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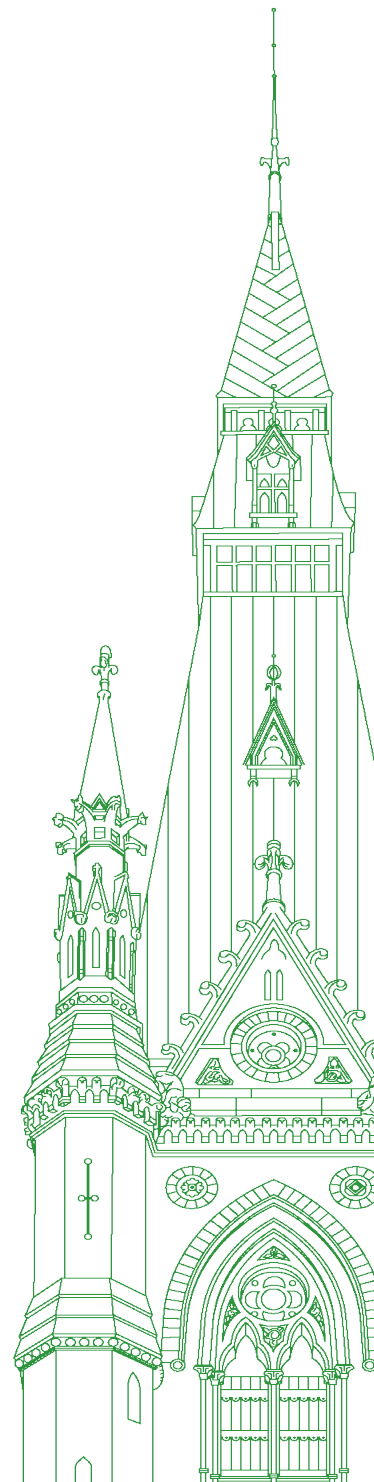
Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 63 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Members will be attending in person in the room, as you can see, and virtually, online.

Before speaking, and to ensure an orderly meeting, please wait until I recognize you by name.

You have the option of speaking and participating in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available in the room, where you can use the interpretation earpiece. Online, at the bottom of your Surface, you can choose French or English audio. If there is a problem with interpretation, please get my attention, and we'll suspend while it's corrected.

Please, for your benefit, screenshots are not allowed of the meeting today, in the room or virtually.

Also, if you do not have a House of Commons-approved headset, you cannot participate in the meeting verbally. If you're a member of the committee, you can participate in the voting format by simply indicating, but I will not recognize you to participate verbally.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Friday, February 3, 2023, the committee will continue its study of Bill C-35, an act respecting early learning and child care in Canada.

Everybody's equipment has been tested, so I would like to welcome our witnesses, beginning in the room with Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell, who is the program director at Cardus. From the College of Early Childhood Educators, we have Beth Deazeley. From the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission, we have Richard Gray, manager, and Patrice Lacasse, manager. Mr. Lacasse may be the one participating, because I believe we have an issue with Mr. Gray's audio.

Each of the witnesses will begin with five minutes this morning. We have one round of questions, so there will be six minutes for each of the parties.

We'll begin with Mr. Mitchell for five minutes.

I would ask the witnesses to please stay within the five-minute time allotment so that we can get our questions in.

Mr. Mitchell, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell (Program Director, Family, Cardus): Thank you for the invitation to appear this morning, and thank you for the work of this committee in support of families across Canada.

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which people, institutions and governments work together for the common good. I direct our family program at Cardus, which explores how to strengthen family stability.

Child care is the care of a child, regardless of who provides that care, whether a licensed provider, an in-home caregiver, a neighbour or relative, or a parent who forgoes income. Statistics Canada data shows that Canadians rely on diverse forms of care to meet their needs.

Bill C-35 supports only a limited number of care options. The bill enshrines inequitable treatment of families, based on the type of care they use. Canadian data and international examples show that higher-income families are more likely to access subsidized licensed care as compared with lower-income families. There are better and more equitable ways and options to support the care needs of Canadian families. However, should Bill C-35 proceed, I recommend three amendments.

First, paragraph 5(e) should reflect that parents and guardians have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their children. Parents are best positioned to make the care choices for their children. In the brief that we submitted to the committee, we provide wording that reflects the phrasing found in article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the same article from which clause 5 of the bill draws its inspiration.

Second, paragraph 7(1)(a) discriminates against licensed independent operators in favour of public and not-for-profit providers. This discrimination harms families and hampers the government's own goals. This discrimination contravenes an earlier statement in the bill supporting the importance of flexible early learning and child care programs. Many of the agreements prevent funding intended for space creation and growth from going to licensed independent providers who are currently serving Canadian families.

This discrimination hampers accessibility. Currently, there are only enough licensed spaces for about one-third of Canadian children under the age of six. The aggressive space creation targets within the Canada-wide agreements are proving difficult to achieve. In the first year of its agreement, Saskatchewan exceeded its space creation budget, only to achieve 37% of its space creation target. The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario estimates that in that province, 25% of families with children under the age of six who want a highly subsidized space will be unable to access one. It is very unlikely that space creation targets will be met without independent licensed providers.

Third, clause 16, regarding annual reporting, must be strengthened. The desire to report on progress within the bill should be applauded, but clause 16 should be more specific. The federal government collects detailed financial data and progress towards targets from the provinces annually. The agreements in most cases state that provinces "may" report progress to the public. To my knowledge, only two provinces have publicly reported on the progress made during the first year of their agreements within the timeline specified in their agreements. One way to remedy this is to strengthen the federal reporting requirements within the bill, requiring the federal government to release detailed expenditures and progress towards stated targets for each province. How well are families being served by the Canada-wide program?

Caring for vulnerable populations, such as children, is complex and expensive. We should be striving for higher levels of accountability. Child care is the care of a child, regardless of who provides that care. We should strive for policy options that treat families fairly and offer true flexibility to families as they select the care that best meets their needs.

Thank you very much.

• (0850)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mitchell.

Next, we have Ms. Deazeley for five minutes.

Ms. Beth Deazeley (Registrar and Chief Executive Officer, College of Early Childhood Educators): Thank you. Good morning.

As the registrar and CEO of the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, I'm honoured to join today's panel and to provide our insights on the proposed legislation.

Our college is responsible for regulating the profession of early childhood education in Ontario, with a mandate to establish registration requirements, ethical standards, requirements for continuous professional learning, and a complaints process to ensure that the interests of children and families are prioritized and protected. Our

work also includes maintaining a comprehensive public register of our members. This scope of regulatory activity is unique, and it does not currently occur in any other jurisdiction in Canada.

In recent years, we've helped raise the profession's standards by implementing a mandatory sexual abuse prevention program for educators, by providing guidance on the inclusion of children with disabilities, and by recognizing that acts of racism and discrimination by educators constitute professional misconduct.

Our membership data report shows over 60,000 early childhood educators currently in Ontario, with nearly an additional 30,000 registered at one time during the past 15 years, but who have now left the profession. This kind of data is valuable when considering workforce challenges, and isn't collected by any other organization.

While we acknowledge the importance of all the principles in Bill C-35, we wish to emphasize that measures intended to support the affordability and expansion of child care spaces should not compromise the quality of early learning in child care. We believe it's vital to safeguard against policy solutions that may focus on increasing access in the short term but exacerbate longer-term systemic problems that impact quality.

While there's no universally accepted definition of quality, what research has demonstrated is that qualified and well-supported educators are the most significant contributors to early years programs, resulting in better outcomes for children and families.

We're concerned that the proposed legislation does not sufficiently reflect the importance of ensuring a qualified and well-supported workforce. The concept of professional educators includes not just minimum standards of qualification but also an ongoing obligation to practice in accordance with standards, to put the interests of children and families first, and to continue development opportunities throughout a professional's career.

Our first request is for the inclusion in the legislation of a fifth guiding principle that clearly articulates the need for a workforce composed of qualified, professional, well-supported educators. This would help to ensure that funding and policy initiatives focus on supporting and developing the workforce.

Ontario, like many other provinces, is facing a workforce crisis in child care. While high numbers of educators enter the field each year, people leave at nearly the same rate. To address this, it's necessary to focus first on retention by addressing systemic issues—including working conditions, program resourcing, compensation and lack of opportunities for professional growth, which are contributing to attrition—rather than overemphasizing mechanisms to increase recruitment of new educators.

Our second request is for the opportunity to participate in the work of the national advisory council. As a unique organization with data-informed insights about the profession, the college's inclusion on the advisory council would help to maintain standards for professional educators, ensure that data inform decisions, prioritize the public interest and help maintain quality in the Canada-wide early learning and child care program as it's implemented across jurisdictions.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to provide our perspective. We look forward to collaborating on this critical work, and I'm happy to answer any questions from the committee.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deazeley.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Patrice Lacasse (Manager, Early Childhood Services, First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission): Good morning, everyone. I'd like to thank the committee chair and members for having invited us to come and speak about the realities of indigenous first nations.

I acknowledge that we are in Wendat territory. In fact the commission's offices are located in the community of Wendake. As for me, I'm an Innu from the community of Uashat Mak Mani-utenam.

I represent the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission. The organization's mission is to help the communities meet their health, well-being, cultural and self-determination objectives. The commission is covers several sectors, including health and social services, research, social development, and child care. Needless to say, all these sectors contribute to the well-being of children. The commission was established in 1994 by the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador. This body gives it mandates, whether for the secretariat or policy matters. The commission also receives mandates from its board of directors, whose members are the directors of health and social services in the various communities.

With respect to Bill C-35, the main recommendation in the brief submitted last month was about developing a distinct act for indigenous early learning and child care. In this presentation, we will discuss elements that could considerably improve what has been put forward in Bill C-35. The goal is to better address the specific needs and realities of the communities. Even though the bill recognizes the needs and realities of each community, we feel that these are underestimated, whether in terms of access to services, geographical realities or the importance of language and culture.

As for indigenous self-determination, one of the basic principles is the decision-making authority of the first nations. This authority should rest with the first nations. Employment and Social Development Canada's indigenous early learning and child care programs, IELCCs, affirm the right to self-determination and the right to control, conceive, execute and administer an IELCC system that reflects our needs, priorities and aspirations.

There is nevertheless a paradox. The former Bill C-92, An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, acknowledged the jurisdiction of first nations and indigenous people with respect to child services. We are therefore asking why Bill C-35 or some other act specifically for indigenous people, might not acknowledge this jurisdiction. Canada also recognizes the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and has been working to implement it in its statutes. The government acknowledges the self-determination principle in the IELCC programs. However, the jurisdiction of the first nations and the Inuit over child care is required to implement these programs as effectively as possible. These powers need to be restored to the first nations.

For the implementation of the IELCC programs, the communities recently distanced themselves from the usual methods. Indeed, it was only last year that the organization signed an agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada. In order to show consideration for the powers of the communities, we recommend local coordination and mobilization. Early childhood is everybody's business, and not the preserve of a single sector. We would like to promote decompartmentalization. We have been straitjacketed for too long by certain programs. We would therefore like a development plan based not only on conditions, but also needs. The idea is to make sure that the measures introduced are aligned with children's needs, and also their environment, by which we mean the family and the community.

● (0900)

I'll stop there, because I've run out of speaking time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lacasse.

[*English*]

We will now open the floor to questions, beginning with Madam Ferreri for six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today to discuss Bill C-35, a valuable conversation to ensure we are helping as many Canadian families as possible and putting the child first, at the nucleus of this discussion.

I'll start with you, Mr. Mitchell.

One of the things you said is a major concern to a lot of parents who are experiencing this. It is that currently only a third of all children have spaces. In the data you've provided, you are predicting that will get worse.

Do you have the research on the numbers that the wait-lists are expected to grow to?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Is that in terms of wait-lists?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's in terms of accessibility to spaces.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I don't know that we can predict what those wait-lists will be. We know that early on, provinces have been missing their targets. For instance, I quoted that Saskatchewan only met 37% of its space creation target by the end of the first year of its agreements. Certainly we would know more if more data were available from the provinces, collected and sent to the federal government. This is why we support increasing this and strengthening the bill in terms of reporting requirements in clause 16.

Also, I think you mentioned low-income families. We know from Canadian data over the last 10 years that low-income families are less likely to access licensed care, maybe as much as 20% less likely, according to Statistics Canada. This is a concern, because we are rapidly reducing the cost of these existing spaces, which are more likely to be used by middle- and higher-income families. We're certainly not creating enough spaces fast enough to accommodate.

• (0905)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That will deeply impact our rural communities.

One of the things that's really interesting in the brief you submitted to the committee is that you said, "All public, not for profit and private licensed providers are bound by the same provincial licensing standards, yet Bill C-35 discriminates against private licensed providers and the families that rely on them."

You spoke a lot about discrimination in this bill, intended or unintended. Can you expand on the discrimination you see and the quickest way to fix that?

I don't mean to rush you, but I have only a certain amount of time.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Actually, a lot of the agreements limit the amount of money that can go towards space creation for for-profit or independent providers. When we speak with them, they say this is creating significant stress among these providers. Facing cost control frameworks, it's hard for them to look at future planning. This puts in jeopardy the spaces they're providing, if they can't sustain that. That hurts Canadian families who use those spaces. It's difficult to expand and to grow and to achieve the spaces the federal government would like to achieve without the help of these providers. I think that hurts future families who will be looking for licensed care in a licensed sector.

We know from a briefing note from British Columbia that for-profit providers tend to be a little quicker in terms of being able to action space creation and being able to create those spaces. I've spoken to providers across the country, and they're quite concerned about the future. I know in some cases they've put plans for expansion on hold.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: There's a section in your brief that says, "Costs will balloon at the expense of quality". Do you have research you could table with the committee on what those costs will be and what you're projecting, or where you obtained that data?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Previous to the federal announcement—in 2021, I believe—we did a costing estimate looking at what a national program might cost. Our high-end estimate suggested that it would be \$36 billion over budget. I can certainly make the report, "Look Before You Leap", available if you would like.

Unfortunately, we have seen that Quebec has the lowest ratios, which affects quality. We've seen costs go up in Quebec. It's difficult to lower the cost of child care and to build these programs without sacrificing quality. We've seen that in Quebec, unfortunately, and I'm worried that we're going to entrench a low-quality system in Canada.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Quickly, if I may....

Mr. Mitchell, these provincial and territorial agreements have already been signed, and in your submission you talk about how these were put forth in 2017-18. Why do you think the bill has been brought forward now, when it's already done? What would be the benefit, from the Liberal government's perspective, to all of a sudden putting forth a bill, when all of these agreements have already been done?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Bilateral agreements have been put forward, and then the new Canada-wide program layers on top of that. In a sense, I believe the agreements do the heavy lifting already, so it does make it somewhat curious that the bill is necessary. The provinces and federal government have agreed to the terms in those bills, so it's already being enacted.

In our submission, we said that we find it curious that the legislation would even be necessary, as it's really the agreements that do the heavy lifting, and that's actually where it should happen.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much.

I'm just going to ask Ms. Deazeley about tabling some data about her workforce, as well, if she could, to the committee. I think it's valuable in recruitment and retainment to keep these spaces available for parents who are waiting.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ferreri.

[Translation]

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

• (0910)

[English]

Ms. Ya'ara Saks (York Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses who have joined us this morning.

Mr. Mitchell, I'd like to start with one of your recommendations: that the bill be amended to no longer prioritize investment in the non-profit sector.

I'm curious as to why your organization is looking for the government to fund care that, according to a specific study that you quoted.... Christa Japel was actually here recently. You used her report to support your evidence, but her testimony three days ago was contradictory to that. She said that non-profit care provides higher-quality care, either very good or excellent quality, compared to for-profit or unlicensed care, which was about 10% of poor-quality care.

Could you lean in on that briefly?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Thank you.

When we look at quality, we look at structural dimensions—which include staff-child ratios, group size and staff qualifications, as I said—and then processed dimensions, which look more at the experience that the child has with a caregiver. We know, as I think was said earlier by another witness, that we don't necessarily have a consistent definition of “quality”, but I would say those are the two measures.

A well-known report, issued some years ago, called “You Bet I Care!”, focusing largely on staffing and working conditions, concluded that the majority of licensed care in Canada is of minimal to mediocre quality.

I acknowledge that there have been reports suggesting that for-profit care may be of lower quality, but we don't want to assume that all care across Canada is necessarily high quality. I think the same researchers are saying—

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I understand. However, we've had numerous witnesses here who have spoken to the contrary on that, so I'm just trying to understand that.

I'd like to move on. Your organization has also advocated for income splitting for Canadian families as a means of providing care. Is that still your position?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I've advocated for income splitting in the past, yes.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: Do you have concerns about the fact that this policy would benefit the wealthiest Canadians?

We've talked about access for low-income families through a non-profit, nationwide system. Your recommendation would not impact them.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I'm sorry....

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: If you support income splitting, do you have any concerns that a policy like that would benefit the wealthiest of Canadians, when the concern—certainly in this committee—is access through a system that would help low-income families?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I'm not aware that income splitting is on the table. In fact, I think it was repealed a long time ago.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I'm asking about your contemplation on that for your organization.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I support income splitting, because I think it helps families.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: Okay, I understand.

I'll just move on, if I may....

You know, I've had some time to read your organization's documents. Your organization said that the government's support for child care means that parents who stay at home are “paying to care for their own kids—and everyone else's.” Does your organization feel that parents like those who are actually accessing what we call CWELCC are taking advantage of other parents?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I think what we're saying is that everyone pays into the system, but few actually benefit from the system.

We know that it serves, I think I said in my presentation about one-third of kids under the age of six, so what we're advocating for are policies and positions that would help a wider range of families.

I would prefer to see money go to parents. I like the Canada child benefit. I think it's a good program that could be expanded upon, and it's geared to income. We could certainly continue to target funds towards children under six. I think this would be a fairer way of treating families, and it certainly would help families of lower income, because it is geared to income.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: We can appreciate the benefits of the child care benefit in terms of assisting families and lifting children out of poverty. As a matter of fact, it has impacted hundreds of thousands of children, lifting them out of poverty across the country. That is something the government committed itself to. That doesn't take away from the fact that we are building a nationwide system for families to be able to access high-quality, educational child care for their children.

Are you suggesting, then, that after years of tax credits, your organization is advocating tax credits as a solution to this child care issue, rather than building a system that allows children to be well educated, socialized and part of a community to get the best start in life?

• (0915)

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: The reality is that Canadian families use diverse care forms to meet their needs, and those forms often change over time as their care needs change.

The program, as it is being implemented, will not serve the majority of Canadians, and I have grave concerns that it will be unable to meet its space creation goals. I think it's largely underfunded and extremely complex.

Because child care is a provincial issue, there are great complexities across the country. There are different programs and different ways that provinces are tackling child care, and I think a one-size-fits-all solution is not the way to go.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I appreciate that. Thank you.

However—this will be a yes or no, Chair—there weren't enough spaces before this program started, and parents couldn't afford child care. Now we're building a system to create spaces and make it affordable.

Would you suggest that we go back to tax credits instead, yes or no?

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: I would say that provinces—

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I'm asking for a yes-or-no answer.

Mr. Peter Jon Mitchell: Provinces already funded spaces and were already creating spaces every year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mitchell.

Ms. Saks, your time has gone over a bit.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. Bill C-35 is very important for our children.

Mr. Lacasse, I enjoyed your fine presentation on first nations, the Inuit and the Métis. I'd like to know what the current relationship is between Quebec's ministère de la Famille and the communities. In addition, what sort of agreement is there on the delegation of powers between the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission and the ministère de la Famille?

Mr. Patrice Lacasse: Thank you, Ms. Bérubé.

The relationship between the ministère de la Famille and the communities has been established through funding for the various types of child care services. I would say that the relationship is mainly based on respect for standards. Child care operations and administration are conditioned or subject to an act and several regulations. So it's a financial and accountability relationship.

As for the commission's accountability to the ministère de la Famille, an agreement was signed in 2015 to help the communities respond to the difficulties in obtaining effective mentoring that would be useful to them. The agreement concerns licence management and compliance.

We are also going to adopt a mentoring approach for the various child care services. It will not be coercive, but it will provide more support and guidance so that services, administration and pedagogical aspects, which are extremely important, can be improved. No one really wants child care services that simply keep children busy. We want places where children can develop, be stimulated, and build their identity. The same is true of compliance, where our approach focuses more on improving administration and management. The financial aspects will have to be worked out soon. We're not responsible for that, but we can support the communities.

I'd like to point out that last year, a new section 121.1 was added to Quebec's Educational Childcare Act. This new section will not solve every problem, but it acknowledges the possibility of signing agreements with each of the communities to adapt the act to the realities of the first nations. This will of course depend on the will of the government.

I should also point out that when we talk about accountability and links with the communities, it's about more than child care services. In 2017, as part of the work on indigenous early learning and child care programs, the IELCCs, national consultations were held on the development of an indigenous IELCC framework. The comprehensive vision of the first nations and indigenous peoples was included in the regional report. In short, our vision is more comprehensive—some might call it holistic—and focused on the fact that in the communities, the top priority of first nations families is children.

Parents and extended families also need to make an effort and contribute to help child care services do their work effectively. The importance of language and cultures—and I'm using the plural because first nations, and indigenous peoples, are not a monolithic block—means that specific solutions are needed for each. The educational approaches developed have to be culturally safe so that children and families can thrive in a healthy and safe community.

• (0920)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: I represent the Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou riding in northern Quebec and I'm aware of the progress that has been made in indigenous communities like mine. I'm thinking among other things of the indigenous friendship centre in Val-d'Or, which has a child care centre. That's one good example, but I'd like you to tell us more about the other remote regions. How does your commission go about its work?

Mr. Patrice Lacasse: We provide support as best we can with the limited resources at our disposal.

For at least 10 years now, we have been pointing to studies showing higher costs in indigenous communities. One example is Matimekush. Some studies done with Université Laval showed that construction costs were 65% to 100% higher. So it will cost a lot more to build a child care centre.

Then there are food costs. Just recently, a child care services counsellor who went to an indigenous community told me that it was unbelievable. Strictly from the cost standpoint, food is inaccessible, not to mention the impact of transportation on quality. All these factors put pressure on human resources, and some communities have been forced to adjust their daily fees because...

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lacasse and Ms. Bérubé.

[English]

Ms. Gazan, you have six minutes and probably a little more, because you were cut short at the other meeting.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much.

My first question is for Monsieur Lacasse.

You spoke about the importance of self-determination in regard to children, and I actually could not agree more. In particular, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we know that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is mentioned 15 times. Central to that is self-determination.

I share that with you because I think that on matters related to children it's critical that indigenous people have free, prior and informed consent, particularly because of history, but also because of ongoing issues around having self-determination over our children. In fact, we just had a case in Manitoba that ended up on the news yesterday.

In your submission, you said that Bill C-35 could be improved by recognizing the right to self-determination of indigenous people and how it should contribute to the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People by affirming first nations jurisdiction over child care services.

The NDP is putting forward an amendment to strengthen the bill: that under clause 6 it be amended so that it's "programs and services that are culturally appropriate, that are led by indigenous people and that respect the right of indigenous people to free, prior and informed consent in matters relating to children."

Do you think that's an important amendment?

• (0925)

[Translation]

Mr. Patrice Lacasse: It's hard for me to take a position. Your line of argument looks all right, but then I'm just a generalist manager. I'd have to ask our colleagues in the legal department. However, to me, it looks more positive than anything else.

[English]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Could you please submit that?

I would like you to follow up on that. If you could submit that to the committee, that would be very helpful.

Thank you so much. As well, we can send you the amendment.

[Translation]

Mr. Patrice Lacasse: I'll do that today.

[English]

Ms. Leah Gazan: That's no problem.

My next question is for Madam Deazeley.

You spoke about quality child care. You know, I think, that I often brag that I am a former ECE. I spent many years as an early childhood educator, early on.

One of the things that really disturb me about early childhood education is that people often think it's babysitting. It's not. They're actual educational facilities, where you're teaching critical skills, including things like pre-reading skills for kids even prior to entering school. You spoke about the workforce and how research has shown how qualified and accountable educators "are the most significant contributors to early years programs" and result in "better outcomes for children and families". It's a critical part of education.

What are some of the risks to children, families and staff if they fail to properly support early childhood educators, including in areas like wages, benefits and working conditions? I agree with you: I think it's important that we open up spaces, but it can't be at the expense of providing children with high-quality education. Can you please expand on that?

Thank you.

Ms. Beth Deazeley: As you've said really well, early childhood educators are professional educators. They have a body of knowledge that they get through post-secondary education. They have expertise in pedagogy, in child development, in creating safe and inclusive learning environments, in documentation, in assessing progress and in working with children and families.

One of the unique things about this profession is that it is relationship-based. The reason that educators are the greatest single contributor to the quality of the program is that the relationship the children have with the educators they spend their day with has the greatest impact on the outcomes for them. The concern is that there is a clear link between the well-being of those educators and the well-being of the children in their care, because what the research also shows across professions is that the quality of the working environment and the supports available to professionals in their practice directly impact the quality of the services they're able to provide. They also impact the length of time people stay in a given profession.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I would like to agree with that. I actually became a teacher, and one of the reasons I left the profession was that there were no holidays, the pay was lousy, and the respect for the profession has not, I think, really changed, yet I was still required to do the same things as a teacher—lesson plans and curriculum plans for the kids I was teaching at the time.

You mentioned in your remarks that Ontario is facing a workforce crisis in child care, and you note the high numbers of people who are entering the profession and then leaving. You spoke about the importance of retention. We can focus on expanding and training, but we need to focus on retention. What would that look like?

● (0930)

Ms. Beth Deazeley: We make a number of suggestions in the brief that can help to support retention. While we don't currently collect specific reasons that people are leaving the field, I can assure you that we consistently hear from members and stakeholders that the major drivers of attrition include things like wages and working conditions. It's low wages, split shifts and a lack of benefits to support their own and their family's well-being.

As you noted, there is a distinction across different practice environments in terms of the quality of support that's available to educators, as well as chronic understaffing and under-resourcing of programs that can leave them feeling burnt out. In terms of solutions, wages and benefits are obviously a significant component to that solution, but there are also other opportunities to support retention in the profession. They can include things like mentorship and professional development opportunities, and the opportunity to support professional growth and career advancement to make it a profession in which it's viable for educators who are committed to children to stay for an entire career.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

This concludes the first round. Thank you to the witnesses for appearing this morning and for providing their testimony to the committee on this important matter. The witnesses can leave while we bring in the final panel.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes while we transition to the next round.

● (0930)

(Pause)

● (0930)

The Chair: Welcome back.

The committee will resume its study of Bill C-35, an act respecting early learning and child care in Canada. To assist the interpreters, I remind all members and those appearing virtually to please introduce yourselves when speaking and to speak slowly so the interpreter has the ability to fully grasp what you're saying and interpret it.

You can choose to speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available. For virtual participants, use the translation icon at the bottom of your Surface. If there is an issue with translation, please get my attention and we will suspend while it is being corrected.

Please address all comments through me, the chair, to ensure an orderly meeting, and wait until I recognize you. Also, please, no screenshots or camera shots are allowed in the room while the meeting is proceeding.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks. We have Jennifer Ratcliffe, director of Pebble Lane Early Learning; Maryam Harim, director, Tiny Hoppers Early Learning Centre; and Sibel Cicek, director of government relations, YMCA of Greater Toronto.

We will start with Ms. Harim for five minutes, please. You have the floor.

● (0935)

Ms. Maryam Harim (Director, Tiny Hoppers Early Learning Centre): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of Parliament. Good morning.

My name is Maryam Harim. I thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak to Bill C-35. I am a registered early childhood educator who is currently working as the director at Tiny Hoppers, Newmarket South. I was an immigrant who came to Canada 30 years ago, and I started my career as an educator by volunteering at a child care centre.

Today, I stand here in front of you as a woman who raised her three children single-handedly, while working full-time in child care and going to night school. Back to 29 years ago, I was on a wait-list for subsidized child care for my first child. After my maternity leave ended, I was paying through the nose for child care. All the money I made at that time went to child care.

I had my second and third, and I was then approved for a subsidy. All the money was going straight to child care fees. I was on the wait-list, and I kept waiting until my third one was born.

It was a lot of pressure on a single mom, especially when all of my money was going toward child care, food and shelter, leaving aside any extracurricular activities that I wanted to send my children to, like ballet lessons, karate, basketball and swimming lessons.

Bill C-35 is a universal child care bill that is made to be flexible and accessible to all families of young children. I'm really grateful to whoever finally brought this across, because I'm happy that... Yes, I suffered as a young woman back then, but my children won't. These families, whom I have been taking care of for the last 30 years, are not going to be suffering. They will actually benefit, because children need the kind of care that we've been giving, and they deserve it. They do not deserve to get through it with a second mortgage because they can't afford it.

I've been there and done that, and I'm really happy. It brings tears to my eyes when I look back at my years, but I'm extremely happy for what has gone through.

The idea is to give children the respect and care they deserve in child care in Canada. This is not a winning or losing game. We are all here, collectively, to advocate for the little lives and the future of Canada. As child care workers, we are committed to and focused on the well-being of the children in our care.

As a parent, it has made me very happy for my own children that they won't have to suffer the way I did back then in my days. They won't have to take out a second mortgage to be able to send their children to day care.

However, as an educator, adviser and director at Tiny Hoppers in Newmarket South, I am concerned. Will the government continue to support us forever? I am all in for Bill C-35, as long as the teacher-to-child ratios do not change and we provide the same quality care that we have been giving for the last so many years.

Thank you.

• (0940)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harim.

We'll move to Ms. Ratcliffe.

Ms. Jennifer Ratcliffe (Director, Pebble Lane Early Learning): Good morning.

My name is Jennifer Ratcliffe. I am the director and owner of Pebble Lane child care, a private child care facility that operates care programs in British Columbia. I have been in the care industry for 20 years and have experienced working with not-for-profits, the Surrey school board and various other child care organizations.

I come before you today as a witness to Bill C-35 an act respecting early learning and child care in Canada. Thank you to the members of this committee for giving me the opportunity to be here.

The pandemic showed us a child care crisis like never before. We saw how quickly a lack of available child care spaces can affect our country. This experience led to the creation of a national funding program and the realization that without adequate child care, people cannot work, pay bills, buy food and ultimately live. If the child care industry stops, even for one week, it becomes a national emergency.

A large majority of families live paycheque to paycheque, and a few weeks without being able to access child care leads very quickly to social and economic issues. A national funding program is exactly what our industry needs to support families and children. I believe our future lies in the strength of the generations that come after us, and it is our job to pave the way.

The delivery of the funding program is key. There are four major concerns that this program must address correctly in order to ensure long-term success. Each of these concerns is linked, and they affect one another. They are funding and inclusion, affordability, accessibility, and qualified and suitable staff. Funding programs must include all types of care, working toward one common goal.

I ask that the wording in proposed paragraph 7(1)(a) include "all licensed types of care". All licensed child care spaces are required to follow the same regulations and uphold the same quality standards, regardless of business model. This allows quality standards to be consistent.

Currently, the CWELCC excludes disbursement funding that is used to hire support staff. Without this funding available, we have to turn away children who require additional support in our programs. This must also change, so that we can meet the needs of all children.

Recently, increases to funding have been made to reduce the cost to parents. However, the delivery of this funding has been extremely complicated. The approval process takes months, and there is little to no support or communication to answer questions. Providers

are subsidizing the government and going into debt to discount their parent fees while they wait for funding. Operators feel as though they are taken for granted.

The pressure to implement this program so quickly has resulted in overpayments to providers, families double-dipping, and funding methods being overlapped. Parents are stressed and providers feel like they have no help. It is clear that the provinces are scrambling as they try to prove they can do this, but they are ultimately failing. You cannot simply throw money at a problem and expect it to change.

Wait-lists across the country are growing by the thousands each month, and families are left with no one to help them. Parents need to work and if they don't have care, their only option is social assistance. This doesn't seem right. Affordable child care is an empty promise to parents if it is not accessible.

Providers are doing everything they can to accept as many families as possible, but there are simply not enough spaces. Demand is increasing at a level that we have not seen in years. New spaces must be created in order to meet demand. Private operators need to be able to expand, but being excluded from funding for new spaces means they cannot afford to. The fee caps mean we are restricted when negotiating leases and working out operating expenses.

I have written to our government in B.C. many times, asking for help and guidance. I have never received a response.

We need our governments to support us. We need access to new spaces funding and funds to develop quality programs for the families we serve. Funding needs to be consistent, and the application process needs to be more straightforward to allow the creation of new spaces.

The vast majority of child care centres in our country are built from a lifelong commitment to caring for families and children. The women who create these facilities from the ground up have a passion and drive like no other, and they deserve recognition.

If you want a successful child care program, there needs to be drive, inspiration and passion. The work we do with children is very specific and cannot be replaced with a one-size-fits-all approach. A national child care program must be inclusive. There is simply too much demand to do it any other way if it is to be successful.

● (0945)

We need to work together to create quality licensed facilities and step away from the titles that separate us. Our country's core values are built on supporting others and ensuring equality. This funding program should be nothing less.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ratcliffe.

Ms. Cicek, you have the floor.

Ms. Sibel Cicek (Director, Government Relations, YMCA of Greater Toronto): Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to join you here today. I'm Sibel Cicek, and I'm here representing the YMCA of Greater Toronto.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto has more than 300 child care program locations serving children ages 0 to 12 and their families. We're also part of an Ontario network and a network across Canada. Together, YMCAs have 88,000 licensed child care spaces, making us the largest providers of non-profit licensed care across the country.

Our 55 years of experience in child care have taught us that accessible, affordable, inclusive and high-quality child care is essential to healthy child development, positive family outcomes, the participation of women in the workforce, and the strength of our economy. That's why we proudly signed on to the Canada-wide early learning and child care plan. It's also why we fully support the passage of Bill C-35.

I have three key points I want to touch on today. First is the need for consistent and predictable funding. Second is the need to support and compensate our workforce fairly. Third is the need to ensure equity and inclusion as we roll out the plan.

To begin, with funding, we are really pleased to see a commitment to sustained and ongoing child care funding at the federal level in this bill. Our recommendation is that funding be explicitly described as annualized and tied to the licensed, regulated system of child care. We also welcome mechanisms for ensuring that child care funding provided to operators reflects their true costs.

YMCAs, like other operators, are experiencing challenges with shortfalls as a result of frozen fees, the impact of inflation and inconsistent approaches across the country. This makes it difficult to forecast and plan. We know there will be bumps in the road—we're certainly feeling them—and we welcome additional foresight to ensure operators remain financially stable so that we can sustain our current operations and, in fact, also think about expanding and improving the quality of the programs we're delivering.

Second, when it comes to the workforce, I would also echo what I think you've heard here today; early childhood educators are the backbone of our child care system. We need to ensure that they are well-trained and fairly compensated for the valuable work they do. The CWELCC system will not succeed without them.

As fees for child care go down, demand is going up, and it's going up fast. In Ontario alone, the province estimates that we will be short 8,500 ECEs at the time of full implementation. Our own mod-

elling at the YMCA indicates that we will need almost 3,500 ECEs to expand our capacity by just 20%.

Frankly, it's not just expansion that's an issue. The workforce shortage of ECEs is in fact challenging our current everyday operations. We currently have 420 vacancies for our ECE positions open in Ontario, which challenges our ability to keep our current programs stable. Without a dedicated pipeline, we can't meet current demand, let alone fulfill the expansion goals of our agreement.

We urge the federal government to work together with our provinces and territories to formalize a consistent wage grid that compensates ECEs fairly and ensures that the system can effectively recruit and retain them.

Number three is equity and inclusion. When it comes to equity in the system, we also want to ensure that safeguards are in place. If we fail to expand the new child care system in an equitable manner, the families that currently have child care spaces will be the only ones that can access the benefits. This means that families that could not afford licensed child care before CWELCC will still be prevented from accessing the program, because they will simply not be able to find an available space.

We also have much work ahead to ensure that children with special needs can be supported and included in the program. This will require more resources for staffing and support.

We urge the federal government to work together with provinces and territories to ensure that all decisions related to expansion going forward are made with an equity and inclusion lens.

Finally, if I may add one additional point, it's our need to support our six- to 12-year-olds. Anyone with kids will tell you that learning and development does not stop at age six and that families continue to need support managing the high cost of before- and after-school care for their older children as well. Although this is outside the scope of this bill, we would love to see more attention on this important age group, so that older children can have the same access to affordable high-quality care as their younger siblings.

● (0950)

To close, I want to reiterate that the YMCA supports Bill C-35 and continues to be a committed partner in realizing the Canada-wide early learning and child care plan. We support the establishment of a national advisory council, and we welcome ongoing formal and informal opportunities to continue to consult with all levels of government to ensure our continued success going forward.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cicek.

We'll now begin the questioning with Ms. Ferreri, for six minutes, please.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

I want to give Maryam a big shout-out. I think we all connected with what you said at the beginning about trying to put your kids through child care and the importance of affordable child care. I think it's important that everyone at the table hear me say this. I can't stress enough that I know how valuable affordable child care is. I know the cost that I paid as a mom, too, and about quality, so I just want to say thanks to you for that.

Ms. Cicek, you have touched on so many interesting points. I know that the CBC article touched a lot on the fact that you have 16,000 children enrolled in your 35,000 licensed spaces, meaning that 19,000 more children don't have access currently, and it's because of the lack of people to provide the care, not the spaces. You said something that is of great concern, and I'm curious about what you think.

For children aged six and over who are not eligible for CWELCC, do you see centres and child care facilities having to increase the fees for that age demographic to offset the cost that it's going to take to sustain this program for those under age six?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: We certainly wouldn't be looking to increase fees for that age group, because we don't feel that families could manage an additional fee. Those fees are already, relatively speaking now in comparison with CWELCC fees, quite high, but there will be a need to look at other ways to help those families to manage their costs, because as the CWELCC reduces fees for the under-six age group, it does become a bit glaring in terms of the fees that parents with older children pay for before- and after-school care. Certainly we wouldn't want to increase that burden on families. We would really be looking to the government to work with us to help families manage those costs.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

Again, we see this sustainability issue playing out. How are we going to fund this and ensure that the care of the child is met?

I'll go to you, Ms. Ratcliffe.

Thanks for your testimony. A lot of what you said ties in with what Ms. Cicek said.

We want to be equitable when we're looking at this child care bill. That's the reality, especially as a Conservative. We're trying to push for universal and equitable care, so that the people who need it the most get access to it.

You said something very interesting that I've heard from many centres. I know that the people who are in the program have benefited greatly—I concur with that—but you said that you had pressure, that you felt extreme pressure to buy in. That is a very curious comment, because we've heard repeatedly from a lot of centres that they didn't feel they had any option other than to buy in. Can you expand on that?

Ms. Jennifer Ratcliffe: We want to be able to support our families, specifically those who have young children, and if we are not able to be part of the program, we don't feel that we're supporting them, so we naturally want to be part of the program, but we also have to weigh in all the other factors that we have to take into consideration when we want to offer quality programs.

It's really important for us to recognize what the needs are of our families, and, yes, there's definitely pressure to want to be part of that. We don't want to operate outside of everyone to be able to support our families, but we also need to be able to implement quality programs, so we're looking to be able, hopefully, to meet in the middle.

● (0955)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you for that.

Do you think that under the way the legislation is currently written, you will be able to expand and offer more spaces, more opportunity, for families to access child care?

Ms. Jennifer Ratcliffe: We are already finding that we are struggling to expand, and when opportunities arise, we have to turn them down. We are simply not able to move forward, because of the lack of funding. We've had to turn down thousands of spaces, me and other providers I know. We're just not in a position to accept them, because we can't access the new spaces funding and we are having to operate under the fee caps.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much.

If I can go back to Ms. Harim—Maryam, if I may?

You touched on quality, and said that you support this bill. You think it's great, but you want reassurance that quality will not be compromised.

I want to tie in all three witnesses and what they've said, and in particular what Ms. Cicek said about children with exceptional needs, differences or disabilities. In the way the bill is currently written, what would you suggest to ensure that quality is still met, and that it provides equal access for all children?

Ms. Maryam Harim: That's a very touchy subject right now for me, because for the last two weeks we've been fighting over giving care to a child we've accommodated for the last two years. That child is autistic, has high needs and has been refused by many day cares. My educators are the ones giving good care in that room. That child has been denied care in school by the school board. How does that make me feel as a mom? That mom comes to me crying every day. All the other children are starting to go with that first step.

They're starting in September or March. It's almost the end of April, and this mom is still trying to fight, saying, "My child also needs a normal life. Yes, she has high needs, but if day care can accommodate, why can't you? You can give the same funding, the same one-on-one."

It makes my heart bleed. The EI comes in and she's crying. She's literally on the floor, saying, "Somebody help this child. Put her through school," but no, the school board isn't doing it.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harim and Ms. Ferreri.

We went over a bit, but it was a compelling question. Thank you for your answer.

Next, we have Mr. Van Bynen for six minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's great to see the scope of the witnesses today.

First of all, to the local Newmarket operation, thank you for taking the time to come. At the same time, we have the benefit of an operator, or an organization, like the YMCA, with 88,000 spaces, I think I heard. It's great for us to get both perspectives as we go forward.

I'll start with you, Ms. Harim. I had the pleasure of viewing your set-up down on Stonehaven, I think.

What's the impact of your business on the local community? What's the effect of this program for the local community as you see it?

Ms. Maryam Harim: It has made a huge impact on the families. Like I stated before, as a parent I'm extremely happy. I'm very happy as an educator, as well, because these families are able to afford care that was not previously affordable.

I suffered as a mom and as a parent. As these parents, the new young generation that's coming up.... For that matter, my children will definitely benefit. They are 28 and 29 now, and will be putting their children in child care so they can go back to work.

I'm happy to see these children and new families come to child care and get quality care. These children are like sponges at this age. They absorb everything, and they need quality care.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: They certainly have lots of energy and require a lot of attention.

The challenge I'm seeing more often, in many services, is that we have federal funding programs, but local and provincial deliveries.

As a small independent operator, what are the gaps that you think should be considered in this bill?

• (1000)

Ms. Maryam Harim: First and foremost, the quality of care shouldn't go down. The ratios should not be changed, if those are even in the mix. I have no idea about that. If they are, they will definitely have a big impact on the quality we have been giving all of these years, and what we will be providing to the children and families.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I, for one, agree that the quality of care needs to be critical.

I will turn now to Ms. Cicek.

From your perspective in managing so many outlets, how do you determine, or satisfy yourself, that the quality of care is consistent and to the standards that you as an organization have set?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: That's a great question.

The YMCA has been at this for a number of decades now, and we have an established national curriculum that was developed at the YMCA of Greater Toronto, which is implemented across the country.

In each province where we're operating, we also ensure that we are not only meeting, but, as often as we can, exceeding the regulations and guidelines that are set out. We take great pride in our ability to train ECEs when they join our organization, are matched with mentors, and hopefully have opportunities for growth and development while they're with us.

However, that doesn't prevent attrition. We are still losing ECEs on a very regular basis to other sectors, including school boards and municipalities, where wages are much higher.

We're doing everything we can to compensate ECEs fairly with the resources we have, but we're finding that there is not a level playing field in terms of system delivery. Certainly ECEs are leaving en masse to work with school boards and municipalities, and even to take up careers in other sectors where they can earn more.

We would really like to see that compensation of ECEs be addressed. It is such an important component of the quality of the program experience that we're able to deliver. The quality of the staff and the relationship that ECEs have with children really contribute to the valuable experience they have in child care. Without those high-quality ECEs, we won't be able to meet the mark when it comes to quality. That's a big priority for us.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: We've heard that compensation is a significant component of retention.

Newfoundland and Labrador recently announced a \$25 minimum wage for ECEs. If Ontario did the same, what would that mean for your operations, and what would it mean for the sector, broadly, as well?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: It would be a good start.

Right now, we have a baseline in Ontario of \$18 an hour, which is far too low, and frankly, somewhat insulting for ECEs. You can get a job and work as a barista, for example, and make more money than that. It's not congruent with the value that ECEs are bringing to our society. With regard to \$25 an hour...I don't know what the specific number should be, but I do know that it should be much higher than it is.

Even at the YGTA, where we are able to compensate on average around \$24 an hour, with extensive benefits and pension for those who are full time, we are still losing people very regularly. If you are taking a similar role at a school board, for example, in Toronto, you would be starting at about \$28 an hour. Municipalities are able to pay even higher.

In Ontario, we're also subject to wage-constraint legislation right now, which is causing us another problem. We are looking for potential solutions. I know that others in the sector have called for \$25 an hour. I think it would be a much better baseline to be working from than where we currently are.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses here today for our study of Bill C-35. All the testimony we heard today was moving. Ms. Harim's was also very touching and personal.

I'm now addressing all the witnesses. We talked about the support some families need, about problems related to labour and attrition, various needs, problems in terms of potential quality, and available spaces in child care centres. I want to remind you that Quebec is a model for child care services. With all that in mind, what would be the most important thing to add to the bill?

• (1005)

[*English*]

Ms. Maryam Harim: I'm just trying to understand. I don't understand French.

I'm sorry; I couldn't hear you. Can you go again, please?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: I can jump in. Is it okay if I take the question?

Ms. Maryam Harim: Yes, please, if somebody can help....

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Sibel Cicek: We support and value the licensed child care system, and we would really like to see wording in the bill that makes it explicit that the funding provided for the realization of this plan will stay within the licensed, regulated system of child care.

We believe that the government has a role to play in ensuring that a certain set of minimum standards are maintained. That is possible in a licensed system that is publicly accountable. We would want to ensure that wording is very explicit in the legislation.

Ms. Jennifer Ratcliffe: I will also agree with that. As I mentioned in my brief, in proposed paragraph 7(1)(a), the wording of all types of care—all licensed facilities, regardless of whether they are not-for-profit or for-profit—should be included in the funding.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Ms. Harim, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Maryam Harim: I completely agree with the statements both ladies have made and the huge statement that our friend from

the YMCA has made, as well, that the salaries that educators are making are absolutely nothing compared to the amount of work they are putting in.

By all means, I am with this bill, but the pay needs to go up for the educators—the ECEs and the ECAs—for the kind of work that they are expected to do.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: I would now like us to talk about the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care. What criteria should we be taking into consideration to ensure that members of the council are representative of the diversity of Canadian society? I'd like to hear what each of you has to say about this.

Ms. Harim, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Maryam Harim: I need a minute, please.

Thank you.

The Chair: If you would, please identify who you want to answer your question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: The question is for Ms. Ratcliffe.

Could you answer the question?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Ratcliffe: Sure. I think it's really important for there to be representatives from each category of type of care. To the best of my knowledge, I don't believe there are any representatives from the private sector included at the moment. I think that's a very key component in order for it to be successful. Everybody has to be on the same page and, as I mentioned before, everybody has to work together.

There are simply too many children and too many families at this point to segregate it and to think that one specific type of care can manage that on its own. We all need to be on the same page and work together.

There definitely need to be representatives from all different types of category of care.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Ms. Cicek, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Sibel Cicek: Thank you.

I believe the process for applying to the national advisory council and the vetting process were quite rigorous. I don't espouse that it would be possible to represent every single perspective at that council. I feel that would be very difficult.

Certainly, there is a good array of representation currently. We would really welcome, in addition to the national advisory council, ongoing opportunities for collaboration and consultation, so that every voice could be represented, be it via the national advisory council, forums like this or other forums.

• (1010)

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Ms. Harim, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Maryam Harim: I agree with the comments made that everyone has to be in there together, because, as I said before, it is not a winning or losing game. It is what we are doing for the families and the children, without doing any harm to the quality of care that we are offering, yet making it affordable for the families, because all of the prices, for everything you touch, have gone up.

Are the educators making the same kind of money? No, they are not. Have the prices gone up? No.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bérubé and Ms. Harim.

[English]

Ms. Gazan, to conclude, you have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair.

My first question is for Madam Harim. Thank you for your work in the area. Thank you for sharing your story about being a mom and paying for child care. You've been there and done that. Thank goodness we are getting a national child care plan put in place.

You mentioned something about wages. I feel like we need to address the elephant in the room. Nobody is joining the sector, because the wages are low and the working conditions are really harsh. If we're going to develop a plan, we have to address this head-on.

Would you agree with me that, within the legislation, we need very clearly defined wages, benefits and working conditions? That has been part of the bill if we are going to achieve having a national child care strategy.

Ms. Maryam Harim: Thank you. I agree 100%, more so because of the kind of work that child care workers put in. Again, I will say that I've been there, done that in the classroom with those children—cleaning them up, taking care of them, giving them quality care, and abiding by the ministry rules and regulations. We do everything.

They do not get enough credit, forget about getting enough money.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much. I couldn't agree with you more.

Madam Cicek, I'm a huge fan of YMCAs across the country. I am blessed to have one in my riding, in fact, with an early childhood education centre right in it.

The YMCA Canada submission in regard to Bill C-35 states, "Without a dedicated pipeline of new ECEs, Canada will not be

able to meet the demand or fulfill the expansion goals within the agreements."

Expanding on the question I just asked, how significant do you believe low wages, insecure working conditions and inadequate benefits are in contributing to the child care workforce crisis?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: They are extremely significant. The number one reason we are losing people to other sectors or to other organizations, like school boards and municipalities, is the wages that we're able to pay. They are not high enough to make it worthwhile for ECEs to have a career and to support their own families, with the current rate of pay they're being provided.

It's absolutely critical that we address compensation. Certainly, it is not the only thing we can do to improve what employment looks like for ECEs, but it is absolutely the first priority that we need to make for ourselves as we look at implementing this program.

Ms. Leah Gazan: As well, the YMCA submission talks about how the language in Bill C-35 should be strengthened to better recognize the federal government's role in supporting early childhood educators.

Would you support amending the bill so that it clearly commits to supporting decent working conditions, livable wages and benefits as one of the principles guiding federal investments in the system?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: Yes, I believe you've articulated that quite well. That is something we would support. It would really strengthen the bill and the commitments, not only to implementing this program but to the workforce that is responsible for ensuring its success.

• (1015)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Your brief also speaks about the need for federal leadership to support an ECE workforce. To this end, would you support a national workforce strategy that would look to address issues, including compensation, benefits, retirement security, adequate working conditions, education and training opportunities?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: That's perfect. The YMCA is currently the largest provider of non-profit, licensed child care. In your brief you mentioned that it's critical for Bill C-35 to prioritize non-profit care. Do you agree that the federal investment should focus on an expansion of public and non-profit child care services, rather than those that are private and for-profit? If so, why?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: That's a great question, and it's not something that we've taken a public position on. As non-profit providers, we certainly understand the value of ensuring that tax dollars are being very well stewarded in the non-profit sector. We know that families want non-profit child care. We have very long wait-lists that demonstrate that people are interested in the expansion of our programs.

We are very pleased that the priority has been put on non-profit expansion. We are looking forward to supporting that process.

Ms. Leah Gazan: The word “licensed” is also an important distinction. Why is it important for federal investments in ELCC to prioritize licensed, centre-based and home-based child care?

Ms. Sibel Cicek: The licence system allows for public accountability and transparency. There are certain standards that need to be met to ensure that programs are high-quality and being implemented according to ratio, and that we're offering safe and stimulating environments for kids.

The risks are really high when you're working with a vulnerable population of kids under six. We need to ensure that public investment and the mandate for this program really are tied to the licence system to ensure that we are expanding licensed, regulated, safe and stimulating high-quality child care for children and families.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

That concludes this round of witnesses. I would like, at this time, to thank the witnesses for presenting today and answering the questions. We will suspend, and the witnesses can leave at this time, but then members who are here virtually will have to come back in, as the committee will move into an in camera business portion for the next, roughly, 30 minutes.

Again, thank you, witnesses and committee members. We will suspend for a couple of minutes while we reconnect.

Merci beaucoup.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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