

## Premier: Plea for early immersion 'ironic'

### Description

TAMMY SCOTT-WALLACE LEGISLATURE BUREAU

Amid calls by the Opposition to scrap moving the early French immersion entry point to Grade 1, this week in question period a Progressive Conservative MLA asked the government to make sure students in her riding have the ability to sign up.

PHOTO: TAMMY SCOTT-WALLACE/LEGISLATURE BUREAU

FREDERICTON • Amid calls by the Opposition to scrap moving the early French immersion entry point back to Grade 1, a Progressive Conservative MLA is asking the government to make sure students in her riding are given an equal opportunity to enroll as those attending larger schools.

Pam Lynch, MLA for Fredericton-Grand Lake, has questioned the government over how readily available French immersion will be in rural areas, prompting the premier to rise and speak when he hadn't intended to.

"I have to say this. I have to get up. . . I debated as to whether I should, but I have to get up and point out the irony," Premier Brian Gallant said in question period on Tuesday. Until that point Lynch's line of questioning was being addressed by education minister Brian Kenny.

"We have a member of the Opposition getting up and advocating that French immersion should be in Grade 1 in her community while the leader of the Opposition thinks it is a lightning rod that has ruined the province, even though it has not been in place for some years," Gallant said. "The irony is beyond me. The leader of the Opposition needs to figure out whether he is coming or going."

Opposition leader Blaine Higgs refused to respond to the premier's comments.

Higgs has been consistently pushing government to hold off plans to reinstate Grade 1 French immersion for a few years until the results of the current Grade 3 entry point are known when those students graduate high school. He feels another change to an education system that is already struggling and turning out provincial scores that fall to the bottom of the national pack will lend further instability.

The province maintains the earlier children are introduced to a second language the better, and promises the right resources will be in place to strengthen the system in time for the fall.

But Lynch believes the province is creating an unlevel playing field with different offerings for students depending on where they live.

She wants the Gallant Liberals to change the threshold of students needed in smaller school to make French available to them as well.

“In my riding, a group has been formed with the goal of bringing back French immersion for the students of the Grand Lake area,” Lynch said in question period. “This group has advocated, primarily through social media, for the return of this program, and it believes that the support is there for the program. With the growing efforts of these parents, will the premier commit to reinstating the French immersion program at Minto Elementary Middle School and give the students of the Grand Lake area the same opportunities as students in our urban centres?”

In an emailed statement Thursday, she said her focus in questioning was to ensure rural communities are given the same options for French programming.

“In typical fashion the premier has twisted a plea by rural parents for equal access to French Immersion education into an alternative version of facts,” she wrote.

She believes the province should review and lower the minimum enrollment quotas for early and late French immersion to improve access in rural schools.

This isn’t the first time the Progressive Conservatives have raised the issue of ensuring French Immersion is accessible for everyone. A year ago Lynch seconded a motion asking for equal opportunity regardless of school size.

Gallant said every possible opportunity will be made available to students.

“We’re going to be working very hard to make sure French immersion is as accessible as possible throughout the province,” Gallant said in a scrum with reporters on Thursday. “We are still seeing enrollments come in.”

“Once we have the completion of the enrollments, we’re going to do everything we can to give communities across the province access to French immersion in Grade 1, but there will be some that maybe might not be able to do it.”

He added: “In any case, if there is not the case to be able to put French immersion that would start in Grade 1, we will look for other opportunities to be able to ensure that we give those children in those communities the chance to learn a second language.”

Gallant wouldn’t say what actions his government will take to provide that opportunity.

But he added that he hopes those alternative measures would be in place by next fall.

The education minister said across the province’s English-speaking schools over 1,800 students are enrolled in Grade 1 French immersion for the fall, but in rural schools the numbers are often not high enough to make the same offering.

“Throughout New Brunswick, we have some rural areas that may not have the uptake that we would like to see. However, we will work together with those communities and those schools, principals, and districts to be able to allow these programs to come in,” Kenny told question period.

– With files from Adam Huras

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