

Canadian Parents for French

How a grassroots organization has contributed to the advancement of Canada's official languages policy

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This article describes the efforts undertaken by a grassroots, non-profit association established to promote French-second-language learning in Canada, and how those efforts have contributed to the advancement of Canada's official languages policy. After identifying the historical context in which the immersion approach to second language instruction was developed, we use a historical institutionalism theory with an archival research method to examine texts produced by Canadian Parents for French over the past 38 years to see how the organization has contributed to the growth of English-French bilingualism within Canada. We then note the continuing challenges to universal access to French immersion programs which the association has identified. This article demonstrates that stakeholders can play an important role in the successful implementation of a policy and offers examples that may be relevant for international audiences seeking to promote language learning.

French abstract at end.

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1. Introduction and background

Language policy and the implementation of language programs in education have been studied widely (Pennycook, 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 2002). Which languages to choose and how to promote those particular languages differs from place to place, and the actions taken require careful consideration of a

country's history and population as well as the target audience. The role of parents in language policy is also well described, especially when it concerns family language choices and bilingual education (King & Fogle, 2006; Schwartz, 2013). At the macro level of language policy, parents also have a key role to play in advocacy for their children's education. As Kidder (n.d., para. 1) notes, "policymakers have come to recognize the importance of parents' role not only with their own children, but in the education system as a whole."

In this paper we discuss how Canadian Parents for French (CPF), a national organization, became one of the most important champions of bilingual education in Canada. We will examine how parents advocated for French immersion programs in a large country with a complex language and education jurisdictional structure by working together and with other stakeholders. The questions directing our enquiry were: How has a national parents' association contributed to the advancement of French-second-language (FSL) instruction in Canada over time? How have those efforts contributed to the advancement of one aspect of the policy that establishes French and English as the official languages of the country? Through a historical institutionalism theory of public policy (Hayday, 2011; Skocpol, 1995), using an archival research method, we will examine documents produced from the founding of the association until the present. We will also support our examination of the organization's journey through the voices of some of those who were involved.

After introducing the historical context of the Canadian languages policy, we will examine the organization's structure and review the interrelated efforts of CPF in disseminating information, advocating for effective FSL programs, and enhancing FSL programs through extracurricular activities. Finally, we will review the continuing challenges faced by CPF in trying to ensure that quality FSL programs are available throughout the country.

The story of how a group of Canadian parents has promoted language learning for their own and others' children will illustrate how the active support and involvement of stakeholders can play a significant role in the successful implementation of a policy. Examples from this story will also be relevant for international audiences seeking ideas about advocating for language learning within their own contexts.

1.1 Canadian context

Canada comprises ten provinces in the south and three territories across the north. It is a federal state in which there is a complex division of powers between the federal and the provincial and territorial governments. Education, for example, is the responsibility of the provincial and territorial governments, which means

that regulations governing school boards and schools vary across the country — including the language of instruction and any requirements to teach additional languages.

When the Parliament of the United Kingdom established the Dominion of Canada through the *British North America Act, 1867*, both English and French, the languages of the European countries which colonized the region, were recognized. English was the *de facto* official language of the new country, but the Act allowed the use of French within the federal Parliament and within the Legislature of the mainly French-speaking province of Quebec as well as within federal and Quebec courts. Also, certain official federal and Quebec documents were required to be published in both languages.

The population of those who speak French continues to be concentrated in two areas in the eastern part of the country. According to the 2011 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2011), about 83% of the population of the province of Quebec and 29% of those in New Brunswick speak only French or French and one or more other languages most often in their homes. Within the other eight provinces and the three territories, the number who speak French at home ranges from less than 1% to almost 3%. Among other Canadians, the great majority speak English or English and one or more other languages at home.

1.2 Official Languages Act

In 1963, in response to challenges inherent in the uneven distribution of English and French speakers across the country and tensions that were developing due to a decline in the status of French, the federal government of Canada appointed a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to “inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races” (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1970, p.225). In its preliminary report, the Commission warned that inequalities between the two languages could potentially lead to a break-up of the country. Its final recommendations were aimed at making both English and French official languages of the country and at protecting and supporting language minority communities throughout Canada by offering services in the second official language of each region. The federal Parliament quickly responded to those recommendations by passing Canada’s first *Official Languages Act* in 1969. The Act recognized English and French as the official languages of all federal institutions, including Parliament, courts, and public service. Among its other provisions, it established the position of Commissioner of Official

Languages, an ombudsman responsible for promoting the objectives of the Act and for reporting to Parliament regarding implementation of the Act.

Although the *Official Languages Act* did not apply to those matters under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, in 1970 the federal government negotiated agreements with the provinces to provide funding support for members of the minority official language population to be educated in their own language and for members of the majority to learn their second official language. This funding helped to bring changes to provincial education policies and helped to develop second language instruction in provinces where French was a minority (Hayday, 2011).

A much revised *Official Languages Act*, passed in 1988, specifically mandated the federal government to “encourage and support the learning of English and French in Canada” and to “encourage and assist provincial governments to provide opportunities for everyone in Canada to learn both English and French” (Government of Canada, 1988).

1.3 Beginning of French immersion

Meanwhile, the 1960s saw the province of Quebec going through a period of political, social, and cultural turmoil, widely known as the “Quiet Revolution.” One of the concerns addressed by a new provincial government elected in 1960 was the control by the small Anglophone minority (native speakers of English) over most of the elite positions in Quebec business and industry (Heller, Bartholomot, Lévy, & Ostiguy, 1982).

Quebec had both French- and English-language schools at that time. In the latter, French was taught as a subject through conventional methods which fell far short of achieving fluency. Anglophone parents within the province were beginning to realize this could not continue: their children would need a strong command of French to succeed in a much-changed Quebec. Three Anglophone mothers in the community of Saint-Lambert began a crusade to find a much more effective language teaching approach (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). In this they were assisted by experimental psychologist Wallace Lambert and neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, both then working at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Eventually, the school district agreed to set up an experimental kindergarten class called “French immersion” for September 1965 (Genesee, 1987, 2015).

The implementation of French immersion — a content-based approach in which the target language is used for instruction of many if not all school subjects (Lyster, 2007) — was well documented with the help of scholars from McGill University, who showed that this approach resulted in high levels of second language proficiency at no cost to academic achievement in other subject areas or to the development of English (Genesee, 1987; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013;

Lambert & Tucker, 1972). This information spread quickly across the country, and Anglophone parents in all regions began asking their school boards to establish French immersion as a program of choice for interested families. In some communities this was accomplished with relative ease; elsewhere, parents formed grass-roots groups to counter trustees' and administrators' concerns or community resistance around issues such as funding (Curran, 1977), elitism, and displacement of unilingual teachers (Daneault, 1989). By the mid-1970s there were immersion programs in many larger centers across the country, such as Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Moncton.

2. Historical institutionalism theory and the archival research method

Our analysis of how Canadian Parents for French has helped to promote French immersion and thus contributed to language policy will be informed by historical institutionalism theory in the Canadian context (Smith, 2007; Hayday, 2011). For Smith and Hayday, this theory stipulates that the state has a fundamental role in shaping policy. The division of power among levels of government in Canada, for example, has played an important role in the policy process and affected the ways in which social group movements must work to bring about change.

For the Canadian federal government to successfully implement a policy to encourage the learning of both official languages, which infringed on provincial jurisdiction in education, there had to be widespread acceptance among the population. As Hayday (2011, p. 135) said, "They [voters] certainly would not have agreed to, and in some cases would have fought hard against, sending their children to second language immersion programs." This is where Canadian Parents for French (CPF), from our perspective, played a significant role.

In order to examine historical texts produced by CPF, we are using an archival research method that consists of studying historical documents and archives that give us access to what happened in the past (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). As Ventresca and Mohr note, archival materials are never transparent, as their conditions of production mean that materials often offer partial evidence of an interpretation. In addition, an archival research method does not try to find the truth about past events, but to expose history as contingent and interpretive as it is now perceived by those who are reading past documents and remembering what happened.

A wide range of CPF archival materials was reviewed, such as newsletters, briefs, studies, and reports. Articles by or about CPF that were published elsewhere were also consulted. We look at these documents from a thematic point of view to demonstrate challenges and successes over a period of 38 years. It is

important to note that one of the authors was involved with CPF throughout much of the time under discussion, which brings an additional understanding of what happened in the past in an interpretive way. In the following, we look at why CPF was established and how it is structured. Subsequent sections provide examples of CPF efforts over time that have contributed to the promotion and support of FSL learning: disseminating information, enhancing FSL programs, and advocating for effective FSL programs. We end with a summary of continuing challenges.

3. From isolated grassroots efforts to a Canada-wide movement

In March 1977, the first Commissioner of Official Languages, Keith Spicer, hosted 28 anglophone parents from all ten provinces at a weekend *Parents Conference on French Language and Exchange Opportunities*. The parents he invited to participate were leaders in promoting FSL within their communities, as he was hoping that a strong group would be established to lobby the government and other organizations (M. Swain, personal communication, March 3, 2015). Also in attendance were 26 researchers, specialists, second language education consultants, and observers. After hearing from experts on a variety of topics related to FSL learning and after discussing issues and successes around improving FSL education within their home communities and provinces, the parents developed a series of recommendations with regard to FSL curriculum development, cultural reinforcement of FSL teaching, exchanges, teacher training and staffing, and funding. These were aimed at the Government of Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and non-profit and government agencies sponsoring youth exchange programs.

The participating parents' first recommendation was to establish a national association of parents, which was subsequently named Canadian Parents for French. By noon on March 27, 1977, goals for the new parents' association were articulated, and a provisional executive committee comprising representatives from five regions of Canada (British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, the Atlantic Region) was elected (Canada. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1977). All those in attendance were to return to their provinces to inform parents, education authorities, and others about the association while serving as liaisons with the committee.

At the first CPF national conference, held in Canada's capital city, Ottawa, in October 1977, the more than 60 delegates enthusiastically confirmed the need for a national association of parents and formally endorsed three goals for the association:

1. to assist in ensuring that each Canadian child have the opportunity to acquire as great a knowledge of French language and culture as he or she is willing and able to attain;
2. to promote the best possible types of French language learning opportunities;
3. to establish and maintain effective communication between interested parents and educational and government authorities concerned with the provision of French language learning opportunities. (Canadian Parents for French, 1978, p. 1)

4. The structure of CPF

From the beginning CPF developed a three-tiered structure which reflected not only the grassroots activism already underway but also the realities of education decision making in Canada: national, branch (provincial/territorial), chapter (community-based). A later national president, Stewart Goodings, would write, "While it seems obvious now that this is the most sensible organization for an association of this kind, it is a tribute to the original directors that they insisted on developing a presence all over the country, and did not settle for simply being a lobby group in Ottawa" (Goodings, 1985, p. 117).

The work of CPF has been conducted predominantly by volunteers. Looking at the early lists of those on the national Board of Directors, Janet Poyen, the second CPF president, notes that they were parents with children in the school system, most of whom had no working knowledge of French (J. Poyen, personal communication, September 27, 2013). The majority were women (still the case), although the proportion of men in leadership and other volunteer roles has increased over the years. Staffing at the national and provincial levels has always been minimal, and at the community level leadership, management, and execution continue to lie entirely in the hands of volunteers.

While issues of national unity and official (English-French) bilingualism have often been a topic of great concern for these CPF leaders and volunteers, this was never the primary motivation for wanting their children to learn French.¹ Rapidly-spreading interest among parents in the success of the new "immersion" approach to language teaching coincided with passage of the *Official Languages Act* and subsequent federal initiatives to encourage language learning (Hayday, 2011). As Goodings pointed out, for the parents it was a matter of taking advantage of an opportunity: "Why shouldn't an officially bilingual country provide its young people with the chance to become fluent in two of the world's most used languages?" (Goodings, 1997, p. 3).

CPF has had to rely on many sources for its funding. Grants from the federal Department of the Secretary of State, later the Department of Canadian Heritage,² under its mandate to promote both official languages, have continued to be the most significant single source. A small (\$5) membership fee was introduced in the summer of 1979, and it continues to be very modest (just \$25/year per family) so that parents from all walks of life are encouraged to participate. Additional financial sources include donations, grants from various agencies, advertising fees, and, especially at the community level, fundraising activities such as raffles and bake sales. To this has been added an incalculable amount of volunteer time, expertise, goods, and services contributed by members and friends of CPF.

5. CPF efforts: providing access to information

Among the priorities set by the founding members of CPF — based on their own questions about French immersion and on the questions they were encountering within their home communities — were the “production of appropriate publications popularizing relevant research, case studies, and other matters pertaining to the Association’s goals” (Canada. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1977, Appendix I, p. 1). To this day, CPF continues to recognize and respond to the information needs of parents, working across jurisdictional boundaries and between stakeholder groups to make the most current information on FSL accessible to parents throughout the country. In so doing, CPF contributes to efforts to “encourage and support the learning of English and French in Canada” [Government of Canada, 1988, Section 43(1)(b)].

The following list illustrates the range of efforts undertaken by CPF. These serve as examples of what needs to be done in any jurisdiction where second language programs are put in place:

- A handbook for parents throughout Canada on French-second-language instruction. *So You Want Your Child to Learn French!* comprised 24 articles written specifically for parents by researchers, educators, and parents about various aspects of FSL education (Mlacak & Isabelle, 1979). A companion book entitled *More French, s’il vous plaît!* was published a few years later (McGillivray, 1985), and *So You Want...* was revised in 1990 (Fleming & Whitla, 1990).
- A unique directory of key information about all of the French immersion programs throughout Canada. CPF community volunteers gathered this information in order to help families that were relocating and also to facilitate networking (Canadian Parents for French, 1982a). Today a searchable database of immersion and extended core French³ programs is available at www.cpf.ca.

- A variety of publications and presentations designed to ease the pangs of anxiety and feelings of helplessness that parents can experience when their children are being educated via a language they, the parents, do not understand. For example, the first pamphlet produced by the national association was called *How to Be an Immersion Parent* (Canadian Parents for French, n.d.a). In 1996 the education department in the province of Alberta partnered with the Alberta Branch of CPF to produce the book *Yes, you can help! A guide for French immersion parents* (Brehaut & Gibson, 1996); an updated version is now available online at <https://education.alberta.ca>.
- A booklet for students aged 11 to 15. This publication was intended to help students put their immersion experiences into perspective and encourage them to persevere in developing their knowledge of French through high school and beyond. *French Immersion: The Trial Balloon That Flew* was published by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and co-sponsored by CPF (Lapkin, Swain, & Argue, 1983).
- Videos that allow parents and others to hear from the students themselves. The first, *A Wider Vision / Élargir ses horizons*, showed “children and young people of various ages and stages of knowledge learning French, and having fun doing it. Threaded through the film, ever-so-lightly, are their reasons why it matters” (Canadian Parents for French, 1990, p. 1).
- Surveys, research, and literature reviews commissioned in order to fill information gaps. These include a study of the insights of university students who had come from French immersion programs (Canadian Parents for French, 2006a) and a study on immigrant children and FSL programs (Mady, 2010).
- Six nation-wide information multi-media campaigns. These have taken the organization’s message about FSL learning to the general public through public service announcements, transit cards, posters, media information kits, and cross-Canada speaking tours by national presidents (Canadian Parents for French, 1989, 1992b, 1995, 2003).
- An *Early Childhood Activity Workbook* featuring pencil-and-paper activities that introduce French to English-speaking children. Each page also provides the answer to a question commonly asked by parents considering FSL education for their children. The workbook is now available in the ten languages most commonly spoken by immigrants to Canada as well as in English (Canadian Parents for French, n.d.b).
- Information focused on promising practices. For example, the *CPF School Self-Assessment Tool* is designed to help school communities (administrators, teachers, parents, older students) assess for themselves the level of support for their own FSL programs against 18 indicators such as availability, remedial assistance, qualified teachers, and parent involvement (Canadian Parents for

French, 2001). The *Peer Tutoring Literacy Program* allows a French-speaking teacher coordinator and unilingual parent volunteers to facilitate support by Grade 5–7 immersion students for their Grade 2–3 peers who need extra help in French with basic reading skills (Canadian Parents for French, 2005a).

6. CPF efforts: going beyond the classroom

Among the recommendations passed by the founding members of CPF were several addressed to various agencies regarding “cultural reinforcement of French teaching” and exchange programs for youth (Canada. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1977, Appendix I, p. 3). Thus, from the beginning, the association recognized that opportunities to experience the target language in the “real world” were an essential aspect of efforts to “encourage and support the learning of English and French in Canada” [Government of Canada, 1988, Section 43(1)(b)].

Over the years CPF has not only circulated information about activities and resources for FSL students offered by others, it has organized many such opportunities on its own or in collaboration with other organizations. The following paragraphs illustrate the variety of opportunities offered by CPF.

From the beginning, many local chapters and provincial/territorial branches have organized summer programs for immersion and/or core French students. For example, the Prince Edward Island Branch summer camps were initiated in 1979 as three-day, two-night sessions held at a camp facility in a French-speaking community (Canadian Parents for French, 1982b). This has evolved over the years into a nautical camp and a sea kayak camp on the Îles-de-la-Madeleine (Canadian Parents for French — Prince Edward Island Branch, n.d.). In 1981 the North Vancouver chapter worked with an Okanagan resort owner to develop a two-week family camping experience featuring day-time activities for the school-aged children led by Francophone *animateurs* (Canadian Parents for French, 1982c). From that modest start, the B.C. Family French Camp, now an independent association affiliated with the British Columbia & Yukon Branch of CPF, has grown to involve some 400 families each year at sites on Vancouver Island and in the interior and the north of the province (British Columbia Family French Camp Society, n.d.).

In the spring of 1985, CPF took over the organization of a public speaking event begun by professor André Obadia in British Columbia two years earlier. The chapters and branches, in collaboration with schools, school districts, and teachers’ associations, began to organize “speak-offs” called *Concours d’art oratoire* at various levels of the education system, with separate categories for core French, French immersion, and French-first-language students. Originally the grand prize for the provincial/territorial winners in Grades 7–12 was attendance at a *Festival*

national d'art oratoire to showcase their speeches (Konok, 1990); today senior high school winners go on to compete for scholarships to Canadian French or bilingual postsecondary institutions (Canadian Parents for French, n.d.c).

CPF has organized a number of other national contests over the years, most often in partnership with other organizations.⁴ The most recent is *Allons en France* for Grade 11/12 students, which offers a trip to France as the grand prize. In different years the projects to be submitted have involved writing, drama, a public awareness campaign, audio/video, and Twitter (Canadian Parents for French, n.d.d).

Innumerable other activities in French have been organized or sponsored by CPF branches and chapters, with many thousands of students participating each year. The list includes: competitions, movie nights, Francophone entertainers, family dances, winter carnivals, field trips, swimming and skating parties, and youth conferences.

7. CPF efforts: champions of FSL

The establishment of CPF gave isolated parent groups a forum to share strategies for persuading their school boards and education departments to improve FSL instruction (Canadian Parents for French, 1978, p.1). As Hayday (2011, p.144) said, “CPF could lobby provincial governments and school boards that the federal agencies could not, and in this way, it helped to finesse the constraints of Canadian federalism to strengthen the [official languages] policy.” The following examples illustrate the ways in which CPF has championed the cause of FSL education.

7.1 Advocating for critical funding support for FSL

The federal-provincial/territorial multi-year agreements for federal funding support of FSL education have periodically been the focus of attention by CPF. Following the expiration of the second agreement, there were prolonged and difficult negotiations over the amount of new funding and the conditions to be met by the provincial education departments. “By 1979 local school board authorities were urging CPF to lobby the Secretary of State for a new long-term funding agreement. The current agreement was about to run out and rumors were rampant that the federal government intended to withdraw its funding. . . . By 1980, the lack of a long-term agreement was seriously affecting policy-making at the local level” (Poyen, 1989, pp.76–77). Poyen describes the intensive efforts by CPF to mediate between the federal and provincial governments so that this critical funding would continue. “The future of immersion programs and other French language learning opportunities was at stake” (Poyen, 1989, p.86). After several years of

interim funding arrangements, a three-year protocol for agreements was signed by the Secretary of State and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) in December 1983.

As is the case for so much of CPF's advocacy, evidence for its influence on these funding negotiations is indirect: many of the suggestions put forward in the CPF briefs and in meetings with ministers and senior officials were reflected in the new agreement. The approach taken by CPF national and provincial branch leaders — well-researched, carefully considered, positive, balanced, all reinforced by letters and calls from chapters and individual parents — helped to establish the organization's credibility. "CPF seemed to enjoy greater status shortly thereafter. The organization began to receive much larger grants to sustain its operations. The Minister began appearing at national conferences. Communications with higher level officials increased" (Poyen, 1989, p. 83).

As each subsequent protocol expired, CPF again armed its members with facts about the Official Languages in Education Program and made recommendations about priorities and changes for the next agreement. Community pressure on politicians, participation in consultations at the federal and provincial levels, and formal presentations to the relevant ministers emphasized the importance of speedy negotiations for continued, adequate, and effective funding support for FSL education. Meanwhile, CPF continues to play an important watchdog role regarding the use of the funds for FSL programs.

7.2 Highlighting the need for postsecondary opportunities and teacher training

Several articles in the April 1981 edition of the *CPF National Newsletter* set the stage for a multi-year campaign to improve postsecondary opportunities for FSL graduates as well as FSL teacher training. Referencing the "exploding immersion programs," Poyen summarized the situation by asking, "Why are teacher training institutions not responding to the demand for French teachers?" "Are universities going to provide courses in French for the increasing numbers of bilingual students who will soon be knocking on their doors?" and "What should be done about second language [postsecondary] entrance requirements?" (Poyen, 1981, p. 2). Beginning in 1983, conferences on the role of universities in bilingual education were held by CPF across the country, some in collaboration with other stakeholder groups, culminating in a national colloquium in Ottawa in March 1986 (Manzer, 1986). The awareness raised through these events and the ensuing reports, briefs, studies, and committees served as an impetus for new postsecondary programs, services, and initiatives to address the growing needs (Manzer, 1991). Then in 2005 CPF published a series of articles on postsecondary opportunities

for FSL graduates in order to again highlight challenges and promising practices around this topic (Canadian Parents for French, 2005b).

7.3 Addressing attrition from immersion programs

A similar campaign was initiated in September 1991 when a CPF-commissioned study on *Attrition/retention of Students in French Immersion with Particular Emphasis on Secondary School* was released (Halsall, 1994). In the fall of 1992 one of the provincial branches held the first in a series of conferences on *Meeting the Challenges of Secondary School French Programs*, culminating in a session at the 1993 national conference (Finlay, 1994). Strategies to reduce attrition continue to be a topic of articles, presentations, and discussions and the objective of CPF activities at all levels.

7.4 Responding to public opposition

There have always been active opponents of official bilingualism, of public support for FSL learning, and of French immersion in particular. Occasionally, such opposition has reached the front pages of the national media. In 1992, Premier Don Getty of Alberta spoke out against official bilingualism. CPF President Pat Brehaut felt that the organization had to respond, and so letters were sent to newspaper editors across the country pointing out, in part, that “This has been a grassroots movement of ordinary parents who have chosen bilingualism [for their children] rather than return to the two solitudes of the past” (Canadian Parents for French, 1992a, p. 1).

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, there was a great deal of public controversy around claims by linguistics professor Hector Hammerly that immersion was a flawed approach to language teaching which resulted in graduates who spoke “Frenglish” (Hammerly, 1989) (for a response to Hammerly see Allen, Cummins, Harley, Lapkin, & Swain, 1989). In September 1994 an article by Carol Milstone entitled *False Immersion* appeared in *Saturday Night* magazine. It complained that “CPF soon turned French immersion into a sacred cow” (p. 14) and ended, “The trouble is that when it comes to French immersion parental faith has been shaped by false hopes, false promises, and false illusions — all fuelled by the government of Canada’s bilingual dream machine” (p. 18). In the case of these and many similar criticisms over the years, CPF has been able to work with researchers and educators to quickly provide its spokespersons and grassroots members with evidence-based rebuttals.

7.5 Consulting with decision-makers

As of 2014, CPF had submitted briefs to and/or appeared before federal Senate and House of Commons committees at least 15 times. CPF has been involved in numerous consultations and symposia regarding topics including a new *Official Languages Act*, the agreements for federal funding support of FSL education, and how to increase the number of bilingual graduates from Canadian schools. Similarly, CPF branches and chapters have brought the views and wishes of their members to education departments, school boards, and other governing bodies.

8. Continuing challenges

The most obvious impact of the efforts undertaken by the grassroots members of Canadian Parents for French is the spread of the French immersion option from a limited number of major centers in 1977 to hundreds of communities large and small in every province and territory except Nunavut, and from a program mainly available at the elementary level to variations on the immersion approach from preschool through postsecondary.⁵ These efforts continue, with parents in some smaller communities throughout the country still working to have immersion programs established.

Figure 1 illustrates Canadian French immersion enrolments from 1977–78 to 2010–11.⁶ While there are gaps in the Canada-wide data which has been collected and published, it is clear that enrolment in French immersion leapt by almost 600% during the first 10 years after Canadian Parents for French was founded. Growth has since slowed, but continues despite some recent decline in the total Canadian school population, increased participation in French language education by francophone students outside of Quebec, and the establishment of immersion programs in several other languages.

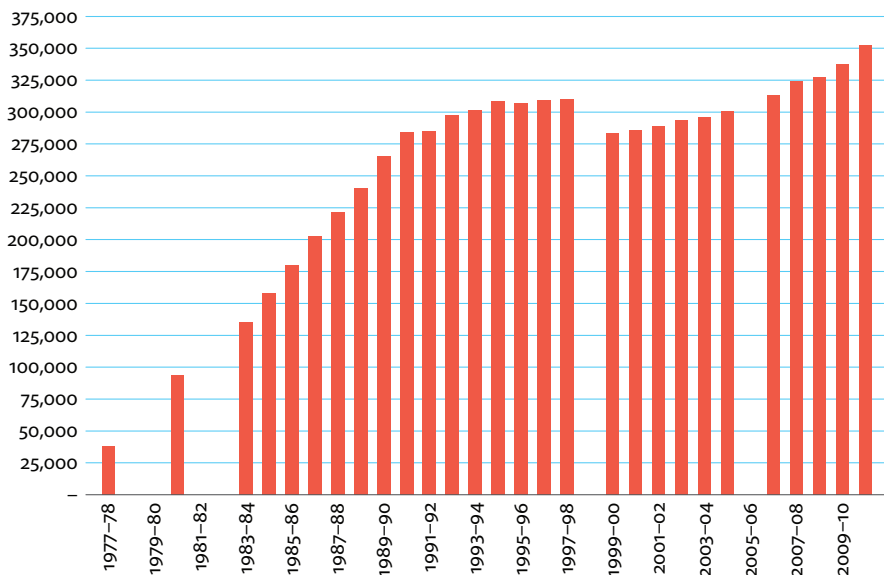


Figure 1. French Immersion Enrolments in Canada, 1977–78 to 2010–11

While most provinces and territories require their students to study French as a subject (or, in some cases, French or another language)⁷ for some part of their K-12 education, beyond the specified grades it continues to be optional for school boards to offer core French, an enhanced version of core French, or some form of French immersion. At the first CPF news conference, held in the spring of 1977, the federal government was urged “to adopt immediately a charter ‘which would ensure all Canadian children have access to second language instruction’” (Webster, 1997, p.2). A November 2012 CPF brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages called for “A changing of the current model of optional access to French second language education to a substantive right, which would allow all children in Canada the option to learn French in the program of their choice” (Canadian Parents for French, 2012, p.4).

In addition to the question of access, over the past several years the national level of CPF has focused on several major challenges it has identified as affecting FSL education throughout Canada:

- There are obstacles to participation by academically challenged students in FSL programs, especially French immersion, including a lack of appropriate supports (Canadian Parents for French, 2012).
- Students whose first language is neither English nor French “are not encouraged, and are sometimes actively discouraged, from enrolling in FSL education despite the impressive performance of those who do” (Canadian Parents for French, 2010a, p.5).

- There is a need for a Canada-wide “transparent and coherent system for describing and measuring language proficiency on a life-long basis” (Vandergrift, 2008, p. 10). Such national benchmarks for language competency would involve reading, writing, speaking, and listening within real-life situations.
- While not consistent for all regions of the country, all programs, or all grade levels, there are shortages of teachers for both core French and French immersion (Canadian Parents for French, 2006b).
- There is a need for education departments to create formal policies based on research that would ensure access to FSL education, promote consistency among school boards and schools, and provide clear direction and stability (Canadian Parents for French, 2010b).
- More opportunities and supports at the postsecondary level for students to continue to develop their FSL proficiency are needed (Oldfield, 2005).

Additional issues are more prevalent in some parts of the country than in others. For example, caps on enrolment in French immersion and lotteries to enter the program result in disappointment for many British Columbia families (Canadian Parents for French — British Columbia & Yukon Branch, 2008). In Ontario, a lack of transportation to many French immersion programs is a major concern (Canadian Parents for French — Ontario Branch, 2008).

In 2013 CPF President Lisa Marie Perkins wrote:

Though FSL education advocates have accomplished much — and CPF’s 36-year history is built on the most vocal and passionate of these advocates — unfortunately, our education system remains in large part inequitable in its delivery of FSL programs nationwide. ... We believe that each of Canada’s 3.8 million students eligible for FSL enrolment⁸ should be given the chance to become bilingual. FSL advocates in Canada have come a long way, and we have been successful in so much — we should be proud of the decades of work that went into helping promote Canada’s many FSL programs and in enabling school boards to better understand the challenges faced by students from all walks of life, and meet those challenges with real answers. We know that we are not finished, and are eager to continue in this legacy of success as we demand better resources, greater inclusion, and more options. (Perkins, 2013, p. 1)

9. Conclusion

English and French are the official languages of Canada’s federal parliament, government, and institutions. The policy is one of institutional, not personal, bilingualism. However, the *Official Languages Act* also commits the federal government to fostering the use of both languages and to enhancing opportunities to

learn both languages. Canadian Parents for French has played a fundamental role in helping to fulfill that commitment.

As we have seen through documents and the voices of those who were involved at the time, the early leaders of Canadian Parents for French chose to focus the organization's limited resources on support for the thousands of parents working to improve FSL learning within their own schools and communities. While there were many other influences, it is highly likely that the efforts of CPF contributed greatly to the spectacular expansion of French immersion in the 1980s. On its own and through formal partnerships and informal collaboration with many other stakeholder organizations, CPF has continued to play a critical role in the development of FSL learning throughout the country.

Graduates of French immersion now permeate Canadian society, bringing both official languages as well as a bicultural or multicultural perspective to their citizenship, work, leisure pursuits, and personal relationships. Moreover, schools are now seeing a third generation of immersion students. In 2007, Commissioner of Official Languages Graham Fraser told the members of CPF:

Bilingualism has increased. Across Canada, one high school student in four is bilingual, in large part thanks to improvements in core and immersion programs, exactly the kind of approach you've been promoting for 30 years now. ... I can honestly say we wouldn't be where we are today, were it not for your tireless efforts every step of the way. (Fraser, 2007)

Goodings (1997, p. 3) goes farther: "But beyond the straight numbers, CPF's achievement has been to legitimize the concept of personal bilingualism across Canada."

Despite the great success of the French immersion program, as measured by pedagogical outcomes and by ever-increasing participation, there remain significant obstacles in the way of universal access to French immersion throughout Canada. Thus, there is still an important role to be played by CPF in promoting, advocating for, and enhancing effective FSL learning opportunities for young Canadians. In pursuing its ongoing mandate, CPF will continue to support Canada's policy of encouraging the learning of both of its official languages.

This paper illustrates how the mandate of an association of parents coincided with the official languages policy of their country, and how their efforts have helped to overcome many of the challenges facing realization of that policy. We hope that these examples will be of assistance to audiences in other countries as they seek ways to advance language learning within their own contexts.

Notes

1. According to a nation-wide poll of English-speaking Canadians conducted in 1984, the main reason for interest in French education programs was better employment opportunities (44.9%), followed by intellectual development (15.1%), cultural enrichment (13.3%), and travel possibilities (12.9%) (Canadian Gallup Poll Limited, 1984, p. 21).
2. Under the leadership of a federal cabinet minister, the Department of Canadian Heritage is the ministry responsible for policies and programs regarding arts and culture, Canadian identity, sports, and history and heritage in addition to official languages.
3. “Core French” refers to teaching French as a subject, often for one classroom period each day. “Extended core French” refers to a program in which, in addition to core French, French is the language of instruction for one or two other subjects.
4. Including: Association de la presse francophone, Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers, Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, Department of Canadian Heritage, Embassy of France to Canada, Société pour la promotion de l’enseignement de l’anglais langue seconde au Québec, and Society for Educational Visits and Exchanges in Canada.
5. While much of the work of CPF has been focused on French immersion — to the point where some have come to associate the organization exclusively with that program — core French has not been neglected. CPF has also consistently promoted and supported efforts to improve the effectiveness of the program in which the majority of Canadian children study French as a second language (Poyen & Gibson, 1990; Scane, 2004).
6. Data for 1977–78 through 1982–83 does not include Alberta, as that province did not differentiate between French immersion and minority French education until 1983–84. Sources: Annual Reports 1984 through 1996, Commissioner of Official Languages; The CPF Immersion Registry 1996, Canadian Parents for French; The State of French Second Language Education in Canada 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004, Canadian Parents for French; <http://cpf.ca/en/files/CPF-FSL-Enrolment-Stats.pdf> and <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/2011095/tbl/tbla.1.1-eng.htm>.
7. According to information collected by CPF, Alberta, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut have no FSL study requirement, while school districts in British Columbia and Manitoba may choose to teach a language other than French (Canadian Parents for French, 2013, Appendix I).
8. The expression “eligible for FSL enrolment” is used by CPF to mean students for whom French is a second or additional language.

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Résumé

Cet article donne un aperçu du travail de terrain qu'a entrepris une association à but non lucratif afin de promouvoir l'apprentissage du français langue seconde au Canada; et comment les efforts de l'association ont contribué d'une façon ou d'une autre à l'avancement de la politique linguistique canadienne. Après avoir donné un aperçu du contexte historique de l'immersion française, nous examinons, à partir de la théorie institutionnalisme historique et d'une méthode de recherche des archives de textes produits par l'association Canadian Parents for French sur une période de 38 ans et comment cette association a contribué à l'accroissement du bilinguisme anglais-français à travers le Canada. Enfin, nous noterons les défis qui continuent d'exister pour l'accès aux programmes d'immersion française et dont l'association se préoccupe. Cet article démontre que toutes les parties-prenantes peuvent jouer un rôle important dans la mise en œuvre réussie d'une politique et offre des exemples qui peuvent être pertinents pour le public international qui cherchent à promouvoir l'apprentissage des langues.

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