



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Official Languages

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 120

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Tuesday, November 19, 2024

Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 120 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I'll quickly go over the instructions to avoid acoustic accidents caused by the sound system and microphones, among other things. Please read the small card in front of you carefully, for the sake of the interpreters and the technical team. Acoustic accidents do not occur in virtual mode, but rather around the table.

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

Before giving the floor to the witnesses, I would like to digress for a moment.

Two weeks ago, for technical reasons, we adjourned the meeting instead of suspending it. Before the meeting adjourned, we were in the middle of the action, and Mr. Godin had the floor.

We'll get to the witnesses shortly, so bear with us.

Mr. Godin, the floor is yours.

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

We can be pleased that we'll probably get the support of the party opposite, the government party, and we'll get back to our study on the education continuum, at least I hope so.

Personally, I'm going to conclude my remarks so that the witnesses can speak. I'm obviously waiting to hear what the government's position is.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

According to my list, Mr. Serré is next, but he isn't here.

Ms. Gladu, would you like to take the floor?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): No.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, would you like the floor?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): No.

The Chair: Mr. Généreux, would you like the floor?

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): No.

The Chair: Mr. Iacono, would you like the floor?

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Yes.

The Chair: That was two weeks ago.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Lightbound, I just saw your hand up.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I'll turn it over to Mr. Lightbound.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Lightbound.

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Given the fact that Mr. Brock apologized in the House of Commons, which was the purpose of the motion, I think the adage “better late than never” applies in this case, and I believe the motion is null and void.

I therefore ask for unanimous consent for the motion to be withdrawn.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr.—

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, there is a proposal from Mr. Lightbound. We have to take a position on that before someone else takes the floor.

The Chair: I know, but Mr. Iacono allowed Mr. Lightbound to speak before him, since he wanted to speak.

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

It's not up to a member of the committee to decide the speaking order; it's up to the chair.

The Chair: That's correct, but I had given my approval.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor, but please be brief.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You're a very flexible and reasonable person.

I just wanted to say that I'm glad there was finally an apology in the House. However, I would like to point out that this is the third time our Conservative colleagues have shown a lack of respect—

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, Mr. Lightbound asked for unanimous consent. I think we first need to take a position on this and close the debate.

So I'm asking you—

The Chair: I agreed to change the speaking order, at Mr. Iacono's request.

Mr. Iacono will be the last speaker. After that, we will—

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Mr. Chair, I withdraw my request for unanimous consent.

Having said that, after Mr. Iacono, I—

The Chair: Okay. That's perfect.

I think everyone agrees to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: As I was saying, this isn't the first time the Conservatives have shown a lack of respect for the French language, either in the House of Commons or in parliamentary committees. I hope there won't be a fourth time.

I'm a little disappointed to see that, at these three events, not a single Conservative member from Quebec rose to denounce his colleagues' comments about the French language and about Canadians who speak French.

I'm happy with the rest.

The Chair: Mr. Lightbound is asking for the motion to be withdrawn. Does he have unanimous consent?

Mr. Lightbound, do you want to pick up—

Mr. Joël Lightbound: I move to withdraw the unanimous consent motion.

• (1110)

The Chair: I see Mrs. Shanahan on the screen and everyone around the table. Everyone seems to agree on that. That's perfect.

(Motion withdrawn)

The Chair: We will now begin—

Mr. Joël Godin: On a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Joël Godin: I would like to seek unanimous consent so that our witnesses have as much time as possible to answer our questions. I propose that we devote a full hour to their testimony. I think it's important to hear from the organizations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chair. You took the words right out of my mouth. I was just going to allude to that.

That's the technical sidebar.

Witnesses, you have a full hour.

We have two hours for our committee meeting, but we have some committee business to do in camera. However, before that, we can give the witnesses a full hour.

We now have Basile Dorion, former school trustee, as an individual. From Canadian Parents for French, we have Nicole Thibault, executive director, and Mr. Visweswaran, director of public affairs and policy.

I think this is the first time you've appeared before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. The way we operate is that we

give each witness or group five minutes to make their opening statement. So there will be five minutes for Mr. Dorion and five minutes for Canadian Parents for French. Then there will be a series of questions from members of the various political parties.

We'll start with Mr. Dorion. I'm very strict about speaking time because the stricter I am, the more questions members will have.

Mr. Dorion, please go ahead. I'll give you five minutes for your opening remarks. If you run out of time, you can use the question round to add what you won't have time to say.

Mr. Basile Dorion (Former School Counsellor, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee and support staff, thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my experience, my observations and, above all, my very great concern about French as a first language and the language of use, what I call "natural French".

I must admit that I find it very difficult to present the scope of the complex subject of the state of the French language in just five minutes, so I hope you will ask me questions. I also want to say that I'm going to speak to you from the heart and with a lot of emotion. I admit that what I'm about to say won't always be politically correct; it may even be crude at times.

Since 1934, my family has lived on the shores of Georgian Bay, Ontario, in the Lafontaine region. I'm Métis and French Canadian. We have always lived in French, at home and in the community, even though we were surrounded by anglophones. I've always spoken French to my children, even though my marriage is mixed. I'm very fortunate that my wife supports everything I do.

For much of my life, I worked to defend French and my culture in a very minority environment. It's not easy, but I continue to do so with determination.

I was a school board trustee for 21 years, before the French school boards arrived. I was the spokesperson and coordinator during the school crisis in Penetanguishene in 1979, when we had to fight to get our French high school. We finally got it, after multiple protests and litigation. At the same time, I also worked as a community development officer and executive director of the Centre d'activités françaises, our cultural centre, now called La Clé d'la Baie.

Even though French as a second language is rarely used, it seems to be doing quite well. My two biggest concerns are the alarming decline of French as the language of use and the fact that children who already speak French when they arrive at school are disadvantaged by French school boards because they are in a predominantly anglophone context.

I could give you hundreds of examples of how fewer and fewer people have French as their natural language. For example, I used to be able to count 37 houses on my row, or in my “*concession*”, as we say back home, where French was always spoken at home. There were only one or two where people didn't speak French. Now, 50 years later, it's exactly the opposite: of those 37 houses, there are barely two or three where French is still spoken.

I also see it in my own family, in my community and in the people around me. We've lost our pride in being francophone. People now think that speaking French in public or at home is bad manners. The church told us that we had to be very polite to those who didn't understand French. As a result, if an English-speaking person is 50 feet away from us, we shouldn't offend them. Sometimes, out of habit or laziness, we forget that the English speaker isn't there any more, and we continue to speak in English. French in a minority setting has become a second language, not a natural one. If it hasn't become one yet, it's rapidly becoming one.

Our French school boards, along with the homes, have a major role to play, and they have an important responsibility to preserve French as a first language or language used. However, I think French school boards are too preoccupied with the numbers, that is to say the subsidies. It's much more profitable to have predominantly anglophone students in our French-language schools, rather than predominantly francophone students.

At one time, they were referred to as schoolchildren. Then we got more sophisticated and called them pupils. Today, school boards call them “enrolments”. It doesn't sound very humane; it seems to be more about money.

• (1115)

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

Mr. Basile Dorion: I would go so far as to say that our French school boards are too poor to take proactive measures, because they're afraid of offending and losing the predominantly anglophone clientele.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

You will be able to provide more information as the questions are put to you. Your five minutes is already up.

I don't know if it's Ms. Thibault or Mr. Visweswaran who will be speaking.

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

Ms. Nicole Thibault (Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Parents for French): I will be speaking.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting us to appear before you today.

I am the CEO of Canadian Parents for French, CPF, a national network. I will be sharing my time with Ahdithya.

Founded in 1977, Canadian Parents for French has long been dedicated to supporting bilingualism in Canada, recognizing the importance of building allies to support the francophonie. Our mission is to promote French language learning through programs, re-

sources and advocacy for anglophones and allophones across the country.

We're represented by branches and offices nationwide that advocate for equitable access to French second language programs, and this includes French immersion. Through initiatives such as *Concours d'art oratoire*, *le tutorat virtuel* and our virtual career fair, CPF has addressed community needs for over 50 years in every province and every territory. These programs help Canadian youth gain valuable language skills, benefiting their personal and professional lives and enhancing the social and economic prosperity of our country. We recognize the importance of studying the full continuum of education over the lifespan of each Canadian.

For early childhood, it's crucial for cognitive, emotional, social and language development. While early French language learning is supported in a francophone school system or with exogamous families, it's not emphasized enough in early childhood programs for the majority of the population. We believe that, to normalize bilingualism in Canada, we must start early. CPF advocates for English-speaking child care providers to offer a bilingual program to ensure early exposure to parents so that they will enrol their children in French immersion kindergarten for the best learning experience.

CPF created the successful French Footprints pilot that trains English-speaking practitioners to integrate French into their everyday routines. This program has been highly successful, benefiting practitioners and families. Unfortunately, the funding has not yet been received to continue to pursue this innovative work.

[*Translation*]

For us, the quality and accessibility of French as a second language programs are paramount. French as a second language programs in Canada have grown significantly. More than 450,000 students enrol every year, which is a 40% increase in 20 years.

This increase reflects a growing interest in learning French, particularly among immigrant families, who wish to provide their children with opportunities in both official languages, English and French.

According to Canadian Parents for French, if more spaces were made available, approximately 100,000 additional students could enrol in immersion programs starting tomorrow. However, access to these programs is restricted due to certain geographic barriers and limited resources for English school boards.

People who submit applications are often denied. Only 15% of Canadian youth are enrolled in immersion. That means that 85% of students don't have that opportunity, and that concerns me, in 2024, in a country that calls itself officially bilingual.

Of course, the federal government must review funding for official languages programs in education. We need to support investment and guarantee accessible and equitable second-language education across the country.

We note that the major English school boards, such as those in Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary and Vancouver, will not appear before your committee. However, despite these challenges, we hope you will think of the Peel District School Board, which has turned away nearly 7,000 registrations over the past 10 years.

• (1120)

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran (Director, Advocacy and Public Policy, Canadian Parents for French): Mr. Chair, this exclusion isn't just a statistic.

Every year, 700 talented young people from the greater Toronto area cannot aspire to become Supreme Court justices, governors general or thought leaders in Canadian society. Denying them these opportunities limits their individual potential.

As a French immersion graduate myself, I firmly believe in its value. It was through this gift that I was able to access other enriching opportunities that wouldn't have been available if I hadn't spoken both official languages. Limiting access to the possibility of becoming bilingual also creates barriers to integration in all spheres of Canadian society. This makes our institutions unrepresentative of Canadian diversity and feeds the discourse of the two solitudes.

We'll now let you ask us questions so that we can continue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion, Ms. Thibault and Mr. Visweswaran.

There will be a first round, during which each political party will be able to ask you questions that you can answer. It will be about six minutes each. As always, we're going to start with the Conservatives. Mr. Godin, who is the first vice-chair of this committee, will have the honour of breaking the ice.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us this morning. It's always nice to meet in person. We particularly appreciate it, given what we've been through.

I will first address the representatives of Canadian Parents for French.

You said—this is stimulating for us—that there were a lot of applications from young people who wanted to study in French. So the clientele is there.

Since our time is very limited, could you quickly give us an explanation that will help us understand the difference between immersion, which seems to be for anglophones, and education in French for rights holders?

Can you explain that to us, given that we're talking about the education continuum, from early childhood to post-secondary? There's been a request for us to do a study on immersion at a later date, but I would first like to hear what you have to tell us about this issue.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: It's important to understand that these are two completely different paths. We have French school boards, which are intended for francophones. There's a path to follow. These people must have some knowledge of French at the outset. Mr. Dorion mentioned that we were concerned about the quality of what was offered when people who didn't necessarily have the same level of French were integrated into the system.

I'm going to talk about my field, immersion. The Toronto District School Board and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, which are English school boards, offer a program in English, so one path, as well as core French. So there's 30 or 40 minutes of French a day. We are also offering another path, French immersion. That means that, starting in kindergarten, the days take place in English and French equally. In the first year, 80% of the day is spent in French and 20% in English.

The proportion increases over the years, until grades four and five, when the proportion is 50% on both sides. At the secondary level, about 25% of courses are in French.

Since these students started using French very early, they passed a threshold that allows them to converse, to communicate in French. In addition, the various subjects make it possible to learn that language.

• (1125)

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you for that clarification, Ms. Thibault.

What happens then at the post-secondary level?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: At that level, things happen in the same environments.

I'll let Mr. Visweswaran speak to that.

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: I went through French immersion. After Grade 12, I was able to decide whether I was going to continue my studies in French or English. In the case of Campus Saint-Jean, the French campus of the University of Alberta, it's often said that 60% of students went through French immersion. So the demand is high among young people who started with French as a second language and who want to pursue post-secondary studies in French.

Mr. Joël Godin: However, I'm told that the problem at the post-secondary level is that French-language programs aren't complete.

Is that correct?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: It depends on the field. Whatever the case may be, there are fewer choices, and you may have to go to another province to find certain courses in French.

Mr. Joël Godin: In terms of immersion programs, do English school boards compete with French school boards? We're talking about two different worlds here. Is there any competition between them?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: My answer is no, even though that may be the case in small communities.

Think of a family that wants to choose a French-language school as a rights holder. If there is no French-language school in or around the neighbourhood, those people could choose a school that's nearby, that's part of an English school board and offers a French immersion program.

For our part, we insist on the fact that these are really two paths. Our organization is called "Canadian Parents for French", not "Canadian Parents for French immersion". When we advise parents, we recommend that they seek the best possible quality of French. If people are rights holders, we suggest that they opt for the French-language program, but, if not, we recommend the best possible French program for them, which is immersion.

The problem in small communities is that some rights holders haven't had the opportunity to use French and have a natural mastery of it. That may be a challenge that needs to be addressed through francization.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Thibault. As Mr. Babin said in his presentation, unfortunately, students often represent dollar signs for school boards.

I would like to ask you a question about education. Is there a shortage of French teachers?

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: I'm not a teacher, and I know that Ms. Thibault could talk about this as well, but according to a recent study by the Canadian Association of Immersion Professionals, 50% of teachers who teach in French immersion programs are anglophones and 6% are allophones. That means that francophone teachers are not in the majority in French immersion schools.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: They went through the immersion program. They're proud of their French and, as teachers, they return to the French immersion program.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: In my opinion, it's often because they don't have the linguistic security to teach on the francophone side.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I'd like to make a correction. I called Mr. Dorion "Mr. Babin" when I was talking about money.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Let's try to keep to everyone's time so that everyone can ask even more questions. That's my goal. My role, which isn't always pleasant, is to be strict in this regard.

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Samson, from the Liberal Party, for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. Their presence enriches our work and will help us complete our report, which will be the first ever report on the education continuum. We were limited by certain interpretations of section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

My first questions will be for Ms. Thibault, whom I have known for a long time and with whom I worked closely, quite early in my career, when I worked in education and was responsible for basic programs and immersion programs.

There was no French-language school back in the day. So I did all my schooling in English.

My time is running out, and I know that my colleagues are going to try to steal a few seconds from me, so I'll move ahead quickly.

Ms. Thibault, how long have you been the executive director of this association?

• (1130)

Ms. Nicole Thibault: I've been the executive director of Canadian Parents for French for 10 years. I was also the executive director of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers for 10 years—

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm going to ask my questions fairly quickly, because I also want to address Mr. Dorion.

I must say that you've always supported education in French as a first language. I've always seen you as an ally, and I thank you and your association for that.

If I understood correctly, I think you said that 10,000 students were turned away by the Peel District School Board. So there's a gap. I imagine that the number of spaces in immersion classes is limited and that there's a waiting list. Is that correct?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Yes, and you see it across the country. For example, there's a lot of immigration in Halifax, so two new schools will be opened.

Canadian Parents for French is advocating that these two schools offer an immersion program, but you'll understand that it's easier not to offer one—

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm sorry to interrupt you again, but my speaking time is limited, and I have two other questions for you.

First, there's a myth that I would like you to break. Some say that French immersion schools steal teachers from French school boards. What can you tell us about that?

Second, why did you choose to make a presentation here today?

I think these issues are important so that this committee can one day conduct a study on French immersion. Please try to answer in 30 seconds.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: French immersion programs are complementary. We're in the process of creating the allies of the francophonie. For us, the fact that you're conducting this study is extremely important. We have to understand this issue and then go further to see how bilingual members of the majority language group could support the country's francophonie.

It's not about competition. Teachers are trained in two different ways. In addition, the student audience is different. You really have to meet the admission criteria.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dorion, I really liked your presentation. I understand how you feel. I also have mixed feelings, given that education in French as a first language was not available in my time.

I'll ask you a question that I'd like you to answer quickly.

What is the definition of an anglophone?

Mr. Basile Dorion: An anglophone is someone who lives more in English. By my definition, their name could be Marchand, Dorion or Lorrain, as well as Ferguson or Smith.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, I don't want to—

Mr. Basile Dorion: Those are two completely different worlds.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm asking you this question because it's very important. In my heart, bilingualism in this country has been challenged since Confederation. Francophones and Acadians did not have access to French-language schools. They've been assimilated. It was not their choice. They were assimilated because the system failed them.

Today, these people look me in the eye and tell me that their names are Landry, Marchand or Beaulieu and that they have lost their French. They ask me whether section 23 of the charter will be able to help them regain their language and culture.

I'm not sure it's a good idea to define these people as anglophones. For me, any assimilated Acadian is not an anglophone, but an assimilated Acadian. The blood that flows in their veins is Acadian blood. So my heart is big.

In Nova Scotia, despite all the efforts society has made for bilingualism since the 1969 legislation, 80% of students entering the francophone school system do not speak the language of the school, even though most of them are rights holders. These children do not speak French because they often come from mixed marriages.

It's not a matter of getting anglophones, but of providing an education and a culture again. There's a very fine line that needs to be worked on. In Nova Scotia, a superintendent of the francophone school board was quite innovative: He created an early learning system. At the age of four, children do their early education in a fun and games environment in French. This helps them learn the language before beginning their formal education in French.

● (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I will close by saying that, according to the Supreme Court of Canada decision that agreed with the Commission scolaire francophone des Territoires-du-Nord-Ouest, we have the right to accept. However, I am telling you that—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: —that the legislation comes under the provinces and not the federal government.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, I'm going to turn off your microphone.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were listening to me.

The Chair: We know how passionate you are, Mr. Samson. Thank you for the comments.

Everyone understands that I've extended the six minutes of speaking time by 15 seconds. I'm trying to be fair to everyone.

I now give the floor to the second vice-chair of this committee.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Dorion, I don't know if you had finished your presentation. Do you want to finish it?

Mr. Basile Dorion: I had more to say because talking comes easily to me.

It is important to say that our French-language schools have three different clienteles. The first is made up of francophones who already speak French. Very often, they are a small minority in the school and they are lost in a predominantly anglophone world. The second clientele is exactly like my family members, my neighbours, my cousins and my brother: They are francophones who have lost their language for various reasons. In some cases, it's not their fault; in other cases, it's because they don't care.

The third clientele is made up of rights holders. Our school boards have admitted hundreds and hundreds of non-rights holders by creating rights holders. When an anglophone becomes a rights holder in school, their entire family automatically gains those rights, as do the generations that follow. It applies across generations. Two are initially accepted; there are four in the next generation; there will be eight in the generation after, and so on. The idea of the three clienteles is very important.

I'm concerned about the fact that children who already speak French when they start school are disadvantaged by the system. Our francophone school boards are too poor to take proactive measures and work with parents. They are so afraid of losing an anglophone parent that they bow down before them, and tough luck for the francophone parent, who has no other choice.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Isn't there a funding issue? Section 23 of the charter talks about minority language education rights where numbers warrant, but it doesn't specify what the numbers should be.

Rather than establishing a criterion that would enable schools by and for francophones to operate, even with fewer students, if necessary, that sort of requires them—

Mr. Basile Dorion: The funding provided by the federal and provincial governments should first be used to retain the francophones who are already there, rather than neglecting them completely. However, the criteria are always based on the number of students, and that has never benefited the francophone minority.

To have a French-language school, a lot of young anglophones or assimilated francophones who may have the right to be there are admitted. I don't have a problem with that. The problem is that the funding provided is based on the number of students and not on needs. Needs should take precedence, not the number of students.

Our school boards are forced to prostitute themselves in order to recruit enough students to obtain funding, as the funding provided makes it possible to create good jobs.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In your document, you talk a bit about the urgency of the situation.

Can you give us more examples that really show how urgent it is to change the way things are being done?

Mr. Basile Dorion: I always come back to the fact that it's the little francophone starting school who is neglected. The vast majority of the funding granted is directed to francization rather than to maintaining the francophonie. Therefore, the little francophone is neglected. They get to school and, if they want to have friends, they have to do what most students do and speak English. Otherwise, they are ostracized, made fun of, called "little Frenchy", and so on. That's what happens in a French-language school. Imagine the challenge for teachers in a classroom where 23 out of 25 students do not understand French, in a French-language school.

The problem is huge.

• (1140)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That reminds me of the problem we have in Montreal schools, where francophones are in the minority.

We said earlier that the most recent action plan for official languages 2023–2028 included an increase in funding for immersion schools. Although immersion schools are a good thing, we're not talking about increasing funding for schools by and for francophones. According to some of the testimony we've heard, there are often no French-language schools nearby. So francophones go to an immersion school or elsewhere.

Shouldn't funding be directed more toward schools by and for francophones, or, at the very least, increased?

Mr. Basile Dorion: Access to education in French as a first language is a right. Access to a second language is a privilege. I do love the fact that a lot of anglophones want to learn French, but it shouldn't be at the expense of small francophone children who feel like strangers in their own school. That's what needs to change.

Teachers want to do the right thing. I'm thinking of a teacher in the York region. She complained on Facebook that her little girl couldn't make friends at school, a French-language school, because she was the only one in her class who spoke and understood French. This lady was contacted. She received a letter from her superintendent asking her to withdraw her comments if she did not want to risk disciplinary action.

Our teachers who stand up to defend French are ostracized. This lady called me crying one Friday night to tell me that she could no longer be associated with me because she was at risk of losing her job.

When I look for people to defend the cause of francophones, they are afraid to get involved, as they're afraid of the consequences their children might suffer at school. A lot of francophone parents are teachers. They're afraid to speak out. This unfortunate situation is happening within our French-language school boards.

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

We'll move on to the last questions of this round.

I now give the floor to Mr. Boulerice, who is replacing Ms. Ashton, from the New Democratic Party.

Mr. Boulerice, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank everyone for being here for this important study.

Before I ask my questions, I would like to make a comment.

Mr. Dorion, when you said that the term "students" had been replaced by "school population", it sent a bit of a chill down my spine. I have to admit that I, too, saw the big dollar sign coming. I think we're losing the philosophy, the mission and the direction.

To the representatives of Canadian Parents for French, I want to say that it always warms my heart to see how many parents in English Canada want their child to learn French. I think that's a good sign. British Columbia is not the province with the largest number of people whose mother tongue or language used at home is French, but there is a huge demand for French courses and immersion schools. Some of my NDP colleagues in British Columbia tell me that some parents get up at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. to go and line up, hoping to be able to find a place for their child in an immersion school so that they can take advantage of that opportunity. I was going to say "*opportunité*", but we have to be careful not to anglicize the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I would like to hear you talk about this movement. You provided some pretty telling figures. Why is this movement so important to the survival and preservation of the French language in Canada and to maintaining the spirit of bilingualism?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: I'll start.

I think it's important because those parents are our allies. I think we're seeing more and more of a change in our Canadian population. We have a lot of immigration. People arrive in Canada and immediately think that Canada is a bilingual country. To benefit from their experience and contribute to Canadian society, they want to be proficient in both official languages. From the outset, when they arrive in the country, they are ready to learn both languages. Immersion gives them that opportunity, since they are not necessarily rights holders. The majority of newcomers also need to be invested in, so that people understand that the opportunity to learn French and become bilingual is guaranteed.

That's what I've been concerned about for 20 years. Mr. Samson said that I have been working in the field for a long time. People who learn French through immersion have no guarantee that their child will have the same opportunity. Some children will have never learned French in Canada. From kindergarten to second grade, they can go to school in English and never learn French. I don't think that should be acceptable. All Canadians should reach a certain level of French.

There's a lot of talk about guarantees. Immersion education could be guaranteed for children whose parents received it. So if a student was guaranteed a place in an immersion school, they wouldn't take the place of a student in a francophone school. If more was invested in immersion schools, fewer people would try to go to francophone schools. The level of quality of education could be raised for them. Let's not have a competitive system; let's have a complementary system.

• (1145)

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: I have nothing to add.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: We often get the impression that official languages are a zero-sum equation, where, when one wins, the other loses. I think the thinking should be that both communities can benefit from this. Right now, what I understand is that there is competition; clientele are being stolen.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Sometimes, a portion of the clientele is rejected.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: That's the case for the 7,000 students who were rejected in 10 years. That's huge.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: What's more, this figure applies to only one school board. I can give you the figures for 23 other school boards. I could fill 100,000 places in immersion tomorrow if they were available.

In British Columbia, it's a random draw. You can imagine a parent with twins. So one of the children could have access to immersion and the other could not. Is it acceptable for that parent to say they'll give that opportunity to one but not to the other? Yet, a parent has to make that choice in certain situations.

We are concerned about investments in teaching French to anglophones. If the quality of education were increased, there would be less competition. Two quality systems that teach French could be made available for the future of bilingualism in Canada.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I don't have a lot of time, but I may be entitled to a second round of questions.

Mr. Visweswaran, you talked about your background and the opportunities that bilingualism can lead to in a career, such as promotions. I'd like you to expand on that. What possibilities and economic development opportunities can this bring to Canada? I'm thinking in particular of relations with Africa, which is now the continent with the most francophones on the planet. How do you see the additional arrow in the quiver of fluency in a second language?

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: If I'm not mistaken, you just completed a study on the economic development of official language minority communities. We hear a great deal about the shortage of bilingual workers. Yet in the greater Toronto area, 7,000 people

have been denied access to education in French as a second language. These 7,000 people could be working in French and contributing to both the francophonie and the delivery of French-language services. They could teach French. Over 10 years, these 7,000 people have been denied the chance to promote and enrich the francophonie on a cultural, linguistic and economic level. That's a huge loss. If we want to invest in Canada's francophonie, we must also invest in education in French as a second language.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boulerice. You had about six minutes and 15 seconds.

We'll move on to another round of questions. This time, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party will have five-minute rounds.

We'll start with Mr. Dalton, a Franco-Albertan by birth.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you all for your remarks.

I also want to thank the witnesses.

I'm a Franco-Albertan living in British Columbia. I have two daughters and a son, but I'll talk about my daughters. One of them was enrolled in an immersion program. It went well and she continued to study in French at the post-secondary level. However, my other daughter wasn't able to learn French. She was the 42nd student to register for the 40 places available. We had the right to send our children to a school in the French school board. However, I didn't really consider this possibility. The school was an hour's bus ride away, whereas the immersion school was three minutes away.

Do you think that families in similar situations should have the right to send their children to an immersion school?

• (1150)

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Of course, your first choice would have been the French school, if it were within a reasonable distance. However, parents must make choices for many reasons. We also have exogamous families made up of one rights holder and one non-rights holder. They each have 50% of the decision-making power.

In my opinion, every Canadian should have guaranteed access to immersion. The goal of Canadian Parents for French is to ensure that Canadians have access to the best possible programs. It may not be easy to guarantee access, from a legal perspective. However, I think that we're giving you this challenge for the next modernization of the Official Languages Act—

Mr. Darrell Samson: That will be 10 years from now.

Mr. Joël Godin: We wanted it to take place every five years.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Immigration is another issue. Is it possible to guarantee newcomers access to immersion programs? I think that it's possible. We hope to see this implemented over the coming years.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Dorion, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. I'm also Métis, and my mother is French-Canadian.

I completely agree that children should speak French in French school board schools. That's a real challenge. However, I would like you to talk about another challenge. The population and the number of children are decreasing. If these schools are only for children who already speak French, we won't have as many schools and we won't be able to provide programs to bring in children. Do you agree?

Mr. Basile Dorion: Immersion schools don't compete with French school boards. It's the other way around. The French school boards are competing with the immersion system because they want the money. In my opinion, there isn't a shortage of teachers. Instead, French schools have a surplus of students who perhaps should be in immersion.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

Mr. Basile Dorion: I'm all for immersion programs. However, we're talking about two completely different worlds. One belongs to a people with a culture in their blood, and the other has an advantage—

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

I have just a few seconds left. I would like to ask some more questions.

Ms. Thibault, could you talk about the main differences between teaching French as a second language and teaching French in immersion programs and about the teacher shortage?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: When you teach French as a second language, you teach the French language. However, you spend little time talking about culture and having authentic experiences in French.

However, in immersion programs, a certain percentage of the day is spent in French. For example, you learn French by doing math or studying science in French. You live your French and feel more inclined to communicate in French in real life.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

• (1155)

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

I want to welcome the witnesses. I'm happy to see you here today.

My question is for Mr. Visweswaran.

You have had quite a remarkable journey. I won't give too much away.

Could you tell us what the French language means to you?

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: I say it often.

[English]

French immersion was the biggest gift my parents gave me. French has truly been the *fil conducteur* throughout my professional career.

I'm a child of Indian immigrants. I was born in the U.S. and started French immersion in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I did it all the way through. I completed French immersion in high school in Edmonton, Alberta. This shows that French immersion works in the western part of the country, too. Then I pursued my post-secondary studies at Campus Saint-Jean in political science and history. That's a completely French degree. I did almost 100% of my studies in French.

Obviously, there are issues accessing post-secondary in French, which this committee is studying. I'm glad to hear that and hope we can solve those issues, so folks can do 100% of their post-secondary in French.

The opportunities that have come from having French have been so many. Most recently—last year—I completed the parliamentary internship program here at the House of Commons. I got to work with a member of the government and the opposition in a program that's bilingual. I wouldn't have gotten to do that—move to Ottawa and work in French. So many opportunities like that have been truly enriching.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I'm truly happy to hear you say what you said.

My journey, if you will, is a bit different than yours, because I am a child of Greek immigrants. My parents emigrated from Greece in 1957. I was born in Montreal, where I continue to live and where my children were born. When it was my turn to go to elementary school, my mom—being a forward thinker, I believe—wanted to register me in French schools, but I did not have the right. Because I was not French Canadian in my province, and because I was not Catholic at the time, the rules were very different. I had to study in English.

I'm happy to say that, one generation later, my two sons are perfectly trilingual, because I had the means to send them to a French private school by choice. I recognized the importance of being perfectly bilingual in this beautiful country of ours. My children would not feel the disadvantages that I sometimes continue to feel to this day.

[Translation]

I'm really proud of you and your journey.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

You have two minutes left. You can give your time to Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I would like to add to Ms. Koutrakis's story, because I went through the same dilemma. In the 1970s, my parents wanted to send me to a French school.

By the way, before coming to Canada, my parents went to live in France for five years, in order to learn French before coming to Canada from Italy. When they came to Quebec, they wanted to send me to French school. I confronted the same dilemma. We were not allowed to go to French school because we were threatening to the French language schools—taking over their space. We were obliged to go to an English school.

Today, my 10-year-old son goes to a bilingual school. Just last night, my wife was telling him, “*Gabriel, parle-moi en français.*” He has come out recently with great marks because we push him to speak French at home. He's doing great, and we're proud of that. We're proud to be supporting the languages.

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: Mr. Chair, if I may, I would add another point.

[Translation]

The Chair: We're listening.

[English]

Mr. Ahdithya Visweswaran: I think that goes to show that immigrants and newcomers who come to Canada value bilingualism and truly want their kids to succeed in both official languages. All of our stories show that.

Just to point to statistics as well, Statistics Canada shows that about half of the students in French immersion programs across Canada are of immigrant origin. It's not just folks who were born and raised here, but also people who come to Canada and want all of the opportunities that this country can provide.

• (1200)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I want to quickly address the comments made by Ms. Koutrakis and Mr. Iacono. I would like them to give me the year of these rejections and the names of the schools that rejected them. I've read a study suggesting that a myth has been spread about this topic. We'll talk about this later.

My question is for Mr. Dorion.

Your study argues that funds must be invested starting now and that language and culture have already lost a great deal of ground over the past two generations.

What do you think the future holds for French?

Mr. Basile Dorion: There's a clear need to invest in people who already speak French. If they all disappear, we'll no longer need French as a second language or we'll need it much less.

The issue lies in the fact that our boards and organizations believe that all rights holders are people who speak French as their

main language. This isn't the case at all. If you want a service, you ask for it in the language in which you're comfortable. If you're more comfortable in French, you ask for it in French. If you're more comfortable in English, you ask for it in English.

There's a lack of investment in children who already speak French. I have no issue with all the other investments. It's just necessary to invest in the people who remain francophone, because they're dropping like flies. It takes a great deal of energy, both to retain these people and to seek out more people.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: To preserve instruction by and for francophones, shouldn't there be more schools? If French schools are located 200 kilometres away, it becomes complicated.

Mr. Basile Dorion: There could be more French schools in some places. However, we can't always rely on the typical little box that defines a school. There are creative approaches. Yes, all francophones should have the option of learning in French and the minimum number shouldn't be too low.

For example, when I was a school counsellor, I voted to open a new school in our town of Barrie. As I was saying, 25 to 30 non-Catholic people were entitled to a French-language education. Hence my proposal to open a school to serve those 25 to 30 students, knowing that their numbers would increase. Shortly afterwards, the superintendent came to us with anglophone admission committees. I let him know that, no, I didn't really want to open an immersion school. He replied that we would look crazy if we had fewer than 100 students. For him, it wasn't a matter of serving students, but of not looking crazy if we had fewer than 100 students in a school.

As a school counsellor, I was prepared to fight until the end for those 25 or 30 students. We opened the school, and 92% of the children in grades one, two and three were new rights holders identified on the spot. The remaining 8% had already entered through the normal admission process.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Basile Dorion: The French school that I was thinking of opening became an immersion school.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

Mr. Basile Dorion: I would also say that, yes—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

Mr. Basile Dorion: —there could be fewer schools—

The Chair: Mr. Dorion—

Mr. Basile Dorion: —because too many students in French schools should be in immersion schools.

The Chair: Mr. Dorion, I'll bring out the strap.

Phew, Mr. Beaulieu, you're in luck.

Mr. Boulerice, I'll be generous too. Normally, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm lucky enough to live with a person who speaks French as a third language. We're talking more about the children of Bill 101 here. Today, she works and writes exclusively in French. It isn't quite the same, but I'm reminded a bit of this.

Ms. Thibault, a number of people think that institutions that provide French as a second language are taking teachers, students or resources away from francophone institutions. What's your take on this? Is it true?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: I don't think that it's true. According to the reports that we have on immersion, around 50% of immersion teachers went through the immersion system.

I personally teach French as a second language here in Ottawa. I've taught core French and immersion. I must say that, despite what my current level of French may lead you to believe, I lacked the confidence or linguistic security needed to teach in a French school in Ottawa. I felt quite comfortable in my immersion class. However, I would never have had the confidence to try to get hired by the French board. Admittedly, I didn't have the chance to fully live in French. My mother was Irish and I learned French. Of course, a person could be confident enough in their abilities to teach in a French school. I applaud that person!

That said, Mr. Boulerice, I don't think that the figures reflect the reality. I think that the figures may be more accurate in remote areas, where people are happy to welcome a French speaker, even though that person took an immersion course in a French school. People are happy to be able to provide the program.

Moreover, the skills are different. When I teach a second language, I use a different methodology to teach the language to a person who has never spoken it before. Francophone students will have an ear for French, as they say. Anglophone students can't yet tell whether we say "*le table*" or "*la table*". We must use teaching strategies to help them hear French properly. I'm personally qualified to teach French as a second language in an English school. However, I'm not qualified to teach French in French schools.

• (1205)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I would like to talk about the responsibilities of the federal government.

Do you think that the federal government is doing enough to recruit and retain teachers in French schools, especially in rural areas?

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Since the implementation of the action plan for official languages, specific investments have been made in this area. I believe that this is a good start.

With your permission, I would like to make a comment.

In 2019, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages published a report entitled "Accessing opportunity: A study on challenges in French-as-a-second-language education teacher supply and demand in Canada". The report's first recommendation was to set up a national French-as-a-second-language consultation table, bringing together all the provincial education departments, community organizations and the Department of Canadian Heritage, for example.

This table has helped us a great deal with collaboration and co-operation on certain projects and with sharing projects that work well. For example, if I'm doing something related to recruitment, I can talk to another province, which can do something similar.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: In my opinion, the creation of this national table is a good investment. It's a start.

The Chair: Thank you.

This table is so undisciplined!

The witnesses' comments are quite intriguing. I think that the committee will give them a "VIP pass".

Ms. Gladu, you now have the floor for no more than two minutes. After two minutes, the axe will fall.

The Liberals will then have five minutes.

Ms. Gladu, you have the floor.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses.

My dream is for our country to become truly bilingual. When I was young, I learned French at school, in grade two, because everyone had to speak both languages. This good idea has now been set aside. However, I think that we should get back to it.

I have only two minutes. I would like to ask Mr. Dorion a question.

What can the government do to improve the situation?

Mr. Basile Dorion: That is a major issue.

We need to invest in those whose mother tongue is French, meaning francophones, and in immersion. To be frank, we can't stop investing in immersion because it is necessary. Personally, I have been dreaming of a country that is truly bilingual for 76 years, and I hope that dream comes true while I'm still alive. So far, it hasn't.

There are two communities, but the English-speaking community is the dominant one. People don't know what the reality is. When a language and culture are part of your core, keeping them alive is extremely important. That is what we should be investing in.

I would like to see cultural organizers working in French schools. At one point in time, the anglophone school board in my region gave us permission to hire a cultural organizer in each school.

• (1210)

Mr. Darrell Samson: The francophone school boards got rid of them when they entered the picture.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: If you have any other recommendations, you can send them to the clerk.

Mr. Basile Dorion: I'm ashamed of our French-language school boards.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

The next two minutes are supposed to go to the Liberals, but since Mr. Lightbound is passing me the puck, I have a question for you, Mr. Dorion. Since we'll be drafting a report, I would like this information to be on the record.

Mr. Dorion,

You talked about a domino effect in relation to rights holders. If I understood you correctly, as soon as someone in the family becomes a rights holder, all generations after that become rights holders as well.

However, how can someone who is not a rights holder become one and thus be entitled as a rights holder to send their children to French school?

What legal mechanism allows an anglophone in an English-speaking family to become a rights holder?

Mr. Basile Dorion: It's important to know what the intention behind section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was when Jean Chrétien introduced it way back when. Was it to recognize those who already existed and a few exceptions, or was it to leave the door wide open? Unfortunately, our francophone school boards took advantage and went much too....

Forgive me, I'm getting a little—

The Chair: It's getting clearer. I think I understand what you're saying. When the school boards—so the provinces—grant anglophones who are not rights holders the right to send their children to French schools, any children born into the family going forward become rights holders. It gets passed on to subsequent generations.

Is that what you are saying?

Mr. Basile Dorion: The school boards are to blame. They are the ones letting in the children, without taking into account the impact on little francophones.

The Chair: I see.

Go ahead, Ms. Thibault.

Mr. Basile Dorion: People are putting their careers above the survival of French.

Ms. Nicole Thibault: Education ministries are the ones giving the school boards the authority.

It's fair to say that a school board in a remote area might use an interpretation that suits its needs and change the criteria. For example, if a parent asks the school board to let their child attend the school because the parent is fluent in French and plans to raise the child in French, the board could agree to the parent's request.

The situation changes depending on the province and school board.

It would be really important for the committee's study to examine the different interpretations out there.

The Chair: The thing that's important for the committee to understand is that a rights holder is being given a fairly broad inter-

pretation by school boards in order to bring up their student numbers. It's a vicious circle.

There is a bit of time left, so I'm going to be generous, Mr. Samson. We know you well.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

The Chair: You object, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: I just want to make a comment, Mr. Chair.

You ought to participate in the discussion more often. Your question was highly pertinent. Thank you.

The Chair: My time is up.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I have something to say as far as shedding light on the definition of a rights holder goes. It's even broader than we heard.

First, the Supreme Court determined that school boards have the authority to grant the right, and the provinces work with them. They understand the principle.

It can work other ways, though. Consider this scenario: two anglophones in Nova Scotia who don't speak a word of French and the parents move to Quebec. The children attend school in French in Quebec for one term. When the family returns to Nova Scotia, the children are rights holders, and they automatically get to do their schooling in French.

The Chair: We know about situations like that. They are covered under the law. Someone merely has to attend school in French, no matter how short that schooling is.

Ms. Lucie Lecomte (Committee Researcher): It covers grandparents as well.

The Chair: Exactly.

During your five-minute presentation, Mr. Dorion, you talked about the fact that anglophones who had not been granted any legal right were becoming rights holders, at which point, the generational domino effect begins.

Mr. Basile Dorion: School boards go after anglophones. They take out full-page English-only ads in the Toronto Star encouraging parents to put their children in the French system. However, once that right has been granted, there is no oversight. They are given the password to get in. It's akin to giving someone a test but giving them the answers first.

There are exceptions. I have a lot of anglophone friends who are very committed. One in particular took her children to Quebec on vacation to expose them to a French environment. Nevertheless, it is a small minority. The others just want to be allowed in, and once that happens, their commitment fades.

Even schools tell parents not to worry, saying they will take care of it. Take care of it, my foot.

● (1215)

The Chair: In the interest of fairness, you may go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Dorion, I don't think it's a bad thing to have more rights holders, because they get access to French-language instruction. That's a plus for francophones.

That said, I understand that the environment is not ideal, but I do welcome a greater number of rights holders.

Mr. Basile Dorion: It can be positive, but I can tell you about my daughters' friends. I have four daughters who are now adults. Many of the kids they went to school with can't understand French anymore. If parents don't put in the work at home, nothing happens.

Mr. Joël Godin: At least, it is like riding a bike. It comes back quickly. It's just practice.

Mr. Basile Dorion: Yes, but we have to worry about francophones if we want to keep them. Otherwise, what's the point?

The Chair: Esteemed witnesses, thank you for contributing to this discussion and answering the committee's questions. Official languages, especially as they relate to education, are compelling issues to Canadians, so this is a great study we are doing.

Thank you for your patience. This was your first time before the committee. Although it's not something we can really do, we would make you VIPs if we could.

Now, we'll now suspend briefly while we move in camera.

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