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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 124 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Once again, I am going to abbreviate the instructions, but for those who are in the room, I would remind you that there are little cards with explanations concerning feedback incidents and how to avoid them. I ask that only one microphone be on at a time, so please do not turn your mic on until I give you the floor.

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

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who are with us by videoconference for the first hour of the meeting.

First, we have Paul E. Henry, major (retired) and director of education and secretary-treasurer of the Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario.

Next, from the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon, we have Jean-Sébastien Blais, president, and his associate, Marc Champagne, executive director.

Each witness will have five minutes to make their presentation, after which there will be a period for questions from each party. I am strict about time, because that allows all parties to ask questions.

Mr. Henry, from the Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Paul E. Henry (Retired Major, Director of Education and Secretary-Treasurer, Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario): Hello, *aanii*, Mr. Chair and members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

My name is Paul Henry, major (retired) and director of education and secretary-treasurer of the Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario, also known as the CSC Nouvelon, which is located on the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek and Wahnapiatae nations, which is designated in the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850. More specifically, it lies in the corridor that is the route of Highway 17, the Trans-Canada, which goes through Sudbury East, Greater Sudbury, Algoma, Michipicoten, Wawa and Chapleau. It is a French Catholic school district extending from

Markstay-Warren to Hornepayne and consisting of over 20,000 square kilometres,

This is my 33rd year in Franco-Ontarian education, in the course of which I have spent the last five years at the helm of the CSC Nouvelon, and I will be bowing out in spring 2025. I want to offer my very sincere thanks for this invitation and this important and unique opportunity to present my perspective as an experienced educator and administrator in the field of the official languages of Canada. My brief presentation will touch on various issues that I consider to be crucial in order to secure and intensify the “by and for” approach for francophones in minority communities, while respecting our linguistic duality under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982. At bottom, governance of my Catholic school board, whose first language is French, is the determining factor and must be intensified.

Moving on, I will now present several crucial concerns in the form of pillars, to lay the groundwork for the discussion that will follow.

I will start with funding for French first language education. The funding allocated by the federal government to the provinces, and in particular to Ontario, is not always divided equitably among the 12 French-language school boards and the Consortium Centre Jules-Léger. Increasingly, we feel that the idea of uniform solutions is being applied in Ontario without our knowledge. This kind of approach is discriminatory, inequitable and unfair to us as compared to the approach adopted for our anglophone counterparts. It seems that we are always having to demand our rights and the gains we have made. Otherwise, it is our students, our learners, our parents and guardians, our elected representatives, and our staff members who end up the losers—

The Chair: Wait just a minute, Mr. Henry. I have stopped the clock because there is a technical problem with the interpretation. I think your mic is too close to your mouth and because you are speaking forcefully, it is causing the sound to be distorted, so I would ask that you move back a bit.

Thank you. You may continue.

• (1110)

Mr. Paul E. Henry: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The second point relates to early childhood education, the goal of which is to provide a K-12 continuum of learning, from kindergarten to grade 12.

The federal government, represented by the Department of Canadian Heritage, in collaboration with the Ontario Ministry of Education, recently granted increased funding in the amount of \$4.2 million to the Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario. That money will support the completion of a major expansion: a new child care centre in our new school being built in the Val Thérèse, Hanmer, and Capreol districts. We want to thank the federal government again for this considerable financial support. There will be 88 new places in this modern child care centre, which will accommodate infants, toddlers and preschool aged children, who will thus be able to embark on their learning path in a French first language Catholic school environment.

This important, decisive and extraordinary funding will enable us to respond to a glaring need for much desired places in schools and support our future parents and future students, since the waiting lists are enormous at present. Obviously, the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, is strongly encouraged to continue offering essential financial support through its action plan for official languages. The experts confirm that exposing our future students earlier to French as a first language is a determining factor in their later success in the K-12 learning continuum.

The third concern is the violation of section 23 and failure to respect our governance in French as a first language. The 1990 Mahe decision gave francophones the right to manage their schools. This essential right was entrenched in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, by the Supreme Court of Canada, applying section 23, specifically. It is still a leading legal tool for guaranteeing our governance in our French first language school boards.

We have actually seen for some time that successive Ontario governments do not seem open to recognizing and respecting this fact. Recently, we have seen various sworn statements made in cases heard by the Ontario Court of Justice that make it plain what risk that francophone school boards are at, because of the underfunding of transportation and allocation of new capital projects, among other things. It is important to note that several of the boards are currently in a deficit situation because of this underfunding. I want to reiterate the importance for us all of having our fair share of the market and being properly funded, for the future of our students and the survival of our French first language schools.

My fourth point is the conceptual framework for developing educational leadership. For several years, the Conseil ontarien des directions de l'éducation de langue française has been calling on the Ontario government to allocate funds to the school boards so they can set up leadership and mentoring programs to support senior managers and managers in the schools and in the councils' own services. It would be good if the government prioritized ad hoc funding precisely to ensure that there is an adequate pool of people with preparation in leadership to fill these positions in the years to come.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Henry. You may have an opportunity to make the other points in your presentation during the question and answer period. For the moment, however, I have to give the floor to the other organization, the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon.

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

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais (President, Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon): Good afternoon to all of the committee.

I am very pleased to be with you today to talk about the Yukon perspective on the underfunding of French education. With me is Marc Champagne, our executive director.

I come from a school board whose activities and facilities are located on the territories of three Indigenous nations: the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in nation, in Dawson, and the Ta'an Kwäch'än council and Kwanlin nation, in Whitehorse. I want to recognize them and congratulate them on their contribution to the education of their students.

My presentation will cover three topics: kindergarten to grade 12, early childhood education, and post-secondary education.

I want to point out that Yukon is the only place in Canada where the demographic weight of the francophone population has not declined in the last 50 years; the opposite is true: it has grown by 87% since 1971. With this constant growth in the French-speaking population of Yukon comes an increase in needs in both urban and rural areas. If we want to maintain that growth, we must have the resources to support education in French, from early childhood to the post-secondary level.

First, education from kindergarten to grade 12. As you know, the francophone community has schools in Yukon. Those schools are how we are able to access our language and our culture. Whitehorse has two francophone schools: Émilie-Tremblay School and Paul-Émile-Mercier Secondary School Community Centre. Dawson has the Confluence program, which offers an education from four-year-old kindergarten up to grade 5. There is also Nomad School, a virtual school that offers services to families who homeschool and do not have access to a francophone school. In total, we have 403 students in our educational institutions. We have seen growth of over 75% over the last ten years.

You are aware, of course, that funding, which comes from the official languages in education program, continues to pose serious problems. While the last action plan for official languages announced an increase in that funding, we have seen a decline in the per-student allocation. This situation is a matter of concern at a time when the needs of francophone schools like ours are continuing to grow. To meet these challenges, we believe it is essential that adequate funding, on the order of 67¢ per student rather than the 56¢ per student we currently get, be restored.

As well, in order for Canadian Heritage to be more aware of our needs and better able to fund us through the official languages in education program, we believe it should adopt a practice of systematic consultation. Consultation could take place once or twice a year. We could have a meeting with representatives of the department about the use of federal funds. This would be a way for Canadian Heritage to get information from both the territories and the provinces, but also, at the same time, from the users of official languages in education program money: the school boards. At present, there is little indication to suggest that Canadian Heritage is concerned about systematically consulting with the school boards, and this means that the territories and provinces are the only ones providing information about education to Canadian Heritage. We believe that the sources of information supplied to Canadian Heritage should be expanded.

We would like to draw your attention to another point: the lack of equity in the funding given to the territories and provinces. The cost of living in Yukon is high. Every dollar invested by Canadian Heritage in Toronto buys more goods than a dollar invested in Whitehorse. For example, in August 2024, the cost of living was 23% higher in Whitehorse than in a province like Alberta. For food, there was also a 23% difference between Whitehorse prices and prices in rural areas of Yukon. Equity therefore calls for a funding formula that takes the northern factor and the rural factor into account.

We would also point out that for remote and rural regions like Yukon, it is important that the census continue to enumerate rights holders rather than simply estimate the number. This process enables us to monitor demographic trends properly and adapt our services to the evolving needs of francophone minority communities. We want to note that evidence such as is provided by the 2021 Census enabled us to hold an effective discussion with the Yukon government, which made it possible to set up the Confluence program in Dawson.

• (1115)

I would also like to say, regarding postsecondary education, that it is also important that Canadian Heritage invest so that our secondary school graduates will pursue their education in French in postsecondary educational institutions. In Yukon at present there are no postsecondary educational institutions able to serve these students in French.

I see that my five minutes are coming to an end, and I thank you.

The Chair: Your time was not coming to an end, you had gone beyond it, but that's okay.

For the benefit of people who are not used to attending our meetings, there will now be a question period during which each party will have six minutes. We always start with the official opposition, the Conservatives.

I invite the first vice-chair of our committee, Mr. Godin, to take the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you for being with us, Mr. Henry and Mr. Blais.

I don't know what is happening in Yukon or what your recipe is, but you are getting good results. Can you tell us, briefly, how you manage to achieve such positive progress for francophones?

• (1120)

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: Two things come to mind. The first is to have high quality educational programs that make students want to attend school in French. I am thinking about the quality of the teaching and of the pedagogical tools and teacher training, and the fact that these are qualified teachers who are there for the students. The second thing is the quality of the infrastructure. When you come to our schools, you can expect to see high quality infrastructure, and this gives parents confidence that the educational experience will benefit their children. In my opinion, these two things persuade the community to come to our schools.

Mr. Joël Godin: Correct me if I'm wrong, but the territorial government is willing to collaborate and the francophone community in Yukon is important to it.

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: We have a good relationship with the Yukon government, and that is a good thing. However, it is not codified. If there were a change of leadership in the territorial government team, who knows whether the culture of collaboration would survive.

Mr. Joël Godin: So there is some fragility.

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: That's right.

I would like to ask Mr. Champagne, who deals with the senior officials in the Yukon government, to say a few words on this subject.

Mr. Marc Champagne (Executive Director, Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon): As I mentioned, our relationship often depends on people's goodwill; so it is not necessarily codified. Among other things, we are talking about the memorandum of understanding with Heritage Canada, which deals with funding. We would like the manner of proceeding, collaborating and consulting the school board here in Yukon, along with the other education stakeholders, to be codified. As you said, there is a degree of fragility when it comes to relationships.

However, we have made a lot of gains in Yukon thanks to the support of the federal government. We recently opened a secondary school community centre—

Mr. Joël Godin: Unfortunately, Mr. Champagne, I have to interrupt you, because my time is very limited. I just wanted to know whether your collaboration with the territorial government was working well.

Mr. Blais, you talked about the importance of enumerating the rights holders instead of just estimating how many there are, as the act says. The Conservative Party has fought for the obligation to enumerate these rights holders to be included and clearly codified in the new Official Languages Act.

What would the impact be, where you are, of an enumeration rather than just an estimate?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: The answer is simple. There are 45,000 of us in Yukon, which is not very many. If there was an estimate and the participation rate was low, the data would definitely not be disclosed based on statistical reliability. So it is in our interests to count the rights holders, to make sure the data can be disclosed. As well, that would give us relatively accurate figures about the situation in rural areas. The fact that people live in a rural community or made the choice to live there does not mean that they should have less data released to the territorial government. It is important to do a count to get a better understanding of the situation, and not end up with undisclosed figures.

Mr. Joël Godin: So we need a true picture, to give you the tools you need, because ultimately there is money attached to all of this.

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you. I would have liked to ask you a lot more questions, but I only have two minutes left, so I am going to move on to our other witness.

Mr. Henry, I would first like to thank you. If my information is correct, you are the first one who responded to the questionnaire. If people from other school boards are listening, I invite them to respond as well. You are an example for others to follow in this regard.

Can you tell us what impact a separate memorandum for teaching French as a first language would have? You suggested in the questionnaire that French immersion be separated from francophone instruction in the case of official language minority communities. Can you give us more details about that, please?

Mr. Paul E. Henry: Thank you for the question, Mr. Godin.

Personally, I belong to a French first language school board. It is important for us to maintain this service for parents. This is particularly the case, given that we have a very interesting situation where I am. Immigration enables us to recruit growing numbers of students from places like francophone African countries and the West Indies. The challenge we face often emerges when they arrive, since in some cases they are initially referred to English-language school boards in places like Toronto and Ottawa, for example.

In Sudbury, this is less of a problem. The presence of French as a first language in our elementary, secondary and postsecondary institutions means that parents have some degree of choice in the matter. When the students arrive in Canada with their parents, they want to be able to choose French as a first language. What changes things, in my opinion, is being able to direct them to a French first language school board.

Some parents choose an anglophone school board that offers a French immersion program. It is common for immersion programs to break down over time and end up being eliminated because of insufficient funding. That is always their problem.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Henry. We have gone well over the six minutes.

Before continuing, I note that there is going to be a vote in the House in 30 minutes. If there is unanimous consent, we can continue the meeting until 25 minutes before the vote. Is there agreement?

Mr. Joël Godin: I propose that it be 20 minutes.

The Chair: Right.

So we will move on to the next set of questions. I would ask the witnesses to excuse this interruption, but these are the vicissitudes of parliamentary life.

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

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Thank you.

Thanks to Mr. Blais and Mr. Champagne for participating in this meeting from Yukon, a magnificent territory I had the good fortune to visit in 2018. It was on the occasion of the announcement of federal funding for Yukon University. I observed the vitality of the francophone community. I also met with my friend Vincent Larochelle, who played a role on the school board and to whom I offer my indirect greetings.

Mr. Blais, you spoke about the impact of the northern and rural factors on what you are able to accomplish. Does the funding you receive from the federal government acknowledge this reality?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: That is a very good question. Thank you for asking it.

On the periodic projects, I would note that in the case of the Paul-Émile Mercier Secondary School Community Centre, we had received substantial support from the federal government, in the amount of about \$7 million. For ad hoc projects, we can sometimes negotiate increases to the envelopes. However, from what we understand, there is no factor in the official languages in education program formula at present to take the additional costs associated with northern reality into account.

In our view, it would be beneficial to review that formula in order for the difference in the cost of living and in the costs of construction and program development to be considered, and Mr. Champagne will be able to give his views on that.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: You talked about the cost of living in your opening remarks. As we know, everything costs more in Whitehorse, including groceries. When it comes to construction, what impact does that have on management of your operations? You mentioned the Mercier centre. How much does it cost to build a school in Yukon as compared to Ontario or elsewhere in Canada?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: At the time, we thought it cost 50% more to build in Yukon than to construct the same building in an urban centre in southern Canada.

Mr. Champagne, do you want to add anything on this subject?

Mr. Marc Champagne: At the time the Mercier centre was built, we were told that the construction cost per square meter was essentially about double in Whitehorse as compared to a building in Ontario or British Columbia.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Right.

I understand that ad hoc funding from the federal government, which takes this reality into account, has been very useful to you, particularly in the case of the Mercier centre.

However, if the funding from the official languages in education program took into account the reality where you live, that would help you plan your activities and your expansion, would it not?

• (1130)

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: Yes, it would.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Fine.

I am going to ask you one last question, and then I will yield the floor to my colleague Mr. Serré.

You talked about your desire to be consulted more by the Department of Canadian Heritage. Right now, it is the Yukon government that consults you, and then transmits the information to the department. Do you sometimes get the feeling that it is not adequately relayed? Is it the fact that the territory does not consult you enough? How do you perceive the situation?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: Given that this is a discussion about the federal aspect, I am going to leave the province out of this discussion.

However, we can tell you that the consultation Canadian Heritage does with our organization is actually pretty slim. We had a discussion, a consultation, with Canadian Heritage last week, but we had not had any consultation with the department for a very long time.

In our view, it is obvious that it would be beneficial for us to be able to inform Canadian Heritage about how federal funds are used. Certainly it is important that the department consult the province or territory, because they are the ones that signed the agreement. However, Canadian heritage should at least consult us too and give us an opportunity to offer our version of how the funds have been used.

Mr. Champagne could also answer that question.

Mr. Marc Champagne: At the moment, I think relations with the territory are good when it comes to the negotiations and consultations around the official languages in education program. However, there is some fragility because nothing is codified. We keep coming back to this point. If the team changes, everything could fall apart and everything could change here in the Yukon.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Thank you, Mr. Blais and Mr. Champagne.

I will now yield the rest of my time to Mr. Serré, given that we will be interrupted to go and vote in the House.

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

Obviously, because we are going to be called to vote in the House, I would not have a chance to speak during the second round of questions.

Thank you for being with us today, Mr. Blais and Mr. Champagne. I visited your school two years ago. I would ask you to thank the staff and the volunteers and parents for me, for all their work. They do an exceptional job.

Mr. Henry, I want to thank you for your service to Canada as well. That may be why you were one of the first in the country to receive our document. A big thank you too for your work in education.

I have several questions to ask, but I don't have a lot of time, unfortunately. I would like to focus on one point. You mentioned that the formula used for distributing funding among the 12 school boards is not equitable. I was a school board member for six years in the 2000s.

I would like you to talk a bit about section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We have heard here about what the federal Supreme Court could do to enable the federal government to work more with school boards rather than just with the provinces and territories. It seems that the provinces do not consult the school boards equitably.

Can you give us your recommendations for the federal government to be able to play a bigger and more direct role with the school boards?

Mr. Paul E. Henry: Thank you for the question, Mr. Serré.

At first glance, I think I am going to focus on a few points.

First, we know that governance is entrenched in the Canadian constitution under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Our school board members are elected to serve on their French first language school board to respond to what the parents in their community want. This principle is entrenched and protected. Right now, what often happens is that the provinces do not respect the duality we have been granted.

Take the example of the design of resources for our students. The teachers at French first language school boards are in the best position to define their children's needs, from kindergarten to grade 12, in their school sector. In some cases, we are required to use an English resource that has been translated, which is then distributed in the first language school. That is why I alluded earlier to the uniform solution idea. In my example, there are nuances, and this does not reflect the needs of our students.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Henry.

Mr. Serré, as you see, I am stretching the six minutes out, because there will not be a second round of questions.

Mr. Beaulieu, from the Bloc Québécois, that applies to you too. You have the floor for a bit more than six minutes.

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

Mr. Henry, in answer to the previous question about the right of school management, you said at the end that your right was not being respected because you can't choose your tools, such as reference books, which are translated from English to French and are not appropriate. Have I understood correctly?

• (1135)

Mr. Paul E. Henry: That is one example that I gave you. There have been certain discussions that I can't disclose, because they might relate to potential legal proceedings for our protection. However, I can say that in French Ontario, we often consult experts in French first language education, by and for francophones. They are experts from the University of Ottawa, Laurentian University and the Université de l'Ontario français who support us in designing resources that are adequate, or even more than adequate, for our students. This is important.

However, as I said when I answered the questionnaire, our rights are also violated when it comes to funding for transportation, since our school zones are extremely large, compared to our anglophone counterparts'. I mentioned the size of my school territory earlier, which is 20,000 square kilometres. That is a very impressive bit of land. As well, the costs associated with fuel and insurance have exploded, particularly since the pandemic. My colleague from Yukon talked about capital spending. We often find ourselves in an area where we have to practically yell to get our own infrastructure.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: When you talk about transportation, you mean that because your territory is so large, students have to travel longer distances to go to school, but you don't have a bigger budget than the other school boards, which need less transportation. Have I understood correctly?

Mr. Paul E. Henry: I forget the exact formula for funding per student for transportation, since it was amended last year, but I will give you an example. I have students who have to take the bus for an hour or an hour and a quarter to get to their high school. They leave Sudbury East at 6:30 or 7:00 in the morning to get to Sudbury itself, in Greater Sudbury. For anglophones, on the other hand, students travel by bus for a maximum of 30 minutes. That is one of the situations that makes it difficult to recruit and retain our students in our French first language schools.

Obviously, we are all part of a transportation consortium. In the Greater Sudbury region, for example, four adjoining boards belong to a consortium, and we are in the process of renewing the contracts with the school transportation vehicle operators, which should be done within two years. My colleague from Ottawa recently saw contract costs rise by between 25 and 46%, which would be attributable to the increased cost of insurance and fuel and the challenges involved in recruiting school bus drivers, in particular. When we add up several factors like that, obviously, it is the school boards that have to absorb the associated costs.

French first language school boards are recognized for their wise financial management. I am proud to say that I represent one of the only French school boards in Ontario to have a budget surplus at the moment. It isn't a huge surplus, but we have pretty impressive reserves. The government is taking a close look at our reserves. They are talking about financial accountability. Having reserves will certainly make it possible for us to build schools in the future, for example, but we still want to take a prudent financial approach.

There is one other very important factor I would like to highlight. Often, the way construction projects are awarded is not equitable. For example, for one year, in my 20,000 square kilometre large territory, two contracts, or two potential contracts, will be awarded to our anglophone counterparts, while francophones receive only one. But we want our piece of the pie. We want to be treated equally, so we are able to serve our communities and respond to what parents request.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: When you talk about unfairness for French first language school boards, you are asking that there be bilateral agreements separate from the contracts that apply to French second language instruction. Do you think too many resources are going to immersion schools as compared to schools by and for francophones?

• (1140)

Mr. Paul E. Henry: My professional opinion, after 33 years in the trade, is that there is a lot of unfairness pretty much everywhere. If we emphasize the fact that we are entitled to our own management in the French-language schools, I think that is what will enable us to go after our share of the market. So yes, while I do not have the actual figures in front of me, I would say there are some cases of unfairness.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Blais, there are no postsecondary institutions in Yukon. What happens with your graduates?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: There is a postsecondary institution, the University of Yukon, but it is not a specialized institution—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Is it a francophone institution?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: No. So students in Yukon have to go elsewhere to get a postsecondary education in French. Nonetheless, we are working on a community project to have an institution that could offer training and courses in French that are connected with labour market demand. It is going to take a few years, though.

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

We are going to move on to the last speaker in this round before the vote.

Ms. Ashton, from the NDP, the floor is yours.

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

Thank you, witnesses. I am very happy to hear the witnesses from northern Ontario and Yukon. Here at the committee, we have talked a bit about the special challenges faced by minority communities in the north, particularly from the perspective of education in French. This is an issue I am very familiar with here in northern Manitoba. Thank you for your testimony today. I think it is so important to hear the voices of the north on this subject.

Mr. Blais or Mr. Champagne, what is the situation in Yukon? Can you tell us about the labour shortage for early childhood educators and for elementary and secondary school teachers?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: I will let Mr. Champagne answer that question.

Mr. Marc Champagne: In Yukon, the labour shortage in education is felt to a much greater extent in the field of early childhood. Virtually all of the new employees in our child care centres come from outside Canada. They are newcomers to Canada. Going out and recruiting employees is an expensive, laborious and fairly difficult process.

Regarding our elementary and secondary schools, up to now, we have managed to fill all our positions with trained and qualified teachers. So we are relatively lucky, but we invest a lot in recruitment. With luck, and thanks to those investments, we have been able to fill all our positions, but it is getting harder and harder to do. So this is certainly a subject that concerns us.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Right.

As you say, recruiting and retaining staff calls for a lot of work and is very expensive. Let's talk about early childhood first. Do you believe the federal government has a role to play? Obviously, we know that funds have been promised, and I want to recognize the work done by my colleague Leah Gazan on this subject, when Bill C-35 was enacted. Do you think the federal government has a role to play, or has some responsibility, when it comes to ensuring that child care centre directors and school boards that assist child care centres have permanent funding to enable them to do staff recruitment and training?

Mr. Marc Champagne: Absolutely. We would definitely like the federal government to participate more. It's more costly to operate a francophone day care centre in northern Canada than an anglophone one. It's also harder to recruit staff, resources are more costly, and there are a lot of additional costs. Consequently, a greater contribution from the federal government would help us continue offering high-quality services and increase supply in order to meet the demand. We urgently need more new day care spaces here in Yukon. As a result, I believe that federal government support and leadership are essential in enabling us to provide equitable services.

• (1145)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Would you please tell us about day care waiting lists? Do you have any figures?

Mr. Marc Champagne: There are no French-language day care centres in Dawson right now. It's a small community, but we're working on a project to open one here. Last year, we determined that we would need French-language day care services for eight children.

Here in Whitehorse, it's harder to come up with an exact number of children who would need French-language day care services, but the local francophone day care centre, the Petit Cheval Blanc, has a waiting list more than 50 children long. So we're now working on a project to open a second day care in Whitehorse.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Do you agree with other witnesses who have said that, if no investment were made in day care centres, they

would lose francophone families and children because they might not continue their education in French beyond early childhood.

Mr. Marc Champagne: That's absolutely true. We believe in the education continuum principle. Day care centres are essential to the survival and development of francophone schools. In a way, day care centres are the nurseries of our schools. Minority communities absolutely must have French-language child care services to prepare their children and enable them to develop language skills so they're ready to enter our schools. We're losing students and families because we lack day care centres. So that has a major impact on our system.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Blais, do you have anything to add regarding your situation in Yukon?

Mr. Jean-Sébastien Blais: I'd just like to say that the cultural and language issue is an important one. Early childhood is a priority issue because every generation loses people to assimilation. If we have to invest in one sector of the education continuum in the north, it would have to be early childhood, which is an increasingly important issue for us. We'd like to see the same sort of leadership from the federal government as we saw with the Centre scolaire secondaire communautaire Paul-Émile-Mercier. That requires a type of funding that acknowledges the costs associated with early childhood education in the rural north.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blais.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Witnesses, as is sometimes the case on Parliament Hill, we must suspend this meeting because there will shortly be a vote in the House of Commons. However, if you haven't had a chance to forward all the information you wanted to send us, please don't hesitate to do so in writing and to forward it to the clerk, who will distribute it to all the committee members.

Mr. Henry, I interrupted your presentation at the five-minute mark. You were discussing a fourth point, and I cut you off. You also wanted to discuss fifth, sixth and seventh points. Please feel free to send us any additional information that can inform us and help us draft our report.

I see you've raised your hand. Do you have a question?

Mr. Paul E. Henry: Just a comment, Mr. Chair. I previously sent my remarks in French to the clerk, and they've already been translated into English. So you have the rest of what I wanted to say as well as the questionnaire that I completed.

The Chair: Thank you for responding to the questionnaire.

Thanks to all the witnesses. Your work is important, and we need to hear what you have to say so we can draft our report.

Mr. Henry, you told us you've been working in this field for 33 years. On behalf of all the members of this committee, I tip my hat to you.

Witnesses, we won't detain you any longer, but, if you wish, you may stay online or remain here in person for the next part of our meeting, which will begin when we come back from voting.

We will now suspend.

• (1145) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1210)

The Chair: We will now resume.

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

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who are with us, both in person and by video conference, for the second hour of this meeting.

From the Provincial Francophone School Board of Newfoundland and Labrador, we welcome Michael Clair, chair, who is joining us by video conference. From the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine, we also have Brigitte L'Heureux.

If I'm not mistaken, this is your first appearance before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Don't worry though; this is the best committee in town.

Each of you will have five minutes, and I ask you to stick to that time limit. That way the committee members, who are passionately interested in this subject, can ask several rounds of questions.

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

Mr. Michael Clair (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Provincial Francophone School Board of Newfoundland and Labrador): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I didn't know you were strict about the five minutes, and I timed myself at seven minutes, so I'll cut out a few parts of my speech.

The Francophonie of Newfoundland and Labrador is a very small component, less than 5% of the province's total population, and that population is scattered across the province.

We are very far from having the demographic or political weight to impose our will on the provincial government and sometimes even to be recognized at all by our decision-makers. So, we have three ways to have our rights recognized.

The first is the demographic and economic argument that we put forward. We are a gateway for francophone immigrants, people who speak one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. We open international export markets. We also tell them that the fact that we are francophones allows us to be more visible and influential within Confederation. For example, after 70 years in the Canadian family, the province finally has a judge on the Supreme Court of Canada who meets the requirement of being bilingual. So we are an asset to the province.

The second argument we can turn to is the Courts of Justice. Sometimes even the threat of litigation is enough to get things moving.

The third and final argument that we can tell you about is the federal government. This is the level of government that defends official bilingualism across the country. Although many essential services for the minority—such as education, health and early childhood—are mainly under provincial auspices, the federal gov-

ernment can encourage the provinces to better serve their linguistic minority with financial and other incentives.

And here we come to the Official Languages in Education Program, our beloved OLEP. First of all, I want to thank the federal government for initiating this program, not only for the development of the Francophonie in our province, but for its very survival.

However, not everything is perfect and I thank the Official Languages Committee for inviting me to discuss how we could improve this program. The major shortcoming of the OLEP in Newfoundland and Labrador is that the French-speaking community is in no way involved or even consulted in its development. Since the beginning of the Provincial Francophone School Board 28 years ago, not once has the province invited the board to participate in the negotiation or management of the three-year minority language education agreements that have been signed to date. I believe there have been seven of these to date.

To our knowledge, there has never been any consultation with the community to determine our needs. This goes squarely against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and even the principle of "nothing about us without us". The unfortunate reality is that people who are not an integral part of the French-speaking community identify what they interpret as the needs of the community and communicate them unilaterally to the federal government. This does not make sense, specially since clause 5.2 of the agreement requires that reports due to the federal government require the inclusion of a description of the consultations conducted with the main stakeholders for the development of the action plan and the consultation process that will be established for the implementation of the action plan. A provision of the Bilateral Agreement on Minority-Language Education thus provides that we be consulted.

However, the federal position seems to have been—and I believe it still is—that since education is a provincial prerogative, then the provinces should not be forced too much to follow the instructions of the agreement, except those related to funding. If the province does not consult its francophone community, well, too bad.

In 2017, we approached the federal government to insist that the province involve the minority community more fully in this process, without success. And so, the school board filed a lawsuit in Federal Court to force Canadian Heritage to fully apply clause 5.2 of the agreement. Seven years later, the case has not yet been heard. One of the reasons for this delay is that it is only recently that the community has come to understand in detail the workings of this agreement and the opportunities that we have missed over the years due to its lack of transparency.

• (1215)

As a result, we insisted on a meeting with the Minister of Education to develop a new protocol that would govern the negotiation and management of this agreement. We have just recently received the response that the province is ready to meet with us to discuss this issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clair. I'm sure you'll be able to tell us more about this when you answer questions from the members.

Ms. L'Heureux, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux (Executive Director, Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine): Good afternoon, everyone.

It's a pleasure for me to be here today to discuss the education continuum and, in particular, the role of early childhood in it. First of all, I think it's important to define what early childhood services are. The Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine and its partners believe it is important to provide two types of services on the minority education continuum.

First, we offer Manitoba's francophone families a network of childhood educational resource centres, family centres that provide French-language services and programming for children and their parents. In Manitoba, these centres are located in the schools of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, and they are the children's first steppingstone to their future education. The centres are full of important information, and they promote networking and convey that information to the parents.

The second service, which will definitely be of greater interest to you is the range of early childhood day care and learning services. This includes learning centres, such as early childhood centres and day cares, as well as day care services in a family setting. These services make it possible for parents to go back to work or back to school while their children continue to grow and develop through play, learning and making new friends. Providing children in the early childhood range with high-quality learning services has an enormous impact on both the children and society. These services may also have a considerable impact on the health, economic and legal systems and are thus a worthwhile investment. In a minority setting, these services also have a major impact on the development of francophone communities.

I'd like to discuss several challenges with you, but I'll limit myself to issues pertaining partnerships, accessibility, structure and funding.

To ensure a successful transition through the various parts of the continuum, we need to emphasize how important it is to promote sound partnerships and constant dialogue among the continuum's actors. The various education partners in Manitoba frequently meet to discuss the continuum, the needs of each of its components, how best to help each other and, especially, major challenges.

With regard to the challenge of accessibility in Manitoba, not all francophone families have access to a day care service or childhood educational resource centre. According to the last survey, which was conducted this past summer as part of our strategic planning, the most urgent need among families is for access to a space in a day care service. In our view, this lack of access could have a major impact on the rest of the continuum and within the francophonie as a whole.

The last challenge concerns structure and funding. It is clear from a comparison between the early childhood sector and the school board and post-secondary institutions sector that the former isn't as structured or funded as the latter. The research clearly shows that early childhood is a critical time for brain and language development. It seems to me that, if we want a genuine education continuum, we have to invest in new types of structures and early

childhood services, which include early childhood professionals and related services that make it possible to manage that structure.

Thank you very much for listening. I will be happy to answer your questions.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux. You completed your remarks in four minutes. I hope the committee members are as disciplined as you.

As the second hour of the meeting has been shortened as a result of the vote in the House, I'm going to be strict about speaking time and will warn you 15 seconds before your time is up.

We will begin with the Conservative Party. I give the floor to the committee's first vice-chair, Mr. Godin, for six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux and Mr. Clair.

Mr. Clair, you said that the Provincial Francophone School Board wasn't consulted but that the province now seemed to be open to the possibility. Has the threat of a lawsuit made them take an interest in your needs?

Today you also have an opportunity to be consulted by the Standing Committee on Official Languages about improving the education continuum. What would be the most important factor to consider when we draft our report?

Mr. Michael Clair: I think the federal government should be less skittish about enforcing the clauses of the agreement that say the community has to be consulted. It should also describe what it considers an acceptable consultation. For the moment, the provinces may or may not consult us. There's no pressure from the federal government. Now that we're going to negotiate with the province, it would be a good thing if the federal government put some pressure on it and urged it to consult us.

• (1225)

Mr. Joël Godin: I understand you, Mr. Clair, but help us help you: how can the federal government put pressure on the provinces and territories?

Mr. Michael Clair: I'm not a politician, so it's up to you to do that. All I can do is tell you what we need, which is to be consulted.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Clair, I'm going to stop you right there. Yes, you've identified a need, but I need solutions if I'm to be more effective as a legislator.

Can you tell me exactly how we can respectfully force the provinces and territories to do the right thing and help the Canadian francophonie grow?

Mr. Michael Clair: The two parties have consented, under the agreement, to conduct consultations. One of the parties isn't doing that, and the other can't force it to do so.

I therefore think that it may be up to the federal government to ensure that the province conducts its consultations, perhaps by asking the province to have the community organizations provide letters of support or letters confirming that they've been consulted and the dates of those consultations.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Clair.

Actually, the problem is that the act doesn't provide for that kind of leverage. Furthermore, provincial jurisdictions must also be respected. So this is a delicate situation which unfortunately turns on the wishes of the people and decision-makers. So that's the problem.

We've previously heard that Yukon's territorial government and the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon are co-operating. From what I understand, however, the same can't be said about Newfoundland and Labrador.

Ms. L'Heureux, it's interesting that you focus on early childhood because we heard in the first hour of our meeting that it's a nursery for developing the francophonie.

Consequently, we have to invest, but, as you know, if we invest, mathematically, the budget won't really be the same because the costs will be passed on to someone else. Federal government money is taxpayers' money, and budgets have to be managed. However, I entirely agree with your conclusion that we have to invest in early childhood because that's our resource for developing the francophonie.

Where could we find the money to invest in early childhood services and increase the potential clientele and help it expand the continuum?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: I think that both money and structure are important. Some school boards and universities receive operating funding. In the case of early childhood, individual non-profit organizations often focus on their local clientele.

Many federations of parents are developing structural initiatives. We've established the Centre d'appui à la jeune enfance du Manitoba. We also manage six learning centres, but we have 24 members. We need to have investment centralized at a central point and for funding to be distributed across the francophonie. I think that's probably the best way to do things if we want to generate economies of scale. We can't invest in every individual centre because there are thousands of them across the province. Structuring means finding ways to work together to generate economies of scale.

That being said, investments necessarily have to be made. We can't keep on professionalizing the field and engaging in development if we don't have people who can do it.

Mr. Joël Godin: You're right.

Ms. L'Heureux, I'm going to give you a piece of information that I received at the annual meeting of the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones. I don't know if it's in Manitoba, but one school centre has decided to provide full-day early childhood services. This saves money because, transportation being what it is, it costs less to provide those services over full days. They use the same transportation to—

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. That's an excellent question, but we have far exceeded the six minutes. I'm sorry, but I have to make sure that everyone has a turn.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Please make sure that I have the full six minutes and that my colleague doesn't take a few seconds of my speaking time.

Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux and my colleague from Newfoundland and Labrador, Mr. Clair.

Mr. Clair, you've been chair of the Provincial Francophone School Board of Newfoundland and Labrador for seven years. Thank you for the work you do. You discussed something that really grabbed my attention: consultation. The Standing Committee on Official Languages sent a questionnaire to all school boards and departments in Canada. It's one way for us to consult you directly so we can be sure we draft a report that highlights the needs that are expressed. Did you receive it? Do you intend to complete it soon?

Mr. Michael Clair: Yes, we received it, and we sat down this morning to complete it. You'll have it before the deadline.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm very pleased to hear it.

Second, do you know that the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones has signed an agreement on a strategic plan with Canadian Heritage to ensure that the school boards' priorities are raised in talks with the provinces regarding funding for the official languages in education program?

Mr. Michael Clair: I'm aware of the agreement, but I didn't know it would have an impact on the ground here, in the province.

Mr. Darrell Samson: All right. That means that the school boards and other stakeholders have some work to do.

Before asking Ms. L'Heureux any serious questions, I have a question for you. You said you had sued Canadian Heritage. That surprises me. Would you please explain that in a few words?

Mr. Michael Clair: Yes. We had asked Canadian Heritage to put pressure on the province, but without any success. Consequently, in 2017, we went to court to move things along.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thanks very much because we'll have to think about that. I've never thought of that strategy, but it's very interesting and I thank you for it.

Ms. L'Heureux, I've travelled many times to Manitoba, where your school board plays a very important role. Early childhood education is extremely important. There's no question that it's the right response to the increasing francophone student population.

First, is there a strong connection between early childhood services and schools in Manitoba?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes, absolutely. As I said, we meet with each other. We have a coalition.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Are you mainly responsible for children 18 months to 4 years old, or are there 4- and 5-year-olds too? Is it the Manitoba school board that handles children 4 to 5 years of age?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: In Manitoba, the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine handles kindergarten, but there aren't any four-year-olds. There are children five years old and over.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Are the four-year-olds with you or at school?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: The Division scolaire franco-manitobaine has five pilot projects that include junior kindergarten, but they aren't subsidized. The funding comes from our own budget. We handle the rest and children up to 12 years of age before and after school.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Bill C-35, which our government passed, contains strong language concerning francophone day care centres. Do you find it useful?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes, absolutely. That is especially the case for the part that was added concerning the funding needed for francophones.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

A few weeks ago, the Minister of Immigration described early childhood educators as a priority for immigration. Were you aware of that?

• (1235)

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes, I'm aware of it.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What do you think about that?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: This is certainly an area where we need to do a lot of recruitment and retention. It can be damaging.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Are you pleased? Is this going to help?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: I'm not pleased.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You're not pleased because helping people to immigrate is now a priority?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: No; pardon me, I thought you said something else.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Right. I knew we had not understood each other.

So you are very pleased because now this is going to help us to address the shortage. That is very good because we just want to make sure they are listening, here.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Right. Exactly.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You talked about a type of structure, so I will end on that important point. Very briefly, explain what the ideal structure would be, if I understood correctly, to ensure the continuum works in your province, Manitoba.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: It would be a centre that could both manage and support all kinds of services, be it recruitment, retention, finance, human resources over a broad—

Mr. Darrell Samson: Are you talking about the school system or child care centres?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: The structure would be for child care centres and learning centres. It would be the same as in the school division, which includes a human resources department, a finance

department, a quality department. There would have to be the same structure for early childhood.

Mr. Darrell Samson: So it would be a school board for early childhood.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: That's it exactly.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That is a pretty interesting idea, isn't it?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: That's right.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Right. Thank you for the work you are doing. Keep it up, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Mr. Chair, I think the questionnaire was sent to early childhood also, was it not? Or was it sent only to the school boards?

That might be an idea we should consider. We could maybe ask the child care and early childhood centres a few questions to inform our discussions. I also know that Mr. Godin would be very pleased to get a whole lot of good information to help child care centres, in Canada—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Beaulieu, I am starting the clock. The floor is yours for six minutes.

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

Ms. L'Heureux, your federation offers programs and services as well as resources for young children aged zero to five. What kinds of services do you offer? Are they offered directly, a bit like in pre-kindergartens? Can you tell us more about that?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: At the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine, we have the Centre d'appui à la jeune enfance du Manitoba. We manage six child care licences throughout Manitoba, and all of the centres and family child care centres that belong to the federation receive professional development from us. We make presentations for managers and staff. We even have someone now who supports us regarding inclusion of children with additional needs. We also have someone who helps with francization.

The services we offer families include the Little Chefs and Little Picassos programs. We also organize activities for parents. At present, there is a wide range of services to support children's overall development in 17 of our communities. As well, most of these programs are offered within the school division, although there are a few child care centres outside the division.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: About how many employees do you have?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Right now, with six child care centres, the federation has been 40 and 50 permanent employees.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That is a fairly big organization.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: It is just getting started.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Right.

What is your assessment of the situation for junior kindergarten and preschool in French, in Manitoba? Given that your organization is just getting started, is that enough or is it definitely not enough?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: It is definitely not enough. As I said, this is parents' number one need.

I have some figures. According to Statistics Canada data, there are about 6,930 children aged zero to four who are rights holders. In Manitoba, right now, there are 1,055 children enrolled in a program for ages zero to five. There is double that number on waiting lists. The last time we looked, there were about 1,800 Manitoban children waiting to get access to a francophone child care service. At present, there could be as many as 3,391. I heard reports from two parents this week who were trying to find a child care service in French in Manitoba. There is a glaring need and there has been for years.

On the other hand, we are very grateful to the federal government for its investment in early childhood education in Manitoba. All of the centres offer spaces at \$10 a day, which is excellent, but this has also increased the need for child care services. There is a huge amount of work to be done, particularly when it comes to creating more child care spaces.

● (1240)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You say there are over 7,000 preschool aged rights holders, but only 1,000 of them are enrolled in a francophone preschool program. So only one seventh of rights holders have access to preschool services.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes. Some regions have more than 300 or 400 children on their waiting lists.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's a lot.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes, and this is even the case in rural communities. For example, a child care centre was opened in Sainte-Anne, a village with a population of about 2,000. They have 150 children on their waiting list. There is a glaring need.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: What happens to children who do not have access to child care centres in French? Do they tend to go to school in English after that?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: That's right. They often go over to the anglophone side. We see that a lot.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Clair, your organization has started legal proceedings. You feel you are not being consulted enough and you believe you have not received all the funding owed to you. Can you tell us some more about that? How did you reach that conclusion?

Mr. Michael Clair: We may have received the funds we are owed, but there is a lack of transparency. We don't know what is being invested or where it is being invested. We want to know more. However, one thing for sure is that we are definitely underfunded and we would like to have more money.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That is a fairly widespread feeling. How much funding do you believe you are short, as a proportion of your budget?

Mr. Michael Clair: That is an excellent question. Unfortunately, I don't have the figures it's based on. We know we have needs that are not being met.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Roughly speaking, can you estimate the extent of these needs that are not being met? Would you need something like twice as much money? Is it less than that?

Mr. Michael Clair: We have needs we would like to meet, but we can't meet them with the current funding.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Do you know what proportion of rights holders attend French schools?

Mr. Michael Clair: Apparently Newfoundland and Labrador has the lowest participation rate for rights holders in francophone schools in Canada.

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

I will now give the floor to Ms. Ashton from the NDP for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

Ms. L'Heureux, from the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine, we are great admirers of your work. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend a family event you organized at the Centre culturel franco-manitobain. My children were able to take part. From what I saw, there is really a lot of diversity in our community. There are people and families from all over and little kids from different origins, but they are all proud francophones. So I thank you for the work you do. We believe the best way to support your work is to listen to your recommendations and then to act, of course.

I would like to focus on the early childhood programs. I have spoken a number of times in this committee about the challenge my family faced. We were on a waiting list for a long time for my twins to be able to access the services of the Les Louveteaux child care centre, which is attached to our school in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine here in Thompson. There is room, but there are no staff. Because of the labour shortage, we were unfortunately never able to enrol my children for child care in French. This is important to me.

I want to go back to the issue of the demand here in Manitoba.

● (1245)

[English]

I'll switch over to English. I think this is also a very important issue for many who are of francophone background, but because of our history, we know that we don't necessarily speak French. We also know that many newcomers value their kids being able to speak French.

How significant is the demand that you're seeing among Manitobans for their kids to be able to access day care in French? Second to that, to what extent do you believe the federal government has a permanent role to play in supporting early childhood education in French, given that we know that French is on the decline and that we know that early childhood education in French is critical to be able to get kids on track to being francophone?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: In connection with the bilateral agreements, I think the federal government can make sure it includes specific clauses for the provinces. In these agreements, the federal government can encourage the provinces to allocate a certain percentage of the funding for francophone child care services. That is probably the most effective approach to take. Right now, there are no specific clauses regarding the funding provided under this federal agreement.

So far, my experience with the Manitoba government has been very positive. We have built a very good relationship. I am hopeful that we will soon prepare a development plan that we can present to the province. The goal of the plan is to identify areas where the need for funding is greatest right now. I think we have to focus on spaces. We have to make sure that francophone spaces are prioritized.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I am very pleased to hear that you have a positive relationship with the current provincial government.

I just want to clarify one thing. Do you believe the federal government also has a role to play and has a share of the responsibility when it comes to permanent, long-term financial support?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes. Absolutely.

That is why we fought to get this funding guarantee. That said, I think it is also a provincial responsibility to ensure that funding is granted for spaces in French.

Ms. Niki Ashton: That's good, thank you.

I also want to clarify something else, just for information. The problem of the shortage of spaces in francophone child care services is very important to all of us in the New Democratic Party. My New Democrat colleague Leah Gazan, who is also from Manitoba, introduced an amendment to Bill C-35 to guarantee access to francophones in minority communities to child care services in French. We worked closely with my colleague. We believe that this must be clearly stated in the act and, of course, that there must be permanent, long-term financial support.

I want to come back to the question of the current labour shortage. We know that the Université de Saint-Boniface has an innovative project in connection with this. We also know that all our child care services are making an effort to alleviate this labour shortage. Can you tell us about the current labour shortage and about how important it is to sit all our governments down at the same table to help us find solutions to this shortage?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Yes, absolutely.

The labour shortage is real. You saw it in the Thompson region. We see it in the Saint-Georges region. The labour shortage is very apparent in rural areas, and even in the cities.

We need to attract and train more educators but we also need to be able to retain them in our early learning centres, and this brings up the issue of wages. To attract people to the field, you have to be able to offer an adequate wage. One example is Prince Edward Island, where they now offer up to \$28 an hour. They have an excess supply of personnel at the moment. We held meetings this morning about this. So I think pay really is the key issue here.

However, we also have to train people, and we have to retain them and offer them terms and conditions. When I say good terms and conditions, I am referring back to the structure, where people have good work environments: where they are offered benefits and so on.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux and Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux.

The Chair: We have less than ten minutes left, so I am going to give everyone shorter times for the next round of questions.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): I want to thank Ms. L'Heureux and Mr. Clair for being here and for their testimony.

Ms. L'Heureux, you are the executive director of the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine. Do you represent only the francophone school board, or do you also represent the parents and children in anglophone schools that offer immersion programs?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: At the moment, our mandate is to advocate for francophone parents and young children in Manitoba. We work mainly with rights holder parents in order to provide early childhood services.

Mr. Marc Dalton: How many students and schools do you represent? Are those numbers stable or are they going up or down?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: Right now, we are open to parents and each school has its own parents' committee that does not come under the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine. There are 6,000 students in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine and that number is going up every year.

Mr. Marc Dalton: You spoke before about early childhood education. What percentage do kindergarten students who enrol in a francophone program represent?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: We don't have those statistics, but we do hear reports that clearly indicate that children who attend a francophone child care service go on to attend to a francophone school. This really is the gateway to the continuum.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Marc Dalton: Yes, I wanted to know what percentage of students continued their schooling in a francophone school, in kindergarten or grade one, for example.

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: We don't have the figures, we just have the reports we hear.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Right.

I would like you to tell us a bit about immigration. What impact does immigration have on the program? Is that impact increasing? What is the difference?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: What I can say is that newcomers who have children are at the bottom of the waiting list for accessing child care. If we decide to admit immigrant families, we have to make sure we are able to offer them services. What we are seeing is that when newcomer parents enter, they put their children on the waiting list, but they are at the bottom. However, they are the first to enrol their children in an anglophone service. Some of them will then enrol their children at an immersion school after that.

That results in a complete loss of French. I have seen—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux. I am sorry to interrupt you, but I have to turn the floor over to the next speaker.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is now yours for three minutes.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Clair, I am going to ask you the same question as the one my colleague Mr. Godin asked you earlier.

I think it is really important that we complete our study. Have you had an opportunity to tell the province what your needs are? What are those needs? Do they relate to funding or infrastructure? If you could give us some concrete examples, that would help us a lot.

Mr. Michael Clair: Thank you for the question.

I don't want to paint too pessimistic a picture of our relationship with the province, since it is relatively good. In fact, most of our funding comes from the province, and things are working well.

When it comes to the official languages in education program, however, that is a long story. The problem didn't start with the current government. It actually goes back further. I don't know why we are not consulted, but we would like to have a summit to determine what the needs of the francophone community and the schools are. We would bring that information to the provincial government and the province could then negotiate with the federal government.

• (1255)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Mr. Clair, I imagine you are familiar with the needs and with what parents want to see. Can you give us some concrete examples?

Mr. Michael Clair: That question would be better put to the education branch, where they could give you some examples. My own job is to find the resources we need. We know there are positions in education that remain to be filled. We would also like to have more schools and to recruit students, because we know—

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Is it because of the lack of funding, the labour shortage, or both?

Mr. Michael Clair: Both factors are involved. Certainly we have a labour shortage at the moment. However, as I said earlier, Newfoundland has the lowest percentage of rights holders attending francophone schools. We would like to recruit, but we don't have the money.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: You're telling me there is no growth in the francophone schools in Newfoundland. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Clair: There is one, but it's slow. We know we could get a lot more.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you for being here. Thank you for the work you are doing.

Mr. Michael Clair: Thank you for your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis and Mr. Clair.

Mr. Beaulieu, the floor is yours for one minute.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Ms. L'Heureux, you talked about franco-phone immigration and the fact that there are not enough preschool and kindergarten spaces. You said that people end up continuing their schooling in English and you lose them completely. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: What we observe, and what I have personally observed, is that the parents' first choice is an immersion school.

My spouse is of African descent. I know families who have recently arrived in our area and I see children of francophone parents who speak only English because they spend all day in English child care centres. Obviously, when it comes time to choose a school, the parents are going to consider sending their child to an English school. If they send them to a French school, however, we have to consider all the francization supports and additional investments that have to be made. That is the situation we see every day.

Families come to us and ask whether we can help them find a place, but that is not something we can do. We know there are long wait times.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor and time to ask one question.

Ms. Niki Ashton: How essential is it to do something to address the labour shortage and access to child care services, when we are facing a decline in French all across Canada?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: I think it is crucial that we tackle all these issues at the same time, given how recruitment and retention are done.

We are seeing a decline in French in the population, but we can certainly fix any decline by offering early childhood services, because that really is the gateway to the continuum. That really is where parents turn first and it is the foundation of the continuum.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux.

Before concluding, I would like to get a small clarification on behalf of the committee. Earlier, you started out by talking about your three themes, which are partnerships, accessibility, and structure and funding. I don't think I heard you talk about partnerships. In 30 seconds, who are these partners and how does it work?

Ms. Brigitte L'Heureux: The partners are the school board, the Université de Saint-Boniface, Canadian Parents for French, the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine, the advocacy organization and the Conseil jeunesse provincial du Manitoba. We can even include the school divisions that have immersion schools. We frequently meet to talk about problems relating to the continuum. We have been talking about the continuum for a long time in Manitoba.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. L'Heureux.

Mr. Clair, I would like to ask you one last question on behalf of the committee. You talked about a violation of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution arising from the failure to consult. You also cited the "by and for" principle. Are there opinions regarding that violation that you could tell us about?

Mr. Michael Clair: I would like the federal government, as the provinces' foremost partner, to do more to force the provinces to adhere to the bilateral agreements.

The Chair: We understood that. Was the concern you told us about, that constitutional rights have not been respected, based on opinions you have received?

Mr. Michael Clair: No, it was just our impression.

The Chair: Thank you.

To our witnesses, I know we are always pressed for time and that is not pleasant, but thank you for your testimony, which truly has been extraordinary. If there is any additional information you would like to convey to the committee, please don't hesitate to send it to the clerk, who will distribute everything to all members of the committee.

Before closing, I would like to remind committee members that the deadline for submitting their witness lists for the study on local media is Friday, December 20. That will allow the clerk to start working on that study in January, when we aren't in Ottawa. We will send you a reminder in writing.

The meeting is adjourned.

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