

It is a very great pleasure to be back at this school to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the first immersion class; it brings up memories very dear to our hearts. We, as the founding parents were involved in the development of the program for nine years - from the fall of 1963, when we held our first meeting of 12 parents, to 1972 when the program appeared to be safely institutionalized and was spreading, it seemed miraculously, far beyond the walls of this little school. We were confident then that our model had proven itself, first by observing our children's growing fluency and then by the more objective test results of Dr. Lambert and his team. We now felt we could retire until, like Rip Van Winkles, we found ourselves invited this week to revisit the the scenes of this long-ago experience.

At that first meeting in October 1963, we were a disparate group of parents, but unanimous in wanting our children to speak more than Diefenbaker French (alas poor Mr. Diefenbaker - how he would have benefited from early immersion!) and furthermore we were united in the belief that young children were perfectly capable of learning a second language without too many tears.. Our belief was also reflected in the 1962 UNESCO report on the Teaching of Second Languages, our bible at the time. It showed us that whole populations had produced bilingual speakers, some by necessity, others by choice, many at an early age. Our task was to create a model that would respond to our situation. If we sometimes differed among ourselves in our motivation, for me it was primarily for the enrichment of the individual student, to give him or her a more flexible mind, to help him be at home in more than one culture, and, not unexpectedly, in this one.

The model we proposed was for a home-school language switch program, and it was supported by 240 parents united under the name of the St. Lambert Protestant Parents for Bilingual Education. Murielle has told you the steps we took before the first Kindergarten was introduced in September 1965. This wasn't the end of the story. For a number of years the existence of the immersion classes was threatened each spring, but over time the number of supporters among the decision makers increased, partly because of the longitudinal study undertaken by Dr. Lambert and partly due to continued pressure of the St. Lambert Bilingual School Study Group, the successor of the larger parents' group.



This group of up to six parents had the task of keeping "the baby" afloat. We wrote countless letters and briefs, helped find teachers and chose curriculum, studied, argued, visited Home and School groups throughout the Montreal area, encouraged each other after every setback, rejoiced at every success, and learned not to take "no" for an answer. I can assure you it was the experience of a lifetime!

Thirty years later, I am more aware that language is a divisive force in our society, as it is in the world at large. But we are more than language speakers; we are human beings who must among other things learn to overcome language and cultural differences. A high level of second language acquisition is one tool for reconciliation. But our primary concern is and must remain the development and enrichment of the individual child, and parents must be trusted to make the best decisions in that regard.

My wish is that the members of the pilot class, who are now the age we were back then, will also find a cause to embrace and that when the going gets tough, they will take heart from their parents' experience of thirty years ago.

Thank you.

*Omelikoff*