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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): This meeting is called to order.

Welcome to meeting number 115 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

To prevent feedback incidents, I would remind all in-person participants to read the guidelines written on the cards on the table.

I would also remind you all to wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments must be addressed through the chair. Please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether you are participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will do our best to follow the speaking order of those with raised hands and to recognize you.

Before we enter into the subject of the meeting with our witnesses, I would remind you that you received a news release about the report we prepared on the economic development of official language minority communities. I will be presenting the report at 10 a.m. this Thursday.

That said, we will now—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Will there be a news conference on Parliament Hill?

The Chair: No, but you all received the news release.

We will now turn to the subject of the meeting, the minority-language education continuum.

For our first group of witnesses, it is an honour to welcome Pierre Foucher, retired constitutional law professor, as an individual. We also welcome two representatives of the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association, Robert Demers, chair, and Yves Lévesque, executive director.

Welcome to you all.

I want to let everyone know, the witnesses and those attending in person or participating via Zoom, that I will be very strict with time management to make sure that everyone can ask a lot more questions.

Mr. Lévesque and Mr. Demers, I believe this is your first time appearing before this committee, which is the best one on Parliament Hill.

Mr. Foucher, you know how this works and have appeared before the committee before.

The witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks. That will be followed by the question and answer period. It is really interesting and it will go smoothly.

Mr. Généreux, do you have a question?

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Before going any further, regarding the news release that will be or has been published, could we talk about it later on in the meeting, after we have heard from the witnesses?

The Chair: Could we do that in the last five or ten minutes of the meeting?

• (1105)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes.

The Chair: Do you want to do that in camera?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. We can talk about it in the last ten minutes of the second hour because we have to allow five minutes to go in camera.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you.

The Chair: Perfect, thank you. Remind me if I forget.

Mr. Foucher, you have just five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Pierre Foucher (Retired Professor, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair. First, I would like to commend you on your political involvement. You were a law school student of mine at the University of Moncton. I want to congratulate you on your career in politics and for everything you have done. I wish you the best in all of your endeavours.

Honourable members, thank you for inviting me. I have not had a lot of time to prepare, so you will understand that my remarks are general. I am here today as a lawyer and law professor. I want to point out that I cannot give you a legal opinion since I am no longer a member of the bar; I will simply provide information about points of law.

I will start with something obvious that you also know: Education falls under provincial jurisdiction. The federal government's role and avenues for action are therefore limited. It cannot regulate on specific matters related to education, such as program content, exam conditions, teacher discipline or any matter directly related to education.

Looking at the scope of your mandate for the present study, I note that the concept of the education continuum, which is useful for educators and education stakeholders, goes far beyond primary and secondary education, ranging from early childhood to universities, and including continuing education and professional training. Some of those areas are protected by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, while the status of others is less clear. I will come back to that.

The federal government does nonetheless have some avenues for action. The exercise of its spending power, whose constitutional validity is undeniable in the current state of the law, enables it to provide assistance, sometimes substantial, to convince the provinces and territories to cover the full range of minority education rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Its spending power is now entrenched in the new part VII of the Official Languages Act, which imposes more specific requirements on the government as regards education in particular.

I will comment very briefly on each aspect of the study mandate.

The first component is early childhood education. Despite its importance for the development of primary and secondary education as part of the education continuum, this component has not yet been covered by section 23, as seen in the case law from the Northwest Territories Court of Appeal. The Supreme Court of Canada has never ruled on this. Francophone constitutional specialists from outside Quebec continue to argue for extending section 23 to early childhood education. The same goes for after-school programs, although the community component of federal programs for the construction of new schools does provide funding for such spaces. The arguments for extending section 23 to day care are convincing, since the concept of instruction can be interpreted broadly and liberally.

The second component is funding for primary and secondary schools. This falls squarely under section 23, bringing into play concepts that have recently been developed in the case law: the presumed insufficient number of individuals and real equivalency in the quality of the educational experience. These concepts include various elements in which the federal government could play a helpful role.

The third component is post-secondary education. While there are strong arguments for including preschool education under section 23, even if they have not yet been established by the case law, that is not the case for post-secondary education. It is unfortunate, one could say as a defender of official language minorities, because access to post-secondary education is essential for the growth and vitality of linguistic communities. In that regard, I believe the Official Languages Act provides a sufficient framework to establish an official languages in education program specifically for post-secondary institutions.

- (1110)

At this point, I would like to comment on something I see as an inconsistency on the part of the federal government. On the one hand, it wants to encourage post-secondary institutions, but on the other, its temporary immigration policies are reducing the number of international students at those institutions. Those reductions are also questionable—

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left, Mr. Foucher.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Okay. My last point is about the effects of the education continuum—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Foucher, but you have gone well over your five minutes. You will have the opportunity to say more during the question period.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: My apologies.

Mr. Lévesque or Mr. Demers, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Robert Demers (Chair, Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, committee members.

I am Robert Demers, chair of the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association, or AFOCSC. I am also vice-chair of the Providence Catholic School Board, in southwestern Ontario. With me is Yves Lévesque, executive director of the AFOCSC. Our offices are in Toronto.

The AFOCSC would like to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages for the opportunity to present its views, concerns and some of its recommendations in a brief to committee members.

Since it was officially founded in 1998, the AFOCSC has represented French Catholic school boards in Ontario. Serving its members, it defends their interests and promotes French Catholic education to governments on behalf of the Franco-Ontario community. As the voice of the eight Catholic school boards and the Consortium Centre Jules-Léger, which offers services to deaf and blind students from across the province, the AFOCSC advocates for the needs and growth of the school network to government bodies at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

As a representative of the Crown and as an employer, and with considerable support from its members, the French Catholic school boards, the AFOCSC negotiates working conditions that provide for quality French Catholic education for students and positive labour relations for staff, in co-operation with the various unions.

Through co-operation, networking and partnered initiatives, AFOCSC members strive in particular to safeguard the distinctiveness of French Catholic education in all aspects of programs of study and the educational process. We seek equity for all French Catholic schools, based on the real needs rooted in our distinctiveness. Finally, we strive to uphold the rights guaranteed by the Constitution Act, 1867, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

French Catholic education is one of the four school systems in Ontario and it receives steadfast support from the vast majority of French Catholic parents. French Catholic schools, which are chosen by close to 70% of francophone parents in Ontario, currently serve more than 77,000 elementary and secondary students. We have more than 180 French-language school day care facilities for children aged from 18 months to 4 years, which are a pillar of success for our schools and community development. In total, we have about 77,000 students, 300 schools and 11,000 employees, and French Catholic education is the choice of about 7 out of 10 parents.

Given the pressing challenges facing French-language education in Ontario, including underfunding, the teacher shortage and unequal access, governments must take immediate and decisive action. By implementing or supporting the recommendations in our brief, the federal government can help guarantee quality and equitable education for Franco-Ontarian students, and preserve and strengthen the distinctive character of French Catholic education in Ontario, for Canada.

In conclusion, the Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association brief provides an overview of the challenges facing French Catholic education in Ontario. To meet those challenges, we recommend, first of all, increasing federal funding specifically for school transportation, early childhood education and teacher recruitment and retention. Second, we recommend simplifying approval processes for school construction and infrastructure projects. Third, we recommend increasing support for French-language universities in order to expand training and increase the number of qualified French teachers. Finally, we recommend a renewed commitment to equity so that all Franco-Ontarian students have equal access to quality education.

● (1115)

By implementing those recommendations, the various levels of government can demonstrate their commitment to the Franco-Ontarian community and to the principles of equity and quality. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Demers. You may provide committee members with further information during the upcoming question and answer period.

Each political party will now have six minutes to ask the witnesses questions and hear their answers. Once again, I will be very strict with your speaking time. Everyone has the same time as I do: If an MP asks a question in the sixth minute, there will not be enough time. That will give everyone as much time as possible to ask more questions thereafter.

Let us begin.

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

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to welcome all of the witnesses.

Mr. Lévesque and Mr. Demers, I am very proud to have four Catholic schools in my riding. Is there a difference in the federal support provided to Catholic schools as opposed to public schools?

Mr. Yves Lévesque (Executive Director, Ontario French Catholic School Trustees Association): No, the funding is the same.

As we and Mr. Foucher have stated, education is publicly funded in Ontario. The four systems are therefore funded by the provincial government. Federal funding is provided through agreements between the two levels of government. Under the Canada-Ontario agreement, for example, certain funds are directed to the province to support certain programs. Access to public schools and Catholic schools is therefore the same. The amounts are not the same, of course, but each system has the same access to funding.

You have to remember that 70% of students attend Catholic schools and 30% attend public schools. You have to bear that ratio in mind when figuring things out.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: We have heard there is a shortage of francophone teachers. How many teachers are needed?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: We are going into the tenth year of the shortage of francophone teachers in Ontario. Right now, we need about 5,000 francophone teachers for French-language schools in order to restore balance and operate properly, that is, with call-back lists, substitute teachers and qualified staff at all levels.

We suggested that about 1,000 teachers should be trained every year to make up for the shortfall. Right now, there are only about 400 or 450 students who complete education degrees every year. In addition, more and more people are retiring. So the shortage is getting worse, and that is undermining the quality of education in schools.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

Mr. Foucher, would you like to finish your presentation? Then I could ask questions about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and federal funding.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Thank you, Ms. Gladu.

I had one last point about the enumeration of rights holders, which is included in your mandate. Enumeration has already begun and the federal government now has figures on rights holders, which show a gap between the proportion of rights holders attending French-language schools and those who do not.

I would like to point out that the most recent Supreme Court decision calls on provincial and territorial governments to consider section 23 of the Charter when deciding on admitting people who are not rights holders into minority-language schools. I am referring to people who do not have the constitutional right to minority-language education, but who want to attend French-language schools, such as immigrants. From now on, ministries of education must consider the objectives of section 23 when they make decisions about admitting those people.

• (1120)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: You said a mechanism is needed for people who are not rights holders. Could you elaborate on that please?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Essentially, referring once again to what the courts have said, the ministries of education can give the school boards the responsibility to make that decision. If people want to attend French-language schools, they can do so. That is also the case in Ontario. Admission committees make decisions about individuals who are not rights holders. Governments can do that and most have done so, either by delegating that responsibility or by adopting policies based on section 23 criteria to extend that right. For example, if someone isn't a Canadian citizen but is French-speaking, they could be eligible. So there is a framework for the criteria.

Further, the federal government must base its funding on everyone, including both rights holders and those who are not rights holders but are granted permission to attend French-language schools.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: If the government doesn't fund them adequately, it is actually violating the rights they have in the charter. Is that your view?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Once those people are admitted to French-language schools, they actually become rights holders by operation of a section 23 provision. So the answer to your question is yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Foucher and Ms. Gladu.

The second question will be from the Liberals.

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

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

Greetings to all the witnesses.

Professor Foucher, thank you for joining us.

My first question follows in part from what my colleague Ms. Gladu said. Like the good law student I was, I was taking notes during your presentation. If I am not mistaken, the last point you wanted to make was about the impacts of the education continuum. So I would like to give you the chance to continue talking about that and tell us what those impacts are.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: I think the impacts are significant and could provide a basis for expanding the scope of section 23, as they pertain to achieving the goals of primary and secondary education.

For example, it could certainly be argued that effective action is needed at the preschool level in order to generate rights holders, give them access to instruction and ensure that students who attended preschool in French and go on to attend French-language schools receive support and a certain training. I am not an education specialist, but I imagine there are special programs for that. That would be part of the concept of equal quality.

Post-secondary education is related to community development. Something occurred to me while I was listening to the AFOCSC representatives. There is a handful of people who argue that educa-

tion faculties should be recognized under section 23 because they are essential for training the teachers we need to provide education of equal quality. That is an argument circulating among francophone lawyers outside Quebec, but it has never been tested in court.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: That makes sense and I understand your argument.

At a recent committee meeting, we did in fact hear that admission to education programs is in free fall. If I am not mistaken, that was in New Brunswick. That itself is an existential threat to French-language education in the medium and long term.

Depending on case law developments, do you think that section 23 will one day also apply to preschool and post-secondary education?

• (1125)

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Preschool will likely be covered by section 23.

With respect to post-secondary education, it's somewhat debatable. As I mentioned, you can't assume that all post-secondary education programs or institutions will be covered by section 23. When you look at the history of section 23 case law, it's clear that this was not necessarily the intention of its authors. As I said, the concept can be applied to faculties of education or certain faculties whose services are required to ensure the quality of education. I don't think we can yet claim that the courts will accept that all homogeneous post-secondary institutions be covered by section 23.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: I'd like to get back to what you said to my colleague Ms. Gladu about rights holders. If I'm not mistaken, you referred to the most recent Supreme Court decision in this area, *Commission scolaire francophone des Territoires du Nord-Ouest v. Northwest Territories (Education, Culture and Employment)*. The decision effectively broadened the notion of rights holders.

Are you satisfied with this broader scope? In your opinion, what effect might it have in the longer term?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: It should have a positive effect. I hope that all education ministries have taken note of the decision and are implementing it. As we know, it took many rulings following the 1990 decision in *Mahé v. Alberta* for education ministries to understand that school boards have to be established where the number of rights holders warrants it. That problem has now been addressed.

It may take some time for it to be embedded system-wide, but yes, there will be a positive impact. As you know, and as all committee members and the general public know, there are some aberrations. For example, it's hard to understand why someone from the Congo who has come to the Northwest Territories to work and whose second language is French can't attend a French-language school. It just doesn't make sense.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You still have a minute and a half.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Very good. In your opening remarks, you talked about the modernized Official Languages Act. In your opinion, does the act adequately ensure that funding transferred to the provinces and territories is directed to minority school boards?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Ultimately, everything will depend on the regulations. The Official Languages Commissioner has already mentioned this, and your committee could as well. The government is in the process of developing regulations on the accountability mechanisms. To date, I'm not convinced that these mechanisms are sufficiently effective. Hopefully, the regulations will solve the problem. We'd need to see the regulations, but there aren't any at the moment.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Is there anything you would like to see in the regulations that would reassure you that the funds are being used appropriately?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: First of all, the funds would have to be earmarked in a specific and well-targeted way, so that they don't disappear into the provinces' consolidated funds. There would also have to be consequences for non-compliance. The federal government could also fund school boards directly, without going through education ministries. Other legal experts have suggested this, outside Quebec, where it already exists. To my knowledge, there is nothing preventing the federal government from sending funds directly to minority school boards.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Foucher and Mr. Lightbound.

Mr. Beaulieu, from the Bloc Québécois, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for taking part in this meeting.

Mr. Foucher, you say that the federal government could transfer funds directly to official language minority school boards, perhaps under certain conditions, in all provinces except Quebec. I agree with that, but I'd like you to tell me how you came to that conclusion.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: It's due to the fact that Quebec has a regulation for organizations receiving over 50% of their funding. They have to get authorization from cabinet and the lieutenant governor in council, in other words from the executive branch in Quebec.

• (1130)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Demers and Mr. Lévesque, from the Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques, you mentioned equity. Do you feel there is equity between francophone and anglophone schools in Ontario? Can you tell us more about that?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: The quick answer is no. Access to services is a common problem. You have to understand that francophone schools in Ontario, be they public or Catholic, are what I would consider regional schools. To get to school in the morning, students have to travel 30 to 45 minutes by bus, sometimes even longer, and the same amount of time to get back home. French-speaking com-

munities don't have neighbourhood schools, whereas all English-speaking communities do.

Is there equal access to education? The answer is no. Franco-phone school boards should be able to establish institutions to serve their students more quickly, throughout the province. Obtaining sufficient funding from the government to build the infrastructure required to meet the needs of francophones is an ongoing challenge. This worsens the inequity when it comes to access to education.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would you say that, right now, things are moving in the right direction, or is the inequity stagnant?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: At this point, we can't say things are getting better. I wouldn't say school construction has stagnated over the last four or five years, but it has slowed down. When you don't build enough schools, you have fewer services to offer students. Ontario's French-speaking population continues to grow, even though it's not at the same pace as the general English-speaking population. Schools aren't being built fast enough to keep pace. As a result, students have to choose between attending their local English-language schools or travelling long distances by bus to attend French-language schools. Often, parents choose to enrol their children in local schools, meaning faster assimilation and increased service inequity. I'd say, then, that things aren't getting better. There are still issues when it comes to schools being built.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Given what happened in the past with the adoption of Regulation 17, for instance, which prohibited the teaching of French in Ontario for quite some time, do you think francophones should be entitled to reparations for the harm done? In my opinion, it would be impossible to right all those wrongs. Having said that, I think there was an apology issued regarding Regulation 17, but not much has been said about reparations for harm.

You said earlier that immediate steps should be taken to address the underfunding, but there doesn't seem to be a desire to move in that direction.

Mr. Yves Lévesque: To get to that point, there would need to be an acknowledgement of harm on the part of the government, perhaps following a lawsuit, and then there would have to be reparations, obviously.

I think the problem today is that the specificity of francophones in Ontario is not necessarily recognized, so we're often treated just like other school boards. The current approach is that we are all the same, but that's not true. French and English-language educational needs differ. French-language education often costs more. For change to happen, the provincial government would have to recognize the needs, and that probably applies to all the other provinces as well. It's a challenge. Reparations would be a good idea, but that's another process.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: There could be a legal process for the acknowledgement of harm, for instance, through the court challenges program. Does anyone intend to use that avenue to get the Ontario government to acknowledge these harms?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: Mr. Foucher is likely in a better position to answer that question than I am.

What I can say is that it's an important case that should be brought before the courts. That would mean challenging French-language education in Ontario as administered by the governments of the day. That's a big job.

• (1135)

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

The next questioner is Ms. Ashton, who represents a riding in northern Manitoba.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

Mr. Lévesque, what impact is the shortage of teachers and early childhood educators having on your schools? Do you think the federal government has a key role to play in finding solutions to this shortage?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: That's an excellent question.

The staff shortage is clearly having an impact in schools. When you're forced to hire what we'd call unqualified teachers in schools because there's a shortage of qualified ones, it affects continuity. We don't always have teachers who are certified or who have the necessary skills, even though they are generally capable of doing the job. These are teachers who are not yet certified, but who have certain skills. It's a temporary solution to the staff shortage. It's a challenge.

There's also a challenge on the early childhood services side. Training for people who work with children is inadequate, and university training for certified teachers is insufficient. I do believe that the federal government can do something to increase teacher training in universities. That would have an effect on training capacity. At this point, even if we wanted to do more, we wouldn't have more teachers coming out of university. You can train 400 teachers, but that doesn't necessarily mean they'll all be teaching overnight. They won't all automatically become teachers. They may have gotten their certificates, but that doesn't mean they'll end up in schools and called to work the next day. We can assume that 80% of these individuals will end up in schools, but 20% of them will be lost to other sectors.

We need to increase the number of spots in universities, as well as the number of educators or early childhood educators, to create a big enough pool of employees. It can be a temporary solution. It doesn't necessarily have to be permanent, but it does need to be considered for both early childhood as well as post-secondary education.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

Mr. Foucher, I'll ask you the same question on the repercussions of the labour shortage. Do you think the federal government has a role to play in dealing with the shortage and coming up with solutions?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Thank you for the question.

I'd first like to add to Mr. Lévesque's comment on school bus transportation. A member of the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial in Nova Scotia said that 10 more French-language elementary schools are needed in Halifax. This proves that the problem affects all of Canada, not just Ontario.

To your question, I'd say the teacher shortage is very serious. What can the federal government do? As Mr. Lévesque mentioned, more spots must be made available in education faculties. The government has successfully intervened in some sectors in the past. I'm living proof of this, as is your chair. Prior to the early 1980s, no common law programs were taught in French, and the federal government, by getting involved, managed to put programs in place in Ottawa and Moncton, and a few in western Canada, as well. This type of intervention has been undertaken before and it can be done for education, too. I think it's the key. One of the next section 23 battles will be about the teacher shortage.

I come back to my earlier suggestion of setting up a post-secondary official language education program modelled on the official language teaching program that's worked well for elementary and secondary education.

• (1140)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you. We all support putting in new measures to deal with the labour shortage, which affects us all.

Thanks for your feedback, Mr. Foucher. Your comment on the government's initiative several years ago in the field of law is very interesting. Something similar could be done in education. It's obvious that action is needed to respond to this ever-worsening labour shortage and the high demand for education in French.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Ashton.

We now go to two more rounds of questions, for five minutes and then two and a half minutes.

Mr. Généreux, you have five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Demers, in your opening remarks, you spoke many times about Catholic schools. If I understand correctly, you represent seven out of 10 pupils in Ontario. I gather that the three other pupils attend public francophone schools, which are likewise funded.

The purpose of our study is to determine how we can improve the education continuum, starting with early childhood. You talked about day care for children between 18 months and four years old, while Mr. Foucher discussed the university sector.

If we want to look at schooling over the next 15, 20 or 30 years, the question we need to ask is the following: What can the federal government do now to prevent disruptions to service or quality in the education continuum?

We know that many francophone immigrants are being welcomed throughout Canada, and there's a big focus on immigration. In fact, the government has boasted about reaching the 4% francophone immigration target it set long ago.

I see the repercussions of potentially training teachers from abroad here in Canada, so they can fill the void in our schools and ease the labour shortage, like a chain. Where, though, can we currently expect this chain, or continuum, to break or be weakened?

Let's begin with you, Mr. Lévesque.

Mr. Yves Lévesque: I'll expand on Mr. Foucher's comment about schools. If we wanted to bring Ontario rights holders into our school system, 150 schools would have to be built. That's a major shortage preventing the inclusion of all rights holders, even if we know that they wouldn't all attend our schools.

It's obvious that the chain is broken or snags at several points, as you've said, which raises questions.

As Mr. Foucher mentioned, section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not necessarily provide protection or a guarantee of minority French-language education at all levels. That creates problems at the early childhood level, in particular. Nothing is guaranteed at the secondary or post-secondary level, either.

What's more, there are currently no guarantees ensuring that francophone students could take teacher training in French. For example, the University of Ottawa is bilingual and offers a teacher education program in both English and French, but nothing guarantees that the French program will always be offered. If there are more anglophone students one year, there will be fewer francophone students. In other words, there are no guaranteed spots that would allow 500 francophones, let's say, to take the program each year.

Should it be easier to bring immigrant teachers into the system? That's a question for the Ontario College of Teachers. It could determine how to better or more rapidly integrate these teachers into the system. Teachers trained at the three Ontario universities who complete their certification year should automatically be allowed to work in our schools. That's not the case, however, because the Ontario College of Teachers still uses a drawn-out process.

Many factors in the system therefore hurt the continuum.

• (1145)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

Can you provide the committee with an exhaustive list of the factors that, in your opinion, have an impact on this chain?

You referred to unqualified teaching positions, among other things. It would be useful for us to have more information on this topic. However, we currently have only five minutes to ask all the witnesses questions, and there is never enough time to get through all of our thoughts. That said, the issue you just raised is important.

What are your thoughts, Mr. Foucher?

The Chair: Mr. Foucher, you have 20 seconds.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: I will try to respond in 20 seconds.

First, because day care and early childhood learning services are often located on the same grounds as the school, sometimes even within the school itself, it's possible to take actions.

Second, to train teachers, you need education programs, and to get education programs, you need universities. Students need access to well-funded French-language universities. That is where the federal government can help.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Foucher.

Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I am pleased to see you again, Mr. Demers, Mr. Lévesque and Mr. Foucher.

Mr. Foucher, you raised two important issues. First, you mentioned the education continuum. I believe it is essential. In Nova Scotia, we've seen how important access to education in French from the age of four is.

That said, I want to dig a little deeper. I'm sure you know that the Official Languages Act, which was modernized under Bill C-13, refers a few times to early childhood and post-secondary education, specifically in subsections 41(3), 41(6) and 93.1(1.2). With the addition of these provisions to the Official Languages Act, has Bill C-13 enhanced section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms from a legal standpoint?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Yes, the provisions complement section 23. They provide all the tools needed for the federal government to take concrete action in support of French-language education.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's exactly the answer I was looking for.

I'm now going to talk about another issue. You have often said that school boards should sign memoranda of understanding on minority official language education. Are you aware that the federal government and the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones have signed a strategic agreement for francophone minority school boards to be consulted and to be able to share their priorities with the government?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Yes, I'm aware of that, and I think it's a good initiative that should continue.

Mr. Darrell Samson: It's a start. That's exactly the answer I was looking for.

I'm going to suggest a new mechanism. If I'm wrong, you can tell me.

A 1990 court decision confirmed the right of francophones in minority communities to establish independent school boards in control of their destiny. However, isn't that like allowing someone to build a house but not giving them money for the wood? We allow the establishment of francophone school boards, but we don't give them the money to operate.

Haven't we reached the point where we can say that section 23 gives school boards the right to negotiate directly with the federal government for French-language education outside Quebec?

Mr. Pierre Foucher: I wouldn't venture to comment on that. As I told you at the outset, I am no longer a member of the bar. Therefore, I can't give a legal opinion. All I can say is that it would be desirable.

• (1150)

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm taking the liberty of saying it, because I say what I want when I want, in fact. Thank you, Mr. Foucher.

Mr. Demers and Mr. Lévesque, thanks to an amendment that was added to Bill C-13, the Official Languages Act now has a provision that says school boards or provinces with school building needs must be consulted when the federal government sells real property, such as land. In other words, minority school boards can have access to federal government lands. Are you aware of that?

Mr. Yves Lévesque: Yes, but it's still done through the province.

Mr. Darrell Samson: It's still done through the province, but I'll tell you something. Three years ago, I worked with the Province of Nova Scotia, and we were able to put pressure on the Canada Lands Company to buy the land we wanted in downtown Halifax. We had been looking for land for 20 years. It's very important to know about that option. We need to talk about it at the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones conference. It's being held this weekend, and you'll be attending. Let's discuss that, because it's very important.

Second, I want to congratulate the Province of Ontario, because it gives 68% of the federal funding under the protocol for agreements for minority-language education to francophone school boards and only 32% to anglophone school boards. In that regard, it is the best province in the country. In Nova Scotia, 51% of federal funding goes to francophones and 49% goes to anglophones. In Newfoundland and Labrador, 33% of the funding goes to francophones. You can imagine how difficult that is.

Can we say that, in Ontario, 80% of students who enter kindergarten don't speak the language of the institution? That's the case in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Yves Lévesque: It's hard to—

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm just looking for a ballpark answer. It could be 5%, give or take. It can be 70%.

Mr. Yves Lévesque: A lot of education is done in kindergarten, even in day care. It's estimated that about 60% of francophone families in Ontario are exogamous, so I would say that 60% of the children entering the schools don't speak French to begin with.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I suspect you may agree with me.

In conclusion, that's why more money should be allocated to francization. We already give money to teach English as a second language to immigrants. We also need to allocate funding to teaching French as a first language to the children of rights holders. It's not complicated.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson. It's really not complicated.

Mr. Beaulieu, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Earlier, I asked some questions about the right to redress. We discussed acknowledging the wrongs done. Mr. Foucher, I believe you wanted to weigh in on the issue.

Mr. Pierre Foucher: Yes, thank you.

Firstly, the concept of redress already exists in case law, and it is mentioned in every Supreme Court ruling. Secondly, I agree with Mr. Lévesque that seeking comprehensive redress in court would be an extraordinary undertaking. The idea has come up, but given that judges prefer to proceed with caution, ruling on cases one at a time, I am not certain that an undertaking of that scale would be successful.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Given the issues with transportation, would you say that French immersion schools are competing with French-language schools to some extent? I am sure that in some cases, parents will choose to send their child to a French immersion school rather than subject them to a long commute. What is the impact of that?

Mr. Robert Demers: I can answer that question. There is definitely an impact. The number of immersion schools is growing, so there is direct competition with our schools. Immersion schools are regional, but their catchment areas are smaller than those of our schools. Yes, they are competing with us.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I know that when the government reformed the Official Languages Act, it announced increased funding for immersion schools, but there was no discussion of schools by and for francophones.

Do you think it would be a good idea to instead increase funding for schools by and for francophones?

Mr. Robert Demers: Absolutely.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have heard that immersion schools actually contribute to the assimilation of francophones.

Mr. Robert Demers: Absolutely.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: There you have it.

You spoke extensively about the teacher shortage. Does a significant portion of your teachers come from Quebec?

• (1155)

Mr. Yves Lévesque: Obviously, Quebec has always been a place where you can recruit teachers, but it seems to me that solutions have to be local, which is why it's important to increase our university-level training in Ontario. I think the capacity may be there, but a lot of teachers definitely do come from Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you. We're well over time.

Ms. Ashton, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. I just wanted to comment briefly on the subject of immersion that my colleague Mr. Beaulieu raised. I wanted to note that we have a labour shortage, a shortage of French immersion teachers, in our regions here in western Canada. We're also seeing teachers leave the immersion system to teach in the French-language school system. Consequently, solutions to the labour shortage should apply to the two systems, both of which need educators.

I'd also say that there's a free flow between the two school systems. For example, many children stay in the French-language school system until high school, then enter immersion. Conversely, other students start in immersion and then continue in the other system. I would just note that there are a lot of similarities between the two systems, including a genuine shared labour shortage.

Mr. Lévesque and Mr. Demers, I'd like to read you a very interesting comment from your website: "How to help: As elected school board trustees in Ontario, taxpayers, or parents in our school system, you can impact the future of French-language Catholic education by raising awareness among your local elected officials at the provincial, municipal, and federal levels." You raise several points there. I think it's great that you give such direct advice. You also clearly state that you need support and commitment from the political class to meet the challenges you're facing. You can't just accept that things are the way they are and let the trustees of the two school systems sort out their problems. It's up to all of us to act, and I'm very pleased that you also mentioned the federal government.

I have very little time left, but I just want to give you another chance to tell us clearly how important it is for the federal government to play a role in addressing the labour shortage and these training needs. It isn't solely up to the provincial governments or universities to play that role; it's really a federal government responsibility as well, since we know that French is in trouble and steps need to be taken to slow its decline.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. You took nearly three minutes to ask your question.

Before briefly suspending so we can welcome the next witness panel, I want to remind the witnesses in this first panel not to hesitate to send us any additional information they would like to forward to us. For example, they could provide us with answers to the excellent question that Ms. Ashton just asked, among other things.

Mr. Foucher, I'm aware you're no longer a member of the bar and that you therefore may not provide legal advice, but perhaps you can guide us through the legal landscape of facts and logical arguments that don't constitute legal opinion. Should you feel that any additional comments might assist the committee in drafting its report, please don't be shy.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here. Your testimony was really interesting and will definitely help us as we draft our report.

I will briefly suspend now so we can welcome the next witness panel.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: We will resume.

We are continuing our study of the minority-language education continuum, and we now welcome our second panel of witnesses.

We have Stephanie Hickey, teacher, as an individual; and Nicole Nicolas, principal of the École communautaire la Voie du Nord. Both are joining us by video conference.

Ladies, I imagine this is your first appearance before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I hope you aren't nervous because you're in good hands here. This is the best committee on Parliament Hill, and our members are exceptional.

We will allow each of you five minutes to introduce yourselves or to outline what you want to tell us. I am very strict about time. Please don't be insulted if I cut you off after five minutes. You may continue your remarks in response to the questions you'll be asked along the way.

Mrs. Hickey, we will begin with you, and I now turn the floor over to you for exactly five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey (Teacher, As an Individual): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, first, I want to thank you for welcoming me as a witness. Since I feel a bit stressed, I'm going to rely on the notes I have before me.

My name is Stephanie Hickey, and I am a teacher, but, above all, I am the mother of four Franco-Manitoban children. I have been living in Thompson, Manitoba, for nearly three years. This is my second time in Thompson because, as a result of my husband's career, we've travelled extensively across the country. One of the things we look for before settling somewhere is French-language preschool and school services so our children can be in French immersion. That's really important. Both of us are francophones from the eastern part of the country, but western Canada is now our home.

Preschool education is the first point I want to raise. I have one child in preschool, and, every time we move, it's hard for us to find a French-language day care or learning centre, something that's very important for us. We're lucky because, Les Louveteaux, a francophone day care centre, has been attached to our beautiful school, La Voie du Nord, in Thompson, since 2018. It isn't always easy to find a space because they're very limited as a result of many factors, including the labour shortage, of course. It's very hard to find certified francophone employees.

I've also been sitting on the day care centre's administrative committee for a year. We lost the centre's management staff, but management ultimately wound up in the hands of our parents committee, which consists of volunteers who work from Monday to Friday and are then responsible for the centre's human resources, hiring, interviews and finances. It has been very difficult, and I've been on the committee for only a year. The situation has lasted for more than two years. This is something that the parents set up, but we had to delegate the centre's management to the Fédération des parents de la francophonie manitobaine, which is now responsible for it.

The situation is difficult because there have been many personnel changes. Some employees leave. When I was there, we had to hire an anglophone director and several anglophone employees because, otherwise, we might have had to shut down and lose our day care service. We're gradually seeing improvements. Finally, after two and a half years, we opened the nursery this month. I forgot to mention that we now have 16 preschool children and four in the nursery. We also have six employees on the day care team, five of whom are francophones. So we've managed to find more francophone staff, but we still have constant turnover. It's never stable, and we know there's always a chance we'll lose employees. In addition, only two of those employees, an anglophone and a francophone, are certified.

One of the points I want to make is that virtual training is the only way for day care employees to be trained in French. It can be tough at times because they all have to work and have other obligations.

I've probably forgotten to mention some things, but I just want to say this: As a teacher, I see children who leave day care and arrive here in kindergarten. We unfortunately don't have a pre-kindergarten program. I would like it if we could get the necessary funding to create one because that would help improve the children's language skills before they enter kindergarten. For the moment, as one of the witnesses said earlier, a large percentage of children who enter kindergarten don't understand and can't speak the language. Consequently, we spend a lot of time in kindergarten teaching them

the language. Before grade one, they aren't ready to learn advanced literacy or numeracy skills because they spend so much time learning the language.

• (1205)

In conclusion, I would simply like to say, as a mother, that this is having a significant impact on families.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Hickey.

Nicole Nicolas, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas (Principal, École communautaire la Voie du Nord): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, I want to thank you for this invitation to appear before you and to draw your attention to the current challenges we're facing in education in French as a first language in an official language minority community.

First of all, Thompson is a northern Manitoba community located some 760 kilometres from the city of Winnipeg, a distance that can be covered in approximately 8 hours by automobile and an hour and a half by plane.

This year, the École communautaire La Voie du Nord welcomed 106 students from the city of Thompson and one from the community of Paint Lake, which is located in Paint Lake Provincial Park. Our team consists of 20 people: a school principal, a special education teacher who also works as a guidance counsellor, 10 teachers and eight support staff members. Of our student population, 77% come from exogamous families, 28% are newcomer students and 10% are indigenous students.

Our parents want their children to be proud of their Franco-Manitoban language and culture when they complete their education. Newcomer parents and non-rights-holder parents also want their children to be able to identify as francophones. These parents recognize the importance of bilingualism in Canada and a high-quality education in French.

We have to face many challenges as a francophone school in an official language minority community in northern Manitoba.

Recruiting and retaining francophone teachers who want to work in the north are our greatest challenges. This has a direct impact on student learning and on the development of staff members. For example, as a result of a teacher shortage last year, 30% of my time, and that of our special education and guidance counsellor, was devoted to teaching. Consequently, students didn't always receive the attention they needed to further their education, and teachers didn't always get the support and feedback they needed to develop professionally in order to meet the needs of our students, particularly those with special needs. As a result of that additional workload, staff was not always able to consult me or receive my support.

It's also important to note that, for those same reasons, the invaluable moments of collaboration for teachers that occur during the school day, and are designed to further our teachers' professional development, rarely occurred. Those moments of collaboration are important and invaluable; they enable us to come together as a professional learning community team, to engage in professional reading, to review our literary and numerical knowledge and to model teaching best practices.

We currently have no one to replace a teacher who becomes ill and goes on extended sick leave or a female teacher who takes maternity leave.

We also have to overcome the major challenge of supporting and mentoring newcomer teachers who have no experience of the Canadian education system. They find themselves in classrooms as permanent teachers, even though there are major differences between our education system and the ones they have known. For example, inclusion, differentiated instruction, adaptation and modification are approaches with which they may not necessarily be familiar. Furthermore, virtually most of those teachers aren't capable of teaching English starting at grade four. This year, as a result of the teacher shortage, we have two individuals who have a limited teaching licence because they haven't taken the university courses they need to do the job.

Consequently, our students may not complete their school year at the expected level in our curricula. If this alarming situation continues, our children may not receive the education that they deserve and that their parents expect. They need that education in order to pursue the post-secondary studies required to fill jobs in the fields of health, technology, science, mathematics and, of course, education.

In conclusion, I want to thank you for your attention to the challenges we face in education in the north and in an official language minority community. Thanks as well for your work on the important issue of the education of our children and our Franco-Manitoban and Canadian youth.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nicolas.

We will now begin the first round of questions, for which each political party will have six minutes.

Let's go to the western Canadian francophonie and to the Conservative Party: Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Nicolas and Mrs. Hickey, thank you for your testimony, which I appreciate. School sector representatives sometimes give much more general testimony, but, in this instance, you've focused on the smallest communities. That's very important.

Ms. Nicolas, are student numbers at your school stable? Do you have a recruitment problem? You mentioned newcomers. How are they fitting into the student body?

• (1215)

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: The student population is actually increasing at our school. We had 77 students three or four years ago but now we have 106. Ours is one of the schools with the fastest-rising number of students in our school division.

Mr. Marc Dalton: That's excellent. Congratulations.

I believe there are one or two immersion schools in your region. Do you have partnerships with them regarding substitute teaching and resources?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: No, we don't have any right now.

We work in two separate school divisions. However, the organization *Éducatrices et éducateurs francophones du Manitoba*, or EFM, as well as teachers from the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine and the anglophone school divisions that offer immersion programs work together and have access to grants for certain activities.

In fact, we've briefly spoken with one immersion school about activities that we could offer together but haven't pursued the matter for the moment.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Personally, I had another career. I previously taught at the elementary and secondary levels.

You briefly mentioned connections, but tell us a little about professional development. Is that done more online? Do you have to pay to go to Winnipeg or elsewhere? Is that something that could be done in Thompson with other immersion schools? Would you please tell us more about that?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I've actually never thought about the possibility of providing professional development with the other immersion school.

My colleague here, Mrs. Hickey, is a special education teacher and guidance counsellor in Thompson. Our experience is with student services. We offer teachers more training and mentoring. For professional training, we have to travel to Winnipeg to meet with our colleagues at the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, and that entails extraordinary costs.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Even though I've previously taught at a public school, I know that private schools were sometimes given a chance to take that training.

I'd like you to tell us about recruitment. For example, health is a provincial jurisdiction. There are 20,000 doctors and 30,000 nurses in Canada who aren't allowed to practise as a result of all the credential issues. Are a lot of newcomers in Thompson qualified teachers who can't teach because their credentials aren't recognized?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Thank you, that's a good question, but I can't answer it because I don't have any data on the subject. However, I can give you an example. We had a janitor who worked evenings at the school. He told me one day that he had been a school principal in his home country but that he was now working as a janitor.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

Mrs. Hickey, I want to commend you for your efforts, your passion and your vision of student learning.

We discussed the rising numbers of students in the schools. Is demand also increasing in the early childhood day care centres?

• (1220)

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Dalton.

Pardon me for interrupting the conversation, Mrs. Hickey, but Mr. Dalton has the same clock as I do, and his time is up. You may have time to clarify your thoughts in response to the upcoming questions.

We will continue with the Liberal Party: Mr. Serré, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thanks as well to our two witnesses, Mrs. Hickey and Ms. Nicolas.

This is really interesting because your local perspective is very much like that of schools in the rural regions of northern Ontario. You aren't the only ones, and I thank you for your courage and perseverance in supporting French-language education in minority communities.

Before further discussing the transportation shortage, I'd like to ask you if you're aware of the federal government's action plan. I'd like to get an idea of the funding you've received from the various federal government programs.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I'm afraid I can't answer that question. Our school division would have that information.

Mr. Marc Serré: I see. I thought so, but I just wanted to know if you had that information. You aren't necessarily aware either of the funding allocated by the Province of Manitoba.

Ms. Nicolas, with regard to the faculties of education in Manitoba, it was mentioned earlier that there's a major shortage of teachers and spaces in education faculties in Ontario. Are you aware of the teacher training that's offered in Manitoba? How many spaces are there for francophone teachers in Winnipeg, for example? Do you know?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I'm not exactly aware of the number of spaces, but I know that number has increased in the education faculty at the Université de Saint-Boniface, in Winnipeg.

Mr. Marc Serré: Mrs. Hickey, what training is offered to people wishing to work for you?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: I believe you're referring to the preschool program.

Right now it amounts to college-level early childhood courses. We have the University College of the North, or UCN, in Thompson, but that program is offered in English. That's precisely where we recruited the anglophone director to support us with our day care centre. Apart from that, training is provided virtually, and since it's remote, I don't have that much information. I know there are various university and college-level institutions that I imagine could offer the French-language early childhood program.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Nicolas, do you have any statistics on the length of school transport routes? You mentioned that your numbers increased from 77 to 106 students. Was a study conducted to determine whether you could increase the number of students by adding another school or shortening the routes?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Not as far as I know. However, there's already talk of renovations, an addition to our school, in response to our increasing population.

Mr. Marc Serré: I would advise you to work through your school board to ensure that the province submits proposals to the federal government because announcements have been made in northern Ontario to assist schools such as yours in developing early childhood education.

We spoke with another French immersion witness. In Ontario, the appropriateness of funding immersion schools as opposed to Catholic or public schools is a somewhat delicate issue.

Ms. Nicolas, are there any students who are more or less in immersion but who could attend your school? Have you analyzed that aspect?

• (1225)

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: What's happening in our region, here in Thompson, is that students often wind up in anglophone schools after grade eight because they offer a broader selection of programs. I don't necessarily want to call that a tradition. That's why we want to work with our school division to ensure that our students, from early childhood to the intermediate cycle, stay with us right through their secondary education.

Mr. Marc Serré: Mrs. Hickey, preschool teaching in early childhood is so important in assisting schools such as the one where Ms. Nicolas works.

What can the federal or provincial governments do to help you recruit more students? Do you have a waiting list? What resources do you need in order to recruit more students?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: We always have a waiting list. As I mentioned earlier, I haven't sat on the board of directors since November 2023. I let that go. However, the waiting list is endless. At one point, we were unable to accept anyone for nearly a year. The demand is there, but the service isn't always, and that's the problem. We're short of labour. We have to attract people.

Despite the fact that we're a small urban centre in northern Manitoba, we live in a very remote region. Sometimes people view us as coming from another region because we live far away from the major centres. Consequently, it's very hard to attract people to work in the early childhood field, even in our schools. So it's very—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Hickey.

Thank you, Mr. Serré.

The next questions will come from the Bloc Québécois: Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you for being here, ladies. Your testimony focuses more on local life, and that's interesting.

Mrs. Hickey, you say that many employees are leaving. What's the explanation for those departures? Are salaries too low? What's going on?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: That's actually just an opinion that I expressed.

I arrived in Thompson in 2010, at the start of my career. My husband and I began our careers here. We had to change regions because my husband has a job that requires him to travel across the country. Thompson is a region where many people really are in transit: They come to the region to begin their careers with employers, companies, for a few years and then leave the region. That's the reality of our region.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: With respect to the Canada-Manitoba Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement—2021 to 2026, we are told that there are provisions for day care.

Have you taken advantage of those provisions? Do you think that this has an impact on a number of day cares like Les Louveteaux?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: I'm not sure I understood your question. Can you repeat it?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The Canada-Manitoba Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement—2021 to 2026 includes provisions on French. Are you aware of any new funding for your day care services?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: I'm not aware of that at this time. As I mentioned, the day care is now managed by a federation. I'm sorry. I don't have an answer for you.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Ms. Nicolas, do you have any idea? You don't know either, do you?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: No, I don't have that information.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, if there were more funding, would that make it easier for you to recruit more teachers and keep them?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Again, this is my opinion. It would be very interesting to see the data to find out how many of our high school students want to go into education.

Here in Thompson we have a small group of seven high school students, but none of them are interested in teaching. Here, in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, we want a certain percentage of our students to become teachers, because that is important. However, I think that fewer and fewer students are interested in entering the field of education, which is a major challenge and a major concern.

• (1230)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Is there an institution in or around Manitoba where those who choose education can study?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Yes, there is the Université de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg. I believe it's the only francophone university in western Canada. They have a very good education program.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In terms of statistics, I see that the proportion of the population speaking French at home in Manitoba was 4% in 1971, but 1.3% in 2021. So there has been a real decline in French. Is that decline noticeable around you?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Yes, absolutely. We see it in our school, where the majority of students come from exogamous families. There's an expression that says English is as easy to catch as the flu. We're not worried about students not learning English, because English is all around us. Rather, we're worried that they won't acquire the basics and sufficient French oral communication skills.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Despite everything, you are persevering in speaking French and working towards that end.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Yes, absolutely. When we went to school, we were told things. That was less the case for my generation, because we had a certain pride in being francophone. That being said, students must not be constantly reminded to speak French. We strive to work with teachers to help them understand that learning a language and identifying with a culture can be fun. Having fun in French so that students can take pride in the francophonie is really what we are aiming for.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you. When you look at the numbers and you see the underfunding and everything else, it's really hard to be optimistic. However, we are not really hearing any alarm bells coming from western Canada, apart from the one you are sounding today.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: There are big red flags behind me!

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Things have happened with the provincial governments. In Manitoba, there were anti-French laws. It's no coincidence that French has declined to that extent, especially before the 1970s. However, it's as if there were no acknowledgement of the harm done or any real willingness to repair it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. You're well over your time.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I want to start by saying something to my colleagues around the table. It may be fairly obvious, but Ms. Nicolas, Mrs. Hickey and I are all from the same community. Thanks to them, my children and the 106 children you heard about can live in French and learn French in our community. I want to thank them for their hard work. The situation is not easy at all.

Mrs. Hickey and Ms. Nicolas, I also want to thank you for speaking honestly about the challenges you face and those that affect our schools in official language minority communities. Before turning to the school level, I want to ask you about the preschool level, which I've talked about a lot before this committee.

As for my family, we have been on a waiting list for a long time, but we've never been able to access day care because of the labour shortage. I remember the principle telling me about it at the time.

Mrs. Hickey, can you tell us about the waiting list for families who want to put their children in day care? Is the message we need to hear that many families in our communities want access to those services?

• (1235)

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: Yes, there are many families who want to enrol their children in preschool in French. This often has to do with the little brothers or sisters of children who are already in our schools, and their parents want them to learn the language so that they are ready to start kindergarten. I see many of them when I go to the day care, but I know that the waiting list is very long and that many more children need those services. I don't have the data, but there is an ongoing need for day care. As this hasn't always been the case, only since 2018, and given the significant interruptions related to the services that could be provided to the nursery, this demand will continue.

People end up trying to find a place in an English-language day care, which has a significant impact on the language. For example, my first child didn't benefit from francophone day care services. For three and a half years, my daughter received English-language day care services. In terms of social development, everything was done in English with her little friends. She is the only one of my four children who has not had access to preschool services in French, and she is the only one who continues to have difficulties in French. She always wants to switch to English, because that's the social language she learned first.

The waiting list for those services is long, and it pains me that we cannot provide them to all families who need or want them.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for sharing that with us. This affects us all personally.

You talked about access to training and the fact that our program, for example, is in English. Would it be useful to use federal funds to provide distance training in French, as well as wage incentives? We know that those who work in the early childhood field are not well paid. Should we be doing something about that, particularly by investing federal funds in early childhood?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: Yes, absolutely. We are competing with large urban centres for the same workforce. If you take a course at a francophone institution in Winnipeg, it is easier to stay there because you're already there. If you live here, in the north, and you have to travel, that adds to the cost of living. That has financial consequences. So, if we could pay the labour force more to attract it here, that would have a significant impact.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I don't have much time left, Ms. Nicolas, but I would like to ask you if you have any comments on early childhood services as an important link to facilitate entry to school, as well as any improvements that should be made.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: The first five years of a child's life are very important. If we reach out to francophones and those who want to go to a francophone school sooner rather than later, that has a marked effect on their educational and social development. Preschool is almost essential in minority communities.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I think I'm out of time. I will continue my questions for Ms. Nicolas in the second round. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

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

• (1240)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ladies, thank you for accepting the committee's invitation. I imagine that Ms. Ashton proposed you as witnesses, obviously.

I went to Google Maps to see where Thompson was, because I honestly didn't know. In my riding, when a concession road is a little far away, I say that it's lost in the wilderness. You are lost in the far north, let's face it. However, you are not really lost. You decided to live there in a small community. I imagine that's a choice you've made.

What is the population of Thompson? I suppose Ms. Ashton could answer me, but you can answer as well. I guess it's not a large community, from what I've seen.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I think the city of Thompson has about 13,000 people.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: What is the proportion of francophones among those 13,000 inhabitants? Is it 10%, 20%, 30%?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Perhaps Ms. Ashton could answer that question. Personally, I would not be able to answer it.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Ashton, do you have any idea of the proportion of francophones in Thompson?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Actually, no. However, we have to wonder about the quality of this data. I think Ms. Nicolas talked a lot about newcomers, who include a large percentage of francophones.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I imagine that the existence of those communities in the north is due to the presence of certain private companies. Do they contribute to education, particularly French-language education? For example, for day care services, do you feel supported by those businesses, which I don't know? Do you feel the presence of those companies in the educational world?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I'm getting to know the city of Thompson. Did you know that this city is one of the very few that owes its development to the mining industry?

I know that the Vale mine is looking to recruit our students. That mine is the largest employer in Thompson. They are very pleased that many of us are very much involved in their information sessions on the trades. It certainly has an impact on our students, because they know there are many employment opportunities.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Thompson is recognized as the northern hub. People from all the other northern communities come to Thompson, for health care, shopping, and so on.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mrs. Hickey, you said you weren't really from Thompson, because you weren't born there, but you live there with your family. I imagine your husband works for or around the Vale mine, or would he be a doctor?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: No, he is a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: That's why he's called upon to travel throughout Canada, which obviously has an impact on your family life.

You talked about early childhood services as part of the education continuum. I understand that, in small or remote communities like Thompson, having access to such services can kick-start a child's entire education in the French-speaking system.

Both of you talked about people coming in from outside or, in fact, immigrants. Are there a lot of francophone immigrants who come to work with you, not necessarily in education, but in the community in general?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Do you mean as adults?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes, I'm talking about adult newcomers.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Yes, but in education—

Mr. Bernard Généreux: In the Thompson area, and by “area” I mean the city or the constituency, do you think that the region is also involved in promoting Thompson as a place where francophones could settle?

The Chair: You have one second left.

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I would say no.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nicolas. You know how to respect the time, unlike my colleague Mr. Généreux. He had five minutes and the clock shows that he took another twelve seconds.

Ms. Koutrakis, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I'd like to continue to better understand labour shortages. What distinguishes the training of future early childhood educators who will work in a minority language community from that offered to educators destined to work in institutions where the language is that of the majority?

• (1245)

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Mrs. Hickey, I'll let you answer the question first, and then I'll comment.

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: If I understand correctly, you want to know the difference between the training of francophone educators who go to work in a minority environment and the training provided to educators who go to work in a majority institution.

On the one hand, there is language, of course. On the other hand, there is culture. Songs, nursery rhymes and all the things that make the francophonie alive would be part of the training of the person taking the francophone program.

I hope that answers your question.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Ms. Nicolas, would you like to add something?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I may not have understood the question, but one of the major differences is access to post-secondary education in French. Here, in Thompson and in the north, we don't have access to face-to-face post-secondary education. If there are opportunities for access, they would be virtual, but I don't think there are many. If people want to get training, they have to go to Winnipeg.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Why do you think it was important for you to appear before the committee today?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: First, I care about children, young people and the francophone community in Manitoba. It hasn't always been easy to be a francophone in Manitoba. Many members of my family became anglophones because of society in general. At one point, it wasn't legal to teach in French; those who spoke French were really not part of society. The development of our young people in French is very important to me. I have two children who are now adults. My daughter attended the Université de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, where she completed a bachelor of science degree. Then she chose to study in Ottawa, because that's where a French-language medical program was offered. She is now a doctor, and she is proud to have been able to take her training in French.

Second, it is important to me that we francophones have the same opportunities as our colleagues or young anglophones, but that's not the case right now. There are many more opportunities for anglophone children and young people than there are for francophones. We feel it right across the province. I can't say we feel it just in the northern part of the province, although it's more glaring. That has an impact on us as well. As I mentioned, our high school students often want to go to English school in Thompson because they will have access to a number of other programs, including music or trades.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Ms. Nicolas.

Mrs. Hickey, what do you think?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: It will be difficult to answer after what Ms. Nicolas just said. I felt it was important to appear before the committee for personal and professional reasons.

Personally, I kind of took my French childhood for granted. I come from an area where there was a better balance. I come from an exogamous family, but I was able to do all my education in French. I want my children to have that same opportunity. As Ms. Nicolas just said, there are certainly advantages on the anglophone side, but I find that unfair. My children should have the same benefits in their mother tongue.

As for the professional side, since I work with these children, I can see how far behind they are if they have not had the opportunity to speak French from a young age. Their anglophone comrades, who already speak English, can simply learn and grow. They don't have to work as hard to learn the language in which the subject is taught. I don't know if what I just said makes sense.

• (1250)

The Chair: Yes, it makes sense, Mrs. Hickey. It was very well explained.

Mr. Beaulieu, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Ladies, it was said earlier that many children arrive at day care without knowing how to speak French. Is it because they don't speak French at home? Why do they not know how to speak French when they arrive at the day care centre?

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: I'll try to answer that question a little.

The Division scolaire franco-manitobaine has done some research, but I don't know if it's official. At home, the family adopts the mother's language and, if the mother is anglophone, the child will learn English. So when it comes to enrolling their five-year-old child in French school, parents realize that they could have enrolled him or her in preschool programs and activities in French, if necessary. I don't know if that answers your question.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Yes, it's not an easy question anyway.

I think the rate of assimilation and language transfer to English is important, because the last data I saw was close to 60% in Manitoba. Obviously, some parents no longer speak French at home, even though they are of francophone origin.

As for life outside the home, I came across an article that talked about living one's francophonie in Thompson. The woman who was doing the interview said that it was possible as long as she got together with francophone friends, but once she got out of the house, it was over. Is that pretty much your reality?

Mrs. Stephanie Hickey: I think that's true. When I go shopping or to the grocery store, my son asks me why no one speaks to him in French and why we can't do grocery shopping in French. However, sometimes I meet students who have been taught in French immersion and who provide services in French. When that happens, my son is surprised.

I think that, yes, we speak French most often at home, but it should be done more outside the home.

The Chair: That's fine. Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for the last two and a half minutes of this round.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by saying a big thank you to Ms. Nicolas and Mrs. Hickey. I think it's very important to hear from people on the front lines of this study. We have already heard from many people, including school board directors, the university sector and others. However, it's good to hear from two people who are on the ground. I know that Ms. Nicolas teaches because there is a labour shortage and that Mrs. Hickey does everything in our school. I think their contribution is really important for this study and for the recommendations we want to make.

I don't have much time left. Ms. Nicolas, you clearly indicated the challenges you are facing, particularly the labour shortage. I would like you to tell us about the importance of ensuring that francophone schools, in minority communities such as ours and in other rural and northern regions, have the financial support they need to hire the right people.

Do we need wage incentives? Do we need housing support, because we know that housing is hard to find in the north? We know that action is needed to put an end to the decline of French. We know that we need teachers. Is there a role for the federal government to fund those kinds of incentives and support to attract teachers to our region?

• (1255)

Ms. Nicole Nicolas: Yes, absolutely. Mrs. Hickey and I were just talking about that. One of the things that could improve the situation would be to offer scholarships to francophone students who are studying in the faculty of education. I would even go further by proposing that their last two years of education be paid and that, in return, they work for three years in a minority environment, for example. That way, we would always have a pool of teachers to draw from.

We absolutely must have programs that encourage future teachers to work in minority communities. Newly qualified teachers often want to work in an urban environment. Minority communities are very interested in encouraging them to come to their schools. Also, at the University—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nicolas and Mrs. Hickey.

That concludes the public part of the meeting, which we will now continue in camera. We don't have much time.

As I always say to the witnesses who come before us, if you have additional information that you would like to send to us so that we can learn more about these issues and help us write our report, please feel free to do so and send it to the clerk, who will forward it to all committee members.

Thank you very much for taking part in this exercise. You made us want to visit La Voie du Nord school in Thompson. Perhaps Ms. Ashton will invite us one day. As one of our colleagues said earlier, we thank you for your courage and for not giving up the fight. We appreciate what you are doing for the francophonie outside Quebec.

The meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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