Vitality of Language and Community

By Selena Mell, Provincial Francophone School Division/Conseil scolaire francophone provincial



Quidi Vidi neighbourhood in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, taken fall 2022.



Newfoundland coastline outside of St. John's, Newfoundland, taken fall 2022. Photos courtesy of Selena Mell.

Outstretched from the easternmost region of Canada and from the mainland to the northwest, Newfoundland and Labrador offer more than pristine coastlines and woodlands or interaction with friendly locals. Beyond pea soup, toutons, cod tongues, or Jigg's dinner, the province's history reveals a rich French ancestry.

A French presence was first established in Newfoundland in the 16th century when a francophone colony was established at Plaisance now Placentia.[1] The population expanded throughout Newfoundland and Labrador with primary concentration in three distinct regions at the Port au Port Peninsula, St. John's and its surrounding areas, and Labrador. In 1987, marking its longstanding influence, the historical adoption and raising of an official flag prominently reflected the origins of French Newfoundlanders and Labradorians through a symbolic design which combined the flags of France and those of Acadian descent.[2] Furthermore, in 2004, the province proudly celebrated 500 years of French residence.

Anchoring the francophone community

The first French language school in the province opened in La Grand'Terre in 1984.[3] Well before this time, preserving language and cultivating a strong sense of francophone identity remained the focus of the French minority. For almost 25 years, the provincial Francophone School District (CSFP) has provided educational opportunities for K-12 French First Language Education, where learners embark on historical, linguistic, and cultural learning experiences beyond classroom walls.

A unique element of Francophone schools is that they provide an inclusive environment, further extending to the community. The vitality of ongoing partnerships allows the schools to foster activities and initiatives which help anchor the francophone families and help ensure the survival and growth of this official language.

Bridging francophone identity

St John's – Principals Kevin Hautcoeur from École des Grands-Vents and Nicole Champdoizeau from Rocher-du-Nord in St. John's, view their alliances as an integral part of student success. Many activities occur due to a partnership with the Francophone Community Association of St. John's (ACSFJ). A PassepArt micro-grant provided access to a living museum showcasing Francophone, Indigenous Peoples and Newfoundland heritage. This allowed the discovery of ancestral roots where students and volunteers developed costumes, determined staging, and finalized efforts together. Collaboration with the Cultural Network led to the hosting of the first provincial Francophone literary festival that included visiting francophone artists.

The Vice Versa micro-grant provided fitness room equipment for training and expanded into furnishing materials needed by the girls' volleyball team. This resulted in the team's ability to compete in its first provincial tournament and being selected as the provincial youth representatives for the Jeux de l'Acadie in New Brunswick.

West Coast – Principals Dominique Savoie from École Sainte-Anne (La Grand'Terre) and Josette Bourque from École Notre-Dame-du-Cap (Cap Saint-Georges) value their engagement with the francophone west coast regional organization (ARCO). Savoie asserts that this well-respected relationship has been forged for numerous years, while Bourque credits the group with enhancing students' cultural identity by offering a variety of activities and enhancing teaching by proposing projects that accompany programs of study.

ARCO's partnership helped bring École Sainte-Anne's mascot to life, which

they showcased in a promotional video demonstrating the creative process and interviewing the artist/school alumnus responsible for its design. Savoie sees the effort as one example of creating a sense of belonging to their French school. Bourque points to the groups' assistance in locating grants which finance school activities such as hydroponic gardening or providing joint opportunities with the neighbouring CSFP school.

Labrador – Principal Chloé Tinkler at *École l'ENVOL* (Labrador City) believes that minority languages and their culture are strengthened through community partners. As the cornerstone of the Francophone community, Tinkler asserts that school leaders must actively pursue and maintain ancillary relationships with different organizations, noting a prominent partnership with the local Francophone Association (AFL). An example provided was the celebration marking the provincially recognized Francophone Day on May 30. Marking the 50th anniversary of the provincial francophone flag raising, the school hosted the event with the support of AFL, inviting the francophone community and regional leaders to the celebration, concert, and luncheon. Tinkler states that shared community goals increase a sense of belonging and enhance student cultural identity.

At École Boréale (Happy Valley-Goose Bay), Principal Nancy Boutin shared examples from the alliance with the Labrador Festival Creative. A local painter assisted the school in creating a mosaic linking students' painted canvas. The effort is directly related to the Indigenous Peoples, paying homage to the dual heritage existing for some regional Francophone families. A secondary art focus through a local instructor provided learning in elements of theatre while working on a production of *The Wizard of Oz*; a production later shared with preschool and community children.

We recognize education as the pillar of any society. CSFP schools are proud to work alongside community groups grounded in efforts to reinforce and promote social, cultural, athletic, and artistic opportunities. The groups highlighted, as well as francophone media, youth organizations, advocacy groups and our anglophone allies are valued as they help strengthen the visibility and enhance recognition of the francophone minority context. We know that together we are stronger. ○

References:

1. Higgins, J. (2009). French Settlement 1504-1904. Hertiage Newfoundland and Labrador.
2. Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Education, Division of Program Development. (1991, June). A policy for French first language education in Newfoundland and Labrador. https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/k12_french_languepremiere_pdf_english.pdf.
3. Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. (2020). *Infographic: The French presence in Newfoundland and Labrador*. https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/statistics/infographics/french-presence-newfoundland-labrador.

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