



Office of the
Commissioner of
Official Languages

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officielles

**MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
ACTION PLAN FOR OFFICIAL LANGUAGES 2018-2023:
*INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE***

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT FIVE-YEAR PLAN

MAY 2022



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1. INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the vitality of official language minority communities and advancing English and French in Canadian society are central to the *Official Languages Act* and the priorities of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* is the federal government's primary mechanism for fulfilling its commitment to official language minority communities and for advancing official languages under the *Official Languages Act*. The five-year strategy for official languages includes an additional investment of nearly \$500 million more than the previous plan, bringing the total investment to \$2.7 billion, the largest amount ever provided for the support and advancement of official languages.

In view of my mandate as Commissioner of Official Languages, I want to ensure that the investments made by federal institutions through the Action Plan achieve the expected results. In my 2017–2018 annual report, which marked the beginning of my term as Commissioner, I stated that I would be keeping a close watch on how the government planned to coordinate and implement the initiatives described in the Action Plan. Monitoring that implementation has therefore been one of my priority activities since the beginning of my mandate in 2018. More specifically, I am interested in how federal institutions contribute to the vitality of official language minority communities and how they foster the recognition and use of English and French in Canadian society through the Action Plan. While some sectors related to the Action Plan initiatives, such as education, fall under provincial or territorial jurisdiction, the federal government does play a key role in the implementation of these initiatives. This report gives me an opportunity to highlight good practices and to identify issues that need special attention. All in all, I am satisfied with the implementation of the majority of the initiatives my office has been tracking. The initiatives seem to be meeting the needs of our official language communities. In the spirit of continuous improvement, I have made recommendations to the government for the next iteration of the action plan for official languages, which is expected to begin on April 1, 2023.

The *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* was implemented in the unprecedented circumstances of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Many sectors were hit hard and will continue to need support and attention in the years to come. I would like to acknowledge the exceptional work done to ensure the successful rollout of the Action Plan initiatives, which required resilience, flexibility and creativity.

1.1 Monitoring approach

My office developed an approach to assess the implementation status of initiatives at the national level under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. We selected priority sectors of intervention and focused on key factors that contribute to the vitality of official language minority communities, such as immigration and education. We also paid close attention to new initiatives funded through the additional investment under the Action Plan. In the end, 17 of the 60 Action Plan initiatives were monitored on a priority basis (see Appendix 1). Most of these 17 initiatives were developed with the new funding. In this report, the titles of the initiatives are worded as they appear in the Action Plan.

This report is based on our analysis of meetings we held in the fall of 2019, the summer of 2020 and the spring of 2021 with some 130 stakeholders, including 5 federal institutions: Canadian Heritage; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; the Public Health Agency of Canada; Employment and Social Development Canada; and the Department of Justice Canada.

Our monitoring activities were not intended to be exhaustive or representative of all the initiatives arising from the Action Plan. We met with stakeholders associated with a limited number of Action Plan initiatives. In the same vein, this report does not include all the comments received from stakeholders on the Action Plan. We did little or no monitoring in sectors such as health, arts and culture, and economic development, which also contribute significantly to the vitality of official language minority communities. Some stakeholders pointed out that the *Official Languages Health Contribution Program (Networks, Training and Access to Health Services)* requires special attention. Although this program has not been actively monitored by my team, we will continue to maintain ties with stakeholders involved in the program. Considering the serious effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on the health, arts and culture, and economic development sectors, the Action Plan must continue to play a key role in those sectors, and its initiatives must achieve their objectives.

Our approach included discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including funding recipients, organizations that act as intermediaries for funding and deploying initiatives, and representatives of federal institutions. These discussions gave us an overview of the targeted initiatives and helped us identify cross-cutting issues and trends related to specific initiatives. I would like to thank all of the stakeholders who participated in our monitoring activities and helped my office monitor the implementation of the Action Plan and its impact on communities.

1.2 Structure of the report

This report is divided into two main sections. In the first, I report on the key findings for the initiatives we focused on, including those related to education and early childhood, immigration, minority language media, and Quebec's English-speaking communities. In the second, I provide six cross-cutting observations on initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. The two main sections also contain my recommendations for the next action plan for official languages, and the report ends with my overall conclusion.

2. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES UNDER THE *ACTION PLAN FOR OFFICIAL LANGUAGES 2018-2023: INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE* AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the key findings of my office's monitoring activities regarding specific initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. It is divided into several subsections reflecting the priority sectors that generated the most feedback during our discussions with stakeholders. These subsections also include my recommendations for the next action plan for official languages to address the issues identified.

2.1 Education continuum

The importance of a strong education continuum—from early childhood to post-secondary, including adult education—is clear. As recent events involving Campus Saint-Jean in Alberta and Laurentian University in Ontario have illustrated, one of the foundations of official language minority community vitality is the opportunity for students to study in their first official language throughout the entire continuum. In addition, the learning opportunities provided through second-language initiatives are essential to promoting the use of both official languages by all Canadians. My observations on some education initiatives, along with those of many stakeholders interviewed by my office during our monitoring activities, are presented below.

2.1.1 Early childhood

Early childhood is a key factor in the vitality of official language minority communities and is the first step in the education continuum. It is also a crucial period of identity building, when children of the linguistic minority forge a sense of belonging to their community. The new investments under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* that support the early childhood sector, including the *Support for early childhood development* initiative and the *Enhanced early childhood health promotion programming* initiative, have generally been well received by community and education stakeholders.

2.1.1.1 Support for early childhood development

Despite the popularity of these new investments, official language minority communities face major challenges in accessing child care services in the official language of the linguistic minority. First, it is difficult to recruit and retain educators, particularly

because of the combination of low salaries and increased responsibilities. Second, the lack of funding for the construction, expansion or renovation of child care facilities has been a significant barrier that limits capacity. Waiting lists for access to child care services are common and often a symptom of one or both of these challenges.

The *Support for early childhood development* initiative, delivered through two Employment and Social Development Canada programs (the *Enabling Fund for Official Language Minority Communities* and the *Early Learning and Child Care Innovation Program*) and available to Francophone communities outside Quebec, was established to address these issues. It supports professional training and capacity building for child care workers and helps increase the number of child care spaces and jobs in daycares. This initiative has made significant progress and resulted in positive impacts, as evidenced by the number of child care spaces created by the Réseau de développement économique et d'employabilité Canada, the number of early childhood educators trained and the organization of the first national symposium on early childhood by the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne. However, stakeholders stressed the importance of investing in projects with programming funding and a long-term vision, rather than through project-based funding. And although the initiative provides leverage for the development of new projects, organizations have to use their own operating funds to sustain the projects when the funding ends.

I was therefore pleased to see the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan announced in the 2021 federal budget, even though it does not fall under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. These investments will create new child care spaces, facilitate the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, make child care services more affordable, and have other positive impacts on Canadian society.

However, I am concerned the language clauses in these agreements are not strong enough. The federal government should be proactive and be an official languages leader in developing federal-provincial-territorial agreements by ensuring that separate language clauses for official language minority communities are included where appropriate. It is essential for

mechanisms to be put in place to specify when and how the provinces and territories must consult with official language minority communities, and to ensure that appropriate funding, with a specific target, is set aside for these communities. The federal institution responsible for federal-provincial-territorial agreements must then monitor the implementation of these mechanisms by the provinces and territories to ensure compliance. As I also point out in this report, it is crucial to include provisions in federal-provincial-territorial agreements that guarantee transparency in the use of the funding and allow for follow up with the provinces and territories to ensure that this is done in a timely manner.

It is important to note that English-speaking communities in Quebec do not have access to funding from the *Support for early childhood development* initiative. While access to early childhood services in English continues to be a priority for these communities, stakeholders reported that access to child care is often a challenge, particularly in remote areas. It is therefore essential to ensure support for the vitality of Quebec's official language minority communities in the next action plan for official languages.

I recommend that in the next action plan for official languages, the Minister of Official Languages provide Quebec's English-speaking communities with a funding envelope equivalent to the *Support for early childhood development* initiative's envelope.

2.1.1.2 *Enhanced early childhood health promotion programming*

My office also examined the implementation of the *Enhanced early childhood health promotion programming* initiative. This funding has helped recipient organizations to implement new projects, which, in turn, have identified the need for services to address many early childhood health issues. Some of these issues predated the COVID-19 pandemic, while others have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the health crisis, particularly in the areas of mental health and language development. I applaud the hard work done by stakeholders to ensure the provision of essential early childhood health and social services.

Funding for *Enhanced early childhood health promotion programming* continues to be a critical investment for official language minority communities. I commend both the Francophone communities outside Quebec for working together

across sectors and the English-speaking communities in Quebec for mobilizing an existing network to ensure the effective operation of this initiative.

2.1.2 *Elementary, high school and post-secondary education*

Significant investments have been made in education, including money for new initiatives that address specific needs in official language communities. Given the importance of access to learning opportunities—both in the first official language of the linguistic minority and in the second official language of the linguistic majority—in achieving the government's bilingualism objectives, these initiatives have been welcomed by stakeholders. The *Support to Civic Community School Initiative* provides micro-grants to non-profit organizations that establish a partnership with a French-language school outside Quebec. This funding provides students with opportunities to participate in projects that will contribute to their identity building while meeting an identified need in the school or community. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations and schools were able to adapt to the fund's virtual format. They moved forward with their initiatives and focused on the students by involving them directly in the development and execution of their projects. Indeed, the success of the *Support to Civic Community School Initiative* suggests that it could produce even more positive effects if it were also applied to French-second-language programs.

I recommend that the Minister of Official Languages consult with stakeholders, in preparation for the next action plan for official languages, to explore the possibility of providing a funding envelope for the *Civic Community School Support Fund*, or a similar initiative, for French-immersion and French-second-language programs.

The *Bursaries for post-secondary education in French as a second language* initiative provides \$3,000 per year to students who have graduated from an English-language high school, including English-speaking students in Quebec, and who have chosen to do at least half of their post-secondary education in French. The initiative aims to increase the rate of bilingualism among students and reduce the decline in French-language

skills that may occur after students graduate from high school. The initiative has an effective structure in that it not only uses the intermediary organization's pre-existing networks but also leverages the post-secondary institutions' expertise by having them allocate the bursaries.

2.1.2.1 Federal-provincial-territorial agreements in education

Federal-provincial-territorial agreements, or bilateral agreements, in education have two components: Minority-Language Education and Second Language Learning.¹ In 2019, an additional \$60 million in funding over four years was announced to increase support for minority language education under these agreements. This is the first funding increase in over 10 years and has been welcomed by school boards and education stakeholders. New funding was also announced in the 2021 federal budget: \$121.3 million over three years for high-quality post-secondary minority-language education, and \$180.4 million over three years for projects that include enhancing French-immersion and French-second-language programs in schools and post-secondary institutions.

Despite these advances, there are still significant problems in the federal-provincial-territorial agreements. The delays in signing the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction 2019–2020 to 2022–2023* between the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories caused a serious delay in the signing of bilateral agreements. As of March 31, 2020, only two provinces and one territory had signed four-year (2019–2023) bilateral agreements: New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. The remaining provinces and territories signed interim agreements only for 2019–2020, partly because the COVID-19 pandemic hampered negotiations. By the spring of 2021, all provinces and territories had signed multi-year bilateral agreements through 2022–2023, except for Quebec, which signed a one-year interim bilateral agreement for 2020–2021. Though not a party to the Protocol, Quebec endorses its general principles.

In addition, since some provincial and territorial governments do not provide recipients with confirmations of funding from bilateral agreements until after the agreement is signed, it is not uncommon to receive confirmation six months—or even

less—before the end of a funding cycle, which makes planning very difficult, especially for post-secondary institutions. Some administrators of French-language institutions in English-language universities were forced to negotiate with their institutions to have the funds advanced. Institutions devote a great deal of energy to negotiating these types of agreements, which monopolizes resources. Since the usual funds available to each province and territory are confirmed even if the agreements are not yet in place, these delays could be avoided. I therefore urge all stakeholders to mobilize to ensure that delays in confirming funds from bilateral agreements do not occur again. The signing of multi-year bilateral agreements should mitigate this particular problem.

There have been significant improvements with respect to the Protocol. The signatories agreed on the importance of increasing consultation and collaboration with stakeholders and school boards and on the importance of transparency and accountability. They recognize the role that the education continuum plays in fostering the vitality of official language minority communities. It should be noted, however, that some French-language school boards were not directly consulted by the provincial/territorial governments during the Protocol discussions. In Quebec, the provincial government did consult with the school boards, but it did so through the boards' senior administrators, not through the elected chairs. According to these school boards, consultations should be conducted directly with rights-holders under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which means communicating with the chairs of the nine English school boards in Quebec.

Keeping up to date on the status of talks between the federal government and the provinces/territories is a challenge for school boards—one that can certainly be characterized as systemic. The rather insulated discussion process makes it difficult to challenge the decision-making process that determines the defined contributions. This process needs to be more transparent. Education stakeholders must have access to more advance information about the process and the contributions for the next round of funding.

Tripartite communications are in place through the National Table on French as a Second Language and the tripartite committee representing the French-language minority education sector.

¹ The federal-provincial-territorial agreements in education were formerly known as the *Official Languages in Education Program*.

However, the provinces and territories do not always seem to be aware of all the funding available for various initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. School boards had to approach their provincial or territorial government to inform them that funding was available for certain education initiatives. All stakeholders must be made aware of any funding for which they may be eligible.

I recommend that the Minister of Official Languages ensure that the tripartite communications between the federal government, the provincial/territorial government, and school boards and other stakeholders allow for an optimal sharing of information about minority-language education and second-language instruction initiatives arising from bilateral agreements, about available funding and about every aspect of the delivery of these initiatives.

Each bilateral agreement is accompanied by an action plan. Some stakeholders pointed out that the level of detail required and the rigidity of the formula for developing and drafting action plans represent an additional responsibility and administrative burden. Others valued their involvement in this stage of the process and felt that it allowed them a degree of autonomy. The administrative process of preparing action plans deserves special attention to ensure that it is not too burdensome for stakeholders.

With the exception of the additional \$60 million identified in the Protocol and allocated over four years for minority language education, the fact that the level of funding for supporting school boards has not increased for several years continues to be a central issue. Because of this, there are fewer opportunities to implement structural changes. School boards are grateful for the variety of new initiatives in the Action Plan, but the funding needs for programming and operations are still very high. According to the stakeholders we consulted, increased funding for operations and programming will be the main demand for the next action plan for official languages. French-language school boards are also hopeful that the additional \$60 million over four years will be made permanent in the school boards' operating funding envelope.

Provincial/territorial accountability and transparency continue to be issues of concern to me. Under the Protocol, the provinces and territories are supposed to be transparent about the funds

they distribute, and they are required to establish a consultation mechanism. Stakeholders reported that in some provinces and territories, that information is still not easy to access. Concerns have been raised by stakeholders about the first two years of the Action Plan, especially since it is not possible to know how the funds were allocated because of the lack of transparency. One provincial/territorial government did not seem to want to release information about the specific amounts that should be provided to school boards. Instead, this government referred to the generic funding formula for all school boards. It should be noted here that I advocated improved transparency and accountability in my 2018–2019 annual report and stated in my 2019–2020 annual report that transparency and accountability are important to English-speaking minority communities, even though Quebec did not sign the Protocol. It is therefore essential to put mechanisms in place to ensure transparency and accountability across all provinces and territories. Clauses that require comprehensive reporting and enable the federal government to measure provincial/territorial compliance are an essential element of federal-provincial-territorial education agreements. In fact, I recommended this in my 2018–2019 annual report. My follow-up on the implementation of that recommendation is still in progress.

2.1.2.2 Recruitment of teachers for minority community schools and Recruitment of teachers for French immersion schools²

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the education sector. I applaud the tremendous efforts made by all education stakeholders to support the teaching of both official languages. However, there is still a shortage of teachers in minority French-language schools and French-second-language programs. The creation of funding envelopes for teacher recruitment and retention is a step in the right direction. Many of the stakeholders we consulted said they were satisfied with this strategy. Initiatives that have been put in place with funding from those envelopes include promotion and recruitment campaigns, partnerships between post-secondary institutions and a pan-Canadian database.

Because of the pandemic, several initiatives had to be adapted and delivered virtually, while others were postponed to subsequent fiscal years. Nevertheless, a number of stakeholders stated that Canadian Heritage has been very open to reallocating funds between fiscal years and that they are grateful for this flexibility. Canadian Heritage also issued another express call

² It should be noted that the Canadian Heritage website lists them, respectively, as *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy in Minority French-Language Schools* and *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy in French Immersion and French Second-Language Programs*.

for projects using funds available for 2020–2021. The projects were to be specifically targeted to address the immediate needs created by the pandemic. Although the application deadlines for this funding were extremely tight, the stakeholders we consulted were pleased to have the additional funding.

Although some organizations receive funding directly from Canadian Heritage, the vast majority of projects are funded through bilateral education agreements. To avoid having to sign new contribution agreements for each initiative funded, appendices are included in the bilateral agreements. The delays in signing the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction 2019–2020 to 2022–2023*, which caused a serious delay in the signing of multi-year bilateral agreements, also held up the execution of new projects with the new funds in provinces and territories that provide confirmation of funds to recipients only after a bilateral agreement has been signed. Delays were also caused by the federal election and the COVID-19 pandemic. These delays, which were mentioned by a number of stakeholders, resulted in the postponement or modification of projects and reallocation of funds to different fiscal years. As noted in my 2020–2021 annual report, the delays presented a challenge for the project to open Campus Saint-Jean satellite sites in Alberta. The province considered the funding to be unconfirmed until the 2020–2023 multi-year bilateral agreement was signed on March 30, 2021. Many of these problems would have been avoided if the Protocol had been signed in a timely manner.

There were also communication and consultation problems. Some school boards were disappointed not to receive information about these initiatives directly from their respective provincial or territorial governments—an issue that was also raised regarding the *Support for community spaces – infrastructure* and *Support for educational community infrastructure* initiatives. In addition, it appears that one government funded projects without consulting key education stakeholders, including school boards.

As I noted in my 2019 study on the challenges in French-as-a-second-language teacher supply and demand in Canada, the high demand for access to immersion programs in some areas continues to be a huge strain because of teacher shortages and

the lack of space. Some education stakeholders would like to see the eligibility criteria for Canadian Heritage’s teacher recruitment and retention strategies expanded to support initiatives that include pay incentives, such as hiring bonuses, or that support wellness and mental health. Some stakeholders were critical of the lack of coordination of initiatives at the national level and stated that funding was provided for a number of similar projects or for projects that could have been combined. Some stakeholders asked whether the National Table on French as a Second Language could play a more active role in coordinating funding. Establishing the Table was one of the recommendations in my study, and I would like to acknowledge the work that has been done on this.

Recruitment and retention needs vary across the provinces and territories. A continuous approach is essential to ensure that staff are available for this part of the education system and to effectively address the shortage in minority French-language schools and French-second-language programs.

I recommend that the Minister of Official Languages:

(i) establish stronger coordination at the national level for the allocation of funds from the envelopes for teacher recruitment and retention under the next action plan for official languages; and

(ii) explore the possibility of having school boards and post-secondary institutions submit applications for teacher recruitment and retention funding directly to Canadian Heritage.

2.1.2.3 Support for community spaces – infrastructure and Support for educational community infrastructure

The *Support for community spaces – infrastructure* and the *Support for educational community infrastructure* initiatives³ help provinces and territories undertake projects to build, upgrade or renovate educational and community infrastructure within the educational and post-secondary institutions of official language minority communities. They were made available to the provinces

³ It should be noted that the 2021 federal budget provides for an investment of \$81.8 million over two years (2021–2022 to 2022–2023) to support the construction, renovation and development of educational and community spaces for official language minority communities. This is in addition to the \$67.2 million over five years provided for in the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in our Future* (and the \$14.8 million per year, on an ongoing basis after 2022–2023) to support provincial and territorial construction projects (*Support for community spaces – infrastructure*), and the \$80 million over 10 years (2018–2029) announced in Budget 2017 (*Support for educational community infrastructure*) as part of the Government of Canada’s Investing in Canada plan.

and territories on the condition that the provinces and territories provide matching funding to support the infrastructure project. A portion of the funding for the *Support for community spaces – infrastructure* initiative is dedicated to the *Community Spaces Fund*, for which community organizations are able to apply without providing any matching funds. This fund has generated a great deal of interest.

According to some of the stakeholders we consulted about the infrastructure initiatives, the requirement for matching funds means that the projects that are proposed do not necessarily reflect the community's greatest needs, because the projects are dependent on provincial and territorial government priorities. Some of the school boards consulted felt that having to match funds was making it more difficult for them to access infrastructure initiatives because information about available funding was not shared with school boards in some provinces and territories. In one jurisdiction, school boards approached the federal government directly to explore funding opportunities for community spaces in educational infrastructure projects. The federal government's requirement for matching funds can be a barrier to negotiation with the provincial or territorial government, and some projects are abandoned. Some stakeholders were also critical of the provinces and territories for their lack of transparency about the reasons for denying funding applications. Others would like to see information made more readily available about which projects have been funded and which have been rejected. It should be noted, however, that some educational infrastructure projects are funded by the provinces and territories outside these initiatives, and often without federal funding.

I understand that one of the purposes of the matching requirement is to hold provinces and territories accountable by ensuring their support for infrastructure projects. However, the fact remains that projects are at the mercy of the current provincial or territorial government. I therefore encourage Canadian Heritage to look for solutions, including the possibility of providing funding directly to communities, school boards and post-secondary institutions where appropriate.

2.2 Immigration

The *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* also includes the *Francophone integration pathway* initiative, which applies only to Francophone initiatives in French linguistic minority communities. The goal of the initiative is to strengthen connections between French-speaking newcomers and their host communities and to help support settlement services provided “by and for” the Francophone minority. The

targeted services help to build ties between French-speaking newcomers and the communities that want to welcome them, integrate them into their institutions and businesses, and encourage them to settle permanently in their new community.

The *Francophone integration pathway* initiative has three components: improved core services, the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative, and capacity building in the Francophone settlement sector. Two of these components try to direct French-speaking newcomers to French-language reception and support services during settlement processes across Canada. The main challenge noted in many regions is the lack of consistency in settlement services across the country.

2.2.1 Specialized integration services

English-speaking immigrants sometimes receive specialized services based on individual needs. For example, services may be available for professionals or based on newcomers' permanent resident class. Few Francophone organizations are currently able to offer this type of specialized service. Some of them are concerned because they have noticed that Francophone newcomers who approach English-language immigration service providers are not automatically redirected to French-language services. French-speaking newcomers should be referred to French-language integration service providers.

I recommend that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship continue to expand the range of specialized French-language reception services where they already exist, with a view to achieving greater equivalence between French-language services for newcomers and existing English-language services.

2.2.2 Services across Canada

The Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative is a new model that was developed in 2018 and launched in 2020. It promotes the integration and retention of French-speaking newcomers in 14 designated regions across the country and helps strengthen connections between newcomers and their host communities. According to several stakeholders, the program is already having some success in their communities. This model can now be expanded and launched in many other communities across the country. This would help to increase service availability, build ties within communities where French-speaking newcomers do not always receive services in French, and support the vitality of French linguistic minority communities.

I recommend that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship increase the number of communities that offer services such as those introduced through the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative.

2.2.3 Expanded eligibility criteria

A number of organizations that provide services through the *Francophone integration pathway* initiative reported that they were not allowed to offer services to French-speaking newcomers in the temporary resident class. Some of them felt that providing reception services to French-speaking temporary residents—mainly international students and temporary workers—would have a positive impact on the long-term retention of those residents. Having these kinds of services available might encourage temporary residents to apply for permanent residence in Canada. In other words, according to proponents of this approach, making it easier for people to obtain services when they arrive in Canada could serve as an implicit newcomer recruitment strategy. Several stakeholders we spoke with believe that access to services for French-speaking newcomers should be based on their need to have those services in French when they arrive in Canada and not on their immigration status.

I recommend that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship revise the eligibility criteria for services funded under the *Francophone integration pathway* initiative so that temporary residents have access to them.

2.3 Linguistic minority community media

The new funding for the *Strengthening community media and radio* initiative aims to support the development of media content in official language minority communities, to assist these media in making the switch to digital communications, and to help bring young people into the labour market, all while meeting the media's workforce needs.

To achieve these objectives, the Community Media Strategic Support Fund component supports collaborative projects involving minority community media, providing financial support for projects that contribute to the maintenance of radio stations and newspapers in official language minority communities. A second component aims to create internships for the next generation of professionals in minority language media.

This second component was quickly implemented through Canadian Heritage's Young Canada Works employment platform. However, several stakeholders raised concerns about the structure of the initiative, which they found was not adapted to the reality of the various media, especially considering that this component was designed primarily to strengthen the skills of young people in the sector rather than to meet the immediate and pressing needs of the media. They also found that it does not allow for the creation of a database of the interns' contact information, which further limits the possibility of providing for the media's long-term human resources needs and preparing the next generation. Moreover, the terms and conditions of the initiative had to be changed along the way to accommodate media and radio outlets in the most remote regions and in the North, which have had difficulty attracting candidates for internships.

Although the initiative has had a number of successes, including interns who are now in management positions, it does not appear to be a long-term solution or a promise of survival for smaller media outlets that are facing increased financial instability. The *Community Media Strategic Support Fund* allows its recipients to propose strategic projects aimed at creating major change with long-term results. It should be noted, however, that the Fund does not cover expenses related to operational activities or regular business, or infrastructure costs for community newspapers and radio stations, despite the fact that for smaller media outlets, these expenses are a priority. The loss of revenue to the Web giants is one of the causes of these difficulties. Without revenue to pay for all the elements needed for production, minority language media are in survival mode and cannot plan for the long term. Receiving funding for their operations is more pressing, especially for recruitment, as some may not be able to attract staff or do not have enough money to pay them.

An analysis of the initiative and of the minority language media sector raised two major points. First, it is clear that the main thing these organizations need is funding for their core activities. They cannot think strategically about the long term unless they have the capacity, the funding and the human resources they need to undertake this exercise. Second, the administrative process involved in applying for funds and some of the administrative accountability mechanisms are more demanding for smaller media outlets, thereby limiting their chances of accessing funding when they need it most.

I recommend that the Minister of Official Languages:

(i) consult with the media outlets and radio stations in official language minority communities before the next action plan for official languages to find ways to offset the loss of revenue caused by the withdrawal of advertising payments so that they can continue their normal operations; and

(ii) following these consultations, incorporate concrete measures in the next action plan for official languages that meet the priority needs of the minority community media outlets and radio stations.

2.4 Funding for Quebec's English-speaking communities

Funding for Quebec English-speaking communities is a new initiative in the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. This investment is designed to support community initiatives in Quebec's official language minority communities. It helps community organizations to identify and respond to the needs of the English-speaking minority by providing consistent and effective English-language services in various regions in Quebec.

During a meeting with several stakeholders, my office learned that they were satisfied with the way Canadian Heritage was managing the funds. However, there was some dissatisfaction with the duration of the funding. A number of community sector stakeholders said they would prefer projects to be approved for the full five years of the Action Plan, rather than for a maximum of two years. They were also disappointed that organizations cannot apply for funding for the same project twice. Many stakeholders shared the view that the current funding cycle limits their ability to have a tangible impact on communities in need of services, given that developing complex and effective programs requires more planning and longer implementation windows.

Community sector stakeholders also highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their communities. For example, the lack of reliable Internet access in remote regions such as the Gaspé Peninsula, Nunavik, the Magdalen Islands and the Lower North Shore presented major challenges for outreach projects. Combined with public health measures prohibiting travel to these areas, the isolation these communities experienced during the pandemic was unprecedented. This was especially difficult for certain segments of the population, such as young people who had to increasingly rely on the Internet for their education and older people who were sometimes unable to afford monthly Internet fees. Although community sector stakeholders were able to provide services to help mitigate some of the problems caused by the pandemic (such as grocery shopping services and help with access to vaccinations), limited telecommunications networks highlighted the extent to which these communities can be vulnerable in times of crisis.

There are ways these issues can be addressed. Although stakeholders preferred funding without intermediaries, their ability to develop complex and effective programs depends on planning with longer implementation windows. A multi-year funding system would help mitigate problems (this is discussed further in section 3.4). The pandemic has also highlighted the shortcomings of telecommunications networks in many remote communities. Quebec's English-speaking communities must be widely consulted in advance of the next action plan for official languages to ensure that their priority needs can be identified and addressed in the next five-year plan.

3. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ON THE *ACTION PLAN FOR OFFICIAL LANGUAGES 2018-2023: INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE* AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Monitoring the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* has enabled me to make some overall observations and attendant recommendations. The following sections provide an overview of the common elements raised by the stakeholders my office consulted, as well as my recommendations regarding those elements, particularly in preparation for the next action plan for official languages.

3.1 Consultations and initiative design

Community consultation through community-based organizations at the local, regional or national level is essential in establishing priorities and initiatives funded under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. My office met with many stakeholders who participated in the pan-Canadian consultations and were consulted in the design of programs and initiatives. For example, Canadian Heritage held a number of dialogue sessions to develop its new initiatives that were designed using the “by and for” approach with intermediary organizations managing the initiatives. However, for the education agreements, some decisions were made symmetrically and unilaterally, as provinces and territories negotiated with the federal government without systematically consulting school boards.

During consultations for the next action plan for official languages, I recommend that:

(i) the Minister of Official Languages reach out to as many stakeholders as possible, including smaller organizations, to ensure that they are all able to communicate their priorities; and

(ii) federal institutions consult with stakeholders when designing programs and initiatives so they can ensure that the needs of communities are taken into account.

Indeed, particular attention needs to be paid to the ongoing problems with consultations for the federal-provincial-territorial education agreements. By signing the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction 2019–2020 to 2022–2023*, the signatories agreed that

stakeholder consultation is a guiding principle; however, some school boards are still not being consulted by their respective provinces or territories.

As part of the next protocol for agreements for minority-language education and second-language instruction and the next negotiations for bilateral education agreements, I recommend that the Minister of Official Languages put mechanisms in place to ensure that school boards are consulted early in the process and to identify which party is responsible for ensuring that the mechanisms are respected.

3.2 Funding delays

For a variety of reasons, significant delays were reported in the allocation of funds by federal institutions, which in turn led to further delays in the signing of some contribution agreements and in the disbursement of funds. For example, the impact of the 2019 federal election and the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the rollout of the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. For some initiatives, grant applications had to be significantly changed or revised before being accepted and processed by federal institutions, which created more delays.

As a result of these delays, organizations have sometimes had to spend their funds very quickly in order to meet the federal government’s funding cycles, which has caused added stress. I recognize that setting up new initiatives, such as those developed with the additional investment of nearly \$500 million included in the Action Plan, requires time on the part of federal institutions to develop guidelines in collaboration with community organizations. Because the additional funds are considered to be permanent, recurring funding and now that these new initiatives have guidelines and have been launched, these delays should happen less frequently in the future. However, regardless of the pandemic or the increased time required to create new initiatives, delays at the beginning of funding cycles are very common. These delays cause difficulties in human resource management and negatively affect the organizations’ ability to implement their initiatives. In the education sector, adherence to timelines for the disbursement of funds is critical to the effective functioning of the school system. Therefore, delays in the signing of the next

protocol for agreements for minority-language education and second-language instruction and its related bilateral agreements must be avoided.

I recommend that federal institutions:

(i) put the necessary measures in place to ensure the rapid deployment of initiatives so as to minimize delays when the next action plan for official languages is launched; and

(ii) put support measures in place to help organizations apply for funding when they identify a need under the next action plan for official languages.

3.3 The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many impacts on implementing initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. In some cases, the shift to virtual activities led to decreased participation in Action Plan initiatives because of problems accessing the necessary technology or people's level of comfort with participating online. Many of the stakeholders we consulted said that in-person activities make it possible to build much stronger ties than those developed through virtual activities. In-person contact in terms of language and socio-cultural interaction is also very important, especially for minority French-language schools, French-second-language initiatives and immigrants. However, some activities, such as online courses, have proven to be very positive for learners in remote regions who can now benefit from online learning without having to travel. Going virtual has also led to improvements such as investments in new computers, a better Internet network and an increased social media presence for organizations. Going forward, consideration should be given to the possibility of offering a hybrid formula that includes a combination of in-person and virtual activities.

Several stakeholders we consulted highlighted the flexibility of some federal institutions, such as Canadian Heritage and the Public Health Agency of Canada, which gave organizations considerable leeway to revise their projects and postpone activities because of the pandemic. Some stakeholders also noted how proactive certain federal institutions had been since the beginning of the pandemic, which allowed them to quickly identify problems and implement solutions. The fact that federal institutions created communication forums and made the officials responsible for initiatives available was greatly appreciated and

seemed to help initiatives function effectively. Some federal institutions requested the reprofiling of funds from one fiscal year to another or allowed for adjustments in expenditures (e.g., the reallocation of travel funds for other purposes), which was very well received by the stakeholders we consulted. Other federal institutions continued to be very demanding in terms of deliverables and deadlines by not agreeing to reprofile funds in exceptional circumstances. Flexibility appears to be a matter of organizational culture. Some federal institutions are more willing to accept higher risks and take a less directive approach with stakeholders in implementing initiatives. Added to that is the issue of staff turnover and changes within federal government teams that leads to more challenges, such as difficulty in tracking the outcomes of initiatives over the long term.

The testimony of community sector stakeholders showed that federal institutions' flexibility in response to the pandemic with respect to reprofiling funds, modifying previously planned activities, and ensuring effective communications with funding applicants is critical to the success of the Action Plan initiatives. I urge federal institutions to continue to be more flexible after the end of the pandemic and in future action plans for official languages. This could include being more open to reprofiling funds, adjusting expenditures or revising deliverables in extreme circumstances.

3.4 Administrative process and level of funding

The administrative burden of applying for funding and ensuring accountability was noted by a number of the stakeholders we consulted. The impact is even greater in smaller regions, such as the territories, because the same amount of work is required for smaller amounts. According to some stakeholders, the funding reserved for the territories or rural regions is minimal in some initiatives, including immigration, community media and early childhood health and does not take into account the higher cost of living. The level of funding is sometimes considered insufficient, according to certain stakeholders who are worried about not being able to make structural changes.

Although the funding application and accountability procedures are clear, they are also cumbersome and require a lot of time that could instead be spent on developing programs and services. The administrative burden was also noted, especially by small organizations that do not have enough resources to manage it. A number of stakeholders said they would like to manage their initiative with fewer conditions attached to the funding they receive. Nevertheless, most organizations are grateful for multi-year funding, which provides stability.

The administrative burden that comes with applying for funding and ensuring accountability can take up a significant amount of resources that organizations would like to put to better use in their communities. The impact of this administrative management is increased when small organizations do not have the resources to complete the applications or when the dedicated envelopes do not sufficiently offset the costs associated with the application processes.

I recommend that federal institutions administering initiatives under the next action plan for official languages:

(i) promote multi-year funding;

(ii) implement simplified administrative processes, including funding application submissions and accountability that preserve the integrity of sound management of public funds by respecting the principles of transparency and accountability; and

(iii) provide funding that is proportional to the level of need and takes into account the high cost of living in rural regions and in the territories.

When an initiative is administered through an intermediary organization, that organization should also take these measures.

3.5 Initiative eligibility

Some initiatives have restrictive eligibility criteria. For example, some of the education initiatives, such as funding for teacher recruitment and retention, do not allow school boards to apply directly to the federal institution. Municipalities face similar challenges, having to go through their province or territory to apply for funding for certain initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. In other cases, the eligibility criteria put some provinces or territories at a disadvantage when it comes to receiving funding, although this appears to be unintentional.

Other initiatives have restrictive eligibility criteria for service users to access the initiatives. I have heard repeatedly that most immigration services for Francophone minority communities are not open to temporary residents. According to several stakeholders, many temporary residents eventually become

permanent residents, and service eligibility should not be limited by immigration status.

Some initiatives are simply not available to certain official language communities. Some communities have particular needs, and it is worth considering how an expansion of the eligibility criteria could have a positive impact on the initiatives in question. It is worth noting the importance of dedicating an envelope to Quebec's English-speaking communities for the *Support for early childhood development* initiative in the next action plan for official languages. In addition, the *Support to Civic Community School Initiative* has proven itself in Francophone minority communities and could have a very positive impact on French-second-language programs.

I therefore encourage federal institutions to review the eligibility criteria for their initiatives under the next action plan for official languages, when requested by stakeholders, to ensure that the funding reaches the people who need it. I also encourage them to make equivalent envelopes available to official language communities that were not eligible to receive funding for certain initiatives, where appropriate.

3.6 Intermediary funding

Intermediary funding has been praised by many, including federal institutions that are very pleased with the approach, even though it requires a lot of work up front. One of its main advantages is the development of organizational capacity. It requires intermediary organizations to develop the capacity and skills necessary to manage the program and to develop their network. Intermediary funding also seems to favour the "by and for" approach. Most organizations that act as intermediaries found that it works very well. In some cases, it involves sector organizations working together on a national or regional management committee, which many consider to be a good practice. In this approach, federal institutions develop initiatives in consultation with stakeholders, and intermediary organizations implement the initiatives. This allows federal institutions to focus on operational aspects and to transfer some responsibility to intermediary organizations that can address problems efficiently and effectively because they are well equipped to understand and respond to the needs in the field. By entrusting this responsibility to intermediary organizations, federal institutions relinquish some control, but they also recognize the organizations' expertise and hold them accountable. Federal institutions must still ensure that initiatives produce results, while giving a greater degree of control over the initiative to intermediary organizations.

However, there are some challenges with this approach. In some cases, community organizations question whether the intermediary organization is in the best position to assess and allocate funds to the communities they provide services to. Some stakeholders believe that too much money is allocated to the management of initiatives compared to the amount of money allocated to projects. Initiatives with intermediaries can also take longer to get off the ground, as they require that stakeholders agree on how to proceed. Other stakeholders said that the “by and for” approach should not simply mean a transfer of funds and responsibilities from the federal institution to the intermediary organization. Rather, it requires time to rethink the approach and ensure that organizations can strengthen their capacity to implement these initiatives. In some cases, the stakeholders we consulted felt that it would be easier to go directly through the federal institution because the accountability required by the intermediary organization seemed to be more onerous than what the federal institution would require. It should be noted that, in principle, intermediary organizations should reduce—not increase—the recipients’ administrative burden. It is also important to consider that some of the stakeholders we consulted wanted to maintain the traditional funding approach of dealing directly with the federal institution without the involvement of an intermediary organization.

In summary, intermediary funding has many advantages, including the ability to develop the capacity of organizations and to promote a “by and for” approach. However, the stakeholders we consulted reported that this funding approach involves challenges and would not be suitable for all initiatives in the next action plan for official languages.

I recommend that in the next action plan for official languages, the Minister of Official Languages prioritize intermediary funding in initiatives where it has been successfully implemented and where it is supported by the organizations requesting funding.

It is important to note that the intermediary organization is responsible for maintaining close ties with local organizations on issues that occur in the field, but it is the federal institution’s responsibility to carefully select the intermediary.

I recommend that federal institutions administering initiatives under the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*:

(i) put initiative management frameworks in place for intermediary organizations in order to provide guidance to recipients on the implementation of initiatives, including funding applications and accountability measures; and

(ii) select intermediary organizations that can meet the objectives of the initiatives, that have close ties to and good relationships with the communities they serve, and that have the capacity needed to fulfill this role.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report was to provide an overview of the monitoring my office has conducted since 2019 of the implementation of the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. It contains eight recommendations for targeted initiatives and six recommendations for common elements that emerged in our discussions with stakeholders. These recommendations are intended to address issues identified by my office following meetings with stakeholders, in order to improve the next action plan for official languages.

Although there are still some significant issues with the Action Plan, most of the initiatives we monitored are making good progress. The nearly \$500 million in additional investments in the Action Plan has resulted in the development of many new initiatives. This has brought new and much-needed life to the Action Plan by empowering communities to implement initiatives that respond to current challenges.

Through this monitoring exercise, I am fully committed to continuing to work with stakeholders representing the interests of official language communities and federal institutions, where appropriate, in order to help promote both of Canada's official languages through the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*. The action plan for official languages and a modernized *Official Languages Act* are the cornerstones of a strong and vibrant linguistic duality.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INITIATIVES MONITORED ON A PRIORITY BASIS⁴

- *Bursaries for post-secondary education in French as a second language*
- *Core funding to justice organizations*
- *Enhanced early childhood health promotion programming*
- *Francophone integration pathway*
- *Funding for Quebec English-speaking communities*
- *Minority-language education (federal-provincial-territorial agreements)*
- *Mobile application for learning French and English as a second language*
- *OLMC Literacy and Essential Skills Initiative*
- *Recruitment of teachers for French immersion schools*
- *Recruitment of teachers for minority community schools*
- *Strengthening community media and radio*
- *Strengthening strategic investment capacity*
- *Support for community spaces – infrastructure*
- *Support for early childhood development*
- *Support for educational community infrastructure*
- *Support for second-language learning (federal-provincial-territorial agreements)*
- *Support to Civic Community School Initiative*

⁴ In this appendix, the titles of the initiatives are worded as they appear in the *Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future*.