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Mr. Pablo Rodriguez

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• (0910)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.)):
Good morning, everyone. Good morning, dear colleagues.

As you may have noticed, there are two items on today's agenda. Firstly, we will hear from the Commission nationale des parents francophones.

[English]

Point two is committee business, for the last half hour.

[Translation]

Welcome, and thank you for being with us today.

You have about ten minutes to make your presentation. Following that, we will move to a round of questions, in a predetermined order.

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon (President, Commission nationale des parents francophones): On behalf of the Commission nationale des parents francophones, I would like to thank you for providing us with this opportunity to meet with you at a time when we need to rally all of our support in order to make progress in the area of official languages. As you know, the Minister of Social Development is preparing to conclude agreements, in January, with the provinces and territories with respect to the implementation of a national day care system. This project is extremely important for our communities.

The Commission nationale des parents francophones has an excellent relationship with the department. A few years ago, through Minister Stéphane Dion, we were successful in putting the issue of early childhood development on the agenda. It is why Social Development Canada is now a part of the Action Plan for Official Languages. The commission, speaking for early childhood development for francophones living in a minority setting, brought up the issue on three successive occasions with Ministers Stewart, Frulla and Dryden. We are now on the radar screen!

Last year, we received \$1 million over 25 months for the project called *Partir en français*, and more recently, we received \$365,000 over a period of 18 months for the second half of the project, called *Partir en français 2*. The most recent allocation was announced by member of Parliament Mr. Raymond Simard during our 25th anniversary gala dinner held in October, in Winnipeg. These monies will be used to build the capacities of our members and their partners in the field, because early childhood development falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Our network greatly appreciates the department's support.

We are working closely with the applied research sector to steer our day care pilot project—which is worth \$10.8 million—under the action plan. Two representatives of the commission as well as several francophone researchers living in a minority setting sit on the research advisory committee. The research will allow development of crucial scientific data upon which to base the department's upcoming policies and programs.

The issue of day care funding is of concern to us. In a minority setting, we do not have the same needs and priorities as the Canadian majority. We cannot expect provincial and territorial governments to fully grasp our specific needs and priorities. Therefore, we are asking them to make room for their respective francophone communities, just as the federal government does for the francophone community. You may find that our comments are very similar to those we made when the school governance issue was at the forefront 10 years ago. That is not a coincidence.

As we speak, only 8% of children in Canada have access to an accredited day care centre. Francophones in minority environments remain poorly served, even though they have a clear and pressing requirement to address the overall development of their children.

Francophone communities are demanding early childhood and family centres aimed at supporting families from the moment of a child's birth and providing a variety of services during early childhood. Educational day care is an essential requirement. However, if we wait one, two or three years—as is the current practice—we will miss the boat for the majority of children. At least half of them will be assimilated before the age of five and will not go to a French school.

Our greatest challenge in the minority environment is to raise the parents' awareness and to provide them with a system to assist their children from a very tender age. This is the foundation of every recruiting approach used by French schools. Preparation for kindergarten should start as early as a child's first attempts at speech. Adding French to a child's environment only after they start attending day care or kindergarten is waiting too long. In fact, there is a significant dropout rate in favour of English schools in first grade, simply because children are unable to keep up with the curriculum.

Learning a language—or two, as is the case in exogamous families—begins in the sixth month of pregnancy and peaks before the age of three. Talking and reading to a child are essential tools. Stimulation of the senses—touch, hearing, sight—is conducive to the development of the brain. Without this stimulation, we lose part of our learning ability, as well as the desire to learn. This is a striking reality which has a material impact on the future of francophones.

It is recognized in the business world that investing in early development leads to substantial and sustainable savings. Research has confirmed these savings in the most costly public services such as justice, health and social programs. While it may appear expensive to take action, the cost of inaction is beyond measure. As a society, we cannot continue to sustain these systems without a preventive approach to the youngest segment of the population. In today's economy, investing in human capital is the key to innovation and creativity.

According to the most recent research, the most effective programs are delivered by centres that focus on early childhood, integrate multidisciplinary programs that encourage strong participation by parents, start as soon as possible in the child's life, and are related to kindergarten access.

The research also indicates that essential components of early childhood and family education centres are health care services for parents and their children, play-based learning, educational resources, prenatal and post-natal support, and nutrition programs. The research unequivocally supports the direction taken by francophone parents and their partners from one end of Canada to the other, that is to say ECFCs that offer a multitude of integrated education, health and social services, adapted to the needs and realities of each of our communities.

Quebec's family policy is a good model for early childhood development across Canada. In addition to the emphasis that is placed on quality, two other key elements of the Quebec preschool initiative must absolutely be emphasized. Firstly, the anglophone and First Nation minorities receive equivalent services. It goes without saying, therefore, that minority francophone communities across Canada should be on an equal footing with other communities when it comes to receiving services from their governments.

The other important element is the participation of parents. In Quebec, parents effectively become the managers of the preschool centres, thanks to professional guidance and ongoing education. For francophone parents in a minority environment, there can be no question of letting the majority manage the family and early childhood centres.

The governance of French schools was so important that we went before the courts to obtain it. The management of ECFCs will be even more important because the children concerned are even younger and more vulnerable. Francophone communities must benefit from federal, provincial and territorial early childhood education funding agreements. Early childhood partners are positioned to negotiate with their government. They are demanding an equitable portion of the funding that has been specifically earmarked for the stable and sustainable development of francophone communities.

It is possible that the provinces and territories will not want to make room for francophone communities or give them any special consideration. Other avenues must then be sought out. Excellent solutions have been identified in the area of health care by the Société Santé en français. Other solutions have been found in areas such as the economy and human resources by the Comité national de développement des ressources humaines de la francophonie canadienne and the RDEEs, economic and labour development networks.

We understand the language of management. We are willing to explore other avenues with the department. I repeat, our needs and priorities are different from those of the majority.

The following 10 principles endorsed by the francophone parents' movement should guide the federal, provincial and territorial governments in establishing their policy regarding early childhood development for francophone children: the overall development of the child; integrated programs for families, both endogamous and exogamous, from the very birth of the child; integrated services, including educational day care, in a centre linked to a French language primary school; universal access; public funding; high quality of service—through an enriched program, adequately compensated professionals and standardized training; recognition of the needs and priorities of francophone communities regarding language, culture and identity; management by francophone parents; national legislation to establish the basic principles and ensure national standards; an equitable portion of the funding available within the framework of federal, provincial and territorial agreements.

• (0915)

The Francophone Parents Network is mobilizing with its partners, and everywhere we ask parents' federations to provide information to and raise awareness amongst all levels of government in view of the negotiations on the funding of the proposed national day care system. We want to speak with people from the Department of Social Development, specifically with Minister Ken Dryden and his provincial and territorial counterparts, to emphasize our four fundamental demands.

Firstly, we want the emphasis to be put on early childhood development. We want social development policies to foster an integrated approach to health, learning and social development in minority environments, centred on intervention among families in the months and years immediately following the birth of a child.

Secondly, we wish to see the creation of early childhood and family centres, which are commonly known as ECFCs. These centres should be linked to each French language primary school. ECFCs will be a centre for family intervention and will include a variety of services for children: educational day care, resource centres, preschool, play groups, early detection.

Thirdly, with respect to federal, provincial and territorial agreements, minority francophone communities must be a priority beneficiary of these agreements. The federal government must ensure that equitable funding is reserved for francophones in every jurisdiction. Governments must consider francophone communities as priority locations for immediate action. In other words, we do not have the luxury to wait as the rest of the population goes to the front of the line.

Fourthly, we are calling for the implementation of an early childhood network. Governments must immediately and actively support the consolidation of partners—institutions, professionals, instructors, communities and governments—into a network and provide them with the ability to get together, inform each other and promote francophone early childhood development in each province or territory.

We are talking about public policies and public funds. We want to hold this dialogue with the department. We have called for the striking of a joint committee to study these policies. Recently we approached the Réseau des affaires francophones intergouvernementales, whose coordinator is Nathalie Dubois, in order to participate in this joint committee and serve as a link to the provinces and territories. We want a tripartite committee. We are going to pursue our representations to Minister Ken Dryden so that the committee is struck as soon as possible. You can convey to him the importance such a tool would have in helping to shape federal government policies. The work of this committee would be enriched by the findings of the applied research initiative.

We believe that early childhood development is key to our future. It has been a long time since such a project has spurred so much enthusiasm in the communities. We toured the country between May and October this year: I can assure you that the expectations are high, people on the ground are looking forward to this and are ready to get down to work. The future of our families, our schools and our communities is at stake. As such, this issue also affects the future of bilingualism, multiculturalism and Canada's socio-economic development.

Thank you for your attention.

● (0920)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pilon.

[English]

We'll start our first round with a question from Mr. Lauzon.

[Translation]

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you.

Welcome, Ms. Pilon. You have done a great deal of research. Do you know why parents do not choose to send their children to francophone child care centres? Have you done any research on that?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: No research has been done on that issue, but we can state, after speaking to parents from each province, that there are not many francophone child care centres. Eight per cent of anglophone children have access to a day care centre: you can imagine that there are far fewer on the francophone side. But child

care centres, when they do exist, are not close to home. Generally, we want to have them near a French school to ensure that, if the parents register their child in a day care centre close to the school or in the same building, the child could then go to a French school.

Further, statistics tell us that 63% of our families have mixed marriages, which means that one parent is francophone and the other parent is anglophone. Generally, both English and French are spoken at home. The parents might choose the nearest day care centre if it offers the same services as the other centres. Thus, we want to set up more specialized services to attract young francophones.

● (0925)

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Do you think that this will lead parents to choose francophone centres?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: Yes, parents will choose centres where they can obtain services in French as well as child care. They want something more than day care. We need some way to attract them. However, generally, when they can, parents choose French day care centres so as to preserve their culture and language.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How do you intend to reach your objectives?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: We are working to ensure that each of our elementary schools has a child care and family centre. Our survival depends on this.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: With each of your elementary schools?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: Yes. There are more than 400 of them in Canada. If child care and family centres were paired with each of our elementary schools, families could proceed in a normal way.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Do you already have such institutions?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: We are talking about French schools, which, as you know, are essential to our communities.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Have you begun to set up these centres?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: Some places already have them.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette (Director General, Commission nationale des parents francophones): In our experience, registration rates are up in communities where there is a centre in the school. That is why we are taking a much broader view. If we had an early childhood and family centre, and not just a day care centre, parents could come in very early on to get information about their child. The centre would provide integrated health care service, which would enable parents to come in with their children and receive service in French. If it were impossible to integrate the centre into a primary school because of a shortage of space, it would have to be set up as close to the school as possible.

Bilingual day care centres exist in many places. However, "bilingual" means that the centre functions in English. Throughout our country, the word "bilingual" means that service in French is virtually non-existent.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How many schools have centres of the type you describe at this time?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: I would not know. There may be about 15 of them.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Is that all?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You say that the registration rates in these 15 schools are much higher.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Yes, that is true. Parents enrol their child in day care, and then, quite naturally, they receive the necessary support. Later on, they enrol their children in the schools.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Do you have any data to show the exact difference?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We do not have that at the moment. However, we can send you the relevant information.

The Chair: You may send that to the clerk.

Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Please proceed, Mr. André.

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Congratulations on your fine presentation, Ms. Pilon and Ms. Gagné-Ouellette. It is very interesting to see your dynamic approach to establishing more services for francophone minorities. You spoke a great deal about day care centres, what we call our care system, that is the child care agencies and facilities in family settings.

If I understand correctly, Minister Dryden's new social development policy will bring about some changes. It will be possible to improve the situation for young children in your areas of operation. Are health care services for young children accessible at the moment? I'm referring to vaccination, early detection, and all the parental support services for parents having all sorts of problems with their young children.

You say that you are going to reorganize these services under the new social development policy. How are these services provided? Are they adequate? Are they offered in French?

• (0930)

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Let us take the example of remedial teachers. In our French-language schools, these specialists often have to cover three or four schools in the same region. In Saskatchewan, there are one or two for the whole province. Children are already enrolled in school. Consequently, when early detection is necessary, the parents often have to turn to the English-language schools, because there is no service available in French. There may be more services in some large urban centres, but with the exception of Toronto, Ottawa and Moncton, there are very few such services.

Mr. Guy André: So all the psychosocial follow-up requested by parents is offered in English.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: In most cases. If people are lucky, they get to deal with a bilingual person. However, this is very rare.

Mr. Guy André: If I understand correctly, the new social development model you want to adopt, which would integrate day care services, schools and the health care system, would greatly improve the quality of the services you provide.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Exactly.

Mr. Guy André: You refer to Quebec's child care system. Some francophone communities are smaller than others. Did you consider

family-operated child care agencies in the context of your social development policy? Are you somewhat familiar with this concept?

These agencies have been developed in our rural regions, because of the smaller population there. Services are provided to young children by families and specialized educators. Their services and facilities are the same as those in day care centres, because they are incorporated into this system.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: In some of our communities, a school may have only 40 children. In that case, we would not set up an entire early childhood centre. Each of our communities determines its own needs; a family child care service could be the option chosen. In such cases, we would not only incorporate this family child care centre, but we would also support it, to ensure that it offers a high quality educational program.

We also offer support to parents through meetings or committees in the evenings, or through a small resource centre. I should mention in this regard that in some of our communities, we do not even have a public library. It would be good if our schools could have books available for our families.

In larger centres, we would establish early childhood centres, with all the services that go with them.

Mr. Guy André: How are you planning to incorporate health care services into these schools? I must say that I find this concept very interesting. In my region, services are offered through the CLSCs, but in your region the structure is different. Perhaps you are considering borrowing social workers or nurses, for example. Have any agreements been concluded in this regard?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: I must say, Mr. André, that our communities are very active. We spoke earlier about the Société Santé en français, which is establishing a national network of services in French. Some institutions have already been designated bilingual, which means that some communities are already able to provide services. Of course, we are working with the Société Santé en français. Consequently, we will be able to incorporate some of the health care services into those offered by the early childhood centres.

Mr. Guy André: You're talking here about providing services within the new structure you want to establish in schools, the early childhood and family centres. The idea is to provide a broader range of services.

• (0935)

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: That is correct. For example, when children receive their vaccination, a public sector nurse could visit the early childhood and family centres and we could invite parents in to meet her at that time.

Mr. Guy André: Would that not increase costs?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: No, the services already exist.

Mr. Guy André: So it is just a question of reorganizing resources so as to provide better service.

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: The idea is to provide services for our francophones under the same roof. The centre becomes the heart of the community. Francophones know that they can go there for health care services, nutrition information, and so on. Flu shots for francophones could be given at this location. The services are already being paid for in any case.

It is convenient for parents to come to the centre, and it becomes the heart of the community. If it is located close to the school and follows the child from birth, parents may then decide to send their child to the English-language school so that they can become really bilingual.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. André.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to welcome you. It has been very interesting listening to you. As you perhaps already know, I am from northeastern New Brunswick, from the Acadian Peninsula. In New Brunswick, we have already established a francophone school board and an anglophone school board. I think that has made the difference. That is why when you were reading your statement, you were echoing my thoughts on what had happened in my region. It gave people an opportunity. We always said that children were speaking English in the school yard and French in the classroom. We had trouble getting these programs adopted. That helped a lot.

My colleague, Mr. André, made some interesting comments on the possibility of setting up centres near the schools and using existing infrastructures, because the costs are already covered. I am going to give you an example. A small day care opened in Saint-Sauveur, in the region where I was born. They got a room in the school. About two weeks ago, I was in the area and I stopped by. While the pupils were in the classrooms, the children from the day care were outside and were using the infrastructures like the play areas, etc. Why reinvent the wheel? I congratulate you on the direction you have chosen to move in. I think it is important.

If there is access to these centres, it will encourage people to use them. My brothers and sisters live in northern Ontario. Personally, I think that is unfortunate. There is nothing to be ashamed of, but they are not near the area where their parents' mother tongue is spoken, they who were both francophones. Everything in the school yard is in English.

Let's get back to my question. You mentioned the Dion plan earlier on. Since the Dion plan was announced, have you received any funding and can you see a difference? If yes, how much?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We may have some opportunities under the Official Languages Action Plan, which includes \$22 million over five years for early childhood development in a minority environment. Of the \$22 million, \$10.8 million have been earmarked for applied research, namely to conduct research on child care facilities, etc. It has been conducted by federal government researchers. We sit on the applied research committee as a community. We have therefore worked very hard along with them to ensure that the research is relevant and takes our needs into account. Moreover, \$7.4 million has been earmarked for family literacy. That amount has been given to the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français. There is another \$3.8 million set aside for national organizations.

The Commission nationale des parents francophones has received a million dollars for a 25-month project that began in March 2004 and that will be completed in March 2006. This year, that enabled us

to tour the country, as Ms. Pilon mentioned, to make people aware of the concept of early childhood and family centres, and to oversee our community's needs. The rest of the money will also be used to increase our action.

Recently, we received another \$ 315,000 to help us and support our provincial counterparts, because there are federations of parents in each province that will also be tackling the job of enhancing government awareness. In fact, early childhood services and child care facilities come under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. We must ensure that our provinces can provide information to their governments to ensure that we receive funding for our francophone communities.

● (0940)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I would like to address that topic.

If I understand correctly, you went on a national tour. Was there any reluctance on the part of certain provinces that might have told you to mind your own business because it was their jurisdiction? Or did you sense a desire to cooperate on their part? They might have said that in 2004, it is time we worked together. I would like to know how people really felt.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We met with more than 300 people, school trustees, community partners and government officials. The majority of provinces were very open to the idea of listening to a presentation from our commission.

Officials in some provinces asked us this: "Where is the French money?" They told us to go and see Ottawa, since Ottawa wanted a bilingual Canada. Comments like that came only from certain provinces, not all of them: most provinces are very open. We are, nevertheless, continuing to increase our means. We must make people aware of the reasons why we need francophone schools. We also need early childhood and family centres attached to the schools to ensure that francophones are registering in French schools and that the community continues to grow.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Godbout, you have the floor.

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): I too want to welcome you. I apologize for arriving late, Mr. Chairman. A little earlier on, I met with representatives from three schools, who just happened to talk about leadership, as it happens. I am sure that you will accept my apologies, given your passion for school governance.

I would like to highlight the exceptional role that your organization has played in implementing school governance by French-language communities in the country. If the Commission nationale des parents francophones had not been there, Mr. Chairman, school boards would not be managed by French-language communities in our provinces and territories.

You're raising an important issue: early childhood and what I have always called the unfortunate phenomenon of early assimilation. When we are not successful in offering services to our children at a very young age, more often than not, they do not even go to our schools.

I'm going to ask you a question. Do not worry if you do not have the answer. Do you have figures? Do you know how much it would cost to set up Canada-wide early childhood centres that are integrated into our schools or in family environments? We are setting up a national program for child care centres and early childhood development services. If you were to meet Mr. Dryden—moreover, I believe that you already met with him in my colleague Mr. Simard's hometown—and you were to ask him to set aside money—not "French money"—that would represent your share of this national program, how much would you need?

• (0945)

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: When we met the Honourable Stéphane Dion, we discussed the Official Languages Action Plan. We quickly put a number on that during our initial meeting. We had not conducted a study. Based on the requirements of our parent federations, we estimated that at about \$33 million per year for all communities.

Since the announcement of the program *Partir en français 2*, we have been analyzing what already exists, what is being offered, and who is paying for what in our communities. We have parent workshops. Who is paying for that? Are volunteers being relied upon to a large extent? Are the programs paid for by the province? Are they federal projects? We are currently looking at this analysis of the context, and we hope to have some more accurate figures within the next few months.

Mr. Marc Godbout: I get the sense the committee is preparing a recommendation. If you were to ask us for our support with respect to transfer payments to the provinces, would you recommend that we include in our recommendation something that would compel the provinces to earmark funds for official language communities?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We want the funding to be fair. We know that offering services in French costs a bit more than offering some services in English. There already are far more services in English. The costs are even higher in remote areas because of distance. In the Yukon or in the Northwest Territories, some francophone communities don't get services. It costs a bit more for francophones, but we would like something fair.

Mr. Marc Godbout: You mentioned schools. Several day cares do exist in schools currently, especially in Ontario. How are you going to build a partnership with school boards, in other words, a partnership between school boards and parents with respect to day care services? Have you already started negotiations?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: We have already started to build some ties with the Fédération des conseils. These people are convinced that they need parents when it comes to setting up early childhood services, services for children younger than three. We know that kindergarten in Ontario starts at four.

They fully agree with the idea that parent committees would be responsible for a board of directors comprised mostly of parents. They took into consideration the opinion of Dr. Fraser Mustard, who says that parents are a child's first teachers. They have to be there to offer affection to their children as well as to manage day cares and early childhood centres for their children.

This has been very well received and we've been working together on this front on a regular basis. Trustees at the national level have

come to Winnipeg. Progress is being made and they're very happy to be establishing early childhood centres in schools where there is room to do so. They are all ready to do so.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Given this context, it would probably be very important to define programs. In francophone and Acadian communities, specifically with respect to health care services, there's always the phenomenon of what we might call "build it and they will come". Oftentimes, once services are set up, you still have to motivate the community to use them. Are you planning an awareness-raising campaign with your project?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: We are currently organizing a socio-community campaign aiming to raise awareness amongst parents of the importance of French at a young age and of the fact that things have to be done before the age of three. If you want your child to speak both languages fluently, in one way or another, he or she must be exposed to French. Of course, you need a socio-community campaign to that effect. Within the school boards, we are working on the issue of education. Moreover, school boards want to launch a major marketing campaign on schools. Together, we could launch a significant campaign that would underscore the fact that to be fully bilingual, you have to start learning at a young age.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godbout.

• (0950)

[English]

We're going to the second round. This time it's five minutes each.

[Translation]

Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us today.

I'm wondering about parents' choices and responsibilities. In my opinion, they have the responsibility and the right to locate child care resources for their children themselves. I have a difficult time understanding why they would necessarily need government support to that end.

Why not hand out the money directly to the parents so that they can decide what they want to do with it themselves?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: In my opinion, as taxpayers, we are entitled to receive services from our communities and from our government. It would be good to be able to give the money directly to parents, but the fact is that not all parents necessarily have an educational program at home focusing on their children's needs. I don't mean to say that parents who stay at home with their children are not able to do this. We were talking about early childhood services, which does not strictly mean early childhood health services. These services must be made available to parents who need them.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It wouldn't be necessary for them to stay at home with their children. If parents received the money to take care of their children directly, they could spend it on sending their children to day care. It should be their choice. In fact, under this day care program, the government would be deciding for them. Why not give the parents the money directly so that they can decide what they want to do for their child?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: In my opinion, parents are not aware of the choices they have because they've never had a choice other than English. By definition, a choice is between two things. However, from what you're suggesting, parents are not aware of the fact that there are two choices.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: For 6,000 years, parents have been able to decide what they want to do with their children. Our civilization was built on the principle that parents provide care to their children.

My question is more general. The issue is not strictly to decide whether day cares should offer services in French or in English, but also to determine whether the money allocated to childcare should go directly to parents and whether the government should decide for parents what to do with their children.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Mr. Poilievre, suppose you give parents \$2,000 a year. What are they going to do with that amount, when day care can cost \$500 to \$600 a week? Unfortunately, under the circumstances, they're going to use this small amount for other purposes.

With a national day care program, there are more opportunities, including an educational framework. Parents in general would benefit much more from such a program than they would from a small amount such as \$2,000 per year.

• (0955)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But all studies...

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, your five minutes are up.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Simard.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to our witnesses.

First, to respond to Mr. Lauzons's question, as to whether or not parents would avail themselves of the proposed services, I would like to mention that in the south part of my riding, the Christine-l'Espérance school was built, and it includes a day care. At first we thought it was gigantic, but after a year, we realize it is overflowing. Recently, there was a pilot project developed by the Précieux-Sang school which financed an early child care centre. There are eight spots, but there are already 40 names on the waiting list. Of course, I agree wholeheartedly that there is an urgent need for these services.

I think that at the provincial level, in Manitoba, things are going rather well. I would like to know if you are considering implementing a national strategy everywhere across the board, or whether you are considering a more gradual approach, one province at a time, according to the progress made by the provinces as partners.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We wouldn't proceed one province at a time: we would go to those communities that are already ready for ECFCs. Some communities are already ready and have already taken the initiative, in Manitoba, for example. The federal and provincial governments have both invested to move things forward in this area. Things are moving along, and they already have two demonstration projects.

In British Columbia, \$20,000 was granted to fund a demonstration project. That's a modest amount, but it's a start. Inside schools, the

school boards are willing to lend us or give us space, if they have any, of course. Otherwise, they can build anything for us. There's a kind of partnership growing in this way in our communities, and people are willing to work together.

Hon. Raymond Simard: In your presentation, you said that early development led to substantial and ongoing savings. I can tell you that some of our colleagues here are very concerned about the cost of our programs. I'd like you to give us some details on that.

In addition, you said earlier that services in French necessarily cost more. I'm not sure I agree with that statement. For example, the Montfort Hospital, which provides its services in both official languages, has operating costs that are among the lowest in Canada. So I think we should focus on that issue.

Can you tell us what the long term financial advantages are?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Well, it's important to point out that the Montfort Hospital's costs are lower because it is a major institution that serves a large population. The costs of a small francophone hospital in the Yukon would probably be higher. That's where we were coming from when we made that statement.

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: One dollar invested today in early childhood saves \$8 in a child's long term health and social development, and in justice-related costs as well. That's been proven all over the world. A one-dollar investment may seem expensive, but if you consider the long term savings, you can see that it's worthwhile.

Hon. Raymond Simard: You're talking about investing in early childhood in general, not just francophone early childhood.

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: We're talking about early childhood, from 0 to 3 years or from 0 to 6 years, depending on the province. One dollar invested today saves \$8 in the long run. I'm also talking about education. In education, one dollar invested for 6-to-12-year-olds saves \$3. Beyond that age, there are no savings to be had.

Hon. Raymond Simard: You said in your presentation that you were on the radar screen, and I find that interesting. You have met with Minister Dryden and a number of other ministers. There have been a number of recent developments in this area.

Quite significant amounts will soon be invested in early childhood. If francophone or minority communities don't get their share, if they miss out, nothing may happen after that for a long time. How can the Standing Committee on Official Languages support your efforts?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: In my opinion, the committee certainly can support us by making sure that when agreements between the federal government and the provinces or territories are signed, the francophone share is included in those agreements. In addition, you must make sure that at the provincial level, those agreements take community needs into account. Very often, the funding doesn't go to francophones: it is used for other purposes.

We have experienced that in the area of education. The situation has been rectified to some extent, but the fact remains that the French-speaking communities suffered greatly from that. In short, we need to make sure that those agreements provide funding to francophones. If the provinces don't want to agree to that, the federal government has an obligation in terms of linguistic duality, and must accordingly take care of its francophone communities.

•(1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simard.

Mr. Desrochers.

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Pilon and Ms. Gagné-Ouellette, I'd like to ask you a question. According to what you said earlier, officials in some provinces apparently told you, in politer terms than these, that if the francophone communities wished to obtain services for schools or day care, for example, they had only to call on the federal government. That caught my attention.

An agreement was signed in 2000 between the federal government and the provinces. Under that agreement, what is the provincial contribution? I know that in Quebec, we have special status. We all know that education, day care and health come under provincial jurisdiction. Even if you make every effort and have federal government support, if you don't get solid support from each and every province to set up structures for francophones, how is it supposed to work?

Could you identify which provinces have been reluctant in this regard, so that we can lean on them a little bit harder?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Don't forget that we were talking about officials. Some of them didn't understand the situation. It depended on the level of the position they were in. I could name the provinces, but I think you already know them.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I still want to hear you name them.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: I'm not sure I want to do that.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Ms. Gagné-Ouellette, we are currently considering doing a cross-Canada tour. We could visit the places where you are having problems. We could then provide greater support for your efforts. I'm just asking you the question to get information.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: In Manitoba and New Brunswick, things are working very well. In Prince Edward Island, they are working relatively well. Clearly, it's less easy in western Canada. We know our provinces and our officials.

As for French schools, they've had to allow them because we took our case all the way to the Supreme Court. We've been there four times. It is our view at the Commission nationale des parents francophones that early childhood is now a right under section 23. If the federal government provides funding, but the provinces refuse to see to it that we get funds for early childhood, we may have to go that route again.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: You're saying that you have to fight court battles in order to have your rights recognized in some provinces.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: It is very unfortunate, but that's the situation for francophone communities outside Quebec.

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: In order to have our French schools, we had to go to court. Take Prince Edward Island, for example. They didn't want to build a high school; they said that having to travel 70 miles was no big deal.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: In your consultations with officials, did you get the feeling that they had received the mandate from their government to support you also? Do those governments think that only the Government of Canada has to provide services?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: That's very interesting, Mr. Desrochers. Senior officials are currently discussing federal-provincial agreements with a view to the upcoming ministers' meeting in January. We've heard through the grapevine that provinces sympathetic to our cause are trying to convince the other provinces. That's a good thing, because they are their co-partners. So maybe it's easier for them to convince them than it is for us, even though we are trying to hammer our message home.

•(1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desrochers.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I could almost say to my friends at the other end of the table that they will win an Oscar if they go on like this.

Do you have legal opinions indicating that section 23 of the Charter applies to early childhood services? If so, does the section actually provide that provinces bear equal responsibility?

If only the federal government has obligations, but this is an area of provincial jurisdiction, where are we going?

Do you have legal opinions regarding the provinces? For example, Prince Edward Island has decided to put the issue before the court. On the other end, if only parents had been involved, they would never have had their schools. Sometimes, the government or the court must take a stand so that your rights be recognized.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: We do have legal opinions. However, we have never gone before the court. If this initiative does not work out, however, some parents will certainly be ready to go to court on the issue of academic upgrading, as well as other issues.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The legal opinion stipulates that you are entitled to it. Is that accurate?

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: If we view things from that angle, education begins at birth. Education does not begin when a child turns six, but at birth. That is when a child begins to learn.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: The legal opinion stipulates that Francophones need early childhood services as soon as a child is born. We must ensure that French-speaking children have equal opportunities when they reach school age and go to school.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do you believe that the federal government has an important role to play, and that it should persuade provinces who are not convinced they should integrate the care facilities, and so on.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: The federal government certainly has a role to play when it signs federal-provincial agreements. It must ensure that budgets are allocated to Francophones and communities. When we apply for funding for project, we have to show how we plan to spend the money. Provincial government must be accountable for their actions towards Francophone communities.

Mr. Yvon Godin: So you do not want the federal government to simply transfer money to the provinces, assuming that they are responsible enough to make their own decisions. It is like when parents decide where children should go.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: If our Francophone communities were as well treated as Anglophone communities in Quebec are, we would not have too many problems.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

[English]

We'll go for one last quick round.

Mr. Scheer.

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): I just have a few simple questions.

Do you believe that any early learning or early development can take place without putting a child into a government-regulated day care centre?

[Translation]

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Education begins at home.

[English]

Early childhood education is also a responsibility of the parents.

[Translation]

However, studies have shown that with a professional educational program, children have equal opportunities once they reach school age. In Francophone communities, when there is a mixed marriage—a marriage between a Francophone and an Anglophone—the children have to speak both languages. A program could be helpful to parents.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I know it's difficult being the Conservative on a committee like this, because traditionally we're responsible for bringing some reality to the discussion after all the dreamy, utopian ideas have been brought to the fore. But the reality is that if you're going to set up a national government-funded babysitting program—

•(1010)

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: It's not a babysitting program.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: —you're going to have to take dollars out of the pockets of parents through higher taxes. In the long run this is

going to cost a lot more money than \$2,000 per child per year. It's just impossible for it to be done at that level.

I don't understand why it is that advocates of this national government babysitting program do not believe that parents ought to have the right to keep their own money and then decide what they want to do. Perhaps they will choose some institutional care, perhaps they will choose to have their children raised by a family member, or perhaps they will send them to the local synagogue or mosque, but it ought to be their choice, not yours. Why do you think otherwise?

[Translation]

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: But we do not have a choice. We say that parents can keep the children at home. They have no choice.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Scheer: It's their dollars you're taking.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But you still have to pay. The Bloc Québécois is advocating that Quebec ought to be able to opt out of the national day care program but still get the money. One of my constituents asked, why can't I opt out and still get the money? Can you give him an answer?

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: If we followed that line of reasoning, we might even suggest that schools be abolished. We do not need to send children to school. We can educate them ourselves, at home. So I can keep my tax dollars that go to education. What kind of society would we turn into? We have become what we are because our children are educated. Go see what goes on in countries where children receive no education. Go see what sort of country they end up with. If we want to advance and become a revolutionary country, our young children need a good foundation.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You want to have a revolutionary society. I understand.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: No, I am talking about a progressive, not a regressive society.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So you really believe that this government babysitting initiative is as essential to the livelihoods of our children as public schools. You really believe that.

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: I would like to ask you a question. What is our greatest natural resource, the one we can never exhaust?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Our most important resource is of course our children, and that's why—

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: That is the answer. Why do we not take care of it?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: —I believe that the people who care most for them ought to have the decision as to how they're cared for. The people who care most for their children, with all due respect, are not you or a government bureaucracy but the parents of those children. We believe in parents.

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: The parents spoke to us, sir. They want family and child care centres. These parents want to work, but they want to be reassured: they want their children to be protected.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Let them choose that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: If that's the case, then why don't you just let the government give child care dollars directly to those parents, and they'll choose your institution to spend those child care dollars on?

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: How much are you going to give me? Two thousand dollars per year?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: As much as you're going to spend on a national day care program. But you're not going to be able to do it for \$2,000 per child per year. It's impossible.

[Translation]

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Mr. Poilievre, you just said that the parents should be given \$2,000 and be allowed to choose their institutions. We do not even have any institutions. Let the government give us the money, and we will set up our institutions.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But if there were the demand you allege there is, then people would put those dollars forward and somebody would respond by providing the institutions you're looking for, would they not? The reality here is that you believe you should spend parents' child care dollars for them, whereas we believe parents ought to have a choice.

[Translation]

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: That is not the reality. It is the same thing with health. We opened hospitals to take care of our patients.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, it's the reality.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much. You took a little over five minutes. Thank you.

We'll move on to Mr. André.

Mr. Guy André: I will not launch into that debate this morning. I would simply like to remind everyone that our family and social policies represent the best guarantee that we can offer services to all children. We have had that discussion in Quebec. If we give that money to families, what guarantee do we have that the children will receive those services?

You have indicated that francophone minorities outside Quebec have difficulty accessing social services and health services. Do you

have any statistics on the impact that the lack of services adapted to francophone minorities outside Quebec may have on child development? For example, do you have any statistics on low birth weight babies? Do you have any statistics on reporting to child protection services, because prevention services were not provided in time, etc.?

• (1015)

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: It is very interesting that you talk about statistics, Mr. André. Often, there are no studies on francophone communities because no one chose to study us. We are not identified as francophones; we are lumped in with the anglophones.

Some provinces, such as New Brunswick and sometimes Ontario, do much earlier targeting, because there are many more francophones. In the rest of the country, francophones are almost non-existent. This is why a portion of the \$10.8 million of the Official Languages Action Plan has been set aside for applied research. Francophones across the country were forgotten when the longitudinal study was done. We will do it now. That is why we have so few statistics. However, as we discuss this with our communities and our families, we know that there are no services and they have needs.

Mr. Guy André: That must have a negative impact on the development of some children. The new family policy should be of some assistance.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Personal stories are emerging. We are all aware of a nephew with learning disabilities. My nephew was obliged to go to an English school because there were no services for francophones. This child lost his francophone rights.

Mr. Guy André: I see. Under the new agreement with HRDC, the federal government will pay out \$2.2 billion to the provinces and territories over a five year period. How much money has been distributed since the beginning of this agreement?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Do you mean for francophones?

Mr. Guy André: Yes.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Are you referring to the agreements signed since 2000?

Mr. Guy André: How much of the planned expenditures have been paid out?

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: Manitoba was very generous. They paid perhaps \$100,000 per year. Ontario also paid out monies. I think it was in the order of \$500,000. It is about that. There are some bilingual services in New Brunswick because it is a bilingual province. However, that is all that has been spent since the signing of those agreements.

Mr. Guy André: So the agreements have not been respected very much since they were signed.

Ms. Murielle Gagné-Ouellette: They do not have any provision on this.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. André.

We are down to our last two interventions, by Mr. D'Amours and Mr. Godin. Then we will move to the next item on the agenda.

You have the floor, Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to make a comment, and then I have something to say to you. I want to calm down some of the hysterical crises we have been witnessing.

The last time I used the word “deplorable”, this fact was reported in the media, and I got some e-mails telling me that this was not good. I am speaking to you, through the chair. I find it quite deplorable that people from the party on the other side of the table make certain comments. Here in Canada, it is up to the federal government to ensure that the official languages are respected. This is not an option. I simply don't understand when I hear comments of this type.

I have three nieces. My sister lives in the riding of my colleague from Saint-Boniface. Theirs is an exogamous family. You spoke about that earlier. I have been able to observe this reality at close hand. You say that it is important not to wait two, three, four or five years before teaching children the language. That is very obvious. When they are two or three years old, they are already having trouble: they speak partly in French and partly in English. After a while, they no longer know whether they should opt for French or English. I very much agree with you when you talk about making these early childhood centres more important so as to provide better support for families.

There is no doubt that families living in minority communities, such as anglophones in Quebec, for example, need to be supported. Throughout Canada, it is very important to support francophones. As you mentioned, young people are our future. You are quite right. We must not silence our young people, our future, by saying things that give us virtually no choice but to be silent ourselves.

I would like you to tell us more about the benefits of early childhood and family centres for exogamous families.

•(1020)

Ms. Ghislaine Pilon: This is a subject about which I feel very strongly. I am married to an anglophone of Chinese origin. In our home, there are three cultures represented. My children are perfectly bilingual: they speak French and English fluently. Personally, I am passionate about French.

If the mother of a family is anglophone and is the person most often at home, what language do you think is spoken at home? English, of course, and that is to be expected. Those people are our best allies. When they decide to send their children to a francophone child care centre, they need tools and support. They come to see us to tell us that they want their child to speak French and English.

While I may be repeating myself, I would point out that this country has been bilingual for 35 years, but if we had started hiring bilinguals 34 years ago, we would not be in the situation in which we find ourselves today. We would not have to force people to learn a second language that nobody wants. I think we missed the boat at some point. It is not too late, provided we make the next generation bilingual. When people speak two languages, they learn a third much more easily. In our schools, many francophones are learning a third language, generally Spanish. What a wonderful heritage we are passing on to these children!

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: You referred to 63% of families. We are all familiar with assimilation. If we do not establish mechanisms of the type you have suggested, some time in the not-too-distant future, we could see even greater assimilation. In my riding, the situation is the reverse: there are far more francophones than anglophones. We respect the anglophones and vice versa.

This figure of 63% must be the average, not in a particular region, but throughout the country. Consequently, the smaller the number of francophones, the greater the risk of assimilation. In this case, we must ensure that we give them the tools they require. It is one thing to have the money, but we must also be given the tools to enable us to have a better future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

We will now go to the final speaker, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would just like to make a comment. I congratulate you on your work and I encourage you to continue your battle. I think most Canadians are on your side. We have to convince the minority that having two official languages is something that enriches Canadians. A third language enriches us further. Some countries have six languages and they do not get into fights over language issues.

We have two official languages communities in Canada. The day we work together to give them the tools to survive, I think we will have made a significant step forward and we will be able to move on to some other issue.

I would like to thank you myself. Keep up the good work.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I too would like to thank you, Ms. Pilon and Ms. Ouellette, for appearing before us today. I would also like to thank the committee members for their good work. I wish you good luck, and perhaps we will be seeing you again soon.

The committee is staying here.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Guy André: Before this meeting ends, I would ask for the committee's unanimous consent to present a motion. It reads as follows:

That the Official Languages Committee find out why the status of the two official languages was not respected by the RCMP officers assigned to security duties on Parliament Hill during the visit by the US President.

We had a number of similar complaints that day. I would therefore like to move this motion.

•(1025)

The Chair: Do I have unanimous consent? Agreed, you may table the motion. Do you want this to be a report?

Mr. Odina Desrochers: In that case, I have another motion to present, Mr. Chairman. If you agree that we should study this problem, it might be a good idea to have those in charge of the police operations come in to explain to us why no respect was shown for the two official languages.

The Chair: I think that could be part of our future business, something we will be discussing immediately after the motion is tabled.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I respect your decision, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I have received the motion. Is it your wish that...?

Mr. Odina Desrochers: We have it in writing and we will bring it to you.

Mr. Guy André: We will give it to you so that you can follow up on it.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: It is in one language only.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I am new to Parliament, Mr. Chairman. Is there supposed to be one day's notice for the presentation of a motion?

The Chair: There is supposed to be 48 hours' notice, unless there is unanimous consent. If we had not had unanimous consent, I would not have been able to allow Mr. Desrochers to present his motion. But everyone agreed.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, we agree on the motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

[The meeting continued in camera]

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