

French Advisory Committees: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Who is ensuring that French immersion programs are promoted to parents of preschoolers? Who is in charge of recruiting and hiring new French teachers? Who is developing districts' French language policies?

And who's looking at the big picture to help ensure that districts are proactive rather than reactive in response to demands to expand FSL?

In many cases, these tasks are now carried out by administrators from the school board who may or may not have a passion for French second language education, and who certainly have many other priorities to juggle. They are justifiably caught up in the issues of school closures, teacher layoffs and trying to balance their budgets.

Some of these duties are carried out by parent volunteers through local CPF chapters. But in many cases, much of this simply gets overlooked.

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, determining where and how French programs would grow, addressing curriculum issues, selecting text books and allocating federal French funding were the domain of district language coordinators. Unfortunately most of those positions fell on the chopping block a few years ago, leaving school district administrators, teachers, trustees and parents scrambling to pick up the slack.

Not only did the language coordinators oversee appropriate spending of federal French top-up funds as well as maintain and enhance French immersion and core French programs, they shared that information with their counterparts from other districts so that best practices, such as designing exit surveys for students leaving French immersion before graduation, were passed on.

In a perfect world, every district would have a language coordinator, However, we have another option. Many districts have formed a French Advisory Committee — a group responsible for

ensuring French second language programs remain vibrant and viable. Made up of local educators, parents, school administrators and trustees, FACs bring together community members who have a stake in ensuring the long term success of French second language programs.

The issues FACs cover vary from district to district, year to year. In Victoria, for example, the question of where and how French immersion middle and high school programs expand is being hotly debated by a group of parents and district staff who have a keen interest in long-term planning. Other FACs meet to discuss spending and budgets, and act as a watchdog to ensure monies for French education are appropriately spent.

Who should sit on the committee? At a minimum, there should be: a teacher and/or administrator from all French immersion schools; a teacher from the core French program; the superintendent or assistant superintendent; the local CPF president; and, of course the language coordinator if the position still exists. Other possible members would include a trustee, student representative and a member of the District Parent Advisory Council.

Some FACs are more active than others — for instance, every month during the school year, Saanich's FAC meets for breakfast at 6:30 am at the local White Spot. Now that is a dedicated group! Topics for discussion could include long-term visioning, short term funding allocations, curriculum and textbooks, learning assistance, teacher professional development, teacher and student recruitment, program expansion, attrition and much, much more. FACs are also

excellent mechanisms for documenting and sharing best practices and challenges you are experiencing.

By nature of their jobs, trustees and ministry staff must be generalists, as they answer to all constituents in the education community. Just as you would expect your doctor to refer you to a specialist if you had a serious health issue, so district trustees and staff should be able to refer questions concerning FSL to an informed body, one they can trust to keep them on top of the latest issues in French second language education. And just as your GP remains involved in your treatment even after you are referred to a specialist, the board and district staff must remain actively involved.

French Advisory Committees have become an indispensable tool in many districts across the province. If you've already got an FAC in your district and want to know if it's making the grade, download our checklist at www.cpf.bc.ca > Resources > French Advisory Committees.

For more information on how a French Advisory Committee (or an enhanced FAC) could be ideal for your district, contact Michel or Nancy at the CPF-BC & Yukon office – they'd be happy to lend a hand in this process.

Setting up an FAC

- Talk to the teachers, principals, parent organizations, trustees and district staff to gauge support.
- Draft a letter inviting the Superintendent or designate to participate on this committee and have interested parties sign it so that it is seen as a team effort.
- Put together a list of all district/board efforts that have been effective within French second language programs.
- Put together a list of areas that need more attention.
- Send final version of letter to district and copy trustees.
- Once established, select or vote for someone to be chair and someone to take minutes.
- Agree on meeting times and locations in advance.