

# Researchers: Schools have long way to go to offer equitable learning opportunities, especially in French immersion

January 31 2024, by Diana Burchell, Becky Xi Chen, Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird and Roksana Dobrin-De Grace

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The Ontario Human Rights Commission's [Right to Read report](#), published last February, called for changes in the province's educational system. The commission found shortcomings in how schools support students with special education needs.

We found similar trends in our [interview-based study](#) on the accessibility of French immersion for students with [special education](#) needs from low-income communities in Toronto. We interviewed eight mothers with diverse socio-economic status, home language and immigration backgrounds on their experiences with the French immersion program.

According to the Right to Read report's [recommendations](#), children need accessible, effective learning assessments, as well as evidence-based interventions that occur in a timely manner.

These interventions include explicit, systematic programs that focus on [phonics \(teaching the relationships between letters and the sounds of spoken language\) and decoding \(applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships to written words, or "sounding out"\)](#), [metalinguistic awareness](#) (a larger awareness of language, including an ability to reflect on it) and other skills [that support reading accuracy and fluency](#)).

Research has highlighted difficulties accessing support for students with special education needs [in French immersion programs](#). As we also heard in our study, parents of children with students with special education needs from low-income communities in Toronto faced barriers accessing resources for their children.

## **Marginalized students underrepresented**

French immersion programs have become increasingly popular [across Canada](#), since students who learn both English and French in school may [benefit from increased intercultural awareness](#), easier travel throughout

Canada, better access to bilingual jobs as well as potential [developmental and social benefits](#).

There is a [high demand](#) for French immersion in Canada, and the program is often perceived as [an elitist system](#).

In the [Toronto District School board \(TDSB\) French immersion report released in 2019](#), marginalized students are underrepresented in its immersion programs. For example, the report—based on registration and census information—noted that in grades 7–8:

- 49% of students identify as white in French immersion and 30% in the board overall;
- students without special needs represent 90% of students in French immersion and 78% of students in the board overall;
- Students whose [family income](#) is \$100,000 and over represent 66% of students in French immersion and 47% of students in the board overall;
- Children from families who speak English at home represent 63% of French immersion classes and 35% of the board overall.

## Reading struggles

Emily (not her real name) is one of the mothers who participated in our study. She has seen the [high cost of disability in our school systems](#). With her permission, we have shared her story below to illustrate her family's experience in a French immersion program.

Emily enrolled all of her three children in a French immersion program. Emily's eldest child excelled in immersion, and continued to study French into university. However, Emily's two youngest were struggling to read in French. The teachers assured her that her children would catch up in time and there was no need to worry.

Shockingly for Emily, once her middle child reached Grade 3, she was suddenly informed that her child was reading at a kindergarten level.

However, the wait to be assessed was approximately three years—meaning this child might be in Grade 6 before they received any formal assessment and intervention support.

At the suggestion of the school's administration, Emily agreed to pay \$3,500 for an external evaluation. She said about the experience:

"I'll never forget it, having that SST (school support team) meeting. I'm in front of the psychologist and all these different people and I literally lost control. The head of special education, she said, 'It's okay.' I'm like, 'I'm not crying because my daughter has a learning disability. I've come to terms with that.' I said, 'I'm crying because I had to pay \$3,500 dollars ...' ... How many kids are falling through the cracks?' That was very disconcerting for me. I was heartbroken."

## **Insufficient special education support**

Even after spending an exorbitant amount of money, Emily found out the hard way that there wasn't sufficient special education support in French immersion for her child. She ended up removing her middle child from the immersion program the next year. Emily's middle child did get the support she needed in the English program.

This is just one example of the stories we heard in our research study on the accessibility of French immersion.

Emily's question stayed with us throughout our work: How many students are falling through the cracks?

The truth is, we don't really know. Based on the attrition rates in French

immersion from the TDSB, it must be high. According to a [2019 report published by the TDSB](#), from the early French immersion cohort where students start in senior kindergarten, approximately 70% of the students have left the [program](#) by Grade 9.

## **Need for early intervention**

In our study, one parent was told that her child couldn't be assessed until Grade 3, which contradicts [evidence-based best practices](#) that call for early assessment and intervention.

Parents also said they often feel pressure to pay for expensive tutors, French summer camps and other language immersion opportunities so their children don't fall behind.

They reported spending a lot of time supporting their children's studies despite not speaking the language of instruction, and this ends up becoming an emotional and financial burden.

## **Ensuring changes are implemented equitably**

Following the Right to Read inquiry, the Government of Ontario committed to sweeping change such as [mandating early literacy screening](#). We have also seen a huge amount of [professional learning](#) for teachers. Ensuring that positive change yielded by these approaches are effective in French immersion programs is critical.

We know that individual resilience and community support networks aren't enough to combat systemic barriers.

We still have a long way to go if we want our school system to be an equitable learning opportunity for all students—particularly in

[immersion](#).

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Citation: Researchers: Schools have long way to go to offer equitable learning opportunities, especially in French immersion (2024, January 31) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-schools-equitable-opportunities-french-immersion.html>

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