



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

Curriculum Reform 15 Years after the Estates General

Brief Prepared by the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers in Response to the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's* Consultation

October 2013

Introduction

The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), on behalf of the 8,000 teachers in English public schools in Quebec, welcomes the opportunity provided by the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (CSE) to participate in its evaluation of curriculum reform 15 years into its implementation. QPAT has views and positions regarding the reform that reflect the reality of teachers in English public schools in Quebec. However, QPAT thinks that the timeframe to provide the CSE with a response is too short. On a topic of this magnitude, more time would be required to conduct a complete investigation of where the QPAT membership stands, especially with respect to all the individual programs and evaluation of students for these programs; many months rather than a matter of weeks would have been necessary to conduct a full review. As such, QPAT's comments in this brief cannot completely reflect everything the organization would have to say. Should the CSE extend the timeframe or provide further opportunities for input on the matter of the reform, QPAT would be able to make additional comments.

Foundational Principles of the Reform

There seemed to be an implicit assumption emerging from the Estates General, as reflected in the CSE consultation document, that there were many problems in Quebec's education system. QPAT does not think that that was the case. For example, graduation rates from English schools were good and performance on cross-jurisdictional measures, such as pan-Canadian, TIMMS and PISA testing, has shown generally positive results for non-reform cohorts of students. QPAT's legal predecessor, the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers (PAPT), made the point to the Estates General that the situation in the school system was not the crisis that was being made out by some and that the school system was actually generally good.

In the English school sector, there was already a culture of using many different pedagogical approaches in instruction prior to the reform. Group work, cooperative learning, projects and other varied instructional methods meant that students in English schools learned in different ways. The English Language Arts program had already developed a more holistic approach to learning language. In many ways, the English school system already implemented elements that would later be attributed to the reform. In light of this set of values and approaches, the orientations emanating from the Estates General seem like "motherhood and apple pie", such as the belief in the educability of all students, the desire for the greatest possible degree of success for students and the important role of parents in schools; teachers believed in these before the Estates General also.

Given this initial perspective, QPAT questions still what the purpose of reform actually was. There can be no doubt that major changes were made to education in Quebec, but whether those changes were necessary and whether they had the desired effect remains an open question. QPAT thinks that rather than spending money on a reform that impacted everyone, specific problems should have been clearly identified and resources should have been put toward those problems rather than causing an upheaval in the entire system.

Reform in Pre-School, Elementary and Secondary

Over the course of the implementation, some concerns were recurring themes whether in elementary or secondary. First, it is clear that teachers expressed a general lack of preparedness in implementing the reform. The inadequate training sessions, the lack of appropriate materials in English along with the zeal of some school boards to start the reform all led to increased pressures on teachers to implement a new curriculum they barely understood but were told they had to teach. The actual communication to teachers and training about the reform were highly variable from board to board and from school to school. This led to an incoherent and variable implementation.

A second concern that emerged was the fact that the programs were heavy on competency development but short on essential knowledge and understanding that students were expected to acquire. The program structure was vague and provided inadequate guidance to teachers in terms of what students needed to learn. Interpretation of what was to be taught varied widely; attentive teachers in the same school teaching the same subject could come to a vastly different understanding from one another of what needed to be taught. The level of competency development that was indicated in the programs suggested learning that simply did not fit with the reality of the developmental capacity of most students of the corresponding age level. This was the main reason that QPAT demanded a clarification as to the essential knowledge that students were expected to learn in the program. The progression of learning documents were an attempt to deal with this problem but those documents only came about a decade into the implementation. In the intervening years, teachers were left to struggle to understand what was expected of them and their students and the progression of learning documents have not fully solved the problem of vague or incomplete programs. The overall impression is that the reform was likely too idealistic and theoretical; practical considerations about the natural developmental ability of typical students seem to be absent from the design of the program, which often seems geared for the students that are naturally strongest and most advanced.

A third concern that emerged was the evaluation of student learning. As stated above, the programs were vague and this led to considerable confusion about what to evaluate and how to evaluate. Were all competencies of equal value? Did they all have to be evaluated for each report card? In a new competency framework, did all previously used evaluation tools have to be left aside? How and why were cross-curricular competencies to be evaluated? The answers to these questions evolved over time to what they are now, but the answers given to teachers at different times, particularly during the elementary implementation period, led to impossible expectations. For example, if a homeroom teacher had to evaluate all the subject competencies and all the cross-curricular competencies each term, as some were told they had to do, this could lead to dozens of competencies to evaluate for each student. Given that teachers could not often use the evaluations they had previously developed, and given the high number of competencies for which substantive information would be required, it was impossible to have all the necessary tools and requisite time to properly report on all of these competencies.

Teachers also have found it difficult to have consistent evaluation since, as with the programs themselves, there was much that was left to interpretation so that standards and expectations could be dramatically different from one class to the next. Given that teachers were unclear on what was to be taught, they were unclear on what they were supposed to evaluate. These problems were further compounded by modifications made to the report card system; use of a percentage system on a report card still seems antithetical to the premise of the reform; for elementary school, QPAT was and remains opposed to the use of percentages in the evaluation of students.

Another trend was the recentralization of policy-making. In the initial phases of reform, the governing board was supposed to acquire increased responsibility and provide an avenue for increased local autonomy at the school level and principals were meant to become more independent leaders in their schools. In the first years, school boards continued to try to impose their decision-making on schools. In recent years, managerial and political imperatives from the school boards and the MELS have caused much of the decision-making to be returned to the boards and the MELS; the partnership agreements, management and educational success agreements and provincial report cards have forced schools to hew to a central orientation and have removed much of the intended autonomy of the school. Today, principals are expected to implement the school board's dictates and managerial expectations before developing their own pedagogical leadership. QPAT cannot unambiguously state whether more autonomy at the school level would be desirable or not; what is clear is that it never really materialized and is not the case today.

Reform in Adult Education

Implementation of the reform programs in adult education has met some of the same difficulties in the adult education sector as were met in the youth sector. The lack of materials in English, the incoherence of the reform and the lack of clear preparation, understanding and orientation are problems that adult education teachers have raised. In addition to this, the particularities of adult education make it difficult to implement many reform practices. For example, it is impossible to realistically develop and coordinate Learning and Evaluation Situations (LES) with group work and discussion when students within the same group are following completely different programs and modules of work that reflect their actual level or ability. The new basic common core program has been implemented across the English boards, but the method of implementation has been uneven; in some cases, reform means a change in the course code but with little if any change in the content. As for the diversified education program, there has been some tentative preliminary work but there has been no implementation of the reform in any real way and there does not seem to be a strong desire to push forward. In this context, further implementation of the reform should be suspended until a clear assessment of the results in the youth sector is made. If the assessment is positive, implementation should only happen where it is feasible for specific programs and centres. As for programs that currently exist, they should be reviewed and updated where necessary.

QPAT's Assessment of the Reform and its Implementation

Overall, implementation of the reform was highly problematic in the English sector. As has been indicated previously, school boards in many cases displayed zeal in implementing the reform and expected the same level of commitment from teachers without adequate discussion. In addition to the lack of materials available in English, this placed extra pressure on teachers to develop their own solutions to implementation, which increased not only their workload, but the expectations held of them and, consequently, their level of stress and malaise, even though many teachers may have found specific elements within the reform and the new programs that were pedagogically interesting.

Appropriate textbooks and materials available in English at the time of implementation would have facilitated the reform greatly. Their arrival many years later was inadequate and required teachers in the English sector to make adaptations that were not required in the French sector. For any future programs or reforms that may occur, it is essential that the system not fail students in the English sector again; programs must not be put in place without the appropriate English textbooks and materials being available.

Proper implementation would have required more time and money; having said this, money for the reform may have been better spent on carefully identified problems rather than wholesale changes to the system. For example, one of the main reasons cited for the need for reform was the concern about high school dropouts. More careful examination of the problem, however, would have shown that the nature of this problem was not uniform to the whole education system across the province. This issue is certainly one of great concern that merits a good solution, but rather than causing an upheaval in the whole system, resources aimed at understanding and addressing the specific problem and its nuances depending on language, gender, population density and economic opportunity, among other variables, may have been better spent.

The Future of the Reform

An assessment of the reform is essential and it is ultimately the responsibility of the MELS to perform this evaluation. This assessment will have to carefully and objectively take into account what gains have actually been made compared to the situation that prevailed prior to the reform. It will also have to take into account that the reform itself changed over the years. Given the lack of such an objective assessment from the MELS and given the lack of time for QPAT to examine all aspects of the issues regarding the reform, QPAT cannot speak to everything that should be kept or changed about the reform. Hence, any comments made on this point can only be partial. Having said this, QPAT can make the following specific recommendations:

- 1) The MELS must use objective fact-based research to determine its orientations in order to ensure that specific problems are clearly identified and that solutions are geared to those clearly identified problems.
- 2) The English Language Arts (ELA) program and the evaluation of learning for it need to be modified. As it is the language programs that distinguish the English sector, QPAT has developed position papers for both the elementary and secondary ELA programs. These papers have been attached to the present brief. Key areas of concern are the excessive value of the Talk competency, particularly at the secondary level, an excessive emphasis on the use and understanding of media, a lack of clarity as to the specific essential reading and writing skills despite the progression of learning documents, and the need to make the MELS exams more representative of the program and less time-consuming.
- 3) All programs should undergo specific program review at some point or other to ensure that they are up-to-date. When this is the case, QPAT expects to be a full participant in such reviews.

- 4) Prior to implementation of any new or updated programs, it is essential that curricula, materials and textbooks be made available in English.
- 5) Documentation has been developed over the years but this documentation is not consistent with present reality. Specifically, evaluation has been a moving target given that the Policy on the Evaluation of Learning was written before the imposition of a provincial report card and certain competencies have been given specific weights or have been merged. The policy and afferent documentation need to be reviewed and aligned to ensure coherence that fully reflects current reality and practice.
- 6) The reform in Adult Education should be suspended until it is ascertained that the reform has had a positive impact in the youth sector. If this is the case, reform should be selectively implemented based on its feasibility according to particular program, centre and delivery of courses. Otherwise, the content of existing programs and materials should be reviewed and brought up-to-date where necessary.
- 7) QPAT maintains that elementary students should not be evaluated with percentage grades and the evaluation of cross-curricular competencies should be removed altogether.
- 8) Technology use in the classroom must be carefully evaluated based on pedagogical needs and objectives of teachers once the appropriate infrastructure, access and training are in place. Teachers have been expected to use new technologies without regard for whether they wish to use them in their classrooms, whether it is appropriate for use with students and without adequate support. If new technologies are to be introduced, teachers must express the desire for them and have the needed training, support and access to the internet to use them.

Appendix 1

Elementary English Language Arts Position Paper



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
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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**
 - 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**
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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.

Appendix 2

Secondary English Language Arts Position Paper



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
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The English Language Arts Program
At the Secondary 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 2011

The English Language Arts Program
At the Secondary Level
QPAT Evaluation and Recommendations
May 2011

Introduction

The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), on behalf of the teachers it represents in the English sector, has examined the Secondary English Language Arts (ELA) program as well as the recent 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 2005-2006 and contains QPAT's recommendations to correct certain elements of the program.

At the time of writing, the secondary ELA program is in its second year of implementation across all five years of high school. In conjunction with the new documents tabled by MELS in the late summer and fall of 2010 (i.e. Progression of Learning and Frameworks for the Evaluation of Learning), it is an opportune moment to assess the effectiveness and relevance of the program and its evaluation of students.

A working group of teachers was established to conduct the review. The committee represents a broad cross-section of the teachers in our schools at both the cycle I and cycle II levels. The teachers come from schools on the island of Montreal, from the surrounding suburbs and from outside the Montreal area. Their schools range in size from 400 to over 1700 students and they have taught anywhere from 8 to 34 years. 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? Do the new documents 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 and leads them to an appropriate level of learning over the course of their secondary schooling.

The program

The program is comprised of four competencies at cycle I and three competencies at cycle II. The competency in media that is separate in cycle I is integrated into the remaining competencies in cycle II. This integration will happen in fact, if not in theory, for the 2011-2012 school year in cycle I given the method by which marks will be reported as of then. Consequently, the analysis and discussion was held from the perspective of there being three competencies across both cycles with an examination of the place and content for each.

In general terms, the competencies of the program reflect different elements that are appropriate to a mother tongue program. Any language is learned by the development of a variety of interconnected skills. The ability to speak for the purpose of effective interaction (Talk to Learn), to read for meaning (Reading of Literary and Media Texts) and to produce and communicate ideas effectively (Production of Literary and Media Texts) are broad areas of language development that interact with one another in an organic way. As such, each of these elements has a place in the program and in evaluation. There are, however, specific issues with each of these competencies that need to be addressed. These issues arise out of the fact that the program is very broad and all-encompassing, which has led to a highly variable understanding of what the program is and its application. The analysis and recommendations that follow are intended to highlight the areas of difficulty and find ways to provide a common understanding of the program in the interest of ensuring that students learn what is appropriate and necessary.

Talk to Learn (Talk)

The Talk competency elicited a strong response from the members of the committee. There is an important place for this competency in the program as it offers another way for students to be engaged actively in their learning. However, there is very serious concern about its extent and implications of its implementation. The main challenge coming from the Talk competency is its weight in the evaluation process and the difficulty in evaluating it. The competency places a greater stress on the oral interaction component of the program than existed before, which leads to a reduced emphasis on reading and production. The weighting of the competency at 33% of the mark skews the focus of the program; this has the consequence of giving opportunity for a student to pass the course on the basis of oral skills, even if written and reading skills are clearly below those needed to be able to function at an age appropriate level. This short-changes students in the long term.

The evaluation of the competency exacerbates the difficulty outlined above. Unless students are presenting a more traditional oral, it is very difficult to evaluate the competency, particularly during group discussions. Students are more aware of what they are saying when a teacher is nearby and may be able to express an idea briefly in a way that suggests that they are actively thinking and discussing with their group partners. However, three clear issues arise: a) the student's response may be superficial and the teacher does not have much time to probe more deeply to see what the student is developing at that level; b) the teacher is missing out on what other groups are saying at the same time c) the student who is not by nature an extrovert may be drowned out by those who are, whether or not their thinking and less obvious interventions are more profound or not. This last point underscores another weakness: the lack of attention given to the importance of listening in learning. The capacity to understand and process an oral message has been given short shrift, yet it should be an important part of the Talk competency since dialogue is not only the ability to emit a message but to receive one also.

The foregoing is not to suggest that group discussions should not be used; on the contrary, there is an obvious place for learning by sharing and exchanging with one's classmates. Further, the ability to interact and present ideas and argue for them during the course of a discussion is a useful skill for someone who is going to be an engaged citizen or effective in certain workplaces. The competency,

clearly, is relevant to students. However, the weight of the competency, given the difficulties in evaluating it beyond a superficial level, distorts the true level of overall language development of a student.

Consistency across comparable programs is also an issue. The current weight of 33% is out of line with the equivalent oral component in the *Français langue d'instruction* program, which is 20% (10% at secondary V). Further, the enriched French second language program has the same percentage (33%) for the oral component for the 2011-2012 school year. In other words, the oral component of ELA, which is a course in language of instruction, is weighted as if it were a second language course.

Finally, the nature of the Talk competency is such that it is used to generate ideas that will be reflected to some extent in the Reading competency and the Production competency. In other words, the effective weight of Talk is even greater than the 33% currently allocated. This places even greater importance on this competency as compared to the others.

In light of the foregoing, QPAT makes the following recommendation to MELS:

The weighting of the Talk competency must be reduced to 20% of the grade, with the Reading and Production competencies to be weighted at 40 % each.

Reading of Literary and Media Texts (Reading)

Developing a certain ability to read various media texts is important and a useful skill for an individual who needs to be able to think critically about the messages he or she is receiving in everyday life. However, it remains important, relevant and imperative to have students read and use traditional texts, particularly given that they may not have this exposure outside of school. The issue is to find the right balance that best serves students.

In implementing the program, the question of what distinguishes media from language arts is becoming increasingly unclear for many. Trying to include large amounts of media in a language arts program inevitably leaves less time for the other elements of the language arts program. The messages that have been put forth at various points in time either by MELS or school board representatives have led to confusion about what are appropriate media texts that will develop the student's ability to read media but that still can be considered genuine language arts. These messages have also eroded the place and importance of traditional texts. In order to provide both balance and clarification, media must be viewed as something that has to be connected to language. Also, media elements used in the program must be clearly rooted in what is being read in class. Viewing reading in this way would show the relative importance of reading traditional texts as opposed to media texts.

In the interest of clarifying the place of each, QPAT recommends the following:

The Reading competency must emphasize traditional forms of text, while retaining a Media component.

Media texts that are produced, promoted or distributed by MELS must clearly be connected to language arts.

Production of Written and Media Texts (Production)

Discussion around the production competency raised the key issue of the place and role of media production. While there is recognition of the fact that media production can engage certain students and speaks to the side of their daily reality that is highly connected electronically, there are many difficulties regarding the media component. At a practical level, uneven access to facilities and equipment places the students across the province in an inequitable position relative to one another as they will not all have the same opportunities to produce media texts. Another practical issue is one of time: media production can take up a great deal of time to the detriment of other forms of production, particularly writing. Finally, the variety of media elements required compels teachers who are language specialists to become more knowledgeable about other arts than they can possibly fully learn.

The media elements can complement the program in an effective manner, and they should be used as a tool for learning. However, they could take up too much place within the formal program and its evaluation, particularly at the expense of written production. Traditional genres of written production must remain the emphasis of this competency as writing provides skills and learning that will be the most broadly relevant and necessary to students.

In the interest of providing a program that provides better balance to students in their production of work with greater equity, QPAT recommends the following:

The Production competency must emphasize traditional forms of writing, while retaining a Media component.

The program content regarding media production must be streamlined to allow teachers the flexibility needed to focus on media production that is realistic to their situation.

The Progression of Learning

The progression of learning document will be of use to teachers, but this usefulness will be limited. It will allow teachers to see what they have covered and what they have not. It also will offer some sense as to what basic content requirements there are and some essential knowledge. However, the structure makes for a document that is not user friendly and does not focus enough on what is essential for students. It also does not recognize the organic nature of language.

The progression of learning document would be substantially improved and more useful to teachers if it were reorganized. In its current format, each item is listed in a way that does not group together concepts that are in fact closely connected. The document should bring clearer attention to the necessity of using the beginning of high school as a time where basic skills are developed to provide solid building blocks for later high school years. Students enter high school with a fairly wide range of experiences in elementary school. Frequently, at the beginning of high school they have to either learn or re-learn certain writing skills. The objective is to have them use writing as a thinking process by the time they finish high school. The progression of learning document needs to better reflect that overall continuum.

The document needs to be re-organized so that there would be two sections for each grade level: the list of skills and knowledge they should have at the beginning of the year and the list of skills and knowledge they should have by the end of the year, expressed in clear language to make it more user friendly for teachers and students. A revised progression document also would be more effective if exemplars on form and language for each cycle were provided that clearly reflected the criteria of the program. Such concrete and well-organized tools would be of far greater assistance to teachers, particularly those who are new to teaching or who are not ELA specialists.

In order to make the progression of learning document more meaningful to teachers, QPAT recommends the following:

The progression of learning document must be revised

- **to reflect a clear progression of skills, particularly in writing, for each grade level;**
- **to present connected concepts more logically;**
- **to provide exemplars that match the criteria of the program.**

Evaluation

It is evident that there is a dramatic disconnect between the program and the evaluation of students. A program that is broad is reduced to a narrow set of options and expectations on the high school leaving exam. Coupled with information that arrives too late in the year, this examination reality leads teachers to spend the last term of the year narrowly teaching to an exam. This will have a particularly distorting effect as of the 2011-2012 school-year, when the last term will be worth 60% of the school mark. In effect, 80% of the year's mark (term three plus exam) will be based on an exam that will home in on but a few very specific elements of the program. This is intellectually inconsistent and ill-serves students.

The recommendations made below deal with the final exams that have been implemented by MELS and target any exams that MELS will develop in the future. This is also significant at the school board level as many boards develop exams at earlier grades based on MELS' model.

As has been outlined previously, evaluation of the Talk competency is problematic. The problems outlined are particularly relevant in an examination context. Evaluation of Talk is best left as a school mark where there is greater opportunity for teachers to assess it fairly and allow it to develop over time.

The Media production component that has been included as an optional element in the past, after a failed attempt to make it compulsory, should be dropped altogether. Since it is not possible to have the same conditions to complete the production across the province, maintaining an optional component only confuses matters. If MELS wishes to produce suggested media assignments or LES it should do so independently of the examination process.

The structure of the examinations also leads to outcomes that can favour students who may not have effective writing skills but have understood the process required of them and can pass the exam because they figured out the right steps to follow. Other students who have effective writing skills and can communicate clearly and accurately may be penalized because they missed or misunderstood some element of the process. An examination in written production should reflect the student's ability to write effectively, not their ability to understand the "tricks" in the process. In fact, the current format of the exam is so limiting, narrow and abstrusely precise that it actually contradicts the program, which is very broad, and artificially limits the way in which a student can write. An examination with a broader range of writing topics would allow better for a student to demonstrate his or her skills and better represent the program.

It needs to be noted that the rubrics published by MELS are also highly problematic. Part of their purpose is to be used as a tool with students, but they are written in a fashion that is nearly impossible for students to understand. It is also very difficult for teachers to agree on the interpretation of these rubrics. This means that they cannot be used easily and that teachers spend far too much time simply explaining what the rubrics actually mean.

In order to simplify final exams and make them more representative of student skills, QPAT recommends the following:

MELS examinations in ELA must

- **reflect the program;**
- **eliminate evaluation of Talk;**
- **eliminate evaluation of Media Production;**
- **provide a choice of genres for Written Production;**
- **take less time to administer and evaluate.**

MELS must review and simplify the rubrics for ELA to make them understandable to students and emphasize outcomes more and process less.

MELS must provide information about the exams at the beginning of the school year so that it can be used for effective planning.

Conclusion

QPAT has carefully examined the various elements of the secondary ELA program and its evaluation. It is clear that the program attempts to incorporate learning that was deemed essential by the program developers for students in the 21st century. It is important, however, that these skills not supplant traditional skills that remain essential to students. A certain rebalancing needs to take place to ensure that students are best served by the program. It is in this spirit that QPAT makes its recommendations, which are reiterated here:

- 1. The weighting of the Talk competency must be reduced to 20% of the grade, with the Reading and Production competencies to be weighted at 40 % each.**
- 2. The Reading competency must emphasize traditional forms of text, while retaining a Media component.**
- 3. Media texts that are produced, promoted or distributed by MELS must clearly be connected to language arts.**
- 4. The Production competency must emphasize traditional forms of writing, while retaining a Media component.**
- 5. The program content regarding media production must be streamlined to allow teachers the flexibility needed to focus on media production that is realistic to their situation.**
- 6. The progression of learning document must be revised**
 - to reflect a clear progression of skills, particularly in writing, for each grade level;**
 - to present connected concepts more logically;**
 - to provide exemplars that match the criteria of the program.**
- 7. MELS examinations in ELA must**
 - reflect the program;**
 - eliminate evaluation of Talk;**
 - eliminate evaluation of Media Production;**
 - provide a choice of genres for written production;**
 - take less time to administer and evaluate.**
- 8. MELS must review and simplify the rubrics for ELA to make them understandable to students and emphasize outcomes more and process less.**
- 9. MELS must provide information about the exams at the beginning of the school year so that it can be used for effective planning.**

There is one final action that MELS must undertake in a systematic manner: 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.