

BUT MOM....!!!!

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But MOM, I've been in Immersion for the last 7 years and I can speak French...

I have spent 16 years working as an immersion teacher and administrator, primarily at the grade 7 to 9 level. Leaving the immersion program after grade six or after grade 9 is something many parents have asked me about. My intention in this brief article is to share the many conversations and informal tracking of students so that parents might be better equipped to respond to their children's questions.

I would like to express my apologies to all fathers who read this. I am not implying that fathers do not have an important voice in educational programming decisions of their children. I simply made a choice because of images in my own head of several mothers with whom I have had conversations. One could as one could easily replace the title **But Mom** with **But Dad**.

This is what I hear:

1. **But Mom...** I've been in immersion for the last 7 years and I can already speak French. There is no reason for me to continue in immersion in junior high school. It's just a waste of time!!

If I had a nickel for every time a parent has come to me with that sob story from their children, I would be a millionaire. Here is how I have taken to answering.

Sure, I think it would be a good idea to quit learning French and pull your child out of immersion. But why stop there? He has been learning math for 7 years too. I really think that should cover all his basic math skills in adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. He doesn't need to learn trigonometry and logarithms. Our social studies curriculum would like students to be responsible citizens. I know your son and he is a responsible citizen. Let's pull him out of social studies as well. Oh and your son has scored very high in standardized reading tests, so why have him continue with this Language Arts nonsense? Surely he has more important things to do with his time than improving reading and writing.

Though my approach may be a little bit harsh, I think it drives home a point that is very important. Though students are quite fluent in French after 7 years of immersion instruction, they have learned only a fraction of what they need to know to function in the working world in French. As I now work with post-secondary immersion students, I can assure you that not all students have the level of linguistic fluency required to excel in a French working environment. At Faculté Saint-Jean we have supports in place to ensure even our university level French students continue to learn and improve their language skills.

2. **But Mom...** if I switch out of immersion, it will be easier and my marks will improve!!

There is another story that parents have come to me with on numerous occasions. On the surface it makes sense, however when a task is easy, we tend to put in less effort. My experience has been that students leaving an immersion program see their marks decline, at times quite significantly. Students seem to think that if they can make

choices their educational program, then they can also choose whether or not to do their homework, whom to hang around with and what is “cool”. In an attempt to integrate into a new social setting outside the immersion class as quickly as possible, many of the good work habits that students have developed tend to fall to the wayside. The immersion peer group is left for a new social group where academic pursuits are not always the priority. Is it a surprise? Not to me, but it usually is to parents. Making things easier for children is not always a good policy. Hard work has its rewards. In immersion the reward is a greater ability to speak, read, write and understand in French.

In fact, I can recall only one instance where a student actually improved their marks after switching out of immersion. It was a situation where a student had difficulty socially within the immersion class. Yet I have never heard a child try to convince their parents that they would be better off outside the immersion program because students in their class were bullying them.

3. **But Mom...** I will be able do better in my English classes, and in my achievement exams.

A child may have a point here. The truth is students likely perform better on standardized tests when they are able to write in their first language. However, across the province of Alberta, students in immersion programs show significantly better results in their English Language Arts achievement exams than students in regular English programs. Their reading skills are better. When [Statistics Canada](#) analyzed this information, improved scores could not be attributed to social-economic standing or parental education. Immersion students receive a double dose of language skills, French and English. Skills learned in one language are transferred to the other meaning students English language skills are also improved.

4. **But Mom...** my friends are not in my class. If I switch to the regular stream, I will be with my friends.

As an administrator who has spent many hours creating “class lists” I know that teachers think many close friends should not be in the same class. It creates a lack of focus on their learning. Though time for socializing is important for teenagers, it doesn’t have to happen in class. Class time is for learning.

5. **But Mom...** I will be going to university in English and I won’t manage if I learn classes like Biology and Physics in French.

The facts don’t bear this out at all. A lot of scientific terminology has its basis in Latin, and the English and French words are nearly identical (biologie/biology, molecule/molécule). Learning concepts is what is important, and that can be done in French just as well as in English. Statistics show graduates of immersion programs do very well in science courses taught in English. Better yet, why not pursue a degree in French, continue to develop your bilingualism and really be ready for the job market.