Acadians Hope To Hold On To Their French Heritage

(NOTE: Reader Elaine Ludwig sends us this article which ran in the Times Picayune on Sunday, February 15, 1981, front page, "D'aimé beaucoup le nouveau style de Mamou Prairie").

HALIFAX, Nova Scotia - A bit bruised and disheveled, Nova Scotia's French are holding their own in efforts to avoid assimilation, Acadian leaders say.

"I'm not saying we're not losing ground," says Gerald Boudreau, registrar at the province's only francophone university and school board chairman in the large Acadian district of Clare in southwestern Nova Scotia.

But assimilation has been slowed, and "what we're getting is a better quality of French for fewer numbers."

That development alone is of comfort to Boudreau, Charles Gaudet, president of the University of St. Anne, and Leger Comeau, executive-director of the Acadian Federation of Nova Scotia.

A small Acadian population casts Nova Scotia in a different light than in officially-bilingual New Brunswick, where a policy of separate, unilingual school districts has been adopted and is already in use in some areas.

Here the notion of a complete French-language education in a total francophone environment is not central for plans to bring a cultural reawakening to full flower.

In fact, Boudreau, calling himself a realist, dismisses any such demand as silly.

Instead, efforts are being made to make Acadian children fluent in their mother tongue and give them an appreciation of their culture before sending them out in what — within Nova Scotia — is mostly an English-speaking world.

So Nova Scotia's recently-announced plans to give legal status to minority French-language education have been warmly welcomed by Acadian representatives, even while they wonder whether the government will put money where its principles are.

It's a matter of legality more than practicality," says Boudreau in reference to amendments to the education act, promised in the upcoming legislative session.

The bill will be coming as a federal subsidy winds down. In Boudreau's district of Clare, the subsidy has enabled the hiring of 12 additional teachers to fulfill the more rigorous demands of French-language instruction in a mostly English-language provincial school system.

No provincial finances have replaced the federal money, shrinking by about 20 percent a year until it reaches a steady level, and officials say Acadian boards are on edge about the threat of eroding services.

Still, the legal protection was viewed as an essential step by Boudreau and Gaudet, both of whom say French instruction was more tolerated than encouraged for decades.

An estimated 80,000 Nova Scotians — close to one-tenth of the population — are of French origin. Of that total, about half are estimated to be fluent in French.

While representing only a fraction of New Brunswick's Acadian population of more than 230,000, Nova Scotia's francophones are spread in such a way they predominate four districts — Richmond and northern Inverness counties in Cape Breton, and Argyle County and the Clare district on the southwestern coast.

In these areas, the first language of instruction in most schools is French at the elementary level, with the two languages integrated in the curriculum from the seventh grade on.

Boudreau says it would be ideal for his own five-year-old to progress through Clare's school system with complete French instruction.

But he says a quick transformation would be judged politically and financially unwise by the provincial government.

Education Minister Terrance Donahoe has drawn from federal constitutional wording in promising the legislation would guarantee minority language education "where numbers warrant."

Boudreau says a revival of interest and pride in Acadian culture, while progressing, is incomplete. For that reason he questions whether communities now without French instruction will demand it.

Even among many Acadians, he says, "I don't know whether the ordinary Joe is convinced that French is important, or even useful."

Should other parts of Nova Scotia be given French as a first language of instruction?

"I think there is a need," Boudreau says, "but I don't know whether the demand is there."

Boudreau and Gaudet credit the federal government's official policy of bilingualism as having opened the way for a reinvigoration of Nova Scotia's Acadian culture.

With money for cultural and educational programs over the years, most francophones have withstood the near-saturation of English media in the province, Boudreau said.

One French-language weekly and the often-fuzzy reception of Radio Canada programming from Moncton, N.B., are virtually the only alternative in the media.

The education system has spawned another problem identified in separate interviews with Gaudet and Boudreau.

In places where unilingual anglophone students and English language schools are a minority, there is a natural drift in the classroom toward the language all understand.

"What it comes down to is the Acadian student putting aside his culture for the safety of the English student," Boudreau says.