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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1135)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The meeting is now public.

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

I would like to welcome our witnesses, some of whom are new to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. With us is Heidi Yetman, president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation. Also with us are the president of the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones, Simon Cloutier, and the executive director of that federation, Valérie Morand.

Witnesses will each have five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will have a series of questions from all parties. I might have to interrupt the discussion at some point to do a sound test with a witness who is having technical difficulties. Other than that, everything should run smoothly.

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

Ms. Heidi Yetman (President, Canadian Teachers' Federation): Good morning, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the members of the committee for having me here.

My name is Heidi Yetman and I am the president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, which represents almost 370,000 teachers in the public sector all across Canada. I am also a graduate of a French first language school in Saint-Boniface, in Winnipeg. I am therefore an example of someone who has benefited from the francophone minority education system in Canada. From 2019 to 2023, I was also the president of the Association provinciale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec, which represents the teaching personnel in the anglophone minority community's public schools.

At the Federation, we have a Francophonie program, an advisory committee on French first language, and a network of francophone liaison officers. Of course, all of the Federation's programs incorporate Francophonie components and all services and events are offered in both official languages.

At present, the priorities of our Francophonie program are focused on combatting the teacher shortage. This is a major problem for the future of our schools. Another of our priorities is providing support and professional integration for teachers who are recent immigrants.

In the spring of 2024, our francophone network reported that the main challenge was the shortage of qualified francophone teachers everywhere in Canada. This serious shortage is jeopardizing services to students, damaging their learning conditions and threatening the survival of some francophone schools, mainly in rural areas.

Enrolment in French-language schools continues to rise, which is good news. However, the significant increase in the number of students also comes with major challenges and a glaring shortage of resources. In rural areas, it is very difficult to retain students in the francophone network since the anglophone schools offer more options and more services.

The provinces and territories introduce new programs with very few pedagogical resources or supporting materials in French. In my experience, I can tell you that there is also a shortage of pedagogical materials in English in Quebec. Plainly, the resources allocated to French schools, to provide an education of equivalent quality within the systems, are insufficient by far.

In November, I participated in the Conférence des associations francophones d'éducation. After that event ended, a statement was published regarding the shortage of teaching personnel that concluded as follows:

[*Translation*] This situation is no longer merely a challenge; it is an emergency for both the future of our educational systems and the flourishing of French and its cultures. We cannot remain indifferent to this crisis, which has a direct impact on the future of our children and our communities.

The Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones, which is represented here today at this meeting, is a partner in education. It has identified a number of priorities for strengthening its network, including increasing financial support from the federal government, building schools and modernizing existing ones, developing the education continuum from early childhood to postsecondary, and combating the teacher shortage. The actions arising from those priorities will add to the impact and sustainability of francophone identity all across Canada and ensure equitable access to a high quality education for all learners.

The budget envelopes allocated by the federal government under the official languages in education program have remained substantially the same since 2009, while the number of students has grown steadily and the needs are increasingly urgent.

We not only need more investments in teaching the minority languages; we also need more transparency as to how this money is spent. That is why it is essential that stakeholders be consulted.

Today, I am proud to convey the heartfelt plea of francophone teachers and I urge you to hear their appeal.

● (1140)

I hope I have stayed within my allotted five minutes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yetman. You finished at five minutes on the dot.

Before we go any further, we are going to bring in Mr. Gagnon, who has finally solved his technical problems.

Mr. Gagnon, are you there?

Mr. Christian Gagnon (President, Ligue d'action nationale): Here I am.

The Chair: Please raise your microphone a bit so it is between your mouth and your nose, and say a few sentences so we can check the sound quality for our interpreters.

Is the weather good there?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Yes, the weather is very good here. There is a lot of snow, like in Ottawa, I think.

I hope you can hear me. I am going to try to stick to the five minutes' speaking time, too.

May I begin now? Is it working?

The Chair: That's fine, Mr. Gagnon.

Try your best to make your presentation in five minutes. I will stop you if you go over your allotted time. The floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Christian Gagnon: The fact that students continue to attend the francophone minority system is largely due to the quality of the educational experience that francophone students have in elementary school. In many provinces, French language minority elementary schools are still far from offering conditions equivalent to those in the anglophone schools. This is not a recent problem. As long ago as 1996, a study by the Commission nationale des parents francophones showed that of the \$5 billion paid by Ottawa under its official languages in education program from 1970 to 1988, 62% went to anglophones in Quebec and immersion schools in English Canada, and Francophones outside Quebec had to make do with a measly 28.5%.

I would like to illustrate the current situation with a concrete example: Rose-des-vents francophone elementary school in Vancouver, which shares a quadrangle with Jules-Verne secondary school. For many years, parents of Rose-des-vents students had been fed up with a school composed of mobile homes joined end to end and poorly soundproofed classrooms that were much smaller than the ones in the anglophone schools. Two of them did not even have windows, nor did the school have a gym or green space, and it had too few lockers.

In 2010, the Association des parents de l'école Rose-des-vents hauled the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britan-

nique into court, citing section 23 of the Charter. The Conseil scolaire francophone and the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique also brought a parallel action against the British Columbia government, on the same basis, in that case involving 20 areas with deficient educational services in French, more or less all across the province.

In 2015, the Association des parents de l'école Rose-des-vents won its case in the Supreme Court. In 2020, after ten years in the courts, the Conseil scolaire francophone also won its case in the Supreme Court to have some ten new French schools built.

However, nine years after the victory won by the Association des parents de l'école Rose-des-vents, they are still waiting for the new school. There are projects planned for 2028 and 2030, one of which is to be on a lot just beside the quadrangle occupied by Rose-des-Vents school and Jules Verne secondary school, but those projects are going nowhere, since the expansion of the secondary school depends on the old Rose-des-vents school, which is currently occupied, being demolished, and that project is scheduled for 2030. Until the school has been demolished, the secondary school can't be expanded. This gives you an idea of the level of dissatisfaction among students in that area.

The 2020 victory won by the Conseil scolaire francophone in the Supreme Court also provided for construction of some ten French schools, but that project has also stagnated, to the point that the Conseil scolaire francophone has now gone before the British Columbia Supreme Court to force the province to carry out the judgment.

Every five years, protocols are established for the payment of federal funds by Ottawa for official languages education, and every time, French immersion for anglophones is given priority over education of francophones in minority communities. If we take as an indicator of good treatment of francophone minorities the proportion of that money that is allocated to francophone schools, we see that New Brunswick and Ontario are leading the pack, with their francophone schools receiving 75% and 70% of the funds, respectively. The proportion then plummets to below 50%, and even below 40% for the last four provinces: Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador. This is the case even though those provinces are where the rate of francophone assimilation is highest and the largest share of federal funds should be allocated to French schools—the complete opposite of the present situation.

● (1145)

Since we are talking about immersion instruction, I would point out that several years ago, the former minister of official languages, Mélanie Joly, agreed that the rate of bilingualism among anglophones outside Quebec had stagnated at 9% for 30 years. The reason is that the retention rate for this learning is not making the grade, because after going through an immersion program, most of the children go back to live in an environment where there is virtually no French.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gagnon. You will have an opportunity to say more when committee members ask their questions. Another thing: I forgot to introduce you as the president of the Ligue d'action nationale, which is the capacity in which you are here today. I apologize for forgetting to mention it.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Cloutier, from the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones, for five minutes.

Mr. Simon Cloutier (President, Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on a fundamental issue for the Francophonie in Canada: real equivalency between education for francophone students in minority situations and education for anglophone students in majority situations.

The Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones represents 29 French language school boards across the country. These school boards ensure the education of nearly 180,000 students in our French-language schools, guaranteeing their right to a French-language education under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Today, I'd like to draw your attention to a crucial problem that's holding back the full development of our school network: the chronic underfunding of French-language school boards. This underfunding directly affects the quality of education offered to students, creates inequalities in access to French-language instruction and prevents the development of educational services needed to strengthen our Francophone communities.

The underfunding of the school network translates into inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching resources and overcrowded classrooms. In 2021, the census revealed that there were over 593,000 children eligible for French-language education across Canada, but only one third of these children currently attend a French-language school. Why is this rate of enrolment so low? Because, while the supply exists, it's not large enough to meet the demand. There simply aren't enough French-language schools, and those that do exist lack the resources to offer education equivalent to that of English-language schools.

Underfunding has a direct impact on the quality of education we can offer. Our schools lack the resources to hire more qualified teachers, they struggle to adapt educational programs to the needs of our students, and, in many cases, they are forced to resort to temporary infrastructures such as portable classrooms in trailers, which are a short-term solution but detract from the children's school experience.

To remedy this situation, we propose a number of solutions that we believe would remove the barriers to access to quality French-language education in our minority communities.

First, school boards' management rights must be recognized. We are calling for French-language school boards to have genuine management rights, including in matters of student admission, infrastructure and funding. This also includes the right to have a truly consulted voice in provincial and federal decisions.

Second, provincial funding formulas, which do not take into account the specificities of French-language schools, must be adapt-

ed. We advocate a revision of these formulas so that French-language schools receive funding that reflects their real needs and the needs of their students.

Third, federal financial support must be increased. Although the federal government plays a key role under the Official Languages Act, the official languages in education program remains insufficient. We are calling for a substantial increase in funding to support francophone minority schools and for these funds to be paid directly to school boards, to cut out the middleman and simplify the process.

Fourth, schools must be built and modernized. We call for massive investment in the construction of French-language schools and the modernization of existing ones. The lack of infrastructure is a major barrier to families' acceptance of French-language schools.

Fifth, it is crucial to strengthen the entire educational continuum, from early childhood to post-secondary education. Access to French-language education must begin at an early age and continue throughout life. This requires better francization services, particularly in regions where demand is high, but supply remains insufficient.

Sixth, we have to counter the shortage of qualified staff in our schools, which is a major challenge for us. To attract and retain competent teachers, we propose incentives such as recognition of qualifications obtained abroad and facilitation of interprovincial mobility.

I will close by saying that the education of French-speaking children is much more than just a question of schooling. It is a question of linguistic and cultural vitality. By investing in French-language education, we are investing in the future of our communities, in inclusion, in diversity and, ultimately, in the prosperity of our country.

We at the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones firmly believe that the proposed solutions are not only possible, they are necessary to ensure an equivalent education for francophone students, commensurate with their rights guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We are ready to work with all levels of government to ensure that this right is fully respected.

Thank you for your attention and your commitment to quality French-language education for all Canadians.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cloutier.

For the witnesses, most of whom are here for the first time, there will now be a first round of questions and answers during which each of the parties will have six minutes. Everyone has the same clock as me. The more strictly I limit speaking time, the more questions will get asked by everyone and the more opportunity we will have to do more rounds of questions after this one.

We will start the first round of questions with the first vice-chair of this committee, Mr. Godin, from the Conservative Party.

• (1155)

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

Ms. Yetman, from the Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et enseignants, you said you went to school in Saint-Boniface. Were you in a francophone school program or an immersion program?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I was in a francophone program.

Mr. Joël Godin: Are immersion programs offered in Saint-Boniface?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: No. It really is a francophone minority community.

Mr. Joël Godin: Is it like that entirely?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: You said the labour shortage was your challenge in 2024. What is your solution?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: First, there need to be places created in francophone universities so that more teachers can be trained. That is one of the missing pieces. In other words, there are not enough places and creating some will help.

Second, we are also looking at recent immigration, which has produced a lot of teachers. That is why the Fédération is working on a project, in collaboration with the Department of Canadian Heritage, to help people integrate. That is another way of addressing the labour shortage.

Mr. Joël Godin: That is another potential solution for the labour shortage. I think you agree with the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones that a skills equivalency or conversion factor has to be put in place for immigration.

Ms. Heidi Yetman: Yes. May I add something?

Mr. Joël Godin: Okay. Be quick, because I unfortunately have only six minutes.

Ms. Heidi Yetman: There are also the terms of employment.

Mr. Joël Godin: It is always a question of money, whether we invest in the workforce, in infrastructure, in programs, or in tools. It is not easy.

Thank you, Ms. Yetman.

Mr. Gagnon, from the Ligue d'action nationale, you say that 62% of budgets are invested in immersion schools, English in Quebec and French outside Quebec. Is that correct?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: The 62% figure comes from a study done in the years between 1970 and 1988.

Mr. Joël Godin: Do you have the current figures?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: The current figures are in the Protocol for Agreements for Minority Language Education and Second-Language Instruction, 2019-2020 to 2022-2023, between the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories.

The protocol recently expired, so—

Mr. Joël Godin: That's fine. You have answered my question. I just want to put the fact in context. We are in an English-French bilingual country and I think anglophones in Quebec have as many

rights as francophones outside Quebec, and it is important to invest in immersion.

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Well, you are talking to me about immersion and anglophones, which are two different things. Immersion education in Quebec works very well, and I have nothing against that, myself.

But I am talking to you about the money that is paid by the provinces. The federal government gives the provinces several hundreds of millions of dollars. I think that in the last protocol it was \$355 million up to 2023. Some of the provinces pay out most of those funds to the francophone minority schools, but others, like Newfoundland and Labrador, only pay one third of that money to francophones—

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Gagnon. Unfortunately, I have to interrupt you because I have only two minutes left, and I would like to talk to the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones.

Mr. Cloutier, you say that you have 180,000 students attending your schools to get their general education in French, although the last census revealed that 581,000 rights holders were eligible for instruction in French. What can be done to increase enrolment by students who are eligible but are not attending your schools?

Give us some potential solutions for accelerating the process. We have been falling behind for several years and we have some catching up to do.

• (1200)

Mr. Simon Cloutier: We are facing a big problem. As I said in my presentation, there need to be investments at all levels. At present, it is difficult to keep our students in school because we don't offer an education that is equivalent to what is offered elsewhere. We don't have the funding to do it. As far as the existing schools, there would have to be equivalent infrastructure, and equivalent programs would help us a lot.

In addition, the census also showed that the 593,000 rights holders are not all represented by a school in their vicinity. All across Canada, there are places where the children have to take a bus for an hour or an hour and a half, morning and evening, to attend a francophone school. In some regions, there isn't even a francophone school. There need to be major investments in order to offer our programs in every province, territory and region. This is not the case at present.

Mr. Joël Godin: In fact, I understand clearly that there is a need for teachers, infrastructure, funding for pedagogical tools, and access.

If you were a legislator, what is the first thing you would do? My time is limited here, but we also have limited time to protect francophones outside Quebec. What is the first thing you would do?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Our purpose here is to stress that the federal government has a major role to play. Education comes under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, and obviously those governments have to invest in francophone schools. However, we believe the federal government also has a role to play.

For several years, we have watched as funding for the official languages in education program has lagged behind to the point that it will be difficult to make up. However, now that we have the census data, I think the federal government also has a role to play in funding infrastructure. It is done elsewhere—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cloutier. We will have to continue later.

The next question will be from the Liberal Party.

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

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

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

Mr. Gagnon, Canada signs agreements with all of the territories and provinces. The objective of those agreements is to support education in the minority language, but they also include clauses about instruction in the second language. Do you believe the federal government should be signing these agreements with the provinces?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Francophone minority schools are notoriously underfunded. I have been hearing the other speakers say the same thing just now. In Quebec, on the other hand, education in English is very well funded, from pre-kindergarten to post-doctorate. In fact, there is really an oversupply of education in English in Quebec.

This is far from being the case for francophones in English Canada. As I said, under the protocols signed for many years, some provinces have spent half of the federal money, if not often two thirds, on immersion, rather than to support the minority schools, which are having so much trouble with their resources.

I think the objective of the federal spending should be to support minority francophones, much more than to teach French in immersion to anglophones. In fact, the provinces should bear sole responsibility for the cost of immersion for anglophones and leave the federal government to provide support entirely for francophones. We should be asking the anglophone provinces to pay for their immersion courses themselves.

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

Ms. Yetman, you said earlier that the amounts provided have been the same since 2009. Do you agree with me that the amounts allocated by the federal government reflect what the provinces asked for? The federal government actually allocates amounts based on the amounts the provinces ask for, not on the amounts requested by the rest of the world. The reason the amounts have stayed the same is that these are the amounts the provinces have asked the federal government for, is it not?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I didn't know that, but I can say that education in general is underfunded everywhere.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: We certainly understand that the field is underfunded, but education comes under provincial jurisdiction. And yet all of a sudden we are being told that the federal government is not doing enough. Can the federal government just give out more money as it sees fit, without being told it is exceeding its jurisdiction? In this case, the federal government has to do what the provinces ask it to do, does it not?

• (1205)

Ms. Heidi Yetman: But there are two official languages in Canada, so I think that is important.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: It is not a question of whether to be bilingual or not. It is a question of adhering to the parameters and powers.

The provincial and territorial governments are the primary funders in the case of education, under the Canadian constitution. Can you tell us what arguments for minority language education your organization makes in its dealings with the provincial and territorial governments?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: The Canadian Teachers' Federation is composed of 18 member organizations. Some of them are in Ontario. One example is the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens. Each member organization also has francophone divisions. We always support the requests they make to the provinces.

I can give you a recent example. In the case of Canada's national school food program, which has just been launched with the help of the federal Liberal government, we urge our member organizations to ask that their provincial governments sign an agreement with the federal government. We support their lobbying efforts in their dealings with the provincial governments.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I yield the rest of my time to my colleague Darrell Samson.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you have 50 seconds left.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Right. Thank you.

For now, I am going to ask Mr. Gagnon and Ms. Yetman two quick questions. I will keep my six minutes for other questions.

My first question is this: are you aware that the federal government is going to make immigration by teachers a priority?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I was not aware of it. That's great. We need teachers.

Mr. Darrell Samson: It's extremely important, so you will be able to find out more about it. In fact, they have just announced that this will also apply to early childhood educators.

Mr. Gagnon, a strategy that should be used in the future is for judges to retain full jurisdiction over their decisions so that a province would be forced to go to a judge's office to tell them that it has done something or that it has done absolutely nothing, which would be unacceptable. We will talk about that later. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson. Thank you for sticking to the time.

The third question will be from the Bloc Québécois.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Gagnon, you seemed not to have finished your presentation. Did you have something else to add?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: When the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique creating ten new schools, there were other parties involved in the case: seven provinces and territories that opposed section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Those provinces and territories supported British Columbia's position that creating those francophone schools costs too much and that it is appropriate in a free and democratic society, under section 1 of the Charter, to violate section 23 of the Charter and not build the schools that francophones are entitled to under the Constitution.

The truly sad thing is that section 23 and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in general are supposed to be important elements of Canadian identity. The fact that so many provinces and territories support violating section 23 is truly striking. Imagine the hue and cry it would set off if section 1 were cited in Quebec to close English schools because there are more than necessary.

So this is a truly deplorable situation and that was my reason for saying that immersion should not be included in the federal protocol. Federal money should be used to counter the anglophone provinces' underfunding of education in French for their francophone minorities.

• (1210)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We have often heard that organizations for the defence of French in Quebec are not concerned about francophones outside Quebec. How do you answer that?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: I think that is not an accurate statement. The Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal actually has a scholarship system exclusively for francophone organizations outside Quebec. As well, the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the Mouvement Québec français have often intervened in cases outside Quebec, in particular *Caron v. Alberta* a few years ago, or the huge case brought by the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique that was first won in the British Columbia Supreme Court.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The Official Languages Act has been around for 55 years and the court challenges program has been around for 45 years, but francophone schools outside Quebec are still chronically underfunded. The assimilation rate is rising. You have a table that illustrates this.

What should we conclude from this? Is there something that could change? What can be done to change things?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Education is under provincial jurisdiction and the federal government cannot tell the provinces what to do, but it should at least require the provinces to use the funds it gives them to provide better support and funding for francophone minority education.

So we should start by telling the provinces that the money it sends them must not be used for immersion programs for anglophones anymore. That money must be used solely to fund the francophone system. This would make a lot more money available for francophones. As I said earlier, the anglophone provinces say education in French costs too much. Well, if it costs so much, the federal government can tell them to use the money it sends them to fund French schools. That would be one way to solve the problem.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Yes, it would.

In the table you presented, the percentage of federal funding allocated to the schools that meet the by and for francophones principle ranges from 76.8% to 33%, as compared to immersion schools. Is that correct?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: I was told that the table in question had to be translated before being distributed to the committee members. I don't know whether that was done.

Take the example of Newfoundland, where the federal government pays \$3.9 million for official languages. Out of that, the province spends \$1.3 million for francophones and \$2.6 million—twice as much—for anglophone immersion programs. Knowing that the assimilation rate for francophones in Newfoundland is 64%, we frankly consider this to be money that the federal government should be directing elsewhere.

There are other cases. In Saskatchewan, for example, 40% of the \$6.7 million paid by the federal government goes to francophone schools and 60% to immersion programs. If the federal government told the province that the money it provides may not go to immersion programs anymore and must go to francophone schools, they would get almost twice as much money.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gagnon.

We are going to move on to the NDP.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before asking my questions, I want to say I am a bit concerned about immersion being regarded as an attack on francophone education, particularly in western Canada. I am a graduate of an immersion school myself. That school was the only option in northern Manitoba at the time. In fact, there has not even been both a French school and an immersion school for ten years yet. The reality is that in some of our communities, immersion is the only choice in the vicinity for rights holders and for families who want their children to be bilingual. So I don't believe the solution is to attack immersion, it is to determine what needs the schools have in common. Education in French is not the only thing that needs more support.

I will now turn to the witnesses, whom I thank for being with us.

Ms. Yetman, I appreciate your connection with Manitoba. Thank you for the clear message you have conveyed, which included the federal government's responsibility for funding education in French.

My question will be brief: do you think that the labour shortage in French first language education or in immersion programs is a crisis in this country?

• (1215)

Ms. Heidi Yetman: Yes, there is a crisis in Canada. I would say that on the francophone side it is worse than on the anglophone side.

Ms. Niki Ashton: That reflects what we have heard from a number of witnesses.

When it comes to solutions, I believe the federal government prefers that the provinces handle it, and yet when it comes to bilingualism and the need to address the decline of French, clearly the federal government has a role to play under the Official Languages Act.

Let's talk about concrete solutions. Other witnesses have told us that to deal with the labour shortage, we have to figure out how to attract teachers. Do you think that offering a higher wage, for example, is something that could be done? Do we need to reimburse people who study to become teachers in French for a portion of their tuition fees? Should we be proposing incentives for teachers to work in francophone or immersion schools after that? Do you have any concrete solutions to propose?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: The solutions are the same for the anglophone and francophone sides. We have to value the profession. We don't do that at present, and that is a big problem. When we value a profession, we pay the people. I have a son who is an engineer. He will be getting his degree shortly, after four years of university, and will be earning more than teachers who are at the top of the salary scale. So in my opinion, pay is part of valuing. I have also talked about employment terms and scholarships, which are also important to encourage people to choose this profession, which is the greatest in the world.

I would now like to make an unrelated comment. In minority communities in Canada and Quebec, people work very well together. We work with school boards and parents, as a community. So we absolutely have to look at this a bit differently, because we are capable of working together more than elsewhere. That means that people have to be consulted. What we are doing today is extremely important. For example, in our community, we collaborate, we are partners, we talk to one another, and that happens all the time in minority communities.

When I worked in Quebec, our association worked upstream with the school boards. That doesn't happen on the francophone side in Quebec, but it works in the minority communities. This collaboration is a huge asset. So we have to think about that when we talk about minorities. People are capable of working together, so we have to listen to them.

In other words, it is important to value the profession, to improve the terms of employment, to increase university scholarships, and to create more places in the universities. I am glad to hear that the Liberal government wants to make immigration by teachers and educators a priority, which is also a good thing, because we need these people.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yetman and Ms. Ashton.

Mr. G n reux, the floor is yours for five minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Cloutier, your federation has signed a strategic agreement with the Government of Canada, the F d ration des communaut s francophones et acadienne du Canada and the Commission na-

tionale des parents francophones. You said it was not possible to track the impact of that agreement. What did you mean by that, and what were you asking for at the time?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Thank you for the question.

First, you have to understand that we signed the strategic agreement in order to have a voice in the negotiations concerning education transfers to the provinces and territories, what is commonly called the official languages in education program. That was the aim of the strategic agreement.

However, now that the agreement has been in place for the entire length of an action plan for official languages, we can see that there has not been enough consultation, although we have seen some improvement in that regard. As well, when it comes to accountability, things are still extremely complicated. As other witnesses have explained, there is tremendous disparity between the envelope for French first language education and the envelope for immersion programs.

As well, some provinces go even further and tell the federal government that its money was spent in French language schools, when our school boards, which are on site, say the money was actually used to pay teachers who should have been paid by the province instead. Those funds, which were supposed to be additional funds, are ultimately not additional. That is the problem.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Right, but what were you asking for at the time?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: We were asking to have a voice in the negotiations. At the start, we had asked for a tripartite agreement, but that was not agreed to, and so we signed a strategic agreement. In an ideal world, we would be a party to a tripartite agreement, so we could participate fully in the process and be able to monitor the money transferred to each province and territory and what ends up happening.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Under the protocol for agreements for minority language education and second-language instruction, 2019-2020 to 2022-2023, between the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories, there were three main shortcomings. What were those shortcomings, in your opinion?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question properly. What shortcomings are you talking about?

Mr. Bernard G n reux: I'm talking about the shortcomings in the protocol, particularly the ones observed over the last three years.

Mr. Simon Cloutier: The first shortcoming relates to consultations. We want a lot more, because often—

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Are you talking about the federal government?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: I'm talking about the federal government, obviously. That said, what we would like is to be at the table with the federal government and the provinces when each transfer is negotiated, whether it be a Canada—Ontario transfer, a Canada—NWT transfer, or whatever. That is the first shortcoming.

The second shortcoming is obviously accountability. This is a big problem because, in our opinion, not a lot of accounting is requested, nor is much auditing being done to identify what problems the money is spent on.

For the third shortcoming, I will ask Ms. Morand to answer, since she has the information in front of her.

Ms. Valérie Morand (Executive Director, Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones): I was going to note that the process is still very opaque, despite all the efforts to make it more transparent. Accountability and an understanding of where the money is being allocated are still very unclear. There is a new action plan, and when it was brought in, we figured that the official languages in education program was not in its infancy, and yet it is as if the process started over again every time. The school boards are completely in the dark. There are interim measures in place during the transition year before the new program comes into effect, and while we wait, the funds are stalled. There are school boards that have to lay off staff. There are school boards whose budgets and finances are up in the air.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Are you talking about a lack of continuity from one plan to the next?

Ms. Valérie Morand: That's it, there is no continuity. There are service interruptions.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I am going to ask a quick question that relates to the right to manage schools. I think that is a really important point, and one that you addressed. What would be the major difference or the fundamental differences between the full right to manage that you are quite clearly calling for and what you have right now?

• (1225)

Mr. Simon Cloutier: It is hard to give precise differences because it is very different from one province to another. There are provinces that have a lot more control than others, which have a lot less. The idea behind full management—

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Would you want this right of management to vary from one province to another, or rather that it be the same all across Canada?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Ideally, all school boards in the country should have full management of their schools, their programs, and everything, which is not the case at present. Often, in many places, including in the Northwest Territories, where I come from, there is a lot of interference by the territorial government that limits the schools' autonomy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cloutier.

Mr. Samson, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the representatives of the three organizations for being with us, but I am going to focus on the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones.

Mr. Cloutier and Ms. Morand, my questions will be specific, and I am looking for specific answers, in order to cover more ground, if you don't mind.

First, I want to thank you for completing the questionnaire. I would ask that you continue encouraging the school boards to do that, because only three of them have completed it so far, and that is unacceptable. The committee needs this information to deliver the goods, and it intends to deliver something historic. So please, complete the questionnaire.

The main message I am getting from you is that actual school management is very important. I love the information you provided to us concerning school management and questions about programming, infrastructure, funding and student admissions, among other things. Some things are progressing well, including the student admissions, with the case that the Commission scolaire francophone des Territoires du Nord-Ouest took to the Supreme Court having had an effect there. Immigration and the priority given to teachers is going to help a bit to alleviate the staff shortage.

Funding is always a problem, but we must not forget that from 2015 to 2028, it went from \$2.2 billion to \$4.1 billion, almost double. Where do the problems lie now? I think infrastructure is the main problem, and two things have been identified in that regard. In my opinion, there are some things the government can do, and there are other things the courts have to resolve. The government can do some things, as it has already done, in particular helping with property. You talk about this point, which is very important. I agree 100% that you should be involved in that.

The thing the courts have to resolve is the issue of students. If there is no access to schools, you can't reach the 593,000 students in question.

Do you believe section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should be interpreted more broadly?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: I think the Supreme Court has said in several of its judgments that section 23 of the Charter is not black and white, and we have to take a much broader view of it, but the problem that often arises is that the provinces and territories are actually trying to narrow its scope and make it black and white.

What is important, however, is the purpose of the Charter. When it was enacted in 1982, we could not have predicted what Canada would be in 2024. That is why we have these objectives and why it is important to recognize them.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you. Infrastructure is the important issue.

Francophone students have classes in trailers, which anglophones don't. Francophone students will be assimilated because they want to leave the French school.

A case needs to be mounted to assert our right and show that only one third of francophones attend French schools. We are entitled to an education in French, but students are leaving French schools because they find themselves in portable classrooms or because there is not enough space. This is a serious situation.

I quite like the idea of a preschool Francization program for children aged three to five.

Can you tell us about that, briefly?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: This is essential.

At present, there are so few early childhood child care services in French that we could pretty much say they are non-existent. This is a serious problem, because when children attend English-language schools, the language spoken at home becomes English.

Outside Canada, there are often exogamous families, as we would expect. When they arrive here, the parents of these families choose to send their children to English schools.

Investment in early childhood services is therefore essential to ensure the survival of the schools.

• (1230)

Mr. Darrell Samson: So we have to address infrastructure and early childhood.

Bill C-13 is helpful because it deals with preschool, in particular, and that will be an improvement.

You spoke earlier about the 2017 strategic agreement.

Have you asked for a new agreement? The reason I ask this question is that the agreement has expired. It was for a term of only five years.

If so, can you tell us what important details you have incorporated into the agreement?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: We are working on that. We are specifically trying to work with the government to determine what steps have to be taken to produce a memorandum of understanding, one that will be stronger, so we are able to achieve more results. Although it was a good step in the right direction, we still feel that the results were actually very mixed.

Mr. Darrell Samson: If I understand correctly, autonomy when it comes to school board management, in the cases you mentioned, is not within reach; you need to get funding and a strategic plan has to be followed when it comes to infrastructure, preschool education, and so on.

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Yes, because—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cloutier and Mr. Samson.

You are on the same clock as I am.

Mr. Cloutier, you will be able to provide details later, if you wish.

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

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

I'll be brief.

Mr. Gagnon, earlier you said that anglophone schools in Quebec were very well funded, perhaps overfunded. However, under the Official Languages Act, all funding is still allocated to the anglophone schools.

What do you think about that?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Until 2018, the protocols between the federal government and the provincial education ministers didn't state the percentage distribution of funding between minority and immersion schools. It wasn't until the most recent protocol, the one from 2019 to 2023, that there was any such clarity. However, the

rules provide that a province may change the funding distribution between immersion and French-language schools, provided they inform Ottawa of the change.

Earlier we heard witnesses complain about the lack of funding. However, it's extremely difficult to get any information from Ottawa or to know whether a province has altered the funding distribution, as it's entitled to do, even if it has signed the protocol.

I tried to do it. I contacted all the authorities and was told I could get the information, but I didn't even get an acknowledgement of receipt. It's very hard to find this out. There's clarity in principle, but, in actual fact, it's still very hard to get that information.

Earlier Ms. Ashton mentioned the teacher shortage. Immersion and French-language schools compete with each other to recruit French-language teachers.

If French-language schools remain underfunded and immersion schools raise salaries, French schools won't be able to compete with immersion schools, and the teacher shortage will worsen for French schools.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have another quick question—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gagnon and Mr. Beaulieu.

I would remind you once again that everyone is on the clock as I am.

Before turning the floor over to Ms. Ashton, I want to tell you, out of a concern for fairness, that Mr. Gagnon may be leaving the meeting at 12:45.

Is that still the case, Mr. Gagnon?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Yes.

The Chair: I am informing you of this because, if you want to ask Mr. Gagnon questions, you will have to do so before he leaves around 12:45. That's why I'm letting you know.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My questions are for the representative of the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones, and they're similar to the ones I asked Ms. Yetman.

I would appreciate brief answers. Do you think that the labour shortage in your schools amounts to a crisis?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Absolutely. We have a major crisis in many provinces and territories.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

As far as specific solutions go, do you think the federal government has a permanent role to play in providing stable, permanent education funding to address that crisis?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Yes, I do.

And one of our potential solutions is to expedite recognition of the qualifications of people from outside Canada. I'm glad to hear that the federal government is attracting more teachers, although it's also important to acknowledge their experience.

I think the federal government also has an influential role to play with the provinces, territories and various federations—their names don't matter—to recognize the experience these people have acquired and to enable them to move here and teach in our schools. That would be a great help to us.

● (1235)

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right.

How can we attract and recruit teachers from both outside Canada and here, in our communities, among the graduates of our educational institutions? Do you think their salaries should be increased? Should we have education scholarships, particularly to train educators in French? Should we offer financial incentives, considering the fact that the country is facing a crisis that could contribute to the decline of French outside Quebec because we can't meet French-language education needs.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left.

Mr. Simon Cloutier: You are absolutely right and all that is true. Promoting the occupation and raising salaries, that's all well and good, but we also have to fund educational institutions and create more spaces at francophone universities.

The federal government has a role to play in funding post-secondary education in French. We currently have few spaces. You have to understand that francophones and bilingual people are facing limits. There are two systems, immersion education and French-language education, as a result of which we're facing a deepening crisis. So, yes, this is important.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cloutier.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much to the witnesses.

Ms. Yetman, I was a teacher for many years. So I was one of the 360,000 teachers you represent.

Do you represent both teachers at francophone schools in Quebec and those in school boards outside Quebec? Would you please provide us with figures on Quebec schools and French-language schools outside Quebec?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I may not have those figures, but we represent francophone teachers in francophone areas across Canada, except in Quebec and New Brunswick.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I see.

You mentioned the teacher shortage and the need for more spaces at the universities and other educational institutions. Does the problem stem from a shortage of college and university professors or a shortage of applicants to education programs to teach in French?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: There's definitely a shortage of spaces for students. I can't speak to the shortage of professors. However, there's a shortage of spaces, especially in the francophone sector. We have to create more university spaces.

We were talking about the importance of French-language education from preschool to the post-secondary level. If there aren't any spaces for students at French-language universities, secondary-level francophone students will want to continue their studies at an English-language school so they're prepared for English-language studies at the university level. It's French-language spaces that we need.

Mr. Marc Dalton: All right.

I wanted to talk about universities that teach in French in order to train new teachers.

If there aren't any spaces, that means there's a lot of demand. Universities offer programs when demand is high and put on the brakes when it's low.

Ms. Heidi Yetman: Absolutely. Some universities have shut down. One university in Ontario offered French-language training but shut down. I don't remember its name.

It's extremely important to ensure that French-language spaces are available at the universities.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Ms. Yetman.

Mr. Cloutier, you said that most of the funding that the federal government allocates was invested in anglophone schools in Quebec and that one third of that money, or rather 29%, was invested in francophone schools outside Quebec.

Would you please clarify those figures?

● (1240)

Mr. Simon Cloutier: I don't believe I said that; it might have been Mr. Gagnon.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Yes, pardon me.

Mr. Gagnon, you said that most of the money allocated to minority-language education was granted to anglophone schools in Quebec. Would you please clarify that?

Mr. Christian Gagnon: That's not exactly what I said. What I did say is that a study conducted in 1996 showed that, from 1970 to 1988, 62% of federal funding from the official languages in education program was earmarked for anglophones in Quebec and immersion schools in the rest of Canada. However, those are figures from another era.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I have another question for you.

School board members are elected by universal suffrage, in other words by vote, but minority school boards aren't signatories to the protocol for agreements or bilateral agreements between the federal government and the provinces or territories for minority-language education.

Do you think that constitutes a violation of the school management rights conferred under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? Do school boards want to be signatories to the protocol and bilateral agreements or would they be satisfied taking part in effective consultations?

I think you have enough time to answer my questions, but you may also respond to the committee in writing.

The Chair: Those are excellent questions, and we may have time to come back to them.

Mr. Serré, the floor is yours for five minutes.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here. I definitely think their remarks will add to our study.

My initial questions are for Mr. Cloutier and Ms. Morand. Then I'll ask Ms. Yetman some questions about teaching.

You discussed the agreement... Some representatives of other school boards told us that there were a lot of funding challenges as well as negotiations and consultations with the provinces and school boards. You offered us six recommendations. However, as I understand it, we won't be able to resolve anything if we don't correct the way funding is currently distributed.

You discussed section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in your recommendations. You also said that the federal government had given you funding so that you could try to work with the provinces, but that hasn't worked over the past five years.

All parliamentarians and political parties consider it important to resolve this issue. I have been a school board member, and I know how important this issue is. I've also been elected. It isn't just a small group of school board members speaking. This is important.

What can the federal government or the courts do to guarantee some consistency in the way the provinces directly fund their school boards?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Thank you for that excellent question. It's extremely important for us.

As I said in my opening remarks, in an ideal world, the federal government should transfer money directly to the francophone school boards. People often say that education is a provincial or territorial jurisdiction, but this is also done in other jurisdictions, as we've previously seen. It's done in health, on the francophone side, and it's done with the municipalities. So I don't think it's impossible to do it in education.

If it's a complicated thing to do, we could split the budget of the official languages in education program. Immersion and French as a first language shouldn't have to share the same budget. Unfortunately, the provincial and territorial governments often use this as a way to divide the community. Other witnesses have said that, in many instances, some provinces allocate more funding to immersion than to French as a first language, while others provide more for French as a first language.

If the federal government divided that budget in two, it would be easy: money would go to institutions that teach French as a first language and to immersion education institutions. No one would be able to change that. That's what we recommend.

Mr. Marc Serré: I was a school board member in 2000, and we completely funded the early childhood sector, but that's not what other provinces did.

What do you recommend? Is it roughly the same federal support model?

We definitely understand the importance you attach to early childhood. What could the federal government do to ensure that more funding is provided without however relieving the provinces of their responsibility to fund early childhood?

• (1245)

Mr. Simon Cloutier: It's more or less the same principle. The provinces are being given the flexibility to invest more or less where they want. I know that the agreements now indicate certain thresholds to ensure that francophones get a share. The problem with these agreements is that amounts are often set as a minimum threshold but are often seen by provincial and territorial governments as a maximum threshold. It then becomes difficult to increase the share for francophones.

Anglophones already have services that are much better established than ours. The federal government should be making sure that funding for francophone education is increased, because there is some catching up to do. Separating the envelopes would be a good way to do that. That way the shares for francophones and anglophones would be clearly defined.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you very much.

Ms. Yetman, the teacher shortage is being called a crisis and an emergency. However, our committee is hearing that immigrants trained in France or Morocco, for example, can't teach here.

Is it the associations, the provincial governments or the federal government that are preventing them from doing so? Are there stakeholders who don't want to administer exams? Is there a problem at the national level?

I don't know if this is a sensitive topic for you. Could we develop a skills accreditation exam for foreign teachers who come to the country to teach in the provinces?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: That's an interesting question. In fact, last year, it was discussed at our general meeting. All the provinces meet once a year. It's very difficult for a foreigner to navigate the Canadian education system because there's something different in every province. A request was made at our general meeting that we start looking at each provincial system.

In conclusion, it would be interesting for there to be some commonality in the provinces' education systems.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yetman—

Mr. Marc Serré: Can you send us a report—

The Chair: I'm on it, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Gagnon, if you have to leave, please do so. However, you are welcome to stay if you're able to.

Mr. Christian Gagnon: Unfortunately, I can't.

I hope the rest of the meeting goes well.

The Chair: Before you go, Mr. Gagnon, if you have any additional information that you didn't get a chance to share with us, please send it to our clerk. She will pass it on to all members of the committee.

Thank you very much for your time.

Mr. Christian Gagnon: I will be submitting a brief to you next year.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a comment and a question are for the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones.

I see that the funding you receive for your general operations has not been increased in several years. I'm rounding off the numbers here, but according to the enumeration done after the 2021 census, the number of students is 180,000 out of a possible 580,000.

Don't you think there should be an envelope dedicated to catching up and bolstering French outside Quebec and English in Quebec, so that francophone minorities have the tools they need to at least attempt to get to the same level? We know that we won't get there completely.

I'd like to hear your opinion on that, Mr. Cloutier.

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Obviously, this is important. If we look at the previous envelope, we can see that we managed to obtain a small increase. For example, 15 years ago, we were at 56¢ on the dollar and we are now at 67¢ on the dollar. Given the inflation of recent years and the increase in the number of employees, we're probably already back to 56¢ on the dollar. When the agreement expires, we will be getting even less. Our funding does indeed need to be massively increased.

You mentioned the census. This is important for us, because funding for francophone schools is constantly declining.

It's a vicious cycle. Because we don't have a lot of students, we don't have a lot of funding, we don't have a lot of infrastructure. However, because we don't have that, we don't have the rest. It is therefore important to be proactive in the area of francophone education. Estimating the number of francophones through an enumeration process is extremely important.

In fact, the act says "estimated," but for a statistician, it's still an estimate. Therefore, it is important to make an estimate using an enumeration process. This allows us to monitor population changes and to call for more schools, more funding and more investment to ensure that we identify all rights holders across the country and meet their needs.

I was saying earlier that there are places that don't have schools. If we don't know that there isn't a school in a certain place and if we don't know that there are enough francophones for there to be one, the enumeration can tell us that. That's why this enumeration is so important.

• (1250)

Mr. Joël Godin: Now I'm going to ask you the killer question. We know that we'll never reach 100% of rights holders having access to education in the minority language, but if we set a target of 60% or 75%, how many years and how much money would it take to get there?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: That's a great question. I can't give you any figures right now, but we could look into it and send you an answer in writing after the meeting.

Given that currently one third of all francophone rights holders are enrolled in a francophone school, if we calculated the funding for all francophone schools and doubled it, we would probably arrive at a proportion of two thirds. That's a pretty easy calculation.

However, I think it's also important to point out that the federal government has a crucial role to play. From what I understand, and contrary to what was mentioned a little earlier, federal funding to support education in the minority language is set out by the federal government through the envelope of the action plan for official languages. The provinces and territories then negotiate with the federal government to obtain their share of the funding. The federal government therefore has an extremely important role to play. It's not the other way around. That's why we believe that, if the federal government wants to meet its obligations to francophones, it must increase its funding and, at the very least, inform us and give us a seat at the negotiating table.

Sometimes consultations are information sessions rather than actual consultations. It's all well and good to sit in a room and tick off boxes, but at the end of the day, if what is said doesn't count and if the decisions have already been made, it will be difficult to make any progress. We are therefore asking for real consultations.

Mr. Joël Godin: My next question may be utopian, but let's allow ourselves to dream, Mr. Cloutier.

Could there be an exception? Could the federal government set aside a funding envelope so that minority language education can catch up, all the while respecting provincial and territorial jurisdictional areas?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: Absolutely. That would be a great place to start. The federal government has a major role to play in promoting bilingualism in the country, and there's a lot of catching up to do. If the federal government decides to walk the talk, as we like to say where I come from, the provinces will follow suit. It's important for the federal government to exert a positive influence. Obviously, having a dedicated envelope for catching up would allow us to do that.

Mr. Joël Godin: That is the federal government's responsibility.

Mr. Cloutier, in closing, I just want to tell you that I'm very optimistic about the future of francophones in Canada and anglophones in Quebec. We can maintain official languages and reposition ourselves because of the demand which is high, and that in itself is positive. However, for that to happen, you have to be given the necessary tools to enable you to meet that demand.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. For the next five minutes, I'm going to use some of Mr. Lightbound's time and I'm going to share it with Mr. Samson.

Mr. Cloutier, my first question is related to Mr. Dalton's question that I cut short. Mr. Dalton spoke of agreement signatories and consultation. You also talked a lot about consultation.

In fact, Mr. Samson's wife told me that he consults her often, but that he doesn't necessarily listen to her answers.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All kidding aside, we know that successive governments do a lot of consulting, but they don't necessarily listen to the answers. Consultations are held on form, not on substance.

Do you think school boards would be consulted differently if they were signatories to funding agreements?

Mr. Simon Cloutier: I think that's a critical factor. If the school boards were signatories, they would have to be consulted or they wouldn't sign anything. That would solve the problem.

The Chair: Ms. Yetman, what do you think?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I want to back up a bit. The federal government plays an important role in education, period. We are going through a crisis in Canada right now. Of course, the federal government's role in official languages is very important, but the federal government also plays a role in health. In education, we all have the same problems everywhere in Canada, whether in the minority or majority language. The federal government certainly has a role to play.

We recently conducted a survey with Abacus Data to find out what Canadians think about education. They found that education is viewed as being incredibly important. It plays a foundational role in a society—

• (1255)

The Chair: I have to interrupt you, because I want to have time to ask you questions, after which I will give the floor to Mr. Samson.

At the beginning, you talked about the teacher shortage, which we've also spoken about at length here. That's the biggest problem when it comes to education. A ship without a rudder or an engine serves no purpose. Even if we have the best education system in the world, if there are no teachers, it doesn't work.

For the past two Septembers, we've been hearing discouraging statistics. In Quebec alone, last year, two weeks before Parliament resumed, there was a shortage of 10,000 to 12,000 teachers. This year, Quebec was short between 5,000 and 7,000 teachers, and the same is true for all the other provinces.

Is it really due to a lack of spots in our universities to train teachers, or is it a lack of interest because the profession is starting to lose its appeal? Is it a combination of both?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: The main reason is the lack of appeal, as you just said.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Morand, do you have anything to add?

Ms. Valérie Morand: I completely agree with Ms. Yetman, but I must add that paid practicums are also important for our graduates.

We have to give them optimal conditions by offering fairly long and paid practicums.

There also seems to be a disconnect between the training students receive at university and the reality they face on the ground. We need to support them better, so that their transition to the workplace is successful and the employer and the new employee both come out as winners.

These are things we will have to look at to support students in the education continuum, both in terms of training and the transition into the workplace.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Yetman, earlier you said that we were losing francophone schools in rural Canada outside Quebec. This is concerning. Do you have any data to share with us on that?

Ms. Heidi Yetman: I don't know if we have any data, but we regularly discuss things with all our members in the francophone network. We can check to see if there is any data.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Samson, you have the floor for one minute.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you. I think you've taken up a lot of time, Mr. Chair.

I think we can conclude that we don't have the number of students or the infrastructure we should have, and those two responsibilities fall to the provinces. Section 23, as you said, didn't take into account all those challenges at the time. I wonder if there shouldn't be an additional envelope, a catch-up envelope, so to speak, to help the provinces make the necessary investments. They are the ones who decide whether they want to build a school and whether that school will be French or English. We're constantly competing, and we're losing every time.

As was said earlier, the provinces don't distribute the funding equally. Perhaps something can be done about that. There's no question that we need to find a way to put pressure on the provinces to come to the table and discuss these issues with the federal government. Together, they can probably find a solution.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

As I reminded Mr. Gagnon earlier, if there's any information you think we should hear or read, please send it to us. We would like to have data on rural Canada, for example. I don't want to make you do homework for nothing, but it's important, because we know that francophone communities outside Quebec are mainly in rural areas, in small towns outside the major cities. I'm thinking of Sainte-Anne, south of Winnipeg, for example. If schools are more at risk in those regions than in urban areas, I'd like to have statistics on the subject, for the committee's benefit.

You can send that information to the clerk, who will forward it to all the members.

Thank you very much for being here and for your thoughtful answers.

The meeting is adjourned.

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