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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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Chair: The Honourable Marc Garneau





## Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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• (1540)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)):** Good afternoon, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 53 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I would like to acknowledge that we are on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[English]

Before we get started, is there unanimous consent for the clerk to prepare a press release outlining the committee's upcoming travel to Cambridge Bay, Kugluktuk and Yellowknife next week, to be shared with local news outlets?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

As with our previous meetings, today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

[English]

For members participating virtually, you know the rules to follow.

For everyone, before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When speaking, please address your comments to the chair and speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

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

Today, on our first panel, we welcome the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services Canada, who is here in person. As well, we have deputy minister Gina Wilson, also from Indigenous Services Canada and in person.

Of course, all of us may speak in the official language of our choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. At the bottom of your screen, you have the choice of floor, English or French audio. I suggest you choose that language now, so you'll be ready when another lan-

guage is spoken. With that, if interpretation is lost, please notify us and we'll interrupt briefly until we re-establish it.

As is the custom, Minister Hajdu, we open the floor to you for introductory remarks. I understand that you have a bit more than five minutes. I was told seven or eight minutes. In the interest of hearing your presentation, that will be fine.

After that, we'll proceed with questions.

It's over to you, Minister.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

*Kwe kwe. Tansi. Unnusakkt. Good morning. Bonjour.*

I'm very grateful to be here with you all today on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to discuss the work the federal government is doing to improve education for indigenous youth.

[English]

I know all of you have been working really diligently to understand the history of European settlement and the resulting policies that were meant to displace indigenous people from their lands, traditions and culture, which resulted in many indigenous children, for generations, being robbed of their right to thrive in communities with family and the right to access education comparable to non-indigenous children, often in the same region or territory.

In fact, in 2021, just over 53% of indigenous students graduated from secondary school, and 90% of non-indigenous students in the same year successfully completed their high school education. That gap of 37%, made up of young people with frustrated dreams and paths forward, is a tragedy we all have to work to end.

In 2021, post-secondary education attainment rates for first nations, Inuit and Métis were 45.3%, 33.6% and 56.3%, respectively, while for non-indigenous Canadians it's about 70%. What a waste of talent—talent that Canada needs now more than ever. It should be our collective commitment to make sure we can change these outcomes for this generation and for the next one.

To change those outcomes, we need not just financial investment but strong support for the leaders who are building and rebuilding education systems that are founded on and connected to language and culture from early learning to post-secondary. The mainstream schools have not served indigenous students well, and the effects of racism and a curriculum that whitewashes indigenous perspectives and history have compounded the problem.

Students on reserve must be funded comparably to students in provincial systems off reserve, and investments must be made in critical areas, such as language and culture, full-day kindergarten and before and after school programming.

In 2016, the federal Liberal government began the work of creating new partnerships with indigenous people to reform the way elementary and secondary school education was funded. The government set provincial education formulas as the new minimum base and agreed to modifications that addressed specific first nations' needs and priorities. To bring credibility to this work, the government has increased funding for elementary and secondary education for first nations students on reserve by 74% since 2015.

We see encouraging signs that the new approach is working. As of 2021, just over 53% of first nations youth between the ages of 18-24 had a secondary school diploma or equivalent. That is still too large a gap, but the gap is getting smaller. The deficit left by 10 years of sparse to no new money spent on indigenous youth also meant that infrastructure was often decrepit or unsafe.

Indigenous youth deserve and need safe places to learn. Indigenous Services Canada and the AFN have commissioned studies that demonstrate the unacceptable and shameful gap in infrastructure between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

Since 2015, the federal government has committed \$2.35 billion in targeted funding for school facilities, and \$2.27 billion has been allocated, funding 250 projects, including 70 new schools. Of the 250 projects, 164 are now complete, and 86 projects are ongoing. These infrastructure investments serve 270 communities and about 313,000 students. These are very important steps towards closing the infrastructure gap by 2030.

The federal government uses provincial formulas as a minimum base to address the equity gap. Partners have expressed that each regional area is unique, with some communities requiring support for transportation, teacher residences, and/or healthy meals as part of their education systems.

Many indigenous partners are pursuing self-determined education. Nine regional education agreements have been signed to restore control to first nations on the design and delivery of education on reserve, ensuring that learning is grounded in culture and language, and that the funding formulas work best for each unique region.

• (1545)

[Translation]

In July 2022, I had the honour of joining grand chiefs and chiefs of the First Nations Education Council to sign a multi-million dollar regional education agreement with 22 first nations supporting the First Nations Education Council in Quebec.

At that event, I was moved by a young girl who opened the ceremony by speaking in her own indigenous language of Mohawk or Kanienkehaka. She learned her language through an immersion program that she joined in kindergarten.

[English]

It was incredibly moving. There are 50 agreements under development, and leaders are determined to provide education that results in confident and capable adults rooted in culture and language.

In January I visited with Dianne Roach, director of operations of the Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig, who toured us through the new Anishinabe post-secondary institute partially funded by FedNor. This institute works to preserve the integrity of the Anishinabe language and knowledge. I was greeted by students learning and teaching Ojibwa. The confidence, connection and strength these students are building in themselves is a gift to their communities and to the generations to come.

The promise of reconciliation is that every person in this country has the pride and confidence in themselves that they, too, can reach their full potential. Indeed, our country can thrive only if every first nations, Inuit and Métis child has hope for their future and the confidence that they can learn, grow and contribute to their family, their community, the nation and the world. They must know that they have the best possibility to learn and that they have equal opportunities for education and economic success. This will allow for the promise of a better future, success and prosperity for all of us.

We will get there by ensuring that first nations, Métis and Inuit educators have the tools and resources they need to design and deliver the education that will help their youth succeed.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1550)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to our first round of questions, each six minutes, beginning with Mr. Vidal.

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

Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister, for being here today. I appreciate the opportunity to engage with you in this important discussion.

Minister, you threw out a bunch of statistics about graduation rates. The study has a graduation rate focus, but there's a focus also on improving outcomes of education overall, which I guess is measured by graduation rates. You threw out a bunch of numbers on indigenous rates, but I want to talk for a few minutes about the rates on first nations. The departmental results report that I saw recently actually shows that the percentage of first nations reserve students who graduate from secondary school has declined by just over six per cent in the last four or five years.

I'm curious what your comment would be on that. Where do you think the breakdown is, relative to the other improvements that you talked about?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** First of all, let me say that it's no small piece of work that the federal Liberal government has increased funding by about 70% overall since taking office in 2015. Money was a big barrier for a very long time. We know that sometimes turning data points around takes time, because it's not only about money, but also about curriculum and the capacity of communities.

I visited with Tataskweyak just a while ago, and one of the points of interest the community wanted me to see was their school. Their school is an aging school. It needs repairs. It needs significant enhancement. Indigenous communities are some of the fastest-growing communities in the entire country. In Tataskweyak we talked about the increased capacity of the community to design and deliver their own curriculum and the work they were doing to try to reach those goals.

I think my data shows that there has been an improvement in education outcomes since 2015. I will get the department to speak specifically to those numbers. You can question the officials if you'd like, but what I would say is that the increase, although small, is tracking in the right direction, and what we need to see is more rapid success. That's the promise of the education coordination agreements, the self-determination—

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** I'm going to run out of time, Minister. I want to move on.

In 2018, the Auditor General did a report. I'm going to paraphrase so I don't have to read all of it, but they were talking about recommendations to Indigenous Services Canada in connection with closing the socio-economic gaps, education being one of those. One of the things they said in the conclusions was that we have to find things that are actually improving the lives of indigenous people by using proper indicators rather than focusing on the amount of money spent. The ultimate goal is to improve lives and to close these gaps. The numbers I referred to are reported by Indigenous Services Canada, so we can move on from that and see where that goes.

There was also a discussion by the Auditor General back in 2018 that the graduation reports on reserves were being reported inaccurately. It was using a methodology that was measuring only kids who started in grade 12, not the cohort method, which goes from grades 9 to 12 or grades 10 to 12, like most provincial systems do. When we start comparing these rates.... You talked about the average being 85% or something like that. I'm talking about rates as low as 34%. The Auditor General talked about those rates being even lower than that, if we actually used the proper methodology.

It's my understanding that there is a new method that was agreed to by the ADM in August 2020, which would do the proper comparative rates. Are you aware of that? How has that impacted the rates you're measuring when you measure the success?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** First, let me just give you the data I have here on your original question, which was on whether the graduation rates have been increasing or decreasing since 2016. Thank you to the deputy for finding the sheet with the data.

In fact, in 2016 we saw a total graduation rate of 43.9% of first nations from secondary or high school. In 2021, it was 53.4%. That's a 10% increase, actually, over the last six or seven years. That's—

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** I'm sorry, Minister.

Are you saying the reports in the department and the results report are inaccurate?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** This is the data I have in front of me.

• (1555)

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Well, the data I have, which was presented to me by the Library of Parliament today, says that they have decreased by six and a half per cent in four years.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We'll have to compare and we'll get officials—

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Maybe you can respond to us on that.

Quickly, with the little time I have left, the other challenge I saw.... Back in this whole process, a target was supposed to be set for what we would like graduation rates to be. It was supposed to be set by March 2023.

Has that target been set? Can you tell us what that target is?

**Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services):** Mr. Chair, I just want to get back to another question about the variability of methodologies. There is a high degree of variability of projected costs for differences in assumptions and methodologies for various studies. I won't get into the detail of that, but I'll just state that.

On your question of a target, I'd have to check. I don't have information on a specific target that we have established. If you could let us know where you sourced that, we can get back to you on that.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Sure. It was actually in the departmental results report for 2021-22, which stated that the target was supposed to be set by March 2023. I guess now it's March 2023.

**Ms. Gina Wilson:** That's fair enough.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We'll get back to you with the target, then.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you.

I think that's my time, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** It is. Thank you very much, Mr. Vidal.

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

**Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

My question is going to be around the regional educational agreements and some of the challenges and barriers we're seeing to moving in that direction.

Not everyone may be familiar with what regional education agreements are. To give some context, we have an amazing example of this in Nova Scotia, with Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey. Twenty years ago in Nova Scotia, the first nations graduation rates were at 30%. Today they're at 90%, which are some of the highest graduation rates of first nations across the country. When I talk to the co-chair of the organization, Chief Leroy Denny and his staff, Blaire Gould, they all attribute it to the fact that now they are working together collectively as communities on education. Through that collaboration, they are able to focus on language, on culture and on really decolonizing education.

You said in your speech that we have nine regional education agreements from across the country. I'm wondering if you could tell us what you've seen as best practices.

Why is this the best practice? Why is this working? How can we create more communities that go down this route?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thanks very much, Mr. Battiste.

I'll just say that self-determination is the key out of this mess, actually. It's when indigenous people have the tools and the control to be able to reassert their rights over the education of their children and their communities.

When we took office, the federal government under Stephen Harper had in fact eliminated federal funding for things that would have helped with Mr. Vidal's question. For example, the first nations statistical institute had been dismantled. It was a key institution that allowed first nations themselves to collect data that was crucial and required for self-governance.

We've refunded that institute and indeed have been spending significant resources on funding first nations' control over how data is collected and how it's used to improve outcomes.

I would also say that you hit on some really important aspects. It's about the curriculum, the language and the world view that goes along with how people are educated in community.

You also pointed out something that is really beneficial. That's when communities work together to have the capacity at a larger scale to be able to do regional education agreements that provide supports for some of the smaller communities that may not have the capacity to do it on their own. Communities work really hard on these regional education agreements. It's a process of negotiation with the federal government, so that everybody is comfortable, when the reins are transferred to indigenous communities, that they have the capacity to do exactly what they want to do, which is to improve education outcomes.

The success is people who graduate, who are proud of themselves and who have confidence in their own stories and their own capacity to develop to their full potential and to contribute back to their communities.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Thank you, Minister.

I think what I'm hearing from you when we talk about these regional education agreements is that long-term, predictable and stable funding, whereby communities are accountable to each other as opposed to the government, is something that really is working. When we turn over jurisdiction.... The last I saw from the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey.... In 2019, we signed a 10-year agreement. These long-term, stable agreements are leading to great progress.

I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about your opinion on what the role of culture and language is and how that plays an important role in closing the education gap within our communities.

● (1600)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Let me just reflect, first of all, on the long-term and predictable.... As those of you who have run organizations will know, when you have short-term funding—a year or two years—it's very hard to do a whole bunch of things, including plan for the future, but also to recruit and retain really qualified educators.

With 10-year agreements, you can actually stabilize the education system that you're running, including ensuring the stability of educators. Some of you—Madame Gill, for example, and others—have been teachers and know that the relationship between students and teachers is an important part of outcomes. When people don't have the confidence or the control.... We see this frequently, especially in remote communities. Teachers go in for a couple of years and then fly out for greener pastures in teaching that maybe will be closer to their own families or their own cultures.

In terms of culture and language—and, again, this is coming from the chiefs, from the students and from the families I've had an opportunity to speak with—everybody, without a doubt, says that when students feel safe, respected, and understood and are learning a curriculum that is relevant to their lives and to their own world view, having an opportunity to learn it in languages that oftentimes they've heard at home—whether it's through grandparents or other relatives—provides a better sense of grounding for that student. The student is then more connected to the school.

When we talk about the failure of education systems to graduate first nations students from mainstream secondary schools, often-times it's because those students have left school. It's not because they've reached grade 12 and failed. It's because they've often left class, left schools, because they don't feel welcome in those systems, or they've experienced disproportionate racism, either at the hands of the educators—which is extremely sad—or from their peers.

Quite frankly, the curriculum is in some cases offensive, because it whitewashes their experiences as indigenous people. This turns the page.

I have a real, high degree of hope that we'll see more and more of these agreements come online in the next number of years.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

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

Thank you to the minister and deputy minister, Ms. Wilson, for being here.

What you just said, Ms. Hajdu, really struck a chord with me. We are on the same page when it comes to students' language, culture and, of course, academic success, not to mention all the associated benefits. This is about their very identity.

That said, I want to spend the next few minutes discussing the Auditor General's 2018 report, which Mr. Vidal brought up earlier. I want to talk about what it says in that report. I heard things that surprised me, so I want to follow up on what the Auditor General found in 2018.

For example, according to the report on socio-economic gaps on first nations reserves, the department did not collect relevant data or adequately use data to inform decision-making.

I don't have the exact numbers in front of me, but I'd like to know whether you changed your approach to data collection, to make sure the data you collected going forward were relevant and adequate in order to inform funding decisions, as recommended by the Office of the Auditor General.

[*English*]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much, Madame Gill.

Yes, in fact, the elementary and secondary programs are now using a new cohort-based high school graduation rate methodology that's going to align better with the current pan-Canadian high school graduation rate. This is going to improve the department's ability to understand and measure the difference in high school graduation rates between first nations students on reserve and the non-indigenous population across Canada.

We anticipate that the new cohort-based graduation rate methodology data will be published in the departmental report for 2022-23, which either is coming out or should be out now. I remember editing the minister's message, so it must be coming soon.

I will also point to the fact that the work we're doing to reinvest in the data sovereignty of indigenous people—the ability to collect, analyze and use that data through indigenous-led data institutes—is another really key piece of this, because, of course, the way we assess the data and the way indigenous partners do may be different.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** I apologize for cutting you off. I wish we had more time with you, as always. I understood everything you said, but I didn't hear you say whether you were collecting different data or, at least, other types of data to ensure they were relevant. You didn't answer my first question, and I plan to continue with the same line of questioning.

The audit also revealed that the department didn't assess the data for accuracy or share the data with first nations. That was in 2018.

Similar to my previous question, I'd like to know what was done in the wake of the finding. Did you share the data with first nations? Did you do anything more—other than what you'd already been doing—to ensure that any data possibly being shared with first nations were indeed accurate?

I have two more questions, but let's start there.

[*English*]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** First of all, I want to reiterate that there is a new approach and methodology that the department has begun. It is important that we have accurate data, and that we share the data. The principle of the department is to share data with the community that's relevant to the community.

I would have to turn to officials for details about the frequency of that sharing and how that's done, but, yes, it's important for first nations to have control over data. It's important for first nations to know what's happening in their own communities, so they can use that information to either advocate, change approaches, or design programs and services. The value that the department has around truth and transparency would require data sharing.

The deputy may wish to add something, just really quickly.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Gina Wilson:** I would just point out that there's a big difference with the provinces and territories as far as data analysis goes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Yes, everything is relative. Nothing is black and white. I completely agree with you on that. Nevertheless, asking these questions is our job.





In terms of the language schools for Inuit, what I would say is that the Government of Canada established what is called—and you know about this—the permanent bilateral mechanisms in 2016, to talk about the very thing you're mentioning. That is what the joint priorities are, what the policies are that Inuit want us to proceed with and to pursue and in what order, and how we can monitor progress on those priorities.

I will also say, as you know, that education is delivered through the territories. In Nunavut, the agreement is with the territory of Nunavut. I met with the education minister and deputy premier, Pamela Gross in February, to talk about her priorities, particularly the funding and support available under the Inuit child first initiative.

We agreed that we would work towards a tripartite table, because of the discord that's happening between.... There are people who feel that the territory is not doing a good job of preserving language and culture. They're not feeling the outcomes of the education investments by the territory through the federal government.

That work of setting up the tripartite table will hopefully begin soon. I'm looking forward to the first meeting, because what Minister Gross and I agreed on was that regardless of how we get there, we have to do a better job. Inuit children have to have the equal opportunity to learning that I spoke about in my opening remarks.

I think this is a positive development.

• (1615)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We'll start a second round, and we'll go with Mr. Vidal for five minutes.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to follow up on the conversation we've been having and suggest that you don't need to get back to me on those statistics, because when I go back to both the 2020-21 and 2021-22.... That's where those numbers come from. Those graduation rates are on page 25 of the 2021 report. In fact, they're on the line below the data point you were just talking about in response to Ms. Idlout. Your own departmental results reports, two years in a row—which you signed off on, Minister—identify that the percentage of first nation on-reserve students who graduate has declined from 40.5% to 34.2%.

Let me put this into perspective for you, Minister. You want to go back and blame the 10 years prior, but after eight years of being in government, the graduation rate of on-reserve first nations students has declined by 6.5%. That means, for every 100 kids who enter the system.... We don't even know whether we're measuring these results right, because that's part of the process still to come. For every 100 kids, we lost over six in the process. That's terrifying. It's tragic. The rates are less than half of those in the provincial systems in the first place, and they're declining.

Do you have a response to that, further to what you gave me before?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you.

First of all, the data I am drawing from is from Statistics Canada. It's Statistics Canada's 2021 census data, so—

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Minister, the data I'm drawing from is your department's.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I will say this. The path we're on towards self-determination is critically important to indigenous partners, as is the increase in funding per capita. I will also say that we are hearing back from partners, and they are seeing improvements.

I spoke with Long Lake #58 in my own riding, for example, and Chief Desmoulin. Since they've been able to educate children from K to grade 12, they've seen graduation rates shoot up. I don't want to give you a number, but it's well approaching the provincial rate. They are extremely happy with the outcomes for their young people, who are now taking that secondary education and going to post-secondary. They are then coming back to the community, by the way, and using that education in the community to do all the things it needs done.

Therefore—

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you, Minister.

Those are one-off statistics. The numbers from your department are nationwide numbers that the department, I'm assuming, is measuring accurately, but perhaps that's not the case.

Further down, page 26 of the departmental results report identifies that a target is to be set by March 2023. I'm sorry, but I have to admit I am extremely disappointed that neither you nor your deputy minister is aware of this date for setting a target. It seems profound to me that you don't know the commitments your own department has made, or that the deputy minister didn't know those commitments when I asked the question earlier.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I will say this: My target is that every student who has the capacity and desire to graduate can graduate. That is my target. However, I will again....

Are there officials in the back who have a target rate for us?

**A voice:** It's in development now and will be published in the next departmental report.

**Ms. Gina Wilson:** While we're waiting for that.... He indicated there will be a target established. I don't know what target you're speaking about. You're talking about one reference in a departmental report from two years ago.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** It was in the 2020-21 report and also in the 2021-22 report.

**Ms. Gina Wilson:** Okay. We're going to find that, sir.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** If I heard the official right, he said it's going to be set in the next report. Is there a time frame, then, for when we can expect that?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** There's an availability, I think.... He is indicating fall of—

• (1620)

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Will we have that target in the fall of this year?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** That's right.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Okay. I will watch for that target, then.

I'm going to leave it there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** You had about 30 seconds.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC):** Can I take that?

**The Chair:** You can, if the answer is within 30 seconds.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Okay.

Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister.

Are you telling me and this committee that the two top officials in the department had no idea what was in their departmental plan when it came to setting a target for graduation rates? I just want to be clear.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Listen, I have committed that we'll make sure that you have the target by this fall and that you will know what that target is—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** You didn't know about it, though. That's what's so concerning. The two top people had no clue that there were targets in your departmental report that needed to be set. Nobody knew about it...into a study in which we're talking about indigenous graduation, which is going down, according to your departmental data.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, listen, there's a heck of a lot of deflection coming right now from the Conservative side of the table—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** I'm taking your data.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —who had a decade to do something about this.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** This is your information.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We lost a decade.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Netflix wasn't a thing when the Conservatives lost power.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We lost a decade—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** You had eight years.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —and I am thrilled that our government—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** You're going down, and you don't....

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —is now funding equitably—

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** You and the top of your department had no idea that there's a target to be set—

**The Chair:** I'm going to bring this to an end. The time is up. Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

We will now go to Ms. Atwin for five minutes.

**Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and deputy minister for joining us today.

Hopefully, I can get us back on track with my line of questioning. As I've mentioned before, this is very close to my heart. My whole past was involved in indigenous education here in New Brunswick, and for sure I think back to a lot of the things that many of the people I worked with would like me to ask.

The biggest piece, of course, is around the funding gap that existed. I'm really happy to hear that a 70% increase in funding has occurred since 2015. Are you hearing that on the ground? Is that one of the most common things you're hearing as you tour the country? In speaking with those with on-reserve schools or with those who have students attending off-reserve schools, is funding the biggest component that's been missing in this?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thanks, Mrs. Atwin, for your service as an educator.

You're absolutely right, and I fully believe that education is the key that unlocks generational poverty. As someone who was first in my family to graduate with a post-secondary education, it's near and dear to my heart.

I hear two things from communities. One, there is a recognition that there is improved funding for students by 70% since 2015. Let's be clear that we're not talking about 10% or 20% more, but 70% more, on average. We are now at provincial comparability.

However, I also hear that there are still gaps in learning because of the gap having been so neglected for so long. I was talking about a decade of darkness. That was a decade of lost multiple generations of students, who were not funded comparably to their provincial systems and who fell behind. In fact, not only were those school systems not funded; institutes who helped first nations do things like gather data were also defunded. They were starved of the resources they needed so that first nations themselves could make good decisions about how to move forward on education.

What I'm hearing is, "Please, let's not go back there." We need long-term agreements that are going to solidify this funding so that we never again see a government cut funding for indigenous education or cut funding for indigenous infrastructure or cut funding for indigenous water or all the things that we saw in complete, decrepit decay when we took office in 2015. It's a lot of work and a lot of financial commitment, but first nations communities are doing that work with us. I can tell you that there is a groundswell of change happening. What people fear the most is a return to the past. They fear that if our government isn't around and a Conservative government is elected, they're going to lose those gains.

Quite frankly, Mrs. Atwin, that's why we're working on long-term agreements with first nations, so that they have the runway, the autonomy and the sufficiency of funding to make sure we don't end up in that place again.

**Mrs. Jenica Atwin:** Thank you very much for that answer.

Again, I studied this even before I entered into education and then came to this place. Seeing the growth over the last couple of years has been incredible. We're feeling it in communities across the country.

Of course, we're focusing on how to improve graduation rates and those kinds of outcomes. I'm also wondering, with a focus on excellence in education for indigenous peoples across the country, about this: What is the most effective measure our government can take to increase first nations enrolment in post-secondary education?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much. That's a really great segue.

I will also say—and I didn't want to lose sight of this—that our commitment to funding Jordan's principle and making sure that every child gets the support through Jordan's principle, ending generations of neglect on behalf of governments at all levels towards first nations children, is also helping with education and retention in school systems and with supports for families who want to make sure their kids can succeed.

In terms of post-secondary education, this is something that, as I mentioned, is near and dear to my heart. In communities that have the capacity—for example, with own-source revenue to augment the supports from the federal government—to ensure that every student who has the ability to go to post-secondary training or education can actually get there and can stay enrolled in those schools, you can see that what actually happens is that people graduate with the skills that are needed to run communities. People come back as nurses, accountants, lawyers, doctors, civil engineers and construction workers, and communities begin to thrive because residents themselves are taking control over their communities and are able to run them in a way that is indigenous-centred and trusted by the communities.

I look at the community of Biigtigong in my own riding, which made a commitment 40 to 50 years ago to ensure that every child who wanted to access post-secondary could. They have a wraparound program whereby they make sure that children are attached to community members, so that if they're struggling while they're away for school, they can connect with community and remind themselves again about why they're doing this and who they are, in a culturally appropriate way. Those students are coming back. Fifty years later, that community has teachers from Biigtigong, nurses from Biigtigong, water operators from Biigtigong and construction workers from Biigtigong. They have a number of economic development opportunities, including the approval of a mine in a joint project with the nearby Town of Marathon.

That's the kind of potential that communities have when we see post-secondary students succeed. It has been a priority for me as the minister to make sure that I impress this on my colleagues: that we need to continue our journey to ensure that the supports are there.

Students are entitled to Canada student loans and grants, which, by the way, we doubled. Children, young people and adults who are in poverty and are first-time applicants for Canada student loans and grants are going to get more money for the tuition aspect and

some of the living expenses, but there is often a need for additional supports. That's to make sure we can retain people in environments that oftentimes are very new and different, and are difficult for people to stay in.

• (1625)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Over to you, Mrs. Gill, for two and a half minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, we talked about the Auditor General's audit of the elementary and secondary education program—specifically, the relevance and accuracy of the data and the sharing of those data with indigenous communities. We also talked about the methodology, which doesn't guarantee that the data will be relevant or accurate, but at least the department confirmed that changes are being made to improve things.

I'd like to hear your views on something else that was raised, and it isn't necessarily tied to methodology. The audit revealed that the department did not report results for many measures. We are talking about a lot—17 out of 23.

Why were there no results for those measures?

Since then, have you managed to report results for all the measures?

[*English*]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I would have to have more specific indicators. I don't have the report in front of me. Can you draw out a couple of examples for me?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** It's about more than just the actual examples. I'll give you the figures, plain and simple.

In its audit of the on-reserve elementary and secondary education program, the Office of the Auditor General noted that the department should have provided results for all 23 measures but that it didn't report results for 17 of them. In other words, the department didn't report on roughly 75% of the measures.

First of all, is there a reason why the department wasn't able to provide those results or couldn't?

Second, what efforts were made to report as many results as possible for each measure?

[*English*]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** That's where I think this new cohort-based high school graduation rate methodology is going to improve the department's ability to both gather data and measure the difference in high school graduation rates, for example. That is part of the departmental report for 2022-23 and the targets we were talking about earlier that will be available this fall.



• (1635)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I don't know how much time I have, Mr. Chair, but I'll take a stab at first of all answering the meat of the question. There is so much trauma, and this is true of Inuit children, but not only Inuit children. There is residential school trauma. The infliction of trauma, as a result of the experience of colonization, is in the DNA of indigenous people in this country. It for sure impacts the capacity of people to learn, and it for sure impacts their capacity to stay and focus in school.

You're absolutely right. It intersects with the shortage of housing and with the many other ways indigenous people experience poverty in communities all across this country. That's why the work we're doing to close the infrastructure gap by 2030, which is an ambitious goal, is so critically important.

You're right: If you're living in a household of 14 people, what that means in practice, as some elders and parents have told me, is that people sleep in shifts. You take turns sleeping, because there isn't space for everyone to have a normal night. That is obviously not compatible with learning or education.

I really hope, when we see budget 2023, we don't see a repeat of what we saw in budgets 2021 and 2022, which was the Conservative Party, in particular, voting against the investments in indigenous peoples and voting against the investments in education. The sum of \$1.2 billion in 2021 was invested in education. It was voted against. There was \$6 billion for infrastructure, including shovel-ready infrastructure projects that were ready to go. Operation and maintenance costs were voted against by Conservatives. There was \$107.9 million for elementary and secondary education—

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** I'm so sorry. I need to interrupt you because I don't know if my question was interpreted.

My question was this. Can you commit to investing more in education, so that there are improved and renovated schools and they are getting the expansions that were promised? I've been to Whale Cove, Arviat and Coral Harbour. All of them have been promised extensions, because there is overcrowding and there are not enough classrooms.

**The Chair:** Ms. Idlout, just finish your question, and we'll have to have a quick answer. We're past our time.

**Ms. Lori Idlout:** Will there be an increase in investments for schools in Nunavut?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you, Ms. Idlout. My apologies for not answering that at the front. I will say that that's the point behind the tripartite table, to work with the Government of Nunavut and the Government of Canada, together with Inuit leaders, to make sure we do everything together to ensure that people have schools that are safe and that are going to work for the education of Inuit children.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister Hajdu, for appearing before us today as we look at the issue of education for indigenous people. Thank you very much, Deputy Minister Wilson, for also being on hand.

We will suspend briefly, committee, and prepare for our second panel.

Thank you.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

**The Chair:** We are resuming.

We would like to welcome our second panel. We have with us from Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, Ms. Angela Bate, who is director general, and Dionne Savill, director general, implementation branch, both by video conference today.

With us in the room we have, from the Department of Indigenous Services, Rory O'Connor, director general, regional infrastructure delivery branch, and Jonathan Allen, who is a director with the department.

Welcome to all of you. I understand there are no opening statements, but that you are here to answer our questions. We'll launch into that right away.

We'll start with six minutes with Mr. Zimmer.

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

Maybe just for clarity on the witnesses again, because I know there's an update to the agenda this morning.... The member from Yukon.... Who does that person represent again, just for clarity?

**The Chair:** These are all people from federal departments, two from Crown-Indigenous Relations and two from ISC.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Okay. Thanks for clarifying, Mr. Chair.

I'll start off with, I have some questions, as a former teacher myself. I taught high school for seven years. I was a bit unique, I guess, in my education. I became a tradesman. I was a Red Seal carpenter; I am a Red Seal carpenter. Then I went and got two degrees after that. I have seen both sides of the fence, with a trades education and also university. I have a heart for trades training—let me put it that way.

I'll dig into this article from Nunavut News. It was dated June 26, 2021.

Statistics Canada reported as of 2016 that 41 per cent of Inuit had attained their high school diploma. Among Inuit living within Inuit Nunangat, 28.2 per cent reported a post-secondary qualification compared with Inuit living outside Inuit Nunangat at 53.3 per cent.

"It is working, but not to its fullest capacity," says Peesee Pitsiulak, Nunavut Arctic College's Nunatta Campus dean and a member of the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework's Task Force on Northern Post-Secondary Education.

I'll start off with that. It's not a great stat. One thing I always found as a bit of joy in being a teacher and a coach was seeing kids in my class succeed and go off. They'd come to me later on and say, "Mr. Zimmer, I'm a welder now," or, "I have my degree." I couldn't be happier for students who have achieved more success after they've been in my class.

There are still problems. I'll quote an article. The article is "The Insufficiency of High School Completion Rates to Redress Educational Inequities among Indigenous Students", and I'll quote a paragraph in it that I think is telling.

Notably absent from these plans is consultation with First Nations communities regarding their perspectives on potential improvements and the accessibility of the system. Since we understand that on-reserve First Nations students have the lowest graduation rates, perhaps engaging with these communities on collaborative strategies through the Accountability Framework could drastically increase learners' success in the education system and reduce pervasive disparity.

It continues:

For example, the increases in the graduation rates to near parity for Indigenous learners in the northern British Columbia school district previously referenced was built upon strong relationships and collaboration with First Nations....

I had this question for the minister, but I understand that she could only be here for an hour. We can talk about this all day long. We could have meetings for 10 years and 20 years and still have more meetings and more meetings. We could throw funding at the problem, but unless we're consulting with first nations communities to ask what we need to do to fix this, then we're going nowhere. We're spinning in circles and just spending a lot more money, not getting anywhere.

The sad part of it is that the kids are the ones who lose. They're the ones who end up at a lower graduation rate and with less of an opportunity going forward.

What I want to do is ask whoever is part of the department this: What are you doing to consult with first nations about how to increase these rates—graduation rates and success rates—among indigenous students in indigenous communities?

• (1645)

**The Chair:** If your question is for ISC, it's for these two gentlemen in the room.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Sure—or the ones online, too.

**The Chair:** They are from Crown-Indigenous Relations. Could you point to one of the departments, at least?

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'd look for an answer from any of them. If they can give me.... If they're working on this, I'd like to hear it.

**The Chair:** Mr. Allen, go ahead.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen (Director, Department of Indigenous Services):** In the context of first nations' engagement in co-development for elementary and secondary education, that was a fundamental tenet of how education transformation for secondary was undertaken, which led to the implementation of a new funding approach in 2019. In the—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Let me just stop you. I'm not talking about funding approaches. I'm talking about actually dealing with curricula, whatever shortfalls are there in delivery. I don't think it's a question of funding. Yes, funding might be part of the problem, but when we talk about graduation rates, there are other systemic issues there that we have to fix. I've seen issues within the non-indigenous community and graduation rates and how to fix them, too. They're different.

I want to hear if you're consulting with first nations communities to find solutions to get the rates higher. Are you doing that? I don't want to hear about money right now.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** Yes, we are engaging in co-developing in a couple of different contexts.

There are technical tables that look at the ongoing implementation of the elementary and secondary program. They exist in different formats, depending on who our partners are in each region. In Ontario, for example, there's a region-wide technical table that has education practitioners and administrators who look not only at the funding formula but also at what it does, the types of data and outcomes.

The permanent bilateral mechanisms also look at education writ large and what partners want, and—

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Looking at things, I still haven't heard you say.... We have the Doig and Blueberry first nations in my community. There's Halfway. There's Prophet River. I haven't heard an example of you sitting down at this particular forum to discuss how to increase graduation rates in first nations communities. I still haven't heard you say that.

Maybe it's intertwined in that explanation. Please, if you have that, say it now.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** The technical tables I referred to include both the implementation of the funding and the outcomes—the challenges, the hurdles, the objectives that our partners are looking for—that can then be tied to the implementation to get to those results. It starts with the money and gets the results.

Also, regional education agreement tables—

• (1650)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** My time is short. I apologize.

Outcomes are an important thing. We can do this for 20 years and never arrive on a landing spot. When is the deadline for these outcomes, where we have the goal and we say that we're going to try to have this out the door by the end of 2023 to change things going forward?

Do we have a timeline in place by which this is supposed to be in place?

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** The departmental plans, which were referred to earlier with the minister and deputy minister, set a one-year deadline to set the targets. COVID has pushed those out. That's what's in our most current departmental plan. We're working with the AFN and partners at those tables that I mentioned.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** What's the deadline?

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** It's setting them for March 2023 for publishing in the next round of departmental plans and reports.

The issue there is that co-developing them takes time and trust. What's emerging—what we're hearing—is that rather than a target, a year-over-year improvement or check-in is more representative of what our partners are facing and how they deliver their systems.

That is the kind of dialogue we're having at the technical tables, at regional educational agreements and with the AFN and other groups, looking specifically at the outcomes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Yes. The one thing that—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Zimmer. We're way over time.

We'll go to Mr. Hanley for six minutes.

**Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.):** Thank you.

I'm a guest on this committee. I appreciate the opportunity to participate.

This is an important study. Thanks to the committee members for putting this study forward.

My interest in first nation education and graduation rates began in my days as Yukon's chief medical officer of health, when I recognized and wrote about the relationship between first nations graduation rates and future opportunities in health and well-being.

In the Yukon, there was a critical—you might even say scathing—2019 Auditor General's report that I'm sure you're familiar with, which showed little progress in graduation rates amongst Yukon first nations. That gap was not only between first nations and non-first nations; there was also an urban-rural gap. I think one of the most significant developments we've seen since that report was the creation, with a real sense of urgency, of the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate, and then, just a year ago, in February 2022, a First Nation School Board with elected trustees.

To maybe answer some of Mr. Zimmer's questions, I think there is an example here of some real partnerships with first nation governments and first nation people in the Yukon that really take things in a different direction. Hopefully these augment and accelerate progress towards better outcomes.

With that overall context, I think my first question is for Ms. Savill.

I know you're based in the Yukon. I wonder if you can just briefly tell me your role vis-à-vis first nation education writ large and perhaps specifically as it relates to what's going on in the Yukon.

**Ms. Dionne Savill (Director General, Implementation Branch, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Hanley.

I recently changed roles. I'm now the director general of the implementation sector, but I have worked with Yukon first nations on developing their own vision for education in the Yukon for their children. That has meant, as you say, the First Nation School Board and the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate.

In their self-government agreements and their modern treaties, Yukon first nations have jurisdiction over the provision of education programs and services for citizens choosing to participate. Self-governing Yukon first nations also have the ability to assume

responsibility for the territorial programs and services. That being said, to date they have chosen to focus on a First Nation School Board and also the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate, which is funded through Indigenous Services Canada's education partnerships program to the tune of about \$2.8 million annually.

We have seen successes in first nation programming on the land and through language and culture, which has been introduced into the school system.

**Mr. Brendan Hanley:** Thank you. That's a perfect segue into my second question, which is about language and culture.

As you've indicated, there has also been significant investment in programming recently in first nation language programs, including language nests, immersion programs for youth and immersion programs for adults, even. I want to point that out and also maybe have you comment on the relationship between how that relates to ultimately improving educational outcomes in the Yukon. How important is the federal support for language development and the resuscitation of imperiled first nation and indigenous languages?

That's open to either you, Ms. Savill, or anyone who might want to jump in on that.

• (1655)

**Ms. Dionne Savill:** The Yukon first nations have had program service transfers of federal funding around indigenous languages, and that has enabled many of them to start immersion programs. For example, the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations have a complete immersion program through which they recently graduated 30 students. There's a real language revitalization that is their linking to success for student outcomes. Other first nations, because of that example, are following along.

At Yukon University there's a native language centre that is producing tools to enable teachers to teach the first nation languages of each of the traditional territories in the schools.

I'll leave it at that and see if my colleagues have anything they would like to add.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** Thank you.

I'd add as well that with first nations on reserve, part of the education transformation funding includes an enhancement beyond the provincial comparability base, regardless of what provinces provide for indigenous language and culture. The department's funding formula in each region with first nations on reserve adds to that funding, because our studies and our partners tell us how fundamentally important it is for them to see their language and culture reflected in curriculum. Learning their language creates more of an attachment to school, to participation, to perseverance and to future post-secondary attachment.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hanley.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have six minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

During our first hour with the minister, Ms. Hajdu, we talked about the Office of the Auditor General's 2018 report on elementary and secondary education on reserves. We discussed a number of issues, especially how hard it was to obtain data to get an accurate reading of the situation. That's what was discussed.

At the very end of the discussion, I brought up indicators. Of the 23 measures used, the department did not report on 17 of them. I would think the departments are the ones that select the measures.

On one hand, there are no data, and on the other, measures can't be reported on because of the lack of data. We were told that a transformation would be taking place, and I hope that's the case.

I have other questions along the same lines.

Of course, you set targets with the best of intentions. In June and December of 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released reports containing recommendations. One of those recommendations calls on the federal government to work with indigenous communities to develop a strategy to reduce—in an ideal world, eliminate—the gap in education and academic success between non-indigenous communities and indigenous communities. The government later said that it had implemented measures to close the gap.

In short, the government said in 2015 that it had implemented measures to close the gap, but a few years later, the Office of the Auditor General put out a report stating that what the government was doing wasn't working. The department wasn't collecting the necessary data. The report even said that the funding system wasn't working and that the whole strategy should be reviewed.

Have you introduced a new strategy since?

According to the government's website, new measures were put in place to close the gap. What are those measures? I'm not talking about the measures that were implemented previously. I'm talking about new measures.

Feel free to tie in other issues as well. We are talking about funding, yes, but the problem goes beyond education funding. My fellow member Mr. Hanley brought up language. The last study dealt with that. The issues don't exist in silos; they are interconnected.

You have free rein to go outside the scope of the question.

• (1700)

[*English*]

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** Education transformation and first nations control of first nations education on reserve for elementary and secondary are our driving mandate and our driving purpose. That transformation is attached to funding, the program structure, outcomes, reporting and data.

The Auditor General's report really drove a lot of that. The minister spoke about the change to the graduation rate, which was criticized in the Auditor General's report because it focused only on students who had entered grade 12 and graduated. We've moved and will be reporting in the next cycles of plans and reports a cohort base, which matches more what the census in Canada does, as well as what provinces do and what our partners do as they support students throughout their high school career toward attainment, not just those at the end. That is a concrete change that is driven by that Auditor General report.

We also looked at the type of data, the amount of data and the reporting burden, and we have reduced that. A part of the program structure of transformation was eliminating proposal-based programs, which were very cumbersome and resulted in funding and activities that weren't evenly or fairly distributed across the country or within regions. The elimination of those and the move to a formula basis greatly reduced the number of proposals and reports that partners would need to go through.

The changing performance measurement framework that the department works on is really targeted at what drives the funding out in a transparent, predictable way, and we are creating that space to co-develop indicators with our partners, as well as through regional education agreements, which are the most powerful part of our mandate to have first nations define their vision, their voice and their outcomes.

The CEPN in Quebec, the First Nations Education Council, is about exactly that. I understand a witness will be appearing here in the future. It's about letting first nations have those three parts—the transformed funding, the structure and the outcomes—to define how they will see their students, under their control, advance.

Thank you.







When the minister was here, she spoke about the coming plan for some of those graduation targets, which we'll see in the fall, I suppose. I'm curious about whether those targets will include a breakdown of students attending school on reserve and indigenous students who are part of the provincial systems, attending off reserve.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** The graduation rate will be for students funded by ISC. Those are first nations students who are ordinarily residents on reserve and who attend either first nations-administered schools or provincially operated schools—meaning they travel off reserve to those local private or federal schools. All those types of students within the student body will be reported on.

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** Thank you.

I'm curious about... Let's go a bit broader than graduation rates themselves. Obviously, that's a very important metric we should be tracking—perhaps the most important. However, is there a plan—or already a process in the department, perhaps—to measure things such as attendance rates, for example, or other metrics that measure the success of your program, so far?

• (1715)

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** Attendance and participation are key parts of what we're hearing at regional education agreement tables. As I said earlier, those are the venues where partners can look at the needs and outcomes defined by their vision for education within their communities—one community or multiple communities. The basic tenets that come up are these: Are students participating in class? Are they progressing and are they completing? Beyond that, we work to have our partners tell us what that means to them. We've heard examples such as a longer or shorter secondary...to accommodate family or working needs, potentially, or different times for a year-long secondary education grade.

All those things are possible through the development of a regional education agreement. The departmental indicators are anchored in that graduation rate, but the regional education agreements let us go a bit further. The engagement happening on the departmental educators is similar, but we try to make them as minimal as possible in recognition of first nations control and to eliminate the reporting burden in terms of information and data that aren't being used to generate that funding. Striking the right balance is exactly what we're discussing, not only through co-development with our partners in the AFN, but also with individual regional education agreement tables—anywhere it comes up.

We're learning from our self-governing partners, as well. There were examples with the MK agreement and some of the B.C. agreements. With jurisdictional control come all the reporting and data by and for the communities, to their membership. We learn from our self-governing partners, as well, in order to guide us on the right balance between departmental reporting reach and what is rightly under first nations control.

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** I appreciate that.

I want to touch on something I believe the minister was speaking a bit about as well, some of those connected issues, not necessarily when it comes to education specifically but things that impact education, such as some more of the socio-economic issues—things like the infrastructure gaps that we're seeing and the boil water advisories. There are still many communities, of course, across the

country, many in my own riding in northwestern Ontario, that are fighting and hoping to have clean water and improved infrastructure, despite some significant progress that has no doubt been made. Of course, we know there's still a large gap there.

Have there been metrics used by the department to measure or account for how those types of social issues also create barriers to education?

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** The department looks to community well-being and different indices that link together some of the fundamental health, community safety and community infrastructure aspects, as well as education. That's the context in which we hear partners talk about tracking and reporting change year over year, because there's so much involved in it.

That creates some opportunity to look at what the influences are, where there are some successes and where there is more work that needs to be done across different streams of the department. We look at that very much.

Again, in regional education agreements, it's an opportunity to also take a broader look at self-government agreements, in which there may be other sectoral subjects that come together and can be tied together that way. It's definitely as holistic as we can make it, from what we've learned from our partners.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

We'll now go to Ms. Atwin for five minutes.

**Mrs. Jenica Atwin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

I'm going to ask my question of Mr. O'Connor. It's similar to the questions Ms. Idlout was asking with regard to building schools and how important that piece is. Certainly the effort that was put into the residential school system should be outmatched by our efforts now to address the wrongs that were done.

I know there's a community in my riding in particular that has applied to have a school built on reserve. Access to land is an issue.

Can you give a bit of an example of why communities might not receive that funding or a proposal might not be funded to build a school, so we can have a better idea of how we can support communities in their dream, should it be their goal to have a community school?

**Mr. Rory O'Connor:** This touches me close to home. I've worked for over six years as associate regional director general in the Atlantic region. I've been in schools throughout the four Atlantic provinces. I've seen how well the communities who have a new school are using it. It goes right into the study into educational attainment, but it's also important to the community. Those are places for gatherings. In some places, they are emergency shelters for extreme weather. They are so important for communities.

I would say that one of the key things is that a lot of additional funds have gone into school builds over the last number of years. There have been a number of new schools built thanks to the dedicated funding, but there is still a huge demand. Part of that is related to inflation, COVID cost increases and supplies. There is a demand. There is a list of schools waiting to be built.

We have to prioritize what is built in co-operation with communities. Some of the things we look at are, obviously, health and safety and the condition of the current facility. We look at overcrowding. We look at accessibility of schools off reserve. That is one potential consideration. We look at the design and cost efficiency opportunities, because sometimes it might make more sense to build a new school than keep an old school running and try to do the repairs to it.

Those are some of the key prioritization principles we look at when we're trying to do the prioritization of what can be funded and what can't. Timing might also be a question that's looked at. When could the shovel be put into the ground?

• (1720)

**Mrs. Jenica Atwin:** That's great. Thank you very much.

In that same vein, speaking to how important schools are in that they become the heart of the community, the centre of activity, in my experience on the east coast most band-operated or community schools are K to 8, and there aren't very many that go to secondary level. What we've seen statistically is that the highest dropout rates happen in grade 9, the first time you're entering the high school stage, because it doesn't have that same feeling. There isn't that representation. Perhaps it's located outside your community, and there's a transportation piece as well.

I'm just wondering a bit more about those tripartite tables for discussions with provinces and territories, which are then responsible for the delivery of education, and where they might be falling short on reaching these outcomes. How can we better support changes there as well that are slightly outside our jurisdiction?

Perhaps Crown-Indigenous Relations would be the better place to have the answer.

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** I could perhaps start with the tripartite. Our education partnerships program and streams of funding through the education branch of ISC support tripartite work with first nations, provinces and the federal government to look at the types of supports students need to transition between the systems, data sharing among provincial school boards and communities on their students' results, and participation of communities in provincial boards. That's both because students who may ordinarily be residents on reserve attend provincial schools and because the indigenous students in the provincial system can be the focus of

provincial activities to shape language, culture, connections to communities and things like that. That program exists and there are memorandums of understanding in different tables and activities across the country that support that tripartite approach as well. I hope that helps.

**Mrs. Jenica Atwin:** Is there anything to add from the other witnesses? No. Okay.

Again, I think there's a lot we need to do as far as those tables of discussion and ensuring everyone's on board are concerned. I've certainly seen a lot of development in that area. Part of that, though, is with departmental officials who are coming to check in. For example, when I was working in indigenous schools and doing the nominal roll every year, we had the Indigenous Services Canada officials come in and check to see if our data was accurate, if we were crossing our t's and dotting our i's. Oftentimes, teachers who were employed through the community felt a bit as if they were misunderstood.

Has anything been done there with sensitivity training and cultural training to ensure that anyone who's entering into these schools or into communities has the background to make those involved feel comfortable and respected?

• (1725)

**Mr. Jonathan Allen:** Yes. As departmental employees there is cultural awareness training and there are different kinds of activities that we do to understand our colleagues and the best way to work together with first nations partners.

Also, we've established in the education branch an education data unit that includes a training stream. That is as much training for our own staff about the data-in, data-out points on education, given that its student data is some of the most sensitive. The nominal roll, which you referred to, is the registry of eligible students. Those activities take place at the front lines, with school administrators in communities.

We have a system that gives communities access to all their own data, with all the principles of ownership and control, so the communities can use that data to drive some of their own strategies and work and school lists in the same way as it is also used to drive funding.

Overall, that's where the relationship really happens on the front lines, and we've worked to try to anchor it in data that is owned by our partners. The use of it by the department and its purpose are very clear. Again, that links back to what we learned from the Auditor General's report as well.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Atwin.



I don't know if there's anything CIRNAC wants to add to that.

**Ms. Angela Bate:** Thanks, Rory.

I can add that we have similar objectives in terms of hiring indigenous staff. We probably lag a bit behind Indigenous Services in terms of our results at this point in time, but one of the things we're working on is simply to create a healthy, safe workspace where all of our employees, including our indigenous employees, are free to express their thoughts, contradict us if needed and share their experiences.

We also put a significant emphasis on indigenous learning. There's a mandatory 15 hours-per-year requirement for all our employees.

I want to comment on one of the things you said earlier around the importance of indigenous people being in charge of their own learning and their ways. The work I came here to talk about is still pretty early in terms of its implementation. We signed the first agreements in 2021 and implemented them with the first four nations in 2022.

We hear back from some of those communities about the importance of this work. One of the comments is that there's a momentum of hopefulness and community pride as they move towards control of their education model, based on their own principles, such as "*nt'ákmen*", or how their ancestors did things. That's an example of what we're hearing back from the communities.

We don't have results or reports at this stage in terms of graduation rates, but the feeling of ownership and responsibility as they take on jurisdiction, I think, is remarkable.

Thanks.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

That brings our second panel to completion.

Thank you very much, Ms. Bate and Ms. Savill, for joining us online, and thank you, Mr. O'Connor and Mr. Allen, for being with us in person today to answer our questions.

With that, committee members, this meeting is adjourned.

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