributing to the exodus from the French-language system.

✓ *How it was used in decision-making*

Between 2001 and 2005, the Ontario government approved annual capital funding over 25 years which drove about US\$ 282 million in capitalized value to meet unique needs of French-language school boards, in particular in municipalities where such boards had no permanent presence.

In 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Education determined that French-language secondary schools, on average, were offering 53 unique courses, compared with 101 unique courses in English-language secondary schools. To close this gap and therefore allow French-language secondary students to enjoy a wider range of programs, the government provided two targeted funding enhancements in 2005-2006 and 2007-2008 of a combined annual value of U.S.\$ 9.7 million, enabling the hiring of 200 more secondary teachers. Targeted efforts have also been made to improve e-learning opportunities for French-language secondary students.

The government announced a four-year U.S.\$ 188 million dollars capital investment strategy for 2006-2007 to 2009-2010 to secure increased permanent pupil places for French-language students, especially in urban areas where travel distances to the closest existing French-language secondary schools could be a significant factor in poor student retention.

In approving specific capital projects in this four year investment strategy, the Ministry conducted a thorough simulation – municipality by municipality – of the estimated number of children of “rights holders” not served by French-language schools. This simulation relied on the working assumption that the proportion of students enrolled in Junior Kindergarten in a given municipality should be the same in Grade 12 if retention was a controllable variable.

✓ *Outcomes*

Trend in enrollment figures give us an overall measure of the vitality of the French-language education system (Figure 5). Since 1998-1999 and up until 2004-2005, enrollment in French-language schools has been in decline. The sharp decline in 2003-2004 is the result of the elimination of “Grade 13/Ontario Advanced Courses (OACs)” in Ontario.

Since 2004-2005 however, despite the compounded effects of overall declining enrollment in Ontario’s schools, assimilation of French-speaking citizens to the linguistic majority and the low proportion of immigrants enrolling in French-language schools, we are seeing a small increase in the number of students enrolled in Ontario’s French-language schools.

The Language Planning Policy was introduced in 2004, French-language secondary students benefited from enhanced course offerings starting in 2005-2006 while several capital investments had come to reality by 2006-2007.

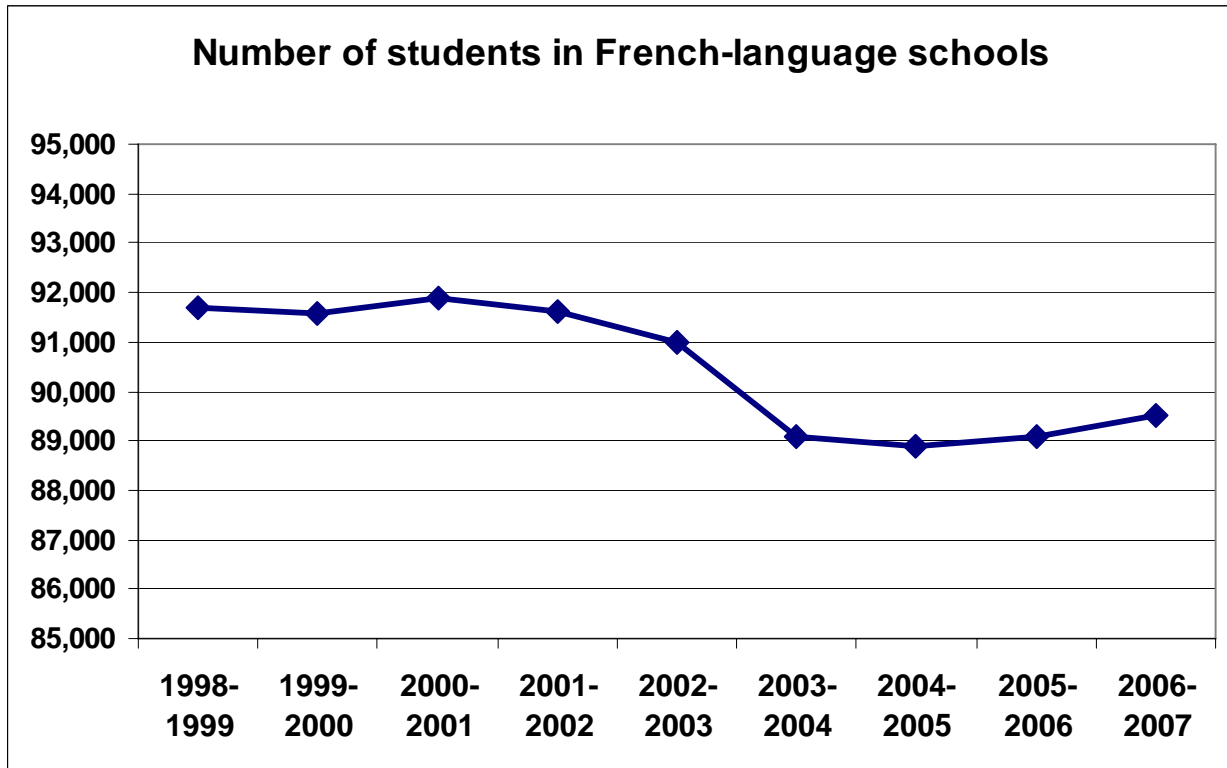


Figure 5: Number of students in Ontario's French-language schools

CONCLUSION - NEXT STEPS

The examples described above were not meant to describe in details the comprehensive implementation strategies related to the 2004 Aménagement Linguistique Policy for Ontario's French-Language Schools.

This paper was developed to illustrate how the use of data had created a stronger focus for sustained success in the publicly-funded French-language education system in the province of Ontario, Canada. For each of the three concrete examples, there was a direct relationship with a key intended outcome of the Aménagement Linguistique Policy, early evidence had influenced education public policy, and preliminary outcomes of these new policies are now available.

The Minister's Permanent French-Language Education Task Force has identified some key areas that will require closer attention in the coming years. Further significant efforts must be made to improve student retention in French-language schools, including more innovative secondary programs, targeted capital and student transportation related investments. The need for a more thorough strategy for early childhood education and school-integrated daycare was highlighted, along with improved attempts to welcome Ontario's French-speaking newcomers to French-language schools.

The Task Force has recommended that a large-scale social marketing campaign be developed in order to improve the perception of French-speaking parents with regards to the advantages of sending their children to French-language schools. A campaign of this nature would be modeled on other public awareness campaigns such as the ones promoting exercise or aimed at stopping smoking.

Finally, the continued sharing of best practices, along with the fostering of a culture of accountability and transparency, ensure an alignment of priorities between the Ministry of Education, French-language school boards, schools and education partners.

Overall, French-language education in Ontario is becoming a success story, thanks to a clear and comprehensive language planning policy, targeted investments from the province, a renewed focus on outcomes by the French-language education system, increased collaboration and solidarity among all institutions and stakeholders involved in French-language education

While enrolment is up, French-language students are now usually performing as well – and occasionally better - than students of the linguistic majority on key student achievement indicators.

The Ontario Ministry of Education is committed to continue reversing the trend of assimilation of its linguistic minority. However, to be successful in the long term, this goal requires an all-encompassing action plan involving players from several ministries, governments, and community organizations. All agree that education is the basis for economic growth and competitiveness. It has become necessary to track the progress and effectiveness of publicly-funded education systems.

This paper was a small attempt to show that a clear vision, the appropriate skills, incentives and resources, all translated into a robust action plan, could be key ingredients in successfully driving targeted and meaningful change.

References

1. Ontario's Aménagement Linguistique Policy for French-Language Education. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2005.

Available at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/linguistique/linguistique.pdf>

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