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• (1645)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC)): Good afternoon. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to the 54th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

We acknowledge that we meet on the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe peoples.

Our meeting this afternoon will be in the hybrid format pursuant to the House order on Thursday, June 23, and members can be present in person or on Zoom. The proceedings will be published on the House of Commons website. The broadcast will show the person speaking and not necessarily the whole committee.

For those participating virtually, I'd like to outline a few rules to follow. You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, Inuktitut, English or French. Please select your language now. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings. For members participating in person, proceed as you normally would when the whole committee meeting is in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. Those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. Please remember to address your questions through the chair. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

We have a number of witnesses today. We will try to get through them as efficiently as possible. First, we'll go through the names of the witnesses and then we'll start the testimony. In person, we have Renee St. Germain, a director at the Assembly of First Nations. We have Irene Oakes, project specialist, and Dana Braunberger, research and innovation, from Headwater Learning Solutions. Joining us remotely, from the First Nations Education Council, we have John Martin and Annie Gros-Louis. From the First Nations with

Schools Collective, we have Leslee White-Eye, governance director.

Thank you, everyone.

We've done the sound checks and everything is ready to proceed. I believe we'll start with Ms. St. Germain.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Renee St. Germain (Director of Languages and Learning, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Chair.

I would like to start by thanking the committee for the opportunity to appear in front of you today to speak on first nations' graduation rates and the successful outcomes of our students.

I'm here representing the Assembly of First Nations as the director of languages and learning. The AFN is a national advocacy organization that works to advance the collective aspirations of first nations individuals and communities across Canada on matters of national or international nature and concern.

First nations students have the inherent and treaty right to receive an education that is in accordance with their culture, values, traditions and languages and that is free from prejudice and discrimination. Quality and culturally appropriate education is a cornerstone to the preservation and vitality of first nations societies.

The history of colonization, residential institutions, the sixties scoop and the imposition of federal and provincial laws and policies have had devastating consequences on first nations children and families, their languages, education and social structures. There is a pressing need for greater supports to address the gaps in first nations education systems.

Measuring first nations' graduation rates from coast to coast to coast provides examples of both exemplary first nations-led education systems but even more that are seeking to assert control to address the impacts of colonization and poor government supports.

An example of first nations' success includes Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, which represents the majority of Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia through an education self-government agreement. MK continues to lead first nations and non-indigenous high school students with a consistent 90% average graduation rate.

As first nations gain control over their education systems, we are encouraged to see that more and more first nations students are completing high school both on and off reserve. In the past five years, there has been a 10% increase in high school attainment on reserve; however, the education gap remains.

The most recent first nations high school attainment rate on a broader scale indicates that 58% of first nations young adults aged 20 to 24 living on reserve had a high school certificate or equivalent compared to 93% of non-indigenous Canadians.

Approximately 54% of first nations students must leave their community to achieve a high school diploma due to lack of access to secondary schools. It is essential that provinces and public school boards are held accountable to first nations for the outcomes of our students.

First nations across the country remain resilient and committed to asserting their jurisdiction and control over their education systems. With nine completed and signed transformative education agreements, there's an estimated 30% of first nations receiving equitable funding that meets their specific needs and circumstances. These figures are expected to grow with an estimated 50 first nations currently engaging in activities to develop regional education agreements.

We look forward to seeing the benefits of these agreements provided to first nations students as they move through their primary and secondary education. With greater funding and control of their education in schools, we remain confident that first nations will continue to see progress in graduation rates and successful student outcomes.

Alongside primary and secondary education, attainment rates in post-secondary certificates, diplomas and degrees reveal an estimated 20% education gap between first nations and non-indigenous Canadians.

Across the spectrum of post-secondary education, first nations have comparable attainment rates for apprenticeships and trade certificates. Furthermore, first nations at the highest level of education attainment have higher employment rates than their non-indigenous counterparts. The demand from first nations students far exceed the money that first nations receive to support members who wish to attend post-secondary schooling. There are over 30,000 first nations post-secondary students year over year who are not funded in accordance with their treaty and inherent rights.

While our treaty partners fail to recognize these rights, investments towards closing the education gap would result in significant benefits. Among these benefits is an estimated increase in the gross domestic product by \$30 billion and an additional 188,000 jobs for first nations people.

Finally, the AFN has published three reports over the last three years that provide alarming figures on the state of first nations' school conditions. These reports include identifying 202 on-reserve schools that are overcrowded and require additions. This is over half of the first nations schools in Canada.

Furthermore, as I deliver these remarks to you right now, there are more than 56 schools that require immediate replacement based

on reported poor conditions or facility age. As we seek to identify solutions in programming, transformative agreements and targeted enhancements, there must be the same emphasis on education infrastructure. Graduation rates will not be accelerated with first nations students in schools that need to be condemned or in storage rooms acting as classrooms.

• (1650)

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Ms. St. Germain. That was four minutes and 58 seconds—well done.

We'll go to our friends who are here in person. From Headwater Learning Solutions, we have Irene Oakes and Dana Braunberger.

Combined, you have five minutes.

Ms. Irene Oakes (Project Specialist, Headwater Learning Solutions): [*Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following text:*]

Tanisi, Asini Iskwew ay-see-ka-soo-wan. Nekaneet oo-chi-niya.

[*Witness provided the following translation:*]

Hello. How are you? My name is Stone Woman. I am from Nekaneet.

[*English*]

Good afternoon, new honourable chairman and honourable members. Thank you for the invitation to present the great work we are doing in partnership with Headwater Learning Solutions in Alberta. It is an extreme honour. I bring greetings from Treaty 4 territory.

I'd like to acknowledge Ms. Dana Braunberger, a member of our team. She will also be available to answer any questions you might have.

We all know the dismal statistics of first nations education and the devastating impacts that has had. I have witnessed the far-reaching consequences of the one-size-fits-all approach to education that began with residential schools, day schools, provincial school systems and many others. As a lifelong educator, I have seen the growth of many great things and some not so great. The work that we are doing right now with Headwater Learning Solutions works.

I first began working with Headwater Learning Solutions in 2017, when we signed a three-year partnership with Thunderchild First Nation in Saskatchewan. The work, which we continue to do, was focused on facilitating the unique vision that Thunderchild had for the education of their youth, grounded in the needs of the students and the community. It was a transformative approach, focused on building a sustainable and scalable solution that helps prepare youth to be internationally competitive while having knowledge and pride in their identity as Thunderchild citizens in an ever-evolving environment.

Headwater Learning Solutions continues to make a commitment to the 1970s principle as defined by our leaders from that era, that of Indian control of Indian education. The work we do is highly customized to what the community has expressed it wants for the education of its youth as well as implementing the full treaty right to education as signed by our past leaders. Rather than taking a piecemeal approach to promoting and implementing what the community wants, through our authentic partnership we are able to unravel complexities to develop an integrated, systemic approach that defines education solutions more broadly to include the cultural, academic and social needs of the students.

At the end of the Thunderchild partnership, measurable success was present at every level. Eighty per cent of teachers demonstrated improved urgency, intentionality and rigour in the planning and delivery of their classes. With the development of culturally based guiding principles, which we call PISIM at Thunderchild, Thunderchild traditions, ceremonies, values and the Cree language were infused daily into the school and into the classrooms. The result was that student participation and engagement increased substantially. Nearly 70% of students were able to close their three- to five-year learning gaps in foundational reading and numeracy skills. This increased student success also fuelled increased teacher confidence and competence. The school was successful in retaining 75% of its staff for the length of the project, which is a substantial improvement to the high teacher turnover of the past.

A huge part of the success with this work is that HLS is a not-for-profit organization and is able to offer services based on the community's identified needs irrespective of profit opportunity, but it also provides the opportunity for it to engage in fund development to make up the shortfall required to address the needs of students, teachers and education leaders. Because of historical injustices perpetuated on first nations peoples and communities, there were, and continue to be, many complexities that challenge the delivery of effective education programming. The resources required to best address these complexities far exceed current funding models, predicated on provincial comparability. Targeted needs-based funding continues to be required.

Our work is built on the foundation that was instilled within me through the values and principles as lived by my late father, Gordon Oakes, who has a student centre named after him at the University of Saskatchewan. It has a portrait of a team of horses, a red horse and a white horse, pulling a wagon. The painting has two messages that we follow. It illustrates the need and promise for first nations children to be provided with a deep understanding of and pride in their own identity—their community's cultural knowledges, teachings and the language—and to be provided with the competencies

to learn the cunning of the white man so that they are able to choose whatever future they want. It also reflects the importance for first nations and non-first nations people to continue to work together in a good way to address the education needs and opportunities for all our youth.

• (1655)

Both Dana and I being here today reflects that team of horses.

Thank you. *Hai hai. Kinana'skomitina'wa'w.* Thank you for listening.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much for that presentation. It was right on time as well.

We'll go via video conference to Chief John Martin, member of the chiefs committee, as well as Annie Gros-Louis, for a combined five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annie Gros-Louis (Educational Services Director, First Nations Education Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Kwe, good morning.

My name is Annie Gros-Louis, and I am the educational services director at the First Nations Education Council, FNEC. I am accompanied by John Martin, Chief of Gesgapegiag.

The FNEC is an association of first nations pursuing the common objective of exercising their full jurisdiction over the education of their communities. The association currently includes eight of the 11 nations in Quebec.

The FNEC's mission is excellence, educational success, cultural pride, as well as control of education by and for first nations.

That is why, on July 14, 2022, 22 member communities, the FNEC and the Government of Canada signed a regional education agreement to ensure equitable, predictable and sustainable funding for early childhood, elementary and secondary education for FNEC first nations.

That agreement will enable first nations to work toward improving student outcomes in a context of financial stability and flexibility, so that they can access and direct resources to better meet students' educational needs.

The FNEC itself provides an economy of scale and second-level education services, such as special education, professional development, language and culture, school administration, technology and data governance services.

The FNEC has adopted the learning schools model for its collaborative work with school teams in member communities. In this vision, the FNEC works upstream in a targeted manner with schools to develop educational directions and strategies based on data gathered by the schools themselves.

Finally, that agreement proposes clear accountability structures to operationalize and potentially measure progress, development and the achievement of its goals, including academic performance, ancestral language learning and access to specialized services.

Tiawenhk.

• (1700)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Okay. You fell short of the five minutes, so that's perfect.

Thank you very much for that presentation.

We have the First Nations with Schools Collective up next for five minutes.

Ms. Leslee White-Eye (Governance Director, First Nations with Schools Collective): *Boozhoo.* Hello. *Bonjour.*

Thank you so much to the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

The First Nations with Schools Collective is an inter-nation table made up of nine first nation communities in Ontario and growing. Each participating first nation has been administering their own schools—one from K-6, five from K-8, and two from K-12—for over the last three to four decades.

Many of those first first nation teachers back then became those first first nation principals, who then became those frontline leaders fighting for first nation school principal certification programs, first nation education institutes and indigenous teacher education programs. Those education leaders had the same goal back then as the FNWSC has today.

We want high-quality education systems that outperform provincial systems on a number of success indicators including revitalizing culture and graduation rates. This long-term change is clear evidence that self-determination results in positive student outcomes that have larger positive impacts many times over. Those leaders were community leaders, like you and I. They saw a gap and worked to fill it, pushed hard with willing partners.

It's time—the children began raising their voices in 2021. They are calling us to direct our attention to first nation children living right now, currently attending their home schools, our youngest generations. Our children have waited far too long, at much cost to them, for the adults, you and I, to ready ourselves to deliver on this promise.

The promise of UNDRIPA, signed in 2021, signalled Canada's intention to deliver on this promise: to find and push down the barriers to our children's freedom, according to article 14(1), to their right to a quality education, to their right to an education in their language and grounded in their culture, and to our responsibility as self-determining nations to provide it for them.

A 2023 goal of the collective therefore is to seek a legislated response for full and unfettered first nation control over first nation education, supported by a distinctions-based first nation education funding parity plus model. We have developed this model to take to a Canada-first nation table.

The funding model is led by first nations for first nations. Because of the long-standing historical, cultural and uniquely geopolitical circumstances that are first nation-Canada relations, provincial governments have no jurisdiction over our governing affairs as such, yet Canada has tied first nation education funding inextricably to provincial formulas beginning in 2019 with its interim funding approach.

We have done this work because we know that fair and equitable funding for first nation education systems in communities will have direct and immediate positive impacts on graduation rates and success outcomes. Here is why.

The means by which traditional knowledge is transferred, captured, stored and safe-guarded must evolve.

First nation life-long learning systems privilege learning about the people, their lifeways, histories and beliefs within a rich environment of love and caring. A curriculum is about our wellness, our goodness. It showcases what we want people to see about us—our community and our people.

Spiritual essence and kinship principles, their meanings and the place of these principles amongst all things learned must be re-established as a core tenet of a first nation curriculum. It is felt that these concepts are largely absent from learning these days, and learner well-being is dependent on knowing and embracing these key lifeway principles.

Communities must plan for learning in and on the homelands, no matter where community members are. First nation learners long to belong, learn, practice what it means to be Haudenosaunee, or Anishinabe in our case, on the lands that have constitutionally protected aboriginal rights, where aboriginal treaty rights and inherent rights exist.

Curriculum design is different for first nations. It involves researching, writing histories largely untold, in communities, with one another.

Curriculum design requires a robust space for continuous Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe critical thinking in the intellectual traditions of their peoples. Time to think and reflect on the teaching for curriculum development and implementation is needed, because knowledge transfer protocols are different from western ways of educating.

Time with elders to gather traditional knowledge is limited. The time is now to gather, record and pass along the traditions and knowledge. Therefore, emphasis on new teacher - adult learner supports in the transfer of knowledge about the ways of the people is of critical importance from the outset, all of which must be funded properly so that a high-quality education system, as we define it, can exist.

• (1705)

Because it's International Women's Day, I want to showcase the importance of language. *Ikwe* is the word for woman in Ojibwa. It is connected to the word *aki*, the Ojibwa word for earth. Both are life-givers. The word for old woman is *mindimooyeh*, which actually breaks down to "one who holds it all together", which is the foundation of our most sacred governance structure, the family. *Aki*, the word for earth, is also rooted in the word for teacher, *gekinoo'amaaged*. It is the land that is our greatest teacher and our relation to her sits at the centre of these words.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much to our witnesses.

We will begin the first round of questioning. We begin with the first round. We go to Gary Vidal for six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for your attendance today. I know you all are giving up valuable time to be here and to share your knowledge and experience with us. We are looking for some answers to push forward on some solutions to this challenge we face around graduation rates and success in schools.

I'm going to start with Ms. Oakes and Ms. Braunberger, please.

Ms. Oakes, you talked about the far-reaching consequences of a one-size-fits-all education system. You went on to share the success that Headwater has had in this two and half year relationship with Thunderchild First Nation. Very specifically you talked about measurable success, measurable success at every level, being the teacher level and increased engagement and urgency and intentionality, and rigour in planning and delivery. You talked about improvement in traditions and ceremonies and values and language being incorporated into what was going on. More importantly, and maybe the biggest thing, was the success of the actual students. You talked about some very measurable and statistical proof of the success. It's my assumption that that success you had there would lead ultimately to greater graduations or to better graduation rates. I think that's the expectation.

You never mentioned it in your comments, but in your brief you talked about Indigenous Services Canada being a partner with you. I think it's a great thing that they did that.

My question for you, though, is this: At the end of your pilot project or this program you did, was there any follow-up or any kind of outreach done by the department that would come back and talk to you about some of the success you had to determine if it would be scalable and replicable, or if it could be taken out and done in other places to achieve the same success you did there?

Was there any follow-up or any work done that would allow you to share that success and see if we could replicate it?

Ms. Irene Oakes: Thank you for the question. I appreciate that, Mr. Vidal.

I will answer your question, but before I do that, I will let you know that this is not a pilot. It's something that's going to be ongoing, and it's important that every first nation participate in the work that we're doing and buy into it.

The way I can answer is that I know that Thunderchild did the usual reporting that's required when you receive funding but no follow-up was done from ISC with Headwater Learning.

Thank you.

• (1710)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Does that surprise you in the sense that you actually achieved some very measurable successes, some very measurable outcomes, and there was no, kind of, how can we go replicate this?

I would assume that would be a little bit of a disappointment. I think the opportunity is there for you to do that. The short answer would be that I'm assuming this would be an opportunity to replicate.

Ms. Irene Oakes: Yes, this is a great opportunity that I think ISC might have.... Again, these are my comments, and I think the work is required. You have heard the data and the comments made by the other speakers that we're at a place in our history where we need to do some action. We're doing some action. Of course, we're very disappointed.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you. Let's move on a little bit.

One of the other things in the conversations that we've had and in the presentation that you've made.... I hope I'm not leaping to any conclusions here. Please clarify.

In your experience, how important is the governance, leadership and instruction when improving education results on first nations? I think it's bigger than just the teachers. There's a governance and leadership role to play as well. I just wonder if you would have a comment on that at all.

Ms. Irene Oakes: Thank you again for the question.

Yes, the governance, leadership and instruction all tie in, but again, the biggest thing that needs to be included in your question is the whole aspect of culture and language. You need strong governance within the first nation that's working with us. You also need stable leadership. You need education leadership that has the skills to carry on the work that's required. Instruction...everything that we do is evidence-based. We do a lot of data. We do a lot of support.

One of the most common things we always talk about is that we're not a drive-by PD organization. We're there.

The school we work with.... We're also working with another one right now. Our team, which includes Dana, is in schools two to three weeks out of the month, supporting the teachers with regard to the culture and language. The culture and language need to come from the community. We can't use a pan-Indianism approach to culture. The language model we have been using is a totally physical response. It's just repeat, repeat, repeat. Be repetitive until they know it and its importance.

Everything is tied in together, but the governance structure within the first nation needs to be stable and very committed to supporting the work within education.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much.

I'm sorry, Mr. Vidal. You are out of time.

We'll go next to the Liberal Party, with six minutes for Jenica Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today. I can't help but notice that all these incredible voices and speakers are women.

I'd really like to pick up on what Ms. Leslee White-Eye was commenting on at the end of her presentation. If you could speak more broadly, what is the role of women and grandmothers in the work that's been done in steering the importance, again, of culture and language, and infusing this in education?

I have seen a lot more support from the federal government over the last few years, but really, that work is being done in community. If you can, speak more generally to the role of women in the work that's ahead.

Maybe we'll start with Ms. Oakes.

Ms. Irene Oakes: Thank you for that question.

Dana and I always tease about this. It's not very cultural, but the comment I make is, "You need a woman to do a man's job" in the work that we're doing. I'm sorry.

For me, as a Plains Cree woman, the woman is the backbone of everything that we do, as it is for the other Algonquin tribes. I know the woman is the backbone.

We need to elevate our women to that level, where they're seen as the spoken and unspoken leaders, because they have the traditions and the ceremonies that they need to continue to retain. In my community of Nekanet, ceremony is important, but it's the women who determine when they occur and if they occur. Given that much

power and authority, that needs to be seen, as well, within the education circles.

Again, I acknowledge International Women's Day. It's very important, and it says a lot for women to be speaking here.

Hai hai. Thank you.

● (1715)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

Would the other witnesses like to comment?

Ms. Leslee White-Eye: Thank you for that question. It's a really important one.

I just want to shout out to Anna Marie, Bette, Joette, Patti, Maureen and Heather. They're all the education directors in the communities with the First Nations with Schools Collective.

The earlier comments were that you need good governance and you need stable leaders. The reality of their work is unbelievable. They run transportation contracts. They're developing the curriculum contracts. If they have the money to do it, they are hiring. They're retaining. They're recruiting. They're assessing their principals. They're running community engagement programs. They're trying to purchase resources. They're trying to save money on the purchase of resources. They're trying to negotiate education service agreements with their provincial school boards. They're sitting in on meetings at Chiefs of Ontario. They're sitting in on meetings at AFN. They sitting in on meetings of their PTOs.

There's no way this can continue. That's why you have this governance issue and you have this stability issue. They get burnt out, and we have to start all over with new ones. They have to get paid what they deserve. They're running entire systems. They're running early years programs, post-secondary programs, secondary engagement, the elementary program and adult learning. This is one person, but because we're women, we just keep barreling on.

I want to hold them up and stand those women up, because that's what they've been doing. It's not sustainable without the proper funding to build a central administration office, which provincial school boards enjoy. I know those superintendents don't do all of that. They delegate, and they can because they have the people in the office to do that. That's the shortfall of this funding approach.

Meegwetch for the question.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Go ahead, Madam Gros-Louis.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annie Gros-Louis: Thank you.

Since it is International Women's Day, I would like to make a special request to the committee.

When I had the floor, I used two and a half minutes of my time because I am accompanied by Chief John Martin, from the community of Gesgapegiag.

However, he did not use his time. I would like him to be given time to make his arguments, if possible.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Mrs. Atwin, you still have a minute left.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Sure.

I'll just use my time to give shout-outs to the incredible women who are doing the work back home in my riding, as well.

Lisa Perley Dutcher is running an immersion school. It's the first of its kind in this territory. That is the transformational work we need to see more of. So many elders are doing their work—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Mr. Chair—

I apologize for interrupting you, Ms. Atwin.

If I understood the previous request correctly, the First Nations Education Council representatives did not have their five minutes to make their opening remarks; they only had two and a half minutes. They would like to complete their opening remarks. That is the request that was made.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you, Madam Gill.

We were just discussing that. There was that long pause after the first presentation. You are correct; they have about two and a half minutes left. I was thinking of letting Mrs. Atwin finish.... I think she is done. She just wrapped it up.

We'll let Chief Martin do his two and a half minutes, and then go back into the next round. I believe you're next.

Chief Martin, thank you. I'm sorry about that.

You have about two and a half minutes, if that's okay with the committee.

Is everyone okay with that? Thank you.

Chief John Martin (Member of the Chiefs Committee, First Nations Education Council): [*Witness spoke in Mi'kmaq and provided the following text:*]

Weli ulawg, iganpugultijig Ugit N'nueiel Lugwowagann.

Nin John Martin tel'wisi. N'nu Sagamaw ugit Gesgapegiagewag.

[*Witness provided the following translation:*]

Good evening to all members of the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs.

My name is John Martin. I am the chief of the M'Kmaq of Gesgapegiag.

[*English*]

I just want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight.

I'm speaking about the first nations educational regional agreement. It's a historic agreement for us and a significant one. It's significant because it took 15 years of research on this formula. The work's all been done by first nations people. It's a funding model that has been entirely conducted and developed by and for first nations. It's based on the real needs of our students.

While the agreement certainly has room for improvement, it is a step forward toward what we have been advocating for since 1972, which is Indian control of Indian education. As the saying goes, "It takes two to dance."

Actually, in the context of colonial governance, it takes three to dance. Provinces hold provincial jurisdiction in education, particularly when it comes to legislation and certification of education in their provincial programs.

This last point is a crucial point in the Quebec context. Despite our aboriginal rights, self-governance and self-determination in education, which we fully implement today as a result of the agreement, the province continues to arbitrarily impose the Charter of the French Language onto first nations education—mainly our students outside the community, who go to school outside the community.

The Quebec charter gravely affects our efforts to revitalize our languages by demoting them to third-level language status. It creates administrative hurdles for our students to access post-secondary education in Quebec and to receive an education in the language of their choice. It hinders critical professional services for students in the language of their choice. It also endangers the professionals who come to our communities where we speak only English.

To conclude this, the success of students' efforts is not just a one-way avenue. There's a responsibility on both the federal and provincial governments. There's an important role to play in this. Both governments have the responsibility to undo the damage done over the past 150 years. This can be done through real reconciliation and accommodation within the legislation and policies that are developed and that currently create barriers and hinder the present and future efforts to provide a quality education while respecting first nations values, traditions and languages.

We ask you to help us put an end to the existing barriers to graduation rates and increase successful outcomes for our students.

Wela'liog.

I'd like to take the opportunity, as well, to acknowledge all the women present here today, as well as all the women in our community. A majority of our people leading the community are, in fact, women.

Thank you.

• (1720)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Chief Martin.

For six minutes, we go now to the Bloc Québécois and Madam Gill.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank all the witnesses who are here today.

As we have said many times, many of my colleagues are teachers themselves, probably teachers without pay. Ultimately, they have experience in education, particularly with first nations. This is my own case. I am a member of Parliament from the North Shore. The Innu Nation and the Naskapi Nation are present in my region. For me, the issue of languages is intimately associated with learning, success and, of course, identity. That is almost a truism.

I wish I had some idea of your needs. We do know that these needs are not homogeneous from one community to another and that we cannot apply the same solutions everywhere. We have looked at the reality of indigenous languages and have found that, in some communities, the language is dormant and cannot be revitalized without a lot of research first being done. On the other hand, in other communities, the language is very much alive.

At home, I hear the Innu language daily. I don't understand all of it, as it's very complex, but it's a really vibrant language that also has a literature. We see how strong that language is.

I would have liked you to paint a picture of your needs. I know the needs are very broad because there are 700 communities in Canada, but tell us about you, for example. We have Ms. Oakes who is a Plains Cree, as well the members of the First Nations Education Council.

I would like each of you in turn to paint a picture of your needs.

We've talked about funding; I know that's been welcomed by some of you, but what is really important?

Maybe you could tell us what the starting point is and how far it extends so that we can make proposals and recommendations that would be tailored to each request.

Feel free to present whatever proposals you like.

Ms. Saint-Germain could start, followed by Ms. Oakes, Ms. Braunberger, and then those who are online, if they want to speak, of course.

[*Member spoke in Innu*]

• (1725)

[*English*]

Ms. Renee St. Germain: Thank you for the question.

Our indigenous languages are in a vital state, and we really do need to work towards revitalization. When we look across the country and the funding that goes out to help revitalize our indigenous languages, it's not enough. Even with the passing of the Indigenous Languages Act, that hasn't provided sustainable funding and long-term funding to build up the languages within the communities.

We do see examples of first nations languages being spoken. There are examples of immersion schools that exist. The Mi'kmaq have some immersion schools that are thriving, and the language is doing better than those in other parts of the country. However, that's not consistent across the country. We really do need that long-term sustainable funding to see our languages developed both within and outside the education system.

Ms. Irene Oakes: Thank you as well for that question. I appreciate that.

I sat here thinking about what would be the best answer. Of course the biggest thing, which was just repeated, is that funding is huge. We know that. Another area that I see is training. We need to provide the proper training for our people on the front lines with regard to the best way. Utilizing and including the written form is not the way. It has to be a form that lifelong speakers have been taught, because if you don't meet the needs within the communities, they're not going to be met.

In the areas I come from, it varies. It seems as though the further north you go in the prairie provinces, the more available it is, the more alive. Further south, it's dying. We need to develop a strategy at the AFN and at the regional level, within our regional PTOs, and our leadership needs to take the lead.

Thank you. *Hai hai.*

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, I'm having trouble seeing the people who are online.

If other witnesses would like to take turns providing answers, and if I still have time, I would like to hear from the First Nations Education Council representatives, who are also present, and the First Nations with Schools Collective.

Thank you.

Ms. Annie Gros-Louis: I can provide an answer.

As you know, in education, the primary vehicles are our languages. As you mentioned, Mrs. Gill, some of our languages are dormant. They are alive, but they remain fragile.

We see this when we work in our schools. Teachers and speakers are present. That said, their numbers are dwindling, and we need to make the most of their presence. I'm not telling you anything new when I say that a speaker leaving is sort of like a library closing.

We are increasingly hearing that we need to support efforts in the territory and the languages of the territory. That needs to be taken into consideration. Certainly, when we explore the options available to us with teachers in different schools—and this is regardless of the region, as each one really has its own complexity—we must keep in mind the importance of the language of the territory. There's an important element there to consider.

[*English*]

Ms. Leslee White-Eye: I'll add that—

I'm sorry.

Chief John Martin: No, go ahead. I'll speak after you.

Ms. Leslee White-Eye: *Meegwetch*, Chief.

I'll just add that we need full-time language coordinators to develop the programs, monitoring assessments and materials to support the teachers. We need full language immersion funding—just as school boards enjoy for French—in every one of those schools. We also need grade development for the inclusion of fluent speakers so that they are paid equitably and fairly for their contributions to our schools.

Meegwetch.

• (1730)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): I need to jump in here, it's been a bit over time. We are going now to the NDP.

Lori Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Chairman. I think Chief John wants to respond. I will wait for him to respond first before I jump into my questions.

Thank you.

Chief John Martin: Thank you.

With regard to the situation in this province, Quebec, a lot of our English-speaking first nation communities are struggling. I come from a Mi'kmaq community. In our households right now, we have approximately 13% of the households that still use the language. I'm familiar with many communities across the Maritimes where the language is practically non-existent.

We are in a situation where our languages in our area are on the verge of extinction. The language laws that Quebec recently passed have had a significant impact in the continuation of the loss of our language. The space is taken up. We have to compete with modern-day technology, children walk around with their phones connected to a different world, a different language.

The criteria of the French charter that's imposed on our people now is much more stringent than it was. In my community right now, I'm looking at eight out of 10 students who go into adult education, which is in the English school system. They dropped out.

They don't have the French credits that they need to be able to graduate high school. This prevents them from gaining access to post-secondary education in Quebec.

In my community, we've been struggling with this law for the past 40 years. It has had a very significant impact on the development of capacity in our community and our people. It is a lot. It is very colonialistic. It is continuing the job of the extinguishment of our language and our culture.

We really need the federal government to step in and do something to support first nations. We've tried with the Quebec government to seek accommodation within the legislation, but there's been absolutely no acceptance for accommodation.

I want the government to be aware that our situation is critical. It has an impact on the loss of our language. It also has a very important capacity on my community in terms of developing capacity for our future generations, our future leaders. We lose a significant number of students every year as a result of that.

Wela'liooq.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

I have a question for Leslee, who works for the First Nations collective agency.

It seems you are doing very good work where you are. You continue to pursue or stand your ground where education in first nations languages is concerned. Now, you are striving for more opportunities to continue to grow.

What problems do you face when you are not having your needs met?

Ms. Leslee White-Eye: Thank you for that important question, MP Idlout.

The first part of it is funding. Eighty per cent of participating communities in the collective undertake an immersion program, only to be faced with walls because there isn't enough funding to build the program before the teacher enters the classroom. They need assessments, lesson plans, a curriculum and somebody with skills to coordinate all of that. They're out there, but you have to compete and pay them properly to do the work.

The second and most important piece is this: We have the speakers. They're not OCT-qualified, but they can provide that conversational, immersive language—which is what our young kids need—quite easily, with the support of a teacher. That type of funding is just not available in this current interim funding approach.

There's a real need, here, to take advantage of what I'll call this last decade of fluent speakers. I believe we've seen the model. Renee talked about it. If you give that conversational language to children in grade 1, 2, 3 or 4, or in kindergarten or earlier, the dying of a language goes away. That, to me, is an investment. You're going to get far more return on a dollar spent in a first nations school that offers immersion, and real change happening in language recovery.

Meegwetch.

• (1735)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Unfortunately, we are out of time in this round, Ms. Idlout. Thank you very much for your questions.

Chief Martin, do you have your hand up again, or is it just up since you last spoke?

Chief John Martin: Oh, I can't feel my arm anymore. It's been up too long.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): I'm just checking. Thank you very much, sir.

Unfortunately, we don't have any more time for another round, but we'd like to thank our witnesses for their valuable contributions and the great discussion we've had so far.

We are going to briefly suspend while we change over for the next panel.

I thank everyone for being here, either in person or remotely. I look forward to more conversations.

Thank you.

• (1735)

(Pause)

• (1740)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Welcome to our second panel. We thank the committee for their patience here.

Dr. Cook, you're in person. Lucky you, you get to go first. If you want to kick it off, you have five minutes to give your opening statement. Then we will go to our panellists online for five minutes each and then have some questions.

Dr. Cook, it's all yours for five minutes.

Dr. Catherine Cook (Vice-President, Indigenous, University of Manitoba): Thank you. I'm Catherine Cook. I am a medical doctor, and I am Métis from Manitoba.

I'd like to thank you for including us in this important study.

In 2020, I began serving as the University of Manitoba's first vice-president, indigenous. My goal has been to address the gaps and barriers to equitable access for indigenous success and achievement in education and in health care for indigenous people through systems change.

Today 8.8% of the 30,000 students at U of M self-declare as indigenous. It is the largest indigenous student population in Canada, but the indigenous population of Manitoba is 18%, so it isn't reflected.

We must address this gap and work together to ensure that indigenous students pursuing post-secondary education and training receive the same quality of K-12 education and have the same sense of belonging.

The challenges that existed when I was a student still exist today. Remote geography, limited capital investment for education and training sites, and program funding for education services remain major barriers. The ambiguity of financial responsibility, the scope of educational practice and the potential for areas requiring government collaboration and community partnership have never been clear. As a result, even when communities or tribal councils establish productive partnerships for program delivery, the capital investment and infrastructure on federal reserve lands is almost non-existent for training and insufficient for the programming needs.

When I began my tenure, my team committed to engage indigenous community partners in strategy development, and then COVID hit, revealing further inequities. Indigenous students living in rural and remote areas identified challenges to engaging in online learning such as poor Internet connectivity and technology, the lack of appropriate study spaces in busy households and the shortage of academic resources in their communities. Many of these challenges were shared by urban-based indigenous students.

As the pandemic continued, we hosted engagement sessions where participants identified other barriers to post-secondary education such as experiencing culture shock, homesickness and racism, the high cost of education, relocation and living expenses and the fear of losing their connection to culture. This is not new information.

We must work collaboratively to build a fluid and comprehensive continuum of education. Education is the most significant social determinant of good health and wellness for individuals and for communities. Without it, we cannot access employment that will support and sustain our families. We won't have choices for good housing, food security, healthy living or control over our lives. Everyone must feel that we have something to contribute to our families and to society in general. Living in poverty because of a lack of education is the ultimate life sentence of unhappiness and despair.

We need to look at the organizational structure of indigenous education and find new delivery models. U of M recently entered a partnership with the Mastercard Foundation's EleV program, which provides the financial opportunity to explore new opportunities that were codesigned by first nations, Métis and Inuit partners. Our main focus is to return education to the community as much as possible.

One example is a new learning hub in Pinaymootang First Nation. This hub provides a space with excellent Internet, technology and wraparound supports. It allows students attending any Manitoba post-secondary institution to access online classes and programs with the goal of developing the in-person, in-community delivery of training that's identified as a priority by the community. It's the first of a series of hubs that will be established throughout Manitoba.

The learning hubs address some of the previously mentioned systemic challenges, and they also keep young people near language speakers, culture and support systems. They provide opportunities for inspiring and mentoring students still in K-12, and they increase the chances of graduates staying in the community to work, which will contribute to building capacity and community.

We're grateful to offer our experiences working in this area. The federal government has a responsibility to invest in developing a continuum of education and to support capital investment for training and education opportunities. The continuum requires a commitment for a fulsome partnership with school divisions; tribal councils; post-secondary institutions; provincial, federal and indigenous governments; and partners in industry and philanthropy.

- (1745)

Together, we can develop a comprehensive approach to a continuum of education that will enhance access and support through K to 12 and will bridge entry to and through post-secondary to career development.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Dr. Cook. You're right on time—perfect. We appreciate it.

We'll go to the video conference now. Let's go to Kelsey Wrightson, executive director.

Kelsey, you have five minutes.

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson (Executive Director, Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning): Wonderful.

My name is Kelsey. I'm the executive director at Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning. I'm joining you today from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories.

I have the great honour and privilege of working at Dechinta, where we've been delivering award-winning, indigenous-led, land-based post-secondary programming since 2010. I'm incredibly grateful for the invitation to share with you, as legislators and decision-makers, what I have the privilege of learning from indigenous learners every day as we work to support indigenous educational success.

Dechinta's classrooms are the lands, and our programs are as diverse as the north. Here in Chief Drygeese territory, you'll hear Wiilhideh Yatii and children's laughter echoing across camp as students learn about research methods or land claims or the impacts of climate change on food security. You'll see infants bundled on snowmobiles, and elders on the backs of toboggans heading out to camps that they visited as young people. They are all on an educational journey that brings them home and heals.

Dechinta's family-inclusive programming was codesigned by indigenous faculty and elders to create education models that celebrate the knowledge of indigenous communities and help mitigate barriers that folks are facing when accessing post-secondary. We create learning spaces for young people that enable parents to participate in education. For those young people, seeing their family members and their community as learners and teachers enables them to see themselves in expansive education and employment pathways.

In order to support educational outcomes of children, we collectively need to be committed to the educational success of parents, family members and communities. If we want to support families and communities to learn, we need to create learning spaces that celebrate strengths and transform people's relationships to education.

University-level accredited programming at Dechinta lasts between one to six weeks and is open to people of all ages. For some students, it's the start of their education journey. For others, it renews their commitment to learning. In the past year we've had over 200 applicants to our program: 40% of those applicants needed indigenous approaches to health and wellness, and 20% requested child care to support their success.

Our job is to create programming that's accessible to diverse learners, providing comprehensive wraparound supports to ensure their success and open up diverse education and employment pathways by ensuring that the credentials registered students obtain are portable. In this, we ensure that students are supported and celebrated in every step they take towards achieving their educational goals.

Research demonstrates that the stories people tell themselves have a direct effect on their learning outcomes. When learners don't believe they can learn, they don't. The incredible thing is that, as much as these negative stereotypes dampen achievements, affirmation nurtures success. Crucially, confidence of a learner in one area impacts their success in others. When we see someone thriving on the land and being celebrated for their skills and knowledge or for the care they take with their community, this will impact the success they have in other areas of learning.

Long-term and predictable investments by Canada in community-directed indigenous education enables us to build relationships, create trust and create new programs. This is the call the government answered when supporting Dechinta through Canada's comprehensive approach in the Arctic policy framework and recognizing the centrality of education and research in supporting a healthy north. It directly supports people of all generations to imagine themselves in education. It creates meaningful work, strong and healthy communities, and new programming that reflects the diversity of educational needs and pathways. This requires the creation of a learning space where indigenous learners, teachers and elders feel comfortable, where we're learning and healing together.

I'll leave you with a quote from a Yellowknives Dene First Nation member and student of Dechinta, Bertha Drygeese:

The first sight of self-governance community [at] Dechinta brought me back...four decades...when I felt the cold, crisp air on my face—it felt like a dream which I could finally wake up to.... I felt sure of myself after practicing my culture and tradition.... It all came clear... I am home. I am here on my homeland.... I came back to myself, my land and my people.... I thought to myself, "maybe I was not lost, just disconnected".

Mahsi cho .

• (1750)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much for that testimony.

We will now go, for another five-minute round, to Blaire Gould.

Ms. Blaire Gould (Executive Director, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey): Good evening, everyone. My name is Blaire Gould. I'm the executive director for Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, or MK for short.

I had hoped to witness in person; however, I am here at our annual symposium today and tomorrow, sharing and witnessing the efforts and excellence in each and every community, celebrating them and planning with them.

As MK, we actively engage our communities by customizing service delivery models that best fit their needs and aspirations.

I am a product of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey. I went to school in my community of Eskasoni from kindergarten to grade 12, and even had some post-secondary opportunities. I did not learn English until I was in grade three. At that time, I had my first non-indigenous teacher. For most of my schooling, I was taught by Mi'kmaq educators.

Today, I am the executive director for Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey. Just 25 years ago, discussions at our leadership table involved a vision for children like me. They would have an opportunity to succeed and would be destined to become leaders. As I sit here, I often reflect that I am very grateful for those decision-makers who made decisions for children like me. Now today I have the honour and privilege of working with them to reflect on where we come from and the new direction we are shaping—informed by data and informed by our leaders in education.

Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey has been in existence since 1997. The journey started in 1992. During that time period, our graduation rates have drastically improved from 20% to 90%. The 90% is consistent and has been for about a decade, maybe more.

We are the leaders in indigenous education. We walk that path with great respect, responsibility and humility. What has continued to evolve for us over the last two decades is our commitment to and passion for education. We set the bar higher for ourselves. We work to achieve those desires, those visions and those goals.

We are innovative. We truly believe that the key to our success is that we work collectively to promote excellence in Mi'kmaq education. Our model supports communities as they exercise jurisdiction in education to educate the youth according to their values and customs. We offer guidance to our communities across many areas, such as academics, healthy living and language and culture, but their autonomy has allowed them to shape and deliver programming that would otherwise be missed if we mandated a one-size-fits-all model.

Even though our communities have jurisdiction over their own education, our leadership is committed to working together. The chiefs from each of our communities make collective decisions about important matters such as finances and capital infrastructure. They have made those hard decisions and sacrificed additions to their own communities for years to help other communities that may be in pursuit of exercising their jurisdiction within their own community so that they can have an opportunity to build. They support each other, knowing that what they do is for the betterment of the nation. It seems to work for us.

Our student attainments and achievements in elementary and secondary—not just in academia but strongly rooted in their identity—translate into great success in post-secondary education. We have high, excellent rates in post-secondary and their achievements continue on.

We are not here to say that everything is perfect. We struggle, as do most, but we want to reinforce that working together, for us, has certainly rewarded us in many great ways. We wanted to share a little bit of our journey.

We continue to stand together as a united front and we encourage every community, learner and teacher to reach for their goals and to show the world what we can do when we work together.

Wela'liog.

• (1755)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much to our witnesses for all of their testimony today. Everyone was under time today, so that is a great start.

I'd like to welcome also to the committee Shelby Kramp-Neuman, my geographical neighbour. We won't put her on the hot seat yet to start questions, but we will open up with the Conservative round. Six minutes goes to Bob Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to thank the witnesses for appearing, especially Dr. Cook at the end. We had a little incident coming in and I tried to race her up the stairs but anyway, I'll leave it there.

Thanks for appearing today. I sure appreciate your experience too as a physician travelling around and serving our northern communities and our communities at large, and I just thank you for that.

With my questions I'll start off with Kelsey Wrightson from Dechinta Centre.

I'm a former teacher in northern B.C. I taught trades even though I had two degrees. Actually I have my Red Seal and I have two degrees in other things and really found I was right in the middle of seeing the value of both sides of education, whether it be in a degree aspect or a trade.

Kelsey, I see that in your programs—I'm looking at your website right now—you have some very innovative ways to relate to students in northern communities. I was wanting to know your levels of success. You've talked a little bit about that already, but do you see them making the jump over to these other professions that are going to be needed, whether it's being a carpenter like I was or getting my degree in education as well?

Do you see these kinds of innovative ways helping with those aspects of education, really helping students get to where they need to go?

• (1800)

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: I'll start by saying that in our programming our success rate in getting students to complete programming is close to 98%. In the last five years, we've only had two students unable to complete their programs, and they're actually coming back this upcoming semester to complete their programs.

I think you're right. What we are aiming to do is to reach out and reach the students who might not see themselves in education, who might not see themselves in different kinds of career paths, and demonstrate that not only do they have the skills and knowledge, but they can actually achieve the diverse kinds of employment and educational outcomes they might need.

In our follow-ups with alumni, we've seen a lot of folks take on really diverse employment opportunities. We have a number of folks going to post-secondary, and we've had a number of folks working within their communities. What we really see is that addition to programming helps them to reconnect to themselves, reconnect to their land and community, and sets them up for success in whatever pathway they choose to take next.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I commend you for your success rate. The one thing we have talked to different panel presenters in this committee about, and it's the reason why we're studying this, is the very low graduation rate, and we want to see that improve. We had the ministry here a few days ago, which seems to just want to endlessly study the issue instead of actually doing something about it. I would just challenge the ministry to reach out to folks like you, Kelsey. It seems you have a good grasp of how to get kids past the finish line and beyond into a positive career post-secondary.

I'll move on to Dr. Cook.

Again, I really appreciate what you've done in the north. Maybe on a similar topic, similar to what I was asking Kelsey, how do you see that we can address this low graduation rate in ways that really work? I've been up to Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon, and a big part of the problem, even if you're going to be a tradesperson, let's say, is that you have to leave your community and go thousands of kilometres away somewhere else, distant from your very close family, which you've been a part of all your life, to go get trained and then come back. Some don't want to make that jump. Is that part of being trained in communities up there? Is it that?

How do we see that success rate get better, Dr. Cook?

Dr. Catherine Cook: I think it's different for everyone. We certainly have been working with our communities, particularly through these learning hubs.

I'm coming at this specifically from a post-secondary perspective. We have the privilege of having a collective of all of our post-secondaries working together in Manitoba, so we've been able to promote what is important to the youth and their communities.

When you talk about the trades, we haven't traditionally supported students going into the trades. It's been almost always a focus on university. When we're talking with a community and really working with them to look at what their priorities are, it can be a whole continuum of things. Sometimes for these kids, just showing up in a program is success. We need to honour that and celebrate that with them.

One of the challenges with trades as well is that we have young people who want to go into the trades, but they don't have a place to apprentice in their own communities all the time. Collectively we could come together and come up with some ideas about how that could be accomplished with partnerships with the communities and with industry. What does it look like to be successful? How are the graduates...?

If people know there's a pathway, the intent to stay on track, come back and get your program success rate, even if you left, is more accessible and more likely to occur.

• (1805)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much.

That was six minutes. I appreciate the question-and-answer period.

We will now go to the Liberal party. We have Michael McLeod for six minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for presenting today. It's very interesting to hear your presentations.

My question is for Kelsey from Dechinta in the Northwest Territories.

Kelsey, I think you've heard—and I've certainly heard as I've travelled to the communities—how leaders talk about education as a way forward for our people, for the indigenous people and for the young people who are growing up in the communities. However, many parents and grandparents have expressed concern many times because, when the student is going to move to post-secondary, it means that they're leaving their culture behind. A lot of times it means that they're going to be moving away from their families.

Often in the northern indigenous communities, our youth travel to the cities in the south to go to post-secondary institutions. Many times they end up staying there because there is a lack of opportunity in or a growing sense of disconnection with their home communities.

I want to ask if you could speak to how ensuring that northern and indigenous students having post-secondary opportunities closer to home can lead to better outcomes for both students and their communities.

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: *Mahsi cho.* Thank you so much for that question.

It really raises a lot of things that we have heard over and over again from students, from parents and from elders, the concern of people moving away, of losing their connection to family and also students not wanting to leave their communities and not wanting to leave the supports they have.

That's part of the reason our programming is designed to be so mobile. It's designed to be delivered in communities where we can go and hear from community leadership, hear from community members and hear from students about what their priorities are. Then we deliver programming in a strength-based way that allows people to stay in their homes and to be surrounded by the incredible wealth of knowledge that is their community and their land.

This not only supports the success of students in being able to achieve those educational outcomes, but it also supports the whole community in re-establishing a new relationship to what education can be. It can mean a reinvestment, a recommitment, a revitalization of their knowledge and a revitalization of the relationships they have with each other and with the land.

The other important thing is that this knowledge economy creates incredible employment opportunities. In the last three years, Dechinta has been able to hire over 60 people in northern communities to do meaningful work that allows them to connect and re-connect to their families and their homelands and keep themselves really well.

Mahsi cho.

Mr. Michael McLeod: My next question is about funding. If Dechinta is able to secure longer-term funding, what will that sense of security enable your organization to accomplish?

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: Long-term funding, I think we've heard many times, is so important to being able to establish stable long-term relationships with the communities we're working in. What we have been able to do since the first commitment of funding, our

first long-term funding agreement with the federal government, is to actually say to communities and say to students, "We will be here for the next five years, so you can plan on our being able to provide employment opportunities. You can plan on our being able to support your education. If you're 16, we'll be here when you're ready to go to university. We'll provide those steps and those pathways." That is so fundamental to being able to actually provide the real foundation of what community-based and community codeveloped programming is, which is the strong relationships that are necessary to make it happen.

• (1810)

Mr. Michael McLeod: My last question is about some of the comments we hear. A lot of students who have to go to post-secondary institutions in the south are essentially turning their backs on being indigenous because they don't have opportunities to practise their culture. They have to move away from their families.

At the same time, we see Dechinta, which is an educational institution, building sod huts, sod houses, which hasn't been done for a long time in our history. Can you just talk about how you can do it, then, and what attraction that has for your students?

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: It's just that I learn...and I see this in my colleagues every day and the students every day. I hear in the words of our students reflecting on the programs that being able to connect to their community and their culture is so empowering and completely transforms how they see themselves and the confidence they have.

We have students who are learning how to tan hides for the first time, and remembering what it was like when they were at their grandmother's feet, watching them practise hide tanning. I think that really provides the really important foundation for not only cultural revitalization but also building incredibly strong communities and continuing to pass that knowledge on to the next generation.

When we have our harvesters out on the land, bringing food into the communities, you can see the pride they have, the pride in their ability to share their knowledge and share their skills. Having that reflected back and celebrated by the elders, whom they respect, is an incredible thing to witness.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Mr. McLeod, for your questions. That was six minutes.

We now go to the Bloc Québécois, Madam Gill, for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank all the witnesses—Ms. Wrightson, Ms. Gould and Dr. Cook—for being here.

Over the past few meetings, we have talked about women. By the way, I wish you a happy International Women's Day. We know how much of an indigenous component there is and that much needs to be done for indigenous women. I imagine that there may be a difference between the education of men and that of women in the communities, at least in terms of the difficulties to which they are exposed. You can tell me if I'm wrong.

As a teacher myself, I saw a lot of indigenous women in the classroom, but they had particular challenges. I was wondering if certain solutions could be adopted, whatever they may be, to be able to remedy this situation and make sure that women could continue their education and eventually enter the workforce. We could take a snapshot of men and women to see if there are things that would help improve success rates.

Dr. Cook, I would like to hear from you.

Afterwards, I would like to hear from Ms. Wrightson and Ms. Gould.

Thank you.

[English]

Dr. Catherine Cook: Thank you very much for the question. It's really an interesting question. We find in our institutions or organizations that we tend to have more indigenous women than men seeking post-secondary education. I think part of that could have to do with the traditional roles in community that men assume. It's a challenge for both young women and young men. Frequently it is easier for the women to achieve more supports through family, I believe. Certainly, we've had many examples of women who end up becoming the matriarchs of the family, as you would expect, achieve a post-secondary education and support the children and the family with the support of their partner. Most important in all of this is the support of community and family.

I don't really have anything more to add at this point, but it's very much a familial support network that is so critical to success for women and men.

Thank you.

• (1815)

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: I'd like to echo that. The support of community is so important. In our last three years, 94% of the graduates from our programs were actually women. That, I think, is a result of the kinds of programming—barrier-reducing programming—decisions we made, which were to include families in all of our programs. If a student is admitted to a program, they're welcome to bring their whole family to attend alongside of them, but it also means listening to students and making sure we're creating programming that meets their needs. We do a really comprehensive intake and make sure we're reaching folks of all genders and creating programming that's going to be meaningful for them.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Thank you for your question.

We have achieved an attendance rate of about 82% over the last decade and a half, I would say. That has been a stable indicator for us and a credit to the successes that we see. A lot of our focus on boys and girls in elementary is attendance. We know that if they attend school regularly, their chances of success in middle school, ju-

nior high, secondary and into post-secondary are greater. We cannot stress enough and emphasize enough the importance of attendance in all years, but especially in elementary.

We create a lot of opportunities—targeted opportunities, I would call them. We have cohorts to create.... Just recently and currently, there's a desire to have more early childhood educators, as it's a huge need in our communities. We design and create the cohorts with our partners. Certainly for us here in Nova Scotia, we have great working relationships with the institutions, the Nova Scotia community colleges. We redesign programs that they have already offered, giving them a Mi'kmaq focus and ensuring that the program delivery is appropriate to what we desire.

We do a lot of specific programming targeting girls in trade, for example, where we want to see more girls in trade. We do a lot of specific initiatives around wellness. One of the more successful ones that we have heightened a little bit more is boys and wellness. It is just as important for boys to be able to be in a safe space to talk about their well-being as well.

Certainly, for us wellness is a priority just all around the map. COVID has certainly opened a lot of gaps that we are seeing and triaging at this time, but I think we would be a little bit not focused if we didn't engage community. In every effort, starting as early as grade 5, we engage parents in their attainment, because parents play a critical role in the future of their children's education. They are likely the decision-makers for where their children will go, be it trades or be it university. We engage parents in a “try a trade” model, where they accompany their children to see the benefits of working in trades, for example. We have trades halls and apprenticeship halls and other things that we can access.

Then there's transition and a lot of opportunities as well for secondary students and middle school students in university attainment. We have created a lot of pathways. Those pathway themes are in education, health, entrepreneurship, business and STEM. We create all of these opportunities so that if you want to become a plumber, we have a pathway created for you. If you want to become a veterinarian, we have a pathway for you. Children know early on that the choices they make in junior high and high school will elevate them into the pathways they see themselves in.

We certainly encourage a lot of efforts by both our communities and our parents especially, because students are students but the parents are the boss, especially in Mi'kmaq territory.

• (1820)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Ms. Gould.

Thank you, Ms. Gill. We did go a bit over time.

We will now go to the NDP.

Lori Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Chairperson. I thank all of the witnesses who have come here to share their progress. Although I speak mainly in my language, I will be asking my questions in English so they will be clearer. I'm thankful that we have interpreters, but I will be speaking in English. Thank you.

[*English*]

My questions will be to Blaire Gould.

I want to share briefly my life history. Just so you know, it might need to have a trigger warning. My dad died by suicide when I was about six or seven years old. Because of that, I was raised in the foster care system, and because of the foster care system, I grew up in several different communities. In all of these different communities, I went to several different schools.

My story is very common when it comes to indigenous peoples' history. We have very inconsistent education. We don't have regular teachers. A lot of the times, we don't have consistent care. Despite that history, to get back to who I am, I was able to complete my grade 12. I was able to get my undergraduate degree, and I was able to go to law school and become a lawyer. I think part of the reason I am who I am today is that my education included teachings from elders, from teachers—always elders and teachers—and all of my foster parents telling me how important it was to have coping skills to know how to survive.

Blair, you touched a little bit in your presentation on pathways. I'm very struck by the success that you had at MK, and I think MK really needs to be modelled by many more jurisdictions. I wonder if you could share more about how you're able to use the strengths of the Mi'kmaq to make sure that you have success with your students.

Ms. Blair Gould: Thank you.

Absolutely, and thank you for sharing your story on the loss of your dad.

Just to touch a little bit on the foster system, one of the greatest things about having jurisdiction over education is the ability to create the partnerships that we desire, that we want. It's an elevated voice, especially in this province. I talk often about the relationships that we have with government despite whatever party is in leadership. That has never faltered. The relationships have stayed the same for us. It is because we have such an elevated status, so to speak, around jurisdiction, and that autonomy is greatly recognized here.

One of the things that I will mention is that, in those partnerships, we have a sectoral self-government agreement here in education, but a lot of the sectoral agreements and models currently in social work, in social in general, and health transformation are springing up here. It's not an anomaly kind of thing, but it's a testament I think to our unity at the end of the day. We have a very low

rate of child apprehension here. A lot of it is kinship placement. With children we don't see a lot of instances of their being moved home to home or community to community. Also, we work closely with the child and family services based in the Mi'kmaq community to ensure that the child is the centre. It's very child centre focused. It's very holistic when it comes to the transitioning of programming and the transitioning of care perhaps from parents to kinship.

One of the things for us also, just to hit some of the points you talked about, is that elders in residence is something that we greatly promote, not just in elementary and secondary education but also in universities. This is something that the province has modelled after us. Elders in residence is something that is quite accessible here in any institution where there are students who are Mi'kmaq.

We really also emphasize the community presence in our schools. Every community does it differently, but it is a common priority amongst communities that the community must be present in the school. That means elders, parents, community people, fishers, trappers, all of these folks are part of the curricula in designed ways that are unique to them.

Speaking about the pathways, right now in post-secondary we're on a pathway of our own vision to create our own accredited institution. It may not be a physical institution in these early phases, but it is something that we're actively seeking. We have a lot of Mi'kmaq care, a duty and care, that we feel toward our students in these areas. Those pathways are, just to name a few.... In health, there are things like the LPNs, RNs, CAs and doctors. In education it's administrators, teacher aides, EAs and the teachers themselves. There are social entrepreneurs, businesses, trades and human services and STEM. A lot of the service industry, because our desire is not—

• (1825)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Ms. Gould, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're way over time and our meeting is growing tight. We do have a quick abbreviated round if the committee is okay with two minutes each. I see thumbs up all around. It's two minutes and each party will get a round.

Mr. Vidal for two minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Chair.

I'm making my question really brief because of time.

I want to thank you, Ms. Gould, for bringing up the matter of attendance in your comments a few minutes ago. My question is actually really quick. It's my opinion in talking to some people recently that increased attendance leads to increased reading rates, which leads to increased or better outcomes, which would ultimately lead to better graduation rates.

For my question maybe I'll start with Ms. Gould and then go to Ms. Wrightson and Dr. Cook. If she wants to answer the question as well that's great.

Do you measure, do you track, attendance rates? Do you actually measure that against outcomes? I want you to comment on why you believe that's really important, as you do obviously.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Very quickly, to answer your question, yes we do. We follow and analyze cohorts as they come in. It is not uncommon for us to look at a cohort in grade 1, for example, and again in grade 5 and grade 7, just to see and compare where those kids are at. We believe attendance leads to attainment, which leads to success overall. This is something that we consistently look in on.

We weren't always at an 82% average, as well. COVID has impacted that a little bit. We're building and strengthening those systems and policies back up. As you know—I'm testament to that, I guess—you don't need to be there to be present. It's something that we have to evolve. Our students are just getting smarter and savvier.

For us, absolutely we look at data as a way to inform every next step that we take. We're very proud of the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey student information system, which is a customized system developed by Mi'kmaq.

Thank you.

• (1830)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): That's two minutes. Thank you very much.

I will be tight with the timing on everybody, because we are running out of time.

We go now to the Liberals.

Jaime Battiste, you have minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you.

Wela'liek, Blaire, for your presentation today. MK showcases a model between the department and AFN that is succeeding in what you're doing. I understand just now that you signed a 10-year agreement in 2019.

For all those first nations out there who would like to replicate the successes of MK, what would you recommend on how communities can get to a sectoral self-government for communities that want to work together on this?

Ms. Blaire Gould: We are a very big promoter of sectoral self-government agreements. It comes first with a lot of unity and a united front amongst the collective who are willing to work together. Remember, when the MK discussion started in 1992, it was with all 13 communities here in Nova Scotia. At the time when we nego-

tiated the agreement, nine communities were ready. I'm very proud that we're a 12-community member collective today. That didn't stop us early on in 1997. We were respectful of the readiness that needed to happen for the other communities.

For us, the 10-year agreement of course offers a lot of time to get things done, rather than, by the time you implement the agreement in year one, already needing to go into negotiations to set up the next agreement by year two or three. We've done a lot of presentations across the country for sectoral self-government agreements. It appears that a lot of communities are going through the REA route, the regional educational agreement route. It's not that different, but it's not quite the same. We're obviously just a step above, promoting the REAs into more of a sectoral agreement.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): That was exactly two minutes.

We will now go to Ms. Gill for two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My last question is for the entire panel.

We have heard about the funding. It's an expectation that everyone has of the federal government. Of course, we are talking about recurrent funding that can be relied on. However, if you had any other recommendations for the committee—either concerning emergencies or structural recommendations—what would they be?

Again, my question is for Dr. Cook, Ms. Wrightson and Ms. Gould.

[*English*]

Dr. Kelsey Wrightson: Thank you so much for that question.

As you indicated, stable long-term funding is really important for us to be able to continue to invest in the relationships to deliver new and innovative programming. Part of that is also having really healthy communication with the government, making sure that we're able to share the successes of our programming and making sure that we're able to ensure that everything is being measured according to evaluation systems that make sense for the indigenous communities that we're working in. It's just having open communication and trust established between us, the communities and the government that we work alongside.

Mahsi.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Thank you.

This is a very good question, because often we feel that we're limited and we wish that we weren't. Often our innovation gets the best of us. We are on a lot more different trajectory when it comes to the different programmings and services we offer. Often budget announcements or budget allocations come, usually, when we're about five to seven years in implementation. That is one limitation that we often face.

One area that we would wish increased funding for is, of course, wage parity for our teachers. That retains them and allows us to grow our system and not compete with the public school system, for example. In addition, language and culture—

• (1835)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much, Ms. Gould. I'm sorry, but I do have to cut you off. Maybe Ms. Idlout will allow you to continue. I'm very sorry to have to cut you off. I do apologize. We lose translation services right at 6:45, so we are tight here.

You have two more minutes, Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Can you hold on for one second? We did not get translation at our end. I will reset the clock.

Ms. Idlout, do you mind repeating that?

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

This question is for Blaire Gould.

How did you start the process to get your self-governance? This is very important information that we need to hear. What did you have to do to get to where you are today?

Ms. Blaire Gould: Thank you.

Just as a brief historical timeline, in 1991 we approached the then Department of Indian Affairs. We wanted a Mi'kmaq education authority to assume control over first nation education. In 1992, that conversation changed from what we had wanted originally—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Ms. Gould, I'm very sorry. We are still having an issue with interpretation here. We're just waiting for the French translation.

Hold that thought, Ms. Gould. I'm very sorry.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: The interpretation is back, Mr. Chair, but I didn't hear Ms. Idlout's question. I don't know if we have time, but perhaps she could repeat it.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Now I'm not getting the French translation.

Hold tight. Please hold.

Ms. Blaire Gould: I know it's been a long day for a lot of you, but every time you say "hold", you have to add one minute to my clock.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): I am very sorry. I didn't want to interrupt that last time, because you were speaking. I thought for sure you were going to come through the screen and strangle me.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Are we good? We're good to go. Okay.

I don't even know where we left off, so....

Ms. Gill, did you hear the question?

Ms. Blaire Gould: I have a photographic memory. In 1991—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): No. Okay.

Ms. Blaire Gould: No, I did hear the question.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Ms. Gill did not get the French translation of the question. Is there any way we could repeat the question for Ms. Gill, and then—

Ms. Blaire Gould: I don't need the French translation.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Ms. Gill does. We do on this end. Then we'll reset the clock, Ms. Gould.

Ms. Blaire Gould: Okay.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

The question was this. To get to where you are in self-governance, what did you have to do? What steps did you have to take to get everything that you needed and that brought you to where you are today?

Ms. Blaire Gould: Thank you.

This is a quick historical dive. In 1991, the assembly of chiefs here in Nova Scotia approached the then Department of Indian Affairs and proposed a Mi'kmaq education authority to assume jurisdiction and control over first nation education. That conversation went from what we would call a devolution of education programs from DIAND into more of the jurisdictional transfer from Canada, subsequently Nova Scotia, to the Mi'kmaq.

That conversation started through a lot of assurances on nailing the vision. That happened through a political accord—the Mi'kmaq education framework—and then that was used to inform what we now call the Mi'kmaq main agreement. That was an original agreement. It's still in its original form today in 1997. The authority itself, federal legislation and provincial legislation all speak to both of those.

Through that, of course, legislation was the official transfer of jurisdiction from Canada to the Mi'kmaq.

• (1840)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you very much for that testimony.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us here today.

Thank you to our committee members, who had great questions. This is great evidence that we will include in our study.

I'd like to thank the committee for their patience—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I wanted to commend the chair on doing such a great job as chair in such a difficult situation today.

Well done, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I don't think that's a point of order, but I would like to echo the comments and thank you for your pinch-hitting on a very surprising day today for

all of us in the committee, and for all of our witnesses who had to endure it with us as we went through this day.

You did a great job, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jamie Schmale): Thank you to the committee for making it easy on me. You really took it easy on me.

I did not expect to do this when I woke up this morning, so I'm sure this came as a surprise to everyone.

I want to say I will miss our chair, Marc Garneau. He was a steady hand at this committee and a lot of fun to work with. His leadership will be missed. His service not only to Parliament but as a minister, as head of the Canadian Space Agency and as part of our military.... He is the true leader that I think we all aspire to become.

Thank you, everyone. I will adjourn.

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