



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 055**

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

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Chair: Mrs. Jenica Atwin







**The Chair:** We also have to reschedule our witnesses from March 20. Is it the will of the committee to reschedule the March 20 witnesses to April 17 and have drafting instructions and committee business on April 19?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on November 21, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on improving graduation rates for indigenous students.

Today we welcome Lisa Smith, interim adviser to the president, Native Women's Association of Canada, via video conference. I'm told, however, that we may have an issue, which we'll have to address. We also welcome Thomas Sierzycki from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, who is appearing in person. We also welcome Margaret Moss, professor and director, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia, via video conference. Thank you very much for being with us today.

We will have five minutes for each of our speakers. Please be on time. I will be there to remind you as well. We will hear from Dr. Moss first.

You have five minutes.

• (1700)

**Dr. Margaret Moss (Professor and Director, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia):** Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee today to speak on indigenous student experiences, retention and success at UBC, with a focus on the Vancouver campus where I'm stationed.

How do students experience "place"? UBC is on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territory of the Musqueam people. This ongoing relationship includes land acknowledgement, place names in *hənq̓əmin̓əḥ*, art work, recognition and dialogue about place in most areas of the university. This supports learning and connection to this land for both indigenous and non-indigenous students. This recognition is a reminder to students about the commitment between the Musqueam and UBC to participating in a relationship that relies on an authentic partnership.

The UBC Longhouse and the First Nations House of Learning are features of the campus for the indigenous community. Long-term indigenous strategic planning has encouraged the incorporation of indigenous staff members throughout the units and faculties to ensure that there are opportunities for belonging throughout the campus. We have the indigenous strategic plan, which launched in 2020 with eight goals, including—and I'll just read a few—leading at all levels, advocating for truth, moving research forward, and indigenizing our curriculum.

Student success is dependent on belonging. Students need to feel that someone at UBC cares about them. Often, the greatest support that students find is in their peer connections. Investing in programming and resources that enrich community and connection experiences are important tools in supporting the indigenous student experience.

There's a great diversity of indigenous students at UBC, each with their own unique needs. We need to ensure that there are many

different spaces and resources for students to connect. The UBC Longhouse and the *šx̣ẉta:təχẉəm* Collegium provide spaces where staff and student staff are invested in creating belonging by reaching out and supporting students. Additional campus spaces and support for indigenous students ensure that there's flexibility, so students also have the ability to change spaces and supports as needed.

Indigenous student leaders play leading roles in creating community, are aware of resources and staff connections, and are guided by curriculum that reflects changes, challenges and opportunities for the year.

Academic, mental health and wellness supports are so important for indigenous students. Indigenous academic advisers need to exist in all faculties to support the specific needs of indigenous students within faculty learning environments. Although there are numerous tutoring programs available on campus, our indigenous student-focused program at the First Nations House of Learning ensures that students have a place to receive support that is safe. The collegium also runs academic support programs—indigenous student-led—that incorporate the importance of well-being into academic success. The professor in collegia program ensures that indigenous students have the opportunity to build community with an indigenous faculty member.

Finally, mental health supports for indigenous students are well thought out and continue to grow to meet student needs. UBC has an indigenous mental health and wellness support team that provides one-on-one support. There's crisis support and connection to long-term supports. Early Alert, a campus-wide program, also exists to intervene and navigate for students who may face multiple challenges in their academic journey.

Enrolment service professionals work to support by providing financial, housing and registration advice. Our enrolment number for the 2021 academic year was 2,204 indigenous students, with a total head count of 72,000-plus students for both campuses.

The programming I have mentioned is for the Vancouver campus, where around 1,500 indigenous students attend. The first-year undergrad retention is at 88%. In 2021, 329 degrees were conferred on indigenous students—graduate and undergraduate—on the UBCV campus.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Moss.

We'll now proceed to our next witness.

Thomas Sierzycki, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki (Northern Education Advisor, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education):** Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation and congratulations, Madam Chair.

It's a pleasure to be here in the nation's capital on the unsundered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation to discuss topics that are very important to me.

I come to you from La Ronge, Saskatchewan, located on Treaty No. 6 territory and the home of the Métis people. As a lifelong northerner and the father of two indigenous boys, I hope to bring perspective of the work that is being done and needs to be done in order to improve graduation rates and successful outcomes for northern and indigenous students.

I've had the opportunity to work with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education for close to seven years. As the education adviser to the deputy minister's office, there are several crucial developments that have improved the educational opportunities for northern and indigenous students. As we work towards educational improvement in the province, our minister, the Honourable Dustin Duncan, and the deputy minister, Donna Johnson, have set priorities to ensure a path of a collaborative journey with indigenous, northern and Métis partners.

In this spirit of collaboration, the Ministry of Education has been working on a new provincial education plan that is inclusive to and cognizant of the students we serve. This plan will serve as the foundation of education in the province until 2030 and includes indigenous knowledge throughout. Indigenous and Métis stakeholders are part of the creation and implementation of this innovative plan. Areas such as student mental health are also pillars of this plan.

There are five important aspects that are critical investments to improve the education of indigenous, Métis and northern students.

The first is strategic investment and resourcing in the early years. As numerous studies have indicated, strategic investments in early childhood development have significant societal and financial gains. As a province, we have invested in family resource centres, KidsFirst North, early childhood intervention programs and child care centres. The Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and the bilateral Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement are two examples of the collaborative nature of the levels of government coming together to impact kids.

The second is curriculum and instructional supports. In addition to a collaborative and inclusive curriculum model, the Ministry of Education's "Following Their Voices", the invitational shared ser-

vices agreement and the learning opportunities program—or the LOP—provide supports, collaboration and funding to improve teacher practice and to engage school divisions and first nations authorities. LOP funding includes science, technology, engineering and mathematics—or STEM—instruction. Saskatchewan mandated treaty curricula in 2007, and it has proven to be extremely important for all students in the province.

The third is infrastructure investment. It is important that northern and first nations communities have access to safe and welcoming schools that are reflective of them within their communities. The Ministry of Education continues to invest in school renovation and replacement, with a strong example being the \$30-million elementary school that is currently being built in La Loche. Minister Duncan said, "This new elementary school will be able to serve not only the students and families of La Loche, but also the broader community for generations to come." The school is set to open in spring 2025 and has been designed with community aspects throughout.

The fourth is teacher recruitment and retention, which continues to be an issue in northern Saskatchewan. The Government of Saskatchewan continues to fund teacher programs such as the Dene teacher education program in La Loche and local regional colleges to provide local teacher education programs. It is well understood that teachers learning in their respective communities have a higher success rate and are more inclined to stay and teach in the communities they call home. When indigenous, northern and Métis students see that their teachers are just like them, this creates an atmosphere of trust, pride and success. The Ministry of Education also works with local school divisions on ways to best support their recruitment and retention plans in both strategic and financial ways.

The fifth is distance learning opportunities. The Government of Saskatchewan is in the process of establishing a new Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation, or Sask DLC. The new centralized school will streamline online learning in the province and provide students across the province with equal access to more than 180 online courses for kindergarten to grade 12 students, including more than 120 high-school electives to choose from. The Sask DLC will have a central office in Kenaston, Saskatchewan, with nine additional satellite locations that will help serve every geographic region in the province. In-school online facilitators will assist students with any learning challenges they may experience. It is important to note that the Sask DLC will provide opportunities to students where there may not be a teacher, or there's a teacher shortage within their classroom. This model will help students in remote areas with receiving the best possible education.

• (1705)

As indicated, Saskatchewan is doing innovative and transformative things to make educational standing and opportunities a priority for first nations, indigenous, northern and Métis students. With strong instruction and support, there's significant opportunity to work with first nations and Métis stakeholders to make our collective education system the best it can be for all students.

I'd like to thank the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs for the invitation to speak on ways to improve the educational attainment of our students. I am looking forward to the rest of our time as we engage in this discussion and important topic.

As we would say in northern Saskatchewan, thank you, *merci, tēniki and mahsi cho*.

• (1710)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sierzycki.

Our witness, Lisa Smith, will have to be rescheduled for another time due to technical difficulties.

We will now continue to our first round of questions, starting with the Conservatives and Mr. Vidal, for six minutes.

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

Congratulations on your new appointment.

Welcome, Mr. Aldag, to our committee. I look forward to the opportunity to get to know you.

I'm going to start with Mr. Sierzycki this morning...or this afternoon, I guess it is. It's been a long day.

I have a couple of questions for you in the context of some of the comments you made, the first one being around investments in early education.

I had a very wise man tell me recently that, if we want to improve graduation rates anywhere, whether it's on reserve, off reserve or in non-indigenous schools, we should focus on the reading rates from kindergarten to grade 3. It's a longer-term investment, but we have to start giving them that opportunity. You talked about some of the investments the Province of Saskatchewan has made in early childhood learning and intervention. I just want to give you an opportunity to speak a little bit further to that for a couple minutes. Then I'll move on to another question.

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** Absolutely. We learn to read, and then we read to learn. Those are important aspects I think everyone in this room is familiar with. Literacy and literacy knowledge is absolutely critical in the formation of any student to do well in any aspect of education. We believe that strategic investments such as early programming is key, especially in communities that may be isolated and lack additional resources. Of course, working with other levels of government and first nations' leadership, the Province of Saskatchewan has engaged in several unique partnerships.

One of them I'll speak to is KidsFirst North. In this last budgetary cycle, we announced about six family resource centres across the province that work with families of all backgrounds, but also geographically in areas with a high number of indigenous fam-

ilies. That is one aspect of working collectively to ensure that literacy is a priority, best practices of engaging and teaching literacy are a practice, and also that we are just providing resources for that aspect.

Absolutely, any suggestion, as an educator...and I think anyone who's an educator in this room knows that early literacy is absolutely paramount for the further success of all students.

Thank you for that question.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you.

I was going to just point out for the committee, and I forgot to do it at the beginning, that Mr. Sierzycki is one of the youngest mayors ever elected in Canada. He was elected as mayor at 21, after being a councillor for a couple of years in his community of La Ronge. I think that's a really cool fact about our witness today.

To get back to the topic though, you talked about teacher recruitment and retention. One of the things I know is a struggle in my riding in northern Saskatchewan—which you reside in, you know this—specifically in first nations schools, is the actual recruitment of teachers, qualified teachers, teachers who are educated to be teachers. Recruitment and retention is such an important factor.

You talked about how teachers learning in their respective communities have a higher success rate and are more inclined to stay and teach in the communities they call home. I just want to give you an opportunity to expand on that a little bit. I know this is not exactly where you work, but in the context of what would apply in some of the first nation schools in northern Saskatchewan, how might we be able to learn something about attracting qualified and educated teachers into some of those communities that are struggling with that exact challenge?

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** Thank you for that.

I do want to say that I stepped down after my second term. I did not run again, so I wasn't beat. That's always a good thing as a politician, for everyone in this room.

That being said, in the teacher recruitment and retention piece, there are some innovative things being done. One example is Clearwater River Dene Nation in La Loche, which has a Dene TEP program. This is an educational, four-year university program, partnering with First Nations University of Canada through the U of R, and funded by the Ministry of Advanced Education. This is providing an opportunity for teachers to be trained in their local communities, and working with school divisions and first nations authorities to support them in practicum spaces. It ensures that those teachers are engaged in the communities they're from.

The first rendition of DTEP was created in 2006 after the horrific school shooting in La Loche. Of the students who went through that program, 80% to 90% of them are still engaged in northern Saskatchewan teaching occupations. I say 80% to 90% because, when you become a specialized teacher, you're in high demand. We've had several teachers go as far as British Columbia. Other provinces also hired them. Again, this is a good thing.

The school division is also working with the University of Saskatchewan to have a program in Cumberland House.

What we're finding is that, when you have these teachers in the community, it's not only building human capacity in that community, but it's also filling that void where teachers may not normally come to those communities to start off their careers. We're seeing a pinch across the country in terms of teachers filling vacancies across jurisdictions, including circumpolar north regions. This is a prime example of what's working.

Absolutely, more significant investment could be done in this area, but for what's being invested, it's been an awesome thing to see.

• (1715)

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** My time is really short, so add whatever comments you want to add around the concept of collaboration.

I know that's a really important thing to you. Take the last few seconds you have and talk about collaboration.

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** Thank you for that.

In terms of collaboration, obviously I'm here to talk about the innovative and great things the Province of Saskatchewan is doing, but that's not to say there isn't more to be done.

The only way to do more for kids across Canada—indigenous kids across Canada—is to work with all levels of government and all stakeholders to work collectively and work from the perspective of those students that we're serving. Without having their voices and the voices of communities and elders, significant change won't happen to the educational establishment.

Thank you for that. Again, that's the collaborative piece.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now move to Liberal member Jaime Battiste for six minutes.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair. Congratulations on being the chair.

Mr. Sierzycki, during your intervention you talked a little bit about how, in 2007, the province mandated treaty curricula. I think that's a lot of the good work that's been done by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan. Now it's being run by the treaty commissioner, Mary Culbertson. They're doing some excellent work. In fact, in Nova Scotia, we went to Saskatchewan to see how the practice of treaty commissions could run in terms of creating best practices across Canada.

Do you think that indigenous students seeing themselves reflected in the education system and in the curriculum—not just on reserve but everywhere—increases graduation rates?

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** Thank you for that question, MP Battiste.

Absolutely. In 2007, Saskatchewan implemented mandatory first nations curricula throughout. Premier Wall, at that time, indicated that this was a priority for the Ministry of Education. From that time, I can tell you that there were significant improvements in not only attendance but in every other aspect of students seeing themselves reflected in that curricula. When you're attending school and you're seeing yourself reflected in that, of course you're going to succeed.

The OTC does a tremendous job in terms of resourcing and supporting with best practices teachers across the province, who may not even have a background or the knowledge of how to best approach those things. That's been very important.

The other thing I want to say, from a personal perspective, is that we have two indigenous boys. I'm non-indigenous. My wife is from Saddle Lake Cree Nation. She's sitting in the back there, obviously, and listening to me. With that being said, we have a perspective from seeing our boys at home talk about certain things, like what their grandparents perhaps had gone through and where they come from. Those are all positive things about creating who they are and how they fit into the educational system as a whole.

Absolutely, sir, the resourcing from OTC as well as mandating indigenous curricula are two important steps.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Thank you very much for that, Mr. Sierzycki.

I'm going to turn my question to Dr. Moss. She talked a little bit about the university. We've been focusing a bit on high school graduation rates.

Can you talk to us a little about some of the best practices around advancing reconciliation within university campuses? How have they led to better graduation rates at the university level for indigenous students?

**Dr. Margaret Moss:** I came to the University of British Columbia in 2018 and was able to be colead on their refreshed indigenous strategic plan. That process took two years. It was launched in 2020 and helped us get all the voices in. We spoke to indigenous students, faculty, staff, non-indigenous people, many community members and so forth, to be able to see what our people want and what they need. That's how we came up with the eight goals, four of which I read earlier.

Another one was spaces. How do we reconcile spaces? That seems to be a big thing for students. They want to know where to go, where they are welcome and where they can find other people like them, other students and so forth, who can share their experiences. In that realm, we were able to make the First Nations House of Learning, which is housed within the First Nations Longhouse. We've just expanded it 2,500 square feet to add new spaces.

On the other end, we started an indigenous collegia, which is specifically for first-year students for most of the collegia on UBC—there are six or seven of them—to be able to get people in and feel comfortable, build community and so forth.

We started an indigenous collegium in the Longhouse. That also took quite a bit of work remodelling, recruiting and so forth. We don't kick them out, if you will, after the first year, but we did recognize that first-year students really do need something. At the first nations house, we also recruited and onboarded a first-year retention coordinator, recognizing that there is some drop-off in first year, especially the first term of the first year, especially when we just went through the pandemic. Money was tight, and people needed a lot of support and backup.

We were literally making spaces, building spaces, for people to come and feel comfortable, especially first-year students. The first-year coordinator works both in the wider Longhouse and then also in the collegium, so there are lot of resources for the people just coming in from high school.

• (1720)

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Dr. Moss, I know that you've spent some time focusing on the students here. I want to focus on the professors a bit here, as I am a former indigenous professor.

What are some of the key things that universities can do to make sure that their indigenous professors feel supported and welcome in continuing their job of helping indigenous students?

**Dr. Margaret Moss:** We have sort of an informal, loose indigenous caucus for faculty. We also have another group that is for indigenous staff. At the Longhouse, we've just started having indigenous staff lunches, which is also faculty—faculty and staff. We just started it this year to do just what you're talking about, to try to build community within the faculty, within the staff, to hear what's going on with the students and what's going on with curriculum in terms of indigenizing all of the things that we talk about with decolonization, indigenizing and reconciliation.

This forum seems to be growing, and it's been very useful. We've had lunches and things for the students, but again, it was recognized that staff and faculty also needed this community building.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Battiste.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to our colleague from the Bloc Québécois.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I want to congratulate you, on behalf of myself and my colleague Marilène Gill, on your appointment as chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses who are with us today.

As the critic for status of women, I have had opportunities to hear the Native Women's Association of Canada speak from a feminist and indigenous perspective in other committees. I regret that their representative could not be here today owing to technical problems. Her testimony would have been quite enlightening, as usual, so I hope she will have an opportunity to appear before the committee again.

That said, another interesting point that both witnesses made was the importance of providing educational services to young children and intervening with them early on. In Quebec, we understand that importance. In fact, it was the first female premier of Quebec who set up the early childhood centres. When young children can benefit from a good education very early in life, even before they begin their schooling, it changes their outlook for life.

Mr. Sierzycki, I am now going to ask you a question, which Ms. Moss can also answer later.

In your remarks, you talked about the reality of northern Saskatchewan. Remoteness is a challenge that comes up frequently in this committee's discussions, regardless of the studies being conducted. That element is also frequently addressed in the work of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, in relation to issues that particularly or differently affect women in rural or somewhat more remote communities.



When it comes to education, we see that first nations students often have to leave their families to study in larger centres. In doing so, they lose crucial contact with their territory, their loved ones and their culture. I would like to know what you think about the remoteness, the isolation experienced and its impact on the students.

● (1725)

[English]

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** Thank you for that question.

In terms of remoteness, it creates significant challenges in many ways. One, of course, is being able to provide those educational opportunities that otherwise are attainable in urban centres. Second to that, of course, is connectivity and ensuring that the infrastructure's in place if you are going to do other things to ensure students have that access to either online learning or other aspects of that.

The reason Saskatchewan is in the process of going to a Treasury Board Crown for centralized online learning is to provide those opportunities to students in remote and rural areas that perhaps they wouldn't otherwise get. It's very important to have a teacher in place to support that online learning. However, the specialities are where you can really get into specifics in terms of supporting those students and ensuring they have the credits and the opportunities for further post-secondary education or entering the workforce.

Obviously there are lots of compliments to the federal government, as well as federal governments of the past and provincial governments, in terms of infrastructure development. We're only as good as the infrastructure in many communities. When you have SaskTel, the provider of telecommunications in the province, putting in infrastructure, those are huge things that need to take place in order to provide those online learning opportunities. Again, infrastructure is a big piece there.

To challenge the remoteness aspect, I think there's a key thing that all levels of government should consider. We have a centralized model of providing services to our citizens of Canada and of our province, but at times there's a decentralization movement that's also important. It is ensuring that service providers develop relationships with communities and go into communities. I know everyone from health, education and different aspects do go into communities, but it's creating that important relationship as you go in and build off it.

In educational terms, if you are sending in online learning supports, it's very important that those teachers who are working with those students actually go into the community at some point and talk to the students face to face and understand where they're coming from, their challenges, their opportunities and their families. Is it ideal and perfect based on the time commitment? It isn't always, but it's an extremely important thing that needs to be done to tackle remoteness and remote and rural types of learning opportunities.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Ms. Moss, do you have anything to add?

[English]

**Dr. Margaret Moss:** Sure. I'll answer very briefly. Thank you.

The pandemic, for the university, brought the idea of this remoteness to the fore. What we had to learn—professors, staff and everyone—was that flexibility is key, more than it ever has been, with indigenous students. This was recognizing the added costs, if they had to purchase things—either if we helped out through the enrolment services programs and so forth, or if they had to do it on their own—and the additional time that is sometimes needed due to connectivity and so forth.

There's the other side of the coin that, even when they are living in Vancouver, it is an expensive city to live in.

Whether they are remote or whether they are local, we've recognized that the support needed is profound.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

We'll now go to Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

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

[illegible]

[Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:]

Thank you.

Firstly, I want to thank Marc Garneau for the time he served us as chairperson. He resigned before I had a chance to thank him.

Jenica, I welcome you to the chairperson's seat. I'm pretty sure that you will do a good job.

The question I have is for Margaret, and for Thomas afterward.



**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** In terms of teacher education programs, they are very innovative in Saskatchewan. The Dene TEP, CTEP and indigenous teacher education program all utilize language and cultural-based resources, so that's a tremendous point. We're hoping that continues to grow. Much of their material is in the language they're learning to teach in.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we have time for a very short second round of two minutes.

Perhaps, Ms. Moss, you could answer that in the second round, in the interest of time.

We'll proceed to the Conservatives, and Mr. Schmale, for two minutes.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Congratulations once again.

Congratulations to Mr. Aldag. It's nice to see him again.

Welcome to the committee.

Before I get into my question, I have a bit of housekeeping. In the first round, when Gary Vidal was doing his questioning, you let him go about 12 seconds too long. When I was in the chair, I cut him off 30 seconds early. He pointed that out to me, so, if you want to cut him off 45 seconds early, you'll have no complaints from this side.

Thank you, witnesses for coming, both of you. Since I have a very short period of time, maybe I will start with the witness here in person. According to Indigenous Services' report, graduation rates of first nations on-reserve students have gone down about 6%, whereas, overall, graduation rates for first nations students are going up.

Without getting too partisan, are there any lessons that you could pass along to ISC from things you're doing differently that could, potentially, create a best practice situation so we can start to see an increase in these numbers?

**Mr. Thomas Sierzycki:** In terms of improving the graduation rates off reserve, again, in Saskatchewan, it's trending a little bit differently. Is it still high enough? Absolutely not, so we as a province are still trying to figure out what the "best" best practices are. In terms of investments, investments are important to ensure resourcing and to have the capacity, the human capacity, to deliver programs.

Again, if you're a student in an urban location, you may have different supports than some other first nations communities in the province. Therefore, it comes down to that expertise and support mechanism. Our hope and the goal of our online school is to provide opportunities to all students across the province, so there's an example of bridging the divide between specialities and where students may be in the province.

Again, when it comes down to it, it definitely creates an issue when you don't have the supports in place or the access to those supports for those kids.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Battiste, you have two minutes.

• (1740)

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** I am going to go back to Dr. Moss.

Dr. Moss, at the end of this study we're going to be making several recommendations on what we can do better. From the university and post-secondary angle, can you give us some very concrete recommendations as to what students need for supports in post-secondary and universities to be successful?

**Dr. Margaret Moss:** Sure. I'll look at our challenges, so the recommendations will be the opposite.

Flexibility is number one. That's a huge challenge for faculty and staff to understand the challenges of indigenous students. There at times has to be flexibility to even the playing field.

There have to be unique, tailored supports or interventions. We need to meet the needs of the individuals because, again, we have a wide array of first nations, Métis, Inuit, urban, reserve-based and so forth, so there needs to be unique, tailored supports.

Again, as I had mentioned previously, for our students—and it could be for others—the cost of living in the city is horrendous, so we have to find ways for monetary as well as other supports for them to be able to safely and securely get through without worrying about money at all times.

There is the need for multiple spaces and inclusion. The idea of belonging is so important. We need to make sure that there are spaces, such as our collegia that we have within the Longhouse, and others.

I am glad the other witness brought up land-based learning. We have really partnered with the UBC farm and what's happening over there, so we have the indoor Longhouse and then the farm is the outdoor. We really try to bring some programming together where there can be smudging if that's one's tradition, fires and so forth.

The idea of belonging in many other ways, such as was brought up, that having a language.... It's difficult and there are so many languages, but at least have a few languages, which we do and we do have an elder in residence for the Longhouse, who is also in the language department, so there is some cross-work going on there.

Then ongoing—



We'll take a brief pause as we prepare for our second panel.

• (1745)

(Pause)

• (1750)

**The Chair:** We will begin our second panel this afternoon, entering the evening.

First, we have Suzanne Brant, president of First Nations Technical Institute, here with us in person. We have Michael DeGagné, president and CEO of Indspire. Online, we have Melanie Bennett, executive director of the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate.

You each have five minutes for opening remarks. I will begin with Ms. Brant.

Thank you very much.

**Ms. Suzanne Brant (President, First Nations Technical Institute):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the indigenous and northern affairs committee members.

*[Witness spoke in Mohawk as follows:]*

Níá:wén.

Shé:kon sewakwé:kon. Katsi'tsiarihshion ióntiats . Tyendinaga ni kiteron wakskeréwake.

*[Mohawk text translated as follows:]*

Thank you.

Hello everyone. My name is Katsi'tsiarihshion. I live in Tyendinaga and I am a member of the Bear Clan.

*[English]*

My name is Suzanne Brant. I'm the president of the First Nations Technical Institute, a member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte and Bear Clan.

Since 1985 we have been meeting the educational needs of indigenous students. We have served 112 different indigenous communities in Ontario and 189 indigenous communities across Canada.

We are an indigenous-led and -governed post-secondary institute. We're recognized under the Indigenous Institutes Act of Ontario, which was passed in 2017. We provide post-secondary programming in the areas of social science, health sciences, governance and policy, humanities, research and innovation, and aviation technology.

Currently, we have enrolled in our programs over 450 students. Eighty-seven per cent of those students are women. The average age of our students is 36 years. This is due to the barriers that currently exist in education. We provide high-quality education that links directly to employment. We use traditional ways of knowing and learning. We use indigenous knowledge, culture and languages within all of our programs. Not only are our students gaining the skills and technology they need, but they also gain indigenous knowledge.

We braid our healing and learning together. We recognize that a lot of our students have experienced many traumas. We want to make sure that they have the opportunity to unburden those traumas while they're in our programs. We provide student success facilitators and cultural advisers in all of our programming. They're there to help support the students. This helps to build pride and confidence within our students as well. This has led to a graduation rate of over 92% in the last three years.

We have grown our enrolment by 203% since 2015. Every one of the programs we are currently running is oversubscribed. I'll just give you an example. We opened our enrolment for our practical nurse program on March 9. Today I can tell you that we have 80 applicants, and we can only take 15 students.

There's more that needs to be done to support FNTI and indigenous institutes so we can continue to support our learners. We require resources to deliver our programs to meet the needs and demands coming from our communities. Without adequate funding, we cannot provide our students with appropriate infrastructure and fully culturally relevant curriculum and support. We cannot meet the increasing program, community and economic needs.

I want to give you another example. Bill C-92, An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, was passed in June 2019. First nations are working very hard to set up their own child well-being agencies, and we've been asked to provide the training. We went ahead and developed a four-year degree program in a bachelor's of indigenous social work. We obtained regulatory accreditation across Canada, and now the program is accredited in Ontario. We're going to offer this program in January 2024. This morning, there were 677 expressions of interest. We can only accept 36 students.

This issue is beyond social work. Every program we currently offer, as I mentioned, is oversubscribed. We have wait-lists. We have eight other indigenous programs under development for which there has been expressed interest and community interest.

It is frustrating that we have so many interested learners who want to enrol in our programs, but because of funding constraints, we can't serve them.

Madam Chair, I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk. I welcome any questions.

• (1755)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Brant.

We'll now move to Mr. DeGagné for five minutes.

**Mr. Michael DeGagné (President and Chief Executive Officer, Indspire):** Thanks very much for the invitation to provide some input into this very critical report. It's long overdue. I'm glad you're examining this.

We provided a brief earlier today that outlines the contributions that Indspire makes to post-secondary education. Indspire is an indigenous organization that works with governments and many hundreds of donors across Canada to raise funds to provide scholarships and bursaries to indigenous post-secondary students. We would have given this year probably in excess of 7,000 scholarships and bursaries for in excess of \$26 million. It's an organization that has become a critical resource for indigenous students.

My remarks won't focus on statistics as much as two historic contexts for this report that I hope you'll consider.

I'll first go to 1967, the year of Confederation. While many were supportive of and very positive about Confederation and Canada's 100th birthday, there was a famous speech put out by Chief Dan George called "A Lament for Confederation", where he outlined some of his concerns with where Canada was going.

I will quote one of the things he said in that. He said, "I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success—his education, his skills—and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society."

At the time within the context of his speech, we know that the policy of enfranchisement was in force, which forced indigenous people to trade membership and registration in their home community for an opportunity to enter into university. This was a choice that very few people could make. This essentially kept us out of the university.

The most significant predictor of entry into university is whether or not your mom and dad went or someone very close to you in your family went. Without the backdrop of many generations of people attending post-secondary education, we were new to this. We are still new to this. If you consider this as an important part of your report, this is only the second generation of our people who have gone to university. We are embracing it.

The second important point occurred in 1972—this is the 50th anniversary and in my view it should be celebrated—which was the famous policy of Indian control of Indian education. It was created by an amalgam of reports and policies that had been produced by all the provinces and territories at the time from the indigenous quarter. They talked about lessons and the philosophy of survival in the 20th century. They said:

Pride encourages us to recognize and use our talents, as well as to master the skills needed to make a living.

Understanding our fellowmen will enable us to meet other Canadians on an equal footing, respecting cultural differences while pooling resources for the common good.

Also, they said we must live in harmony with nature, which "will insure preservation of the balance between man and his environment which is necessary for the future of our planet".

I think this, exactly 50 years later, is what is still guiding indigenous education. It's critical to our thinking today. Of the 30,000-

plus indigenous post-secondary students, as I said before, we've embraced this.

Financial need remains the largest barriers to success—my colleague from FNTI has just outlined that in a very specific way—but we are still attending in record numbers. While many students require additional help, we are outstanding in many ways. Organizations like Indspire are supporting our academic excellence.

There is an urgency to indigenous post-secondary education. I can't say this enough. Our young population is not a future burden on society. Our young population represents an opportunity to make an outsized impact on Canadian society. We need to double down now. We are at the margins, but we are moving to the centre. In my view, that movement from the margins to the centre is what reconciliation is all about.

● (1800)

From my own perspective as a former university president in Canada and now with an indigenous education organization, I would say that our challenges are to encourage greater numbers, to inspire students to broaden their degree and career options—we tend to choose the same narrow fields of study—to help our students see graduation as a first step and not a terminal event, and to make academic life better reflect the growing indigenous reality in the post-secondary environment.

Thank you very much for your attention.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Mr. DeGagné.

We'll move to Ms. Bennett online for five minutes. Thank you very much.

**Ms. Melanie Bennett (Executive Director, Yukon First Nation Education Directorate):** Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank the committee for allowing me to speak and for listening to me.

My name is Melanie Bennett. I am from the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation. I am the granddaughter of Alice and Alfred Titus, and the daughter of the late chief Hilda Titus.

I am a lifelong educator. I have been serving indigenous children for more than 30 years now as a teacher and an administrator, and I currently have the honour of the role of executive director of the newly formed Yukon First Nation Education Directorate. I am also a technician with the Yukon chiefs committee on education.

I'm joining you from Whitehorse, Yukon, where I'm currently sitting in a little room, because we are hosting our 4th annual education conference with hundreds of people participating in person and over Zoom for the next two exciting days.

I really appreciate this opportunity.

Here in Yukon, we are in the early years of implementing our first nations education strategy, which was determined by our chiefs committee on education in 2019, with regard to K-to-12 education and getting our students to post-secondary education. This was based on decades of work by the leaders who preceded us.

The CCOE brings together 10 self-governing first nations and non-self-governing Yukon first nations to transform the education system in Yukon in order to close the appalling education gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students by reclaiming authority over first nations education in the territory. Their work here is dire, and it's urgent.

The CCOE established the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate in 2020 to deliver programs and a Jordan's principle wraparound service to support first nations and indigenous students and families throughout Yukon. We were also integral to establishing the First Nation School Board, which has assumed authority through referenda for the operation of eight public schools in Yukon. Next year, they will operate 11 public schools in partnership with the Government of Yukon.

In only three years, YFNED and the First Nation School Board have begun to make deep and systemic changes to education in the territory. We are seeing first-hand indigenous students and their families receiving the cultural and education supports they need to thrive in a system that finally reflects their Yukon first nation world view. It's too early to present any data, but we know things are starting to turn around for our students. This is just the first step in the vision of the CCOE.

The final step is the creation of a Yukon first nations school system funded directly through an REA with the federal government so that those Yukon first nations that choose to can finally assume full responsibility over the education of their children, without the government's public school system and its restrictive and colonial policies and legislation further impacting our children.

For 20 years, many Yukon first nations have had jurisdiction over education through their self-governing agreements, with the ability to draw down on the program and services transfer agreements that were negotiated then. However, not a single first nation has fully drawn down their PSTA, because so many Yukon first nations have realized that it may not be in their best interest to do it in small numbers.

First nations understand that, rather, working as a unified whole under the CCOE, Yukon first nations now have the financial and the organizational capacity and strength to actualize their vision for first nations control of first nations education.

Right now, Yukon first nations remain decades behind first nations south of 60, which have significantly more control over their education. Since the 1960s, Yukon first nations have been abandoned by the Government of Canada in the area of education, when it transferred the responsibility for first nations education to the Government of Yukon without any notice or consultation with the first nations.

Our students have suffered, generation after generation, under the assimilative authority of the government in the Yukon public school system. It's clearly demonstrated in the Auditor General re-

ports that have been repeatedly done in Yukon, showing the deplorable results.

Now the CCOE is entering into a formal partnership with the Government of Canada, through the negotiation of an MOU, firstly to address the issues around multi-year adequate funding for YFNED and the First Nations School Board, and secondly to provide the negotiation of an REA that addresses the unique needs of both self-governing and non-self-governing Yukon first nations. This would support the creation of a Yukon first nations education system that would truly be for first nations by first nations, including the construction of first nations schools within the territory.

● (1805)

I really appreciate, again, being able to come and speak to you about this, and I really look forward to your questions.

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this study. I look forward to elaborating and discussing the unique position of Yukon first nations education in Canada.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Bennett.

We will now proceed to our first round of questions, beginning with the Conservatives and Mr. Melillo for six minutes.

**Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today to be a part of this important discussion. I appreciate all of your testimony so far. I know we will get a lot more great information from the questions.

I would like to start with Mr. DeGagné. I have done a little bit of reading about Indspire and learning more about the work you are doing. It is quite incredible work. I understand that the goal, or at least one of the goals of the organization, is that, within a generation, every indigenous student will graduate. I think that's an incredible goal and obviously one we should all be aiming for.

You mentioned off the hop that you weren't going to talk too much about data in your opening remarks, but unfortunately, I'm going to ask you about data. I know you are well equipped to handle that.

We have had some, I guess, conflicting information here at the committee in prior meetings that caused a bit of a stir. It highlighted to me a glaring issue in that, depending on where you're sourcing your information from, you can get drastically different information, particularly around things like the graduation rates of indigenous students.

I also understand that Indigenous Services Canada is not monitoring the graduation rates of students who are in the public school system off reserve, which I think is an issue as well, because obviously there are many indigenous students in that system who certainly should not be forgotten or neglected by any means.

Do you have any comments as to how the government can best ensure that they gather accurate information, perhaps more uniform information, so they can make the best decisions and have the most accurate information to do that?

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** Yes, we have an inability to answer really fundamental questions and find fundamental data about indigenous education in Canada. For example, as we emerged from this whole idea of being kept out of the universities in the 1970s, etc., and you asked what our baseline was or how many students we had in university and colleges in 1980 and 1990, you would be hard-pressed to be able to find a number that everybody can agree on.

Those numbers were never kept in a uniform way, so they may reflect only first nations. They may reflect first nations and Inuit but not Métis. They may include trade schools, colleges or some universities. It depends on the reporting. I think there's a lot of wisdom in having a report like this drive the data gaps that exist and in establishing an organization that can give us the data we need in order to make good decisions.

We have a very good system of gathering the number of people who come in the front door of a college and university, but very little on gathering how many go out the back door when they graduate. This is simply because every organization and every government seems to collect their data in a different way.

There is a real need here to standardize data collection. I don't doubt that you will get 10 experts here who will give you 10 different answers. I don't doubt that a bit. I think they are all coming from their own place, and I think there's a real opportunity here for us to lead in this area, for us to have a uniform rubric for data collection.

• (1810)

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

You also mentioned something in your opening remarks that stood out quite a bit. You mentioned indigenous students, using your words, going into the "same narrow fields of study". I believe that was the expression you used.

Could you contextualize that a little bit for us and speak to perhaps why that's happening and how we could address that?

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** In spite of being in administration, as many administrators do, I taught when I was an administrator in order to keep my finger on the pulse of what was happening in the institution.

I taught a contemporary indigenous issues course, and I assumed that the people who would be attracted to this course would be those who didn't know much about it—non-indigenous students. No, it was almost exclusively indigenous students. I remember asking on the first day, "What are you guys doing here? Why are you interested in this?" They said, "Because we don't know these things." A lot of this is about a reinforcement of identity. They like to come to classes where there are lots of indigenous students. They know they'll be there. They like to study together.

In some classes there was a critical mass of Cree-speaking students, where a lot of the discussion occurred in Cree. It was really interesting for me to see, but you will find, I think, that lots of indigenous students choose indigenous studies or Canadian history, especially with an indigenous focus, for these reasons—for the idea of collegiality and of coming together with another group of indigenous students.

It can be challenging. We, at Indspire, for example, get all sorts of requests to find students in physics, AI and different scientific disciplines, and we realize that we have very few numbers there. There's a critical need to direct students, or at least to give them a sense of what the options are for them beyond their first choice, and to maybe intervene with them in their third year of university and say that they're doing well but the world's a big place and here are some options for them based on what they're doing.

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** I think that's my time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

We'll move to Mr. McLeod for six minutes.

**Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and congratulations.

Thank you to the presenters today. It's very interesting and very inspiring.

When I first entered the workforce, one of the jobs that I held for a number of years was band manager in my home community. The elders on our council would encourage our council to do more so that our young people could stay in school and get educated, because that was the way forward—but it was a tough task. We didn't have the financial resources. We didn't have capacity. It was always frustrating for everybody involved. I'm really happy to hear that things are starting to change.



What did work, though, were on-the-land programs. We also saw that the summer camps had a lot of young people applying, because they were all together and they were all friends. We'd always recognize that the attitude of the students would change when an elder walked into the room. There was a lot more respect. Things would quiet down.

I listened with interest when the Yukon first nations representative talked about culture-based learning being a big part of the schools. I want to ask her to explain to us how important this priority is that they've set for the Yukon schools, and how it will help better prepare students for educational success.

• (1815)

**Ms. Melanie Bennett:** I think it's integral. I really appreciate your comments about on-the-land learning and cultural learning—there are lots of descriptors. In Yukon, as indigenous people, we say it's our way. It's how we do things. It's integral to our world view.

I think the most important thing—and I've heard from some of the other presenters, even in that streamlining—is when our students know they have a sense of place, which is so important to us, and that sense of place comes from the land. It is all within our own world view. That sense of place has to be built in the education system as well. Currently the sense of place in the education system for an indigenous student is very fragile. It is built on an industrial model of moving children through by grades to attain this thing called a graduation certificate and move on into the world. It has benchmarks.

In the ones that I as an indigenous person have had to meet, in terms of graduating, being one of 12 in my family who made it through the system, then moving on into university and getting a bachelor's degree, then a bachelor of education and a master's degree, and then moving on further into a Ph.D., I look at my indigenous elders, as I would call my colleagues, because those are our Ph.D.s. When we build that equity and demonstrate to our children that a Ph.D. is the same as an elder sitting there, and we give them the ability to have that sense of place and not have the feeling that they are less than but that they are equitable to, this will then lead to success.

It can't be just the pictures on the wall. I often as an educator would hear about cultural inclusion, which really alludes to that you're going to fit us into a model. Inclusion is when we partner, and I think the school board agreement that we've implemented here in the Yukon is a model of that, a beginning, a start to it. When we partner to say we're both coming in at an equal stance and we have to learn, the duality that comes with that is where we will find success.

**Mr. Michael McLeod:** I'm going to interrupt you, because I really want to ask this question of all of you. Our report is going to be based on what you're recommending to our committee.

I want each one of you to tell us what financial support gaps first nations education institutions suffer from the most. How can the federal government and provincial or territorial governments do a better job of offering more targeted support in these cases?

**The Chair:** Answer in about 30 seconds, please.

**Ms. Melanie Bennett:** I would say that, for us in Yukon, the greatest financial support would be providing financing for access to do on-the-land learning. It costs more. It takes a lot more intensive work, and it needs to be funded appropriately.

Then the second piece to that is funding for training and tracking that.

• (1820)

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** I would say that what's mostly needed is some sort of consistency in the funding. I'm not going to comment on how much, because more is better.

When we create programs for the general population and when we try to address a problem in the general population, we create structures with people in them, and they are ongoing. In a first nations community, Inuit community or Métis community, we tend to create projects or programs that are temporary that go on from one year to the next.

If I had to categorize the need for funding for, let's say, the university system as it addresses indigenous students, it's just that everything is temporary. Everything is one year at a time, one project at a time. You can't build a system of support on temporary funding.

**Ms. Suzanne Brant:** I think that an institute like FNTI needs operational funding. Right now we're only getting \$360,000 from the federal government to support our programs, yet we have great success. If we had adequate operational funding, we could bring in any indigenous student without tuition. We could open up our indigenous programming to our indigenous students and not have to charge the tuition. They wouldn't have that burden put on them. It's not a lot of money. In terms of the return on that investment, when you look at graduation rates like we have of 92%, 94% and 97%, depending on the year. It's not a lot to invest to be able to see that kind of result.

Also, we need programming that is indigenous-based.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

[Translation]

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Bennett, Mr. DeGagné and Ms. Brant, I want to thank you for joining us today. You have already answered some of my questions in your opening remarks and in talking with some of my colleagues, but I have more.

Since we began this study on indigenous students' education and the improvement of their educational success, organizations on the ground that see the work that needs to be done have provided us with a picture of communities' different needs. We have also learned about gaps and heard about urgent needs.

Ms. Brant, you even talked in your opening remarks about financial and infrastructure requirements. I'd like you to tell us about the urgent needs that you are noting in your work that would be good for us to consider in our study. For example, it has been said that project-based funding may not be ideal and that more recurring and stable funding is needed. I would like to hear your views on this, as well as Mr. DeGagné's if he would like to comment.

[English]

**Ms. Suzanne Brant:** The other thing is that we need to make sure there are supports there for the students. For us, the reason we have such success in our organizations is that we have cultural advisers in every program. There is an elder in the program who actually informs the curriculum from an indigenous world view and understanding.

The other is that we have to be able to unburden those traumas that have affected generations. That's why I was saying that we braid our learning with healing so that the students have the opportunity, through circles and processes.... The faculty, the cultural adviser and the student success facilitator help them. They're not only learning the skills. They're also learning to become whole again.

Those kinds of resources are critical to the success of a student.

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** At Indspire, we offer support to students. In this day and age where we can do it online or via Zoom, it works very well.

What we offer to students who are in college and university are the typical academic supports: how to write an essay, how to get along in first-year university, how to choose courses, and these types of things. Not long ago we offered an introduction to the Mohawk language. It sold out. Hundreds of students signed up to take it. We had to split it over two nights. We introduced an introduction to Anishinabemowin, the Anishinabe language. It sold out.

What's interesting is that we are trying to develop.... We see as a gap their knowledge about university, but that's not a gap. What they, as students, are identifying as a gap is their cultural supports. They want some sort of cultural grounding in order to get through. I think that's very important.

The other part that we don't think enough about is, as they are approaching graduation and about to become professionals in one place or another, connecting them with other indigenous emerging professionals, so having places where the indigenous students we have in teachers college can connect with other students in teachers college so that they have a process of peer and professional support out there for them. That's also something that's emerged for us.

• (1825)

[Translation]

**Ms. Andr  anne Larouche:** Mr. DeG  n   and Ms. Brant, I understand that it is important for these young students to have role models. That is actually what we heard from the previous panel.

Mr. DeG  n  , you just raised something very interesting about language. In fact, the committee's previous study, which was proposed by my Bloc Qu  b  cois colleague from Manicouagan, dealt with indigenous languages and ways to revitalize them, promote them and ensure their sustainability. Witnesses mentioned the im-

portance of indigenous languages in the context of learning and teaching, but especially in the transmission of knowledge and traditions. We already heard that today from the first panel, as well.

Can you tell us a little more about that in the remaining minute? Would you say it's a factor in academic success and motivation?

Ms. Brant, you even mentioned healing circles.

[English]

**Ms. Suzanne Brant:** Yes, for sure.

For us, all of our curriculum has indigenous learning outcomes, so they're working toward understanding who we are from an indigenous perspective but also an indigenous world view. There are some really critical points in the language that drive that understanding. Our languages are verb-based, so they create pictures. It's beautiful to understand in the language your positions. You understand what your relationship is with someone you're speaking to or with the rest of creation.

It's important that we see that reflected in everything that we do within our institutes for success. Our students need to see themselves. They need to have their language, and they need to be working toward those goals and things that make sense to them and to us as indigenous people.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Larouche.

We'll go to Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

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

I think you're right. I think that in some ways cultural rejuvenation is up to us. We define our culture and it's up to us to bring it back, but I think the catalyst for that is the rejuvenation of language. That's where we need support, and I think it has to be very broad-based.

I want to ask if you are in agreement with me that the federal government should provide more funding to revitalize the culture, the language and the identity of indigenous peoples, so that we can keep our culture and language alive. If the government can spend

• (1835)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Idlout.

We do have time for a condensed second round, so we'll go to Mr. Zimmer for five minutes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to ask a question of Melanie Bennett in Yukon.

I appreciate all the witnesses appearing today and congrats to our new chair as well.

Melanie, you referred to this earlier. I'm just going to quote a Yukon News article titled "Long-standing gaps in student outcomes persist as Yukon government works to close them". It starts off like this:

The territorial government is taking steps that it hopes will lead to better student outcomes nearly three years after an auditor general's report slammed the Department of Education for falling short of understanding and addressing long-standing gaps.

It goes on to say:

According to the March 9 news release, the department created a performance and analytics unit in 2018 to better manage and analyze student performance data, and a joint data working group was created in 2020 with the chiefs committee on education to improve data-sharing with Yukon First Nations about student outcomes.

Lastly, it says:

As for the breakdown by self-identification status, the graduation rate among Yukon First Nation students was 66 per cent or 65 out of 98 potential graduates.

The graduation rate was even lower for "other Indigenous" students, at 63 per cent or 22 out of 35 graduates.

I bring that up because I appreciate why you are doing what you're doing in your organization. I really appreciate it, as a former teacher myself. I really have a heart for students and kids and want to see them get through high school to achieve greater success in life.

I wanted to give you the opportunity. In your earlier testimony, you said you'd like to elaborate. I want you to elaborate on what's next.

We know why you're here. You're here to help things get better in Yukon. Please elaborate.

**Ms. Melanie Bennett:** First I'll elaborate on that data, because people hear 66% and they say, that's not bad—you're better than 50%. It's not 66% as a graduation rate. It's 66% of the 30% of students who made it to grade 12. The data working group that's been put in place, for three years, has been working very hard to try to have that accountability to the Yukon Education. It is very difficult to get any data, so YFNED being in place is now working very hard to develop our own data. We could have the relationship of saying, let's just ATIP it and figure it all out from there, but that's not being done—as our elders teach us—in a good way.

Ultimately, our goal is student success. It's determining how that will be. I really appreciated some other folks who spoke of.... It seems to be there's this benchmark of getting them to university, but that isn't necessarily always the path for all of our indigenous students. We've developed a model that will provide them success on

their chosen path, because for us, a chosen path is to come home and be a community member. That could be a language speaker. That could be a doctor. That could also be a ditch digger. They are helping in their community. That's what we want: our people who are going to come back to the communities.

I bet you every one of us, in the last storm, really appreciated the person who was able to drive the snowplow. Those are the things we have to build in our children, the strength to do that, and that's what we're trying to do.

I appreciate that you brought up data because that is an important thing. It will give us the benchmarks and the ideas, and will find the gaps, because one of those things that we are seeing is that there are some successes. We implemented programming this year, and for the first time we have an improvement in math because of the indigenous-led math camps that we've been operating with targeted interventions to the students.

Now, if I could get Yukon Education to implement that same thing, instead of me and the organization doing a one-off of that, I think we would see greater achievement outcomes for our students. That's what we mean by indigenous-led. We need to listen to and hear from our people what the gaps are in the things we need for our children and how we can fit them in a ministry-operated system, in a first nations school board, or in a first nations school that's operated by an individual first nation.

• (1840)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** My time is up, Melanie, but I just applaud your efforts and wish you all the best of success. We look forward to hearing that positive data in a few years, when you have it. Thank you.

**Ms. Melanie Bennett:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Zimmer.

We'll now proceed to Mr. Badawey for five minutes.

**Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll preface my comments by echoing Mr. Zimmer's comments with respect to applauding the efforts of all of you. Great work.

I want to concentrate and focus in on the strengthening of capacity. As many of you know, from our meetings in the past and when I visited many communities throughout the past year, ISC in particular, the department that I represent, is moving forward with, for example, water legislation and the replacement of the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act. We're looking at indigenous health. We're looking at capacity with respect to long-term investments to support closing the infrastructure gap. The list goes on. There's the business navigator program that will assist indigenous businesses in finding supports across the federal family, with all departments, not just ISC but Infrastructure, Health, and the list goes on.

I do want to concentrate on Ms. Brant because I guess I have a bit of a bias because we've done some work together in the past. If I have time, I will also be going to Mr. DeGagné and others.

Ms. Brant, can you speak about some of the things you're looking at right now with respect to the people you represent, in particular, as it relates to, first, your partnership with both colleges and universities, but also, getting a bit more granular, how you are strengthening the capacity to allow it to be very personal in terms of the next generation of those who are going to be working in our indigenous communities? Can you speak about how that would then allow more culture-based programming and culture-based responses to the needs with respect to what I already mentioned and, lastly, to ensure that sustainability exists for many generations in the future, especially as it relates to managing infrastructure, asset management and the list goes on?

Can you speak a bit more about, first, what you're doing, as you mentioned earlier—you can get a bit more into the weeds on that—and, second, what some of those recommendations are that you may have to enhance and strengthen those needs?

**Ms. Suzanne Brant:** That's exactly what we're doing: building capacity. The Indigenous Institutes Act passed in Ontario now gives us the right to graduate from certificates all the way to graduate degrees. That's in our own knowledge, while also meeting the requirements of regulatory bodies and things.

For example, the indigenous bachelor's of social work program builds indigenous social workers who can then go back into the communities and address issues in ways that are very culturally appropriate. At FNTI, we have our own capacity to develop programs and support students and graduate students. As I mentioned, the average age of our students is 36 years old this year. They've already tried the mainstream system, or they didn't succeed in high school. We have all the systems in place to bring them in, train them and develop that capacity.

We're also a research institute. We're developing the capacity to bring our needs back to the communities and then figure out solutions to those issues.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** Thank you.

Mr. DeGagné, do you want to comment on that?

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** On strengthening our capacity, I'd have to speak from the perspective of Indspire. One thing I've noticed is that.... As I said before, we get funding from the federal and provincial governments, but we have Canadian donors and corporations that step up and match those funds. That's what provides us with a pool to fund indigenous students. Strengthening Indspire's capacity with that sort of fund-matching from the federal government would....

We have a long list of donors interested in that sort of thing, from people who give us \$100 at a time to those who give us \$1 million at a time. I'm absolutely astonished at how many Canadians are interested in providing support to indigenous people, and to indigenous students specifically. They do so not because they see indigenous people as having some sort of deficit that has to be fixed but to support the excellence of our students—the ones who want to go

on to graduate or professional studies. That group among our students needs to be acknowledged for their excellence.

I think that's where the real capacity strengthening will occur.

● (1845)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Badawey. That concludes your time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I see that this is a committee where we have fun among colleagues. That's what I feel, and that's good, because we need to work in a non-partisan way.

I want to thank the three witnesses again for their participation in this study.

Mr. DeGagné, you unfortunately did not have an opportunity to respond to my earlier question about language, on the topic of which Ms. Brant made a fine case. You managed to touch on it briefly in response to a question from one of my colleagues about language and its importance in keeping indigenous students motivated and encouraging their perseverance. You noted that the importance of language was prioritized in your consultations.

Do you have anything to add on that topic?

[*English*]

**Mr. Michael DeGagné:** This is an excellent question because I don't think we considered language as the doorway to support for education. We see it as something that's maybe more tied to culture, but language seems to be a critical piece of all of this.

Six years ago, in 2016-17, I was sitting on a departmental audit committee for Indian and Northern Affairs. We got a copy of the department's annual results report. In there was a sentence that I was just astounded by. It said that, in spite of 30 years of sustained funding to indigenous communities across the country, we have not been able to improve the community well-being index of the Government of Canada vis-à-vis the difference between indigenous people and non-indigenous people.

The community well-being index gap between indigenous people and non-indigenous people had not closed one bit after 30 years of funding from Indian and Northern Affairs. That's billions of dollars of investment. I thought it was a very honest admission that, in spite of all of our efforts, a lot of things have not improved—health, education, etc.











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