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

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**

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

Monday, June 1, 2009

•(0935)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)):** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we will continue our study on the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada.

I want to say at the outset here that we welcome all of our witnesses. Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to be here.

For those of you who may not be aware, we've been in Halifax, Moncton, and Montreal. We're going to spend a couple of days here in Toronto, and then we hope to travel out west in the fall.

Once again, I want to thank you very much for coming here today and taking the time to give us your perspective on what's going on with poverty in this country.

I'm going to start on my left-hand side with you, Trevor. We're going to work our way across. We'd ask that you try to keep it to five minutes, as best you can. The timer will go off at five minutes, but I'm not going to cut you off right at five minutes; it will just give you an idea of where you are in the timeframe. We'll then follow that with some questions from the floor.

So, Trevor David, welcome, sir. I'm going to give you the floor. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Trevor David (President, AfriCana Village and Museum):** Thank you very much.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. And good morning, members of Parliament of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

My name is Trevor David. I'm president of AfriCana Village and Museum, a proposed for-profit/non-profit social purpose enterprise community and economic development initiative created to develop an African-Canadian-Caribbean cultural heritage tourism entertainment destination on the waterfront of the greater Toronto area.

This will create 2,000 cultural jobs and thousands more in spin-off jobs. Our goal is to create an economic engine and a wealth generator for the African-Canadian community.

Before I commence my submission, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your colleagues again for the opportunity to share with you some of the social purpose and

market-driven solutions and business concepts we have developed to address the 400-year history and sad state of affairs of the African Canadian community 400 years after our history books tell us that Matthew Da Costa was the guy who interpreted for Samuel de Champlain in 1603-1604. So it's been quite a while, and we're hoping today to maybe take a step in the right direction.

In my submission, I would first like to answer the following questions: Can current federal resources for reducing poverty be deployed more effectively? If so, how? What additional federal resources are needed for reducing poverty in Canada? What sources of funding are available to pay for these additional resources?

And, second, what strategies and solutions is our organization proposing to reduce poverty?

In the U.K., they've had the same issue with unemployment among marginalized communities. Over the past 10 years, they have made significant progress in utilizing social enterprise as part of the solution. As a matter of fact, they have created an entire new ministry called the Office of the Third Sector, a dedicated body with its own minister. The U.K. government recently released a new report called *Third Sector Strategy for Communities and Local Government*, in which they have linked the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and tourism with their third-sector strategy initiatives. Their mission statement reads:

We aim to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities, to support the pursuit of excellence and to champion the tourism, creative and leisure industries.

So as you can see, the U.K., which has made some strides in addressing poverty, has used social enterprise. They have actually created a third sector to address some of these issues, and they have actually linked that to the cultural and tourism industries.

We had no knowledge they were doing that in the U.K., but when the concept of AfriCana Village came to us about four or five years ago, we thought if we could take what is basically the only natural resource the black community has, the cultural sector and the entertainment sector, and leverage that into a social enterprise to create jobs, we might make an impact in addressing some of the issues confronting us.

For instance, we believe that Infrastructure Canada's Building Canada Fund can be deployed in more constructive and innovative ways to address poverty among marginalized groups and communities. We know that the Building Canada Fund specifically calls for urban tourism projects. AfriCana Village fits right into that niche. Highways and urban tourism infrastructure are two of the things the federal government has been looking at with the Building Canada Fund. Urban tourism, that's what AfriCana Village is.

As is done in the U.K., we believe that Canada should consider using unclaimed funds from dormant bank accounts to fund social enterprises and macroeconomic projects. As far as I understand, tens of millions of dollars are left every year in banks as unclaimed funds, and I believe they go back into the treasury. Well, in the U.K., what they have done is to use these funds to fund social enterprises and help lift up marginalized groups and get them working and paying taxes. That may be something the standing committee would want to take a look at, in terms of being innovative and creative.

Also, on the issue of pension funds, in California there is the California Public Employees' Retirement System, CalPERS. I know you may not have input in this area, but you may want to give some consideration to it. Some of the large pension funds in the U.S. allocate half a per cent or a quarter of a per cent of the fund for urban tourism development projects in marginalized communities. You have trillions of dollars of funds locked up, and that's another way to use it to good purpose. We're not talking about risking the majority of the funds. Maybe half a per cent or a quarter of a per cent is used to stimulate economic activity and to create economic engines and wealth generators in marginalized communities.

Also, just quickly, in the event that Canada, Ontario, and the GTA are successful in the bid for the 2015 Pan-Am Games, we believe it's an excellent opportunity for us to showcase to the world what kind of country we really are. Most of these countries that take part in the Pan-Am Games are from the Caribbean and so forth. Wouldn't it be a wonderful display for us to use some of this Pan-Am Games money and for the government to grant us maybe 40 acres of waterfront land?

Do you know that the federal government owns thousands of acres of waterfront properties in the Golden Horseshoe area? Why not allocate us 40 acres, "40 acres and a mule"? Well, keep the mule, but why not grant us 40 acres towards creating some kind of a destination, some kind of place where the African Canadian community can create some kind of Disneyland of Afrocentric art, music, and culture, a sort of year-round Caribana on the waterfront? There again is the stimulus, something that will kickstart the creation of wealth that can then be used to fund other projects in the community for young entrepreneurs and for scholarships and so forth.

We have a number of ways to address this issue. I'll just quickly wrap it up by saying that we also believe the Employment Equity Act should be strengthened in order to create jobs and to make sure that African Canadians and other visible minority groups get their fair share of jobs. We know that the government, with this stimulus package, is giving billions of dollars, but is there anything in place to make sure that some of the wealth is spread around a little bit?

I remember when the SkyDome was being built here in Toronto. It cost \$800 million. You know, we are taxpayers here in the city. I checked with the Carpenters' Union and found out that there were only two black persons who worked on the SkyDome, two out of the thousands of workers who were utilized on the SkyDome. Our tax dollars went into it. We pay taxes, right? Only two African Canadians worked on the SkyDome. Those were taxpayers' dollars. It was our tax dollars that went into building this edifice that was later sold for \$25 million to Rogers.

There again, it's about being inclusive. I'm not here to talk about the past. I'm really talking about solutions for the future. I'm talking about working together with the federal government, which has a responsibility to all of its citizens. It can't just leave this up to the local or the provincial government. We've been in Canada since 1604. We were side by side with Samuel de Champlain when this country was founded.

We're not just another minority group. We're one of the founding peoples of this country. You can check your history books. James Douglas of B.C. was a black man. He was the governor who founded B.C. William Hall of Nova Scotia won the first Victoria Cross for this country. We've been here from day one. In the War of 1812, we died on the waterfront defending southwestern Ontario from the Americans. We have been here every day since day one.

I'm just asking the committee to ask the government to maybe make an investment in the black community. We see that in the U.S., where they're putting together a billion dollars. The Republican Congress assigned a billion dollars to build a national museum of African American history and culture on the mall in Washington, on five acres across from the Washington Monument. The Republican Bush White House did this. We're asking the government to show the Americans and show the world that when we say we value diversity, those are not just empty words, that we really mean it.

We have 40% to 70% unemployment in the black community. This is from Professor Ornstein from York University. That's 40% to 70% unemployment, my friends, and that is mind boggling, but this is what we face every day. That's why you see the crimes and the issues in our community. The young men and the people are hopeless. It's amazing that it hasn't boiled over into something à la France.

We are trying to come forward with solutions. We believe that if we find a willing partner in the federal government, we can do great things. We can build institutions, cultural entities, and have cultural tourism that will generate \$500 million to \$600 million a year. Caribana does that in two weeks. Ask the government here. It generates \$48 million in PST for the provincial government over a two-week period. Jim Bradley, the Minister of Tourism, told me that. That's \$48 million in two weeks. Can you imagine what a year-round destination on the waterfront would do, not only in terms of generating taxes for the city and the province, but also for the federal government? What about the GST?

● (0940)

So we're asking the federal government, basically, to partner with us, to talk to the provinces, to talk to the city about working with the local black community and social entrepreneurs like myself, who have ideas. There's no shortage of ideas. What we need is a willing partner at the federal level, to engage us and work with people like myself who are committed—committed—to the cause of building economic and cultural institutions that will not only be of benefit to the black community, but be of benefit to this country.

Thank you.

● (0945)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. David, and thank you for your passionate delivery there.

Mr. Rae, welcome again. It's good to see you. I know we spoke during our employability study. It's good to see you again. You've got five minutes, sir.

**Mr. John Rae (President, Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's good to see you, again as well.

Members of the committee, I'm delighted to be here.

Way back in 1981, the United Nations conducted the International Year of Disabled Persons. It did so under the forward-looking theme of full participation and equality. That was 1981. Since then, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been put into place, and it spoke about equal protection under the law and the equal benefit of the law. Unfortunately, we've done not too badly in terms of equal protection of the law, but we're a long way from achieving either the goal of the international year or the promise of the charter, namely the equal benefit of the law.

So what do we see? Today, persons with disabilities are among the poorest of the poor in Canada, among the most unemployed in Canada, among the most chronically marginalized in this country. We submit that ongoing situation, that ongoing plight, is a national disgrace. It's nothing short of a national disgrace in a country like this.

So what do we need? We need a national economic strategy. I've chosen those words very carefully—and, Mr. Chairman, you've heard me speak about this one time before, and I did not mean a national employment strategy, I meant it when I said a national economic strategy. Instead of looking at things in the typical way government does, a piecemeal approach, we are calling for a holistic broad-brush approach.

Where does it start? It starts with the main tenet that has been missing forever in this country, and that is national political will. Thus, we call upon the Prime Minister to convene a new approach, calling together business, labour, and citizen organizations like mine, like the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, the DisAbleD Women's Network, citizens organizations, to try to forge a new partnership.

That partnership needs to look at employment. It should start by making the federal public service the model employer that we want it to be. In the last year or so there was a new commitment to hiring visible minorities in the federal public service. I think that's a good idea. We believe a dedicated, energetic strategy needs also to be put into place to cover the disabled community. And that needs also to take place in all provinces and territories across the country and among all other employers, both private and public.

In Canada, we have the opportunity to move from province to province. That is enshrined in the charter itself. It's called mobility rights. We, too, have the right to move across country. But if you look at the disparity that exists province to province, this is what we find. I was first entertained when I heard this notion; now I'm not. Laurie Beachell, the national coordinator of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities says that if you are disabled, if you need home care, you'd better live in Manitoba; if you want technical aids, you'd better live in Ontario; and so on and so forth. What he means by this is that, in the area of technical aids, as an Ontarian I have the opportunity to access Ontario's assistive devices program, but if I should leave Ontario and move just one mile across the border into Manitoba, I would not have a similar opportunity.

I think that's disgraceful. We live in what is supposedly one country. Why do we not have similar entitlements in all provinces? What this needs is national standards, a national strategy.

In the area of income, we hear about the disability tax credit. I'm retired. I'm a taxpayer. I benefit from that. I'm very pleased about it. It does help offset some of the costs of disability. But I think calling it a tax credit is a grand misnomer. People like me who work, benefit. People who are on social assistance, who I must say need it even more than I do, don't. That's not a credit; it's a deduction. If you mean it to be a deduction, then call it a deduction; that's fine. We are among those who believe that the tax credit should become a true refundable tax credit.

● (0950)

A lot of the work we do, Mr. Chairman, is in trying to remove old barriers and prevent the introduction of new ones. Believe it or not, in 2009 a growing amount of our work involves trying to prevent the introduction of new barriers. That happens, believe it or not, in this year in this country. The area of technology provides a good example. A lot of technology is not developed with the notion of universal design in mind; thus either it is unusable by us or it requires expensive additional technology. To make a cellphone talk involves our buying extra adaptive technology to make it work. You can go to a store and buy a microwave, or travel on Air Canada and use all that's available. I am presented with more and more touch screens that have no buttons and that I can't use. Is it any wonder that I call this discrimination?

Of course, in the area of income, the disabled community's plight and level of poverty is well known and well documented, especially in this province. Report upon report has come out in the last year. As you know, Ontario has embarked upon a poverty reduction strategy. We'll see what happens. One of these reports has made a very interesting and perhaps startling revelation; that is, if you put \$1,000 more into the pockets of poor people, it will make a significant difference in their health status. We know that our health care system is overburdened. We need to do everything we can to try to help with it.

Finally, I want to talk about a point in the last budget, the infrastructure money. There are potentials here, but to what extent does that program include money designated to help remove some of the barriers that affect persons with disabilities? Some of the money is going to colleges and universities, and that's a good idea. Some colleges and universities need significant retrofit to make their buildings more accessible. To what extent is it intended that some of this money be used for that? In the area of public transit, the transit needs to be made more accessible. Can that money be used—never mind can it, but is it intended to be used for those purposes?

In conclusion, we're calling for a national economic strategy that will begin with political will, that will include some work on labour market involvement, that will look at income security and at removing barriers to technology, that will also address the issues of first nations people with disabilities, and that will make use of some of the infrastructure money to assist our community.

Mr. Chairman, these days governments at all levels are finding funds to bail out corporations. Isn't it time that some more money be found to help bail out those Canadians who are most in need of assistance?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chair:** Thank you, John.

We'll move to Sherry Campbell from Frontier College.

Welcome Sherry. The floor is yours.

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell (President, Frontier College):** Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I'm thrilled to be here.

I was a keener and arrived a little bit early, and I was listening to some of the other sessions. So unlike one of my colleagues who was

here earlier, I am going to link low literacy and poverty quite explicitly, I hope.

Frontier College is Canada's original national literacy organization. We're quite proud that this year we're celebrating 110 years of national literacy programming. We have always been working on the frontiers with those who are most marginalized. Our programs include one-to-one tutoring, homework clubs, reading circles, classroom support, ESL, prison literacy, aboriginal summer camps, and workplace literacy. The learners we serve are poor and often on the margins of society, and they include families living in social housing, newcomers from racial and cultural minorities struggling to survive on low-paying jobs, high-school dropouts and at-risk youth who are chronically unemployed and often criminalized, first nations people living on remote reserves across Canada, prisoners, and people with disabilities.

We believe literacy is a fundamental human right, so that people can participate fully in a wider society. Any successful strategy or plan to reduce poverty in Canada must address the issue of low literacy and poverty, and the findings from these studies are sobering. People with low literacy levels are twice as likely to be unemployed as other adults.

I was listening to a story on the radio this morning about a retraining program from the manufacturing sector, trying to retrain their laid-off workers. They were teaching them food safety certificates, everything entailed with new food safety training so they could work as dietician assistants, etc. But one of the barriers to these women completing the retraining program was their low literacy levels. These women couldn't read or write well enough, after spending years in manufacturing and not using their literacy skills, so even the money going into retraining programs has to start with basic literacy upgrading.

People with literacy problems have only two-thirds the income of other adults. Individuals with the lowest levels of literacy earn \$28,000 less than those with the highest literacy levels. We know that people from poor families have higher rates of both illiteracy and poverty. People with low literacy cannot fill out the forms or even access a lot of the supports that the government has for them. It's an important service. People need to understand that to access housing, or health care, or other government programs and services, they need to have a pretty high functioning level of literacy. They are much less likely to be engaged in civic participation, such as voting or attending community meetings, or school meetings.

Low literacy, we know, is intergenerational, as is poverty. For people who cannot help their children learn to read and write or do their schoolwork, we know their children often grow up also becoming adults with low literacy.

Children in poor families are likely to be labelled in the school system and are placed in classes where less is expected of them and less may be offered. As a result, many poor children either drop out of school or graduate without being fully literate.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives recently put out a paper headed "Poverty reduction is the best cure for an ailing economy". It said that a grade 10 student who drops out of high school loses out on more than \$120,000 in their lifetime earnings.

Poverty and low literacy are intertwined. We lose as a society when students drop out. We lose as a society when people cannot understand their prescription medicine instructions, when workers cannot read safety instructions, when parents cannot read bedtime stories to their children.

While we, like other literacy providers, would certainly welcome additional government resources for community-based literacy programs to better serve learners, we also know that only a small fraction, about 5% to 10%, of adults with low literacy skills enrol in literacy programs for upgrading. We believe that new approaches are required to raise the literacy levels and to reach more learners, so we propose the following: that HRSDC pilot projects be embedded in community-based literacy programs among non-traditional literacy service settings, such as food banks, health clinics, counselling services, and retraining programs, to access more potential learners.

We know people aren't accessing those programs because they're outside of their community. We know there's a stigma attached to having low literacy skills. We also know that people may not be aware of how low their literacy skills are. The woman I mentioned earlier coming out of a manufacturing job wasn't necessarily dealing with the barriers that her low literacy provided, until she was forced to re-enter or reattach herself to the workforce.

We know that the people who are suffering the effects of increased poverty are accessing more and more community organizations, so we would ask that literacy programs be embedded in those.

• (0955)

We'd also like to suggest that federal government departments review all their programs from a literacy perspective. For example, Health Canada could review its instructions for medicine bottle labelling and ensure the language was accessible to Canadians with low literacy skills.

To conclude, poverty and low literacy are intertwined, and any successful poverty reduction strategy must address this. We know from numerous studies that too many Canadians are living in poverty, being left behind by traditional educational systems, and not accessing programs.

I'd like to end with a quote from a report by TD Economics. Craig Alexander is the chief economist at TD. A few years back they did a report called *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action*. To quote the report in its conclusion:

The best news is that efforts to improve literacy can have dramatic and far reaching effects. Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society.

Thank you.

• (1000)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Sherry.

We'll now move to Margaret Eaton from the ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation.

Margaret, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Margaret Eaton (President, ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation):** Thank you very much, and thank you, Sherry, for that wonderful lead-in to my follow-up comments on literacy. We have some recommendations that will build on those fabulous points.

My name is Margaret Eaton, as mentioned. I'm president of ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, and it's a great pleasure to be here to address this really crucial issue.

I'm also going to speak about those tremendous connections between adult literacy and poverty. The two really are inextricably linked. If we can raise adult literacy levels, we will definitely raise Canadians out of poverty.

As Sherry pointed out, the recession is taking a terrible toll right now. As unemployment rises, there are waiting lists across the country—sometimes months long—for Canadians to enter literacy programs. The gap between the skills of a line worker in manufacturing and the skills they require for a job outside that sector is, for many, immense. Literacy is a foundational skill, and by literacy I mean the reading, writing, and math skills necessary to participate in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community to achieve one's goals.

According to international assessments, about 42% of Canadians are at low literacy. That means they fall below a high school level, which is the internationally recognized standard for where we should be to participate in the knowledge economy. Some of those people are at high levels of income, but a great percentage are not.

As Sherry pointed out, low literacy is absolutely correlated with low income. This group is less likely to be employed than groups at higher levels of literacy. It's just harder to find and keep a job. Without literacy skills, the chances of raising yourself out of poverty are much lower. We're worried that many Canadians in this current recession don't have the skills they need as this economy shifts.

We've seen the decline in manufacturing and the squeeze in forestry and mining. These places all provided high-income jobs, in some cases, for people with very low literacy skills. And they're having a tremendous time making the switch. We also know that jobs are requiring higher levels of skills. For example, the trucking industry used to be a wonderful refuge in some places for people with low literacy, but even trucking companies are now requiring drivers to participate in inventory management. They have on-board computer systems they have to manage.

Many Canadians are going to need to retrain and upgrade their skills to compete in this changing labour market.

We recently asked Ipsos Reid to sample Canadian workers about their own levels of literacy. We asked them whether, if they were to lose their jobs today, they possess the necessary literacy skills to secure a new job. Fully 21% of Canadians are concerned to some degree that they don't have those necessary literacy skills.

Along with that, we also need to look at financial literacy and numeracy skills among those with low skills. As we saw in the fallout from the mortgage issue in the U.S., which we're feeling a little bit in Canada, financial illiteracy was a huge contributing factor. These skills can also help raise people out of poverty.

As Sherry also said, the literacy level of children is absolutely correlated with the literacy level of the parents. If we're going to break the cycle of low literacy, we must address adult literacy.

In our Ipsos Reid study we also asked who is responsible for improving the skills of Canadians. Most believe, of course, that it's up to individuals to improve their own skills, but it appears that they aren't expected to do it on their own. Four in ten believe that an individual's place of work has an important role to play. But seven out of ten Canadians also believe that the government should contribute to improving adult literacy. That is, the vast majority of Canadians want their government to take a role in supporting adults in improving their skills.

We recommend that Canada develop a poverty strategy and that as a key plank of that strategy it create a literacy and essential skills strategy to ensure that Canadians have the skills they need to compete in the present and future workplace. Skills and employment are key elements in lifting Canadians out of poverty and for ensuring that they stay out of poverty. I appreciated John's comments about the notion of an economic strategy, because this is really an economic issue. I believe this committee could really take a leadership role in defining a large strategy that could address many planks of the concerns raised today.

What role can the federal government play? We believe the federal government can play a strong role in providing leadership in the creation and implementation of the national poverty strategy, with a key part being a national literacy strategy. By convening the provinces, territories, and literacy stakeholders, we can create that

national strategy. It can provide a unified and principled approach to literacy, eliminate that patchwork of services that exists across the country, and provide real standards.

● (1005)

The federal government can create a vision and goals for the country, matching our workforce to the needs of a global economy.

Raising the literacy levels of Canadians means that everyone has access to a good-paying job. That has a huge impact on the quality of life for individuals. Higher literacy is correlated with better health, higher income, and higher civic participation. Higher literacy also means a country with a workforce that can compete in what is increasingly an international labour market. Increasing skills and reducing poverty has a far-reaching economic impact on our country.

Our competitiveness, our productivity, and our creativity depend upon a foundation of solid literacy and numeracy skills as a key plank in reducing poverty.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Margaret.

We'll now go to John Stapleton from the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

John, welcome. The floor is yours for five minutes.

**Mr. John Stapleton (Senior Policy Advisor, Atkinson Charitable Foundation):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Committee members, good morning. My name is John Stapleton. I hold social policy fellowships with the Metcalfe Foundation. It's in St. Christopher House in Toronto. My work is also funded by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

I would like to make three observations and recommendations to the committee. The first concerns the federal government's diminishing role in addressing Canada's social safety net. The second relates to poverty reduction strategies at the provincial, territorial, and federal levels. The third concerns social assistance asset limits in particular and what the federal government could actually do about that.



On the first point, in the 1980s the federal government's share of GDP exceeded the total provincial share. It is presently at two-thirds of the provincial share and falling, while the provincial share is rising. At the present rate of decline, the federal share could actually go below the gross municipal share of GDP by 2025, again if present trends continue. This means that the federal government is heading toward a lesser role in setting national standards for social programs, as its spending power and its fiscal presence diminishes over time.

As you know, the federal government's ability to fund its own programs will be sorely tested in the next decade, as baby boomers retire, seniors' benefits increase, and tax revenues diminish. I urge the committee to note these disturbing trends and take them into account in assessing the Government of Canada's future role in setting social policy. The federal government should try to reverse the trend toward erosion of its share of social spending to maintain its leadership role in the future.

The second point is in regard to poverty reduction strategies. Although the Government of Canada has not adopted a poverty reduction strategy itself, the majority of provinces have now adopted such strategies, including Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, and, most recently, a couple of weeks ago, Manitoba. It's no accident that Canada's two largest provinces have been the first to pass poverty reduction legislation. As provinces grow in fiscal size compared to the federal government, the two largest provinces have the greatest fiscal capacity to address that poverty, at least in part, on their own.

Smaller provinces with lower fiscal capacity and western provinces more influenced by commodity price cycles have yet to adopt such strategies. If this situation persists, it may be the case that poverty reduction will look very different in some Canadian jurisdictions than others. The federal government should not allow this to happen. The federal government should exert its leadership role and set a national poverty reduction strategy at the earliest possible opportunity.

I've also provided you with comments on completion of the national child benefit and the disturbing trend that five of Canada's smallest jurisdictions have not been able to implement an integrated child benefit. This also shows the lack of capacity of smaller provinces and territories.

On the final issue of asset limits and social assistance, Canada's abandonment of its cost-sharing platform for social assistance and services, the Canada Assistance Plan in 1996, is important, but CAP was not only a cost-sharing vehicle; it also set parameters and guidelines in what provinces could and could not do. For example, CAP disallowed workfare and set asset limits for provinces and territories to follow. But with the demise of CAP 13 years ago, many provinces implemented various forms of workfare. They also reduced asset limits by many orders of magnitude, to the point that eligibility for welfare now requires destitution as a standard eligibility requirement.

Make no mistake, there's been no time in the history of Canada's social assistance programs that asset limits have ever been lower and the programs harder to access. This means that in those provinces with low EI protection, whose caseloads are rapidly rising—that's Quebec, Ontario, and B.C.—unlike New Brunswick and Newfound-

land, welfare eligibility is very different than it was in previous recessions when welfare caseloads also grew. In previous recessions, recipients were allowed a reasonable cushion of assets to allow them to establish themselves once they were able to leave welfare. Those assets are no longer allowed, and as a result, we'll see a large and costly overhang in caseloads that will persist long after this recession is over.

Here is something the federal government could do, absolutely free. Previous displays of federal leadership show that the provinces and territories can and will respond to federal calls for change in national standards. For example, when Minister of Finance John Manley asked provinces to stop clawing back increments in the federal NCBS in 2003, all provinces complied. When HRSDC asked all provinces to exempt RESPs from welfare payments in 2004, all jurisdictions complied. When Finance Minister Flaherty asked provinces to exempt the working income tax benefit—the WITB—and the registered disability savings plan from welfare payment on December 23 of last year, all complied. However, when no call is issued to exempt either RRSPs or the new TFSA from welfare payments, provinces and territories retain the policies to count TFSAs and, more importantly, RRSPs as assets and income under provincial welfare programs. Only Alberta, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador provide any amount of exemption on these savings vehicles, again as exemplified in some of the comments that John Rae made earlier.

• (1010)

So what's the result? Unemployed workers with a few thousand dollars in RRSPs, who apply for welfare, are told that they have to liquidate them in order to become eligible later on. They cash them out at a low point after the market crashed, spend the proceeds before getting a single dollar of assistance, then face a tax bill in the next year when they can least afford to pay it. For their trouble, they have no savings for their retirement, and they will become even more reliant on programs like the guaranteed income supplement when they turn 65, all as a result of shortsighted policies that will cost all of us dearly.

I therefore call on the federal government to assume its demonstrably successful leadership role and call on provinces and territories to exempt modest RRSP and TFSA amounts.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, John.

We're now going to move to our last group, the African Canadian Legal Clinic. We have Marie Chen, as well as Heather Kere. Welcome. You have five minutes.

**Mrs. Heather Kere (Court Worker, African Canadian Legal Clinic):** Thank you. Good morning, Mr. Chair, committee members, and fellow witnesses.

The African Canadian Legal Clinic is a legal aid Ontario clinic that represents low-income African Canadians. We engage in anti-racism and equality rights test cases, litigation, and law reform activities.

My name is Heather Kere. I'm a court worker with the African Canadian Legal Clinic, and I'm accompanied by my colleague, Marie Chen, who is a staff lawyer with the legal clinic.

We come to speak to you today regarding the situation of poverty for African Canadians. It's a perspective that is often not heard, but it's one that is critical in any effort to eradicate poverty. I'll be referring to statistics in my presentation, but they're all contained in the written brief that we've submitted to the committee.

Just as many presenters have asserted today about the interconnectedness between poverty and literacy, we assert today that poverty is intertwined with racism. The African Canadian Legal Clinic, along with many of our allies, assert that poverty is racialized. Racialized groups, especially African Canadians, experience disproportionately higher rates of poverty due to structural barriers and institutional racism.

It's important for us to note that anti-black racism in particular is central to the experience of poverty for African Canadians. Strategies, any strategy for alleviating poverty, must incorporate an anti-racist analysis in order to create equal opportunities for our political, social, and economic development. Issues around poverty are interconnected, and together they effectively jeopardize the enjoyment of many other rights, such as access to jobs, housing, and food security. Obstacles to breaking through the cycle of poverty for African Canadians include high rates of unemployment, gendered and child poverty, and the concentration of African Canadians in low-income neighbourhoods. This has been shown to increase contact with the criminal justice system.

In his research on the poverty level among racial minorities, Professor Michael Ornstein shows that 10.6% of white families live below the low-income cut-off, compared with 36% for African Canadians—10.6% to 36%; that's an almost 25% difference. African Canadians currently make up only 0.2% of the Canadian population, but a 2006 analysis of the census revealed that 40% of all African Canadians lived below the poverty line in 2001.

So what is the state of African Canadians in terms of employment? The 2001 census showed that African Canadians are just as likely to be educated as others, yet African Canadians have higher poverty rates, are less likely to be employed, have lower incomes, and have higher unemployment rates than the general population. It's 11.4% for African Canadians and 5.8% for others.

What is the state of our women and children? With more than 57% below the low-income cut-off, African Canadian women are the poorest racialized group in Canada. Over 34.5% of African Canadian women in families are poor, and over 52.7% of single African

Canadian women are poor. These figures stand in sober comparison to 13.7% of all women in families and 41.9% for all single adult women in Canada.

According to the 2001 census by Statistics Canada, 44% of all African Canadian children live in poverty, compared to 19% for the general Canadian population. Furthermore, poverty amongst single-parent, mother-led families stood at 26% for European families and 65% for African Canadian families. African Canadians also contend with other issues relating to social security, threats to food security, and inadequate housing, which are expanded on in our written submission.

What are our recommendations to the federal government? We believe first that any strategy to combat poverty must incorporate an understanding of the fundamental role that racism plays in creating and perpetuating poverty and the systemic barriers faced by African Canadians.

● (1015)

A complete list of our recommendations is found in our written submission, but we'd like to highlight the following four.

First is to develop and implement a national anti-poverty strategy that incorporates an integrated and multi-sector response that acknowledges the racialization of poverty and recognizes the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of and barriers faced by African Canadians, to ensure an adequate standard of living for all Canadians, including African-Canadians.

Second is to mandate the collection of disaggregated data on the social and economic indicators of poverty on the basis of race in all agencies and departments as a monitoring and evaluation tool.

Third is to take steps to ensure equality of working opportunities for all, especially women, and prevail on provincial and territorial governments to enact meaningful employment equity legislation with mandates, targets, and specific indicators to adjust the employment disparities of African Canadians, and to ensure that such laws are vigorously enforced.

And last is to increase the national child benefit supplement, particularly for social assistance recipients, and prevail on all provinces and territories still engaging in the clawback of the national child benefit supplement from social assistance recipients to end this discriminatory practice that leaves our women and children destitute.

When entire communities live in poverty, everyone suffers. The communities themselves and society as a whole suffer the same. Our women our suffering and our children and youth are in crisis. The African Canadian community is asking the federal government to take responsibility and create a national plan to create and maintain an equal standard of living for all Canadians.

Thank you.

• (1020)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Kere.

We'll now start with rounds of questions. The first round will be seven minutes, and I think that's probably all we'll have time for. Translation is available if you need it. Mr. Ouellet will ask his questions in French.

We'll start with Ms. Minna. You have seven minutes.

**Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for coming here this morning.

My frustration isn't what I hear this morning, and I've said this in other meetings; this isn't new to me. I'm from Toronto, and I've done community work in the city for many years before running federally, so some of this stuff seems like *déjà vu* to some degree, in that we've been fighting it for some time. And that actually is more tragic than even the fact that it exists.

I simply wanted to say that.

I also want to say to Ms. Kere that you're absolutely right. One of the things the Standing Committee on the Status of Women identified when we looked at gender-based analysis was that within that, whenever we do studies on poverty or what have you, we need to have a gender component but also a racial-ethnic component, because the two are extremely important.

Sadly, we all know that while we pretend that racism doesn't exist in this country, it really does. And it exists in a way that may not be as overt, but is insidious in the sense that it's systemic and denies a lot of children and families the right to participate. I know that from personal experience because I came here from Italy in the 1950s. My entire community went through three generations in Canada before we were able to start going to university full time, because of the streaming in the schools. It was assumed we'd all be construction workers and that was where everybody belonged, or in factories. I know it's not the same thing and I can't compare with that. I only wanted to say that I understand to some degree what that means. And I know that today it's even worse, with respect to visible minorities in our country.

We need to be aggressive, so I accept and I agree with all you have said.

I want to go back to put a couple of questions. Mr. David, you were talking about social enterprise. We actually had a parliamentary secretary responsible for the social economy file at one time in the government, but we don't have that now. However, I think that's what you were referring to, if I may clarify. Obviously, it is your particular organization that you talked about, but I think across the board we're talking about social economy, meaning that we can look at social and economic projects. If we were looking at housing, we

could attach some economic components around it, whether it is training, employment, opening up a store, or opening up skills development or what have you, in the community setting. So you're talking about integrating a community social development/economic development framework. Am I right?

**Mr. Trevor David:** Exactly. As a matter of fact, one of the things would be the redevelopment of Regent Park, which is a massive development we have here. We approached Derek Ballantyne, the CEO of Toronto Housing, which is overlooking the Regent Park development. We said to him that the Regent Park development is a 10-minute walk to some waterfront land we're looking at, which is at Parliament St. and Queen's Quay here. We said, "You're going to be tearing down Regent Park and rebuilding the entire thing. What are you going to do with the people you're bringing back to live there in a nice building? Are you going to have somebody unemployed living next to a banker? What about working with us so we can create an AfriCana Village just down the road from Parliament and Queen's Quay on the East Bayfront so that the people who come back can have jobs?"

**Hon. Maria Minna:** It's one good example of what I mean by social economy.

**Mr. Trevor David:** Exactly. They didn't even respond. Again, the ideas are there, but you need a willing partner.

Quickly, if I could just add something, one of the things we want to do with AfriCana Village is work with the Carpenters' Union, for instance, and hire maybe 100 of these youth to work in the construction trade for the training and so forth and all that. It would be integrated every step of the way.

• (1025)

**Hon. Maria Minna:** I understand. That was the concept of social economy I understood. You're talking about that, but it can also apply in a broader context in addition to, obviously, your program. I think that's very important.

Just to go back to literacy for a moment, I think it was Ms. Campbell who mentioned the *Literacy Matters* report. Do you by any chance have...? Who wrote the report, so we can get a link to it?

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** It's called *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action*. It was the TD Financial Group. The author was Craig Alexander, who at that point was vice-president and deputy chief economist. I think you still can get it on the TD website.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** If not, we'll be calling you.

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** Yes, absolutely.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** I'd like to read it. I think this is an area that needs to be addressed aggressively, because it does impact on poverty. I understand it. Again, in my family, my mother was illiterate, completely, because my grandfather didn't believe in education for girls. My father had a grade 2 education. So I understand. I was the bridge child who did everything for the family.

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** He has a lot of good information.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** In a way, it forced me to learn faster. It acted in the opposite way, but nonetheless....

Mrs. Kere, did we get a written presentation? You had a lot of very good statistics. I wrote some of them down, but I would like to get an actual report.

Mr. Chair, did we?

**The Chair:** I think we had the brief, but it's not translated yet.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** It's not translated. Okay, fine. I just wanted to know that we're getting it. I just wanted to make sure about that.

To go back to the literacy aspect, I would assume that all of you would agree that as a national poverty strategy is done, literacy would become an integral part of it. I would almost have a national literacy strategy, an education strategy, that would include... Education for me goes from cradle, which means early education and child care and preschool, to the time you stop working, I suppose. I think that needs to be a spectrum we need to look at. Would you agree with that?

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** I think we'd both agree with that. I think one of the issues with that is the constitutional issue of where education lies and the various sectors that are responsible for it. On-reserve aboriginal communities are federal. Off-reserve is provincial. Youth education is provincial, and new immigrants.... You know, there are a lot of issues around where it lies. If there's a national literacy strategy that overrides all of that, and the provinces and community organizations and municipal governments see themselves in it, I think that would make the most sense. I worry about a strategy that's held with the federal government only.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** I understand that. I appreciate that.

I'm just jumping around a bit because of time.

I'm going back to Ms. Kere again. The issue of racial problems is egregious; it's very serious. I'll finish by asking if there have been any studies as to the extent.... Obviously, we need to do an aggressive interracial communications program with companies and so on to break down the barriers. In addition to that, is there anything your experience has shown with respect to elementary and high school education? Are we doing enough at that level to educate the next generation of employers, if you like, with proper racial integrative-type programs? Or are we failing there as well?

**Mrs. Heather Kere:** I know of one study that was done by an OISE professor, Dr. George Dei. He explained and went through the experiences of African Canadian youth in the education system and how they're discriminated against. There was testimony about how treatment affected their perspective on the education system and about how they were disengaged. That's one particular study I know of in terms of education.

I'm not sure if Marie has anything to add.

**Mrs. Marie Chen (Staff Lawyer, African Canadian Legal Clinic):** Certainly in the work we do we have seen numerous problems with the education of African Canadian children. I think it's well documented that drop-out rates are extremely high.

Within Toronto itself there has been a huge debate as to whether the public education system has failed African Canadian children, and it's pretty clear that it has. There was a debate around the Afrocentric school. I think all those problems are pretty well documented and accepted.

In our view, there are additional barriers to reducing poverty when you have undereducated children, high drop-out rates, and kids going through the applied stream instead of the academic stream and not getting the education they deserve. Safe schools legislation is resulting in kids being suspended and education being interrupted. We've seen the impact of that as well. That feeds into the cycle of poverty. When kids are not in school, where are they in the community? Who is safe? What is out there for them?

Part of what we're trying to say today is that it is multi-sectored. We have to look at the whole issue of racism—not just the economic circumstances, but what leads to that.

• (1030)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Ouellet, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As Ms. Minna said, we've been meeting with groups for a long time. In 2006, I toured Canada for a month and a half, seven days a week. I met with many groups with poverty problems, the homeless and people who need housing. We know that the homeless need a place to live to get out of their situation, but once they're housed, they're confronted with their illiteracy problem. Everyone here is interested in literacy because all groups are dealing with the problem.

Ms. Eaton, you said that the federal government should provide leadership to change the situation. By assigning some of its responsibilities to private enterprise and charity organizations, as is currently the case—that's what we were told in the House—is the government providing the leadership that will produce results?

[*English*]

**Ms. Margaret Eaton:** I believe there have been some very good steps that have been taken, including some money—the labour market agreements that were alluded to—that was downloaded to the provinces. That money has been going out, in some cases in partnerships with the private sector, for workplace literacy programs and for increased programs for the unemployed. Some of that money has been directed toward literacy. But our concern is really that it's kind of a patchwork quilt across the province, so we don't see the same kind of care and attention being taken to literacy issues as in a wonderful province like Manitoba, which is really a leader in how it rolls out its literacy program, as compared to some of the have-not provinces and territories, which have other issues that they've been addressing with their labour market money.

So we really would like to see the federal government take a stronger leadership role, as we've been discussing, but as Sherry rightly point out, it has to be in concert with the provinces, because of some of these jurisdictional issues, which are sensitive, so that it's the provinces and territories working hand in hand with the federal government, but the federal government taking a role, as many people have said here today, to set standards and to ensure equity across the country.

[Translation]

**Mr. Christian Ouellet:** Could Employment Insurance be an important link in enabling people who lose their jobs to improve their education? This program comes under federal jurisdiction, and the government could do the same thing as Finland and Sweden do. In those countries, someone who loses his job and doesn't know how to express himself, read or write, well enough, is offered a course lasting one or one and a half years. Employment Insurance should do the same thing and not just offer two- or three-week courses.

[English]

**Ms. Margaret Eaton:** Yes, I think we could be using employment insurance in a much more creative way.

One of the things we've been talking to the provincial government in Ontario about, and the federal government, is work-sharing programs. So if someone is laid off but is only, say, doing three days of work, as opposed to five, those other two days could be invaluable training days. That could be supported through EI in a much more creative and flexible way than we're seeing right now. The EI surplus could be used in a much more creative way, perhaps, to provide longer-term support.

We have a program funded through EI, the second career strategy, which is also funded through the labour market agreement in Ontario. It's to give people training programs for a year to go into college or university programs to change careers. A lot of the people getting into those programs don't even have the basic and essential skills to participate at the college level, so there's a gap between our ability to even do that program.... We need something that is more flexible, that's more responsive. I think this government is trying in many ways to do that, but certainly there could be more.

• (1035)

[Translation]

**Mr. Christian Ouellet:** Mr. David, I agree with you on the subject of social economy. We could add to that economy of proximity, that is, economy that takes place close to people. Last week, in Quebec, there was a meeting on social economy. In Quebec alone, social economy represents assets worth \$43 billion annually.

Do you think the federal government should play a leadership role in a growing number of proximity social economy projects?

[English]

**Mr. Trevor David:** Yes, most definitely.

As I indicated, in the U.K., the Blair government initiated the Office of the Third Sector specifically for that reason: they realized there's a lot of talent and innovativeness in the third sector, in the non-profit/for-profit sector, in social enterprise.

We think one of the mandates of the federal government is to take leadership in that area. You look at the United States, you look at the civil rights struggle, you look at all the great gains, the great leaps forward; it was all done by the federal government. If you leave it to the local government, if you leave it to the provinces and the city.... For example, in the city a hundred years ago we had a black councillor, William P. Hubbard. He became a councillor because George Brown—George Brown College—who was an abolitionist, tapped him and backed him, and from 1895 to 1914 he was the acting mayor and councillor of the city. A hundred years later we still have only one black councillor in this city. This city is 50% visible minority, but only 13% of the councillors in the city are a visible minority. So there again....

If you don't have the political clout or the wherewithal, they ignore you, right? They can talk a good game if you want to build a basketball court in the black neighbourhood, no problem, or a hip-hop program after school, no problem; the mayor is there to take the initiative. Great. But when you talk about serious—serious—sustainable economic projects that will create sustainable jobs, they disappear, because again, there's no interest.

So we are counting on the federal government to take leadership in that area. If you leave it to the local establishment, to be honest with you, they don't care. I've been on this project for four years now and I've received the back of the hand of every major institution, political, philanthropic, you name it, in this city over this great idea that can create 2,000 cultural jobs, generate \$5 million to \$6 million a year, millions in taxes, hire 500 at-risk youth and put them to work. But there again you get the back of the hand and the door slammed in your face. Why? Because you represent a community that is powerless. Election time, yes, they'll come knocking. After that, forget it. We have no voice. We are a voiceless people in this city, and this is a country and a city that we helped build for hundreds of years.

So, yes, we are counting on the federal government to take leadership in that area.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Ouellet.

We're going to move now to Mr. Martin, for seven minutes, sir.

**Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP):** Thank you for coming this morning and for some very good information.

What I hear, as we listen to people from across Canada, is a call for leadership at the federal level and a call for more resources. I guess the question is, how do we frame that? What message do we share with the federal government and bring to the federal government as part of that to make sure that what they put in place is actually going to have the effect we want? Plus, how do we make it long term, as well as in the immediate term?

I don't think anybody misunderstands the terrible disaster that's in front of us here now with the economy the way it is, the number of people who are already poor and the people who will become poor. Lots of people will reach the end of their employment insurance, no matter how we reform it, and they will end up on welfare. They will find that welfare is a very mean-spirited vehicle that government has now put in place to assist people.

John, earlier I asked probably a colleague of yours from the food bank, or somebody you know, for any statistics they might have on the new welfare rates for various provinces. I think that would be instructive and informative for us here. I think government really needs to be courageous and willing to act quickly on some of these things. It's not like they need to reinvent the wheel. There are provinces already out there, as I mentioned earlier, moving on strategies—Quebec, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, as we heard when we were down there, and Manitoba, as we heard last week when we were in Calgary. As the federal government, we need to partner with those folks, because they're saying to us that they can't do it by themselves; they don't have the resources.

We used to have the Canada Assistance Plan—which you spoke to, John. It had in it some very real requirements, and governments needed to live up to that. The federal government wielded a pretty effective stick in terms of the funding it used to flow. That has been reduced as well.

I was in provincial politics for 13 years, including five years during the Bob Rae government, and we brought in an employment equity act. It no longer exists. There is no employment equity act anywhere that I'm aware of in Canada today. That act was targeted at disabled people and people of colour, and in fact it was working. Because of what we did, there were people who were getting employment, and good employment.

When it was done away with in the mid-1990s, when the government particularly began to cut back, it was first in, first out. Those who were hired who were from those targeted groups then lost their jobs. In some instances—and I had some who came into my office—it was more damaging in the long run to have given them that hope and then taken it away from them than not to have given it to them at all in the first place.

That said, what should we include if we decided as a federal government to move on an act, something similar to the Canada Assistance Plan perhaps? What should that include? What would that look like, from your perspective, if you had an opportunity to speak to government about that?

●(1040)

**Mr. John Stapleton:** We have to first recognize that the programs we have for aged people in the form of old age security and GIS are working. We have registered pension plans and programs that match

funds there. We have the same thing we're building for children. We have a base child tax benefit and a national child benefit supplement. We also have registered programs and matching programs.

When we look at working-age adults, which is where we're really missing out, we have non-refundable credits in many places, boutique credits, programs that don't work well with each other. So I think at the very start of a federal poverty reduction act, obviously it should make a commitment, it should have sound principles, as the Quebec and Ontario plans do, but it should also include targets and measures, as Ontario's plan has done, and then move from there to put in a plan that actually looks to harness and marshal the income security programs we already have, to try to do for working-age adults what we are in the process of doing for children and what we've already done for aged people in Canada.

We should make something out of the current EI programs we have that don't mesh well with social assistance, and realize that we've written down those programs over the last 15 years and don't have the safety net we once had. I think that would be one of the first orders of business, to try to talk about what sort of base benefit we would start having at the federal level that would actually help working-age adults. It would do so, I think, by starting off as a first order of business to change a lot of the non-refundable tax credits into refundable base credits.

●(1045)

**Mr. John Rae:** Mr. Martin, you went to the employment equity act at the provincial level. I had the honour—and it was a great honour—to work in that program for a while. Of course, we have the federal program. It's currently set with a threshold of 100 employees, so that excludes so many employers in this country.

Secondly, Mr. Ouellet, you spoke about employment insurance. Certainly, there are more creative ways that some of that fund could be used. For our community, since so many of us are chronically unemployed, didn't work, or don't have the kind of attachment to the labour force that is required for eligibility for EI programs, we're doubly disadvantaged. We didn't work to begin with, and we don't qualify for those programs that are designed to help unemployed workers. That's why, as part of a national economic strategy, we need dedicated programs that will include some targets for the disabled community.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Martin.

We will now move over to Mr. Vellacott. Sir, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to explore a little bit off the top here in terms of literacy. I think we'd all agree around the table the cruciality of that in terms of getting out of poverty, staying out of poverty. The gaps in income, obviously, are huge because of different levels of income or literacy, I guess, using it as a bit of a cipher at the same time here.

I am curious about this in respect to.... One can home-school or one can use other forms of education, too, but most of our children are in either public or what they call out my way as the Catholic or separate system. In terms of elementary education up to a certain level—I'm not sure the exact age cut-off requirement in Ontario—you have to be in school over that period of time. In the old days, at least, way back in history, reading, writing, and arithmetic were at least the basics you should be learning there.

Are we saying that the schools...? I want to kind of explore beyond the schools here, but that's the fundamental kind of area where you're supposed to learn the literacy. Then there are reasons why people fall between the cracks. But is there something more that needs to be done there? This is provincial, but why do we have so many people simply passing through their grade up to the next grade, and they're really not getting a handle on the basic required literacy? Then they supposedly finish their grade 12 and maybe don't take any post-secondary education. If twelve years is not enough for literacy, then we have a fundamental problem with the school systems, the elementary school system and the high school system.

I'd like a response on that, and how can we...? We can do these things around the edges—and I say that quite respectfully—but at the core of it, what is required, when we have the bulk or the mass of our kids coming up and we're not doing it right there?

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** I never like this question because it sets up something that we're trying to fight, that the ministries of advanced education will say it's the education system's fault, the K to 12. There's a whole bunch of factors. It's certainly something that my other colleagues at the table might want to address, but certainly racial issues impede children's success.

Not all schools are the same: rural versus urban, isolated aboriginal communities, on reserve, off reserve, in Toronto, in Rosedale to Regent Park. There's a whole bunch of factors that impede a child's education. Parents in poverty, parents who have to work two or three jobs. Even if they can and do have good reading and writing skills, parents don't have the time to support their kids. It needs to be far more than only an education system. There has to be community involvement, and we know that many teachers don't live in the communities in which they teach, so they're not aware of the other community supports they could use to support the children. We need to have programs in place that introduce the community agencies to the schools and vice versa, and parents need to be involved in that.

There are a number of reasons why education can fail children. I think one of the ways we can ensure that children have better success is to ensure that there's more support outside of school for education, that once you say it should happen in a classroom from 9 to 5, it's not that. It's about engaging youth in their education, about empowering parents to be engaged in their education, and about community support.

• (1050)

**Ms. Margaret Eaton:** I'd like to respond to that one, because we get that question a lot.

One of the big issues for us is that there's a declining population of children. A much greater portion of our population is the working-age population. Even if we could make every child perfectly literate

when they graduate at 18, we would still have the bulk of our population struggling with literacy issues.

As we see the child population decline, what we're going to see is a growing immigrant population and the increased skill levels required of people who perhaps even had their grade 12 but have since lost skills.

I was speaking recently with someone who is in charge of the Peel literacy connection. They surveyed 50 people who had come through their programs, and 37 of those people had their grade 12, but because they had been in jobs that didn't require those literacy skills, they were coming back into programs to say they didn't have the writing skills or didn't have the grammar. One man wrote in saying that he had to do a lot of e-mail at work and didn't really have the skills. He had been told that his writing was just not good enough, and he asked for our help.

If we could just snap our fingers and fix the K to 12 system, if it needs fixing, that wouldn't address the issue that's out there right now for people.

**Mr. Maurice Vellacott:** I understand that, and I appreciate your remarks, but I want to get on the record the fact that.... You know these stories too. I'm still troubled with the fact that I hear people coming to you after grade 12. It's one thing, as you say, when people lose these skills at a point because they may be off doing some very manual things through most of their time. But it's still really troubling to me, because I so much appreciated...I developed my love for learning through a low-level, poverty income kind of background, but through the school system. I'm troubled that people can be passed all the way through grade 12 and not have it. I think that's a basic, foundational thing that pre-empted—prevented, if you will.... And of course we have to do the other, beyond that.

What are the things, along that line, beyond having people come back to work at skills in literacy that they never had to any great degree, or to pick them up again because they have lost the skills over time...? We can have our literacy centres, in my city of Saskatoon and elsewhere, and I'm intrigued with what I think Sherry said. Is there a great push for this—having it more in the food banks, the health clinics, the counselling? Certainly our government is pushing within the job retraining to have more of it. I think Margaret acknowledged that a bit here too. Do you sense that this is happening, that this is the point of contact? I think it's a great idea. Why haven't we been doing it since a long time ago?

**Mrs. Sherry Campbell:** Certainly it's been our model of working for many years. But I think it's also where literacy issues are first identified. I have a story from Winnipeg, where the women were coming in for their food basket, and they were changing the system by which they had to apply. They had to fill out a form and phone it in. There was a great kerfuffle when we were there handing out information, talking to the women; they were going to come on Thursday, when the class was starting. What we realized is that the great kerfuffle was that these women couldn't fill out the applications to renew their food bank access. So of course we took that form as part of our course work and that tutorial session later in the week.

Over and over, that's where people are identifying their own low literacy issues, and community agencies have an opportunity. So why aren't there more programs in which families are accessing their basic needs for food and also having classes where their children can read better and get homework help and they can develop workplace literacy as well, so that people can come in and learn to read and write better?

There are so many barriers to saying or identifying that you have a low literacy issue. These people will get into the second career program in Ontario, but first they need to feel comfortable about where they access literacy programming. It's probably in their community. They're not going to walk through a door that says "I have low literacy skills", but they will walk through a door that perhaps provides support for their child with their reading or homework, and then the adults might feel more at home in accessing that kind of help as well.

**Mr. Maurice Vellacott:** I want to ask John if he has a modest exempt amount that he's talking about in terms of the TSA and RRSPs? I don't know whether we have the time now for a quick response or whether we can discuss it off line, if you have a suggestion for exempting this so that there's not a clawback. Do you have an amount?

• (1055)

**Mr. John Stapleton:** Well, Quebec has an amount right now of \$60,000 for all RESPs combined, which you know can go up to \$45,000 each. By putting all the various registered instruments together, they have a \$60,000 amount. Alberta has a more modest \$5,000 amount per adult.

I think that anything similar or along those lines for all of Canada would be very good.

**The Chair:** Okay, Ms. Kere, be very quick.

**Mrs. Heather Kere:** I'll try to be brief.

I want to try to answer the previous question about a grade 12 student, for example, who doesn't know how to read. One of the presenters alluded to the role racism plays in the education system and how that affects groups of children.

In terms of the African Canadian community, there's a disproportionate drop-out rate for our children as opposed to other children. Things such as the Safe Schools Act disproportionately affect African Canadian children, as well as children with disabilities, in terms of how they perceive the education system and also how they progress through it.

Curriculum is also a huge factor. That's one thing the Afrocentric alternative school initiative is working to address. I'm happy to say it is opening in September this year.

But there are students whom I encounter in my work who are somewhat transient through the school system. You'll have a student who....

Just to add to or precede that point, a lot more African Canadian children are diagnosed with behavioural problems than other children. And because there's a lot of targeting in that sense, they're often pushed out of classrooms. As they get older, they're suspended. That problematic behaviour is not only diagnosed as a behavioural problem, but it also results in suspensions.

I'll find children who are suspended and who have been sent home with no school work or no homework. That happens very often. It's the school's responsibility to send them home with homework and also to notify the parents that the child is being suspended. That does not happen in a lot of the cases I have seen—and it's supposed to happen every time. So there are children who get by not having to do work, and the school system is not being accountable for those children. So I think that's a huge problem.

We also have to look at who's being affected by this. That's one thing our community has tried to address. We are very productive in the way we deal with these things. And one of the fights, as I've mentioned before, for the Afrocentric alternative school has come to fruition. So that's one success, but we still have a lot of work to do.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses once again for taking time out of their schedules to be here today.

We'd ask you to clear the table. Some MPs want to come by and thank you, but if you could clear the table so we can set up for our next panel, thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.









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