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Chair: Yvan Baker



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• (1110)

[*Translation*]

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

I would first like to inform you that, for the last 10 or 15 minutes, we have been trying to resolve technical problems involving witnesses who have to participate in the meeting by video conference.

Witnesses, we look forward to hearing what you have to say. I'm so sorry about the technical issues. The technical team will continue to work with you to see if they can resolve them quickly. If not, we will unfortunately have to ask you to testify at a later date, at a future meeting. The sound quality is not adequate for the interpreters to do their job, and it is imperative that we have interpretation.

Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Is only one witness affected?

The Chair: The technical problem is affecting the two witnesses who have to participate by video conference.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): I waited for you to give me the floor, Mr. Chair. You know I'm disciplined.

Will we still have the other witnesses with us for an hour and a half?

The Chair: If it's the will of the committee, yes.

Is it the will of the committee to still have an hour and a half with the other witnesses?

Marc Dalton: I don't want to speak for the team, but an hour and a half with a small group of witnesses is a long time.

I think it would be preferable to limit the testimony to a maximum of one hour.

Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): The two witnesses will not be participating, including the one from Alberta.

The Chair: We can proceed as you would like.

To clarify matters, I remind you that the two witnesses who have to participate by video conference are from the same organization, the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta.

However, two other organizations are in the room and are ready to testify. We can ask them questions for an hour and a half or we can change the length of the testimony.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I just want to make sure that we are going to respect the motion adopted for this study. The motion calls for six meetings.

How are you going to account for that?

The Chair: The clerk always makes sure that we respect the number of witnesses each party can invite.

In terms of the number of meetings set for this study, the motion states that a minimum of six meetings must be held. If the committee wishes to keep the same number of witnesses, it can decide to add a meeting.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I don't want our witnesses from Alberta to be interrupted because of technical problems. I think it's important to hear their testimony.

From what I understand, you're going to invite them again. Perhaps the sound quality will be better next time. The witnesses may appear in person. That way, their testimony will be taken into account in the drafting of the committee's report.

The Chair: I agree with you, Mr. Godin. We want to hear from the witnesses. It's very important.

If the committee wishes to keep the same number of witnesses and maintain the number of witnesses for each party, I propose to add one meeting.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: I would like to ask another question, Mr. Chair. It can wait a bit.

Joël Godin: We in the Conservative Party agree with your proposal, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): We agree with the proposal, as well.

We can hear from the witnesses for an hour, while maintaining flexibility so that we can take an additional 30 minutes if the technical problems of the witnesses from Alberta are resolved.

It is now 11:13 a.m. If the testimony lasts an hour, we will have 15 minutes left at the end to move on to another matter. If the two witnesses who are participating remotely can join us, we can continue until 12:45 p.m. to have an hour and a half with the witnesses.

I would be comfortable moving in that direction in order to maximize the time we have to hear from witnesses.

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Chair, I also agree, but I have a question.

Technical problems like this have occurred a few times.

Are sound tests done before the meetings?

Was it working then and is not working now?

The Clerk of the Committee (Madeleine Martin): Mr. Chair, every time an invitation to appear is sent to a witness, they are given the choice of appearing in person or by video conference. If they choose to do appear virtually, they are sent an email with the information they need to carry out a mandatory sound test. The witness must absolutely pass this test to connect to the meeting.

The two witnesses today passed the test. Our operators do not allow witnesses who do not pass the test to participate. It's not even allowed. They also make sure witnesses have the right headset.

I don't know if today's problem has anything to do with the room. I'm not a technician, so it's hard to say.

Interpreters are definitely not present during the tests. It's the technical team that measures the quality indicators. I can't explain what's happening today. I don't know.

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

Joël Godin: I have two things to say.

First, I want to be sure I understand my colleague's proposal. Today, we will work with the two witnesses who are here for an hour, and then for an additional half an hour if the technical problem is resolved.

Is that correct?

• (1115)

The Chair: That's my understanding.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault is confirming that this is correct.

Do you agree with that, Mr. Godin?

Joël Godin: I absolutely agree. I just wanted some clarity. I like things to be clear.

Second, for clarity's sake, what is the unit of measure used?

Mr. Beaulieu's question is very relevant. Sound tests were done before the meeting. By the quality standards of the House of Commons, they were successful. When we started the meeting, the indicators were different.

For my own knowledge and that of the other committee members, can you tell us what metric is used to determine whether the quality passes or doesn't pass the test?

The Clerk: Since I'm not a technician, the situation isn't within my purview. My role is simply to send an email to the technical team and ask them to conduct a test.

The technical team manages the tests. I don't have the answer right now, but I'm writing to a manager who communicates with interpretation services. I am wondering the same thing.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Madam Clerk.

We've been through this before. I just want to get a clear understanding of the situation and get accurate information about the indicators that would help us understand what's going on. Our job as legislators is to understand the situation. Right now, we don't have enough data.

If possible, Madam Clerk, could you provide us with information on which criteria are assessed for fluidity, clarity or decibel volume? We would appreciate that.

Like you, Madam Clerk, I know nothing about the technical aspect, and I'm in the dark.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Beaulieu, thank you for asking the question. I was wondering the same thing as you.

Madam Clerk, if you can get back to the committee on that, it would be appreciated. That could prevent the same problems from happening in the future.

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor.

Marc Dalton: On the same issue, I'm a little concerned about what's happening right now. I'm not blaming anyone, especially not the technicians, but this is the second time this has happened at the beginning of a meeting. Last time, we had the right headsets.

I also wonder if every committee has the same problem. I understand that problems can arise when a witness doesn't have the right headset, but when that's not the case, something really needs to be corrected.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

I agree with you. We could add that question to the request for information that the clerk is going to submit.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: I think the interpreters are not at all happy with the new agreement and the new offers that have been proposed by Public Services and Procurement Canada. It may be related to that. They may be stricter. We had a meeting on interpreters, and the worst-case scenario happened. The interpreters are not at all happy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

I'm mindful of the time of our colleagues, but also of the witnesses who are before us. I think the clerk promised that she would answer the questions that were asked. I agree with you that we need to take steps to make sure that doesn't happen in the future. It's possible.

I would like to tell the witnesses who are participating in the meeting virtually that all members of the committee want to hear their testimony. They want to make sure this issue doesn't happen going forward. We're hoping to correct the issue in the next few minutes. However, if that's not possible, I hope the witnesses will be prepared to testify before us at a future meeting, once the technical problems have been resolved.

Mr. Beaulieu has asked that we take 10 or 15 minutes after our witnesses' appearance to deal with a motion. Do the committee members agree that we should take 10 or 15 minutes to discuss the topic proposed by Mr. Beaulieu?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

My understanding is that we're going to spend an hour with the witnesses who are in the room. If the technical issues are resolved for our video conference witnesses, we'll set aside half an hour at the end for them, if they're available. If the issues are not resolved, we will move on to the topic proposed by Mr. Beaulieu, and we will invite those witnesses to appear before us at another meeting.

Is that what we've decided?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

I have a couple of housekeeping items to discuss.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Committee members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether you're participating in person or 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, the committee is meeting today to continue its study on the minority-language education continuum.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses who are with us in person. They are Ronald Ajavon, chief executive officer of the Conseil des écoles francsaskoises, and Marco Fiola, principal, Glendon College, York University.

Each organization will have five minutes for their opening remarks. We will then proceed to a question and answer period with committee members.

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

• (1120)

Ronald Ajavon (Chief Executive Officer, Conseil des écoles francsaskoises): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this topic, which is also important to us.

I have been working at the Conseil des écoles francsaskoises, or CEF, for a little over 10 years. The continuum, from early childhood to post-secondary education, is a fundamental pillar for the

linguistic and cultural vitality of our francophone minority communities in Canada.

In Saskatchewan, the survival of French depends on an integrated, accessible and quality education system, from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary education. A number of systemic barriers persist. They create significant problems for the system's proper functioning. I'm thinking in particular of underfunding.

I'll go over the historical context.

For nearly a century, teaching French was illegal in Saskatchewan, and that created a historic and profound harm in the Saskatchewan community.

Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognizes the right to education in the minority language and imposes an obligation on the provincial and federal governments to guarantee substantive equivalence for the children of rights holders.

Under Saskatchewan's Education Act, 1995, we have the exclusive responsibility to offer French first-language education. However, this responsibility is sometimes exercised within a legislative and administrative framework that, de facto, strongly favours majority schools. That reproduces the structural inequalities, which have been denounced for several decades.

Early childhood is an essential link in the continuum, and it must not be overlooked. However, it is sometimes neglected. Early childhood is also a recognized but unfunded linguistic vulnerability.

French-language linguistic development plays a pivotal role, an essential role. In Saskatchewan, most of our programs for pre-kindergarten 3 and pre-kindergarten 4—for children aged three and four—are not funded, and the programs for five-year-olds are funded only on a part-time basis. Since this program is offered on a full-time basis, that creates problems. Those children sometimes have language vulnerabilities. We're missing those vulnerabilities on the pre-kindergarten-to-kindergarten side of things, which costs a lot more in the future. It's also a huge loss for our communities.

I will now talk about capitalization. We have a number of schools and communities. Among our 12 communities, a number of infrastructure projects are not currently funded. We are aiming for access to local schools, which would reduce the distance to travel to school and provide accessible services to our rights holders.

Census data show that there are more than 11,000 rights holders. We have only 20% of them in our schools, which is also a pretty significant harm. Therefore, we ask that these measures be corrected.

The continuum is weakened, which is also the case at the post-secondary level. Once students finish their studies in the system, they need to hope to be able to find their way into the core post-secondary program. As far as this component is concerned, this lack of adapted post-secondary programming creates challenges. We see many young people leaving the Franco-Saskatchewanian community and going elsewhere, which further weakens our communities.

Here are some recommendations I would like to submit to the committee.

You know that the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises is always ready to work, and we thank you for all the steps that have been taken under part VII of the Official Languages Act, more specifically section 41.

Our goal is really to fully exercise the power conferred by this provision—that is to say the spending power to support the effective implementation of section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

More specifically, the CEF recommends that the federal government be able to initiate and directly announce projects to build or expand French-language schools in minority communities. The CEF requests this without relying on a prior request from the provincial government, when the data show the following: a sufficient number of rights holders confirmed by Statistics Canada; a situation of overcrowding, obsolescence or the absence of local schools; or a cumulative delay in the implementation of section 23.

• (1125)

This approach is based on subsection 41(1) of the Official Languages Act, which requires the Government of Canada to enhance the vitality of official language minority communities and support their development, and subsection 41(2), which requires federal institutions to take positive measures to implement that commitment.

The Chair: Mr. Ajavon, I'm sorry to interrupt. Your five minutes are up.

Could you wrap up quickly, in a few words? You'll be able to tell us more during the question and answer period.

Ronald Ajavon: Thank you for the reminder.

It's all in my brief. Our second recommendation concerns funding for school operating expenses. Again, the same thing is possible.

I want to thank you for your time today. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ajavon.

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

Marco Fiola (Principal, Glendon College, York University): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to begin by thanking the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today. I want you to know that I appreciate the privilege of being able to communicate directly with you as a representative of a bilingual institution.

York University, an Ontario post-secondary institution with a bilingual faculty called Glendon College, of which I am the principal, would like to share with the committee members the role that francophone or bilingual post-secondary institutions play in maintaining this continuum and making it relevant.

York University believes that it plays a privileged, and often little-known, role in maintaining the education continuum. The lack of awareness of its role in this regard undoubtedly stems from the fact that its bilingual calling is being obscured in favour of other post-secondary institutions that are better able to show their contribution because of their status.

[English]

York University is Canada's third largest, with three campuses and 10 faculties, where some 55,000 students acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to build their future, as well as the Canada and world of tomorrow.

Among these 10 faculties is Glendon College. It was born out of the imagination of senior civil servants in the 1960s and has never strayed from its original mandate: to train tomorrow's public servants while promoting bilingualism and intercultural competence. We proudly claim this mission and fully embrace its uniqueness, despite an economic climate that seems to favour training and research in less traditional fields.

[Translation]

The geopolitical and economic issues facing current society contribute to accentuating the feeling of insecurity that has always pre-occupied francophone or bilingual institutions in minority communities.

Of course, all post-secondary institutions are going through a period of uncertainty. They have to make difficult choices, as it's a matter of responding to the economic context without jeopardizing the students' future.

The problem arises all the more acutely in francophone or bilingual post-secondary educational institutions in minority communities, as their academic programs are often incidental to decision-makers, especially when it comes to making difficult choices.

[English]

Today, I would like to highlight the vital role that bilingual post-secondary education plays in maintaining the values associated with our official bilingualism—a bilingualism that is demographically asymmetrical and distinctive. The importance of bilingual post-secondary institutions in minority communities cannot be denied. I will attempt to illustrate my point using the institution for which I am responsible.

Glendon College is an essential link in the minority education continuum, not only for the education it provides within its walls, but also for the role it plays indirectly, both upstream and far downstream from post-secondary education. For example, our programs prepare future elementary and secondary school teachers in immersion programs, which, it should be noted, are sometimes the only French-language programs available to linguistic minority populations.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Glendon College also offers the only professional translation baccalaureate program in Ontario, as well as one of only two master's degrees in conference interpreting in Canada. The unique feature of Glendon's is that conference interpreting can be studied in languages other than French and English.

The Glendon School of Public and International Affairs is preparing tomorrow's legislators and diplomats to represent our values and ideas here and around the world.

Through its social sciences and humanities programs, Glendon is training the future economists, psychologists, lawyers and communicators we need. In short, Glendon is training the bilingual leadership Canada needs now and in the future. Those are just a few examples.

Everyone knows that what distinguishes our country on this continent, apart from our public health care system, is our official bilingualism, which is a true national cultural asset. By providing young people with a bilingual and experiential post-secondary ecosystem to develop their full potential, Glendon is helping to preserve and enhance the vitality of Canada's official language minorities.

If the public service, but also the private sector, is able to serve the public in the minority language, it is much more likely that this language will have the opportunity to flourish.

In conclusion, I invite you to consider how our federal institutions can participate, in their own way, in maintaining bilingualism as an essential part of the minority education continuum. Civil society, education, health, social services, justice and the legislative system are all aspects that, through cultural diversity, respect for minorities and official bilingualism, help to define what distinguishes us as a country and to broaden our horizons as Canadians.

Thank you. *Merci. Meegwetch.*

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fiola.

We will now proceed to questions from members.

Mr. Godin has the floor for six minutes.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here this morning and for telling us about their day-to-day concerns.

Mr. Ajavon, you talked about the 1995 provincial law favouring majority schools.

Can you give us more details about the fact that priority is given to majority groups?

Since Saskatchewan is a very large territory, it may have constraints that explain why we can't meet the needs of francophones or rights holders who live in the regions.

What do you think?

Ronald Ajavon: Mr. Godin, thank you for your question.

When I talk about the 1995 act, I'm referring to Saskatchewan's Education Act, 1995.

The problem is the number. When we see that there are so few French-language schools in Saskatchewan, that doesn't automatically lead to the construction of new schools. However, we know that the potential is there.

We've also observed that every time a new school is built, students attend and the school fills up. People say that construction is a good start.

The idea is to be able to look beyond these sometimes restrictive laws and base decisions on the demographic potential of our regions provided by Statistics Canada, for example.

Joël Godin: Thank you.

I'm sorry. I'm having a technical issue. I can no longer hear the interpretation, but I won't complain about the technology, because we're going to lose time again.

You also said that institutions accommodating three and four-year-olds were not funded and that those that accommodate five-year-olds were partially funded. We know that early childhood is the incubator for Canadians taking an interest later in life in one of the two official languages, in this case, French.

Isn't that a major problem?

If we can't meet the needs of institutions that offer pre-kindergarten or early childhood services, aren't we creating a problem that persists all the way to the post-secondary level?

Ronald Ajavon: That's true, absolutely. You hit the nail on the head, that's the problem.

When things go wrong in early childhood, they go wrong throughout the school system. That means we have to spend and invest even more at the higher levels, particularly in kindergarten to grade 12, to support these young people.

We know that everything happens in the first three years. That's why the early childhood component remains a pivotal force for the education of young people.

• (1135)

Joël Godin: Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms says that rights holders are entitled to have their children receive their instruction in the language of their choice.

Therefore, people are not complying with the law if they are doing that.

Ronald Ajavon: You're absolutely right.

Joël Godin: How can we address the problem? The federal government's responsibility is to maintain bilingualism in Canada. The province seems to be playing with the numbers and focusing on the language of the majority.

Can you give us a potential solution we can incorporate into the recommendations that will be part of the report we submit to the federal government? Help us help you.

Ronald Ajavon: Thank you. You make a critical point.

That's why recommendation 2 in the brief I submitted highlights the pivotal role of the federal government and applauds the Official Languages Act, because it is quite an achievement in itself. However, there's a little more to do.

The Conseil des écoles fransaskoises recommends that, in accordance with section 41 in part VII of the Official Languages Act, the Government of Canada fully exercise its spending power to support the effective implementation of substantive equivalence.

“Substantive equivalence” refers to the aspect you raised, Mr. Godin. This is to ensure that wherever the provinces are failing, the federal government can step in if, of course, the data, the indicators from the councils and the provinces warrant it.

Joël Godin: We agree that the indicators warrant it. The last census found 300,000 rights holders.

Ronald Ajavon: I couldn't agree with you more.

Joël Godin: The indicators are there.

That said, how can we ensure compliance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Official Languages Act?

Ronald Ajavon: It's appropriate to use part VII of the Official Languages Act, particularly section 41 and its subsections 41(1) and 41(2), which aim to promote the vitality of language communities—

Joël Godin: Mr. Ajavon, I'm sorry to interrupt. I have 30 seconds left and I want to ask Mr. Fiola a question. We can continue our discussion later. If not, you can send us additional information in writing.

Mr. Fiola, you said you were preparing the next immersion teachers.

How many applications do you receive? How many graduates are there?

Are some of those people immigrants?

Marco Fiola: In any given year, we have about 50 students who come to us for a Bachelor of Education in French as a Second Language.

Joël Godin: How many are there?

Marco Fiola: There are about the same number, because the students we admit to this bachelor's program have already completed a bachelor's degree in French studies at our university. I would say that skills are sorted upstream of admission to the education program. If we admit 50 or so, there will generally be close to 50 who graduate.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, I'm sorry, your time is up.

Thank you very much. There will be another round of questions, and you can continue the discussion.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mingarelli for six minutes.

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

Mr. Fiola, thank you for being with us.

Your Bachelor of Education in French as a Second Language program aims to train the next generation of teachers.

What are the main challenges your graduates face when they try to teach in the country's French-language or immersion schools?

Marco Fiola: That's a great question.

Generally, French-language schools across the country recruit students who have completed a bachelor's degree in French education, for teaching French to native speakers of French. The program is different. French isn't taught to immersion students the same way it's taught to students whose mother tongue is French. The teaching is different. The educational approach may be different.

As I said a little earlier, in some regions and communities, there may be rights holders who are in immersion because there is no native speaker program or simply because the French as a second language program is offered in a school offering more services and opportunities. You'd have to talk to parents. They might tell you the same story I'm telling you.

We have partnerships with associations like Canadian Parents for French and French for the Future. That's more or less what they're telling us as well. These associations have pretty much the same opinion.

● (1140)

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you very much.

As Glendon College is a French-language institution in a minority setting, what are the biggest challenges it faces in maintaining and expanding its programs available in French?

Marco Fiola: That's also a great question.

I'm going to correct you slightly. The college is a bilingual educational institution. That means we offer programs in French and programs in English. What we offer students is an immersive and bilingual learning framework.

We have programs in French only. For example, earlier I mentioned the bachelor's degree in French studies. We also have programs offered in both English and French, and a program that is in English only, the English studies program, of course.

Does that answer your question?

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you, Mr. Fiola.

Mr. Ajavon, thank you as well for being with us today.

The Conseil des écoles fransaskoises manages 16 primary and secondary schools in the province.

How many of them are high schools?

In your opinion, do high school graduates want to pursue their post-secondary education in French, even if the options are far more limited out west than they are in eastern Canada?

Ronald Ajavon: Thank you. That's a great question.

We have high schools in both major cities. All the other schools are combined primary and secondary schools, except in Regina and Saskatoon, which have stand-alone primary schools.

After grade 12, many students would like to continue their post-secondary studies in French, but they can't do so because few institutions offer programs in French after high school. Sometimes the programs simply don't exist. They are therefore inclined to continue their education in other provinces.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Conseil des écoles francsaskoises says that Franco-Saskatchewanian schools have a threefold mandate: a school mandate, a cultural mandate and a community mandate.

Mr. Ajavon, could you explain in more detail how these three mandates are implemented in your schools?

Ronald Ajavon: The school mandate, which we all know, concerns everything related to training, to studies. What we call the identity mandate is the provision of cultural programming and an approach aimed at ensuring the vitality of community identity.

In our schools, we have community school centres, where the community is present. For example, in Regina, all the community organizations offer French-language activities to students. This vibrancy enables students to have a better life in French and assert their francophone identity. Our school board also reflects these values.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'm done.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for six minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ajavon, you gave a very good presentation. It was very interesting.

You talked about the historical wrongs that have been done when it comes to teaching French. We know that there are a number of laws in Saskatchewan that prohibited teaching French at one time.

Can you tell us a bit more about that and approximately when those laws ceased to apply?

When did teaching French really begin?

Ronald Ajavon: Thank you for the question, Mr. Beaulieu.

When it comes to teaching French, 100 years ago, young people had to hide in basements to study French. Those wrongs have remained.

These days, when you speak to seniors in French, it ignites emotions in them related to that past. Their children, who are now parents in the various communities, are still wondering today whether

French will be a source of problems and challenges for their children in the future if they go to a French-language school.

That's precisely why I'm really talking about righting these past wrongs. This requires governments to implement positive measures, at both the provincial and federal levels.

• (1145)

Mario Beaulieu: You talked about systemic barriers.

Do you feel that the Government of Saskatchewan is really committed to righting these historical wrongs?

Ronald Ajavon: Yes, I really do. We're working with the government to right these wrongs. I made some recommendations earlier. I would add that the people around this table have a pivotal role to play. The federal government will have a positive role to play in remedying the situation, as set out in the new version of the Official Languages Act. It will have to implement measures where the provincial government is not doing so.

I'll give you a concrete example. When a new school is announced, the federal government is always ready to fund the community portion. That's being done very well by the federal government. The problem is that the school project has to get under way.

Why wait when we know that students are living in unacceptable situations in Canada, as if they were in a third world country?

Why can't the federal government intervene earlier in the process? Can we reverse the order of things?

That would simply enable us to achieve the results we're aiming for here, at this table. If these new schools are there, the children will go and study at French-language post-secondary educational institutions. The development of francophone communities that we're aiming for would be more easily attainable.

Mario Beaulieu: You wonder why the federal government doesn't intervene. It's because education is a provincial jurisdiction.

When French-language instruction was banned in almost all the provinces, which are now anglophone, the federal government did nothing. It didn't intervene at all. Today, provincial governments seem to be letting things slide, allowing assimilation to happen. They make very little effort.

You said that your schools are falling into disrepair a bit. There really is a double standard. It's going to be very difficult.

In Quebec, the situation is reversed. English-language schools have always been overfunded. Today, it's more balanced, but there are still disparities when it comes to colleges and universities.

So you think that the provincial governments don't really have the will to act and that it would then be up to the federal government to take action.

Is that right?

Ronald Ajavon: I think provincial governments should always be encouraged to play their role, which is very important.

On top of that, I think it's also important for the federal government to play a positive role in this, particularly in the area of health. This is done in other cases.

I understand very well that education is a provincial jurisdiction, but I think we can go a little further to right these wrongs.

Mario Beaulieu: In this case, there really needs to be asymmetry in the act, and we've started to see that. We'll talk about it again, because so far, in Quebec, action has only been taken to strengthen English, which is growing.

French is in decline in the provinces. As a result, the Official Languages Act pits francophones outside Quebec against francophones in Quebec because of the alleged asymmetry.

You're talking about systemic barriers, which result in underfunding. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Ronald Ajavon: We're talking about the whole budget issue here, about real equivalence. Because of their limited budget, French-language schools can't always offer what the English-language school next door offers. This creates an inequity, a situation where there is no real equivalence, whether in terms of curriculum or the condition of the schools.

For example, a parent who sees a 30 or 100-year-old French-language school, which is located next to a newly built and sometimes very beautiful English-language school, abandons their values and sends their child to the English-language school.

I hear about it from friends, and they're sorry. Their choice was very difficult, but they ended up sending their children to the English-language school.

These are recurring situations year after year.

• (1150)

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, you have four seconds left.

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Fiola, I'll come back to you in the next round of questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we move on to the second round of questions, I will provide an update on the situation. The technical team worked with the online witnesses and made some changes. The team is optimistic that it will work, but we need to test the sound.

I propose that we suspend the meeting for a minute or two to test the sound with the witnesses.

Then we can start the next round of questions.

I'm suspending the meeting.

• (1150)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1155)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I'd like to thank the online witnesses and the technical team who worked very hard. The sound is working now. It's acceptable.

If the committee agrees, I propose that we give the witnesses online five minutes to make their presentations. That way, members

would be able to ask all the witnesses questions during the next rounds of questions.

We'll be done with the witnesses at 12:45 p.m., so we'll have 15 minutes left to deal with the subject proposed by Mr. Beaulieu.

Is that okay with everyone? Can we continue like this?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Ms. Lachance, you have the floor for five minutes.

Nathalie Lachance (President, Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to all members of the committee.

My name is Nathalie Lachance, and I am the president of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, or ACFA. With me today is our executive director, Isabelle Laurin.

I sincerely thank you for the invitation to testify before you as part of this important study on the minority-language education continuum.

Since 1926, the ACFA has been defending the rights, gains and vitality of Alberta's francophonie. Today, it represents more than 261,000 French-speaking Albertans, as well as some 50 franco-phone organizations across the province.

We welcome the resumption of the committee's work on this crucial topic. In December 2024, the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta, the Fédération des parents francophones de l'Alberta and the ACFA submitted a joint brief presenting a series of recommendations. This brief followed an appearance by the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta on October 24, 2024. Today, I would like to come back to some major challenges, particularly in early childhood and post-secondary education.

When francophone families don't have access to child care services in their language, we see early anglicization of children before they even enter school. This language loss continues throughout the educational process, all the way to post-secondary education.

However, if one of the links in the continuum from early childhood to post-secondary is weakened, the entire French-language educational system is weakened. The result is clear: fewer French-speaking graduates, fewer workers able to provide services in French, an erosion of the right guaranteed by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and increased assimilation in our communities.

In Alberta, the francophone education system suffers from structural underfunding at all levels. For example, in early childhood, a number of regions in the province have a 0% coverage rate for French-language child care services. At the post-secondary level, the lack of a variety of programs was confirmed at the second summit on French-language post-secondary education in Alberta, organized by the ACFA in April 2024. In addition, the report of the estates general of the Association des collèges et universités de la Francophonie canadienne showed that the western provinces are the most disadvantaged when it comes to offering programs in French. While 18.8% of the francophone population lives there, only 7.9% of francophone minority university programs are offered in that region.

This situation stems in part from the federal funding formulas currently in place, which do not reflect demographic growth or the unique realities of Alberta's francophonie.

Between 2018 and 2023, Alberta ranked ninth in the country for per capita funding for minority-language education, at \$60 per francophone, compared to a national average of \$153. This means that our community is constantly having to do more with fewer resources.

We are proposing concrete recommendations to strengthen the francophone education continuum in Alberta and elsewhere in the country.

First, the funding formulas in the protocol for agreements for minority-language education and second-language instruction between the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories, which concerns the Department of Canadian Heritage more directly, must be adjusted to reflect the rapid growth of francophone populations and regional realities. Equitable funding is an essential condition for substantive equality in education.

Second, the funding mechanisms for community spaces need to be reviewed to lighten the administrative burden, allow funding for the modernization and expansion of existing infrastructure and cover additional operating costs related to integrated early childhood spaces.

Third, the allocation mechanisms for post-secondary education in French must be reviewed to ensure an adequate supply of programs and to support the training of a skilled French-speaking workforce. Currently, funding under the memorandum of understanding is in competition between primary and secondary education, on the one hand, and post-secondary education, on the other, which weakens both.

Fourth, we need to implement strategies to integrate the internationally trained workforce by simplifying prior learning recognition and supporting ongoing training. Francophone immigration plays a key role in Alberta, but without adequate integration mechanisms, this potential remains under-exploited.

The francophone education continuum is not a luxury; it is essential to meet the constitutional obligations set out in section 23 of the charter, and it is a shared responsibility. Every link has to be strong, from early childhood to post-secondary, if we want to ensure the vitality and sustainability of our francophone communities.

The ACFA invites the committee to recommend concrete equity measures in the funding and governance of francophone education, adapted to regional realities and the growing needs of our communities in Alberta.

Thank you for your attention. We are available to answer your questions.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lachance. I'm very pleased that the technical difficulties have been resolved so that we can hear your remarks.

We will now move on to the second round of questions.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

I have a question for you, Mr. Ajavon.

You mentioned a challenge related to underfunding in Saskatchewan. I'm always interested in numbers. According to the data I see, spending on these programs in your province is about \$8 million a year.

Do you receive \$8 million from each level of government, federal and provincial, or is that the total amount?

Ronald Ajavon: I think that's the total amount, but it must be said that we receive much less.

That amount is for the overall component. When I was talking about underfunding earlier, I was including capital and the operating budget. There is underfunding because of funding formulas that make it possible to create new schools. I was saying more specifically that the announcement of a new school must be made by the provincial government before the federal government can offer its share. However, it is the provincial government's announcement that is the most difficult and the one that is taking the longest.

For example, this year, a new school just opened in Regina, but we had already been asking for it for over 15 years. Students who were in junior kindergarten when this school was requested are now at university, so they haven't been able to benefit from these necessary services.

Jim Bélanger: Okay.

I see that we spend about the same amount on minority-language education as we do on second-language learning. Do you think that's a good proportion or should it be different?

Ronald Ajavon: That's an excellent question and it raises a key point. We're talking about redress, but having an equivalent proportion is already a challenge for us, because redress involves programs, whether cultural programming or the community outreach, to fulfill our threefold mandate. It's not really possible to do that with the \$2.4 million in funding we receive from the federal government.

The figure you have integrated all provincial services and notably includes what our departments use just for francophone programs. The school board therefore doesn't receive the entire amount. The proportion we receive isn't enough to meet the real needs of our communities.

Jim Bélanger: How much do you think you would need to save francophone culture in your province?

Ronald Ajavon: I think we would need at least four times that amount to provide services and implement measures to help us counter the growing assimilation in our province.

• (1205)

Jim Bélanger: I see another factor that interests me, which is that the proportion of French-language primary and secondary schools has increased from only 0.4% in 1983-84 to 1.1% in 2023.

We usually see a decline in services to francophones. What has led to this increase?

Ronald Ajavon: Immigration has been a big part of that growth.

That said, we must also consider the harms caused in the past. As I mentioned earlier to Mr. Beaulieu, there is still some reluctance and disengagement from the past. The provincial government must therefore take positive measures, including implementing adapted programs and building new schools, to welcome back these students who are disconnected from our system today because of insufficient infrastructure and services that are not comparable to those offered to the majority.

The Chair: You have 50 seconds left, Mr. Bélanger.

Jim Bélanger: Okay.

So I'm going to continue on this subject, Mr. Ajavon.

In 2021, 16,000 children were eligible for French-language education, but only 2,000 of them were enrolled in francophone institutions. Why is that?

Ronald Ajavon: It's always the same problem. We need to have local schools and funding that meets the real needs of the system, comparable to what is offered to the majority. When those two elements aren't present, students go elsewhere. Parents want their children to study in French, but because they perceive that francophone services are the poor cousin of the education system and that they don't want to sacrifice their children's education, they send them to English-language schools.

When I talk about a systemic challenge, I'm talking about these difficulties that have existed for a number of years and that are perpetuated. That's why we recommend that the federal government intervene a little more positively with the provinces to put restorative measures in place.

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, your time is up.

I now give the floor to Ms. Chenette for five minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their very interesting testimony.

My question is for you, Mr. Fiola.

In recent weeks, the various witnesses we've heard from have emphasized the fact that people from the francophone community and those from the anglophone community shouldn't be grouped together in the same institutions, because there was a risk of assimilation. It wasn't necessarily higher education institutions, but rather high schools, elementary schools and so on.

Your model seems to have made it possible for you to integrate both communities well. Do you think this model causes greater assimilation?

What should we learn from your model, if we wanted to replicate it at lower levels in the education process? Do you think that's possible?

Marco Fiola: Thank you very much for that important question.

If we take this position of offering bilingual programming and creating an ecosystem where students can learn in both languages and become familiar with both cultures, it's because I see that there is currently a growing need for young English-speaking graduates who will have been educated in a bilingual or immersion setting, so that these future teachers, lawyers, sociologists and psychologists will be able to offer all services to the public in both languages. As a result, the availability of services in French and English will increase. People will then be able to access services in their own language, which can only have a positive effect on the preservation of French across the country.

French speakers in Canada are like parsley: they're everywhere, and they grow everywhere. And that's a good thing; they should be everywhere.

We can't think that we're going to find the magic solution without taking into account the fact that there is a bilingual and francophile population. It must take part in the search for solutions to preserve the future of French in Canada.

• (1210)

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you, Mr. Fiola.

My next question is for Mr. Ajavon.

Do all students at the Conseil des écoles francosaskoises de Regina and Saskatoon go from a French-language elementary school to a French-language secondary school, or do a significant number of them go through the immersion system instead?

Ronald Ajavon: That's an excellent question, Ms. Chenette.

Yes, we lose a lot of students in grade 9, once again for service-related reasons. We need secondary schools that are comparable to those of the majority when it comes to services. It's really the actual equivalence of services that poses that challenge.

Madeleine Chenette: I want to go back to a discussion we had earlier. You recommend that section 41 of part VII of the Official Languages Act give full power to the federal government. We're indeed very concerned about the fact that education is a provincial jurisdiction. My colleague was talking about the reality in Quebec.

In that context, have you discussed your proposal with your colleagues in the other provinces? How socially acceptable is such a recommendation?

What would be the challenges and real benefits of giving the federal government full power, instead of continuing to work with the provinces to get there?

Ronald Ajavon: You've asked an essential question.

In my discussions with the provincial representatives, we always look at the pie chart for the province. It's never a question of refusing one thing or saying there shouldn't be access to another thing. In that context, if the federal government has a positive obligation when it's ready to announce funding, the province will never say no. That means there has to be some kind of tripartite agreement between the province, the school boards and the federal government to address the issue of funding. Otherwise, we'll be going around in circles for a number of years, and our children will still have the same challenges as what we're discussing around this table.

This approach was actually adopted in the health field, for example, and it took nothing away from that area of provincial jurisdiction. It would also take nothing away from provincial jurisdiction over education. In fact, it would be a good support.

Like all our other colleagues across the country, what we want is access to services and schools, including local schools. We also all want to have access to fair funding and real equivalence. Our proposal would enable us to get all of that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Chenette. Your time is up.

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

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a first question for you, Ms. Lachance.

You said that your schools were allocated \$60 per francophone, whereas the national average was about \$150. Can you explain a bit more about what those numbers correspond to?

Nathalie Lachance: They correspond to the funding we receive from the federal government per francophone. That reflects a bigger problem for Alberta's francophonie, because we've had a growing francophone population for a long time, but the funding formulas haven't kept pace with the rapid growth of the Franco-Albertan population.

Alberta is a province that attracts a lot of people. In fact, 24% of francophones in Alberta have been living there for a number of decades. Some francophone families have been living there for 200 years. In addition, 40% of francophones come from elsewhere in Canada, like me, and 32% were born abroad. For us to have such a diverse francophonie today, we've experienced very rapid growth. Our population has doubled in recent years. The funding formulas haven't kept up, though, as is the case with all the education funding agreements.

Mario Beaulieu: As a result, the current funding agreements allocate almost twice as much money to anglophone students as to francophone students.

Nathalie Lachance: It isn't a comparison between francophones and anglophones; it's a comparison between francophones across the country. Ms. Laurin can correct me if I've misunderstood, but it's a matter of comparing how much funding the federal government provides per student across the country.

Mario Beaulieu: The federal government gives less funding to francophones in Alberta than those elsewhere, then. Is that correct?

Nathalie Lachance: That's correct. It's because the funding formulas haven't been adapted to the growth of Alberta's francophonie.

• (1215)

Mario Beaulieu: Perfect, thank you.

My next question is for you, Mr. Fiola.

For a very long time, francophones outside Quebec have fought to have institutions run by and for francophones. There is now the Université de l'Ontario français, which is developing, but I know that a number of bilingual universities lobbied to prevent the creation of that university.

Do you think it's important to have universities run by and for francophones?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but your time is up. I will allow the witness to answer if he can do so very quickly, or you can continue this discussion during your next turn.

Marco Fiola: I think that services offered by and for francophones have their place. I represent a bilingual university, and I've formed partnerships with unilingual French-language universities in Ontario. I happily welcome the arrival of those universities. They're additional players on the chessboard for defending French and bilingualism in Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Marc Dalton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses. It's a pleasure to hear from them. My francophone roots are in Alberta. I'm Métis, from a family that's lived in Alberta for 200 years. My mother's name is Beaudoin, and she comes from a family of 18 children, so I think I'm related to half of the francophones in Alberta.

Is the number of francophones attending primary schools, secondary schools or early childhood centres stable, declining or increasing?

Nathalie Lachance: In terms of kindergarten to grade 12, around 10,000 students are enrolled in the 45 French-language schools of the province's four French-language school boards. That figure is growing, though, so it doesn't reflect the significant needs. The latest Statistics Canada census indicates that the province has 75,000 rights holders under the age of 18. I know that some of them aren't of school age, but that still puts us in second place for the largest francophone population outside Quebec. Ontario is number one, and then it's us. There are even more rights holders in Alberta than in New Brunswick.

I don't have the figures for early childhood, but my colleague Ms. Laurin could provide them. These are really urgent needs. We have what we call child care deserts. Across the province, there are places without any French-language services available. That has a very significant impact on young people and families. That's often why, after day care, parents enrol their children in English-language schools.

Marc Dalton: Okay.

Can you tell us a bit about the importance of francophone immigration in Alberta?

Nathalie Lachance: Francophone immigration is very important in Alberta. We have the benefit of a well diversified, but also inclusive, francophonie. Thirty-two per cent of Albertan francophones were born outside the country, and two-thirds of those immigrants come from Africa.

That means that Alberta's francophone immigration profile is different from the province's immigration profile; 23% of Albertans were born outside the country, and Southeast Asia is the main source of immigration to the province. Our immigrant population is different. Immigrants who arrive in our francophone communities come from the African continent, speak French and integrate very well into our structures and schools. We can count on the participation of a huge number of families or community members of African descent, as well as Caribbean, in some cases. I'm thinking of Haiti, for example.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

Like the other witnesses, you talked about federal underfunding. The amount you receive is stable, but would inflation, the rising living costs and wages that aren't keeping pace be the cause of all this pressure? Could you elaborate on that?

The representatives from the other organizations can also speak afterward.

Nathalie Lachance: In that regard, I would agree with my colleague from Saskatchewan. Underfunding has been going on for a very long time, and we're constantly playing catch-up. However, for us to be able to catch up as needed, it's important to speed up the process, which isn't happening. I'm thinking of school construction, for example. Every provincial budget announces the construction of one or two schools in a province, but we need more than that. In Edmonton, the school board had to wait 20 years to get a new school. Before then, all we had were schools that had been donated by other school boards and renovated. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], there really are gaps.

• (1220)

The Chair: Ms. Lachance, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're having technical difficulties once again, and the interpreters unfortunately can't interpret what you're saying. Would it be possible to ask Ms. Laurin to answer on behalf of the ACFA?

Just to be clear, Mr. Dalton, I stopped the clock during the technical difficulties. You now have one minute.

You have the floor to answer the question, Ms. Laurin.

Isabelle Laurin (Executive Director, Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta): I'm sorry, I've lost track. What was the question?

The Chair: Mr. Dalton, can you repeat the question? I'll stop the clock while you do that, and I'll restart it when Ms. Laurin begins her answer.

Marc Dalton: I was saying that even if federal funding increased, the fact remains that inflation, the rising cost of living and wages that aren't keeping pace are the main cause of all this pressure, aren't they?

Isabelle Laurin: To Ms. Lachance's point, I'd say that Alberta is struggling to get schools built. As she said, it took 20 years to get a new French-language school in Edmonton. In the past, we had only old schools that other English-language school boards had given us.

The cost of living obviously has a huge impact. As we've already said, the growth and diversity of Alberta's francophonie create new needs for services in our French-language schools, which also require financial support.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

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

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their participation today.

My first question is for the witnesses from Alberta.

You talked about early childhood. As we know, early childhood is the gateway to the education continuum. As part of the two most recent action plans for official languages, significant amounts have been invested to support francophone early childhood. A number of innovative projects have been implemented in Alberta, but there are still regions where needs aren't being met.

Could you tell us what could be done overall to ensure the sustainability of the francophone early childhood sector in Alberta, both in places that already benefit from innovative projects and in regions that are currently less well served, where needs have to be better met?

Nathalie Lachance: I'll try to answer, and if it doesn't work, Ms. Laurin will take over.

First and foremost, our students need access to post-secondary education so that we can make sure to train the workforce we need.

Second, it's very important that federal-provincial agreements include language clauses, because that underscores the importance of offering services in French.

Finally, it's important to always make sure that there's enough funding, because, honestly, the needs in early childhood are very pressing throughout the province.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

Over the past few years, we've seen many headlines in Alberta about post-secondary education in French, particularly with Campus Saint-Jean.

Could you give us a brief update on the current status of that?

Nathalie Lachance: What we've learned from Campus Saint-Jean in recent months is that there has been a nice increase in staff, with more students admitted this year than in the past. I tip my hat to Campus Saint-Jean for that.

However, it's been noted that there hasn't necessarily been an increase in the programs offered. There's also a challenge related to erasing the history of Saint-Jean and Alberta's francophonie on campus, which is a problem in an institution that trains part of the workforce. The bachelor's degree in education at Campus Saint-Jean is very important. We want to make sure that this knowledge of Alberta's francophonie is preserved and always visible. We want to ensure that educators and teachers understand the importance of Alberta's francophonie with its challenges and successes, and that they can speak about it eloquently. I'm talking about all educators and teachers, whether they're in French-language schools or immersion schools, or whether they're teaching French in second-language programs in anglophone schools.

• (1225)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you, Ms. Lachance.

I'll turn to you now, Mr. Fiola.

You offer various programs at Campus Saint-Jean, including the education program, but also other programs in a bilingual educational environment. I'd first like to know approximately what proportion of your students come from French immersion programs.

Marco Fiola: That's a very high proportion. About 20% of our students at Glendon are first-language francophones; 80% aren't, and at least half of those who aren't come from the French immersion system in Ontario. Among the francophones, a high proportion of students are immigrants. Those are foreign students who come to Glendon to study with us in French and English.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you. The reason I asked about immersion is that we've seen, over the past decade, a substantial increase in the number of students in immersion programs across the country. When students go through French immersion in secondary school and continue in French at the post-secondary level, that's a period of reinforcing their learning of language skills. How does your campus help strengthen Ontario's francophonie, particularly by reinforcing the use of French among people who have gone through immersion?

Marco Fiola: That's a great question. In fact, we're trying to improve our students' ability or ease as professionals, in both French and English. We raise their level of bilingualism to a professional standard so that they can provide services and support, and pursue graduate studies in either official language. That's the big difference. If they have received basic immersion training, when they arrive, we push them toward a professional knowledge of both official languages. That would mean they take an economics course, for example, in both languages.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

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

Members, we're moving on to the third round of questions. We have 15 to 16 minutes left before we move on to the matter you raised, Mr. Beaulieu.

I propose that we do the first part of the third round, so one member from each party will ask questions. We'll begin with Mr. Godin, who will have five minutes. Mr. Villeneuve will follow, for five minutes. Finally, Mr. Beaulieu will have two and a half minutes.

Is that okay with everyone? Yes, perfect.

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

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the people from Alberta.

You told us that there are currently 10,000 students out of a possible 75,000 students. Those 75,000 students represent a much larger proportion than in the only bilingual province in Canada, which is New Brunswick. That's interesting, because it shows that there's good potential in Alberta.

Now, we hear Liberal Party members saying that the government has invested a lot of money, \$4.1 billion, in the action plan for official languages, or APOL. However, if I understand correctly, that solution doesn't enable you to increase the number of students who have access to education in French.

Is that correct?

Nathalie Lachance: The additional funding is helping us, there's no doubt about that.

We're talking about the challenge we're facing. We need to have more funds to catch up on the decades-long delay. Alberta's francophonie needs additional funding to support the rapid growth of our population. We're working with funding formulas that have stagnated and haven't increased with that growth.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Lachance.

I'd like to ask you to give me a very simple figure: How many Albertan students were studying in French five years ago compared with the 10,000 students today?

Nathalie Lachance: Off the top of my head, I would say there were maybe 7,000 students five years ago. We would have to check that; we could send you the exact figures.

Joël Godin: If you could send that information to the committee, I would appreciate it.

My next question is for the three witnesses we have here this morning.

I think the takeaway is this: We have to find tools and possible solutions to be able to grow the francophonie in Canada. You've all put forward recommendations, such as recommendations 3, 4 and 2. I'd like to know which of your recommendations would be the most important if you could only table one. Imagine a genie coming into the room and telling you that you're entitled to only one wish. Which one will be most effective in improving the francophonie in Canada?

We can take turns. We'll begin with Mr. Ajavon, followed by Mr. Fiola and Ms. Lachance.

Mr. Ajavon, what do you think?

• (1230)

Ronald Ajavon: I would ask for greater positive federal involvement in funding, whether in terms of operating costs or capital funding for the construction of schools.

Joël Godin: Before I let the other witnesses answer, I'd like to know if federal money makes it to you, Mr. Ajavon.

Ronald Ajavon: I would say that some of the money makes it.

Joël Godin: Mr. Fiola, it's your turn.

Marco Fiola: Thank you for your question.

I won't hide it from you; my answer will be very selfish. I'd ask for more predictable funding with an increase that takes into account the fact that, when programming is offered in a bilingual environment, as is my case, there are often costs associated with bilingualism. Those costs are higher than for a unilingual institution. I have to provide services in both languages. I have to have websites. I have to have recruitment teams that work in both communities. We don't recruit francophone students the same way we recruit bilingual or anglophone students. Funding has to take that fact into account.

Joël Godin: You're talking about predictability, and that surely includes predictability in terms of the pool of students who can come and study at your university. We know what happened a year ago: The Liberal government drastically reduced international student enrolment without warning. That's a statistic that destabilized your management, isn't it?

Marco Fiola: That change even destabilized the entire academic community, no matter where in Canada.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Fiola.

Ms. Laurin or Ms. Lachance, would you like to answer my question?

Nathalie Lachance: When it comes to Alberta's francophonie, we're talking about a francophonie that's truly international. The recognition of prior learning is still one of our priorities. I'm talking about anything that can be done to simplify that process so the people who come here with a great education can enter the workforce quickly. That will also encourage them to keep their children in French-language schools and to continue contributing to the vitality of the francophonie.

Joël Godin: Thank you to all three of you.

I appreciate your participation in this study.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

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

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us.

As a citizen of Quebec, I've learned a lot since joining this committee. Frankly, some of the things I hear are shocking.

Ms. Lachance, thank you for recognizing that additional government funding is helpful. I also heard you say that, because of your growth, the funding formula doesn't seem to work as you'd hoped.

For the benefit of those following these proceedings, can you give us any recommendations on how the government could improve the formula?

Nathalie Lachance: When we found out that more funding was available, we were hoping the formula would be adjusted. We thought there would be a way for the government to recognize the wonderful growth in Alberta's francophone community through additional funding, instead of just allocating the same percentage to every organization. We don't want to take money away from provinces with small French-speaking populations, which do have significant needs after all, but we were hoping that the money would be allocated a bit differently.

By bringing everyone's funding up to 25%, the government has just widened the gap, because 25% of 100,000 is not the same as 25% of 500,000. That's why we were disappointed with the process that was followed. On top of that, an austerity budget is around the corner, and there will be cuts. If the cuts are calculated the same way the funding is, we are going to have more problems.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Ms. Lachance.

Mr. Ajavon, how do the 2021 census data on rights holders help you make your case to the province in terms of what you need?

Ronald Ajavon: Thank you for that excellent question.

We are always referring to those data to highlight our needs in our discussions with the province. We have many discussions based on demographic potential.

Louis Villeneuve: That's great. Thank you.

Does the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises, or CEF, still require that one of the parents be fluent in French?

• (1235)

Ronald Ajavon: Yes, that's a requirement, but we can make exceptions. We grant what's known as enrolment permission. Every school has to meet with the family before making a decision on whether the student can enrol. Then the board just approves it. Overall, the board has a pretty strict enrolment policy when it comes to rights holders.

Louis Villeneuve: Considering the high level of assimilation and the desire to remedy the situation, is the CEF missing out on certain students by applying other criteria?

Ronald Ajavon: As you know, our mandate is threefold. In addition to educating students, we have to support identity-building and community vitality. To fulfill that mandate, we have to have not only a screening process for enrolment, but also the means to meet the French-language needs of students who do not speak the language. That is why, in the earlier discussion with your fellow members, we were so adamant that the system needed more funding, precisely to remedy the situation.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Mr. Ajavon.

The CEF opened a new school in the northern part of the city, École du Parc. Is that right?

Ronald Ajavon: That's right.

Louis Villeneuve: Is the school already at full capacity?

Ronald Ajavon: We almost have no spots left, and Regina wants a new school for next year. We have resource centres and libraries that have been converted into classrooms, so again, students don't have that substantive equivalence, and we lose many of them to immersion schools or English school boards, as a result.

The Chair: Mr. Villeneuve, you have 35 seconds left.

Louis Villeneuve: Okay.

Quickly, how much does the success or failure of part VII of the Official Languages Act depend on whether a full minority-language education continuum is established?

Ronald Ajavon: In order for part VII to be a success, the federal government has to do a bit more in fulfilling its duty to take positive measures. It has to stop saying that education is a provincial responsibility. Yes, education is under provincial jurisdiction, but there are still other things the federal government can do.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Mr. Ajavon.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

Lastly, we go to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Earlier, I heard Mr. Ajavon and Ms. Lachance, from Alberta, say that a lot of rundown English schools had been given to francophones. That really makes it seem as though francophones are second-class citizens.

What do you think?

Nathalie Lachance: It's a very big challenge for Alberta's francophone community. Our children have had to attend schools that were in absolutely unacceptable condition. For two years, my son went to a makeshift high school in the basement of a retirement home. In Jasper, for many years, our students did their schooling in a Royal Canadian Legion building. Needless to say, we have faced major challenges.

I can tell you, though, that Jasper now has what is probably the nicest school in the province, École Alexandre-Taché. My son went there. The situation has gotten better, but there's still a big challenge. Still today in Alberta, children go to school in places that weren't built for that purpose, old processing centres, for instance. Francophones have accepted all kinds of things they shouldn't have. Why? Because they needed to give students an education in French. It's still happening now, in 2025.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

You answered a bit earlier—

Ronald Ajavon: I would like to add something, if I may. The public school board in Regina was going to knock down École Monseigneur de Laval right before the school was handed over to the French system. That should give you a sense of the situation.

Mario Beaulieu: Schools by and for francophones are supposed to contribute to the vitality of French-speaking communities, but half the funding, if not more, goes to immersion schools.

Wouldn't it be more effective to make sure that schools by and for francophones were sufficiently funded, especially with the sluggish bilingualism rate in English-speaking Canada? The bilingualism rate among anglophones isn't going up.

• (1240)

The Chair: We have just 10 seconds left, so please be brief.

Ronald Ajavon: Absolutely.

The francophone system is important. It's important to have schools by and for francophones, while recognizing that immersion schools also have an important role.

However, schools by and for francophones need to be better equipped. By that, I mean proper infrastructure and a proper funding formula.

Nathalie Lachance: Quickly, I want to add that, in Alberta, we are trying to obtain a francophone list, in order to know what francophones and schools need. We don't want to be in competition with anglophone schools.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all the witnesses.

Mr. Fiola, Mr. Ajavon, Ms. Lachance and Ms. Laurin, thank you for being with us.

Ms. Lachance and Ms. Laurin, again, please accept our apologies for the technical difficulties. Thank you for being patient and working with us so diligently to fix the issue. We appreciate your input and your time.

Honourable members, with your permission, we are going to say goodbye to the witnesses, so we can carry on our discussion.

Is everyone fine with that? Yes?

All right.

In that case, thank you, witnesses.

Colleagues, we will now move to the item you wanted to talk about.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: I sent a notice of motion.

I will now put forward the two-part motion.

I think the motion is just as important for francophone and Acadian communities as it is for French in Quebec.

We know that since the Official Languages Act came into force, federal support in Quebec has served only to strengthen the vitality of English. Based on my calculations, at least \$3.6 billion has been invested in that goal.

However, since 2020, there's been what I would call a historic shift. The Governor General of Canada, several Liberal ministers and members of other political parties acknowledged that French was declining, even in Quebec. They also acknowledged that the responsibility to protect and promote French, not only outside Quebec, but also in Quebec, should fall on the federal government. This vision was partially included in the new Official Languages Act.

Unfortunately, nothing has changed since. Case in point: No changes appear in the public accounts of Canada for 2023-24.

What's more, although the new act was passed two years ago, the regulations have not been implemented. It's actually something the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, the Commissioner of Official Languages and pretty much everyone, really, have been asking for. The regulations of the new act regarding federally regulated businesses have not been implemented either.

That is why I am putting forward the following motion:

Be it resolved that the committee report to the House its desire:

- a. to see the implementation of the regulations of the new Official Languages Act take place as quickly as possible;
- b. to see the new asymmetric approach of the Official Languages Act in favour of French in Quebec become a reality.

What's in paragraph (a) has been promised many times already. We're now talking about November. Great, that's perfect, but we want to make sure it happens. Regarding paragraph (b), it's important to note that the new act recognizes that French is declining across the country and is in a minority situation in Canada and North America.

I hope that things will change once the regulations are implemented and that measures will finally be adopted for French in Quebec. We'll see what the plans are.

That is the motion I propose. I think you all have a copy.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, is the motion you're putting forward today the same one you shared with the committee a few days ago?

● (1245)

Mario Beaulieu: Yes. It's the one with paragraphs (a) and (b).

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Mr. Chair, I would like to add a paragraph (c) to Mr. Beaulieu's motion, to ask for a government response.

Mario Beaulieu: Asking for a government response without necessarily referring to Standing Order 109 would allow us to have a debate. If so, I have no objection.

I would like to have a debate on the matter once the committee reports back to the House.

The Chair: Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Chair, could we take a short break?

The Chair: I'll suspend the meeting.

● (1245) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1245)

The Chair: We're resuming the meeting.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mario Beaulieu: We don't support the amendment, because we'd like to have a debate right now, not only once we get the government response.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Chair, if there are no other comments, we can go to a vote.

The Chair: I'll consult the clerk.

To clarify, I will explain. Mr. Beaulieu, you have put forward a motion to which Mr. Deschênes-Thériault has proposed an amendment. We were discussing the amendment. If there are other comments regarding the amendment, I will hear them now. Otherwise, we'll vote on Mr. Deschênes-Thériault's amendment.

If there are no other comments on Mr. Deschênes-Thériault's amendment, we will go to a vote.

(Amendment negatived: nays 5; yeas 4)

● (1250)

The Chair: We will now move to Mr. Beaulieu's motion.

If there are no other comments on Mr. Beaulieu's motion, we will go to a vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 9; nays 0)

The Chair: Colleagues, can we adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I don't want to put the clerk on the spot, but I'd like to come back to something. Our friends are looking for some predictability to help them manage the schools in their province or territory. Could we also have some predictability to know what's coming?

Requests have been made regarding the ministers' mandate letters and the 21-day deadline. I just want to remind my colleagues that 21 days takes us to a break week.

Will the government comply with Standing Order 106(4) and what the committee has voted on? Will it comply with the 21-day deadline? Could we know ahead of time?

I know there are a lot of things going on, not to mention hearing from witnesses on the reasons why the Prime Minister should speak French more often.

Could all this information be updated?

The Chair: Mr. Godin, the clerk and I cannot directly answer your question regarding the ministers' intentions.

I will ask the clerk to give us an update on the committee's schedule.

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

After the motion to invite ministers to appear before the committee for the study on the use of French in federal communications was adopted, the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister responsible for Official Languages were invited to appear within 21 days. I have yet to receive an answer, but I contacted them again this morning to remind them of the 21-day deadline.

Meanwhile, I am inviting witnesses for the meetings we have left for the study on the minority-language education continuum. Those meetings are planned for Tuesday, November 4, and Thursday, November 6. However, if one of the ministers wishes to appear on one of those days, we can give them priority and postpone the witness remarks for the study on the minority-language education continuum until the week following the constituency week.

• (1255)

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

Joël Godin: Madam Clerk, what day will the 21-day deadline fall on?

The Clerk: The motion was adopted on October 23, so the 21-day deadline would fall on November 13.

Joël Godin: That's during the constituency week, then.

The Clerk: Yes.

Joël Godin: What will happen if the government doesn't comply with that deadline and the ministers don't appear before the committee by then?

Also, if they make themselves available during the break week, do we have to plan a meeting?

The Clerk: An invitation to appear before the committee is not binding. An MP cannot be forced to appear before the committee. However, if they refuse, the committee could report it to the House.

If one of the ministers wishes to appear before the committee during the constituency week, I will let the chair know. If the committee agrees, we could meet on that day.

Joël Godin: If I understand correctly, the two ministers don't have to appear by the 21-day deadline. However, if they don't, we could report to the House that they did not comply with our request, that they simply avoided it.

The Clerk: That's correct.

The Chair: Ms. Chenette, you have the floor.

Madeleine Chenette: Our colleagues have reported several technical issues over the last few meetings, and things have run much less efficiently. I join my colleagues in saying that we need to see whether the problem is coming from the room or the equipment in the interpretation booth. Out of respect for the committee members and our witnesses, I would like the problem to be fixed before our next meeting.

The Clerk: I can confirm that the administration officials have been informed of today's issues. They will contact technical services and interpretation services.

Whether the room is the issue is a good question. My colleagues and I are actually looking into using another room to see whether it's better. However, since the issue has also been reported in other rooms, I'm not so sure that the room is the problem. It's hard to say.

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

Joël Godin: I just want to remind my colleagues that we used to hold the committee meetings in a different room, in the Wellington Building. We moved here because we were having this issue, so I doubt the room is the problem.

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

Mario Beaulieu: I'd like to point out that the problems seem real. During the witness remarks, either there was no sound or the volume would go down. It was difficult to hear.

The Chair: I think we understand the issue. We all agree the technical problems need to be fixed. The clerk and I will work on it and do our best to get the issue fixed. In fact, the clerk has already brought up the issue.

I agree with my colleagues that the measures put in place haven't worked, and that we need to respect our witnesses and members' allotted time.

Are there any other questions or comments? Can we adjourn the meeting?

The meeting is adjourned.

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