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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 46 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

We acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe people.

[Translation]

Today we are beginning our study on indigenous languages.

[English]

We are pleased to welcome Blaire Gould, who is the executive director of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, as well as Gerry Guillet, who is here in person, who is the director of education at the Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority. Welcome to both of you.

Just before we get going, I'll make the usual introductory comments.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

[Translation]

For interpretation, those using Zoom can choose floor audio, English or French using the little globe icon at the bottom of the screen. Those in the room can use the headset and select their preferred channel. When questions are asked in Inuktitut, choose the interpretation language of your choice.

[English]

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as well as we can.

Each witness will have five minutes for opening remarks. We will start with Ms. Blaire Gould.

Ms. Gould, if you are ready, the floor is yours for the next five minutes.

Ms. Blaire Gould (Executive Director, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey): Thank you.

[Witness spoke in Mi'kmaq and provided the following text:]

Wela'lloq, ta'n tel pekitimioq.

[Witness provided the following translation:]

Thank you for inviting me here today.

[English]

I had certainly hoped to be there in person, but maybe next time.

Mi'kmaq language has been on a decline over the last number of decades.

In comparative studies done in 1999 and 2013 by Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, language data in age populations found that generally the population aged 40 and above are not in an immediate threat to their understanding and speaking of Mi'kmaq; however, those 30 and under were faced with a sudden decrease in the population of speakers, but generally had a good range of people who understood Mi'kmaq. They were not able to speak it but were able to understand. Those under the age of 20—from zero to 20—were dangerously low in both the population of speakers and those who understood Mi'kmaq. We projected some linear and exponential data bringing us to 13 years later from 2013, and we predict certainly a bigger decline in those populations of speakers.

We try to project our data and our discussion with community around the realities of this data and where we sit today from where we sat in 2013. I indicated to communities that if nothing changes, this is the predicted decline, and much of it is critical. A lot of it, especially for those zero to 12, is “sleeping”, meaning that there are no active speakers in those age populations.

Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, along with communities, implemented quick measures and put them into place, such as teacher development, language planning curriculum and program development, and continue to do so year over year.

Standing here—virtually, of course—is something that I have done in the past as I speak to the benefit of the Indigenous Languages Act. Along with Chief Denny, I helped shape what the act looks like. We were able to receive feedback from our nation and heard engagement from across the nation of Canada, which we bring here today. We sit in favour of the act. We sit in favour of more sustainable funding to implement the measures required to sustain and revitalize languages.

Of course, speaking as a resident of the Atlantic region, and more specifically Nova Scotia, what has this act done for us? It's been a little time since 2019, when the act was passed. We have had our common share of struggles in the last couple of years. It certainly has not deterred us from the work we're doing. Very plainly, what has this done for us? I can explain what we feel: that the Indigenous Languages Act helped us advance here in Nova Scotia as a Mi'kmaq nation. We have benefited from the act. There are sections within the act that prompt provinces and territories to do work to help nations revitalize and reclaim their languages.

I'm very proud to stand here today and let you know that we co-developed legislation called the "Mi'kmaw Language Act"—"An Act to Recognize, Promote and Support the Revitalization and Reclamation of the Mi'kmaw Language"—here in Nova Scotia. We co-developed this last year and submitted it to the bill system in February 2022. In April, we saw the first, second and third readings unanimously pass through the government. As you know, we have a really unique government system.

Currently in Nova Scotia, we have a Conservative leadership, but we really collectively work with all members of government. We recognize our past work with the Liberal government and how we started the advancement of this work and concluded it with the Conservative government, as well as the NDP government. It was quite unique in that it received unanimous support in April 2022.

We're self-determined in our nation and recognize that we have our own functions of laws and our own processes for laws to be passed, so we certainly respect the way Nova Scotia planned to uphold and proclaim their law. We did so in a joint way in July 2022. The law itself came into effect on October 1. It's a significant day for the Mi'kmaq, being Mi'kmaq Treaty Day here in Nova Scotia.

What does this act aim to do for us, and what supports does it give us? For us, being very distinct here in Nova Scotia, we are just one nation. There is only the Mi'kmaq nation here, so we have one language here in Nova Scotia, which is Mi'kmaq. The act recognizes Mi'kmaq as the original language of this land, among other things. Very plainly, it aims to develop a strategy and an action plan to revitalize the language. We have gotten to work, and it's still very fresh, but we're looking forward to the future there.

Aside from that, there is a financial benefit of the act. Currently, through the act, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey is a third party manager to the indigenous languages component. We are currently not in any section 8 or 9 deals with the federal government, but we are exploring some options there. We do manage this small pot of money for the indigenous languages component. This allows us to really make the decisions as a collective to fund projects.

What that means in terms of investment is that, with the ongoing funding, without the enhancements of funding, that brings approximately \$500,000 to Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey. That translates to about one and a half projects that communities apply for and that we manage and provide support for, so that is not sustainable.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gould.

We have to allow time for questions, so please wrap up very quickly, or, if you're ready, we'll proceed to questions.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Yes, I'm almost done.

MK receives that \$500,000 as part of the ongoing \$70-million national investment. With the enhancements, we've seen an increase to \$1.2 million. Again, that translates to about five projects, and we have 13 communities, so we're still not seeing the sustainable funding that we had anticipated in this rollout. We're here to speak in support of increasing funding to support the efforts of the Mi'kmaq here in Nova Scotia. I just wanted to put into perspective what national investment looks like in a regional, provincial context.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gould

We'll now go to Mr. Gerry Guillet, director of education at the Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority.

Mr. Guillet, you have five minutes.

Mr. Gerry Guillet (Director of Education, Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority): Thank you very much, honourable Chairman.

Good morning, honourable members. I'm Gerry Guillet, director of education and CEO for the Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority of northern Saskatchewan. Our authority is very young in its establishment. We were first organized and have been operating since August 2019. In establishing our authority to represent the far northern isolated communities of Fond Du Lac, Black Lake and Hatchet Lake first nations, we deliver educational programming for the schools. We have four schools of 1,300 students.

The Dene language, culture and land-based programming are an important part of our authority. It is our first strategic plan in improving the language abilities of our students. The remoteness of our communities creates many challenges for the authority, and we had to house our education centre in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. We can only reach our communities via air travel. One community has an all-season road, which is a 14-hour drive to the south in Prince Albert. Having said that, our land-based culture and language programs are our first priority in the strategic plan of our authority.

We have many aspects to our programming that are vital, including literacy and numeracy. However, given the culture where our students are not using their language at a significant level, certainly one of our major attempts is to improve and provide more language opportunities.

It is important to note that 75% of the staff in the schools in our communities are local and only 60% of them are able to speak the Dene language. We are planning that we would like to instill in our schools Dene immersion programming. We come across many challenges in that aspect, certainly, with the lack of resources in the Dene language. Our elders in our communities are very strong within their language, their culture and their faith dimension.

We certainly feel that the government's Indigenous Languages Act is one that we'd look at in terms of formulating all our strategies as we want to plan initiatives and activities for restoring and maintaining the fluency in our Dene language.

Our attempts to create technological tools and educational materials, including audio and video recordings, have met many challenges. We have not been able, as a new authority, to access the funds that are required for us to realize those visions, goals and aspects for our children and our community members within our communities.

Our coordinator, who is very fluent in the Dene language, has done a tremendous amount of work in the three years of our existence to improve significantly the ability of our teachers and our programs in our schools to include the Dene language in all the instructional materials as much as possible.

In the daily life of our students in the classrooms, our Dene language is spoken almost as much as the English language, despite the fact that we follow provincial curricula, all in English. Dene certainly is a language that is used throughout our schools and in our communities.

What we are asking for at this opportunity is the funding that our authority desperately needs in order to revitalize the language of our Dene people. It is being lost at a significant rate, and it is our goal to revitalize our language within our culture of our Dene people.

• (1115)

We have not realized any significant funding increase to date in order for us to move forward in translating many of the resources available in English into the Dene language, so that our immersion programs have the resources for our teachers to teach the language at a significant level.

I take this opportunity to express to the committee that our organization is a model. Although we are only three years old, we have established an organization founded on children coming first. Our board of directors is very determined. They hold their children, first and foremost, in their hearts and their deliberations.

All of our programming and initiatives are directed toward our children. In particular, our language is sacred to them, which we desperately want to revitalize. Our children need to learn more of their language, their land base and their culture. We are attempting to do that in revitalizing the language aspect within our communities and, in particular, within our schools. To initiate any kind of immersion program in Dene, we lack many of the resources to enable that vision to move forward.

It is my intent, Mr. Chairman and honourable members, to present to you today a challenge that the Athabasca Denesuline Ed-

ucation Authority faces in revitalizing our language, certainly according to Bill C-91, the Indigenous Languages Act. We are really looking at having more opportunity within the funding regime so that we can address those issues for our communities and our people.

I thank you for that.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guillet.

We will now proceed to a round of questions. We will begin with—

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Davies): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Denny logged on.

The Chair: Okay.

Before we go to questions, we'll have our third witness here.

Welcome, Chief Leroy Denny of the Eskasoni First Nation, to this panel. We will provide you with five minutes to make introductory remarks, and then we'll get down to the questions.

If you're ready, Chief Denny, the microphone is yours for five minutes.

Chief Leroy Denny (Eskasoni Band Council, Eskasoni First Nation): Good afternoon.

My name is Chief Leroy Denny from Eskasoni. Welcome to you all from Eskasoni First Nation.

I know that in the opening statement on behalf of the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, our executive director touched on a few things there with the ongoing funding that has been discussed. MK receives annually \$500,000. We are currently managing the funding through the indigenous language component.

The current investment from the ILC funding provides the region with a total of \$1.2 million, and the goal of the indigenous language component funding is to support community-based projects that contribute to the strengthening of our cultural identity, as well as the preservation and revitalization of the Mi'kmaq language, which my community has been really pushing for a long time, and MK has been pushing.

An example is our all-immersion school here in Eskasoni. Our community members Tom and Carol Anne have been contributing to the resources by making movies and translating movies and cartoons. Even as of now, they are in Paris for the beginning of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. I just want to call out to them for these projects, which are working quite well.

To put this into perspective, the funding we receive allows only approximately four or five projects. This means that we are forced to really choose certain projects to approve and others to deny, and we have to cut from everybody in order to provide a little to everyone. These projects are coming in, and the ideas that are coming in from our language communities are amazing projects.

We're trying to help our elders, because many of our elders are starting to pass away. Every time an elder passes away, they take the whole knowledge like a library with them, so time is of the essence here. It's really important that we have extra support and extra funding. This is simply not nearly enough of an investment. We really need to start working to move more quickly, move faster, and have more funds.

We have 13 Mi'kmaq communities in our province, and we need more funding in order to fully support everyone's efforts. We're starting to look into music and videos, and we're trying to really find this generation. Considering the generation that I grew up in, these are different now. There's a different generation, and we're trying to promote and revitalize our languages through technology and through movies in some way.

If this government is serious about the objectives set out in the Indigenous Languages Act, the funding must back the objectives. We have all the objectives laid out in front of you. Again, our concern is that it is limited. Certainly from this act, we need more room to work with our communities and all those who submit proposals, such as MK. Many proposals we submit so people like Tom and Carol Anne and our schools.... We're in the process of building a Mi'kmaq language studio to translate movies and cartoons and have young people be involved in creating and developing film for this generation for our communities.

Again, time is of the essence for us, as our Mi'kmaq language community is getting smaller and we're starting to lose more and more of our knowledge-keepers and especially our language warriors. Again, I hope that this helps to make it possible, and this is a plea that we need more funding for this and more room.

Wela'liq.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Chief Denny.

For the benefit of our committee members, we're going to have time for only one round, but I think we can increase the time for each of the four speakers to seven minutes.

We will start with Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Vidal, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all our guests today for appearing and presenting your testimony for us.

I'm going to start with Mr. Guillet.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Guillet. You talked in your presentation about the priorities of your educational authority being language, culture and land-based learning. I know that in earlier conversations we have talked about that being combined with literacy, mathematics and retention levels.

Recently you were denied a funding application from Heritage Canada for language programming in your school. I have two quick questions on that. Were you given a reason for the denial? Second, what could you have done? What would you have been able to do

with that funding for your students in northeast Saskatchewan if you had received that?

Mr. Gerry Guillet: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

The only reasons we were given.... Our application was submitted in November 2021. On December 2, 2022, I finally received correspondence from Canadian Heritage, which said, "in a context of limited funds, I regret to inform you that at this time, the Department is unable to approve a financial contribution for your project."

Our project was to revitalize our language and to have the ability to provide resources for our teachers. If we are to implement an immersion Dene language program in our schools, teachers need resources to teach with, and there are extremely limited resources available in Dene. Our project was to provide more resources through translating current English material into our Dene language and to provide some videos of our elders and also some audio of our elders.

We had applied for a grant of \$300,000. Our project would have cost \$450,000. We applied for \$300,000 and were denied.

Mr. Gary Vidal: All right. Thank you for that.

Further on the funding angle, you said that when you established the authority in 2019, this was a relatively new organization. There was approval for establishing the organization, but there was an agreement or an understanding that the operational funding would come as you flesh this out a bit further, I believe. Can you elaborate a bit on where you're at now in that process and any successes or challenges that you face in that process now in 2022?

• (1130)

Mr. Gerry Guillet: Yes. Thank you.

When we submitted our agreement with ISC and it was formalized in August 2019, that submission of our agreement included a comprehensive budget. The authority received acknowledgement from our leadership in our three communities that the authority would be responsible for pre-kindergarten to grade 12 programming in their schools. We would assume full responsibility financially with facilities, programming delivery and all aspects of the delivery of education—similar to, for example, a provincial school division, although we remain an independent authority and non-political in its total context.

Within our submission was a budget submitted to ISC to recognize the geographic location of our communities. They are in the extreme north, just south of the Northwest Territories border. The isolation factor certainly creates many challenges for us to serve our schools in a comprehensive manner. The funding that was submitted to ISC was totally based on need in terms of program facilities and the operation of an education authority or a school division in a county.

To date, after three and a half years of trying to negotiate and finalize the funding, that is the only piece of our agreement that remains to be settled. We have not as yet had any kind of commitment. We have presented many arguments to finalize our agreement with our funding based on need, and every year the costs are going up and up. The funding that we currently receive is strictly what the bands were receiving at the time of our inception. All funding, rather than being directed to the bands and the leadership, is now directed specifically to the authority to operate the schools and programs in every aspect, including transportation, facilities, teacher wages, etc.

That funding doesn't even come close, now that the ISC has gone to a provincial formula. In Saskatchewan, the provincial formula does not meet the needs of our provincial schools, let alone our isolated communities. No other division has the isolation factor that we do, with its challenges. Just the flight to get my board members into our Prince Albert office for regular meetings, two days of meetings, costs our authority \$45,000. That's just to get our board members there for two days.

On our funding, we have been pleading and pleading to finalize this aspect of our agreement, which to date still has not realized any kind of commitment. We have pleaded also to have an audience with Treasury Board so that we can present our package and defend it with the knowledge we have of our communities in terms of the geography and the challenges of isolated communities. We've not yet had any kind of response from the minister's office in terms of having that ability, knowing full well that others have had that ability to present their funding ask in front of Treasury Board.

All we ask for is equity and the same opportunity to defend our ask, based totally on program needs and on the needs of our students, whose current education is strictly academic. I have 50 years' experience in education. I'm not new to this game. When I see our children in our schools receiving a strictly academic program, what incentive is there for them to come to school other than to be with their peers?

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

We have to go to the next questioner.

Mr. Battiste, you have seven minutes.

• (1135)

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to ask Chief Leroy and Blaire Gould to talk a little bit about some of the best practices around Mi'kmaq language. I hear you 100% about some of the need for more funding. I think that's something we need to look at as a committee, advocating for that funding.

But let's say funding wasn't an obstacle. What are some of the factors that lead to fluency in Mi'kmaq communities these days? I believe your organization represents 12 out of 13 of the Mi'kmaq communities. You've taken jurisdiction over education since the 1990s. What are some of the things we're funding that are working? As well, what factors lead to a child being fluent again?

Blaire, you might want to start with that.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Certainly.

We're no strangers to advocating and launching a lot of different programs and services. One of the greatest benefits for us and one of the factors in fluency is that languages need to evolve, so we've certainly embraced this, that the Mi'kmaq language needs to evolve. Ensuring that it is accessible, that it is current, that it is not outdated is something that we're always on top of.

I could show you a little bit of some samples that I got out today. We've created an oral language program that looks at assessing the oral language of children regardless of what language they speak, but most important, the exposure that they get to Mi'kmaq at home, so really connecting the home to the learning and the school and all of that so that it is centred around the child.

We have developed a lot of content that supports this program. We've done it in mathematics. We have created this supporting resource tool not just for teachers and not just for education systems, but for their homes. We understand and fully embrace that children also learn at home and their parents play a critical role in their lives.

Further into that, we've developed endless amounts of books and ways to support and tie in cultural learning and tie in—

Mr. Jaime Battiste: These are all in the Mi'kmaq language, I understand.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Absolutely. We've done planners. We've done books centred around what it means to be a treaty person, certainly for us, but a little deeper than that, understanding the role of family and the responsibility within the family and the roles that we play within that.

For teachers, we've done scripts and books on how to read and write Mi'kmaq. We've done interactive games and activities, making sure that we're keeping things fresh and we're keeping things modern.

On the more popular side of things, we have used a lot of resources making them look beautiful. This was certainly a priority for us because the English resources are certainly very beautiful and so when we publish content, we want to make it look just as good. We have our learning curriculum, our language curriculum, which we assess, evaluate and monitor, on how to learn the Mi'kmaq language in the systems we are in.

Also, assessment is a big component of that. Certainly we're not strangers to creating things. We've done that. We're really careful about the way we implement things and we do it with a lot of good intentions and a lot of spirit and support. When we launch programs, it's not just a launching of the program. It's understanding that we're going to continue to be present and supportive throughout the journey of implementation before we take a step back. Certainly we are of that mindset.

In addition—and I think Chief Denny could elaborate on it a bit more—we have one immersion program in the entirety of the collective of Mi'kmaq nations. We have one immersion program. It is quite successful, but again, it exists only in one community. There is a lot of desire among other communities to have the same thing that Eskasoni has, but they are unable to, whether it be funding, whether it be numbers, whether it be support—

● (1140)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: In terms of time, Blaire, I'd like to hear from Chief Leroy.

Chief Leroy, your community has been successful in getting a full immersion school from grades 1 to 4. My son is a graduate of that school. What is the community doing to supplement the teachers who are doing the hard work at the immersion schools? What are the communities really focusing on, the cultural practices? I know the Minister of Canadian Heritage is going to want to hear about the other things we're doing besides school.

Chief Leroy Denny: As a community, we do our best to.... It starts with leadership. We speak our language at our leadership table. We've started to do many things at the Mi'kmaq language studio. We're really focused on that and translating signs around the community, having people hear and see more signage around the community. That's one thing, seeing, and supporting whatever initiatives we have in the community. If I speak, sometimes I speak my language.

It's very challenging. There are a lot of successful things. We try everything. We're working with MK. We work with our partners to make our language work. We try creative things, from music to translating movies, as Tom and Carol Anne are doing. Also, they're reaching out to TikTok, having young people help them along the way. We're trying to stay on top of the game.

One thing I see that I feel is working.... This is very challenging compared to when I was younger, because then everybody spoke. Everybody was conversing. These days, everybody is talking through the phone, and there's not much conversation from our people today. We need to develop programs for young people. COVID really wasn't a good help because we didn't visit each other.

We go back to our culture. We talk to each other and have these programs, like tea and toast programs, and meet with elders, those types of things. Today we have podcasts. We have all this technology that we can really tap into.

There is one thing that really struck me about one of my councilmen. His name is Joef Bernard, and he's a land-based person. He's always on the land with his son. His son is three years old. His son is fluent in Mi'kmaq. He would always teach him about the land, about the medicines. He is very fluent. One thing that really struck

me is that he told me he tries to confuse him when they watch cartoons, because everyone is watching cartoons. Most kids are watching the iPads and those things. He told me that he puts on a cartoon that's not in English. It would be in a different language, like Spanish or other languages, just to confuse him because kids only watch the cartoon, the colours and everything. He would do that. He was hoping that there would be more product out there, cartoons translated for toddlers, because they are like sponges. Three-, four- and five-year-olds are like sponges. Whatever they hear and see....

It's like a trend. Right now, the trend is that everybody is speaking English. People will just.... With all that work we do in immersion and all that families do to try to really help their children speak the language, once they go out in the outside world, they get involved in the trends, speaking English or whatever slang we sometimes hear in certain communities.

That's basically it. I think land-based culture is also key, teaching our children about the land and its terms—

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Denny. I apologize for cutting you off. We have to keep to a certain time.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses today for sharing their knowledge. I would like to take this opportunity to wish them a happy International Decade of Indigenous Languages, which started this year. I hope this decade will be a positive one for indigenous languages.

As an MP, it is my pleasure to represent speakers of the Innu language, which is very much alive in my riding. We have a very vibrant cultural institute whose mission is to strengthen and sustain the language. That's what we all want for all indigenous languages.

Ms. Gould talked about how the situation is critical for people from zero to 12 years of age who do not speak the language actively at this time.

Mr. Denny talked about how, unfortunately, time is running out as we lose our elders, who are really our living libraries.

We heard a little about the \$1.2 million for one-time projects under various programs. I'd like to hear more from the witnesses. Yes, a bill was passed in 2019, and that takes several years to be implemented, but there are still needs that have to be met in the meantime. There are budgets and we can already start thinking about what's going to happen when the act is fully in force.

What kind of funding do communities like yours need to revitalize, maintain and strengthen indigenous languages?

As the minister knows, the ask in this bill was for adequate, stable, long-term funding, which is not what we have right now. I think Mr. Guillet mentioned that when he talked about requests others made that were granted by Treasury Board while his Dene community did not get any funding.

Mr. Guillet, Mr. Denny and Ms. Gould, in that order, can you tell us what your communities need in terms of stable, adequate, long-term funding to strengthen, revitalize and maintain indigenous languages?

• (1145)

Mr. Gerry Guillet: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

That's really what we're asking for, funding to continue revitalizing the Dene language in northern Saskatchewan. We haven't yet received funding to continue or expand our language and culture programs. We still want to implement immersion programs to make the language accessible to young people in particular, but we don't have the resources. It's always a huge challenge to get the resources we need to offer instruction in our language.

[English]

The Chair: Chief Denny, perhaps you could go next, and then Ms. Gould. You have, between the two of you, three minutes to respond to the question from Madame Gill.

Chief Leroy Denny: What we need to succeed in the future of our language is a very interesting question. It's a no-brainer here. It's more money for this resource, as I developed in my opening statement. I believe that to help the families and the communities, it'll have to be...it's not just school-driven. I know we get help for schools, but it has to be community-driven as well. Work with our elders, our youth and families to meet that support.

I mentioned my colleague, my fellow councillor, who is helping those families and the children get the real resources, trying to accommodate their needs and their wants—which are things like cartoons—and to fully fund our studios. Studios are very important.

On training, the technology part is the hard part. Focusing on these technology aspects of video and audio is a lot of work and a lot of money, and there needs to be investment for that part.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Before Ms. Gould answers, I would like to ask Mr. Guillet and Mr. Denny a follow-up question.

The Indigenous Languages Act it is not yet fully implemented, but has the work that's been done so far begun to have an impact on funding? Do you feel that you're getting more stable, long-term, adequate funding, as requested, or do you feel that the money isn't coming through yet and doesn't seem likely to?

You first, Mr. Guillet.

• (1150)

Mr. Gerry Guillet: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

Funding is exactly what we want. We need a budget that will enable us to make our vision a reality and revitalize the Dene lan-

guage, not only in schools, but in the community as a whole. We haven't received any funding yet. We've submitted requests, but they've been denied. That's why I'm asking for at least enough funding to revitalize our Dene language.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I don't know if Ms. Gould has a few seconds to answer the question.

[English]

Ms. Blaire Gould: Thank you for your question.

What does it take? I think we can certainly elaborate on what it takes, but if we want to just scale it back to what it is now versus what it would be for everybody, it's important that we separate the language delivery in schools and their operation from that in the community, because those thrive in different forums and things like that.

From a school perspective, let's take a look at what it currently costs to operate an immersion school, and that's a little less than \$1 million. If we wanted to open that all the way up to the secondary institution, we're looking at intensive financial support there.

The money that we manage from the indigenous languages component is \$1.2 million, and, as I indicated, that's for four projects. So, if that met four communities, and we did one project each for those communities, there are still nine other communities that do not receive anything. That is not equitable to those communities. If we wanted to say, "We must meet everybody there", we're talking about a minimum of \$4 million to just satisfy one project for those communities. Most often, communities have multiple projects as their desirables, and that's just at the minimum amount.

Then, in terms of community, certainly, as well, the cost of the whole community approach is quite different. It's important to always differentiate that and consider that.

That's my response to your question, Ms. Gill.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gould.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

We'll now go to our last speaker, Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Idlout, you will have seven minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:]

Also, this is an old one from B.C.: \$700,000 a year for French. I know that when I was on the task force there were 60 languages of first peoples in Canada, with the Inuit language being one and, therefore, all the rest being Métis and first nations. Of those, 50 languages are in B.C., and although there is \$700,000 a year for the French language, and each language in B.C. is a separate language, they are not getting that kind of funding. This paragraph 14 in the preamble is also very important to me.

I am now going to page 5—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kublu.

Ms. Kublu, unfortunately we have to stick to a schedule because of questions. Perhaps you'll be able to bring out some of these points when you're questioned on them. Thank you for your opening testimony.

We will now go to Grand Chief Ron Tremblay.

You will have five minutes to make introductory remarks. Go ahead, Grand Chief.

• (1215)

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay (Wolastoqey Language Developer and Teacher, Wolastoq Grand Council): [*Witness spoke in Wolastoqiyik as follows:*]

Qey, Woliwon, ntoliwis nil Wespasahuwet Possesom EtoLaqosit naka Kahkakuhsuwakutom naka Malsomuwakutom. Nuceyaw nil Wolastokuk.

[*Wolastoqiyik text translated as follows:*]

Hello, thank you, my name is Morning Star Burning and from the Crow Clan and Wolf Clan. I am from Wolastokuk territory.

[*English*]

Greetings. My traditional name is Morning Star Burning, and I represent, through my mother's side, the Crow Clan and, from my father's side, the Wolf Clan. I am from the homeland we call the Wolastoqey. We are the people of the beautiful and bountiful river.

I just stepped out of a *mite* ceremony, here in Winnipeg. I flew here a day and a half ago. Senator Murray Sinclair is part of our beautiful ceremonies. He spoke yesterday, at the tail end of our session, about how important language is to all indigenous peoples and how it connects us deeply to who we are and our relationship to the land, waters and all the fauna and flora. Plus, he said, it points out what our responsibilities are, as a nation and people—as citizens of our nations.

I just turned 62 years old a week ago. I am probably one of the youngest fluent speakers of our Wolastoqey language. Unfortunately, people younger than me can possibly comprehend what we're saying, but the younger ones cannot speak it. They are not fluent at all in our Wolastoqey language.

Back when I was born, in 1960, you could walk around my community of Neqotkuk, which is called Tobique, and that was all you heard: our beautiful Wolastoqey language. Because of Catholicism and the provincial school system, our language decreased rapidly within two decades. It is unfortunate that our language is on the

brink of extinction. We have approximately 10,000 citizens in our nation, but fewer than 100 speakers are left. I have five sisters and four brothers. Fortunately, we grew up in a home where our parents and grandparents spoke fluently, so we're all fluent speakers, but we're some of the few who can still speak our language. We are in very dire straits, right now.

On a positive note, this past September, we started a pre-K immersion program outside the city of Fredericton. It was started by Lisa Perley-Dutcher, who is a first cousin of mine. We have six students there. I go in once a week to help and guide the teachers in our language, but we lack funding from both the provincial and federal governments. We have put in various proposals, but very few are approved. We are very fortunate that the mayor and council of the City of Fredericton gifted us with a building to teach the language in. It's an on-land teaching process we're doing there.

I was fortunate to visit our Maori sisters and brothers in New Zealand, approximately four years ago. I was so amazed and astonished that every one of their communities had a Maori immersion program. They were getting full support from the New Zealand government, because their language, over 35 years ago, had fewer than five speakers left. With the hard work of those five grandmothers, plus the support of the New Zealand government, they have more than.... I believe 75% are now fluent in their beautiful Maori language.

• (1220)

We are in dire straits on the east coast. In the province of New Brunswick, the Wolastoqey language is dying. We need funding and support, especially through the immersion programs. There was an elder woman, Christine Saulis, who taught for over 40 years in the provincial school system in a Wolastoqey core program. Close to her death, I remember talking to Christine. She was such a beautiful, kind lady. She said, “Ronnie, in all the years that I taught, I never produced one fluent speaker, because these little core language programs, 20 minutes to 30 minutes a day, do not work. We need immersion programs.”

I am proposing that the federal government put monies and funding to support immersion programs in our communities, as well as all over our nations.

I will end with that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Tremblay.

We'll now go to our first round of questions, for six minutes.

I think it's Mr. Vidal, again, but correct me if I'm wrong.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Mr. Chair, it's Mr. Zimmer.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

Thank you both for your comments. My questions are going to be predominantly to Alexina.

I really like what you just said, Mr. Tremblay, about the outcomes, because that's the basis of what I'm going to ask Ms. Kublu about.

As a former teacher, I think what we consider a success is when we have students who are actually able to achieve what we set out to have them learn at the beginning of the year. It's part of the joy of teaching, but it's also part of what the course is meant to do.

Mr. Tremblay, I guess what I'm concerned about is when I heard you say that unless it was full immersion, you weren't seeing high success rates. You had seen only one student, you say—and I don't want to put words in your mouth—who actually learned the language or was successful.

I'll ask maybe Ms. Kublu about that. We talk about programs like this. It isn't just about the finance. It isn't just about the money. It's actually seeing those kids and students...and it's not only kids. It can be adults who have learned their language for the first time. That's a great joy.

What would be the best way, Ms. Kublu, to see our dream of enabling indigenous and Inuit people to learn their language and also pass it on? What do we need to do to make that happen at the highest success rate possible?

The Chair: Ms. Kublu, you're on mute.

Ms. Alexina Kublu: Now I'm unmuted. I do that when I'm teaching as well.

The traditional method of passing on knowledge among Inuit is—as I think it is among other peoples, as well—by doing. It's by watching and doing, not sitting down in a classroom and having someone talk and talk and talk at you. This happens during the summer, mainly, because it is quite cold in the winter up here. People go out on the land, away from the community, and they will focus on a skill, whether it's how to make a qamutiik or how to make a harpoon, or sewing and working with seal skin. It's to relive the Inuit culture using Inuktitut.

I know that in high school here, as well as in the lower grades, they get taken out on the land by hunters and people who know what they're doing, so that they can be away from the classroom with someone who is talking to them in Inuktitut and so that they're digesting the language as they're living it.

We also sit in the classroom. I'm sad to say that our classrooms do not have beautiful, ready-made teaching material. I was—

• (1225)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Ms. Kublu, I'm sorry. I have to interrupt. I know the time is short here, but that's what I was going to get to.

We're talking about languages. How do we implement them so that they actually work? We all want to see Inuit maintain their language and maintain the traditions. However, from a federal perspective, is the set-up that the current government has successful to date?

If you were to give them advice—and I guess you're getting to the curriculum part of it—how would you structure it better, as an instructor yourself? How would you structure it better, so that we see a higher success rate at the end of the program? It's not just dumping money at something and spending a lot of money on something, but having something in which we see successful students who complete the program and have a good knowledge of your language.

Maybe explain that. As an instructor, I'm sure you would be able to draw up a plan that would work to see it realized. Speak to that.

Ms. Alexina Kublu: Currently, in the teacher education program, the instructors have to speak Inuktitut to our students. It's not just hearing it; we're teaching the class in Inuktitut.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's like immersion.

Ms. Alexina Kublu: It's not just having a subject. It's not just the subject of Inuktitut—which, I'm sad to say, beyond grade four, is what it is in the schools. Inuktitut is no longer a language of instruction, but a subject, and all of the other subjects are in English.

What we're trying to do in the teacher education program is teach the subjects in Inuktitut.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Kublu.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mrs. Atwin for six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

I'll be asking most of my questions of Mr. Tremblay.

Woli-nipayiw. Kulahsikhulpon. Welcome to our committee today.

I'm speaking from the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Wolastoqiyik here in Fredericton.

It's so important for me to have you join us today to speak in the open and to our government about a lot of the conversations that we have around the dinner table. I know just how important immersion is, in particular. I'd love it if you could speak a bit more about the new initiative that was launched here in our area on immersion and, specifically, the role of the grandmothers and the grandfathers in passing this language on. Also, what are the challenges in getting youth engaged? We know there's that gap in the middle.

Thank you. *Wela'lin.*

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: This whole process of getting the Kehkimin School ready last September was a huge chore because a lot of the people who were part of the development of the school have not taught in that setting before. There was a lack of readiness and a lack of education in teaching teachers how to teach the language. We had about one month to get the school ready and to show the curriculum to the teachers. It was really fast-paced and by the time the pre-K students came in, the teachers hadn't had a chance to get the proper training.

There was a lack of funding in the training, as well as in the curriculum development. We were working pretty much day and night trying to get the curriculum ready for the teachers, and even though we did produce a lot of resources for the teachers, they lacked time spent prior to the kids coming in.

There has been a learning curve for us. We started in September, and here it is December and it's just been in the last few weeks that the teachers really had time to sit down to go through the curriculum resources that were provided for them.

Then having the elders and the speakers coming to assist them in going through the curriculum has been a chore because there are only a few speakers around in the area who can do that.

We're trying to focus on land-based teachings. Because we're near a city, we would really love to have the area to have an immersion school right in the woods, somewhere near water. We do have Killarney Lake right there, but still there's a lot of traffic that comes in and out. There are walkers going through the park and around the lake so it's not completely in solitude and away from the public.

Those are the challenges: funding for the adequate training for teachers and giving them proper time to go over all the curriculum that we produced for them. Mind you, it's been successful up to now. We're hoping to move from pre-K to kindergarten next year, and each year move up, hopefully to grade 4, but again, space is going to be limited because we need a larger building to have these classes.

Those are the struggles: the lack of funding and the lack of space. A lot of the money, the funding and the grants, that we received is not toward the infrastructure for buildings or renovations. It's mainly toward the cost of providing for teachers and a few resources and so on.

It's been a challenge, but we've had success with these beautiful young children. When I go in, I speak the language to them and they respond to me in the language about the weather or what they're doing that day.

We're hoping we will get future assistance in funding from the government.

I don't know if I completed the question or not.

• (1230)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: That's great.

You spoke about resources, and I know that over your long career in education and as an advocate for language, you've worked on a number of apps and websites. Can you speak to technology? Is it working? Is it enough to grab the attention of the younger genera-

tion? Are there successes? Is it a best practice we should use moving forward?

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: Well, just being here at the *mite* ceremony, I had a chance to listen to some speakers yesterday talking about languages. A huge concern was about the time spent by our young people on mobile devices, be it phones or computers. They said, you know, if you want to learn a language, you have to go on the earth to get your hands dirty. You have to connect with our lands and our waters. Those are our teachers. Our language came from the land, not from a computer or from sitting in a classroom. We do need some technical support or technical curriculum to assist the teachers, or even the families at home, that way, but I think the real teachings come from the land.

In terms of giving the responsibilities back to us to get back on the land, this fall we went to skin a deer and tan the hide. These little ones were scraping and getting their hands bloody. They loved every minute of skinning the deer hide to make either clothing or drums. I incorporated the language within the whole process. This was an amazing event for three days for them.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Chief and Ms. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank Ms. Kublu and Chief Tremblay for being at this committee meeting. What they said about land was very interesting.

I should have started by wishing you a happy International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

The committee's goal is to study how the government can support language revitalization. The Indigenous Languages Act, Bill C-91, was passed in 2019, but time is running out. Just over the past 30 years, Ms. Kublu has seen knowledge of Inuktitut and the number of Inuktitut speakers decline. In theory, the act is supposed to be implemented over five years, but action must be taken. Even Mr. Tremblay said there's hardly anyone left under 60 who speaks his language, so revitalization has to happen through community initiatives. This shows us just how important it is to take significant measures now even though the act was passed in 2019. Ms. Kublu and Chief Tremblay talked both directly and indirectly about immersion.

Now back to the land issue. In my riding on the North Shore, we have the Innu first nation, whose language is very much alive. Having read the Innu-French dictionary, I learned that a lot of the terms have to do with the land and practices upon the land, so I certainly understand the importance of language.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: My hope, Ms. Kublu, is that to make this program successful, they would consult with people like you, especially those who are teachers, who are Inuit, who really know what needs to be done. You've talked about an immersion-type program. My daughter took French immersion, and that language just stuck, and she can speak it and understand it quite well as a result of that. My hope is that they would really be listening to people like you on the ground about how to make the program really work. I think it's one thing to provide resources to the program, but I think our bottom line is really providing resources to a program that will work, and I hope that the committee today and your testimony today will make that happen.

Thank you, Ms. Kublu.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

We'll go to either Mrs. Atwin or Mr. McLeod. I'm not sure which of the two.

Go ahead, Mrs. Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We talk a lot about the calls to action, truth and reconciliation, and the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and day schools. Grand Chief Tremblay, I'm wondering whether you could again speak to the coordinated effort we need to undertake now in order to return what was taken. Could you speak to that?

Thank you.

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: Sure. I've been in discussion with a few of my siblings, who have all been involved in curriculum development or teaching throughout the years. We've always talked about this. What is needed here is a board of speakers to help us create more curricula, as well as ideas about what needs to be done to preserve our language. There's been a lot of money wasted on core programs. As I said before, we know those don't work.

What's really needed is a whole section of our people who can sit down and speak the language, so we can start to record them, whether they're making baskets, carving, sewing or beading—have that documented and use it as a resource, because, as I said, we've lost a lot of our speakers in the last few months and years. We need this years ago.

This is a very slow process. I'm not pointing fingers at any federal or provincial party. We've been talking about this for decades and it's a very slow process. We need things done now.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, if you have a question, go ahead.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question about which actions the government should prioritize.

As we've seen, there are one-off programs and initiatives that can't fix everything, obviously, but do help with revitalization. Should there also be a program that provides large-scale, rapid as-

sistance to communities whose language is more endangered than other indigenous languages?

I'd like to hear from Ms. Kublu and then Chief Tremblay.

[*English*]

Ms. Alexina Kublu: *Qujannamiik.*

Yes, I think the levels of funding need to vary, because one level does not cover all. The ones where.... Revitalization takes a different form of presenting, whereas maintaining is a different way. You cannot treat the two as one. They are separate. Therefore, when funding is provided, it should be diverse in how the transmission is handled. It will vary as to what is best. Go for best practices.

The Chair: Go ahead, Chief Tremblay.

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: What was the question again? I kind of forgot. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Chief Tremblay, do you think the government should prioritize certain languages that are in greater danger of disappearing unless urgent action is taken?

I know there are already programs and that people want something large-scale and intensive. Do you think there should also be emergency programs and initiatives for endangered languages?

[*English*]

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: Yes, for sure. First and foremost, I think we need to strike up a board of people who are really concerned about the preservation of our language and get those people talking. This way we can start to produce something more in an immersion form on exactly how to go about preserving our languages and how to support a school like Kehkimin and our pre-K immersion school in Fredericton.

That should receive a huge amount of funding for creating a building, training the teachers, and training more teachers for the future, as well as funding for more curriculum development and equipment focused on land-based learning. As I said before, our language comes from the land. We need to get our young children back out to the land.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Ms. Idlout, if you have a question, please go ahead.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:]

Thank you.

Your presentations have been very useful and interesting. They've given us a better understanding of the local perspective and the practitioner's perspective.

If you were able to amend the Indigenous Languages Act, if you had that capability and that power, what would you change in the act?

Alexina, perhaps you can start.

[English]

Ms. Alexina Kublu: I'll send you my scribbles. I've gone through the act and shown the changes that I would make here and there.

One of them is that anywhere in the act that says "may", that should be changed to either "must" or "shall". "May" is waffling. "Must" means it has to get done.

The Chair: Thank you.

Chief Tremblay, did you want to make a final comment?

Grand Chief Ron Tremblay: Sure.

Unfortunately, I don't know the languages act, or haven't had a chance to go through it, but I totally agree with the previous speaker. The settlers' language is very deceiving sometimes, when you use words like "may" or "should", because in our indigenous languages, you either do it or you don't do it when you make a statement.

I strongly agree that the original languages of Canada should be recognized as first languages, not as third or second languages. Our languages should be the official languages of our homelands. French and English should be the secondary ones.

I'm a very strong advocate for our rights, especially through our ceremonies and through our languages. As I said at the beginning, Senator Murray Sinclair spoke last night so powerfully. He said that it is only through our languages that we will save who we are and what our purposes are here on earth.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Tremblay.

On that note, thank you very much to our two panellists this morning, Alexina Kublu from the Inuit community and Grand Chief Ron Tremblay from the Wolastoq Grand Council.

We very much appreciate both your taking the time to answer our questions and your opening remarks today. It will help us as we examine where we're at with indigenous languages. Certainly, you and the panel before you had some common themes on what needs to be done. We very much appreciate that.

With that—

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, there's a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, just bear with me a second.

With that, I just wanted to bring the panel to a close.

Who has the point of order?

The Clerk: It's Mr. Battiste.

The Chair: Just before we get to the point of order, Mr. Battiste, perhaps you could bear with me for a second.

I've heard quite a bit of chat about when the heritage minister and the commissioner of indigenous languages will appear. For those who have been wondering, that will be when we reconvene at the end of January. They were unable to come this week.

With respect to this week, there is always uncertainty every year about where we'll be at on Thursday as we approach the end of the fall session. For that reason, we decided not to invite any witnesses. At the moment, we have only committee business, and all we have on it, at the moment, is the work plan. I just wanted to make you aware of that in case you have any suggestions from the committee.

Mr. Battiste, do you have a suggestion?

● (1305)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Yes, Mr. Chair. There have been some discussions among the parties, and there is not an overwhelming need for committee business for the work plan. We would propose that no meeting take place on Thursday, allowing people to get home to their families during the Christmas break.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

Is there unanimous consent on that?

The Clerk: Yes, there is unanimous consent around the table.

The Chair: I sense a certain amount of enthusiasm.

Thank you very much. That motion—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I have a question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Actually, it's a comment. There hasn't been any discussion among the parties that I know of, but you certainly have my consent, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. I was told there was unanimous consent.

[English]

I guess it wasn't quite unanimous, but it is now. Thank you very much.

We will reconvene in January. By the way, the schedules could change. There is a transition to new scheduling for committees when we reconvene.

I wish you all a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

This committee stands adjourned.

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