



Youth in Community Economic Development

# La Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne



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Strengthening Canada's Communities / Des communautés plus fortes au Canada

## Youth in Community Economic Development

# La Fédération de la Jeunesse Franco-Ontarienne (FESFO)

*"On veut, on peut, on s'unit... On l'aura!"<sup>i</sup>*

*("Our collective goals... together, we can achieve them!")*

*This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.*

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"FESFO's main goal is to ensure that Franco-Ontarian youth participate fully in the development of their community. In order to achieve this, FESFO must allow youth to discover their own personalities, understand their place in their environment, in order to better identify, evaluate and improve it, have positive experiences in French with other youth to open themselves up to the world, understand the role they can play as Francophones in their community, and help other youth identify themselves as Franco-Ontarian through actions that affirm their identity as Francophones."<sup>ii</sup> In order to carry out this mission, FESFO acts on two fronts: defending the interests and opinions of youth to decision-makers, and providing opportunities for training and group activities to its members.

As Francophones outside of Quebec are a minority there are added challenges, particularly for youth, to fully participate in their communities. FESFO encourages young people to identify with and become confident and proud of their culture, further empowering them to use their voices to become involved in and make change in their communities. FESFO plays an important role as an incubator for leaders in the Franco-Ontarian community.

### **Context**

There are 600,000 Francophones in Ontario, and FESFO has 30,000 members. FESFO members are students between the ages of 14 to 18, or between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, enrolled in an Ontario French-language secondary school. It is a socio-economically diverse community living primarily in urban centres (70%).

French speakers in Ontario are ethnically diverse; many are immigrants and non-Caucasians born in Ontario. As an example, 1/3 of the Francophone community was born in Ontario, 1/3 are immigrants and 1/3 were born in Quebec.

While politically diverse, the community is traditionally associated with the federal and provincial Liberal parties.

Families are increasingly inter-linguistic, that is, the product of marriages between a Francophone and someone whose first or spoken language is not French. One of the paradoxes of the Franco-Ontarian community is its geography. While its few-and-far-between distribution is a weakness, the strength lies in its regional diversity, its presence in many areas and the importance given to networking.

FESFO answered the need for an organization to support and offer resources for Francophones outside of Quebec, particularly students, in their struggle to have their rights to a quality and equitable education recognized. The specifics of the dossiers of this organization changes each year as the needs of the students passing through change, but as FESFO is now 30 years old there is obviously a demand for its services.

## **History**

As FESFO was created in 1977, this year is its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The first conference took place in Orillia, and the organization became incorporated in 1981. Eric Stephenson describes the social and historical context in which FESFO was born:

The quiet revolution happened during the 60's in Quebec, when French-Canadians from that province declared their independence and unique national identity from the rest of Canada. Before that time there wasn't really a "French border." Identity was not defined by provincial geography. If you were French-Canadian you were French Canadian, anywhere in the country. By identifying as "Quebecois"

during the revolution, this population basically removed itself from the "French Canadian" context, to be recognized as solely Quebecois. The Quebecois identified with the province of Quebec rather than Canada. So Francophones in each province began redefining their identity more provincially based as well. Hence the "Franco-ontarienne."

The late 60s and 70s brought about social change in society in general but also with Minority groups who started organizing in a dynamic way. Youth were a part of this new organizing too. For young Francophones there was a need for training of youth leadership. The immediate reason at the time concerned education for Francophones outside of Quebec. Before 1968 there was no government funding for a French high school education past grade 10. After many battles nationwide the governments finally officially recognized that Francophones had a right to a French education outside of Quebec. During this period there was call for an umbrella youth organization to support and offer resources for the struggle. The need for a larger youth organization also had a symbolic component – to enable youth to become a part of something bigger than ones own backyard. This historical period was also an opportunity for Francophones outside of Quebec to regroup and reconnect with their rights as Francophones.

In the mid-seventies the Ministry of Education in Ontario created the Canadian Leadership Grants, for sports, music, and scholastic activities. There was also a leadership grant for class presidents. At one of the leadership camps some of the francophone students got together and decided that they needed an organization that represented them and their reality – all of the camps and activities were happening in English. There was leadership-training need specifically for francophone students. The idea of FESFO started being tossed around.

Thirty years later FESFO is still here. The reasons for being and particular activities change every year because the students needs change as they pass through. However the demand for an organization that enables them to know and identify with their culture so that they can be a part of the development of their communities remains constant.

#### *The Timeline of FESFO:*

- FESFO created in 1977: first conference in Sudbury.
- 1981: incorporation
- 1987: *Organizzazione!* regional forums launched
- 1989: First day of organized activities in schools (a large-scale activity that involves all students at a given school)
- 1992: Demonstrations and campaigns demanding more French community colleges
- 1993: FESFO consults with more than 10,000 students to determine their educational needs during the Royal Commission on Learning
- 1994: First Franco-Ontarian Games in Orleans
- 1995: The United Nations Association in Canada asks FESFO to develop a national conflict resolution strategy.
- 1997: Rallies, petitions and demonstrations to protest the closure of Montfort Hospital, the only French-language hospital in Ontario.
- 2001: FESFO receives the *Prix Boréal* from the *Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne* in recognition of its contribution to the development and advancement of Francophone and Acadian communities across Canada.
- 2004: FESFO participates at the *États généraux sur le développement des services en français en matière de violence contre les femmes* (conference on the development of French-language services in the area of violence against women)

- November 2005: 6,000 documents downloaded from the [www.fesfo.ca](http://www.fesfo.ca) website.

#### **Activities in CED**

FESFO is an organization managed by and for youth through 95 contact persons in schools and in youth organizations with membership in the Federation. A provincial council of representatives, elected annually during the organization's general meeting, prioritizes activities and establishes goals for employees. The FESFO membership is diverse, with GLBT, immigrants and refugees represented, as well as individuals from interlinguistic families (where one parent does not speak French). FESFO targets groups according to the needs of the school. For instance, there are direct intervention projects underway in schools serving immigrant, visible-minority and socio-economically mixed communities.

Employees are more often than not Franco-Ontarians and former FESFO members and participants in FESFO-organized activities. Office employees represent a diverse mix of backgrounds (GLBT, first-generation Canadian, black, women, immigrant, interlinguistic, etc.)

FESFO puts on a number of activities. Here are a few of them:

#### *The Franco-Ontarian Games*

The Games attract more than one million youth, volunteers and participants, and take place each May. Over a period of four days, participants will engage in a variety of educational activities across six different fields: sports, the visual arts, singing and music, circus arts, improvisational theatre and Franco-Ontarian trivia. The structure of the Games is unique in Canada since they are non-competitive; schools are not pitted against each other, but rather participants are put on mixed teams as soon as they arrive, thus allowing youth from different regions to get to know each other, to break down feelings of isolation that can be felt as a Francophone and to

encourage youth to build on their capacity to work together. FESFO is organizing the 13<sup>th</sup> Games, which will take place in 2006 and will be hosted by the city of Timmins.

### *Organizzaction! regional forums*

These forums are training workshops where skills in organizing activities are exchanged. It is one of the rare opportunities for young Francophones to meet in their respective regions. Now ongoing since 1987, the workshops aim to unite and train 600 young leaders with a wide variety of interests to help them initiate and create local projects to benefit thousands of youths and help them get informed and educated on the day-to-day issues in their lives. Four forums take place per year, and each includes 40 practical workshops in the space of 48 hours.

### *Stage franco-ontarien de formation en leadership (SFOFEL) (Franco-Ontarian placement for leadership development)*

The SFOFEL initiative offers in-depth training in leadership as a Francophone in a minority environment. It was established in 1980 and is recognized by the Ministry of Education and the 12 French-language school boards for its significant educational and cultural value. Many participants credit it with having triggered an awakening of sorts with respect to their cultural identity.

### *Self-Affirming Workshops*

This touring workshop allows young women in more than 25 French-language schools throughout Ontario to experience a one-day discussion group dealing with negative attitudes and behaviour towards women. Participants learn the value of tangible actions with respect to their identity as a way to take their rightful place in the world.

### *Other activities*

FESFO also puts on a number of activities and workshops throughout the year and according to demand, on subjects such as

Franco-Ontarian pride and history, school spirit, racism, sexism, the environment, self-affirmation, health and physical activity, violence, etc.

Eric talks about FESFO's relationship to CED:

"In general we connect with CED objectives because we do a lot of training of members around the organizing of large activities and workshops, how to set up inclusive committees, how to organize an activity or group at your school, etc. This training builds youth capacity to engage in community economic development, to get involved in their communities, and to organize the change that they identify as needed. In the last fiscal year we had 5000 participants – so that's 5000 young people that are being empowered to take leadership in their communities.

"Last year FESFO ran a leadership camp with Conseil de la coopération de l'Ontario. Working in tandem with the Conseil de la coopération de l'Ontario we did training about how to be a leader in your community, what a co-operative is and why you might choose that structure, how a young person can start a co-op, and how leadership fits into the scenario. The camp unfortunately hasn't run this year because the person who was heading the project has left the organization."

There are partnerships and relationships with multiple other organizations in the community also working with a similar population. They include:

- Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne française
- Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes
- Assemblée de la francophonie ontarienne
- ...and many French-language secondary schools

## Youth Inclusion in CED

A significant challenge is that of assimilation, often caused by youth transferring to the English school system between their sixth and eighth year of school. This highlights the importance of reinforcing the Franco-Ontarian identity, which is fundamentally linguistically based. Another important challenge is the outward migration of young Francophones towards urban centres where French is more widely spoken (often due to reasons relating to postsecondary school registration), e.g., Ottawa, Sudbury or Quebec.

The Council of representatives is elected at the organization's annual meeting by all the representatives of the school student councils, who are also the elected representatives of the students of each school. At the last annual meeting, 68 French-language secondary schools out of 75 sent delegates to orient the organization's goals, elect the council and learn how better to get involved with FESFO in the coming year. (FESFO)

When asked about how to engage people with their hearts, and why young people feel connected to FESFO, Eric had several thoughts.

"The cultural identity context of our work plays a role, in the sense that you are working with people that can be quite isolated culturally. People need to revive and come together with others of similar backgrounds in order to re-connect to that, to find strength in it. At our camps and retreats we often hear comments like, "Ici je me sens bien, je suis pas gêné de parler en français." ("I feel good here; I'm not embarrassed to speak French.")

"Another reason that young people engage and return to the camps or even to work with FESFO is because they feel as though they can make a difference, as though their participation and involvement has an impact. We consult them frequently and there is always a chance for evaluation after the activities as well, both formally and informally. In general,

when they talk with me they say that they feel they are now able to have an impact, to genuinely contribute to their community. Members have authentic dialogue with others, and are able to discuss about issues that are important to them and that are not necessarily discussed in a school/classroom setting.

"A third, and possibly the most important reason that young people get engaged in FESFO's work, is because it's fun! It's enjoyable! Our team is made up of interesting and diverse individuals, the majority of whom are under the age of twenty-four. They are great role models, and the youth can see and experience the effects of that. It creates a really positive environment. The activities that are run make people feel as though they can take charge of their environment and situation, it's really empowering. To feel that you can make a difference, be it starting a radio program, or as a leader at school or in your community, is invaluable.

*"For me, the Franco-Ontarian Games are a weekend where I don't feel like a minority."*

— Young Francophone Participant from Windsor

"Ninety percent of our facilitators are people who either are currently in high school or who went through the program in high school and identified with the organization and its work. Generally all the trainers are under the age of 24. The employees tend to be older than 24, but still tend to be in the younger age brackets. Each year there is another crew of young people trained – an average network of 200-250 new young people a year."

In order to better carry out its role as a representative and its political education mandate, FESFO also works outside its "official" network, engaging the student body as a whole and involving students in three specific ways:

### *Frequent and large-scale consultation*

- Every year, their opinions and needs are solicited on various subjects through the use of questionnaires (8,000 to 10,000 annual respondents)
- FESFO puts on youth consultation forums through the *Organizzaction* regional forums, the annual meeting and training placements (in this way, our priorities and positions are chosen by 2,000 leaders and representatives).

### *Informing and educating*

- Depending on the project, FEFOS organizes round-table discussions in schools to encourage students to express their concerns and spark further thought on their values while expressing their expectations to FEFOS (between 8,000 and 15,000 students annually, depending on the project).
- Through the use of promotional campaigns on social or political topics (e.g., radio spots on violence against young women, issues surrounding Bill 160).
- Through the use of touring programs to raise awareness on certain issues, depending on partnerships established.

### *Mobilization*

- Through the use of petitions or pressure campaigns (e.g., the campaign on school management in 1995-96, the campaign to support TFO in 1997, the campaign on construction materials, and sending 12,000 faxes to Prime Ministers Mulroney and Rae to pressure for French-language colleges in 1992).
- Through the organization of rallies and protests (e.g., information campaigns, human chain and rally for SOS Montfort in 1997, rallies and presentations against Bill 160, 11 demonstrations for colleges in 1992).

- Through the organization of delegations and presentations (e.g., 28 presentations by Franco-Ontarian secondary school students to the Royal Commission on Learning in 1993, and to committees at Queen's Park on subjects such as education reform and cultural activities). (FESFO)

### **Outcomes and Evaluation**

Some of the outcomes identified in FESFO's work include:

- Increasing awareness of the fact that as a representative in this field, we must ensure that the needs, desires and aspirations of youth are reflected in the federation's activities and in political initiatives at all levels;
- Increasing FESFO's ability to reach and mobilize youth across Canada, on a provincial, regional and local level;
- Fostering a better understanding by community leaders of how to develop strategies and initiatives, as well as the role of youth in crafting these strategies and initiatives;
- Increasing the number of youths involved in developing the Franco-Ontarian community in various fields of activity (justice, economy, health, arts, education, etc.);
- Strengthening the sense of identity and belonging in the Franco-Ontarian youth community;
- Increasing the ability of youth to participate actively in the development of their community by exercising their leadership and organizing culturally related group activities in their community;
- Increasing the retention rate of students who stay in the French-language school system when advancing from elementary to secondary school;
- Increasing the involvement and effectiveness of youth as agents of positive change in Canadian society;



- Increasing the feeling of belonging to the Franco-Ontarian community.

Every year, nearly 3,000 leaders participate in various training placements with FESFO and at least 15,000 more youths are directly educated and informed through its cultural activity programs in various schools. For the last 15 years, FESFO has trained leaders by means of four province-wide placements in leadership, 40 types of on-demand workshops, regional forums and other special projects. Two thousand youths per year participate in a training weekend with the federation. (FESFO)

FESFO's expertise in community development is widely recognized and in use by other high-level partners such as the Ontario Ministry of Education, the United Nations Association in Canada, and the organizing committee for the 4<sup>th</sup> *Jeux de la Francophonie*, held in Ottawa-Hull in 2001. The dynamic nature of all these activities results in the federation being 70% financially self-sufficient, with revenue generated through the sale of its services organizing group activities, as well as through grants and sponsorships from 247 financial partners, among them the Ontario network of *Clubs Richelieu*, the network of credit unions, the network of post-secondary institutions and Ontario's 12 French-language school boards. (FESFO)

### **Success Factors and Lessons Learned**

One of the areas where there have been lessons learned is in terms of evaluation, and the gathering of that information. FESFO consults regularly with youth through questionnaires, travelling consultation panels and collective activities (e.g., more than 10,000 members expressed their needs to the Royal Commission on Learning). (FESFO) For the past two years the organization has realized the value of conducting evaluations that produce more information and encompass more than a simple yes or no answer. Yet this is a real challenge as many of the youth that FESFO works

with are not always articulate with their thoughts on the subject – plus spending tons of time doing an evaluation is boring! So this is an issue the organization is working through. One of the methods Eric mentioned as a strategy for getting better information in evaluations is that during the design phase the organizers are thinking more carefully about the specific questions being asked, and about what knowledge they want to gain through this process.

*"We're searching for more than the immediate answer, we want to measure our impact in the long-term. For instance, at this point we are not able to evaluate how the activities of FESFO influence the actions of young people in other environments. From what we understand we have an impact in schools, but it would be useful to have more concrete information about that. The longer-term impacts are collected informally, but there needs to be a more formal process. This is something that we are working towards."*

— Eric Stephenson

It has been possible to track the impact had on the 20 young people that compose the elected Representatives council (with which Éric works closely) but the specific impact upon the larger groups that take part in the forums and conferences continues to be hard to measure. Progress has been slow to change this evaluative process, but it is happening now, little by little.

*As recently as three years ago the Francophone system and curriculum was run and set up exactly the same way as the Anglophone system. Last year a more Francophone-specific education policy was put in place. This policy, *Aménagement linguistique*, recognizes and plans for a school to reach two objectives. 1. Scholastic excellence 2. Identity building. See: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/documen/policy/linguistique/guide/index.html>*

The province of Ontario is possibly the most advanced regarding French language education because they received a lot of support from the recent Liberal Government. This support has been essential in the development of the Francophone system.

This change in system is another area where people have been able to recognize FESFO's impact in the Franco-ontarienne community.

*With our clients, it's always a brand new beginning! The beauty and dynamic nature of FESFO comes from the fact that there's such a high rate of turnover in the membership and in the network. The average length of membership is quite short compared to other organizations, since the youths only attend secondary school for four or five years and only start to get actively involved in Grade 10... Also, more than 80% of youth who participate in our training and activities are new to the organization, which is a strength and a weakness at the same time." (FESFO)*

"The turnover is very high since our role is to "incubate" leaders. However, we spend a lot of energy ensuring that each generation of new leaders is informed and equipped to better fulfil their role in their schools and allow them to contribute to the evolution of our activities which have been crafted by thousands of other youths since 1975!" (FESFO)

### **Future Directions and Policy**

Some of the challenges of FESFO are finances and funding, Anglicization and acculturation (if not assimilation) which is tied to an ever-changing perspective on ourselves as individuals-members of a minority community and what it is to be a Francophone in modern, globalized Ontario, and the media's depiction of youth in general. These are ongoing and perpetual and the issues that affect FESFO's chosen direction and actions in the future.

### **Financing**

You understand everything that this challenge entails, as do we. Over the last several years, we have been able to look ahead, increase our self-sufficiency to 75% and find creative methods to cut expenses while increasing the number of activities we offer our members. A lot of energy goes into financing our activities, and your support is crucial.

### ***The phenomenon of the "cultural dropout"***

This situation is alarming and directly affects the membership pool of our federation as well as impacting on the opportunities and numbers of people available to organize cultural and extracurricular activities. But most of all we are preoccupied for reasons that will affect the future development of our community.

### ***Franco-Ontarian youth as portrayed in the media***

Aside from daily efforts by TFO and a few other French-language media outlets, Franco-Ontarian youth are non-existent in the media. The young leaders present at our last annual meeting were quick to denounce this and point out that most media coverage of youth centres around the activities of a small elite or focuses on problems caused by youth. This perpetuates a state of ignorance on the part of Anglophones on the richness of our Francophone community, a state of ignorance on the part of Quebecers of our very existence and vitality, and finally a general state of disinterest among youth towards these very media outlets that do not seem to meet their needs. FESFO sometimes experiences the same difficulties when it comes to making its members' opinions more widely known on topics relevant to youth when these opinions do not follow the wider general view. We publish around 20 media releases per year and according to the feedback we receive, less than half of them ever make the headlines. This does not include the weeklies and community radio stations who communicate regularly

with us to solicit our opinions and promote our upcoming activities, and for this we thank them. We know that this problem is not limited to our clients. However, it is as though our organization is completely non-existent in certain media outlets. We believe that all media outlets should grant the initiatives promoted by Francophone youth their rightful place, since a large part of motivating youth comes from positive reinforcement (and youth don't just play sports!) (FESFO)

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<sup>i</sup> Taken from <http://fesfo.ca/fesfo.html> on March 2nd, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Eric Stephenson, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006.