



Immersion

A SYSTEM

IN CONSTANT GROWTH

The first immersion school opened in Manitoba in 1973, in the wake of the federal *Official Languages Act*, which came into effect in 1969.

Since then, the immersion system has become organized, structured into school divisions, and above all, has continued to grow. Today, it represents 13% of all students in the province’s public school system.

CHRISTIAN MICHALIK

*Superintendent,
Louis Riel School Division*



photo: Courtesy of the Louis Riel School Division

BY MATHILDE ERRARD

In Manitoba, Sacred Heart School, then part of the Winnipeg School Division No. 1, became the birthplace of the French Immersion school system in 1973 under the administration of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

Christian Michalik, Superintendent of the Louis Riel School Division (LRSD), recalls that immersion took its first steps in the context of the *Official Languages Act*. It came into force on September 7, 1969, and established English and French as the official languages of Canada.

“Even though immersion faced opposition, there was a growing awareness among many English-speaking families who wanted their children to speak both official languages of Canada,” he says.

Immersion has grown every year since its inception. One year after its introduction in Manitoba, 0.4% of the province’s students were enrolled in immersion. Nearly 25 years later, in 2001-2002, that figure had risen to just over 8%.

By 2016-2017, with some 24,400 students, the proportion of French immersion students in Manitoba had reached 13%. ▀

A pioneering system

Over the years, the immersion school system in Manitoba has grown, structured and found its legitimacy.

While the first elementary school dates back to 1973, the first high school to offer an immersion program in Manitoba, Collège Béliveau, was established in 1982. It was the first of its kind in North America.

Manitoba immersion marked another milestone in its history in 1995: its program was officially recognized. Christian Michalik:

“It was the will of a part of society that led to a political realization.

“And it brought legitimacy to immersion, educational resources and a market for publishing houses as well.”

Immersion was then gradually structured within the various school divisions, including the Louis Riel School Division, which came into being in 2002.

Like the overall French immersion system, the number of enrollments in the LRSD is steadily increasing. Of its 40 schools, 13 are immersion schools and accommodate no fewer than 5,200 students, or 33.5% of its total student population.

“And if the trend continues, we expect to reach 40% of immersion students in the next decade,” says Michalik.

CHOOSING IMMERSION FOR THE *future*

BY MATHILDE ERRARD

It's almost 4 p.m. on a Tuesday during the Festival du Voyageur and Raina, eight, and Vaughn, six, have just returned from school. The little one, in Grade 1, is proud to show off his latest creation, pinned on his shirt. "It's a red toque from the Festival du Voyageur!"

Many years ago, his parents were also immersion students in Winnipeg. It was natural for them to enroll them in the same system. Kristin Baetsen recalls, "My sister wasn't in immersion, it didn't exist at the time. But I was lucky enough to be in immersion and now I know about Francophone history and culture."

Johann, the father of the family, adds that immersion was also a choice for their

Employment, openness, a link with their multilingual family: Kristin and Johann Baetsen, Anglophones, did not hesitate to enroll their children, Raina and Vaughn in immersion, at École Provencher.

children's future. "French brings more job opportunities. And it's important that they know how to speak and understand the history of Canada's second official language." His wife continues: "We live in Winnipeg's Francophone neighbourhood, so we thought, why shouldn't our children learn French?"

Another factor also played a role in both parents' decision: their family ties to French. Johann Baetsen understands a little French and can speak a few words, and in his family, French has always been spoken, more or less. "My grandparents spoke six languages, including French. My mother is also French-speaking and lives in St. Boniface. We have a history with this language, so enrolling our children in immersion is a way to continue our contribution to the Francophone community."

For the moment, their children are learning the basics of the language, including associating pictures and words. In fact, Vaughn is running home with a French book on animals and reading the few sentences with his sister. Raina, in third grade, says, "Learning French is a life-changing experience. You can sing, read, write and speak in French. It's a lot of fun!"

Johann makes no secret of the fact that he has never spoken so much French since his children have been in immersion. He also coaches a French soccer team at the Notre-Dame sports complex.

Kristin Baetsen points out that the children's learning continues outside of school. Their children take swimming lessons in French and Raina participates in a choir, Les petits Intrépides. ▶



photo: Marta Guerrero

For the Baetsen couple, it was important to enroll their children in immersion. On the picture from left to right: Johann, Vaughn, Kristin and Raina Baetsen.

FROM FRANCOPHILE TO *francophone*

PATRICK GAGNÉ

*Humanities and
Computer Science Teacher,
Grades 9 and 10,
Collège Béliveau*



In addition to learning the French language, one of the objectives of the LRSD's immersion program is to foster the integration of its students into the Francophone community, and to give them all the tools and confidence they need to continue speaking French after Grade 12 and feel fully Francophone.

photo: Marta Guerrero

BY MATHILDE ERRARD

The notion of student identity is at the heart of French language learning in LRSD schools. Christian Michalik, its Superintendent, explains: “Together with the pedagogical teams, we work to make young people aware of their identity and their bilingualism so that they can continue to practise outside the classroom and after graduation, and to fully consider themselves Francophones.”

If the notion of Francophone identity includes the language aspect, it is also based on culture, sense of belonging and inclusion. “Immersion students can acquire and nurture a Francophone identity throughout their school career, whether they are very familiar with Francophone culture or not. It is essential to include all of these profiles in our teaching.”

For nearly 50 years, immersion has been forcing us to rethink the Franco-Manitoban identity. *The Francophone Community Enhancement and Support Act*, adopted by the Province in 2016, has broadened the definition of Francophone.

“While efforts are still needed to broaden the social definition of the Francophonie, immersion students are indeed part of it and have a key role to play in its development,” says Christian Michalik. Indeed, those who were called Francophiles a short time ago are now true Francophones in Manitoba.

Patrick Gagné, 29, is one of the former students of the LRSD who continues to practise French. After studying history and geography and then education at the Université de Saint-Boniface, he has been a teacher of humanities and computer science for the past six years, teaching Grades 9 and 10 at Collège Béliveau.

“My goal is to give students every possible opportunity to practise their French outside the academic setting and in authentic situations.

“We are always looking to improve their oral skills as well. So for example, during last year’s election period, we organized class debates where everyone could ask questions and express their ideas in French.”

From student to teacher

“I was born into an exogamous family: my mother, Hélène Jeanson, is French-speaking. My father, Michael Gagné, is Anglophone and his father is from Quebec. For them, it was important for me and my brother Matthieu to maintain this connection with the language of part of my family and to increase career opportunities.

“In fact, my brother and sister-in-law are also immersion teachers, as is my wife Rae-Ann Trudeau!

“Six years ago, I started my career at Collège Béliveau, where I spent part of my schooling. Today, as a teacher, I feel that I can give something back, be a role model. In class, we try as much as possible to immerse the students in concrete cases, outside the classroom, such as sports or theatre.

“Michel Roy, one of my colleagues, has put together a bilingual musical. At the moment, I am at the beginning of my career. I coach a basketball team where we speak as much French as possible and I plan to become more involved in initiatives with students. It’s important that students gain confidence in authentic situations.

“When I was a student, immersion gave me every opportunity to use the language. Then my challenge was to continue to find opportunities to practise after Grade 12. Studying history, geography and then education at the Université de Saint-Boniface was a good way to do that. And then, most recently, I participated in the Festival du Voyageur as a volunteer.”

PATRICK GAGNÉ
Humanities and Computer Science Teacher,
Grades 9 and 10,
Collège Béliveau

Thriving Learners ∞ Flourishing Communities

Des apprenants épanouis ∞ Des communautés florissantes

Gegwe-gikenjigewaad ∞ Mamino-ayaang Eyaang



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LOUIS RIEL

SCHOOL DIVISION



900, chemin St. Mary's | Winnipeg | Manitoba | R2M 3R3 | Tél. : 204-257-7827 | Irsd.net