



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 017 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

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Chair

Mr. Ed Komarnicki

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order.

I want to remind the members that we will have some committee business in the second round. We will adjourn somewhat early in the second round so we can deal with, essentially, the budget with respect to this study, and I'll have a couple of remarks to make about that.

Without saying more, I'd like to welcome before our committee Gary Merasty.

You are wearing your member of Parliament pin because you have been a member of Parliament, and we've had the good pleasure of knowing you in your past life. We want to welcome you especially, and your wife Brenda and Kim Radbourne as well.

The practice is to have each of you present. After the presentation we will have a five-minute round of questions, alternating between the parties.

Mr. Merasty, are you going to start? Go ahead.

Mr. Gary Merasty (Vice-President, Corporate Social Responsibility, Cameco Corporation): I'm pleased to be here presenting to the members of the committee on the issue at hand.

As mentioned, my name is Gary Merasty and I am the vice-president of corporate social responsibility with Cameco Corporation, a uranium mine in northern Saskatchewan. We're one of the world's largest producers of uranium worldwide, accounting for about 16% of the world's total supply. The heartbeat of Cameco really is in northern Saskatchewan, nestled in among the first nations and Métis communities in northern Saskatchewan.

I'm going to go through this presentation fairly quickly and give you some of the highlights of it; then we'll get into the question period. I'll give you a few stats about the mining industry in Saskatchewan and first nations and Métis employment in Saskatchewan, and then speak about some of our own Cameco experience.

There is a need in Saskatchewan for approximately 18,000 new positions related to the mining industry. By 2028, we are expecting \$43 billion worth of capital expansions to occur; that number has actually been revised recently to be closer to \$50 billion. There's a huge demand in a number of occupations related to the mining industry, the vast majority of which are in the trades. Of course there

will be administrative and professional services as well. As I said, that's just a quick overview on some of these points; I know that as a committee you're very well informed on these matters.

With respect to the first nations and Métis population of Saskatchewan, the proportion of aboriginal people in their twenties is expected to double. Now, this statement was made a few years ago—they said it would double from 17% to approximately 30% by 2017. When we look at some of the indicators, they certainly are on pace to achieve this—and actually exceed it—over the next number of years.

The provinces with the highest percentages of aboriginal people, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, also have the highest aboriginal unemployment rates, at about 18% and 22% respectively. These rates are about four times the unemployment rates in those provinces, so there are massive differences and big gaps in the unemployment rates. Closer to home, in northern Saskatchewan, the unemployment rate is even higher because, as you know, in order to be unemployed, you have to register. In northern Saskatchewan, according to the 2006 census, about 9,000 people are employed and 2,300 are unemployed, but 11,000 are not in the labour force—this is the labour force age population, so the unemployment is much higher.

Looking at the people up there, 86% are first nations and Métis, 53% are under the age of 25—but I think it's more likely that 50% are under the age of 18—and 50% to 60% do not have grade 12. The more remote the location is, the lower the graduation rates are. What's interesting to me, as a teacher in my past life, is the huge re-enrollment of students in grade 10 who dropped out earlier and came back to challenge the system, but then ended up dropping out again. This represents a huge opportunity for some kind of an initiative. High school math and science are lacking in the north.

The main points I'm trying to make with those first few comments are that there is a resource boom happening in Saskatchewan, and for that matter in rural and remote Canada, and there is a great need in the first nations and Métis community and there's a great opportunity for governments—provincial and federal—to facilitate positive socio-economic outcomes. To mining companies like ours, the first nations and Métis population represents a competitive advantage for a workforce that's loyal and stays there. Common interests are great among all three parties. Improving educational outcomes is absolutely key for employment in our companies. Of course, if you increase educational outcomes you improve employment rates. When you improve employment rates you support families and communities, and then you build local economies, so local business development begins to occur. Overall, it begins to increase the quality of life for those communities.

I'll tell you a little bit about Cameco now. As I mentioned, the heartbeat of Cameco is in northern Saskatchewan. The northern part of Saskatchewan is larger than the country of Germany, but we only have a population of 40,000 people who are spread over approximately 40 communities.

• (1535)

The Cameco experience is that we are the number one industrial employer of aboriginal peoples in Canada. As of October 2011, 763 aboriginal employees were employed with us directly, with salaries nearing \$70 million. This represents 50% of our total workforce at our mine sites. Since 2004 we've seen aboriginal employment increase by 65%, and from 2004 to 2011 the salaries went from \$60 million to the \$70 million I mentioned a few moments ago. Approximately 25% of our trades people are northern aboriginal people.

Another important aspect of our company and our relationship with northerners is that we have built a northern preferred supplier program in northern Saskatchewan. We expect that most of the suppliers that provide services to our mine site will be aboriginal-owned companies of 50% or more, with aboriginal people in senior management. They follow our aspirational targets for employment numbers as well.

Actually, 2011 is going to be a record year. We'll have procured services from aboriginal-owned companies to the tune of \$320 million this year, and that's only to the end of October. Since 2004 we've procured over \$1.6 billion from these aboriginal-owned companies. They in turn employ another 850 people. So between us directly and the companies that provide services to us, that's about 1,600 employees.

How did Cameco get there? Well, we're a company that's been in northern Saskatchewan for over 20 years. We've initiated a lot of different programs that we've jointly built, basically from the ground up, with northern communities. We work with the communities. We take a glass-half-full approach. We work with them, build on the strengths within the communities, and identify their goals, dreams, and aspirations. We initiate a lot of development, such as career fair school visits—some of those standard types of initiatives—but also a Credenda virtual high school, to transmit math and science into remote communities.

We have a very successful multi-party training plan. This is a partnership of provincial governments, northern educational institutions, and industry—us, in particular—where we design courses specifically targeted for our industry. We have numerous other initiatives. The apprenticeship program is quite large within our company.

These are just some of the initiatives, and for the sake of time I don't want to go much deeper in them. The main point is that these initiatives were jointly developed with our partners in the north, and they range from initiatives in the high school, to technical college, to university. We have initiatives in each of those categories.

I do want to highlight our aboriginal skills employment partnership program, called Northern Career Quest. It is Canada's largest employment training programs in northern Saskatchewan. I chair this organization. The original proposal called for us to assess the career goals and aspirations of 3,000 first nations and Métis people, and we were to put 1,500 of them into training and secure 750 of them jobs.

We will finish this program in March 2012, after four years of operation. We'll have assessed close to 5,000 people, so we are way over that target. We'll have trained close to 1,700, so we're way over that target. And in terms of employment, we're at 1,300, so we're almost double the employment targets we had set out there.

This is a great partnership between us and the communities. The communities came to us and said let's work together on this. I can't applaud this program any stronger because of these types of outcomes. Some of the reasons for success are that the training is linked to employment; you can see a line of sight from the training right to a job. That motivates the people to stay in the training and then secure that job.

There is a resource boom, and northern Saskatchewan may be at a bit of an advantage. There's been mining in northern Saskatchewan for over 60 years, so there's industrial experience in some of these northern communities.

In terms of wrapping it up with some of the lessons learned, we would like to see some form of the ASEP program continue. It's absolutely critical.

• (1540)

The big challenge we have right now, because we have filled every entry-level position with northern first nation and Métis people, is to increase the number of grade 12 graduates. We urge governments and local communities to really address the school situation. The time to do that is now. There have been numerous reports done, and basically we can always argue that the time is not now. We delay and delay, but now is the time to act, with those key issues lining up perfectly to allow opportunities for aboriginal people to proceed. The return on investment is huge. We get to retain our employees, and that gives us a huge competitive advantage.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that presentation. We'll certainly make note of your many comments and recommendations.

Now we'll move to Kim Radbourne.

Ms. Kim Radbourne (Executive Director, Moose Cree First Nation; Board Member, SIBI Employment and Training): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon.

I work for Moose Cree First Nation, as the employment and training coordinator for the Lower Mattagami River project. The hydro redevelopment project is a partnership between Ontario Power Generation and Moose Cree First Nation. I am here through the successes of our aboriginal skills employment partnership program as well.

Last night, according to my database results, our employees are currently at 441 in our database system, and this is just after about 16 months of operation. I believe our successes are really due to and consistent with a number of findings in the business case for investing in Canada's remote communities, specifically the need for flexible and diverse training programs. A lot of our successes are from learning from best practices regionally and across the country, and likely the key to the success in our program is from the integration of community participation in the processes of the project.

SIBI Employment and Training received aboriginal skills employment partnership dollars in June 2010, so it has not been long. These dollars have been an important piece of our training employment funding. Our organization actually began building capacity in 2007, when, in preparation, Moose Cree First Nation and Ontario Power Generation put together a human resources survey for our community and we identified what the current skills were in the community.

The database continues to grow, with over 1,000 clients. From the database we identified four groups that were interested in working on the projects—first, individuals with specific experience and certification—the qualified people. So those are easy. They are our journeypeople, of whom we have very few. We have say five carpenters, one plumber, and two electricians. I can count them. They can go directly to the unions. In fact, with our Lower Mattagami River project, Moose Cree First Nation had the first journeyperson carpenter at site, so that was really positive for our community.

The second group, which is the largest group of workers, is people with experience but who don't have the accreditation. They don't have their certificates, and likely it would take too long to actually go back and achieve their certification. There would be too many barriers and they wouldn't be successful. What we did on that item for our project was to work with the unions to have interviewing and aptitude testing so that these individuals could qualify for employment on the project, but wouldn't have long-term union membership and wouldn't become journeypeople.

We also had individuals from past training programs, who had been trained but had little experience. For these individuals we developed work placement programs. And then we had a large group of people who were either new workers or returning to the labour force. We developed a seven-week introductory course that looked at self-knowledge and community knowledge, and we called it employment readiness. That program began in November 2009,

and was delivered to 180 people through 11 intakes since November 2009.

Also, in identifying past training that had happened in the region, we noted that in a past project 250 heavy equipment operators were trained; however, they hadn't achieved employment. So those were our people that we sent to union-recognized training schools to get their certification. And all of those individuals worked at the Lower Mattagami River project at some point, or are currently working. Many have moved on to Detour at this stage.

We used our labour market information from the supply and the demand side, and then joined the dots.

What happened once the project started is that we developed a targeted training-to-employment plan with the contractor, and we've had successes in areas such as cement field testers for quality assurance, rodbusters, carpenters, drill and blasters, cement truck drivers, warehouse people, health and safety officers, security guards, cooks, and crane operators—so very diverse employment opportunities.

The success is collaboration on delivery agents, and curriculum and the training selection with all three stakeholders involved: the community, the industry, and the unions. I think government could be at the table as well, although they haven't really been at the table except through HRSDC representation with our project.

- (1545)

Having trainees do a turnaround at the site or any type of site visit is also another best practice that we have recognized during our training, so that people can see if that's the type of work for them. Getting the contractor involved with the trainees right from the beginning also makes it easier if there are delays in the work schedule in the training-to-employment program because then that trainee feels connected. We know it's challenging trying to work with industry, especially in a construction project, and meet schedules, timelines, and integrate the trainees into that. But if the contractor—and in my case, the union—is directly connected with our trainees, then that frustration isn't there because those people see there is a job eventually coming for them.

I do think a broad-based training program that does not overtrain in one area is necessary for a successful long-term labour force. That's really an important key to it being community-driven and dependent on the needs of the community.

A priority for SIBI is also apprenticeship registrations and completions, as past training initiatives have really focused on pre-apprenticeship models. Through this project, I've tried to look at the successes of past models, and found that we've had very few apprentice registrations from those pre-apprenticeship models.

With the Lower Mattagami River project we currently have through the union registrations and employer direct registrations two mobile crane operators, two electricians, one plumber, one heavy equipment mechanic, so six registered apprentices. Currently, there are also apprenticeship registrations happening at our Lower Mattagami site.

One of the common challenges I was reading about in the report and that I've experienced quite frequently is dealing with the provincial Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities on apprenticeship and dealing with different representatives. There are challenges and frustrations in dealing with the same government but with different analysts and different ideas coming from the offices. The main goal for us is to create a legacy of certified tradespeople from the youth that will be able to keep those skills in the community for the future.

This is related to education. I'm not going into all the barriers that first nations peoples face in education. I think in the last couple of days we've really been bombarded with information that to me are very band-aid solutions—such as Attawapiskat—but education brings all of those issues to the surface, right? One of the things that's been identified and has already been identified by Gary as well is the lack of career counselling and knowledge of opportunities, which results in problems, as I mentioned before, of many community members wanting to become heavy equipment operators because of a lack of knowledge due to the provincial and federal dichotomy.

I think it's really through our local businesses.... Another focus for our training dollars has been on wage partnerships, and that is to really encourage our local businesses to build their capacity. We've also done a workplace literacy program with local businesses. I think that is another area that needs to grow and that can really benefit the individual workers and the businesses. It's through our local business successes that long-term community economic growth will occur. The integration of the community into the project is the key to our success, and this has been achieved by the first nations Amisk-oo-skow agreement, which, as I've heard Moose Creek First Nation Chief Hardisty say, is a treaty-based agreement. It's based on partnership, apologies for past grievances, and a respectful relationship into the future that includes cross-cultural learning through recognition of traditional ecological knowledge on the project, integration of an elders' advisory working group, and then opportunities for Moose Creek First Nation business, employment, and training opportunities.

•(1550)

Specific to the results of the employment success is the integration of our office into the hiring process.

The Chair: Ms. Radbourne, can you wrap up, please?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: I am going to wrap up right now—last paragraph.

The first nations employment office.... I think the aboriginal inclusion is really key to the success, and one of those is the employment referrals and how our office is integrated right in the hiring process, with the unions. That's how we've achieved our employment successes.

To me, in this political period in Canadian history, we're in a transition to first nations self-governance. That's what I truly believe. First nation self-governments, provinces, territories, industry, and the federal government must work together to ensure that the socio-economic barriers that first nations face are overcome through targeted, flexible, locally driven training programs that meet the needs of both the community and the local entrepreneurs, and

achieve a labour force for large resource extraction projects. This is needed for a positive result of resource extraction in the north with those Canadians who are closest to the projects and most affected by the projects—the aboriginal people benefiting from those projects.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now start with our round of questioning.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you.

And I want to thank you both very much for coming.

You may be aware that part of the basis for this study was a report that was done by the Chamber of Commerce. In their list of recommendations, the Chamber of Commerce made a couple of key points that I think relate to what you both presented. One was that the K-to-12 system needs a strong look because of the fact that you can end up with people who can't go on to certification or trades apprenticeships unless they have their grade 12 graduation. The second thing was ensuring that skills and training programs are flexible enough to accommodate the realities of the communities.

There are a couple of points. You both seem to point to successes in the program. One is that full partnerships with business, with labour, and with the first nations communities are important. The second thing that seems to have been a success is the direct employment link from the training programs for the individuals.

I wonder if you could both touch on this. Are the programs that are currently available long enough? Are they funded well enough? Is the bureaucracy too much?

I'll start with Mr. Merasty.

•(1555)

Mr. Gary Merasty: Thank you. There are always going to be challenges between the speed of government and the speed of business in how things get done. The closer the alignment we can get there—that's critical. That's one point. The second point is I think the initiatives need to be looked at a lot more closely to make sure they fit the reality that is happening out there.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Could you say something specific about that? Is there something that you would recommend as an improvement?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Each region is different, but certainly right now in remote Canada, northern Canada, there is a great deal of opportunity, and I think a “made in northern Canada” strategy is absolutely critical. That can address some of the K-to-12 issues and certainly the skills training programs out there. There has probably been no better time, at least in recent history, for all the stars to align to actually make a big dent in some of the socio-economic issues out there.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Ms. Radbourne.

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Yes, definitely, there are problems with K-to-12, but it is again the gap for adults to return and the difference in programming in urban centres. Provincially, in Ontario it's funded through the school board, independent learning centres, and colleges—all three sectors. Yet in our reserve communities we just have federal funding for our high schools.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So you don't see the supports for adults who have dropped out of school and then at some point are able to re-enter the workforce. You're not seeing the supports there for them.

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Not on a consistent basis. The supports become available when the government has pockets of money that we're able to apply for and set up programs, but it's not available on a consistent basis, as it is in urban centres.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but this speaks to the need for a longer-term planning and a longer-term commitment to those kinds of programs, again, driven by the communities. I think Mr. Merasty made a good point around a “made in northern Canada” strategy.

I just want to touch on this again. It seems to me this is a “made in northern Canada” problem. Oftentimes the supports for people to complete high school, for example, aren't there. There's not the access.

Mr. Merasty, you touched on the virtual high school piece, but it seems that sometimes there's a difficulty in having students stay in their community to get that kind of education. Could you speak a little bit more about that, Mr. Merasty?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Certainly. Having been a teacher in the north for many years, I can tell you there is a high dropout rate in the years before grade 10. As they mature a bit and they want to come back, they usually challenge the high school program and come in at grade 10. I've taught in classrooms where I had 70 kids standing up with their backs to the wall. We usually lost them by the end of September or shortly thereafter.

They represent a great opportunity. If you look at some of the European training models, you see that not everybody is university-bound. If there are opportunities for colleges and technical training, losing that group represents a huge loss to the community. So having some kind of program to keep those adult students who are challenging a grade 10 high school program is critical.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Do I have any more time?

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Daniel.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

My thanks to you witnesses for coming here. The amount of work you're doing in converting training into jobs is truly commendable.

If you were to go to the next level, what are the main barriers associated with skills development? Is it the lack of technical facilities such as high-speed Internet and e-learning facilities? Is it a lack of formal training programs? Is it a lack of access to basic skills and education? Would either of you wish to comment?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Connectivity is a big issue in the northern schools. The more remote they are, the more difficult it is for these communities to recruit qualified teachers. It helps to have connectivity and the ability to use that technology to teach specialized courses such as math and science, which are subjects not often taught in the north. You need math and science to get into the apprenticeship programs and virtually anything else. The sheer number of dropouts and the lack of space in the schools is a huge issue.

● (1600)

Mr. Joe Daniel: Madam Radbourne.

Ms. Kim Radbourne: You're asking about barriers people face in trying to go back? There are a lot of social issues, such as overcrowded housing—it is difficult to get your homework done when you have ten people living in your house.

One time I taught in Port Alberni in a building that used to be the residential school. I taught in the college sector, so I was working with adults. A lot of those people had had bad experiences in that building. I wondered how we could expect adults to learn in a place where negative things had happened. It often brought back the experiences that people had in the classrooms. There are a lot of these colonization troubles that people are still experiencing. Some face them on a daily basis.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Once you've trained some of these folks, do they leave the area, or do they generally stay in their communities?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: I see both. In our region we also have De Beers. When people found employment with the De Beers project, many left our community. It was just as easy to live in an urban centre and fly in as it was to commute from our community. We had some people who would take their whole family and leave. But I think people move back. That was around 2005, and some of the families that left have now returned. People may leave for a while and then return, but I don't think it will create a mass exodus resulting in ghost towns. People have a strong link to the land.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Do you have any comments?

Mr. Gary Merasty: I agree with that. Of the 1,600 employees we got from northern Saskatchewan, only a handful have left. They prefer to stay in their home communities.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Given the fiscal constraints that we're under because of the economy and the world situation, if you were to prioritize a set of non-monetary changes to encourage private sector participation in the development of remote communities, what would they be? What would be your top three?

Mr. Gary Merasty: That's a tough question, certainly controversial in recent political debate across this country. We're confronted as a corporation with the funding challenges that the schools have.

Certainly comparability in funding is probably the biggest issue. Now, outside of that is the relationship-building that we have, and there are successes in these communities—some of their post-secondary education programs, technical training programs. We actually partner with them and leverage cooperation and best efforts to make these work, and programs like the ASEP program have been outstanding.

But it's a tough one to answer, because the lack of comparable funding for basically the K-to-12 system stares you in the face in the communities.

The Chair: Your time is up.

Ms. Radbourne, did you want to make a comment on that? If you do, could you make it brief?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: I had a comment, but it slipped my mind, so it must not have been that great.

The Chair: All right, that's fine.

We'll then move to Madame Perreault.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Good afternoon. I want to thank you for joining us.

Very few women hold non-traditional jobs, but I think we should still spend some time on this topic.

What is the biggest obstacle faced by women who want to work in your field?

• (1605)

[English]

Ms. Kim Radbourne: For women, the main issue is camp life and being away from their family and children. With our project, it's three weeks working at the camp and one week off. That's very

difficult for our women, when many young women start having families often by the age of 18. That's a difficult thing to ask.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Thank you.

Do you feel that child care services could have an effect on women's participation in those training activities?

[English]

Ms. Kim Radbourne: I think our day care service could always be improved. The project is actually at a remote site, so the day care wouldn't really be relevant. They're going to be away for 21 days in a row, so it would be hard to find a day care provider to leave their child with for 21 days. How people do it currently is with other family members. When they're working, they leave their children with other family members.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: I want to discuss the programs you mentioned earlier, as far as employment preparation goes. You talked about one such program. I was wondering whether the government could play a role in encouraging people to get more involved in their training.

[English]

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Oh, definitely. This, to me, is everyone's job in the community, and the government's as well, to encourage people right from the start to complete their grade 12. That will make their future training in life much easier. The best success for individual training plans is when people actually see that end job. That's when they stick to achieving it. When they see other people achieving those jobs with the employer, that motivates them to stay committed to the plan.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Do women attend those training sessions? Are there any women involved?

[English]

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Yes, we've had two women carpenters. I don't have any women rodbusters. I have a few women in the quality assurance department. There is a smattering of women, but not large numbers. I would like to see more.

Mr. Gary Merasty: I'll just make a comment there. We do have quite a few women in our training programs from underground mining: heavy equipment operators, truck drivers. They're really breaking the mould by entering these jobs, which were male-dominated in the past.

With respect to the day care question, it can be extremely valuable, because there is a lack of day care spaces in the communities, and at the sites as well. It's a bit challenging when it's an industrial site.

If I could just finish with this on day care, when a mother has a baby at a hospital in an urban centre, if they go back home to a reserve or a remote community, usually no health professionals see that child until that child is in school. So any developmental delays really compound over x number of years, because there are no early childhood development head start programs in virtually any northern first nation communities.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: We talked about people dropping out of training programs. Are there currently any incentives for encouraging instructors to find ways to help people finish their program, their studies?

[English]

Mr. Gary Merasty: Some of the schools are pretty innovative. I've heard discussion of going to a three-semester system, so you would have September to January, January to April or May, and then a summer one. The loss of time, by having that summer break, can compound some of the second-language issues and learning retention rates.

There are a lot of night classes being offered to alleviate some of the overcrowding during the day. But that does lead to high burnout of teachers and of the school system itself. The facility takes on a lot more wear and tear.

But there are some creative and innovative undertakings being done by a lot of the communities to address some of these challenges.

•(1610)

The Chair: All right.

We'll move to Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you for being here.

I just want to clarify with you some of the numbers, Mr. Merasty. You said in your remarks that the population of northern Saskatchewan is around 40,000. Is that correct? You mentioned that 86% of that population is first nations and Métis. Then of that, 30% are actually in the workforce. Just kind of doing the math on that, you're saying that currently there are 18,000 job openings. Is that correct?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Yes, throughout Saskatchewan, not just in the north.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Not just the north. Okay. I wanted to clarify that.

You alluded to—and I didn't write them down—the numbers of individuals under the age of 25. You broke it down that way for us. Do you see the actual numbers of people living in the north being able to fill the needs of the jobs in the north, if it were a perfect environment where everyone is up to speed on their education, has their grade 12, is into the trades, as many as you need? Or do you see a need for bringing workers in to meet the need?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Let me put it this way. There are 40,000 in the north. Some 50% of them are under the age of 18, so that leaves 20,000. And 50% of them don't have grade 12, so that leaves 10,000. There are currently about 9,000 employed; that leaves 1,000 for us to go after who have grade 12. And we're competing with other industry, band offices, public service providers, health services, and so on and so forth.

The important number is that 50% who don't have grade 12. Investments in that population, which are significant and targeted to employment, could lead to our addressing the biggest chunk of employment growth we see in the north. Next year we're hiring approximately 400 people. But there are only 125 graduates, I think, and this is from some work we had commissioned. There are only 125 grade 12 graduates coming out from the high schools. So we're seeing a gap.

But the real opportunity is in those people who drop out, who don't have a grade 12. They're willing to work, but they're having a tough time breaking in.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I want to compliment you on the successes you've had with the funding you've been able to utilize, because they're very impressive. It's the kind of thing that often you don't hear about, that level of success, when you're doubling the actual goals you set for yourself.

Ms. Radbourne, I just want to validate what I think I heard you mention in part of your comments. I believe you said that in bringing people through the apprenticeship programs you faced barriers with what I would call bureaucracy—so governments—and I'm not saying that was federal, provincial, or municipal. I don't know.

You mentioned that as you tried to bring people through, one of your frustrations was the fact that... I think you might have alluded to people changing in their roles, different new people, and people interpreting things differently. Could you expand on that a bit for us?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Being rural, we don't have one office to deal with, so oftentimes.... In this case, it's regarding unions and apprenticeship registration. Because we're dealing with union halls that are from a number of different areas, we also have to deal with the apprenticeship registration officers from the province, from those different urban cities. And yes, there are differences. Although there's one government, and you would think one policy and standard on how things should work, there are differences that are very frustrating.

•(1615)

Mr. Phil McColeman: I was in construction for 25 years with my own company. It reminds me a lot of the frustrations in being a small-business entrepreneur and some of the things we had to go through to do some of the simplest things, like getting a silly small building permit to put up a gazebo in someone's backyard, and different things like that. I'm not saying to draw this as... But sometimes things get so convoluted, it seems, on the government side.

Here's the question I want to ask you. Do you see the need to streamline, to get rid of unnecessary procedures, policies, or regulations, whatever they might be, just to make it as simple as most common sense would tell you it could be simple? Do you agree with that?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Both streamlining and bringing in the system so that anybody could access within the same department, yes, that would be—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Yes: streamline it, make it easy, make it a simple point of access, and expedite it. Take it in and get it done. Because for what it's worth, I think some people might have dropped out because of the frustration they saw in seeing themselves not having the perseverance, I suppose, to hang in there with the program, especially apprenticeship programs—which I'm very familiar with—because of all the hoops and hurdles they might have had to overcome along the way. Fair comment or not?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Yes.

Mr. Gary Merasty: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. McColeman, your time's well up, but it's a fair point.

I take it you agree with that point. Do you want to add to it or leave it?

Mr. Gary Merasty: The apprenticeship issue is a good one. Northern Alberta had a good pilot for that, where they tried to do a three-to-one journeyman-to-apprentice pilot. A lot of jurisdictions have a one-to-one system and that can plug up or bottleneck the system a bit.

The Chair: So there are some issues like that.

Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thanks very much.

I appreciate you both being here today. It's great to see my old friend and colleague Gary, who was a great member of Parliament and certainly made a good contribution during his time here on the Hill.

It's great to see that you continue to do good work for the people you represent and that you are realizing some of those successes.

If we could just go back a bit, Gary, I have a couple of points for you, and then if I can I will go to Kim.

You were talking about the dropouts. They come back for grade 10. Are you saying that there's not really an adult education program that is able to accommodate those adult learners, those in their early twenties?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Yes. In the post-secondary program you're not allowed to really invest in the upgrading piece. The technical programs do, but they come in waves, and they're inconsistent, so in getting any type of momentum in tackling the adult education issues, the gaps in the northern communities remain.

Programs like ASEP actually allowed us to be flexible and target some of those. As Kim mentioned, a lot of our programs actually had

an upgrading component to them, a workplace education type of component.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: We've had good success in Nova Scotia with the adult learning component in community colleges. A teacher might have 15 students, but they all go at their own pace. It's not the teacher up front sort of teaching a lesson. It's a program that's a little bit tougher to put forward, but they've had huge success, in that it better accommodates the needs of the adult learner.

Tell me, is there any kind of network in the mining sector and the oil sector in these northern communities? Because some companies are doing real good stuff. I know that Suncor and Syncrude take corporate social responsibility very seriously. Do you guys interface with best practices? Is there a network there, Gary?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Yes, there are various networks. There's the Conference Board, the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the Canada West Foundation, and those types of things. There's a sharing of best practices, and we do stay in touch. We share a lot of what we do, and we learn from others, as well.

• (1620)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I know that entrepreneurship is something that's really starting to grow in the Fort McMurray area, because the companies have made it a focus and have brought attention to that. Are you starting to see some examples of that? Or is it mainly that the opportunities are continuing to grow more so within the trades?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Yes, it's within the trades. You're seeing tradespeople out-earn professional training by a significant margin, because they start to earn earlier. Their training is on-the-job, so sometimes they get a salary during that time. There are a lot of opportunities in that area, especially right now.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Kim, you mentioned the pre-apprenticeship program. Is that a training program without any actual hours, or is it an upgrading to grade 12? Is it an equivalency program? Is that what you were referring to?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Yes. They add an upgrading component to the level one for trades readiness. There is an intro, and then you get your level one, as well. But unlike a regular apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeships sunset. So the level one is only good for so long, and if you don't get registered you lose it. It's a year.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: You mentioned that many communities, many people, just don't understand the opportunities that are out there because of the dichotomy between federal and provincial responsibilities. Could you sort of expand on that a little bit more? If it's everybody's responsibility, then it's nobody's responsibility. Is that it?

Ms. Kim Radbourne: Again, I guess it would be like the funding of K to 12, right? Every little boy, and hopefully every little girl now, too, wants to be a truck driver or wants to drive the heavy equipment, but they're not aware of all the different opportunities. For example, we have an electrical training program in our program right now. I went in to present to them to say, hey, let's think about all the opportunities in terms of being an electrician. Electrical techniques and electrical instrumentation can be a starting point for so many fields. There's a huge need for electrical instrumentation. There are power-line apprenticeships. There are so many opportunities.

This kind of career education doesn't happen in our first nation communities.

The Chair: Mr. Cuzner, your time is up, so we're going to move to the final round of questioning.

Ms. Leitch.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for taking the time to join us today. We appreciate your comments.

I usually get cut off, because I'm the last person on the round. I'm going to give you two questions, and if you can't answer them, maybe you could send us a response. I'd greatly appreciate it.

I grew up in a northern community, in Fort McMurray, actually. I recognize exactly the opportunities that are there, particularly for integrating the first nation communities into large industrial mining operations.

First, what are some of the specific best practices or educational programs you believe your company can invest in or is already investing in? Do you have examples of other firms we can look to for best practices? That's an educational question.

Second, can you provide some comments on successes in the private sector with respect to training and development in these remote rural communities? What are they doing to attract individuals from other parts of either your province or the country? I think we all know that a thousand people are probably not going to be enough to service all those jobs in Saskatchewan. A thousand people will not be enough to service even northern Saskatchewan. We're going to have to find those other individuals somewhere else, hopefully within our own country. What are your firms and other best-practice firms doing to attract individuals from other parts of the country so that we're utilizing as many Canadians as possible and are making sure that every Canadian possible has a job?

Mr. Gary Merasty: We take a bit of a pipeline approach to our education training programs within Cameco. I think one of the best practices revolves around that approach, in that we look at what some of the needs are in the high school system and we try to support it. Some of them are traditional, like career fairs, informational sessions. We go in there and we introduce them to the trades, that type of thing.

We invested \$2 million into Credenda virtual high school to enhance the math and science training in those schools, especially the remote ones, so they can come out with the math and science. Then we do the university-college—again, we do scholarships there,

some of that traditional approach. We also bring them in to partner internally with our in-house training, so we can have economies of scale. We look at leveraging outside dollars, our internal dollars, and undertaking some of this.

We've had people get commerce degrees. Once they're employed with us, we pay their tuition to go into engineering. We just had a Métis graduate with his engineering degree. He started with us with only basically grade 12, and it went up. He's an engineer. Big John, we call him. That type of top-of-company commitment is absolutely critical. After that, it's just more engagement with the communities and really getting to know what it is they'd like to see.

There was an earlier question about innovation. Unfortunately, there's a lot of welfare in the communities. And the ability to keep people on welfare while they're undergoing some training to enhance their skills, top it up perhaps, could meet with some positive results in the future, especially with those large numbers of drop-outs.

Those are some best practices we've heard about.

• (1625)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: In addition to your firm, do you have other firms you would recommend that have best practices?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Certainly there's our partner, AREVA Canada. And we've gone into the oil field, oil sector, to look at Suncor, Shell. With our ASEP program, Shell was actually a partner in that process. De Beers has done some good things in the Xstrata Raglan mine in northern Quebec as well. They've been quite innovative.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Thank you.

Ms. Kim Radbourne: One of the best practices I see with the Lower Mattagami River project is the use of the contractor Kiewit-Alarie for soliciting any of our university or college graduates, due to the incentive grants for engineers. It's really excellent to provide that opportunity to any of our technical graduates.

That's the main thing that I see, because I'm with the training organization, not the company side. The company side is being forced to sit with us at the table and to develop these plans to achieve the position. But I think they see it as mutually beneficial in meeting the obligations of our agreement and in seeing that people close to the project are getting the jobs.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Leitch, you have had your full five minutes, remarkably.

With that, we'd like to thank each of the presenters for their interesting presentations and for some of their more provocative kinds of approaches they'd like to see governments take. We appreciate that, and your recommendations. Thank you once again for coming before us and presenting.

With that, we'll suspend for a few moments.

• (1625)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: We will get started.

For the information of committee members, the budget for this particular study was distributed. You may want to have a look at that. We will break about ten minutes before we adjourn, to go over that and any other matters we may have, so you may want to be looking at that.

We will now commence with our second panel. I gather we have two presenters, ABC Life Literacy Canada, and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. We would like you to present for about seven minutes, and then we'll have five-minute rounds of questions.

I'm not sure who is going to present first. Is it Ms. Eaton?

Okay, go ahead, Ms. Eaton.

• (1640)

Ms. Margaret Eaton (President, ABC Life Literacy Canada): Thank you very much.

I am delighted to be here.

My name is Margaret Eaton. I am president of ABC Life Literacy Canada.

We're a national literacy organization, and our vision is that every Canadian have the literacy skills they need to live a fully engaged life at home, at work, and in their community. We're delighted to be speaking on this topic today.

As you know, a report by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, "The Business Case for Investing in Canada's Remote Communities", explains that improving the skills and training of Canadians is absolutely essential to helping business make the case for investing in remote and rural communities. We really couldn't agree more with that statement.

Poor and low-level literacy and essential skills are a reality throughout Canada. According to international assessments, 42% of Canadians are at low levels of literacy, meaning they have below a grade 12 level of literacy skills.

We're also witnessing dramatic changes in the labour market, with the mismatch between the skills that Canadians have and the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. In its report, "Menial No More", the Ontario Literacy Coalition explains that skill-level requirements for jobs that were assumed to be entry level or low-skilled have increased. This change has been driven largely by technology, by the pressures of productivity, and by legislative changes to health and safety standards. We require higher digital and technical skills for almost every job.

I'm sure you've seen this. In hospitals orderlies now carry with them PDAs—personal digital assistant devices. We're seeing this in hotel chains, where the cleaning staff are now carrying PDAs with them. Even a Starbucks barista is now charged with being the person who fixes the Wi-Fi when it goes down. So we're seeing that all sorts of jobs have different kinds of technical skill requirements.

We're also entering into a time of labour shortage. It's estimated that the Ring of Fire in the James Bay lowlands of northern Ontario will require 90,000 new workers. Those workers will need a higher level of skill than many Canadians currently have. HRSDC estimates

that by 2031, 77% of all jobs will need some form of post-secondary education or training.

So how do we address these new training needs, especially for remote communities? The Chamber of Commerce suggests that training needs to be more closely aligned with the unique needs of individual communities. Better aligning skills training to the economic and business opportunities in communities really means engaging business. Our best solution to this is through partnerships between government, business, and employees through workplace literacy and essential skills training. We've already heard a bit about some of the successes of that model today.

We see this happening in the diamond mines in the Northwest Territories. Both Diavik and Ekati diamond mines have successful workplace literacy and essential skills training programs that serve their largely aboriginal workforce. Their training programs include literacy and basic skills, the opportunity to attain a GED diploma, and job-specific training on equipment and systems. The program has become a model. In fact the HR director at Diavik told me that they get recruiters from Fort McMurray coming to Yellowknife to pinch some of their staff. It's that successful.

This program was funded partially by the territorial government and partially by the employer, but it also included a contribution of time from the employees. We find that this kind of partnership, with each player contributing, creates a successful, sustainable model for long-term training programs. The employee is acquiring the job-specific skills they need for their current role, but also the literacy and essential skills foundation that they can then take to any employer.

These programs also provide a great win for the employer. Our research shows that those employers who invest in workplace literacy and essential skills training experience many benefits, including lower absenteeism, higher retention of employees, better communication skills in employees, higher productivity, lower costs, lower error rates, and better health and safety standards.

In remote communities, especially those that are dependent on one large employer, the employer can truly be a fantastic provider of skills training. The workplace is an astounding place for training, because the people are already there. You've overcome some of those barriers. The person doesn't have to go home, get dinner on, find a babysitter, and then do their training. They can actually do their training where they are. The learning can be immediately attached and applied to the job they're doing, which makes for a better learning experience.

• (1645)

Even for small and medium-sized enterprises, we've seen models where companies join together to provide training opportunities for employees and share the costs. As we experience labour shortage, especially in remote and northern communities, employers are increasingly going to have to train the people they have. They're going to have to work with the people who are there, as we saw in the northern Saskatchewan case.

In a 2009 Ipsos Reid study, ABC Life Literacy Canada posed the question: who is responsible for improving the literacy and essential skills of Canadians? What we found was that most Canadians believe that it's up to the individual to improve their own skills, but it appears that they aren't expected to do it on their own. Four in ten Canadians believe that an individual's place of work has a role to play, but seven out of ten also believe that the government should contribute to improving adult literacy.

So what role can the federal government play? We believe that the government can play a strong role in providing leadership in incenting employers to invest in workplace literacy and essential skills. We know that employers in Canada have a poor record of training of employees. The OECD ranks Canada 13th among western nations in investment in training. We're far below the U.S. and the United Kingdom. And we know that any training dollars that are spent tend to be spent on the manager class, not on front-line workers. In those regions where there are government programs providing an incentive to employers, then employers are far more likely to provide training to that front-line worker. And we see this in highly successful programs in Manitoba, in Nova Scotia, and in Quebec.

Through a forum of federal, provincial, and territorial labour ministers, governments can encourage and incent employers to ensure that they are a part of the solution. This could include a workplace training tax credit. It could also include measures and incentives to ensure that provinces engage employers and businesses in their essential skills training models. In some provinces, the labour market agreements are used, for example, to support employers in providing literacy and essential skills training.

Innovative partnerships of government, employers, and employees can equip Canadians with the skills they need for the job they're in, and for their next job. The leadership of our federal government can help ensure that our workforce has the skills that will allow Canadian business to excel in the global economy. In that sense, increasing skills has a far-reaching economic impact for every community in our country and for our nation as a whole.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation.

Is it Ms. Clarke who is going to present? Okay, go ahead.

Mrs. Michèle Clarke (Director, Public Policy and Federal Relations, Association of Canadian Community Colleges): Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[*English*]

My name is Michèle Clarke. I'm the director of government relations and policy research at the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input to the committee's study on skills development in rural and remote communities. I am accompanied today by my colleague, Suzanne Taschereau, who is responsible for our essential skills initiatives.

ACCC is the national and international voice of Canada's 150 colleges, institutes, university colleges, polytechnics, and CEGEPs. With campuses in 1,000 urban, rural, and remote communities, these institutions draw students equally from all socio-economic quarters.

Our presentation today focuses on the roles colleges play in improving skills development in remote rural communities. We will identify some of the barriers to effective skills development, and share innovative approaches and practices on how colleges work closely with business, industry, and community employers to meet their education and training requirements to foster business innovation, and to enhance access to post-secondary education and training.

Colleges and institutes have extensive reach across Canada's remote rural communities. They are often the only post-secondary institution in the area, and are a valuable resource in providing rural and remote Canadians with equitable access to post-secondary education and skills training. Our three colleges in the territories have main campuses as well as extensive networks of learning centres serving small communities. Aurora College, for example, has 24 learning centres. These colleges serve as hubs of community response and local socio-economic well-being. They offer innovative programming and service delivery modes to facilitate access to post-secondary education, to support innovation, and to improve productivity of rural small and medium-sized enterprises.

As noted in the Canadian Chamber of Commerce report "The Business Case for Investing in Canada's Remote Communities", current education funding models disadvantage rural communities. The confusing complexity and prevalence of many different types of financial assistance mechanisms for post-secondary education often discourages learners from participating in post-secondary education. Colleges are often faced with having to piece together funding sources tied to the eligibility criteria for which different learners are eligible. In many cases the funding does not address other challenges, such as geographical and transportation needs, access to child care, and learning support services. Offering a wide array of wraparound support services to ensure learners succeed in transition to the employment market is critical. However, delivering effective student support services in rural areas is more complex and costly.

A significant proportion of the adult population in rural and remote communities is under-prepared academically to participate in post-secondary and skills training programs. In small towns and rural areas, high school dropout rates for youth are twice those in metropolitan areas. Moreover, the shift towards a knowledge-based economy will require advanced and essential employability skills, such as document comprehension, critical thinking, and problem solving. We welcomed the initiative announced in the June 2011 budget to expand territorial colleges' literacy and numeracy programs. Colleges' experience with adult upgrading and essential skills development is a key part of the solution to providing people living in remote rural communities with transferable skills for employment.

ACCC is working with HRSDC to increase the employability of aboriginal people, newcomers to Canada, unskilled workers, and the unemployed currently excluded from the labour market. A national framework will be created to support their essential skills development, including an integrated process to essential skills development and a national repository of essential skills resources.

Relatively modest investments in upgrading essential skills, like those just mentioned, can yield significant gains in productivity. Providing current and meaningful information about career development and related skills development opportunities is also essential. The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, in partnership with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, offers the mobile career coach program to Saskatchewan first nations communities. Two recreational vehicles were retrofitted and equipped with Internet capability, laptops, and office space to allow staff and participants to comfortably engage in mobile career services.

Distance education is particularly effective for serving learners in remote rural areas. Nunavut Arctic College used the knowledge infrastructure program funding to develop a cyber system to expand programs offered by distance and online, in particular by brokering programs from post-secondary institutions in the south.

• (1650)

Alberta-North has 87 community access points offering distance education programs from five northern Alberta colleges, and Contact North is a network of 94 access centres in northern Ontario, linking students to colleges and universities via computer imaging and supporting interaction between faculty and students. These services are expensive.

Education and training in first nations reserves are also critical. Over 80 colleges deliver programs in aboriginal communities in partnership with first nations bands or with aboriginal-controlled institutes. The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Red River College in Manitoba, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies operate mobile labs for programs for automotive service technicians, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and welders, to name a few.

ACCC is partnering with Noront Mines, the Aboriginal Human Resource Council, and a consortium of colleges to explore a potential model for aboriginal employment and business development in the Ring of Fire. The model will feature performance-based programming in two streams, one for employment in trades in the construction and mining sector and the other in business development.

Colleges not only align their education and training programs with the needs of employers through program advisory committees but also provide them with applied research and development support.

College applied research focuses on solving problems for local businesses and helping them to survive and thrive by adopting new technologies and by launching new and improved products and processes. College research institutes such as the Yukon Research Centre and the Aurora Research Institute are developing marketable cold-weather tools, gas hydrate production technology, and Arctic Internet connectivity. College applied research activities produce

highly qualified graduates with real-world challenges, hands-on training with leading-edge technologies, contact with industry, and advanced skills training in all sectors of the economy.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce report highlighted the need for a federal strategy to be founded on strong research about the economic potential that exists in Canada's remote communities.

An ACCC research project on college-led rural knowledge clusters, funded by the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat, confirmed that colleges are key players in rural system amenities and facilitators of innovation and creative industries. ACCC continues to explore opportunities with the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat to undertake research projects to examine the role of colleges and institutes as catalysts of the creative rural economy.

We invite the committee to take note of our brief, which will be submitted on December 13. We thank the committee for giving us this opportunity, and my colleague Suzanne and I would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation.

We'll start with Mr. Patry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, ladies.

You say that 42% of Canadians have difficulty reading and writing, and have not received any training. I, for one, was a factory worker. In 90, a new technology was developed. CEGEP teachers came to show people who had a Grade 11, or Secondary V, education how to use this new technology. Workers were pulled from the factory for six months, while they worked with teachers. Afterwards, we had to play catch-up and double up our efforts. I live 200 kilometres north of Quebec City. That is less complicated than if I were living 200 kilometres north of what is truly northern Quebec.

I have talked to employers, unemployment offices and the community. As you know, courses were offered in some places to people receiving employment benefits so that they could learn to read and write, and attend the training. I don't know if that is still the case.

Is that still being done in your area? Are companies willing to work with the community and the government to help unemployed people?

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: Is that question for me?

Mr. Claude Patry: It's for all three of you.

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: Yes, colleges are working very closely with industry to help displaced workers. Our members across Canada certainly offer a considerable amount of training to help those people develop new capabilities, new skills, so that they can return to the labour market.

A partnership is first created between the community's affected industry and the college. As I said in my presentation, the establishment is often the community's biggest industry. In small centres, partnerships develop, and those establishments provide displaced workers with training. Yes, that process is ongoing in communities with colleges.

Mr. Claude Patry: Thank you.

You talked about 10,000 new workers. Training is now more demanding, among other places, at CEGEP, which many young people attend. Once they finish their high school studies, they enrol in a career program at a CEGEP or a university. Not very many of them are interested in basic manual labour.

For instance, the lady talked about truck drivers. There are fewer and fewer millwrights, welders and gas plumbers. Those are also interesting jobs, but young people don't seem to be especially interested in them.

Have you planned any kind of training for those people in order to pique their interest and convince them to work in those fields?

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: Unless I'm mistaken, you are talking specifically about encouraging young people to pursue studies in trades, for instance.

There are certainly challenges to meet in all Canadian provinces in terms of encouraging people to enrol in trade-related programs.

There are gaps in all trade areas and a lot of demand across Canada—in some trades more than others. It depends on the trade. In British Columbia, steelworkers are highly in demand. The situation is different in Ontario. In construction, major challenges will have to be met in the coming years, as some 300,000 people will try to fill positions left vacant by the people exiting the labour market. Those industries will have to meet some major challenges.

As for colleges, they certainly promote all the programs they offer and work very closely with the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, for instance, which heavily promotes the trades programs offered.

However, as you say, a prevailing belief in Canada is that young people may not want to be skilled workers. They have also often seen their parents work in trades and do not want to follow the same career path. However, wages are very high in certain areas.

That's why we, the colleges, are working very closely with the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum in an effort to promote trades. In addition, I know that the forum itself works very closely with employers to encourage apprenticeship. Young people may become skilled workers without really being apprentices. However, if they do go through apprenticeship training, they will benefit later because they will be able to reach other skill levels. Their training will be recognized in Canada thanks to the Red Seal Program certification. Their wages will be even higher than without that certification.

• (1700)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Patry. Your time is up.

We'll move to Mr. Shory. Now you're on a roll.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here this afternoon and giving us a brief background on your expertise, which will help this committee to complete our study and come up with some positive recommendations in this area.

As you know, the federal government is committed to work with all levels—provinces, territories, municipalities, and the others—in partnership to focus on a long-term infrastructure plan for remote and rural areas. As a matter of fact, only last week Minister Lebel had already launched a process in that direction, which will help.

Last week I was reading in the Canadian Chamber of Commerce report, which you mentioned in the beginning, called “The Business Case for Investing in Canada's Remote Communities”, and I was struck with the observation it made in the executive summary. It said:

Despite many sources of government support and significant federal spending directed at rural/remote areas of Canada, consistent progress in building strong, self-sustaining remote communities is not evident.

Then in further paragraphs, I noted that there was emphasis in part in creating private sector investment in these areas.

So I am interested, and as a matter of fact the committee would be interested, to know how you feel our government can improve development efforts in remote rural communities. And specifically if you had to prioritize, say, a set of non-monetary changes—of course we all understand we are dealing with times of fiscal restraint—to encourage participation from multiple sectors in the development of remote rural communities, what would they be?

Ms. Margaret Eaton: Thanks very much for the question.

The Chamber of Commerce report was really an interesting and enlightening report. One of the things that I really took from that was this role of the private sector, especially in these communities. We heard about this in the Cameco story, the ability of the large employer to create community. If the employer is doing well then the community is doing well. Those communities then thrive because there are higher wages and further investment in small business, and that leads to a more healthy and sustained environment.

What we would like to see is that when the labour market agreements are being renegotiated, which will happen over the next year or two, that there be some emphasis placed on carving out some of that investment to go towards employers to create that incentive for doing the training. It benefits the employee and it benefits the employer, and that will lead to a healthier community. We really see the labour market agreements as being a powerful way to make a change that the federal government could enact.

•(1705)

Ms. Suzanne Taschereau (Director, Essential Skills, Canadian Partnerships, Association of Canadian Community Colleges): I'd like to add to that.

In the model that we're using with Noront Mines, they are a willing and very interested partner and can play a very interesting role in terms of providing incentives for some of their suppliers. What Noront Mines is proposing to do is to make it a requirement for all of the suppliers that they hire to provide some upgrading to hire aboriginal and local people. This would be done under the condition that they also release them for some amount of training. They provide conditions under their agreements with their suppliers to hire local people, thereby developing a local economy.

For that—and you're saying non-financial—they need to offset their risks in the short term. They're looking at the financial investment as an investment, not a cost, but as a short-term investment that will offset the cost, and in the long run would provide sustainable employment by providing incentives to the suppliers.

I don't know if that answers your question, but it's part of it. We are looking at partnerships. It does require some funding in the north. It's difficult. Through partnerships you can share the burden of those costs and really focus on the incentive piece of it.

The Chair: Mr. Shory, your time is up.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the things we heard from the earlier witnesses was regarding the pace of business versus the pace of government to respond. I've actually got an article from my local paper. It's headlined "Well-paid 'unanswered' jobs for workers willing to go north". Vancouver Island University was actually turning students away from their heavy equipment operator course, and they were indicating the number of jobs that are available in the north right now.

Have you seen best practices for what I would call just-in-time training? Could you speak to that? That's an important issue up north.

Ms. Suzanne Taschereau: What we have seen that works, particularly when we're looking at the foundational skills, is to integrate them with a very small investment—between 20 and 60 hours focused on the requirements of what is needed for the job now, rather than K-to-12 long-term math and literacy.

We're finding that, first of all, the learners who have dropped out at the high school level are really not interested. It's very difficult to convince them, as adults, to go back and do grade 10, grade 11, and grade 12. But you can work with the companies, the colleges, and the local community providers, to provide that just-in-time, "what do you need to be able to do the job", which is very, very focused.

Our colleges have developed some workplace essential skills testing tools that are based on the international adult literacy scales. They require an hour or two, at the most three, depending on the learning needs, to assess what the needs are, work with the company

to know what technical skills are required, and then marry those in very targeted interventions. They tend to work better.

If the funding allows for that, that is much more targeted to immediate needs, where the individual sees the practicality of it and the enterprise sees an immediate benefit in terms of skills acquisition and productivity in the workplace. Then you have the beginning of a winning formula. Then you can leverage those small successes, and the individual then wants more.

Ms. Jean Crowder: You're essentially talking about building blocks. In your experience, is there enough flexibility and availability of funding to do that kind of process?

Ms. Suzanne Taschereau: I could only speak to the essential skills piece, but my colleague might be able to do that for the technical training.

When we are trying out with pilot initiatives, sometimes we have that kind of flexibility, but then they're not scaled up for the long term. So we go from one pilot to another pilot to another pilot. If we could draw from the best practices and all of the learning that we're getting from innovations in pilots, and then scale those up to much longer-term funding, then we'd be in business.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Ms. Clarke.

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: I was going to add that the reaction of colleges.... We often describe our members as being able to turn things around on a dime. They do this regularly, and with ease and with flexibility. There obviously are some cost implications, but their mandate is to respond to community needs and to industry needs, so that if you do have an industry, an SME, a company that's local, or not, that approaches a member institution or college in Canada with a particular request, rare are the times when they're not able to turn it around.

They can certainly respond to the needs of that particular employer. Whether it be to train a small workforce, whether it be to train a large workforce, they tailor the curriculum as needed. Institutions have specific departments that work with industry. It's a different arm of the organization.

•(1710)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Ms. Clarke, is there something in particular that we could propose as a recommendation that would continue to support that kind of activity?

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: In the holistic approach that colleges provide for the learners, there are approaches that colleges are putting in place to be able to support the many needs that learners in rural and remote communities have. So there's the element of being able to support colleges to be able to continue to offer those particular services. There's also partnership development. It was mentioned earlier from the perspective of incentives for employers. We have colleges that partner with employers to be able to satisfy two needs.

Take for example a health centre, as was the case in the Red Deer area, where they couldn't get workers to come to work at that particular health facility, and the college needed to provide some opportunities for its students—it's not necessarily a rural centre, but it's an example—to be able to gain work experience, so both needs were satisfied. The students were able to go to work in this facility, under supervision, to deliver some of the services that were needed and the college students, the learners, were able to acquire some industry experience. In the end, some of them were hired by that particular facility, so there was the on-the-job learning element as well.

Providing some incentives for employers, whether they be tax credits, whether they be support down the road for things that they're doing, I think would be very, very important.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Clarke.

The time is up, but I think, Ms. Eaton, you had a point you wanted to make.

Ms. Margaret Eaton: Yes, thank you.

Some of the more successful models are ones in which the employer is not funded directly. As we were talking about, employers aren't interested in applying for grants and going through that long, long process. In the provinces where it works really well, like Manitoba, it's through a labour market department that actually sends out assessors and trainers to your workplace, figures out what the essential skills and literacy challenges are, and then designs that just-in-time program on their behalf.

Similarly, in Ontario we partnered with the Ontario Literacy Coalition for a workplace literacy project that went into 14 different workplaces across the province. The funding went to the Ontario Literacy Coalition, who then contracted with other local providers to ensure that workplaces had their training needs met.

I think that's a really nice model, where the employer doesn't have to be involved in applying for funding. Sometimes that can be a hassle. If there can be an intermediary, some kind of smart third party, that really helps them. The other thing we hear from employers is that they need a lot of hand-holding. They need help with assessment, with training. A lot of the SMEs in fact don't have HR professionals who are masters of training, so they really are looking for another expert, a college, a school board, a literacy organization that can do that work for them.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Eaton, for that intervention.

Mr. Butt, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to you ladies for being here this afternoon. We're learning some good stuff about what you're doing, and I think that's good for members of the committee to know.

One of the things I heard about from Ms. Taschereau was this problem of going from pilot project to pilot project. The purpose of this study is to look at skills development in remote and rural communities in an era of fiscal restraint. We know dollars are tight.

Can you give me an example of a pilot project that received funding but ended because it wasn't successful? Perhaps the government could be reallocating existing resources from that area into an area that could be more sustainable. Do you have any examples of opportunities to shift some existing funding to areas where we could get a better bang for the buck?

● (1715)

Ms. Suzanne Taschereau: The pilot project approach takes about one year. Then you move from one year to the next. You're always testing some new approach, rather than building on approaches that have shown promise.

I haven't been funded by government for a long time, so I can't give you examples of pilots that should not have gone ahead, pilots with funding you could reallocate. My main point is that the reason for a pilot is to assess whether it's worked or not. If it hasn't worked, then you don't continue. If it has worked, then I would hope we could scale those things up. I haven't had pilots that dismally failed, where money could be reallocated. It isn't usually a lot of money. It's usually \$5,000 to a college here, \$5,000 to a college there. Some colleges will do well. Some won't do as well. You take the lesson from that. You move forward and try to scale up the best practices.

I don't know if my colleagues have any ideas on pilots that have gone haywire, million-dollar pilots whose money could be placed elsewhere. I don't have any examples of those, but maybe you guys have one.

Mrs. Michèle Clarke: I do have a program, though maybe it's not a pilot. The ASEP program is coming to an end in 2012, and colleges have worked through it. They have recommended some efficiencies for it and for ASETS as well.

I would add a comment on the different kinds of funding available for learners. With ASEP and ASETS, the learners have challenges in knowing where to go to get the funding. Some of it comes from here, and some of it comes from there. Whether it's provincial or whether it's federal, there's funding available. It's funding the one that fits. One will provide this, and one won't. We would recommend that there be a centralization of funding for programs available to learners in rural and remote communities, so that they have a one-stop shop to go to.

Mr. Brad Butt: Let me go to the literacy side with Ms. Eaton. On the news yesterday, Margaret Atwood was saying that Canadians are getting more literate by using Twitter, which I thought was kind of bizarre. I mention this to raise the issue of information technology and broadband Internet access. I'm assuming that it's the best way to service remote communities. It's tough to get physical bodies there, but through e-learning, webcasting, and those kinds of things, we could be making substantial progress. I would assume that it's the way we should be going. It's probably the most cost-effective way of servicing communities that are currently under-serviced in these remote areas. Would it be fair to say that this is where we need to be moving?

Ms. Margaret Eaton: I think access is a huge issue. I know the federal government is looking at a digital economy strategy, and I think that is one of the concerns that's going to be addressed there. Certainly there are tremendous innovations in e-learning and web broadcasting. I know the colleges have been involved in that as well. I think there is a tremendous amount of value in that. But I know there are still many remote communities for which that's an impossibility at this point. Until we have access, it will be very tough for a lot of remote communities to even participate. That would be one part.

I guess the second part is that it's very good for certain types of learning, but maybe not for learning that's particularly related to work and to employment. Oftentimes it has to be about this piece of equipment, this tool, this workplace—things that are very situated in their location and the physical space. And we're hearing about this a lot, especially with new technology. As soon as a new piece of equipment comes onto the shop floor, people are flabbergasted and they don't have some of the basic skills to actually work with that equipment. You were telling me a story about this, Brad, from your

experience. Then you need that in-person, on-the-shop-floor kind of training.

I think there are some limitations, but I definitely think it's a big, brave new world of e-learning out there.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our time has run out and we have some committee business to deal with.

We appreciate your presentation and your submissions, and we'll certainly take them into regard.

With that, I'll suspend for a few moments for you to have an opportunity to leave, and then we'll discuss some committee business.

Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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