

What does it mean to go to French Immersion School?

Grade 11 and 12 students at Ecole Camrose Composite High School are getting close to completing a full 13 year, Kindergarten to Grade 12 French Immersion experience.

This year's grad class is only the third in the local program's history. The French Immersion schooling story in Camrose began in 2004, with French programming offered at the Kindergarten and Grade 1 level only. Each year, as the students got a year older, the program expanded by one grade level too. The first students and the program started Grade 12 at the same time.

Though this year's Grade 12 class is small, there are literally hundreds of students in Camrose French Immersion classrooms, now stretching from Pre-Kindergarten opportunities all the way through high school. The program runs in three Camrose schools, side-by-side with English classrooms at Ecole Sifton, Ecole Charlie Killam and Ecole Camrose Composite High schools. This year Battle River School Division is also considering adding a late-enrollment option, so students don't have to start their French studies when they start school, but could begin French Immersion when they reach Grade 6. You could find out more about that option at an information night taking place January 25, at 6:30 p.m. at Ecole Charlie Killam.

Going into the high school classrooms, all the discussion takes place in French and all the information written on the whiteboard or tacked to the walls is in that language too. The teachers talk quickly and expressively and the students are clearly taking it all in.

But what's it like to be going to school in French in east-Central Alberta? We asked this year's most seasoned students a few questions that come up regularly regarding French Immersion.



Joseph Turcan and Owain Osborne in class

Do you come from a family that speaks French? Is it more difficult to do well without that support?

Joseph Turcan, in Grade 12, says he and his sister are both enrolled in French Immersion, but there's no French background at all in their household. Joseph says he and his sibling don't really speak French outside of school, but that hasn't stopped them from succeeding in the program at all.

Kassidy Cameron, a Grade 11 student, says her parents took French back in their own high school days but they aren't really fluent enough to keep up with her and her brother now. She doesn't see it as an issue for her learning either.

Emma-Leigh Simonot's father is fluent in French and Hannah Gau has some French influence in her family, too. But they, like their classmates, believe the program has been more of an influence on their learning than their family has been.

"I never thought of French Immersion as making school harder for me," says Hannah.

Does taking classes in French make you a better student?

Molly Boyd, a Grade 11 student, says you need to be a motivated and committed student when you start the program and Emma-Leigh agrees, adding, "we tend to be pretty dedicated students and we probably would be no matter what."

But the students also agree that the ongoing work of switching languages while they think, write and learn does deepen their thinking and their ability to take what they know in one situation and apply it to another situation.

What's next after high school? Is there more French in your future?

Joseph will be entering the trades and he's exciting about the increased flexibility that his French-language learning will bring. "It gives me a one-up on everyone else," he explains. "I can move around and be employable more places."



Gabe Osborne, Andrew Holm and Leif Hvenegaard enjoy a little Cos-play as they read the script for a classic play in French.

Leif Hvenegaard, in Grade 11, also thinks that having a second language will give him more opportunities. "I'm going to be travelling and studying abroad," he says.

Hannah says she can see herself taking additional French studies in University. "I want to study speech language and I can take additional training to have that degree in both English and French, which is awesome. I never even would have thought of that without being in French Immersion."

And for Emma-Leigh, who is looking at a career in the Canadian film industry, which is most developed in Quebec, having French will be a great asset.

Would you recommend the program to others?

The students agree that the French Immersion program is "pretty decent". They call themselves a tight group, appreciate all that being part of the local program has brought them and believe it will get even better as it continues to mature and grow.

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