

One size fits none: Putting kids' achievement first starts with putting kids first

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Commentary based on a submission to the Minister's consultation process
on the future of early French immersion education in New Brunswick
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Introduction

New Brunswick is last in Canada, dead last, in just about every national and international assessment of English, math and science and has been for some time. This news is not new. Nor is it unique for the government and the department to be openly admitting this fact. Nor, regrettably, is it unique for the government and the department to be advocating a one-size fits all province wide solution to this crisis.

But, in education, one size does not fit all. In fact one size almost always fits none. New Brunswick's children would be far better off if the current opportunity is seized to make real and far reaching changes to the entire education system in the province.

The passion for quality education and the interest in effective reform that has been generated by the debate about the future of early immersion in New Brunswick is a real opportunity. The Department of

Education's decision to eliminate Early French Immersion prompted outrage in many New Brunswick communities. Among the responses was the establishment of the group *Citizens for Educational Choice* (CEC). The CEC describes itself as "an umbrella group that supports fundamental choice in the province's educational system".¹

The evidence is overwhelming that "fundamental choice in the province's education system" is exactly what New Brunswick needs if it wants to provide the very best education for future generations. But, that choice cannot be limited to choosing between early and late immersion, between core and intensive French. It has to be real choice, across the full spectrum of educational opportunities and approaches. It must be available to all and reflective not of the needs of the system, and the adults who run the system, but of the kids whom the system is intended to serve.

¹ <http://www.educationnb.org/>

To achieve that, New Brunswick need only take its own advice and look west – to Alberta and, more specifically, to Edmonton Public Schools. Edmonton; where millionaires send their kids to public school, where private schools are being taken over by the public system, and where kids excel on national and international tests, even while their schools spend less money per student than many of their competitors in Canada and around the world.

Background

The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) has been an active voice on public education in New Brunswick, across the country and indeed, around the world, over the past 15 years. We call on that experience to respond to the New Brunswick Department of Education's decision to eliminate Early French Immersion based on Dr. James Croll and Patricia Lee's report, *A Comprehensive Review of French Second Language Programs and Services Within the Anglophone Sector of the New Brunswick Department of Education* (hereafter referred to as the Croll-Lee Report) and the Department's follow-up discussion paper, *Putting Our Kids' Achievement First*.

The centrally mandated decision to take a single, province-wide approach to French Second Language Programs fails to take into account the unique circumstances of individual schools and their communities. It puts the needs of the system ahead of the needs of students. It also fails to take into account the growing evidence about the importance of choice to the effectiveness of education and to the integration of students of diverse backgrounds.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for example, in "countries with both above average student performance in science and below-average impact of socio-economic background on student performance, 80% of 15-year-olds are in schools which reported competing with one or more schools in the area for students."² It should be

² OECD, "PISA 2006 Science Competencies for tomorrow's World", OECD 2007, page 236

noted that one of the countries cited in this OECD example is Canada, but we should also note that the ONLY region of Canada where this statement does not apply, is here in Atlantic Canada.

But choice, of course, is not enough. Again, according to the OECD, "Another feature that the best performers in PISA share is that they have devolved responsibility to the frontline. PISA suggests that countries giving more responsibility to schools tend to perform better. Giving schools more autonomy in formulating the budget, and letting them decide on allocations within the school tends to go hand in hand with better performance. This remains true even after accounting for socio-economic background and other school and system level factors."³

The OECD also tells us that "PISA shows that schools posting results publicly tend to perform better (even after accounting for all other school and socio-economic factors). This effect is strong across many countries. This suggests that external monitoring of standards, rather than relying mostly on schools and teachers to uphold them, can make a real difference to results."⁴

Problems with the current approach

The model of an effective school system includes: choice, school level autonomy and public accountability through full and frank reporting of school level results. Is it any wonder that the system (by its own admission) that achieves the worst results in Canada lacks all three of these key factors?

The limited nature of public reporting in the Anglophone New Brunswick system⁵ is well

³ Speech by Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General Tokyo, Japan Press Club, 04 December 2007

⁴ Ibid, note 3

⁵ Our comments are phrased here generally in the context of the Anglophone system and specifically in relation to the discussion of Early French Immersion, but the discussion and our conclusions apply to the Francophone system as well. While the Francophone system's public reporting is demonstrably better in this regard than its Anglophone counterpart, the Francophone side still contains large gaps that make true accountability and evidence based management a challenge.

documented and, in fact, the current government has committed on many occasions to improving that situation. We will not, therefore, discuss this issue in detail here although we would encourage the reader to compare the data sets in AIMS' first annual report card on high school performance with the data available in our sixth annual report card (both accessible online at www.aims.ca). The empty columns tell the tale of a precipitous reporting decline in New Brunswick.

Similarly, the lack of publicly funded educational choice options is readily identifiable.⁶ There is no generally available provision for even partial funding of private school tuition. The charter school movement is essentially dead. There is limited support for home schoolers (and no financial support). Although, it should be noted that New Brunswick, like many provinces, does not require home schoolers to secure permission or to make regular reports. Even among government schools⁷, there is little or no openness to the geographic boundaries. While applications to attend “out of boundary” or non-neighbourhood schools are possible in New Brunswick, the onus remains on the parent and student to demonstrate why the exception should be made and there is little onus on the District to demonstrate reasonable (or even unreasonable) grounds for rejecting such applications.

As for the issue of local autonomy, in meetings with school faculties and wider school communities to discuss the results on the AIMS Annual Report

⁶ See, for example, Hepburn, Claudia and Robert Van Belle, “The Canadian Education Freedom Index”, Vancouver, Fraser Institute, 2003

⁷ It is important to recognize the considerable difference between the **end** of public education and the **means** that is a government school. Public education is education funded by the taxpayer and freely available to the general public. Government schools, on the other hand, are simply schools owned and operated by the government and staffed by public servants. A government school is not the only form of “public education” and so to refer to “government schools” as “public schools” implies an exclusivity that does not exist. “Public schools” and “public education” can be found in many different forms: charter schools, fully or partially publicly funded private schools (both profit and not-for-profit), even home schooling.

Card for Atlantic Canadian High Schools, one of the major problems we hear expressed is the inability to choose locally the courses offered to students. Given that options for individual courses are outside of their control, the only educational options schools can provide to suit the circumstances of their communities are minor tweaks within the classroom. Since a single classroom is likely to have students with a variety of educational needs, teachers are highly limited in what they can do to suit the needs of those students.

Recent efforts to break this central monopoly by supporting innovation in the classroom pale in comparison to the clear and unequivocal message of top-down control that would be sent by the adoption of the Croll-Lee recommendation for a single, province-wide solution to the challenge of delivering effective, high quality, French second language instruction.

Autonomy “How to”

Several sources demonstrate support for a more autonomous approach to education.

Education Forum, a New Zealand based organization, provided a roadmap for autonomous schools in its October 2003 publication *A New Deal: Making Education Work for all New Zealanders*. This work suggests that “schools should be free to determine their own curriculum, subject to a minimal core.”⁸ Here is where the department can create the mandate for French as a Second Language to be part of every school. By prescribing a minimum curriculum standard for French, it forces schools to find a way to meet those standards. However, it leaves it to the individual schools and their communities to find the means with which to meet those standards.

Another means of creating autonomous schools is the use of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded but privately managed schools that typically have a board of trustees that provides a similar governance arrangement to a school board. New Orleans recent success in turning its school system around has relied heavily on the use of

⁸ Education Forum, *A New Deal: Making Education Work for all New Zealanders*, October 2003.

charter schools in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Of the 80 schools currently operating in the city (down from 125 before Katrina, more than half of which were failing to meet No Child Left Behind standards), about half are operating as charter schools. The flexibility provided by the autonomy given to charter schools helped to meet the needs of the community faster than the traditional government schools could.⁹

Meanwhile, in William Ouchi's book, *Making Schools Work*, he identifies seven keys for school system success. Two of those keys relate directly to autonomy – every school controls its own budget and everyone delegates authority to those below.¹⁰ The essence of these recommendations is that the schools have the best information about the individual circumstances and needs of their students, and the capacity of their community. Therefore, the school is best able to determine how to reach the desired educational goals. Unless schools, and in particular principals have the authority to make those decisions and the control over resources to execute and implement those decisions, each school is ultimately controlled centrally.

Ouchi's book examines several models that work well to determine his seven keys to success. None demonstrate the autonomous model better than Edmonton Public Schools. The Edmonton Model provides each individual school the autonomy to craft its programs to best suit the needs of the community by delegating the authority for budget decisions to the school level as much as possible. Approximately 92 cents of every dollar spent in Edmonton Public is controlled at the school level.

Edmonton's student performance based on its approach speaks for itself. From 2000 to 2006, three year high school completion rates improved from 51 percent to 68 percent, and five year completion rates improved to 71 percent, up from 64 percent. An analysis of reading results improvement over a three year period for students from one grade to the next saw the percentage of

students reading at or above grade level improve from the mid-70s in Grade 2 to 100 percent by Grade 4, and from the mid-70s in Grade 1 to the mid-90s by Grade 3.¹¹

In terms of language instruction, the autonomy provided to Edmonton's schools has resulted in successful programs not only in French as a Second Language (with both Early and Late French Immersion), but also bilingual programs in six other languages (Arabic, Mandarin, German, Hebrew, Spanish, and Ukrainian). Edmonton Public had 36,000 students enrolled in second language programming in 2006-2007 of a total of over 80,000 students, and projects enrollment in second language programming to rise to 65,000 students by 2012.¹²

In both the Edmonton and New Zealand models, students and parents are able to take advantage of choice within the system. Students are able to attend any school within the district they choose. In this manner, students and parents can choose from a variety of options offered by schools. This allows for Early French Immersion, Core French, Late Immersion, and Intensive French programs to all exist based on the needs of the students and the wider school community and goes beyond simply having the department or district level allow certain schools to offer certain programs while others cannot. Schools choose the programs that are right for the children in their communities given the resources and needs of those communities.

Potential next steps

How do you get to a system like Edmonton's from a system like the one on the ground in New Brunswick today? Let's consider the example of the Edmonton Public Schools.

⁹ Gilbert, Sarah Jane, *Reforming New Orleans Schools After Katrina: Q & A with Stacey M. Chlidress*, Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, July 14, 2008.

¹⁰ Ouchi, William G., *Making Schools Work*, 2003 New York: Simon & Schuster.

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http://www.focusonresults.net/results/ourresults_edmonton.html

¹² Edmonton Public Schools, *Edmonton Public Schools' Annual Education Results Report 2006-07*, http://www.epsb.ca/datafiles/AnnualEdResultsReport_0607.pdf

The “Edmonton model” has five key features:

- **Open Public Reporting of Results** – Student and school performance data along with student and community demographic profiles and selected other relevant information (often including, but not limited to, satisfaction surveys of parents, staff and students) are collected and reported both publicly and internally. The level of public disclosure is adjusted to reflect freedom of information and protection of privacy considerations. Internal disclosure is targeted at delivering the most useful level summary for each individual recipient based on their requirements and responsibilities within the system.
- **School Choice** – Parents and children are free to choose any government school in the district (the traditional neighbourhood boundaries are removed) as well as having a broad selection of other fully or partially funded education choices including: home schooling, charter schools, private for profit, and private not-for-profit schools.
- **Site-Based Management (SBM)** – A significant portion of a district’s budget is allocated to schools, typically through weighted student funding, and the schools have significant control over their own budgets and the programmes they offer. The central administration does not disappear, but its role changes from holding key decision making authority over budgets and programmes to establishing standards, monitoring performance, and providing support services to schools.
- **Weighted Student Funding (WSF)** – Students are allocated an amount of educational funding based on their need and this funding follows them to the school they attend. Every student receives a base amount that is then topped up for extra needs such as disabilities or any other characteristic that would require extra resources to achieve comparable levels of performance.
- **Individually Targeted Professional Development** – Available data are used to target individual level interventions and training

at all levels of the system from the superintendent to individual teachers and support staff. The intended interventions should normally be substantiated by applied research demonstrating proven effectiveness.

All five of these features did not arise together, nor were they achieved system-wide in one fell swoop. In putting this model into place there were essentially three groups of changes.

First, the province of Alberta made a series of changes including: setting and reporting on a series of provincial assessments; introducing expanded public education delivery options (including: expanded support for home schoolers, support for charter schools, partial financial support for private school tuition); and, encouraging choice among government schools by tying funding directly to the students.

In the second step, Edmonton Public schools took the Alberta wide reforms one step further by implementing full choice among government schools and reporting on performance on a school by school basis. They also tested site based management through a seven school pilot that involved not one dollar in extra spending by those schools. This pilot quickly led to improvements in both performance and satisfaction and was rapidly expanded to include the entire school board.

In the third group of reforms, the new environment of excellence for all, choice, openness and innovation allowed more effective responses to the varied needs of individual students, teachers and administrators. These responses included the implementation of weighted student funding and individually evidence based and targeted professional development. At the same time, of course, the lessons learned through the pilot and the system wide implementation led to refinements and adjustments across the system.

This incremental approach involving both a provincial “climate change” and a local pilot is a promising example on several fronts:

- it serves to match words with immediate and important action,

- it sets a provincial tone focused on individual student success, innovation and immediate accountability to parents,
- it allows for evidence based adjustment in the status quo and incremental change based on lessons learned,
- it meets the demands of both those seeking change and those wishing to maintain the status quo by placing the responsibility squarely in their hands to demonstrate that their approach to education works,
- it places the ultimate decision about what works and what doesn't in the hands of students and parents, instead of the Minister or the department.

If it's broke, let them fix it

The one size fits all mentality of the current approach to both second language training (and indeed education more generally) in New Brunswick is destined for continued failure as it presumes the Department of Education knows what is best for every New Brunswick community. The autonomous approach highlighted by the OECD and outlined in brief above is unique in that it prescribes an “if it's broke, let them fix it” mentality where schools and school communities are empowered to find the model of education that works best for their children. It does not mean that the department has no role. Indeed, the department has a central role in a more autonomous system. It sets minimum objectives, tracks and reports on results and supports in a flexible way the choices made by the local communities.

But, if we take literally the principles itemized in *When Kids Come First* and repeated for emphasis at the very beginning of *Putting our Kids' Achievement First* (the documents the government of New Brunswick itself has used to set the parameters of this discussion) then we need to be less concerned about the impact on the department, the districts and indeed, on the schools, and more concerned about the benefits for the children.

Full choice among a broad mix of autonomous schools with clear and accessible reporting puts the “kids first”. Such a model meets each of the five principles outlined by the government of New

Brunswick as being fundamental to our collective educational goals. Such a model: places the students at the “centre of all decision-making in education”; ensures the right supports are in place to nurture each individual student's strengths; engages parents of diverse backgrounds in their child's learning; is guided by “evidence of children's learning”, and treats “each child as an individual and put(s) his or her success and learning first”.

One last word of caution though. Actions speak louder than words. Considerable rhetoric has been expended talking about inclusive education in reference to both children and their parents. The Edmonton model moves rhetoric to reality – it is time for New Brunswick to do the same.

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