

Breaking the spell of French immersion

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By [Sachin Maharaj](#) Freelance Opinion writer

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The Halton Catholic District School Board may be on the verge of deflating one of the biggest bubbles in Canadian public education. Later this month, the school board will consider ending its French immersion program.

Many middle-class parents will find this heretical, as they have flocked to the program in droves over the last decade. But just as the GTA's frenzied housing market experienced a much-needed return to sanity, it is high time for our schools to be released from the spell of French immersion.

French immersion programs started in the 1970s as a nation building effort in what had then become an officially bilingual country. For years, it remained a small boutique program within most school boards. However, within the last decade, enrolments across the country have exploded.

For example, between 2005 and 2015, while total school enrolment in Ontario was plummeting, French immersion enrolment in the province increased by 73 per cent. Why has French immersion enrolment boomed? Because it has increasingly become seen by upwardly mobile Canadian parents as "a private education without tuition," as one OISE researcher concluded.

French immersion classrooms tend to have drastically lower proportions of students with special needs and behavioural issues. The program also tends to segregate students based on race and income.

Indeed, data from the Toronto District School Board has shown that French immersion classrooms have much higher proportions of students from high income families and two times as many white students compared to regular classrooms.

This is why a study of French immersion in Vancouver, which was published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, found that "French immersion programmes operate as a 'cream-skimming' phenomenon ... [that] allows white, middle class parents to access markers of higher social status and prestige."

If our school system is serious about equity, why on Earth are we supporting this?

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The explosion of French immersion has also increased academic streaming by creating a dual track in many schools. One where the smart, motivated kids are funnelled into French, and everyone else gets left behind in English.

As the Ontario government has recently been considering ways to end streaming, it should be alarming that English is quickly becoming the "de facto low track stream" as one teacher in the Vancouver study put it. And schools are facing stark choices as their English programs become hollowed out.

In some cases, schools are putting English students into triple split classes (e.g. combining grades one, two and three) or are just shutting down their English programs altogether.

But here is the real kicker. While many parents are innocently putting their kids into French immersion under the

assumption that it will provide a better education, there is almost no evidence to indicate that the program offers any real academic advantage.

In fact, because school boards are struggling to keep up with the incessant demand, students in French immersion classrooms are increasingly likely to be taught by a teacher who can speak French, but who may not actually be a good teacher. One GTA school board recently reported that 80 per cent of its principals had great difficulty finding French teachers who were of similar quality to the English teachers in their schools.

And apart from whether French immersion offers a comparable education, most kids in the program don't even end up learning French. Doug Willms of the University of New Brunswick has reported that only 9 per cent of French immersion students in his province graduate high school actually proficient in the language.

The reality is that the vast majority of students across Canada who enrol in French immersion drop out by high school, and are then thrown back into the English stream, often with both language and subject matter gaps in their learning.

Should our school system really be encouraging a program that further divides students as early as kindergarten based on race, income, and academic ability? A program for which there is little evidence of benefits for students enrolled, and increasing harms for those left out? Both parents and policy-makers need to snap out of it, come to their senses, and break the spell of French immersion.

Sachin Maharaj is a PhD candidate and Canada graduate scholar in educational policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.