

Leading a French crusade . . . in B.C.

Francophone teacher-in-training hoping that others will follow her path

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VANCOUVER -- Her identity never fails to surprise: a francophone born and raised in British Columbia.

"Wow, you speak French perfectly," Quebeckers tell Tarah Dionne when she travels. "Where are you from again?"

The question is familiar to young French speakers like 21-year-old Ms. Dionne.

After all, only 10 per cent of the B.C.'s francophone population, now at nearly 64,000, were born here.

The community remains far smaller than the English, Cantonese and Punjabi speaking populations, but francophones feel that there are now more reasons to stay put, and see education as the best measure of the community's growth.

Ms. Dionne is planning to be the first teacher to be born and completely educated in French in the Lower Mainland -- from kindergarten to the francophone teaching program at Simon Fraser University. She will graduate in two years, around the same time Vancouver's first francophone high school will open.

The \$21.6-million school, which the province announced last week, will be the fourth high school and 39th school in the province to offer a francophone program.

The province has only one francophone school board, the Conseil Scolaire Francophone [CSF]. The new high school is viewed as a complete turnaround since the battle for francophone education erupted in 1951 with a protest in Maillardville after the government refused support to its French Catholic schools.

CSF chair Marie Bourgeois called the government's current support a "tremendous evolution."

"It's not the same province now as it was when I arrived," said Ms. Bourgeois, who moved to B.C. from Montreal in 1974. "There was basically nothing available in French. If you tried to get services in French. . . forget it, you didn't get it. It just was not there."

Under Bill Bennett's leadership, the province accepted the first outline for a public French education program in 1979, and after the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms enshrined francophone rights, the first French-language elementary school in the province opened in 1983. Both Ms. Bourgeois's sons from a marriage to an anglophone attended École Anne Hébert in Vancouver.

"There was no way I was going to let my heritage die with me," she said.

Schools opened around the province with pressure from the federation of francophone parents. The CSF was created in 1995, and the province established a bureau of francophone affairs in 2001.

"The difference is that we've grown with a sense of community," said Gerry Dionne, Ms. Dionne's father. "When I go into the school now, the walls are starting to reflect a francophone presence. There are pictures of barbecues we attend and where French songs are sung."

Mr. Dionne moved from Sudbury, Ont., to Vancouver in 1979. He said it wasn't until Ms. Dionne, his first child with his anglophone wife, was born that he realized how important French education would be. "I felt that it was important for my children to understand the French *joie de vivre*," he said.

In 2002, Ms. Dionne was one of seven students in the first graduating class from Surrey's only francophone high school -- Gabrielle Roy. Her younger sister's class, which will graduate in 2007, has about 24 students. Already, the number of students enrolled with the CSF has increased to more than 3,600, up from about 2,500 in 2001 and 1,000 in 1995. Classes are significantly smaller than those of most schools, which allows more one-on-one time with teachers, but restricts the number of courses offered.

Recruiting teachers has been a challenge, with most coming from Ontario or Quebec. But as Ms. Dionne's generation grows up, that, too, may change.

Simon Fraser University now offers its one-year teaching program completely in French - and Ms. Dionne will be the first B.C. francophone graduate. The French teaching program has grown exponentially, as it also attracted graduates from B.C.'s popular French immersion program. It will accommodate 64 students starting in January, 2007, up from 32 in 2003.

Many of the students are expected to follow the example of Ms. Dionne, who plans to teach high-school math in the province. She said she wants students, and one day, her own children, to have a positive experience like she had.

"When I was in high school, there was no drugs, there was no bullying, no problems. Nothing," she said.

The provincial government says the future for the community looks bright: "I think French has grown and will continue to be one of the fundamental languages," said Education Minister Shirley Bond. "But I just see this as the beginning." --

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