



SECONDARY SCHOOL EXCHANGES: A PROMISING WAY OF FOSTERING BILINGUALISM IN THE NEXT GENERATION

Introduction

In Quebec, it is a basic fact that a solid grasp of the French language is essential to finding work, participating fully in the political process, and integrating into society. While statistics show that bilingualism is very common among the English-speaking minority, and especially so among youth, problems nonetheless arise. Young English-speakers frequently report that they do not feel confident enough in their ability to speak French, while others remark that their written French is not strong enough to land a job. Inadequate knowledge of French is a contributing factor to the higher unemployment rates experienced by young English-speakers. A lack of work, and a hampered ability to take part in public life in general, lead to the disenfranchisement of members of this community. Given the high demand among young English-speakers for more French-language training, policy makers must come up with new and creative ways of meeting the demand.

Recommendation

All students in Quebec should, in their first two years of secondary school, be given the opportunity to partake in a semester-long school exchange program that includes both a homestay ~~component and participation in extra-curricular activities.~~

A POLICY BRIEF BY
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Current Situation

Given its central place in public life, English-speaking youth show a keen interest in learning French. According to the results of our own analysis of the topic (Holley, 2018), 92% of survey respondents (all English-speaking youth) thought that it was at least “somewhat important” to become bilingual. Just over half of respondents felt it was important to improve their French, and while a quarter disagreed with this statement, the majority of these young people already expressed confidence in their ability to communicate in the language.

In spite of the high level of demand for French-language training resources, there remains dissatisfaction with the number and quality of services available. Many complain of not enough time spent in primary and secondary school curriculum on French. Some respondents to our survey remarked that, as adults in university or working full time, they lacked the money or the free time to devote to language classes. Others noted that availability of resources varies widely between regions, while still others noted that existing resources did not fill their unique needs.

Even considering the inadequacy of French-language training options for English-speaking Quebecers, they nonetheless display high levels of bilingualism. According to Statistics Canada, 82.5% of English-speaking Quebecers under the age of 24 claim to be bilingual. However, a report by the Quebec Community Groups Network (2009) observed that although most participants in the study could communicate in French, many young English-speakers feared that they could not do so well enough to study or work in that language. This lack of confidence, arising from a lack of complete fluency, has a number of effects on the English-language minority in Quebec.

Most notably, an insufficient knowledge of French strongly contributes to a number of economic challenges that young English-speakers face in Quebec. According to a Needs Assessment Study conducted by Youth Employment Services (2017), 13.7% of English-speaking youth in Quebec are unemployed, compared with 9.4% of their French-speaking counterparts. That number rockets to 32.2% on the Lower North Shore, where only 11.1% of French-speaking



youth are unemployed. The study also noted that English-speaking youth earn less compared with their French-speaking peers. When surveyed, participants in the study ranked language as the most common barrier to finding stable employment, at 47%.

Respondents also stated that the lack of job training and unemployment support services in English hampered their situation.

The lack of a sufficient knowledge of French is one of the factors driving emigration from Quebec by young English-speakers. A report by the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages (2011) noted that 25% of English-speaking Quebecers hold at least a Bachelor's Degree, compared with 15% of the French-speaking majority. Given the tendency of English-speakers, especially youth, to leave Quebec in search of work, a brain-drain has taken place in the province. Consequently, Quebec loses a great deal of talent that could drive innovation and help strengthen the economy. This brain-drain leads to lost opportunity, and the entire population loses as a result.

School Exchanges Foster Bilingualism

To combat unemployment among young English-speakers and stop the brain-drain, the provincial government should introduce a program in which students from both linguistic groups are given the opportunity to partake in a semester-long school exchange program that includes both a homestay component and participation in extra-curricular activities.

By allowing French-speaking students to participate as well, the program would do much to combat stereotypes about the English-language minority and improve inter-group relations. A pilot program launched in Châteauguay found just this result. "Option-études Châteauguay" brought secondary students from linguistically-divided school boards together to study one half of the year in English, and the other in French. English-speaking participants in particular noted a greater feeling of belonging to



Quebec and more comfort living in a French-speaking environment after taking part in the program (Côté, Lamarre, and Razakamanana, 2016).

In a 2009 study conducted by the “Society for Educational Visits and Exchanges in Canada” (SEVEC), Mady (2009) demonstrated that English-French school exchanges in Canada have a measurable impact on both English- and French-speaking participants, even for an exchange of limited duration. Participants later reported improved language skills as a result of taking part in the program. Improvements were more pronounced among participants who had been enrolled in immersion programs prior to their exchange. Furthermore, she found that the vast majority of those who had participated in the exchange made goals to further improve their language skills afterwards. Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that immersion programs and exchanges complement each other very well.

In addition, in order for such an exchange to result in maximum benefits to participants, research has shown that it should include both a homestay and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. Both of these have been found to either directly or indirectly enhance second language acquisition. In particular, Desrochers and Gardner (1981) found that Anglophone students who participated in a homestay with a Francophone family developed an increased willingness to speak French, as well as less anxiety when using the language. In terms of extra-curricular activities, Smemoe, Dewey, Cundick, Evans, and Henrichsen (2012) found that second language use outside of a classroom setting resulted in statistically significant increases in proficiency.

Taking into account all this research, Y4Y Quebec strongly recommends that all students in Quebec should, in their first two years of secondary school, be given the opportunity to partake in a one semester-long school exchange program that includes both a homestay component and participation in extra-curricular activities.

MORE INFORMATION :

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