

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

Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN)

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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).¹ Quebec Anglophone² youth, however, are the most bilingual,³ 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).⁴

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 2021, the "language spoken mostly at work" in Quebec was French at 79.9%, followed by English at 14%, while 5.4% of workplaces reported equal use of both languages (Statistics Canada, 2022b). 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).

¹ From 2016 to 2021, the rate of English-French bilingualism increased from 44.5% to 46.4% for the general population (Statistics Canada, 2023). In 2021, the highest rate of bilingualism was among youth, with 65% for 15-19 year-olds and around 70% for 20-24 and 25-29 year-olds (Institut de la statistique du Québec [ISQ], 2022).

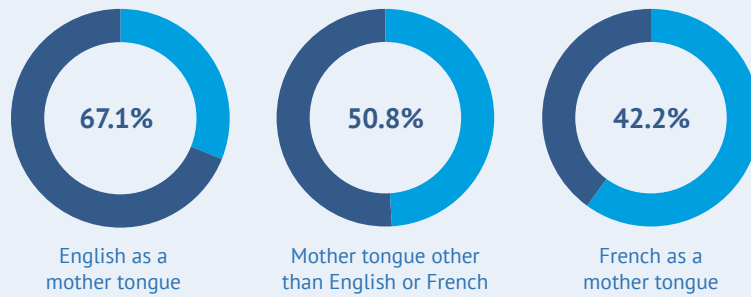
² Until recently, the provincial government defined "Anglophone" as someone for whom English is their first language learned and still understood. The statistics here reflect this definition of the English-speaking community, which excludes "Allophones" who are more proficient in English than French.

³ Anglophones are more bilingual than Francophones, since the rate of English-French bilingualism was higher for people with English as a mother tongue (67.1%) than for those with a mother tongue other than English or French (50.8%) and for those with French as a mother tongue (42.2%) in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023). 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.

⁴ 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, 2022

Bilingualism is higher among Anglophones than Francophones.

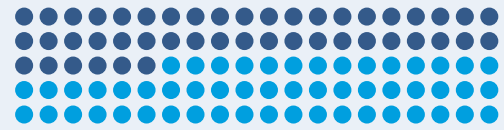


French immersion was a response to this need to raise a generation of bilingual English speakers. This is a form of bilingual education in which students receive instruction in French in English-medium schools in subjects such as history, music, geography, math, art, physical education, and science. 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 schools⁵ 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.

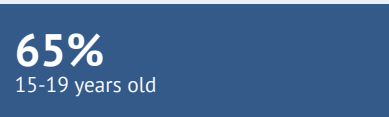
In other provinces, French immersion programs are sometimes accused of promoting elitism in schools, whereas in the Greater Montreal area, French immersion is just as popular in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods as it is in middle-class areas. Uneven rates of bilingualism within the English-speaking 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.⁶

The rate of English-French bilingualism increased from 41% in 2006 to 46% in 2021 for the general population.

46%



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



Source: ISQ (2022); Statistics Canada, 2023

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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). 38% of French immersion schools have a teacher shortage, with 51% of the affected schools located in rural areas (Association canadienne des professionnels de l'immersion, [ACPI], 2021). 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 schools⁷ 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. 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 2021, 23.8% of all school-aged children eligible for instruction in English had never attended an English-language school (Statistics Canada, 2022a).⁸

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.”⁹

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, 2022).

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 prepare students to be bilingual, biliterate and comfortable

⁷ 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).

⁸ 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).

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ For more on declining enrolment, see Brief no. 1 in this series.

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 numbers¹⁰ and, consequently, with dwindling access to financial resources.

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