

MAGGIE MACINTOSH

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FRENCH immersion teachers and parents fear sweeping reforms to the public school system could put second language education on the sidelines in Manitoba if board staff who have long advocated for quality programs lose their jobs.

Last month, the province released the K-12 review, an action plan to boost educational outcomes, and Bill 64 (Education Modernization Act), which aims to replace boards with a central authority of government appointees.

While the action plan discusses improving French immersion curriculum and taking steps to “fully implement” it in schools, nowhere in the proposed legislation is the program mentioned.

“We don’t see ourselves represented at all — French immersion teachers, staff, anybody invested in it,” said Alyssa Rajotte, a Grade 5/6 teacher at École Sage Creek School.

It is not lost on Rajotte, who graduated from immersion and currently has children enrolled in the program, that there is no designated seat for a board member with immersion expertise on the education authority board.

It is also unlikely one of the 16 members on a new advisory council to the education minister, which will be composed of elected parents from 15 new regions and a trustee from the francophone school division, will include such a perspective, she said.

“If you haven’t been in immersion, it’s difficult to understand it’s unique programming needs,” added Rajotte, noting French teaching resources typically cost more than English ones.

Manitoba’s most recent immersion enrolment statistics show 24,381 students were in the program in 2016-17, nearly 12 per cent of total K-12 pupils.

Despite growing demand for immersion, the president of the Association manitobaine des directrices et directeurs des écoles d’immersion française said it remains a minority that could be lost in the looming shuffle.

The majority of the population — three-quarters of it — is concentrated in the capital, which means the odds a single Winnipeg region representative, who will oversee more than 100,000 students,

is a French immersion parent are not promising.

Amy Haworth said she has more questions than answers about the future of both dual-track and French milieu programs.

Not all divisions prioritize the expansion of immersion, embrace the same principles of it, or even offer the program.

Louis Riel School Division has made a name for itself as a leader in programming, in part, because of the board’s ongoing support for French milieu schools: buildings in which all students sing *O Canada* in French daily and all teachers, secretaries and custodians can speak French.

It is written in policy immersion is single-track in the division, save for exceptional circumstances (only École Sage Creek School is currently dualtrack because the division is waiting for another school to be built to separate streams).

“We’re really very proud of the French immersion program here and the work that we do collectively to see it thrive,” said superintendent Christian Michalik, a Franco-Manitoban who has spent his entire professional career working in French immersion.

In total, 30 per cent of Louis Riel’s student population is enrolled in the program.

The division is also unique in its immersion graduates must obtain all high school credits, with the exception of English, in French. The province mandates only 14 of the minimum 30 credits required to graduate are obtained by French immersion graduates.

How successful an immersion program is can be traced back to how keen people in the board office are about it, said Joël Ruest, an instructor of education at Saint Boniface University, who researches French immersion.

Ruest has concerns emphasizing parent voices will quiet expert educator perspectives and allow for misconceptions about immersion to flourish and affect programming.

“There’s definitely some distrust right now. The relationship is strained. French language educators don’t have much confidence in the Pallister government,” added Ruest, noting the province’s decision to axe the assistant deputy minister position from Manitoba Education in 2017.

The termination of the role of a French speaker

in charge of the Bureau de l’éducation française, which has been downsized in and of itself, prompted outcry from the francophone community.

The department currently has a special adviser to the minister on French language education.

“Our government remains committed to advancing French immersion education. As we work with all Manitobans, including the francophone community, our Better Education Starts Today (strategy) will build on what teachers and school divisions have accomplished,” Education Minister Cliff Cullen said in a statement.

Among the province’s action items: launching an online high school with French immersion courses; developing a strategy to recruit and retain French language teachers; and expanding work-integrated learning opportunities for immersion students.

A new French education fact sheet prepared by the province in the wake of the release of Bill 64 states consultations on the education authority structure will ask for input on immersion program needs and issues.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca Twitter: [@macintoshmaggie](https://twitter.com/macintoshmaggie)



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