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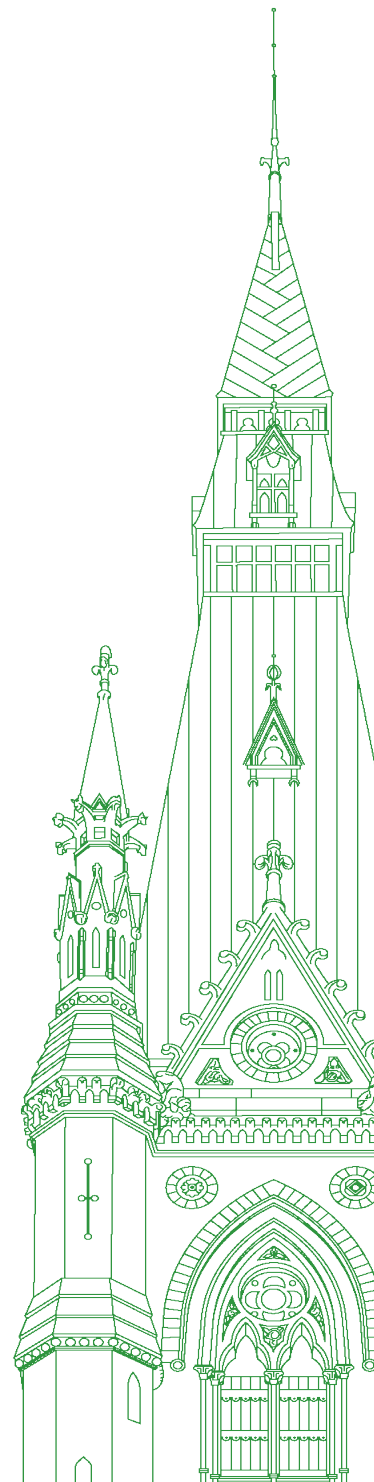
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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



Standing Committee on Official Languages

Thursday, October 24, 2024

• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 116 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

To prevent feedback incidents, I would ask all in-person participants to read the guidelines that are written on the small cards on the table.

I would also like to remind participants of the following points. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will do our best to respect the order in which people have raised their hands in order to request the floor.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on April 29, 2024, we are resuming our study of the minority-language education continuum. The first hour will be reserved for the hearing of witnesses, whom I will now introduce.

First, I would like to welcome Daniel Giroux, who is the president of Collège Boréal.

We also have two representatives from the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta: Ms. Bourque, its chief executive, and Ms. Maisonneuve, its president.

Welcome, everyone.

Mr. Giroux has previously appeared before the committee, but I believe this is a first appearance for Ms. Maisonneuve and Ms. Bourque. So I'm going to explain how we proceed. It's quite simple: I allow each organization five minutes in which to present what it wants us to know. I am strict about time management, for both the witnesses and other people around the table. The objective is for individuals to take full advantage of the time at their disposal to speak or ask questions so that the meeting is more dynamic.

I will begin by turning the floor over to Mr. Giroux for five minutes.

And by that, I mean five New Brunswick minutes, not northern Ontario minutes.

Mr. Giroux, the floor is yours.

Mr. Daniel Giroux (President, Collège Boréal): Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My colleague, our vice-president, comes from New Brunswick, so I know what you mean.

My name is Daniel Giroux, and I am the president of Collège Boréal.

Two of the 24 colleges in Ontario are francophone, including Collège Boréal. Our college was established in a large region comprising 37 sites and 27 communities. It offers more than 70 post-secondary or regular study programs as well as vocational training programs.

Since some 23,500 students and clients pass through our institution every year, the continuum and the connections we maintain with our boards are very important to us.

Collège Boréal received some very good news this year: We are the only Ontario college that has recorded rising numbers of Canadian students over the past three years. More specifically, the number of first-year students at our institution increased by 15.1%. That's excellent news for us.

Ontario's 24 colleges, like their students, receive annual report cards, which are posted to their websites. The purpose of this practice, which has been ongoing for 24 years, is to gauge the satisfaction of students, graduates and the employers who hire our graduates. Collège Boréal has received top marks among all Ontario colleges in 21 of those 24 years. We are extremely proud of that fact.

Furthermore, Collège Boréal is the only Ontario college that guarantees graduates a job. This is an initiative that we call the "Boréal guarantee". If students graduate from Collège Boréal and can't find a job in their field within a year of graduating, we refund all tuition fees. That will give you an idea of how confident we are in the quality of our training.

Today I would like to address three issues.

The first is enhancing of the official languages in education [Technical difficulty—Editor].

The Chair: We lost you, Mr. Giroux, but I don't think your microphone is muted, unless you accidentally pressed a button, because I see a red light on your headset. Don't worry; I've stopped the clock while we try to solve the problem.

Just a minute. I'm being told that there may be a technical problem in the room. We're going to allow the technicians the time to solve it.

I'm told that the problem has now been solved.

Can everyone hear Mr. Giroux on Zoom?

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): We can't hear Mr. Samson either.

The Chair: Yes, fortunately we can't hear Mr. Samson.

Some voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Giroux, we can't hear the sound in the room.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): I can hear both.

Incidentally, you have a nice voice, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ask Mr. Godin and the others if they can hear clearly too.

The Chair: I apologize to everyone joining the meeting by video conference. I think this is the first time this has ever happened.

• (1110)

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Yes, Mr. Serré, Mr. Samson does indeed have a nice voice.

I can confirm that I clearly heard the remarks of my friend Mr. Samson and those of Mr. Iacono as well.

The Chair: Please try again, Mr. Giroux.

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes, perfectly.

Please continue. You have about three minutes left.

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Thank you.

I hope you heard what I said about the “Boréal guarantee”, our way of guaranteeing our graduates a job.

First, we request an enhancement of the official languages in education program, funding of which has been frozen since 2003. As a result, our college has received exactly the same core funding under the program since 2003, 21 years ago. Considering the cumulative increase in the cost of living, that reduces our capacity to act by 70%, which is enormous.

In 2021, the government promised to increase funding for francophone and bilingual post-secondary institutions to \$80 million a year on a permanent basis. We therefore request that our funding be raised to \$80 million a year, as was promised in 2021, rather than maintained at \$32 million a year.

Second, we request that a new scholarship be introduced for studies in French. We know that the Department of Canadian Heritage offers \$3,000 scholarships to students enrolling in a francophone program. However, that scholarship is offered solely to students from anglophone school boards who have completed an immersion program. Consequently, students from francophone school boards are denied access to that scholarship.

Here's where the concept of cumulative assimilation becomes an issue, and this is a problem for us at Collège Boréal. Some 50% of students in francophone school boards decide to study in English rather than take the same program offered at Collège Boréal in French.

Consequently, it's vital that students from francophone school boards be offered scholarships to continue their studies in French.

Third, we request that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada be reformed. According to forecasts, francophone immigrants—we hope—will constitute 8% of total immigration by 2026. However, recent decisions will in fact exclude international students wishing to enrol in study programs critically important for our communities in the fields of early childhood education, technology, and electrical engineering in particular, and training programs for heavy machinery technicians. Those students will no longer be eligible for study permits in Canada.

It is therefore essential for the francophonie that programs to encourage international students be expanded because that would make a very rich contribution to the francophonie across Canada.

That's all I had to tell you for the moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Giroux.

Now it's the turn of the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta.

Ms. Maisonneuve, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve (President, Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the francophone school boards of Alberta, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Sylvianne Maisonneuve, and I am president of the Fédération des conseils scolaires de l'Alberta, or FCSFA. Established in 1995, the FCSFA represents the four francophone school boards of Alberta. The four boards created the FCSFA as an instrument for collaboration, co-operation, advocacy and applying political pressure. The federation enables the four school boards to work together on issues of common interest and to provide services to all francophone schools in the province while enabling all boards to act completely autonomously.

As of September 2024, approximately 9,550 students from kindergarten to grade 12 were attending Alberta's 45 francophone schools. However, Census 2021 revealed that more than 67,000 Albertan children were entitled to instruction at a French-language school. After Ontario, Alberta has the largest number of children entitled to an education in French outside Quebec. However, only a fraction of that number have access to and attend a French-language school in Alberta.

Why is there such a difference between the potential and actual numbers of children attending Alberta's francophone schools?

One of the major challenges that account for that difference is the underfunding of Alberta's francophone school boards, which for many years have inherited the obsolete infrastructure that anglophone school boards no longer need. Francophone school boards are thus forced to spend a portion of their budgets to maintain their buildings. They also have to provide school transport for students who are scattered across a very large territory.

In addition, certain school programming strategies are designed by the ministry for the province's education system as a whole. However, certain aspects of those strategies prevent the strategies themselves from being applied in the francophone system.

In these circumstances, every dollar that Ottawa provides to the minority French-language school system is a step in the right direction. It enables Alberta's school boards to offer certain initiatives that wouldn't otherwise be possible. However, given the enormous challenges that must be overcome, this is simply not enough.

In June 2020, the Supreme Court of Canada held that the Province of British Columbia was systematically underfunding the francophone education system. Since then, Alberta's francophone school boards have observed some improvement in the form of new schools, school renovation projects and planning for future projects. However, much remedial work remains to be done to establish school infrastructure that can compete with that of the majority and provide reasonable bus routes for students.

For our communities, francophone schools are often a crossroads where everything happens. However, the province gives no consideration to community spaces. Children in minority communities must have access to French from a very early age. Unfortunately, we can only provide preschool spaces if any are available, which is not always the case. A federal contribution to funding for community spaces while new schools are being built is vitally important to the survival of francophone minority communities.

Hiring and maintaining enough qualified personnel at Alberta's francophone school boards is a major challenge, particularly in the province's rural communities. The Campus Saint-Jean is admittedly a very important post-secondary educational institution that helps promote the recruitment of new employees. However, francophone immigrants also fulfill certain human resource needs. On that subject, it's important to note that, in recent years, immigration has helped increase the number of students attending Alberta's francophone schools, and that's still the case today.

On the one hand, the chronic underfunding of Alberta's francophone school boards limits access to a French-language education for rights holders and francophone newcomers. On the other hand, it's an obstacle to the development and consolidation of the educational continuum in French as a first language in minority communities. It is essential that rights holders be enumerated for the purposes of the demands that the francophone minority school boards must make.

• (1115)

In a context where Canada is a bilingual country, federal government support has a direct effect on the development of francophone minority communities, and that includes the education system. On the one hand, we have to celebrate a very positive 30-year record of

francophone schools management in Alberta, and, on the other, according to what section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms provides, the right to French-language education isn't being honoured where reasonable parents can be dissuaded from sending their children to a French-language school because an English-language school offers them a better educational experience. Despite the efforts—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maisonneuve. You will be able to say more in response to questions from committee members. I'm sure of that.

Since this is your first appearance before the committee, I want to inform you that each political party is allotted six minutes in the first round of questions.

We will begin with the Conservative Party, more specifically with a francophone member from British Columbia.

Mr. Dalton, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Giroux and Ms. Maisonneuve, thank you very much for your testimony. It's important for us.

Mr. Giroux, you mentioned that Collège Boréal had 36 or 37 sites. I don't remember the exact number. Where is your largest site?

Some of those sites must certainly be small. How does that affect collaboration? Are many courses offered online?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: That's an excellent question.

We have 37 sites scattered across 27 communities. The largest campus is in Sudbury, approximately four hours north of Toronto. It's the main campus. The second-largest site is in Toronto and the third in Ottawa. The other sites are scattered from Windsor to Timmins in northern Ontario.

Under our model, we offer not only post-secondary or regular programs, but employment-related programs and immigration services as well. We have 14 sites where training is provided. We offer institutional services for the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. We also offer language training services in both English and French. We've also designed a socio-economic integration model to assist newcomers in finding short-term employment as well as medium and long-term employment, which in some instances requires that those individuals take training or complete an upgrade program. Thanks to our various models and services, all those sites are viable.

The other component we rely on is technology. Collège Boréal has always been forward-looking. For example, we've been using a video conference system since 1995. We often use new technologies such as the Zoom Webinars.

In small communities such as Hearst and Kapuskasing, we have only two or three students in the early childhood education program. We sometimes have five or six in Windsor. In all, however, Collège Boréal admits 252 students to regular post-secondary early childhood education programs every year. We also have 150 apprenticeship students who are already working in the care centres. So that amounts to 450 to 500 students every year in the early childhood field alone. Without—

• (1120)

Mr. Marc Dalton: I'll interrupt you there because I have more questions for you and the other witnesses.

I'd like you to tell us a little about tuition fees. Have they risen significantly?

I'd also like you to tell us how important newcomers are for Collège Boréal and what percentage of your student body they represent.

I'm somewhat surprised to learn that students who come from immersion programs can apply for a scholarship but not students from the schools of francophone school boards. I may have misunderstood that.

If you could tell us all that in 45 seconds, that would be nice.

Mr. Daniel Giroux: I'll try, Mr. Dalton.

Tuition fees are \$2,700 per year, the lowest across the country. Including provincial funding and tuition fees, we stand at 44% of the national average. Tuition fees declined slightly, by 13%, in 2019 and have been frozen ever since. So our tuition fees are quite moderate for Ontario.

As for the scholarship for French-language studies, that was a shock for us too and for Ontario's 12 francophone school boards. It isn't acceptable to encourage only students who've taken an immersion program offered by an anglophone school board. In many instances, an immersion program amounts to one course in French. What constitutes an immersion program isn't always clearly defined.

If you really want to promote the education continuum, you absolutely must afford the same opportunities and advantages to students from both anglophone and francophone school boards.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Mr. Giroux.

Now I'd like to go to Ms. Maisonneuve. Incidentally, I have relatives named Maisonneuve in Alberta.

First, I'd like to discuss the importance of newcomers in francophone school boards. I know that, under the Constitution, Canadian parents whose first language is French have a right to send their children to francophone schools but that newcomers who speak French do not.

How does that work in Alberta? Does the provincial government open the door to newcomers who speak French?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: My answer to that question is yes. Francophone school boards are fortunately entitled to manage school admissions across the province without government intervention. We're independent in that respect, and that's a good thing.

I'd like to turn the floor over to Mrs. Bourque, if she wishes to add something.

The Chair: Please answer within 10 seconds, Mrs. Bourque.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque (Chief Executive Officer, Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta): Yes, I can confirm that we are responsible for managing enrolment. If parents can prove that they attended French-language schools in their country, we can accept their children in our schools.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Bourque, Ms. Maisonneuve and Mr. Giroux.

Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

We will now go to Marc Serré, of the Liberal Party, for six minutes.

• (1125)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Bourque, Ms. Maisonneuve and Mr. Giroux, thank you for your presentations today. You have different perspectives. You discuss the situation in Alberta, on one hand, and that in Sudbury and elsewhere in Ontario, on the other.

I'm going to ask both organizations virtually the same questions, starting with Mr. Giroux.

First, I'd like to congratulate Collège Boréal and its employees across Ontario for the exceptional work they do, not just for French-language education, but also for immigration, economic development and agriculture. I'm pleased to have you here once again to discuss that, Mr. Giroux.

As you know, we previously discussed the education continuum at the post-secondary level. Today we want to take a look at early childhood.

Your educational institution trains early childhood educators. We know that there are educator shortages and certification problems and that immigration is part of the picture. Would you please briefly describe the challenges you face as an educational institution?

Similarly, Ms. Maisonneuve, I'd like to ask you what Alberta's challenges are. They're slightly different from those of Collège Boréal because, in a way, you represent employers.

Mr. Giroux, first, would you please tell us more about the funding of day care centres and the shortage, recruitment and retention of personnel?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Thank you, Mr. Serré. It's always a pleasure to see you.

The early childhood education program is certainly the largest of all of Collège Boréal's programs. In post-secondary and regular programs, we have 252 students this year. There's also the apprenticeship component, which is for students who are already working in day care centres and the other training modules, such as online courses. The number of students in that component ranges from 150 to 200 a year. That's enormous for Collège Boréal.

Despite our efforts, we can't provide enough graduates for our partners. In Sudbury, for example, four francophone day care centres have shut down for lack of francophone educators. Some centres can't open, even though they have unbelievable waiting lists.

Here's another example. Michelle Boileau, the mayor of Timmins, a city only a three-hour drive north of Sudbury, just had a second child and said she had to wait 18 months for a space at a francophone day care. There are no spaces for the children of the francophone community. Assimilation begins when children are forced to attend anglophone day care centres. But this is the start of the continuum; everything really begins in day care. It's an enormous need.

Foreign students occupy an important place for us. They constitute nearly 50% of our student population. Following the announcement that day care spaces would be available for \$10 a day, which it is good news for parents, we noticed a sharp increase in needs. Parents want a right to those day care spaces. However, according to the announcement made by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, foreign students will no longer be eligible for education programs for early childhood services. As a result, we will be losing 50% of our students in the early childhood sector at a time when there's already a shortage. It will be a complete disaster. The government promotes \$10-a-day spaces on the one hand, and cuts us off on the other, by requiring, among its restrictive immigration measures, that individuals must be qualified, despite the need for more francophone day care centres.

This is a crisis for us. It's unfortunate for our partners, the community day care centres, our school boards and the entire continuum. It's one of the biggest issues and the greatest concern for Ontario's francophone community.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Maisonneuve, I'll put the same question to you. What can we do to encourage high school students to apply to Collège Boréal or to take courses in the early childhood education field?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Early intervention starting in early childhood is definitely essential for the continuation of our education programs from kindergarten to grade 12.

As for graduates, the current trend in Alberta is to offer dual credit programs to encourage students to learn a trade and to start their occupational training while they're still in high school. These programs are highly developed for the linguistic majority but unfortunately less so for the minority.

Post-secondary study programs are provided at the University of Alberta's Campus Saint-Jean for early childhood education. Partnerships can be established in this area, although accessibility is still a challenge. As you know, Alberta is a very large province, as are many other provinces.

I'm going to ask Mrs. Bourque to complete my answer.

• (1130)

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: Campaigns should definitely be organized to increase awareness of occupations in the early childhood field.

I should also mention that kindergarten is still considered as part of early childhood in Alberta and is only 50% funded. The francophone school boards have decided to offer full-time kindergarten—

The Chair: Pardon me, Mrs. Bourque, but I must interrupt because the six minutes of speaking time are more than up. You may be able to continue in answer to another question.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: All right, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Pardon me for performing that delicate task.

I now turn the floor over to the committee's second vice-chair, the member of the Bloc Québécois, Mario Beaulieu.

Mr. Beaulieu, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Bourque, I'm going to give you an opportunity to complete your answer.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: All right.

Alberta's francophone school boards have made the somewhat difficult decision to offer a full-time educational program for kindergarten pupils, whereas anglophone pupils attend kindergarten on only a part-time basis. We were forced to do so as a result of school-transport-related challenges. Given the very large territory that has to be covered, it would be impossible for buses to return the children to their homes and then drive back to school to pick up the older children.

In the circumstances, a large portion of the federal funding that we receive under the official languages in education program is used to fund full-time kindergarten. Full-time kindergarten is a very good thing for francization and for the system, but there's a lack of funding for secondary schools. We lack the resources to encourage students to choose careers in the early childhood field, for example. Our secondary schools could offer optional vocational courses to show students what certain post-secondary courses are like in the early childhood field, for example. However, we don't have the funding for that kind of programming.

In short, there should be a campaign to increase awareness of early childhood occupations and optional courses that would give students a foretaste of what a career in the field might be.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Giroux, did you say that you had 4,000 to 5,000 early childhood students and that they were mainly foreign students? I didn't really understand. Would you please explain that to us a little more?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: There are actually 252 students in post-secondary or regular programs. There are also different learning methods. Some students are already working in day cares and taking courses remotely. That's the case of approximately 150 to 200 students. In all, including all teaching methods, there are roughly 450 students in early childhood programs.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You say that the day care sector is experiencing a crisis. Would you please explain to us realistically how you can escape that situation?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: One of the things that we've started doing is to work with the various communities. For example, if there's a major shortage in Windsor, in southern Ontario, we'll work with the school boards and day care centres specifically on recruitment, somewhat as Mrs. Bourque mentioned earlier. In many instances, we recruit international students, not just Canadian students.

For example, we started offering a post-secondary study program in Tunis, Tunisia, for the first time this past September. We're also going to open a second program in Rabat, Morocco. We are established in those cities and are already beginning to recruit students to come to Canada.

One of the strategies we're working on is to take every opportunity to advertise Collège Boréal. We're doing the same thing in many other fields, such as the trades. That's a specific example of what we're doing to support the francophone school boards and day care centres that are currently in crisis.

• (1135)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Collège Boréal is more or less equivalent to Quebec's CEGEPs for occupational courses, isn't it?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: It's similar, except that, unlike CEGEPs, Ontario's colleges can also offer three and four-year bachelor's degree programs in nursing science, social work, business and public administration, for example.

So we offer two and three-year programs as well as four-year programs. It's a college model combined with a quasi-university model. We offer programs for a broad variety of occupations ranging from business and community services to the environment and agriculture. It's quite varied.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's excellent.

Ms. Maisonneuve, you mentioned a judgment that was rendered in June 2020 and that has helped improve matters. Would you please clarify that a little more?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled in a case involving the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique and the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique as appellants, and the province as respondent. The judgment marked a turning point for Canada as a whole in that it strongly supported the claims of francophone school boards across Canada and furthered the entire idea of substantive equivalence. That principle means that, if a reasonable parent determines that a French-language school doesn't offer services equivalent to those provided by an English-language school in the same locality, then there is no substantive equivalence. The judgment strongly supports the right to demand school boards across Canada.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you have to go back to the courts every time you want to claim your rights? Has that judgment made a major change for your organization?

The Chair: Please answer in less than 10 seconds.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: It has helped us somewhat, of course. Will it mean we don't have to go to court? The answer is no. It's an extremely difficult and exhausting process. It takes a lot of time. It certainly isn't ideal.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maisonneuve.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

We will begin the final six-minute intervention, for which Ms. McPherson, from Alberta, will replace Ms. Ashton.

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

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It is a delight to see some of my fellow Albertans on the witness list today. It's very nice to see you both. I wish you could be here in person.

I'm also, of course, extraordinarily proud to represent Edmonton Strathcona, which has the French Quarter in it and such a dynamic French community, including Campus Saint-Jean, where I am studying French.

I have to say that when I started this job, I didn't speak any French at all because of the failure of the education system in Alberta to provide French immersion training opportunities for me. I have been studying at Campus Saint-Jean, so I'm going to ask some questions in French. I will ask you all for your forgiveness, because I am still very much a learner.

[Translation]

I've had many meetings with representatives of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, or ACFA, and I know they've clearly demonstrated the enormous discrepancy between the number of available spaces at francophone schools and the number of school-age children living in francophone homes in Alberta or whose Albertan parents want them to receive a bilingual education.

My riding of Edmonton Strathcona has five French-language schools that are part of the Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord.

My question is this: How many schools should there be, and how many other French-language schools should there be in Alberta to meet the demand?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I'd say there should be a lot, but I'm going to let Mrs. Bourque give you a more statistical answer.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: It has to be said that we weren't responsible for managing francophone schools 30 years ago. There were 360 students at two francophone schools at the time. Ten years later, in 1994, there were 2,100 students attending 14 schools. Another 10 years later, there were 6,000 students attending 37 schools. Today, we have 45 schools for 9,000 students. If you consider that 67,000 students are eligible for instruction in French, we will need at least 100 or so schools 10 years from now.

You have to understand that people in a city like Edmonton want to send their children to a neighbourhood school. You say that your riding, where I also live, has five French-language schools, but each of them has a student pool possibly the size of 10 neighbourhoods, whereas parents actually want a neighbourhood school, a francophone school that's in their neighbourhood or within a radius of 10 kilometres or so.

The real problem for francophone school boards are the significant sums of money they have to allocate to school transportation due to the fact that there aren't enough schools. Consequently, over the next 10 years, we will definitely need another 100 or so francophone schools in Alberta. I imagine that many other provinces in Canada might have the same need.

Neighbourhood schools are therefore very important in offering services to the francophone population, and they must also be of a level of quality equivalent to that of anglophone schools. If the schools we wind up with are just schools that anglophones no longer want, that's really a problem.

For example, I replaced the principal of a school with 260 students from late February to late June. That school had been leased from an anglophone school board. The building had been constructed for students from grade 7 to 9, but I had students from grade 7 to 12. That'll give you an idea of the problems we experience in the schools.

In Alberta, we still have francophone schools that don't have a gymnasium or that can't offer certain programs, in the early childhood field, for example, because they don't have the necessary premises.

● (1140)

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'll ask this next question because I know that there are so many people in Edmonton who want to put their children into immersion and I know that we had asked that this committee would look at immersion education within this study. That's not part of this study, but I do want to talk about the fact that there is no access for so many people to French language education. While we know that education is predominantly a provincial jurisdiction, the federal government has that obligation as well.

I wonder if you could talk briefly about how difficult it has been to work with the provincial government on this. We know with regard to Campus Saint-Jean that the provincial government failed to meet its obligations to fund the campus. The campus, of course, is the primary place where French teachers get the education that allows them to work in the schools.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

The Chair: You have less than 15 seconds.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Mr. Chair, do I have to answer in English or in French?

The Chair: You may answer in the language of your choice. We have an interpretation service here.

There are 15 seconds left.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: All right.

That's a complex question, and there's no easy answer. On the one hand, we've made gains by co-operating with the provincial government, and, on the other hand, we're facing challenges. The lines of communication are definitely open, but the decision-making is very slow—

The Chair: Pardon me, Ms. Maisonneuve, but I must interrupt because we've already exceeded six and a half minutes. I want us to be able to ask as many questions as possible. That was a very interesting start of an answer. You will certainly have a chance to say more later.

Ms. Gladu, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all the witnesses.

[English]

My first question will be for Mr. Giroux.

You said that you have seen a growth in domestic students. Is it equal across all your locations? Is it in certain programs? Could you elaborate?

● (1145)

Mr. Daniel Giroux: There are three major sites where we've seen growth.

[Translation]

The first is the one in Sudbury, a four-hour drive north of Toronto. The second campus where we are seeing excellent growth is in downtown Toronto, in the Distillery District, which I urge you to visit if you have not yet had a chance, because it is a terrific campus. The third campus experiencing strong growth is in Windsor, in the farthest south part of the province.

Where we have seen incredible growth is mainly in the trades and health care programs. When I say trades, I am talking about programs to train electricians, heavy machinery mechanics, carpenters and plumbers. Health care programs enable people to work as practical nurses or personal support workers, for example. Those are the two areas where we have seen significant growth.

We have also seen major growth in our public administration program, a new program that focuses on support for municipalities and communities that are looking to hire bilingual individuals. This is a business administration program that combines community, municipal, federal and provincial components. It has 200 students at present, all of whom have found full-time jobs, which is truly incredible. There is a severe shortage in this aspect of public administration. Whenever I go out into the communities, the first thing I hear is that they need bilingual people to work in the organizations.

That is where we have seen the most growth.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: You mentioned that you've seen a disconnect between the government wanting \$10-a-day day care but then cutting the immigration for the ECE students. I think it might be a similar situation with our aging population and the need for more PSWs and nurses. They've cut that as well at the college level.

Could you let me know how this is going to impact your colleges?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Giroux: There will be an incredible impact.

For the early childhood education program, since international students make up 50% of our student body, it means that we will be losing 50% of new enrolments in that program. So we will lose half of the students in that field.

But we are one of the largest providers of francophone educators in Ontario, if not the largest. If Collège Boréal has its enrolments and graduates cut by half, what will the consequences be for child care and the economy? Often, access to \$10 a day child care services is what makes it possible for moms and dads to go out to work. So there is going to be a huge crisis.

There will also be an impact on the four-year bachelor's degree in nursing program we offer. Students enrolled in the practical nursing program, a two-year program, are eligible for a study permit issued by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, but students enrolled in the bachelor's in nursing program are not. That means that we will not be able to graduate as many nurses.

But the fact is that there is a huge shortage of francophone and bilingual nurses in Ontario. Operating rooms are having to close because of the shortage of nurses. As we know, the population of some communities in Ontario is 35% to 40% francophone. If they do not have these francophone and bilingual nurses, the crisis will be enormous. This will be a real loss to our communities.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Okay.

My next question is for Ms. Bourque, and it's about trying to get equivalency for the French language in Alberta.

You talked about the number of schools you would need. It's a huge number. Is there any way of sharing space with the English school board and creating bilingual schools so that they would be closer for the parents?

[Translation]

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: Where possible, we are already doing it. A school was built in Jasper about eight years ago and we share it with the anglophones. This is not the best situation, however. You have to understand that our students in minority communities really like speaking English, so it is really important to preserve places that allow them to speak French as much as possible.

There are also anglophone school boards that have given us land. I don't mean that sharing with anglophones doesn't happen, but in reality our schools are not always equivalent to the majority schools.

It is a question of infrastructure, which is one aspect of equivalence.

Problems can also arise for us with the measures proposed by the provincial government. I will give you an example. In the mandate letter from the Premier of Alberta to her Minister of Education, she says that it is essential to promote the opportunity for students to participate in training in the skilled trades—but in Alberta, the only French-language post-secondary institution is Campus Saint-Jean, a small college that offers three programs for skilled trades.

At the moment, one of our efforts with the provincial government involves explaining that the structure it has created can't work for us. However, we have some solutions. Is it prepared to allow us to work with other bodies, such as Collège Boréal, outside Alberta? That would be one possibility. We are—

• (1150)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mrs. Bourque, but I have the difficult job of interrupting you, because we have gone well over time. I must now give the floor to Mr. Samson. You might have an opportunity to continue explaining this with him.

Mr. Samson, the floor is yours.

Just a minute, it isn't working. We seem to be having the same technical problems as before. I am stopping the clock.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): I have reconnected now.

The Chair: It's working. I am restarting the clock.

By the way, I mistakenly gave the last speaker almost six minutes and 20 seconds rather than five minutes. So I am going to do the same thing for everyone.

Mr. Samson, the floor is yours.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know that every second counts. This is very important in minority communities.

I would first like to say hello to my colleagues.

Mr. Giroux, I am very glad to see you again.

Ms. Maisonneuve, it has been a long time since we spoke.

Mrs. Bourque, you are a former teammate at the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial. I am delighted to hear what you have to say.

Because my time is limited, my questions will be to the point. I would like your answers to be, as well. I am going to limit my background remarks.

Mr. Giroux, I am going to start with you.

Very quickly, congratulations on the 100% job guarantee offered by your college. That is very impressive.

Regarding the scholarships awarded to anglophones and not francophones, that decision was made by the province. You should be having discussions with the province about that. In Nova Scotia, in the past, Acadians were not given priority. Since they accounted for only 5% of the population, they were drowned out by all the rest when it came to getting financial aid. They were not all able to make it to the surface, so when they managed to get aid it was a bit of a stroke of luck. These things need to get resolved quickly.

Regarding early childhood education, I know that you are aware that Bill C-13 puts some flesh on the bones. Pre-school and post-secondary education now get mentioned as part of the education continuum. This will expand the issue of official languages in education and increase demand in your communities.

Regarding the measures to limit immigration, there is going to have to be a conversation with the federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. There is a structure in place for education and medicine, but early childhood education may need to be added.

Can you comment a bit in 30 seconds, please?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Thank you for the question, Mr. Samson.

On the subject of scholarships to study in French, a scholarship awarded by Ontario to study in French was eliminated a few years ago. However, the \$3,000 scholarship awarded to students coming out of anglophone school boards' immersion programs who want to pursue their education in French is given by Canadian Heritage. It comes directly from the federal government, via the ACUFC, the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, which takes the lead on this. That comes out of federal funds, not provincial.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Good, you know where the problem is and you are able to take action. If you ever want to discuss it with me at the same time, I am prepared to help in your efforts.

• (1155)

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Excellent.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I am now going to turn to my friends from the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta.

As I said, this study is extremely important in terms of the education continuum, from pre-school to the post-secondary level. I am pleased to have this opportunity.

You are certainly familiar with the strategic agreement that was signed seven or eight years ago by the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones. That agreement requires that you be consulted. I note that negotiations are currently under way between the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada regarding funding for OLEP, the Official Languages in Education Program, if I understand correctly.

Have you been consulted?

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: Yes, we are being consulted, but we are treated the same as immersion schools. The francophone population in our communities is growing rapidly and we often have to prove this in order to justify our needs. This is where the censuses are extremely important. Despite 30 years of education and school management in French, there is still a kind of skepticism. We are asked why, if the francophone population is actually growing, they are not attending our schools.

So yes, we are being consulted, but it is never easy to debate how to divide it up between what is going to be for the immersion schools and what is going to be ours. It is still very difficult.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you for your answer. I do want to congratulate you, because you now have 45 schools and more than 9,000 students. That is exceptional in itself and you are bringing these communities together.

There is another idea I want to put to you. You said that Alberta was paying for half-day kindergarten and you have to cover the costs for the rest of the day. I think it is time to have a very important conversation about this with the province. It has to recognize that a large proportion of your students do not speak the language of the school when they start kindergarten. I imagine that is the case for about 80% of them. This puts them at a disadvantage right from the start. It is also why you need the province to pay for the other half-day.

Have you had any conversations with the province about this?

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: No, not to my knowledge.

What concerns us at the moment is mainly our secondary school curriculum. Our students are not remaining in our schools as much as we would like, so we are putting a lot of emphasis on infrastructure. This is a huge part of our conversations with the province, along with our secondary school curriculum.

I do take your comment on board, though.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Absolutely.

Ms. Maisonneuve, is there anything you would like to say?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Yes, I would like to mention that we have had conversations with the government about half-day kindergarten. I spoke earlier about the complexity of our relations with the government. The problem is that the anglophone majority is also having these conversations with the government and calling for full-day kindergarten. In our relations with the government, needs are always assessed through the majority lens.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, I have had that experience. However, the government must be made to understand that these are two different situations. In your case, 80% of your students do not speak the language of the school when they start kindergarten. In the anglophone schools' case, students starting kindergarten already speak the language of the school. So it is not the same thing, as you said.

This may be a case to be put to the courts, like the 2020 example you mentioned. That is another avenue to explore.

Having said that—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson. I have already given you more than an extra minute, to even things out, since I did that for Ms. Gladu.

I am going to give the next speakers a minute more as well.

Mr. Beaulieu, the floor is yours for three and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Giroux, you talked about competition with immersion schools. I think that was in connection with scholarships, but could you tell us more about that?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Yes, absolutely.

As we know, Canadian Heritage funds are used to award \$3,000 scholarships to students from anglophone school boards' immersion programs so they can continue their education in French. When we talk about the education continuum with our partners in the 12 francophone school boards, they tell us they feel almost discriminated against by these scholarships. When \$3,000 scholarships are awarded to students from anglophone boards for them to continue their education in French or for them to decide to switch to a program in French, no thought is being given to the big challenge facing francophone communities. As Mrs. Bourque said earlier, students are already deciding to leave francophone secondary schools, or even francophone elementary schools, to enter the English-language school system. What can be done to retain these students and encourage them to continue their education in French?

In my case, when I was in school, a scholarship was offered to study in French, and that was what helped me make the decision to study in French and English. The scholarship was a deciding factor in my decision. I see the benefits now that I have graduated. It can do a lot to help slow down the cumulative assimilation process and encourage the education continuum, starting with early childhood education and including kindergarten and elementary and secondary school, all the way to the post-secondary level. A scholarship to study in French is added value for encouraging students to continue along the continuum of education in French. I think this is a significant added value. It prevents or deters students from changing paths and switching to the anglophone school boards.

• (1200)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You said earlier that it was grants from Canadian Heritage that were directed more to anglophone students. That is quite surprising.

In the last reform, introduced by Bill C-13, much was said about increasing the funding for immersion schools. However, nothing was said about increasing the funding for schools managed by and for francophones. In the meantime, assimilation is continuing.

Would it not be wiser to really focus on schools managed by and for francophones, in view of the rising assimilation rate?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Absolutely. I see this when I walk the halls of schools where the francophone community is really a minority, like in downtown Toronto or in communities like Windsor and Sarnia, and I think how we absolutely have to encourage our francophone school boards.

The fact is that the chances of students from the anglophone school boards continuing their education in French are virtually nil, compared to the situation of students in the francophone school boards. The proof is that out of all the students we admit to Collège Boréal every year, only four or five come from anglophone school boards and immersion programs. We believe we really need to focus our energy on students in the francophone school boards. The fact is that in one case out of two, we lose students coming from the francophone school boards, who decide to attend anglophone colleges even if our college offers the same program in French. That is the problem we absolutely have to tackle. I think the emphasis should be more on continuing to invest in organizations managed by and for francophones.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Giroux.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. McPherson, the floor is yours for three and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The situation of the francophone minority when it comes to child care in Alberta is very interesting.

In the NDP, we are proud that Leah Gazan, the member for Winnipeg Centre, has proposed an amendment to guarantee that francophones in minority communities would have access to child care in French. Given the waiting lists, however, it is harder for families in Alberta.

Can you tell us about waiting lists for francophone child care centres?

[English]

Perhaps I would start with Madame Maisonneuve, please.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: May I defer to Madame Bourque on that question?

[Translation]

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes, certainly.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: In Alberta, 12% of rights holders attend francophone schools. For children aged zero to five, only 8% attend a pre-school of some kind.

In all of Alberta, early childhood education services in French provide 1,536 spaces and have 300 employees. The employees are an important component because by speaking French, they contribute to the French fact.

In fact, we expect to need an additional 1,500 employees in the next few years, which is a huge number. One of the solutions proposed is to focus on family child care centres. I will explain what the problem as I understand it is, however. When the federal government gave money to the early childhood education sector, it was meant for the entire sector, on both the anglophone side and the francophone side. Ultimately, that gave us about 15 spaces in francophone centres for all of Alberta.

Here, when we talk about a continuum in French, we need to have people to take the lead on the issue. When the federal government gives money to the provinces, it needs to determine who is the lead on the issue and how much money will be allocated to a specific sector. My own work relates more to the schools, but from what I am told, in the case of early childhood education, the big problem is that funding has not been given specifically for francophones in that case.

• (1205)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Ms. McPherson.

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm good.

The Chair: I'll take those 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Mrs. Bourque, the members of the committee are not in your shoes and are not as familiar with the issue as you are. That comment is meant for Mr. Giroux as well. If you have any other statistics to provide to the committee, we invite you to do so. You said that 12% of rights holders attend francophone schools and, if I understood correctly, 8% of children aged zero to five also went to those schools. Is that correct?

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: It is 8% in the case of early childhood education. That may mean services offered in schools or services in family child care centres. In any event, 8% of children aged zero to five have access to child care.

The Chair: So you are talking about rights holders who have access to child care in French.

Mrs. Gisèle Bourque: Yes.

The Chair: The same goes for all of the witnesses. If you have much more precise information that we could use to produce the best possible report on the study we are doing, please do not hesitate to send it to our clerk in writing. She can then send it to all members of the committee. I am thinking of statistics, tables, or graphs, for example, or other information. That would help us a lot.

Having said that, before suspending the meeting for a minute, I want to thank the witnesses for your excellent testimony.

Thank you, Ms. Maisonneuve. This was your first appearance at the committee. You were a novice, but the information you have provided was very interesting.

Have a good weekend.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I am listening, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I thought I was going to get another turn to ask questions.

The Chair: We won't have time, because the next hour is for committee business.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay. I am very disappointed. I would have liked to get a turn too. Was that not what was planned? Were there not three rounds of questions?

The Chair: No. We always do a third round of questions only if we have time left in the hour scheduled for testimony.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Is this because of the technical problems we had at the beginning?

The Chair: We may have lost a minute because of the technical problems. Also, I allotted an additional minute to each of the parties in the second round of questions. In reality, we rarely manage to have a third round of questions in a one-hour period.

I want to thank the witnesses and wish you luck in your fight, which must go on.

Before I suspend the meeting, for those participating in the meeting by video conference: When you come back after the break, please use the new link that the clerk sent at 9:01 this morning to connect to the in camera portion.

The meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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