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# Standing Committee on Official Languages

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Chair: Yvan Baker





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Tuesday, October 28, 2025

• (1100)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)):** Welcome to meeting number six of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Before we begin, I'd like to make some general comments.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would ask committee members to raise their hands if they wish to speak, whether they're here in person or joining us on Zoom. The committee clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 25, 2025, we are meeting today to resume our study on the minority-language education continuum.

I'd now like to welcome our panel.

Joining us today are Martine St-Onge, chief executive officer, and Annie Brooks, operations director of the Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario. Both are joining us by video conference.

Joining us in person, we also have Judy Romaric Sessua Kuenougou, chair, and Zoya Martin, vice-chair of the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut.

Thank you for being with us today.

Each organization will have five minutes for their opening statement, after which we will move on to the question and answer portion of the meeting.

Ms. St-Onge, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Martine St-Onge (Chief Executive Officer, Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario):** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, dear members, on behalf of the Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario, known as AFESEO, thank you for inviting us to contribute to the study on the minority-language education continuum.

Founded in 1993, AFESEO is a provincial organization mandated to be the voice of francophone early childhood education in Ontario. With its network of 350 French-language educational points of service, representing 36,000 licensed spaces, and its manage-

ment of 25 educational laboratory centres across the province, AFESEO has a unique perspective on the context in which French-language early childhood education is evolving.

Before diving into the heart of the matter, allow me to clarify some of the terms I will be using. Since we're talking about education, we will use the terms "early childhood education services" or "early childhood education centre" instead of the term "day care". We will also use the term "educational staff", as it is inclusive, gender-neutral and independent of the educational background of individuals working in early childhood education. In Ontario, the term "early childhood educator" is a title reserved for staff registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators.

Let's dive right into the heart of the matter. Did you know that only 27% of eligible children 4 years and under have access to a space in an educational centre? This situation contributes to the assimilation of children of rights holders, excluding families whose only spoken official language is French, in other words, French speakers. These families make up a significant percentage of our francophone families, given the high number of families who are recent immigrants. The number of francophone spaces needed is even greater than the 22,000 spaces for eligible children.

Among the challenges related to the quality of early childhood education services is the issue of the funding structure for French-language education services. In Ontario, funding for the Canada-wide early learning and child care system flows through municipalities. Francophone early childhood education services are not considered official language minority services. As a result, accountability and data collection related to funding and the creation of francophone spaces are very difficult to achieve.

In Ontario, child care providers can decide whether to advertise their services as being francophone or bilingual. There is no designation system for francophone providers. What we know as bilingual spaces are actually spaces of assimilation.

Then there's the fact that municipalities that aren't officially francophone designated are not required to provide services in French to francophone providers. This puts the providers who struggle to or simply cannot understand or speak English at a disadvantage, especially in a context of ever-increasing red tape.

Municipal priorities for the creation of spaces do not always meet the needs of francophones, particularly in rural or remote areas. On the other hand, in Ontario, organizations such as AFESEO receive funding from the federal government's official languages road map. This funding, which flows through national organizations and the provincial government, is vital and enables professionalization by and for the early childhood sector. The early childhood sector's ability to be autonomous and to structure itself may be compromised if this funding isn't renewed in future road maps.

The shortage of child care workers is another challenge. In Ontario, the occupancy rate for francophone child care providers is 61%. One reason for this is that existing licensed spaces can't be filled due to a lack of workers to provide the service. Ontario is the only place in North America where the early childhood educator profession is regulated by a college, which is a good thing in itself. However, the college makes foreign and even interprovincial credential recognition impossible. This increases the time required for educators to register with the college, as they must obtain a degree from an Ontario college, which complicates recruitment.

Furthermore, funding doesn't reflect the existence of a college or the salaries offered in similar conditions by other systems, such as school boards. Retention is very difficult because salaries aren't competitive. Staff turnover due to working conditions is very high, which generates significant costs for the entire system. A workforce trained to operate within the sector's legal framework is necessary, not only to provide the service, but also to offer quality service to children whose parents have decided to enrol them in a French-language early childhood education program.

How can we retain this workforce? Here are some ideas to consider. We could set up structured, recurring funding that reflects official language minority status and offer improved working conditions for early childhood education workers.

Thank you.

• (1105)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. St-Onge.

Mr. Sessua Kuengou, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou (Chair, Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the committee, on behalf of the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Ms. Martin and I are here representing the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut, or CSFN, and we come to you with both pride in our achievements and deep concern about the systemic barriers we face in fulfilling our mandate under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Let me begin with a significant milestone. In September 2024, we opened the first French-language high school in Nunavut. This was not simply a ribbon-cutting ceremony. This achievement was the result of a legal battle with the Government of Nunavut to ensure that it fulfilled its constitutional obligations under section 23 of the charter. Twenty-four years after our school board's creation, our

students can finally complete their education in French without leaving the territory of Nunavut.

However, this victory highlights a troubling reality: Having to work through the territorial government adds significant delays and complications in accessing funding. This brings me to an important question for this committee and for the Government of Canada: What checks and balances are in place to ensure that provincial and territorial governments' acts, regulations and laws allow for section 23 to be fully implemented in their jurisdictions? When constitutional rights hinge on the co-operation of provincial and territorial governments, who ensures those rights are protected?

Nunavut presents unique challenges. We arguably have up to three minority languages: Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut and French. The cost to deliver education in Nunavut's remote communities is considerably higher than anywhere else in Canada. This reality leaves the CSFN in a position where we are chronically underfunded to meet the needs of our students.

Let me give you concrete examples of what underfunding means. In 2024, we filled our first art and music teacher position. Twenty-four years after our school board's creation, our students are finally getting access to arts education that students in southern Canada take for granted. We are constantly forced to pick and choose which services to provide our students, making impossible decisions about what constitutes essential programming.

Infrastructure and housing present significant barriers. In the north, housing is not a perk; it is a necessity. Without subsidized housing, we would have virtually no teachers or support staff in our school. Vacancy rates for rentals are near zero, and housing costs are prohibitive. We're already planning ahead, knowing we will need additional housing for teachers and staff as we continue to grow. This isn't just about recruitment; it's about fostering loyalty in the hopes of providing better quality education in our environment.

As already mentioned, our recent expansion in September 2024 included a new high school wing that includes a gymnasium. We're already planning our next proposed expansion because we are approaching capacity. Statistically, we're reaching only 50% of the rights holders in Iqaluit who could be enrolling their children in our school. We should be celebrating this rising enrolment, but instead, we worry about our inability to accommodate growth.

I want to acknowledge our important partnership with Les petits Nanooks child care centre, which is located next to our school. There were renovations at the same time that the school extension was being built. This investment in early childhood education is wonderful and essential for the French-language education continuum, and we're grateful for the support. However, we got 50 new spaces, which isn't enough to meet our community's needs in Iqaluit. And we're not even talking about the needs of other communities.

The broader picture remains challenging. Many programs being offered under the terms of federal agreements with the Government of Nunavut don't provide enough funding and aren't always inclusive of regionally specific programming.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share our history, our concerns and our successes.

• (1110)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sessua.

Let's move on to questions from members.

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

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

I want to thank the witnesses appearing by video conference on behalf of the Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario, as well as those appearing in person on behalf of the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut, for taking part in our study.

I thank them for helping us help them.

My first question is for AFESEO.

Ms. St-Onge, you mentioned that there are currently 25 centres to meet the demand and that only 27% of rights holders can access them. You also mentioned that there are 22,000 rights holders.

How can you help us find ways to secure access for all rights holders?

The fact is that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom states that rights holders have a right to education in the language of their choice.

Can you help us, Ms. St-Onge?

**Martine St-Onge:** Thank you.

We can certainly help you. The system's complex, but the fact remains that, without access to francophone spaces, access to French-language education is compromised. So our educational centres are like the front door. Access is compromised if we don't have space for all rights holders.

As I've said, the workforce is a major challenge. There are 350 points of service, but they meet the needs of only 26% of rights holders, which doesn't even include French speakers, who are the next generation of francophones, after all. They make our communities sustainable.

We really need to find ways to retain labour. Over the last few years across Ontario, thousands of registered early childhood educators have left the profession. We'd be able to make greater strides if we could solve that issue.

Creating spaces is another challenge, and sustained funding is required. For francophones, the first step is to create a community and a hub of services in schools for families who are relocating. The fact is that French-language services aren't available on every street corner, as they are often offered in the regions. So when parents decide to enrol their kids in a French-language centre, they're making a long-term commitment. The same goes for educational staff. The decision to work in this sector is a big one, because most of the workforce speaks both languages.

• (1115)

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Ms. St-Onge.

You also explained that, in Ontario, municipalities are responsible for these services, and those that aren't designated as francophone or bilingual aren't required to offer them in French.

Is that for real?

**Martine St-Onge:** That is absolutely the case.

We just finished a provincial tour of our 350 members—

**Joël Godin:** Forgive me, Ms. St-Onge, but my speaking time is very limited.

You're telling me this is a real thing.

**Martine St-Onge:** It is absolutely real.

**Joël Godin:** Does the Liberals' Official Languages Act of June 2023 address these concerns?

**Martine St-Onge:** I don't have those details, but municipalities are required to offer those services under the law, unless they don't have the designation, in which case the requirement doesn't apply to them.

Therefore, it is essential that they have a legal responsibility to be able to support early childhood centres. However, this is not currently the case.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Ms. St-Onge.

I'm speaking to the witnesses from Nunavut now.

First, I want to congratulate you on establishing the first francophone high school in Nunavut. Well done! I know you're doing a lot with very little, so I congratulate you and your team.

When it comes to compliance with laws, obligations and regulations, do you have the tools to enforce compliance?

Does the Official Languages Act passed by the Liberals in June 2023 address your concerns?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** No, we don't have any tools. We'd like to be at the consultation table as a stakeholder, but the only people we talk to are local government officials, such as the Department of Education.

We have no choice; we have to do what they tell us to do. We're not privy to any discussions with the federal government.

The Official Languages Act would better serve our needs if we were in a densely populated area like Ontario, where other organizations offer services in French.

**Joël Godin:** The law requires the federal government to consult with school boards, so I would encourage you to know your rights.

What percentage of French-speaking eligible students in Nunavut currently attend French-language schools?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** In Iqaluit it's 50%, but elsewhere it's 0%.

**Joël Godin:** What is the territorial average?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Across Nunavut, we're talking around 20%.

**Joël Godin:** That's tragic.

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** It really is.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Sessua.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Godin.

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

**Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for helping us better understand the situation.

I'd like to start with the representatives of AFESFO.

I understand that there's an issue with funding and with municipalities acknowledging the issue. There's also the availability of human resources, meaning people with the skills to work in early childhood centres.

When it comes to municipalities, what kind of regulatory changes would be needed to get them involved?

In your opinion, what would be the minimum French-speaking population threshold for the Government of Canada to recognize this aspect of official languages?

• (1120)

**Martine St-Onge:** There would need to be staff capable of interacting in French with French-language early childhood education centres. Legally, municipalities are under no obligation to offer this service if they don't have francophone status. Indeed, the relationship between these educational centres and municipalities is governed by education laws, not French-language service laws.

In the case of municipalities that aren't designated as francophone, there are no staff members capable of communicating in French with educational centres. We're not talking about having someone who can say, "Hello, I'll transfer your call", but having the

ability to support educational centres. The system makes reporting on finances and data management quite complex.

It should be noted that each municipality applies the law by creating its own guidelines, so when an educational centre receives templates in English only from a municipality and asks for support, the response it receives depends on the municipality, as there are many different ways of doing things. There is no consistency.

Each municipality decides on its level of French-language capacity. Some municipalities are completely unable to support our educational centres in understanding, for example, the requirements related to financial reporting or data management. The support tools aren't translated. We're no longer talking about adapting the tools, but simply translating them. Translations aren't available province-wide.

These areas are so technical and complex that, without tools and support in French, errors can creep in and penalize us, so all of this has a major impact on our sector.

There is a real need in this regard. The sector has been clamouring for a solution. We need support in French from municipalities. This is a priority.

**Madeleine Chenette:** When it comes to attracting talent, you mentioned facing barriers at the provincial level due to regulations adopted in Ontario.

What needs to change? Are you hopeful that this will change? What incentives are you putting in place to attract men and women?

It's not just the francophone community that's at risk, but the entire early childhood sector. Do you have any suggestions for the federal government in this regard?

**Martine St-Onge:** As I said, the College of Early Childhood Educators is putting up one of the biggest barriers. The college is a good thing in that it protects the public, but we're left in a situation where diplomas aren't recognized, regardless of where they come from.

It would be good if there were an agreement between the provinces so that a college diploma, for example, could be transferred from one province to another. We understand that this falls under provincial jurisdiction and that laws differ from one province to another, but some updating could be done.

That said, we could recognize someone's credentials temporarily, provided they take courses, for example in law, to learn about the province. But there's no willingness to do that right now.

We deal with countries whose credentials are considered equivalent, but when people come to Ontario, they have to go through such a long process to get their credentials recognized that they get discouraged. They simply turn to other sectors.

It is really up to the college to put measures in place to allow people arriving from a different jurisdiction to take courses for two or three years to acquire the required knowledge, and also to allow them to be considered trained in the eyes of the law in the meantime.

The regulations are so rigid that we need a ratio of trained to untrained staff. If we don't have enough trained staff, we can't open the groups, even if we have plenty of staff who don't have the professional qualifications. So we can't fill the spaces that have already been allocated.

The lack of capacity doesn't just come down to extra spaces. We also need to have the capacity to provide services with a qualified workforce. Measures should therefore be put in place to allow us to use this workforce while they wait to be considered trained and paid accordingly.

That's also part of the problem. We can't pay the same salary to people who aren't members of the college. When these people arrive from elsewhere, we can imagine the financial pressure they're under, not to mention the stress of change. Even when they apply for a permanent residence permit, they're told they're being denied because they aren't paid enough.

It's really paradoxical, because most staff members get paid that much.

• (1125)

**Madeleine Chenette:** You've played a major role, and these are huge challenges.

I know that I've run out of time, but I still wanted to acknowledge our friends from Nunavut.

I'll let my colleagues ask the questions I had in mind.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Chenette.

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

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

I thank the witnesses for being here.

My first question is for AFESEO.

We know the history of the French language in Ontario. At one time, Regulation 17 even prohibited French-language education and put up all sorts of roadblocks.

Do you sense from the Government of Ontario a willingness to make up for that?

**Martine St-Onge:** That's a difficult question to answer.

We're not really getting that sense, no. Everything goes through the municipalities, who aren't responsible for that. We aren't considered a minority language service. In provincial funding terms, French-language centres are in the funding envelope labelled "inclusion". So we're considered as just another minority.

We were recently called upon to speak to changes to the instructional setting. One of the suggestions was to include a few French words here and there in the children's daily routine, but the thing is, we're not teaching a language. We're living in French.

French-language centres are essentially unregulated in Ontario. Anyone can claim to offer French-language services even if the quality of the language leaves something to be desired. These are places of assimilation like the ones we used to know before the

school boards started running things. There is no system around designations and no system in place to monitor the quality of French-language education.

Nor is there any way to collect francophone-specific data. It's hard to know, for instance, how many French classes were created. Indeed anyone can claim to offer services in French.

So this isn't about reparations, but rather recognition or identification of French-language educational centres. Nothing like that exists at the moment. We don't benefit from an official status that would allow us to collect the relevant data and that would properly regulate these educational programs.

**Mario Beaulieu:** That's rather incredible. In Quebec, every English speaker has access to English-language schools almost everywhere in the province. If there aren't any because there are truly too few English speakers, then arrangements are made so that there will at least be classes in English.

Would you say the same is true for French in Ontario or in Nunavut?

**Martine St-Onge:** I am less familiar with statistics relating to schools, but I am certainly familiar with those concerning early childhood education centres, which are often integrated into schools as a priority.

I can say that French speakers certainly do not have as much access to minority language schools as English speakers do in Quebec.

**Mario Beaulieu:** I will now turn to the representatives from the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut.

You talked about systemic obstacles.

Can you elaborate?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** In Nunavut, only 20% of eligible children have access to French-language education.

Nunavut has existed since 1999, so it is relatively young. The local government has its challenges and French-language education is not one of its priorities. We have been working with the local government for several years. Our school is the only French-language school and we had to go to court to get it expanded.

We want to have the means to offer French-language services to everyone who is eligible. The challenge is that our territory is very vast. It covers 20% of Canada. The cost of living is therefore very high.

The funding we receive, from both the local and federal governments, through Heritage Canada, is far too insufficient to meet the needs in French-language education.

• (1130)

**Mario Beaulieu:** We might say that there is very little political will on the local government's part to ensure the future of French and to secure education services in French.

Is that fair to say?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Indeed, there is very little will.

**Mario Beaulieu:** You also talked about the first high school.

What year did it open?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** It opened last year. In fact, the school that has existed for 24 years was expanded. We have more than one high school. We added a wing to the existing school that is being used as a high school. It was a major challenge for us because the school we have had for 24 years did not have a gym. Expanding the school enabled us to have a gym and to offer other services that we could not offer before.

This is the first step, but, as I was saying, only half the eligible children attend school. The school will be full in a year or two, so we are working on increasing the number of spots.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

**Mario Beaulieu:** I will give the floor to the next speaker.

**The Chair:** That is very kind. Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

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

**Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC):** Thank you very much.

I thank the witnesses for being here with us.

Ms. St-Onge, you said there were 36,000 children at the early childhood centres.

Is that correct?

**Martine St-Onge:** In fact, there are 36,000 spots available, but that includes those for children who attend before and after-school care, because children don't start full-time school until they are 4 years old. If we're talking about early childhood only, there are far fewer spots available.

**Marc Dalton:** Are the centres connected to French-language schools?

**Martine St-Onge:** In fact, the number of educational centres integrated into a school is proportionally higher among French speakers than among the majority.

There has long been an unwritten rule among French speakers in Ontario that schools are given priority when choosing the location of an educational centre. However, this means that infrastructure is often more difficult to renovate or expand. When you want to create space in existing schools, it takes a considerable amount of time.

When a new school is built, there is also a rule that it must include an early childhood education centre, to avoid having to do so later.

Among francophones, I believe that 89% of early childhood education centres are integrated into a school.

**Marc Dalton:** Is there higher demand at institutions that have early childhood education centres?

Is there less supply than there is demand? Is it stable?

Can you also talk about immigration? Does that change things much?

**Martine St-Onge:** When public funding was announced, there was a significant increase in demand for early childhood services from families.

Obviously, before this funding measure, a spot at an early childhood education centre was very expensive for families. Now that the price is more affordable, there has been a surge in demand. The number of people on waiting lists has skyrocketed.

As for your second question, it is true that we are less able to accommodate families if we take into account the families who are waiting for a spot.

Regarding your question about immigration, it is clear that there has also been an increase in francophone immigration. These families are not entitled to benefits under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but they are still families who use our services.

The number of spots we need just for those who are eligible is not enough, considering that immigrant families are growing in number and adding to the ranks of the French-speaking community.

That is what we want, but if we want to be able to offer spots to these immigrant families who speak French and whose first official language is French, then we need even more spots. These are the families who will continue to ensure the sustainability of the French language in Ontario.

• (1135)

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you very much, Ms. St-Onge.

My next question is for the representatives of the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut.

You are rather isolated in your region. Can you speak to the lack of connection you have with the other francophone communities outside of your territory?

Are you getting any support? Are any remote learning courses offered?

I would also like you to tell us about the Collège nordique à Yellowknife, which offers training.

**The Chair:** There are 25 seconds left.

**Zoya Martin (Vice-Chair, Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut):** Thank you for those questions.

We communicate a lot with the other French-language organizations in Nunavut, of which there are 25. We are the only organization of the 25 that offers services in Nunavut.

In Iqaluit, we do everything we can by collaborating with other francophone organizations, including offering courses to the students. We still have not achieved our goal of offering online courses. We do not have the money, nor the necessary support for that. This is one of the things we are discussing with the Government of Nunavut. I hope this will happen by 2050.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Martin.

Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault for five minutes.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their insightful comments.

I would like to begin with the representatives from Nunavut.

First, I want to thank you for all the work you do for the vitality of the northern French-speaking community. I am very pleased to learn that after several years of work, you now have a francophone high school in Iqaluit. That is excellent news.

I would like to bring the committee's attention to the issue of accessing qualified francophone educators.

Is it hard to access labour?

Do you have any strategies in place?

What tools or support measures might you need to increase the French-speaking workforce in education in Nunavut?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Thank you for your question.

When we need to recruit staff, a teacher or a support staff member, for example, we obviously look for qualified staff.

The first challenge is the cost of living and the cost of housing, which are very high in Nunavut. To welcome staff, we have to offer subsidized housing. That is hard to do right now because there is no housing. Nunavut is in desperate need of new housing. Sometimes there are two or three families living in the same house. It is getting really tough for us. Our staff is made up only of people who are fortunate enough to have a place to live. We hope they will stay with us for a long time.

That being said, we depend much more on staff trained in the south, if I may say so, since we consider ourselves to be in the north. Our staff members come from Ontario, Quebec, or other provinces.

We have no choice but to have trained staff. We need to see to what extent the federal government can help local governments or local organizations, such as ours, to offer subsidized housing and better salaries to attract qualified staff.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you very much.

Ms. St-Onge, early childhood is a key period in the development of young children in terms of language acquisition and identity building.

As you mentioned, in the action plans for official languages, particularly those for 2018–2023 and 2023–2028, there have been significant investments to support the early childhood sector. This has led to several initiatives. I am thinking, for example, of the Réseau d'intervenants en petite enfance, which is francophone.

Could you elaborate on the importance of federal funding for the francophone early childhood sector and its repercussions?

• (1140)

**Martine St-Onge:** Having access to funding by and for francophone early childhood education, particularly through the Réseau

d'intervenants en petite enfance, is truly a first. It allows us to structure and professionalize the sector.

This is the first time that money allocated to official languages has been channelled through an early childhood network. In the past, we were not consulted in the process of determining what we needed and what approach to take. As a result, even though the funding was granted with the best of intentions, it did not always meet the needs of the early childhood sector. This time, we received money to plan for ourselves how it will be used based on the needs of our sector.

What we are demonstrating is that the early childhood sector must, as was the case in the past with French-language school boards, find its own way to support early childhood. When things are imposed or when people think they know how to do things a certain way and that does not reflect the reality of the sector, a lot of funding is wasted along the way on trying to understand the sector's needs. When money is sent directly to organizations in the sector, there is no learning curve.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you, Ms. St-Onge.

I would like to know more about the workforce issue in the francophone early childhood sector.

**Martine St-Onge:** This is the main challenge in our sector. On the one hand, we lack skilled labour. On the other hand, the working conditions we offer are not competitive. For example, for the same profession and the same union, educators earn \$10 more an hour in a school board elsewhere. In Ontario, nursery school and kindergarten teaching teams are made up of educators and teaching staff. That gives you an idea.

As for us, we support teaching staff for one, two, three, or four years, however long it takes for them to complete the necessary training. Unfortunately, as soon as people become members of the order, school boards in particular, or other institutions, come to recruit them by offering them considerably more attractive working conditions.

We understand that, and we can't blame our staff for doing that. As a result of this situation, we are constantly trying to build a team. Every time we think we're building something, our foundations collapse like a house of cards. Everything goes up in smoke.

**The Chair:** Ms. St-Onge, I am sorry to interrupt you, but time is up. I gave you a bit more time, like the last time.

You might have time to finish your answer during the next round of questions.

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

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

Ms. St-Onge, if I understand correctly, the funding for early childhood education centres comes from the municipal level.

Is it the same for the schools? You said that the service needed to be designated as a language minority service within the municipality.

Is it the Government of Ontario that decides the designation?

**Martine St-Onge:** Yes, that is the case, except for the schools.

As we know, the schools have obtained governance of their French language system and are recognized as such. Within the Ontario Ministry of Education, there is a division that provides support, management and regulatory oversight for French-language schools.

This is not at all the case for early childhood education. Within the department, there is a division dedicated to early childhood education, but it is a hodgepodge of all kinds of realities. There is no identification as a minority language service. We are not covered by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

We understand that, but even if we don't exist, French-language schools will continue to exist. They will have to do even more to educate children in French and invest a lot more money in recruiting staff.

There is also the problem of dropping out. Families are ill prepared for sending their children to a French-language school system. Early childhood plays an important role in a child's future educational path.

**Mario Beaulieu:** I will go a bit further. Has there been any progress in integrating early childhood centres into school board management? Would this be a good thing?

**Martine St-Onge:** Yes, this keeps coming up. The problem is that the school boards do not have the same mandate as early childhood education. The education provided in schools is really focused on curricula and objectives, while early childhood education focuses on learning through play. Furthermore, we don't want to start schooling children at age one, two or three. In other words, the operational framework of the early childhood sector is very different. I can't tell you how many times this question has been raised, but I can tell you that it has been raised many times over the years. I have been working in this sector for 30 years, and we ask ourselves this question all the time. For example, school boards in Ontario already manage educational centres, but early childhood education just becomes part of the school boards' mandate and is never given the attention it deserves. Integrating it into school board management will require a great deal of thought.

• (1145)

**The Chair:** Your time is up, Mr. Beaulieu.

Thank you very much, Ms. St-Onge.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Bélanger for five minutes.

**Jim Bélanger (Sudbury East—Manitoulin—Nickel Belt, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. St-Onge.

In a context where more needs to be done to create early childhood education spots, how would you rate the federal government's performance in the fight against the labour shortage in the early childhood education sector?

**Martine St-Onge:** That's a good question, and it's a complex one.

Often, labour is a provincial jurisdiction. That is certainly true in Ontario where provincial legislation on this is in place. I know that work was done to ensure the mobility of the workforce and to recognize diplomas. What is more, my provincial counterparts in Ontario have a much easier time than we do in ensuring the compatibility of diplomas from one province to another.

There is certainly still a lot of work to be done to ensure that diplomas are recognized in Ontario. That's where the problem lies and where everything falls apart. A lot of effort is being put into finding workers elsewhere in the world who meet the criteria and choose to work in the early childhood sector. However, when these people arrive in Ontario, they see the reality. They then prefer to go and work in Prince Edward Island or British Columbia rather than Ontario.

Their base salary in Ontario is not high, and it takes a very long time for them to reach the same salary as their colleagues in other provinces. So we are not competitive at all. However, there is still a standard of living to maintain. Many women work in this sector and earn \$50,000 a year. Of course, that salary does not allow them to provide for their families so they end up leaving this sector.

Federal, provincial, or municipal authorities, in our case, should work together to remove systemic barriers to the recognition of qualifications in order to meet the needs of the sector.

**Jim Bélanger:** Do you think that francophone immigration is a solution to the labour shortage?

**Martine St-Onge:** Absolutely; francophone immigration is already a small-scale solution for us, and our resources allow us to make use of it. Many sanctions have been introduced in recent years, so we are grateful for all the rules still in place that allow us to do this. For us, it is a solution to the labour shortage.

In order to increase francophone immigration, we need to establish a framework that allows us to welcome these people and integrate them properly. This is a human environment. People's educational paradigms are sometimes different from Canadian or Ontario educational paradigms. It takes time, support and guidance to ensure that the quality of our services meets Canadian standards.

This is certainly a solution, but we also need to put other programs in place to enable us to welcome the immigrants properly.

**Jim Bélanger:** I come from a region in northern Ontario where the francophone population is rather significant. If people do not apply for an early childhood education spots at least one year in advance, they will not get one. I am interested in this topic. I am not sure if you have any data on that.

**Martine St-Onge:** It depends.

**Jim Bélanger:** What happens to the children who do not end up getting a spot?

**Martine St-Onge:** That is a very good question.

We know that francophone parents will often look for alternatives and find spots at establishments that serve the majority. The children end up staying there because their parents, despite their good intentions, do not want to set them up to fail at school. If these children have not attended a French-language educational centre since birth, or since the age of 12 months, i.e., after parental leave, and if they want to go to school at age 4 but have not learned French at a school level, their parents will not send them to another system for several reasons, such as friends, language, etc.

So we have a serious assimilation problem, because if we don't offer these spots, families will inevitably go elsewhere. They may turn to unaccredited institutions, which may not be French-speaking and whose quality of service we know nothing about, which may be better or worse, or to institutions that are accredited but English-speaking. We therefore lose out across the board if we do not offer these spots to our families.

I don't know what region in northern Ontario you come from, but we have 10 education centres in northeastern Ontario and we are dealing with major labour challenges. It is one of the hardest sectors for finding and retaining labour.

• (1150)

**Jim Bélanger:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

I will give the floor to Mr. Villeneuve for five minutes.

**Louis Villeneuve (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will turn my attention to the representatives from the Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut.

I will start with the good news because it is important to repeat it often. Congratulations again on your high school. That is quite the achievement.

The municipalities fall exclusively under the jurisdiction of the provinces and the territories. The federal government concluded education agreements with each province and each territory, including Nunavut, obviously to encourage them to invest in minority language education, second language learning, post-secondary education and teacher retention.

Could you talk to me about the funding that the school boards are receiving from the Nunavut government? Do you think the funding is adequate?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Thank you for your question.

We receive our funding through the Department of Canadian Heritage. It was increased by about 20% last year and this year, but it is still not enough. We know that the funding allocated to Nunavut is a lot more, but we do not know the exact amount. We have asked the local government several times how much it receives and what percentage of that amount is being allocated to us, but we did not get an answer. That is one of the difficulties or challenges that we are facing.

The local government told us that part of the funding goes to majority schools because they offer French classes two hours a week. These schools are located in 25 communities in Nunavut, while we have only one school in Iqaluit. We get a share of the funding and the other 25 schools also get a share. We are trying to figure out how this works, but we have not had any luck yet. That is the challenge we are facing.

We need to find a way to get the school boards involved so that they have a place at the table, so that they know how much is in each envelope and so that they understand the distribution formula. That is important.

**Louis Villeneuve:** Please excuse my ignorance. You're saying that you're asking for this information but that you're not getting any answers. Are you simply being told that they do not wish to answer you?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Our questions are ignored. It is a polite way of saying that they do not want to answer us. We do not know who to ask at the federal level because we do not have a direct agreement with the Department of Canadian Heritage. The Government of Nunavut is our only contact. There is no transparency.

**Louis Villeneuve:** Thank you. That is interesting.

This is not really about funding, but the committee often hears witnesses say that many families have a really hard time finding a school nearby. I looked at the statistics and it seems as though this is rather complicated.

Could you tell us about this situation in your school board's jurisdiction, in Nunavut? Are the schools spread out? Are they located close to where people live?

**Judy Romaric Sessua Kuengou:** Each of our communities is a small territory. For example, in Iqaluit, children are able to get to a French school in 10 minutes. However, outside of Iqaluit, there are no French schools or services offered in French. Those who live far away do not have access to them. All of these rights holders or children of these rights holders go to the same school as most people.

We are trying to see whether we could offer online courses. It is not the ideal solution, but we want to start there. We have already started identifying communities where there are children of rights holders to see how we could at least start with this approach. Then, we will ask the local government for additional funding for school infrastructure so that we can offer French-language education services.

I want to point out that over 70% of the funding for expanding the schools that we have in Iqaluit comes from the federal government. We hope to have as much funding to grow in Nunavut.

• (1155)

**Louis Villeneuve:** Thank you.

I think my time is up, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Exactly. Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

That concludes the first hour of our meeting. On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses who are attending in person for travelling here, and I want to thank those who are attending virtually for their testimony. The committee is very grateful to you all.

We thank you very much.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to give the members of our next panel time to take their places.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1205)

**The Chair:** I would like to welcome you back to the sixth meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

We are now ready to hear from our second panel of witnesses. From the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, we welcome Martin Normand, president and chief executive officer, and Catherine Rousseau, program manager, early childhood education. By video conference, we welcome Isabelle Côté, from Simon Fraser University. Ms. Côté is the deputy director of the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs, and senior lecturer at the Faculty of Education.

Each organization has five minutes to give their opening remarks. That will be followed by a question and answer period with the committee members.

Mr. Normand, you have five minutes.

**Martin Normand (President and Chief Executive Officer, Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With the government having set itself the task to build a single Canadian economy by eliminating interprovincial barriers and attracting the best talent, it is important to reiterate what our communities have observed. Francophone and bilingual post-secondary institutions in minority communities are setting themselves up to be key players in the development of a united, resilient and innovative Canadian economy. The diverse learning environments that they offer promote the acquisition of lasting bilingualism and the technical and digital skills needed in a rapidly changing labour market. These institutions support access to an active service offering and meet labour needs in key sectors. Many studies corroborate these facts: People educated in French are more mobile, they are more likely to work in jobs that require knowledge of French and they have higher-than-average incomes.

In a francophone minority context, post-secondary education plays an essential role in the education continuum by ensuring the transmission of language and culture to younger generations. Our

members enable families and their children to get an education in French throughout their lives, pursue careers in French and contribute to the growth of their communities. The education continuum, supported by francophone institutions, is key to linguistic and cultural development and to the transfer of knowledge that ensures that individuals can fully participate in professional and civic life.

In our communities, early childhood is the gateway to this continuum. The period from birth to age six is a key time for learning French and building identity. Attending early childhood education centres helps strengthen French language skills, promotes well-being through self-confidence and ensures the transmission of French within communities. As a result, there is a direct correlation between access to quality early childhood education services in French, with properly trained and valued staff, and the development of francophone minority communities. However, the early childhood education sector is experiencing a significant shortage of qualified staff.

According to a recent study that we commissioned, by 2035, over 22,000 educators could be needed to respond to the potential demand. However, depending on several factors, including training and working conditions, at that time, there will likely only be 11,000 educators who will report speaking French regularly as part of their work. That means that there will be only half as many French-speaking early childhood educators as needed to give a place to all eligible children in 2035.

To address this shortage, the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, or ACUFC, is focusing on recognizing the work, expertise and training of early childhood educators. Training is the cornerstone of effective recruitment and long-term retention of qualified staff in the early childhood sector. Initial training and professional development are at the heart of this approach. They are essential for promoting the profession, meeting the sector's growing needs and ensuring quality services for children and families. By focusing on these professionals' expertise, the ACUFC is working to strengthen their sense of belonging and investing in their well-being and career prospects in the sector.

To that end, last week, the ACUFC held the first national early childhood educator appreciation week in francophone minority communities. More than just a celebration, this week aims to encourage engagement, promote the profession and raise more public awareness of early childhood educators' commitment.

The ACUFC reaffirms its commitment to ensuring the long-term recognition of early childhood educators with an annual event that is fun, inspiring and meaningful. This is made possible through funding from the Government of Canada under the official languages action plan.

I will close by making three recommendations.

First, the federal government must make sustainable investments in initial and ongoing training in early childhood education, build the capacity of French-language educators and strengthen support for them.

Second, the federal government must support the production of evidence-based data and knowledge mobilization to support needs, best practices and outcomes in French-language educational institutions.

Third, the federal government must strengthen the capacity of francophone and bilingual post-secondary institutions in minority communities to offer innovative, accessible programs that are tailored to regional realities and that have sufficient capacity to meet labour force needs.

Thank you.

• (1210)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Normand.

Ms. Côté, you have five minutes.

**Isabelle Côté (Deputy Director, Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs, and Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee members for inviting me to testify.

I am here today as a representative of the French programs at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

I will provide a bit of background. Twenty years ago, the federal government, in partnership with the Government of British Columbia, decided to provide real support for French-language post-secondary education to create a continuum of education in the language of the minority. Simon Fraser University chose to spearhead this important project for the francophone community. It was within this framework that Simon Fraser University's Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs was created.

The office manages the federal funding obtained through bilateral agreements between the Department of Canadian Heritage and the province for programs in the faculty of arts and social sciences and in the faculty of education. The faculty of arts and social sciences offers a baccalaureate program in public and international affairs, while the faculty of education offers a teacher training program, two master's programs and a doctorate program. We also have teacher recruitment and retention initiatives.

Simon Fraser University is the only post-secondary institution in western Canada to offer master's and doctorate of education programs in French that address specific issues related to language and literacy in minority communities. I would like to point out that master's programs are needed to strengthen leadership capacities in schools and communities from kindergarten through to the end of high school, since a master's degree is required for all administrative positions on school boards.

The French education team has created a francophone leadership hub in western Canada for the research and post-secondary training needed for the vitality of the community. Compared to the communities in other provinces, this community is small, representing only about 1.6% of the population. However it is very active, and more importantly, it is growing. For example, the French school board is made up of about 6,000 students, 47 schools in urban and rural communities, and 1,200 employees. As for French immersion, we have over 55,000 French immersion students in the school system.

I would like to point out that British Columbia has only had a structure to support the post-secondary education continuum for 20 years, so we are still playing catch-up.

In closing, I would like to remind the committee that our university is only able to offer post-secondary programs in French thanks to the funding provided by the federal government under the official languages in education program, or OLEP. It is very important to note that one of our biggest challenges is the freeze on OLEP funding, which has been in place for 10 years, despite growing needs and ever-rising costs.

For us, federal government funding for post-secondary education is essential to the vitality and vibrancy of our francophone minority community.

• (1215)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Côté.

We will now go on to questions from members.

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

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Côté, I'm going to get right to the heart of the matter. You said that OLEP funding has been frozen for 10 years.

Are you saying that the Liberals are bragging that they provided an additional \$1 billion for official languages but you haven't received any increase in 10 years?

**Isabelle Côté:** Core funding remains the same but there's a bit of a shortfall in terms of ensuring wage increases for faculty members.

**Joël Godin:** Ms. Côté, I understand that funding has been frozen for the past 10 years. Is that correct?

**Isabelle Côté:** Yes.

**Joël Godin:** Okay. Thank you, Ms. Côté.

Mr. Normand, I'm going to touch on a sensitive matter. This week, the media published a complaint that you filed with the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada. The news was publicly announced and the Commissioner agreed with you.

Subsection 44.1(1) of the Official Languages Act, which received royal assent in June 2023, states as follows: "The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration shall adopt a policy on francophone immigration to enhance the vitality of French linguistic minority communities in Canada, including by restoring and increasing their demographic weight."

Does the issue that you discussed in your complaint that you submitted to the Commissioner of Official Languages go against what the act says?

**Martin Normand:** That was one of the things we indicated in the complaint to the Commissioner.

It is important to note that the policy on francophone immigration stems from this section. In that policy, the federal government committed to increasing the number of francophone international students within our network of institutions, which did not happen following the announcements made in January 2024.

**Joël Godin:** Would you say this is a roundabout way for the current government, which has been in power for 10 years, to slowly starve post-secondary educational institutions in order to get access to a pool of francophone students?

**Martin Normand:** I don't know if I would use those words.

**Joël Godin:** You might be more tactful.

**Martin Normand:** Indeed. I can tell you that our institutions had to react quickly to a series of announcements. There was the cap set in January 2024. Then, other announcements followed, such as on raising the minimum income threshold that must be proven and the eligibility for the post-graduate work permit. The teams in our institutions had to adapt to a rapidly changing situation. They showed resilience and had to support students who were very worried and stressed by the situation.

**Joël Godin:** Can you tell us about the short-term and medium-term consequences of the government's sudden decision regarding francophone immigration?

**Martin Normand:** International students allow institutions within Canada's francophone community to expand their cohorts and offer additional programs. Some regions are not large enough in terms of their population levels to allow institutions to offer a full range of programs. As a result, international students make up for this shortfall.

At the same time, increasing the types of programs available also improves the services offered to Canadians. It's harder for our institutions, which have a limited range of programs, to attract students. Therefore, the presence of international students makes it possible to address this factor, which is one of the key factors in the choice of where to pursue post-secondary education.

**Joël Godin:** I understand that this provides some stability to the institutions.

**Martin Normand:** It can also provide opportunities for growth in terms of the programs offered.

**Joël Godin:** It would be stability and growth.

**Martin Normand:** Yes. It should be noted that, over the past 10 years, our network of institutions has been playing catch-up, given that the number of international students in these institutions was lower than the national average. Now we're getting caught up.

**Joël Godin:** Since the start of the study on the education continuum, we've been hearing about the issue of labour shortages. I'm sure you will agree that this issue puts us in a catch-22 situation. Indeed, if Canada were to stop taking in francophone immigrants, it would create a shortfall, given that these individuals come here and pursue their education in French.

Do post-secondary education programs serve as an incubator, if you will, for these immigrants, who then go on and work in the early childhood sector or teach at the elementary and secondary levels? Isn't it a win-win situation?

• (1220)

**Martin Normand:** You're right to say that international students can help address labour needs everywhere, in all sectors, including early childhood. That is clear.

Still, it's not just international students who play that role, but also newcomers, who get their qualifications recognized when they arrive in Canada. That's what we're seeing in the early childhood sector. Women, for the most part, arrive in Canada to enrol in programs so they can embark on this new career, which helps address labour needs.

**Joël Godin:** Ms. Côté, I have the same question for you. Doesn't francophone immigration represent an interesting avenue for British Columbia to obtain additional resources in order to meet the needs of francophone schools?

**Isabelle Côté:** Absolutely. Seeing these individuals arrive in our communities is absolutely a positive thing for the communities.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mingarelli, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Giovanna Mingarelli (Prescott—Russell—Cumberland, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome all the witnesses and thank them for being here with us today.

My riding of Prescott—Russell—Cumberland has the highest percentage of francophones in Ontario. It's also a predominantly rural riding. Many young people in my riding attend the University of Ottawa and Collège La Cité.

Mr. Normand and Ms. Rousseau, in your opinion, what are the main challenges facing francophone students in terms of access to post-secondary education in French, particularly for young people from rural and remote communities?

**Martin Normand:** There are a whole series of studies that highlight the many challenges that students face when it comes to pursuing post-secondary education. First of all, there's a financial barrier. There are far fewer francophone post-secondary institutions than anglophone ones in Canada. As a result, for students from rural and remote communities, enrolling in a francophone institution can mean moving very far from home, which can lead to additional costs, particularly in a context where access to housing is more difficult. They're not having the same experiences as a student who can stay home with their parents and attend a local post-secondary institution.

In terms of studying in French, there's also a barrier related to the variety of programs offered. You mentioned the University of Ottawa and Collège La Cité, which are among the largest member institutions within our association. However, other members in our association offer a more limited number of programs. I'm thinking of the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs at Simon Fraser University, which offers what it can with the funding it has. However, because of their limited offer, they cannot enrol all the students who might be interested in pursuing post-secondary programs in French.

I would start by mentioning those two challenges: access and financial barriers.

**Giovanna Mingarelli:** Thank you.

What measures could the federal government implement to strengthen access to post-secondary programs in French outside of large urban centres?

**Martin Normand:** I will let Ms. Côté start.

**Isabelle Côté:** Since the federal government is responsible for immigration, and since provincial and territorial governments are each responsible for their own education systems, there must be negotiations or an agreement so we can offer training that can be carried out partly online in order to serve remote communities. Very important measures must be taken to highlight this need to improve access to post-secondary education in French for people who live outside of large urban centres. Still, even within these urban centres, there are things we can do better. In our case, for example, Simon Fraser University is located within a large region, the Fraser Valley.

● (1225)

**Martin Normand:** I'd like to add something to the response.

Our association has been managing a scholarship program for post-secondary studies in French as a second language since 2020. This program receives funding from Canadian Heritage. We have been asked for a while to offer an equivalent program for students whose first language is French. As this was included in the Liberal Party's platform, we hope to see positive action quickly so we can implement this program. We are available to federal institutions for help in managing this program.

**Isabelle Côté:** Just to add something to Mr. Normand's response.

Simon Fraser University receives these scholarships from the ACUFC. They are a huge help to our students for whom French is not their first language. There has been growing demand for these scholarships among the 20% of our students who are francophone, as they face the same financial challenges in accessing post-secondary education, particularly students who are immigrants. Some of them already have families and are coming back to school to start a second career. Francophones in minority communities face real financial challenges.

**Giovanna Mingarelli:** Okay.

What percentage of students are new Canadians or immigrants?

**Isabelle Côté:** In our cohorts, we see about 5% to 10% who fit in this category. It is hard for us to label new Canadians over time. Most of them wait to obtain permanent residency in Canada before enrolling in programs. Otherwise, it would cost them \$40,000 a year, instead of about \$10,000 to \$15,000. Though, if we had more financial support, they would be able to enrol in the programs quicker and enter the labour market much faster.

**Giovanna Mingarelli:** Thank you. That's all.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Mingarelli.

Mr. Beaulieu, you now have the floor for six minutes.

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

I want to thank the guests for being here today.

In Quebec, we have carried out a large number of studies on the issue of federal funding of universities and what we hear is that, in terms of research funding, about 30% to 40% of federal funding goes to anglophone universities. Are there comparable studies that exist that provide data on the percentage of funding that goes to francophone universities outside Quebec?

**Martin Normand:** A number of solutions exist for putting a number on that but I don't have them at the top of my head at the moment. Work was done within the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research to get the percentage of federal funding granted to francophone institutions. We also did some work with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to identify the share of the funding that goes to francophone researchers. I can find these studies and send them to the committee.

**Mario Beaulieu:** Off the top of your head, do you recall whether the funding was proportional or much higher than the demographic weight of francophones? In your view, was it equitable?

**Martin Normand:** Off the top of my head, I'm going to venture to say that, no, it wasn't proportional. There's a lot of work to be done, not only in terms of distribution, but also in terms of the criteria for awarding and evaluating grant applications submitted in French. This work is necessary so that they are assessed fairly and equitably compared to those submitted to the granting councils in English.

**Mario Beaulieu:** You talked about the lack of a clear political commitment from the federal government regarding post-secondary funding. Can you expand on that? What would the ideal commitment be?

**Martin Normand:** I didn't use those exact words.

However, I would say that we can always do better when it comes to federal government support for the post-secondary sector. Promises were made in the past, but they did not materialize and the needs remain. We remember the promise to allocate \$80 million a year in additional support for post-secondary institutions. Instead, what was delivered was support of about between \$19 million and \$20 million for the next three years only, not on a permanent basis.

**Mario Beaulieu:** It's much less than what was promised.

**Martin Normand:** Yes, indeed.

**Mario Beaulieu:** Perhaps we should take note of that.

You also said that the federal government's role in post-secondary education could be better defined. In your opinion, what's a clear definition in this respect?

**Martin Normand:** Indeed, I would call for a clearer definition of the role that the federal government can play in areas of shared jurisdiction, not just in education and post-secondary education. We're getting to a point where each level of government, including the federal government, may have its own development goals.

The federal government must have the means to meet its own goals. If the government sets goals for the rate of bilingualism, for the number of francophone international students, or in other areas, it must have the means to act on those priorities. This could be done through regulations under part 7 of the Official Languages Act, which refers to the federal government's power to act in the event of jurisdictional disputes.

• (1230)

**Mario Beaulieu:** Okay.

In the context of the continuum, we've heard a lot about the principle of institutions that are "by and for francophones". How does that apply in post-secondary education?

**Martin Normand:** There is a large variety of governance models within our network.

We have institutions that are 100% francophone, 100% "by and for francophones". Some examples of these institutions are Université Sainte-Anne and Collège La Cité, which we have already talked about.

We also have bilingual institutions, where a significant portion of decisions are made by francophone bodies. In fact, there is an important "by and for francophones" component in bilingual institutions.

Lastly, we have francophone groups within anglophone institutions. I'm thinking here of the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs at Simon Fraser University, a situation that Ms. Côté can talk about in more detail. In addition, it can be harder in some cases to develop the models in a way that the community, institution or group wants to see, but open dialogue continues to be maintained with the bodies in question.

**Mario Beaulieu:** Ms. Côté, how does the "by and for francophones" principle work for the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs?

**Isabelle Côté:** I am a member of the faculty of education as a teaching professor. However, I was able to take a break from teaching. I currently work for the office, where I am the associate director for the faculty of education component. It's a partnership that's working quite well.

I sit on all committees where decisions are made about French-language programs and programs in French within the faculty of education, such as the training programs, the two master's programs and the Ph.D. program. Since I am a member of this faculty, I work with my colleagues as well. We decide together. I think that, in a very minority setting, which is the case in British Columbia, this is a model that can work.

We also have a French cohort program director for the faculty of arts and social sciences, who works in much the same way.

The support of the deans of both faculties is essential. Given the size of Simon Fraser University, which has more than 30,000 students, we have to work in partnership with our anglophone colleagues. Although French programs remain a minority, they are extremely important for the community.

We're also trying to develop partnerships with the school of criminology for legal experts and everyone else who works in the courts. It's through partnerships with other faculties and departments that we can improve how we work.

The recurring issue is funding, because our classes are smaller than the anglophone cohorts. We're seeing recurring problems at the level of program management. They're asking us to open up a course for 15 students instead of 45 and we need to be able to reply that, yes, we can because we're getting funding from the federal government. This is key, especially in the current context of budget cuts at all Canadian universities.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Côté and Mr. Beaulieu.

I now give the floor to Mr. Dalton for five minutes.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to see the witnesses here today.

Ms. Côté, I'm particularly happy to see you since I'm a Simon Fraser University alumnus. My daughter obtained a degree in public affairs from the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs about 10 years ago. This university is very important for the francophone community in British Columbia. Thank you for all your work.

I wanted to talk a bit about your co-operation with other departments, particularly with the department of French, which you talked about. Since we're hearing that there's a shortage of teachers in schools and that Simon Fraser University is a very important institution for teacher training, can you comment a bit on that? How does that work? Are the courses full? What are you doing to meet this demand, this need for French teachers?

• (1235)

**Isabelle Côté:** First, I would like to clarify something about the office. It isn't a department, but an office. We work together with the faculties but we do not offer programs. We support the programs from various faculties. That is where this essential collaboration comes from.

In terms of your question regarding recruitment, British Columbia is seeing a shortage of teachers, from kindergarten to grade 12. We have carried out recruitment as well as retention activities because we also need to address the retention of teachers in the French immersion program. Since these teachers feel they don't receive as much support as their anglophone colleagues, some francophone teachers end up going over to the English program. Recruitment isn't the only issue. We also need to address retention.

In the context of the protocol for agreements for minority-language education, the federal government had given us additional funding for teacher recruitment and retention over three years. We had created extremely promising initiatives, particularly for teachers who are already in the schools. Unfortunately, this was a one-time funding and we only have a very small amount left. As a result, we were not able to pursue this initiative to retain teachers in the programs in a meaningful and important way and prevent them from going over to the English side. We tried but our resources are much more limited today than they were four years ago.

**Marc Dalton:** Do you rely entirely on federal funding or do you also receive provincial funding?

**Isabelle Côté:** The provincial government does not have a specific mandate to support our work at the same level as the federal government.

In terms of retention, the school boards were also able to hire special needs teachers and specialized educational assistants for French classes. These professionals provide significant support in encouraging teachers to remain within the French programs because, generally, there is less support for French teachers than for teachers on the English side.

This funding, which was available for school boards over a period of three years, was very helpful. Unfortunately, this funding has basically disappeared now. Teachers are talking to us about it. Now it's October and teachers are asking what happened to this money, which was a great help for them. I am quite close with those on the ground, because we deal with 25 school boards, including the francophone school board. Teachers and administrators are telling us about this funding and that it is key to teacher retention. These teachers are already trained and are already in the schools. We want them to continue to teach in French so we can address the shortage.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you, Ms. Côté.

Mr. Normand, in terms of the education programs to train French teachers in francophone schools, do they have enough spaces to meet the needs of students?

**The Chair:** Mr. Normand, Mr. Dalton's speaking time has expired. Please provide a very brief response.

**Martin Normand:** I could provide some data to the committee that we have put together in the past.

The shortage of teachers is not only due to the number of spaces in the faculties. It could also be due to working conditions that result in fewer people wanting to get into teaching.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you, Mr. Normand.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

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

**Louis Villeneuve:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm grateful to all the witnesses for being with us.

Mr. Normand and Ms. Rousseau, as I understand it, institutions that are members of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne contribute directly to training early childhood education workers in francophone communities. What kinds of support do your members typically ask for?

• (1240)

**Martin Normand:** Our members request the development of new programs in regions that were previously underserved, and we've been able to address that in the past. They also ask for teaching materials, which can be a necessary support tool. Another issue is the work it takes to find placements and to support organizations that offer placements so they can take on students in early childhood education.

**Catherine Rousseau (Program Manager, Early Childhood Education, Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne):** They also want new specialized programs to effectively meet the needs of the labour market, as well as adapted program delivery methods. As we heard earlier, there is a shortage of French-speaking educators in rural areas, so we're looking for ways to adapt programs so they can be offered in remote areas. That way, students can stay in those areas and help alleviate the labour shortage. People are also looking at developing teaching resources and creating financial incentives, such as internship grants in remote areas.

**Louis Villeneuve:** You talked about having to find placements, and it seems like that's a challenge. Help me understand that.

**Catherine Rousseau:** There's a shortage of qualified educators. Local schools don't have enough space to meet the needs of all the families in a given community. As a result, there aren't many placements available for students who are completing their studies. This is challenging. It's not that colleges don't have the capacity, it's that they can't accept as many students as they would like because they don't have enough internship positions to offer them when they get to that point.

**Louis Villeneuve:** Do you have any data showing whether students trained at your institutions remain in the communities? I would also like to see any community retention data you have.

**Martin Normand:** We have data on early childhood educators, but not the specific data you're looking for. The Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne is developing its capacity to collect data on all of our sectors. It can be difficult to compare information from different provincial databases, as they may use different definitions. We are trying to get better at that. We'll take note of your question, though.

That said, anecdotally, based on reports from our member institutions, we know that the vast majority of graduates remain in the communities where they studied or return to their home communities to complete their training when there is an internship available.

**Louis Villeneuve:** Thank you.

That's all, Mr. Chair. I'll hand things over to my colleague, Mr. Deschênes-Thériault.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have two minutes left.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you.

I would like to begin by thanking the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne for the important work it does to help train educators within the Canadian francophonie.

As you said, we are facing a shortage of qualified educators.

What conditions would enable institutions to boost their capacity to train educators?

What challenges stand in the way of boosting that capacity?

**Catherine Rousseau:** Funding is the main challenge.

As I said, we have the resources we need to develop new programs to meet the needs of the labour market and the early childhood education sector. Over the past few years, we've invested a lot in training, and we're seeing the results on the ground.

More and more training programs are available in French, which wasn't the case a few years ago. In some regions, educators had to train in English. Now they have more and more options for training in French.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Do we have the necessary infrastructure across the country to train more educators?

**Martin Normand:** Infrastructure always has its limits.

At the moment, as my colleague said earlier, our member institutions are capable of offering as many spots as there are internships available. Students cannot graduate unless they do placements. We have to do a better job of matching needs and opportunities.

The infrastructure issue is part of a much larger phenomenon. If we want to increase the number of spaces in our programs, we also need more spaces in early childhood education centres, as well as new early childhood centres that can take in new qualified educators and future interns.

As you can see, the infrastructure issue really isn't about how much infrastructure our institutions have. We know that all institutions have infrastructure issues, but it's not just about creating new infrastructure. It's also about renovating and upgrading existing infrastructure to make these institutions more attractive.

• (1245)

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Deschênes-Thériault and Mr. Villeneuve.

Let's go to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

**Mario Beaulieu:** Perfect.

The ACUFC seems to be saying that intergovernmental co-operation mechanisms are inadequate. Can you expand on that?

I know that your membership doesn't include francophone universities in Quebec, but do you have a good working relationship with the Government of Quebec?

**Martin Normand:** Yes, we have an excellent working relationship with the Government of Quebec. We have a relationship with Quebec's ministry of higher education and ministry of the French language. In the spring, we signed a memorandum of co-operation with the Université du Québec network. We communicate regularly with university presidents and the Fédération des cégeps. I can assure you those relationships are there.

Intergovernmental coordination, however, is a challenge we've been working on for several years.

On some issues, such as early childhood education, we've obtained federal and provincial funding for the same thing. Some institutions have to choose between federal funding and provincial funding to achieve their goals. If intergovernmental coordination were better, one of the two governments would use that money elsewhere, thereby increasing a given institution's capacity in another program or another area of specialization for professions with worker shortages.

There's a lack of intergovernmental coordination, especially in the francophone post-secondary education space.

We have the Ministers' Council on the Canadian Francophonie and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, but nobody in either of those organizations is responsible for coordinating funding for francophone post-secondary institutions.

What we want is more efficient use of existing funding.

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

**Mario Beaulieu:** Okay.

Earlier, I asked a question about "by and for francophones", and you provided an overview of the current situation.

Do you think institutions operated by and for francophones have a positive impact on integration within linguistic communities?

**Martin Normand:** I would say that our 22 member institutions strive to integrate into the communities they are a part of and actively participate in. They train responsible citizens, skilled professionals who can then provide services in French.

A Statistics Canada study we commissioned confirmed that graduates of francophone institutions are five times more likely to work in French after completing their studies. This is proof that these graduates contribute directly to community vitality in all kinds of fields.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Bélanger, you have the floor for five minutes. I understand that you may be splitting your time.

**Jim Bélanger:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Normand, I'd like to talk to you about a somewhat unique situation. I'm from the greater Sudbury area. We are proud to have a francophone college, Collège Boréal, and a bilingual university, Laurentian University. My daughter is a graduate of that university, where she obtained a master's degree in speech-language pathology.

Laurentian University had financial problems and almost went bankrupt. The francophonie is very important. Northern Ontario's culture must also be safeguarded, and these two institutions are very important to us.

What can we do to ensure that this doesn't happen again in the future?

**Martin Normand:** I would add the Université de Sudbury to that list. It is reducing some of its activities that meet certain specific needs. All three of those institutions are members of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, the ACUFC.

More predictability with respect to funding and rules around international students for all institutions would help avoid some of the more difficult situations. We would like to see more predictability in a lot of ways, especially around federal funding, which fluctuates every year based on available envelopes.

There also needs to be more regular communication between institutions, which organizations like ours speak on behalf of, and the various levels of government, including those of the provinces and territories. That would make us more efficient, thereby boosting capacity at all institutions in the network, which is something all communities really want. Intergovernmental coordination is becoming increasingly important to avoid things like programs at francophone institutions across the country being eliminated for all kinds of reasons in recent years.

• (1250)

**Jim Bélanger:** Thank you.

You can have the rest of my time, Mr. Godin.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Normand, you said that one of your three recommendations was support for the production of evidence. Can you tell us what you mean by evidence? Is it data related to rights holders? Can you give us your definition of evidence?

**Martin Normand:** We're talking about two pieces of evidence.

The recommendation refers specifically to the early childhood education research capacity we are developing at the ACUFC. A new colleague is piloting new programs to create new data. There is actually very little data on francophone early childhood education. There hasn't been much investment in research in that field, so we're trying to create early childhood education research capacity to create the data we need to support the sector. That's part of it.

The next type of data we want to work on relates to the issue we addressed earlier. We know that education is under provincial jurisdiction. Because of that, when collecting data at the national level, there may be additional barriers to data comparability. We're working with our institutions to build the necessary capacity to collect

ongoing data on the number of programs, the number of full-time students and the number of international students and their country of origin.

There are all kinds of tools we can use in our public advocacy and in orienting the actions of our association and our members.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Normand.

The data on rights holders is also important. Instead of estimating them, we should count them, but that's another problem.

My next question is for Ms. Côté.

In your presentation, you said that your organization manages federal funds for the province.

Can you tell us more about that?

**Isabelle Côté:** That was the federal-provincial agreement. Every year, the provincial government receives federal funds, and the Ministry of Education gives the funds to the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs. We then support programs at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education. Materially, our support pays professors' and researchers' salaries—

**Joël Godin:** Sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Côté.

My understanding is that your organization receives funding meant for Simon Fraser University, not funding meant for the province.

**Isabelle Côté:** Yes, that's right. Pardon me.

We aren't a department that offers programs. We are the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs, which manages its funds within the university. We always work in collaboration those two large faculties, the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education.

**Joël Godin:** Thank you, Ms. Côté.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Godin and Mr. Bélanger.

I now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault for five minutes. He will be the last to ask this panel questions.

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

I would like to take a minute after the meeting to ask you and the committee members a question, so time should be set aside for that purpose.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Action Plan for Official Languages enables us to fund various sectors that are important to community vitality. In 2018, after a decade of stagnant official languages funding under the previous Conservative government, there was a significant increase in funding. In 2023, increased funding enabled us to do things such as provide more money to the early childhood education sector.

The Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne received funding for some of its member institutions and to implement innovative teacher training programs.

I would like the ACUFC representatives to comment on the importance of federal funding to supporting francophone early childhood education.

Can you share concrete examples of current projects and tell us how they impact francophone communities?

• (1255)

**Catherine Rousseau:** I touched on that earlier. It's important to fund the development of programs that recognize the unique characteristics of minority francophone communities. Official language educators in minority communities have a dual mandate. They support children's overall development, but they also transmit language and culture so as to form children's identity. That's why it's important to have programs that take that into account.

Let's look at a very specific example.

In British Columbia, the Collège Éducentre offered an early childhood education program that was a translation of an anglophone program. I believe that program was offered until 2023, but it didn't take the unique characteristics of minority francophone communities into account. Thanks to federal funding administered by the ACUFC, we were able to design a program specifically for British Columbia's francophone community. Collège Éducentre now offers a francophone program that is not merely a translation. It was actually developed specifically for the early childhood milieu in British Columbia. That's just one of the concrete examples I can share.

We've financed some 40 initiatives. Many different innovative projects have been implemented. That's just one of many examples.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you, Ms. Rousseau.

I agree with you, and I want to congratulate you on all the work you're doing because that work is crucial to the vitality of our communities.

We are currently observing major regional disparities when it comes to early childhood education training capacity. What can you tell us about that?

**Martin Normand:** What I would say is that we certainly would love to do more. As I told you, this is part of a much broader phenomenon related to the availability of infrastructure and internship programs. Our institutions are currently operating at maximum capacity. The limiting factor is what they're able to offer as work placements for students to complete their training.

We need to look at this like an ecosystem.

I'm sure that, if we could solve the internship problem, our institutions would be ready and willing to increase their program capacity, improve their infrastructure and augment resources available to people in their training programs.

We talk a lot about initial training, but we should also be talking about continuing education, which has really expanded in the network thanks to funding we've received in recent years and redistributed on the ground. Access to continuing education has been identified as a factor in staff retention at early childhood education centres. Providing access to continuing education and professional development is a way to recognize and add value to the profession.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you, Mr. Normand.

My last question is for Ms. Côté of Simon Fraser University.

You said earlier that over 50,000 of the people attending your institution went through French immersion. It's actually 50,000 people in British Columbia who go through French immersion. I don't have the exact figure here, but you talked about the importance of French immersion to people who attend your institution.

Can you explain to us how post-secondary studies in French help make the use of French more of a fixture in these people's everyday lives?

**The Chair:** Ms. Côté, you have about 40 seconds to answer the question.

**Isabelle Côté:** Thank you.

We have 55,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students in the French immersion program. In our teacher training programs, 75% of our future teachers are former immersion students, and 20% to 25% are francophones. It's clear that funding for the immersion program and a positive experience for these students prior to post-secondary studies will enable them to picture themselves as future French immersion teachers. A good 75% of our future teachers were immersion students.

When it comes to the vitality of francophone minority communities, these people play an extremely important role with respect to programs in French.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Thank you, Ms. Côté.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Deschênes-Thériault.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all the witnesses for coming here to testify.

Before I suspend the meeting, I'll give the floor to Mr. Godin, who has a question for us.

**Joël Godin:** It's a short question, Mr. Chair.

As you know, during the meeting requested under Standing Order 106(4), we moved a motion to do with inviting two ministers and hearing witnesses within 21 days.

Are we in a position to put that appearance on the calendar so we can all manage our agendas accordingly? Are you able to tell us one way or the other?

• (1300)

**The Chair:** I consulted the clerk, Mr. Godin. From what I understand, she sent the invitations, but we haven't yet set a date for the ministers to appear.

Regarding the study you mentioned, I would like to remind you that, in the motion we passed, we agreed to invite witnesses.

I would therefore like to remind all parties to submit their lists of witnesses.

**Joël Godin:** Is there a deadline for submitting our list?

To be perfectly honest with you, Mr. Chair, we never received a request for a list of witnesses.

This is a perfectly normal process, so if we could set a specific date, we could provide you with a list of witnesses and do our job.

**The Chair:** Certainly. It's really up to the committee to decide what is reasonable for members.

What do you suggest?

Mr. Beaulieu, go ahead.

**Mario Beaulieu:** I think we need to hear from six witnesses so that all parties get one. Actually, it should be eight witnesses, but eight is a lot.

**Joël Godin:** Mr. Chair, we need to work out some details.

First, we need to know how many witnesses are going to appear. Second, we need to decide on the distribution. Third, we need to set a date.

I think it would be reasonable to set a date by the end of next week.

I'm looking at my colleagues, but I don't see any reaction.

**Mario Beaulieu:** It could be this Friday or next week.

**Joël Godin:** I'm suggesting Friday of next week.

**The Chair:** I'd like to deal with one issue at a time.

We have to figure out the date first.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you want to comment on the date.

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** Yes, Friday of next week would be a good time.

I would also like to make an additional comment.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Beaulieu, did you want to speak to the date?

**Mario Beaulieu:** No, it's for the—

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, what did you want to speak to?

**Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault:** It's about the number of witnesses. We're suggesting six witnesses in total.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Mario Beaulieu:** I agree, but I would like the Bloc Québécois to choose at least one witness.

**The Chair:** Are we in agreement?

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

**Joël Godin:** Mr. Chair, I propose increasing the number of witnesses to seven, precisely so the Bloc Québécois can choose one of them.

**Mario Beaulieu:** It would be three witnesses for the Liberals, three witnesses for the Conservatives and one witness for the Bloc Québécois. That seems fine to me.

**The Chair:** Is that okay with everyone?

So the deadline for providing the list of witnesses is Friday of next week. We propose to call a total of seven witnesses, including one selected by the Bloc Québécois.

**Mario Beaulieu:** So it will be Friday, November 7.

**The Chair:** Let's set the deadline for Friday, November 7, at noon. There will be seven witnesses, including one selected by the Bloc Québécois.

Is that okay?

**Joël Godin:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Is everyone okay to adjourn the meeting? Yes? Okay.

Thank you, everyone.





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