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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 78th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, on Thursday, May 2, 2013. Pursuant to standing Order 108, we are studying second official language immersion programs offered in Canada.

[English]

In front of us this morning we have the Quebec English School Boards Association, represented by Mr. Birnbaum, Madam Stein Day, and Madam Dénoimée. Welcome to all of you.

Before we begin with an opening statement, there have been discussions among all the members from all the parties of this committee, and because we only have one group in front of us today we will adjourn at approximately 4:45 in order to allow all members of the committee to ask questions and do one complete round. At that point we'll adjourn because normally we would have three groups in front of us, and so in the interests of time—

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): We have the quality...

The Chair: We have a very high-quality group in front of us today. So today we'll go for approximately an hour and a quarter, and we'll adjourn at that point.

Without further ado,

[Translation]

you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Suanne Stein Day (Board Member, Quebec English School Boards Association, and Chair, Lester B. Pearson School Board): *Monsieur le président*, members of the standing committee, the Quebec English School Boards Association, QESBA, is grateful for this opportunity to share with you its experience, aspirations, and concerns regarding a subject that is at the very core of our educational mission, French second language instruction.

I am Suanne Stein Day, member of the QESBA board and chair of the Lester B. Pearson School Board on Montreal's West Island. I am joined today by Christine Dénoimée, assistant director of pedagogical services at the English Montreal School Board, and David Birnbaum, executive director of QESBA.

We understand the specific topic of study before the commission to be the official language immersion programs. As representatives of the English public school network of Quebec, we take some

personal pride in having been the very birthplace and incubator for language immersion in Canada and in many ways for educational jurisdictions across the globe.

We trust you will indulge us this modest bit of boasting, which we allow ourselves actually for an important reason. First, to have played a role in what has become a story of enrichment for children and families across this country, indeed a story of nation-building, well, that's surely a legitimate source of pride. But more importantly, QESBA makes this point to emphasize that French immersion and related intensive French second language programs in Quebec are a lifeline, perhaps the most vital ingredient in the future vitality of Canada's English-language minority community, the community we serve.

Intensive French second language programs are more than a source of enrichment in Quebec, more than a window on our fundamental value of linguistic duality. These programs in our schools are the required passport to full participation, to full access to opportunity within Quebec society. So the success of intensive French second language programs, the government support for them, and the student participation in them are nothing less than essential.

We look forward to your questions presently, but allow us to use this short introduction to enumerate four areas of pertinence that QESBA trusts will find their place in your study report.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Dénoimée (Pedagogical Services Assistant Director, English Montreal School Board, Quebec English School Boards Association): Thank you.

I wish you a good afternoon.

[English]

First, English public schools in Quebec must be given the necessary support to maintain and expand access to and delivery of French second language programs to students across Quebec, whatever the student's level of potential. Our schools must meet the challenge, all the while delivering on their mandate to serve and support the English language, culture, and history that give meaning to the constitutional underpinnings that ultimately define our existence.

One of the tools we must continue to count on is federal government support through the federal entente with the provinces and its territories on minority language and education, and second language instruction. In this context QESBA signals satisfaction with the recent signing of a renewed five-year entente. We now wait the important signature of a parallel Canada-Quebec agreement.

The statistics tell the story about why French immersion matters. Our parents, our children have insisted upon it. In 2006, 66% of our elementary students were enrolled in one given French immersion model. Five years later that number had increased to 83%. In secondary schools 35% were enrolled in immersion or some form of intensive French second language program.

• (1535)

[Translation]

They were core French, enriched French and French as the language of instruction.

[English]

Five years later, that percentage has already doubled.

Second, early intervention in second language instruction works. In fact, the research on this point is irrefutable. Though some provincial jurisdictions have argued otherwise, we would nonetheless insist on this point. Our nine English school boards in Quebec together can point to an average high school success rate of about 80%. That is quite amazing. That represents the target set by the previous Quebec government for the year 2020 in their partnership agreement between the MELS and the respective boards.

Our graduation rate must continue to improve, but we would tell you that one of the factors contributing to its success is our student-centred and differentiated approach to learning, as well as our extra efforts on second language instruction. Our approach leads many of our graduating students to actually outperform their francophone counterparts in end-of-cycle and/or ministry mother-tongue examinations. Furthermore, many see their English mother-tongue writing competencies improve as a result of their immersion experience.

French second language education in Quebec's English public schools is supported by the active involvement of and consultation with our parents. Parents are demanding a range of FSL—French second language—programs and models at the elementary and secondary levels, which is sometimes difficult and impractical given our vastly dispersed schools and low population density, mainly on the Quebec mainland. But the fact remains that parents must be part of the portrait of our students if our students are going to graduate, bilingual and bi-literate, with the ability and the wish to function well as citizens both in French and in English.

Thank you.

Mr. David Birnbaum (Executive Director, Quebec English School Boards Association): Third, those of us who deliver English public schooling in Quebec need to know that our federal government and our fellow Canadians across this country understand some of the particular obstacles that we face in discharging our duties each day in the province we call home. The QESBA insists at every public occasion that our English school network is an ally in Quebec's legitimate and constant effort to ensure the future stability

of the French language in Quebec. We are a constructive participant in those efforts.

Still, the QESBA and its member boards must continually battle against further threats to English public school access in Quebec, as expressed most recently by Bill 14. If our French immersion success story is to have further chapters, there must be a solid English public school network moving into the future. Our graduates are among the most bilingual of Canadians, embodying the economic and social opportunities that will mark our entire country's future. Our English-speaking community institutions, starting with our school network, must remain strong or that future will be compromised.

Each part of this puzzle must fit. If our French second language programs are not fully effective and if the system that offers them is not fully secure, the QESBA's member school boards will see a further worrisome trend continue, and that is the loss of students to French public and private schools. Statistics indicate that anywhere from 25% to 35% of English eligible students—and that's a restricted category already, under Quebec's French language charter—are not currently enrolled in English schools. For all of these reasons, the health of French immersion and intensive French second language programs in Quebec truly matters.

Fourth, we would conclude that the future of French immersion in Quebec is somewhat linked to its future in every province and territory of this country. Our circumstances are different, but the potential rewards are there across the country. Mastering Canada's two official languages must always be championed as a pillar of our economic strength and potential, as an imperative for national unity, and as a promise that each of us can choose to build our futures right where we live, be it in a minority or majority language situation.

Thank you. We look forward to discussing these points with you.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you for that opening statement.

We'll begin questions and comments with Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you for participating in the study.

[English]

I'm going to be looking at dropout rates and the immigration aspect of immersion.

First off, I think you mentioned the dropout rate and said that you need to improve it. What is it now?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: Our non-completion rate, averaged over the English boards, is about 20%. It's about 16% for the two largest Montreal school boards. That is not our dropout rate. It's the number of students who are not completing their education in English public schools. Our community that may be leaving Quebec for whatever reason, and those students who will leave during the course of their studies, are included in that 20%. Realistically, about 15% are staying in the province but not completing a secondary school diploma.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Do you have numbers on French immersion, in the immersion programs per se?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: My school board, the largest school board in Quebec, is all French immersion to one extent or another. Some are 50-50. Some are 80-20. Between the two largest school boards, the vast majority of our classrooms are French immersion.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: With regard to the new arrivals to Montreal, first, how many of those families send their kids to immersion programs in the school board?

Mr. David Birnbaum: One must remember that's a small percentage to start with because our access to those immigrant communities that might have chosen English schooling in the past is very much limited by the French language charter. A very multicultural, multiracial mix remains in our schools, but new Canadians, for the most part, must direct themselves toward the French school system.

When you look at the dropout rate, which we're continuing to attack, I don't think any of our boards would tell you that we're allowing our intensive French language instruction to contribute to those kids not being able to find their way through. Each of our school boards has, as part of its mission—quite properly in Quebec—to ensure every child the full opportunity to render himself or herself bilingual upon graduation. Where the dropout rate remains a problem, I think we could probably say with some confidence that it would rarely be specifically because of a French program that was simply too difficult for that child. We understand that we have to do everything possible to accompany each child in their quest to master French.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: As new students, either Quebec-born or from parts international, come into the system not speaking French, how are they introduced into the system, as far as learning a language that is not their own and continuing their basic education?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Different support measures will be looked at for any new arrivals, whether they're international or coming from abroad. Under the Canada-Québec entente, there's support for students born outside Quebec. Boards did receive additional financial support, and then we identify these students—and I'm going to talk about student enrolment figures after the September 30 registration. We look at those students, and special measures are put in place.

Teachers and principals are made aware of who these students are. I'm thinking at the school level. For a minimum period of two years, support measures must be put in place. We monitor them twice a year. We validate them through professional development, additional didactic material, in-class resource material, and even exposure, not only to the language but to Quebec culture as well, contributing to

their being part of their community, their getting to know the community, and their learning the language.

• (1545)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

Do I still have time?

From your perspective within that process, other than what you've already presented in terms of fiscal support and so forth, what do you feel is the most difficult aspect of transitioning beginners in the immersion program, as far as adapting to the program and ensuring a successful transition?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: I guess the pedagogical link.

I will apologize if I switch to French. As you will notice from the accent on my name, I am a francophone, so sometimes words will come out in different languages, but I do work for the anglophone school board.

[Translation]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: You may speak in French, if you wish.

[English]

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: It really depends on the age of the learner. Research has told us that the age, intensity, and frequency... the earlier on a student can join us....

If the newcomer is in kindergarten or in cycle one, as we refer to grades one and two at the elementary level, as you can understand, flexibility of the brain will allow those students to acquire much more and be able to do what we call *le transfert des acquis*, to be able to pass that knowledge and competency from one language to the other.

As we only have end-of-cycle examinations, I have to make sure they always look for people who understand. For example, in grade two, grade four, or grade six examinations, we have a much larger scope and we're not looking at giving students a high school diploma by grade four. So we have more time to make sure that the transfer of abilities and competencies gets into place. The support measures are there. Even after the two-year span that I was telling you about, adaptation measures will still be put into place by the school team to ensure that students continue to progress.

However, we'll be honest. If a student arrives from abroad or a family moves into Montreal and they are eligible for English instruction, but they arrive, for example, in grade three, cycle two of secondary, as you will know the time spent to acquire and feel comfortable with the knowledge is lessened because we will finish by secondary five. We'll have a two-year or three-year span where we'll still have support measures and adaptations put into place, but we have those ministry examinations that have to be done. At times we do ask for derogations from our minister, but they're not always granted. It's done on a case-by-case basis and students do need a number of credits in certain subjects, including French, to be able to graduate with a high school leaving diploma.

Many of our international students continue with us and enrol in what we call our CEGEP programs or post-secondary. So we have to ensure that in terms of the measures we put into place, yes, there are financial supports, there are adaptations, and they are continuous and sustained to ensure that our students are successful long after they have completed their high school studies.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Benskin and Madam Dénomée.

Monsieur Gourde.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

Ms. Dénomée, I was very impressed by your program, as well as by the way you handle very young students in terms of the evaluation. Success, measured by the number of students who pass their classes, might be linked to it.

Could you give me more details about that? Some francophone school boards could perhaps benefit from this kind of follow-up.

[*English*]

Ms. Christine Dénomée: I'm on again. My apologies.

I'll talk about models and programs, if you'll allow me.

[*Translation*]

Since you spoke to me in French, I will answer you in French.

For the first six years in grade school, we refer to a teaching model, because they are departmental programs. They can therefore be found at the secondary school level. In grade school, the program offered in anglophone schools is called “second language core French”. Most of the teaching in the first six years of grade school — or seven, if one includes kindergarten — is in English. There are a few subjects, including French, that are taught within an English language context.

However, as was pointed out earlier, one can talk about partial or total immersion in the case of many subjects. Just like my francophone colleagues from francophone school boards, who can only teach English in English, we can only teach

[*English*]

English language arts

[*Translation*]

in English as well. It's the same for other subjects. It's a privilege, and I dare to hope that we will preserve this delightful gift for the future. It allows young people to expand their vocabulary, to make transfers, and to adapt both syntactical and phonological structures. We're talking about phonological awareness from a young age. It's very important. When a young person learns a second language at a young age, from the end of the second cycle — therefore, at the end of grade four — gains can be observed.

Children will often use both English and French words. That's when people may say that they are mixing things up. They separate

them, but afterwards, both official languages are used, depending on vocabulary and the subject matter being taught.

In grade school, we really talk about a model. It's possible, particularly with a classroom teacher, and, in many cases, a few specialist support teachers, to access resources and provide accommodations to ensure that a student, whether a newcomer or someone whose second language is not currently French, does acquire these skills, be it through oral communication, reading or writing.

• (1550)

Mr. David Birnbaum: You will note that one of our assets is this interest on the part of parents. We believe it may be similar to what is happening in French-language school boards where people speak their mother tongue. Given where we live and parents' concerns with their children growing up in Quebec, they are motivated. This is not coercion. Obviously there is everything else that is required when dealing with young students in a school. However, from the start, specifically with respect to intensive French-language or immersion programs, they are motivated.

We would like to mention — from what we gather we are dealing with French-language teaching as a whole, even though French immersion is the focus — one matter that concerns us, a challenge. According to Statistics Canada there is a target in Quebec that one could call

[*English*]

almost an anglophone underclass.

[*Translation*]

These are regions, or perhaps areas more specifically in the case of Montreal, where parents, often living in poor neighbourhoods, have not had an opportunity to improve their own French and therefore do not necessarily pass on a desire to learn French to their children or an understanding of the need to learn it. These are challenges for us. First off it is a challenge to encourage them to register for more intensive programs and, second, to have them understand how important French is in Quebec. That is where strategies like those mentioned by Ms. Dénomée take on even more importance.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Dénomée, I was not fast enough to write down the percentages you mentioned at first. You mentioned 83%, 35% and 70%. Could you repeat them, please?

[*English*]

You can use whichever language you like.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Dénomée: With pleasure, sir.

So what we are saying is that in 2006...

Mr. Dion, would you allow me to respond to you in French?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Of course, it is still an official language.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: So, 66% of students enrolled in primary school were enrolled in one of the immersion programs, in other words partial or total immersion. Five years later, or in 2011, it was 83%. This testifies to the fact that parents want bilingual primary schools. The message is clear.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: That means that 17% of students are taking regular French classes.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: They are in an English stream and there is a core French program within it.

Mr. David Birnbaum: As a general rule, there is more than one hour per...

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Yes, yes it's more than one hour.

Mr. David Birnbaum: It is more intensive, but it is not full immersion.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: When you refer to partial immersion this would mean it wouldn't be for all courses.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: I will tell you what we mean by "partial bilingualism". The term is actually a literal translation. In fact, it would be exactly half of a school day. Fifty-fifty, in other words 50% French over the six to seven years of school. It varies according to subject matters. For instance, it could be over the course of a week. Each school board or school has its own specific model.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: And what year of high school is this?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: We are referring to primary school, sir. From grade 1 to grade 6.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: From grade 1 to grade 6 of primary school?

• (1555)

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Yes. We also see a great deal of temporary immersion in kindergarten.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So all of the courses are in French, from kindergarten until the students get to high school?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Why do they go to English schools if everything is in French?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: You have to remember that what is most important to parents is that their children become bilingual. In French, we talk about "bilinguisme fonctionnel", functional bilingualism, because there is no translation in French for the terms "bilingual" and "bi-literate". They are very proud of the fact that they are anglophone. Let's not forget that French is the language of instruction and English is their mother tongue. When students finish school and arrive in the labour market, they have access to jobs...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: But that means that, from kindergarten to the beginning of high school, eight out of ten students take classes in French.

Mr. David Birnbaum: There are two things here. Obviously, we are trying to do two things, as Ms. Dénoimée mentioned. First, students will try to improve their French skills. However, if you ask any of these parents, they will tell you that their children are going to an English school. There is the English Language Arts program. As

always, there is a second issue. While the program tries to teach students that they must be ready to integrate a mainly francophone society, they are still going to an English school.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: How are their marks on English exams compared to the marks of anglophones in English classes? How do they compare, in terms of English writing and comprehension?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: For grade 11, you will see from our partnership agreements that...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: No, I meant results at the end of elementary school.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: At the end of elementary school, of grade 6, our results are just as high across all subjects.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Even in English? I mean their English marks.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Even in English, yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Parents have nothing to be worried about.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: No.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: What does the 83% represent?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: It means that if 100 students are registered in elementary school...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I'm sorry, I meant the numbers 35% and 70%.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Those are numbers for junior and senior high school.

In high school, most of the subjects are taught in English. Therefore, French as a second language, enriched French and French as the language of instruction are offered to students. You will find that in most of our schools, based on the models and the population. It is a challenge. More courses may also be taught in French, such as history and citizenship, geography, and others.

In 2006, 35% of students were registered in immersion at the high school level, mainly in a program other than the core French second language course.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Now for the 70%.

Does it mean that 7 out of 10 students in high school are taking their courses in French?

Mr. David Birnbaum: No, it varies. We have nine school boards. In the program required under the Education Act, there is a threshold, and we exceed that threshold by 100%. We go beyond it in one way or another in the Gaspé area and in other regions.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So it represents a threshold based on the number of courses in French per week.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: In high school, even if students are registered in an immersion program, most of their classes will be in English. After all, our school board is an English-language school board. Students are therefore registered in a program. There maybe other subjects in those French immersion classes in which the skills differ from those in a core program.

In high school, most of the day and courses take place in English.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Since I still have some time left, Mr. Chair, I would like to come back to our topic.

What I have just heard was useful for my own edification.

Here is our subject: what can the federal government do for you? What you are saying is fascinating, but I fail to understand what we should include in our report to explain why this committee is undertaking this study.

Were I a provincial member of Parliament, I would be deeply interested in all of this and have many ideas. However, at the federal level, what can we do for you? You are familiar with our federal programs, which generally have to do with money transfers. Could we do something better and differently, or are you completely satisfied with what the federal government is doing?

[English]

Mr. David Birnbaum: I think we would point to a number of general things and specific things. It's not by accident that in our remarks we talk about the overall environment in which we work. We are English-speaking institutions in Quebec. That's not always an easy mandate with whatever the government of the day in Quebec might be dealing with.

So it starts with the solidity and *pérennité* of our institutions if we're going to deliver the programs in French or otherwise. We can't overemphasize—and Monsieur, you had a tremendous role in this—the absolute essential lifeline that the Canada entente gives to our system. We've been up with this committee talking about it, in terms of all of the French second language efforts we've made, because beyond the base of requirements in Quebec, we have to fund the research, the support, and the evaluation with federal moneys.

We have a network of community learning centres funded through the federal-provincial entente. So it would start with that entente remaining solid. We've noted that while the road map is signed, the bilateral agreement that will give life to that in Quebec is a question of some sensitivity with a government, by definition, hostile to federal-provincial cooperation. We think there will be discreet ways from our side, and we hope from yours, to make sure that the bilateral entente does everything it needs to do to support our system.

• (1600)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Can you be more specific?

Mr. David Birnbaum: Well, we understand that the official strategy of the current Quebec government is not to sign such ententes. It is to simply repatriate resources with no structure in place.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Do you like the entente of today? Do you want the same entente repeated or do you have improvements to the entente that you would like to see?

Mr. David Birnbaum: Well, we would want to make sure there are checks and balances in there that clearly protect our requirements.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It's not the case today?

Mr. David Birnbaum: No. We'll give you one that is in there now that had better survive, which is that the community is consulted on

the use of that money. All of the things we use it for are the fruits of our suggestions to both the Quebec and federal governments. The protections ensuring that it is maintained are there somewhat, but we'd like them to be more solid. We need to know that the money will never be passed to Quebec unconditionally.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mostly, you're satisfied with what exists. Your concern is that it may disappear in the next negotiations.

Mr. David Birnbaum: That's certainly—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Because of the new Quebec government?

Mr. David Birnbaum: That would be one.

If I might, I'll point to just a few other things again with the notion of

[Translation]

preparing things for our community.

[English]

To start with, when we know that still there are perhaps 3%—or it might be 4% now—of the massive Canadian civil service in Quebec who are from the minority language community, those are jobs our kids could graduate to. They're part of the environment. The federal government can do more on that.

There are certainly very few opportunities for non-immigrant adults to master French in Quebec. There are federal sources of support and funding that might be made available for that to help parents remain in Quebec and encourage their kids to master French. That would certainly be helpful.

There are exchange programs that have been put at some risk by the current government, with respect, that help students to have experiences across the country in French and English. Support for those is essential too. It is those kinds of things the federal government can do to set the table for us that are really important.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Trottier.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

[English]

If it's all right, I'll pose my questions in English.

It's a treat to have you here today. I do find it a bit interesting. I come from Toronto, so I have a bit of a different perspective. I realize Quebec is certainly not a mirror image at all. It's a whole different set of circumstances. But you can imagine an English language school in Ontario where French immersion is seen as something very popular. It tends to be an upper middle class kind of thing. It goes along with the Louis Vuitton handbag; you put your kid in French immersion. So to hear about needing more money from the government, that's not necessarily viewed by people whose kids are not in French immersion as necessary.

That's just the reality. It's viewed as something very desirable, especially among new Canadians, who come to Canada and want to put their kids into French immersion and get that full experience. They really tend to drive their children much harder academically, and they view that as an extra challenge that they want to put in front of their children.

My question is in some ways similar to Monsieur Dion's in the sense that education is clearly a provincial responsibility, and I don't think anybody on this committee is proposing that we should federalize education, that the federal government should take over the responsibilities of the provincial government. You wouldn't want to get into a situation where a school board said, "We don't need to worry about French immersion. The feds are paying for it, so we can vacate that". I don't think we want to get into that situation.

So the question is, what kinds of additional value can the federal government add to supplement education? We don't want to allow a province to shirk its responsibilities to provide the educational programs that it should provide, whether that's immersion or other conventional programs, but are there things? You mentioned research and support and evaluation and community learning centres.

Again, I'm not an expert on education, and maybe there are things we are currently doing with respect to the federal government's intervention. It's a pillar of that road map that we've identified based on feedback from stakeholder groups across the country. Education, immigration, community support are the three big pillars of the road map, but what is it in education that the federal government can really do to improve linguistic duality?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: Obviously in Quebec things are a little bit different. On the moneys we receive, our schools are seen as much more of a community centre than one might think. We bring our communities in to support families, especially in

[*Translation*]

disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

[*English*]

We have our community learning centres in virtually every neighbourhood that contribute to tutorial programs, sports programs, anti-bullying programs, support programs, literacy programs that are helping the community—not only the students but their families, as David mentioned. We also support an organization called LEARN Quebec, which is a tutorial service in both official languages that is funded with these dollars, which helps contribute to our success rates.

But I think it is also important to talk about the economic and community advantages of a bilingual neighbourhood. I used to work in technical support, and Shell Canada used to have to outsource their technical support lines to us because they couldn't find French-speaking people in Calgary. I was in Toronto at the time. It was pretty hard to find some of that staff in Toronto. We had to bribe some of our Quebec young people to come to live in Toronto for a while.

As we said earlier, having two languages contributes so much to a community and to individuals. Bilingual people can go anywhere.

They can contribute to the whole world, and the world is getting smaller. We all know that.

• (1605)

Mr. Bernard Trottier: There's no argument from this committee. We all embrace that notion. I guess I'm asking for some precision, though.

You mentioned a couple of things, including programs that are outside the classrooms themselves. We don't want to let a provincial government off the hook. If it's responsible for education, it should fund the classrooms properly, and teachers properly. All of the support infrastructure should do its job, really.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: But when parents can support their children to reach those objectives, the children will succeed much better.

As David mentioned earlier, in very many of our neighbourhoods the parents are unable to help their children, especially in French. They never had the French immersion opportunity when they were students. I get complaints all the time from parents who say, "The teacher is francophone. She can't even talk to me in English to help me with my son's work."

We want to be able to support the whole family and the whole structure to make those children succeed.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: If I can paraphrase, some of the community and parental infrastructure that surrounds the school—that's an area of intervention for the federal government that could be eminently useful and fruitful.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: Very much so.

Mr. David Birnbaum: One other thing we would point to—one of the many where we insist that there's a mirror looking at both,

[*Translation*]

that is to say linguistic minorities in Canada, in the other provinces and in Quebec.

[*English*]

—is immigration. We understand that there are limits on who can come to our schools, but there are ways to make that work.

It should be seen as a normal part, we would think, of a federal government's overall strategy to remind potential immigrants that they can integrate into Canada in a minority language situation. I think it's vitally important to francophone communities in the rest of the country, and it's vitally important to us, that you can integrate into Quebec society as a non-francophone. With our help and that of other community institutions, you will learn the majority language.

But it's absolutely legitimate and vital in Canada to live in either official language and to have the infrastructure you need, much of it supported by the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Trottier.

Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses and for the presentation we heard today.

I have a question regarding education in the languages. What education factors do you believe must be considered in promoting optimal second language learning? In this case, we are in a minority situation in Quebec. What are the tools you can use to implement the second language?

This is very important for me. I come from a thousand-year background between Hungary and Romania. We never lost our culture. I'm Hungarian by background. I studied the majority language and so on. For me, it's very important that we in Canada speak both official languages and that we promote that skill in a very positive way. It should not be seen as a hindrance, as an obstacle. It should be seen as a great advantage, an economic advantage, a social advantage, which gives access to culture.

In this scenario, then, I'm asking you how you can improve it, and how we can help as the federal government. By the Constitution, our hands are a little bit tied in terms of education, but we are here to do the best we can to have these two great languages, great skills, in our country.

• (1610)

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: I get to talk about competencies, because that's my area of expertise.

I agree with you about the more languages we have. Research has shown that when students develop more than one language, it also brings them to increased sensitivity, openness, and communication, not only to their local community but to our beautiful nation and across the world.

You were asking if I had a wish, and I think it would be around ensuring students' success. We always talk about best practices. Students and parents are at the core of great learning. We want as a school board, as schools, to help our parents, but we also need to support teachers, not only across the province but also across our beautiful nation. You asked me if I had a wish. When we're talking about French second language instruction, we need to make sure that the teachers who are teaching these programs have the competencies in reading, writing, and oral communication that will best serve their students.

This is not only in their province. This is not only in Nova Scotia. Our kids will travel our nation. When they're coming together, as an example,

[*Translation*]

for the Page Program, on Parliament Hill,

[*English*]

they are, as required, bilingual.

We need competent teachers who are supported and who are also aware of the programs. If you're coming into Quebec, one of our

special flavours is that we have the Quebec education program, or QEP. Our QEP has special competencies. Another challenge is to make sure that outside teachers who are coming in, who we're welcoming, are also made aware of QEP, and are QEP friendly and knowledgeable, to better serve our students.

Mr. David Birnbaum: Just very quickly, Mr. Chair, we're obviously quite conscious of where there are provincial jurisdictions. It's our understanding that, first of all, there are many aspects of education, as we've discussed, where it's the federal government's purview to take action.

Again, there are so many complementary areas, and I think we would point to one that's perhaps political and one that's a matter of infrastructure. A number of levers are available to the Department of Canadian Heritage and other government establishments with respect to economic development. Presumably, one of the economic levers that Canada has, and that other countries don't, is its bilingual capacity. Is that being reinforced? Are minority language communities being given every opportunity to use their second language expertise to create wealth, to build services, or to offer their state-of-the-art translation skills? Is there more that can be done on that score?

I guess we would just point to the political message, whatever government might be in power, which has to resonate with an English-speaking minority in Quebec, an education community in Quebec, and French in the rest of the country, and that is that this is not a frill and not an advantage but a fundamental characteristic of Canada. Also, if I might say so, it's not to be put under threat when one makes a very legitimate point that there are other third languages that are amazingly important. Of course they are, but that does not run counter to the very basic Canadian reality that this country functions in two languages. That's not just philosophical. It trickles down to how our schools operate.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Angus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their presentation.

I am from Northern Ontario. The context there is quite different. The francophone community has a strong presence there. There is a good balance between francophone and anglophone communities. Probably around fifty-fifty.

However, each year in September, the competition for young students is quite high because we have four school boards. French public, French Catholic, English Catholic and English public. In my case, I attended an English Catholic school.

The issue of immersion is quite important.

[English]

As for the anglophone parents in the north, they know that if their children aren't bilingual, they're not staying, so we are competing now.... All our young people were going to the francophone schools because they knew they had a better future in the north. We offered immersion programs, but often we were not able to fill immersion programs because of the problem of getting qualified teachers and being able to offer core programs.

Is this an issue that you face in Quebec? Certainly, parents are sold on immersion. They don't know the details of it. They don't know how it works. They just want it. But delivering the programs is a lot more difficult than it seems.

• (1615)

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: Yes, absolutely. It is very difficult for us to attract competent teachers in both languages. To bring in those francophones, we are now doing most of our recruiting from French language universities around Quebec.

In our school board, it is absolutely required for all of my administration team to be fluently bilingual so that they can go out and do that recruitment in French. Nobody wants to do a job interview in the language that they're not 100% comfortable in, so we are doing the vast majority of our interviewing in French right now.

As for your community in northern Ontario, the English school board system in Quebec feels that we are the largest supporters and the largest contributors to the francization of Quebec. We are doing more for that than any other institution, public or private, and it's something that we take great pride in.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Across the various schools.... A number of your schools are going to be in isolated rural regions, probably, so how are you able—

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: A lot of them are in isolated rural regions.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Are you able to do the core programs in those areas or is it a little by hook and by crook, depending on whether you can actually staff it?

Mr. David Birnbaum: It's a real mixed bag, and not only with respect to staffing French immersion programs. To have a school in Val-d'Or fully staffed one way or the other is very difficult when the teachers sometimes are coming from 40 kilometres away each morning. The problems are not more intensified with respect to delivering teachers who can offer the French intensive program. It's simply staffing those schools and all of the challenges that go with that.

Again, because of the kinds of realities that my colleagues are mentioning, it's pretty much understood, even by the universities training the teachers, that it's so important that they have a full capacity to work in either language.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Let's take a community like Val-d'Or, for example. In the far north, many Cree students are leaving the Cree communities. Probably half the Algonquin communities speak English, the other half speak French. They're coming into Val-d'Or. If they're going into the English school boards, do you have percentages who are English-speaking first nations, whether it's in

Montreal or Val-d'Or, and what issues are you dealing with in terms of shortfalls in educational background and special needs?

Are you able to accommodate them? Is it an issue?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: It is an issue. It's a growing issue, both for budgetary purposes and also for general staffing purposes. It's not only a language issue. We have trouble staffing competent math teachers and science teachers.

We are fortunate in that we started immersion programs in Quebec in 1968, so the teachers who are graduating now have themselves been through our immersion programs and are very competent in two languages. Not every school board in the rural regions has the luxury of only hiring francophones, for instance, as we try to do in the city, but at least they are getting teachers who have been through immersion programs themselves and who are bilingual.

Mr. Charlie Angus: With first nation youth coming in now—correct me if I'm wrong—I think the Grand Council of the Crees signed an education deal with the Province of Quebec, but others are under the various federal jurisdictions.

We find in Ontario, when students come into the provincial system, we have not just an education shortfall but a monetary shortfall—often to the tune of \$4,000 or \$5,000 per student—that has to be dealt with before the student can come into the school board. Do you have those same realities in Quebec?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

Go ahead.

Mr. David Birnbaum: Not to a great extent. We don't have the numbers with us, but the percentage of first nation students in our collective system is not that high.

There are concentrations, some at our Western Quebec School Board and some at our Eastern Shores School Board, but the numbers are not that high. We're building relationships with, for instance, the Cree and Kativik school boards, but unlike the rest of the country, there are designated school boards for first nation students in Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Breitzkreuz, would you like to ask a question?

Go ahead.

• (1620)

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): I don't have a question.

The Chair: You don't have a question. Okay.

Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome. I would like to thank the witnesses for coming today.

I would like to continue in the same vein as my colleague Mr. Angus.

I represent the Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier riding, in which the Central Quebec School Board is found.

I was wondering what the situation is, and what particular challenges arise in areas like the National Capital? It is near a large urban centre, but the schools are a bit scattered and farther away from smaller communities.

Mr. David Birnbaum: It is fascinating. We were discussing the diversity of our system and that is another example.

I can tell you without hesitation that a high percentage of students of the Central Quebec School Board, who have access to schooling in English of course, or they would not be among us, speak their mother tongue quite often, meaning French, when they return home.

Ironically, in some schools from that board, we must ensure that a major part of the day takes place in English given that that is the priority. It is quite the opposite from the challenges we see in schools in Val d'Or or New Carlisle, in the Gaspé region. It is mostly the case in the Quebec region. The challenge is that most students speak French as a first language.

Ms. Éloïse Michaud: The population located near the Valcartier base comes to mind. In some cases, students will not have the opportunity to speak French when they are at home.

Do some of the Central Quebec School Board schools offer immersion programs?

Mr. David Birnbaum: Certainly.

First of all, these people are responsible for ensuring that the students speak French well, but English too, given that this is an English-language school board. In this school board, in the Lester B. Pearson School Board and others as well, a growing percentage of students choose to do the French-first-language exam. Those cases are often students whose mother tongue is French, and in the other, they are anglophones who have passed the French-first-language exam.

As for speaking French properly, we are there to teach that. When it comes to writing French well, that presents a major challenge in the case of young francophone Quebecers. We must also meet this need in those schools.

Ms. Éloïse Michaud: Absolutely.

You mentioned earlier that we need better strategies for parents who are less aware, or who, when they were young, did not have access to immersion programs. They do not necessarily see the importance of offering that access to their own children.

Could you provide us with more details about the strategies that have currently been implemented and those you would like to see developed, possibly with federal support?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: I could share some ideas with you.

In the case of first- and second-generation immigrants who did not grow up exposed to French as a second language, we provide literacy activities and workshops designed for parents. Indeed, the transfer of knowledge must take place. However, early strategies or strategies for decoding in French, for example, are different than those used for English or for a third language.

We want to offer parents tools through workshops and skills development, in collaboration with what we offer students, among other things. This can be done through our Community Learning Centres or in cooperation with our community partners. One challenge, still in the regions, is offering services that are accessible in English. We do need to be able to explain the reasons for all of this in English. Access to those services is therefore required.

Mr. David Birnbaum: We are talking about federal involvement. However, a community support program in an official language includes support given to community groups. There are many examples of this, but I will provide you with two.

For the black community of Caribbean origin, learning French seems to pose a particular problem. The same is true for East Asian communities. But community groups that support those communities work with us. Those are often associations that identify with the minority language community.

The federal government has a role to play in supporting those communities as they move forward with us. What we have in mind is ensuring that when the problem arises, an increased effort is made to teach French as a second language in the case of children coming from those communities.

• (1625)

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Mr. Trottier, you have the floor.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to ask our witnesses some questions about the agreements and protocols between the provincial and federal governments. I imagine you have some experience in that area.

Are there things that could be done better in the context of the next roadmap, for example?

I imagine that in some cases, it would take very little time, but could you provide us with some advice as to how we could better manage these agreements between the federal government and the provinces?

Mr. David Birnbaum: The groups that benefit from these funds, including our school boards, often say that delays cause a major challenge. This is also a problem we experience with our own provincial government. Furthermore, certain parameters do not provide them with the flexibility they require. I'll give you an example.

[English]

If we talk about the community learning centres, they are a tremendous success and a lifeline to some of our smaller schools in allowing them to become hubs in the community. Occasionally there have been requirements under the federal agreement that we open up additional ones while the funding for existing ones is drying up. Now, these community learning centres are not going to become profit centres. They will probably always require some extra government support in order to continue operating. The results are tremendous where they are.

The current agreement makes it difficult for those centres to continue to be funded on an ongoing basis. Occasionally in a rather artificial way we have to scramble to open up new ones when it's not what the real objectives of the program might have called for.

I guess the other thing we would just point to without being specific is the great care and vigilance we take in ensuring that a very solid Canada-Quebec minority language and second language agreement is signed. We are deeply conscious of the current political situation in Quebec. We would underline that we have built a very transparent and excellent relationship with the current minister of education in Quebec, and we're optimistic. But there's no doubt this will be a sensitive process and that bilateral agreement is not signed yet.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Are there examples, either through the ministry of official languages or through Heritage, of the school boards getting funding directly from the federal government, or is it always through the province, to your knowledge?

Mr. David Birnbaum: My understanding is that except for perhaps a couple of the *programmes ponctuels*, it would be funnelled directly through the Ministry of Education, when you're talking about education.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay, and again, if we're taking a somewhat more blue-sky approach, because all the details of the road map for 2013-2018 haven't been finalized—there are obviously proposals that still have to come forward and agreements that need to be signed—are there some new innovative things the federal government could do to further enhance immersion? Ultimately the goal is not immersion but promoting linguistic duality in the country via this important vehicle of immersion.

Can you think of some things, some brand new programs, for the next five years of the road map?

Mr. David Birnbaum: That's a very helpful question.

I think we would point to a least one, and perhaps two.

To start with, I think francophones in the rest of the country probably join us in being pioneers with respect to distance education and e-learning. We don't find a very enthusiastic ear with our provincial governments in that matter. I'm not a constitutional expert, but I think there are federal *portes d'entrée* into that whole dossier. We would suggest that the notion of e-learning and distance learning are certainly worth taking a look at.

The other thing would be that I know there are extensive second language monitoring programs and exchange programs for which I think there are direct relationships with community partners and perhaps even with our school boards. Those help support the kinds of objectives we're talking about here.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: I would like to add to that the other supportive organizations that aren't directly controlled by us but that work very closely with us. You fund the Quebec Federation of Home & School Associations. They are fighting for the rights of the English student in virtually every way: when it comes to special needs, when it comes to bilingualism, and when it comes to new curriculum, changing the curriculum, or whatever.

We see working with our community as a huge part of our success. That's why our students do better. It is a fairly unique

arrangement with the anglophone school system, but we would like to see the continued funding of those ancillary organizations that work with our schools on a regular basis.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Breitzkreuz, you have a brief question?

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz: Yes. Thank you very much.

I'm new to this committee. I'm from western Canada, and I have just a few brief questions.

This study is a study of official language programs in all of Canada. I'm from Saskatchewan. Do you have contact with schools there? Is what you do different from what may be happening in some of our schools in southern Saskatchewan?

I'm a former teacher as well, and I found your presentation fascinating. I find this very interesting. Do you have contact with people outside of Quebec, and can you compare what you do with what they do in some way?

A voice: Do you want to talk about the CSBA?

Mr. David Birnbaum: Sure. I will very quickly, and my colleagues might have things to add.

We work really closely with the Canadian School Boards Association at the school board level. The principals have a national association as well. Given that education is a provincial jurisdiction, one of the most important priorities is exchanging information on best practices and so on.

The classroom environment is necessarily so different. We would guess it's a lifeline in Quebec, and it's so important in the rest of the country, but in different ways.

One of the things I would suggest our system could probably be more helpful to other jurisdictions on is in reminding them that French immersion is not just teaching French differently. Ever since people in our community pretty much invented it, along with experts at McGill and elsewhere, we have understood that this is a different way of teaching a language, and all the studies show it works.

We're only guessing, but perhaps those teaching it in the rest of the country haven't fully embraced that. It's not just teaching it more intensively. There are different tools, and we are seeking different capacities in the students we teach. So there might be more interaction and support that perhaps we can give our colleagues in the rest of the country on that.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: I was part of the French immersion experimental program in Montreal in seventh grade in 1969. I can personally attest to what David just said.

We left verb conjugation and “*Je m'appelle Suanne. Où est la gare?*”, and we moved into a cross-curricular focus in which we were just talking in French. We were talking about art and music and drama. We spoke French on the playground. It fits more closely with what I think is happening in most schools today. We don't just teach math, numbers, history, and geography. When we talk about math, we put in problem-solving about the percentage of Canadians who live in this territory, who do this. So we have cross-curricular approaches to it.

We started that with French immersion back in the late sixties.

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: If you will allow me two seconds, as a former French second language teacher I have to say that you are not just teaching the language of French, you are bringing in different competencies and putting them in a live setting. I do have family in Saskatchewan and in Wainwright, Alberta, who happen to be military personnel. So when I look at it, it is not learning the language, it is learning the language skills and the culture

[Translation]

and the cultural references.

[English]

within a very bilingual nation, to make sure that we transfer the knowledge, the culture, and everything that is within a language that is important. So across the province—but we have something very different in Quebec. It is vital for us to be bilingual. So if we can say that other provinces make it much more important, then we'll all benefit from it.

Mr. Garry Breitreuz: Thank you very much. I took French for five years and I wish I had the opportunity to do it in this way.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Dionne Labelle.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon everyone.

I can only recognize the success of anglophone school boards with immersion programs.

A Statistics Canada representative presented an overview to us of French, English and bilingualism in Canada. The French-English bilingualism rate increased by 0.1%. It went from 17.4% to 17.5%. That 0.1% comes mainly from Quebec, where the bilingualism rate increased from 40.6% to 42%. You are therefore part of that success.

Currently, we can't separate our study on immersion from the bigger picture of bilingualism in Canada. The question I am asking myself, concerning the roadmap, is the following: should we invest in immersion in Canada or should we reinvest in second language learning?

Perhaps you can help me gain a clear understanding of this subject. The number of young Canadians who attend immersion schools went from 267,000 to 329,000, which represents an increase

of 23%. However, the number of registrations in regular French-as-a-second-language programs went from 1.8 million to 1.3 million.

In 1996, 15% of young people aged 15 to 24 could carry on a conversation in French, but that percentage is now 11%. We have invested a lot in immersion, but fewer students are enrolled in French-as-a-second-language programs at school. The number of young people who are able to speak French is declining, at least in the rest of Canada.

So my question is this: are we making the right choices?

• (1635)

Mr. David Birnbaum: That is a good question. We don't claim to be able to answer for other provinces and territories. I will nevertheless make one or two observations on the subject.

We must all demystify and eliminate the idea that this is a program for elites. This is often discussed and it affects all of us, whether in Quebec or in the other provinces. It is clear that, pedagogically, anyone can learn a second language very well in an immersion program. If we were able to do so, that could expand access to French immersion throughout the country.

Second, you need to determine the best way to increase the rate of bilingualism. From our point of view and yours, that should be the goal.

In our opinion, it is also possible to have an exchange between the two programs. The core program could be improved anywhere in Canada with techniques used in schools where there are French immersion programs.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: You have nothing further to add on this subject?

Regarding your record, everything seems to be working well. However, generally, the number of registrations at your school boards seems to concern you.

Mr. David Birnbaum: Generally speaking, access to our schools is rather limited by the Charter of the French Language. We are not calling it into question, aside from the new proposals that are currently before the National Assembly.

Moreover, as we mentioned — and it is relevant to our discussions — the importance of the quality of French as a second language is clear every day, because we are aware of the fact that some families who have access to English school make other choices.

We suspect that, in some cases, these are families with two anglophone parents who choose a French school to ensure their children master French. We insist that the option be offered in our schools. Nevertheless, that is a group that doesn't take advantage of us. All of this means that we always have to be concerned about the number of students in our schools.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: I'd like to add that our schools, as I've mentioned many times, are part of our communities. As our numbers decrease, we've been forced over the past 15 years to close schools, and this is damaging to the community. Closing a school is always a last choice, but I know that between our two boards we've probably closed 15 or 16 schools in Montreal, and this damages our communities.

I'm not really worried about the English eligible students who are going to the French schools. Their parents have the choice, and I honour that choice, I respect that choice. I will say to you, there are many reasons they do that—David talked about one. Maybe it's because the school is a block away, and they want to go to a close school. Whatever their choices are, whatever their reasons are, I can assure you that francophones feel the same and would love to be able to send their children to English schools.

By having the population, we are able to maintain the programs of excellence we've been offering. If our critical mass decreases, it becomes harder.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Dion.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have four questions to ask. I will ask them all at once. That way, we will be able to proceed quickly.

[English]

The first question is that in Quebec there's a debate about the danger of teaching a second language too early—some people say it's a danger. I understand that in your community you start at kindergarten. I would like to know if there is a debate about it, and why, if there is no debate, there is a linguist somewhere saying it's not something we should do, as we hear in the French system in Quebec.

The second question I know is not in our jurisdiction, but since you are here, is there something in Bill 14 that you may have a concern about—I know it's a danger for CEGEPs—at primary and secondary schools?

The third point is your main focus. When I was the minister what I was told by the people in your community and by you, Mr. Birnbaum, at that time, was to keep your children so that they stay as adults in Quebec. If they live elsewhere, then for your family at Christmas time, it's very complicated. I understand.

Do you succeed? I guess there are many reasons that people may leave, other than they don't speak French. We are in North America. You may be invited to take a job elsewhere. Francophones may be more reluctant to leave, but anglophones are not. I remember when I was studying in Washington, if I hadn't been a francophone, maybe I would have stayed in the United States. I had a lot of opportunities, but my home was clearly in Montreal, and I came back.

The last point is for the benefit of this committee. You told us a lot of things. Can you sum up the ask you have for the report of our committee, the things you want us to absolutely not miss?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Go ahead.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: All right, Mr. Dion. As for the dangers of early education, the studies are irrefutable. Children as young as two, three, four years old can learn many languages. My school board runs an international language centre that has a preschool for three- and four-year-olds. They do English, French, and their choice of one other language. What happens is that, when they get together in the English and French classes, they all learn the three other languages the children are learning, so most of them can sing their favourite songs in five different languages.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Don't they have a mix-up between the different languages in their minds?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: No, they really do not. As Madame Dénomée said earlier, the studies have proven that these children do better in any or all languages as they get older. Their brains are processing the information at a more rapid pace, and they are learning, and succeeding, at higher rates.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Is it because you avoid some mistakes? I have been told that with two parents with different languages, it's important that the kid identify the language with the parent. Is it true? Are there mistakes to avoid?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: We don't believe that.

Ms. Christine Dénomée: Researchers will have different points of view. If you look at genetics it will bring some things. But they're all in agreement that with transfer of knowledge from a unilingual to a bilingual environment, depending on the origin of the language—from Turkish to Greek, from French to English—they'll harmonize by the time we reach cycle three, grades five and six. The brain will adapt depending on what they're looking at.

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: I can't tell you how lovely it is to listen to them speaking, flipping back and forth between languages as easily as anything.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: As for Bill 14, I don't want have a debate. This isn't the place, but is there something linked to elementary and secondary schools and to the role of the federal government?

Ms. Suanne Stein Day: The first and most important thing is that Bill 14 would get rid of the exemption for the military, for the French military families in Quebec to send their children to English schools. These families can be uprooted at any point in time. I'm very well aware of that. I have two children in the military. They don't live in Quebec, if we're to touch on your third question.

At any point in time these families and these children can be uprooted and moved to other places. While there may be some French schools on the bases across the country, is the quality of French that they're learning there, the quality of education in a small military school, going to be what they can get in a full school? For some of these families in central Quebec, which we heard about earlier, it means two full schools' worth of families that would prefer to keep their kids in an anglophone system so that if and when they're moved—and they may not be moved—their kids can stay in a common area.

• (1645)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Chair, point of order.

Our discussion should be about immersion classes. We won't repeat the discussions happening at a parliamentary committee on Bill 14, with all due respect...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: They are probably immersion schools, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: With all due respect to Mr. Dion, I find it is out of order.

Mr. Chair, I will let you decide.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I protest.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: These people have come to Ottawa and we shouldn't be preventing them from speaking.

The Chair: Mr. Dionne Labelle, thank you for your comment, but Mr. Dion asked the question in a federal context. He asked what, in Bill 14, affected federal jurisdiction.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The question and the answers are acceptable.

I give the floor to Ms. Stein Day.

[English]

Go ahead. You have the floor.

Mr. David Birnbaum: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It should be remembered that French-immersion schools by law are English-language schools. Thus any limitations that might be imposed by Bill 14, we would suggest, are pertinent.

We would start on Bill 14 by reminding you that our *raison d'être* and something we have not frankly succeeded in having completely understood, as Madam Stein Day noted, is that we are agents of francization. Believe me, we know our other core roles as well. We're agents of francization and French immersion is one part of that. Very often those who we are succeeding in rendering capable and conversant in French are not going to get those skills otherwise. They're going to be looking for work. That's one part of it. We would start with the law in its entirety putting our system at risk.

Quickly on the military, I think it's important to note that we sought the intervention of all three federal party leaders on that

matter because the military is a federal jurisdiction. We didn't receive any satisfaction on that.

We are deeply preoccupied by Bill 14. The other thing it does is that it sets further requirements for the right to work in French, which we respect, but the protections by all assessments are there already. Will that hurt our own workforce within our schools? We have worries about that. I just wanted to make those points on that matter.

The notion of the students we get to put in French immersion, in other words our overall numbers, while there continue to be risks, some that are inevitable...

Mr. Dion, you talk about the natural mobility of our community. That is normal. One of the things that's encouraging to us, and the federal government could help on, is that, as we mentioned, we think it absolutely normal and pertinent to remind other Canadians and people around the world through our embassy network and other means that it is good and possible to move to Quebec and be part of the minority language community, thus part of our schools, thus part of our French immersion programs.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: What is your ask for the report?

Mr. David Birnbaum: I guess we would very quickly review some of the things we had said, one...sorry?

Ms. Christine Dénoimée: Our wishes.

Mr. David Birnbaum: Yes. I think we enumerated some of them.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: A better word.

Mr. David Birnbaum: It's that the Quebec-Canada entente be very carefully dealt with and completed. The notion of community input, our own and that of other minority language associations, is absolutely essential. I'm sorry, but the amount of money is meaningless if we have no major input into how it gets distributed to our kids. We talked about the auxiliary areas. We've enumerated some of them where the federal government has jurisdiction; that helps set the table for our communities—employment, access to economic opportunity, second language programs, exchanges, and so on.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

For the benefit of our analysts, I have two quick questions before we adjourn.

Are you aware whether or not the agreements for the renewal of the Canada-Quebec Accord have begun?

Mr. David Birnbaum: We understand there are very advanced discussions, and quite positive ones, being done with great discretion, because the minister responsible in Quebec has made public statements noting they will simply try to grab every dollar without any discussion. But we do understand at the bureaucratic level, and thus through instructions presumably from the political leaders, that stuff is happening.

• (1650)

The Chair: Okay.

Have you heard any discussion about when those agreements might be concluded?

Mr. David Birnbaum: No. We understand that the signature on the overall one is—

The Chair: Then my second quick question is this. Is there anything specifically in the existing Canada-Quebec Accord, that expired on March 31, that you would like to see improved upon or changed in the renewal of that agreement?

Mr. David Birnbaum: We don't have the new road map in front of us, but one of the things that struck us—with the understanding that this was at first reading and not with major analysis—was a focus in the language on a whole range of auxiliary and complementary programs. Frankly, what worried us at first reading was whether there was a pulling away from the capital support for certain projects, the nuts and bolts in delivery of minority language education every day that has to be supported by the road map.

The numbers were there. Most of the clearly described programs were some of the more complementary programs, which are important, but not as central and vital to our delivery of minority language education each day.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you to all members of the committee for their questions and comments.

Thank you very much for your brief and for your opening remarks, as well as your testimony. It's very much appreciated.

I wish you a wonderful weekend.

This meeting is adjourned.

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