

Senator the Honourable Claudette Tardif, Ph.D.
Chair of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages
The Senate of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A4

Dear Senator Tardif:

Pursuant to Rule 12-24(1) of the Rules of the Senate, and on behalf of the Government of Canada, we are pleased to respond to the Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages entitled *Horizon 2018: Toward Stronger Support of French-language learning in British Columbia* (the Report). We would like to thank the Committee for the efforts that went into this report and to express our gratitude to everyone who appeared before the Committee to share their perspectives.

The Government shares the views of the Committee and would like to reassure the Committee that its recommendations are informing the Government's support to both official languages. The Government recognizes the importance that minority language education rights granted under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* be respected. Respecting these rights is essential to the vitality of official language minority communities in Canada. Furthermore, in accordance with the *Official Languages Act*, the Government is firmly committed to supporting the recognition and use of English and French in Canadian society through continued support for minority-language education and second-language learning.

A number of the recommendations raise issues that are being addressed in the context of the development of the new Official Languages Action Plan (Action Plan) and the ongoing negotiations of the next Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction between the Government and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. The Government has given serious consideration to the Committee's recommendations and would like to assure the Committee that they are being taken into account. The Government looks forward to sharing the Action Plan and Protocol with the Committee as well as Canadians, as soon as they are finalized.

The following information is representative of the Government's continued commitment to both official languages, and English and French linguistic minority communities, particularly in the area of French-language learning.

Consultations on the next Action Plan and Protocol

The Government agrees with the Committee's observations regarding minority-language school infrastructure needs, wanting to ensure that Canadians are aware of the merits of French education and bilingualism; ensuring support to students as they travel through the education continuum from early childhood through to the post-secondary level; improving access to French second-language learning; increasing bilingualism among young people; and having strong intergovernmental cooperation on Education and Services.

The new Action Plan is currently being developed, based in part on the results of a broad series of nationwide public consultations conducted in 2016. Twenty-two roundtables were held across the country from June to November 2016, attended by more than 350 participants. An online questionnaire enabled 6,375 Canadians to present their perspective on official languages. More than 100 submissions from interested organizations and individuals were also received. The first findings of these consultations were presented on December 8, 2016, to more than 100 representatives of networks of spokesperson organizations working in minority communities and the promotion of linguistic duality.

The Committee's observations echo those raised by stakeholders in education during consultations on both the Action Plan and the Protocol. The Government has already taken action on them in advance of the negotiation of the next Protocol.

For the first time in July 2017, the Government concluded an agreement with the *Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones*, the *Fédération des communautés francophones et acadiennes du Canada* and the *Commission nationale des parents francophones*. The agreement formalizes the Government's recognition of the priorities of the francophone minority communities (e.g. consultation, eligible expenses, accountability, reporting requirements and acknowledgement of the education continuum) during its negotiation of the next Protocol, and commits to taking those priorities into account in the course of its negotiations. Negotiations are currently underway with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. The Government will continue to work closely with official language minority communities so that the next bilateral education agreements with the provinces and territories, continue to reflect their needs and priorities, and contain effective accountability measures.

The new Action Plan will also address the Committee's concerns and take into account what was heard during the consultations. Minority language community vitality and bilingualism remain priorities for both Canadians and the Government.

Infrastructure

The Government notes the Committee's recommendations related to infrastructure, lack of school spaces and overcrowding as real issues affecting minority-language schools. Budget 2017 includes a commitment to invest an additional \$80 million over 10 years to support the modernization and construction of community educational infrastructures in official language minority communities. Four million dollars will be made available in 2018-19, and the Government will work with the provinces and territories, to consider funding community projects such as early childhood centres and the modernization and construction of community educational infrastructures.

Early Learning and Child Care

The Government shares the Committee's view that supports to early learning and access to child care are key to the vitality of official language minority communities. To help Canadian children get the best start in life, the Government, along with provinces and territories, announced a new Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework on June 12, 2017. The Framework sets the foundation for governments to work towards a shared long-term vision where all children across Canada can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care. Governments have committed to supporting the development of child care systems respectful of language and culture, and in particular recognize the unique needs of French and English linguistic communities.

The Framework lists indicators that provinces and territories are expected to report on according to their investment of federal funds. An indicator on inclusivity asks for the number of children benefiting from programs and/or the number of programs designed to serve children from diverse populations, including children from French and English linguistic minority communities.

A bilateral agreement was reached with the Province of Ontario on June 16, 2017, that will allocate \$435 million for investments towards increasing the accessibility and affordability of high-quality licensed child care and quality early learning opportunities. Pursuant to this agreement, the Province of Ontario will take into account the needs of the official language minority community when developing its programs and policies. Ontario will be creating new Regional Centres of Excellence to support training and professional development opportunities and will be dedicating one of these Centres to the Francophone stream. These Centres of Excellence will take into account particular needs, including language, in the development of specialized networks.

On August 29, 2017 a bilateral agreement was reached with the Province of Prince Edward Island that reaffirms federal commitment and support of the unique provincial early learning and child care needs. The agreement allocates \$10.5 million for the Province of Prince Edward Island.

The Island's funding focus will be on early learning and child care access for vulnerable children such as infants, preschoolers, children whose parents work seasonally or non-standard hours, and under-served populations including newcomer families and Acadian and French speaking communities.

On August 30, 2017, the Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, and the Honourable Brian Gallant, Premier of New Brunswick, announced an agreement under which the government will invest close to \$30 million to improve early learning and child care for preschool-aged children in New Brunswick. These investments will transform at least 300 current child care providers into designated New Brunswick Early Learning Centers which will provide more quality spaces, have lower fee structures, and implement inclusion policies and guidelines for francophone minority communities. Over the coming months, the government will work with other provincial and territorial governments to enter into three-year bilateral agreements that will address their unique early learning and child care needs.

On September 20, 2017, the Governments of Canada and Nunavut reached an agreement on a three year bilateral agreement that reaffirms their commitment and support of the unique early learning and child care needs of Nunavut. The agreement allocates just over seven million dollars to Nunavut for early learning and child care investments. The territory's funding will focus on early learning and child care programs and services to support parents, families, and communities to ensure the best possible future for children in the territory.

Immigration

Like the Committee, the Government recognizes the importance of implementing immigration strategies to increase Francophone immigration, further promote Francophone minority communities and improve settlement services. The Government has already taken steps that are in line with the Committee's concerns on this front. The Government's response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Official Languages entitled *Toward a New Action Plan for Official Languages and Building New Momentum for Immigration in Francophone Minority Communities* (April 2017) provides a comprehensive overview of its actions to date.

Through the current Settlement Memorandum of Understanding between Canada and British Columbia (2016), there is an opportunity to ensure that French-speaking immigrants are better informed of the French-language education opportunities in the province.

The Government will continue to advance its ongoing work with the provinces and territories to ensure that adult newcomers interested in pursuing settlement focused language training are aware of their language abilities in relation to their settlement goals and can access the learning opportunities they need to improve their language ability (commensurate with their skill level, their labour market goals and their social integration needs).

Data collection

The Government also recognizes that, to carry out their obligations under section 23, provincial and territorial governments need to have relevant and accurate information on rights-holders to ensure they are offered the education they are entitled to under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Government of Canada, in its leadership role in official languages, is committed to support provincial and territorial governments in that regard. To this end, the Government has asked Statistics Canada to find the most appropriate way to collect this data based on scientific and professional considerations, including a thorough assessment of the potential and the limitations of various collection methods. To support this work, Statistics Canada will establish a working group to examine and provide external expert advice on the enumeration of rights-holders.

In addition, as part of its formal public consultation process on the content of the 2021 Census, a questionnaire was launched on September 11, 2017. Statistics Canada is actively reaching out to official language minority communities, provincial and territorial governments and other stakeholders to discuss the data needs related to rights-holders. Statistics Canada will also examine and test potential questions for inclusion in the 2021 Census.

To ensure that Canadians are informed of the Government's progress on meeting the need to have accurate and high-quality data on rights-holders, Statistics Canada will issue a public report on its work.

Federal lands

Lastly, the sale and transfer of former federal lands for the purpose of building minority language schools is complex, and decisions regarding the planning, allocation and approval for land uses on these properties involve multiple players.

The Government supports the *Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique's* need to obtain land for a French-language school and the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, who is responsible for Canada Lands Company CLC Limited, has taken on a leadership role in bringing the implicated stakeholders to the table to meet this objective. The Government understands that the Canada Lands Company CLC Limited, along with its First Nations joint venture partners, will endeavour to work with the community (including the *Conseil scolaire*) while respecting the City of Vancouver's planning process, to explore how future uses for this property could respond to the *Conseil scolaire's* pressing need to acquire land to build new schools.

This issue in Vancouver has provided the Government with an occasion to remind all federal institutions that they are required to comply with the Treasury Board Secretariat's *Directive on the Sale or Transfer of Surplus Real Property*. The Directive identifies official languages minority communities as a stakeholder whose needs must be considered in both routine and strategic disposals of federal lands.

The Government would like to assure the Committee that intergovernmental discussions on a number of the recommendations are underway. These discussions are part of the preparations to renew the Protocol for Agreements on Education and to develop a new federal strategy for official languages.

Please accept our best wishes,

Sincerely,

The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Families, Children and Social Development

The Honourable Ahmed Hussen, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship

The Honourable Mélanie Joly, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Canadian Heritage

The Honourable Carla Qualtrough, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Public Services and Procurement