

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Demand for French Immersion programming in B.C. public schools has reached all-time highs recently, with as many as one in ten public school students in the province enrolled in a French Immersion program. High demand for these programs has led to challenges in serving all families who would like to enroll their children in the program, and an increased need to train and recruit French Immersion teachers in the province.

To better understand what is driving this demand for French Immersion programming, the B.C. Ministry of Education undertook a public engagement survey with parents and caregivers involved in French Immersion programming in the province. An online survey was made available on the B.C. Government’s public engagement platform ([engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc](https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/)) from April 12 to May 18, 2021. During this time, more than 6,000 survey responses were captured from members of the public. These responses were then analyzed and are reported on in this What We Heard report.

French Immersion is a highly desirable program for families throughout the province. Parents and caregivers are aware of the cognitive and developmental benefits of second language learning in childhood, and so seek out French Immersion as an opportunity to support their child(ren)’s development. Further, a majority of parents and caregivers see value in their child(ren) learning Canada’s other official language, as they expect it will provide them with greater educational and career opportunities in the future.

A substantial portion of parents and caregivers who completed this survey expressed the opinion that French Immersion was an opportunity to avoid the perceived problems of English catchment schools, especially concerns about the impact of children with support needs and cognitive differences on the learning environment, and their own child(ren)’s learning. There was a perception that French Immersion programs are not hospitable to children with these additional support needs, so enrolling one’s child in a French Immersion program was a way to guarantee a less disrupted learning environment. There were also some comments that ranged from classist and elitist – believing that “better” parents choose to enroll their “better” children in French Immersion programs – to explicitly racist, such as believing that children from non-white ethnic backgrounds “bring down” the classrooms and learning experiences for white children. Overall, these findings suggest that there is a perception among some parents and caregivers that French Immersion classrooms are, at best, not very diverse, and at worst, have school cultures that are hostile to children with diverse needs and from diverse backgrounds.

It is important to note that this survey specifically invited parents of children *currently enrolled or waitlisted* for French Immersion to participate. As such, since the survey did not invite the input from all parents and caregivers of public school students in the province, it is not possible to estimate what the total demand is for French Immersion programs and seats is in the province, nor was this the intention of the survey, which sought to better understand what motivates families to enroll their children in French Immersion. However, even among families that reported already having one or more children enrolled in French Immersion, capacity issues resulting in challenges enrolling other children in French Immersion were noted by about one in ten respondents. Another major barrier to accessing and enrolling in French Immersion programs, as hinted at above, is the perceived lack of supports for children with diverse learning needs in French Immersion programs. Among parents who reported that they have not, will not, or may not enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion, concerns about a child with diverse needs being adequately supported were raised by 42% of respondents.

Overall, findings from this survey suggest that French Immersion programs are highly coveted among parents as a way to provide a superior education for their children within the public school system in B.C. However, this expectation of superiority has given rise to both challenges with serving the high demand, as well as concerns about the ability and willingness of French Immersion programs to support diverse learners in their classrooms.

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Background and Impetus for Public Engagement

French Immersion Programs in B.C.

French Immersion (FI) programs offer students in British Columbia the opportunity to become bilingual in both French and English, through the provision of instruction primarily or fully in French. Early French Immersion begins in Kindergarten, while Late French Immersion begins in Grade 6.

All Kindergarten to Grade 12 students in the province are eligible to enroll in a French Immersion program, providing:

* The program is offered in their school district;
* There is space available in the program;
* Their enrolment does not conflict with school district policies; and
* If entering at a point other than Early or Late FI, the student’s French fluency is strong enough to join the class.

In school districts throughout B.C., FI programs are designated as a “program of choice,” meaning that a child does not need to live in the catchment area to register in an FI program at a school, and living within a school’s catchment area does not give a child priority placement in any FI programs available at the school.

Recent Trends in Demand and Supply for French Immersion

Currently, slightly less than one in ten students in B.C. are enrolled in a French Immersion program.[[1]](#footnote-1) French Immersion programs are in high demand in many school districts throughout B.C., with some schools and programs seeing parents camping in lines to ensure registration for their children in their programs of choice;[[2]](#footnote-2) while other districts and programs use a lottery system to allot program spaces when demand outstrips supply.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Shortages of qualified French Immersion teachers have been identified as a challenge in continuing or growing French Immersion programs to meet demand.[[4]](#footnote-4) In response to this shortage, the B.C. government has undertaken initiatives including the addition of seats at French teacher education programs, allocation of funding for the recruitment of French teachers from other Canadian provinces and abroad, fast-tracking of teacher certification process for French-speaking educators, and numerous other initiatives in collaboration with provincial French education partners. The government is also cognizant of the demands and challenges faced by currently-practicing French teachers, and has thus supported parallel retention initiatives that provide these educators with pedagogical supports, professional learning opportunities, and increased French classroom resources.

Purpose of this Public Engagement and What We Heard Report

While there is a broad public understanding that French Immersion is in high demand in B.C., there is a need for further information on what is driving this demand. As such, the B.C. Ministry of Education partnered with B.C.’s Government Digital Experience Division to host an online survey open to the public. This public engagement sought feedback from parents and guardians of children in B.C. who are either enrolled in, or waitlisted for, French Immersion programs. Questions in the survey were designed to capture information on topics such as reasons for enrolling in French Immersion, barriers to accessing the program, and other general feedback or perceptions about the program in B.C.

This report provides a summary of the data collected through this public engagement. Methods used to conduct the engagement and analyze the data collected, are described in the next section. Findings on demand for French Immersion programs are discussed in detail in the subsequent section, followed by a summary of findings.

Methods and Respondent Characteristics

Public Engagement Survey

To collect feedback from, and hear voices of, parents and guardians throughout B.C. with a child in French Immersion (or waitlisted for FI), an online survey was selected for this method of public engagement. A survey was hosted on the govTogetherBC site ([engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc](https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/)) from April 12 to May 18, 2021. During this time, members of the general public were invited to participate by completing the online survey form.

Survey Design

The survey was designed by representatives from the B.C. Ministry of Education and the B.C. Government Digital Experiences Division. The following issues or topics of interest to the government were included in the survey questions:

* Reasons for seeking French Immersion education among parents and guardians;
* Reasons for not seeking French Immersion (for families that did not enroll a second or subsequent child in French Immersion);
* Perceived benefits to French Immersion;
* Barriers to accessing French Immersion; and
* Other thoughts or feedback (as collected through two open-ended comment fields).

Survey Administration

The survey was open for online feedback for 31 days. During this time, members of the general public could navigate to the survey form and answer the survey questions. No survey items were mandatory, and respondents could skip any questions they wished; as such, there were a number of partial completions that were included for analysis in this report.

The survey was publicized by the Ministry of Education’s Deputy Minister in an emailed bulletin shared with school districts in the province. Two provincial parent groups, Canadian Parents for French and the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils also publicized the survey through their respective communication channels. The survey was closed for feedback on May 18.

Survey Response

Sample Size

At the time of survey close, 6,462 responses had been collected by the online form. Of these, 6,046 responses had answered at least one question, and 5,019 respondents completed the full survey (all questions they were eligible for, based on their answers to previous questions).

Nine cases were removed from the sample following survey close; three of these were test cases, and six were from respondents who identified their children as being enrolled in School District 93, the province’s Francophone school district. As these parents would not have experience with the French Immersion program, they were removed from the sample for analysis.

In total, the analysis included in this What We Heard report included 5,010 full survey completions, and 1,027 partial survey completions. Because some respondents skipped questions throughout the survey, valid *n* counts for each question may vary.

Respondent Characteristics

A number of survey questions asked respondents about demographic factors related to their child(ren) and/or families. These included: whether they had a child enrolled in French Immersion; what school districts children were enrolled in (collapsed here to illustrate region only); grade level of the child; and, whether the child identified as Indigenous. These questions were used to summarize the respondent group below. It is important to note, however, that demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey, after respondents who did not have a child enrolled in French Immersion had been “filtered out” of the sample; as such, comparisons on enrollments by demographic groups were not possible. These data may be available through Ministry of Education records.

1. Respondents with a Child in French Immersion

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=6,025

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Nearly all survey participants (95%) indicated that they had at least one child enrolled in, or waitlisted for, a French Immersion program in a K-12 school in B.C. As a result, it should be kept in mind that the findings from this survey largely reflect the opinions and experiences of those who support and/or participate in French Immersion in B.C., and cannot be interpreted to represent the overall attitude of British Columbian parents to French Immersion programs in the province. Nevertheless, findings may be indicative of the drivers that encourage parents to select French Immersion for their children.

1. Grade Levels of Children in French Immersion

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=4,891

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

While there was representation from parents with children across the K-12 spectrum, slightly more than one-half of respondents (51%) reported that their children were between the Kindergarten and Grade 5 levels. Eight percent indicated that their child was in Late Immersion Grade 6 or 7, while 14% indicated their child was in French Immersion Grade 6 or 7 programs, and the remaining 27% had children in older grades (Grades 8 through 12).

1. Region of Respondents

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=4,902

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

The vast majority of survey respondents had children enrolled in school districts located in either the Metro Vancouver and Fraser Valley, or South Island, regions of the province. Respondents from other areas of the province accounted for less than 17% of survey participants.

Approximately 4% of survey respondents indicated that their child enrolled in French Immersion identifies as Indigenous. This suggests that Indigenous children are participating in French Immersion at rates considerably lower than their non-Indigenous peers; in 2015, Indigenous children represented 11.5% of all public-school enrollments in B.C.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Indigenous Identity among Indigenous Children of Survey Participants

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=188

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Among parents with Indigenous children who participated in the survey, 48% reported their child(ren) were First Nations, 49% reported their child(ren) were Métis, and 3% reported their child(ren) were Inuit.

Survey participants were asked whether any other languages (other than English or French) were spoken in the home of the child attending French Immersion. Of 4,889 individuals who responded to this question, slightly more than one quarter (27%) indicated yes, another language is spoken in the child’s home.

1. Children in French Immersion with Individual Education Plans, Annual Instruction Plans, or Student Learning Plans

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=4,892

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Slightly less than one in ten parents (9%) reported that their child in French Immersion had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), an Annual Instruction Plan (AIP), or a Student Learning Plan (SLP). A further 13% of parents did not know if their child had one of these plans in place.

A follow-up question asked parents whether they believed their child in French Immersion had any other learning needs that they felt were not being acknowledged or addressed by the school. Of the 4,876 parents who responded, 11% (n=526) believed that their child did have an unacknowledged or unaddressed learning need.

What We Heard about Demand for French Immersion

Opting for French Immersion

A series of survey questions asked respondents about how they made the decision to enroll their child in French Immersion. These questions included:

* How they learned about the French Immersion program;
* Whether they would enroll any other child(ren) in their care in French Immersion;
* Their top five reasons for enrolling their child in French Immersion; and
* Other influences on choosing French Immersion for their child.

Survey respondents who had a child enrolled in French Immersion were asked to rank their top five reasons for choosing French Immersion for their child. A variety of reasons were available for respondents to pick from, which generally fell into four categories: benefits of French Immersion; avoiding perceived deficits of English catchment public schools; social and family influences on French Immersion enrollment; and French Immersion being a second choice of program. These are discussed below, in the sections ***Perceived Benefits of French Immersion*** and ***Other Influences on Choosing French Immersion***.

Awareness and Support

Survey respondents who had at least one child in French Immersion were asked to report how they learned about the program; responses to this question are illustrated in **Figure 6** below.

1. How Parents Learned About the French Immersion Program

Source: *French Immersion Programs in B.C.* Survey (2021)

Sample *n*=5,049

Multiple responses were allowed, therefore percentages may add to more than 100%.

The most common way that parents learned about French Immersion programs was through friends and relatives who had participated in French Immersion, or who themselves had a child enrolled in French Immersion. Parents also commonly cited their own participation in French Immersion, or information made available through their child’s school or school district, as ways of learning about French Immersion.

Notably, it appears that the existence of French Immersion programs is becoming common knowledge among parents: 8% of all respondents reported that they couldn’t remember how they first heard about French Immersion programs, and among those who reported “other” ways of learning about it, 5% of the total sample (n=279) reported that it was “common knowledge” or they “just knew” about the program.

Other responses provided by parents who indicated “other” included: personal research into available programs for their children in the district (n=162); professional knowledge, such as they or their spouses being teachers themselves (n=82); recommendations from early childhood educators (n=26); and from involvement with the federal government such as employment in the Canadian Armed Forces (n=7). In addition to these on-topic comments, a total of 348 other open-ended responses were provided, but were either upcoded to existing codes (captured and illustrated in **Figure 6**), or coded as off-topic (n=97).

Among survey respondents with at least one child currently enrolled in the survey, and one or more other school-aged children, 91% (n=3,681) reported that they would, or already have, enrolled their other child(ren) in French Immersion. Approximately 1% of parents said they would enroll “some” of their other children in French Immersion, while 8% reported that they would not enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion. Reasons for opting not to enroll in French Immersion for other children are discussed in the section on **Barriers to French Immersion**.

Perceived Benefits of French Immersion

The expectation that French Immersion provides advantages and benefits to children were captured in this survey, both in closed-ended survey responses and in open-ended comments from parents that were then coded. Participants’ perceptions of these benefits are summarized below.

Three closed-ended survey items were identified as being relevant to perceptions of the benefits of French Immersion, and all three of these reasons among the top five most-endorsed reasons among respondents regarding why they chose French Immersion for their child. These were:

* I think it will increase this child’s chances of getting a good job and provide them with more social mobility opportunities in the future (91% ranked this as a top-five reason for enrolling in French Immersion);
* I think it is important for this child to learn both of Canada’s official languages (77% ranked this as a top-five reason); and
* To provide this child with an additional challenge at school (69% ranked this as a top-five reason).

In addition to the above responses to closed-ended survey questions, further comments on the perceived benefits of French Immersion were noted among open-ended comments to Q7 (What other factors influenced your decision to enroll your child in French Immersion?) from participants. Slightly more than two in five respondents (41%) used the comments to reiterate reasons provided earlier in closed-ended responses (e.g., they chose French Immersion for their child for social mobility reasons, for enrichment, etc.). Among the remaining respondents (n=1,123), the following unique themes related to the benefits of French Immersion were identified:

* Cognitive and other benefits of early second language learning (57% of valid comments); and
* French Immersion offers better French education than French classes in English schools (2% of valid comments).

A selection of comments illustrating the main perceived benefit of French Immersion, cognitive and other benefits to early second language learning, are below.

Early childhood is the best time to learn a new language…learning a second language boosts problem-solving, critical thinking, and listening skills, in addition to improving memory, concentration, and the ability to multitask. Children proficient in other languages also show signs of enhanced creativity and mental flexibility.

Respondent Case 10076

There is an advantage to children learning another language at a young age: understanding different ways of [seeing] the world, speaking empathy for others, activating the language learning part of the brain.

Respondent Case 15311

Overall, the expected benefits of French Immersion were among the top reasons drawing parents to the program and encouraging registration. Parents appear to be strongly motivated by a variety of benefits, ranging from the child’s future career options and earning potential, to cognitive benefits for developing brains, to cultural and developmental benefits (e.g., greater empathy, cultural flexibility).

Other Influences on Choosing French Immersion

Aside from the anticipated benefits of the program, other reasons for opting for French Immersion were endorsed or provided by survey participants. The general themes for these other reasons included avoiding the perceived problems associated with public English catchment schools, cultural influences and Francophone heritage, “family persistence” in French Immersion, peer group influences, and convenience.

Comments and survey responses related to the idea of “avoiding problems” at English catchment schools were among the most common from respondents (aside from benefits of French Immersion, discussed above), regarding why they chose to enroll their children in the program. The reasons provided in the closed-ended survey questions indicated support for the following items:

* I think my child will have access to more learning resources, technology, cultural experiences, etc. in a French Immersion program (48% listed this as a top-five reason for enrolling their child);
* I think this child will receive more focused attention / a better learning experience in a French Immersion program (47% listed this as a top-five reason);
* I think this child will have better access to learning resources in a French Immersion program (23% listed this as a top-five reason); and
* I think the French Immersion program is at a better school than our local catchment school (21% listed this as a top-five reason).

In addition, a clear theme of believing that students and families in French Immersion programs are in some way “better” was noted among open-ended survey comments on other reasons for enrolling in French Immersion. Among the 1,123 valid comments received to this question, 16% (n=179) indicated a belief that French Immersion programs attract and retain a different type of student and/or family compared to English catchment schools. This theme included comments indicating that parents expect that children with special needs will not be in French Immersion classrooms, and therefore parents expect a “better” or “less disruptive” learning environment for their child(ren). Some examples of these types of comments are given below.

The vast majority of parents who put their kids into French Immersion care about their children’s education. Caring parents tend to have good kids. I want my child to be surrounded by good kids. The same cannot be said for public school.

Respondent Case 2271

It’s poor man’s private school. It’s putting my kid in a classroom with other nice children that come from families that care about their children’s education.

Respondent Case 8666

I wanted to be surrounded by like-minded parents, who had an openness to different languages and culture. I wanted to ‘weed out’ kids with behavioural or cognitive challenges, as they are less likely to be saddled with learning another language.

Respondent Case 19491

Worryingly, there were other comments similar to this theme that were more extreme in tone. Some were explicitly racist, while others were implicitly so, or instead focused on ensuring that their children were attending school with other children of similarly middle-to-high socioeconomic status. Some examples of these types of comments are provided below.

So we didn’t have to put our children in private school in order to avoid them being subjected to a 97 percent East Indian population and a culture we don’t agree with and who are NOT Canadians.

Respondent Case 17211

In our area “English” school is actually ESL for East Indians. I’m not going to have my children be the 5% minority, when the 95% don’t listen to women and the boys are not disciplined at all. We would have gone to private school if French Immersion was not available.

Respondent Case 18161

To counteract the impacts of socioeconomic inequities in our catchment.

Respondent Case 826

We became a minority in our city that we were born and raised in and my spouse did not want our children to be the only white children in the school, this became a good compromise for him.

Respondent Case 24566

Among other reasons for enrolling in French Immersion, peer group influences were cited by many respondents. These included:

* Having heard good things about French Immersion from other parents or caregivers (47% indicated this was a top-five reasons for enrolling); and
* The child wanting to join a group of peers in a French Immersion program (18% indicated this was a top-five reason).

Family persistence and/or parental interest in French Immersion was noted as a reason for enrolling in the program, as well. Slightly less than one-third of respondents with a child in French Immersion (31%) indicated that the experiences of a parent, sibling, or other family member was a top-five reason for enrolling their child in French Immersion. Further, a theme of “vicarious interest” was noted among open-ended comments to Question 7, wherein about 2% of respondents (n=33) indicated that they enrolled their child in French Immersion because it was an opportunity that they wish they had had as children.

Cultural heritage and familial influences were a major contributor to the reason to enroll in French Immersion; slightly less than one-quarter of respondents (22%) indicated that a relative speaking French was a top-five reason for enrolling in French Immersion. A further 2% of valid comments to the open-ended question mentioned Francophone heritage that they wanted to reinforce in their child’s education.

Finally, convenience was noted as a minor motivator for enrolling in French Immersion among survey respondents. Approximately five percent of respondents listed this as a top-five reason for enrolling (indicating that French Immersion was more convenient than Francophone school), and 11% of valid comments to Question 7 indicated that they chose to enroll their child in French Immersion because the school was closer to home or otherwise more convenient for their family.

Early Versus Late French Immersion

Parents who indicated that their child began French Immersion at the Late Entry point (Grade 6) were asked questions about why they opted for Late Entry over Early for their child. A number of potential influences were listed in the questions; respondents were asked to rank, on a four-point scale, the influence that each factor had on the decision for Late Entry.

For a majority of families, it appears that Late French Immersion is not chosen “instead of” Early French Immersion, but is based on circumstances at the time the child is entering Grade 6. The top three most influential reasons for choosing Late French Immersion were:

* The child made a personal choice to enter Late French Immersion (83% indicated this was an influence in their choice);
* The Late French Immersion program is in a convenient location (80% indicated this was an influence on their choice); and
* The Late French Immersion program that this child attends is at a desirable school (80% indicated this was an influence on their choice).

**Figure 7** below illustrates the proportion of respondents who indicated that each of these factors had an influence on their choice for late entry (“agreed” or “strongly agreed” with each item).

1. Influences on Choosing Late French Immersion

Gross n=772 (valid *n*s may vary across items due to missing responses).

Each item in the figure above represents an individual survey item, therefore responses are not intended to add up to 100%.

In addition to responses to these closed-ended questions, some survey respondents provided additional comment in an open-ended text field regarding why they chose late entry for their child. Of 349 respondents who provided comment, 190 (54%) provided on-topic comments that spoke to unique themes not addressed in the previous survey items (summarized in **Figure 7** above). These comments were coded and summarized as follows:

* French Immersion was desired as a second language opportunity for the child (34%);
* French Immersion was desired as enrichment for the child (22%);
* Families have an expectation that children and/or families of children that attend French Immersion are “better” in some way (i.e., more academically oriented, more involved parents, fewer behavioural issues, etc.) (18%);
* Families have an expectation that French Immersion offer higher quality education than English catchment schools (15%);
* Families lived somewhere that French Immersion was not available, prior to late entry (e.g., another country) (8%);
* Families felt that the quality of education in early entry French Immersion was poor, so they moved their child to an English program to wait until late entry (2%); and
* Families did not know about French Immersion programs until it was too late for early entry (1%).

Barriers to French Immersion

Capacity-Related Barriers to French Immersion

Despite many families choosing to enroll their children in late entry French Immersion for specific reasons that made the late entry program attractive (discussed above), barrier-related issues to early French Immersion were noted among a significant minority of respondents. Slightly less than one-half of respondents (48%) indicated that there was no early entry program available where they lived, and slightly less than one-third of respondents (31%) indicated that lack of space in local early French Immersion programs influenced their decision to enroll in late entry.

Further, among respondents who indicated that they have not enrolled, or will not enroll, other children in French Immersion (n=345), lack of space was cited as a contributing factor among approximately 10% of them.

Capacity issues were reiterated in responses to the open-ended question about why they didn’t enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion. Approximately 5% of respondents noted that there was no space available in the local French Immersion programs, and 16% indicated that French Immersion programs were unavailable for their other child(ren) (this may be due to programs closing opening or closing in the interim between their children’s school enrollments, moving between school districts, or other issues).

There were no statistically significant differences among different regions of the province regarding reported capacity barriers. Parents reported similar rates of capacity / insufficient space issues across all regions of the province.

Learning and Support-Related Barriers to French Immersion

A theme that carried throughout comments from parents on several questions was that French Immersion was widely perceived to be inappropriate or unwelcoming to children with special needs and/or behavioural issues. For parents who perceived their children to be gifted or otherwise in need of a rigorous academic programme, this was viewed as a positive. However, for parents who said that they would not enroll their other children in French Immersion, or had enrolled their child in French Immersion but subsequently removed their child from the program, this was noted as barrier to accessing second language learning in the public school system.

Among survey respondents who indicated that they would not enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion, 42% (n=91) indicated that their other child(ren)’s needs for additional support were an influence on choosing not to enroll their child in the program. Further, 22% of respondents reiterated this concern in the open-ended question on this topic, saying that their child(ren) had specific supports and learning needs that they felt could not be accommodated in a French Immersion classroom, and/or that their child would be overly challenged in a French Immersion setting.

Further, approximately one-third or survey respondents (34%) indicated that they did not feel they would be able to support their other child(ren)’s French learning at home, and 4% of valid comments reiterated this concern in the open-ended question on this topic.

There were no statistically significant differences among different regions of the province regarding reported support barriers. Parents reported similar levels of concern about French Immersion programs being able to support children with special needs across all regions of the province.

Other Barriers to French Immersion

A variety of other reasons were noted for not enrolling other child(ren) in French Immersion among respondents. These factors included:

* Child’s lack of interest in learning French (50% agreed this was a factor in their decision not to enroll);
* Child lacked the aptitude to learn French in an immersion setting (45% agreed this was a factor in their decision not to enroll);
* Child wanted to stay with a peer group in an English program (34% agreed this was a factor); and
* Child had previously been in French Immersion but left the program (15% agreed this was a factor).

Finally, a few unique themes were identified in open-ended comments on this topic that were reported among parents and caregivers as reasons that they did not enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion. Approximately 12% of valid responses to this open-ended question (n=14) indicated that they found the quality of teaching in their local French Immersion program to be poor, and this was a factor in not enrolling their other child(ren) in the program.

Six percent of valid responses (n=7) indicated that they just did not consider it as an option for their other child(ren). In these cases, the other children not enrolled in French Immersion were usually older, and so parents were either not aware of the program with their first child(ren), or unaware that they could enroll their child(ren) in the program if they wanted.

Four percent of valid responses (n=5) indicated that they found the quality of teaching available to their other child(ren) at their English catchment school to be sufficient, so they did not see the value in enrolling those children in French Immersion.

Finally, one respondent indicated that they had been specifically *discouraged* from enrolling their child in French Immersion by a teacher. In this case, the parent and children were recent immigrants to Canada, and the parent was told that French Immersion programs were “meant for” native, English-speaking Canadian children. This respondent subsequently learned that this was not a requirement, and so enrolled their other child in French Immersion.

Alternatives and Adjuncts to French Immersion

As noted above, concerns about the supports available to children with special needs are a major factor for parents choosing not to enroll one or more of their children in French Immersion. This potentially speaks to a need to provide more resources and supports for diverse learners within French Immersion programs, and/or to publicize to a greater extent that children with diverse learning needs are welcome in French Immersion classrooms.

In addition to concerns about diverse learning needs in classrooms, slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of respondents who chose not to enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion said that this decision was made due to another program of choice being more suitable for that child.

A small number of comments in the final question, asking respondents for any other concerns or comments they’d like to share, raised issues of alternatives and adjuncts to French Immersion programs, and/or ways that respondents would like to see French Immersion offerings improved. These included:

* Comments about the insufficiency of available supports in French Immersion classrooms for diverse learners (3%, n=33);
* Comments about the need for more online learning options for French Immersion students (1%, n=11); and
* Suggestions to increase the cultural diversity of the curriculum (>1%, n=2).

Additional Themes We Heard

Many comments and themes noted in the final open-ended questions reiterated what has been covered here already: comments regarding the benefits of French Immersion and second language learning for children (27% commented on cognitive benefits, 13% commented on career and life benefits, 8% commented on the challenge and enrichment offered), and comments generally expressing support for French Immersion programs (10% of comments).[[6]](#footnote-6)

In addition, 12% of comments advocated for French Immersion programs to be made available in more schools and districts in B.C., 3% of comments advocated for increasing the number of spaces available in French Immersion programs, and 1% of comments advocated for creating more late start opportunities and/or more flexible entry options for French Immersion.

Some additional themes emerged from the final comments in the survey. These included:

* The belief that French Immersion programs offer a ‘better’ learning environment than English catchment schools (13% of comments);
* Concerns about the quality of French Immersion instruction in programs (9% of comments);
* Concerns about insufficient supports for diverse learners in French Immersion (3% of comments); and
* “Other” comments that tended to discuss families’ specific situations (8%), and comments about the importance of French Immersion in supporting their family heritage (6%).

Summary

**What are the “pull” factors drawing families to French Immersion programs?**

Overwhelmingly, parents and caregivers of children in French Immersion were primarily drawn to French Immersion programs because of the perceived benefits of second language learning in general, and French language learning in particular.

Parents and caregivers believe that second language learning in childhood offers important cognitive, developmental, and emotional benefits that will support their child’s growth and learning. In addition, many also believe that learning Canada’s second official language early will support their child’s future educational and career opportunities.

**What are the “push” factors that make parents seek out alternatives to English public schools?**

Survey responses and comments throughout this public engagement suggest that it is not just seeking out the benefits of French language learning, but also avoiding the perceived problems of English public schools, that encourage parents to enrol their children in French Immersion. In particular, there is a widespread perception that enrolling one’s child in a French Immersion program will ensure that the child does not have to share a classroom with children with special needs.

There were also elements of classism and elitism noted in open-ended comments from parents and caregivers, ranging from attitudes that children in French Immersion programs are “better” and come from “better” families, to explicitly racist attitudes suggesting that some parents see French Immersion programs as a way to ensure that their children are placed in majority-white classrooms.

**What barriers exist to accessing French Immersion programming?**

Capacity-related issues, such as insufficient seats in existing programs and insufficient programs in school districts, were named as a barrier to accessing French Immersion programming. Lack of programs and/or spaces in Early French Immersion programs were cited as a major driving factor in deciding to enroll a child in Late French Immersion.

In addition, approximately 9% of all respondents with at least one child in French Immersion noted that they might not, or will not, enroll one or more of their other children in French Immersion. Among these respondents, 5% cited lack of spaces available for these children, and 16% cited lack of programs available for these children.

Learning supports for diverse learners and children with special needs were also noted as a barrier to accessing French Immersion. Among many respondents, there is a perception that French Immersion does not welcome children with special needs. Slightly less than one-half (42%) of all parents who said they would not enroll their other child(ren) in French Immersion indicated that lack of learning supports was an influence in this decision. This perception was reinforced by many survey respondents who indicated that they enrolled their child(ren) in French Immersion specifically to avoid having them share a classroom with children with special needs, suggesting this expectation of French Immersion is widespread among parents.

1. As of the 2020/21 school year, 55,447 enrollments in B.C. K-12 classrooms are French Immersion enrollments, of a total of 673,681 K-12 enrollments throughout the entire province. <https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/bc-schools-student-enrolment-and-fte-by-grade/resource/35b9a70d-0dc0-4b9e-975e-4719cf673b02> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://globalnews.ca/video/3966866/vernon-parents-lineup-for-hours-to-register-kids-for-french-immersion> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.vancouverislandfreedaily.com/news/lottery-system-continues-for-nature-french-immersion-kindergarten/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=52015> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. B.C. Auditor General (November 2015). *An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the B.C. Public School System*. Retrieved from <https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/publications/reports/OAGBC%20Aboriginal%20Education%20Report_FINAL.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Comments could have up to three codes applied, so percentages may not add to 100%. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)