



# Standards for School Leaders: *Implications for Leadership in Foreign Language Immersion Programs*

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## **Introduction and Background**

Since their inception nearly 40 years ago in Canada, language immersion programs have grown in both popularity and numbers around the world (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2003; Swain & Johnson, 1997). Curtain and Dahlberg, in the 2004 edition of their highly acclaimed book *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, report that there are currently some 278 immersion schools in 29 states, including the District of Columbia (p. 278). These statistics include both total and partial foreign language (FL) immersion programs. What this means is that there are, at present, approximately 46,000 foreign language immersion students in the U.S. compared to the 5,000 reported in 1985 (Rubio, 1998). There are also a growing number of two-way (dual language) immersion programs (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2003), those having student populations comprised of native speakers of English and native speakers of the immersion language (e.g., Spanish). However, the focus of this article is one-way (FL) full and partial immersion programs. Their continued increase in numbers is a testament to both their effectiveness with students and the resulting enthusiasm of educators and parents (Genesee, 1987; Met & Lorenz, 1997).

To date, immersion research has tended to focus on those issues of most concern to parents and teachers, such as students' English language development and subject matter learning (Walker & Tedick, 2000). Very little has been written about the challenges of maintaining successful immersion programs from an administrative perspective. Yet, Met (1987) identifies "administrative support" as the number one key ingredient of a successful immersion program. So, where do we go from here? What does an administrator have to know to be able to act as the educational leader in an immersion school?

## **Standards for School Leaders**

Just as standards have been developed to identify what students and teachers need to know and be able to do, so too have they emerged in the field of school administration. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) adopted a set of *Standards for School Leaders* (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), which are presented below.

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:

- ❶ facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (p. 10),
- ❷ advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (p. 12),
- ❸ ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment" (p. 14),
- ❹ collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources" (p. 16),

- 5 acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (p. 18), and
- 6 understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context” (p. 20).

Although the overall leadership and organizational qualifications of being a principal remain the same regardless of the setting, there are some critical differences when considering the role of a principal in an immersion school. Of these six standards shown above, three are addressed in this *Bridge*. Specifically, I address standards one (vision of learning), two (school culture and instructional program), and four (collaboration with families and community). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete analysis of each of these three standards as they apply to the immersion context, I draw on the existing literature to offer some thoughts for each. At the end of each section, I propose standards-related questions that could be asked of candidates who apply for leadership roles in immersion schools.<sup>1</sup>

### Standard 1—Developing a Shared Vision

Met and Lorenz (1997) argue that the numerous long-standing successful immersion programs in the U.S. attest to the skill and commitment of their administrators, suggesting that the selection of administrators for immersion programs is key to the program’s viability. Strong leadership from principals is essential to ensure sound coherent decision-making that promotes the objectives of all immersion programs (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). First and foremost, administrators of immersion programs must understand and wholeheartedly support the immersion model (Met & Lorenz, 1997).

One of the few documents that focuses solely on the role of the administrator in an immersion school is a chapter entitled “Immersion: A Principal’s Perspective,” written by Roger Coffman (1992). Coffman maintains that much has been said about the key role played by the building principal in the overall effectiveness of a school’s program. Being an immersion principal himself, he has found that this role seems to take on a new meaning in an immersion school. According to Coffman (1992), as the immersion school’s main advocate, the immersion principal must be knowledgeable about the immersion program’s goals, as well as be well-versed and constantly up-to-date with current research and theory in the areas of immersion education and first and second language acquisition. Such knowledge is critical in developing, articulating, and implementing a shared vision of learning for the school community.

It is likely that candidates for the principal’s position of an immersion school may not be familiar with immersion initially. The questions below are offered as examples of the kinds of questions related to this first standard that might contribute to the principal interview process for immersion programs.

#### Sample Interview Questions

- How do you view the role of the principal in shaping the culture of our school so that a shared mission and vision consistent with immersion principles are realized?
- What specific steps would you take as an administrator to make sure that you remain (or become) knowledgeable about immersion research and the goals of immersion programs?
- What is different about being a principal in an immersion school vs. a non-immersion school?

### Standard 2—Fostering a School Culture and Instructional Program

Standard 2 in the *Standards for School Leaders* document is very broad and includes activities ranging from fostering successful professional development for teachers to evaluation of teacher performance to guiding curriculum development to ensuring that student performance is assessed in a variety of ways.

Here I raise the question of whether proficiency in the immersion language is necessary for a principal, explore issues related to the administrator's role in curriculum and instruction, discuss issues related to evaluating teacher performance and providing opportunities for teacher professional development, and explore hiring practices.

### *Instructional Leadership: Is Proficiency in the Immersion Language Necessary?*

When discussing what qualifications are necessary for being a principal in an immersion school, the topic of “speaking the language of the school” often arises. According to Fortune and Jorstad (1996), sixty-seven percent of full immersion administrators and 74 percent of partial immersion administrators have no proficiency in the immersion language. This stated, Met and Lorenz (1997) argue that for many principals, the lack of language proficiency only heightens their commitment to the program. In fact, it is their opinion that principals who do not speak the immersion language are often inspired to advocate for immersion because they are witnessing students acquiring the language “with ease and confidence—they see the students doing something that they, an educated adult, cannot do” (p. 244). Their more than two decades worth of experience with U.S. immersion schools have led Met and Lorenz to believe that some of the most effective and supportive administrators are those who do not speak the immersion language.

Coffman (1992) argues for more of a “happy medium” in this area, stating that it is definitely important for the principal to have at least a working knowledge of the language. However, he notes that it is extremely rare to find an individual with all of the necessary administrative credentials and prerequisites who also speaks the immersion language of the school. As support for his position he has found that his interest in and study of the immersion language has enabled him to, as he puts it, “be an equal, knowledgeable participant in the on-going development of the program” (p. 156). It is not necessary to be completely fluent to understand what is happening in the classrooms, in staff meetings, and most importantly, to understand the learning and teaching processes experienced by both students and teachers. Regardless of the principal's language proficiency level, Met and Lorenz (1997) point out two key areas in which they find proficiency in the immersion language a real asset, and Coffman would most likely agree: instructional leadership and teacher evaluation.

### *The Administrator's Role in Curriculum and Instruction*

While proficiency in the immersion language may not be essential, knowledge of effective teaching practices when teaching through an immersion language is. Principals of immersion schools must realize that immersion teachers have to plan for instruction differently, taking into account students' developing proficiency in the immersion language and English. Principals should also acknowledge that immersion teachers need to consider objectives differently as they plan for instruction (Met, 1989). Although the role of the immersion teacher is to teach the standard content curriculum, the majority of the instruction takes place through the medium of the immersion language. Thus, these teachers are language and content teachers, and therefore, really wear two hats at all times (Snow, 1990). Because of this, it is important for administrators to be aware that, in addition to planning content objectives, the immersion teacher must also *intentionally* plan for language growth (Met, 1989).

Effective administrators should be familiar with the two types of language objectives—content-obligatory and content-compatible—recommended for immersion curriculum development. According to Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989), content-obligatory language objectives include the vocabulary, grammar, and language functions *required* for teaching the content objectives. In contrast, content-compatible language objectives encompass those that are compatible with the content objectives, but not necessarily required in order for the students to master the academic concepts of the content curriculum. As an example of content-obligatory language, in a lesson designed to teach students about the various planets of the solar system, the names used to identify each planet must be taught (i.e., content-obligatory). In

contrast, the teacher *may* choose to also teach cardinal numbers so students may identify each planet according to its sequential cardinal number describing its physical proximity to the sun. While this obviously lends itself nicely to the lesson, knowing cardinal numbers is not absolutely required for students to master the concept of identifying the different planets.

Being familiar with content-obligatory and content-compatible language objectives is important for administrators to be able to support effective curriculum development practices within an immersion school. Principals who are knowledgeable in this area can ensure that teachers select or design objectives and activities that will lead to both content mastery and second language acquisition. Likewise, principals can also ensure that instructional activities and teaching practices allow students to acquire the curricular concepts even if their language proficiency may be limited. Finally, immersion principals who are aware of language objectives and how they shape the instruction of language within content lesson plans can use this knowledge as a springboard when discussing classroom observations and instructional improvements with their teachers.

### *Evaluating Immersion Teacher Performance*

Many monolingual school administrators are at a disadvantage as observers in a foreign language classroom (Wallinger, 2000). And yet, because they are responsible for evaluating teacher performance, principals must learn some strategies to effectively do so when they do not speak the immersion language. Met and Lorenz (1997) write that many components of effective instruction are observable. For example, the degree of student engagement, the appropriate use of both large and small group instruction, and the physical and affective climate are areas where the principal's instructional experience is valid, no matter how limited their second language proficiency. However, the more language the principal understands, the more accurate and complete the evaluation becomes. Principals will also improve the quality and accuracy of their evaluations by inviting teachers to clarify anything they were unable to understand during a post-observation interview with the teacher.

When observing and evaluating immersion teacher performance, it may be helpful for administrators to consult the "Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist," developed by Tara Fortune, along with a group of forty immersion teachers from across the U.S.<sup>2</sup> It integrates research and practitioner-based information and may be used to facilitate targeted observation in a variety of ways. For example, it is designed so teachers may use it to explore and evaluate their own teaching by audio- or video-taping themselves for review and reflection. It may also be used to help facilitate peer coaching or mentoring situations. And of course, administrators can use the checklist to aid in the observation of teachers, either individually or within grade-level teams. The key immersion teaching strategies highlighted within the checklist are:

- Integrating language, content, and culture
- Attending to continuous language growth and improvement of accuracy
- Providing multiple ways of making input comprehensible
- Creating a rich second language learning environment
- Using teacher talk effectively
- Promoting extended student output
- Attending to diverse learner needs

It is also possible to be creative when it comes to evaluating teacher performance. Some administrators have been known to involve others in the observation and evaluation process, such as their district's foreign language coordinator, another administrator with language expertise, or in some cases, the school's curriculum specialist (if one exists). The bottom line is that the efforts made by administrators

and the solutions they discover to compensate for their lack of second language proficiency demonstrate a commitment to the effectiveness of immersion education, thus ensuring quality instruction in their schools (Met & Lorenz, 1997).

### *Ensuring On-Going Staff Development*

It is very important for any administrator to fully support on-going professional development opportunities for their teachers. This is especially true for immersion teachers, in light of the fact that no pre-service professional preparation programs for immersion education exist in the U.S. (Met & Lorenz, 1997). Furthermore, no state currently requires a specific certification for immersion or a set of standards defining effective immersion teaching (Walker & Tedick, 2000). Snow (1990, p. 158) has characterized immersion teacher development in the U.S. as taking place in one of two ways: 1) “under the wing,” when new immersion teachers are “adopted” by experienced teachers, or 2) “by the seat of the pants,” as new teachers learn through trial and error.

Met (1989) points out that even when professional development workshops are held, they are usually one-shot, short-term affairs, which are hardly sufficient to meet the professional needs of practicing immersion teachers. Since few immersion schools or districts have “in-house expertise,” it is up to immersion administrators to keep abreast of the needs of their teachers and locate professional development opportunities to meet these needs, as well as to locate the funding necessary to provide these crucial opportunities. Being aware of existing programs and opportunities is key so that principals can encourage teachers to attend workshops or enroll in classes. If the school cannot afford to bring in a speaker, the principal may be able to provide release-time so teachers can attend such workshops on their own.

Over the past decade, some new opportunities specifically targeting immersion educators have emerged. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota, for example, holds week-long institutes each summer.<sup>3</sup> These institutes include immersion-specific options and target a range of important issues in immersion instruction. For example, *Immersion 101: An Introduction to Immersion Teaching*, which specifically targets new immersion teachers and administrators, provides an introduction to the challenges, options, and issues common to immersion education. Another institute, *Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education*, changes gears annually to provide in-depth exploration of various “hot topics” in immersion education, such as literacy instruction or addressing the needs of struggling learners in immersion schools. Additionally, the University of Minnesota has recently developed a certificate program in Language Immersion Education designed to prepare teachers and other professionals to work more effectively in immersion settings.<sup>4</sup> The first of its kind in the U.S., this 15-credit certificate program incorporates a coherent set of courses designed specifically for immersion teachers, addressing topics in second language acquisition, curriculum development, instruction, and assessment. Finally, CARLA sponsors occasional conferences for immersion educators, with the next scheduled for October 21-23, 2004.<sup>5</sup>

### *Hiring Teachers*

As a principal of an immersion school, Coffman (1992) argues that “finding competent, qualified classroom immersion teachers is, no doubt, the single most important and difficult challenge in building an effective language immersion program” (p. 158). Immersion principals need to make sure that hiring practices identify individuals who are not only excellent teachers but also who have native or near-native proficiency in the immersion language. To say that such individuals are hard to find is an understatement. To complicate the matter further, there tends to be significant teacher turnover in immersion schools for a variety of reasons, so building and keeping a talented teaching staff remains a constant concern.

In summary, Standard 2 encompasses a broad range of knowledge and activities that school leaders need to have and practice in order to implement and foster a strong school culture and instructional program. It should be noted that issues related to Standard 2 become even more challenging in school contexts where multiple cultures are represented. Again, I offer questions related to Standard 2 that might contribute to the interview process for candidates seeking to work as principals in immersion programs.

### Sample Interview Questions

- Describe any cultural or international experiences you've had that would prepare you to work with a linguistically and culturally diverse staff.
- What strategies might you use to develop a school climate that encourages and promotes learning and using the immersion language?
- What resources might you tap to evaluate teacher performance effectively?
- How will you find and make available immersion-specific professional development opportunities for your teachers?
- What kind of interview process would you put into place to hire new teachers?

### Standard 4—Collaborating with Families and the Community

It is always important for school leaders to forge strong collaborative relationships with the school families and surrounding community. In an immersion context such collaboration is even more important because immersion is often misunderstood, even by those who support it. Parents who send their children to school must put their trust in school leaders and teachers to ensure that their children will learn. In an immersion program, such trust often requires quite a leap of faith because frequently the parents do not know the immersion language. They must believe in the immersion model and trust that it will indeed work—that not only will their children attain functional proficiency in a new language, but that their English will continue to develop and they will achieve academically.

Collaboration with families is dependent upon the skills necessary for Standard 1, discussed earlier, that is, knowledge of the goals of immersion and research findings in the field. This knowledge base is invaluable in talking to parents of immersion students because the principal needs to be in a position to support the teaching staff and be equipped to articulate to parents why teachers are doing what they are doing when parents express concerns. Coffman (1992) makes the case for the need to ensure that school-wide activities and events that showcase use of the immersion language are organized frequently to provide parents with some “tangible proof of their child’s participation and progress in the program, and build school spirit and pride” (p. 164).

Besides allaying common parental concerns, immersion administrators need to balance parents’ desire to participate in the program with the school’s language development goals. Parents will often want to offer support by spending time in classrooms, but if parents do not speak the immersion language, their presence can interrupt classroom instruction that occurs in the immersion language. It is the responsibility of the school principal to establish classroom visiting policies and other school practices to ensure that the immersion language is used as much as possible. It is also necessary to communicate those policies and practices to parents diplomatically and respectfully while inviting and encouraging parents’ involvement in ways that do not disrupt instruction in the immersion language. Nikki Cholena Woodson, principal of Forest Glen Elementary in Indianapolis, offers a variety of creative ideas for parental involvement, including working in the office and media center, serving on

committees, chaperoning field trips, and working in the Parent-Faculty Organization to raise funds for support programs (2002).

As the strongest advocate for an immersion program (Coffman, 1992), the principal must also find ways to collaborate with the community and other educators within the school system. Coffman (1992) argues that such collaboration involves explaining the program, building ongoing support for it, and, at times, defending it. All too often immersion programs must fight the false charge of being “elitist,” of siphoning off the brightest children and the most involved parents in a district, or of receiving more than their share of district resources. Principals need to be in a position to address such misconceptions with data and to establish strong recruiting strategies that reach all families in a district, including those who may not be aware of the benefits of language immersion education or who may initially be wary of a non-English school program.

In this current and past issues of *The ACIE Newsletter*, some examples of advocacy for the immersion program on the part of administrators have been shared. In the current issue, the lead article by principal Gerald Arthur, titled “Partial Spanish Immersion Program Expands by Offering Academic Excellence for All,” shares the story of how test score data from statewide assessments were used to advocate for the immersion program. By providing these data to school district officials, community members, and parents as support for the partial immersion program (originally a program strand within a monolingual school), the decision was made to expand the program to provide the immersion experience for all learners. David Downs-Reid (2000) shared similar test score data from four Minnesota immersion schools to show how such data can be used strategically to promote immersion education. In this era of strapped district budgets and increasing accountability measures, immersion schools are potentially at risk, and it is imperative that the school principal understand the risks and be able to address them effectively.

The following questions are again offered as contributions to the interview process for candidates applying for the job of principal in immersion schools.

### Sample Interview Questions

- In what ways might you encourage parental involvement while at the same time ensuring that such involvement will not interrupt the use of the immersion language in the school or classroom?
- What recruiting strategies might you use to ensure that all families in the district are invited to consider the immersion context as an option for their children?
- What data might you use to respond to charges that the school is “elitist”?
- With decreasing budgets and increasing calls for accountability, how might you advocate for the immersion program in the district and community?

### Conclusion

The principal of an immersion school plays a vital role in the implementation and continued success of the school’s educational program. While this is true of all principals regardless of their educational setting, immersion principals have the added responsibility of not only understanding, but wholeheartedly embracing their schools’ missions. They must remain informed about current research, theory, and instructional methodologies of immersion education. These practices will allow them to provide the educational leadership necessary to effectively implement the immersion program while supporting their teachers’ continued success and professional growth.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Many of the sample interview questions provided in this article were suggested by members of MAIN—Minnesota Advocates for Immersion Network, a group comprised of immersion school principals, teachers, parents, and coordinators from Minnesota’s immersion schools along with University of Minnesota representatives. I am grateful for their thoughtful contributions.

<sup>2</sup> The “Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist” is available online at [carla.acad.umn.edu/Immersion/immersion\\_checklist](http://carla.acad.umn.edu/Immersion/immersion_checklist)

<sup>3</sup> Information about the CARLA summers institutes is available online at: [www.carla.umn.edu/institutes/](http://www.carla.umn.edu/institutes/)

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the certificate program visit: [education.umn.edu/SPS/programs/certificates/LanguageImmersion.htm](http://education.umn.edu/SPS/programs/certificates/LanguageImmersion.htm).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the upcoming conference, see: [carla.acad.umn.edu/conferences/immersion/papers.html](http://carla.acad.umn.edu/conferences/immersion/papers.html)

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