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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 Standing Committee on Official Languages. This is meeting number seven on Monday, December 2, 2013. Pursuant to Standing Order 108 and the motion adopted on Monday, November 18, 2013, we are here to study second official language immersion programs in Canada.

For the first hour we will be hearing from the Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Fraser, and Mr. Quell and Mr. Giguère.

Welcome to you all. You may begin.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, good afternoon.

I am delighted to appear before the committee today to discuss immersion education, an approach to learning that helps young Canadians develop a strong sense of our country's bilingual nature.

[English]

Right now across Canada immersion education programs continue to be an unparalleled success. Thanks to these programs, more than 300,000 young Canadians have the opportunity to learn their second official language in an educational setting on a daily basis. This is due largely to the efforts and dedication of parents and educators. They survive and even thrive because of the energy and support of school boards, principals, teachers, parents, and organizations like Canadian Parents for French.

Over the past four years, the federal government, for its part, has allocated an average of \$86 million annually to the provinces for second language education. Investments in immersion programs across the country have resulted in a new generation of bilingual Canadians, many of whom are now in post-secondary institutions. The success of immersion graduates, including the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, Shelly Glover, and her predecessor, the Honourable James Moore, demonstrate the value of the program.

[Translation]

A few years ago, I met the father of a minister of the Crown who proudly told me that he had stayed up all night with several members of the family, standing in line, so that his granddaughter could be enrolled in a French immersion program. I experienced conflicting emotions when I heard that story.

On the one hand, that Canada was sufficiently egalitarian that even a minister would not have any special access to immersion for a family member, and that a family would organize itself in shifts around the clock, waiting in line outside the school board office, was inspiring.

On the other hand, treating access to immersion like Rolling Stones tickets is an appalling way to distribute what should be a universal right to quality second language instruction.

The fact that this is still necessary, four decades after Dr. Wallace Lambert's widely successful immersion experiment in Quebec, is cause for concern.

[English]

Anecdotes like these offer a window into the realities and challenges of immersion, providing a sense of what immersion programs are, what is required to sustain them, and what the benefits can be to individuals, families, and entire communities.

What immersion is not, however, is a panacea, nor is it the only way to learn French. Neither should it drain resources away from core French instruction in Canada, as I sometimes fear it does, by attracting the best teachers and the most committed students and teachers.

Despite a high level of interest in immersion programs, some challenges do need to be tackled if we want to increase the level of proficiency of young Canadians in both official languages. I often worry that unilingual parents see French second language programs like immersion as a system that produces perfectly bilingual graduates, or as the one and only way to learn French. These expectations are both unrealistic and counterproductive.

In the global economy, learning other languages is in itself an advantage. It opens doors to a multitude of opportunities around the world.

Learning French can be a stepping stone not only to bilingualism, but also toward multilingualism. In fact, many young people working in the international field today got their start through exposure to their other official language. We become more adept at learning new languages when we learn a second language, so it's easier to learn a third one once you have learned two. I've always been impressed by young Canadians who started with our two official languages and learned a third language abroad.

•(1535)

[*Translation*]

In Canada, immersion offers students a structured program that involves taking all or a significant proportion of their courses in their second language, while benefiting from special second language learning supports and assistance. Immersion programs are, however, much less available in universities in Canada than they are at the elementary and high school levels.

It is disappointing to me that, year after year, many students who want to enrol in French immersion programs or courses at university are not always able to do so—often because of a lack of space in existing programs or because of funding problems that threaten the programs' survival. Many students have had to give up on the idea of perfecting the language skills they acquired in elementary and high school because very few post-secondary institutions give their students the opportunity to take courses within their field in the official language of their choice.

Some post-secondary institutions, such as the University of Ottawa, the Université Sainte-Anne and Glendon College at York University, offer immersion courses and programs. In fact, Glendon has recently developed a bilingual master's program in public and international affairs.

There is no question that the creation of immersion programs at Simon Fraser University and at the University of British Columbia is directly related to the growing number of students from the high school immersion programs being offered in that province. The Université de Saint-Boniface actively recruits from Manitoba's immersion high schools.

The Saint-Jean campus at the University of Alberta is another interesting example. Many students come from local immersion programs and choose to continue their education in French there. All of this did not come about by accident, nor is it solely the result of the exemplary work of the campus and its staff. This success stems from the efforts made by Edmonton public schools since 2000 to improve the immersion programs being offered and, on the strength of this success, other language programs. I was very pleased to learn that you will be hearing from representatives of the Edmonton Public School Board.

[*English*]

At the elementary and high school levels we are still far from achieving the vision in which all Canadians have access to the necessary resources to effectively learn English and French. Registration issues such as enrolment caps, overnight lineups and lotteries continue to hinder access to second language programs in many regions.

In the 1980s there was a study that suggested a trend showing there would be one million students in immersion by the year 2000. With funding caps in place enrolment has plateaued at about 300,000.

It's important that immigrants be encouraged to send their children to immersion, rather than discouraged. Immigrant students in immersion have told me that learning French made them feel more Canadian. Similarly many new arrivals have expressed a stronger

sense of belonging to Canada simply through their children's learning of both official languages. I've also seen examples in which members of visible minority groups are actually more bilingual in English and French than are unilingual Canadians who have been in Canada for generations.

This is why school officials need to provide better support to allophone parents who are interested in these programs. I feel strongly that immersion education should be part of a continuum reinforced by summer programs and exchanges, and supported by strong incentives from universities that recognize the significance of student applicants who have persevered through a more challenging elementary and high school curriculum.

[*Translation*]

At the post-secondary level, some universities have increased their second language learning opportunities, while others have reduced their efforts in this area. The decision to reduce efforts is caused by various factors. For example, the Government of Canada is not expressing its need for bilingual workers loudly and clearly enough to prompt post-secondary education officials to pay more attention to the benefits of second language learning. There are students who are ready, willing and able to learn in their second official language. To achieve a true continuum of second language learning, the federal government must demonstrate its leadership by developing an overall strategy on this issue. There needs to be a continuum of second language learning from elementary school to the post-secondary level and then into the workplace. I believe this continuum is an important and integral part of preparing our young people to be productive employees and citizens who can invest themselves fully in the civic life of their country.

That is why, in my 2009 study of second-language learning in Canadian universities, I recommended that the Government of Canada provide financial assistance to universities so that they can develop and carry out new initiatives to improve students' second-language learning opportunities. I believe a priority should be placed on increasing the number of exchanges and real life opportunities for students to use their second official language and interact with people who speak that language.

The 2009 study will also serve as a tool for students and educators focusing on post-secondary institutions that offer programs in French, and also for exchanges, learning support, coordination between institutions and the organization of social activities. We decided to undertake this study because there was a need to identify the various options that exist for students. This study will also raise awareness amongst users within the various majority and minority communities throughout the country.

In my 2010-2011 annual report, I also recommended that the Prime Minister take the necessary measures to double the number of young Canadians who participate each year in short- and long-term language exchanges at the high school and post-secondary levels.

•(1540)

[English]

Regarding the state of bilingualism outside of Quebec, data from the 2011 census reveals a troubling decline. That is why in my recently tabled annual report I recommended that the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages establish clear objectives to raise the level of bilingualism among Canadians and reverse the decline in bilingualism among anglophones in particular.

Today I suggest that committee members develop and recommend a plan to the minister that could be rolled out in time for the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017. I would also like to reiterate my recommendation that the Government of Canada provide financial assistance to universities so they can develop and carry out new initiatives to improve students' second language learning opportunities. To achieve a full continuum of second language learning, the government must demonstrate its leadership by developing an overall strategy on this issue.

Finally, I recommend that the government refer to the protocol for agreements for minority language education and second language instruction that will strengthen and support the initiatives and investments outlined in "The Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-2018", so that any Canadians wanting to learn their second official language will have the tools to do so.

On this point, Mr. Chair, I will conclude my remarks. I thank you for your attention and will be pleased to answer any questions you or your colleagues may have.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

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

We will have 45 minutes of questions and comments from members of the committee, beginning with Mr. Godin.

[Translation]

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

I would like to welcome the commissioner, Mr. Graham Fraser, and the two individuals accompanying him today.

In your annual report, you state that "the federal government does not seem to place a high enough priority on linguistic duality as a Canadian value", and that "when it comes to promoting linguistic duality, the federal government seems to be trailing behind the public instead of leading the way".

In your opinion, what concrete changes does the government have to make in order to adequately promote linguistic duality in this country with immersion programs? Does there need to be more money, more transparency, or more leadership?

Mr. Graham Fraser: All three are important. First, the federal government and all its institutions have to send the following message to universities: the federal government, the biggest employer in Canada, needs bilingual employees and it is their responsibility to provide learning opportunities to students. The

engineering or architecture firms also have to clearly tell engineering and architecture faculties that they need employees who have received certain kinds of training.

It is also important that deputy ministers, who are, in a way, the main headhunters for their institutions, go to job fairs or send individuals. They have to send a clear message that it is the responsibility of universities to provide that learning. To that end, universities have to send high school students the message that they prefer students who would have taken second-language programs and more demanding programs.

Immersion students told me that their teachers had suggested that they not do the immersion exam but rather the core French exam because it was much easier. They would get better marks. They said that marks were the only thing that universities took into account.

The situation is getting better. The universities that I mentioned are now very aware that immersion students form a pool of high-quality students who have demonstrated their perseverance by undertaking their studies in a second language. I think that those qualities have to be acknowledged by both universities and the federal government.

•(1545)

Mr. Yvon Godin: In your 2012-2013 annual report, the fourth recommendation calls upon the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Official Languages to take the necessary measures in order to increase the rate of bilingualism—I am referring to French and English—amongst Canadians by 2017.

How do you explain the decline in bilingualism that became apparent in the latest census data on language? What measures need to be taken to turn that decline around, especially for anglophones outside Quebec?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is a very important question and I do not have an easy answer. It is always difficult to find the reason why people don't do something. That said, I think it is important that the government invest in promoting linguistic duality and that this be a part, as I said in my remarks, of all celebrations and all anniversaries.

Support also has to be increased, not only for language training in classrooms, but also for programs that provide students with summer jobs, internships, and opportunities to learn the other official language outside the classroom. It is perfectly doable for the government to organize these kinds of programs, whether they be exchange programs or summer jobs. We need to specifically figure out how those jobs can be an opportunity for students to learn the other official language.

I am very sensitive to this because that is how I learned French.

Mr. Yvon Godin: This is not the first year you have held this position; you have held it for five years. Your mandate was extended by three years. Yet, none of your reports appear to have noted any improvements. As a matter of fact, it looks like the opposite. There are examples. Some were provided last week when you appeared here.

You said yourself that the current government, the Conservative government, could be involved in more promotion. Do you know why it has not done that?

During your testimony, you said that immigrants who come to Canada want to learn both languages but those who have been here for generations don't want to. Why is that? Is there not a lack of leadership on the part of the government? Is it really because people don't want to? Is it because they do not accept the Official Languages Act and the equality of both languages?

There are currently people experiencing problems with translation. It is scary to see that in departments, people are being asked to write their reports in English. It is like that everywhere. It came out in the news, for example in this article in *Le Devoir* entitled "Federal public service - Cuts at the expense of French".

These are all indicators that we are not heading in the right direction. You are responsible for being the official languages watchdog. It is all very well to publish reports, Mr. Fraser, but action is needed. You are not the problem. You do have the ability to take the government to court or to ensure follow-up.

Something is not working somewhere.

• (1550)

Mr. Graham Fraser: In answer to your question about the decline of bilingualism amongst anglophones outside Quebec, as I stated, it is always difficult to explain why some things are not done. My role is to take note. I observe, I undertake investigations into complaints and I do monitoring. However, it is often difficult to provide answers on causes.

The Chair: Good.

Thank you, Mr. Fraser and Mr. Godin.

Mr. Gourde now has the floor.

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

Mr. Fraser, thank you for coming here today.

You stated at the beginning of your opening remarks that the government had invested \$86 million into second-language learning. There are also minority official language programs for Canadians. These are two distinct categories of programs.

Could you provide us with more details on these two programs? Could you also tell us how much money has been allocated to the minority official languages program?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I don't have the numbers with me. They are in the appendix of the Canadian Heritage annual report. The department publishes those numbers annually.

My colleague is just showing me the numbers. For minority languages, the total is \$148,371,130, and for second languages, the total is \$86,188,065, as I stated in my remarks.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Should we...

Mr. Graham Fraser: This is in the document entitled "2009-2010 to 2012-2013 Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction Between the Government of Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada".

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, are those two amounts...

Mr. Graham Fraser: This is the three-year budget, that is from 2009-2010 to 2012-2013.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, why did you not refer to those two amounts in your remarks? You only referred to the \$86 million. If you add up both amounts, that is equal to \$235 million per year.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I thought your study was on immersion programs. Minority language instruction programs are not immersion programs. An immersion program is specifically designed for anglophone children studying in French. There is no equivalent in English in Quebec nor is there in minority official language communities. These programs were implemented for anglophones in Quebec who wanted to learn French. They do not exist for francophone children except in some private English institutions.

Minority language education is entirely distinct from immersion. If you would like to undertake a study on education in minority official language communities, I would be happy to answer your questions. The Supreme Court ruling stated that these programs are not managed by the school boards. Schools in minority official language communities are managed by the school boards in those communities, which is not the case for immersion programs.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If I am not mistaken, minority language instruction allows anglophones in Quebec to learn French or francophones to learn English.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Minority language instruction is supported. In Quebec, federal contributions for minority language instruction are for the English system.

• (1555)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: English school boards, for their part, provide courses exclusively in English to those majority language francophones who are eligible. In Quebec, not all families are allowed to enrol their children in an English school board. If your parents are not anglophone, you cannot access these services.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Approximately half the classes in the English system are immersion classes. Access to English schools is restricted under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in other words one parent of the child has to have been educated in English. This means that in some English schools in Quebec...

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, what is the difference between the children of a francophone family being able to go to school in English in order to learn both official languages, and the children of an anglophone family in another province being able to go to a French immersion school? The ultimate goal is to learn both official languages. I do not understand why you make the distinction between Quebec and the other provinces when the ultimate purpose is for the majority of Canadians to learn both languages.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am not the one making that distinction; section 23 of the charter does.

The immersion system was invented for anglophones. For specific historical reasons in Quebec, an English immersion system was not created for francophone students. You are probably more familiar with those historical reasons than I am. When one refers to the immersion system in Canada, one is referring to an immersion system for anglophones. There is no equivalent for francophone students in Quebec.

Parents who exercise their right to send their children to an English school in Quebec must have a specific connection with education in English. That restriction, those criteria were determined under Bill 101 in 1977. Section 23 was subsequently drafted, but with a Canada provision, in order to take into account Bill 101's criteria.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, this act has been in existence for almost 40 years. If you look at the rest of Canada, is there not an injustice being done to those Quebeckers who want to learn the other official language?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is for Quebeckers to decide.

There were periods during the 1960s and the 1970s when Quebec governments were elected or defeated democratically because of their position on access to schools in the minority language. Since the repatriation of the Constitution, this is no longer subject to political debate; it is now a right enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The only way to change that is to amend the charter.

The Chair: Thank you for your questions, Mr. Gourde.

Ms. St-Denis, you have the floor.

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): When you talk about your report, it is easy to listen to you and to agree with you. However, how effective is your report? You make recommendations. I would think that in theory the government would respond to those recommendations. Does that happen? Are there any negotiations or discussions or do you simply make recommendations?

Mr. Graham Fraser: In my annual report, I take note of and follow up on our recommendations. The recommendations about immersion are more problematic because education falls under provincial jurisdiction. I therefore make recommendations to the effect that the government act in order to influence education, which falls under provincial jurisdiction.

There are ways in which the government can act in order to fill the gaps, but I am aware that the structure, curriculum and instruction per se fall under provincial jurisdiction.

• (1600)

Ms. Lise St-Denis: I would like to go back to the \$86 million. You said that that is an annual amount.

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, it is not an annual amount, it is an amount spread over three years.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: It is for a three-year period. Therefore...

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am sorry, I am just being told that it actually is an annual amount.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: So \$86 million is provided for 10 provinces, which means approximately \$8 million per province.

In your opening remarks, you said: "Over the past four years, the federal government, for its part, has allocated an average [...]" So it's over four years.

Mr. Graham Fraser: There is a total budget for four years.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: That means \$20 million per year, no?

Mr. Graham Fraser: The total is \$344.7 million for four years.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Fine.

You spoke about underfunding. If there were more funding, obviously there would be better outcomes.

Mr. Graham Fraser: One would hope so.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Of course.

I am talking about immersion. Is there a significant difference between provinces in terms of outcomes? We saw a report on Alberta, but is the promotion and fostering of French immersion approximately the same for the nine provinces apart from Quebec? I don't know if the territories offer immersion programs.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I need to weigh my words. We do not evaluate results in education. There is no common evaluation system for all the provinces. At one point in time the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada discussed using a type of template or a common evaluation system so that immersion students in Alberta, Saskatchewan or Nova Scotia could compare their results.

You will be speaking with representatives of the Edmonton Public School Board after my appearance. They could speak to you about their use of DELF, which comes from the French system. This board wanted to use the evaluation system used by the Public Service Commission to evaluate student progress, but after one year, the commission decided that this contravened its legislation. That is when the board decided to use DELF, which is a foreign system. Using that system was one of the keys to its success. Thanks to that system, students can compare themselves not only with other students in their class, but also with other students around the world.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Do you have any statistics on the number of people from low-income areas who are in immersion programs?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I do not have any numbers on that. The best source of statistics on immersion is the annual report of Canadian Parents for French. This organization does very patient work in collecting data on various aspects of immersion.

Here is an anecdote. In west Toronto, one of the parents told me that the school board district to which his children's school belonged was organized along a north-south axis. He said that children living in the low-cost housing in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood took long trips by bus every day to go to an immersion school because their parents know that bilingualism is a factor in advancement. As to whether this happens elsewhere, I cannot tell you.

You touched on an important point. The immersion system is often criticized as being only for the elite even though it is funded by taxpayers. This is a frustrating criticism. If students in an immersion program have learning disabilities that have nothing to do with the language of instruction, the school's first reaction will be to pressure the parents of these children to take them out of the program. After a few years, in grade 7, grade 8 or grade 9, all children with learning disabilities are placed in regular classrooms. Because of decisions made by the schools, only those students who excel will be in an immersion program, because those who did not will have been excluded from the system. The system is then criticized and said to be for the elite only. I find this criticism deeply unfair.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. St-Denis.

Ms. Bateman, you have the floor.

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a few questions.

First, I want to talk about core French courses, which are offered in the same way as geography, social studies and other courses. I am not talking about immersion programs here. In grade 7, my son decided to go into the late immersion program, while two of his good friends, whom I know well, decided to take the English program, which included daily French classes. I am really quite impressed with their abilities, insightfulness and tenacity. To me, this really shows the importance of the French courses offered as part of English programs across Canada.

I am curious to know whether you are planning to improve these programs in terms of the French.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am very happy to hear that. One of the negative aspects associated with the success of immersion programs is that these courses can attract the best teachers and best students. However, in Canada, the majority of students who learn French as a second language do so by taking core French classes. This will always be the case. This is why I always find it worrisome to hear parents say that their children will not be able to learn French because they are not in immersion.

• (1610)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: What is your vision for improving core French courses?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think we should start by recognizing the importance of core French and stop treating it, as it is in many schools and school boards, as a second-class program. I have heard stories of core French teachers who do not have their own classrooms and have to carry their books from one classroom to another in a cart, and whose job situation was much more precarious than those of immersion teachers or teachers of subjects such as math and social sciences.

I myself took core French courses. I challenge this idea that immersion is the only way to learn French. I believe it is important for students to have access, in addition to this foundation that can be very important, to exchange programs, summer jobs or summer camps, for example, to work on their French outside the classroom.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you.

[English]

I want to follow up on the question of my colleague earlier.

[Translation]

I will continue in English.

[English]

As a mother from western Canada, I always thought it was like a gift to give my children the opportunity to speak French in a classroom situation and beyond. To me, that's a proud part of being a Canadian, making sure that children in Canada other than in Quebec have access to learning French. I just want to understand what you said before, because to me it would be equally important, as a parent in Quebec, to make sure that my children would have, of course, French, but also the opportunity to learn English. Could you just reiterate *en anglais* your—

Mr. Graham Fraser: Sure.

I think one has to understand the question of access to minority language education, whether that's English in Quebec or French outside of Quebec, in the context of the language debates that took place in Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s. There was growing concern that all of the immigration to Quebec was resulting in parents enrolling their children in English schools. There was a growing fear on the part of some highly respected demographers that the island of Montreal would end up being majority English speaking and that by attracting immigrants, Quebec was financing the creation of itself as a linguistic minority on the island of Montreal. So a variety of legislative instruments were introduced.

First was Bill 22, in which it was decided that the only children who would have access to English schools were those who could pass an English test when they were going into grade one. This was highly criticized because it was viewed that if you succeeded, you went to English school, and if you failed, you were sent off to the hell of French school.

After the election of the Parti Québécois in 1976 and the development of the *Charte de la langue française*, the criteria were developed on the basis of the education of one parent. If one parent had been educated in English, their children would have access. The original version of that was to restrict access to English education in Quebec to what they called the traditional English-speaking community. First with the Blaikie Supreme Court decision and then with the charter in 1982, that was broadened to one parent having been educated in English in Canada.

All of that, really, was in the context of serious concern with threats to the French language as they were perceived to exist in Quebec, particularly through that period.

It is also worth remembering that Quebec is the only province in which studying the other official language is obligatory right to the end of high school. In Quebec, it's introduced in grade 3, and it's obligatory. They've been moving it down to, I think, grade 1. It is the only province where learning the other official language is an obligatory program right through to the end of high school.

Outside of Quebec, it is obligatory to study French up until some level in every province east of Ontario. West of Ontario, I'm not certain about Manitoba. I don't think it's obligatory. It is an option. There's no obligatory course for French in the western provinces.

I think the idea that people are not learning English in Quebec is a mistaken one, if you look at the obligatory—

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Is that part of your vision?

• (1615)

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, I'm not talking about my vision. I'm talking about what the law is. My vision, necessarily, is constrained by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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

Mr. Williamson, you have a briefer time, because we need to get to other members of the committee.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Sure. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Fraser, it's good to see you again. You are always very informative, and no one can doubt your passion on this issue.

I'll commend you and your office for taking the approach you have and for resisting the temptation that my friend, Yvon Godin, suggested in terms of kicking up a storm in the courts. These are important questions we're looking at, but they're also questions that are best solved through democratically elected legislatures.

I do have a question, though, regarding one of the comments you made. I'm either looking for clarity or maybe even for you to just roll it back a little bit. On your line that understanding the two languages allows people to be "productive employees and citizens who can invest themselves fully in the civic life of their country", I'll ask you to explain this. It suggests to me that in order to be fully Canadian or to fully participate as citizens, you have to speak both languages, and I don't think that's true.

I can point to numerous communities in my riding and communities across the country, French and English, where individuals and families can and do contribute greatly in a single language. I have made it a practice to talk about bilingualism and what that adds, but I don't believe that speaking a single language makes someone less Canadian or puts them in a position where they cannot contribute as bilingual individuals can.

Mr. Graham Fraser: In terms of my interventions before the courts, I have intervened before the courts 14 times. There are other cases when I will be intervening before the courts. We've established clear criteria for when we intervene before the courts, so I wouldn't want it to be left on the record that I've avoided using the judicial tools that I have at my disposal.

If I was suggesting that unilingual Canadians are less Canadian than others, that was certainly not my intention. I think that one of the nuances you always have to bring to the table about Canadian bilingualism is that we are two majority unilingual societies that live side by side, but for people who wish to engage at the national level and understand the country as a whole, it is hugely important.

That is why it has now become taken for granted in every political party that to aspire to political leadership bilingualism in the two

official languages is essential to be able to understand the country as a whole. Similarly, there are certain important public positions. Parliament decided unanimously that agents of Parliament, who need to be able to communicate with parliamentarians in their language of choice, need to be bilingual.

That does not mean that people.... Just to take one minor example, the mayor of Lac-Mégantic has proven to be a highly esteemed woman who virtually deserves treatment as a national hero because of the way she has responded to the tragedy that happened in Lac-Mégantic. She is unilingual, to the best of my knowledge. This has not prevented her in any way from playing a critically important role in her community, and more broadly, from being a role model in Quebec for public figures.

• (1620)

Mr. John Williamson: I appreciate your answer, sir.

With respect to the powers, I appreciate that you use them with discretion, and perhaps I should elaborate more. Taking the government to court because the level of bilingualism among anglophones is falling would be rash, I think. You don't need to answer that. It's a rhetorical question.

Over to you, Chair. Thank you.

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

We'll now have Mr. Nicholls and Mr. Benskin. They will be splitting their time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, NDP): Commissioner, I first want to talk about leadership. I find it rather surprising that the members on the government side need a history lesson from you, Commissioner, to understand the language situation in our country.

I believe I am one of the lucky ones, because my parents showed leadership when I was young. They decided to enrol me in a francophone school so that I could learn French. Even after having lived outside Quebec for 20 years, I can speak French. I can still do so even though I did not use my French for about 20 years. This is why I believe leadership leads to a positive attitude towards the second language. It is an integral part of leadership.

In your annual report for 2012-2013, you stated the following: "To achieve a true continuum of second-language learning, the federal government must demonstrate its leadership by developing an overall strategy on this issue." Could you comment on this statement? In your opinion, which key elements should be included in this overall strategy?

Mr. Graham Fraser: First, I do think that it is the responsibility of the government to develop a strategy. This strategy should include elements to promote this concept to universities, the private sector and public institutions to ensure that the presence, development and promotion of both official languages are key factors.

I attended the Canada Games in Sherbrooke this past summer. It was an example of the type of leadership that an institution could show, institution that had received funding from the federal government. Moreover, I believe the organizers of the Pan American Games are doing very significant work at this moment.

Knowing that a promotional strategy exists can give people who play important roles the energy they need. All kinds of institutions can play a role.

I attended the Vanier Cup. Mr. Gourde mentioned the issue. Canadian Interuniversity Sport, or CIS, is under new leadership. Its permanent staff is truly engaged in promoting both official languages. They invested much energy to ensure that the Vanier Cup was an event that took place in both official languages. It showed the commitment on the part of the organization that provided this event.

I would also like to note that, when the leaders of an institution take linguistic duality seriously, we see the results. If the government were to commit to developing a strategy, we would see much more generalized results. It would no longer be a matter of individuals who happen to focus on this issue through their own initiative.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

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

During your presentation, you confirmed what a number of stakeholders said, which was that immersion programs work well and that many Canadians are enrolled in them.

I want to come back to the roadmap. It contains a \$1 billion investment over five years. This includes funding for immersion, which is going very well, and also for the promotion of linguistic duality, which is not going as well. What can we do to ensure that all components under the roadmap work well?

Last week, francophones in Newfoundland and Labrador complained that they received no services in French. Today is the first day of the court proceeding brought by the Conseil Scolaire Francophone de la Colombie-Britannique against the provincial government to obtain 15 schools for francophone children in the province.

On the one hand, immersion is very successful. On the other, it does not appear that defending the rights of francophones all across Canada is going as well.

Is there a way to ensure that we are defending rights as well as we are supporting immersion?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I hope so. It is regrettable that minority schools and school boards still have to go before the courts and demand that their rights be respected by provincial governments.

You can see that in British Columbia. The court recently handed down a decision that I find unfortunate. I do not think it is the end of the world, but I would have preferred the court's minority opinion to its majority opinion. The decision required that the school board in this same trial have the evidence it provided translated. This seems to me to go against the principle of linguistic duality enshrined in the charter.

The same thing happened in the Northwest Territories. In response to the need to expand the schools, the government stated that if all of

the children who were ineligible under section 23 of the charter were expelled, the schools would not have to be expanded.

This shows that there is resistance...

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Allow me to continue in this vein, Mr. Fraser. Immersion may be an important tool to revitalize bilingualism in Canada. However, providing and maintaining services in French for francophone minority communities is essential.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, you are completely right. This is why we must draw a very clear distinction between immersion, which is a tool for language training for the majority, and the support we provide to minority schools, which play a completely different role in defending the community.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Thank you to Mr. Quell, Mr. Fraser and Mr. Giguère.

We will now suspend the meeting for two minutes to allow our next witnesses to set up.

Thank you, everyone.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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• (1630)

The Chair: We are resuming the seventh hearing of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

With us are Mr. Dicks, Director at the University of New Brunswick. We are also joined by Ms. Leclair and Ms. Commance-Shulko,

[*English*]

from the Edmonton Public School Board.

We want to thank you for joining us by video conference. We can see you and hear you loud and clear.

We'll now begin with an opening statement from the Edmonton Public School Board.

Ms. Valérie Leclair (Program Coordinator for French Language Programs, Support for Staff and Students, Edmonton Public School Board): Thank you, Chair, and honourable members.

I am pleased to speak on behalf of Edmonton Public Schools regarding this committee's study of official languages immersion schools.

During this time, I will share information about the context of French immersion within our school district, the key issues and challenges faced, and some of the recommendations and suggestions we have.

We are very proud that Edmonton Public Schools has a strong national and international reputation of very successful second language programs and innovative supports for these programs. Our school district has approximately 85,000 students. We offer the most diverse language programming in a school authority in Canada, with partial immersion programs in seven languages, a large and comprehensive French immersion program, and second language courses in 12 languages.

We offer a number of supports to our students who study a second language, and to our second language teachers, including: international credentialling opportunities; the establishment of the Institute for Innovation in Second Language Education, called IISLE; partnerships with local, national, and international governments and organizations; and comprehensive policies and regulations to support quality language programming. We are very proud and we feel very lucky, as these are just a few examples of the strong context within which our French immersion programs are thriving.

The Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Graham Fraser, has stated, "Edmonton has developed, bar none, the best immersion system in the country". However, we are a district of continuous improvement. In 2001 our district conducted a comprehensive program review of our French programs and based on those results, initiated a French language renewal project and set many goals. Just over a decade later, we have attained many of those goals, doubling the number of students studying French, and increasing enrollment by over 69%.

The funding we have received in the last two cycles has facilitated many key initiatives to support French language program implementation and expansion, including: the establishment of a late French immersion program; new elementary school French immersion programs; two sites in which French immersion students receive extra supports in specialized classrooms; the establishment of an exemplary French resource centre; and a French international examination centre with over 3,500 students receiving international credentialling for their French proficiency, many with very high proficiency levels. We are particularly proud to report that we now have close to 41% of our students studying French.

One of the challenges we have faced related to French immersion programming directly relates to our vision that all children should have the opportunity to become bilingual, or perhaps plurilingual. Having this vision means many things. First, we must consciously welcome all students into our programs and support their success. Second, we must have programs widely available. Third, parents, communities, and educators must understand and value the French immersion program.

Historically, there was a general belief that only students who are academically strong should be in French immersion. However, research and experience have demonstrated that students with various special learning needs can be successful and sometimes flourish in the program, achieving many benefits from second language learning.

We also know that students, parents, administrators, and especially teachers need more support to feel able to effectively meet the range of learning needs in a French immersion classroom. In our district, we are working feverishly to develop and provide a

range of support, including early literacy interventions in French, improved French immersion literacy training for teachers, and access to inclusive teaching strategies.

Our second challenge involves accessibility and availability of programs. Edmonton has a large urban sprawl, a growing population, and numerous program choices for parents. Providing all families with easy and local access to French immersion schools is challenging. Transportation costs and transportation time also pose significant problems.

Our third challenge is ensuring that parents and the community at large value learning the French language. French immersion programs require extensive time, energy, and cost. We continue to make progress, and the expansion of our enrollment is evidence of this.

We launched just last month a new video to promote French immersion programming and to provide parents with key information on its benefits.

- (1635)

Support on a larger scale, though, is needed. Targeted work is needed in this area, and the protocol provides a possible venue to carry this message.

I have just described three of our key challenges. Additional challenges include smooth articulation and transition of our students into post-secondary education, and availability of a healthy supply of qualified teachers and supply teachers.

You have also invited us today to provide recommendations on how the federal government could enhance its contribution to the teaching of the other official language. In general, the protocol and its content remains strong. However, in the spirit of continuous improvement, I wish to share some thoughts with you.

The development of longer-term protocols enables provinces and school authorities to maximize their focus and impact to enable school districts to plan and to strongly focus on implementation. The longer-term focus and stability of funding over time has had a strong impact on quality and results. Having said that, the delays or lag time between the end of one set of protocols and the beginning of implementation of a new set of protocols, especially during times of fiscal restraint, can have a devastating effect on the maintenance and/or implementation of initiatives. Any reductions in this lag time would be a significant improvement that would make a great deal of difference to school authorities.

In terms of specific content in the protocol, I would like to draw your attention to the outcome domain for "second language, primary and secondary, 3.2.2.1 student participation". It identifies the outcome, recruitment, and retention of students in second language education programs up to secondary school graduation. As stated earlier, we believe all Canadian children should have the right of access to French immersion programming and should receive quality supports in those programs to support their success.

To that end, we recommend the statement be changed to read “recruitment and retention of a wide range of students with diverse learning skills, abilities, and needs, and second language education programs up to secondary school graduation.” Or we recommend adding a new outcome that expresses the need to expand access and supports for a wider range of students with a range of learning needs to learn the other official language. From our perspective this alteration would more strongly communicate the goal that all students be enabled to become bilingual.

Second, I would like to again draw your attention to the importance of placing an emphasis on the promotion of French language learning and French immersion programming. This must include communicating the wide range of benefits that second language learning provides. Parents today have many choices, and a concerted effort at the local and national levels is essential to reinforce these benefits. The outcome domains could be strengthened to focus actions in this area.

We wish to also express our encouragement for the continuation of such programs as Explore, Exchanges Canada, SEVEC, summer work student exchange, etc. We feel these programs play critical roles in providing our students with opportunities for meaningful out-of-classroom learning.

We do have suggestions for new programs that could be the responsibility of the federal government. We believe the federal government should take leadership in encouraging and supporting the implementation of a common framework of reference for languages from kindergarten to post-secondary levels and beyond. We have worked with many languages for many years in the implementation of several frameworks, and by far the common European framework of reference, CEFR, has been the strongest for kindergarten to post-secondary education.

We have used the CEFR extensively in classrooms and with other languages with great success. We also believe it has played a key role in improving our teachers' second language teaching, our students' learning, and fundamentally has helped us to improve our student language proficiency levels.

National implementation of this framework would strengthen French programming across Canada in many ways including by increasing coherence and transparency around language proficiency expectations, by fostering understanding among school authorities, elected officials, parents, post-secondary institutions, and employers regarding what to expect from graduates of these programs at various levels, and by facilitating a smoother transition of students into post-secondary second language courses.

A further need that could be addressed by the federal program is through the establishment of separate funds to support emerging needs and innovative responses to these needs. We envision this to be a special initiative fund that would overtly encourage and prioritize interprovincial or pan-Canadian initiatives and/or initiatives that are innovative and responsive in nature.

● (1640)

We envision these initiatives would be managed directly through the federal government, and would not have to be restrained by the provincial requirements and protocols.

I understand there is latitude in the protocols that enables these kinds of initiatives. The references to this possibility in the present agreement appear to be heavily bureaucratic, and as a result, organizations with innovative or emerging projects may not engage in the process, as they anticipate being constrained through the required levels of agreement. There does not appear to be a process in place for the field, such as school jurisdictions, to identify and propose these types of emergent initiatives and needs.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that Edmonton Public Schools is passionate about languages and French immersion and about constantly trying to improve. We very much appreciate this opportunity to share our passion, our successes, our challenges, and our ideas.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Leclair, for this excellent brief. We really appreciate the time and effort you put into its recommendations. It will be valuable for us in drafting our committee report.

We'll now go to Professor Dicks at the University of New Brunswick.

[Translation]

Dr. Joseph Dicks (Director, Second Language Research Institute of Canada (L2RIC) at the University of New Brunswick, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am presenting this report from the perspective of a university professor who is involved, on a daily basis, in teaching and researching French immersion. However, this perspective is influenced by my past experience as an immersion teacher in the public system, as the parent of two children who were placed in immersion in three Canadian provinces, and as someone who learned French as a second language.

French immersion programs continue to be very successful both in Canada and abroad. I am currently writing an article with a colleague for an international review on the development of immersion in North America and along the Pacific Rim. This Canadian innovation in the world of second-language learning continues to be one of our country's most significant exports and has put us at the forefront of second-language teaching in the world. These are very impressive achievements. However, the objective of this report is to comment on the state of French immersion as it exists in Canada in 2013.

● (1645)

[English]

With respect to some lessons from the recent past, I'm going to begin by talking about what happened recently in New Brunswick and by drawing some lessons from that experience.

In July 2007 the New Brunswick Department of Education commissioned a review of French second language programming. The then minister of education, Kelly Lamrock, appointed two commissioners, James Croll and Patricia Lee, neither one an expert in the area of second language education.

On February 27, 2008, the commissioners released their report. To the disbelief of informed readers, that report presented a totally one-sided negative view of early French immersion in New Brunswick.

The views of second language experts and other key informants, such as the Commissioner of Official Languages, who spoke about the benefits of early French immersion as well as the problems that needed to be addressed, were not included in the report. Years of research on early French immersion demonstrating its effectiveness with regard to French proficiency and overall literacy were also ignored, yet the minister decided to implement all the major recommendations of the report, including the elimination of early French immersion.

Consequently, New Brunswick, Canada's only officially bilingual province, is now the only province without an early entry French immersion program. In fact, it does not have any French second language programming from kindergarten to grade 3.

This radical decision to eliminate the grade 1 early French immersion program was unnecessary and unwise. According to the New Brunswick provincial government's own assessment statistics, early French immersion is the only program that has a large majority of students consistently achieving intermediate-plus oral proficiency, 82% of them. In addition, 33% achieve advanced proficiency in oral French. By way of comparison, 44% of late French immersion students and only 4% of core French students achieve intermediate-plus proficiency.

There's no evidence that students in any other program reach intermediate proficiency by the end of high school.

I would recommend, therefore, that the federal government, while providing support for other entry points to immersion, focus upon early French immersion as the standard entry point for French immersion across Canada.

I'd like to talk now about French immersion as a universal program.

French immersion has been described by some as an elitist program that contributes to segregation. However, French immersion in New Brunswick, as in the rest of Canada, is an integrated part of the public school system. It is also a choice that, in principle, is open to all parents. It is difficult to see how the term "segregation" could apply in this context.

There is, however, an undeniable degree of streaming that occurs in schools that offer early French immersion. It would appear that public policies, as well as economic and social forces, affect streaming.

Children with special needs have problems related either to ability or to behaviour, or to both, since the two are often connected. It is also the case that more students who experience difficulty come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Understanding these complex interrelationships and providing teachers with the resources to

address them are crucial to students' success in any classroom or educational setting.

It is important to address the streaming issue in order to make early French immersion the inclusive program it should be. Parents of children who are more likely to find school academically challenging should see early French immersion as a real option for their children. Early French immersion offers the best chance for children of a wide range of academic abilities to become bilingual, because it focuses primarily on language development in the early years and does so in a very natural way, very much like the way students learn their first language.

As a corollary to recommendation one, then, I recommend that the federal government support early French immersion as the most inclusive program option and ensure that supports are in place for teachers and students so that learners of a broad range of abilities enter into and remain in early French immersion.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

Is early immersion a successful program? We have seen that the level of oral competency of early immersion graduates was significantly higher than that of students from other programs. Moreover, a large number of scientific studies across Canada have confirmed the program's success.

Despite these positive results, there is a problem with students dropping out of the immersion program at the secondary school level. But that does not mean that these students do not want to keep studying in French. In many cases, the courses that students would like to take are not offered in French. This is particularly true for advanced math and science courses. If we want to see a higher percentage of graduates from our immersion programs and stronger second-language skills, we need to do more at the secondary level. Otherwise, all of our efforts at the elementary and middle-school levels may be in vain.

I therefore recommend that the federal government encourage the provinces to increase the resources available at the secondary school level to develop and offer a broader range of courses in French. Initiatives to train and recruit bilingual math and science teachers are a critical part of the equation.

[*English*]

Related to the previous topic is the issue of teacher education. As a professor in a faculty of education, this is of particular concern to me.

Our experience has consistently been that there are many students who wish to undertake studies in education to teach in immersion, but do not have the required language proficiency level. Many of these are graduates of French immersion and a number have also completed majors in French at Canadian universities. Clearly, in order to reach a level of language proficiency to teach French, one needs to do more. The issue of alternative French options at anglophone Canadian universities coupled with exchange or medium to longer stay programs in francophone milieux are critical to having a pool of linguistically qualified candidates who can then become pedagogically qualified.

I recommend therefore that the federal government enhance its support of exchange and medium- and long-term programs for prospective French teachers, and provide support to anglophone universities to provide alternative French learning opportunities for students.

[Translation]

I want now to turn to the future of immersion.

Immersion has grown tremendously since it began 45 years ago. It has had a considerable impact on second-language learning here in Canada and around the world. However, we can do more. There are two important questions. How can we best use students' existing knowledge in their first or second language to help them learn French in an immersion context? And how can students with learning difficulties succeed in reaching their potential in an immersion context?

Right now, three of my doctoral students here at the University of New Brunswick are exploring these questions in French immersion classrooms. These students represent the future and will play a critical role in providing our programs to an increasingly diversified clientele. They are receiving financial support from the federal government through the granting programs of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Canadian Heritage, through the Official Languages in Education Program. They would not be able to pursue their research and their careers without that support.

So I recommend that the federal government maintain and even increase its support for research into second-language teaching and, in particular, its support for graduate students and new researchers.

[English]

In conclusion, French immersion, in particular early French immersion, is both a national and international success story. There is, however, still a lot of work to do to make this program accessible to a wider audience here at home. Currently, we see wide discrepancies in enrolments, with 36%, 23%, and 21% of students enrolled in immersion in Quebec, New Brunswick, and P.E.I., but only about 8% to 10% in other provinces and territories. The enrolment trend is upward, and that is positive, but we need to do better. We need to remove the barriers. There is no need for lotteries to decide who gets in, and the lack of support for struggling learners should not be creating a system where only some can stay in.

We can do better, and to create a more truly bilingual society, we must do better.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dicks.

[English]

We'll have about 35 minutes of questions and comments from members, beginning with Monsieur Godin.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to welcome Mr. Joseph Dicks, as well as Ms. Valérie Leclair and her colleague Ms. Marie Commance-Shulko, from the Edmonton Public School Board.

I will be addressing my questions to Mr. Dicks, and my colleagues will have questions for the school board representatives from Alberta.

In New Brunswick, students used to come into immersion in grade 1. Then, as you will recall, the provincial government delayed the entry point until grade 5. That decision led to protests in New Brunswick. Parents were unanimous in demanding that immersion start in grade 1. The government at the time made some changes and set the entry point at grade 3. That happened in 2007.

Why is it important to have early immersion starting in grade 1? I have been a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages for a long time. We have had the opportunity to question professors from the University of Ottawa, the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia and elsewhere. They have always said that the earlier children begin, the more chance they have to succeed.

Do you agree with that statement? What do you think about the position of the New Brunswick government?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I agree, as far as the vast majority of students are concerned. Some students, who may be more talented or more intelligent, can succeed even in late immersion programs, such as those starting at grade 6. I think that it is good to have choices, where possible, with various entry points. But eliminating the kindergarten or grade 1 entry point is definitely not a good idea.

When the decision is delayed and the parents have to decide about immersion when their child is in grade 3, the first question is always whether the child is doing well in English and other subjects. If there are any problems at all on that front, they have a tendency to think that the child should not go into an immersion program.

One school principal that I just spoke to told me that this reality was having a very negative impact in his school. The strongest students were enrolling in immersion and the weakest ones were staying in the English program. If the intention was to resolve the problem of streaming or inequality between the programs, it did not work. I think that the situation is worse now.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You also said that the decision to eliminate the early immersion program in New Brunswick was made on the basis of recommendations in the report prepared by Jim Croll and Patricia Lee. But you mentioned that those recommendations result from the data being interpreted incorrectly.

What are those interpretation errors?

What recommendations were made in the report by Jim Croll and Patricia Lee, and why are they so different from your own recommendations?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I cannot really answer your second question. Not only were their conclusions different from mine, but they were different from those of the vast majority of experts in second-language learning. The problems with the data mainly involved statistics being improperly interpreted. For example, they calculated the dropout rates from immersion programs from one year to the next, but their calculations were wrong.

Moreover, they completely ignored some of the research in preparing their report. I have written much more detailed documents on this subject. I can send them to you if you are interested.

• (1700)

Mr. Yvon Godin: You say that in the other provinces, immersion programs start at an earlier age. As you have mentioned, New Brunswick is the only province in Canada that is officially bilingual, but it is the only one without early immersion.

Is the problem that people are not talking to one another at some level, or is it that someone with blinkers on made this decision on a cost basis?

[English]

Canadian Parents for French, for an example, came to our committee and said they didn't want that. They had 350 people rallying in front of the legislature in New Brunswick saying, "Don't take that away from us."

If it's a monetary problem, what would you recommend, that it happen? Or what is the real problem?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I think there was a small but influential group of people who made strong arguments that the early French immersion program was having a negative impact on the English program. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, more advantaged students, were going into immersion, leaving the English program *défavorisé*. That argument, not proven, somehow won the day nonetheless.

The problem, of course, is that the longer you delay immersion, the greater the chances that you're going to exacerbate that problem rather than resolve it. That's why in my brief I talked about, and I noticed my Edmonton colleagues also talked about, the importance of putting supports in place so that all students, regardless of their ability levels, will be enticed to enrol, or parents will be enticed to enrol their children. Once they're there, they can have the supports so they can stay.

Unless we do that, I think we're going to be faced with these same criticisms again and again. We'll be going around this again for another five years.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Williamson, go ahead.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you, Chair.

Is it Mr. Dicks or Professor Dicks?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: Professor Dicks, Mr. Dicks—

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you. I just want to make sure. I'm going to call you Professor, if that's okay, but I thought it would be better to be safe than sorry, as I've learned around here.

In case you don't know, I'm a member from New Brunswick. I found your testimony to be very helpful, particularly on some of the history.

I'm going to have you clarify a few points.

Your first recommendation—and this one is clear, I think—is to promote the opportunities for learning a second language at an early age. It's a criticism of the change in New Brunswick, and you would suggest that it's better to begin in grade 1. Is that correct?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: That's right.

If you can offer only one program, offer an early one. That's essentially what I'm saying.

Mr. John Williamson: Yes, fair enough.

I referenced Monsieur Godin earlier. This might surprise him, but just to show that we're not always on the opposite side of the fence, I agree with your stance in terms of the province. I think the bilingual program in New Brunswick should begin at grade 1 and be maintained there. That will surprise you, I know, because I went through that same program, and I do understand the importance, and I do think the earlier the better for young minds.

Your recommendations are interesting, and I want to make sure I understand them. You're saying that you would advise the federal government to urge the province to pool resources. Did I hear that correctly?

What was the recommendation on the side of increased access, or increased budget dollars?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: The recommendation was that the federal government support early French immersion as the most inclusive program option, and ensure that supports are in place for teachers and students so that learners of a broader range of abilities enter into and remain in the early French immersion program.

Mr. John Williamson: Right.

To be clear, I'm trying to get a sense of what that implies. I'm trying to mine this for data in terms of some of your findings. Are you suggesting that there should be some pressure on the Province of New Brunswick, a nudge from the federal government in Ottawa, to look at lowering that age?

•(1705)

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I understand that the federal government doesn't control the education policies of the provinces, but obviously, if there were significant dollars supporting official language education, I would think the federal government would want to make sure those dollars were spent so that the widest range of students of varying abilities could take advantage of those programs. Whatever targeted funding provided to provinces so that supports can be put in place for teachers and students of a wide range of abilities to succeed would be a positive thing.

Mr. John Williamson: Again, I'm not hostile to your recommendations; I'm just trying to understand them better. You're right. Obviously, from a taxpayer point of view, we want to get the best value we possibly can for taxpayers. I would say that we already contribute significantly to provinces across the country, including New Brunswick, which actually benefits disproportionately because of the linguistic makeup of the province and its bilingual character.

Are you saying that we should nudge them to go a little further, that we should put more dollars on the table? I might give you a hard time about that one.

What exactly are you suggesting? Is it that you would like to see Ottawa encourage the province to start at an earlier age, or you'd like to see more dollars on the table? What exactly do you think would help in the situation?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I would like to see funding targeted at an early entry program that can provide the opportunities for the widest range of students, rather than a later starting program that benefits a smaller range of abilities.

Mr. John Williamson: Fair enough. On that you'll have no disagreement from me. Mr. Godin has gone. I hope he hasn't sent out a press release on this. I was just going to say, and the chair will appreciate this, that I speak for myself and not for the government.

Thank you very much and I appreciate your time, Professor.

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

[Translation]

Ms. St-Denis, you have the floor.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: My question is for Ms. Leclair, from the Edmonton Public School Board.

How do you explain the success of immersion programs? What has led to such a success in this area in your province?

[English]

Ms. Valérie Leclair: I can speak more so for the success within our own school boards. As I had mentioned, in 2001 the Commissioner of Official Languages, an MLA, and our superintendent of schools met to discuss the decline in numbers within our school district in French immersion to the point where it was becoming quite drastic. A promise was made at that point from our superintendent that we would double our numbers within 10 years, and we have done that successfully. From that discussion in 2001 there was a survey done of parents and staff. That meant teachers, principals, educational assistants, students, and consultants. They surveyed to see what may be some of the issues we are facing that

could be stopping us from increasing our numbers, and from having such a successful program.

In 2002 we came up with what we call the French language renewal project. From that study we developed some recommendations for what a successful language program looks like. With those three years, and the recommendations that were made, we proceeded to start to implement those recommendations to improve our programs. I'll speak to a few of those if you like.

One of the things we found was very helpful for us is we had a very strong board of trustees. Our superintendent and our central leadership staff were very strong and very supportive of the French language programs in our district. From that recommendation as well we developed a very strong consultant core. We were a core of approximately six consultants, which is the largest in Canada if not in North America to this date. We worked together as a team to implement the recommendations that were indicated in the report.

What we found is that we needed to align the French immersion program goals with national and international guidelines. One of the things we looked at was providing a target proficiency level for our students to achieve; that is, when students get to grade 6, grade 9, or grade 12, what it looks like, what it sounds like, where they should be in all skill areas of communication.

We also felt there needed to be a provision of enhanced resources. That did not just mean materials, but it meant access to consultants who could work with them for professional development, for developing leadership capacity within the schools and the district. We looked at different technology that we could use in the classrooms and in the schools.

Another area we looked at was providing opportunities for students to embrace French outside of the classroom. We often hear from students, "French? That's in the classroom. It doesn't matter; when I leave the classroom there's nothing." We knew there was a huge gap there, so we actually worked a lot with the francophone boards within Edmonton. We developed some partnerships with the Alliance française of Edmonton. We actually participated in many activities that were happening in our small francophone community. These were such things as attending L'UniThéâtre, which has plays in French. They would go to the French restaurant, or they would visit the *cabanes à sucre*. They were always welcomed in these situations. It was very interesting to see how our students reacted to that.

Further on down the line we also became involved with French for the future with the Youth Ambassador Program, with their youth forum. Our students participated in that. Just last year we sent one student to France on a program through the French Embassy in Canada called *Génération Bilingue* where that student spent a month in France looking at the different historical sites. There was a group with them from all over the world.

Another area, as I mentioned, is local, national, and international partnerships. We had musicians come in. We had local authors come in. Of course, it was at no cost to the district because these were part of our partnerships.

Actually one of our strongest areas is we developed a comprehensive set of policies and regulations. Right from the get-go the recommendations that the report had made were implemented into policies and regulations that our schools had to follow. With that was also a mandate for our students to start core French in grade 4 and study that until grade 9. That has helped a lot as well.

• (1710)

As well, we've looked at provincial certification and staff language proficiency assessments.

I could go on but you probably want to ask more questions.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: You seem to be doing a very effective job; it is very interesting. Are you in touch with other school boards in your province or in other provinces where there are immersion programs? Do you consult with them?

[*English*]

Ms. Valérie Leclair: Yes, absolutely.

I'm very excited to speak to the Alberta French Language Education Consortium, which was part of our French language renewal that was implemented in 2004. All the other school districts within the province were invited into the consortium, as well as organizations such as, Canadian Parents for French, Alliance Française, and others. This is a place where we meet three times a year to discuss common issues or areas that we would like to work on within the province. That's very exciting.

We do not have as much ability to work outside the province with other districts but we do work very strongly with the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, and also ACPI, the French immersion association.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame St-Denis and Madame Leclair.

We'll now go to Mr. Daniel.

• (1715)

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for being here.

Professor Dicks, you are obviously doing a lot of research on various projects and various things associated with the French language. I notice you have a lot of Ph.D. students, etc.

How has French education teaching evolved over the last 15 to 20 years?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: One of the big changes we have seen involves the whole notion of literacy and multi-literacy in language learning. Whereas 10 or 15 years ago we were much more focused on learning an individual language and looking at that language as an entity, today we're much more interested as researchers and as teachers in how languages work together and complement one another.

One of the questions that I mentioned at the end of my presentation was about one of our doctoral students who is looking at how students' first or second language can help them learn French, and vice versa of course, how French can then help with students' development of their first and second language. That whole

interconnection among languages and viewing literacy as a broader concept and not language specific is a big change. We're seeing quite a big emphasis on that, as well as an emphasis in research in looking at the benefits. For example, one of my students is looking at how students are learning to read. As I mentioned, we no longer have a grade 1 entry immersion program in New Brunswick. It was postponed until grade 3. This means they come in already having learned to read in English.

From a language teaching point of view, while I would like students to begin earlier, it does create some interesting opportunities for understanding how languages work and work together; how the students' ability to learn to read in English, for example, affects their ability to learn to read and write in French, and does learning to read and write in French have a positive impact on their first language reading and writing as well. This whole interconnectivity and literacy as a broader concept is a big one.

Mr. Joe Daniel: A follow-up to that is technical French. When I looked at the programs that are available for people to learn engineering, aeronautics, computers, etc., at university, there is a very limited choice in the French language. That's going to impact industry in Quebec. We recently visited the aerospace sector. Pratt & Whitney, Bombardier, Bell Canada, etc., are predicting that they will need an increase of something like 30% more employees because of the growth of their industry.

How do you think this is going to play out in getting the right technical skills available for these companies to be able to continue to grow their businesses and the economy in general?

Dr. Joseph Dicks: That's really not my area of expertise.

One thing I do know is if we have strong French immersion programs in our schools, particularly at the secondary level, and we can retain more of those students, and particularly have students in the sciences continuing with French, the opportunity to feed into those kinds of programs is going to be greatly enhanced. Granted, those programs have to be there, but the design of French for specific purposes programs is out of my area of expertise. I think we can do a lot at the secondary level at least, if we put more effort into providing students with more options to help in that regard.

Mr. Joe Daniel: You're not researching into what's happening at the higher levels of education where people need technical skills.

Dr. Joseph Dicks: No. That's not my area of research.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Let me switch to the ladies.

Madam Leclair, I think what you're doing in terms of education and French immersion in Edmonton is absolutely wonderful. To get the levels up to 41% of people doing immersion is also great, and I applaud that. Can you help us understand how the Edmonton Public School Board is actually promoting French immersion education?

• (1720)

Ms. Valérie Leclair: When we began our renewal project we did have an area where we were looking at marketing. What we tend to do is meet with our French immersion principals two or three times a year and discuss what kinds of marketing tools we want to look at to use.

Areas that we have done in the past are radio announcements, television announcements. We've also done the boards that you place on the roads and have provided information to open houses to the schools. We also have a very extensive website, both from Edmonton Public Schools, but within that we have a website just for languages, which promotes all of the languages we have in our district. We do work very closely as well with our planning department to obtain information, and also with our research department to obtain data so we know where we should be marketing, and if we're looking at radio, which radio stations, and where the population is that we should be targeting.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madam Bateman.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses.

I have some questions for Madam Leclair, if I may.

If I heard right, Madam Leclair, you were mentioning that you have 41% of your students enrolled in various immersion programs. That's of particular interest to me because we had other witnesses who had 25% and it was a challenge. Can you confirm that I heard right and that's the number?

Ms. Valérie Leclair: Actually, there is a correction to that. It is 41% of our students who are enrolled in French programs, so that does include our core French as well.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Okay.

How many of your students are enrolled in full French immersion programming?

Ms. Valérie Leclair: At this time it's only 8%, which is a number of 3,500 or a bit over. Coming from, I believe we were at something like 1,200, to be now at 3,500 is quite a coup for our district.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: How many children do you serve in your school board?

Ms. Valérie Leclair: In our district we have 85,000 students.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Okay. That's very interesting.

You spoke in your remarks about a study in terms of your approach of reaching out to bilingual teachers for the French immersion program, and hiring and grooming. Can you speak a little bit more to your strategy on that? That's an overwhelming concern for many school divisions, and for parents, I might add.

Ms. Valérie Leclair: We struggle just like other districts. We struggle the same as they do. We are, however, very fortunate to have a French university right here in Edmonton, Campus Saint-Jean. Many of their graduates come to us. We also have teachers coming from our main university.

We work very closely with our human resources department, and they do the initial screening. One of the wonderful opportunities that we've developed for our teachers is that, prior to getting a permanent certificate, a new hire will go through what we call a staff language proficiency assessment. It's an assessment that we do of all of their four skill areas to see exactly where they are in their French in reading, writing, understanding, and speaking. They will get a score that will tell them where they are on a scale of one to five .

They can use that information to obtain bursary money from the district to improve their French skills. It can also be used if they feel they need to improve in French culture. Many of our teachers take advantage of that opportunity. Usually, we find that in the summer they will go to immersion programs where they are able to immerse themselves at an accredited university or a place where they are able to use French on a daily basis.

Does that answer your question?

• (1725)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Absolutely. I very much appreciate that.

If I have time, Mr. Chair, I have one quick question for Professor Dicks.

Professor Dicks, I much appreciated your comments. When we hear that grade 1 French immersion is not available in the one officially bilingual province, it's a shocker. I remember as a former school trustee reading a paper in the early 2000s which you probably are well acquainted with. It basically said that if you want to achieve the best possible results in French immersion, you need to start the programming in grade 4. In my school division, where I was a chair, a policy chair, and you name it, we never did that. There were a number of reasons.

I'm curious about your perspective. Are you aware of that research? Was that the basis for acting on it or changing the level?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Bateman.

Answer briefly, Professor Dicks.

Dr. Joseph Dicks: I'm not aware of that research.

Our results cover many years here in New Brunswick. We had a grade 4 entry point in New Brunswick at one point. The research that I've done with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and other school boards shows that the early-starting students perform the best, followed by those in the middle around grade 4, followed by grade 6, which is what one would normally expect on overall proficiency results.

Of course, it depends who those students are. If you have some kind of selection going on in grade 4 and grade 6, your results may be comparable, but you have to remember that you're not talking about the same kinds of populations. You're talking about much more select groups in those cases.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll finish with Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): I'd like to take a second to commend both of our witnesses for their passion in promoting and maintaining immersion programs and linguistic duality.

Ms. Leclair, I want to know if I understood this correctly. You were responding to Madam St-Denis' question in regard to engaging in outings and various activities outside the classroom. Has this helped your retention rate? Do you think the federal government could help in getting those sorts of programs outside of your district and into other provinces and other French-speaking communities?

Ms. Valérie Leclair: I absolutely believe it has made an incredible difference for our students to see that French not only exists within the classroom, but also exists outside of the classroom.

We think it's important to attend outings within our community and to be part of national outings. I mentioned the youth ambassador program with French for the Future. These outings have made a huge difference for our students. They are able to realize that there is more to the program than just sitting in a chair and learning to read and write in French.

They come back with a renewed interest and a renewed passion. They share that with the other students in the classroom. We find it has made a huge difference for our students. The retention rate has actually increased for us.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: As part of the potential new programs you spoke of in your speech, do you think the federal government could help in creating programs that make this type of access outside of your walls, for lack of a better way of putting it, more accessible?

Ms. Valérie Leclair: I believe it is an area in which the federal government could provide some support and that absolutely would benefit all students in Canada. I'm thinking especially of students who come from lower socio-economic homes, where they're not able to afford outings such as this.

I'm thinking of the SEVEC program and how we have sent some of our classes on the SEVEC programs and how they've come back. Some of those students would never have had the opportunity to do that on their own with their parents or to go on an exchange trip or just a trip to Quebec.

Situations where the federal government could provide some support in that area definitely would help.

● (1730)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

You have actually segued quite nicely into my second exploration.

We've been doing the study for a while and we've heard about many things. There are many things that have been echoed right across the country, such as accessibility to programs and so forth, but this is the first time I'm hearing things broken down on a socio-economic level. Even the commissioner who spoke before you mentioned that there seems to be difficulty with people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and areas having access to immersion programs.

I wonder if you can elaborate on that a bit more.

Ms. Valérie Leclair: I will answer your question, and then I'll pass this on to my colleague, Marie Commance-Shulko, who is the French immersion consultant and works very closely with our schools.

We work very closely with our planning department, because they do work with the communities, to find out where we have parents and families who have the desire to learn French. We have found that we are getting a lot of immigrants coming into Edmonton and this is what they want. They want their children to speak French and English. They already speak another language, but they believe that their children, to be truly Canadian, should be able to speak both official languages.

We have been able to open two schools, actually, in areas that are not affluent. These students are doing extremely well in these schools. We are working very closely with all of these schools to make sure, as I indicated in my speech earlier, that all kids have access to French immersion, that it's not a program of elitists.

I'm going to pass this on to my colleague.

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Ms. Marie Commance-Shulko (French Immersion Consultant, Support for Staff and Students, Edmonton Public School Board): No, that's fine.

Ms. Valérie Leclair: No?

That's fine. Thank you.

The Chair: I want to thank all of our witnesses for their testimony and their briefs. This has been very helpful in informing us for the writing of our report. Thank you very much for taking the time to be here. It was a very informative hour for us.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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