



**Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers**  
**l'Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec**

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**The English Language Arts Program**  
**At the Elementary Level**  
**QPAT Evaluation and Recommendations**

**Position Paper Developed by the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers for  
Presentation to the *ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport***

**May 2012**

## **Introduction**

The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), on behalf of the teachers it represents in the English sector, has examined the Elementary English Language Arts (ELA) program as well as the supporting documentation prepared by the *ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* (MELS). This document is the report of QPAT's evaluation of the program that has been progressively implemented since 2000-2001 and contains QPAT's recommendations to reorganize certain elements of the program. Areas of difficulty with respect to the progression of learning and evaluation are addressed also.

As the Elementary ELA program has now been implemented for many years, there is considerable practical experience that teachers have acquired with the program and its supporting documentation. This experience has led to an understanding of the changes necessary to improve the work of teachers and student learning.

A working group of teachers was established to conduct the review. The committee represents a broad cross-section of the teachers in our schools from all three cycles. The teachers come from schools on the island of Montreal, the surrounding suburbs and outside the Montreal area and have a range of years of experience. In broad terms, the committee examined a range of questions concerning the program. Does the program reflect the content, learning and outcomes that are appropriate for ELA students? Does the progression of learning help clarify the program and help teachers? Does the evaluation of students fit with the program and does it also reflect the learning the students should have? In other words, the committee members brought their varied experiences to bear on an examination of the program to determine whether it meets the needs of our students.

## **The program**

In general, the program of study is suitable for students in each cycle and the content is appropriate. However, a reorganization of the program would facilitate its use and clarify the relative importance of the different elements.

The program, as currently written, has four competencies:

- 1) Reading and listening to various types of texts
- 2) Writing various types of texts
- 3) Representing literacy in different media
- 4) Using language to communicate and learn

It is QPAT's view that the reading and listening elements of the first competency should be distinct competencies. Reading, listening, writing and speaking are all of equal importance in language development at the elementary level. The content of the program should be the same but this redistribution would better reflect the importance of essential language skills. In turn, media literacy should be explored within each of the reformulated competencies, rather than meriting its own competency. The current form grants media literacy the same status as writing or reading and listening combined; while learning about media literacy is important, the overall thrust of the program should better reflect total language development. The media competency sticks out: it does not address overall language development the way the others do. Learning about media should be a tool in developing general language skills, not a skill in and of itself.

In point of fact, teachers will have had to integrate media into the other three competencies this year for the purposes of evaluation and reporting. Consequently, the time is right to acknowledge this change and incorporate it into the program as well. There may be a challenge in separating reading and listening into different competencies, particularly for what it implies in terms of reporting, however, it would better reflect the relative importance of each essential language skill. As each of these skills is of equal importance, each skill must be granted a distinct status. It would also provide clarity not only to teachers, but to parents and students as well, as to what the program's expectations are.

Within the context of the overall re-organization recommended above, certain specific elements within the program should be modified. Specifically, writing conventions need to be assigned to particular grade levels and notions related to the use of idiomatic language should be included in cycle III. Further, the Essential Knowledges section (p. 102 to 108) of the program should have the sub-bullets (dashes where the cycle for the learning is indicated) removed. Finally, the

self-evaluation element as a requirement of the program is problematic. It should be used as a tool for teachers and students to use to verify what has been done; self-evaluation as a requirement of the program, particularly for younger learners, is of questionable value as the students will not have an appropriate baseline against which to compare their learning and progress.

In light of the foregoing, QPAT recommends the following:

**That the current competencies and their related content should be reorganized into the following competencies:**

- 1) Reading**
- 2) Listening**
- 3) Writing**
- 4) Speaking**

**That each of the proposed competencies should have equal importance in the program and its evaluation.**

**That learning about media be incorporated into each of the competencies and not be a separate competency.**

**That writing conventions be specified by grade level, that idioms be included in cycle III in the programs, and that the Essential Knowledges section be limited to stating the main bullet points.**

### **Progression of Learning**

The progression of learning document has helped clarify certain requirements of the program. This was certainly needed in order to reduce the ambiguity of the program. The fact that it introduces the knowledge to be taught is a significant development. However, certain concerns remain.

First, there is a lack of clarity about when various elements should be taught. The required elements need to be placed within a specific year, not just a cycle. This will have the effect of facilitating planning by teachers, especially those new to the profession. It will also help ensure that students across the province will have

the same specific skills that have been acquired at the same time, which will help with the planning that teachers in subsequent grades have to do as they will be better able to determine what skill set their students have coming in to the next grade, whether the student came from their school or any other in the province. It would also provide support to teachers who take over a class during the course of the year.

Second, while the progression of learning has improved the situation, there remains a lack of clarity about what is actually expected at different points in time. A wide range of exemplars by grade level would improve this situation.

Third, given the reality of immersion programs, it is important to be able to use the students' ability to transfer language concepts from one language to another. This would require coordination with the French Second Language programs to determine where there are comparable topics. Supporting comparative documentation from the MELS would allow school teams to more easily determine how and when topics will be approached.

Finally, further supporting documentation from the MELS would help simplify and clarify what is expected of teachers. As complements to the progression of learning document, the MELS should produce a simplified information poster for each grade level that indicates the different specific elements that are to be taught. In a simplified form, this would have multiple positive effects: first it would assist teachers in their planning by clarifying the expectations for that grade, thus addressing a point made previously in this section; second, it would allow students and parents to follow the program more easily; third, it would provide teachers in subsequent grades with an easy reference to ensure that they would neither omit nor repeat concepts.

With respect to this last point, it would also be worthwhile for the MELS to produce similar documentation that recognizes the reality that there are different French programs in English schools and that this has an impact on how English is taught, the percentage of time allocated to it and the grade level in which the program is introduced. While it is not possible to have documentation to account for each different way that English and French programs are implemented,

supporting documents that take into consideration implementation as of cycle two and as of cycle three should also be developed to provide a broader range of tools for teachers to be able to map out their teaching and to assist them in teaching the program in a compressed period. Documents that consider implementation of the program only as of cycles two and three should also pay special attention to the issues of transference from French language learning to allow for the most effective use of ELA learning time.

In light of these concerns, QPAT recommends the following:

### **That the MELS provide**

- 1. Documentation that will indicate the year in which specific learning takes place**
- 2. Exemplars for all grades to indicate appropriate levels of learning of required content**
- 3. Support documentation for teachers to assist students with the transference of language skills between English and French**
- 4. Simplified support documentation in the form of a content wheel or content map that specifies the required learning for each grade level**
- 5. Support documentation to help map learning when ELA implementation begins only in cycles II or III**

### **Evaluation**

The key issue in evaluation that must be addressed is the grade 6 (end of cycle III) exam. When this exam was first implemented almost ten years ago, its intent was to evaluate the implementation of the program and its effects on student learning. Consequently, it was designed as a learning and evaluation situation in order to reflect how the program might be implemented and how it might be taught. The performance of the students on the exams was not necessarily used to help evaluate the students since this was not the intent of the exam.

Over the last several years, the emphasis of the exam has shifted dramatically. There is no sense any longer of using the exam as a tool to measure the

implementation of the reform, as no data was systematically analyzed and presented. The exam has been transformed into a tool with which to evaluate student learning; the Basic School Regulation now mandates that it must be worth 20% of the student's mark. Yet the exam still retains its original structure and format. These are no longer relevant or consistent as the purpose of the exam is to evaluate student learning. Consequently, a major overhaul of the exam is necessary.

The exam timetable mandates that the exam be administered sometime in May or June. Given that students also have an extensive Mathematics exam and that all school boards also mandate a French exam during this time, grade 6 students find themselves in the position of spending much of their last term of elementary school either preparing for exams or writing them. In effect, teaching largely stops sometime during the month of April. This means that the third term in grade 6, which counts for 60% of the year's mark and during which all competencies must be evaluated, is in effect only about a month and a half long once holidays are factored in. Consequently, it is imperative that the exam timeframe be delayed and shortened to allow for more teaching time in the third term.

As the exam is now meant to evaluate student learning rather than program implementation, the learning and evaluation situation format is not the correct tool to use. Since the objective is student assessment, the exam tasks need to be more focused and restricted to measuring student learning. This requires shorter exams that concentrate on the evaluation of reading and writing skills that the student has acquired by the end of elementary as opposed to spending great lengths of time in the preparatory phases where teachers have to teach the exam and need more time to implement it than is foreseen in the exam information document. Reducing the scope of the exams to include only true evaluation of reading and writing will reduce the length of time needed to administer the exam, which addresses the point raised in the previous paragraph. It will also eliminate many of the logistical difficulties encountered due to issues such as student absences during the extended timeframe.

The tasks on the exam need to be restructured as well. The exams in recent years have emphasized synthesizing tasks in writing and structures and features tasks in reading. This level of abstract thinking is beyond the capacity of the majority of grade six students. Appropriate replacement tasks would be to use paraphrasing and/or narrative for writing and response for reading. In addition, there should be more leading questions and a clearer breakdown of the expected tasks for students to follow as they write the exams as opposed to larger questions that are vague or excessively broad.

In light of the foregoing, QPAT recommends the following:

#### **That the MELS grade 6 exam**

- 1. Be restructured as an exam, not an LES, with reading and writing components only**
- 2. Be shortened to two or three days in June with a maximum of one or one and a half hours per day**
- 3. Be redesigned to fit within the prescribed time allocation**
- 4. Focus on paraphrasing, narrative and response and eliminate synthesizing as well as structures and features**

#### **Conclusion**

QPAT has carefully examined the various elements of the elementary ELA program and its evaluation. After ten years of implementation of the reform program in the elementary sector, the time is right for review work to begin to make the necessary adjustments. The curriculum document should be viewed as a living document that can evolve based on the experience that has been had with the program. Certain changes are needed to ensure that students are best served by the program. It is in this spirit that QPAT makes its recommendations, which are reiterated here:

- That the current competencies and their related content should be reorganized into the following competencies:**
  - 1. Reading**
  - 2. Listening**

- 3. Writing**
- 4. Speaking**

- **That each of the proposed competencies should have equal importance in the program and its evaluation.**
- **That learning about media be incorporated into each of the competencies and not be a separate competency.**
- **That writing conventions be specified by grade level, that idioms be included in cycle III in the programs, and that the Essential Knowledges section be limited to stating the main bullet points.**
- **That the MELS provide**
  - 1. Documentation that will indicate the year in which specific learning takes place**
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  - 4. Simplified support documentation in the form of a content wheel or content map that specifies the required learning for each grade level**
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  - 3. Be redesigned to fit within the prescribed time allocation**

**4. Focus on paraphrasing, narrative and response and eliminate synthesizing as well as structures and features**

As QPAT has stated on previous occasions, QPAT must be included at the development phase of any new program or evaluation elements, or any other significant document or policy orientation regarding ELA. It is the program that distinguishes the English sector from the French sector, and QPAT, on behalf of the teachers it represents, has a vested interest in providing timely input to MELS.