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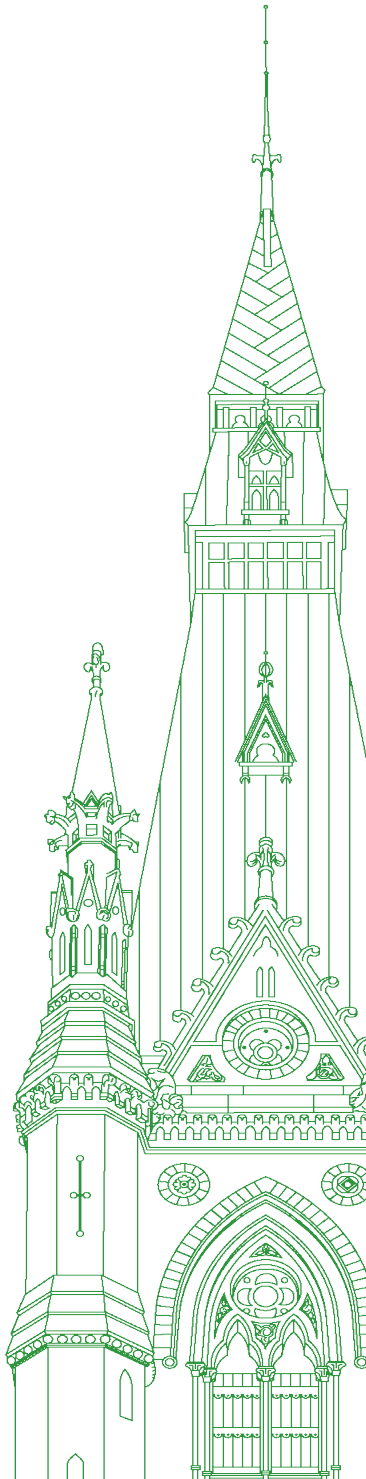

Chair: Mrs. Jenica Atwin

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

● (1630)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 57th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

We acknowledge that we meet on the unceded, unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

[*English*]

For those participating virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, Inuktitut, English or French. Please select your language now.

If interpretation is lost at any time, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

[*Translation*]

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

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

Today in our first panel we welcome Lois Philipp, former teacher and administrator, in person. Thank you for joining us.

We welcome David Rattray, former teacher, by video conference, and Helen Bobiwash, accountant, also by video conference.

Thank you so much for giving us your time today. You'll each have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Philipp, you'll start us off. You have five minutes.

Ms. Lois Philipp (Former Teacher and Administrator, As an Individual): Thank you.

I'm a little bit nervous. I've never done this before. It's nice to see a friendly face in the crowd.

I am from Fort Providence and I've spent 20 years working in a school that I first attended in K to 8. When I attended, it was called Elizabeth Ward School, named after the first nun in the NWT to run a residential school. At that time, it was still heavily influenced by the Catholic church, so for a lot of my education, from K to eight, I was a federal day school student.

This is very much a story with my community at the heart of all I do, what we did to make it a community school and how we need to get back to that.

Right now our school is struggling because of the pandemic, because of the challenges that have emerged over the last few years. However, we all intuitively know that improving graduation rates for indigenous students in both the K-to-12 system and at post-secondary levels would have tremendous benefits in terms of the socio-health indicators in indigenous communities and on the overall GDP indicators in Canada to the tune of billions of dollars.

Such a basic statement is mired in 157 years of colonialism. How do we look at the challenges without understanding the conversations needed to include the breadth of institutional policies that govern our communities?

I'll occasionally look at my school photo from my grade 7-8 class and reflect on the 17 or 18 students who were in my class. Only four of us graduated, and the other three were non-indigenous. Then I flash forward 40 years. Five years ago, from Fort Providence, a community of 800, we had 23 post-secondary students in 11 different post-secondary institutions. The cornerstone of this success was our extensive on-the-land programming, our Dene language immersion program and alternative programming.

One of the things that carries me through my days are the challenges I see and the solutions I seek. I have read a lot about the success of programs elsewhere that have piqued my curiosity. With that mindset, when I moved into administration in 2004, I looked at what we could build upon to make it a better fit in the community.

At that point, our students in grades 3, 6 and 9 wrote the Alberta achievement tests, but I had trouble mentally wrapping my head around a test that was characterized by failure. Why would I want students to write a test that they struggled with? It's not that they were incapable of it but that they were not ready for it. Out of this, we began our Dene Zhatie immersion program, expanding from kindergarten to grade 3.

One of the frustrations I carried as we began the immersion program was that there were loads of funds available if I had wanted to do a French language program, but I had to beg, borrow and steal to implement an indigenous language program.

Fort Providence is the site of the first residential school in the NWT. Our trauma is carried back to Confederation in 1867.

Indigenous languages were integral to what we did, and from this we moved into a year-round schooling calendar so that a robust land-based school program was created. From this, there was buy-in from the community and increased levels of attendance.

At the height of what we did, and where we had our most success, was our K-to-3 students began the semester, which ran from the Friday after the August long weekend until the Friday before the Thanksgiving weekend, outside in a camp by the river. Dene Zhatie was the language of instruction, and in the end, classes focused on the language around numeracy and the science of a land-based curriculum. These students would spend two weeks in the winter at our camp about five kilometres outside the community, being transferred daily by snowmobile, again honouring the cyclical nature of the community. We did the same in the spring at another camp in the opposite direction.

In grade 4 we began to bring our students out for multi-day trips on the land, where they camped out. The students would spend a week every year out on the river with elders, hearing the stories about where they came from. The elders were sent out with the instruction that they needed to tell the stories that grounded our students in place, and they needed to live by the rhythms of the spring. If hunters wanted to get up at four or five in the morning to go out, they needed to bring the kids.

● (1635)

We did this in August for our grade 5-6 class and in June for our grade 4-5 class. We also sent them to a winter camp about 20 kilometres downriver from the community, camping in -20°C to -30°C weather, setting traps, setting nets and learning basic survival skills. In the spring, they spent a week or two at the spring camp down in the opposite direction.

In our junior high program, we had our young men participate in a rites of passage camp and then go out on a moose hunt. Our young women then had their rites of passage camp and were ready to fix and prepare any moose that were harvested. With a successful moose hunt, the class would be drummed back into the community and the meat distributed to community members. In the winter, they also spent a week down at Horn River, setting traps and nets and spending time with skilled community members.

If I'm going too fast, please let me know.

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Ms. Philipp; you can add more, perhaps during the question-and-answer period, but I have to move on to the other witnesses.

Ms. Lois Philipp: Okay.

At this point, they were given the opportunity to participate in some of the longer programs. When our kids reached junior high, we would send them out on a Friday and bring them back the following Sunday so we knew they had two safe weekends when they were safe and out learning.

In our high school program, we offered experiential science courses that were on the land for anywhere from three to six weeks. These were usually done in August and September. We would also organize multi-day canoe trips, wilderness first aid courses, firearms safety courses and canoe trip certification.

● (1640)

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Ms. Philipp; I'm going to cut you off.

Ms. Lois Philipp: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to David Rattray by video conference for five minutes. Thank you.

Mr. David Rattray (Retired Teacher, As an Individual): Thank you for inviting me.

I'm a Tahltan elder, teacher, principal, district principal, counsellor and cultural teacher. I'm going to talk about a couple of topics that we really don't like talking about. I've worked with over 1,000 to 2,000 indigenous kids, and from their perspective, they have four things that they believe contribute to their failing.

The first is pain at home. The second is choosing friends who are hurting. The third is that the school system doesn't know how to deal with them, and the fourth is that they give up hope in themselves.

From my perspective, there are two critical issues that must be addressed at the school level if we are to improve education for indigenous students.

The first is that as indigenous people, we must break our code of silence, acknowledging the huge impact that intergenerational trauma has on many of our community members. Today we hurt each other way more than anybody else does, and this is something we don't even like to talk about, let alone address.

The second issue is that the school system doesn't know how to prepare indigenous youth to be emotionally ready to learn. They don't understand this intergenerational trauma and its impact.

There was a study done back in the late 1990s, the ACE study, adverse childhood experiences. This study looked at the relationship between 10 different adverse childhood experiences and their impact on health later in life. Some of them included abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, incarceration, addictions and so on. If a child experiences four or more of these adverse childhood experiences, they are 32 times more likely to have learning and behavioural problems in school—32 times more. As a counsellor and as a teacher, I have worked with numerous indigenous students who had seven or more of these. This intergenerational trauma shapes the lives of many—not all—indigenous students, and it needs to be addressed by the indigenous leaders and the various levels of the educational and political systems. We watch suicides, drugs, alcohol, anger, violence. These are all surface symptoms of this intergenerational trauma that we do not like to talk about.

I taught in Telegraph Creek, which is in my nation that my mother was from, in northwestern British Columbia. We created an exciting and successful learning environment for all students—"we" being the community, the staff and the students.

There is something that I created in indigenous pedagogy that I call the four goals of indigenous education.

Goal number one is emotional needs and safety. Again, most—not all—indigenous students live in traumatized homes. Their limbic systems are in a state of alert arousal and can be easily triggered by sensory experiences. For learning to happen, their limbic systems must be calmed down. One of the ways that I was taught growing up was gentle approaches to trauma. It's beautiful to see; it's a cornerstone.

The second one is creating belonging environments. It's a safe place to be for everyone. It's relational. There's a spirit of peace. It's fun. It's family orientated, that kind of thing. When I look at school systems, I see what I call "almost belonging" environments instead of belonging. An "almost belonging" environment is where the teacher is still in control in the traditional sense of the word. A belonging environment shifts and looks at "How do I help this human being succeed?" One of the keys to that is looking for their beauty. When you look for beauty in a human being, it's awesome to watch how they respond.

● (1645)

The third goal, as someone already mentioned, is the creation of a culturally rich environment that belongs to the community you're in, but there's another piece to it. I call it bicultural education. It's the ability to teach someone to walk in two worlds. I can go out and hunt moose in snowshoes that I made, kill a moose, drag it back in, prepare it and tan the hide. I can do all that stuff, but I can also apply for a $300,000 grant and nail it. That's bicultural. I'm walking in both worlds.

Once these three are done, the fourth one—academics—soars. This is because they feel safe and they feel they belong. The academics take off. That can be done in the current system.

Thank you for listening.

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

We'll now go to Ms. Bobiwash by video conference for five minutes.

Ms. Helen Bobiwash (Accountant, Kinoomaadziwin Education Body): *Meegwetch*. *Nakurmiik*. *Merci*.

Thank you for the opportunity to share lessons learned from first nations participating in the Anishinabek Nation Education Agreement.

I join you today as a result of federal investment in my education. I am a lifelong first nations learner. I am an independent accountant, a fellow of CPA Ontario, a fiscal negotiator for the Anishinabek Education System and a member of the Thessalon First Nation.

The Anishinabek Nation Education Agreement is the first self-government agreement in Ontario. It came into effect on April 1, 2018. It involves 23 participating first nations. They are situated in an area ranging from Aamjiwnaang First Nation on the southern tip of Lake Huron and northwest to Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek, north of Lake Superior. Participating first nations operate 13 first nations schools. There are two secondary and 11 elementary schools. They also send their students to schools in 21 provincial school boards.

Low graduation rates and the outcomes of indigenous students are a direct result of colonialism and federal legislation and policies aimed at extinguishing indigenous peoples in Canada. Improving education outcomes for first nations peoples requires additional investment to overcome the legacy of racist legislation and policies and to address the unique costs of first nations.

Incorporating indigenous language and culture in learning environments is fundamental to improving achievement among first nations students. This includes daily delivery of indigenous language classes, immersion programming and land-based learning. It also involves documenting languages that are almost lost in some communities.

Digital exclusion is a significant issue in our communities. Increasingly, broadband Internet and accessible technology must be considered fundamental rights. First nations schools and students require affordable technology and Internet access. However, first nations have marginal access to Internet services, and for many families it is cost-prohibitive to bring them into their homes.

Teachers and school staff are on the front lines, witnessing the mental health needs of first nation students. School personnel must be equipped to support the mental health of students in the school environment. They require resources and tools to respond to students' needs.

The costs to support special education are ever increasing. Participating first nations of the Anishinabek Education System report that 45% to 55% of their students require special education accommodations. First nations are seeing increasing numbers of students with autism and in utero opiate exposure. Federal investment in first nations special education funding isn't keeping pace with increasing costs, and this must change.

Education sectoral self-governing bodies also require additional investment to improve education outcomes. Sufficient governance funding is required to carry out additional responsibilities under self-governing education systems for both the participating first nations and the coordinating body.

It is essential to provide sufficient investment for data governance. Sectoral self-governing education systems must develop and manage data and use it to make decisions for the support and benefit of student achievement. Investment in a long-term longitudinal study is essential to measuring the long-term outcomes of the education system.

Finally, education capital is important, particularly for schools, teacherages, transportation vehicles, supporting infrastructure, operations and maintenance. Without the ability to invest in education capital, first nations are unable to fully exercise their jurisdiction in education.

Meegwetch.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Bobiwash.

We'll now proceed to our round of questions, beginning with the Conservatives.

We have Mr. Bob Zimmer for six minutes.

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

My questions will be for David Rattray. David, welcome to the committee.

Your list of answers to the questions has been lengthy. It's been hard to even keep up and take notes, David, but the one thing I'll say is—it's a little because of your grey hair and a little because I used to work with you, many years ago—that you've been at this for a long time. I used to watch you care for students who were struggling, and you managed to bridge the gap and have these kids go on to succeed in their lives. I know that's the joy of a teacher, but I saw that you were especially good at what you did.

In going through your list, there's so much to say, but I'm going to ask you a bit more of a general question: If you were the Minister of Indigenous Affairs—I know you've done this on a small scale, David, because I see what you do—how would you bring what you said to us...? How would you bring that up to the minister and...? Let's say you were the minister. In the first 100 days, what would you do to change the direction of education for indigenous communities in Canada?

It's a big question.

Mr. David Rattray: It's nice to start with a simple question like that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Rattray: The difficulty we're facing is that we keep silent about the trauma we're inflicting on our people, the intergenerational trauma stuff. Holding forums around trauma, education and community needs are the kinds of discussions that need to be held.

There's another piece of it that is very difficult: When someone divulges, we have a culture wherein we attack the person who has been abused and we protect the abuser. We have all of these very powerful structures in our communities such that we're out to not deal with the trauma. We need the ability to be open, honest and transparent about intergenerational trauma. Hey, if we're going to help aboriginal kids, we have to hold talks about intergenerational trauma. Do we have to do it in a rough or rude way? No. We can come and say, “Okay, our kids are hurting. How can we help? How can the school system or political system come to open up this very serious problem?” It's closed right now. We don't talk about it.

On the news, we see drug and alcohol issues and suicide. That's not the problem; the problem is underneath. It's the trauma we're inflicting. We have to be able to open up dialogues in a gentle way. I'm totally against saying, “We have to talk about sexual and spousal abuse, and community abuse.” That's not the way. We have to come in and talk with the community leaders. There are two types of leaders in our communities. There are the political leaders and the unofficial leaders. How do we get them talking about it? It's “Hey, your community is hurting. How can we help?”

Then, for God's sake, help.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, David.

Again, over the years, I watched how—we talked together—you did that, and others around you. I remember Bev and so many kids we got.... We could probably name similar students whom we both taught, whom I still remember and who had heaps of promise. In some ways, they got derailed along the way, but I've also had students who were challenged during high school come and say, “Mr. Zimmer, guess what? I'm a welder now. You taught me how to weld, and I'm enjoying life.” They're having kids and families and succeeding in that next part of their lives.

I know it's perhaps too short a time to fully develop the answer to what you're saying we need to do, but I think that your being so honest and upfront with us will hopefully start the conversation in a good way.

Perhaps I'll ask you this, David, even breaking it down into high school, as an example: Using a high school, where we both taught, how would it look different, in a high school? Would there be extra supports for students?

I know it goes beyond that. It goes into families and much more beyond the four walls of a school. Where would we start?

● (1655)

Mr. David Rattray: It starts by looking at how you create belonging in schools and how you create a place for the limbic system where these kids who come to school are safe. In Telegraph Creek, that's what we did. We found ways to make these kids feel that they were safe and that they belonged. We did all kinds of stuff that focused on how to show these kids that we cared and on how to put the power and the responsibility on the community to help. When you look at it, community help is critical.

It's about changing the mindsets. When you look for beauty in kids, it's a whole different way of seeing kids. I can tell you hundreds of stories about finding beauty, but I'll give you one quick one.

This 15-year-old came in and looked at me: “I hate effing counsellors.” I said, “You're going to get kicked out for fighting.” He said, “Yeah; so?” I said, “Tell me about some fights.” When he asked why, I said, “I just want to see how good you are.” He started to describe some fights, and I was thinking, “Where's his beauty...? Where's his beauty...? Where's his beauty...?”

After about five or six fights, there it was. I could see it as clear as day.

“Stop,” I said. “Every time you fight, when the guy hits the ground, the fight's over.” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Well, you can kick him or you can piss on him. You can do whatever.” He said, “That's disrespectful.” I said, “That's an awesome quality, man. How do you apply that quality before you apply your fists?”

After 20 minutes, he stood up and walked out, saying, “Man, you're cool. I'd like to see you again.” He stopped fighting that day. They were going to kick him out.

It's about that whole mind shift of how you teach and how you discipline with dignity. Where we're at now is that I'm developing Kuwegānh, which is our old laws. We're putting them into the school system there. Kuwegānh is not about right and wrong; it's about restoring balance, restoring friendship, restoring healing. It's not about consequences. It's about people working together to develop and take conflict as something to grow from, not to bring consequence.

Those are the mindsets. The whole shift that's necessary is because we are not doing service to traumatized kids in the way our school system is set up. Therefore, you have to challenge it. How do we change that whole approach so that we can find that beauty in these kids and hold them accountable in a gentle way, and so that their limbic system has calmed down and they feel safe in the school?

That's the kind of mindset you have to explore.

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

Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

We'll now go to Mr. McLeod for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the presenters today.

It's good to see somebody from my hometown. It's not very often we see anybody from the north, never mind my hometown, so I'd like to say welcome to Lois Philipp.

Madam Chair, I'd also ask that Lois present her written submission to us so that we can put it into the record. She was just getting warmed up when you cut her off. She has lots to say. I've known Lois her whole life, pretty much.

Lois, I know that in the community of Fort Providence you've become the go-to person for many people, whether it's students, parents, grandparents or educators. A lot of people seek advice or support from you. It's resulted in a lot of graduations in high school and post-secondary. I'm not sure what you're doing that is resulting in these numbers that we need to see. We're still a long way from where we need to be, but things seem to go well when you get involved.

Is it because we need a navigator program? Do we need people to help the students find their way? Maybe you could talk about some of the obstacles that you're observing when you're talking to people about education and about improving education.

● (1700)

Ms. Lois Philipp: I think the greatest obstacle to our moving forward in terms of education is the division that I see. I look at this room, and I assume that opposition is on this side and government is on that side. That's where it becomes a little bit challenging in terms of how we move forward in a good way, understanding that it needs to be about developing partnerships.

We need to understand that if we were to raise the indigenous graduation rates and narrow that gap, the economic effect on the Canadian GDP would in the hundreds of billions of dollars. We start with that as the primary understanding of why it is important. We get healthier communities. I look at Fort Providence. I was blessed because that is my home community. I was a sixties scoop kid and I was also a residential Indian day school student, so I carry that understanding.

I'm in the community, living with a non.... My family is not indigenous, so that has made me really aware of the challenges of walking in both worlds, understanding that I need to be a voice for my community.

In the midst of our programming, between 2008 and 2013, our attendance rates were well over 95%. That meant that some days I wanted some kids to go home, but they were there.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Lois Philipp: When you have students in the building, learning happens, and when learning happens, we see greater rates of success. The fact is that in a community of 800, we had 23 students at 11 different post-secondaries. We had them at Carleton, Algonquin, RMC in Ontario, and also at post-secondaries in Alberta, Saskatchewan and B.C. Those young people come back to the community with an understanding that they can be the change-makers.

I had the immense pleasure of working last summer with Michael's youngest. She's a go-getter, and the skills that she possesses are incredible. I'd like to think that a lot of it is because of our outdoor programming. By the time our kids graduated from grade 12, they had been out on the land for 50-plus weeks. They had spent over one academic year out on the land, whether it's fishing, moose hunting or doing Science 30—grade 12 science—out on the land. It's incredible.

I forget what the question was.

I think it's about working together for a common vision and setting aside our differences to understand that we want success as indigenous peoples, but it's not always something that is achievable within the present systems.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I want to quickly interrupt you because I want to get one more question in.

You have an opportunity now to make a recommendation to the government. What can the government do better or differently that will improve the graduation rates for indigenous people?

Ms. Lois Philipp: I think language immersion is important to the healing that David referred to. I think that when you privilege a language in a school, you privilege a systems way of thinking. I think that's probably the biggest one.

I think we also need to allow schools to develop alternative programming that is seen to be a mainstay.

When I left the school, we lost our year-round calendar. We lost a lot of things, and those need to be entrenched in the fabric of what is important—language and alternative programming.

Let's redefine the metrics of success. I like the NWT in that we fund students up to 21, so we're away from that period of time, K-12, and from saying you should be done, you should have graduated, at 18. Well, that's not necessarily achievable in all of our communities, but by 21, it is.

Marsi.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

We'll now go to Madame Gill.

[*Translation*]

You have six minutes.

● (1705)

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

I, too, want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I was going to ask a question about student success, but Ms. Philipp took the words right out of my mouth. Before becoming a member of Parliament, I was a CEGEP teacher. I remember a conversation I had with a student once. She told me that she felt as though all teachers cared about was performance. In other words, students had to have good grades as quickly as possible, while competing with one another. I'm not saying I support that, but that was the overall impression the student had of the education system.

That makes me wonder what we mean by “success”.

You gave a definition earlier, Ms. Philipp, and Mr. Rattray talked about it as well. This is for both of you, as well as Ms. Bobiwash. Do you think we should define the term “success” differently?

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Philipp: You want me to redefine “success”. Was that the question?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: The committee's study is about successful outcomes for indigenous students and their educational success. I'd like you to talk about what you consider to be a successful outcome, as someone who has so much experience teaching indigenous youth.

How should we define the term “success”? How should we be measuring success?

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Philipp: Thank you.

When I have kids in my office, I often ask their parents to tell me what their gifts are, as a place to understand that the relationship between community and families needs to be integral as a starting place.

Success is so many different things. If you're a good person or if you have the skills to respond in your community in a good way, those are all the metrics of success that I need.

We have students who struggle with literacy and numeracy skills, but what they bring to our community is what we need. We need doctors, we need lawyers and we need health care professionals and teachers, but we also need those people who are community members who will take care of us, who will....

I think Michael will agree that in Fort Providence over the last eight months, we have experienced some incredible loss. The beauty of the community is how we come together in that loss and how we acknowledge our losses. For me, that's success.

Success is not about graduating at 16, 17 or 18, but about making sure that you have the skills to be a good person, living in both worlds.

I don't know if that is something you can take away, but I think that as indigenous peoples, we have the opportunity to lead in so many ways.

Marsi.

The Chair: Ms. Bobiwash or Mr. Rattray, would you like to weigh in?

Ms. Helen Bobiwash: Thank you.

It's a really good question. Thank you for asking it.

The participating first nations in the Anishinabek Nation Education Agreement are actually talking about that right now, and what student success and well-being mean to them as an education system.

Within the Anishinabek Nation, we have a preamble we open meetings with. “We are all one family” is the English translation. In Anishinabek, it's “Ngo dwe waangizig Anishinaabe”. It really encompasses that concept that we are all here in this one family together, and we all have a purpose in our family. Just as Lois said, we all have different gifts that we can give, and that's fundamental to success. It's being recognized as part of the family, and that relationship and that sense of belonging that David also talked about.

I also want to bring up the word “child”, which in Anishinaabemowin is *binjoojiihns*. *Binoojiihnsaag* is “our children”. It literally translates to “raising the spirits”. I think that's what schools really do. They have a big role in raising the spirits of our students and allowing them to flourish and realize the gifts they've been given, share them with the world and feel good about it.

David was spot-on when he talked about that sense of trauma that we've experienced, both personally and intergenerationally. If we can lift the spirits of our students so that they feel good about themselves and about their family and about where they are at this point in time with the resources they have, that to me is the start of success.

● (1710)

The Chair: Mr. Rattray, if you'd like to add something, you have about 30 seconds.

Mr. David Rattray: I totally agree with was said. The essence of success for indigenous students, I believe, is the ability to help them deal with their trauma and to help them understand that they're living in two worlds and how to navigate those two worlds.

Méduh. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

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

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who have come to speak to us today, because they are speaking the absolute truth.

I'd like to speak in Inuktitut, but for the questions I have, I don't know them in Inuktitut, so I'm going to ask them in English.

[*English*]

I very much appreciate all of your interventions. You've made it very clear to us that the impacts of colonial policies remain and that our students are still experiencing intergenerational trauma.

I love how you're all trying to make sure that as parliamentarians we're seeing these realities and that in order for our students to become healthy, productive adults, we can't judge that only on academic success. We also have to focus on their well-being, on the way that I think first nations, Métis and Inuit used to raise our children.

We used to raise them to make sure they have love and kindness and are wanting to help to protect the environment and the wildlife, that they mattered and that we show respect at all times. With the residential school system teaching indigenous peoples anger, pain and abuse—to force them to suffer such abuse—it's no wonder that we continue to see the impacts of intergenerational trauma. I still experience it myself.

To ensure we are moving towards producing healthy, productive indigenous peoples, I wonder if you agree that maybe we need to be incorporating an education system that talks about love and forgiveness from the indigenous peoples' teachings, rather than only trying to ensure there's academic success. The reason love and forgiveness are so important is that our parents and our grandparents were robbed of them, but how can they teach them if they were robbed of them? That's my question. Do we need to talk more about what indigenous peoples went through and try to make sure we're working towards love and forgiveness in our education system?

Maybe all three could answer. I'd appreciate it.

Ms. Lois Philipp: Okay. I was going go to say, “Go ask someone else first.”

I think that needs to be the cornerstone. The cornerstone of all education needs to be the understanding that within first nations communities we were born of trauma. Every generation since contact has been born into trauma, so how do we move out of that in a way that is collective, in a way that is built on understanding and without judgment, understanding that this is where we are, and how do we move forward?

There are many times when I've had students who have needed a nap and a meal. That's what they needed. They did not need that English test. They did not need that math test. They needed understanding that this was where they were. If we can respond to needs as they arise, in a gentle way, without judgment, then we have the ability to move forward.

● (1715)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Rattray.

Mr. David Rattray: The whole thing about emotional intelligence is very important. It has to involve the community. It has to involve the staff. It's the whole idea around, "How do we help youth who are hurting heal?" When we do that, teachers don't have to "fix the kid". However, we have to create an environment in which their pain is accepted. We need all the strategies around creating a belonging environment.

One day I went to school. I was teaching and I was very tired. I said to the kids, "If you fool around, I'll rip your tongues out today. If you don't believe me, try me." The second-toughest girl I've ever worked with in my life said, "David's having a bad day." She came up and gave me the biggest hug you can imagine. All the girls came up and gave me hugs. Some of the guys hugged me, and some gave me high-fives. How long can you stay upset?

I've never seen that in a discipline policy. These kids intuitively know how to support each other. We have to create the environment for that to happen.

Méduh.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Bobiwash.

Ms. Helen Bobiwash: *Meegwetch*.

The Anishinabek Education System was formed by the first nations to make sure their children are not experiencing the traumas their parents and grandparents did in Indian residential schools. Our mission is this.

[*Witness spoke in Anishinaabemowin and provided the following text*:]

Ni-wiiji'aamin ni-gikinoo'amaaganaanig ji-bimosewaad, Anishinaabewaadiziwin-gikendaasowin miikana.

That translates to "We support our students in following an Anishinaabe Aadziwin learning path." That "Anishinaabe Aadziwin" is the way of life. It involves that love, kindness and respect for each other—not just people, but also creation and all of the lands and beings we share Mother Earth with. That's fundamental to giving the students that sense of relationship to then be able to succeed.

Once they have that sense of safety, they can achieve anything.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout. Thank you to our witnesses. That will conclude our panel.

I want to thank you so much. You have enriched our study today with your testimony. Any kiddo would be lucky to have you as a teacher.

We're going to briefly suspend as we set up for our second panel.

● (1715)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1720)

● (1720)

The Chair: We'll begin our second panel.

We have Ms. Lisa Smith, interim adviser to the president, Native Women's Association of Canada, and Mr. Michael Furdyk, director of innovation, Connected North, by video conference. Hopefully, we'll have Ms. Karen Restoule, advisory board member, by video conference shortly.

We will begin with Ms. Smith. You'll have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Lisa J. Smith (Interim Adviser to the President, Native Women's Association of Canada): Hello.

I am the interim adviser to the president of NWAC and I just want the honourable committee to know how honoured I am to be here.

Education is an important issue for the president of NWAC. Closing the gap in education is a top priority for NWAC.

Unfortunately, the legacy of residential schools continues to impact our youth. Madam Chair, that is why all services, educational or otherwise, must be trauma informed.

NWAC believes that indigenous women, girls, transgender and gender-diverse peoples need to be provided the opportunity to control their education. To do so, investments need to be made to improve facilities and services, while also recognizing the authority of indigenous people in determining their education.

Indigenous peoples are self-determining. Canada is in the process of implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; let us remember that article 14.1 of the declaration states:

> Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

Indigenous education is built on the values and practices informed by indigenous cultures, languages and histories. Passing down indigenous ways of being provides supports and resources to indigenous youth to reach their full potential.

In addition, Madam Chair, we cannot discuss educational rates without discussing indigenous language revitalization. Indigenous languages contain our world views, our cultures and our identities, which oftentimes are intersecting. NWAC believes indigenous language fluency creates strong cultural connections, connections that are tied to greater self-esteem, improved health and better academic outcomes.

NWAC has its own action plan in implementing the 231 calls for justice of the final report on the inquiry into missing and murdered women and girls, or MMIWG. A part of this work will help uplift an educational initiative of the national inquiry. That initiative is called “Their Voices Will Guide Us”. It's a resource for educators at all levels to use to introduce the value of indigenous women's and girls' lives into the classroom and into the minds and hearts of young people. It will prepare educators to use a decolonizing and trauma-informed approach in their teaching.

In Canada, education is provided by provincial and territorial governments, but for first nations kids on reserve, education is paid for by the federal government. Despite the federal government funding these programs, first nations communities are given less money for schools.

Structural barriers to accessing education, such as costs, have an immense impact on indigenous girls. It has been found that indigenous girls are more likely to attend underfunded schools that lack the basic resources, leading many to leave their communities to receive an education. These barriers create greater risks of poverty, poor health and unemployment in the future. Additionally, Madam Chair, indigenous women also cited personal reasons, such as pregnancy and access to child care, as reasons for dropping out of school. Wraparound services are essential in this conversation, Madam Chair.

Northern indigenous students often have to travel significant distances from their homes, families and lands to access education. Indigenous youth who travel south for education often experience the ongoing mental, emotional and financial stress associated with being away from home.

In sum, NWAC's research on indigenous education has found that the most substantial barriers to education are costs, structural constraints, geography and a sense of pride and connection to their culture.

NWAC values indigenous youth as the leaders of tomorrow, with unique voices that must be heard and empowered when leading change.

I would like to thank the committee now for undertaking a study to examine the existing funding and governance structure of the education system. It's greatly appreciated. I'm honoured to be here.

Thank you.

● (1725)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Smith.

We'll now go to Mr. Furdyk for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Furdyk (Director of Innovation, Connected North): Thank you very much to the committee for welcoming Karen and I here to speak with you today about this important topic.

My name is Michael Furdyk. I'm the co-founder and director of innovation at TakingITGlobal, a charity I co-founded in 1999, which operates the Connected North program. I'm based in Toronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

To improve high school graduation rates and successful outcomes for indigenous students, our focus must be on equitable access to learning resources and opportunities that are inspiring, culturally relevant and customized to their unique learning goals. Harnessing the power of technology is also an essential component for creating accessible opportunities.

Given the challenges of reaching students in some of Canada's most remote and isolated communities, which you've heard from many of the panellists to date, many students lack access to the educational resources, mental wellness programming and future pathways guidance readily available to K-12 students in the south. Graduation rates can only be increased if students are inspired and engaged in the classroom from the beginning of their educational experience. That's the goal of Connected North.

A program operated by our registered charity, TakingITGlobal, Connected North uses a technology-driven, classroom-based approach to connect first nations, Inuit and Métis students and teachers living in remote communities across Canada to live virtual learning experiences and opportunities not available to them locally. Previously, students would have been unlikely to access experiences like post-secondary campus tours, museum visits, hands-on coding programs and conversations with indigenous professionals from diverse sectors. Through Connected North, they can now participate from the comfort of their home community.

The program started in just one school, but now operates in 150 schools, serving over 30,000 K-12 students and more than 500 active teachers. During the school year to date, we've delivered over 200,000 minutes of live interactive digital learning. All sessions are customized to meet the unique needs of every school, teacher and classroom, with a focus on delivery by indigenous educators, mentors and role models such as MP Idlout, who recently spoke to students.

It looks like Karen has joined us as well.

Karen, I'll give you a minute to talk a bit about the history of Connected North.

● (1730)

Ms. Karen Restoule (Advisory Board Member, Connected North): Very good.

Can everyone hear me?

Can I maybe get some smiles or a sound check? Are we good?

The Chair: I'm so sorry. We need a proper headset for our interpreters. I'm wondering if you have the one that was sent to you.

Ms. Karen Restoule: I currently have all the approved equipment. I ran the test this morning. I'm featuring a Blue Yeti here. As you can see, it's been approved. I was told that I have the proper equipment.

I'm ready to proceed.

The Chair: Let me just confer for one second.

Okay. We're all good. Thank you so much. Please continue.

Ms. Karen Restoule: Thanks, Michael, for the introduction.

I'm pleased to be here before the committee.

Connected North was created through a collaboration between Cisco Canada and Her Excellency Mary Simon, focusing her work on the 2011 national strategy on Inuit education. The program was launched as an innovative way to harness technology to engage students and provide 21st century digital access to resources to help close the education gap.

After a successful pilot project in one school in Iqaluit in the 2013-2014 academic year, the program expanded across Canada, which is really exciting. TakingITGlobal took over operations of the program in late 2015 and has led its rapid growth since then. Cisco and an ecosystem of private sector technology partners remain engaged today to provide and support best-in-class technology solutions.

At the heart of the program is the commitment to an approach that holds indigenous perspectives at the centre of both content and process. This is what makes the program unique. This includes developing culturally relevant content that respects and values students' cultures, supporting the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Sessions are sourced and developed in partnership with teachers in communities in direct response to their needs, and first nations, Inuit and Métis role models are involved wherever possible as critical sources of knowledge and inspiration.

There are currently over 2,250 sessions available to be booked, which is incredible. Each session has been developed by one of the more than 300 active lesson providers, 132 of whom are indigenous, and the program offers stipends to all providers, bringing new economic development opportunities to many indigenous artists, elders, scientists and a whole host of folks.

The interactive sessions, held in real time, average about 45 minutes in length and cover any topic or subject matter. The most popular subjects are science and environmental studies, arts and music. Examples include virtual field trips to museums, science centres, galleries, aquariums and more; teacher professional development workshops and training; and sessions that explore future pathways for education and careers, featuring indigenous leaders.

We also offer mental wellness programming and resources that are aligned with our well-being framework. The program is made possible thanks to a large ecosystem of donors and supporters, ranging from corporate partners to regional governments, family foundations and private individuals.

It's over to you, Mike.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: I know we're nearly out of time, so I'll just say that we'd be happy to talk a bit more in the questions about some of the program's outcomes and the impact that it's developed to date.

We're excited to have the Government of Nunavut as the first territory to fully fund the program across all of their schools.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now proceed to our round of questions. We'll begin with Mr. Vidal for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all three of our witnesses today. I appreciate your being here today and sharing your knowledge with us.

I'm going to start with Mr. Furdyk this afternoon.

Mr. Furdyk, you have a very impressive resumé. I did some research and I'm very impressed with the knowledge and history of the work you've done.

I would like you to talk a little bit more about the program delivery itself to give you an opportunity to explain it a bit more in the context of what kinds of requirements are necessary for some of the northern and remote communities to be connected and be able to do what they need to do with your program. I know you use digital technology. I know that it's very much a technology-based application. I want to give you the opportunity to talk about that a little more, please.

● (1735)

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Program delivery really begins with a student's interest or the curriculum that a teacher needs to meet. Both of those things are equally important in engaging students. A teacher will come to our team members—we have almost 20 educators on our team who help to deliver the program—and they'll say that they have a student interested in Shakespeare or a student who wants to learn about indigenous cooking or about science experiments. We will source an amazing guest speaker to deliver a session to inspire and engage them.

I think one of the things that also makes the program special is that we will send the supplies and materials to the school to make that happen, whether that's soapstone for them to do a carving, or squid—our office is full of squid. Students will dissect squid to do a science experiment. There are also books by indigenous authors. This year we sent over 800 shipments to our partner schools to make sessions and supplies possible.

Obviously the program requires a sufficient Internet connection to exist. We've seen in an Auditor General's report this week that there are still some challenges with having adequate access for many first nations communities—Inuit and Métis communities too—but we have seen improvements in recent years, in that more schools are able to participate that weren't able to do it before.

Essentially, at the heart of the program, it's delivering a learning experience to meet a student's interest, and it's also aligned to over 2,000 curriculum objectives, so we make it easy for teachers to see how what we have to offer in our catalogue meets the curriculum.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

People who sit at this table regularly are probably tired of my talking about the concept of outcomes, but in the context of the program, in the context of the work you're doing, do you have some specific data you could share with the committee? I'd love to get the outcomes you're able to achieve through your program and what you use to measure success into the report.

There are different ways to measure success. This is about graduation rates, but it's also about outcomes in general. If you have some data you use to measure success and what that looks like, I think the committee would appreciate knowing that. We'd like to have that in the report.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Thank you.

A study by York University in the early days of Connected North found that 89% of students who participated said that this kind of live virtual experience made learning more enjoyable. As part of the program, we also survey our teachers every single year. Last year over 200 teachers responded to that survey, and 96.5% of them said that Connected North helps to do two things—increase students' motivation and contribute to their attendance. We know those are factors critical to success and graduation.

Similar to something like Uber or eBay, at the end of each session a teacher has an opportunity to give us feedback on a five-star scale. This year we had a 94% teacher satisfaction rating, with over 2,000 pieces of feedback to date.

We're very data-driven. We're always analyzing how we can improve. More importantly, we're also working with those institutions—museums, science centres, aquariums—and, based on teacher and student feedback, helping them to improve their virtual learning delivery for every Canadian.

I think we have a big gap in terms of the preparedness. There's a lot of funding for physical spaces from this government, but there is very little funding for institutions, partners of ours, for virtual program delivery and virtual learning.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you. I appreciate that.

I'll go in a bit of a different direction than I was planning when I started today.

In our first panel today, we heard one of our presenters talk about how we develop the skills to be a good person. I know, as an old hockey coach, that this was something very important to me. It wasn't just about wins and losses; it was about whether we made quality young people who were going to be contributing members of society when we were done.

I have about one minute left. I'm going to give you that minute to talk about how your program is providing the skills to young people so that they end up being good people in our society and in their society where they live, and we all come together.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Karen, I'll share this moment with you as well, but the one thing I would emphasize is that a big part of our well-being framework is hope for the future. I think exposing students to role models in any and every field, giving them that opportunity to realize they can be anything they want to be and letting them see themselves represented in their learning is hugely important for them to be excited and have self-esteem and realize that anything is possible in their early age.

Karen, is there anything you want to add?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Yes. The one thing I would add is that this program leverages technology to provide an experience to students. When you think about indigenous ways of learning, it really is truly, at the core, experiential. I'm not talking about just kids; I'm talking just generally. Indigenous ways of transferring knowledge are through experiences: kids get to be interactive with their environment, with the folks they're engaging with.

When you think about this program, particularly in, dare I say, a postpandemic era, it's really pushed the world to a place where we can leverage changes and advancements in technology to provide more experiences to children. They can learn in a way that aligns with their culture and their ideology and gives them a stronger sense of pride in who they are and where they come from, but more importantly that they have opportunities that are accessible to them through these technologies and programs.

● (1740)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I know we're out of time. If you have something else to submit, we would appreciate any further data that you could offer to the committee in writing. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a point of order. It has to do with the devices people are using. This really concerns the interpreters. I think people are using non-House-approved equipment. I also want to say that all of the sound checks weren't done for the first panel.

I simply wanted to bring that to your attention, so we can do things the right way with all the witnesses going forward. It's not nice for them to be interrupted either.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Gill.

I'm just confirming with the clerk that we have the okay from interpreters and that was a tested device and has been approved. Hopefully, we're okay to proceed. Thank you.

We'll now turn to Mr. Aldag for six minutes—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Pardon me, Madam Chair. I wasn't asking whether we had the interpreters' okay. I actually wanted to know whether the equipment was approved by the House of Commons. Those are two completely different things.

Is the equipment being used right now approved by the House?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, it is a House-approved device.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: All right.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

I will now turn to Mr. Aldag for six minutes.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thank you.

Welcome to our witnesses. Thank you for your opening comments.

I'm still somewhat new to this committee. This is my second week here and I'm still understanding the premise of this study. When I go back to the terms of reference in the motion that was introduced, we are talking about gaps in attainment levels between indigenous students and others. I'm assuming the premise is that indigenous persons or students have lower graduation rates.

I'm initially going to direct my questions to Ms. Smith.

I'm also wondering about how often we see female students further disadvantaged, for a number of reasons. Do you know if those attainment levels have a gender difference between indigenous women or girls and males? If that premise is the case, do you have any sense of what factors may be exacerbating or causing that? Once we start understanding if that's actually the premise, if that's true, then we can look at how we start addressing that gender inequality.

I'll start off by asking if there is actually a difference that you're aware of, and is there any information you would have on that?

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: Yes. That's a great question. Thank you.

I am aware of the gender disparity, but I don't have the stats before me. I can follow up, though, with more details. I think it probably will make other members happy too to have that sort of data.

I can talk briefly about the reasons for the gender disparity. When we talk about indigenous education, I can go on about this, but we need to have a shift in what the measure of success is, and we have to decolonize our way of thinking towards education when it comes to indigenous people.

When you have a young indigenous woman or a gender-diverse or transgendered indigenous person, there are colonial harms such as transphobia and homophobia at play. However, it's also about the safety of the indigenous person, so we need to really talk about that.

I know that NWAC has an online resource called “Safe Passage”. Even in that, you're talking about human rights. Oftentimes, unfortunately, women have to think about their safety, and sometimes that's given more priority than studying for a certain exam and that sort of thing.

Also, then, you hear me talk about wraparound services. Oftentimes in formal education, we need to shift the focus away from a traditional service-driven, problem-based approach to care, and instead think of a strength-based, needs-driven approach. We have to think about a lot of factors in there.

I know that I'm going around the question, but certainly, yes, there is a disparity. I spoke a bit on why that is, but I can certainly follow up.

● (1745)

Mr. John Aldag: Sure, and I have another question. You may be able to add additional information through a follow-up to this one too.

When you talk about safety, I'm thinking that we also have very different settings. We have urban settings, which could be indigenous women who are living off reserve or are residents of an urban community. That may be one set of challenges. Then there could be female students in remote communities and the disparities that may be there. I would think perhaps there's safety in living in their own communities with their own families and being schooled with their neighbours and family members and things like that.

Then, as we've heard, people have to leave their communities to go for higher levels of education, even for high school. I've lived in many communities where students have come in from other communities. When we have young female students come in, I look at my daughters in high school. If they had to leave the safety of our home and community and go somewhere else, would that have an effect on those learning outcomes as well?

Again, I'd like any kinds of thoughts on not only the gender differences but those geographical differences and the kinds of settings where indigenous women may have to take their schooling. How do we mitigate against these things for safety in each of those kinds of categories?

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: I think that's a great question again, and I....

The final inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women talks a lot about public transportation. That's very much a part of this discussion as well. We know that for indigenous people in the north, for example, oftentimes there isn't reliable public transportation, and then that's a security issue.

As you said, when people are away from their communities, there's also a disconnect. I think all of us can agree that all we want is to feel part of a community, to feel that connection—I love being here in person with you guys right now—and I think you lose a little bit of that.

Now we have to shift to a decolonized way of education. As I said, part of that is creating emotional intelligence, emotional security and the well-being of the indigenous person in question. That's why we have to think about wraparound services as well, to make sure the person is supported. I think I mentioned “Their Voices Will Guide Us”, which is a resource available online that was put together for educators.

Mr. John Aldag: Sorry; I'm getting the flag from the chair. I think I've hit my time.

Any follow-up information you have that you could submit would be really appreciated.

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: I appreciate it.

Mr. John Aldag: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aldag.

[*Translation*]

You have six minutes, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Ms. Smith, I'd like to hear more about the barriers to education that women and young women face.

Mr. Aldag brought up the geographical barriers in terms of where indigenous women and girls have to take their schooling, whether they live in a rural community, on reserve or off reserve. It's important to talk about that aspect, so we can accurately identify what the federal government needs to focus on, in order to ensure that women and men have equitable access to education.

● (1750)

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: Thank you. That's an excellent question.

Anyone who knows me is probably tired of hearing me talking about this, but I can follow up with the committee on something that I'm really proud of that NWAC did: the culturally relevant gender-based analysis.

I bring that up because in there.... It's really for policy-makers like yourselves to ask hard questions and to ensure that any sort of policy, study or strategy takes into account colonization and takes a trauma-informed approach.

Let's just make up a person who's transgender, disabled and living on reserve. Let's make sure that any sorts of educational efforts and any sorts of efforts when it comes to policy and legislation take into account that person so that this person is not left behind.

You know, truth and reconciliation is hard work. It's all of our work, and we have to ask ourselves....

I was formally trained in law school. Although I'm an Inuk woman, I was separated from my culture due to colonialism and I struggle every day to decolonize my thoughts and not take things for granted. That's what we all do.

Madame Gill, I really appreciate your question. I think it's a good question: Where should our efforts go?

It's oversimplifying it to say that we need to have a decolonizing shift, because what does that mean?

We need people to understand that it's not just formal education and the curricula that we have to focus on; it's those wraparound services that are needed as well for indigenous women and girls and gender-diverse and transgender people.

Maybe there need to be more services in language revitalization. When an indigenous girl feels proud of who she is, it's proven that she will attain better educational outcomes.

What I like about....

I'm sorry that I'm jumping all over the place. I'm really excited to have this discussion.

“Their Voices Will Guide Us” is a resource that I keep referring to. What I love about it is that at the heart of it, it is teaching children—non-indigenous children as well—how valued indigenous women are. When children have love in their hearts and minds for indigenous women and girls, they're less prone to violence and other things that may take them off the course of achieving better educational rates. Part of that is also incorporating indigenous women and girls into the education. Maybe they want to hear from knowledge keepers. Maybe they want to connect with the land in traditional ways of learning. Maybe they want to learn from midwives and healers. Maybe they need positive role models to talk about resiliency, because we're still here.

I know I've given you a lot information and I don't know if I answered the question directly, but thank you for that question.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Ms. Smith. Indeed, there's a lot more to say on the subject. I'm glad that you jumped around and mentioned so many things in your answer. It gives us more food for thought for our study.

Ms. Restoule and Mr. Furdyk, Ms. Smith talked about decolonization, without focusing solely on women. Can you comment on that? I think it's another key consideration in this whole discussion. What role does decolonization play from your standpoint?

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Restoule: Mike, are you good with my taking this one?

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Sure. Go ahead.

● (1755)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karen Restoule: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

When I think of decolonizing, I really think of revitalization. It's less about deconstructing and more about constructing and revitalizing the ways of learning through experience that are very much aligned with indigenous ways of doing, in terms of learning and development.

On your question on and around the comparison between on reserve to off reserve, I think that generally, if you expose children to an environment in which they can learn about the world around them, where the land is the land and the water is the water, it gives them an opportunity to learn in a way that is familiar to them, in a way that is aligned with them culturally and ideologically.

With Connected North, we bring in technology to leverage that experiential learning. Sure, we're not doing it specifically on land and water—well, in some cases we are, actually—but we're not doing it specifically within that context. We're in classrooms, but we're actually connecting people with teachers—indigenous teachers, in some cases—who are transferring knowledge in a way that is familiar to the children we're reaching out to. It really goes back to revitalizing the principles of learning and development that are very much aligned with an indigenous world view.

In a nutshell, it's again not about decolonizing but about bringing in what we know works, what's been axed out by the Indian Act, and more importantly what puts these kids back on the path to knowing who they are and where they come from.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

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

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

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Lisa and the other panellists who are here by Zoom. I am hearing what you said and I am liking what I'm hearing, because it is very important.

My first question is for Lisa.

What you said was like music to my ears. You're saying that we need more culturally based programs in our schools.

I was on a trip recently with some of my colleagues to Cambridge Bay and Kugluktuk. We met with Canadian Rangers who came to speak to us. We heard from them. What they said had a lot of significance. They were stating what is lacking. These Rangers, because they're indigenous, know the environment. They survive in the environment. They help keep our borders secure in Canada.

When you're talking about cultural learning, I wonder if we need more indigenous leaders. A lot of the teachers we have in Nunavut come up from the south. There are some qualified teachers in Nunavut and indigenous communities. I wonder if Rangers can be taken into consideration and utilized as teachers.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: Thank you for that.

What you're saying is music to my ears too, because I honestly hadn't really thought about using Rangers and other wildlife knowledge keepers as teachers. That's because, as I said before, I'm always trying to decolonize my own thoughts. Yes, I think that would be.... We need that shift to happen now so that knowledge is passed on. That's the thing.

What is the measure of success for education? A lot of people don't realize, especially for northern people, that it is survival on the land. When indigenous children learn that, how empowering it is. That's success. We need to shift and use those resources available to us to pass on those teachings. I absolutely agree with that.

I see that some shift is happening in legislation that I think is helpful. For example, there's the Accessible Canada Act on disability. It used to be that a harm had to happen to a disabled person before something was done, but now, with the Accessible Canada Act—it's also called the barrier-free Canada act—it's proactive, and we're perceiving harms and trying to get ahead of it so that the harm doesn't have to happen first. I use this as an example with you policy-makers so that these shifts can happen, and shifting what that measure of success looks like for indigenous children needs to happen now.

I thank you not only for that question, but for everything you've said and suggested. I'll give that a lot of thought.

Thank you.

● (1800)

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

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for your response.

Now I want to ask Connected North a question. I also want to thank you. You seem to be doing a really good job in helping students get their education.

What would you like to see more of? Do you need more funding?

What else do you need to implement programs that would help students succeed while they're in learning centres and have successful futures?

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Thank you for the question.

One thing I'll add is that there is some really strong data that shows that 95% of students who take school trips have higher graduation rates from high school, and 59% have better grades. I think that speaks to the importance of both the land-based learning that you've heard a lot about from other guests and panellists and of the virtual experiences, such as Connected North.

To respond to your question, I would say that what we need is more sustainable, longer-term funding, particularly around digital learning supports for students and schools. There have been some programs here and there, but often—and you heard this from other panellists in earlier sessions—it can be one-year funding at a time, and it's difficult. By the time you get the program up and running, you're preparing to report and close it down.

What we really need is multi-year support, and we need recognition of the value of digital learning and not just physical places, in terms of students in remote communities. As we know, virtual learning offers huge opportunities and provides experiences they wouldn't otherwise be able to access in person. We'd love to see some more programs and support for that.

Ms. Karen Restoule: If I have time to add to this—

The Chair: Actually—

Ms. Karen Restoule: Oh, are we out of time?

The Chair: There isn't time, but we are going to go to a condensed second round, so perhaps you can add to this during that time.

Ms. Karen Restoule: Sure.

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Melillo for five minutes.

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

Thank you to everyone for this great discussion so far. I think it's been very helpful for our committee as we undertake this important study.

One thing that was mentioned during the course of the meeting was Internet connectivity. Of course, a recent Auditor General report that came out highlighted that the government is currently off pace to meet its 2030 goal of bringing affordable and high-quality, high-speed Internet to all Canadians. As of 2021, about 43% of first nation communities across Canada have access to affordable high-speed Internet, and that number is only 33% in Ontario.

I represent northwestern Ontario. My riding spans from the Minnesota border to Hudson Bay. In the 42 first nations in the municipalities that I represent, we know those Internet challenges far too well.

To the representatives for Connected North, I'd like to ask if you can help contextualize that issue for us. The lack of Internet, obviously, is something that would greatly impact you and your ability to carry out your role.

I'm wondering if you can help illustrate how big a challenge that is and how important it is that the government take steps to bring high-speed Internet to every community as quickly as possible.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Thank you very much.

It definitely is something that is top of mind for many of our school partners and even our presenters. For several of the indigenous role models and experts who deliver programming through Connected North, we've had to fundraise as a charity to fund satellite connectivity for them because they didn't have good enough access and they weren't able to deliver to their own community. We've definitely seen that first-hand, and we've heard that from students as well, especially in Nunavut in particular, where it's satellite only and extremely, extremely expensive.

Although there have been big announcements and a lot of funding announced, we have still heard many stories of that connectivity not yet reaching many of the communities from many of the individual students and the presenters. It still poses a huge and urgent challenge, given how essential it is for both learning and innovation, to access that technology to be able to innovate and create, whether it's the next Shopify, an amazing cultural production or a virtual reality experience.

Karen and I co-founded a website called Whose Land, which helps people learn about first nations, Inuit and Métis communities. It has over two million pageviews and helps communities produce content about themselves. They're not able to do that because of that lack of connectivity.

Karen, I know you have something else to add to that, but it's definitely an urgent challenge that we hear about every day from our partner communities.

● (1805)

Ms. Karen Restoule: There is one nuance I'd like to add in terms of what constitutes a successful outcome. I think we all have our own ideals of what constitutes success that we impose on youth today generally but especially on indigenous youth.

The way I would encourage you all to see it is that success is really providing the right framework and the right, equal opportunities for children to be able to engage in learning and development and then have them grow up to honour the gifts that they carry. When I say “gifts”, I'm talking about the skills that they naturally have that they've been given the opportunity to develop over time, and access to the right teachers and the right coaches through the use of technology, as we do at Connected North.

Whether it be a lawyer, a mechanic or even a member of Parliament, it's important that we provide opportunities, various, varied and diverse opportunities to those kids. At Connected North, that's what we aim to do. We aim to level the playing field with technology and give equal opportunity to kids to seek out coaching and mentorship and to be inspired by a variety of teachers and leaders across the country, indigenous and non-indigenous, so that they can see themselves in the world out there and around them and position themselves to also achieve their goals and, most importantly, achieve their dreams.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: And not just be consumers, but be creators.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Right. I appreciate that. Thank you very much for that context.

Michael, just very quickly—I don't have much time left—you alluded to the funding and the announcements that have been made. I know that maybe it's a bit outside your wheelhouse, but could you perhaps identify where those gaps are between the announcements and the funding and the actual outcomes, to use Gary's word, and the results on the ground when it comes to Internet connectivity?

Mr. Michael Furdyk: I think what we've heard from people is that the options that are becoming accessible to them are still far too expensive. They are double or triple the price in the south.

Deloitte did a great report on digital equity recently, and one of the things I suggested was maybe a direct subsidy to northern consumers, recognizing that they pay double or triple rates. It's really just that as these solutions come into being, they're much more expensive than they are in the south. They're not yet anywhere close to price parity, at least in the communities we've heard from.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Weiler, you have five minutes.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today and for the really interesting discussion we've been having here.

I want to pick up on a couple of questions for Connected North. Part of this study and a previous study we just completed on indigenous languages involved looking at the dislocation of indigenous peoples from land and language, damaging things that happened as a result of residential schools. They are really fundamental to moving ahead and creating a better future. I'm really quite fascinated with the approach you've been undertaking on experiential learning as well as on language.

I was hoping that you can speak a little bit more to the practicalities of how you're doing it and what you're doing, in particular when we're talking about experiential learning in connecting people to the land. When you are doing that in a remote way, how are you able to do that? How are your students connecting in that sense, and are they able to then kind of mimic what the teachings are in the place that they are doing that?

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Thanks. That's a great question.

We are really lucky to have a long-term partnership with Cisco, which founded the program in one school with a pilot. To date, they have donated almost $10 million of enterprise-class technology—which is usually used in corporate boardrooms, not in classrooms—so that students are able to have that kind of enterprise-class, high-quality, Webex-based solution.

A part of it is the technology in the classroom, but then for the presenters, for the people who are delivering those sessions—it could be on the land—we have been able to have some funding through the supports for student learning program to provide them with those bandwidth grants that I talked about and also with devices. It could be an iPad or a tablet computer, and they can actually be in the environment or in the field, whether that's doing a science experiment or out talking to students about traditional medicines. They can do that streaming everywhere.

There are a lot of sessions that still aren't possible in those environments, but we're working with Polar Bears International on the tundra in northern Manitoba out of Churchill, talking about polar bear research and climate change from the tundra.

A lot of opportunities are becoming possible, particularly around language revitalization. We work with Rainy River District School Board in northern Ontario. They actually use Connected North to deliver language instruction, because some of the schools don't have access to Ojibwa teachers. Through Connected North sessions, they are able to have a teacher from a school that does have that teacher to help fill that gap and support language learning.

We've also worked with students in five communities to date to publish indigenous language children's books, thanks to Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing here in Canada.

We're also looking at creative ways that we can bring those language resources to life and help students in communities create them where relevant and possible.

● (1810)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: That's really great to hear.

One of the other applications I see is also in urban settings, where you sometimes have indigenous people who have moved there from their traditional territories.

I'm wondering if you have been able to look at how to recreate that connection and provide services like connection to the language and teachings of that nation while people are not able to be in their traditional territory, so that they would be able to perhaps see and talk about and do the same things with other people from their nation.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: We have done a little bit of that. We do serve Wandering Spirit School here in Toronto. There are a number of students who are able to connect in an urban environment with remote communities and have a bit of cultural exchange.

We also launched a program called Fireside Chats. In that program, we have now interviewed over 300 first nations, Inuit and Métis professionals, knowledge keepers, experts, artists and authors. They share their stories on an on-demand basis. We have an indigenous journalist who has written their stories and illustrated them.

We're also looking at creating more on-demand resources that can serve every student. Our focus at Connected North is remote communities, but we've heard a lot of demand, as you said, from urban communities. We've created several programs and resources, including Fireside Chats, Create to Learn and Your Voice is Power, to try to provide some resources to those urban communities as well.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: That's great.

I have just one last question. I was hoping you could speak to the importance of role models in the programming that you offer.

Could you speak to the importance of that, please?

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Thanks.

I know we've heard that from a previous panellist as well. That's what the Fireside Chats program is all about. It's about students seeing themselves in their learning, identifying those role models and making those accessible and available in the classroom. A huge part of the program has been ensuring that the students can see themselves represented in their learning.

We're also working at building a network of post-secondary students who are going into these programs through indigenous support staff at those colleges and universities so that they can help student see that pathway and follow in their footsteps.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiler.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Smith, you've mentioned the resource “Their Voices Will Guide Us” a number of times. It's something you seem to consult often.

Can you tell us a bit more about it, and explain why it's so helpful and important to you?

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa J. Smith: Thank you.

Yes. I keep bringing it up. In NWAC, we have our own action plan to implement the calls for justice, and promoting it is one of them, but I do truly believe in the resource. It offers a pedagogy that's different. I haven't seen another resource like it, and that's why I just want educators to know it's out there. It's a resource. You can find the age of the child you're teaching and go directly to that source.

It's very enlightening in terms of how it talks about the indigenous woman and how colonialism really affected their value and their role in the minds of people. It talks about the stereotypes that came from colonialism and that sort of thing. It gives the truth about how valuable indigenous women are. It talks about the roles of indigenous women in the fur trade. It talks about midwives and healers and that sort of thing. Those are not things that we see in traditional, formal, educational pedagogies. It's a very valuable resource.

There's this message of truth but also of resilience. That's so important for indigenous women, gender-diverse and transgendered people to feel, but also part of the education is how to remain safe as an indigenous woman navigating the world. That's so important too, and that's a key piece of this discussion as well.

It's online. I can't speak about it enough. It really does give you a sense of what is needed for indigenous girls, women and gender-diverse people to succeed.

● (1815)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

We'll now have Ms. Idlout for two and a half minutes.

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

ᖃᓄᖅᓱᒪᒃ ᐊᑦ ᐃᒃᓯᐸᐅᑕᓪᓗᒃ ᓯᐅᓕᓕᒥᒃ ᐊᑦ ᑐᐃᓴᒋᖅᑕᑕᕐᖏᒃ ᐊᒃᓯᐊᓗᓄᒃ ᖃᓄᖅᔪᒪᐸᕐᖏᒃ ᐊᑦ ᐃᓄᒃᑎᑐ– ᑭᓱᓇᖅᑎᑕᐅᓯᔪᓚᒪᒪ ᐊᓪᒪᓗ ᐃᖅᖏᓇᐃᓴᖅᑎᑦ ᐊᒃᓯᐊᓗᓄᒃ ᖃᓄᖅᔪᒪᐸᕐᖏᒃ ᑕᐸᓂᓄ ᐃᓄᒃᑐᑭᑲᓇᖅᑎᑕᐅᖅᑦ– ᑕᕿᒪ ᐊᑦ ᑕᓱᓇ ᐊᑦ ᐃᓄᒃᑐᑭᑲᐃᓇᓱᓂᖅ ᐊᑦ ᓄᓇᖅᖏᖅᖏᓪᓕᐊᔪᖅᑎᒍᑦ ᓴᓱᖏᓂᐃᓄᒃᓱᓂᒃ ᓴᖅᑭᑦᓯᒪᓕᑦ ᐊᑦ ᖃᓄᖅᓱᒪᒃᑯᑦᓯᐊᖅᑐᖅᑕᐃᓱᓇᖅᑐᖅᓯᒐᑦ. ᐊᑦ ᑭᐅᕐᓇ ᑭᐅᑎᐊᑭᓇᖅᓯᐊᖅᖏᐅᒪᒪᑦ ᐱᐃᖅᖏᖅᑎᑦᑐᒪᕐᕕᖅ ᐊᑦ ᑭᐅᖅᑕᐅᔪᓇᖅᓯᑦ ᐊᑦ ᐊᐱᓚᖅᖏᐅᑲᓇᓱᓂᒃ ᐊᐱᓚᖅᓱᓂᓚᐊᖅᖅᓂᖏᓐᓇᖅᐃ ᐅᓪᓕᔭᓇᓂᑦ ᐃᖅᖏᐅᒪᓕᕆ ᖁᓇᖅ ᑭᐅᓂᐊᖅᖏᐅᒪᒪᓐᓇᖅ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank my interpreters because I am able to speak in my indigenous language, my first language.

I also thank the staff here, because they let me speak Inuktitut now.

Being able to speak our language, our mother tongue, is another example of our strength. I just want to show my interpreter how much I appreciate her.

Do you recall my question from earlier? Do you still have the response you wanted to give to my question earlier?

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I believe this is directed to Ms. Restoule.

Ms. Karen Restoule: I'm sorry, but I think I got lost in the translation.

Could you please repeat the question?

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

ᐊᒻᒪ ᐊᐱᓗᖅᑲᐅᑕᒪ ᓯᐅᓪᓕᖏᑲ ᐊᒻ ᑲᓂᑲᑎᑦ ᓄᐊᖅᑯᔪᓯᔪᑦ ᐊᑲᓯᐊᓗᑲ ᐅᐱᒋᐢᓴᓯ ᐱᓕᓗᖅᑕᑲᑕᑲᓯᓚᓂᑲ ᐊᒻ ᐊᐱᓗᖅᑲᐅᐳᖓᒪ ᖅᑲᓄᖅ ᐃᑲᔪᑭᓚᖅᐱᑕ ᐅᐢᔪᑦ ᒪᓕᒫᓕᐅᖅᑎᖅᓴᖅᓯᐊᔪᖓᑦ ᑐᐱᖅ ᑐᖅᑎᑕᐅᔭᓗᓂ– ᐊᖅᑲᖅᐱᑕ ᖅᑲᓄᖅ Ċᓚᓇ ᐱᓕᓗᐊᓗᖅᑲᑕᑲᓯ ᑲᓂᑦᑎᑎᑦ ᑲᔪᓯᑲᑎᓚᖅᑭᑦᓯᓚᓪᓚᖅᑲᑦᓴᓕᒪᑦ ᐊᒻ ᐊᑯᓂᐅᔨᓪᒥᒥᒃᑐᖅ ᖅᑲᓄᖅ ᐃᑲᔪᖅᑕᐅᐳᖅᑲᓚᖅᐱᐊᓕ

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

My first question was this: Because you do a really good job through Connected North, how can those of us who are members of Parliament help Connected North to expand or help it to run more successfully? Do you have any needs to be met?

Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Restoule: Very good.

I'll start off the answer, and then I'll turn to Michael for the hard data there.

It seems that the current government has funded technological advancements, but they haven't necessarily been put in the right places, and the quality of the service provided through the technology they've invested in isn't high enough to facilitate learning and development in our communities up north.

That's a huge miss, and I understand that while we're making efforts, we may not see everyone. To me, it really is about results. It's one thing to fund big lofty programs, but we have to make sure they work and that they reach the people they're intended to serve, and, more importantly, that we can use these tools, this technology, the connectivity, to be able to work together towards achieving outcomes and results for, in this case, indigenous youth.

I'll turn it over to Mike.

● (1820)

Mr. Michael Furdyk: The only thing I would add is that—

The Chair: Mr. Furdyk, I'm so sorry. We're out of time. If you would be able to submit that to our committee, we would appreciate the data for sure.

Mr. Michael Furdyk: Sure.

The Chair: Thank you so much to our witnesses for joining us today.

We're going to briefly suspend as we switch to meeting in camera.

Thank you so much.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]