

**MIDTERM EVALUATION REPORT  
COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRES:  
AN ENGLISH MINORITY-LANGUAGE INITIATIVE**

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Revised November 25, 2008

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This midterm evaluation report presents the findings from the first year of data collection for the *Community Learning Centres: An English Minority-Language Initiative*. The purpose of the initiative is to help schools in Québec's English sector become "Community Learning Centres" (CLCs) that serve as hubs for education and community development and as models for future policy and practice. There are three key results anticipated from the project: (1) ongoing collaborative partnerships between schools, families and communities in all regions; (2) increased student engagement and success; and (3) enhanced access to educational services and lifelong learning opportunities for English-speaking communities. In the long term, it is hoped that the CLCs may contribute to the revitalization of English-speaking minority communities in Québec. The initiative began in 2006 with the selection of 15 schools, referred to as Phase 1 schools in this report. In the spring of 2007, 7 additional schools were selected to become CLCs; these schools are referred to as Phase 2 schools. The key findings in this report represent the first year of data collection on Phase 1 schools.

### The Context

The community school is an international reform that has been receiving growing attention in recent years. A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and the larger community (Melville, 2000). The community school model is built upon an ecological view of school and community as one integral entity (Smith, 2006). Community schools supplement the usual academic function of schools by bringing together various stakeholders in partnerships for youth development, lifelong learning, community engagement, family support, and community health and safety. Community schools have been shown to improve student learning and to contribute to better-functioning schools, increased family engagement with students and schools, and more vital communities (Blank, Melville, & Shah, 2003; Dryfoos, 1994).

In the Québec context, schools serving the English-speaking community take on special significance. Students attending English schools account for less than 10 per cent of all students in the Québec education system, and many of the 340 English schools are small and isolated. These schools—often the last remaining English institutions in their communities—are increasingly being turned to as community centres, "responsible not only for the students' academic performance, but also for the development of their language and culture" (Advisory Board on English Education, 2000). If these schools were to disappear, it would "have a devastating effect on communities already dealing with a delicate sociolinguistic balance" (Berger, 1999, in Advisory Board of English Education, 2000). The Community Learning Centres initiative of the Secteur des services à la communauté anglophone (SSCA) of the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) presents an important opportunity to revitalize and provide solutions to the challenges facing the English school system.

In 1997, the Minister of Education announced *A New Direction for Success*, an education reform that included increasing local autonomy for schools to better serve the needs of their diverse constituents (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2000). School boards were also reorganized in 1997 along linguistic rather than denominational lines (Freeland, 1999). In its 2000-2003 Strategic Plan, the MELS stressed conferring greater local autonomy on those responsible for student outcomes and building partnerships with all community stakeholders. The recent mandates given to schools and school boards in Québec, by increasing schools' responsibilities and ability to act, present the opportunity and challenge of adapting services to the unique populations served and allowing stronger connections between schools and communities.

### **The Project**

The CLC project is funded through the *Canada-Québec Agreement for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction* (the "Entente") through the SSCA at the MELS. The initiative is led by the independent Project Resource Team (PRT) based at the offices of the Leading English Education and Resource Network (LEARN). The project, subsidized for three years, consists of funding for the development of 15 (now 22) CLCs. The funds are to be used for the hiring of a site coordinator as well as for substitute teachers and videoconferencing equipment. The PRT is funded to provide training and technical assistance, and to develop materials to support the development of the CLCs.

The PRT consists of a project manager, community development coordinator, evaluation coordinator and community-based learning coordinator. Together they lead the project in collaboration with the SSCA. In addition, a consultant helps teachers in the CLCs use the Videoconference Network (VCN). The PRT's main role is to provide technical assistance, training and support to the CLCs. Guidance for implementing CLCs can be found in the CLC Framework for Action and the project's Theory of Change. The Framework for Action, and the accompanying resource kit, is a tool that was designed to help schools transition from a regular school to a CLC by following five steps: 1) explore, 2) initiate, 3) plan, 4) implement, and 5) evaluate. The PRT coordinates this work in partnership with the SSCA of the MELS and the Project Implementation Committee (PIC). The PIC is presided over by the Assistant Deputy Minister at the SSCA and includes staff of the PRT and SSCA.

The 22 CLCs are found in every English school board in Québec, as well as in the Littoral school board and the Association of Jewish Day Schools. The project's Theory of Change suggests that CLCs will be led by their principals with support from a coordinator, who works with stakeholders to establish a vision, mission and direction for the CLC. They work in partnership with other organizations and businesses to meet their goals and serve the English-speaking communities in which they are located.

### **The Evaluation**

Learning Innovations at WestEd was contracted to conduct the evaluation of the CLC initiative. The evaluation has three purposes:

- 1) support the implementation of the project and the individual CLCs
- 2) assess the attainment of the short- and medium-term expected outcomes and the longer-term impacts of the project and the CLCs, and
- 3) examine and identify the processes that impact the attainment of expected results of the project and the CLCs

The evaluation activities in the first year of data collection focused on three implementation questions:

- 1) To what extent and in what ways do the PRT and PIC implement activities and processes designed to contribute to the capacity of the CLCs to achieve the short- and medium-term outcomes, such as developing organizational capacity, forming partnerships, and developing a collaborative school culture?
- 2) To what extent and in what ways do the CLCs, led by principals and CLC coordinators, implement their Action Plans, including development of community partnerships and engagement, development of a culture of collaboration, and use of community-based learning?
- 3) What is the role of school boards and school-level committees in the process of implementation of CLCs?

An Evaluation Guide developed in 2007 by Learning Innovations at WestEd and the PRT, with direction from the project's evaluation committee, guides the evaluation. The Evaluation Guide and the project's Theory of Change were used to frame the data collection for this midterm report. This report focuses on Phase 1 schools and covers the period from June 2007 through June 2008. Data-collection activities included: site visits to Phase 1 schools, including interviews and focus groups with principals, coordinators, teachers, parents and community partners; focus groups with principals and coordinators during PRT training sessions; observation of four PRT training sessions; analysis of demographic data from Phase 1 CLC communities; and the review of key documents from the CLCs and PRT, including year-end reports, theories of change, mission statements, listserv communication, training materials, Guidebook, and other documents.

### **Key Findings**

The key findings after one year of implementation of the CLC initiative can be organized into three categories: the work of the PRT and PIC to support CLC implementation; CLC implementation at the school and community level; and the role of the school boards in CLC implementation.

### **The Work of the PRT and PIC**

The role of the PRT and PIC is to support CLC implementation and help them achieve desired outcomes. The PRT and PIC have a significant challenge, that of simultaneously supporting the development of 22 CLCs across Québec through policy and political support, training and technical assistance, and development of materials. The evidence, after one year of data collection, suggests that the project has been well organized and carefully thought out in terms of the development of training and support materials (Guidebook and Framework for Action) and that the PRT and PIC have facilitated the development of CLCs that are working to implement their own vision and goals.

#### Training helps to build capacity among principals and coordinators

The PRT has implemented a number of key activities and strategies that have contributed to the ability of the CLCs to begin to achieve short- and medium-term outcomes such as developing organizational capacity and forming critical community partnerships. A key area of support has been the training led by the PRT, which brought together principals, coordinators and school board representatives. These training sessions, as well as one-on-one technical and organizational assistance provided by PRT members, have resulted in more effective use of the Guidebook and planning tools by coordinators, as well as stronger relationships between CLCs and school boards.

#### Coordinators, principals and school board liaisons value training as working sessions

Providing role-specific training for teachers, principals, coordinators and school board representatives allowed stakeholders to network with each other across CLC sites, and contributed to building networks and learning communities across the schools. Furthermore, these training opportunities allowed school teams to spend time together to reflect and share their experiences, as well as plan for their own CLC. Focus groups in May 2008 revealed that coordinators and principals felt that the time to work in teams was especially valuable for planning and moving forward with implementation.

#### Training and support in community-based learning and the VCN have led to increased use of these for educational and community purposes

The PRT offers additional support and training in the areas of community-based learning and educational videoconferencing. Evidence suggests that support offered to the teachers in community-based learning and the training on the VCN are beginning to have an impact on how teachers use community resources and the VCN to enhance the curriculum.

#### The PRT is essential to CLC implementation

The feedback from CLC coordinators and board representatives indicated that the role of the PRT is essential to project implementation and success. Some key areas that have been specifically singled out as critical are the training sessions, organizing time and providing key documents for CLC teams to plan strategies, and facilitating communication with the school boards. The PRT has been flexible and responsive to formative feedback, especially with regard to changes in the CLC Guidebook and the reduction of reporting and paperwork, which early focus groups with coordinators and principals flagged as issues. The PRT also responded to early focus group findings

indicating the desire of CLC coordinators to work with other coordinators and with their school teams by building in meeting time in subsequent training sessions. Several ongoing concerns regarding the work of the PRT and PIC include unclear reporting requirements from the CLCs to the PRT, and formulating a plan for sustainability of the CLCs after the funding ends.

### **The Implementation of CLCs**

While the 15 Phase 1 CLCs are at varying stages of implementation, by the summer of 2008, they all had a coordinator and had planned and implemented activities; most had also engaged with outside partners in providing activities and/or services to students, families and the general community. As is to be expected with a large, complex initiative that is being played out in many different community contexts, there is variation in the progress and success of CLC implementation. Some general findings are highlighted below.

#### CLCs following stages in the CLC Framework for Action, in combination with other factors such as principal leadership and the work of the coordinator, are in more advanced stages of implementation

All schools have to a greater or lesser extent followed steps in the CLC Framework for Action (FFA). However, the most advanced CLCs have implemented the key stages: they have mapped their community assets, recruited partners, developed a mission statement, and identified and begun offering programs and services. In these CLCs, there is also leadership by the principal, an active coordinator, supportive teachers, an operating steering committee, and partners who are working together toward CLC goals.

Though not all CLCs have followed key stages in the FFA, most have developed or are developing a “theory of change” to guide implementation.

#### CLC implementation falls into one of three stages: installation, initial implementation, and full operation

- The majority of Phase 1 CLCs are in the “initial implementation” stage, where they are initiating change and implementing elements of the concept of a community school, but practices have not yet permeated the whole organization. The coordinator and principal are working together to engage partners and develop activities and services that address student success and community engagement. However, the CLC may still be struggling with questions of implementation and buy-in such as, “what are the activities that best fit our goals?” “how do we get to the outcomes?” “how do we articulate our outcomes?” “how can we get teachers’ support?”
- Several CLCs are in the “full operation stage.” At these CLCs, stakeholders are no longer questioning if this is the right initiative, but rather the initiative is fully integrated into the operation and practice of the school. There is leadership by the principal, an active coordinator, supportive teachers, an operating steering committee, and selected partners who are working together toward CLC goals.
- At least two Phase 1 CLCs appear to still be in the “early installation” phase of implementation, where they have hired a coordinator and are working on organizational changes, but are only beginning to initiate community partnerships. In these CLCs, the implementation may have been slowed by factors such as a turnover

of the principal, a delay in hiring a coordinator, a poor fit between the coordinator and principal, or a lack of support from key stakeholders.

CLCs have formed steering committees that are made up primarily of community partners. Many also include parents, teachers and students

- CLCs have established steering committees that range in size from small (about 5 people) to large (20 or more people). Not all CLCs have steering committees that meet regularly and that are decision-making bodies; some are brought together more for informational purposes.
- In addition to the coordinator, steering committees frequently include the principal, and may include teachers, a parent and even students.

The transformation from a school to a CLC is under way and garnering support from those involved

- Different stakeholders (coordinators, principals, teachers and community partners) have a similar understanding and are supportive of the CLC concept.
- All Phase 1 CLCs have formal or informal partnerships. CLCs have developed partnerships with both government and nongovernment organizations, such as the Centre de santé et de services sociaux (CSSS), the Community Economic Development and Employability Committee (CEDEC), and other local, regional and provincial organizations (e.g. Coasters' Association, Townshippers' Association, Centre for Literacy, Home and School Association).
- Community partners interviewed for the evaluation note the potential for additional or enhanced services through a CLC partnership.
- In general, CLCs are showing their potential to bring in, as well as bring support to, regional and local associations and service providers. A promising finding is that partners in some CLCs report that the partnership allows them to better fulfill their mandate within a mutually beneficial relationship.

CLCs are showing that they can provide a physical space for community life

- By keeping schools open longer hours and more days in a year, many new activities become possible at relatively little cost. Examples include providing space for organizations to deliver services in the school, for community associations and groups to meet, and for residents to have access to libraries and recreational facilities.
- Recreational activities have been a focus of many CLCs, and school gymnasiums have been opened to the community at large for activities such as line dancing, aerobic classes, badminton, basketball and movie nights.

CLCs vary in their engagement of students, teachers, parents and the general community

At the time of data collection, students often did not identify with the CLC or they recognized the CLC only as a new room or area in the school with the VCN equipment. Early on, the majority of teachers also associated the CLC with the VCN, and some have started using this technology to enhance their curriculum. Teachers overall were very supportive of the CLC idea, although many were still unsure of their role in the new initiative or how the CLC will affect them. Among those parents who were involved, they

tend to either be involved in the CLC through participation on the steering committee or in CLC activities.

Students are the primary target of activities, but most CLCs also serve parents and the wider community

- Some CLCs appear to have strong community connections and are focused on providing services to the community at large, while others are more student-focused in their activities. In some CLCs, principals appear to struggle with the balance between centering primarily on students and their success, and serving the broader community.
- Programs and services for students include homework clubs, tutoring, literacy programs, recreational and arts programs, and Saturday schools. CLCs have facilitated other events that promote education and health, such as activities for Literacy Family Week and a health week. Some have also facilitated volunteering opportunities for students in the community.
- Services for parents have included parenting workshops and language classes. Some CLCs have developed “parent” or “family” rooms.
- Community members have participated in “lifelong learning” opportunities, such as language courses, computer courses, photography courses, and more.
- Many activities for parents and the community have included workshops to provide health information through the VCN; this has been especially true in the rural CLCs.

Two models of CLCs have emerged: parallel and integrated

Early data indicate the emergence of two models of how CLCs are incorporated into the school context. In a “parallel model,” the school and the CLC co-exist and the CLC is an “add-on” to the school. In an “integrated model,” the CLC and the school are woven together as one and the school is now seen as a community learning centre. It is still unclear how these different models will influence sustainability of the CLC—an area to examine closely as the project continues to evolve.

CLCs are showing their ability to maintain their educational goals, while addressing broader community goals. But how “community” is defined varies across CLCs

One of the goals of the project is that CLCs will respond to the needs of the English-speaking communities they serve. The nature of the relationship between the CLC and the community varies based on the location of the CLC. In several rural communities, CLCs have become an important centre of activity for the English-speaking residents. In urban locations, CLCs may be active and engaged with the community, but are often not the only community centre in the area. There is a challenge for some CLCs that serve linguistically and ethnically diverse students in defining just “who” the community is.

Leadership of principals is key

The creation of a CLC involves a major shift in how schools are understood and function and requires a change in school culture, hence, a transformation that relies heavily on the support and leadership of school principals. The evaluation indicates that in many sites, this change is under way, but still vulnerable at this stage, particularly in respect to two key players: the school principal and the coordinator. As the evaluation report makes

evident, the implementation of a CLC is seriously hampered if principals and coordinators do not take on leadership roles and if a viable working relationship between these two players is not struck.

#### Principals assume three leadership styles: leader, supporter and a “hands-off” approach

In CLCs with principals that are leaders of the CLC, there appears to be a more successful implementation at the time of this report. Principals who see themselves as *leaders* of the CLC often describe the CLC and school as one entity. Leader principals tend not to involve themselves in day-to-day decisions and operations, but rely on their coordinators. These principals communicate to the school and the community that the CLC initiative is moving forward with themselves at the head. This style of leadership, along with an effective coordinator, appears to be a promising combination to move the CLC initiative forward. Other principals are active and vocal *supporters* of their CLCs, but take less direct responsibility for leading CLC initiatives. A “hands-off” principal takes a less active role in leading the CLC and allows the coordinator to be the face of the CLC to the school and community. It is also important to note that the roles assumed by the principals are not necessarily static. The evaluation data indicated that the principal’s role shifted depending on changing circumstances.

#### CLC coordinators play different but important roles

The role of the coordinator is not the same in all CLCs, as it is shaped by the expertise and experience each individual brings to the role, as well as the expectations of the coordinator held by the principal. The coordinator’s role varied but generally included, to some extent, strategic planning, working with the PRT, developing partnerships, and managing activities and events. Across the sites, there is variation in how active the coordinator was in driving the vision of the CLC. In some sites, the coordinator drove the vision and sought partners to join that vision, while in others, the vision of the CLC was driven more by other stakeholders, such as the principal or other school and community leaders. Regardless of the exact nature of the role the coordinator assumes, the coordinator is described as “the glue” that holds the CLC together and maintains the momentum; indeed, several principals said they would not participate in the initiative if the coordinator role were eliminated.

#### The nature and structure of the CLC coordinator’s job influences implementation

While the findings suggest the coordinator’s role is important in the CLC, several factors relating to the structure and nature of the work posed a challenge for the coordinators and the implementation of some CLCs. These challenges included time, job security and turnover of some coordinators. Most coordinators reported feeling fulfilled by their work but find it difficult to have enough time to fully engage in planning and managing the CLC. This challenge is exacerbated in the many CLCs where coordinators are not full-time employees. The fact that most coordinators are contractual and not permanent employees of their school boards, along with the three-year grant funding for the position, may result in a sense of insecurity for some coordinators.

In conclusion, it is apparent that at this early stage of implementation, CLCs are already showing their ability to generate a great many benefits to the student population and to the broader population. However, some ongoing challenges for the CLCs as they work to solidify their implementation and plan for sustainability include engaging or continuing to engage stakeholders more broadly, such as partners on the steering committee, parents and teachers, in order to build buy-in and strengthen support for implementation. Other challenges include ensuring that all principals provide visible leadership of the CLCs and reducing turnover of CLC coordinators. Fundraising to support the coordinator and other CLC activities, as the grant funding ends, is also an ongoing concern.

### **The Role of the School Boards**

Each of the school boards with a CLC has a representative that serves as the liaison between the CLC and the school board, including the director general. The school board representatives were each interviewed by telephone and most also participated in a later focus group.

#### CLC implementation is challenging without school board support

The support of the regional linguistic school boards is crucial to the implementation and sustainability of the CLCs. Without board support, CLCs found it challenging to implement key CLC features, such as making renovations to support the VCN or covering the extra custodian costs of keeping a school open more hours.

#### Boards find the CLCs a greater financial and energy commitment than anticipated

Some liaisons reported that the school board directors general have found the CLC initiative to be a greater commitment, in terms of funds and energy, than originally expected. Although the support varies, some school boards have been very supportive of the CLCs and one board is even considering having all of the schools in the region become CLCs. Liaisons reported that sustainability is their biggest concern, shared by coordinators and principals as well.

#### School board liaisons play different roles in supporting CLC implementation

The nature and extent of the support provided by school board representatives varied; for most of the liaisons, the CLC is only one of many dossiers, thus limiting the amount of time and resources that the representatives could dedicate. Some of the liaisons worked with the CLCs on hiring coordinators, attending meetings and helping arrange renovations, while others were more hands-off, serving more as a conduit of information. At the beginning of the project, the role of the school board representative was not clear to many of the CLC coordinators and principals, but this seemed to be changing as these representatives attended CLC training sessions and other meetings.

### **Recommendations**

After one year of data collection and implementation, our findings indicate that significant progress has been made overall in the implementation of CLCs and that CLCs are being supported in their development by the PRT. This is a large-scale project that continues to evolve on many different levels. As is expected in an initiative of this size and complexity, a number of challenges for the PRT, CLCs and school boards remain. As

the initiative moves forward, the evaluation team makes the following recommendations for consideration.

### **Recommendations for the Project**

The PRT has established a pattern of in-person training and meetings for members of CLC school teams to attend together. The feedback from these training sessions has been generally positive. Participants have suggested allowing more time at these meetings for the coordinators and principals to interact and share ideas and knowledge across CLC teams. In addition, scheduling more time for CLC school teams to meet together and continue their planning activities would be valuable.

- 1) Communication from the PRT and the school teams should be improved regarding the use of the Guidebook and templates that are required for the project.
- 2) School teams should be involved in the future planning of CLC training sessions and events in order to enhance the collaborative nature of this initiative as well as move the project forward.
- 3) The teachers and other school staff at CLCs would benefit from specific training on how to implement community-based learning. This would increase capacity at the school level and also contribute to the ongoing efforts of sustainability for the CLCs.
- 4) The project should continue to address the ongoing issue of sustainability, both in terms of financial support and policy support.

### **Recommendations for Community Learning Centres**

It is important for school teams to make time for long-term planning and developing a cohesive and strategic program as part of their continued work in their community.

- 1) CLCs need the visible and active leadership of the principal.
- 2) CLCs should consider ways to enhance the use of their steering committees. Close collaboration with the members of their steering committee and their community partners to create buy-in will help position the CLCs to reach their goals and to sustain themselves in the future. Steering committee members may be able to assist with issues such as raising funds and community support to sustain the CLC.
- 3) Working to engage the teachers and other key school staff will be critical for successful implementation at the school level.
- 4) CLCs that have multisite schools should consider the most efficient and effective ways to work together and serve the community as a whole.
- 5) As the CLCs work on implementation, it is also important to recognize their success and share those successes with key partners, including the school board, the directors general and commissioners, to build support and help work toward sustainability.

### **Recommendations for School Boards**

- 1) Communication between the CLCs and school boards will be critical to the initiative over time and especially as the funding cycle comes to an end. Open communication channels between the CLCs and school boards about CLC successes and challenges can only help in the efforts to sustain the CLCs.
- 2) The principals and the coordinators can do a lot of work at the local level fostering partnerships and increasing services to the community, but there is also policy-level work at the school board and interministerial level that will be required to fulfill the full range of goals for the CLC initiative. Each CLC is unique in the school and community context in which it operates and the school boards can be important partners helping to navigate and support CLC efforts. This is a critical relationship that needs further bolstering as the initiative continues.

### **Limitations and Future Work**

There are several limitations to this midterm report. The report represents baseline data from Phase 1 schools and data from the site visits were early in the implementation period. Future data collection will gain insight into later stages of implementation as well as the implementation of the Phase 2 CLCs. Also, the data for this report were collected from June 2007 through June 2008. Since our data-collection efforts, many sites have made progress and a few have had setbacks that are not reflected in this report. Future site visits and other data-collection efforts will capture this information, and the final evaluation report will present a complete picture of the successes and challenges of the CLC implementation process. There are many aspects of the CLC project that are evolving and emerging as the project continues; these include community participation in the CLCs, the nature of the partnerships, and the role of PIC and the Project Resource Committee. Data on these aspects of the project were not available at the time of this report, but will be collected in future data-gathering activities.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that most schools with CLC grants have embraced the concept and are making significant strides in implementing CLCs that address their school and community needs. The coordinators and principals are key contributors to the energy and direction of the implementation. In addition, the PRT's support for coordinators, principals and other stakeholders is critical to their success. More remote and isolated CLCs appear to be firmly on the path to becoming hubs in their communities. In the more urban communities, CLCs may not be hubs for the larger English-speaking community, as other options for community engagement are available, but they are working to fill important gaps in meeting the needs of their communities or key segments of their communities. The early evidence suggests that CLCs have the potential for positive impacts on their schools and communities and that there is a commitment among stakeholders to meet the challenges and sustain the initiative.