

# Official Languages

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## Myths and Realities about Official Languages in New Brunswick

When it comes to official languages, myths abound. One example: All government jobs require bilingualism. False.

Why should we be concerned about these myths? Because they distort the purpose of the *Official Languages Act*. Because they compromise mutual understanding between our two communities. Because they call into question what is at the heart of New Brunswick's identity: the equality of our two official languages and the equality of our two linguistic communities. That is why it is important to set the record straight. Here are some of the myths about official languages, along with the facts.

### Myth 1

The primary objective of the *Official Languages Act* is that all citizens be bilingual.

### Reality

Official bilingualism means that public bodies must provide their services to the public in both English and French. This obligation applies to public bodies, not to individual citizens. Therefore, official bilingualism allows citizens to remain unilingual and receive public services in the official language of their choice.

### Myth 2

Official bilingualism prevents unilingual Anglophones from obtaining government jobs.

### Reality

To provide the general public with services in English and French, provincial government departments must have a certain number of bilingual and unilingual employees. According to the Government of New Brunswick's figures<sup>1</sup>,

- 53% of employees must be able to speak English;
- 2% must be able to speak either English or French;
- 41% must be able to speak both official languages; and
- 4% must be able to speak French.

Unilingual English speakers therefore have access to 55% of government jobs (53% + 2%). Also, 29%<sup>2</sup> of bilingual New Brunswickers have English as their mother tongue. Therefore, these Anglophones can access bilingual positions.

### Myth 3

The bilingual requirement for some positions discriminates against unilingual people.

### Reality

Consider the following scenario: A hospital is recruiting a specialized nurse. The job offer specifies that applicants must have a Master's degree. A person with only a Bachelor of Nursing degree decides to apply, but the application is turned down. Is the hospital discriminating by rejecting this application? No. This candidate simply does not have the educational requirement for the job.

To respect citizens' rights to receive services in their language of choice, some positions require bilingualism. Knowledge of both English and French then becomes an essential qualification just like the requirements for education and work experience.

In summary, requiring bilingualism for some positions is no different than requiring a particular diploma or a specific number of years of experience. It is therefore not discrimination but rather an essential qualification.

### Myth 4

Official bilingualism is not necessary because all Francophones in New Brunswick speak both official languages.

### Reality

First of all, close to 30%<sup>3</sup> of New Brunswick Francophones are not bilingual. Second, just because someone is bilingual doesn't mean he or she wishes to be served in English. For instance, in the health sector, bilingual people will often prefer to use their mother

tongue, because they want to be sure to be well understood by medical staff. Moreover, Francophones know it's important to live, work, and play in French to ensure the future of the language. As a result, they will choose to be served in French in order to actively contribute to the vitality of their language.

It is worth noting that the *Official Languages Act* gives all citizens the right to be served in their preferred official language, whether they speak the other official language or not.

### Myth 5

Bilingualism is bad for the economy.

### Reality

The *Two languages: It's good for business*<sup>4</sup> study clearly demonstrates the many economic advantages of bilingualism. For example, because of its two official languages, New Brunswick has a customer contact centre and back office industry that generates \$1.5 billion worth of export revenue annually for the province. Notably, this economic activity benefits unilingual Anglophones more than bilingual people. In fact, companies that came to the province for its bilingual workforce have created two unilingual English jobs for each bilingual position.

### Myth 6

The French language is not under threat in New Brunswick.

### Reality

It is not uncommon to meet New Brunswickers whose mother tongue is French, but who hardly or no longer speak the language. By contrast, who has ever met a New Brunswicker whose mother tongue is English and who no longer speaks it?

This observation is not surprising. When two languages coexist in the same territory and one exercises more influence than the other, there is always a risk of assimilation.

The English language exercises a strong influence throughout North America. Francophone educational and cultural institutions are essential for the protection and preservation of the Francophone community<sup>6</sup>.

### Myth 7

Duality divides the two linguistic communities.

### Reality

Duality means two. And New Brunswick has two official linguistic communities: one Anglophone, the other Francophone. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* states that each linguistic community in New Brunswick has the right to its own educational and cultural institutions (e.g., schools).

Far from being divisive, duality actually promotes unity. Here's why: To flourish, any linguistic community needs places where its members can live fully in their language. That is the reason for having distinct cultural and educational institutions. By ensuring the development of each community, these institutions promote the equality of the two groups, and equality fosters unity.

Distinct institutions do not prevent dialogue between the two linguistic groups. They come together regularly, in many areas of activity, for example, at work or at play.

### Myth 8

The establishment of two regional health authorities – Horizon and Vitalité – means that we have Anglophone and Francophone hospitals.

### Reality

All hospitals in the province must serve the public in both official languages. This is set out in the *Official Languages Act*. A hospital may adopt an internal working language for its staff, but this in no way changes its obligation to serve members of the public in both English and French.

### Myth 9

The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages only handles complaints from Francophones.

### Reality

In the last few fiscal years, approximately 22% of admissible complaints handled by the Office of the Commissioner concerned services in English. New Brunswick has more Anglophones than Francophones. It's therefore not surprising that being served by government in English poses fewer problems.

### Myth 10

The Commissioner can impose French Immersion programs on all New Brunswick schools.

### Reality

Decisions pertaining to French immersion are the sole responsibility of government and district educational councils. However, under his promotional mandate, the Commissioner can look at issues related to French immersion and make recommendations.

### Myth 11

The Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick sets the rules for official bilingualism in the province.

### Reality

Who does what with respect to official languages in New Brunswick is often the subject of confusion. Let's clarify:

- Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) adopt legislation. Accordingly, MLAs have unanimously adopted the *Official Languages Act*.
- The Premier of New Brunswick is responsible for the administration of the Act. Section 2 assigns this responsibility to the Premier. The government he leads is responsible for implementing the various elements of the Act.

- The Commissioner of Official Languages provides oversight over the government's administration of the Act. To do so, he or she conducts investigations and make recommendations aimed at ensuring compliance with the Act. The Commissioner only has the power to make recommendations, but not to impose measures. The Commissioner also has the role of promoting the advancement of both official languages.
- The courts resolve disputes according to law. Under the *Official Languages Act*, if a complainant is not satisfied with the conclusions of an investigation conducted by the Office of the Commissioner, he or she may apply to the Court of Queen's Bench for a remedy.

- 1- As of March 31, 2019, data for Part I, provided by Finance and Treasury Board
- 2- Pépin-Fillion, Dominique. *The Language Situation in New Brunswick: Worrying Trends and Some Encouraging Signs*. Moncton, Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities. 2018.
- 3- Statistics Canada, 2016 Census
- 4- *Two languages: It's good for business*, Pierre-Marcel Desjardins and David Campbell, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick, Study updated in 2019
- 5- Compliance of Part I departments and agencies with the Official Languages Act, 2015-2016 Annual Report of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick
- 6- "When attempts are made to integrate two systems, one of which is weaker than the other, the lack of symmetry in bilateral relations will cause the integration process to weaken even further the weaker of the two parties. It may eventually become assimilated within a structure – in economic, social and cultural terms – not much different from that of the stronger party." Reviews of National Policies for Education, Canada, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1976

