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Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Good morning everyone, and congratulations on being so punctual. Welcome to this 24th session of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Before considering our draft report, we are pleased to be receiving one final witness, the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association. Welcome to the Committee. Representing the Association are Ms. Carole Drouin, Executive Director, and the President of the Association, Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas.

Without any further ado, I will ask you to make your opening comments, which will be followed by a round of questions from Committee members.

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas (President, Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, distinguished members of the Official Languages Committee. I would like to thank you for inviting the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association to appear before you this morning to discuss the issues and needs of Ontario French Catholic schools. We hope that our presentation and the recommendations we are tabling today will allow you to better understand our challenges and assess the effectiveness of government programming aimed at supporting the sustainable development of minority school communities all across Canada.

The AFOCSC is the political voice of school board trustees who represent Francophone Catholic voters in Ontario—in other words, rights holders under both section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867.

The French language Catholic education system is a voluntary system primarily supported by French-speaking parents in Ontario and fully funded by the Government of Ontario. Sections 23 and 93 confer dual rights to Francophones studying in Catholic schools through their status as a minority: the right to a Catholic education and the right to an education in French. Protection of these two guarantees was conferred by Parliament of Canada and originates in legislative provisions passed by the House of Commons and confirmed over the years by a number of Supreme Court rulings.

The AFOCSC represents the largest system of Francophone schools outside Quebec. It includes eight boards and five French-language Catholic school administrations that provide services to more than 75% of Franco-Ontarians in their schools. At the present time, almost 70,000 students are currently studying in French-

language Catholic schools. Our school system includes 246 elementary schools and 48 secondary schools that are distributed across the different regions of the province.

Our students achieve better scores on tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office—or EQAO—than do students from English-language schools. Our 6th grade Francophone students exceed provincial standards in all areas of assessment be it in literacy, numeracy or mathematics.

Since their inception, Ontario French-language school boards have innovated in order to develop the kind of made-to-measure solutions that would allow them to achieve the success they currently enjoy.

Despite a lack of funding from the Government of Ontario for pre-school programs, our boards decided to offer full-time junior and senior kindergarten programs so that pre-schoolers would have an opportunity to master the French language and increase their chances of scholastic success. Indeed, our boards were quick to note the extent of early assimilation in preschool-aged children. There is no doubt that this problem is exacerbated when no French-language daycare services are available.

French-language school boards in Ontario have recognized the importance of early and proactive intervention by providing full-time programs for four- and five-year olds. These same boards also believe that early intervention with very young children is critical for the recruitment, integration and retention of the children of rights holders and newcomers in their schools. It is crucial for the development of our school boards that there be recognition of the need to fund daycare and early childhood education services.

Thus French-language Catholic schools are offering parents a system of education of comparable, if not superior, quality to that currently available in the English-language system.

In spite of that success, the sustainable development of French-language schools in Ontario is not a given. Too many Francophones are drifting into the English-language system because of some of the benefits it provides.

• (0910)

Despite all the efforts made by the French-language Catholic and public systems, only 54.4% of children of rights holders attend French-language elementary or secondary schools, according to figures from a 2006 Statistics Canada study. Therefore, more than 52,000, or 44%, of children of rights holders are attending English-language schools. French-language schools are therefore suffering annual losses in their target population to English-language schools, particularly high schools. A narrower range of course options available at secondary schools in the French-language system is certainly one of the reasons that students “drop out” linguistically and culturally, or drop out of school altogether. A little later, we will also address the importance of high-quality school facilities.

The latest information from the Ontario Ministry of Education regarding secondary school options shows that 51 options are available in the French-language system, as compared to 101 in the English-language system. Still today, four out of ten students who start out at a French-language school switch to the other system and obtain their Grade 12 diploma from an English-language school. So, it is clear that we face a serious retention problem in our schools.

If French-language Catholic boards were able to provide secondary level programming comparable to what is available in the English-language system, there would be less desire on the part of 33% of their students to leave bastions of the French-language in favour of English-language high schools. Rights holders under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867, make a conscious decision to send their children to the educational system of the majority, because minority schools are not easy to access, despite the superior quality of education offered in French-language Catholic schools. Unfortunately, each family lost to the English-language system represents the assimilation of an entire Francophone bloodline.

Over the years, the AFOCSC has defended the specific needs of French-language communities and succeeded in raising awareness among political decision-makers and the machinery of government of the reality and higher costs of providing French-language education to a minority community. In the last 10 years, new reference levels have been proposed with a view to calculating the actual costs of delivering quality education and, despite increased funding, the French-language education system is still not comparable to the education system of the majority.

The AFOCSC also wishes to emphasize that improving access to schools is critical: school transportation and school construction are the pillars of sustainable development and continue to be the main funding challenges. As regards accommodations, the formula used to determine funding for the construction of schools is based on a reference standard of 500 students for an efficient school. Since the majority of French-language schools in Ontario do not have that many students, the funding they are provided does not enable them to be competitive. The issue here is adequacy.

We often cite this example, which is a clear illustration of the challenges we face: a French-language school board in Ottawa that was building a new secondary school managed to secure funding of \$16 million, although this amount was not enough to buy the lot and build a competitive school, even a modest one. Ironically, the

English-language school board had also purchased a lot to build a new school in the same neighbourhood, but had received \$32 million for its new secondary school. How will French-language schools ever be able to compete with English-language schools in terms of course offerings, sports facilities, gymnasiums, workshops, and the like, if the funding provided is insufficient to offer these features to Francophone students?

• (0915)

There is not always equity between the education system of the majority and that of the French-language minority in Ontario. The adequacy of programs and services for official-language minority communities must be a priority for the federal government. Our schools are not currently comparable to those of the majority—nor are our programs and services.

In closing, we believe it is time the Department of Canadian Heritage considered the status of school management in official-language minority communities. The federal government must take responsibility for ensuring the sustainable development of official-language minority communities, by making school facilities a national priority in its infrastructure program and entering into agreements with the provinces on school management, as a means of enhancing programs and services and funding daycare services for children aged 0 to 5. Indeed, all official language stakeholders should look more closely at a key area such as early childhood education, as a means of ensuring the survival of our minority communities. The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages may want to consider setting aside resources for a Canada-wide study of the availability of daycare services to official-language minority communities.

It is our hope that the federal government will seek to ensure the adequacy of facilities, programs and services, in order to guarantee the sustainable development of French-language communities in Ontario. The current government's commitment should also be reflected in the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. French-language education is an integral part of our vision as a Franco-Ontarian community and is closely linked to our survival. Schools are the very core of our institutional and community vitality. They must receive adequate support to ensure the long-term vitality of official-language communities all across the country.

I hope that our comments have convinced you of the importance of our educational project and that you now have a better understanding of the issues associated with developing French-language Catholic education in Ontario. In closing, I invite you to seriously consider the 13 recommendations provided in our brief. Carole and I will be very pleased to provide any clarifications, should you have questions.

If we want to continue to improve the status of French-language communities in Ontario, now is the time to act, to capitalize on the investments that have already been made, and avoid a further erosion of a system which is now at a crossroads.

On behalf of the members of the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association, I want to thank you for your kind attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Petit-Pas for sharing your concerns with us. I also want to commend you for the scholastic success achieved by the young people who attend your schools. That is terrific.

Ms. Zarac, please.

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, Ms. Petit-Pas and Ms. Drouin. In the first recommendation of the document you provided to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, you ask that there be equitable allocations of funding for junior and senior kindergarten programs. You also mentioned that in your presentation today.

How do you explain that financial imbalance? And, what would equal treatment mean, as far as you are concerned?

● (0920)

Ms. Carole Drouin (Executive Director, Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association): I would just like to point out that the recommendations in questions are in Appendix B of our brief. We submitted these recommendations to the Minister of Education. In fact, the Association presents an annual brief to the Minister of Education to make her aware of funding gaps affecting French-language Catholic schools.

As noted in the document we provided this morning, our school boards offer full-time junior and senior kindergarten programs, although they are only funded for half-time delivery. We are therefore asking the government to provide complete funding, given the critical need to teach French to pre-school aged children in order to ensure their success in school.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: I imagine you are referring to the needs not only of the children, but of the parents as well. When you are working, it is not easy to organize your life when your children are only going to school half the time.

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: At our board, children are in school full time, but the public funding we receive is only adequate for half-time programs.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: So, you are the ones bearing the additional costs.

Ms. Carole Drouin: Yes.

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: We take money from other budget envelopes to ensure that children are able to attend school full time, five days a week.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: How many Francophone Catholic school boards are there in Ontario?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: There are eight.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: How many public school boards are there?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: There are four.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Is that adequate to meet demand? You say that you have only 54% of the people you could be serving—that you are only serving 50% of your target clientele.

Ms. Carole Drouin: If I understand your question, you are asking whether the governance structure in Ontario is adequate to meet that demand, if all the children of rights holders were to attend our

schools. The answer is no. The current structure and the jurisdiction of our French-language school boards would have to be reviewed. As you know, the population is concentrated in urban areas. There would be a need to adjust the territory covered by our boards, and probably add some.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Why are you only serving 54% of your target population? What are the benefits offered by English-speaking school boards? Is that the reason why you are not serving the entire target population?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: There are several reasons. First of all, there is the question of transportation. Our schools are very far away and that is a major problem for parents. Also, the options we can provide at the secondary level are not adequate. We are starting to set up daycare centres adjacent to our high schools, which allows us to attract more students.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Should we take from that that there are not enough schools?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: Yes, exactly.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you.

You mentioned that you have 246 primary and 48 secondary schools. The secondary schools are often larger, but is there really an imbalance? Is that where you are losing students, and why is that happening?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: As we mentioned in our report, we are losing students because certain programs are not offered in our secondary schools. Students wanting to access those programs cannot do it in our schools.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Ms. Petit-Pas, why don't you offer them? Is it out of a lack of funding?

Ms. Carole Drouin: In terms of the diversity of course options, the French-speaking schools offer about half the courses that are available in English schools. Dorothée also mentioned the fact that the schools tend to be far away. Our elementary schools already serve large areas, but when they reach the secondary level, students may have to spend an hour getting to school and another hour going back home. Parents really have to be convinced of the benefit in order to persuade their children to go to French-language schools, even though they do not offer all the courses they may want to take.

With respect to school facilities, we provided a specific example earlier. In the Ottawa area, there are two schools in the same neighbourhood. The English-speaking secondary school has a triple gymnasium, whereas the French-speaking secondary school can only afford a half-gymnasium, because of its limited funding, which is allocated based on the number of students. We need additional assistance, and federal infrastructure program funding in order to be in a position to provide facilities comparable to those available in English schools. That really is part of the problem.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will move on now to Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, ladies.

What I am about to say amounts to stating the obvious. We are in a provincial area of jurisdiction. As federal members of Parliament, we cannot start telling Ontario how to manage its schools. We know what that resulted in in the past: Regulation 17, in 1912, which abolished French-language schools in Ontario. My parents were part of that generation. My father, who will soon be 91, was not able to continue his studies past Grade 8. Fortunately for him, he was in Hawkesbury, in Eastern Ontario, because Ontario government investigators didn't dare go there.

A voice: They went to Guigues school.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I am talking about Hawkesbury and municipal public schools. It's right near St. Isidore.

Having said that, there is something interesting in what you said. We have been talking about daycare. Having worked as a teacher in the Franco-Canadian system, I know that it is the gateway for recruiting students.

What is your view of the current government's decision to provide money for daycare, not to the institutions, but to the parents instead, on an individual basis? How has that affected you, if it has?

Ms. Carole Drouin: I agree with you that it is stating the obvious. For us, daycare services are key, because that is where pre-schoolers have an opportunity to master the language, if necessary, before starting school. The fact that programs have been transferred to the parents has affected us. Some of this funding could have trickled down to the institutions, so that they could get together and develop this service. Now the parents have the buying power, but how can parents in a minority community organize to develop a service that does not exist? That is where we are facing a huge vacuum or even more serious difficulties, in terms of setting up services that do not currently exist. The money is distributed differently, which removes the option of developing new daycare services.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: As you know, we live in a secular society. We do not live in a theocracy where religion decides everything—fortunately. For example, Newfoundland has a multiconfessional system. In Saskatchewan, Francophones decided not to have a French Catholic school board as well as a public school board. They preferred instead to merge them right from the outset, in 1995. It had been abolished by Anderson's Conservative government in 1931. You may recall that French-language schools in Saskatchewan were abolished by the Conservatives in 1931 and nothing was changed in that regard by the Liberal Premier Thatcher, or subsequently by the NDP. It was only in 1995, some 64 years later, that French schools were able to re-open, when Mr. Romanow was in office. A model was developed where French was really the key component in the communities.

Would you agree to give this some thought and could you possibly agree that there should be a merger? Constitutionally, that would be possible because it was done in Quebec through a unanimous vote in the National Assembly. In Quebec, the decisive factor is not whether you are protestant or catholic, but rather which language you use—French or English. The National Assembly and the House of Commons both gave their approval to such a system. So, with Queen's Park and the House of Commons, it would be possible to bring all Franco-Ontarians under a single system where language,

rather than religion, would be the priority. Would you agree with such a system?

● (0930)

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: No. That would not result in there being any more young people or students taking French. We conducted a study and talked to a lot of parents. If there were both a French public board and an Anglophone board, young people would be more attracted to Catholic education in English.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I would just like to make one final point, Mr. Chairman, because it is important for our discussion.

At the French board, the Catholic religion is taught in the French system. Young people have the choice between a religion course and moral instruction. I am firmly convinced that this is something that warrants more thought.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Ms. Drouin and Ms. Petit-Pas. Ms. Petit-Pas, I want to congratulate you for your appointment to the presidency.

I agree with Mr. Nadeau that this is an area of provincial jurisdiction. However, under the Charter, the federal government does have certain responsibilities towards minorities. It has to provide assistance so that adequate services can be offered. It is not a matter of dictating how the courses should be offered, but rather, helping to put the necessary infrastructure in place. I think your comments in that regard were very clear.

It is really almost sickening to see that two schools could be built side by side, where one has a gymnasium two or three times larger than the other one. As a parent, you would necessarily wonder where you should send your child. I think that is something that parents consider. We can imagine what is involved when it is a gymnasium, but in terms of the educational programs, is it a question of money or is it simply a local or provincial decision to offer fewer courses? Is there a need for additional funding to hire more teachers? Could you address that part of the equation?

Ms. Carole Drouin: Thank you for your question. You have touched on a couple of points that are, in fact, part of the solution. First of all, the funding model for course offerings at the secondary level in Ontario is based on the number of students enrolled. At the high school level, we have to find specialized teachers. At the same time, a certain class size is required before the recruitment of a specialized teacher can be justified. The current funding formula, with respect to hiring and offering attractive programming to our students, is part of the problem.

You touched on another issue as well, which is human resources. In some regions of the province, there is a lot of understanding and support from the Ontario government with a view to ensuring that the education system available to the Francophone communities is acceptable. However, at the school board level, we have trouble finding qualified teachers in some regions of the province who are able to teach in French. That may be another area where the federal government, through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, or Industry Canada, could provide assistance with recruitment.

The problem is a multi-faceted one. Even though some courses are now able to be offered via video-conferencing in certain secondary schools, that is no match for what is available on the English side.

• (0935)

Mr. Yvon Godin: A few minutes ago, you were talking about the distances people have to travel to go to school. But if more schools were built, there would be even fewer students. Right now, only 54% of the target population chooses to attend French schools, for all the reasons you outlined: fewer courses available, less attractive facilities, and so on. However, if there were good facilities and people came back, would they still have to travel long distances to go to school? Would that help?

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: Yes, it certainly would.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to know more about the findings of the studies you conducted in that regard.

Ms. Dorothée Petit-Pas: At the present time, we do have some schools that are quite far away. For example, we have a school in Mississauga that serves five elementary schools that are quite far away. We have received funding to open an additional high school in Milton. So, we will be in a position to take in more students at the elementary level, who will then move up to high school, because the school is not far. Therefore, it would certainly be a good idea to have more schools close to elementary schools.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do you have a problem in Ontario? Recently, I heard about a contradictory situation. They said on the news that in Prince Edward Island, where residents have been able to secure French schools, young people are attending classes in a building that houses a bar. For parents, it is not a very attractive option to send their children some place where there is a bar. I believe that, in Alberta, some English schools were closed, because new ones were under construction, and were subsequently offered to Francophones. So, they were able to be housed in the schools that had been closed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We will move on now to Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am pleased to welcome you to our Committee this morning. I have already stated that I may be in a potential conflict of interest. Indeed, I am probably the only one here who pays my taxes to you. I want to thank you for the excellent work you do with the limited resources made available to you by taxpayers.

To answer a question raised earlier by Ms. Zarac, I would just like to say that the number of school boards is the result of a merger carried out by the provincial government some years ago. Before that

came into effect, there were a lot more public and Catholic school boards, either English or French. In 1998, the Ontario government undertook a rationalization of the system with this merger, that affected both the educational system and the municipalities. The merger that occurred at the municipal level was similar to what you experienced.

In terms of infrastructure projects, we are currently in high season. So, it is appropriate to talk about them. Even in areas where infrastructure is a federal responsibility, from one end of the country to the other, we have been making announcements about infrastructure projects that are being carried out with provincial governments. Clearly, section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867, would require that we consult a provincial government—in this case, Ontario, a new partner in “Government Motors”—before interfering with school infrastructure projects. I think we need to know what is on your list, what the status of your negotiations with provincial partners is, and what we can do to help you in that respect.

My question does not deal with infrastructure; it is directly related to the development and vitality of the French language in our schools. This is something that has always been a concern for me. My four children went through that system—successfully, I might add. Living in French when you are part of a minority is often a source of anxiety. In fact, that is one of the reasons why some Francophones decide to abandon French when they reach high school. At some point, anxiety takes hold and they drop out. Either they go somewhere else or they drop out altogether.

I would like to see you and your school boards introduce incentives, so that your students enjoy the French language both in school and outside school. Too often, we focus on punitive measures. However, what we need are incentives, so that speaking, playing and working in French make people feel good.

What can we do with respect to infrastructure that would be helpful to you?

• (0940)

Ms. Carole Drouin: Thank you for your question. I would like to clarify one thing. There were no French-language school boards in Ontario prior to 1998. The Education Act only provided for French-language sections within English school boards. It is important to remember as well that all of this occurred only 10 years ago. In Ottawa, it was different, because there was a Francophone governance; but in the rest of the province, there were only English school boards. In 1998, the entire tax collection system was reviewed and four systems—English, French, Catholic and public—were set up in Ontario and given equitable funding. Those four systems have been in place since 1998.

You reminded me of the Canadian Heritage programs that often bring together culture and the education community through school-community centres. There are a number of them in Canada. In Ontario, because we are lucky enough to have some projects underway, we do not have many such centres. However, I think the whole question of infrastructure should be reviewed to allow our school boards, in more isolated areas—through a partnership such as that one—to set up a facility where they could meet with students and members of French-speaking community.

As regards infrastructure, our boards have developed 15-year plans to meet the needs of their target population. We have projections of the student population for the next 15 years and, every five years, we submit a capital assets plan to the Ministry of Education for the five years to follow. If you like, we could certainly share that information with you and make you aware of our requirements in terms of school facilities in each of the regions of Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Galipeau; thank you very much.

I had neglected to declare my conflict of interest as well, since my godson did attend institutions run by your board.

Would anyone like to add anything—questions or comments? We have time for one last intervention.

On behalf of the entire Committee, I would like to thank you for being with us today. Your presentation was very well documented. Once again, congratulations for your excellent scores. I think your recommendations, as well as your message about capital assets, are perfectly clear. We wish you good luck, and do not hesitate to come back and see us if you feel the need to.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes before starting our *in camera* session.

[The meeting continues in camera.]

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