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Ms. Nancy Karetak-Lindell

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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Nancy Karetak-Lindell (Nunavut, Lib.)): Good morning, and welcome, everyone, to our 21st meeting on Thursday, February 24.

I'd like to start the meeting this morning since we have a guest, the Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser. Thank you for coming.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), this is the study on chapter 5, "Indian and Northern Affairs Canada - Education Program and Post-Secondary Student Support", of the November 2004 *Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.

I'm pleased we could have you at our committee this morning. I shall leave you to give your report.

Ms. Sheila Fraser (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

We thank you for the opportunity to present the results of chapter 5 of our November 2004 report on Indian and Northern Affairs Canada entitled, "Education Program and Post-Secondary Student Support".

With me today are Ronnie Campbell, the Assistant Auditor General, and André Côté, the director responsible for this audit.

This chapter is made up of two audits. The first one focuses on the extent of the progress made by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in addressing the issues and recommendations raised in our April 2000 audit of the elementary and secondary education program, as well as those raised by the public accounts committee in June 2000. The second audit focuses on the department's management of the post-secondary student support program.

I would like to start with a critical point that is common to both audits. It is the lack of clarity in the department's roles and responsibilities.

[Translation]

We raised this issue in 2000. The Public Accounts Committee agreed it was important and recommended that Indian and Northern Affairs Canada "immediately undertake a comprehensive review of its role in education" and "provide a clear and formal statement of its roles and responsibilities". In its response, the Department committed to provide such a statement by the end of June 2002. This has not happened, although the Department has produced numerous drafts.

In our view, until the Department's roles and responsibilities are clarified, in collaboration with First Nations and other partners, it will remain difficult to make progress in First Nations education and to hold the Department properly accountable.

I will now focus my comments first on the elementary and secondary education program findings and then on the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.

The Department has made limited progress in addressing most of the elementary and secondary education issues raised in 2000. With some exceptions, such as a new program for special education, the Department has generally continued the same practices with respect to the way it supports, administers, and reports on elementary and secondary education. We noted that activities and initiatives have taken place, but many are not yet completed despite earlier commitments.

If the education results were satisfactory, this limited progress would not be as critical. We found, however, that the Department still does not have good measures of costs, performance, and results. Consequently, we determined that, based on census data, the time required to close the education gap that exists between First Nations people on reserves and the Canadian population has increased slightly from 27 years to 28 years. The need to close this education gap remains urgent, given that the on-reserve population is young and growing. Otherwise a significant portion of the people living on reserves will not have access to the benefits associated with a higher education.

[English]

Madam Chair, there are two points that I would like to make with respect to post-secondary student support.

First, the department needs to improve the management of this program in consultation with first nations. For example, we found that funding allocations do not ensure equitable access to as many students as possible. Funding to first nations is generally based on historical levels; it is not tied to the number of students to be supported. As a result, some first nations receive more funds than they need under the program, and some not enough. Given that first nations have the flexibility to move funds in or out of the program, the department does not know whether the funds earmarked for the program are sufficient to support all eligible students.

Secondly, the department needs to improve its reporting to Parliament. We found that the only consistent information provided is the total number of students supported by the program. Even then the information does not explain why the number of students supported by the program has declined over recent years despite budget increases.

Although the number of first nations people with post-secondary certificates, diplomas or degrees continues to grow, there remains a gap in post-secondary education between first nations and Canada as a whole. I believe Parliament should be informed about this gap, its potential causes, and the way that post-secondary student support helps to address it.

Your committee may want to hear from the department on how it intends to address the issues raised in the report. You may also want to ask departmental representatives for more information on how the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable will help resolve these issues.

Madam Chair, that concludes our opening statement. My colleagues and I would be pleased to answer any questions that committee members may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I see from our list that we have also a representative from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

We'll hear both presentations and then proceed to questions.

Mr. LeBlanc, please.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc (Senior Assistant Deputy, Regional Operations Support and Services, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Thank you, Madam Chair, for inviting us to appear before the committee today and allowing us to address the findings on first nation education contained in the *Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.

Before I begin, I would like to present my colleague Ms. Line Paré. Ms. Paré is the director general of the department's education branch.

Madam Chair, we would like to thank the Auditor General for her report. We appreciate the diligent effort and careful study undertaken by the Auditor General and her staff and welcome her thoughtful and helpful recommendations.

I would like to provide the committee with a brief overview of some of the important achievements of the department and first nation partners in the last five years or so since the first previous report of the Auditor General.

As provincial education systems are constantly looking at enhancing their regimes to better meet students' needs, so do first nations schools and the department. Over the past five years, we have designed and implemented a number of initiatives with first nations.

First, on New Paths for Education, this initiative is helping communities, education organizations, and individuals to strengthen their management and governance capacity, improve the effective-

ness of classroom instruction, and ensure a smooth transition from school to the workforce. As well, the department successfully launched a national special education program that provides much needed supports and services to first nation students with special needs.

Acting on the recommendation of a national working group on education, the department, along with first nations, also implemented two initiatives aimed at supporting two critical factors in support of education, parental and community involvement, and teacher recruitment and retention.

In order to support better management and accountability frameworks, we have developed national guidelines for our education programs. These guidelines are now part of the funding arrangements between the department and first nations.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

Data and performance indicators are an integral part of management and accountability frameworks. A year ago, the Department, in partnership with First Nations through a working group of the Assembly of First Nations, launched a study of the band school funding formula. The purpose of this study is to examine the funding formula for schools administered by bands. The study also compares federal and provincial funding mechanisms, and examines teachers' pay and benefits and specific cost drivers.

We also undertook a review of all the Department's data collection activities regarding education in order to determine, in collaboration with First Nations and other stakeholders, the necessary performance indicators and data to help us better measure educational outcomes for First Nations in relation to the funds invested.

[*English*]

Madam Chair, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and first nations leaders are undertaking a thorough examination of key elements of the elementary and secondary education programs. The department and its first nations partners have also begun a comprehensive review of first nations post-secondary education, especially the post-secondary student support program. Without anticipating the outcomes of these reviews, they will undoubtedly look at enhanced management and accountability frameworks.

As committee members are no doubt aware, the department is currently developing an action plan to respond to the Auditor General's recommendations. The action plan will build on the research, reports, and studies that have already been done and are now under way, and it will be implemented in true partnership with first nations and other key education stakeholders, such as the provinces. Among the results will be a management framework that defines clear roles and responsibilities, sets out explicit performance objectives, balances expectations and capacities, provides for credible reporting, and ensures reasonable review and appropriate adjustment, as required.

This work will also be informed by the outcomes of the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable, a major initiative launched by the Prime Minister in April 2004. I am pleased to report to the committee that two very successful round table follow-up sessions on lifelong learning have been completed. I believe that the value of the round table process cannot be overemphasized. This collaborative approach to public policy development marks a significant milestone, as aboriginal leaders work together as equal partners with the federal government in the creation of first nation education policy.

Madam Chair, together, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and its first nations partners have already taken great strides to improve first nations education, but we are the first to acknowledge that much remains to be done. First nations education remains one of the highest priorities of the Government of Canada and we are committed to carry on our work with first nations and other aboriginal stakeholders to provide a sound, culturally relevant education for all first nations students. I am confident the department can continue to count on the constructive input of the Auditor General and members of this committee as we collaborate with our first nations partners to accomplish this objective.

Merci. Thank you.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your report.

We will go into our first round of questioning. Mr. Harrison will lead off for the Conservative Party.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would very much like to thank our witnesses for appearing here today, particularly the Auditor General. I've explained to her before the high regard my constituents and my family, particularly my grandfather, hold the Auditor General in. So thank you for being here.

One portion of the Auditor General's statement talked about how:

Funding to First Nations is generally based on historical levels. It is not tied to the number of students to be supported. As a result, some First Nations receive more funds than they need under the program, and some not enough. Given that First Nations have the flexibility to move funds in or out of the program...

That particular part really surprised me, I must say. Just to clarify in my own mind, funding provided to first nations for post-secondary education can be, if not used for post-secondary, moved into any other area that the chief and council would see fit. Is that correct?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: The department enters into agreement for funding of a number of priorities of a first nation. In that agreement there are a number of priority areas that will be funded. In some of these agreements, there's an element of flexibility. So if there were five priority areas, there would be funding arrived at through a funding formula, to which there can be some modifications, some adjustments regionally for the conditions faced by that first nation. The department would require the first nation to meet certain basic conditions, or basic achievements, in those funding areas, with the understanding that once they were met, if there were surplus funds, the band, the council, the leadership of the first nation, could use

those moneys to meet challenges and obligations that would accrue to them from one or more of the other priorities.

In essence, that approach grows out of an agreement, out of the nature of the partnership that recognizes the importance of first nations management of their first nations education systems, as well as their housing systems, their social services systems, infrastructure and housing, and other key priorities.

Yes, you're right, that flexibility exists. It is not there out of any will to neglect the interests of the Crown or first nation people's ability to track moneys. It is essentially a consequence of wanting to afford first nations the flexibility to manage scarce resources to meet very pressing priorities, usually, on their territory.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: I take this as meaning that it can be used for whatever else they deem to be a priority, which is my question. I'd like to ask whether that's good policy. I think you gave us your answer to that already.

The second question I'd like to ask is, considering funding has increased for the post-secondary envelope, why, in your opinion, have the actual enrolment numbers not increased in lockstep with the funding increase? Actually, I think the enrolment has declined for post-secondary aboriginal students as funding has increased. Maybe you can address that.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: Thank you.

In the post-secondary area I think we all look at graduation rates, high school completion rates. It's very important to recognize what the trend has been over these past 20 years or so. There's been remarkable success—my colleague may remind us of the numbers, if we'd like, in a few minutes—but really very significant trending, constant trending, to improvements. So first nations have achieved remarkable results, and they've been on the steady incline over a reasonable amount of time.

There are many factors that in any given year could affect specific participation rates. They may be employment conditions, housing conditions, any array. I can't explain a one-year deviation from the trend, but we're very pleased to see that this trend is positive and that the accomplishments are indeed significant.

● (1125)

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: A third issue that I would like to ask about, and the Auditor General addressed it in her remarks, is the commitment of the department to changing its reporting system to Parliament regarding the post-secondary education basket of issues to include more information to Parliament. This would perhaps give us a better insight as to why enrolment would have declined, with the consequent funding being increased.

I'm wondering if the department is committed to following that recommendation of the Auditor General.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: The department, of course, meets the reporting requirements that other departments do, and the standard reports to Parliament. The department provides correct and precise information, but it does not provide information, in many cases, that is in very great detail. Some of these examples are derived from details, but they're important details and we acknowledge that.

I think it's a question of tracking the appropriate performance indicators to better understand how this programming is doing. That is a key point the Auditor General makes, and we accept that point. We're working with first nations to review that program in the case of post-secondary, and part of what we want to arrive at with our partners is precisely that—better output indicators, better measures, and a better regime of tracking those things. They may well be the kinds of things that should be there before Parliament.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: So is the department committed to following the Auditor General's recommendations on reporting?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: The department has accepted all of the Auditor General's recommendations, yes, and we're in the process of developing an action plan that will show how in effect we can do that over a reasonable period of time.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: Thank you.

The Chair: I think the Auditor General wanted to add to this.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Madam Chair, I'd like to make two comments.

One is on the question of the transfer of funding. The issue we were trying to get at there was that post-secondary education has a certain amount of money within it for post-secondary education. I don't think we're particularly concerned if the money is moved to other high-priority areas, but the department doesn't know how many eligible students there may be in other first nations on reserve who are not receiving funding because on those reserves there isn't sufficient funding. So there should be an assessment overall of the program, of how many students are being funded and how many eligible students are not receiving funding, to give some indication.

On the question of the performance reports, obviously we encourage the department to produce more performance indicators with first nations. But I think that even on the specific ones, say the number of students, we note in our report that they provide the information—they do a comparison from 1968-69, when there were 250 students, to 25,000 today—and that's fine, but they don't go a little further to say that in 1998-99 there were 27,000 students. So even with the indicator that they are presenting, there could be more complete analysis and information given to Parliament on trends that are maybe not quite as favourable.

The Chair: Thank you.

We shall now move on to Mr. Cleary from the Bloc.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Cleary (Louis-Saint-Laurent, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for coming, Ms. Fraser. We're pleased to meet you.

Mr. LeBlanc and Ms. Paré, we've already met a number of times.

Ms. Fraser, I'd like to be sure about what this 28-year gap means. As I understand it, this is abominable. Is it perhaps less so than I understand it to be?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I don't doubt that you understand very well, Mr. Cleary. At the rate the situation is progressing at this time, it will take 28 years before the education level of the First Nations is the same as that of the Canadian population.

• (1130)

Mr. Bernard Cleary: That makes no sense.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We're definitely not making the progress we want to make. The last time we conducted an audit, four years ago, the gap was virtually the same. This shows that solutions are urgently needed because we all agree that education is the key to the economic success and well-being of a population. There's a group in our country that's having a lot of difficulty, and we have to look into the problem. We encourage the Department to find a way to reduce this gap as quickly as possible.

Mr. Bernard Cleary: I've had frequent contact with the Department for 25 years because I negotiated a number of issues. We're encouraged to comply with the Charter, but how can native people think of complying with the Charter when they have so much work ahead of them? We're put at maximum disadvantage, and this has been going on for years now; but what's worse is that this will go on for another 28 years. How are we going to solve this problem? I see you're asking them to solve it, but they don't seem to want to do so. Studies are being conducted. Ms. Fraser, I heard about studies during the 30 years I was at Indian Affairs. People spend their time conducting studies, studies and more studies, and they never lead to results. Here's further evidence of that. This has been studied many times; it's been discussed many times; the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has also discussed all this. The result they've come up with today—I was listening to Mr. LeBlanc a moment ago—is that they're still studying.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Madam Chair and Mr. Cleary, I clearly have no answer. If it were that easy, the situation would have been corrected a long time ago. We recognize that this is a very complex matter. We think the Department first needs to clarify its role and responsibilities in this matter. There is a lot of confusion within the Department and over its role. Is it simply the role of a funding agent? Is it responsible for seeing that the gap closes? As long as there is this kind of confusion within a department that delivers programs, it will be impossible to make progress.

We fundamentally believe that it must clearly define its role and responsibilities. Then there will have to be indicators regarding the actions it takes, and the Department will have to inform Parliament more frequently on progress made or not made. Since it had been four years, we didn't expect the gap to fall from 27 to five years, but we would at least have liked to see a little progress. It was quite the contrary. Perhaps Mr. LeBlanc can propose a solution.

Mr. Bernard Cleary: Ms. Fraser, the Department, or the Government of Canada, is the trustee of the Indians of Canada. It is up to the trustee to find solutions. It is up to it to ensure that Indians are treated in the way they deserve. Until it plays its role as a trustee in education, what we're seeing today will continue to occur.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That's why we say it's essential that everyone's roles and responsibilities be clarified.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Do you want to respond to that, Mr. LeBlanc?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I would be pleased to offer a brief comment, if it would please the committee.

[*Translation*]

This 28-year gap obviously troubles the Department enormously and isn't acceptable. It no doubt troubles our First Nations partners even more. This is pure arithmetic; it's not a projection based on a qualitative analysis of the measures in place. It's a statistical calculation which indicates the time it would take at the rate matters are progressing today, if nothing changed.

However, we won't allow the environment to stay the same as today. Earlier, we described six or seven initiatives that have been put in place since the last audit: the measures of the new programming, the special education programming and other measures. These investments are being made with the approval of the First Nations, because we firmly believe that it is initiatives like these that will reduce this gap in a much more reasonable period of time. We mustn't stop there; we must continue and look for and find others.

I'll stop there, Madam.

•(1135)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cleary.

I shall now move on to Mr. Martin with the NDP.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking Mr. Cleary for bringing this matter to the committee today and for being the one who sponsored this subject matter for us to study. I also recognize the work of the Auditor General in raising this issue as well.

I represent an inner-city riding in Winnipeg where some 16,000 aboriginal people self-identify. One of the most obvious points that come to mind is that the shameful under-representation of aboriginal people completing post-secondary education is matched only by the shocking overrepresentation of aboriginal youth in the criminal justice system. I heard a figure that an Indian kid has a hundred times more likelihood of winding up in jail than in university. That's not to sensationalize the issue, but those are the realities we're looking at in the inner city of Winnipeg and on reserves across the country.

What's really frustrating to me is that the only concrete measure we've seen dealing with aboriginal youth and universities is that as of 2006, the government is going to start taxing tuition, living-out allowance, and travel expenses as income.

I'd like people's views on this, but there is no reason or logic to this. It isn't a revenue grab, because in all likelihood it won't be paying much more money. What it's doing is this: it's a shot across the bow on aboriginal and treaty rights, making the declaration that we don't consider education to be an aboriginal or treaty right; we consider it to be a matter of social policy that we can turn up and turn down as we see fit as a government.

Never mind all the flowery language of the new Minister of Indian Affairs, that his number one priority is getting a generation of aboriginal kids graduated from post-secondary education so that they

have the administrative capacity, etc. In actual fact, the actions the government is taking will surely result in fewer people going to university rather than more. If you start taxing that money as income, the community has to now start filling out T4 slips. It now has to deal with all the administration, for the first time ever, of paying taxes. It's almost as if the message is, you're going to now start paying taxes on this; get used to it, because this is the way it's going to be from now on. That's the message that chief and council are getting in the community.

Isn't this a glaring contradiction that the stated objective is for more kids to graduate from post-secondary education, but we're calling this money that used to be considered an aspect of treaty moneys—and therefore not subject to tax—now taxable?

I don't even know what you can tell me about this, because it's not a matter for the Auditor General.

Maybe in the minute of time that I have left, I will ask a legitimate question of the Auditor General.

My information is that INAC has no way of knowing what's really spent on first nations education, because the money is allocated to the regional offices. The regional office, especially the director of funding services, can then make pretty arbitrary choices about moving it around from program to program. Was that specifically flagged in the Auditor General's study as a criticism—the inability to track the benefit of the money allocated toward post-secondary education if it's being moved around from program to program? What measures are we recommending to be able to track that money more accurately and know that it is, in fact, going toward its intended purpose?

•(1140)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That is correct, Madam Chair.

We note in the report that the department allocates a fixed amount to the regions, which then allocate it to first nations. As we mentioned earlier, if a first nation had met all of the requirements of the eligible students on that reserve and there was a surplus, they could effect the surplus into other areas.

We note in the report as well that when we looked at first nations' financial statements we could see there were surpluses and deficits in the program, but the department does not have that overall information about, if you will, the program in and of itself and how many students are not being funded by the program, because obviously, for first nations where there is a deficit, they are funding more students than the program is giving them funding for.

Mr. Pat Martin: There's a massive shortfall in funding to send to school all of the kids who are eligible and who qualify. You're talking about moving it around from one community to another based on the number of students for tuition. I'm talking about using the money for something completely different.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: No, the point we were making is the first nation can move it from post-secondary education to housing, for example.

Mr. Pat Martin: Or to build a sewage treatment plant.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: So it can be moved to other program areas within that first nation.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's my point. So we don't know if this \$1.2 billion annually goes toward first nations education. Is that the point you're making?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That is the point. Because the department doesn't know the number of eligible students who have not received funding, it's difficult to assess the adequacy of funding as a whole and whether there should be another mechanism for allocating funds if there are surpluses in some areas and large deficits in others.

Mr. Pat Martin: So you have a chief and council that are not even meeting the basic needs of their community—inadequate housing and no running water in many cases—and that are faced with the Sophie's choice of, “Do I send six kids to university or do I alleviate this unreasonable housing emergency I have?” We know that's what is happening in communities, and we know that's why the money is not adequate to actually train a new generation of bright Indian kids.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

I'm not sure if anyone wants to comment on the last remark.

If not, I will go to Mr. St. Amand from the government side.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Firstly, thank you for your presentations this morning.

If I may deal first, Ms. Fraser, with some of your report, you indicated that as an offshoot of a recommendation by the public accounts committee, the department was asked to provide a comprehensive statement of its roles and responsibilities, and it committed itself to doing so by June 2002. Then you indicate that this hasn't happened, although numerous drafts have been produced. Were those drafts provided to your office?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I can ask Mr. Côté to respond.

Mr. André Côté (Director, Indian and Northern Affairs, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): We haven't seen all the drafts, but we saw the most recent ones when we were doing the audit.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: So it's fair to say that the department has produced reports as recommended, but in the view of the Auditor General's department, the reports were not comprehensive enough. Is that the case?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: No. If there's a document outlining roles and responsibilities, we would not consider it complete until it went past the draft stage. As long as it's a draft, it can always be changed. So it means that the department has not adopted it formally. We would want to see a final document that has been approved by the department and that the department accepts as being its definition of its roles and responsibilities.

• (1145)

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: It was fair of you in your presentation to suggest that numerous drafts were produced. Is it fair for me to say that the department is endeavouring, to the best of your knowledge, to produce a comprehensive report?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We can say that efforts have been made to produce this. I think the department should respond as to how successful they feel they have been and whether there will be a resolution of this issue.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I don't know if Mr. LeBlanc wishes to interject at this point.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I'll reply when called upon, if that's okay.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Fair enough.

I'd like to move on to another area. Again to Ms. Fraser, I'm not a mathematician or an auditor, let alone an auditor general, but I have some difficulty as a layperson wrapping my brain around this 28-year gap and how exactly that's quantified. I appreciate that it has been touched on. But what's the touchstone against which is measured this 28-year gap?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: It is, as Mr. LeBlanc mentioned, simply a mathematical calculation. We would presume in that calculation that things would stay as they are currently. We would look at the rate of education within the Canadian population, the scholarization. Then we would look at what progress has been made in first nations communities and as well take into account the rate of growth in that community, which is significantly higher than in the Canadian population. Using those factors we would say, how long will it take, given the current progress, to attain the same level of scholarization in the aboriginal community on reserve?

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: All right, but measured against itself, so to speak, the current system of programming for aboriginal education is improved now compared with five years ago or compared with ten years ago. Am I correct?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Well, there have been improvements, yes, but there would have to be a projection, analysis, and evaluation of what effects there could be over the longer term. You're right, we haven't taken that into account.

Mr. Côté may want to respond.

We've taken into account the current trend of increase in aboriginal education in calculating that factor, but we would not have projected a further increase or a presumption that the system would get better than it is currently.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I understand. Right. But it's fair to say, I think, that compared with five years ago, more aboriginal students now are involved in post-secondary education.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: As an absolute number, most definitely.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Most definitely. All right.

You indicated as well, Ms. Fraser, that the only consistent information being provided to you is the total number of students who are being supported by the program.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I would say the only consistent information being provided to you as parliamentarians.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Okay, fair enough.

In terms, then, of comprehensively assessing the program, what other indicia or data ideally would be supplied by the department?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I think there are several, and I'll ask my colleagues to address it. But just on that particular indicator, if you look at the absolute number of students, it's true that it's increasing and has increased, I would say, substantially. But there's no relation to the population, and the population growth is also very important. So additional information you would want from that indicator is what the percentage is, as a percentage of the population. I can ask, I guess, Mr. Côté. We would want information on costs, on numbers of students who are eligible but who aren't being funded.

Mr. André Côté: The department already has information on the number of graduates who are supported by the program, and this could be provided as well.

As Mrs. Fraser mentioned, I think it should be put in the context of the population growth in the first nations and also what other Canadians are achieving at the post-secondary level. Similar to the case in elementary and secondary education, there is a higher proportion of Canadians graduating from post-secondary education than of first nations people, and that could be put as a comparison between the two.

•(1150)

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: In aboriginal communities in the country, are there community colleges or universities?

Mr. André Côté: On reserve, as such?

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Yes.

Mr. André Côté: Yes, there is at least one university, now called the First Nations University, in Regina. The departmental representatives would probably know more about this, but there are some.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: All right.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. St. Amand, we've reached your time limit. Since we're doing so well with time this morning, I think I'll try to keep everyone within their time limit so we can get to the second round that we haven't been able to get to in the last dozen meetings.

I'll go to Ms. Skelton, from the Conservative Party.

Mrs. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Good morning. Thank you for being here today.

Ms. Fraser, paragraph 5.72 of the report notes that the department allocates money based on historical funding levels, and that some first nations may be receiving more funds than they require and some not as much.

Can you provide the committee with some examples of first nations that are not receiving enough money? Do you have those figures or that information anywhere?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I don't know that we would have those figures. We looked at some of the financial statements of first nations where there was an indication that there was a deficit within the program, but we would not be able, I think, to go much beyond that. We would not have any information, nor does the department, I understand, on eligible students who have not received funding. There's a significant piece of information that would be missing.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: So you have no information on the numbers. You have no idea how many students who are missing out having the funding.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That is correct, and it's really the department. The department doesn't have that information.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: The next question is, why doesn't the department have that information?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: Well, this issue relates to the earlier point I made about the nature of the partnership between the department and the first nations. The program does not assure all necessary funding to meet all expenses of a student who wishes to undertake post-secondary education.

The program allows funding for a student up to so much, usually pegged against comparable provincial student loan regimes, and it gives the band council flexibility to decide things like how close to that maximum they would go. Would they consider whether a student has another means of income? Would they consider if that student's family should be participating and supporting the student's academic achievement? They bring a number of criteria and rigours that reflect the priority for their community, and in all cases, it's not a question of covering all of the needs, but of being a funder, along with the individual—a summer job, a part-time job—the family contributions, which sometimes are quite challenging, bursaries, loans, and so on.

So if a first nation, as someone mentioned earlier, is facing very severe problems in terms of housing or other pricey situations, they may be tempted to lower the percentage that they're going to apply. They may lower the number of dollars they'll give to an individual student in order to have more students participate. These are areas in which we allow their discretion in the current arrangement, recognizing the need for them to have flexibility to make decisions among key priorities.

I think the issue of the absence of knowledge of how many would be in the waiting queue is an important one, notwithstanding anything I've said about the nature of our relationship with first nations. It's an item that we would consider very, very carefully in the review that's ongoing now of the post-secondary student program—it and many others, I should say.

•(1155)

Mrs. Carol Skelton: Are you doing that, or are you just considering it?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: That work is under way now. The review of the program is under way now, and that review will address a number of things, substantive things about how this program can do a better job for more people, some of the managerial things that are indispensable and very important, and some of the shortcomings that the Auditor General rightly points out.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: How soon will that be done? How soon will the report be done?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: This work that I'm describing will be an important component in our action plan of response to the Auditor General's report, and that action plan will be before the committee by April 30. So within that plan, we'll see that for this review in relation to post-secondary, this is what the department feels is the timeframe.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: Thank you.

Do I have more time?

The Chair: No, you're right on.

Mr. Bellavance is next, and I'd just remind the members that we're now into the five-minute round.

Oh, Ms. Barnes, I'm sorry. We're now going back and forth. I haven't done a second round for so long that I'm forgetting the procedure here.

Ms. Barnes, and then Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for your testimony. I have a few questions to ask both of you.

[*English*]

First of all, Mr. LeBlanc, let's just go to this joint review, because I think that's missing in the understanding of potential committee members around the table.

INAC is not a department like another line department that delivers programs to Canadians. There is a relationship-building mechanism that is absolutely essential for the new relationship that we are trying to undertake through the process of the round table, which was initiated last April and then had the education round table as one of the six criteria, the most fundamental areas, with the post-secondary and the primary-secondary school meetings, one in Winnipeg, if I recall, and one in Gatineau. That process will be ongoing until next fall.

So in anything that you do because of a deadline given by another committee on a work plan, there is still the ongoing overall relationship. The whole idea, as I understand it, of getting a new working relationship with aboriginal peoples, be they Métis, Inuit, or first nations, is to do it together.

I just want to have you clarify for the record, when you're talking about the work plan, is this a joint work plan, or is this just department officials going ahead on their own trying to figure out what's good for someone else?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: This work plan that I describe in the context of April 30 is a work plan that the department is strictly obliged to produce in terms of its fundamental responsibilities vis-à-vis the Auditor General and, more importantly, Parliament. This is a fairly short timeframe. It will be informed by consultation with first nations. Consultation with first nations has actually taken place since the commitment was made to produce the plan.

The plan will be built on a long history of consultation that's ongoing. Equally importantly, when a reader sees the plan, the plan will be very much imbued with the values of consultation and partnership. The plan will not read, we will in three days decide this; it will read, we will engage in consultation in order to...but very mindful of timeframes and mindful of what needs to be achieved.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Thank you.

I'm going to be mindful of my timeframe, because I know my chair will be short with me.

The post-secondary education program is almost 100% managed by first nations, and so that gets into this relationship thing. Yes, I

understand where the Auditor General is coming from. You make the point, what's our role? This role is an evolving role, as I see it, and it has to be for it to work. It's not a carrot-and-stick approach of...what are we going to do—take away the schools, the infrastructure? There are real concerns here.

Part of the reason there could be more post-secondary students going through is that we're not doing things like teacher retention on reserves, and we're not getting the parental support. So when we say that money has shifted from one program to another, some of the programs that INAC is now supporting are coming out of that realization.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paré, do you want to give your opinion?

• (1200)

[*English*]

Ms. Line Paré (Director General, Education Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Just to talk about some of the initiatives, you're quite right, it's really done in partnership with first nations. If you take, for example, the national special education program—it was created in 2002—it is implemented by the schools, by the leaders, by the education, by first nations regional education organizations. We have initiatives to provide funding to regional education organizations and to schools to try to encourage parents and communities to be involved in the education of the children, to try to encourage them to complete high school and to further their education. We're concerned about teacher recruitment, so we have an initiative to help the school to try to improve the situation of the teachers, to provide them with professional development, and to encourage them to stay and continue teaching in first nations schools.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Madam Fraser, one of the things you talk about on your 28-year gap or timeline...I just want an acknowledgement, if I'm correct, that this means there are no changes. You're just going on the current situation without policy changes. We're the policy arm here. You have another function vis-à-vis this file. Your number of 28 years, I would suggest to you, would be accurate if there were no change. If there are policy changes or more funding, all these variables that hopefully the round table discussion is coming up with should impact that, and hopefully for the better.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Yes, most definitely. That calculation takes into account current status, if you will.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Do nothing, really. No change.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: No change. I would point out, though—and we do mention in the report—that we have seen areas where there were changes, and positive changes, and we note the special education. Except for a few exceptions, the department is largely doing things the way they were four or five years ago.

Quite frankly, we wouldn't make those kinds of suppositions—to consider that they're going to be radical changes—unless we saw that there was something dramatic happening within the department. Hopefully you're right—that there will be measures put in place. The reason to make those kinds of calculations is to give an indication of the significance of the issue that progress is not as quick as I think everybody would like, and that this hopefully will spur action that will result in significantly reducing that gap.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barnes.

We now go to Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Fraser, on behalf of the population of Richmond-Arthabaska, I thank you for the exceptional work you're doing as watchdog of the public administration. You and your team are doing an excellent job.

That said, it is never pleasant to read your reports, and that's not your fault. It's more that you discover horrifying deficiencies, as is the case in the field of Aboriginal education. Although Ms. Barnes is trying to tell us that things are going very well, that's not what we're seeing. The government has been investing nearly \$1 billion a year in primary and secondary education and approximately \$300,000 a year, over the past 10 years—I'm summarizing—in postsecondary education.

In your view, is this a prudent investment, when the Department's role and responsibilities have not yet even been clearly defined, as you emphasize in your report? We've been waiting for a statement by the Department for three and a half years now, and it still hasn't come. The answers we're getting amount to wishful thinking. Do you think this money is being well invested?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, not all our reports are negative. Some occasionally point out programs that have made progress and undergone improvements. I wouldn't want the member to think it's always negative.

The question you're asking regarding funding is an evaluation question, something we haven't done and that we can't do: it's up to the minister to do that. We know improvements which, we believe, should be made to the processes and ways of doing things.

We acknowledge that there are other, very important partners in education: a very complex question. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined. The position adopted by the minister must be understood by everyone working at the Department, but also by the First Nations and other stakeholders. We believe that clarification of roles and responsibilities should be the priority. Some believe that the Department is merely a fund transfer agency, while others say it has a more important role to play. Until this is clear, it's hard to take action and intervene to improve the situation. We believe this is essential to the program's progress and improvement.

● (1205)

Mr. André Bellavance: How do you explain this kind of laxity, when you submitted one report in 2000 and another in 2004? There's been very little improvement. How do you explain why there hasn't been more movement and why the departmental people are still studying and thinking about the matter?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: It's up to the Department's representatives to explain that. We acknowledge that the issue is complex and that it's not a problem that can be resolved overnight. In the case of roles and responsibilities, as we mentioned, there are a number of drafts.

Perhaps the deadlines and actions they take will be clearer in the action plan they present.

Mr. LeBlanc may also wish to answer the question.

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. LeBlanc, people tell us about the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable as though it were some kind of magical process that will solve a lot of problems. I'd like you to explain how it will solve the problems of primary, secondary and postsecondary education. Will it provide a concrete response to the report of the Auditor General of Canada?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: The Auditor General has found that little change has been made to certain classes of practices for measuring and controlling key points between the publication of these two reports, but—and she'll correct me if I'm wrong—I suppose she has nevertheless observed, with regard to certain policies, that new programs, new measures and new resources have been created. New initiatives have come to the fore.

I believe it's been found that these new initiatives suffered from certain deficiencies with regard to information and measures. We accept those recommendations, which doesn't mean there hasn't been any improvement in strategies and policies, which have been defined in partnership with the First Nations.

There is a definition of the Department's role; it's not completely vague. It lacks clarity and could benefit from greater precision; we recognize that. However, that role is defined in large part by the policies, programs and guidelines that we follow, the agreements that we sign with our partners. All these instruments, which define our work, by their very nature, define our roles. I'm not denying that the definition lacks clarity.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're now moving on to Mr. Valley from the government side.

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for coming today.

I have a question for the Auditor General. You just mentioned the complexity of the file, and you deal with many files. I'm just curious, would you find this file to be more complex than any of them because of the unique relationship with the first nations?

● (1210)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That's a good question. I would certainly say it is more complex than many, yes. I would say that these types of programs and first nations issues are more complex than most programs that government delivers and are alone, if you will, in the delivery mechanism. Obviously there are the beneficiaries, but I would say that inherently I think first nations issues are more complex because of the partnership arrangement.

Mr. Roger Valley: It's more complex than most that we deal with, and I'm not trying to say anything about the department. On any advice you give—and you give some very good advice in your report—it's more difficult for them to move as quickly and as clearly on some of it as it would be for an outside department. Is that fair to say or not? I know you give good advice. I'm just wondering how they take good advice, considering the situation they're in.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I guess our recommendations to departments vary a lot. Some are, we think, relatively easy to do. Some are much more difficult to do. I can think of other examples in other departments that are not easy to resolve either. We will look to the department, when they do their action plans in response, to set the timelines that they are committing themselves to, so in this case the department committed to producing certain documents, and it hasn't met its own commitments.

We're not necessarily imposing a deadline on the department; that's not our role. Our role is to bring forward recommendations, and then the department should prepare the action plan or the response that it feels is appropriate and indicate the timelines that it thinks it will take to do it. That's what we would look to. We would judge them, in most cases, against the commitments that they make.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

Now I have a question for the department. In my own riding I have, as many members do, a large number of first nations, a large number of remote sites. When I travel, I see lots of enthusiasm in the high schools, although many of them only go to grade 10 because they don't have the resources to go past grade 10. They'd have to travel out of the remote sites. Can you tell me how the high school students are doing compared to the rest of Canada? I know that we continually talk about the gap there. But are the high school students in the first nations performing at a level that's acceptable to the rest of Canada?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: The one key issue that you raise yourself is the issue of the gap in completion. That gap is still there. It's significant, it's troublesome, and we have to do everything possible to overcome it. I said early on that notwithstanding that, compared with the gap of 20 years ago, there's been a phenomenal amount of progress. Some first nations schools on reserve adopt provincial regimes of testing to determine that they're meeting the same academic standards as the provinces are.

Correct me if I'm wrong, Line, but I think something like 55% of first nations students who graduate are actually graduating from a provincial school. While 80% of the kids start out in grade one on reserve, through a series of circumstances and choices we get about 55% of the graduates graduating from the provincial system. So those students who graduate from the provincial system, which is the slight majority of all first nation graduates, are graduating from the same standards and meeting the same tests as all other young Canadians in schools.

Some first nations adopt their own testing mechanism, and they do so because of a certain wariness about so-called mainstream testing that may not be quite sensitive, culturally or linguistically, to the needs of their students. These are issues that go right to the heart of why there is a priority for first nation-led education.

So there are a number of circumstances. When you put them together, there's an indication of fair comparability. I'm not seized with findings to the contrary. Graduates are going on to first nation universities and other universities throughout Canada. We see them distinguishing themselves in all walks of Canadian life.

• (1215)

Mr. Roger Valley: Do I have any more time?

The Chair: Mr. Harrison, please.

We're actually in the third round. It's still a five-minute round.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Actually, I'd like to say I think this committee should pat itself on the back for the inquiry we did into the residential school issue. Yesterday we saw in the budget a commitment to changing the program. I think that's largely a result of the work we've done on this committee, particularly in the opposition parties, putting it on the agenda and shining a light on this issue.

The parliamentary secretary might laugh, but I think it's a serious issue and I think we did shine a light on it.

Hon. Sue Barnes: It is a serious issue.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: What I'd like to ask, with regard to the round table process, is how these round tables are proceeding with respect to education, and what kind of timeframe we're looking at for any results coming out of them.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: If I may, I would ask Ms. Paré to describe the process and elaborate.

Ms. Line Paré: With respect to education, one of the follow-up sessions was on lifelong learning, because lifelong learning starts with the early learning and early childhood development program, going then to post-secondary education and skills development.

There were two sessions. There was one session in Winnipeg that focused on early childhood development and the K-to-12 education system, and a second one in Gatineau that focused on post-secondary education and skills training or skills development. During each of those sessions there were close to 100 participants, experts from the field—there were some provincial officials who came; there were federal officials; there were aboriginal experts—who came to talk about each of these issues, from ECD to skills development. The sessions have been completed. They are working right now on finalizing the facilitator's report, which will be in the public domain probably towards the end of March of this year.

The follow-up to all those sessions is first a policy retreat that is scheduled for spring 2005, and after that a first nations and first ministers meeting in the fall of 2005. As has been mentioned in much documentation, people will come together to decide on concrete actions that will be necessary to move towards closing the gap with respect to aboriginal life chances.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: We're looking basically at the fall of 2005 to get recommendations regarding education issues. Am I correct?

Ms. Line Paré: We are, with respect to concrete action on the lifelong learning aspect. That said, the Department of Indian Affairs is continually working with first nations and other stakeholders, such as provincial ministers of education, to continue making efforts to improve quality of education and the education outcomes of children and youth.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: My concern is just—I understand there is a process—that we expedite this process as quickly as possible, echoing what Mr. Pat Martin had talked about in his riding. I have 108 reserves in my riding, which is probably the largest number. Mr. Valley and I have a lot. Mr. Martin was correct in saying there is a higher chance of ending up in jail for young first nations people than ending up in university, and that is just an incredibly sad state of affairs.

My fear, and I hope it's going to be proved wrong, because we have seen a history with this Prime Minister of dragging things out, not making decisions, delaying and delaying.... Indeed, I think there was a magazine article recently in *The Economist* referring to Mr. Martin as “Mr. Dithers”, and it's a word that's been going around this place a lot over the last couple of months. I hope this process is expedited. This is an incredibly important issue for us to have action on, that will increase the participation of young first nations people in universities. I hope we move forward as quickly as we can.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

We shall now move on to Ms. Barnes, and then Mr. Cleary.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Thank you very much.

I think that round table is the vehicle that will launch what actions have to be taken. It has to be a collaborative effort. I think the day has passed that any government should tell first nations what should be done for first nations. There is obviously responsibility here. We are working out of a very antiquated Indian Act. It's a constraint, literally.

Madam Paré, I know you were in attendance at both of the round tables. I know you can't be talking about what happened in them, but there is supposed to be a website. Is the website operational now that puts out the facilitator's reports and all the materials, or is it still being completed?

Ms. Line Paré: It's right now being completed, and it's PCO that is leading all the organization with respect to the preparation of the website. All the facilitator's reports for all the follow-up sessions will be put on the website, including also all the discussion papers that were prepared in advance of these two events from all national aboriginal organizations and federal departments.

Hon. Sue Barnes: So it's very accessible to Canadians, and people can track in the general public the type of discussions that the people most affected and the most knowledgeable.... Obviously you could fill the room probably 20 times, because a lot of people who have knowledge couldn't be there, but to make it a working group, it was done in collaboration with the parties most affected so that we could come up with some ideas. What we're talking about is a transformative action plan here.

I'm very conscious of the fact that auditing is done in arrears. We're here talking about a situation that was, and going forward I think the wake-up call is being echoed by Madam Fraser and her colleagues. At the same time, the biggest message Canadians have to understand is that this is not like every other department of government; there is a different relationship that I don't think has historically been as evolved as it should have been. That's what we're trying to do right now.

That being said, yesterday there were some budget measures announced for special education moneys. Could you just elaborate on where you think those moneys are earmarked?

Ms. Line Paré: The additional funding for the special education program will provide more programming and services directly to the first nations students who are in need of high-cost special education, but it will also provide the opportunity for the schools and the first nations education organizations to support professional development of the special education teachers as well as the para-professionals who are working in those schools to help the children of special needs.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I wonder if I might add a point very quickly.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Yes.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: Also yesterday there was information about a very significant, important investment in first nations housing. It's impossible to separate the impacts and the interconnectivity between housing conditions and academic performance; the well-being of children in school is extremely important. You could almost take the housing heading on that money and put an education heading on it, and it would be just as legitimately categorized. So this is another important development for education. Hopefully we'll take our long-term projections and push forward in them in the near future.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Since the year 2000 there have been some changes inside INAC itself. Ms. Paré, your department was established in 2004?

Ms. Line Paré: The education branch was created in November 2003, a year ago.

Hon. Sue Barnes: Yes, 2003. If we were looking at Canada as a whole, in my community there would be a school board, and there would be bulk buying and curriculum development. In this committee, all of us just worked together on the Tlicho agreement. I know they made a school board-type arrangement in their four communities. But that is, generally speaking, absent in the 600 first nations across the country. Do you want to comment on whether any part of Canada right now—and I think B.C. is leading in this area—is moving in some different manner?

● (1225)

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: Maybe I could make a general comment, and then Ms. Paré could elaborate.

The Chair: I'll have to postpone your answer to the next questioner, because we're past time and I'm trying to get in as many people as I can on this one.

We're now going to Mr. Cleary.

[*Tranlation*]

Mr. Bernard Cleary: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I'd like to mention the fact that there seems to be an enormous belief in these roundtables that have just been tried. Some people are too young to remember this, but history shows us that, at times, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs has tried to shirk its fiduciary responsibilities in all kinds of ways, such as this. However, Indians have always objected to that. They accepted it when the Prime Minister imposed it on them, but it always fizzled out in the end. I don't want to be a chicken little, but I get the impression that it's going to fizzle out once again. Ms. Barnes' fascination with these roundtables doesn't impress me.

Furthermore, I realize that, for some time now, the government has been trying to shirk its responsibilities. For example, education today is no longer an Aboriginal right. That's unfortunate. All the agreements and all the treaties have established that it's an Aboriginal right. This isn't a minor problem, a minor social program we want included in the issue; it's an Aboriginal right that the trustee must respect. Let's not try to shirk it in order to simplify matters and, in some instances, to nullify them.

It's also been said that this is a complex issue. There has been a great deal of emphasis on that fact. I think that's true. Some people in the Department give us the impression they'd like to transfer this complex issue to people who unfortunately don't always have the professional qualifications to handle it. I find that irresponsible. They're incapable of solving the problem and providing explanations to the Auditor General; that means she's right—and they're prepared to transfer it to Aboriginal groups like a hot potato.

It's quite sad, but this matter is even more important. From there, a transfer will have to be made. It'll be done once the problems are solved. Don't transfer your problems, since you're competent enough to solve them, at least you're supposed to be. Consequently, solve them before transferring them to Aboriginal groups, which will have a whole lot of problems.

Since I've been discussing this issue, I have sensed a desire to offload, including the roundtables. The Department wants to get rid of these files. It's transferring them everywhere. However, it won't get rid of its fiduciary responsibility. Forget that, it's a bad thought. You won't get rid of that. Things won't work that way. The Department will have to play its fiduciary role. If it can't, then it should decide on something else. But it will have to do it. Stop trying to make us think that transfers are a panacea; that's not true.

I've experienced and seen transfers for quite a long time. It's rarely a good deal. Why? It's not because people don't want it, but because they're not ready. Acknowledging you're not ready when that's the case isn't a weakness. We won't solve this kind of problem that way. Let's stop this foolishness. Play your role instead.

I think they're capable of it, if they're supported. I think we should support them, but I'm not sure they're supported by everyone. I'm not sure of that. We should support them. The officials in place usually do an excellent job. That depends on their instructions. It's quite unfortunate, but that's a fact. If they don't have any instructions, they're left to their own devices, if the roles aren't very clearly defined... It's not the people at the grassroots level who usually define roles. That's done at another level. Roles should be defined by people who work at the policy level. The trustee should play a role. It's too easy to add that to the officials' burden. It's the officials who

should do that. This should be done and the officials should follow the instructions they're given.

• (1230)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cleary.

To be fair to the witnesses, we are looking at chapter 5, and that's really the scope that our witnesses are able to answer on.

Unfortunately, you've used up your five minutes, so I shall go on to Mr. St. Amand.

I have Ms. Skelton and Mr. Valley on my list.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Madam Chair, I will split my time with Mr. Valley.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Cleary: I have a point of order, Madam Chair. I don't accept what you said when you stated that my comments did not concern the issue we're discussing. I apologize. Furthermore, I made those remarks following what Ms. Barnes said when she referred to her panacea and did a little advertising for the roundtables. Don't come and tell me I wasn't on point.

[*English*]

The Chair: All I'm saying is I don't think the witnesses would be able to answer, because they're here for a specific purpose. I was just trying to let the witnesses know that they're not obligated to answer that one.

I'll go back to Mr. St. Amand and then to Ms. Skelton.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Let's be proactive and get past the bluff and bluster and the waxing indignant. We all recognize that the aboriginal population rate is increasing, the population rate among non-aboriginals is decreasing, and Canada is relying now, and will come to rely more and more, on the immigrant population and, ideally, the aboriginal population to take our economy into its next phase. That's a reality.

In your otherwise balanced, moderate presentation, Mr. LeBlanc, you suggested that phenomenal progress has been achieved. Can you expand on that in terms of specifics?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I was referring to the existence of close to 500 schools on first nation territories that are administered and led by first nation leadership, which allow young children of first nations to achieve education results there, close to home; to go home to lunch and dinner; and to go to their hockey arena after school, which they do at a phenomenal rate, so that we will see in 20 years very remarkable progress in high school completion rates for these young people. This is against a backdrop that was sadly otherwise for too long in Canada. I was referring to that.

I recently visited the first nations university in Saskatchewan. I met young people who are studying post-secondary areas—liberal arts, science, math—in an environment that is very sensitive to their culture and their language, all of which helps, I think, to assure their success.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Just picking up on that, that's why, in my view, comparing the situation of aboriginal students to the rest of Canada's students is a little disingenuous, because available to every Canadian high school graduate who lives in a large urban centre is the opportunity to stay home and go to university or community college. That is simply not available, as I see it, to aboriginal students, except for the one or two exceptions Canada-wide. Is that a situation that can be overcome? Has any thought been given to the building of colleges or universities within aboriginal communities, much like high schools, or is that just so beyond the pale that it's not possible?

• (1235)

Ms. Line Paré: One of the elements of the post-secondary education program is called the Indian studies support program. It was created to help either design or adapt some post-secondary programs for first nations students. In the delivery of these programs, there are some satellite colleges and universities. So there are some places across Canada where students may pursue post-secondary studies while staying at home.

One successful example through the Indian studies support program has been the teachers training program. The Department of Indian Affairs has supported this part of the program since the eighties. It is important to acknowledge that now close to 50% of the teachers in the first nation schools are aboriginal, and we know that many of the teachers are women. So the teachers training program started in the eighties. A lot of the courses were done during the summertime, when teachers were not teaching, or the students were available, and then they continued during the year part time. So there is more and more possibility for students to pursue post-secondary education. Distance education is another example.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I understand.

My remaining time I'd like to defer to Mr. Valley, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have no remaining time.

We're now going on to Ms. Skelton. Then we'll go to Mr. Valley.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: Mr. LeBlanc, I would like to ask you about the budget for the round tables. You've had 200 people attend these round tables. Could you give me a figure of how much your department budgeted for round tables?

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I regret that I do not have those figures today, but I would be pleased to follow up and provide what we have.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: I would appreciate that. Thank you very much.

It was interesting when you talked about websites and everything. I was talking to a wonderful couple from northern Alberta yesterday. I asked them about a computer, and they have no access to a computer. How are you communicating with people who don't have access to computers and are in remote areas?

Ms. Line Paré: With respect to schools on reserve, more and more schools are totally connected. Students have access to the Internet—

Mrs. Carol Skelton: Not all of them.

Ms. Line Paré: —and through the Government of Canada there is a first nations SchoolNet program. Through some of the initiatives

that the Department of Indian Affairs is providing to first nations regional education organizations, some of them, such as the First Nations Education Steering Committee in British Columbia or the First Nations Education Council in Quebec, have been supporting video conferencing between the schools and the education organization, helping them on a regular basis, supporting professional development of their teachers. So it's happening more and more.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I'm aware of an example in Atlantic Canada where a sister department—the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency—a few years ago undertook and saw to the connectivity of all aboriginal communities in that province—not just the connectivity, but the establishment of what were called satellite Canada Business Service Centres. Canada has these business interface offices, business information offices, in all of the capitals. All first nations in that region have this service online with the libraries, informatics-based information.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: You must understand I'm talking about for vast areas. That's what I was talking about.

You were talking about the teachers' training. When I talked to educators, they've commented that they would like to know about their funding for longer periods of time. They said, we want 10-year plans, 15-year plans; give us some idea so we can plan our education and everything. What are you doing about that?

• (1240)

Ms. Line Paré: There are different funding arrangements between the department and the first nations. Some are more flexible. The alternative funding agreement is one example, where they have a five-year plan between the first nations and the department. So it depends on the funding arrangements.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: So it's different right across Canada, then? It's different in different areas across Canada?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have Mr. Valley as the last questioner. But we do have a little bit of time, so we'll see how that goes.

Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley: That's my question. I want to follow up on some of the things that have been said.

I would like to ask the Auditor General and the department.... And the reason I'm asking you, Auditor General, is that you mentioned some numbers suggesting that we were doing better in the past. So from your information, can you tell us what you know of how many students...? I'd like to go back, say, 20 years. Have we improved in 20 years? I know you mentioned a number in the nineties. Can you tell us your impression of how we've been doing in getting students into post-secondary? Then I'd like the department to answer that afterwards.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Yes, and I think the department is absolutely right that there has been significant progress. We note in the report—and they produce this in their performance report—that in 1968-69 there were 250 people being supported in the post-secondary program and there are 25,000 today; that's factual, that's correct. The point we're making is that there could be a little more complete analysis, saying that as well in 1998-99 there were 27,000. So there were more than there are now. It would be helpful I think to parliamentarians to be able to assess the program if some of those numbers were given a little more explanation, and the department could perhaps talk about some of the challenges and give a little more context to the numbers than just the comparison like that. And I believe they agreed with us on that.

Mr. Roger Valley: Okay.

Ms. Line Paré: I think with respect to numbers, the numbers are correct that we have about 23,000 to 25,000 students attending post-secondary education. I think it's important also to look at the demographics and the statistics of these students. Most of the students in post-secondary education are women. We have a lot of single mothers with children in the first nations communities. So this kind of analysis could be really interesting to do.

Mr. Roger Valley: All right, that's good.

That's the final question. That's it.

The Chair: You can share your time with Ms. Barnes.

Hon. Sue Barnes: With my time I'd like to get to the answer about school boards and some of the complexities around the fact that we often have first nations having to replicate what a whole board would do, whether it's for purchasing power, or curriculum, or whatever.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I think the fundamental point about what you raise is how very much is expected of individual first nation communities. When Canada devolved education to first nations it didn't devolve education systems, it devolved school houses. And in the context of when that occurred, considering the alternatives and the history, I think many would agree that was a very positive development and it's taken some time to get the kind of results folks want. And I think it's really remarkable to see how much small communities have achieved in the absence of what mainline society has in terms of school boards and departments of education.

INAC is not the first nations department of education, equivalent to a province. We talked about Ms. Paré's new branch of education. That exists in recognition of the need to bring more support to that collectivity of schools. And in part it connects with Monsieur Cleary's point about helping make things stronger so that when *l'autonomie* is indeed achieved, it's achieved in a healthier context with a better functioning plan for people to be all the more in control of.

There are examples of organizations that aboriginal people have come together to create, and that INAC has supported, that indeed do that secondary level school board kind of role: develop curriculum, teacher certification, and the whole series of supports. The example in British Columbia, to which I think you alluded earlier, is probably one of the outstanding ones in the country, and there are a few more, but they are only a very few. So as we work through round tables and work with first nations in the future on what is going to make a

difference in the long run, this issue of moving from a collectivity of schoolhouses to a strong functioning school system is going to be of utmost importance, in my view.

• (1245)

The Chair: That brings us to Mr. Bellavance, and then I think we'll just start to close in.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Madam Chair. I heard the departmental representatives tell us two or three times that they accepted the recommendations of the Auditor General's report. Accepting them isn't enough; they have to be implemented and they have to correct the deficiencies referred to in the report.

Ms. Fraser, how do you react when, after preparing two reports, you hear that the recommendations are being accepted when they haven't always been corrected?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We're going to look with considerable interest at the action plan the Department has undertaken to produce by the end of April, I believe. We're going to monitor this issue, and we'll come back in a few years to see whether there's been any progress based on the timelines contained in their action plan. We'll do the same calculation, even though it's not a perfect calculation, and we hope that the number of years will be significantly reduced.

Mr. André Bellavance: Are some departments worse than others with regard to the speed with which they correct the deficiencies you report? If so, is the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs one of the worst?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I wouldn't want to make any general remarks, but we often find that this takes time. If you look at the report we tabled last week, you can see that we've conducted eight audits and that four departments have shown satisfactory progress in our view. I dare believe that the next time we study education, we'll come to the same conclusion.

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. LeBlanc, going back to the question I asked in the second round on the roundtables that are being defended or, in any case, that are being presented as a panacea, as my colleague Bernard said. In concrete terms, how will the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable help solve the problems related to primary, secondary and postsecondary education discussed by the Auditor General? What's been started? I know it's scarcely been implemented, but you no doubt have projects.

Mr. Paul LeBlanc: I'm obviously not in a position to prejudge the findings of people who would take part in a roundtable. A number of examples of innovations, means and measures that can be adopted have been cited today. The important point in this roundtable issue is that this is an initiative of the Prime Minister, who has essentially brought together all the political and community leaders of the Aboriginal communities in Canada and the best experts. I dare hope not only that innovative ideas and impressive strategies will come out of this, but also that the spirit of partnership will help bring together resources and people of good will to move forward and to see progress as has never before been achieved.

Mr. André Bellavance: I'm going to hand over to my colleague Bernard. There's a little time left.

• (1250)

[*English*]

The Chair: I think we've done very well with the round of questioning in that we're really into our fourth round. This will be our first opportunity to actually finish our meeting on time.

I'd like to give a chance for closing remarks. As the chair, I try very hard not to make comments, but I'd like to say that I'm very interested in what I'm hearing around the table. They are good questions.

I know this is a very important issue. Mr. LeBlanc mentioned something about how we measure things. Maybe we need to look at ways of measuring knowledge. That really leads into the thought I have that sometimes I think we tend to measure in a southern way of measuring. That's for a lack of a better term; it's not a discriminatory term. But when I think of my parents, who I would think can challenge anyone at a PhD level of knowledge, I think we tend to sometimes forget that we have different kinds of knowledge.

Knowledge is knowledge, and we as first peoples of Canada also have to recognize that we can't keep putting ourselves down, thinking that our level of knowledge is not the same as what of a university degree can provide. There is knowledge in our communities. Maybe we've spent a lot of time trying to fit it into the grade-level way of measuring, and literacy might be one of those weak areas where we tend to grade everyone with an English or French level of knowledge when the reading comprehension tests are done.

It's for us to recognize and realize that we do have other ways of measuring knowledge. How do we incorporate it in a way that's parallel to the kind of education that we've all taken to be the one way of measuring how well we do in other areas? I think it is another way of looking at the level of education, and defining what education and knowledge are in our traditional way of doing that.

I very much applaud where people are going with education. I go to different meetings in different communities and see all the young people who are challenging us and changing those numbers that we like to look at. I always call them the *Globe and Mail* gloom and doom figures. That's one way of looking at things, but we also have to realize that we have to look at things in a different way and in a positive way.

I'm very encouraged by what I see. Yes, the numbers could be better, and we want to see more people take the formal way of post-secondary education, but we also have to recognize that there is knowledge that we need to learn to measure and put into the right context.

It's been a very interesting morning and afternoon. I thank all of you for your patience and cooperation in sticking with the time limits.

I want to take this time to thank all our witnesses, who were very brief in their presentations, therefore enabling us to do many rounds this morning. Thank you again.

This meeting is adjourned.

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