

National action strategy for welcoming and accompanying non-francophone parents in mixed couples

Report on the consultations and development of the strategy

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1. Introduction

Definitions

The original French version of this report is titled *Stratégie nationale d'intervention sur l'accueil et l'accompagnement du parent non francophone de couple exogame*. This last word is the adjective for *exogamie*, or “exogamy” in English, which is defined as the union of two individuals with different languages and cultures, one of whom speaks French. In regions of Canada where French is the minority official language, it's common to use the term *couple exogame* (“exogamous couple”) to describe that union.

Considering that these terms are much more common in French than in English, and recognizing that the non-francophone parents referred to in this report are or were in a relationship with a francophone spouse, we'll use either "mixed couples" or no qualifier as appropriate.

On a similar note, terms used in the education world vary throughout the country: francophone education system, French-first-language system, Acadian school board, French-language schools, francophone school, and so on. For the purposes of this report—and purely in the interest of brevity and consistency—we'll use "francophone" when referring to all aspects of the French-first-language education system operating in Acadian and francophone communities. You'll thus encounter these terms in the following pages: francophone education, francophone system, francophone school board, francophone school, and so on. It's understood that the terms used by CNPF members will depend on their respective situations.

And what about the title of this strategy: "welcoming and accompanying"? Who is welcoming whom, and to what or where? Here, too, the French expression *accueil et accompagnement* is used frequently in the world of minority francophone education. Although it rolls off the tongue more naturally in French than in English, "welcoming and accompanying" does capture the very essence of its meaning. The CNPF, and by extension its member associations from coast to coast to coast, are actively seeking ways to welcome non-francophone parents into the Canadian francophone family and to accompany them on a journey that will include, but not be limited to, years of francophone education for their children. Hence the "national action strategy".

Context

The Commission nationale des parents francophones (CNPF) is a national organization comprising member associations in all provinces and territories outside Quebec, whose mission is to promote parents' participation in their children's francophone education from the preschool to the postsecondary level.

The role and contribution of non-francophone parents in the context of francophone education have been on the radar of the CNPF network for many years.

The CNPF took part in the 2017 *Summit on French-Language Education*, during which young participants spoke about the positive impact that non-francophone parents can have by encouraging them to continue studying in French. According to these youth, the more a non-francophone parent is open to and values French within the family, the more they're keen to pursue their studies in French.

It is thus important for the CNPF network to have a strategy to support non-francophone parents in mixed couples who value French in their lives and choose francophone services for their children's education.

The best way to develop such a strategy is first to consult parents. To that end, the CNPF envisaged a project aimed at identifying non-francophone parents' needs—explicitly recognizing the high proportion of francophone parents outside Quebec whose spouses have a different mother tongue and cultural background. These mixed couples' decisions directly impact the future of minority francophone communities across Canada, and the CNPF wanted to help them make informed decisions about their children's education and take action accordingly.

In 2018, the CNPF launched a Canada-wide consultation, in English, that included two phases: an online survey and in-person focus groups. Non-francophone parents across the country were invited to complete the survey, while parents in three provinces—British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario—received an invitation to the focus groups.

The survey was open online from October 24 to November 13, 2018, and 623 parents took part in it.

The focus groups took place in November 2018 and were attended by some 40 parents.

The overall process, which will continue into 2020, is aimed at developing a national action strategy for welcoming and accompanying non-francophone parents in mixed couples. Implementing the strategy can take different forms depending on each CNPF member association's needs and realities.

Another important group

This initiative focuses on the participation of non-francophone parents in their children's linguistic, cultural, and identity development. There are, however, a considerable number of parents in minority francophone communities whose francophone roots have been compromised by years of assimilation.

Parents who wish to reintegrate this francophone heritage into their family today face challenges similar to those of their non-francophone peers. The CNPF believes the present strategy could benefit these parents as well, while at the same time recognizing that their situation includes other layers of complexity.

A collaborative effort

The CNPF team carried out this project in collaboration with the following persons:

- **Consultant:** Glen Taylor, specialist in exogamy
- **Committee comprising the executive directors of five CNPF member associations:**
 - Anastasia DesRoches, Fédération des parents de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard (PEI)
 - Chantal Varin, Association francophone des parents du Nouveau-Brunswick (NB)
 - Véronique Legault, Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse (NS)
 - Sylvie Ross, Parents partenaires en éducation (ON)
 - Marie-Andrée Asselin, Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique (BC).

2. Consultation framework

To ensure consistency between the two project phases (survey and focus groups), the most frequent responses from the survey were used as the basis of the focus group discussions. This led to a significant realization: the survey provided factual responses, whereas the focus groups also yielded affective, or emotional, reactions. In terms of strategy development, we consider the survey results to be an expression of parents' needs and the focus group results an expression of their concerns. We believe it is important to consider both types of data when developing a strategy.

a) Survey

The online survey comprised 12 questions intended for parents of children at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels.

Here are some of the highlights:

Parents' comfort level in French

- 14% understood no French.
- 49% understood basic French.
- 11% understood French quite well.
- 26% could hold conversations in French.

Different stages on the educational continuum

- 33% had children of preschool age.
- 74% had children attending a francophone elementary school.
- 19% had children attending a francophone secondary school.

Children's first language(s) as indicated by parents

- 44% of parents had children with more than one first language, including French.
- 42% of parents had children whose first language was English.
- 10% of parents had children whose first language was French.

How do parents wish to receive information?

- 85% by email
- 40% via websites
- 29% in person
- 22% through social media.

What do parents want to learn more about?

- How the francophone school system prepares students for postsecondary studies in English (74%).
- What role they can play in their child's francophone education (61%).
- How their child can become fluently bilingual (48%).

More specifically at the preschool level:

To make decisions, parents need to know...

- how they can prepare their children for the type of school they'll attend (57%)
- how they can help their children develop an identity that includes the French language and francophone culture (57%)
- what opportunities their children will have through early childhood services to develop their French-language skills (52%).

Once the schooling decision is made, parents would like to know what actions they can take...

- to prepare their children for the education they'll be receiving (65%).

More specifically at the elementary and secondary francophone school levels:

Parents need help to decide...

- what roles they can play in their children’s francophone education, at home and in the school (60%)
- how they can help with homework (60%).

Once the schooling decision is made, parents would like to know what actions they can take to ensure...

- that participating in their children’s francophone education, at home and in school, is as meaningful as possible for them and for their children (69%)
- that their children always feel good about their French-language skills and francophone culture (61%).

Involvement in the francophone community:

We also wondered if parents considered it important for their children to have opportunities for involvement in their local francophone community as they grew up.

- 88% did consider it of importance, including 33% who said it was very important.

b) Focus groups

After the survey phase, focus groups were held in order to delve deeper into the most frequent survey responses—those that scored higher than 50 percent. This created a connection, and revealed some interesting parallels, between the survey and the in-person consultation.

It should be noted that many participants in the three focus groups voiced enthusiastic appreciation for this CNPF initiative. Several explained that they felt excluded from their children’s francophone education in many respects, but that this consultation, in English, provided an exceptional and meaningful opportunity to discuss their situation.

c) Parallels between the survey and focus group results

As mentioned above, besides discussing specific survey questions, focus group participants also shared some emotional reactions. By comparing the survey results (highlighting needs) and focus group comments (expressing concerns), we were able to draw parallels between the two.

Here are a few examples:

Need	Concern
help my child become bilingual	feeling embarrassed by my limited French skills
help my preschool child learn French	worrying about how I as an anglophone will be received in the francophone community
prepare my child for francophone schooling	doubting the soundness of our choice of a francophone education
play a role in my child’s francophone education	being frustrated by how hard it is for me to keep up on what’s happening at school
help with homework	feeling inadequate because of my limits in French
prepare my child for postsecondary studies	fearing that my child won’t be able to succeed in an English-language university

help my child develop an identity that includes the French language and francophone culture	feeling that I haven't got all the skills to help my child in this linguistic and cultural development
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Recognizing and exploring these parallels enabled us to start developing an action strategy based on everyday life—and especially on the needs and concerns—of non-francophone parents in mixed couples.

3. Developing an action strategy focussed on the role of non-francophone parents

The strategy arising from this consultation process comprises the following four components:

a) Needs and concerns

The needs and concerns expressed through the survey and focus groups, as described above, form the core of the strategy.

b) Messages and means

To assure parents that we have heard their needs and concerns, and to develop a realistic, relevant, and accessible strategy, we have added two more components: messages and means.

The messages come from listening attentively to parents and proposing concrete courses of action. The means are the ways in which these messages are conveyed in a targeted and accessible manner.

The types of messages to be conveyed depend on the nature of parents' needs and concerns. For example, the need to learn more about bilingualism would be addressed in an informative message; the concern of being unable to express oneself correctly in French, and thus being unable to help one's child in French, would be addressed in messages of reassurance, awareness-raising, empowerment, and even inspiration.

The strategy would thus include messages that...

- inform
- raise awareness
- acknowledge
- reassure
- reinforce
- support resourcefulness
- empower
- express appreciation
- inspire.

The means to convey effectively these messages would include:

- using English in certain situations
- employing a variety of platforms
- presentations
- workshops

- videoclips
- testimonials
- collaboration with partners.

Current CNPF member initiatives, such as Conversations and Dream Big workshops, can also provide excellent means for conveying messages.

Recent discussions between the CNPF and the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne (ACUFC, the association of Canadian francophone colleges and universities) have focussed on the need to accompany parents toward the postsecondary world. This budding partnership shows significant potential for coordination between the two networks aimed at providing parents with valuable information and developing resources of benefit to both them and their teens.

In keeping with the focus of the CNPF consultations, messages must be formulated in such way as to help parents make informed decisions and then take actions consistent with those decisions.

The needs and concerns of non-francophone parents in mixed couples (as well as many parents with francophone roots), identified through the survey and focus groups, are discussed in the next section along with the messages and means for conveying them.

4. Strategy rollout

4.1 Communications

The word “communications” came up more often than any other in the focus groups. Besides referring to the transmission of information they need, this single word provokes a flood of emotions ranging from insecurity to indignation, not to mention considerable frustration. The following tables present various aspects of communications.

4.1.1 Preschool level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>When discussing how to help their children learn French and develop francophone culture and identity, parents of preschoolers emphasized the need for communications outside the francophone education system. They want to know what resources, activities, and socialization opportunities will help reinforce this development.</p> <p>This need raises concerns about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their limited French skills • how they'll be received in francophone preschool organizations. <p>These concerns are based on discouraging incidents that the participants had either experienced or heard about.</p>	<i>Informative messages</i>	
	<p>Inform parents about...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • activities in French intended for preschool-age children • day camps where children can learn and practise their French • the monthly calendar of regular French-language activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ play groups ○ story time in French (at the local francophone resource centre, library, etc.) • contact information of francophone daycares, preschools, and resource centres. 	<p>Convey these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in English or bilingually • through social media • on the radio (community, CBC, other local stations) • in local newspapers • in the form of calendars posted in public places (libraries, clinics, grocery stores, community centres, etc.).
	<i>Messages of acknowledgement, reinforcement, and inspiration</i>	
	<p>Formulate messages that...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emphasize how their decisions and actions help their child to grow linguistically and culturally • explain the benefits of children being exposed to French, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ neurological development ○ preparation for francophone schooling ○ identity development • recognize that bringing their child into the francophone world can take them out of their own comfort zone • congratulate them for getting involved. 	<p>Convey these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as soon as a parent contacts the organization or group in question <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ which underlines the importance of raising employees' and volunteers' awareness (see below) • in English if the parent doesn't speak French • in person if possible, otherwise using the same technology as the parent who initiated the contact (over the phone, by email, etc.).

4.1.1 Preschool level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
	<i>Awareness-raising messages</i>	
	Raise awareness among employees and volunteers in preschool organizations that it is important to make parents feel welcome regardless of their French-language skills, recognizing that their children are part of the next generation of francophones.	Convey this message... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in French • to the team of employees and volunteers • in person (by an internal or external resource person) • in the form of a presentation, workshop, discussion, etc.
The preschool survey and focus groups also revealed the need to receive information on schooling options , even if it would be relevant only several years later. This need includes preparation for postsecondary studies.	<i>Informative messages</i>	
	Formulate the following messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francophone schools provide the education best suited to their children's needs. • Francization (intensive French-language instruction) enables anglo-dominant children to learn French quickly and integrate into the francophone system seamlessly. • Although there are some differences between and within provincial and territorial francophone and anglophone education programs... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ students in the francophone system take and pass the same English-language courses as their anglophone peers ○ francophone graduates' high level of bilingualism enables them to study or work in both English and French. • (where applicable:) If parents wish to improve their own French, there are 	Convey these messages... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in English or bilingually • through social media • on the radio (community, CBC, other local stations) • in local newspapers • through presentations, workshops, and conversations for parents of preschool-age children, held in... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ community centres ○ family resource centres ○ francophone schools • in welcome kits given to parents of newborns.

4.1.1 Preschool level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>This need for information is accompanied by parents' concerns about their limited French skills. They believe and fear that this will hinder participation in their child's francophone education.</p>	<p>courses for adults in the municipality, region, etc.</p>	
	<p><i>Messages of awareness-raising, acknowledgement, and appreciation</i></p>	
	<p>Formulate messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explaining that they don't need to master French in order to participate in their child's francophone education • acknowledging the efforts they're making already, while their child is still very young • expressing appreciation for their openness to being involved in their child's francophone education. 	<p>Convey these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in English for parents who don't speak French • immediately when parents contact the school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ initiate a personal contact with a school representative ○ consider the participation of parent "ambassadors" who could also speak with parents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ invite parents to contact their CNPF member association • through videoclips <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ featuring testimonials from parents who have gone through the same situation ○ explaining the myths and realities of francophone education in a minority setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ e.g., videoclips produced by the Université de Moncton • during information evenings hosted by... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the school ○ the school board ○ the CNPF member association.

4.1.2 Elementary level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>To participate fully in their children’s education (a priority according to the survey), parents need to know what their children are doing at school. They want to know the curriculum and activities, as well as their children’s progress and any homework they might have to help with. They also want to know how the francophone system prepares students for postsecondary studies.</p> <p>Once parents are in the francophone system, communications take on another dimension: that of keeping them informed on a frequent basis. In the context of mixed couples, this creates challenges for many reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents’ roles at home, especially with respect to their children’s education • francophone parents’ presence and availability, e.g., to translate school documents • situations where a non-francophone parent is raising the children. <p>Parents want communications that help them be proactive rather than reactive. They want to take part in activities like educational outings regardless of their French skills. They’re also looking for consistence in the language requirements of different volunteer positions.</p> <p>Many parents want to receive communications in English so that they can feel involved in their children’s education. Others insist that their school’s francophone ambiance be respected.</p>	<p>It’s mainly up to school boards to address these needs and concerns. The CNPF network does, however, represent parents who are raising the next generation of Canada’s minority francophone communities, and thus has a duty to promote positive relations between parents and educators.</p> <p>The focus groups provided a unique opportunity and framework for productive discussions on this matter. It would be highly appropriate for CNPF member associations to share these results on an informational basis with the francophone school boards throughout their territory.</p>	
	Informative messages	
	<p>Formulate messages that...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are effective (clear and easy to translate) • explain why francophone schools exist (to serve the francophone community) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ this being a fundamental difference between the francophone system and French immersion programs ○ why French must be the dominant language within the system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ including parent committees of various types • describe the differences between francophone education and French immersion programs (mandates, target clientele, anticipated outcomes in terms of bilingualism, etc.) • identify ways and areas where non-francophone parents can participate. 	<p>Participate in conveying these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in close collaboration with school boards • with other partners when opportunities arise.

4.1.2 Elementary level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>One concern expressed by many participants is that they're unsure about their ability to understand communications coming from the school. This is not a matter of linguistic insecurity—of being unable to communicate in French—but rather a fear of disappointing their children because they missed or misunderstood important information sent out by the school.</p> <p>Many parents told us they spend a lot of time translating information coming from the school. They're not complaining, merely pointing out that they make this effort for their children.</p> <p>Unfortunately, weaknesses in automatic translation are often a source of frustration because parents cannot count on the accuracy of the translated messages.</p> <p>Receiving long emails in French can also be frustrating; translating them sometimes becomes so arduous that even the most determined parents get discouraged and give up.</p> <p>Despite these difficulties, many parents maintain that they do not wish to receive everything in English—just enough to know what's happening in their children's school life.</p>	<p><i>Messages of responsibility, acknowledgement, and appreciation</i></p> <p>Formulate messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encouraging non-francophone parents to assume certain responsibilities within the context of their school board's language policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ as one aspect of their parental involvement • acknowledging that many non-francophone parents assume such responsibilities daily by making an effort to understand information coming from the school • commending their efforts to keep up on school life • emphasizing that their involvement contributes to their children's francophone education. 	<p>Convey these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in English if parents don't speak French <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ preferably in private if in English • spontaneously during personal exchanges with parents • publicly during school or community events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ a brief word thanking them for their efforts can be greatly appreciated • during presentations, e.g., at the start of the school year, when explaining the importance of creating and maintaining a francophone ambiance in the school.

4.1.3 Secondary level		
Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>Besides wanting to follow their children’s progress, parents at the high school level find themselves in a world of increasing competition for students, including more program choices (languages, arts, sports, international baccalaureate, etc.) that are often available in English. Significant emphasis is also placed on preparing students for postsecondary studies.</p> <p>This postsecondary preoccupation has an impact on high school education in general. But the situation is even more complicated in the francophone system where, although graduates’ bilingualism clearly opens doors to both francophone and anglophone institutions, some parents continue to wonder about their teens’ ability to succeed at the postsecondary level in English.</p> <p>When it comes to postsecondary studies, then, parents and students need to be informed and reassured that they’re making the right choice by doing all their schooling in the francophone education system.</p>	<i>Informative and reassuring messages</i>	
	<p>Formulate messages for parents and students...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • affirming that graduates from the francophone system are among the most bilingual individuals in Canada • presenting studies and standardized test results • explaining that this level of bilingualism will allow them to study or work in both of Canada’s official languages • countering myths, e.g., that students must attend an anglophone high school in order to succeed at postsecondary studies in English • reiterating that francophone high schools provide many academic and cultural benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ low student-teacher ratio ○ preparation for a future rich in possibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ and not only for a job with the federal government. 	<p>Convey these messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in French and English <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ including testimonials from graduates and parents • in person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g., during school orientation sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ both elementary and secondary • in publications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g., from the CNPF network • in videoclips <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ presented during school and extracurricular events ○ available online ○ sent to parents who enrol their children in a francophone school.

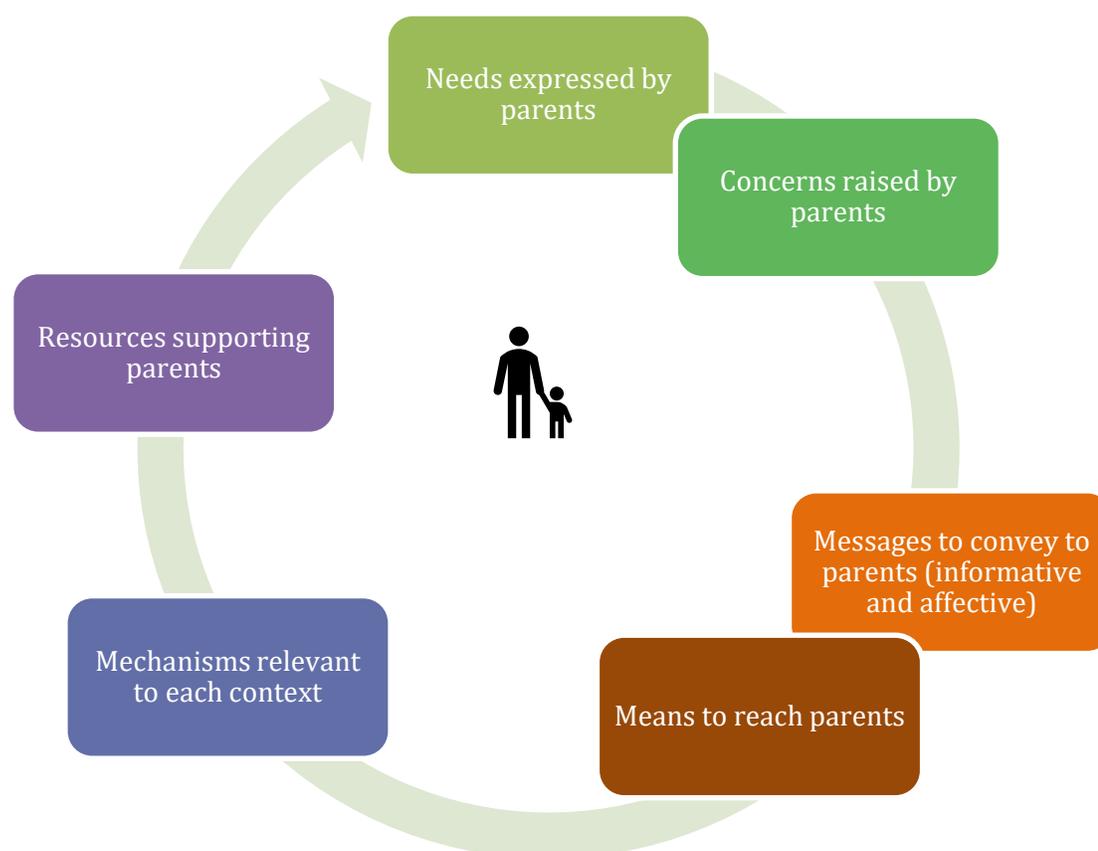
4.2 Homework

While communications give rise to a variety of needs and concerns among parents, homework comes a close second. Even parents of preschool-age children seem to be preoccupied by homework.

Needs and concerns	Messages		Means
<p>The survey results and comments from focus group participants are most revealing. As one parent, who’s also a teacher, puts it: “We must rid parents of this homework obsession!”.</p> <p>A wide-ranging conversation on homework is becoming increasingly necessary. If there’s no consensus on homework—the amount, frequency, and even the need for it—among educators, how can parents be informed about it?</p> <p>First, by identifying a role they can play regardless of their French-language skills: parents can help their children by acting as “coaches” rather than sitting down and doing the homework with their children.</p> <p>Parents who choose a coaching role need to know what homework entails.</p> <p>They must also realize that homework outcomes depend on their children and not on their own active participation. Homework results can help teachers monitor how well subject matter is being understood and to make adjustments as needed.</p> <p>Furthermore, parents need to know the resources and tools that are available to their children, such as the Eurêka! online homework service.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Informative and reassuring messages</i></p> <p>Formulate informative messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explaining that parents’ role is not to do their children’s homework but rather to provide a framework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g., by creating favourable conditions for doing homework • citing resources and tools such as Eurêka!, educational apps, etc. • reminding parents that, with the evolution of education programs and teaching approaches, at some point homework could well become a challenge regardless of their knowledge of French. 		<p>Convey these informative and reassuring messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in French and English • in workshops, presentations, conversations, etc. • during school orientation sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ both elementary and high school • in publications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g., from the CNPF network • in videoclips <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ presented during school and extracurricular events ○ available online ○ sent to parents who enrol their children in a francophone school.

Needs and concerns	Messages	Means
<p>Parents' main concerns arise from their limited knowledge of French: how can they help their children with homework if they don't understand the language?</p>	<p>Formulate reassuring messages...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • affirming that parents' language skills don't prevent them from accompanying their children as "coaches" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ by assuming a coaching role, parents help their children learn subject matter and develop confidence. 	

Graphic of the action strategy for welcoming and accompanying non-francophone parents in mixed couples who wish to play an active role in their children's francophone education



Conclusion

A national action strategy for welcoming and accompanying non-francophone parents in mixed couples, applied in each region according to the needs and realities, must include several interrelated components in order to reach the greatest possible number of parents.

This initiative has enabled the CNPF to identify various **needs** and **concerns** of parents who participated in the survey and focus groups. The resulting strategy includes these two components because they signify ideas and emotions. Focussing on facts without taking account of feelings is to ignore the substantial influence of emotions on decisions and actions; focussing only on feelings ignores the crucial importance of facts in the decision-making process.

The other two components of the strategy, **messages** and the **means** to convey them—deployed using mechanisms relevant to each context—provide opportunities not only to inform parents but also to show that the CNPF network is listening to them.