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Chair

Mr. Phil McColeman

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

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● (0845)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC)): Order. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Before we begin our testimony today, we have two requests for the floor. I believe these are for notices of motion.

First we'll go to Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wish to table a motion for discussion at a later time for our next study. I have this in both official languages.

The motion states:

> That this study be entitled "Better jobs for Canadians: A Study on the Renewal of the Labour Market Development Agreements";
>
> That the study focus on hearing from stakeholders on ways to improve the LMDAs, including through increased engagement with employers and workers, increased employer investment in training and better employment outcomes from training;
>
> That the Committee begins this new study with an appearance from the Minister of Employment and Social Development and following that a briefing from department officials;
>
> That at least eight meetings be scheduled for the study before the summer adjournment;
>
> While recognizing that business referred to the Committee by the House such as Government legislation, private members legislation or Estimates will take precedence in scheduling over this study;
>
> And that the Committee finalizes its report to be tabled in the House before the house rises for Summer 2014.

I would present that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Sims.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Chair, I have two notices of motion in both languages.

The first is a notice of motion for future discussion:

> That the Committee invite the Parliamentary Budget Office to appear before the Committee to discuss his findings pertaining to skills shortages in Canada, and that the meeting happen no later than April 10th.

My second one is not as eloquently written as my colleague's across the way. We have suggestions for future studies. One of them is the labour market information opinions, the current process and potential improvement, and the other one is temporary foreign workers in low-skilled areas.

The Chair: Thank you for those.

We'll now go to the regular business of the meeting, and for which this meeting was scheduled.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is meeting number 18 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today is Tuesday, April 1, 2014. This is the final meeting of witness testimony for our study concerning opportunities for aboriginal persons in the workforce. We have four witnesses in attendance this morning, although two have yet to arrive. We hope they will arrive shortly. We'll be listening to testimony until 10:15 a.m. Then we'll have a short recess and return in camera for discussion of our report today.

Joining us today are Mr. Ryan Montpellier, executive director of the Mining Industry Human Resources Council; Pierre Gratton, president and chief executive officer of the Mining Association of Canada; and from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne, director of parliamentary affairs.

Welcome to everyone. I'll welcome the other two witnesses upon their arrival.

Perhaps we could start off the testimony with Mr. Montpellier.

Mr. Ryan Montpellier (Executive Director, Mining Industry Human Resources Council): If it's okay with you, Mr. Chair, I think having Mr. Gratton from the Mining Association of Canada begin and sort of provide an industry overview would be probably a better sequence of activity, if that's fine with you.

● (0850)

The Chair: I'm prepared to accept that.

If you'd like to proceed, Mr. Gratton, that would be wonderful.

Mr. Pierre Gratton (President and Chief Executive Officer, Mining Association of Canada): Sure, and thank you very much.

You have before you a copy of our presentation, but I'm not actually going to go through it. It's there for you to consider at your leisure. There's quite a lot of information in there, and in a few minutes I'll turn to slide 8 entitled Aboriginal Training Organizations and Mining Sector in Action.

To start with, I thought I'd summarize what our message to you is today. We are, according to Statistics Canada, the largest private sector employer on a proportionate basis. We've seen significant growth of aboriginal participation in mining over the last 15 to 20 years . Between 2007 and 2012, we saw a 14% increase in that timeframe, and the preceding five years were similar. Clearly, there's an acceleration of aboriginal participation in mining. A lot of this is brought about through the agreements that are reached between companies, and I think you've met with some of our members over the last several weeks that you've been holding hearings.

As you know, Cameco is the largest private sector employer in the country. You also see at operations at Voisey's Bay around 60% aboriginal participation. The diamond mines in the Northwest Territories have 30% to 40% aboriginal participation, and that's direct employment. Also indirectly, you'll see there are a number of aboriginal businesses that have been set up to serve and supply the industry. That's also part of the industry that I think is not captured in the Statistics Canada results, but there are huge spinoffs that flow from that. It's a really important part of the mining story in Canada and in our view it's one that's going to continue and accelerate with time.

As an industry we're also facing a human resources shortage. The pressure at the moment is a little abated because the industry is going through a bit of a downturn, but in general—and Ryan will speak to this in a few minutes—we do have an aging workforce. You'll hear this, I'm sure, from the Chamber of Commerce as well. There is a lot of turnover taking place in the industry, and aboriginal people represent an important source of replacement workers for the industry. So there's a real direct industry imperative to continue the progress we've been making to improve aboriginal participation in mining.

Really, that's the main thrust. There are a lot of good reasons to do this for the industry, as well, in this country. If we want to develop a mine, it helps a lot that aboriginal people want you in their backyard building that mine and ensuring that they can participate actively in the mine, either through direct employment or other ways. It's really, really helpful.

With that, what would my messages be for the federal government and for parliamentarians?

There have been some very successful programs that have been around now for a number of years. I was personally involved in one when I was CEO of the Mining Association of B.C., and that's called B.C. AMTA, which, when I was there, was the B.C. Aboriginal Mine Training Association. It's now been morphed into the B.C. Aboriginal Mentoring and Training Association. It's going beyond mining. I like to think that it started with mining, like the original frontiers, and now it's expanding to many other sectors of the B.C. and Alberta economy. So they're expanding beyond the border and they're expanding into other sectors. It has played a hugely critical role in accelerating the participation of aboriginal people in mining in B.C.

As I mentioned, I sat on the board of this organization in its early days. Its original office is in Kamloops, and they've done incredible work there, but they now have branch offices in many other parts of the province. The B.C. AMTA model was based on the Mine Training Association in the Northwest Territories that developed around the diamond mines. We've recently seen an announcement of a similar program in the Ring of Fire, which I congratulate the government for because I see this as being very proactive.

Why are these initiatives important and why is the federal government's involvement important? I can tell you, having sat on the board, that what the federal government does by bringing itself to the table with financial support is level the playing field: it puts industry and aboriginal communities on an equal playing field around the table.

● (0855)

When it's just industry money, and believe me, there's industry money and active industry participation in these initiatives, but when that's the case there isn't a balance no matter how hard industry may try. It doesn't create the right conditions for participation, I believe. Whereas the federal government involvement or the provincial government involvement levels the table, makes active participation, and helps build trust that over time can be really, really important. I've seen this at work in Kamloops. I've also been to some of the events involving the New Afton mine in Kamloops. I've seen the graduates of this program and I can tell you it's extremely moving to see largely aboriginal youth going through these training programs and having a job and a certificate at the end of it. I think these initiatives are transformative. We're only at the beginning of these programs and I think over time you're going to see some true transformation taking place in a lot of those communities where mines and these types of programs are available.

Our message to you is to really continue these types of investments. There is a review currently under way of the two key programs for this: the ASETS program; and, the SPF program, the strategic partnerships fund. Those are two HRSDC programs that have provided the kind of funding that I'm talking about to allow these organizations to flourish. There's a five-year review. You get our full endorsement of these programs, and I encourage you to recommend that they be continued and in fact enhanced. Given the opportunities ahead of us across the country in the mining sector and in other natural resource sectors, I think there's going to be more demand for programs like this.

With that, I'll stop and turn it over to Ryan.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Ryan Montpellier: Thanks, Pierre.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and the members of the committee. It's a pleasure to be here this morning. We certainly appreciate the opportunity to address the committee.

I'm the executive director at the Mining Industry Human Resources Council. The MiHR Council is a non-profit, membership-based organization with a mandate to identify and address the labour market and HR issues facing the mining industry today. If you are familiar with the sector council program, we are an organization that evolved from that. We are one of the few, I think, that continue to survive and thrive and continue to address the needs of our sector.

We do this collaboratively with our industry. We bring industry together, and not just employers and not just members of the Mining Association of Canada, but also organized labour, educational institutions, aboriginal groups, and a variety of other stakeholder groups to help address the needs of industry.

There has been a lot of talk recently, and also a lot of discussion through the media and other vehicles, about the skills shortage in Canada. There are very strong arguments on both sides as to whether or not Canada is in fact facing a skills shortage.

I can tell you, based on all of our consultations with our member companies—as Pierre alluded to, it's taking a bit of a reprieve today with commodity prices—that mining companies continue to face very significant challenges in attracting workers. It's not across all occupations and not across all regions of the country, but there are pockets of challenges, and there are areas of the country where there have been employment vacancies for over a year, where we just simply can't find a mining engineer with 10 or 15 years' experience to walk in to operate a mine. That's a reality.

Like I said, that's not in all areas of the country. There are a number of quotes from the chamber and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and a number of surveys that all talk about employers talking about labour shortages, but I can tell you anecdotally, from the ground, that our employers are facing a challenge in finding individuals. I'll get into that in a bit more detail when I talk about some of the factors that drive that skills shortage and why we believe it's going to become more challenging in the years to come.

We believe that the Canadian mining labour market is facing somewhat of a perfect storm. According to the Mining Association of Canada and their members, there's about $160 billion in new potential mining projects that currently are going through the environmental assessment and permitting phase. Certainly not all of them will come to fruition, but even if a portion of them do, it will cause significant pressure for an already strained labour market.

When you factor in the aging workforce—about 40% of those in our industry today are over 50 years old, and about a third are going to be eligible to retire in the next five years—this creates a very daunting challenge. You couple an expanding industry with an aging workforce at the same time. There are a number of other recruitment challenges in regard to the fact that the mining industry is operating in more rural and remote locations; there are persistent negative stereotypes associated with careers in mining that we are still trying to dispel. When you put all that together, it makes for a very daunting challenge in trying to recruit the next generation of mine workers when you have this expansion and this aging workforce all coming together at the same time.

At the council, we look at labour market forecasting on a regular basis. We try to look at our forecasts, our demand, over the course of the next two, five, and ten years. Our most recent forecast suggests that we will need about 145,000 new people to join the industry over the course of the next decade. If you break that down, only about 20% of that number is due to growth, and that's based on our baseline scenario. So 20% of that is due to growth, but a full 80% of it is replacement requirements, replacing people who are currently working in the industry and who are leaving due to retirement or for other reasons.

This is one of the most critical challenges facing our mining industry today: where will we find the next generation of skilled mine workers? I know, from speaking to our VPs of HR and our leadership in the industry, that this is a significant problem. Where will these people come from? Well, there's no magic formula here. The mining industry does need to make better use of all potential sources of supply, including youth, women, and new Canadians, but certainly one of the key sources of labour is aboriginal people.

● (0900)

The mining industry has done a tremendous job in the past at doing this, and I think we're one of the leading industries in Canada in attracting and recruiting and retaining aboriginal people. Certainly, as an industry we view this as a strategic source of labour. For many reasons there's a lot of opportunity in doing that. The main one, which I think Pierre spoke to, is the fact that we operate, in many instances, on their traditional territory.

As Pierre mentioned, there are about 100 active impact and benefit agreements. These are agreements signed between mining companies and aboriginal communities. Most of those impact and benefit agreements—our socio-economic, our partnership agreements—have an employment component to them. The employment component often has targets around either a total number of aboriginal people employed or a percentage of the workforce coming from aboriginal communities.

We studied about 16 very prominent impact-benefit agreements a few years ago. We interviewed the company executives who negotiated them and the community leaders who developed them and looked at a number of challenges around why companies and communities were struggling to reach their employment targets. A number of factors came out, for example, the lack of trust and lack of knowledge about the project and careers. There were a number of barriers as to why employment targets were not met. One of the key ones was the lack of education, and in particular, essential skills and work readiness skills. Mining companies often underestimated what level of essential skills were in the community and how much of that early training was required to even get the individual employable in the sector.

As a result of that, MiHR and our industry launched a new program called mining essentials. I'd like to focus the rest of my talk on our mining essentials program and the success this program is having.

Mining essentials is a pre-employment work readiness training program geared for aboriginal people. It was developed between the mining industry and the Assembly of First Nations. It's a partnership between both the industry and the AFN, but it was developed in partnership with the Métis, with the Inuit, with essential skills experts in Canada, with a number of educational institutions. The goal of this program is really to increase the involvement and engagement of aboriginal people across the sector by providing work readiness and essential skills training needed to gain employment.

What's unique about this program is that it teaches essential skills using industry examples, industry tools, industry documents, industry scenarios, industry simulations, but it teaches all of this using an aboriginal culture. So it's not somebody lecturing in front of a classroom. It's using a culturally appropriate aboriginal approach to education, and it's using things like learning circles and storytelling and cultural events, and bringing elders into the classroom to talk about the history of aboriginal participation in mining. It's really a very holistic and different approach to education. We've seen a tremendous amount of uptake in this program, a tremendous amount of value, from the local communities and the mining companies that are hiring the individuals at the end.

We have now developed this program. It's been operating for about 18 months. We've seen uptake of this in a number of different provinces and territories across the country. We've graduated 110 graduates so far. There are 180 currently in the program. This is a 12-week program. There's a significant amount of growth with this program; it's almost exponential at this point. We anticipate an additional 200 this year. So really by the end of 2014 we could have 450 new young aboriginal people going through this program. We have about a 75% graduation rate, and 80% of those who graduate find employment immediately in the sector.

Now, that 75% graduation rate may seem low, but I can say that from an aboriginal essential skills perspective, it's actually very high. One of the key challenges with this program or requirement is attendance. That's one of the key challenges, getting these individuals in a classroom regularly for 12 weeks. That's almost like a 12-week interview that the companies can go to and see if the person is coming in on time, if they're receiving the training.

● (0905)

All of these intakes require an employer, partner, at the table; an educational institution, be it a community college or a private aboriginal training organization; and an aboriginal community. It's that three-stakeholder approach that has made mining essentials such a success.

The biggest challenge with mining essentials is one of funding. My last point on this is the program has been extremely successful and has been rolled out across the country in both English and French with a number of communities, not just first nations, but with Métis and Inuit communities as well. The biggest challenge is trying to find the funding to run the program. I can tell you that the federal government, through the SPF and the ASETS program, has been instrumental. There's a number of funding pots available for this funding as well through the provincial and territorial governments that have been quite successful. Mining companies and industry associations have also stepped up and helped fund these programs, but the key challenge is trying to get aboriginal communities access to this funding and steer that funding into programs like mining essentials that have a meaningful return on that investment and lead directly to employment in any industry, but in our case, mining.

I'll leave it at that. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

We have been joined by our further two witnesses. I'd like to welcome to the table Valerie Bowers, the executive director of the Mi'kmaq Employment Training Secretariat; as well as Karen Pictou, the partnership liaison officer.

Welcome. We're glad you made it. I know you had a challenge last week. We anticipated having you by teleconference and here you are live, so it's very good that you're here.

We will leave your testimony until the end and we'll move on to Susanna for her testimony from the chamber.

Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne (Director, Parliamentary Affairs, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): Good morning, members. I'd like to say that I thank you very much for having given me the opportunity to meet with you this morning.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce released the report, *Opportunity Found: Improving the Participation of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada's Workforce*, last December. I believe it was sent to all members of the committee.The report was driven by our members' desire to address one of the key factors in the challenge they face in finding the skilled workers they need, and that is the under-representation of aboriginal peoples in our workforce.

The Canadian Chamber—and many others-—have focused on the significant difficulties aboriginal peoples face in completing elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education, and then after that, in obtaining and retaining employment. In this paper we took a different approach and we highlighted productive initiatives to improve the workforce participation of aboriginal peoples and the competitiveness of employers that resulted from it. We also offered recommendations to the federal government and Canada's businesses —and that's something I always try to do in my papers, offer suggestions to the business community as well—on measures that both can take to provide aboriginal peoples and the communities that they live in with tools to make these success stories the norm.

● (0910)

[*Translation*]

Our key message is that increasing the number of aboriginal workers in our workforce is not an aboriginal issue, but an issue that concerns all Canadians.

[*English*]

The completion of high school is considered the minimum level of education required for employment. While the education success gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians is closing, it needs to do so a lot more and it needs to do so a lot more quickly.

There's a lot of focus on post-secondary education, however this is meaningless for people who don't finish high school. Many aboriginal organizations are doing something about this. One of the examples I mentioned in the paper is Saskatchewan's Mosquito First Nation, which has been directing the national child care benefit payments it receives from the federal government to programs to bring its people in year one up to grade 10 equivalency, and now they're working on bringing people from their first nation up to grade 12 equivalency, and then on to post-secondary education.

We also mention examples of companies and post-secondary institutions recognizing that they need to invest early in tomorrow's aboriginal students and employees. A couple of the examples I mention in the paper include RBC's aboriginal stay in school program, which has actually been around for 20 years and offers aboriginal students positions in RBC branches across the country. There's also the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, which has weekly programs with aboriginal 12-to-18-year-olds in Oshawa, Ontario, aimed at giving them a sense of their culture and demonstrating to them the benefits of having an education.

Amongst the recommendations that we've put forward to encourage more of these kinds of initiatives is that that the federal government look for more opportunities to match business funding for aboriginal skills and training programs.

Educators have told us that they believe one of the biggest roadblocks to aboriginal students' success in school and the work force is that they can't see where they fit into either one. This is why we and many others find programs like the Nunavut Sivukniksavut program very interesting, and recommend that the federal government fund more programs like it that instill a sense of place and pride in aboriginal students before they enter post-secondary education. So this is a program that occurs after high school graduation.

We've heard from businesses and training organizations about the frustrations caused by programs that come and go—we're talking about the review of some federal programs today—and also by the government being more focused on paperwork and audits than on results. This is why we've suggested that the federal government would get better results for its aboriginal training dollars if it avoided changing project deadlines, parameters, and launch dates. The example that I mentioned in the paper is with the Northwest Territories Mine Training Society's experience.

We've also suggested that the government offer businesses tax credits to make it more attractive for companies to assist new small businesses in remote areas, many of which are often aboriginal businesses. We have also proposed that the federal government ensure aboriginal communities have access to business and financial literacy training if they wish, and that in the territories where there is no provincial government to go to for another level of funding, the federal government direct a portion of the resource royalties received from extraction in the territories be specifically earmarked for skills and training programs.

[*Translation*]

Our members believe that Canada, through its governments, its people and enterprises, has the means to leave behind it the failures and deceptions that went with the participation of aboriginal persons in its society and economy.

● (0915)

[*English*]

We all have to pursue opportunities to do so in ways that are realistic and respectful, and achieve the results that aboriginal peoples desire and all Canadians need.

[*Translation*]

I thank you once again for having given us the opportunity to appear before you this morning.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

Now we'll move on to Valerie and Karen. You have 10 minutes. I know you're splitting your time, but please proceed.

Ms. Valerie Bowers (Executive Director, Mi'kmaq Employment Training Secretariat): Thank you, first of all, for inviting us to come here. *Wela'lioq* .

My name is Valerie Bowers, and I'm the executive director for Mi'kmaq Employment Training Secretariat otherwise known as METS. With me is Karen Pictou, and she's the partnership liaison officer of METS. She is my right-hand person. She is awesome. In these roles we have direct knowledge of the successes as well as the challenges we face for our aboriginal people in Nova Scotia for gaining and sustaining meaningful employment. As you know, our first nations people all have employment issues.

METS is one of the three ASETS holders in the province, and we coordinate and administer training and employment programs and services to the 13 first nations communities as well as the off-reserve population via the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre.

We were established in April 1991. We were formerly known as Pathway Secretariat, and we were incorporated as the Mi'kmaq Employment Training Secretariat in April 1996. We operate under a subagreement model, and we supply a native employment officer in all of the 13 communities as well as the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. We split the training dollars by population, and the friendship centre is only receiving funding for the native employment officer.

Our funding has never increased since its beginning despite an increase in our population, the cost of training, and the cost of living.

Our population is mainly made up of Mi'kmaq people, approximately 24,175 people of aboriginal descent in Nova Scotia, which has increased 42% since 2001. Of these, 14,239 people are status Indians registered to Nova Scotia bands.

As you are all aware, the first nations population is much younger than the general population here in Nova Scotia, as it is in the rest of the country. With the median age of 25.4 versus 41.6 for the total population, 46% of the total registered Indian population in the province are under the age of 25.

In Nova Scotia, 9,773 status Mi'kmaq people live on reserve. As I mentioned, there are 13 first nations communities in Nova Scotia and 42 reserve locations across the province.

A growing proportion of the aboriginal population resides in Halifax, which accounts for 5,320 people, so that's quite a number of people who moved to the urban centres.

Responsibility for education on reserve is designated to the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey school board, MK. It's like a school board for all of the province.

Most recent statistics show that of the aboriginal identity population between the ages of 25 and 64, 27% did not complete high school as compared to 19% of the general population. So we still have a big issue of high school completion.

The unemployment rate for people living on reserve in the 2006 census was 24.6% versus 9.1% for all of Nova Scotia. The unemployment rate for the aboriginal identity population was 15.5%. In addition, only 50% of people living on reserve participated in the labour force.

Since the 2004 and 2005 Supreme Court of Canada decision that found that the crown has a duty to consult with aboriginal people regarding decisions or taking actions that might adversely affect their establishments or potential aboriginal rights and treaty rights, our relationship with the Province of Nova Scotia has strengthened, and the Mi'kmaq are starting to gain some traction in regard to being included more effectively in the province's economic landscape.

The Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs has unified the voice of the Mi'kmaq and is working together for the inclusion of Mi'kmaq people and businesses within the framework of Nova Scotia's economy.

This landmark decision has given the Mi'kmaq a great opportunity to be involved in major economic development ventures with the inception creating spinoffs for our communities.

● (0920)

The Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn negotiation team, the KMKNO office, works for the assembly to negotiate agreements with proponents and continues to ensure the rights and title of the Mi'kmaq are honoured.

The KMKNO office is making headway in their negotiations with industry, and as a result a number of agreements have been signed to date and many more are in development. However, no provincial mandate requires proponents to work with the Mi'kmaq. It can be challenging to ensure our people receive opportunities to participate in the developments on our lands.

METS works closely with KMKNO and together we have created an employment working group team composed of key representatives from aboriginal employment related organizations. The team leads the employment related strategies under each agreement.

I will leave it with Karen.

Ms. Karen Pictou (Partnership Liaison Officer, Mi'kmaq Employment Training Secretariat): METS partners with other training and employment organizations in Nova Scotia. Currently in addition to the ASETS agreement holders there are a number of skills and partnership fund agreements in our province with various end dates.

The largest of these SPF programs is the Nova Scotia aboriginal employment partnership. This program expires at the end of the 2015 fiscal year as well. NSAEP focuses specifically on employment opportunities within the $25-billion Irving Shipbuilding contract and the resulting spinoff opportunities.

We have been working in partnership with NSAEP to understand the needs and to promote, recruit, and train individuals so that they have the skills to succeed despite the first deal for these ships not being cut until 2015. This SPF project will receive approximately $5 million over a two-and-a-half year period. Continued resources will be needed to resume this work effectively and increase aboriginal participation at all stages of this project. It is estimated that at its peak, between 2020 and 2021, there will be 2,000 to 2,500 people employed at this site.

It is commonly stated that Nova Scotia's aging population is suffering, and will continue to suffer, from a shortage of skilled workers. We are currently working with Irving, the provincial and federal governments, as well as key aboriginal organizations to create a strategy for engaging first nations individuals and businesses to benefit from these opportunities. Ongoing resources will be key to implementing the strategy and for Mi'kmaq people to successfully prepare for these opportunities.

In addition to the Irving Shipbuilding contract, there are a number of other provincial economic development initiatives under way over the next few years that will require many skilled workers: for example, the Maritime Link project, the construction and operation of the Pictou County jail, first nations-owned wind projects, and the Melford terminal.

In addition, the assembly of Mi'kmaq chiefs and the KMKNO office have signed, and are currently negotiating, MOUs and IBAs with a number of companies, including Port Hawkesbury Paper, Donkin mines, Emera, Shell, Pieridae, and Moose River. All of these projects will have considerable opportunities for the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. With our limited budgets for training and employment interventions, we do not have the financial resources to adequately prepare our community members for these opportunities. It is imperative to the Mi'kmaq that further and greater funding resources be allocated post-2015.

Working in partnership with all aboriginal organizations in the province has helped to eliminate redundancy and the silo effect. However, even with our combined expertise and resources, our people are still facing many of the same barriers to gaining and sustaining employment. Some of these barriers include low literacy skills, limited educational attainment levels and access to education, racism, discrimination, low self-esteem, poverty and poor housing conditions, lack of driver's licences and transportation, the recruitment and selection process for employment itself, access to affordable child care, proximity of employment opportunities to their home communities, and still very few aboriginal people being in positions involving real decision-making authority.

In addition to these barriers, there seems to be a gap between official government policy and practice in relation to workforce diversity. These barriers will require commitment from not only the Mi'kmaq but also all levels of government and industry themselves. A future agreement for employment and training should be one that is flexible, with a longer funding commitment. The historical and systemic barriers that aboriginal people have faced for gaining self-sufficiency will not be changed in the next five years. In order to achieve the greatest success, continuous planning for short-term as well as long-term results will need to be sustainable over a longer duration of time.

Many of our clients come with multiple barriers. They need multiple interventions, in addition to requiring an array of services. By providing wraparound services that will ultimately prepare clients with the fundamental and foundational skill sets needed, greater results will be captured. We know, as employment experts, that we want to engage our clients while they're excited to start on their journey to becoming self-sustaining. Having year-after-year wait-lists for training only further handicaps our people before they even begin.

To date our communities have used the LMA dollars to offset expenses and capture a wider audience. These funds were used for on-site literacy, essential skills and skills development projects, work placements, and workplace education. With the transfer of funds from the LMA to the Canada jobs grant, the aboriginal communities will not be able to provide these types of programs on site. Nova Scotia is made up of a majority of small to medium-sized businesses. With the financial strains of today's economy, very few businesses will be able to meet the criteria of matching requests to access this fund.

Not only aboriginals but Nova Scotians as a whole will feel the effects of losing these dollars that could be utilized to bridge the gap to employment. Given the remote locations of the majority of our communities, these are the types of businesses we have partnered with for required hours, work placements, and cost sharing.

● (0925)

Without additional dollars, we will not be able to meet the demands of our regular programs, plus much needed community-based projects with links to our regional community—

The Chair: Karen, can I just ask you to quickly wrap up? We're way over time, so maybe go to your conclusion.

Ms. Karen Pictou: Okay.

Great work is being done in Nova Scotia and we need the momentum to continue with your support. An increase in funding is imperative to make more success. The risk of losing funding is a real threat to the ongoing prosperity of our communities. We need all levels of government onside with a strong commitment to wanting to eradicate the barriers of hundreds of years of oppression.

It will take us all to create the change we need in first nations communities as well as increasing our participation in all levels of Canada's workforce.

It has only been since my generation that Mi'kmaq people were not forced to attend residential school and have been offered education and employment without being forced to renounce our identity as Mi'kmaq people.

The work that ASETS agreement holders are doing across this country is crucial to rebuilding our nations from within.

If adequate and responsive measures are not put in place to provide innovative solutions to these barriers, it will result in further dependence on social assistance and continue the cycle of exclusion and oppression.

Thank you for your time and attention in this important matter and we trust that you will continue to advocate on our behalf for the betterment of our nation.

The Chair: Thank you for that, and now we'll move on to our first round of questioning, beginning with Madame Groguhé for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Firstly, I want to thank all of our witnesses for having agreed to meet with us today.

It goes without saying that the challenges remain huge. Some of you began to intervene several years ago in the area of aboriginal worker training. There is a type of intervention we hear about whenever we hear witnesses on this, and this is prevention. When we talk about prevention, it really means to take into consideration the situation of aboriginal peoples, and act upstream, regarding education, for instance.

Let's talk about education. It is clear to me that education starts at a young age. It begins with the construction of schools that are accessible to all aboriginal children, and that should happen as early as possible.

We know that the dropout problem among our youth is serious, in fact whether they are aboriginal or not. If we really want to see results by banking on labour training strategies, clearly we cannot do without government action that allows us to first meet the challenges aboriginal populations face.

My question is for you, Mr. Montpellier. You talked about mentorship. How is that mentorship built? What are the positive effects of that mentorship when it comes to placing aboriginal youth in jobs?

● (0930)

Mr. Ryan Montpellier: I thank you very much for your question.

I agree with what you said in the beginning concerning the importance of early education. We need schools and training to equip people with basic skills so that they can have success in their future careers.

One of the biggest issues in our industry is the lack of basic skills when individuals come in. Beyond basic training, companies could provide training that is specific to the professional groups. Currently, we see that businesses must invest in basic skills training and job preparation.

In our job preparation program entitled *Mining Essentials*, there is one component that twins program participants with someone from the industry. We are very much in favour of cooperation with businesses.

A representative from a company comes into the classrooms and can present a relevant point of view regarding the reality encountered by workers in the industry. In short, he provides an overview of life in the industry. We bring mentors into the classroom, preferably aboriginal people. The participants in the program can have a role model to look to. Someone they can meet and identify with. They can observe the success of someone like themselves who has had success in the industry and can live a good life. These mentors can present reality a little better, as well as the benefits reaped by someone who works in the industry long-term.

The mentorship is certainly an inherent part of the program. It is an essential element, not only for aboriginal persons, but for everyone. We have seen the benefits of it throughout our industry. Aboriginal persons value this in particular because they can really see the reality experienced by someone who works in the field.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: My second question is for Ms. Pictou.

I note however that you did highlight that. My question is about the challenges regarding funding. You referred to the importance of having access to flexible programs and long-term funding. Can you give us some further information about that and explain to us why long-term funding would lead to even more positive effects?

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Pictou: When I talk about flexible funding, I'm referring to some of the gaps that we encounter, for example, being able to provide more services to youth. With our current funding we're not allowed to pay for skills development training or things of that nature for anyone under the age of 18 or who hasn't been out of school for a year. That automatically poses a gap for a lot of our community members who want to access education prior to that.

It's almost like we're having to constantly just be reactive rather than taking a proactive approach and trying to provide more services for young people before they're in a devastating situation where they've dropped out of school and now they have no money, and at times are single moms or single dads of young children and do not have access to child care. All of those things accumulate and make it difficult. That's one gap. Having more flexibility of the funding for that purpose would be great.

We're always challenging that five-year mark. We're always worried about whether or not funding's going to be renewed for the next five years so planning ahead further past that time constantly is a challenge, because that first year you're getting things back on track and getting going and then the last year again, you're worried and you're planning for the new funding.

There are a few years in the middle where things work really great. In the past it seems that some other programs changed or shifted, so then you have to go back and re-strategize with your plan, as well as different funding pots that are around that sort of come and go.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's over the time on that.

We're on to Mrs. McLeod for five minutes.

● (0935)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I would too like to thank the witnesses and welcome them here.

There's something that I'm struggling a little bit with. I'll maybe focus with Mr. Gratton. What we've heard and certainly we've heard from B.C. AMTA.... Coming from Kamloops, I'm very familiar with them, and also with some of the ASETS holders in the area.... I'm really trying to key in the two.

Mr. Gratton, you went on the board of B.C. AMTA. Some of the ASETS holders are suggesting that it's really a duplication of the support that's available through them. Could you tell me why you headed down that path to set up a new organization with support from SPF? I think there are some valid comments in terms of structures being in place throughout the country that are tasked and we've created duplication and overlap. Could you talk to me a little bit more? I understand that SPF was a temporary program, it was part of the economic action plan. We're really trying to look at the models and why the models work.

Mr. Pierre Gratton: B.C. AMTA was created under a previous program, the ASEP program, the aboriginal skills and employment partnership program, which sunset in 2012, I believe. This picks up on the comment about the uncertainty.

It was created very explicitly under a program that had a number of successes across the country, particularly those that involved the mining sector, but they didn't just apply to the mining sector. I understand there were some challenges with the ASEP program, with some other sectors where mining wasn't involved, but my understanding from ESDC at the time, was that the mining programs were very successful.

Then it sunset, and B.C. AMTA at this point was going great guns and having great success and having people come through the program and getting training and finding work in an area of Kamloops where there was an awful lot of opportunity because you had a new mine in development. They applied under the new program, the ASETS program.

I think that created some of the friction you're identifying because it was a different pool of money from which other groups were also drawing. That conflict didn't exist before because they were separate pools and then all of sudden they were all competing under the same funding source.

I think what makes the B.C. AMTA unique is the.... I think there are many reasons B.C. AMTA was successful in securing that funding, the success rate being one of them. The fact is that they had such high participation rates and such success in getting people through training and into jobs. It was very nimble. It had significant support from industry and the local first nations groups, the Skeetchestn and Kamloops indian bands in the first instance, so they were able to secure that kind of funding. I think that's largely the reason.

I understand that it created some tension with some other groups in the area that felt they were also trying to do this, but they didn't have the coalition of the willing that B.C. AMTA had.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: We heard testimony up in Williams Lake, which is a pretty small community, that the ASETS holder and B.C. AMTA are coexisting side by side.

If you were to advise government, would you say the ASETS holders could do the job if they had more finances, or is there something different about the model of B.C. AMTA, that they're complementary and that they're two different programs?

The Chair: Make a very quick response, please.

Mr. Pierre Gratton: I'm not familiar enough with the competencies of the ASETS holders in Williams Lake, so it's hard for me to answer that specifically.

With B.C. AMTA or the Mine Training Society, elsewhere you have this partnership, you have the support from industry and the educators, and you have an accepted curriculum. You have the simulators, you have a lot of the necessary in-class training materials, so it works. If the ASETS holders in a particular region don't have that they're not in a position to offer the same kind of opportunity that B.C. AMTA is able to for the mining sector.

B.C. AMTA is now expanding to be much more than just mining and to play a role in other sectors.

It has been a very successful partnership model.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cuzner, you have five minutes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses.

I'm going to ask two questions and then see if we can get a response.

First, a lot of the testimony that we've received here at committee has been around the mining sector, but I think that as a result of the Marshall decision in 1999 one of the true opportunities that first nations people have been able to seize has been in the fishery in Atlantic Canada. I'll pose the question and then I want to give you a couple of seconds to gather your thoughts on it.

Do we continue to train? Some communities have done well with that opportunity, and other communities haven't done as well. Are we continuing to train young people to get into the fishery? Because it was a completely new experience for a lot of first nations communities. If you can gather your thoughts on that, just give us your view on it.

I want to go to Ms. Cluff-Clyburne. The Prime Minister in 2012 said that Canada was seized by this skills crisis, and Minister Finley referred to it as a crisis. Minister Kenney sort of stepped back from that; he's not sure why.... I think the Prime Minister's comments were really a result of the study that the chamber came out with.

In 2012 when you tabled the report on the skills crisis, you said that the number one challenge to Canadian competitiveness was the skills crisis, but since then, Donald Drummond, the TD, and the PBO have come out and said that it's sectoral and regional. Could you sort of square the difference in the two?

Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne: Yes, and just to be clear, my expertise is not.... I believe that someone from the chamber has already appeared before you and addressed the broader issue of the skills challenge.

I think that from our perspective it is best characterized as a skills mismatch. That's how employers see the situation. They still regard it, at least from our members' perspective, as their number one challenge to being competitive. It is regional, and nothing that you've said isn't true, but it still remains a tremendous challenge for businesses.

The numbers speak for themselves. We still have a lot of people unemployed, and we still have employers saying they're not getting the skilled workers they need, so I would say that it's evolved into more of an issue of a mismatch than a shortage. But if you're in the mining industry, it's very definitely a shortage. Other sectors may not characterize it that way.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: If you're one of the 15% of these young Canadians who are looking for that first job, they're saying that they have skills to offer, so your evaluation, your assessment, of this being a mismatch I think is probably more accurate.

Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne: That would be correct, yes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: So on the fisheries opportunities, are we doing okay there? Are we doing well? Are young people being drawn to that industry? Are you guys able to train them for that industry?

Ms. Valerie Bowers: Well, as METS ASETS holders, we don't really deal with the fisheries. Fisheries are a different part of employment. There's a fisheries section that looks after fisheries.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Do they have training components?

Ms. Valerie Bowers: Yes, they do. They actually go to the NSCC, the Nova Scotia Community College. They have a marine institute where they train them for fisheries. They have their marine emergency duties. Some of them are captains.

But it's actually I think a pretty closed market. Not a lot of young people are going that way. The fishermen who are already there tend to stay there because, as you know, employment issues are really tough. Also, the fishing season is very, very short, so it's really hard.

● (0945)

Ms. Karen Pictou: It varies across Nova Scotia, really, as to how much involvement a first nations community has in the fisheries and what types of catch they're doing and things like that. I know that some of the communities with ASETS dollars are paying for things like MED, for decking and courses and things like that. Still, across the province in the majority of communities, captains are non-native and they're still leasing out that work to non-native—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: It's like....

Ms. Karen Pictou: Some communities are doing this; others aren't. The communities are rather leaning in that direction, training their community members to be captains and things like that. In some communities, Millbrook being one—my home community—one of the fishermen recently started his own business. He is trained as a captain, and now the community is leasing parts of the quota to him and he is personally hiring his crew. So it is starting to go that way.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: So it's a revenue stream for the community, plus a job creator.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's the end of that round.

Now we go on to Mr. Armstrong for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll pick up on that, Karen, because you and I have spoken about this before.

This is a new industry for first nations people in Nova Scotia, and we're still breaking ground on making it truly a vehicle for broader employment.

But for a new and a young industry, there's a lot of potential in it. Would you agree with that?

Ms. Karen Pictou: Yes—and no at the same time. There is potential; however, the number of jobs in each community in fishing is not a large number.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: That is right at the moment, but if you had self-employment there, the money would revolve more inside the communities themselves, and that might generate some more economic activity.

Let me go back to Mr. Montpellier.

You talked about the mining essentials program and about how the program's been expanded nationally. How many provinces have engaged in this? In how many sites do you have this training program?

Mr. Ryan Montpellier: We have 10 active sites today. We've had intakes in B.C., Yukon, the NWT, Saskatchewan, nothing in Manitoba, several in Ontario—several in the Ring of Fire and the Sudbury Basin. We'll have our first intake in Quebec starting next month. We'll have our first French intake in Ontario, and our English intake is in Quebec, which is ironic. Our first French intake will start in northern Ontario at Collège Boréal, and we're hoping to have our first one in the Maritimes start this spring. So it has been national. There has been a concentration, probably, in Saskatchewan and Ontario.

There have been some really interesting intakes with this. With the Native Women's Association of Canada, we've had 16 women go through the program, and most of them find employment. This is a win on a number of levels.

We've also had some sites that have really struggled. The training in northern communities, where we don't necessarily have infrastructure, has been a real challenge. We've had to stop the training for methadone clinics and we've had no running water or have not had the right infrastructure in the facility. We've had trainers who have gone into communities and just couldn't handle it and have had to leave halfway through the program.

So there are a number of challenges in this. We've had some really really good success stories, but we've also had.... This is not traditional education.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Thank you.

Karen, in Moose River we have some opportunity. I know there has been some discussion between the Millbrook Band and the owner of the Moose River gold expansion. Mining sounds like something we might take a look at to try to engage now for future employment.

Have you talked about this? Has there been any discussion with them about that program?

Ms. Karen Pictou: Yes. It's still being negotiated to reach some type of agreement, but there will be employment opportunities, and when opportunities come up, the information is shared with all of the community.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Concerning your comment on LMAs and funding, I want to make sure you know that there's no requirement for the province to use LMA money to fund a Canada job grant. They don't have to use LMA money for it; they can use any federal funding for training dollars. It can come from the LMDAs and other funds as well. The Province of Nova Scotia won't likely be using any LMA money to fund the Canada job grant.

Susanna, thank you very much for coming. You talked about the RBC program, the stay in school program. Can you expand on that a little? I'm unaware of that program.

● (0950)

Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne: This is a program that RBC started, as I mentioned, in the early 1990s, more than 20 years ago. They recruit aboriginal students from across the country to work in their branches, mostly in the customer-facing functions, because in my understanding of how it works, most of the telemarketing or support services are provided in more central locations. That's my understanding of it.

I'd be happy to connect you with RBC to get more information about where programs might be available in Atlantic Canada, for example, but my understanding is that it's available throughout the country and in the territories. It brings aboriginal students into the branches so that they can see what it's like to work in a bank, basically, and explore the opportunity to learn what education is required for holding this type of job after they finish high school.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll move on to Monsieur Brahmi, for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In all the testimony we heard, the same thing almost always comes up, that is to say basic skills. The various industry stakeholders tell us that they have to do more general training when they should be able to do professional training, training specific to their business or industry. That is the case because the workers who arrive with technical training do not have the basic skills they should have acquired during their schooling, rather than during vocational training.

First, my question is addressed to our two witnesses from Nova Scotia. They are the closest to the communities and they will be able to give us a more appropriate vision of the aboriginal communities. My question will then be addressed to all of our guests.

In your opinion, what changes should the federal government, which is responsible for educating aboriginal populations, make so that we can, both on and off reserves, fight the drop-out rate and school failure in aboriginal communities? These mean that young aboriginal persons of 17 or 18 years of age cannot accede to vocational training programs because they do not have the basic training.

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Pictou: It's a really loaded question, with lots of different views—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tarik Brahmi: I am asking if you have recommendations, practical measures that you feel would be necessary, since you interact with your community. Are the professors not adapted to the situation? Are the courses not appropriate? Are the schools the issue, do they have structural problems? What do you see on the ground? What can you suggest to the committee?

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Pictou: So much of education is also a part of the social dynamic of the community. Speaking from personal experience, I dropped out in grade 9 and didn't go back to school again until I was 19. By then, I already had a kid, I was living on my own The thing that gave me success was my parents' expectations of me. My parents are both university educated. They always expected me to go to school and all of those things.

One thing that I've heard is a best practice across the country is engaging parents as career coaches and getting them involved right from the beginning of their children's education. One thing we don't see very much in our schools is parents' involvement at the school—going to parent-teacher interviews, and all of those types of things—which really is the core of how well a student is going to do growing up, despite all of the challenges in the community. Much of the programming that is needed to do the proper outreach just doesn't exist. That's one view.

● (0955)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tarik Brahmi: Ms. Bowers, what is your opinion on that?

[*English*]

Ms. Valerie Bowers: Actually, I was an educator first and then I went into employment. As an educator, I have seen that we end up losing our kids before they even reach high school. We have to reach the children when they're in junior high and help them figure things out.

I think we need to give them more role models. We need to show them what's available, because they have absolutely no idea what's out there and what they need. They're taking courses that are not going to help them when they get into the employment world. When they get to us, they don't have the math, science, and language arts literacy skills—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tarik Brahmi: If I understand what you said correctly, you are recommending a change in curricula? Are you saying that the school programs are not adapted to the needs the young people have when they come out of the school system? Do you think that the federal government should change the school programs?

[*English*]

Ms. Valerie Bowers: I think the federal government should be talking more with provinces and with the educational system. I think there has to be more of a universal model, so that everyone is starting out on the same plane. There are many differences among provinces. We need to start looking at a more even plane to figure out where we need to be.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We will move on to Mr. Mayes for five minutes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

One of the great things about the employment challenge that our Canadian economy is experiencing now is that it actually has awakened two parties. First, the aboriginal community recognizes its potential as employees and second, the Canadian employers recognize the potential of the aboriginal community. So it's actually a blessing that we're going through this now because it's just accelerating this opportunity that has been overlooked in our economy for some time. It's great that we're seeing the potential and we're acting on it.

One of the things that has come up a number of times is an issue about eligibility. You talked about 18. We did a study on post-secondary education for aboriginal students when I was on the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and what was identified at that time was that things needed to start sooner in the education system in the aboriginal communities—to get the potential skills training to those already in grade school, to keep their interest, and to enable them to access those opportunities earlier in their education.

First, I'd like to go on record to make sure the analyst picks that up, because I'd like to see that in the report.

The next thing I've heard, talking about the program, is that it's limited to five years and there are cut-off dates. We are entrusted to use taxpayers' money—it's not government money, it's taxpayers' money—to ensure that we have good value. I don't think it's unreasonable to have a sunset clause on programs so that they can be reviewed. It doesn't mean that they're not going to be renewed, but it gives us an opportunity to look at the outcomes.

Quite frankly, previously we've found that various programs just didn't have great outcomes so we need to have that opportunity to review. It isn't that there isn't support of the programs as much as it is that we just want to make sure we review them and make sure they're working. That's what this committee is doing now, just seeing what is working and what is not. It's great that we can ask you those questions.

On the take-up in the aboriginal communities as far as recognizing these opportunities and moving forward, I wonder how you go into a community and take that opportunity in a classroom or somewhere and just communicate the opportunities and encourage and give students confidence.

I would ask our witnesses particularly from Nova Scotia and from the mining sector if you get involved in that and if so, how do you manage that?

● (1000)

Ms. Karen Pictou: A lot of times when we're doing recruitment for specific opportunities we'll take people who have shown interest on site tours and do a short work placement in that area, if possible, if the safety levels aren't too high there, and things like that to let them get their feet wet and see if it's a good career fit for them. That's one piece.

Val, do you have anything else to add?

Ms. Valerie Bowers: I really think it's important that students are exposed to employment that's out there in their community, whatever it is, so they are aware of opportunities and they can make proper decisions when it comes to making choices in high school. When they're picking the courses to take in high school they should know what their prerequisites are. They have to know what it involves.

We really need to be able to give them a taste, a test drive, but we don't really have that in our first nations communities. It's in the provincial schools more. We really need kids to be able to see and experience it first-hand so they can make the proper decisions and then build upon that. I think they really need to experience it first.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Ryan Montpellier: If I can just add, we've developed a number of resources at the council to help our members. When they move into a community or when they explore for the next mine, they have the right resources to help educate the local population about the opportunities at each phase of the mining cycle, so that there are no broken promises and we can set expectations realistically.

If I can just comment on Mr. Brahmi's comment about specific recommendations to increase the participation of aboriginal people in the education system, I agree with your comments around keeping youth involved in education for as long as possible. What we saw in the diamond mines in the NWT was that high school completion rates were only at about 50% before the diamond mines came in. Once youth had a vision of a career, once they could see what, if they stayed in school, awaited them at the end of that, once we could demonstrate that opportunity, the high school completion rates moved north of 80%.

So when we're talking about a stay-in-school message, when we're talking about the importance of STEM, when we're talking about the importance of education, I really think it's a question of demonstrating the link back to a career and to a lifestyle that is different from the one they may be living today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Sims, you have five minutes.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you very much. I want to thank the presenters. I'm so glad you two made it today, and in person, to boot.

K-to-12 education is a provincial matter, and yet we find ourselves talking a lot about K to 12 because it's one of the foundations for entry into the workplace and for lifelong learning. Having been a teacher all my life, I sometimes feel I'm still that even today, but in a different venue. It's a profession I've absolutely loved and I would not make any changes in my career choices.

We cannot avoid talking about K to 12 when we're talking about.... It's not just employment; it's about lifelong learning for our first nations students. I've had the privilege, and I would say a privilege, of working with first nations students as a counsellor and a teacher. I can tell you about the tears of joy I had when one of my students graduated out of grade 12 and got a really great scholarship. I still get emotional when I think of that moment because it wasn't just a big moment for us at school. It was a huge moment for the community as well. We did a big community celebration after that.

However, the federal government does have a role to play in K to 12, and that is with funding for schools on reserves, aboriginal schools. Historically, we have not done a great job. We're still busy apologizing. I believe reconciliation is a process that is ongoing. But I really worry about the shortfall in funding. I'm a great believer in equity rather than equality. As a classroom teacher teaching students from diverse backgrounds, often it wasn't about giving everybody an equal opportunity, it was about that equitable opportunity. Because when we have students who have extraordinary needs, then you need to provide the resources so that those children can live up to their potential. I think we do need a major investment to ensure greater success.

The other side comment I have to make is that after having been out of the classroom for over 10 years—I think it was closer to 12, actually—when I finished my presidency I chose to go back to a classroom on purpose. I chose an inner city school in Nanaimo. What broke my heart at that time is that things were worse for the kids 10 or 12 years later than before. One point that you made to me really struck home, and that is the need for role models for our first nations students. It's not just teaching first nations students in little rooms set aside in a school. Our first nations students need to see teachers right across the board teaching math, teaching English, teaching home economics, the whole spectrum.

What I really want to get down to right now is the work experience you mentioned that we do have in the public school system, which I believe is a great motivator and a connector for our kids. How do you think the work experience program could be implemented into the aboriginal schools so that the students can find that link to what they learn and where their passion may rest? It doesn't happen from reading a book, as much as I would want it to be. It happens from going out and doing something hands-on and having some real experiences. How do you think we could encourage or facilitate that?

● (1005)

The Chair: A very quick answer, please. We're almost out of time.

Ms. Valerie Bowers: I really think we need to work with our provincial educational authorities to partner together so that we can bring those services into our communities. In Nova Scotia, we've actually started that conversation, so I'm hoping that it will work. I've visited schools in Frog Lake, and they have that in school. I was so impressed. I said, oh, I want this in Nova Scotia. I know it does exist because when I went to school they had it, but I went to a provincial school. We really need that, and I think the best practice is what we need to borrow from across the country. The best practice, whatever's working, we need to make sure that it's universal.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Mr. Maguire, you have five minutes.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your presentations today.

This issue of continuing education is something that has always been important to me in regard to making sure that people stay in our schools, starting in the elementary, but probably mid-year levels more than anything.

From your own experience, Ms. Pictou, you've certainly indicated that it was important to you.

We've put this $1.25 billion that's going to go into improving this on-reserve education system here coming up, but I want to ask both Mr. Montpellier and Mr. Gratton, and perhaps any of you, what you see as the most important way of making sure that we can work with students in our schools, whether it's to use the hope that once you get out of school you get into the community colleges and the proper training.... I think you've emphasized, all of you, that the importance there could start right in our schools, right in the grade 9,10, 11, 12 areas in regard to training and how important it is to have a goal once the mind was set up that there was something to achieve and something to work for.

I have some experience in relation to one particular region that has a program of helping to keep kids in school. One of them is to make sure that they graduate or finish school, as you've said. They've put some non-traditional course involvement in place to help students stay in school or at least be attracted to it. One of the things that I heard earlier, I believe from Ryan, was to talk about how it's important to make sure that there is an attendance record in place.

What can we do to make sure that an attendance record is there as a beginning to an interest in training?

● (1010)

Mr. Pierre Gratton: If I may, I want to jump in before we run out of time to share an anecdote and also to partly answer your question.

There is another initiative that I got involved with in B.C., the Breakfast Club of Canada. Let's not overlook that a hungry child doesn't do well in school. When I was involved we got Grand Chief Ed John involved as well. There's a first nations component in B.C. to the breakfast clubs initiative. It started in Quebec, but I think it's now pretty pan-Canadian. Don't lose sight of that very basic need, kids going hungry.

I wanted to also share an anecdote. I don't know, and it would be interesting to learn from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development how pervasive it is, but when I visited the North American Palladium mine five or six years ago outside of Thunder Bay, the participation rate of aboriginal people at the mine was quite low. I asked the question why the community nearby, about a half an hour away so maybe two hours from Thunder Bay, had no secondary school. It stopped at primary. The kids who wanted to go to high school had to go to Thunder Bay.

I ask all of you, or all of us here, how many of us would want to send our kids, at the age of 12 or 13, two hours away, perhaps for the week, to attend high school? Most of us don't have to deal with that. It's kind of like a perpetuation of residential schools in some way because they have to leave their families if they want to get high school education. No wonder we have this problem. I just wonder how many communities are like that.

Of the ones who do go to Thunder Bay, some of them succeed but some of them just end up dropping out of school there and then becoming a destitute, urban aboriginal person on the streets in Thunder Bay, or they stay in their community and don't go to high school. We need to address those fundamental needs, and I'm hopeful that the new initiative that the Prime Minister and Shawn Atleo announced and that investment in schools on reserves will start to address that issue. I just wanted to share that story.

The Chair: Would any other witnesses like to weigh in on Mr. Maguire's question?

Ms. Susanna Cluff-Clyburne: The only thing that I would add is, one of the things that our members have told us is very important and that we've also heard from educators is the issue of transitional assistance for aboriginal peoples because many of them do have to leave their home communities to go to high school. If you live in Old Crow, Yukon, you're only going home at Christmas, and they were debating in Yukon whether to fund a flight home at Easter. It's a big thing.

I think that for any of us, if we were at 14 years old and thrown into a totally alien community with a lot of people who we don't know, it would be a culture that's unfamiliar to us. It would be a pretty tough slog. If you ramp that up to the post-secondary education level, that's one of the things that our members have told us is where one of the fallout points is, of course, that there just isn't a lot of support in many cases for aboriginal students who do have a goal. They know what they want to do. They want to go and seek the post-secondary education to get them there, but unfortunately there just isn't the support once they land in Ottawa, Thunder Bay, or wherever it is that they have to go to get their post-secondary education.

The Chair: Thank you for that, and that ends our time for questioning.

I'd like to take this moment to thank our witnesses for coming to Ottawa and for sharing with us. This has been what I would characterize today as a very good conversation, back and forth between the members of Parliament around the table and yourselves. We appreciate your input; it's a lovely group to have finished with our live witnesses. You are welcome to submit written submissions to us if you wish, beyond this.

Thank you very much again for being here.

We'll take a short recess and then go into committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]