

Putting Francophone Rights into Action



It's one thing to have a right and it's another to access that right. A right makes a difference in your life only when you use it. Nothing happens automatically from entrenching a right in the Charter.

In 1982, the rights in section 23 were new to us — they were new to everybody. So, the first step was understanding what the right granted us. Then, we had to educate others about what the right meant: that Francophones in Alberta could establish French first-language schools for themselves, distinct from other schools. This was the same right the English minority in Québec had had since Confederation.

This upset some people. But Francophones need Francophone schools — this one thing, distinct, for us. We need it for the survival of our community.

For Francophone students to become contributing members of our country and the world, they need to learn in their first language, and in an environment that supports their identity. They need to learn from other Francophones and hear the stories — learn the stories. Not just so they can retell the stories, but so they can create with them, and find new ways of being Francophone.

People in the majority don't have to think about what supports their identity. The supports are just there. But they aren't "just there" for us.

When you're a Francophone in a minority setting, the English-speaking world is all around you. If you don't pay attention, you can become assimilated. Francophone schools make you aware that you have a choice. If you want to remain Francophone, it's a decision. You have to make it consciously and often.

The fact of the right, and using the right, makes me proud as a citizen. I'm living in a country that allows me to say, "I'm legitimate. I have a right to be here." I really feel good about that for myself, my family, my community — and for Canada.



CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

How does official bilingualism help create a society in which all Canadians belong?



Claudette Roy, C.M., led her community to obtain the first publicly funded Francophone school in Edmonton in 1984, after section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms enshrined minority language education rights in Canada's constitution. She was named to the Order of Canada in 2000 for her work in education.



CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

In what way is asserting collective rights an act of citizenship? In what way does it build a society in which people of different identities and perspectives can belong?