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French Immersion: C'est what?

Imagine a school program so popular that parents are willing to line up overnight just to secure a spot for their child. A program whose appeal cuts across income groups, mother tongues and just about every other demographic measurement. A program as emblematic of our country as our flag or our vaunted universal health care system.

Now imagine that the response to this growing demand is: "Hey! This program is too popular – we better cut it back!"

Bizarre as that response seems, that's exactly the threat to French immersion programs in a number of communities in Ontario. Even worse, advocates of these cutbacks use spurious arguments and the omission of vital information – as we saw in the Globe and Mail a few days ago – to try to dampen parent support for immersion.

"French immersion is an 'elite program' that appeals only to the wealthiest families?" In fact, data from the Toronto District School Board – the country's largest – shows that uptake in the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods is growing just as it is elsewhere in the city.

"French immersion is too hard, and kids need to focus on the subjects that 'really matter'?" Well, the province's standardized testing shows that by grade 6, French immersion students aren't just becoming proficient in French – they're actually at par or surpassing their peers in math and – get this – reading and writing in *English!*

"Immigrant kids in our schools should focus on learning English – adding French is too tough?" Actually, the language skills these kids already have give them a leg up with French. What's more, there's something particularly paternalistic about this one; as if these kids should be relegated to a second class and not given the opportunities that native-born Canadians have. People who believe this should meet the Sri Lanka-born father I did who spoke passionately in halting English of how he wanted his child to learn French, so that he might grow up one day to become Prime Minister of Canada.

Finally, there's the perennial *"Why bother learning French at all – kids should be learning Mandarin or Spanish, or some other language that will have commercial value?"* Put aside for a moment what that says about the questioner's sense of his or her own country. Or the fact that Mandarin and Spanish immersion are not offered in Ontario schools. Or that French immersion doesn't compete with or interfere with after-school language programs. All you need to know is that French immersion is an excellent gateway for young people to learn other languages.

We like to think that as a country and province we've come a long way. And in many ways we have. But, to paraphrase our flawlessly bilingual prime minister, a trained French immersion teacher himself, "It's 2016". And in the very year that our province's premier apologized to Franco-Ontarians for the notorious Regulation 17 which severely curtailed French education a century ago, we really should be wondering why accessing quality French as a second language education for English kids is still a fight and not a right. Parents often respond with shock when they learn that the French immersion program is capped or that transportation is not provided or that this key educational decision is going to be made by lottery. They immediately say 'But, Canada is a bilingual country. Don't my children have a right to fully participate by becoming fluent in French?'

Well, so much depends on where you live. According to the Ontario Education Act, English school boards have the discretion to establish French programs for their students and that discretion is exercised differently across the province. It is very dependent on political will rather than sound, research-based pedagogy and equity. If you live in Ottawa and your child is starting Junior Kindergarten this fall, he or she, along with all of their age group will be going into French immersion. If you live in Peel and your child is starting grade 1, you will be in the lottery and could be turned away like 400 others in the last two years. If you live in Halton, there is great uncertainty as the board is exploring getting rid of early French immersion altogether and instituting a cap, like Peel. In Upper Grand, the board is considering watering down the immersion program and instituting a cap, also like Peel. Meanwhile, if you live in Sudbury or Toronto, you have a great immersion program – all French in the early years, no limits on who attends and a strong commitment to supporting all learners in the program.

Imagine if your child's ability to learn Science depended on which school district you lived in. Imagine if your schoolboard said "We're going to limit access to Math classes because the parents aren't choosing it for the right reasons." Imagine if they said "We don't need to teach kids subjects that let them get to know their country, like Canadian History or Geography."

Every child should get a great education. If a parent wants that education to include a top-notch, full-on French immersion program, it should be provided. If a parent wants a basic French program, then that child should get a great education too. Education should never be reduced to a zero sum game where parents compete for resources or school real estate. The growing demand for a program that produces graduates who are comfortable and confident in both of Canada's Official Languages is a wonderful, positive step forward not something to curtail.

Our schools are building the citizens – and the Canada – of the future. Parents know this – that's why they're choosing French immersion in ever increasing numbers. Instead of the current patchwork of opportunity for kids to become bilingual in Ontario, let's get our school boards, the province and the feds working together to embrace this challenge, to make French immersion accessible to all and to have the best possible achievement in French for all of our children.

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