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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 121 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I would remind those who are present around the table to read the written notices on the cards in front of you, to avoid acoustic incidents that could injure our interpreters. Please take the time to read the little card and follow the guidelines.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, April 29, 2024, we are continuing our study on the minority-language education continuum.

I would like to welcome the witnesses who will be with us for the first hour this morning. Yvon Laberge, president and chief executive officer of Educacentre College, will be appearing virtually.

Welcome, Mr. Laberge.

The other witnesses are representing the Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest. You will have to tell me what northwest that is, because in my little province, New Brunswick, we have a Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest and it is in my riding, Madawaska—Restigouche.

I think this is the one in northwestern Ontario. We have Sylvianne Maisonneuve with us.

I am told it is not northwestern Ontario, it is the one in Alberta. Please forgive me.

Actually, I even think Ms. Maisonneuve has testified before the committee in the past.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): I think the interpretation is not working.

The Chair: There is no interpretation.

Just a minute, we are going to check it.

[*English*]

Ms. Leila Dance (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): I was getting the translation.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: I'm on the English channel. I'm not getting it.

Okay.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Apparently there is no problem.

When I speak in French, are you hearing the interpretation? It seems so.

The problem has been solved.

So from the Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest, we have Sylvianne Maisonneuve, the president, and Brigitte Kropielnicki, executive director.

Welcome, everyone. You are participating in the meeting virtually.

For those testifying for the first time, I will explain how we operate. Each organization has five minutes to make a presentation, introduce themselves, and tell us what their expectations are. There will then be several rounds of questions from MPs from the various parties. Interaction will be in question and answer format. I will offer guidance when the time comes.

I am very tough when it comes to time. That is my job. The tougher we are about that, the more opportunity there is to ask questions.

I will now give each organization five minutes for its presentation; we will start with Mr. Laberge from Educacentre College.

The floor is yours, Mr. Laberge. We are listening.

Mr. Yvon Laberge (President and Chief Executive Officer, Educacentre College): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, members of the committee.

I am pleased to be here with you today to discuss issues relating to post-secondary education in French in official language minority communities. I will be speaking mainly about the objective of obtaining funding from federal sources for post-secondary institutions that provide services to official language minority communities in Canada. My remarks will focus on the situation of francophone minorities in British Columbia and on Educacentre College.

Educacentre College was established in British Columbia in 1992 and is notable as the only francophone college in the province. It is a charitable not-for-profit organization operating under provincial jurisdiction. Since 2015, Educacentre College has been recognized as a private college by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training.

We have asked to be granted public college status but the provincial government has not agreed. Since its status is private, Educacentre College does not have access to federal funding opportunities such as the Post-Secondary Institutions Strategic Investment Fund.

In 2023-24, Educacentre College served nearly 3,000 people across all programs and services, including 1,018 students at the college level. The college trains a large majority of French-speaking educators in the province. The college plans to admit up to 25 international students in September 2025 and we hope that they will choose to stay in the province after completing their studies.

Educacentre College's funding continues to be the crucial issue that needs to be resolved. For the fiscal year ending on March 31, 2024, 87% of the college's funds came from the federal government, with the rest coming from income-generating activities. Funding from the minority language education support program accounts for 21% of the total budget. Of that figure, 52% is provided to fund core activities and the rest goes to fund defined projects. However, the core funding provided to the college has been unchanged since 2014. The consequences of core funding remaining static while the cost of living rises include a significant risk to the college's future posed by the widening gap between its operating costs and its core funding and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining employees as a result of being unable to offer wage increases.

This summary brings us to two key observations. The first is the financial withdrawal on the part of the province. The second is the absence of permanent federal funding for post-secondary education. These two factors are major concerns in that they contribute to the stagnation of the college's core funding. We believe it is the responsibility of the federal government to ensure that the province honours its commitment to pay 50% to match federal funding to support instruction in the minority language. If the province does not fulfill its obligation, it is up to the federal government to take measures to ensure that the necessary funding is provided to the college. Such measures could include discussions with the provinces or even legal action, if necessary.

We are therefore making three recommendations to the committee. First, we recommend that the Government of Canada provide a permanent funding envelope to support post-secondary institutions in official language minority communities. This is essential to ensure continued, stable support for these institutions. This permanent funding would enable them to do long-term planning, improve working conditions for their employees and offer high-quality programs.

Second, we recommend that the Government of Canada take a flexible approach in interpreting its funding parameters for private post-secondary institutions in provinces where the provincial government refuses to recognize them as public institutions.

Third, we recommend that the Government of Canada take concrete measures to support post-secondary students in official language minority communities where the provinces and territories fail to meet their financial obligations. If a provincial or territorial government refuses to contribute equitably to funding post-secondary institutions, the federal government should consider making up the funding shortfall directly.

By including these recommendations in your efforts to meet the funding and stability challenge, you could contribute to strengthening Educacentre College's financial viability and ensure that it is able to continue playing its part in post-secondary education in French in British Columbia.

• (1110)

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

I will now give the floor to Ms. Maisonneuve from the Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest for five minutes.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve (Board Chair, NorthWest Francophone Education Region): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Sylvianne Maisonneuve and I am the president of the CSNO, the Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest de l'Alberta.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I am going to talk about the crucial issues involved in ensuring the survival of the French language and francophone culture in the northwest.

The CSNO's territory covers all of northwestern Alberta from Slave Lake to the British Columbia border and the Northwest Territories border. We currently have three kindergarten to grade 12 francophone schools with approximately 460 students.

I am first going to address the issue of ECCs, early childhood centres. ECCs are essential to help parents pass on their language and culture and properly prepare children for their academic career. The CSNO has long recognized the importance of offering these services in its schools. We operate three ECCs: a service that provides child care, pre-kindergarten, and before and after-school child care in Grande Prairie; a child care centre/pre-kindergarten in Peace River; and a pre-kindergarten in Falher where we are taking steps, at parents' request, to open a francophone child care centre in that school as well.

Parents in our communities are thrilled with the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement for \$10 a day child care, which has had a very positive effect in our region.

However, we are facing two major challenges when it comes to early childhood. First, there is a shortage of francophone certified early childhood educators in northwestern Alberta. Certification of educators in Alberta is the responsibility of the Ministry of Children's Services. Although that ministry encourages young people to pursue a career in early childhood education, very little promotion is done in French to attract the francophone population to a career in this field.

The second challenge involves adding spaces for an ECC to new school construction projects. It takes too long after a new construction project is announced by the province for the federal government to approve projects in order for matching funds for infrastructure to be provided. The result is wasted time for the architectural team and missed opportunities. There should be a more fluid process to ensure better collaboration between the two governments, to avoid delays or to avoid the risk of not having early childhood spaces in the francophone minority schools.

The CSNO benefits from the Official Languages in Education Program for minority language instruction in elementary and secondary schools. The four francophone school boards in Alberta are working with the Ministry of Education and the CSNO is very happy about this. That financial support will enable the CSNO to offer its students and teachers projects that promote their language and culture in our schools. However, we believe that the funds allocated to Alberta are not sufficient to address the remarkable rise in the number of rights holders in our province. The Official Languages in Education Program is important to us since programming and retaining high school students in our schools are still a challenge, particularly in the community of Grande Prairie, where we have to compete with single-track and special program immersion schools.

In addition, while there has been a shortage of francophone teachers in our region for several years, we have recently observed that the situation has worsened. Teacher positions remain vacant for several months or even for a full school year, and this means that our students do not have access to an education in French that is substantively equivalent to what is offered by English-language schools. A national campaign to encourage young people to enrol in education programs, along with scholarships for graduates who work in minority communities in rural areas, are avenues that could be considered.

The court challenges program is essential if school boards are to be able to ensure that the province meet its responsibilities under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, the inadequate funding of that program means that school boards are not able to effectively assert rights holders' right to francophone education.

The latest data obtained from the enumeration of rights holders has been crucial for the CSNO in its efforts to create new schools and modernize existing institutions. It is essential that this practice be continued, since without data the provinces are unable to fully understand the needs and issues. With this data, we were able to show that there were many rights holders within the area covered by the CSNO who did not have access to francophone education. In Grande Prairie, for example, Nouvelle Frontière school, with an enrolment of 180 students from kindergarten to grade 12, is located in the southwest part of the city. The data from the enumeration revealed that nearly 500 children of rights holder parents were living in the northern part of Grande Prairie, but fewer than 50 children in that part of the city attend Nouvelle Frontière.

As a final point, funding for our only minority post-secondary institution continues to be a significant challenge in our province. Because they do not have adequate financial support, Campus Saint-Jean and the Centre collégial de l'Alberta are not able to offer the programs to which our students should have access. In Alberta, se-

nior high school students have the opportunity to earn dual credits recognized at both the college and high school levels.

• (1115)

Unfortunately, our students who are interested in various trades have to take those courses in English, because they are not offered in French. As a result, our students who want to earn those credits do not receive their secondary education in French.

Thank you for listening. I am available to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maisonneuve.

For the first round of questions and answers, each party will have six minutes. We will begin with the Conservative Party.

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

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for helping us get better as we do a study that I hope will address their circumstances.

My first question is for Mr. Laberge from Educacentre College.

Mr. Laberge, you said you currently have 1,018 students enrolled for the 2023-24 year. Is that correct?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes, there are 1,018 enrolments—

Mr. Joël Godin: Right. Mr. Laberge, you understand that I only have six minutes of speaking time. I would appreciate it if you give me succinct answers, so we can explore the subject in greater depth.

You said that you anticipate admitting 25 immigrants in January 2025. Is that correct?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That is correct.

Mr. Joël Godin: Right.

Mr. Laberge, what is your school's occupancy rate right now?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: It is 110%.

Mr. Joël Godin: So I understand there is some overflow.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That is correct.

Mr. Joël Godin: How many students who have expressed a desire to attend your school have had their applications rejected?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: At the college level, there are no waiting lists, but other language training programs, such as LINC and CLIC, have long waiting lists.

Mr. Joël Godin: Right. Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

You also said that the provincial government did not recognize you as a public college.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That is correct.

Mr. Joël Godin: What effect does that have on your administration?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: As I pointed out in my presentation, for one thing, it means we don't get adequate core funding. A college the size of ours should have a core budget of around \$15 million, but our budget is \$790,000.

Mr. Joël Godin: So you're doing a lot with a little.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's correct. We have to rely on other funding programs from the federal government to fill the void.

Mr. Joël Godin: How does the provincial government justify its refusal to recognize you as a public college?

• (1120)

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's a good question.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: I don't have a clear answer, but I think it has something to do with the demographic standing of francophones compared to other groups.

The government doesn't really recognize the importance of French as an official language, so it uses other—

Mr. Joël Godin: Okay.

I'm going to ask you one last question, Mr. Laberge, and then I'm going to go to the other witnesses.

Does the provincial government respect the rights holder rule?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes, but the rights holder rule, which is section 23 of the Charter, doesn't apply at the post-secondary level—at least, not yet.

Mr. Joël Godin: I hope our report will change that.

Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

Now I'm going to turn to the folks from Alberta. Ms. Maisonneuve and Ms. Kropielnicki, you raised a major problem, the ECE shortage.

Can you tell me how you recruit dedicated people who have that valuable teaching vocation?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Our problem is two-fold. We talked about ECEs, but there are also licensed teachers.

Most of our ECE candidates are people who are already working in our schools. Their communities and families encourage them to train as ECEs, but there are barriers, because the college doesn't offer that training remotely. These ECEs are therefore trained in English.

I'll let the executive director, Ms. Kropielnicki, comment on licensed teachers.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki (Superintendent of schools, North-West Francophone Education Region): We post our teaching positions all across Canada.

I'll give you an example. Ten years ago or so, we would get dozens of resumé for every position. Last year, we got just three resumé for all the positions we posted.

Mr. Joël Godin: That is a big problem, Ms. Kropielnicki.

Thank you very much.

You talked about rights holders, and I have to say that, back in 2019, our committee fought to include an enumeration of rights holders in the census. This is something of a victory for the Standing Committee on Official Languages, for all the parties here. It's important to recognize that.

Can you tell me about your current clientele, compared to the number of rights holders who should have access to French-language schools, but who are denied admission?

Do you have that figure, Ms. Maisonneuve or Ms. Kropielnicki?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I'll let Ms. Kropielnicki take that.

Mr. Joël Godin: If you don't have it, you can send us the information through the clerk of the committee.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: If I understood the question correctly, the rights holders who apply—

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm asking you to compare the number of rights holders to the number of people who currently have access to a French-language school in your area.

The Chair: We can come back to that later because you've gone over your six minutes.

The next speaker is from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Iacono, you have six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us this morning.

My first question is for Ms. Maisonneuve and Mr. Laberge.

In your opinion, do the recent changes to the Official Languages Act ensure that funds transferred to the provinces and territories for minority-language education are redirected to minority school boards? Is that happening?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: If I understand correctly, we're talking about the funds allocated in large part by the official languages in education program. As I mentioned in my remarks, Alberta has experienced incredible growth in the number of rights holders in the province in recent years. The number has gone up, but the amount of money that goes to the province has not.

Clearly, the allocation is insufficient. Alberta is second only to Ontario for the number of French-language education rights holders outside Quebec. That makes this a major challenge.

• (1125)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Mr. Laberge, what about where you are?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: I can't speak on behalf of school boards, but ours is the only entirely francophone post-secondary or college-level institution in British Columbia. At the university level, Simon Fraser University's Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs, or OFFA, has the best-defined francophone structure.

That said, other major universities receive an enormous amount of money from the official languages in education program, which means there's less money to support what we're doing, at least at the college. I know the director of the OFFA, Gino LeBlanc, very well. He says the same thing. He needs more resources, but the resources go to big anglophone institutions.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Mr. Laberge, the committee often hears about the labour shortage in the education sector, which seems to be a major concern.

What is your institution doing to address this shortage?

Also, do you offer incentives to encourage enrolment in your programs?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: We have two education programs: early childhood education and special education assistance. As I mentioned, most of our college-level enrolment is in the early childhood education program. Our institution is the only one that can offer this training in French, so we're the ones who train early childhood educators in French in the province.

Could you repeat the second part of your question?

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do you offer incentives?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes. We receive funding from Canadian Heritage. We get a number of scholarships for francophones and for young people coming out of immersion. However, we aren't really seeing many students from immersion programs at the college level because, when they've completed their grade 12 in immersion, they generally opt for university programs. That's why I was saying that a little flexibility in funding envelopes would be helpful. For example, if there are scholarships earmarked for immersion students at the college level, maybe we could give those to students whose first language is French.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

Ms. Maisonneuve, the committee often hears witnesses say that distance from home to school poses a significant problem for many families.

Can you tell us about your school board's territory?

Are the schools near where community members live or far away?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: That's a good question.

Our territory is huge. It's in northern Alberta, and most parts of it are quite rural. Our three schools are located in three towns and cities.

Of course, there are rights holders outside those centres. According to the data we've been able to analyze, some rights holders in the very northern part of the province don't have access to francophone education. There are also some in the western and south-western portions of our territory, in the Slave Lake region. It's quite

a large population, but it's spread out all over our territory. We have received applications that we will analyze soon, but, again, funding constraints make it difficult for us to take action.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maisonneuve.

Thank you, Mr. Iacono. Six minutes go by fast.

Next up is the Bloc Québécois, with the second vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

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

Thank you to our guests for being here.

First of all, for the NorthWest Francophone Education Region representatives, I want to follow up on my colleague's question. What is the number of rights holders compared to the number of spaces in your schools?

• (1130)

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: That's a good technical question.

I'll turn it over to Ms. Kropielnicki.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: Okay.

At the moment, the CSNO has 480 registered students. According to the 2021 statistics, nearly 2,000 students are eligible to attend our schools.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

Staying with this, yesterday, we heard from a witness who found that, in his region—I think he's in Ontario—many schools accept lots of people who are not rights holders because they don't have enough students. In order to maintain their funding, they have to accept anglophones, people who don't know French.

Is that the case in your schools as well?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I would say no. We've made some exceptions, but we have an administrative directive for the percentage of cases we accept. They really are exceptions. The vast majority of our students are rights holders.

I'll let Ms. Kropielnicki elaborate.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: Among those exceptions are francophone immigrants who do not yet have Canadian citizenship, but who come from francophone countries. They're considered exceptions in our schools.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

Does the school board have the authority to designate new rights holders?

I am asking you this question because, the day before yesterday, we learned that school boards could accept people who are not rights holders, and those people then become rights holders.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Fortunately, the province gives us full control over this issue, so we can decide whether students are accepted or not.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

This is a detail, but you said earlier that, after Ontario, your province has the most rights holders.

Are there more rights holders in your province than in New Brunswick? It's not a big deal, but it surprised me.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: According to the info I have, the answer would be yes, but Ms. Kropielnicki may have something to add on that.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: I meant west of Ontario. According to the statistics, there are 68,000 rights holders in the province.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Laberge, if I understand correctly, Collège Éducacentre is the only francophone college in British Columbia, so there are no francophone public colleges in British Columbia.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's correct.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In addition, there is no university by and for francophones in British Columbia.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's correct. As I was saying, the closest thing would be the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs at Simon Fraser University. The other universities have a few people in the faculties of education or romance languages.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, one of your main problems is that you're not recognized as a public college. A lack of political will on the part of the Government of British Columbia is preventing you from growing as much as you should.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's correct.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do the students who study at your college mainly come from French schools in British Columbia? Do you also accept a lot of anglophones or people who are not rights holders?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Our college programs get students from the francophone school board or newcomers. People who enrol at our college may have spent one year at the school board or none at all. The majority of our college students are, on average, between 32 and 34 years old, so it's an older student population.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: They come to you to retrain.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If I understand correctly, not many anglophones attend your educational institution.

• (1135)

Mr. Yvon Laberge: There aren't many in college programs, but we offer French as a second language programs to immigrants. That program has a mix of immigrants from different countries.

Also, for the English-language learning program for immigrants, which is called LINC, we prioritize francophones. However, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada encourages us to accept

non-francophone students because there are long waiting lists for this program.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would you say—

The Chair: You have only five seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

Are you meeting the demand for French schools, or are you short a lot of spaces?

The Chair: Mr. Laberge, please answer yes or no.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: No. We're not meeting the demand.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge. We can come back to that. I apologize.

For the next round of questions, I will give the floor to Leila Dance from the NDP.

[*English*]

Ms. Dance, first of all, congratulations on your victory.

She is, I would say, the youngest MP in the House of Commons.

Congratulations.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you.

The Chair: She won the by-election last September. She is the youngest MP in the House of Commons.

[*English*]

Welcome to this committee, Ms. Dance.

The floor is yours for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you very much.

I will ask my questions in English.

[*English*]

I am not that great in French, yet.

I'll start with Ms. Maisonneuve.

You spoke about the serious labour shortage, including teachers and support staff across the board. We heard about the lack of post-secondary training available.

Do you think that if the federal government were to invest more in French language post-secondary education it would help solve some of the issues you're seeing in your area?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: That's a very valid question and a very valid solution.

As we mentioned in the presentation, Alberta has a double credit system. Having better programs at the secondary level would certainly help. Our students could explore a larger variety of careers in their language. We all know that when people are formed locally, or close to locally, there are more chances of them staying, so that would definitely help.

Ms. Leila Dance: You mentioned online and virtual classes a bit.

I'll ask you whether you think those would allow people from your community to train. Then I'll go back to Monsieur Laberge and ask him if he's offering any online classes that might be available.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Yes, I think online classes would be a great addition. Our region is quite removed and rural. We're five hours north of Edmonton, which is where our francophone post-secondary education institutions are. Also, some people pursue that post-secondary education in later years, during adult training, as we said, for our *éducatrices*. They're working full time.

Being able to access these courses online is a great advantage.

Ms. Leila Dance: Mr. Laberge.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes. All of our college-level programs are offered online, because the francophone population in British Columbia is very spread out across the province. There are no enclaves or francophone communities, as you may have in Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba. People are very spread out everywhere. That's our bread and butter when it comes to college-level programming. It's distance education.

Ms. Leila Dance: Okay.

In my riding of Elmwood—Transcona, we have quite a few French immersion schools. I actually graduated from one of them. However, I know that right now they are overflowing with students. Some are being turned away and are not getting that opportunity. We only have one French university in Winnipeg, Université de Saint-Boniface. Again, that's another one that has to turn away students because of access.

I wonder if we could use this province to province, whether you could take online classes at the Université de Saint-Boniface and move it over to different rural and remote areas, as Madam Maisonneuve was talking about.

Do you know whether any of your staff or other people are accessing stuff that way?

• (1140)

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Are you posing the question to me or to Madam Maisonneuve?

Ms. Leila Dance: Oh, I'm sorry. It's for Madam Maisonneuve.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I'm sorry. I missed the question.

Ms. Leila Dance: Do you have anybody accessing online services through the Université de Saint-Boniface, which is in Winnipeg, or in other provinces?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Not that I know of....

I will allow Madam Kropielnicki to answer this question.

I believe there are provincial restrictions on certification.

Go ahead.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: No. All of our early-learning educators are doing it online with anglophones because of the practicum certification.

Ms. Leila Dance: Okay.

Do you think it would be beneficial to do something to open it up across Canada, if it's province to province?

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: It would be great.

Ms. Leila Dance: That's interesting. I'm learning as I go. Thank you so much for that.

I know we also talked a bit about day care spaces.

I'm very proud of what the NDP has done. My colleague Leah Gazan introduced an amendment ensuring that francophones in majority situations have access to child care services in French.

I want to know whether that's something you think has been helpful in putting some of those in some of the different schools.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I think it has been absolutely helpful. As we know, early intervention is the key to language acquisition and the enhancement of transmission of culture. It has made a real difference, as I presented earlier. These services did not exist before \$10-day care options. We've developed all of these programs in the last couple of years, and they're well attended. They're at full capacity and highly appreciated by our parents.

Ms. Leila Dance: That's perfect. Thank you both so much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dance and Ms. Maisonneuve.

For the next round of questions, the next two parties will have five minutes each.

We'll start with the Conservatives.

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

Thank you very much to the witnesses for being here with us today.

Ms. Maisonneuve, I have a lot of family in your area, from Grande Prairie to Falher and Slave Lake. There are even some Maisonneuves living there. We may be related.

You represent a French-language school board. I read a little bit about the NorthWest Francophone Education Region. You serve Catholic schools, right?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Our school board is made up of three schools; one is Catholic and the other two are public.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay. Is the Catholic school in Falher? Where are the schools located?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: The Catholic school is indeed located in Falher. The two public schools are in Peace River and Grande Prairie.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay.

I have a lot of memories from that area. My father was in the military. I didn't live there, but I visited often in the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, families were very big, and everyone spoke French. Nowadays, families are much smaller, farms are much larger, and fewer people speak French.

Is the number of students declining because of demographics, or is it staying the same?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: Numbers have definitely declined since then. In recent years, I believe the population has remained fairly stable, with no notable increase or decrease. There are certainly far fewer people in remote areas than there used to be.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Are there more and more children from immigrant families?

• (1145)

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: There aren't as many as in cities, but there are more and more of them, especially in more urban centres, such as Grande Prairie, where the immigrant population is quite large.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Does the vast majority of the money come from the province? Is the federal funding amount significant?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: The federal grants that we receive through the official languages in education program allow us to offer programs to our students that wouldn't be possible otherwise. For example, we offer cultural activities in all our schools, which is important for identity consolidation and acquisition. We also offer a leadership course, for which the students receive credits. We fund half of the kindergarten program, as the province funds only half. We also offer professional development courses. Finally, the grants allow us to do some promotion and marketing. Those grants are—

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you. I'm sorry to cut you off, but I would like to ask more questions.

Do you have any partnerships with high schools that offer immersion programs? These partnerships could include other courses, programs or sports, for example.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: It doesn't happen very often, but I'll let Ms. Kropielnicki answer that question.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: There are no exchanges of services with immersion schools.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Laberge, you said that 87% of the funding came from the federal government. Do your students pay tuition?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes.

Mr. Marc Dalton: What percentage of the cost is that?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: I'm not sure I understand your question.

Mr. Marc Dalton: For example, for a student at Simon Fraser University, tuition fees make up about a third of total costs. Approximately how much is it for your institution?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: It's pretty much the same.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay.

Is the provincial government still turning a deaf ear? You have been deemed a private institution, but you would like to be a public institution. Is that what you want?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That is our wish, yes.

Personally, I've been in my position since 2010, and I make this request every time I meet with representatives from the provincial government, but the answer is always no.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Laberge and Mr. Dalton.

We're going to move over to the Liberals now.

Mr. Serré, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today and making their contribution to our study.

Mr. Laberge, we conducted a more in-depth study on post-secondary education in May, so we have a good understanding of the challenges you raised. Even though the federal government has set aside a permanent envelope of \$80 million, we're not sure that's enough to meet your needs if there is absolutely no support from the province. There is no doubt that there are major problems at the regional level related to the provinces' contribution.

That said, my questions today will focus more on early childhood. We all know how important that is.

You currently offer a training program for early childhood education. How many students are you currently able to take in? I understand that you don't have enough room to accommodate more. Second, what is the demand in the community? Do all graduates find a job immediately? Finally, how much money would you need to build up the necessary infrastructure and train more early childhood educators?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: With regard to early childhood education, I repeat that all our college programs are offered remotely. So space is not a problem.

In terms of our capacity to take in more students, we could easily double the number of enrolments, which wouldn't be too much, because we could add a few educators to train students.

As to our operating budget, next year we could easily use an additional \$1 million in core funding. That would allow us to consolidate our activities.

Finally, in terms of infrastructure, we have a number of projects under way, including a very technical program that we want to deliver in Victoria. For this one, we would need about \$2.5 million.

• (1150)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Laberge.

Ms. Maisonneuve, thank you for the work you do in the early childhood field and at the Conseil scolaire du Nord-Ouest. I myself was a school board trustee in northern Ontario, so I understand the challenges associated with large geographic areas, the shortage of teachers and funding based on the number of students, which penalizes you.

I would also like to hear what you have to say about training early childhood educators. What is your capacity? What are your challenges? How can the federal government help you to have more teachers and more francophone students in early childhood centres?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: This is not directly related to your question, but I will start by mentioning a challenge we have regarding space. We can access complementary federal funding for infrastructure projects, which is fantastic for new construction. However, communication between the two levels of government is choppy and their announcements are not always made at the same time. In addition, when it comes to existing buildings, nothing can be changed or added, because funds are only granted for new construction.

As for training educators, I will let Ms. Kropielnicki answer your question.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: Our biggest challenge, when it comes to recruitment, is tuition. Most of our educators are mothers who want to take the training, but don't necessarily have the means to do so. So, at the moment, the school board subsidizes some of our educators with funding from the official languages in education program, but it's not enough.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

Ms. Maisonneuve, can you send the committee more details and examples on the challenges you face? For example, you mentioned twice the lack of coordination between the provinces and the federal government when it comes to funding. If you could provide that in writing to the committee, it would be greatly appreciated.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Mr. Laberge, you said earlier that you weren't able to provide services, that you weren't able to meet the demand from high school graduates in British Columbia. Can you expand on that?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Yes.

One of the challenges is attracting young people to our institutions, because we only have six college-level programs. So we are responding to a limited need in that regard. We would like to offer more programs.

I mentioned earlier an infrastructure project that we would like to get going in Victoria. The idea would be to jointly offer a sound technology program with the Collège d'Alma. This project requires building a studio and acquiring equipment for students, and it would attract a new demographic. The majority of our students right now are female, but we would like to attract more male stu-

dents. The school board has expressed its intent to make such a request.

The other thing is that we've created a partnership with the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique to offer dual credit programs, like they do Alberta. That initiative is starting to take shape.

We have also started offering courses towards the dogwood diploma for adults, in conjunction with the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. The dogwood diploma is granted to adults who have taken grade 12 equivalency courses. Students would like to attend college, but they have to finish high school before they can come to our programs.

• (1155)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: When we look at the overall situation, the fact that there is no public college and the fact that the provincial government stubbornly refuses to grant you the status of public college is scandalous, in my opinion. Shouldn't there be a campaign to denounce this fact?

We could take a look at that, because it doesn't make sense.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Indeed.

The Chair: Please answer in 10 seconds, Mr. Laberge.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: I think I'll use those 10 seconds later.

The Chair: It could be a long answer, is that it? Two and a half minutes go by quickly.

Thank you very much, Mr. Laberge.

[English]

Madam Dance, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you.

I would like to go back to the labour shortage they're seeing in specifically northern Alberta. I'm sure it's exactly what is happening across the country in many remote or rural communities, and I'm sure it's being seen in some of the city centres as well. Are we missing teachers at a specific level? Is it at the day care level, or is it in the early or middle years?

As well, do you have any recommendations as to what the government could do very specifically on that, whether it involves helping with tuition, access to courses or those types of specific items?

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I think it's across the board.

I will allow Madam Kropielnicki to answer this question.

Ms. Brigitte Kropielnicki: Yes, it's across the board. In the past it was mainly high school, but now we're seeing the shortage trickling into elementary. If teachers had a bursary for working in remote areas, the way doctors do, I believe that would probably encourage them to come up north.

I just want to add that right now the biggest challenge we have is that a lot of the students we're getting are from immigration, and they don't want to leave the big cities. A lot of teachers are not working in the big cities but are subbing, and they refuse to come up north. If they had a little incentive money-wise to come up north, they might come.

Ms. Leila Dance: That's very interesting. I hadn't even thought about stuff like that.

I have 45 seconds left. Is there anything you don't feel you had a chance to speak to in all the questions you were asked? You can quickly touch on that right now.

Ms. Sylvianne Maisonneuve: I just want to touch quickly on another problem we have. If we do succeed in attracting labour to our area, there's a housing issue as well. That becomes a bit of a challenge. Some school boards in our area own their own houses and can accommodate their employees, but we don't have the financial capacity to do that.

Ms. Leila Dance: Perfect. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dance.

As we have just under two minutes left before the end of the first hour of the meeting, I'm going to take advantage of my privilege as chair to ask questions.

Mr. Laberge, in your presentation, you said that in your opinion, the federal government should make funding envelopes for post-secondary education permanent. You also stated that the federal government should take action when the provinces shirk their responsibilities. That's my understanding.

When you use the words "in our opinion", is it because you received a notice to that effect?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: That's our analysis of the situation. A precedent has been set with the Université de l'Ontario français. In that case, the federal government provided the full amount with the understanding that the provincial government would invest later in the five-year cycle. I think it's possible to do something like that.

There would have to be a—

The Chair: Mr. Laberge, is it possible to send that analysis to the committee? I'm asking the question because it touches on everyone's questions to some extent, and certainly those asked earlier by Mr. Beaulieu.

Can that analysis be made public? I don't want to force your hand, but it's something that committee members could read and take on board as part of our study.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: I would have to draft it. I have bits and pieces here and there. These are arguments we use in our advocacy strategy with the Department of Canadian Heritage. We only launched this strategy this fall.

• (1200)

The Chair: Okay. In any case, if you want to submit a brief, feel free to do so and send it to the clerk, who will distribute it to committee members. It's really important.

I have one last question, with 30 seconds left on the clock.

In studies that have been done since I have been a member, witnesses have often described the kind of situation you find yourselves in. Doesn't that encourage the provinces and territories to disengage from the work they have to do? It seems so easy to say that if the provinces don't deliver what they should, the federal government will take care of it. Isn't that really the message that would be sent to the provinces and territories that aren't very disciplined when it comes to official languages?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: You're absolutely right in that assessment. That's why I said that the federal government would have to look at the possibility of offering some kind of legal recourse. The provinces sign agreements with the federal government for official languages programs in education. If the provinces do not comply with the agreements, there should be some sort of legal recourse.

The Chair: That's a very good point. I'll leave you with that, because I took more than the time allowed to ask my questions.

Thank you, Mr. Laberge, Ms. Kropielnicki and Ms. Maisonneuve. If you have any additional information that you didn't have time to share with the committee, please don't hesitate to send it in writing to the clerk, who will forward it to all committee members.

We will now take a break to bring in our next panel.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion passed by the committee on April 29, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the minority-language education continuum.

I would like to welcome the witnesses who will be with us for this second hour. We have one of our regulars, Stéphanie Chouinard, associate professor, who is appearing by video conference as an individual. We have with us in the room Mr. Bourgeois, researcher, also appearing as an individual.

Mr. Bourgeois, I think this is your first time at the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Welcome.

You each have five minutes for your presentation. We're very strict on timekeeping because it gives us more time for questions. This means I have the difficult task of stopping anyone who goes over their time. We'll start with Mr. Bourgeois for the first five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Bourgeois.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois (Researcher, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation.

[*English*]

Do we really know if the official languages policy is successful? If so, why is it successful, and how successful is it? Can we prove it?

What if we could prove that the presence of a school could guarantee that an official-language minority community could survive 80 years and that the absence of a school would lead to its disappearance in 40 years? Would we fund early childhood development and employability differently if we knew that the former contributed 10 times more than the latter to OLMC vitality? If we could prove that education is the most important tool to ensure vitality, should we not fund it adequately before spending elsewhere? If so, would parliamentarians accept modifying public spending accordingly? Would governments stand firm against vested-interest groups?

I don't know, but it behooves parliamentarians to assess the results of public policies, programs and investments in official languages. This is required to enhance effectiveness and efficiency, as well as democratic accountability.

To perform such an assessment, we must first set precise ends to achieve. Are they equality, equivalence, progression and vitality? They've all been used, and they all pose challenges.

I propose sustainability. It is more aspirational and measurable, and it is better aligned with the theory of being, which best reflects OLMC reality. Regardless of which end is chosen, we must identify all potential interventions and especially determine the relative importance of each one. Education and early childhood development are the sectors most worthy of public support. They should thus be funded accordingly. This core business presently receives most of the funds on official languages, but perhaps it should be funded even more and, if required, at the expense of other sectors.

After identifying specific ends and the best means to such ends, we must adopt a coherent national tripartite strategic plan in minority education—a plan to ensure that minority school boards achieve their double mandate; a plan that is strategic, which means that evidence-based priorities come first; a plan that is coherent, so investments are set to maximize results; a plan that integrates and synergizes federal, provincial, territorial and community actions; a plan that frames actions longer than five years; and a plan that assesses and updates the means. Many such plans already exist, so there's no need to start from scratch. However, they must be revised in light of the long-term ends and through the lens of the minority.

Since your mandate is to study the first-language education continuum in OLMCs and report your findings and your recommendations to the House, I tried to put myself in your shoes. I wrote my thoughts as findings and recommendations for your consideration.

In addition to the adoption and full implementation of a coherent national minority language education plan, I submit five additional recommendations: Education must be recognized and prioritized as the most important public service in support of the intergenerational transmission of language and culture. Minority families must be supported in their efforts to transmit the language and culture to their children, notably during early childhood and the school years. Minority early childhood centres and day cares must be supported

in a manner proportional to their importance, similar to our support for minority schools. Minority school boards must be supported and assessed in their efforts to enhance students' identity construction and in their community sustainability. Finally, minority school boards must be granted the exclusive educational powers indicated by section 23 and be supported to ensure that they are fully implemented.

In short, if we don't ensure the success of the minority language education and early childhood systems—the core business—all other actions will be for naught.

Thank you for your attention. I will try my best to answer your questions.

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bourgeois.

Ms. Chouinard, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard (Associate Professor, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, thank you for welcoming me once again today to talk about the minority-language education continuum.

My remarks today can be summed up in a single sentence: As long as the education continuum is not complete and access to education of equal quality, managed by and for our communities, is unavailable, the communities' vitality will remain precarious.

This education continuum is now explicitly mentioned in the Official Languages Act, but even before that progress was made, it was already clear that, until all the pieces of the puzzle—from early childhood to post-secondary education—were in place, troubling gaps would continue to emerge in primary and secondary education, even though they are protected by the charter.

Let me start at the beginning, which is early childhood.

In the first direct attack on the vitality of our communities in education, for every available space in a francophone day care centre outside Quebec, four other children remain without a space and will likely end up in an English-language day care centre. Unless their families—many of whom are exogamous, admittedly—make Herculean efforts, those four children will not start kindergarten with the same language and cultural skills as the children enrolled in francophone day care centres. So the additional burden of teaching young francophones French is being placed on the shoulders of our elementary schools, which already have a dual mandate to meet the objectives of the provincial curriculum and act as cultural carriers in a minority situation. This is an unfairly onerous task, and it is all the more difficult given that our schools are experiencing a profound shortage of qualified personnel, which will take me to the other end of the continuum in a moment.

Even though we worked hard to have the new Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act include a protection for funding dedicated to official language minority communities, it doesn't go far enough. Language clauses are absolutely necessary to ensure that the provinces invest a fair share of federal funding to serve our communities. Consultations with the communities must also be part of the negotiations of these agreements, to ensure that their priorities are taken into account. The history of funding for official language education programs has long shown us that the provinces cannot be trusted to spend the money transferred to them where it should be spent and in a way that meets the needs of the community. It would be naive, to use a euphemism, to expect them to act differently in early childhood.

Let's now move on to the fact that the education continuum is not complete in post-secondary education. This situation is obviously contributing to the staff shortage in our schools, jeopardizing the quality of education provided there. But it gets worse. Students who don't have an option to continue their post-secondary education in French near them—within a radius of about 80 kilometres, according to studies—desert French-language schools starting in seventh grade, and that phenomenon accelerates until the last years of high school in favour of majority-language schools. A 2016 study by the now-defunct Office of the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario shows that, in some regions with a very small minority, such as southern Ontario, nearly two thirds of students enrolled in minority-language schools will have left the francophone system in favour of anglophone schools before they graduate from high school.

Why the exodus? Students—and their parents—want to make sure they have a high enough level of English to be able to attend college or university in that language. To put it more clearly, the lack of post-secondary education options in French is draining our high schools. This phenomenon is all the more alarming since we know that an individual's identity is solidified during adolescence and young adulthood. This means that we are losing these young people to English-language schools at the very time when all the identity-building work that has been done since early childhood is starting to pay off.

I recently spoke to you about the challenges specific to francophone minority post-secondary institutions and to research, so I

won't dwell on that subject today, but if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask me, of course.

In conclusion, the only hope for francophones in minority situations to survive is the completion of the education continuum. Concrete action toward that goal is long overdue. I hope my remarks have helped inform the scope of the work to be done.

Thank you, and I look forward to further discussion.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard. That was very clear.

We will begin the first round of questions with six minutes for each of the political parties. We'll start with the Conservatives.

Mr. G n reux, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Bernard G n reux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivi re-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here. Their comments are very interesting.

Ms. Chouinard and Mr. Bourgeois, I get the impression that we are currently experiencing a paradox in Canada. Immersion schools are overwhelmed by demand. Parents have to line up for 24 hours to enrol their children in immersion schools, particularly in western Canada. We have seen that. My sister actually taught in an immersion school. The situation is the opposite of that in francophone school boards, which are almost systemically underfunded and unable to meet needs.

In addition, as you mentioned, Ms. Chouinard, if children are educated in French starting in kindergarten, perhaps one day they will want to teach in French, and the wheel will continue to turn. Do you see a paradox there?

My other question, related to the first one, is about funding. Obviously, it's not just a matter of money. It's also a matter of identity. However, we've heard a number of times in the past that the federal government was sending funds to the provinces under agreements, but that accountability wasn't there. So sometimes the funds sent by the federal government to the provinces to support the education continuum aren't being allocated by the provinces in accordance with the terms of the agreement, or the federal government isn't able to verify that they really are.

Mr. Bourgeois, do you see accountability as a real problem in these agreements?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I'm not sure I understood your question about the paradox between immersion schools and francophone schools. If you ask it again, I may be able to answer it with more wisdom.

When it comes to accountability, the Constitution says that education is under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. However, the federal government does intervene. It is difficult to imagine the French-language education system in a minority setting without a contribution from the federal government. The provinces are certainly pushing back, as they see education as their jurisdiction, and rightly so. However, as I indicated at the end of my little four-page brief, if we have fundamental values, such as the protection of minorities, and if we have section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which the provinces have signed, we must have the courage of our convictions and invest accordingly. In my oral presentation, I tried to say that, without the success of the education system and the early childhood system being ensured, all the other efforts would be pointless or, at the very least, would be less effective.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Chouinard, I would also like to hear your opinion.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Under the federal-provincial bilateral agreements for minority-language education, with which you are very familiar, there are always three funding streams. The first concerns what we call basic French, and that funding, according to the agreements with the provinces, must be added to the core funding that the provinces are already supposed to provide for their curriculum. Then there is the funding stream for immersion and, lastly, the funding for minority language schools. However, in many provinces, we can see on the ground that the proportion of funding allocated by the provinces to minority language schools is not even close to being equal to the proportion of students in those schools. So these students are at a systematic disadvantage.

If I'm not mistaken, in my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador, a case is making its way through the courts because the Fédération des francophones de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador got angry about this issue.

The rest of the federal funding, once it gets into the provincial school system, gets lost in the wilderness. We see that funding ending up being used as core funding rather than additional funding, when the provinces are supposed to add it to the funding they already provide to their provincial school systems. So, if the provinces were honest about how they use funding from the federal government, perhaps we would have less of a problem when it comes to things like waiting lists for immersion programs, which you mentioned and which are overflowing everywhere.

• (1220)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Bourgeois, my question about immersion was related to the fact that there is an overflow, in the sense that the demand is high. Anglophones clearly do want to send their children to immersion schools.

However, is there a link to be made to the fact that, once again, federal money going to the provinces ends up disappearing? When it comes to accountability, we are often told, and have been for a number of years, that money is literally disappearing, and Ms. Chouinard has just repeated that.

Should there be an obligation within the framework of the agreements to report on where the money is going?

The Chair: Please answer in 15 seconds.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I think the answer is yes. There's a problem, an issue, a difficulty. Most provinces don't even report their spending to minority school boards, let alone to the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bourgeois.

We will continue with the second round of questions, starting with the Liberals.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for joining us this morning.

Mr. Bourgeois, the labour shortage in education is often a major concern for our committee. What is your institution doing to address that shortage? Do you provide any incentives to encourage enrolment in your programs?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I don't represent a school. I'm an independent researcher.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I apologize.

Ms. Chouinard, you are a staunch defender of official language minority communities. You've written extensively on the subject and you live your francophonie openly. We often ask you for your professional opinion on various subjects that affect the francophonie.

Today, I would like you to tell us about your journey as the mother of a young girl.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: I have a son.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Okay. I'm sorry.

You live in an anglophone city, and your son will soon reach preschool age and start going to a child care centre. Could you tell us about your journey to find a French-language child care centre?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Okay. I'll give you some dates for context.

On December 24, 2021, my husband and I, who live in Toronto, learned that we were expecting a child. On December 26, we put our future child on the waiting list of the two francophone child care centres in our neighbourhood. I couldn't have been any faster. Our son was born in September 2022, and I returned to work on July 1, 2023. However, my son only got a space in a francophone day care on July 1, 2024. So he was on the waiting list for that day care for over a year from the end of my maternity leave. During that year, to my great dismay, our family was among those where four out of five children did not have a space in a francophone day care. I thought I had done everything in my power to avoid such a situation. I was very desperate.

As part of your study, you heard a little earlier from other witnesses that, in Prince Edward Island, 150 francophone children are waiting for a space in the province's child care centres. In our neighbourhood, at least 150 children are in the same situation. I'm not trying to make it into a competition, but I just want to give you an idea of the scope of the demand that could be met if there were more spaces.

• (1225)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Let me ask you a question before you continue telling us your story.

You are talking about those 150 children, but is the problem related to the location? Has this problem been around for the past two or three years, or has it been around for more than 10 years? Could you confirm for us that this problem has existed for over 10 years and that no provincial or federal government has ever paid attention to it?

It's impossible that this problem has suddenly started to escalate since the Liberals came to power in 2015.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: In 2015, I was still working on my doctorate and was not quite ready to have children. So I can't answer you.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: However, the problem existed, didn't it?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: I don't know the extent of the problem at the time, but I would be prepared to tell you that the issue did indeed exist at the time. The problem has worsened recently, especially because of the popularity of child care services. In recent months and years, the cost of child care spaces has been much lower, as a result of investments and agreements between the federal government and the provinces. In some families, one parent would stay at home because the cost of child care spaces was too high. That parent is now considering the possibility of returning to the labour market because, economically speaking, it makes sense for them to do so.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: You're telling me that a positive change made by our government has a negative side.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Exactly. Obviously, no parents have complained about the far more affordable child care services we now have, but it's clear that the lower cost had led to higher demand. I think we could have anticipated this result, but it might have been hard to anticipate the scope. Indeed, workers are telling us that the waiting lists are significantly longer now that child care costs are lower.

When we look at what child care centres can do financially, we note that spots for infants are the hardest to fund because child care centres lose money on those spots. However, that's how young children enter the early child care system. That's what the board at my son's day care believes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard. You'll get the opportunity to speak later when other questions are asked, but we have significantly exceeded the six-minute mark.

Mr. Beaulieu, our second vice-chair, has the floor for six minutes.

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

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us.

We have two witnesses who are researchers. Mr. Bourgeois talked about how effective the federal language policy is and how to assess it. If we look at the Official Languages Act since its adoption in 1969, we could ask whether it's a failure or a success.

The francophone assimilation rate has continued to rise since 1969, and it's very obvious outside Quebec. Quebec has seen some progress, despite having the Constitution forced on it. Quebec is home to 90% of the francophones in Canada. Quebecers are not recognized as a minority, even if they are a minority within Canada.

Furthermore, the Official Languages Act seeks solely to reinforce English in Quebec. We thought that the new version of the act might change things but, clearly, that's not the case. It does nothing to support the French language in Quebec. The federal government is doling out subsidies to francophones outside Quebec for their education system. Witnesses spoke about the education system and, in many instances, funding for preschools and schools was insufficient. One witness told us earlier that British Columbia had no public francophone college or university created by and for francophones.

Ultimately, isn't the aim of the federal language policy to quietly and gradually assimilate francophones and to let them assimilate? In Quebec, where there is a chance of ensuring their survival, there are efforts to weaken French in order to promote English.

I'd like to hear what the two witnesses have to say about that.

• (1230)

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: Many Quebecers have made that argument since the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the 1960s. Biculturalism was subsequently abandoned in favour of a policy on bilingualism and multiculturalism.

As a researcher, however, I've never read anything confirming that the federal government sought to assimilate the minority, bit by bit. That's your opinion. I'll leave it there.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Understood.

This issue was raised prior to the adoption of the Official Languages Act, but also following its adoption. There has often been criticism to that effect.

Ms. Chouinard, what do you think?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Good morning, Mr. Beaulieu.

Today's study is on the education continuum. I think it's important to recall that, pursuant to Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867, education falls under provincial jurisdiction. The question is a Gordian knot. We talked about it in relation to post-secondary education, and we're talking about it again today.

The federal government makes investments. Are they insufficient? We can certainly discuss that. Personally, I'd like to them to be higher, but the key is really to ensure that, when those transfers are made to the provinces, that the money gets spent where it needs to be. Perhaps that's thanks to the sections on language, which should be imposed on the provinces, to ensure among other things that funding is invested based on the needs of the communities and to meet the needs and priorities of those communities.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I think that Quebec is the only province where funding for a minority-language community is guaranteed. The anglophone community in Quebec is considered a minority by the federal government, and it's certainly a minority in terms of Quebec's population, even if it's part of the English-speaking majority in Canada. That community is well funded, and I would even say that the funding is higher than the percentage of anglophones, be it at the preschool, elementary or secondary school level. In that province, the federal government only takes action to reinforce English. If Quebec's powers are weakened, if the federal government encroaches more in Quebec, we could consider that that it will further undermine the future of French in Quebec.

Wouldn't it be better to do things differently?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Mr. Beaulieu, for the first time in history, the new Official Languages Act explicitly states that French is the language of the minority in Canada.

I think that the federal government is adopting a very clear tool precisely to ensure that this imbalance is corrected. Now, it's time to implement this wonderful statute, which dates back to last year.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

However, if you look at the Action Plan for Official Languages 2023–2028: Protection-Promotion-Collaboration, nothing has changed. All the funding in Quebec goes to English. The new act says one thing and its opposite. It admits that francophones, including those in Quebec, are part of a minority, but it continues to refer to anglophones in Quebec as a minority. In the end, this ambiguity seems to serve to perpetuate the same old system as before.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, Ms. Chouinard.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Mr. Beaulieu, I think you and I disagree on how to see things.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: However, I hope that the situation will change, but it hasn't yet.

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

[English]

Ms. Dance, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you very much.

I'm new to the committee, and I'm trying to understand things. As researchers, I'm hoping you can share some information with me so that I have a better understanding of what we're looking at.

What I can see is that the provinces and territories must provide a per diem for each student. Is that correct? Are we talking about the federal government providing the provinces with money based on the number of students in general?

• (1235)

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: It varies from province to province. I did research for the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones in 2014. Some provinces have a lot of money per student. Some have much less. It depends.

Actually, the trend is that the more students there are—in New Brunswick and Ontario, for instance—the less money there is per student.

Ms. Leila Dance: Did you compare anglophone students to francophone students? When it gets to the provincial level and they start dividing it up, is it being disbursed evenly?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: It's not even. What I did was study the PLOE-OLEP funding, which is for immersion second language and French first language.

In every province and territory, if I remember correctly, the funding for the French language and minority languages was superior per student, per total, than the amounts for second language French immersion.

Ms. Leila Dance: Right, but none of that was compared against just anglophone students in the English-speaking classrooms.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: No. All I did was compare the PLOE-OLEP funding.

Ms. Leila Dance: I'm trying to understand this. Both of you have mentioned how the provincial government isn't spending correctly, and that there's a discrepancy. I'm trying to compare both sides to figure out how we can increase that or make sure that it's on par.

Do either or both of you have any recommendations on how we can hold the provinces more accountable for those types of things?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I suggest an integrated tripartite plan where everybody knows what everybody is supposed to be doing. Everybody accounts for their spending and their investments. That's probably the best one.

I'll give you an anecdote. In Prince Edward Island, the school board had to make a request under the freedom of information and protection of privacy legislation to get access to how the province was spending its OLEP funding. The province refused, because the pretext was, "Well, we're negotiating with the federal government, so negotiations between federal and provincial governments preclude the divulgence of information."

I personally think the best solution is to have a plan where everybody signs on board and everybody shares the information. We know where we're heading. It's "You do this, I do that and minority school boards do this," and everybody grows in the same direction.

Ms. Leila Dance: I like that.

I'll pose the same questions to the other witness, Ms. Chouinard.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: First of all, welcome to the committee. It's nice to see a new face.

I largely agree with my colleague on either a tripartite agreement or, as some other community members would call it, a linguistic clause. Ideally, a representative of the provincial community would be a signatory to ensure not only transparency in where the funding goes but also that where the funding is allocated is on par with and represents the priorities and needs of the community. Nobody else in each province is better placed to tell the province and the federal government where those priorities should be.

As it stands right now, with these bilateral agreements in education between the federal government and the provinces, the provinces are free to make up their own priorities as to where that funding is allocated. Often, when it is revealed where that funding went—because that's not always the case, as Daniel just said—we realize that the funding went to places that were absolutely useless with regard to the vitality of communities.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I'll add an anecdote.

In Prince Edward Island, the OLEP is served by the province to fund 13.75 teachers. That's supposed to be a primary provincial responsibility. It shouldn't be using OLEP funding to fund the salaries of 13.75 teachers, but it does. The French-language school board has told the province it can't do that. Canadian Heritage is fully aware of that and does nothing to correct that.

• (1240)

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Unless, in some provinces, like Newfoundland and Labrador, someone in the community decides to take PCH to court, which is what's happening right now. The funding by the PLOE-OLEP is deemed to be supplementary funding to what the province should be putting forward. Right now, that is not how that funding is used a large number of times.

Ms. Leila Dance: Did any of you do any research on the staffing shortages?

I just want to prepare for the next round. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dance.

Ms. Gladu, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

Ms. Chouinard, you described the current situation and the many difficulties. What actions does the government need to take, and what are the priorities?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: That's a big question.

First, under the new Official Languages Act, a francophone lens should be applied to new legislation. However, there are recent examples where this hasn't been done on the ground and where we've had to fight for it. That's what happened with the Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act. We had to turn to the Senate, because an amendment couldn't be made in the House of Commons to protect funding specifically for official language minority communities.

The Official Languages Act should be able to address such issues horizontally. These issues must be taken into consideration in the legislative drafting process, not when a bill is being debated. That would be a good step forward.

Furthermore, since we're talking about education here, and the federal government always has to do business with the provinces and territories, it's necessary to ensure transparency and accountability, through language clauses, so that we can have proof that the funding sent by the federal government to the provinces is being spent as it should be.

[*English*]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

My question for you, Mr. Bourgeois, has to do with your research and section 23 of the charter. It's a bit vague in the charter. It doesn't really say how many francophone or minority-language students you would need to have before you have to fund a school for them, and it doesn't seem to cover post-secondary or early childhood education.

If changes were to be made, what would you like to see changed there?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I think the overall problem in the entire system, education-wise, is that the provinces do not respect their obligations. We usually refer to the exclusive powers of minority-language school boards, and we haven't even gone there yet. It's not even complete.

However, the biggest problem is that the provinces have obligations, according to Mahe and other jurisprudence, and they're not doing their job either.

Nobody has thus far sued the provinces or forced them to the table and said, "Listen, you have obligations to promote the official-language minority education system." Regardless of the OLEP, they have that responsibility. Now if the federal government wants to help them do that, that's fine. If not, they still have that obligation, so that's probably one of the....

I'm trying to remember the second part of your question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Since you studied the right to school management, it would be interesting to hear you talk about the link between section 23 of the charter, on the right to school management, and the current federal funding models. I would also like you to comment on the accountability provisions in the current memorandum of understanding.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: I think completely separate funding from the official languages in education program should be provided directly from the federal government to school boards to carry out their cultural and community mandates. Schools and school boards would be responsible, but their cultural and community mandate would be separate from the agreement on the official languages in education program, and that would make it possible to bypass recalcitrant provinces and territories.

• (1245)

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you very much.

What I will do is ask either of you whether you have other recommendations you would like the federal government to take action on. You can send those to the clerk of the committee, and they will be incorporated into our final report.

Thank you so much for your testimony today. It's much appreciated.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gladu.

Mr. Serré, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the two researchers very much for their testimony today. They've done some research with respect to the Constitution and provincial responsibilities.

On the one hand, we fully agree on the education continuum, early childhood, school boards and post-secondary education. Clearly, there are major gaps in that regard. We've heard that loud and clear throughout our study, and beforehand. I come from northern Ontario, where the challenges are huge, obviously. We're frustrated.

Ms. Chouinard, we're talking about certain elements. The federal government in power right now is the one that has probably imposed the most conditions in some of the agreements, something that had never been done before. However, these measures aren't enough.

You know that we have the court challenges program. The Bloc Québécois and the Conservatives were against this program, by the way. This was debated at the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage when I was a member. This matter is currently stalled in the House of Commons. We put that in the Official Languages Act.

Should francophone community groups across the country use this program to defend themselves against the provinces, to ensure that there are penalties and that funding is provided by the provinces for early childhood, secondary and post-secondary education?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Thank you for the question.

Mr. Serré, I don't know if you're aware of this, but you will be.

I'm a member of the official languages rights expert panel in the court challenges program. So I have a good idea of the types of applications that are submitted and the types of applications that are

funded. These questions appear in the files filed under the court challenges program. However, one of the important criteria for cases to be funded is that they must raise a new question of law.

We know that a plethora of cases since 1982 have gone to the courts and all the way to the Supreme Court under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Some issues are considered to have already been resolved, whether or not they are resolved in the way the communities would like them to be resolved. The choices are made in that context.

As for funding for early childhood and post-secondary education, there are indeed elements that have yet to be determined. Case law has already appeared in certain instances, including the obligation of a province to add a space to set up a child care centre when a new school is built. However, the Supreme Court refused to go that far.

It's important to keep things in perspective. Our job at the official languages rights expert panel is to see whether the applications before the panel raise new legal issues that deserve to be clarified by the courts.

Mr. Marc Serré: Would the only way to prioritize funding for official language minority communities be through the courts? At the moment, there doesn't seem to be any political will within the provinces.

Are you able to look at that, advocate for that, and bring in more people who are going to be looking at this issue?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: I'm not sure I understand your question.

Mr. Marc Serré: Do the parameters of the court challenges program need to be expanded so that other associations and organizations can take the provinces to court to force them to meet their obligations to official language minority communities under the Constitution? It's because education is a provincial responsibility.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: Okay.

I'm sort of walking on eggshells as a member of the official languages rights expert panel.

• (1250)

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes, that's true.

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: I could say one thing, though. One of the problems faced by organizations wishing to pursue issues such as these through the courts is often the cap on funding available through the court challenges program. Because of the funding that is currently available, we often can't meet the demand for litigation costs from start to finish.

For example, we've heard the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique say many times that funding should be withdrawn from the operating budget, when that funding should help schools fund litigation against the province. We're facing some really troubling challenges. In the meantime, the quality of education cannot be the same. If school boards are constantly tied up in court, they have to take money out of their coffers to fight the province.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chouinard and Mr. Serré. We went a little over the allotted time.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: All the testimony presented here confirms that several anglophone provinces refuse to fund a minimum continuum of education for the viability of francophone and Acadian communities. Even federal funding sometimes seems to be diverted. There's also a lack of willingness on the part of the federal government to demand accountability. As a result, assimilation continues. At some point, irreparable harm will be done to francophone and Acadian communities that will have been assimilated as a result of measures aimed at banning schools a long time ago. If major change doesn't come soon, we'll be headed for further assimilation.

How do you see the future? What prospects do you see?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: There's been a reversal on Prince Edward Island, where I've worked the most. Ten or 15 years ago, there were about 850 students in our French schools. Now there are about 1,300. The goal is to reach 1,500 students.

If all these students are bilingual and proud of their identity building, I imagine that in 20 or 30 years, it will be much better than what we have now, quantitatively speaking.

Will the quality of identity building also be there? Federal funding for identity building and official language programs in education, among other things, could contribute enormously. It takes conviction on the part of the provinces, but I see that as a very positive thing.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If we look at the figures objectively, we see no improvement so far.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: The figures I just gave you are for Prince Edward Island.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: For the number of students, it is. On the other hand, there are schools where a large proportion of students don't know French. We talked about it earlier, but we'll see.

Ms. Chouinard, would you like to comment on that?

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: To quickly answer your question, I would say that the future belongs to those who fight, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Yes, we will continue to fight. We have no choice.

The Chair: With those wise words, I might add that our friend Darrell Samson always says that you have to get up early and go to bed later than others to continue the fight. That's why he goes to bed later.

We now go to the New Democratic Party.

Ms. Dance, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

[English]

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you so much.

I'm just going to go back to your presentation. You spoke about how currently the government has a five-year plan. It didn't seem like you liked that number. Tell us what you think the ideal number would be.

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: It's in my four-page document, regarding 2067, Canada's bicentennial. If Finland can have an education plan for 22 to 23 years, I'm not sure why we shouldn't.

We have an official-language plan for five years. We have education plans for five years. We have OLEP funding for five years. There is no education system in the world that functions five years at a time.

Ms. Leila Dance: Can you tell me, in your opinion, what happens to the French minority communities when a French school or day care closes? Overall, what's going to happen to Canada's official language if the communities don't have access to French language and education supports?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: We have anecdotal evidence about schools being closed, which was the 1960s centralization: the elimination of small schools into consolidated schools throughout the country.

I'll give you an anecdote. My wife is from Tignish, P.E.I. She did her first year of school—grade one—in a French-language school. Then the province came in and consolidated the six French-language schools in the Tignish area into none. They had to go to English-language schools. She became assimilated. Her sisters became assimilated. The entire village, called Tignish Shore, became assimilated 20 years later.

We have other examples of that throughout the country. We also have examples of schools being built, like in Chezzetcook, in Nova Scotia, where the community revitalized itself.

There are probably going to be hits and misses, but without a school and, secondarily, without early childhood development, it's doomed to failure.

• (1255)

Ms. Leila Dance: Thank you so much.

I want to thank both of you for sharing all of your research and information with our committee today.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bourgeois and Ms. Chouinard, the quality of your comments made it possible to focus on the crux of the matter. If you think there is additional information you would have liked to share with us, please send it to the committee. This is really important, because the committee can only write in its reports what it hears from witnesses.

In closing, Mr. Bourgeois, I'm going to use my privilege as chair to ask you a question. As a researcher, you're an expert in school management rights. Is there a legal argument to be made, on the federal side, regarding school management and the fact that school boards are excluded from the negotiations of bilateral agreements? Is there an argument to be made to correct the future in terms of the legislation?

Mr. Daniel Bourgeois: Sure. As I said, it would have to be a tripartite plan. Who will represent the minority? It's the people elected by the universal suffrage who sit on the school board. You are federal elected representatives. There are provincial elected representatives who represent the minority, but they aren't even at the bargaining table. They're not even being adequately consulted. Some provinces consult them, but most do not. It's certainly not an effective consultation.

Who speaks on behalf of minorities, who are supposed to have eight exclusive powers, but aren't even exclusive? Section 23 has been around for 40 years. Since 1990, in principle, we're supposed to have full school management, but in reality, that isn't the case. We're floundering. We know what the eight powers are, but no school district or school board in the country exercises those exclusive powers. Are they really "exclusive" if they're shared with the government? It seems to me that, at some point, we have to stop and say whether these are exclusive powers or not. If they are exclusive, let's give them to the minorities, school boards and their elected representatives.

It's a bit like saying that if the province didn't want to decentralize its powers to school boards, school boards would have to assume powers even if it means getting sued by the province. The problem is that the funding isn't keeping up. It would be a good idea for school boards to exercise their eight exclusive powers, such as setting school curricula and spending public funds on culture and identity. If the means don't follow the obligation of the secession case or the Beaulac decision, it's difficult to exercise these powers. You're not going to raise enough money to carry out these mandates through church collections. The provinces should get serious and at the negotiating table.

My last comment is this. I've been working with the Acadian community and the department for two years. I don't want to denigrate the provinces. The Government of New Brunswick is very supportive. In fact, it's in the process of co-constructing the French-language school system. The department is divided in two in New Brunswick; there is a francophone deputy minister and an anglophone deputy minister. The francophone deputy minister is fully prepared to find solutions and establish full school management. It's coming. It will probably be done within the next year or two, depending on the new government. That bodes well. It's not everywhere; it's in New Brunswick, where the situation is different.

Nova Scotia has led the way with the development of the programs. It's the only territory where the school board develops the programs, which is really the crux of the matter. What are you teaching your students, and how? Nova Scotia is a leader in this regard. New Brunswick will eventually lead the way when it comes to full school management. Perhaps it will snowball for the other school boards.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bourgeois.

Ms. Chouinard, do you have anything to add on this issue?

• (1300)

Ms. Stéphanie Chouinard: I'm going to add to what Mr. Bourgeois just said. I would remind you that the Supreme Court handed down the Arsenault-Cameron decision at the turn of the last century. It explicitly established that school boards and francophone minority parents should be recognized as the community's spokespersons in education. So there is case law that supports what my colleague is saying.

The Chair: Again, we can't thank you enough, witnesses, for your wise counsel and your very interesting answers.

We'll end it there.

The meeting is adjourned.

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