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Is French immersion too popular?

In response to this question posed on CBC Radio's Ontario Today Program on January 29, 2014, shouldn't all well-educated people know and use at least two languages? Here's what learning French in an effective, high-quality program does: it improves cognition, executive function, critical thinking skills, conflict resolution skills and resilience; increases employment opportunities; gives Alzheimer-related health benefits; allows for full participation in Canadian public and cultural life; and it helps our students keep pace with competing students, like those in Finland, Singapore and beyond where being proficient in two languages is the norm.

Enrolment in French immersion, the most effective French Second Language program, is growing. In Ontario over the last six years it has grown an average of 5.2 percent per year. Our total immersion enrolment is 8.1 percent of the student population. In terms of participation in immersion programs across Canada, that puts us on par with British Columbia, slightly ahead of Alberta and Saskatchewan and well behind the rest of the country. We have a significant amount of catching up to do.

Where is the growth coming from? First- and second-generation immersion graduates are now parents who have experienced the benefits and now want them for their children. They are also providing strong support for their peers. The internet has opened the door for parents to make informed choices. They are reading about the brain benefits of learning an additional language, about how an early start with 'Time on Task' is the most effective way to develop proficiency in French. New arrivals in Canada often speak two languages (English or French and a home language), are open to multilingualism, and are looking closely at future job opportunities for their children.

At the local level, growth or shrinkage in enrolment is a challenge for school boards no matter what program is involved. Students do not usually arrive in groups of 20 to form a perfect class, in a school with space, and in advance of staffing deadlines. Boards are trying to approach these challenges with sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of all students. Happily, most boards recognize that they are in the business of providing opportunity not rationing it.

French immersion is not a fad. It is a regular program that provides the additional benefits of bilingualism. How can a research-based, effective program that graduates well-educated students be 'too popular'?

Opinion editorial by Mary Cruden, President, CPF Ontario

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Contact CPF Ontario by email at cpfont@cpfont.on.ca