

Why is French immersion so popular?

Margaret Wentz

The Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Feb. 05 2013, 6:00 AM EST

Last updated Tuesday, Feb. 05 2013, 2:05 PM EST

From Vancouver to St. John's, the demand for French immersion has been soaring out of sight. Anxious parents camp out on the sidewalk to snag precious enrolment spots for their kids. School districts such as the sprawling Peel Region west of Toronto have been forced to introduce a lottery system. About 12 years ago, just 10 per cent of the region's Grade 1 students were enrolled in French immersion. Today it's 25 per cent.

What's driving the demand? Is it the Trudeau generation, who want to pass along our bilingual heritage to their kids?

Er, no. The main allure of French immersion is that it provides all the benefits of a private school without the tuition costs (or so parents hope). They've heard about those brain-science studies that say bilingualism confers important cognitive benefits. If that's true, then depriving your child of French immersion is practically child abuse.

Parents who are ambitious for their children use French immersion as a form of streaming. Their kids do very well in school – not because they're learning French, but because they'd do well anywhere. These are the same kids who started out in Montessori school. Their parents know that peer groups matter and that French-immersion classes are full of other bright, accomplished children. There are very few children with behavioural problems, special-education or ESL students in French immersion (although it's worth noting that the craze has spread to affluent immigrant parents). French immersion is also a way to get the benefits of a top public school even if you can't afford to live near one.

But if you actually expect your child to wind up speaking fluent French, you might be disappointed. Attrition rates are high, and language proficiency is surprisingly low. Some parents are dismayed because their kids don't become proficient in either language. Some of them struggle in science and math. And after graduation, many of them never use their French again. Why would they? They don't need it unless they live in Quebec or New Brunswick. "After 13 years in French immersion, my son has no interest in speaking it," one mother told me.

None of this should come as a surprise. Bilingualism isn't easy, and unless you are immersed in another language outside of school, you may never become fluent. Also, French-immersion teachers are in extremely short supply, and not all of them are competent.

But any rational analysis of French immersion is almost impossible to find. And the response of school systems to these practical problems has been to deny them. Instead of supporting a few excellent programs, school systems across Canada have scrambled to expand them and water them down. They often offer immersion programs that begin in kindergarten or Grade 1, not because kids

need instruction at such an early age to become proficient (they don't), but because parents demand it. When New Brunswick decided to cancel French immersion in the early grades a few years ago, activist parents all but rioted in the streets. They even took the government to court.

"It's all about the parents," says Jim Croll, co-author of the report that recommended the change. Naturally, every parent wants what's best for their children. But there's only so much money to go around. What happens when some parents are more vocal than others? Mr. Croll says, "We are shortchanging a great number of our kids for our own social reasons."