

Basic language skills come first

Ottawa pledged another \$750 million last week to help make Canadians more bilingual.

There will be more money for minority language education and second-language instruction. More bucks for bilingual services in hospitals, courts and early childhood development programs. Additional funding to boost bilingualism in the federal public service. All in a bid to make the dream of the last four decades—"linguistic duality"—a reality.

First, there was the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963. Then there was the Official Languages Act in 1969. A few years later came bilingual labelling of consumer products.

In 1982, the principles of bilingualism were further guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In last year's throne speech, the government pledged to "re-energize" its official languages policy.

And now Ottawa has laid out a five-year action plan to further promote bilingualism. This is all well and good but perhaps we should be attending to people's needs—basic language skills—before showering so much money on wants, like hoping half of our high school students will be bilingual in 10 years.

Local organizers of federally funded language programs for new immigrants find it ironic that there's plenty of new money for bilingualism but the settlement services budget for Edmonton and northern Alberta is being reduced by 7% next month.

"We've been told to be prepared for fairly significant cuts," says Annette Kreider, who runs the Catholic Social Services' assessment program that refers immigrants to language classes.

Immigration Canada pays for the program, known as LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada). But there isn't enough money to go around as it is. "We're expected to take care of more and more people with an ever-shrinking budget," says Kreider.

Cutting money from federally funded language programs while pouring huge amounts

of money into bilingualism is "an embarrassment," she adds.

Alberta's share of federal settlement services money for 2003-04 is being reduced by 2%, says Immigration spokesman Randy Gurlock.

As well, the budget for Edmonton and northern Alberta is dropping by 7%. Calgary's getting the money instead because that city gets more immigrants, he says.

He concedes, though, that settlement services budgets are based on the destination cities prospective immigrants mark down on their applications while still abroad. In other words, officials have no way of tracking secondary migration—where newcomers go after they first arrive in

Canada. And plenty of them are coming to Edmonton because they've heard the city is booming, say Kreider. But the language instruction money doesn't follow them. At the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, for instance, immigrants have to wait three to six months for language classes, depending on the level of instruction and whether they need child care.

The LINC classes are packed at Norquest College as well, says Lilli Fortier, dean of English language programs. "We certainly have no lack of students needing ESL (English as a second language). We always fill our seats," she says.

It's not that bilingualism isn't a worthy goal. I just wonder whether we'll ever reach it. Outside of Quebec, the Ottawa area and New Brunswick, where francophones make up one-third of the population, bilingualism is pretty hit and miss.

In one poll, only 36% of Quebec anglophone respondents felt the education they received in French had equipped them to succeed in Quebec society. And it's unrealistic to expect that students who take summer French immersion programs will become bilingual.

Mastering a language requires long-term exposure.

Linguistic duality may be a nice concept but it's probably a pipe dream.



Mindelle
Jacobs