

September 21, 2005, 'Excerpt from Canadian Parents for French British Columbia-Yukon quarterly newspaper'

The Birth of EFI in Chetwynd.

“Je suis une pizza...”

This is the song I just watched some of my son's grade one classmates sing with their teacher tonight. It's daunting that not even a year ago my wife and I decided to start an E.F.I. program in Chetwynd and that here before us is our child and many others having an awesome time in French Immersion. The knowledge of what we accomplished, that it may possibly open doors of opportunity for some of the children in this class and the feelings associated with it is almost too deep for an average dude like me.

It all started when Garret and Sherry Watchorn moved back to Canada from working overseas. Instead of moving home to Chetwynd, we decided to live in Prince George as we thought the opportunities for our child's education would be better. We had decided to enrol our 5 year old in the French Immersion program in Prince George after witnessing the advantages of having a second language overseas.

Before kindergarten started we had to move back to Chetwynd and were very impressed with our new kindergarten teacher, but we always felt a sense of loss when thinking about the missed opportunity for our son.

It was early October when we decided to organize and push for a French immersion program in Chetwynd. I had no idea where to start. I first researched my school district board policies on programs of choice and French Immersion, talked to the District Superintendent and local board trustees, and found the essentials the board needed to make a decision in our favour. I then phoned the French Immersion School in Prince George to get some direction. They had forwarded me to an organization called Canadian Parents for French. I then contacted them and spoke to Nancy Taylor who immediately gave me solid guidance and support through the entire process.

Through CPF I found schools that offered French immersion in towns comparable to Chetwynd. I talked to the principals of these schools to find the struggles and realities of this program in small centers to find out if having an Early French Immersion (E.F.I.) was a possibility. Yes, there were some issues but none so large as to keep us from moving forward.

On November 05/04 Sherry and I decided to blitz the town of Chetwynd with French Immersion information brochures located at key places in town delivered to us from CPF-BC & Yukon branch, an article in the newspaper, a radio advertisement, 2,350 surveys circulated in the community newspaper and the Coffee Talk newsletter which gave highlights of the French Immersion program. On the bottom of the survey there was a section that listed the interest level of the parents of children entering grade 1 and kindergarten in the 2005/06 year. They were to complete the questionnaire and return to

collection boxes located at places where our target age group frequented (pre-schools, swimming pools, etc...). The school district would not allow us to distribute the brochure/survey to the current Kindergarten students... Also on this day, our newspaper editor at the time was a French Immersion graduate and she wrote many great articles and editorials in our newspaper in favour of our attempt.

In the first week, out of an estimated 80 children entering Kindergarten and Grade One, we received 21 committed parents. I sent a notice to our school district that on December 15/04 I would like to make a presentation to ask the board to start an E.F.I in Chetwynd.

After the presentation the District Superintendent carried out a feasibility study and on Feb. 15/05 came back with results that would be reviewed by a newly created French Advisory Committee. The findings of this review from the F.A.C. were to be presented to the board on March 16/05.

Time was running out. On March 16th I gave a final presentation asking the board for a decision. After the F.A.C. review had been read, Chetwynd's trustee's put forth a motion to start E.F.I. in Chetwynd. All were in favour-none were opposed. During the decision, (which took about 3 minutes) it felt like 20 minutes had passed and that my heart turned into a sledge hammer thudding slowly. It took a day for it to sink in.

May 20th we held a French Immersion information night. This was one of the highlights for me because we had found out that not only did our district find a teacher but that she was coming to the information night. Also a Dawson Creek Principal was travelling to the meeting to let us know that we had indeed lucked out in finding our new teacher as she had worked with her before. Sally Schilds (CPF President in Dawson Creek) and her grade 7 daughter Brenna Schilds (who was an awesome speaker!) came up to give presentations as well. All presentations were very well done and most of the parents' questions and worries were put to bed.

Now we have a French immersion program that is working very well. There is a waiting list for our class. We have extremely competent, organized, keen parents that have just started up a CPF chapter. We love our teacher and we have parents trying to secure a spot for their children in EFI for 2008. This whole experience, although a lot of work, has been totally gratifying. Now, if Chetwynd's weather was more like Sooke, I'd be complete.

Seriously though, I think that humanity's future, the future of this Earth and its systems rely on our children and their children after them. Energy issues, pollution, overpopulation, and economic issues...the list goes on. It's a burden I wish they would not have to bear. I honestly can't think of a better cause than working for a chance at a better future for my children. My wish is that all parents fight and work as hard as we did for the best educational programs possible, if that happens; the sky is the limit for education for our children in Canada.

I hear of many hardships of other communities who are trying to get an Early French Immersion program. I really don't know why things seemed to go smoothly here, but I know that having some of the following definitely helped:

- Solid support, information and encouragement from Nancy Taylor and CPF
- Discussions and e-mails with Heather Newman
- Well written, classy editorials by Denise Everitt
- Support from Ecole Frank Ross Principal Leslie Lambie
- Support from our town Mayor, Evan Suagstead
- Backing from our Public Library, Little Lights Daycare, and the other two pre-schools located in our town, who distributed the CPF brochures/surveys.
- Affordable advertising from our local Coffee Talk, Chetwynd Echo, and our radio station 94.5 Chet. FM
- A local elementary school shutting down due to insufficient numbers the summer before EFI started up, buffering the student shortage on other schools when students moved to the EFI program
- Our fast, forward thinking school board
- The helpfulness of school board 59 Superintendent, Bill Deith
- A warm reception by local Principal Jarvis Wice
- An excitement level stirred up by parents who wanted more for their children and who had the courage to not listen to the local rumour mill and try something new
- A “can't lose” attitude
- Lady luck. Our teacher (Mdm. Morgret... the best) and her husband who lived in Vancouver happened to be looking for a cheaper place to live and closer to family. Chetwynd fit both.

In the end, I guess I can summarize the whole thing as a David and Goliath story. The odds were against us no doubt. I don't know who's going to read this but if you are and you are trying to start an EFI in your community I hope this story helps and I hope that you get a bit of inspiration in the knowledge that if the Chetwyndites can do it, so can you.

Never ever give up!

Cheers,

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