

**Backgrounder****Parental involvement brought French immersion  
to the public education system**

*"Little did the parents know at the time what the consequences of their modest overtures would be." - Olga Melikoff, a founding member of the St. Lambert parents who initiated French immersion education*

The introduction of French immersion public education at St. Lambert's Margaret Pendlebury School in 1965 is a striking example of how parental involvement led to positive and far-reaching change in the education system.

The launch of the first immersion program in a kindergarten class of 26 students was a direct result of the efforts of some 200 St. Lambert parents, led by Olga Melikoff, Valerie Neale and Murielle Parkes, all three of whom had school-age children at the time.

These anglophone parents wanted their children to have a bilingual education that would enable them to understand and communicate freely with their francophone neighbours. They were frustrated by the apparent ineffectiveness of the traditional approaches to French second-language education in English public schools. Private schools were an option for only the privileged few, while overcrowding in the French Catholic public system precluded more than a limited number of English-speaking children attending local French schools.

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The St. Lambert parents realized the urgent need for an innovative French-language program within the English public school system. They also felt strongly that this should be available on a voluntary basis to all children, regardless of intellectual ability.

Their proposal was to "immerse" children in the second language by providing 100 per cent of their early instruction in French, and only gradually introduce teaching in English as the students advanced in the elementary grades.

As widespread as immersion education is today with approximately 300,000 students enrolled across Canada, in the early 1960s it was considered a radical and potentially dangerous idea. Existing pedagogy held that educating very young children in a language other than their mother tongue could negatively affect progress in the mother tongue and even damage their overall intellectual development.

Convinced of the opposite, the St. Lambert parents systematically developed counter-arguments, guided by a 1962 UNESCO report that cautiously endorsed second-language learning at an early age. They also sought the support of experts in the field, including neurosurgeon Dr. Wilder Penfield and McGill psycholinguist Dr. Wallace Lambert, both of whom endorsed the project.

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After more than two years of hard work, countless meetings and extensive research, the parents convinced the Chambly County Protestant Central School Board (predecessor of today's South Shore School Board) to set up a trial French immersion kindergarten.

By now the parents had also persuaded Evelyne Billey-Lichon, a kindergarten teacher recently arrived from France, to teach the first class. They had previously hired her to teach Saturday morning art classes to their children in French and were encouraged by the positive outcome.

In the years following its introduction, what came to be known as "the St. Lambert experiment" generated intense interest on the part of both Canadian and foreign academics and educators. It was the first experiment in bilingual education submitted to long-term testing, and its success led to the growth of immersion education throughout the Montreal area, across Canada and internationally.

The St. Lambert parents were true innovators at a time when school authorities were not used to parental input in educational matters. The South Shore School Board salutes their visionary spirit which helped to make it a Canadian leader in immersion education.

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