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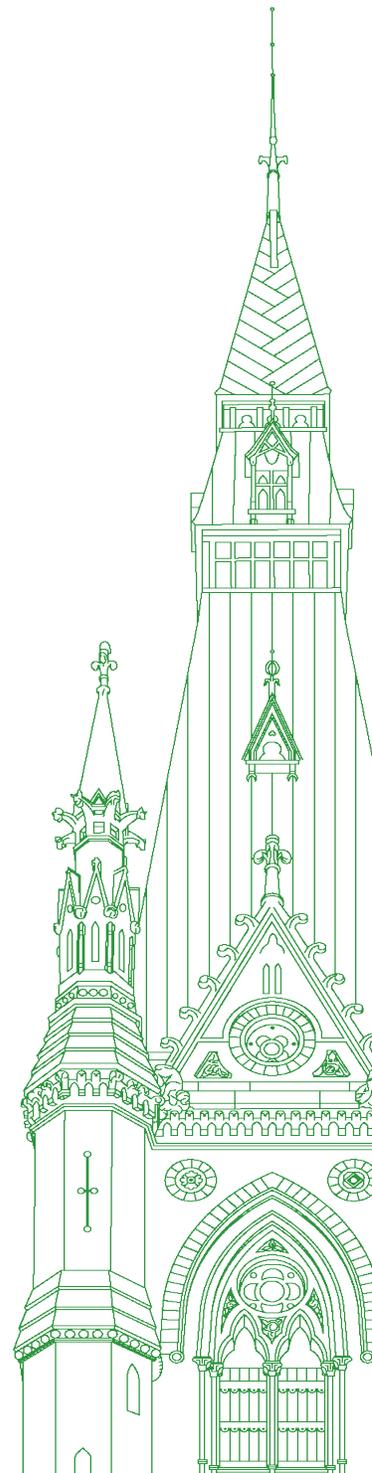
Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Chair: Robert Morrissey

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I'll open meeting number 24 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

We're going to hear from witnesses on Bill C-15 for one hour and 45 minutes or so. We will then go in camera for a discussion on the draft report on workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Before we begin, I want to remind those participating in the room, including members, of a few things.

Please ensure that your devices are on silent mode. Please refrain from tapping the boom of the mic, as it can cause issues for the translators. You have the option to participate in the official language of your choice.

I have to suspend for a moment because there's an issue.

• (1540)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1540)

The Chair: The meeting is back in session. I apologize for that, but we cannot proceed without translation.

On that, I was reminding those appearing virtually to click on the globe icon at the bottom of their Surface and choose the official language they wish to participate in. If there's an interruption in translation services, please get my attention and we'll suspend, as we did just a moment ago, for it to be corrected.

All questions and comments should be addressed through the chair.

Before I introduce the panel for the first hour, I have an item. A budget was circulated to all members that we need to approve to conduct this study, which we've now just about completed.

Do we have approval for the \$46,200 budget? I was advised that it had been circulated to all members.

Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): What budget?

The Chair: It's the budget. It's for your lunch.

Laila Goodridge: And headsets?

The Chair: It was circulated to all members last week. It's \$46,200. Do we have approval for this budget? It is the last day and I need approval.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, members.

With that, we'll move to the first panel. I'd like to welcome our guests.

From the Breakfast Club of Canada, we have Judith Barry, co-founder and director of governmental relations. From the Coalition for Healthy School Food, we have Carolyn Webb, knowledge mobilization coordinator. Appearing on screen, we have Dylan Kirk from the Council of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Schools of Ontario.

Each organization has five minutes for opening remarks. I will begin with Ms. Barry.

Ms. Barry, you have up to five minutes.

Judith Barry (Co-Founder, Director for Governmental Relations, Breakfast Club of Canada): Hi, dear members of the HUMA committee. I'm really happy to be here today.

I'll express myself mainly in French, but please know that I can answer any questions in French or English.

[Translation]

Nearly two years after the initial investment in the national school food program was announced, the federal government included legislation in clause 599 of Bill C-15 to make the program permanent and to contribute \$216 million per year to it. The Breakfast Club of Canada and a number of other civil society partners welcomed this bill. More specifically, the club submitted a brief recommending that Bill C-15 be adopted to secure sustainable, long-term funding and stability for students and their families, regardless of changes in political leadership or fiscal cycles.

To support this recommendation, the Breakfast Club of Canada included in its brief new data from a cost-benefit analysis conducted by economists at AppEco, confirming that for every dollar invested in school breakfast programs, society receives \$2 in socio-economic benefits. These returns are driven by three concrete and quantifiable impacts: increased disposable income for families, higher lifetime earnings linked to improved educational attainment and reduced health care costs.

To our first recommendation, we add that it's also important to encourage the federal government to index its investments to inflation and to invest in infrastructure and local procurement.

The second recommendation in the Breakfast Club of Canada calls on the government to recognize the national school food program's multidimensional nature, which requires coordinated actions and mechanisms across government levels and departments, including formal ways to engage with civil society organizations and food industry partners.

According to the World Food Programme's Centre of Excellence against Hunger in Brazil, it's very important to set up coordination mechanisms that involve all sectors and that include mechanisms to evaluate and to involve organizations and the food industry. The goal is to intentionally generate productivity and ensure that there's a lasting impact on the resilience of food systems.

For all of these reasons, we recommend that Bill C-15 be adopted.

We hope to be able to answer all your questions.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barry.

[English]

Ms. Webb, go ahead for five minutes or less, please.

Carolyn Webb (Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator, Coalition for Healthy School Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair and the committee, for inviting me to speak today.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is a network made up of more than 380 non-profit member organizations and over 150 endorsing organizations from all provinces and territories.

We've been advocating for a cost-shared national school food program for over a decade. We were very pleased when Canada joined the rest of the G7 by introducing the national school food policy and signing bilateral agreements with all provinces and territories.

We celebrate the tabling of the national school food program act, as we've been communicating that we'd like Canada to follow this best practice seen in other countries.

A recent World Food Programme report stated that all the evidence shows that school meal programs are one of the smartest long-term investments any government can make.

[Translation]

This bill is important to Canadians. The national school food program is about levelling the playing field and allowing children and youth across the country to eat well, be ready to learn and have equal opportunities to succeed. These programs help parents, especially women, reduce their stress and the time they spend preparing school meals. If breakfast and lunch are served, they also help families with two kids save \$2,600 to \$3,800 in annual food expenses.

[English]

Like many countries, Canada has been living through a food affordability crisis, and the national school food program has

emerged as an important tool to help families with cost of living pressures. Our vision is that this program will support all families and children over time, which the legislation has committed to. We hope this is a first step in addressing this issue together. As you think about how to continue helping families with affordability pressures, we hope all parties and all members will appreciate that building out the national school food program is a ready-made tool that will have a real impact.

I'll continue to look at school food program benefits.

Intentionally designed programs can create a market for regionally grown food, grow local food economies and support communities. You and your colleagues can allocate funding to the "buy Canadian in the school" food program concept proposed in the April 2025 Liberal platform costing plan. The 2025 EAT-Lancet Commission also speaks about the strong potential of sustainable school meal policies to promote climate resilience, as well as more sustainable and equitable food systems.

These benefits can all be realized through the excellent national school food policy that supports the act. Specifically, the policy's principles are that programs be the following: accessible, without stigma or barriers; health-promoting, wherein food is nutritious and consistent with Canada's food guide, and where children and youth develop healthful behaviours, attitudes, knowledge and skills; inclusive, providing culturally appropriate food and engaging students in the broader community; flexible, wherein food is locally sourced where possible and reflective of local and regional circumstances; environmentally sustainable and adequately resourced; and accountable, with consistent and transparent monitoring and evaluation to make sure programs achieve policy objectives.

• (1550)

[Translation]

Given the importance and potential of the national school food program, we're very pleased that this program is included in this bill. This will allow organizations across the country to benefit from stable funding and, in turn, implement programs in a gradual and planned manner.

I would like to share our three recommendations.

The first is that you and your colleagues quickly pass the National School Food Program Act.

[English]

For our second recommendation, we want to see the full potential of the policy's vision and principles realized. We'd like to see strong mechanisms put in place for the Government of Canada to continually and incrementally work towards, monitor and report on the comprehensive implementation of the policy's vision, with each of the principles and objectives done in collaboration with the provinces, territories and indigenous governing bodies.

Third, the government should promote the national school food policy in all public communications of the act to ensure that the policy's details are recognized and understood.

We urge you to pass the national school food program act into legislation and then continue to build the program, including increasing your investment and working to ensure greater provincial and territorial involvement so that there's true equity of access. It's critical that these programs be adequately funded so that all children and youth can be nourished at school, as food affordability remains a top issue for families.

We look forward to continuing this conversation with you and working to achieve the full potential of this program.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Webb.

Mr. Kirk has the floor for five minutes or less.

Dylan Kirk (President, Council of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Schools of Ontario): Mr. Chair, vice-chairs and members of the committee, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] speak on behalf of our profession and our students.

My name is Dylan Kirk. I'm here today as the president of the Council of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Schools of Ontario, representing the institutions that train the majority of this workforce in our [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and the academic dean at the Ontario College of TCM, which has been operating since 1998.

We take immense pride in running excellent, high-standard education programs [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 7,700 registered acupuncturists, TCM practitioners or doctors of TCM who offer affordable health care [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], relieving pressure on our public health system.

The Chair: Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Kirk. We're losing sound with you.

I will have to suspend for a moment while we're getting it checked out.

• (1550) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1555)

The Chair: We are back in session.

Mr. Kirk, I will ask you to pick up the part of your speech where we went into suspension.

Is that clear to you?

Laila Goodridge: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I would ask if we could consider having him start from the beginning, because parts of it weren't included and therefore weren't translated.

The Chair: That's fine with me.

Mr. Kirk, if you want to start from the top, it's fine.

Dylan Kirk: Thank you.

Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. My name is Dylan Kirk. I am [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Kirk, there's still an issue. At this time, we're going to proceed with the meeting, but I'm going to ask you to stay online. The technical people will be in touch with you to see what we can correct.

With that, we have to suspend your comments, Mr. Kirk.

We will go with the first six-minute round of questioning, beginning with Ms. Goodridge, please.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss this important topic.

Both of you highlighted the fact that we are in a cost of living crisis. I am a mom to young kids, and I talk to parents all the time who are struggling. They're struggling to be able to provide the food that they were able to provide just last year. Programs that both of you have been delivering for many years have been so positive.

When I first started looking into this, I reached out to school principals to see what kind of administrative burden this was putting on them. Many of them shared that there was an enormous administrative burden.

Could you tell us what kind of administrative burden this assistance has added to your program? Perhaps we could start with Ms. Barry and then go to Ms. Webb.

Judith Barry: On our side, at the Breakfast Club of Canada, we are not involved with the deployment of the federal investment within all provinces and territories. As far as we understand, there is reporting and data that is needed for the federal government, provinces and territories, relating to the outcomes that they have committed to deliver. Of course, if some strong mechanism to coordinate and monitor the results were in place, it would help all sectors to align and streamline the reporting.

Laila Goodridge: In reading through the reports that you've released, you've been able to quantify the costs in Quebec, but you can't actually quantify the costs in other provinces and territories, because there is no streamlined system of data collection.

The school administrators I've talked to already have a lot on their plate. The federal government has given them this. They know it is important to make sure that kids are fed and that kids do better in school when they are fed. They don't have the means to be able to implement the program as well as possible, because they don't have the experience as an organization like both of you have in actually making sure kids get fed.

How many kids do you feed a year through your Breakfast Club, Ms. Barry?

• (1600)

Judith Barry: The Breakfast Club of Canada, in collaboration with many school districts and regional organizations, is currently reaching over 800,000 students.

We do on a daily basis.

Laila Goodridge: How much money is that?

Judith Barry: That's a yearly budget of over \$50 million.

Laila Goodridge: This federal government wants to feed 400,000 kids with \$216 million annually.

Do you think you could feed more kids, better?

Judith Barry: I think all stakeholders are needed. We were really happy two years ago that finally the federal government was part of the solution. We were the only G7 country without a national school food program. The federal investment is needed. We can look at the impact on those 400,000 students. We can look at a universal reach, because that's the vision of the national school food policy.

Laila Goodridge: I appreciate that.

Who is primarily responsible in Canada for education?

Judith Barry: You know that it's the provinces and territories. That's why we need to build on their existing programming.

Laila Goodridge: This is one of the pieces where I have concerns. I came from a provincial background. I know for a fact that my province has had a school food program for many years. It has been working collaboratively. It has actually worked fairly collaboratively with the federal government in trying to rule this out. I know other provinces didn't necessarily have that framework in place and have been put into a bit of a challenge space.

Ms. Webb, what kind of administrative burden have you heard of from other partners, when it comes to this new national school food program that the government rolled out?

Carolyn Webb: We haven't heard from anyone about the administrative burdens. My understanding is that the provinces and territories are responsible for enhancing the programs they already have. For them, I think the new addition is the reporting requirements from the federal government. I can see how that will add certainly to the administrative burden.

Hopefully, though, as Ms. Barry spoke to, we can see this as growing pains and things we can improve on to streamline and coordinate that monitoring and really figure out some good systems, including even what we are all monitoring together like some of those common indicators. As well, some of my colleagues at the University of Saskatchewan have been developing some tools that

can be used to support some of that monitoring. I think that as all these tools and platforms are developed, we can....

Laila Goodridge: Could you speak a little bit to that?

I have read quite a bit about what the University of Saskatchewan is doing. I think it's absolutely spectacular. Perhaps you could share a little bit about that amazing prairie ingenuity.

Carolyn Webb: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Make it a quick answer, as your time is up.

Carolyn Webb: They've received some tools to support monitoring and evaluation, as well as how programs can be run and different models. In other words, if you're looking to monitor this, here are some good questions. We can certainly send information to anyone who's interested.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Fancy, you have six minutes.

Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Good afternoon. Thank you very much for being here, Ms. Barry and Ms. Webb today.

I'm speaking today as a former administrator and teacher and talking a little bit about just how this program has been quite transformational in terms of education. I know my colleague across the way just talked about the administrative burden. Ask me, because I was in the thick of this. As an educator from Nova Scotia, we were one of the first national adopters. My school board, South Shore Regional Centre for Education, was actually the national template.

When we talk about implementing this program, in the early stages was there a lot of work and some burden? Yes there was, but that's why we always have a good lessons learned document. The benefits from this program, once we worked out some of the kinks over the last year or so, have been tremendous.

I have a couple of questions for both of you today.

As former educator and principal in schools across my riding of South Shore—St. Margarets, I saw first-hand that hungry kids struggle to focus and participate.

Ms. Barry, from your experience, how do you feel that school food programs directly support learning and classroom engagement? I know I could go on forever, but you're here as our witness today.

Thank you.

• (1605)

Judith Barry: After more than 30 years of supporting implementation of the quality school breakfast program, the Breakfast Club of Canada has seen tremendous impacts and stories of change. In some regions, we have had school principals tell us that if the next school year were not going to be supported by Breakfast Club of Canada, they would close their doors because they had had so many behavioural issues to deal with before the implementation of the program. In terms of learnings, they couldn't teach at all. Of course, it has a tremendous impact and there are a lot of studies providing evidence on learning, on health and on the ability of the students to create and build healthy relationships amongst themselves.

Jessica Fancy: That's wonderful.

Also, as a rural education researcher, we did a lot of work with the early development indicators, EDI, reports back decades ago. They were calling on governments to create larger food programs. Having this national food program has been one of the indicators of vulnerability that the EDI reports had really been speaking for.

I'm from a rural and coastal community. Schools here often face some very unique challenges around access and capacity. How can the national school food program help the investments to ensure that rural kids aren't left behind?

This question is for Ms. Webb.

Thank you.

Carolyn Webb: Thank you so much.

I would say, again, that all of these are growing pains, as you talked about. Nova Scotia is an early adopter, and it's been really interesting hearing about the program coming into place and being grown. I think that one of the beautiful and challenging things is that there are schools in every region and riding of Canada, and it really is a matter of partnerships, I believe, and figuring out those distribution chains. We know that the last mile is often one of the most challenging, especially for rural and remote communities.

In conversation with our indigenous partners, they were particularly highlighting—and may submit a brief about—the unique challenges for indigenous communities. Very often they are small and need just as many resources, if not more, to get the food provided there. I really want to highlight that equitable programming and funding, so I appreciate that I can speak to that today.

In terms of solutions, it's a matter of really working with the experts in the field, the folks who know those distribution chains. I talked to somebody at the Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association who manages their northern fruit and vegetable program in Ontario. They've mapped out all these supply chains and now can distribute snacks in a pretty coordinated way to many rural communities. I think it's just tapping into those experts who have been doing this and working with all sorts of partners to try to make this happen.

Jessica Fancy: I love that we're talking about nutrition and healthy food here.

How do school nutrition programs support not just children, but also working families who are managing or trying to manage the rising cost of food?

Carolyn Webb: The wonderful thing about school food programs is that the aim is to bring nutritious food into a school setting where children can learn together, connect with each other and also expand their palate. That is another growing pain because our food culture is often not one that has many of the foods...and so part of the program is helping gain that recognition and so on.

These programs can significantly lower grocery bills for families and make it so that children and youth are exposed to different foods, and they can have those habits for a lifetime of healthy eating.

Jessica Fancy: Thanks.

Ms. Barry, you talked a little bit earlier about the 1:2 ratio of beneficial economic value. Could you expand upon that a little bit?

• (1610)

Judith Barry: It has been amazing across the globe to see the World Food Programme and many other stakeholders demonstrating the impact of school meals in terms of return on investment. We thought it would be important, as Canada is implementing its first national school food program, to specifically know about Canadian breakfast programs. It was for one—

The Chair: Sorry, I wasn't watching. We're over by a bit.

[*Translation*]

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

Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the three witnesses, Dylan Kirk, Carolyn Webb and Judith Barry, for being with us today.

I'll start with you, Ms. Barry.

In Quebec, where we have early childhood centres, we understand the importance of feeding toddlers. Quebec was a pioneer and understood the gains to be made, in time and energy, when meals are provided to toddlers in early childhood centres.

Let's go back to schools. I used to be a supply teacher at elementary schools over the lunch hour. I wanted to experience that. I know they're always looking for staff to take care of the kids at lunchtime. It was an extremely rewarding experience. I saw that, in the wake of early childhood centres, schools in Quebec were thinking about solutions, because toddlers were arriving with little to eat in their lunch boxes. You would see a great disparity between the lunch boxes that got opened up. Some lunch hours, we were able to help some kids who had next to nothing in their lunch box. However, we know that it has an impact on their behaviour and on their ability to learn. It was really striking and egregious.

I remember talking to you after I got to Parliament, Ms. Barry. You suggested that I visit two schools in the riding. I visited two, in Waterloo and Granby, to see the volunteers in action and the school meal service. Once again, it was an extremely rewarding experience. It made me realize that, to eat well, young people need support from an entire community. In the last Parliament, you also spoke with my colleague Sylvie Bérubé, among others, about this program.

Obviously, we realize the importance of that, while taking into account the fact that Quebec has unique characteristics and already has its own school food support model.

So how can the federal program support existing initiatives without duplicating services or encroaching? How do you envision that collaboration?

Judith Barry: Thank you very much, Ms. Larouche. I think that's an extremely important question.

As far as the federal government's intentions are concerned, as Mrs. Goodridge mentioned, education falls under provincial jurisdiction, so it's important that the federal government continue to respect provincial jurisdiction and that its investments ultimately enhance existing structures in the provinces.

The purpose of the national school food program is really to ensure that there is consistency and that, together, as a society, we can establish a mechanism and a national vehicle that, at the end of the day, will give all students across the country access to healthy food at some point in their schooling, when they need it, regardless of the reason.

The goal is really to build that ecosystem of collaboration between levels of government, civil society organizations and the food industry.

● (1615)

Andréanne Larouche: As we can see, a lot of people revolve around that. They're like little bees that come to life to serve those meals. When you experience that in a school, you can see the hive of activity. In return, you see smiles, too.

Is federal funding currently adequate and predictable enough to sustain existing programs?

Judith Barry: We absolutely need federal investments to be indexed to inflation over the years.

For the time being, if we looked at universal participation and investments that would reach all students across the country, we'd be talking about a federal investment of 15 cents per child per day.

The provinces and territories currently invest an average of 40 cents per child per day. So, if we consider the cost of a meal, be it breakfast or lunch, those amounts are, of course, insufficient at the moment.

Andréanne Larouche: What mechanisms could be put in place to ensure that?

I could also ask Ms. Webb this question as well. We can come back to that.

In your case, Ms. Barry, what mechanisms could be put in place to help you? You touched on this a bit in your opening remarks.

Judith Barry: Yes, absolutely.

When we talk about coordination mechanisms, we have to make sure we have things like round tables where all sectors of society are represented, so as to align efforts. We must also ensure that the resources and investments provided by each do not duplicate those of the others, but rather enhance and complement them.

There are also local procurement and local agriculture strategies to be put in place. That can't happen without coordinated efforts and without partners coming up with a common vision.

So, in the long term, we really hope that there will be those kinds of mechanisms, like national advisory committees and, at the provincial and regional levels, working committees.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We have Mr. Genuis for five minutes.

Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I want to probe this issue of the federal government's involvement in these programs. I understand why people involved in delivering these programs would love to see more money from the federal government, but I'm talking specifically about administrative involvement in the programs.

The federal government is not involved in the delivery of education. It is not involved in decisions about running schools, laying out schools or the curricula. I could see why people might want to make a case for saying that there should be an increase in transfers to provincial governments and then to school boards for programs they deliver. I could see why people involved in this kind of work would want to make that argument, but I don't really understand why it would be desirable to have the federal government involved in, specifically, the administration of these kinds of programs, things like monitoring, evaluation and decision-making. Aren't these the sorts of things that are best left to decision-making at the local level?

Carolyn Webb: I can start on that. Since we were established, over the past 10 years, we've been speaking to this as a health intervention for kids that takes place in a school setting, because we know health benefits are so rich for the physical and mental health of our children and youth.

In terms of making sure that programs are monitored, it is very valuable to understand what the impacts of these programs are to be able to grow them.

Then in terms of how—

Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry. I'll give you the floor back but, I mean, it happens in an education setting. You've described it as a health intervention, but even health interventions are typically administered at the provincial level. It's not obvious to me why, as an education, a health intervention or both, the federal government directing aspects of implementation makes any sense when you have school boards present that are engaged in activities that are designed to benefit the health as well as the education of students. These programs could be supported through an increase to provincial transfers in general. Why specifically does having public servants in Ottawa involved in reviewing and directing on top of what's happening at other levels make the system any better?

• (1620)

Carolyn Webb: My understanding is that the federal money is given to provinces and territories to implement and supplement their own programs and that it can be used in the way they deem best. On the big question about civil servants in Ottawa, my understanding is that the monitoring and evaluation is really to see the impact from the federal perspective. It was designed so that the provinces and territories could do whatever seemed most relevant to their context and situation.

Garnett Genuis: Is the program just an increase in transfer to the provinces, or does it involve hiring additional people here in Ottawa to make decisions about what interventions should and should not be supported?

Judith Barry: That question shouldn't be for us. I'm sorry, but I think it should be—

Garnett Genuis: I'm asking how the program works from your perspective, though.

Carolyn Webb: To my understanding, the money is mostly transferred to provinces and territories. I don't know about hires within the federal government here.

Garnett Genuis: Do you think it would be better if it were all transferred to the provinces and territories, with zero money spent on hiring new public servants and all the money spent on transfers to the people who are already doing it on the front lines?

Judith Barry: I think it's important to remind ourselves that we believe this is a multi-dimensional program by nature. We need all sectors and all stakeholders to be much more involved, because you're right, there is clearly—

Garnett Genuis: Sorry. I am running out of time.

I guess I still don't really understand having an additional group of public servants in Ottawa who are reviewing and sending directions and suggestions to people in my riding who are already deliv-

ering these programs. How in the world does that improve the effectiveness?

Judith Barry: We think it would improve efficiency if we gathered stakeholders and ensured that some mechanism was in place to monitor and really support efficient, impactful programming. We believe civil society can help that, because we—

Garnett Genuis: Civil society can do it, then. This is a question about the federal government's involvement.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

[*English*]

Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

The Chair: Next is Madam Koutrakis for five minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing here today. Thank you for your important testimony on this very important subject matter.

I think everyone around this table, regardless of party stripe, will agree that sending children to school hungry in the morning is not the way in which this G7 country should be looking after its young. If we want young talent and bright talent to continue in this country, I think it's the responsibility of all levels of government to ensure that the funding is there to make sure we have a program like the national school food program.

Beyond the direct benefits for children, what evidence or experience have you seen regarding the broader economic benefits of school food programs, particularly their impact on household purchasing power, such as reducing food costs for families, as well as benefits for communities and public systems more generally?

Either one of you can answer.

Carolyn Webb: I can speak to what I have heard about the school food programs, not necessarily for families but in terms of a system. It increases the bulk purchasing power of those schools and those programs to really support more food to be purchased for each dollar. You can say that it's more efficient for purchasing food, which does relieve the costs on families themselves. I'm not sure if that addresses the point you're trying to make, but yes, we've certainly heard about the efficiency.

It's pretty amazing, what some folks are doing. In a Maskwacis, Alberta, community program, they've bought an apple orchard, or half an apple orchard or something. They ship the apples and have cold storage systems. They're really supporting those local farmers and systems in that, because you have the bulk. My back-of-the-napkin calculation says that about 7% of meals—I might be wrong—are eaten in schools. That is a lot of purchasing power.

It is pretty exciting. We'll put this plea out to everybody here: Think about what we can do with that. It's pretty wonderful to support our local economies and local producers and really bring that to kids and help them understand those connections.

● (1625)

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you so much for this.

Based on this answer, Mr. Chair, I would like to move the following motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study on the implementation and long-term permanence of the national school food program, as made permanent and funded in budget 2025;

that the study examine the design, governance and delivery of the program, including the division of roles and responsibilities between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, the funding model and metrics used to measure outcomes, efficiency and long-term sustainability, and the mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability;

that the study explore the impact of program permanence on achieving equitable access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food in schools across Canada, with particular attention to children in low-income, indigenous, northern, rural and remote communities;

that witnesses include, but not be limited to, representatives from the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Breakfast Club of Canada, La Table des chefs, indigenous organizations, and public health and nutrition experts;

that the committee devote a minimum of eight meetings to this study; and that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

Mr. Chair, we have also sent a copy to the clerk in both official languages.

The Chair: Are you putting it on notice, or are you moving it for debate?

Annie Koutrakis: I'm moving it for debate.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis.

[*Translation*]

Garnett Genuis: I have a suggestion to possibly simplify things a little.

[*English*]

We have witnesses here. We have witnesses in the second hour who are scheduled to talk about some important issues around traditional Chinese medicine. I understand that we have committee business scheduled for the end of this meeting anyway. My colleague is fully within her rights procedurally to move this motion. I'm also fully within my rights to move—in the hopes that we'll be able to get back to hearing from witnesses and that the committee will be able to proceed as planned—that we adjourn debate on this motion.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Mr. Chair, before we proceed with the vote, can you suspend the meeting for a moment?

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Larouche, I do have a dilatory motion to adjourn debate that I have to dispense with.

A motion has been moved to adjourn debate on the motion of Madam Koutrakis.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: The debate on the motion is adjourned at the moment. That returns us to the questioning.

Madam Koutrakis, you had the floor.

Laila Goodridge: She lost all her time moving her motion.

● (1630)

The Chair: No, when you move a motion, it takes the time...unless you want to concede it.

Annie Koutrakis: Do I have time to ask a question?

The Chair: You have time to ask one question.

Annie Koutrakis: Okay.

What are the main barriers you face in collecting consistent or comparable data? How could governments help reduce those challenges while keeping the burden on schools manageable? We've heard testimony, and I've heard when I've had one-on-one meetings with various groups, that collecting data is quite challenging. Are you able to speak to that?

Judith Barry: At the Breakfast Club of Canada, we would be happy to help bridge all the reporting requirements. We know that sometimes within the same school there is governmental data that is required, but there are other stakeholders that are supporting the same program because it takes a village to feed a child. That's exactly why we feel that some coordinating mechanisms are needed. It would make it easy to solve those types of concerns and issues and to facilitate the lives of the school teams.

Annie Koutrakis: Do you want to add something?

Carolyn Webb: I'll just add—and I think I might have spoken to it before—that there is not consistency across the different jurisdictions. Creating some consistency as Madam Barry said, bringing people together, and then having those tools to be able to report back in that consistent way would be quite valuable. That's what we've heard.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you.

The Chair: We will conclude with Madame Larouche.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again to the witnesses for being with us today.

Ms. Webb, I touched on strengthening mechanisms with Ms. Barry, and I'd like to give you an opportunity to add your comments, since that was one of your three recommendations in your opening remarks. You were talking about strong mechanisms.

Can you elaborate on what you meant when you talked about strong mechanisms? Do you have any examples?

Carolyn Webb: Thank you very much.

I don't have any specific ideas for mechanisms.

[English]

Right now, we know there's specific program-wide monitoring on the number of students, the number of meals and those basics. We're hoping that, at some point, it can be scaled up so we can really look at..... It might not be with the reporting...more monitoring or research on how we can support more local food in schools. How can we support those connections to food literacy? How can we support community economic growth and, really, just look beyond some of the basic metrics to the long-term impacts of these programs?

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: You both talk about having a local procurement strategy and making room for local agriculture. I have less than a minute left, but I invite you to share that time amongst yourselves to explain a little more about your vision of local procurement.

Judith Barry: Ms. Webb has a great deal of experience, so I won't take a lot of time.

International studies show that, when we act with the specific intention of creating these links between local procurement, agriculture and schools, there's a real opportunity to build more resilient food systems. The national school food program is a great opportunity to do that.

[English]

Carolyn Webb: We would certainly encourage federal encouragement of provincial and territorial targets for local procurement, although they won't all be the same because every place is different. It's a lot more possible in some regions than others. However, some of those targets, as well as policies, especially how school boards can support more policies, might be some examples of different ways in which this work can be done.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

Ms. Desrochers, would you like to comment?

[English]

Caroline Desrochers (Trois-Rivières, Lib.): Chair, could I have the floor briefly, before we suspend?

As we heard from the speakers, this national school food program is essential, and—

Laila Goodridge: I have a point of order.

Garnett Genuis: On a point of order, Chair, there's an order to the round.

Caroline Desrochers: —the opposition is refusing—

Garnett Genuis: Is she able to ask a question, or...?

Caroline Desrochers: It's a point of order.

Laila Goodridge: No, you can't move anything on a point of order.

● (1635)

Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, but I didn't hear that she was moving anything, but—

The Chair: Well, she identified a point of order. I have to hear it.

Caroline Desrochers: What I was saying, Mr. Chair, is we've heard from the witnesses today how important it is, and yet the Conservatives and the Bloc are refusing to debate a motion that would make the school food program permanent or to study this motion.

Garnett Genuis: Chair, is this a point of order?

Laila Goodridge: That's a point of debate.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desrochers.

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: Hold on, Mr. Chair. If we're getting into that, I have something to say too.

Ms. Desrochers, it's not that we don't want to debate it; it's just that we want to be able to study the motion. It was just introduced like that, without 48 hours' notice—

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Order.

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: If we accept that in all the committees, we won't have time to study the motion in question.

[English]

The Chair: Order in committee. Order.

[Translation]

Ms. Larouche—

Andréanne Larouche: Don't go and say we're against the motion, Ms. Desrochers. We just want to study it properly.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Now, I want to advise the committee that the first hour is concluded. We were able to move Mr. Kirk to the second hour. I've been advised that he was successfully tested.

With that, we will suspend while we transition to the second hour.

● (1635)

(Pause)

● (1640)

The Chair: Committee members, we are back in session for the second panel.

I would like to welcome, in the committee room, Ms. Joomun, the executive director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. Appearing virtually by video conference, we have Ms. Wu from the Toronto School of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and we have Mr. Kirk from the Council of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Schools of Ontario.

I'm going to begin with Mr. Kirk for five minutes.

Mr. Kirk, please give your full opening statement.

Dylan Kirk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, vice-chairs and members of the committee, good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of our profession and our students.

My name is Dylan Kirk, and I'm here today as the president of the Council of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Schools of Ontario, representing the institutions that train the majority of this workforce in our province.

I am also a practitioner of TCM and the academic dean at the Ontario College of TCM, which has been operating since 1998. We take immense pride in running excellent, high-standard education programs. Our graduates join the approximately 7,700 registered acupuncturists, TCM practitioners or doctors of TCM who offer affordable health care to millions of patients across Canada, relieving pressure on our public health system.

I'm here to address a critical disconnect between the text of Bill C-15 and the government's stated policy direction in the budget. The 2025 federal budget explicitly stated an intention to remove Canada student grants for anyone attending private colleges. While Bill C-15 only mentions institutions outside Canada, the concern for domestic students remains.

Our primary request to this committee is clear. We ask that Canada reconsider this action and continue supporting students in our programs, as has been done successfully for decades, to ensure that future talent can continue to serve the health care needs of Canadians.

Private colleges are not competing with the public system; we are complementing it. We provide specialized, high-level training capable of meeting the needs of students and the profession. In Ontario, there are three designations we train: three-year full-time or equivalent registered acupuncturist; four-year full-time or equivalent registered TCM practitioner; and five-year full-time or equivalent for the proposed doctor of TCM designation.

There are only four public colleges in all of Canada that offer TCM or acupuncture programs. Ontario has one TCM practitioner program. B.C., Alberta and Quebec each have one acupuncture program. By contrast, there are at least 25 private institutions delivering this training across the country. This is evidenced in Ontario, where in 2024 only 23 of the 248 candidates who wrote the pan-Canadian examinations were from public colleges, while 225 were from private institutions.

If you implement the budget's plan, you will effectively cut off support for approximately 90% of the future workforce in this regulated health profession.

It is unclear why the government would make this change, but we have heard it might relate to fraudulent activities by a small number of private career colleges. Meanwhile, we have been ethically administering student assistance on behalf of Canada and the provinces, and there has never been a hint of impropriety or inappropriate action in our sector. It makes no sense to punish the private colleges and all of our students because of the illegal actions of a few unethical operators.

Our member institutions operate as private businesses with no subsidy from the government. Public institutions, in contrast, receive an estimated \$8,000 to \$12,000 of taxpayer money per seat. We rely entirely on tuition, and our students rely on a mix of grants and loans to afford that tuition. We are an asset to the Canadian economy and Canadian health care, not a liability.

At OCTCM, nearly 80% of our 311 students receive financial assistance, including federal grant awards. Many of these students are upgrading skills or entering a second career. Federal and provincial awards are crucial for their ability to complete their education.

If you replace these grants with loans, as the budget proposes, the first effect is that you will burden future health care practitioners with significantly higher debt just as they start their careers; the second is that students considering this career will not find it accessible; and the third is that many TCM colleges across Canada will contract or cease operations.

Mr. Chair, we have sent letters to both Minister Hajdu and provincial Minister Quinn detailing these risks. Today, we ask you to act. We recommend this committee report to the House that students in regulated health care programs must be exempt from any cuts to Canada student grants.

● (1645)

We ask you to remove this threat from the federal agenda so we can continue training the health care workers Canada desperately needs.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Kirk, thank you for moving to the second panel.

We'll now move to you, Ms. Joomun, for up to five minutes for your opening statement.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun (Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations): Good afternoon, honourable Chair, esteemed committee members and fellow witnesses.

I would like to begin my statement by saying that I am joining you today on the territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

I am here representing the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, CASA, and alongside our partner at the Union étudiante du Québec, I am speaking on behalf of more than half a million post-secondary students currently attending 40 public colleges, polytechnics, CEGEPs and universities across Canada.

The Canada student financial aid program supports over 700,000 Canadians annually via loans and grants. CASA is currently running a campaign pushing for the permanent increase in financial aid support for students. Students are sharing their realities of how, without adequate financial support, they will lose access to post-secondary education.

A second-year student at the University of Alberta shares the following:

A cut to the CSFA [program] would reduce my capacity to attend university and may cause me to have to leave school to work entry-level jobs for many years just to afford [education]. Please listen to the students all across Canada who will be affected by this. With the scarcity of jobs currently and low student worker wages, paying for school will be a lot more difficult and add on to the stress of youth. I hope you will keep all of these students in mind.

Our 2024 survey with Abacus Data reports that even with the current levels of funding, students are struggling, in that 3% of domestic students experience homelessness and 36% skip meals because they cannot afford food. Over 28% of Canada student financial aid recipients report unmet financial need, a figure projected to rise to 55% if annual grants are to decrease by \$1,200 and weekly loans by \$90, pricing out education for over 180,000 Canadians.

Since the 2022 temporary expansion of the program at \$4,200, domestic participation in post-secondary education increased by 6.7% among low- and middle-income learners. Enrolment growth has been most pronounced among students from the lowest 40% of households incomes, groups historically under-represented in post-secondary education. In 2022–23, 87% of indigenous student beneficiaries received grants. These cuts would hit hardest for low- and middle-income students, students with disabilities, students with dependants, first-generation students and indigenous students.

Last month we asked Canadians about this, and 77% reported that they would see notable impacts on their standard of living if their income were to drop by \$100 a week. Canadians understand the financial reality, with the majority saying they would oppose a cut to student financial aid.

This is also reflected in e-petition 7090, currently before Parliament, which calls for a permanent expansion of the Canada student financial aid program to prevent support levels from reverting after July 2026. In less than three weeks, more than 2,500 Canadians have signed this petition, demonstrating that students and families are being loud and clear in communicating to the government that maintaining and strengthening student financial aid is essential to preserving access to post-secondary education across Canada.

Canadians across the board are facing financial precarity. Now is not the time to cut aid, particularly for students, who face the brunt of the affordability crisis. Over the past year, students have faced sharp increases in costs across key areas, including rent, up by 21.6%; living expenses, up by 71.7%; and school-related costs, up by 23.5%; yet data shows that for every dollar spent in the Canada

student financial aid program by the government, \$1.64 is brought back to the Canadian economy.

This committee's current study of the subject matter of part 5, including division 36, of Bill C-15 is directly consequential for students. Division 36 specifically engages amendments related to the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act, making this study a critical opportunity to ensure that any legislative or regulatory changes strengthen, rather than weaken, access and predictability of federal student aid.

From the student policy perspective, we urge the committee to assess these measures through the lens of financial adequacy, unmet need and long-term program sustainability. Federal student aid is not simply an expenditure line; it is a core labour, productivity and social mobility instrument. As Parliament considers implementation measures flowing from the federal budget, it is essential that student financial assistance policy continues to reflect real-world cost pressures and preserves the federal government commitment to reducing financial barriers to post-secondary education and empowering the next generation. Education builds a nation, and students cannot build Canada's future if they are too busy fighting to afford the present.

Thank you for your time.

I look forward to your questions.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Joomun.

I would just remind the presenters to slow it a bit when they're speaking for the translators, who must translate for you.

We have the final presentation from Ms. Wu for five minutes or less.

Mary Wu (President, Toronto School of Traditional Chinese Medicine): Thank you, Mr. Chair, vice-chairs and committee members of HUMA. I deeply appreciate this opportunity to address the committee.

I think I need only to echo the previous two witnesses, who have said everything so well, but I would still like to take the floor and express my appreciation and our concerns.

My name is Mary Xiumei Wu, and I'm the president of the Toronto School of Traditional Chinese Medicine. I was a medical doctor in China and a registered TCM practitioner and acupuncturist here in Ontario.

In China, I received five years of medical school training, majoring in traditional Chinese medicine. I was a medical doctor and a researcher, as well as an educator back then, at home. That's from 1975. If we calculate it, it's been about 50 years already.

I came to Canada in 1986, completed my master's degree in biology and did medical research in privileged organizations, such as the Banting and Best institute and the Hospital for Sick Children in the fields of reproduction, diabetes and gene therapy.

I have been an advocate for and played a leadership role in the regulation of the traditional Chinese medicine profession, as well as natural health products. I have appeared before the committee a few times already. It is so great to be here again today to talk about this very important topic.

The reason for my appearance today is that we are deeply concerned about certain proposed budget measures that are discriminatory and would negatively impact the vital work our institutions, our graduates and our students will be doing or are doing. While I realize that these measures have not yet been implemented and are not contained within the budget implementation act, they represent government policy intention and directly relate to the issues of financial support being discussed at this committee now, so we must address the policy intent now to prevent inequity.

On behalf of our students, their families and our graduates, we request that the committee ensure the continued financial support—especially the Canada student grant—that is extended to all eligible full-time students, including our students who are attending private institutions.

I'm going to skip a few things and not elaborate on their importance. I'll get to the end and to our request.

We sincerely request that the committee reconsider the proposal and continue to offer the Canada student grant to our students. We're not asking for anything extra, really. We are simply asking to be treated fairly and for everything to be fair to the students who are attending public educational institutions and private educational institutions.

Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Wu.

With that, we'll begin the first round of questions with six minutes each.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor.

Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much to our witnesses.

Conservatives put forward in the fall our Conservative youth jobs plan. That included proposals to fix training, which focused on accessible training for students pursuing in-demand jobs. We recognize that there are some skill gaps in the economy. There are some areas where people with specific skills are needed, and there's not a sufficient number of people who have that training.

Unfortunately, in response to these proposals, Liberals presented a budget that actually went in the opposite direction by proposing discrimination against students studying job-relevant programs at career colleges. These provisions were not in the BIA, but they were in the budget and the deputy minister has reaffirmed that these

remain government policy. We've heard today specifically about the impacts that this would have on traditional Chinese medicine.

It seems strange to me that the government would take the position that any student studying any program at a university gets the full grant, regardless of the connection to employment or not, and that any student studying at a career college would not be eligible for that grant, regardless of the connection to employment or not. It seems like a strange way to make this distinction when we have many in-demand skills and we have students preparing for very in-demand jobs at career colleges who would be cut off as a result of this policy. Traditional Chinese medicine is one example among many.

I did some events specifically on this issue with now-Liberal MP Michael Ma. I was hoping that he would join us today and he chose not to. Michael Ma was previously very vocal on the issue of how these budget provisions would attack traditional Chinese medicine and on the concerns he had that were reflecting on his community. He actually called this “systemic discrimination”. He said that the budget provisions as they related to traditional Chinese medicine and to the impact on the Chinese community amounted to systemic discrimination.

I'd like to ask the witnesses who we have here, particularly those from the TCM community, if they would agree with Liberal MP Michael Ma's previous comments that the change proposed in the budget would qualify as systemic discrimination.

• (1700)

Mary Wu: We do feel that we are discriminated against. In this case, actually, Michael was right. It was systemic in that way, because at the beginning, when we started our program, we were told that our students were not eligible for student financial assistance. You know, it took us over 20 years to communicate with the government and to really work very hard with our students, our associations and so on to request even the eligibility for anyone studying TCM and acupuncture in private institutions to get student assistance. That is one thing.

Another thing is that we do not have any government funding—I mean zero—and we all have to work by ourselves day and night. Sometimes people say that we are for-profit, but we are really not-for-profit: We do this because of our formal belief in this ancient medicine. We believe this medicine could help everybody significantly—including everyone in Canada here—with health promotion and for disease prevention and treatments.

Third, our graduates from private institutions were not allowed to get a working permit for international students. That cut out a lot of other things. Even for the past couple of years, we were not allowed to have any international students.

In this way, we do agree.

Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry. I'll just jump in, because I have one minute left.

I appreciate the point you're making about how there's a link between the discrimination in this grant and access. You've made the point effectively, because the vast majority of people are trained through these types of institutions where the grants would no longer be eligible. It would have a significant impact on access.

Mr. Kirk, in the time we have left could you comment on Mr. Ma's comments that this policy constitutes systemic discrimination? Was Mr. Ma right to say that this is systemic discrimination?

Dylan Kirk: Yes, we have faced an uphill battle in this profession and often have faced misunderstanding from regulators or other health care professions or policy-makers. Part of that is why the majority of our educational system is private colleges. We do see the need to be flexible and adapt to the situation.

I agree with that statement. We hope to continue to advocate for the profession and allow our students to access the same resources as those who decide to go to public colleges.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

[Translation]

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

Caroline Desrochers: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

What we have today is, again, a clear illustration of the Conservatives' plans. Actually, it's a clear illustration that the Conservatives have no plans, other than obstructing everything the government is putting forward. We have seen this earlier today with the national school food program. We are seeing it every day on affordability. We are seeing it with tough on crime legislation.

They are saying they want to work together and, yet, in committee they're blocking and misinterpreting—

Laila Goodridge: I have a point of order.

• (1705)

The Chair: Clearly state your point of order.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is very clear that we cannot work collaboratively if we do not receive the motion in advance.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Goodridge.

That is not a point of order.

Madame Desrochers, you have the floor.

Caroline Desrochers: We are here today to discuss Bill C-15. All of the elements I'm talking about, and many of which are in Bill C-15, we are seeing every day in the House. There are questions about affordability. Yet, when it comes time to support the initiatives we are putting forward, like the national school food program, the dental care plan and the child care benefit, the Conservatives stand up and vote no.

Here we are discussing the budget implementation act, Bill C-15.

Thank you very much, Ms. Joomun, for your testimony today. I hear your concern. I want to present what we are putting forward, just to clarify. I am hearing concerns. We are after students who attend private, for-profit educational institutions outside Canada. We are not looking to claw back on programs in Canada, unless the provincial government is making a recommendation that the institution does not necessarily provide the services it should provide.

We are here, again, in this world of building a big monster and the Liberals broke everything. That's in theory, of course. There are no credible plans that you are putting forward that we can actually work with.

Garnett Genuis: It's the budget.

Caroline Desrochers: Yes, the budget is the economic plan.

We're discussing Bill C-15 today, which is our economic plan to deal with the current situation that is happening in our country with the unjustified tariffs we are going through, the trade war that's happening, the cost of living and the housing crisis. We are putting forward credible measures to deal with that. Yet, you stand up and vote no against Canadians every time.

Ms. Joomun, thank you very much again for being here. Can you explain to me to what extent the proposed amendment...?

There are students attending schools outside Canada. How many students are we talking about, who are attending for-profit schools outside Canada, who have a student loan that could be impacted by this? Do you have numbers on that?

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Again, I want to highlight my mandate. I represent public institutions here. As we are also having discussions about the implementing of this act, there is also a current risk that is going to happen. If, after July 2026, we see no further commitment to continue expansion of the Canada student grants and loans, because we did not see it in budget 2025, we will see a decrease in the number of students who will be accessing those programs and a cut to their support to continue post-secondary education.

Again, it is not my area of expertise to speak on private institutions. We do have the experts here. I am here to talk a bit about the risk that the value of the Canada student financial aid program is about to experience after July 2026.

Caroline Desrochers: In the budget included in Bill C-15, there is the proposal to increase the Canada summer job wage subsidy, the proposal to increase work on work-integrated learning, and proposals to increase all of these to help with youth unemployment and to help students gain that meaningful first experience. Would you say that those are helpful for students looking to transition into the market?

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Of course, we're thankful to see that there are so many opportunities that have increased, and I guess, with time, we will see the benefit of these. Again, if we are then creating barriers for students to even get into post-secondary....

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we did see an increase in groups that are traditionally under-represented going into post-secondary and accessing post-secondary education. We might have job opportunities during their post-secondary education, but if they are not able to even get their foot through the door and attend post-secondary, we will then continue experiencing student unemployment where we will see that high school graduates will not be able to continue post-secondary education, and we will see an increase in unemployment outside of the post-secondary sector as well.

• (1710)

Caroline Desrochers: Thank you, Ms. Joomun.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desrochers.

[*Translation*]

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're here today to debate the budget implementation bill, Bill C-15.

In the first part of the meeting, we did talk about the national school food program. Let's be clear. Witnesses came to talk to us about that.

We're asking the Liberals, in good faith, to send us their motion, which we will study, because that is how things work at committee.

I'll try to be brief, Mr. Chair. Then I will turn to the witnesses to ask them questions.

At the last meeting of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, I was criticized for not sending my motion 48 hours in advance, which wasn't true. The Liberals criticized me for it, even though evidence showed that it had been sent in advance.

Today, someone walked in and put a motion on the table. I simply suggest that my colleagues do the right thing, which is to send it by email. Then, we will study it in good faith and take a position on the motion when it comes back for debate. It's not that we're opposed to what's in the motion; we simply have to do our work as parliamentarians properly, with the rigour it deserves, and not by spreading disinformation or attempting to attack.

There you go. Now I'll get back to the subject at hand.

You said that Bill C-15 was an opportunity to talk about the cost of living and housing affordability. That's good timing, since we're hearing testimony on that today.

I'll turn to you, Ms. Joomun.

You said that if this measure is implemented you will be forced to end your studies. Did I understand correctly? So if students are considering leaving their studies, there will be financial consequences.

You also talked about rent, among other things.

What are the consequences of the measure you've come here to tell us about today? You said you will have to end your education and return to the labour market, and that you'll have trouble paying the rent.

On the issue of affordability, we know that the term "affordable housing" can be used in a number of different ways. Is that a good definition? Is the housing being proposed really affordable?

I'd like to hear a little more about what you have to say about this.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Thank you very much for the question. I'll answer in English, if that's okay.

[*English*]

We are currently tabling this at our 26 member campuses across Canada. What we hear from students is that they are being told by employers that they need to get a post-secondary education and earn a credential to get into the workforce.

However, what they are currently experiencing is the high cost of living. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, over the past year, we've seen living expenses for our students increase by 71.7%. There has not been any decision made about whether the Canada student grant will continue being expanded after July 2026. That is leaving a lot of students in precarity. The testimony I shared is from a student in a second-year program, so they've already invested two years in the program. They will wake up in the summer of 2026 to find \$1,200 less than what they were expecting to get. As I mentioned, students are already facing a lot of barriers. To answer your question, students are very much living in precarity.

In terms of longevity and long-term prospects, it is important to recognize that we are experiencing a decrease in enrolment in general with the international student policy change. Now is the time to encourage our domestic students to pursue post-secondary education because they are the future. They will be the ones building the country that we are saying we will build. I think there is a barrier here that is not allowing people to go into post-secondary.

In terms of affordable housing, I know there are a lot of investments and projects happening, but, again, you need the people to build those houses. That's why we push for apprenticeship. We need the students to go to colleges and get those certificates so they are able to build that housing. The main issue here, and what we are putting at risk, is that we will see fewer and fewer students entering our post-secondary system if there is a decrease in funding.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: When we talk about projects, such as the ones at Build Canada Homes right now, some groups are concerned about what affordability means in terms of the percentage of people's real income that needs to go to housing. That can have an impact, because the more money people put into housing, the less money they have left for food.

You also talk about under-represented groups and students with disabilities. What else can be done to help these under-represented groups and students with disabilities? How could the government support them more?

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Thank you very much for the question.

[*English*]

We talk to students with disabilities. The costs they end up having are a lot more than they are for someone who is not living with disabilities when it comes to the maintenance of medication or the maintenance of whatever the disability is.

I think we are categorizing them within the same student financial aid program, so that fund becomes a lot more important to them. The \$1,200 grant they receive annually is, in fact, important to them. I would say that the cost of living is definitely way higher for them than it is for a student who might be living without a disability.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

I want to clarify this for the committee, because we were scheduled to go in camera at this time: We have time to continue with a second full round of five minutes, five minutes and two and a half minutes.

With that, Mr. Ho, you have the floor for five minutes.

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kirk, could you describe how traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture students typically finance their education, and where grants fit into that picture?

Dylan Kirk: What we see in our sector is that a lot of students are coming in after a liberal arts degree, or as a second career after trying something else. This means many of them may have families or other responsibilities. What I experience in speaking with them is that they are struggling. It's difficult to live in today's economic world, dealing with all the other challenges of life and also being a full-time student in an intensive medical program.

The grant portion is very important. One of the ways we see it, very tangibly, is that the graduate should not be burdened with huge sums of debt that take them many years to get out of.

Vincent Ho: While we're on that point, what percentage, approximately, of students do you see relying on those federal grants?

Dylan Kirk: Somewhere around 80% of students in our college are getting financial aid, and the majority of them have some grant allocation.

Vincent Ho: What impact do you anticipate on enrolment and the viability of all the programs that are part of your group if the Liberal government recklessly defunds these grants? Would you see enrolment go down?

Dylan Kirk: Absolutely. Enrolment would go down. For access to education, people do rely on those grants.

Vincent Ho: How would you describe the role that private career colleges play in filling gaps left by the public institutions that the Liberal government is failing to see?

Dylan Kirk: I've observed that public institutions are large organizations that take time to change and to implement change. In certain sectors, like ours, the private colleges are able to step in and fill those roles. We can offer the education that's needed and make changes as necessary to meet students' needs for scheduling, access or location in a way that larger institutions cannot.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Dylan.

Ms. Wu, thank you for joining us. Can you speak to the level of demand you see for professionals who are trained in traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture? Has the demand gone up in recent years?

• (1720)

Mary Wu: In our situation here, before the pandemic and even before government student financial assistance was available, we may have had five to 10 students in each class. With the financial assistance in the last three to five years, our enrolment has significantly increased. Now we can get 30 to 40 students in a class. This is a huge difference.

The proposed budget last year actually disturbed our students tremendously already. Some of them are thinking about withdrawal from the program because they say they simply won't be able to sustain and continue their education. Some of them are saying, "Hey, I'm going to public college because I can continue to get the Government of Canada student grant."

If you look at my speech, there is an appendix about the public institutions versus private institutions. In Ontario, there are 16 educational institutions—

Vincent Ho: I'm running out of time.

With the Liberals recklessly defunding the financing of training in traditional Chinese medicine, would you see a reduction in new graduates, which would ultimately affect service in your community?

Mary Wu: Absolutely. It will seriously affect.... It may even be detrimental for students getting in. They may have to be steered towards other majors at other post-secondary educational institutions, or they may simply stop. Some of our institutions may not even be able to survive.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon.

You know me and you know that there are things I can't let people get away with. My colleague Garnett Genuis is going around asking universities to scrap their diversity programs, but today in committee he's talking to us about systemic racism. This is nonsense.

We're talking about housing. However, if we want to build housing, the budget has to be passed, because as long as—

I'll wait until Mr. Genuis has finished speaking.

[*English*]

Garnett Genuis: [*Inaudible—Editor*] Michael Ma.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Until the budget is passed, no houses will be built. Funding for homes is in the budget, in Build Canada Homes. That's an important point.

Ms. Joomun, I have some questions for you because we're talking about students.

How can student associations make significant contributions to the development of public policies concerning student education and health through government programs?

How can governments help you make a more significant contribution to all that?

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Thank you very much for the question. I'll answer in English, if that's okay.

[*English*]

Yes, in terms of how we get our student associations and the student leaders involved, again, I think when I see the student leaders I work with on a regular basis, this is like a work-integrated learning they are also getting by being advocates on their campus.

I feel like I'm sounding like a broken record, but my reason for being here is highlighting how in budget 2025 we didn't see a continued expansion of Canada's student grants and loans. We've seen an increase in inflation going forward. What our students are genuinely asking for is to get that continued support they have had since the pandemic. We recognize that this measure was included in the pandemic to support the students, but we haven't seen a decrease in....

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: I'm sorry to interrupt. You said there's no increase in budget 2025. You know there's no increase at this time, but what will happen if the budget is not passed? That's not really a question. If the budget isn't passed, there will be no increase.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: The increase was temporary.

Natilien Joseph: The budget needs to be passed.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: I don't think I'm in a position to comment on whether the budget will pass or not.

Natilien Joseph: You're talking about funding.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: The increase was temporary, and it will be gone as of July 2026, regardless of whether the budget passes. Students are really quite concerned about what's going to happen after July 2026. That's why I'm here today. I'm asking you to consider making this program and the investments permanent. Students can't make decisions when they don't know if they'll have money to continue their studies the following year. As such, my priority is to ensure that investments in the program become permanent.

• (1725)

Natilien Joseph: Should all committee members consider that a recommendation? Your voice matters.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Yes, students recommend that consideration be given to making this education support program permanent.

Natilien Joseph: Okay.

What are the most important measures the government should adopt to improve student access to funding?

Also—

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Again—

Natilien Joseph: Wait, I haven't finished my question. I'm sorry.

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Oh, sorry.

Natilien Joseph: We know that some university student populations are vulnerable. My colleague, Ms. Larouche, talked about students with disabilities, but I think there are other vulnerable groups. If so, can you tell us about them?

[*English*]

Bibi Wasiimah Joomun: Again, I think the Canada student grants and the loans, as we've expressed, do end up helping a lot more low-income students, students with disabilities and indigenous students to access post-secondary education. That's why we're asking for a little bit more for the permanent investment.

In terms of specific recommendations for these groups, of course I'm happy to follow up on what that would look like. Again, I think the education system, as a lot of our students have said, is their way to get out of the vulnerable groups they grew up in. In terms of social mobility and getting access to these services, for us the main concern we currently have is how we get the students in those institutions and how we support them financially to get into those institutions.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: I'm going to—

Is my time up, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You still have 10 minutes. Sorry, I mean 10 seconds.

Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

Garnett Genuis: Where is Michael Ma? I hope he was here.

Caroline Desrochers: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, committee members.

My mistake, Mr. Joseph.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: You're the one who said that in committee.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Larouche, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, I started talking to Ms. Joomun about how students and young adults who are struggling to find housing and buy their first home are in a precarious position. We're concerned about that, and we're looking for solutions for them. We also need to address the rising cost of food.

Now I have some questions for you, Mr. Kirk. You talked about federal grants. Do you have any specific examples that illustrate what precariousness means for a student? Can you paint a picture for us? What are students really experiencing now, and how much poorer might they get?

[*English*]

Dylan Kirk: You may have a single mother, with a child at home, who is struggling to maintain her full-time education, child care, cost of housing and cost of food. All of this adds up.

I will add that people from indigenous communities or other communities have seen an increase in their ability to take these programs with the grants, and that has allowed them to access them.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: I'll go to Ms. Wu.

What can be done to put these students in a less precarious position?

• (1730)

[*English*]

Mary Wu: In our situation, many students are single mothers or are from low-income families. In this case, they are very concerned about the cut.

What we really want to tell the committee is to not cut or make reductions when there are already these ongoing hardships. Also, do not increase the financial burden on our students at this time, and do not add unfairness between the public students attending public institutions and those at private institutions.

We would like the government to be fair and, if possible, increase the funding for specially needed areas and professions such as traditional Chinese medicine.

We have seen and heard so many success stories about graduates who have been able to help Canadians to improve their health and reduce their pains and aches. Most of our students come to study TCM because they themselves are beneficiaries of the treatment of acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine. They have the passion to help people.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wu.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

That concludes the second hour of the committee's witness testimony.

I would like to thank the witnesses for appearing.

Also, thank you, Mr. Kirk, for accommodating the committee in the second hour.

With that, we're going to suspend while we transition to in camera for a brief period of time.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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