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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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● (1115)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are going to continue our study of the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada.

I want to thank all my guests and witnesses for being here today.

How long are your presentations, seven to ten minutes? Okay. We'll get started, and then we'll have questions afterwards. We will have two rounds of questions—a first round of seven minutes, and an additional round of five minutes, questions and answers.

I will turn it over to Terry Anne Boyles, from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

Terry Anne, thank you for being here. The floor is yours.

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles (Vice-President, Members Services and Public Policy, Association of Canadian Community Colleges): Thank you. It's a pleasure to appear here on behalf of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

Our association represents Canada's 150 colleges, institutes of technology, CEGEPs, polytechnics, and some university colleges. With a thousand campuses in all regions of the country, we're urban, we're rural, we're aboriginal, we're francophone, and we're anglophone. We're based in communities, very tied to community economic and social development, so certainly in the context of the work of the committee on poverty, this is a key area of interest for the institutions. Our institutions embrace all types of learners. Indeed, low-income learners come to colleges and institutes in a greater percentage than they do other institutions in the country.

In our brief today, we just want to contextualize the way in which the demographic and economic transformation provides an opportunity toward poverty alleviation in the country. We believe that maximizing the skill levels for all Canadians is critical, and we cannot, as a nation, afford not to do such maximization of skill levels.

Notwithstanding the current downturn in the economy, there are critical issues with respect to the advanced skills that our industries need for productivity and competitiveness. We spoke to this before the downturn, and our industry partners, in a national coalition of employers on advanced skills, still speaks to that need, going forward, for their recovery.

With the decline in birth rates in the country, we really need to increase that productivity and competitiveness. We need to involve those from all groups within our Canadian society in those programs.

The knowledge infrastructure program has been a help to our institutions. We would like to acknowledge that.

There are massive wait lists for entry into colleges and institutes in Canada. Those wait lists were there and capacity was a concern before the downturn. With the number of people falling off employment and onto employment insurance rolls, those wait lists are growing. It is a significant concern for us in virtually all regions in the country, some more than others, depending upon what has been happening in the economy.

With respect to disadvantaged learners—I'm sure Paul Cappon will speak to this later—certainly there is that real relationship between poverty and levels of education. Lower-income individuals are less likely to participate in post-secondary institutions. In education, many need bridging programs in terms of literacy programs to address the low-skills gaps and to be able to bridge into the post-secondary programs. A number of other barriers to participation affect low-income learners and those within the poverty situation in the country.

The committee certainly would know, in terms of literacy statistics, that 42% of the Canadian population is below the international standard for participation in the economy and in society at large. Not paying attention to those literacy challenges is at the peril of our country, we believe.

In terms of employment insurance programs, even with some adjustments currently in the economic downturn, we're very concerned about the length of time for eligibility, not to get into EI but to be able to get into the advanced skills training programs that people need for the industry of the future. Often people are on wait lists. They become EI-eligible, are put on wait lists trying to get into the programs, and their benefits expire before they are able to complete those programs. That is a major concern going forward. Certainly we recommend a long-term expansion of the training eligibility period.

With respect to low-income learners pre-post-secondary, another area of major involvement of colleges and institutes in the country, there is a confusing complexity of fragmented programs across the federal government, provincial governments, territorial governments, municipal governments, and aboriginal governments. It's confusing and complex for our institutions and our financial aid officers. It's even more complex for the individuals affected who are trying to access ways to alleviate poverty.

There are also major inequities between the programs. For example, if you move off a social assistance program into another program area, you could lose your child benefits, health care benefits, and dental benefits. So that's a significant concern for impoverished people, particularly those adults who may be returning to post-secondary education or to the bridging programs.

We also want to flag a touch of concern, in that the Canada social transfer has the moneys for post-secondary education and social programs within the country. As people fall off the employment insurance rolls into more poverty situations, they often move to the social assistance programs. We're concerned that the increase in social assistance programs may result in a decline in funding available for post-secondary education in the country. We certainly support social assistance recipients being able to have access while they're on social assistance.

The need-based Canada study grants for post-secondary education are appreciated. We wish to flag that $250 a month for living expenses is inadequate, and we recommend an expansion of that program so that low-income participants, especially in the higher-cost areas of the country, can participate more fully.

The Indian and Northern Affairs Canada post-secondary student support program has been capped at 2% growth since 1996. According to the Assembly of First Nations, there are over 10,000 eligible first nations students who are unable to access post-secondary education in the country, and that's a significant challenge. We have people completing high school who are unable to move on to post-secondary education.

I want to draw your attention to a very complex graphic in your package. We undertook a study of the colleges and institutes programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners a year ago. The institutions and their community and business partners support learning through a whole array of programs and services. Our full report is also in our package.

One area that may be a touch unusual to bring forward when we're talking about poverty is the role of small and medium enterprises. Small and medium enterprises are the job creators in the country. One of the roles of the colleges is to work with small and medium enterprises to increase their innovative and productive capacities through things such as applied research. There's virtually no money to support the applied research of colleges and their industry lab partners, so we recommend that 5% of federal research dollars be allocated to colleges and their small and medium enterprise partners so the enterprises can create jobs and be innovative for the future.

In the last page of the report we have a number of recommendations, several of which I've already mentioned. We want to work with the provinces to ensure that the transfers for post-secondary education are allocated to post-secondary education and that the colleges and institutes receive a proportionate share. There should be a continued increase in investments in human capital and knowledge infrastructure, specifically physical infrastructure. Colleges and institutes were, for the most part, built through the federal technical and vocational act of 1960. That infrastructure is failing, and there's a dramatic need if we're going to have capacity for the current students and expanded capacity for the future. Of course we mentioned the fragmentation and the short-term funding mechanisms, particularly for people in literacy, adult basic education, and pre- and post-secondary programs.

We recommend an increase in funding for the Canada post-secondary grants. Colleges play an important role with small and medium enterprises, particularly in rural and remote and resource-based communities, but also in metropolitan areas of the country in applied research product development, the innovative capacity of those companies, and the support for learners to be able to access jobs in those areas.

● (1120)

We have a couple of other recommendations on the eligibility period for training under employment insurance and the possibility of a national summit. It would bring together the community partners, industry, the various governments, and the post-secondary and other sectors to really look at poverty alleviation in the country. We believe there is a huge jeopardy for the country if we don't address the poverty issue and the 42% literacy challenges going forward.

Colleges and institutes are real partners in poverty alleviation in the country. The institutions have played a critical role in poverty alleviation since their establishment, and our members look forward to continuing to work on this area with the federal government and all the communities they serve.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boyles.

We'll now move to the Canadian Teachers' Federation. We have with us today Emily Noble, president, and Calvin Fraser, secretary general.

Welcome today. The floor is yours.

Mrs. Emily Noble (President, Canadian Teachers' Federation): Thank you very much.

I'll make some brief comments and then pass it over to our secretary general, Dr. Calvin Fraser.

I want to thank you very much for the opportunity to have the Canadian Teachers' Federation make a presentation before you. Educators, whether they are at the early childhood or tertiary level, see the faces of poverty first-hand, so it is really important that we have a voice here.

I was pleased with the wording and want to commend and thank you for guidance on presenting. Where it says “how the federal government can contribute”, that would not have been the wording 20 or 30 years ago; it would have been “if”. So I applaud you. The “how” indicates to me that there is a strong commitment, so I thank you.

You have our brief before you, and Calvin will take us through that.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation is a voluntary organization representing teacher federations across Canada and comprises about 200,000 teachers at the elementary and secondary levels. We see the poverty, and it is important that every student has the right to the full benefits of a publicly funded education. So it's not only opportunity of access; it's opportunity of outcome too.

Teachers zero in on words, and the word “hope” is on the second page. One of the things educators give to children, their parents, and their grandparents is hope for a better future for them and hope that they can reach their potential.

On the last page are the recommendations.

I'll turn it over to Calvin to take us through some of the specifics.

Thanks.

● (1125)

Mr. Calvin Fraser (Secretary General, Canadian Teachers' Federation): Thank you, Emily.

Once again, thank you for having us here today.

I don't intend to read this particular document to you as a brief. It was provided to you in advance. I'm sure you either have had or will have the chance to read it, and I hope you use it in your own reports and in your activities apart from this committee.

I'll take you back to the first page. Looking at the titles there, we start with “Child poverty in the Canadian context” because of course child poverty is what affects us as teachers on a daily basis. Of course, child poverty is really just an extension of poverty throughout the entire country. We do, though, see working with children as being a joint responsibility of the federal government, the provincial government, and even organizations like ours to help build the future. That joint responsibility is the focus that we want to put on that particular section of this report.

Moving into the second page, the focus you'll see in there is the feelings, the sensitivities, and why we're saying we're losing some of our best and our brightest in this country. When a child is afraid to tell his mother he needs gym shoes because he knows the family simply can't possibly afford gym shoes, what other effects does that have on the child? Obviously, lots. I'm sure that in a very competitive global economy the federal government is as concerned as we are about losing the potential that's there, and that's a concern we're prepared to work on with you.

The call to action on the next page makes very clear to you that we're not abdicating responsibility but pleading for help for all the children in poverty in this country. As Emily said, we were quite gratified in looking at the guidance for witnesses and the focus this committee has already taken, the sincerity of the work; and the willingness to work together for common goals is noted, appreciated, and wonderful, because it does require the participation of everybody.

There are some particular areas in there, and this is picked up on in that page as well. The aboriginal groups and the immigrant groups would be prime examples of where clearly there's a larger federal responsibility than a provincial responsibility in meeting their needs. Clearly, responses are required from the federal government in those areas. Once again, a good place to start is with the youth and looking at school classes across this country, how they're composed, and how you can reach out from that way.

Page 4 acknowledges that the federal government is helping right now. We note in there that it would be at least 10% worse without the current federal government intervention. That is a good tribute. However, when you look at the fact that even with that intervention we're just holding even, we're not moving ahead, clearly we need to do more. We need to reach out and we need to work together more.

We also noted in your guidance sheet that this committee has already seen the benefits of a federal response. When you're looking at the U.K., Ireland, or New Zealand, you've already seen some of the possibilities out there and the benefits from working together.

The last page is worth spending just a couple more minutes on, starting with the National Council of Welfare cornerstones: vision, a plan of action, accountability structure, and indicators to measure four key cornerstones they bring forward that we strongly support and believe in. You see our recommendations below that would fit and tie right into that.

● (1130)

What is really significant below is that everything there grows from commitment. Once you develop the will, then there is a way to reach the goals. When you look at the goals and the recommendations there, it probably requires cross-ministry work, so it probably can't be pigeonholed into any single federal department. It probably needs to be looked at as a project with targeted goals that can be reached and achieved and built on. It probably needs to work from the existing programs that are out there and build on the success that has already been achieved. It probably needs to target education, and particularly education for those groups that are federal responsibilities, the aboriginal groups, the immigrant groups. And it probably needs to involve partners that haven't always traditionally been involved.

When I look across this table at the groups that are here to talk to you today, I think about the ability of these groups to identify needs and to identify the effects of efforts as they are being implemented. I think about these groups and their ability to communicate and to extend the reach of the federal government. I cannot emphasize too much that if the commitment is there, the way is there, and the people are here ready to help you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

We will now move to the Canadian Federation of University Women. I have Ms. Susan Russell.

Welcome, the floor is yours.

Ms. Susan Russell (Executive Director, Canadian Federation of University Women): Good morning. On behalf of the 10,000 members of the Canadian Federation of University Women, I wish to thank you for this opportunity to present CFUW views.

CFUW is a non-partisan, self-funded organization of graduate women and students in 118 clubs across this country. We feel it is extremely important that the committee has chosen to study the issue of deep and persistent poverty within a land that is both abundant and prosperous. Today I would like to speak about poverty's connection to gender.

Women form the majority of the poor in Canada. One in seven, roughly, or 2.4 million Canadian women were living in poverty in 2004. Poverty affects women differently based on many factors. It's a complex issue that includes age, employment, race, sexual orientation, and the like.

I would like to share with you an excerpt from a 2005 edition of the "Women and Poverty" fact sheet from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. It says:

> A single mother of one child in Ontario receives $957 per month of assistance before deductions. Then she has to spend $675 on rent, $200 on groceries, and has $82 left to pay bills (electricity, telephone, heat), laundry, transportation, school needs for her son.... She has to explain to her son why he can't go on school trips like the other kids, why he is teased for being dressed in old third-hand clothes, why he can't go to a friend's birthday party because there's no money for a little gift, why he can't participate in hot dog day at school because it costs money, why the milk tastes different because she's had to water it down, why by the end of the month they have to go down to the food bank because there's nothing left to eat. She has to cope with well-meaning higher income individuals who give her suggestions like buying in bulk when she has neither a car nor the financial means to buy large quantities. All of a sudden, how she spends her money and who she dates becomes everybody's business, and she is criticized if she splurges on a treat to relieve her depression or make her child happy. Being poor limits your choices and is not simply a matter of bad budgeting. Managing on a very low income is like a 7-day-a-week job from which there is no vacation or relief. Poverty grinds you down, body and soul.

This type of grinding poverty disproportionately affects women in Canada. In 2006 lone-parent families headed by women had median earnings of $30,958. In contrast, their male counterparts had median earnings of $47,943. With the number of female-headed families in Canada topping one million, this leads to disparity and drives home the reality that poverty that affects women inescapably affects children.

The Canadian Federation of University Women works at the international, national, provincial, and local levels to encourage elected representatives to stand up for the interests of women and girls. In our 90-year history the issue of poverty has always been with us. We have found, because of this long engagement, band-aid solutions do not work. The issue is complex, it is interconnected, and by this it makes certain groups of women more vulnerable to deep and persistent poverty than other groups.

● (1135)

Women in Canada continue to face a persistent wage gap, which has narrowed little since the 1980s. Today, full-time working women earn 71¢ for every dollar earned by men. Part-time and seasonal workers earn 54¢, women of colour earn 38¢, and aboriginal women a mere 46% of what men are paid.

The trend is worse and the gap is wider for women with post-secondary education. In 1985, university-educated women earned 75% of what men earned, a figure that had dropped to 68% by 2005.

This pay inequity has far-reaching consequences, such as smaller maternity and parental benefits and the greater likelihood of poverty in old age due to reduced CPP and QPP benefits.

CFUW believes that there is already a clear framework in existence to address pay inequity through proactive legislation by the federal government. The 2004 pay equity task force report recommends adopting a new stand-alone pay equity law that will cover women as well as workers of colour, aboriginal workers, and workers with disabilities. The recommendations outlined in the report are comprehensive, provide a clear way forward, and are useful models for proactive pay equity in Ontario and Quebec to build upon. This report has yet to be implemented by any government, and the recent inclusion of the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act in the budget implementation bill risks weakening what little recourse women currently have to pay equity.

High-quality, accessible child care is another important key to getting out of poverty, essential to support employment and learning, a strategy that is critical to women's equality, an important element of reconciliation with our aboriginal peoples, and a key to social inclusion for newcomers in Canada. In spite of this, Canada is the lowest spender on early childhood education of any country of the OECD and ranks last in international assessments of access to and quality of early childhood education and care.

The federal government must address this fundamental building block of poverty reduction through creating a national not-for-profit child care system. This process could begin with the restoration of multi-year federal funding to the provinces through dedicated capital transfers. This money should go to community-based child care services, so that the provinces and territories can begin to build this critical child care assistance.

Standards of care and services among the provinces and territories and between Canada and other so-called advanced countries, including the G8, call out for vigorous and broadly based action.

Currently, employment insurance is an essential program that allows unemployed women to support themselves and their families while they search for a new job. Unemployment benefits are spent on necessities and, when they are provided in adequate amounts, can prevent families from falling into poverty following job loss.

However, the EI program rules exclude or unfairly penalize women because they fail to take into account how women's work patterns differ from men's. While the great majority of adult women engage in paid work, their non-standard patterns of work exclude many from EI benefits, as do periods of time spent away from work while caring for children or others. These responsibilities make it even more difficult for women to qualify. After a two-year absence from paid work, the entrance requirement jumps from between 420 and 700 hours to 910 work hours, or more than six months of full-time work. Consequently, in 2004 only 32% of unemployed women qualified for regular EI benefits, compared with 40% of men who were unemployed.

● (1140)

The gap is much bigger when it comes to average benefits. In 2006-07 the average benefit for women was $298 per week, compared with $360 for men. Women qualify for shorter periods, on average. In 2005-06, 30% of women exhausted their regular benefits, compared with 26% of men. Most telling is the fact that only about one-third of the total dollar amount of regular EI benefits is paid to women, though women now participate in the paid labour force at almost the same rate as men.

CFW is strongly in favour of making three changes to the EI program: a cut-off requirement of 360 hours of work across the country to enable more women to qualify, should they be laid off from part-time or casual work; benefits for up to 50 weeks, so that fewer unemployed workers exhaust a claim; higher weekly benefits, based on the best 12 weeks of earning before lay-off. These changes to the EI program represent critical steps to prevent temporary job loss from becoming a sentence of lifetime poverty.

In closing, I would like to draw the committee's attention to the fact that in its response to Canada's May 2006 periodic report, the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted the absence of any factors or difficulties preventing Canada from doing what it needs to do to end poverty. The question, therefore, of ending poverty is not one of resources but rather of priorities and political will.

On behalf of the membership of the Canadian Federation of University Women, I urge you to consider these recommendations to alleviate poverty as it affects so many women in Canada.

Thank you for this opportunity to present.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Russell.

We are now going to move to the Canadian Council on Learning. We have Mr. Paul Cappon.

Paul, welcome back. You are the president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Council on Learning. The floor is yours, sir.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Paul Cappon (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Council on Learning): Good morning, everyone.

Mr. Chair, thank you sincerely for the invitation to appear once more before the standing committee. Permit me to make some observations about the committee's work and commitment before getting to the heart of the issue.

[*English*]

I would like to observe how much I value the excellent contributions to our population that are accomplished by this committee. Many of us, looking at the deliberations of the House and its various working groups, view the HUMA committee as one of the most effective, least partisan, and most thoughtful of these groups, with admirable process and collegiality and laudable results. I hold the time spent with your committee as time well spent.

I won't spend a lot of time in presenting; I'll be pithy and succinct, because I know you have some notes in front of you from us, and we'll have a formal submission.

[*Translation*]

The way in which I will contribute to your deliberations today is just to answer, one by one, some of the questions that you asked of the groups that have appeared before the committee.

The committee first asked how we feel that poverty should be measured. The CCL, of course, does not measure poverty directly. Instead, our approach to try to examine how learning can improve employment stability by reducing periods of unemployment, how it can increase earning potential, increase job prospects and contribute to a better overall quality of life and health for all Canadians. We also examine the contribution of learning to community and civic engagement. These days, people must pursue lifelong learning in order to keep their skills current.

[*English*]

To the question of what role government should play in reducing poverty in Canada, there is a list of bullets in your notes, six or seven or eight bullets. All of them revolve around the fact that we do some things, but we could do these things better. We could better connect Canadians to skills training and lifelong workplace learning opportunities. We could do much better to integrate labour market information with post-secondary education.

Let me just make a general remark to say that we have an ironic situation when we want to provide information and analysis to Canadians and that information and data are not readily available. There's an irony that data on poverty cost money. To extract data on poverty from Statistics Canada for use by this committee or by a research group or an activist organization in Canada, you have to pay for it, and sometimes the cost can be substantial.

It's similar for labour market information. You may have seen this in reports this week on the labour market information study that Don Drummond has been leading. Surely we want to connect Canadians to employment if we want to reduce poverty. It's very difficult to do that if it's difficult to access whatever information is available—which is not coherent and cohesive enough, and not accessible enough.

To the question on what more government should do to reduce poverty, I have 10 points—I won't call them commandments, because we are dealing with the federal government; we'll call them contributions—and then eight more specific considerations. We'll call them that.

First is to clarify and promote the benefits of lifelong learning. The Canadian Council on Learning does that through something called the composite learning index, which is a measure of the learning conditions in society. Our fourth annual index will be released on Thursday of this week. We need to pay attention to what other countries are doing. The U.K. has a complete report, which I hope this committee will reference, on lifelong learning as an important potential contribution to poverty reduction. Some of the recommendations that are made in the U.K. apply equally to this country.

Second, we can encourage employers to offer increased training opportunities, which will reduce poverty over the long run. CCL previously, in front of this committee, set out the five principles that we believe are relevant with respect to governmental support for employers who provide training opportunities.

Third, we need to create increased awareness and recognition of prior learning assessment and recognition. That is the learning that people have done formally or informally in the past, which often doesn't count, but should count. The Conference Board of Canada, as you'll notice in our notes, has suggested that this would give Canadians an additional $6 billion in income annually, and it would make a great deal of difference to some people who are now below the poverty line if their learning were better recognized.

Last year we produced, with some colleagues, a report that gives a lot of detail about prior learning assessment and recognition that is done in the various Canadian provinces, but it's not done nationally on a very strong basis at all.

Fourth, we can promote the recognition of informal learning—that is, outside the classroom. Our annual report on the state of learning does that, I think, on a very sustained basis.

Fifth, we need to encourage unions to foster strong working relationships with employers, aimed at effectively identifying training needs.

Sixth, we need a flexible and accessible delivery system for adult learning. The OECD, when it evaluated Canada's adult learning systems, thought that we lacked cohesion and accessibility because we weren't well organized for adult learning in this country.

Seventh, we need to encourage cooperation among stakeholders with respect to ongoing learning.

Eighth, we need to foster a culture of learning in the workplace. I've referred already to the need to encourage employers to do more in that regard.

Ninth—and this has been referenced by CTF and others already—we need to target the lower-skilled population through investments and initiatives in early childhood education and by increasing the general rates among adults of literacy, numeracy, and IT competencies. Although we need to do much more in early childhood, it's also true that learning has an intergenerational impact. If we can do more for parents and grandparents, they will do more for their children, because of course, the most important environment for learning for young children is the home environment.

Tenth, we need to recognize that it's not only the unemployed who are vulnerable. As of 2002, over 600,000 Canadians were working poor, and that number, I think, has probably risen since then.

With respect to more specific considerations for government, I have eight, and these would complement what's encompassed already in Canada's economic action plan.

● (1150)

First, we need to increase the strategic investment in Canada's human infrastructure, as we call it, to equal the current level of federal investment in physical infrastructure.

Second, we need to establish financial incentives that encourage businesses to offer training, and individuals to participate in adult learning. We need to do this carefully and selectively. We don't want to give money away to firms simply because they're in business, but that's why we've set out the principles that might govern the allocation of those resources to business.

Third, we need to provide non-financial support to employers. This is probably even more important, because they often don't know what to offer to their employees in terms of training. We need to give them information, advisory and referral service, and national recognition and qualification and certification systems, including recognition and prior learning, as I have mentioned. We need to support their innovative training approaches and help them to share and disseminate best practices. Many practices are useful in Canada; very few of those are well disseminated throughout the country.

Fourth, we need to support and promote the development of targeted, innovative, and accessible training and education programs for populations at risk, such as retraining initiatives for older workers and basic literacy skills. You may know that 42% of Canadians are below the international bar in adult literacy skills at the present time.

Fifth, and I've mentioned this before, we need to better match existing labour needs with existing labour supply through skills training and learning opportunities coupled with workforce adjustment programs and other measures.

Sixth, we need to facilitate decision-making by individuals, businesses, and stakeholder organizations by better integrating labour market information with post-secondary adult education and counselling and support services, along the lines of what I think we'll get as recommendations from the LMI committee.

Seventh, we need to fund research to determine which methods of adult learning promote resilience and combat poverty among Canadian workers and Canadian businesses. That kind of research is important because it enables us to set standards, measure and report on progress, and establish an authoritative body of information upon which to build future policies, programs, and services for Canadian workers and businesses.

Finally, the eighth point, we need to create forward-looking, evidence-based government policies that position Canadians and businesses with respect to emerging green technologies, services, and economies.

● (1155)

[*Translation*]

Lastly, the committee asked what strategies and solutions our organization is currently providing to reduce poverty. I feel that I have already mentioned our emphasis on the importance of education and learning. We believe that investments in measuring and promoting our own potential, our human infrastructure, offer benefits as significant as, and likely more durable than, investments in roads, buildings and equipment.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cappon.

We will move to our first round. For the Liberal party, Mr. Savage. You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming.

It's hard to know where to start. We have four organizations here that we all know do fabulous work in this country. It's a pleasure to have all of you. I think one of my favourite organizations in the Canadian Teachers' Federation. I will tell you why.

When the Canadian Teachers' Federation comes to MPs, they're not talking about teachers' pensions or teachers' pay or any of those other very important issues, but they talk about the bigger issues. The last couple of years it has been poverty. Either the last year or the year before it was international poverty and the work that the Canadian Teachers' Federation is doing in parts of the world that need help. Now there is also child poverty here in Canada.

Emily, you have done a great job as president, and I know that your successor is from Nova Scotia. Mary-Lou Donnelly will be the new president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation. She is a dynamic and determined spokesperson as well, so I want to commend you on the work you have done.

I have a question, first of all, for Dr. Cappon. When the minister came here in March after the budget, she was asked a question about whether your funding had been extended through HRSDC, a five-year funding. She indicated that it had. But a couple of days later, when officials came, we asked the question again and were told it had been reprofiled, which I think is bureaucracy talk for not so much.

What is your funding situation right now from the federal government? I realize you are not a partisan person, but please tell us what that is.

Dr. Paul Cappon: CCL, of course, is a non-profit corporation that does exist independently from government but obviously is very dependent on federal government funding. We're awaiting a decision by the Government of Canada, through HRSD, with regard to its continued funding support. What the Government of Canada has done, through HRSD, is agree to extend our ability to expend the initial five-year funding to March 31, 2010. We are continuing to do that on a budget of about 34% of our previous annual expenditures.

My view is that CCL is critical because it provides an independent assessment of Canadian learning at all levels—home, school, community, and workplace—and is fundamental to prosperity. I regard it as a service that's critical to the Canadian social fabric, but it is a service, not a lobby, so our view is that the people, through Parliament, will decide on its relative importance and on the added value that CCL represents. That's a decision we're waiting for.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

So your five-year funding ended at the end of March.

Dr. Paul Cappon: But our ability to expend the funding that we were originally given is extended until March 31, 2010, so we continue to function.

Mr. Michael Savage: But that's a dubious benefit. If somebody tells me that I'm going to stop getting paid but I can spend what I got last year, that's not particularly helpful. I know from talking to people like Marie Battiste, who does work with the aboriginal knowledge centres, that they're very anxious, as I know some members of the government side are, to see that we extend that funding, because the work you do is very important.

To ACCC, the community colleges, it's great work that you guys are doing. I really appreciate your coming here today on the issue of poverty. I know a lot of people involved in the community college network, as we all do. Ray Ivani is a friend of mine. Mark Frison runs a community college in Ed's province. Also, in Nova Scotia, we have one of the most impressive leaders in post-secondary education in Canada in Joan McArthur-Blair, who heads up our community college network.

I want to talk to you about that. I've talked to her a number of times as we've been dealing with this sort of recession in terms of ideas that ACCC has put forward. This is what she has said, very forcefully. She says that we're in a recession and we have to provide opportunities for Canadians right now so they can work, but we also need to train them for the future. For example, in Nova Scotia, if we decide that the infrastructure spending, the stimulus spending, is to build a new convention centre, which is one of the possibilities, in Nova Scotia we'd really be moving our skilled workers from one job into another job, as opposed to creating new opportunities for people.

In essence, here's what I think she's saying. Why can't we use this as an opportunity both to train and to educate, but also pay people right now? That can be done through the community colleges because of the nimbleness of the community college network.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

● (1200)

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: Yes. Certainly, Joan is also a member of the national board of directors of our association. We work very closely with her.

Perhaps I can give another example. I was president of the college in Saskatoon, and during one of the downturns in the economy, what we were able to do in partnership with the industry—and this is indicative of the colleges and institutes across the country—is partner with the local industries to use plant facilities that were underutilized. We'd partner with municipalities if they were building new infrastructure in order to do fast-forward of training in the industry types of programs. We could use facilities and resource people. Laid-off and possibly laid-off senior people from industry would actually help with the teaching as well, and we'd move people off some of the welfare rolls, getting training supports immediately.

The best way of that being done is through a strategic discussion among the federal partners, the provincial government partners, and the aboriginal band councils, etc., who may be involved in the communities, to move it very quickly forward, rather than through individual decisions where people may just be in a lineup to get into programs.

Mr. Michael Savage: A number of you mentioned the idea of early learning and child care in Canada. I think Susan referenced that. Paul referenced that. Perhaps Emily and Calvin may have mentioned that as well.

I want to ask you about this. Particularly for people who are living in poverty or working families that are really struggling to get a leg up at a tough time, I don't know the extent to which Canadians realize how little we actually invest in child care. We don't have a national early learning and child care system, as many other countries do, and that leads to a whole host of issues.

Is it true that all of you would like to see some kind of national system of early learning and child care in this country, not piecemeal and not by mailbox, but actually by building a national system of early learning and child care in this country?

Mrs. Emily Noble: From the Canadian Teachers' point of view, yes. Dr. Cappon talked about life-long learning. I think it's quite important.

Calvin, you've done a fair amount of work on this. You may have a few comments.

Mr. Calvin Fraser: This is another issue that we are pressing forward on, and we believe it's part of an answer to the whole poverty question.

The Chair: Terry Anne.

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: The colleges train early childhood educators. Our premise is that education during the first four years of a child's life is critical as an underpinning for future learning.

Mr. Michael Savage: Are you suggesting that children don't start learning at six but actually earlier than that? That's radical.

The Chair: You're a funny guy, Mr. Savage.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome and thank you for being here. There was something remarkable, I feel, in the briefs you have presented this morning: not only have you clearly identified the current problems, but you have also put them in context, which helps us to understand.

I am going to speak in global terms. Both the Canadian Teachers' Federation and Mr. Cappon pointed out what is being done in other countries, particularly in the European Union, the United Kingdom and New Zealand; the federation also mentioned the United Nations' position.

I have the impression that you have studied what is being done in those places quite closely, especially the Canadian Teachers' Federation. That is my understanding. At the same time, I have the impression that history is repeating itself. When we reread the brief that you presented in 1989, when the government was committing to a 50% reduction in child poverty before 2000, we realize that it is almost identical to the one that you presented today in terms of its recommendations. I am very struck by that.

You say that involvement from the Government of Canada is still noticeable, that it can be felt, that it makes about a 10% difference in the alleviation of poverty. Yet here we are with almost the same challenges, if we look at your recommendations. What are we to make of that? Have we made any progress at all, or are we running on the spot? If so, why are we not getting anywhere?

I have two related questions. What can we learn from the strategies and the legislation that the countries I mentioned earlier have put in place in order to eliminate poverty? Do we have things to learn, or do those countries have things to learn from our virtual failure to reach the objectives that were set?

● (1205)

Mr. Calvin Fraser: Thank you.

We often work with other countries. I believe that we are not without influence in Education International, the largest association of educators in the world. We work with all the countries mentioned in the brief. In Canada, it is interesting to consider the federal government's position because, often, our initiatives are provincial. However, there are still a lot of things that the federal government can do, working not only with provincial governments but also with other national and international organizations. That can contribute a lot to the eventual victory over the challenges.

[*English*]

In looking at what the feds cannot do, obviously they cannot come in with pat solutions. Even if we look to the other countries, the pat solutions aren't there. We must do the comparisons. We must look at what's appropriate for us and use it appropriately in Canada. But we can still, at a federal level, coordinate efforts, and I think that was mentioned by my compatriot here as well. We can cross boundaries. Whether those boundaries happen to be borders or languages or ethnicity and race or religion, the federal government is the only group that can really cross those boundaries.

We can stimulate. That also was previously mentioned. I think Dr. Cappon mentioned that. We can stimulate the efforts, both financially and in services that are not financial. I would have called that enhanced with the non-financial services. That is actually —call them financial if you wish—where I would put things like EI and child care, because on those things truly the federal government can have immediate benefit with strong intervention. The federal government can reward and celebrate success and make it visible from one part of this country to the other. I guess that's also part of the awareness. That's another side of the awareness that was previously mentioned. So that success becomes a model and a base that we work from.

The federal government can use stakeholder groups at the national level, and ultimately the federal government can collect the rewards of having a stronger country.

I had difficulty, Mr. Lessard, in hearing some of your words, because you tend to speak fairly softly, but I think I've at least partially answered your question.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

If there is anything more I can tell you, please ask.

Mr. Yves Lessard: You answered my question in part. But you will see where I want to go with it. You said something very important that was repeated by everyone here, that the effort has to come from everyone. Decision-makers and influential groups in society will be making it happen. We are all of the same opinion, but we still need to turn our words into actions.

Let me explain. This is not about party politics, given that the invitation is also extended to our colleagues in the major national parties, The Canadian Federation of University Women believes—and I share their view—that there should be strong, proactive legislation on pay equity. That sums up their remarks on the inequities.

Does not abolishing a woman's right to go to court to obtain pay equity fly in the face of the sentiments we are hearing today?

Mr. Calvin Fraser: That is a question for my colleague.

[*English*]

Ms. Susan Russell: I believe your question was on the task force on pay equity and how it affects women. I'm not quite sure what the question was, but our recommendation was that a pay equity task force be implemented. We said that the recent Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act threatened pay equity in that it weakened women's recourse to pay equity because they cannot challenge a judgment if it has been passed, as I understand it.

That, to me, is undemocratic. We find that very troublesome and we really would like to see a future government or this government implement the task force, because the recommendations are excellent. They're very good. They would make the country look good. It seems to me that the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act was very backward-looking.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have—

Ms. Susan Russell: Does that answer your question?

The Chair: We're actually over time right now, so we're going to go to the next questioner. Thank you, Mr. Lessard and Ms. Russell.

We're now going to move to Mr. Martin, for seven minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much.

I first wanted to say that I appreciated the comments from the Canadian Council on Learning in terms of this committee. We do in fact work well together. It's not that we don't have the odd difference of opinion and good debate over issues, but we do, and we're trying to do something constructive on this piece. It took commitment from all parties to get this study on the road, which I have appreciated, and I think everybody else that's come before the committee has also.

Last week when we were on our so-called break, the committee was actually in Calgary at the national conference on poverty, which I think in itself speaks a myriad about the serious commitment we have from this committee to actually get something done. I appreciate that.

I have three questions, so I would appreciate succinct answers to them so that I can get all three of them in.

I want to start by saying to Susan that when we were in Halifax two weeks ago, we heard from the YWCA a cry on behalf of women referred to as the poorest of the poor. It was not just for charity or band-aids, but for justice. I think it was a meaningful statement that we all need to hear, which brings me to my first question. My question is for the colleges.

Terry Anne, do you remember the story of a young Ontario woman named Kimberly Rogers? We can, as government, not only create policy that makes opportunity; we can also create policy that creates huge roadblocks for people, and from the late 1990s into the early 2000s in Ontario we made it illegal, a criminal act, to be on welfare and also collect student assistance.

This one woman got caught in that web. Her name was Kimberly Rogers. She was a woman expecting a child, was in her last year at college, and was about to graduate and get on with this new education and training to a life for herself and her soon-to-be-born child. She ended up charged, convicted, and assigned to house arrest. On the hottest day of the summer of 2002, I believe it was, in Sudbury, she and her unborn child died in her apartment, a tragic and terrible example of how bad policy can create unexpected results.

In terms of people trying to get out of poverty and take advantage of what the community college system has to offer, are there other policies across the country that get in the way of people actually doing that? I know there was an inquest and some recommendations. One of them was to do away with that linking, to delink that. Is that still going on?

● (1215)

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: There are countless examples of programs, particularly for low-income people to access post-secondary education or literacy and bridging programs. They are not quite as radical as that, but certainly....

We'll use Burns Lake, B.C., as another example. There were 20 students in an aboriginal-based community learning program for community health care. There were 20 different funding mechanisms for those learners. They each had to figure out which one they might be eligible for and which one would make sure they didn't lose the benefits for their children through the differences in the living cost allowances. That's one of the key points we've made.

One of the examples, the model in Saskatchewan, has done a harmonization of their various programs to eliminate some of the inequities in linking that to some of the federal programs on inequities to alleviate.... Actually, in the mid-1980s there was a pilot project between the federal government and the provincial government there to look at ways that they could test how you could enable people on social assistance programs to go to bridging programs and post-secondary education without losing their social welfare benefits. We had the fortune of being a pilot institution for that, and we had huge success. There was quite a difference in terms of the students who were coming through that funding mechanism and their success and the success of their children.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

I want to move to the Canadian Teachers' Federation and share with them that when I was in Penticton two years ago, I met in a church hall with community activists. The teachers were there, and they told of children coming to school in September who, en masse, disappeared in the spring. They lived over the winter in hotels that, all of a sudden, had rooms available because it was no longer the tourism season. They were immigrant farm workers. Their kids went to school while they were not working in the winter. Once the hotels became in need again, they no longer had housing, so they moved somewhere. It was thought that they moved into the mountains, where they had lean-tos and tents, and also some accommodation on the farms themselves. The teachers were saying what a shock it was for them, and what a waste of human potential. These children actually never graduate because they never finish a year.

Are there other examples of that unique feature across the country in terms of to trying to educate children with this economic reality sort of hitting them in the face?

● (1220)

Mrs. Emily Noble: Calvin talked about some of the things in Alberta, but—Tony, you're my MP—I think it may not be that kids are moving all over. Let me tell you, when I was principal of Alex Muir Public School in Sault Ste. Marie—at standard rate, we would call it an inner-city school—the kids who moved on September 26, because they couldn't pay the rent or something was coming up, would go to another school for October, and then there was a whole cyclical kind of thing. There was one kid who, in the space of two years, had been in eight different schools. Think of the impact on the family, the impact on the child's learning, and the impact on the potential for the child. That is the kind of example we see fairly frequently.

Certainly in southern Ontario they are not picking tobacco that much anymore, but there are people, particularly from Mexico, who come up to pick fruit and then go back down to the States or Mexico. That was quite extensive, and there is quite a revolving door there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Martin.

We're now going to move to Mr. Komarnicki for seven minutes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you very much for your insightful presentation. Certainly there are common threads that we have heard in the presentations here today and from others who have presented.

Higher levels of education and skills upgrading are certainly important, not just for those...but they have a way of affecting the children down the road.

I noted that you said there is a growing momentum to tackle poverty and a will to address it, but the solutions aren't always uniform. There may need to be some adaptability, Mr. Fraser said, and pat solutions might not be the same for all areas. I also get the sense that there needs to be collaboration not just between the federal and provincial governments, where there are some issues I will talk about a little later, but also with municipal governments, school boards, the teachers' federation, and elsewhere, including maybe at an international level, to tackle the problem in this fashion.

How would you describe the process that's available now? Is there a medium for that type of collaborative discussion to take place at one time? How are we doing? Is there room for improvement, and are there any suggestions on how we might better improve in that area?

It doesn't matter how you start. Mr. Cappon, you may start, if you like.

Dr. Paul Cappon: I think Canada has several impediments when it comes to improvement, and those impediments revolve around the lack of mechanisms or ways of collaborating that exist in some other countries but not here. When we go to international meetings and hear how other countries do things, we find it very difficult to bring back the lessons and use them here, because we don't have the mechanisms in place.

● (1225)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: What would you suggest?

Dr. Paul Cappon: In particular, we don't have a means of disseminating interesting or promising practices. We have some excellent practices in almost every area of social policy in various regions of the country, but we don't have the means of spreading them from one part of the country to the other. People don't know in one province what the province next door is doing. This is true even within regions.

Secondly, we don't have shared benchmarks and targets, and this is probably the most important consideration. In education, this is why parents like report cards. It gives a sense of progress. You know what your child is supposed to be able to attain in any particular year, and you're able to assess from a report card whether you're getting there.

Monsieur Lessard was talking about Europe. Europe has, for education and training, 16 indicators and benchmarks that all countries in Europe accept, and there are reports on the performance of every single one of those countries with respect to those benchmarks. Moreover, five targets are held in common across all of the European Union. On an annual or biannual basis, they have to report on whether they're meeting those targets.

If you don't have targets in social policy, what is it that you're going to accomplish in a particular timeframe? It's very difficult to move toward the solutions we need. But high expectations tend to yield better results than low expectations.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Calvin Fraser: I agree with Dr. Cappon that one of our problems is that efforts are often made in isolation and are not seen by anybody else anywhere in the country. Some excellent pilots took place 20 or 30 years ago. There are currently some successful pilots, in Saskatchewan and B.C. particularly, working very well that deal with at least major chunks of the issues before you today.

To actually have a big effect on the aboriginal question, we need to be able to bring people like Indian and Northern Affairs Canada together with the school boards, the provincial organizations, and the teachers' organizations. We're doing not so much more with the immigrants and the workers. The concept that you heard a few minutes ago of students disappearing is more common than any of you would like to think, and it happens particularly in all of those vulnerable groups. As for aboriginal students, as soon as somebody tries to help them, bang, they're gone, back to another community, and there's no coordination between agencies or provinces to try to track them and help them and to actually deal with the issue. Clearly, there's a coordination role and an information role that other partners can play.

I'd also like to pick up on the accountability piece and to note that the targets can't always be measured in numbers, but that doesn't make them any less important. If we're going to look at immigrant children or aboriginal children and improving their performance in school, we can count how many years they attend or how much the completion rate changes. But there are all kinds of things we can look at that are at least as important to the children's lives and the future they see for themselves. The targets can't just be quantifiable, measurable targets. They need to be targets that are meaningful for the country and for the people living in poverty.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The federal-provincial differences can be counterproductive—clawbacks on programs and so on. It's good to see some of what's happening in Saskatchewan. Maybe you could amplify that. What do we need to do to make things better coordinated, better targeted, more strategic?

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: One of the biggest challenges is that over the last 15 years or so there has been more fragmentation in terms of the programs. So a lot of the funding mechanisms are now project based; the partners and communities are sometimes competing against each other in order to do program delivery for the same client group. We really believe there's a whole community approach at the local level, the pan-regional level, the pan-Canadian level, and for our member institutions, because we work so much in the international development domain, at the world level.

Our report is one example of how we do the information sharing between and amongst the colleges in Canada. We also work with the World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics, and we have a Canada-European Union meeting happening next week looking at some of that common information. But our system misses some of those collaborative meetings that used to happen between municipalities, the federal government, the provinces, the social service agencies, and the colleges in terms of alleviating poverty in particular.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We will start our five-minute round of questions and answers. I will start with Madam Folco.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The presentation you made seemed to me to be extremely complete and well-organized.

But I would like to go into a little more detail on some of the points you raised. In terms of the national strategy, I know for a fact that the use of the word “national“, in the Canadian context, is a significant obstacle. Given the federal-provincial agreements that are to come, could you tell us how it will be possible to avoid obstacles like that in the minds of some provincial and territorial governments?

So we are talking about a national strategy, a federal-provincial agreement on education as part of the fight against poverty. You said that accountability can not always be measured or expressed in precise numbers. But I feel that accountability should be a significant element of an ideal agreement. That has not always been the case. I would like to hear your comments on that.

I would also like you, if possible, to include the question of legal challenges and the assistance that the government could provide. I think that Ms. Russell in particular indirectly alluded to it in her presentation. If possible, I would like both your answer and the national strategy to deal with the issue.

The question is open to anyone who wants to answer.

● (1230)

Dr. Paul Cappon: As I mentioned earlier, a number of things flow from working cooperatively on training and sharing data between provinces, the federal government and stakeholders in education and learning, in the broadest sense of the term.

As has been previously mentioned, even the information we have in Canada at the moment is very fragmented. For example, we do not know exactly how many students are in any given system, whether it be a college or even a university, at any given time. In a variety of fields, we do not know how many graduates there are. How can we meet the needs of the labour market in Canada if we do not even know how many people graduate in each field each year?

This database must be set up as a cooperative federal-provincial venture. Once that has been done, we can set objectives. As I mentioned previously, the objectives do not necessarily have to be quantitative—and I agree with Calvin Fraser about that—but they have to be clear and they have to involve accountability. A province would not be responsible to Canada as a whole, but Canadians as a whole would be responsible to other Canadians. That is the very broad sense in which I see accountability.

With a significant information base, with objectives, targets and reference points shared by the provinces, as is the case with member states of the European Union, pilot projects could be established. For example, the federal government could support pilot workplace projects in the provinces. The projects could be operated by the stakeholders and supported by the provinces. The goal would be to encourage employers to do much more in the area of training and learning, especially for their workers' literacy, numeracy and basic skills. That is not being done at the moment. Canada really is below the OECD average in this respect.

In a real sense, poverty is linked to basic skills like literacy and numeracy. But, even there, a way must be found to measure the quality of the involvement. The evaluation must be based on standards that reflect the views of each province and the federal government.

There is a principle, but there are also ways to tie activities to each of the learning objectives. I feel the same about early childhood education. In Canada, one child in four enters school without the necessary skill. There are a number of examples like that.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Can you give me one more minute, Mr. Chair?

When we talk about overseas qualifications, we are not always talking about immigrants; they are often Canadians, in fact. For them, poverty is a factor. We often talk about the taxi drivers with PhDs. I wonder if you can make recommendations for those clients too.

● (1235)

[*English*]

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: The Association of Canadian Community Colleges and our members are probably one of the largest providers of immigrant integration programs in the country. The association is running the first three pilot projects for Canada overseas, so between the time immigrants are accepted for immigration to Canada and when they come, typically eight or nine months, in Guangzhou, in Delhi, and in Manila we provide a service where we work with those potential immigrants in terms of doing the links to the credentialing agencies while they're still in their home country. By doing identification and regulatory framework in Canada, they would be working on and looking at it. If language training services are needed, some of that starts beforehand. They are then linked directly into employment in Canada or into the bridge gap-filling programs for the credentialing agencies. Our member institutions and the association staff itself work with the credentialing agencies across the country, whether those are professionals or in the trades, to move immigrants and convention refugees more quickly into the labour market.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Can we get some written information from Madam Boyles on this subject? I'd certainly be interested in having a lot more information on this particular topic from you or any other member of the panel.

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Boyles, if you have something to forward to us, just send it to the clerk and it will get distributed that way.

I have Calvin Fraser for a quick response. We're over time here, but just a quick response.

Mr. Calvin Fraser: I'll try to keep it very quick.

I think in terms of looking at strategies and federal-provincial cooperation, I'll make a quick analogy. Are we looking at the beach or are we looking at the sand? From a federal level we need to look at the beach, and our goal, of course, is to clean that beach. We need to work with all kinds of different groups because the problems in that sand may be different in each and every province, so we need to take it from a much higher level.

Obviously we do need to have clear objectives, and those objectives have to be stated and meetable, reachable. But one of the things the federal government can do is provide two-way communication about where the problems are, how to reach the problems, and reach out to them, because they can do a sharing job that simply isn't being done anywhere else.

[*Translation*]

Graduates, especially overseas graduates, are not a significant problem in education, though it really is a problem in other sectors of our economy. We have mobility for teachers all over Canada, including those who come from other countries. In fact, there are not many of those, since we have too many teachers in Canada at the moment. That is rare. Canada may even be the only country in the world with a surplus of teachers.

We have started to look at this problem and at the question of mobility across the country. The federal government and the provinces are studying the issue. The effort has already borne fruit in some fields. I have raised the matter not only with parliamentarians but also with people working in provincial governments. This is one of the aspects that is improving.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move over to Mr. Vellacott for five minutes, please.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Thank you very much.

I appreciate the presentations we've had today.

I'm going to centre most of my remarks around post-secondary education. I think it's a given. I think we pretty much all agree that getting that good start from young on up is the early building block there. But I think we're also aware that the distinctions and the gaps, if you will, in terms of wage-earning capacity comes as there's the additional post-secondary education. I'm told that it's no different in many other countries in the world than in Canada. Actually, there's always room for improvement, but with respect to participation, we're one of the highest in terms of participation for post-secondary education among all of the OECD countries. So this is an encouraging thing. But as we say, we can always work on that and we can always bump the percentages up from there.

Our government has increased post-secondary education funding, as you know, by about 40%. If we don't know, it's good to be reminded of that. That's fairly huge. We're investing about $2.4 billion in post-secondary education through the Canada social transfer, rising to $3.2 billion in the 2008-09 year.

I also want to ask about the new budget infrastructure, the $2 billion. I want to ask Terry in respect to her further reflection or comments on that. I'm reading from a press release from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges from January 26, right after that $2 billion fund for infrastructure was announced. The president, James Knight, said, "The announcement today by Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Minister John Baird of a $2 billion fund for construction, repair and upgrade of colleges and universities is good news for students, for colleges and for Canada."

He cites some thousand rural and urban communities where there are campuses, and also this very positive...I didn't realize it was that high, but he said that more than 90% of college graduates obtain employment in their field within six months of graduating, even in today's slowing economy. So that's very commendable in terms of our Canadian community colleges.

He goes on to say that his college badly needed an infusion of new capital to help them expand and upgrade their infrastructure and acquire leading-edge technology. The announcement did that.

I guess in terms of that announcement being made in January, I know that in my neck of the woods, in western Canada, some of that is beginning to get under way. What's your sense, Terry, as you connect across the country, of what the dollars are getting at? There are some renovations, maintenance; there's some of that stuff beginning to occur already. It takes a while for dollars to get out sometimes, but is this beginning to happen now? Have you talked with people across the country?

● (1240)

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: Yes. In advance of the announcements, we had done an analysis of ready-to-go projects in the country, so we knew that a number of the institutions had the plans in place, had the permits in place to move readily because of this capacity shortfall.

The application deadline was the end of March. The very first announcements were actually made, for B.C., in the first week in April. Ontario announcements were made yesterday. So money is starting to flow at different stages across the country on most projects. Of course, they're ready-to-go projects, and the colleges are working with their partners in the construction and engineering industries to bring those forward.

At this point in time, we're still awaiting announcements for Quebec, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nunavut and the NWT. So there are some other challenges as we move forward. Also, of course, in the north you have those barriers in terms of the construction season.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: At a time like this, in the economic downturn, there's a lot of retraining required, and so on. I think there is hope and optimism here, certainly in terms of the community colleges operating at capacity and wait lists being very long. The anticipation, I assume, in this is to reduce those wait lists, to be able to expand the capacity of those places so those students can get in and fill the spots.

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: Yes, and as we mentioned in our brief, the infrastructure money is making a dent in the critical shortage of infrastructure for colleges in the country. It needs to move forward. It certainly will be a big step. It also helps to provide the training venues that are so critical for the productivity of the future.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Exactly. Thanks very much.

There are a couple of other things in addition to that. In the last budget, the change from these various non-repayable programs, which are now going to come about in the newly created Canada student grant program, will provide, we think and hope, more predictable financial support to students from low- and middle-income families.

I'm virtually out of time here, but maybe Terry Anne can respond quickly. Is this a good thing, from your perspective?

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: We know that if there are grants for the first two years of post-secondary institutions, low-income people tend to stay in post-secondary education, but the amount of the grant currently is insufficient.

● (1245)

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay. It has to be increased.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the Bloc.

Madame Beaudin, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning and welcome. Everything you have said is very interesting, moving, and even a little disconcerting, especially when Ms. Russell spoke to us about a specific case. I am particularly interested in preschoolers. I have worked in this area in Quebec. I feel that our practices are exemplary in our partnership work with all the decision-makers in all areas of community activity to help children and to prepare them for school. I am particularly concerned by the fact that many preschoolers arrive at school without the skills they need in order to learn.

I would first like to know if our involvement should be the same everywhere. For example, the Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal is presently conducting a study on school readiness in various parts of Montreal to see if the same response is needed everywhere or if it should be different. Politically, should we adopt the same kinds of responses for all provinces and territories? How important to you is citizen involvement through community organizations? I understood that it was very important. Should we continue to fund productive local initiatives? How important to you is the relationship between school, family and community? There are pilot projects along those lines too in Quebec. Should we expand them and work with parents, children and educators?

There, I am afraid that we do not have much time. I would like this to last two hours, but it is not possible.

Mr. Calvin Fraser: As I said just now, we have to look at the forest, not the trees. The problems are very different from province to province. In Quebec, 67% of children, especially boys, do not complete the secondary level. So the problems there are different from those in Alberta. Different solutions are necessary and we must work with provincial governments to establish what those solutions are. It is always possible to measure not only the number of people who finish school but also what happens when we work with those children. The process is just as important as the result.

Dr. Paul Cappon: There are certainly differences between provinces. But the problem of readiness is more or less the same everywhere. I mentioned that one child in four has problems when entering school.

We need one system to analyze and evaluate readiness. At the moment, we have four different systems across Canada. The response will be different in each province, even in each region of a province, because the situation is quite different in each region.

As to the question of the involvement of community organizations, it is critical. That is why we have the composite learning index at the CCL, the Canadian Council on Learning. It is really at neighbourhood level, community level; it is not even provincial level because there are so many differences and so many critical responses at community level.

Lastly, the school-family-community interaction is, once again, critical. Think of the school drop-out problem. The solution does not just lie with the school; it lies with the community as a whole. It really is everyone's problem.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

From everything you have said, it is clear that there are a lot of problems with eligibility for employment insurance, with accessibility to training and learning, and to funding as well.

We have to do something. This is a priority. We have to get involved with the parents as well as with the children. I always come back to my pre-schoolers. I tell myself that I want to break the cycle of poverty in society by getting involved with the pre-schoolers so that they are prepared when they get to school. We know that the real power lies in information and knowledge.

What kind of involvement do you propose in order to have the greatest and most immediate impact on families and parents?

● (1250)

Dr. Paul Cappon: I can think of two things.

First, adult workplace training. Sixteen percent of workers in Canada take no training at work and do not want to take any. This can have a significant intergenerational impact on the children. That is why we cannot put all our resources in early childhood. The impact parents have is so important.

Then there is the question of literacy. Forty-two percent of adult Canadians are below the international literacy standard. This has an impact on the next generation.

So we need direct involvement with early childhood, with schools, with families, but also with the adults who have such a formative effect on the children.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

We'll now go to Mr. Lobb. Sir, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you to the witnesses for taking the time to provide us with information on this very important study.

I'd like to note to the Teachers' Federation that my brother is a full-fledged teacher in the province of Saskatchewan, so I can appreciate where you're coming from.

I have a question. One of the aspects of poverty that I've tried to focus on is financial literacy amongst all Canadians, definitely our most vulnerable but also our working poor. As we know, many people don't go to college and university, so high school is really the last stop for them. Could you update the committee on what programs you have added, are going to add, or are planning to add, that would really provide some financial literacy and education for our high school students? Many of our young Canadians have no idea about savings, writing cheques, RRSP accounts, GICs, the stock market, even something as simple as on-line banking, Microsoft money, or even Microsoft itself.

Please update the committee on some ideas you're working on.

Mrs. Emily Noble: Calvin and I will do a bit of a Frick and Frack here.

Certainly in my experience at the elementary level, I'd give credit to some of the banks and credit unions. They have some excellent programs with which you can supplement your math programs, some of those kinds of things. I know at the high school level a lot of the banks have programs and will have speakers in.

Part of the challenge with kids is that while you're teaching the hormones are racing, so they're not necessarily focused on what you'd like them to do. But I do know there are some tremendous programs out there. A lot of the programs that ministries of education are looking at are whether these are actually practical programs and skill-based programs. There's more of a look from the ministries of education across the country to get skill-based things. Certainly we don't have enough of those skills. When you talk about the debt load that some of the kids have, even out of secondary school, it's absolutely incredible what they're doing with money and their whole understanding of it. We need to do a lot more.

Calvin, I know you have some experience in Alberta.

Mr. Calvin Fraser: Yes, and I'm afraid I have to agree with my president there, that's it's in fact all hit and miss curriculum-wise across the country. There are some required programs for every high school student, but the students see these programs as something they have to get through, because of the old adage, “What's counted, counts”. Ultimately those are not the pieces that show up on the big tests; they're not the pieces that determine whether or not they pass.

Frankly, the students don't approach these courses, in the places where they are compulsory, with the type of attitude we'd all like to see, because we know the need is there. So it's really a matter of societal adjustment in terms of the attitude, if we're going to introduce these courses with any success.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thank you.

I do find it is a bit of a shame that we don't do more for our young people on that front, because that's really one pillar of the piece that's lacking. I think we've seen that in the U.S., where it has been really magnified.

I'd like to ask my last question of Madam Russell—and it is along the lines of student debt as well. In my past, I worked in the finance department of a software company, and one of the things my colleagues and I ended up doing was providing financial counseling to some of our new graduates, because they could not manage their money. It was not necessarily their debt load, but that they had no idea of actually how to manage their money.

I wonder if your group has any ideas beyond looking at ways of repaying debt, but of actually educating young students on what it looks like from the time they enter the first year of university and exactly how many years it will take them to pay off their student debts if they aren't proactive at it.

● (1255)

Ms. Susan Russell: We have done some work on student debt, and I could probably get some material sent to you.

What we have found is that student debt repayment depends on student employment after graduation. We've also found that women take approximately five years longer to pay their student debt because they often end up in lower-paying jobs after graduation. So all of this is linked to how much you earn after you come out of graduation, as much as it is to poor management.

I'm not aware that students are particularly poor managers of money, but I am aware that at the time they graduate they have substantial debt; and not only do they have to pay their debt, but they also have to live on whatever income they have. They will obviously be at the lowest earning peak in their careers, simply because they're just starting out.

So it's a sort of two-way thing, but I can certainly send you my recommendations.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Well, I appreciate that. I can assure you there are people graduating from our universities today who don't even know how to write a cheque. So I'm not knocking the system; I'm just stating a fact.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lobb.

We're now going to continue with Ms. Minna, for five minutes, please.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): First of all, I want to say thank you for coming today.

A lot of what we've discussed isn't new to many of us, and I think it's a matter of getting on, or pulling together, and doing the job here.

I just wanted to ask a couple of things. I think, Mr. Cappon, you've mentioned this with respect to recent immigrants, and the others have as well. I know that recognition of credentials has been an issue. I'm just looking at some data here showing that 51% of recent immigrants—or those who immigrated to Canada in 2001—have earning levels so much lower than Canadians with the same education. But when I look at immigrants, even those who have had their credentials recognized are still having a horrible time finding work in their fields, or being recognized and paid decent wages. Have any of you done the studies on that?

I think I know the reasons, the issues, but maybe you can give us some additional information as to why that still persists, because it's not just the recognition of credentials that's a problem here; it's a lot more. There are many other barriers.

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: Perhaps I can start, Paul.

The report that I'll be forwarding to the committee from the association is a report that we did similar to the one you have in your kit. It's on programs and services for immigrants, and in it we identify a number of the other challenges. We also speak to some of the programs that are being done by colleges and their community-based partners—again that wraparound community approach—to transition people into employment, into the workforce, as well as work being done on the barriers with national-level companies, such as the Royal Bank, which was one of our partners.

Part of it is still a question of understanding. On the issue of accents, we don't talk about accents in whichever of Canada's two official languages we're talking, but they are frequently a barrier for immigrants coming into the country.

The foreign credential recognition is a very minor part of the challenges for most positions. About 15% of the workforce need credentials in order to be accredited to work in particular fields. The challenges are much greater in some of the other areas for integration into the workforce.

We do also the information-sharing workshops within the association for member institutions, and then the member institutions work with their communities—for example, in the work of the Maytree Foundation, which you may know, and the TRIEC example in Toronto, which brings together all the community partners in industry. It is making a substantial difference. They're now working with 16 other communities across the country, and we have our colleges linked in each of those communities to address these issues in particular.

● (1300)

Hon. Maria Minna: One of the things I've suggested, because of this problem, is to have what I call a bridge to employment. Do you think we need to go that far? In other words, in order to break down the barriers between the immigrant worker and the employer, who has preconceived notions of who they are, how they talk, or how they behave, and what have you, the idea is to have what I would call a bridge to employment meeting, whereby we would subsidize part of the salary, possibly, of the immigrant for a short while to break down the barrier to having the employer at least take them on for a period of time.

Is that something you would recommend?

Ms. Terry Anne Boyles: It's definitely something we recommend. We find those programs very effective. Once you've broken down a barrier in one company or business, often because of the cross-sectoral work, the effectiveness of those approaches also transports over to other companies in other sectors.

Hon. Maria Minna: I want to say to the Canadian Teachers' Federation that the data you've provided in your pages 5 and 6 on the level of education with respect to immigrants and also the Inuit and the Métis and so on is extremely valuable. It reinforces for me and I think for all of us that education is a ticket to a good job—or it opens the doors, in any case, to potentially going in other directions. When I look at these numbers, it is absolutely pathetic that we are allowing whole sections of our society in this country to go without proper education and access.

Have any of you developed or looked at an educational strategy for this? We're talking about poverty. Educational strategy is part of that. Has anyone actually done an integrative, inclusive educational strategy for the country, or looked at it? You have the data, but have there been any discussions on solutions?

Mrs. Emily Noble: No, on our part there haven't been, but I'm going to put in a plug for the CCL to have a significant extending of their funding, because the research CCL does—this is something that basically, Dr. Cappon, you folks could coordinate—is very helpful to CTF; it's what I would call hands-on, practical research.

I just want to make a comment about the teaching of immigrants. A tremendous amount of work still needs to be done, but one of things that I think a lot of the boards of education are trying to do is say we need to have teachers who reflect the faces of the kids in the classroom. That hasn't always been the case; in fact, it's still very much a case of a white teacher and then quite a diversity of students. The boards, I think, are moving, and there's policy moving. There's a long way to go, but it's one of the things we need to move further on.

The Chair: Paul, do you want to finish with a last comment?

Dr. Paul Cappon: Just very quickly, let me say with respect to the issue of job attachment for immigrants that obviously language is the main problem. A year and a half ago, we did what we call a market segmentation study of people in Canada: adults below the international level of literacy that's required for a knowledge society. One of the big groups within that market segmentation study is immigrants. It turns out that they need different kinds of approaches to help them get to the level of literacy that's required. They may come to the country with credentials, but they may not have the language skills in English or French that are required.

We think that a lot of effort has to go on that is specific to those groups and their needs. The literacy needs of somebody from North Bay who's Canadian-born and who is below the line are very different from the needs of somebody from Bangladesh in a different generation. We need to be conscious of that when we provide programs.

The Chair: I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today. I'm sorry that we took you a little bit over time.

Thank you very much.

With that, I adjourn the meeting.

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