

## French immersion 30 years later

[French immersion most popular in the Maritimes](#)

[More girls enrol in immersion](#)

[Immersion students outperform non-immersion students in reading](#)

[French immersion students tend to have higher socio-economic status backgrounds](#)

[The role of self-selection and other possible factors](#)

References: This article is based on Allen, Mary (2004). "Reading achievement of students in French immersion programs". Educational Quarterly Review, Volume 9, number 4, pages 25-30. Catalogue 81-003-XIE

French immersion programs were introduced into Canadian schools in the 1970s to encourage bilingualism across the country. Thirty years later, immersion programs provide an alternative education stream for many students. The Program for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)) conducted in 2000 offers some insights into how well Canadian 15-year-olds enrolled in immersion programs are doing. This feature article looks at the PISA results for reading achievement, comparing French-immersion and non-immersion students in English-language school systems in the ten provinces. The analysis also provides information on the students' family background as one set of factors that may lie behind the high performance of students enrolled in French immersion.

### French immersion most popular in the Maritimes

Information on French immersion in PISA was provided by parents. Parents were asked if their child was ever enrolled in an English school in a program where 25% or more of the instruction time was in French, such as French immersion. They were then asked in which grades their child was enrolled in a language immersion program. A student was considered currently enrolled in a French immersion program when parents reported that the student was enrolled in an immersion program for their current grade.

While French immersion programs exist in English language school systems in all ten provinces, the percentage of 15-year-olds enrolled in these programs ranges widely, from 2% in British Columbia to 32% in New Brunswick (Table 1).

**Table 1: Students enrolled in French immersion in 2000**

	Enrolled in French immersion	Enrolled in Immersion and had started before grade 4 (early immersion)	Girls	
			Immersion	Non-immersion
Percentage of students				
<b>Newfoundland and Labrador</b>	7	57	64	50
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	20	59	58	51
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	12	21	58	49
<b>New Brunswick</b>	32	39	61	46

<b>Quebec</b>	22	74	52	48
<b>Ontario</b>	6	57	64	51
<b>Manitoba</b>	6	90	60	48
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	3	87	65	48
<b>Alberta</b>	4	80	59	47
<b>British Columbia</b>	2	55	61	49

**Source:** Program for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)) 2000.

Not all French immersion programs are alike. Early immersion programs begin in either Kindergarten or Grade 1; middle immersion programs start midway through elementary school; and still others begin in the later grades. In turn, attendance in immersion varies by the type of program. For example, while only 21% of the students enrolled in French immersion in Nova Scotia in 2000 had been enrolled in immersion before Grade 4, at least 80% of the 15-year-olds enrolled in French immersion programs in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta had started in early immersion programs.

### **More girls enroll in immersion**

While the proportion of girls and of boys in non-immersion programs is roughly equal in all provinces, girls account for 3 of 5 students in French immersion programs in all provinces except Quebec.

### **Immersion students outperform non-immersion students in reading**

Students were assessed in the language of their school system; 98% of French immersion students were tested in English. While the percentage of immersion students tested in French was generally very small, most of these cases were in Manitoba, where about one-quarter of French immersion students were tested in French.

In all but one province (Manitoba), students in French immersion programs performed significantly better in reading than other students (Table 2).

	<b>Average reading scores</b>	
	<b>Immersion</b>	<b>Non-immersion</b>
<b>Newfoundland and Labrador</b>	608	510
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	558	509
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	567	517
<b>New Brunswick</b>	550	495
<b>Quebec</b>	566	537
<b>Ontario</b>	570	533
<b>Manitoba</b>	533	533

<b>Saskatchewan</b>	570	529
<b>Alberta</b>	601	548
<b>British Columbia</b>	610	537

What accounts for the high performance of French immersion students? One factor may be the over-representation of girls in these programs: PISA results show that, overall, girls tend to outperform boys in reading (average reading score of 551 for girls compared to 519 for boys). However, when the reading results for boys and girls are considered separately, the average performance of French immersion students is still significantly higher, again with the single exception of Manitoba.

### **French immersion students tend to have higher socio-economic status backgrounds**

Overall, there is a strong relationship between reading achievement and family socio-economic (SES) background. While differences in family socio-economic background contribute to the high reading achievement of students in French immersion programs, the advantage held by French immersion students is not that straightforward.

In general, students in French immersion programs tend to come from better off families than non-immersion students. However, in four provinces - Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia - there were no real differences in the average family background of immersion and non-immersion students.

Finally, when only students from families in the top socio-economic quartile are compared, the results show that substantial differences remain in many provinces when the achievement of students in immersion and non-immersion programs is compared.

### **The role of self-selection and other possible factors**

Although further research is needed into factors leading to the higher academic success of French immersion students, in general, parents of immersion students are from higher socio-economic backgrounds and are more likely to have a postsecondary education. Also, a higher proportion of girls enrol in immersion programs; PISA results show that girls outperform boys in reading.

However, when gender, socio-economic background and parents' education are each taken into account, the results show that French immersion students still outperform their counterparts in non-immersion programs. What additional factors might contribute to the high reading performance of French immersion students?

It may be that French immersion programs are more readily available in more affluent (for example, urban) communities, where average literacy scores tend to be higher.

There is also the question of self-selection. Schools and parents may tend to screen students to ensure their readiness for immersion programs. Students who have less developed language skills may be less likely to enter immersion programs, particularly early immersion. There may also be a tendency for less-skilled students to transfer out of immersion programs if there is a concern about their ability to learn in the second language.

It may be the case, as other studies suggest, that French immersion programs assist student learning in other ways, providing an enriched learning environment. A positive peer effect may occur, for example, when students with high potential for achievement are grouped together.

Clearly, more research is needed to allow us to fully explain why students in French immersion programs tend to score higher on reading literacy than non-immersion students. That research will continue to explore the role played by socio-economic status and gender, as well as by other factors, such as home environment, the grades in which the students were enrolled in French immersion programs, and school resources. When considered together, factors such as these should provide a better understanding of the achievement of students in French immersion programs.