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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the 56th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

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

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members will participate in person or by using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available on the House of Commons website. For your information, the webcast will always show the individual speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

[English]

For those participating virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen of the floor, Inuktitut, English or French. Please select your language now. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming our proceedings.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

[Translation]

Please, direct your remarks to the Chair.

[English]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on November 21, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of improving graduation rates of indigenous students.

Today, in our first panel, we welcome from Keewaytinook Internet High School, Nikki Osborne, teacher and graduation coach. From Nunavut Arctic College, we welcome Rebecca Mearns, the president. From Yukon University, we welcome Shelagh Rowles, provost and vice-president academic, who is here by video conference.

Please correct me if I've said any of your names improperly.

We are going to begin with Ms. Mearns.

You'll start us off with five minutes.

Ms. Rebecca Mearns (President, Nunavut Arctic College): *Qujannamiik*, Chair.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Madam Chair, please excuse me. I raised my hand virtually.

First, I want to congratulate you for your new position; I was unable to do so last time. I'm sure that everything will go very well. I'm pleased that you are our new Chair, as much as I greatly appreciated Mr. Garneau.

Also, I'd like to discuss the motion for which I gave notice just over a week ago. I do not know if it is possible to do so now.

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, I invite you to seize the opportunity during your turn to present your motion.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Very well, thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Mearns, if you'd like to start, you have five minutes.

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you. My name is Rebecca Mearns. I'm the president of Nunavut Arctic College. I work out of Iqaluit.

To give you a little background, Nunavut Arctic College is both a post-secondary institute and a public agency of the Government of Nunavut. It was created through the Nunavut Arctic College Act on January 1, 1995. The college is situated within Inuit Nunangat and serves the largest post-secondary region in Canada. It's represented by a network of sites, supports and people across the territory, providing a diverse range of programs, including adult education; certificate, diploma and degree programs; as well as cultural programming and certified trades. Nunavut Arctic College's facilities include 25 community learning centres, three regional campuses, one cultural school and one trade school.

Some of our longest-running programs include the Nunavut teacher education program, which provides graduates with a Bachelor of Education, and the environmental technology diploma program. Both programs have been running for over 35 years.

During my time with the college, I have seen the opportunities and the challenges that come with delivering post-secondary education in Nunavut. Today I will share an example of a program that has received significant investment for expansion of delivery, the Nunavut teacher education program.

The Nunavut teacher education program, through a tripartite working group between the Government of Nunavut, the Government of Canada through Canadian Heritage, and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., received \$34.7 million to fund the pathfinder project. This project not only allowed the college to expand the delivery of the program; it also included dedicated funds to revitalize the program. Through this funding, the college almost doubled the number of communities offering the Bachelor of Education program. This has been such an important investment in the college and for Nunavut, providing decentralized training for Inuit and other Nunavummiut and providing the necessary credentials for those individuals to become teachers within our elementary schools.

The program now embeds Inuit language and culture courses into the first two years of this five-year program. In doing this, students now have an exit option after two years, having earned an Inuktitut language and cultural diploma. Exit and entry points are an important feature for adult learners. The college is proud of the work it has done to create these laddering opportunities. The pathfinder funding included academic and non-academic supports to encourage student success. Key supports identified by the college included academic tutors, Inuit cultural advisers and elders, and information technology.

I can't overstate the magnitude of this investment. Over the past two years, the college has gone from delivering the Nunavut teacher education program in eight Nunavut communities, with approximately 90 students, to our current delivery in 15 communities, with over 170 students enrolled. For a small institution with just over 270 staff and faculty positions, this is an incredible increase.

The rollout of this expansion has not been without its challenges, of course. One of our biggest challenges is space for the delivery of the program. The investment into the teacher education program has allowed the college to deliver the B.Ed., as I said, across 15 communities in community learning centres. Eleven of these 25 community learning centres, or CLCs, are small one- and two-

classroom buildings. Seventeen of the CLCs were built in the 1990s or earlier, with one being built in 1965 and five in the 1970s.

By delivering the Nunavut teacher education program, we're dedicating that classroom space for upwards of five years. If that is the only classroom in that community learning centre, that means we're not able to deliver other programming there until this program is complete. Of course, there are so many programs that are of interest to our community members.

● (1545)

As we see increasing success through the expansion of the Nunavut teacher education program, it's evident that more major infrastructure investments are needed before we can explore the expansion of any of our other existing or future programs. This also means that investment is needed in the housing sector. Although Nunavut Arctic College does have the ability to offer some single and family units, we're very limited and often the requests highly outnumber the number of houses available for our students.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Mearns. Perhaps you could add the rest of your comments during the question and answer period. Your time is up.

Ms. Mearns: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Osborne, you have five minutes.

Ms. Nikki Osborne (Teacher and Graduation Coach, Kee-waytinook Internet High School): [*Witness spoke in Oji-Cree*]

[*English*]

For the past nine years, I've had the best job in the world, which is obviously being a teacher. I've had the honour of working exclusively with indigenous students from northern Ontario. The vast majority of my students come from small fly-in communities. For the past three years, I've worked as the graduation coach at Kee-waytinook Internet High School.

I could talk to you all day about student success and graduation rates—so let me know what you're doing later. I'm no expert, but I have seen what moves the mark and what makes the difference. What it boils down to are holistic student supports delivered by caring and dedicated people.

I hope today that I can talk to you at length about our successful adult education program. This program is delivered by our co-op teacher, who is the same person who oversees our nutrition program. This allows students to access healthy and tasty food at breakfast, at lunch, during evening study hall tutorials and weekend catch-up sessions. All of these classroom hours are of course supervised by our amazing teachers. Please ask me about them later.

Please ask me about our course specialist. She does really important things, like make sure our lessons reflect pedagogy that would make any ministry inspector smile. My favourite thing that she does is to work online one on one with students. Even a learner who is going through yet another lockdown or is out of town receiving medically necessary treatment not available in their home community—by the way, I'm not talking about complex care like seeing a specialist or anything like that, but X-rays—can access the support of a teacher.

Please ask me about our two full-time wellness workers. They work day to day to support students with their mental health and well-being, but they're also there in a time of crisis. They literally answer their phones 24-7, and I do not know how our school could function without their support.

Please ask me about our student success team made up of our special education resource teacher, our student achievement officer and our student success teacher.

I hope today you have time to ask me about our amazing native language teacher. She offers six indigenous language courses in three different dialects. She also helps teachers like me improve my pronunciation. She works very closely with our land-based teacher to provide culturally important learning opportunities on the land for our students.

Ask me today about our guidance counsellors, administrators, support staff and classroom assistants who are hired from within our communities. All of the success that we have seen and continue to strive for at Keewaytinook Internet High School is 100% a team effort.

If you ask me, I'll tell you what a graduation coach does too.

I can also tell you that as investors and stakeholders we all know that early supports will always be more effective than any late interventions. I promise you that a speech and language pathologist seeing a kindergarten student who is non-verbal will always be more effective than any tutoring I can give in high school. I promise you that a designated early reading intervention teacher in grade 2 will be far more effective in improving graduation rates than any IEP that can be written in high school.

We need to work with local education authorities to make sure that the desperately needed special education support is in place. I don't need to tell you the effect that COVID-19 has had in the last few years.

We also need to give my potential grads a reason to graduate. We need to work with local bands and industry to provide employment opportunities both on and off reserve.

Graduating from high school is not easy, and it shouldn't be easy. I don't want it to be easy. No meaningful learning has ever come from easy. As I have told many of my frustrated students, if graduating from high school were easy, then everybody would have a diploma.

We need to take actionable steps to get rid of unnecessary barriers—barriers that my children and your children will never have to face. Let's work together to get rid of these inequalities so that stu-

dents can roll up their sleeves and get on with the meaningful and purposeful hard work of earning their diploma.

Chi-meegwetch.

• (1550)

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

We'll now go to Ms. Rowles from Yukon University by video conference.

Can you please turn on your camera, Ms. Rowles?

Dr. Shelagh Rowles (Provost and Vice-President Academic, Yukon University): Can you see me yet?

The Chair: There we go.

Dr. Shelagh Rowles: Thank you to the indigenous and northern affairs committee for the opportunity to speak to you today on improving graduation rates and successful outcomes for indigenous students.

My name is Shelagh Rowles. I'm the provost and vice-president academic at Yukon University. I began working at the university in 1991 when it was Yukon College, spending my first six years in the fly-in community of Old Crow.

Typically, I would be joining you from my office in Whitehorse, located on the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dun First Nation and the Ta'an Kwach'an Council, but today I'm joining you from Moab, Utah, on the traditional and ancestral lands of the bands of the Ute and the clans of the Ancestral Pueblo people.

I'll start by telling you more about Yukon University. We're a progressive post-secondary institution and Canada's first and currently only university north of 60. Yukon U is early in our journey to becoming a university, but we've been providing post-secondary education in the north since 1963. Our 13 campuses are situated on the traditional territories of the 14 Yukon first nations in 12 communities. Our vision is to become a thriving learning and research community leading Canada's north.

The university's first strategic plan sets out one of our priorities for the next five years as taking our place in advancing reconciliation. That means we'll strengthen our collaboration with Yukon first nations to meet their goals in education.

Little Salmon Carmacks elder and chief Roddy Blackjack, often spoke of the importance of keeping indigenous and western world views side by side. Every graduate and employee of Yukon U must complete a Yukon first nations competency to ensure understanding and appreciation for the unique context we operate in throughout the Yukon.

It's also important for me to mention to you that Yukon University operates in a territory that, like many other places in Canada, has been rocked by several concurrent crises: the pandemic, substance abuse, affordable housing and the cost of living. All that is to say that the past few years have been incredibly difficult for our communities. Barriers to obtaining high school education and later to post-secondary studies have grown significantly. However, Yukon communities and Yukon U have adapted and were resilient.

I'd like to share with you several success stories from the past few years, flowing from federal investment in key areas of housing and infrastructure, economic diversification, environmental protection and remediation. You'll notice that there's a common theme of bringing education to people in their communities, instead of insisting that people travel hundreds of kilometres to access programming.

My first example is Yukon University's housing maintainer program. The program has been impactful in Yukon communities. During the past two years, the university has worked with three first nation governments to deliver the program to 29 students. Students developed knowledge in the skilled trades and acquired an understanding of modern building science. They were able to use the course hours towards an apprenticeship if they decided to pursue those paths—plus, they increased housing capacity in their home communities.

The Yukon first nations arts certificate program provides an incredible opportunity for emerging entrepreneurs and craftspeople. It was delivered in 13 communities to 84 students between 2019 and 2022, in partnership with Yukon first nation governments. It was funded through the northern adult basic education initiative through CanNor. The classes were delivered on timelines suitable for each community and drew from the expertise of local artists. The program fostered the development of local businesses and was the platform for students to support each other during the trying days of the pandemic.

Land use planning, environmental remediation and environmental monitoring are key priorities stemming from the Yukon land claims and self-government agreements. There are 57 students who have completed or are in the environmental monitoring certificate program, which runs in a compressed model offered several times per year for people employed as monitors in their community or who are training to become a monitor. All graduates are employed.

While some of these numbers may seem small, providing the knowledge and skills for just one individual can make an incredible impact on a community of three hundred or four hundred people. It can mean that water quality is monitored and that repairs to the community gathering space or housing can be done without waiting weeks for someone from afar to come.

• (1555)

There's a tremendous opportunity for the federal government to have a greater and more meaningful impact on small northern communities in the areas we've outlined. What's required is stable, longer-term funding models that enable us to collaborate with Yukon first nations to develop, build, deliver and assess the programs we offer for the greatest success, and to scale up and expand when we achieve it.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you all today.

• (1600)

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

We'll now proceed to our first round of questions, beginning with the Conservatives and Mr. Zimmer for six minutes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions will be for Rebecca Mearns.

It was a pleasure to meet you at the Northern Lights conference just a few months ago. Recently, we were up in Nunavut—in Cambridge Bay. We got to experience the college up there and some of the facilities, as well.

I'm looking at an interesting article. It's called, "10 Things You Might Not Know About NAC's President, Becky Mearns". It's quite interesting. I challenge the committee members to check it out afterwards.

You were born in Iqaluit, so you're local. That's one of the reasons I really thought it would be valuable to have you here to hear your perspective, not just as an education professional, but also as somebody who actually went through the system there, to see what we could do to increase those graduation rates.

For the sake of the committee, I think there's one more thing I'd like to add to your resumé that's listed here. This summer, you caught her first seal while out boating. That's among many other things you have on your resumé.

Welcome today, Rebecca.

You know that this study is about the increasing grad rates. I heard you speak specifically, at Northern Lights, about post secondary, but I think they're related because, as a former teacher myself, I think that if a student doesn't have an opportunity post graduation, they might not see graduation as that important.

As a person from the north and from Nunavut, what would you say are some of the key things that we need to do to increase those graduation rates amongst our northern communities?

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: I think there are some great connections between what we do at the college and our K to 12 education system in Nunavut. As I said about the Nunavut teacher education program, the entire goal of that is to get more Inuit and Nunavummiut into the classrooms in Nunavut.

When I was going through high school and when I was going through the system in Nunavut, we'd often have teachers come from outside of the territory. Some would stay for a long time. Some would stay for a year or two. Turnover really impacts how children are building relationships within their classrooms and those connections with their teachers.

Our hope is that we're encouraging Nunavummiut and Inuit to go into our classrooms. We're also creating classrooms where Inuktitut language, culture and access to the land is really key as well. We're providing those supports within the classroom to, hopefully, support the success of our K to 12 students.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: We see that often the key to success in those remote communities is really getting that connection to the community.

This is an effort to train teachers from the community, so they'll stay in the community and really connect with the students for a longer period of time, rather than just those two years in and then they're out somewhere else.

What have you seen as a success? Maybe there are some examples. Have you seen where that's been really taken up in the community, where kids really want to become teachers there? What have you seen?

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: I can give an example of one of our cohorts, which just started this year. As I said, we deliver in communities, so people are able to stay at home and attend the program.

We're delivering the program in Naujaat, which is one of the smaller communities in the central Arctic—in central Nunavut. We have 15 students in that class.

This impacted the elementary school because many of the student-support assistants and some of the teachers who weren't yet certified decided to come to take the Nunavut teacher education program. It's a very good problem to have: They're losing people from the school, but hopefully for a future of creating 15 new teachers who can come back into the school once they've completed their studies.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Decentralizing isn't always a positive thing, but in this case, it very much is. One thing that we all saw by being in the north is that it's a massive area.

One thing I heard you say at the Northern Lights conference was that the challenge for a student to go get training is that they have to fly thousands of kilometres away and be away from their family and their friends, etc.

The one thing that I think you're doing a great job of.... Maybe explain how many communities the college is operating in and how many communities have access to this program as a result of what you're doing.

• (1605)

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: We operate in all Nunavut communities, so all 25 communities do have learning centres. We deliver an array of programs at each of those community learning centres. Right now, 15 of those are offering the teacher education program. We have programs such as college foundations—which is an introduction into college programs—office administration, and management

studies. We just graduated a cohort of Bachelor of Social Work. The degree program is done in partnership with Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: That's very cool.

I think that's my time, but.... Oh, I have 40 seconds.

Well, I'll finish with this. We talked about trades training. I think you presented to us there, as well. What opportunities are offered to kids, young students, who want to get their trades training while still remaining at home in Nunavut? What are the opportunities there? What are some of the barriers to doing that, too?

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: Right now, we are working on expanding the accessibility. We do have a trades school that offers five trades—carpenter, electrician, housing maintainer, oil heat systems technician, and plumber—but students do have to travel to Rankin Inlet at this point in time to attend that.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: That's great—very needed trades in those areas, for sure.

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

We'll proceed to Mr. Powlowski for six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Hello. Welcome to all the guests.

Ms. Osborne, let me start with you.

I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know of your high school, and you're centred right here in Thunder Bay. I looked it up online. Do you cover mostly Treaty No. 3 high schools? I know and I think the Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School looks after the NAN communities, and my understanding is that they do distance learning to those communities. I was looking at your communities, and your communities are further west of there. I'm just trying to figure out which communities you bring services to.

Ms. Nikki Osborne: We also cover Treaty No. 9 and Treaty No. 5. We serve 15 communities all over northern Ontario.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: So, it's not centred in one geographical region.

Ms. Nikki Osborne: No, we cover a wide range of areas.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Okay, so I guess... Matawa, I think, does things there, too, so there seem to be several jurisdictions. Perhaps you could tell me this: In those communities you service, is there also the option of physically going to schools, or are these all communities...? I would think so because I would think that in every community there is the option of physically going and that this is an alternative to those. Do you work with the existing schools in those communities?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: We definitely work in partnership with all of the education bodies to support each another, but generally speaking, no, physical high schools are very limited in our communities. Some of them do have a new high school. We have a new high school in Big Trout Lake. My home community of Deer Lake, where I lived for four years, goes up to grade 9. At Keewaytinook Internet High School, we offer programming all the way up to grade 12. We have 80 different courses, and it's an alternative. Most students choose to go out for high school, so they'll move to places like Thunder Bay or Sioux Lookout. They might be living with family. Most of them live with boarding parents. KIHS is an alternative to that.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Okay.

How many students do you graduate each year? You do graduate from grade 12.

Ms. Nikki Osborne: That's correct, yes.

Two years ago, in 2021, we had 38 graduates. Last year, we had 30. The numbers do range; they vary.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Do they go on to university, or for most of them is grade 12 the end of their education?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: We have seen that a handful will go on to post-secondary education. What we have seen is that students will take a gap year, a couple of years off, and then they'll try post-secondary again.

Frankly, there are a lot of them who are still wondering what to do after graduation.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: How do your graduation rates compare with those of, for example, Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, other indigenous high schools and, I guess, the regular education system—because I have kids in school here, too, and there's a fairly sizable indigenous population in Lakehead school board schools?

• (1610)

Ms. Nikki Osborne: I would suspect they're similar. I don't know the graduation rates of every other school. We're continuing to make progress, and we see the biggest growth within our adult education program. The average age of our graduates is about 26 years old.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I would like to switch to Rebecca Mearns. A bunch of us just came back from Nunavut, Northwest Territories. We went to Cambridge Bay. We did visit one Arctic college campus.

Something I heard about that was kind of a surprise to me was the written Inuit language. Apparently, the areas around Cambridge Bay don't use syllabics in their writing; they use the Roman alphabet, but there are also different dialects. From talking to a few peo-

ple at least, my understanding was that there was an issue with the written language. The question was whether to compile a kind of uniform Inuit language that would make teaching easier, but different regions have not only different dialects but also different forms of writing. The person I talked to suggested that in order to facilitate teaching, it would be good to have a universal Inuit language.

What measures are being done to do that, and are you in favour of such a thing?

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: Part of our delivery, obviously, is in the Inuktitut language, which varies across the communities we deliver in.

The syllabic writing system is used in most of the eastern communities in Nunavut and many of the central communities. In the western communities, we have Inuinnaqtun, which is spoken. It's a varying dialect from Inuktitut, but still very similar. I was able to speak with the elders in Cambridge Bay, when I was there this week, as well.

We're doing a lot of work at the college to look at how we deliver Inuktitut programming, as we do have language and culture programs. We also train interpreters and translators at the college, so this is ongoing work. It's a much larger conversation beyond just the college, when it comes to language. There are many who are engaged in those discussions. There have been discussions for decades about what standardization could look like for youth, whether it's within the classroom or within the government. Certainly, it's something we're always keeping an eye on with interest.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses who are with us today.

Ms. Rowles said earlier that we had to bring education to the communities rather than send students hundreds of kilometres from their homes. My riding, described as remote, is hundreds of kilometres away from large centres.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mrs. Gill, but there is a point of order.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Madam Chair, I'm hearing two voices on my headset, so I can't hear what's being said through translation.

The Chair: We'll suspend momentarily while we figure out the technical issue.

I think we're okay now.

Madame Gill, please continue.

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I will restart from the beginning, Madam Chair.

So, with the same enthusiasm, I thank the witnesses for being here. We have some knowledge, but it is always essential to have conversations with people on the ground.

Ms. Rowles, for instance, said that we had to bring education to communities rather than send students hundreds of kilometres from their homes. I do not want to put words in her mouth, but I think that behind it, she was perhaps alluding to everything that helps keep young people in the school system and ensure ideal conditions for their success. This is, after all, the point of our study.

During the various testimonies we've heard over the last weeks, witnesses often told us about language, territories and communities being winning conditions to, first of all, bring students integrate into the school system, persevere and even succeed in it, then become part of the labour market, as my colleague Mr. Zimmer said. Indeed, the issue is linked to work and to the community itself.

I would like each of you, one after the other, to talk about these important conditions for First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Generally speaking, winning conditions can exist for a whole population. But since the current study focuses on what can be done for First Nations, Métis and Inuit, I would like to hear from you about some successes or points to improve to help students achieve a rate of success that matches their ambition.

Ms. Rowles, you can start. Then, I would like to hear from Ms. Mearns and Ms. Osborne.

[*English*]

Dr. Shelagh Rowles: I'd say that as far as the success rates are concerned, what we find is that especially for younger people, when they're coming into our programs, it's important for them, to be honest, to have a choice. There some students who are really ready to go on and have post-secondary experience—in our case, in Whitehorse, where they might pursue a degree or a diploma program. We also really need to be mindful about programs that need to be available in communities. Rebecca spoke of the teacher education program being available in so many of the Nunavut communities.

This year we went around from community to community really trying to understand and hear their priorities in post-secondary education. What they said to us, what the people who attended our sessions said, is that in some cases, such as business administration or if they want to pursue a social work degree, they seem to prefer to actually go in and take the courses out of Whitehorse. What we heard in some cases, such as in the schools, is that teacher education right now....

It was only through the pandemic that we started to make that available by distance.

What we heard is that in some communities the teacher shortage has become so acute that people who haven't finished their full

teaching qualification are hired as teachers; some of our students are hired as teachers. If we pull those students out and insist that they come to Whitehorse, they have to pull their families with them and then they're pulling children from their school. You're actually not only challenging the individuals who make that journey to a larger centre, but you're also compromising, potentially, the success rate of their families and their children.

What we find has worked incredibly well is that when we know that we have programs—again, such as the teacher education program.... We also offer our first nations or indigenous governance program by distance so that a student, no matter where they are in the territory, can pursue that degree and stay and work in their home community. We've seen that is a successful model.

But I'd have to say there's no easy, one solution.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I do not want to interrupt you. I would continue to listen, but I must give the floor to Ms. Mearns and Ms. Osborne, because there's just about two minutes left, if they would like to speak to the same subject.

Thank you very much, Ms. Rowles.

[*English*]

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: Thank you.

I'd have to agree with Shelagh as well. There's no simple answer to it, but I think the more investment we make in education—whether that be at the K-to-12 level or within the post-secondary education programs we see, as I've discussed today, and whether it be in infrastructure or program delivery or student supports—the greater an increase in success where we put that investment we are going to see.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

We'll proceed now to Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

It is wonderful to hear about the successes you have shared with us, and I have heard about the success rate. You mentioned Naujaat as one of the communities in which the teacher education program is being taught. I know there are many struggles that students face anywhere up north. There are housing issues.

My question is this: When you accept students into the teacher education program, how do you deal with the struggles they face when they move?

Thank you.

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for your question.

The students from smaller communities don't have access to social assistance. It is harder for them to get social assistance.

[*English*]

The way we work within the programs, we have to ensure that they have the same accessibility you would see in our regional campuses, but it's not always at par. Part of the work we are doing is to try to increase the number of student supports we have and to support our students even if it comes down to food insecurity within their home. Obviously, many of our students are reliant upon student funding, student financial assistance, while they're attending school. We all know that the cost of living continues to increase and the cost of food continues to increase, so when you're living with a family in a smaller community where those food costs are so high, we're trying to ensure we have those supports available for them too.

Our students come from many walks of life, from many home situations. Ensuring that we have adequate mental health supports in place for them as well is also a challenge within some of the smaller communities.

These are things we're constantly reviewing. We're looking at them and trying to figure out how we can make them more accessible. We can make the programs accessible, but if they don't have the supports in place, then that's going to impact how they make it through those four to five years of study.

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

Thank you for your response.

One of the really grey areas is where the Nunavut Arctic College gets their funding from. Where are the students who are attending the teacher education program getting their financial support from? Do they have access to those supports?

Thank you.

• (1625)

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: *Qujannamilik.*

The college, as I stated, is a public agency, an agency of the Government of Nunavut, so we do receive core funding through the Government of Nunavut of about \$40 million, which goes towards our operations and maintenance across the territory.

We also rely on a large amount of third party funding to be able to provide additional programming. So, as I mentioned, there's the pathfinder project with funding from the federal government as well as the Government of Nunavut, and, through Makigiaqta Inuit training, funding has been received, and we rely on all of that to come together to be able to run our programs.

Our students do pay tuition, and we have set tuition amounts, obviously. If they are renting student housing units, they pay rent to the college as well. Those are the main sources of revenue. For our

students, when they are attending, many are reliant on financial assistance for Nunavut students, which is a funding body that is out of the Department of Education, which provides funding for post-secondary training. Some of our students receive funding through adult learning and training, which is funding delivered through the Department of Family Services—and those are for other non-designated, post-secondary programs.

The funding amounts are set by those bodies, and they provide the funding directly to the students, not only for their tuition but also for their monthly living allowances and travel, if they have to travel to attend a program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We do have time for a condensed, second round.

We'll be going to Mr. Melillo for five minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for joining us to be part of this important discussion.

I think I'll probably focus completely on you, Ms. Osborne, from Keewaytinook Internet High School.

I want to thank you for taking the time to travel down here and be a part of this, and thank you for the work that you do across my riding and northern Ontario. As you know, it's incredibly important, and I've appreciated the opportunity to join and be a part of some of your graduation ceremonies in the past. It's great to see some of the successes you've had.

You spoke about many important things. I hope we get a chance to get to them, but broadly, you mentioned the unnecessary barriers that need to be broken down to help improve graduation rates. One of the great things that I think your school brings is keeping people in their home communities, which I think is incredibly important. We've heard about it countless times at this table. If we can prevent people from going to Sioux Lookout, Thunder Bay or some of the other larger centres, it's obviously going to be a lot easier for them to learn. To that end, obviously an Internet high school requires Internet, and, as you know, that's not always something that's reliable across our region.

I want to start with that, because there's a recent Auditor General's report that came out, which indicates that, as of 2021, just under 43% of first nation communities across Canada had access to quality, high-speed and affordable Internet. In Ontario, that drops about 10 percentage points to around 33% for those who don't have access to that Internet.

I guess this is a long way of asking if you can shed some light for us on how that impacts the communities you work with and what should be done by the government to help support that.

Ms. Nikki Osborne: At an Internet high school, the Internet is crucial. Now, we're really creative. We all have tools in our tool box for when the Internet goes down. We know how to keep our students productive.

The Internet is important for so many reasons such as access to information, access to quality speakers and access to role models. Our school has been lucky to partner with many organizations, including Takingitglobal and Connected North. You can ask me about that afterwards.

As we look forward after high school, we see that more and more post-secondary institutions are offering programs online. We know that COVID has shown us that more and more careers can be done remotely, and there are more and more digital careers. If we look at graduation rates, if we look at unemployment and if we look at access to mental health services and medical appointments, the Internet is a huge investment, but I promise you, it's worth it. It's going to tick off so many boxes.

• (1630)

Mr. Eric Melillo: I really appreciate that.

In your opening remarks, you laid out a lot of very exciting things about your school and things that you're working on. I want to ask you about as many of them as I can. One that stood out to me is the six different languages being offered. Could you share with us how that process has come to be and how the government could better support that and hopefully replicate it across other jurisdictions as well?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: Absolutely.

We offer three different languages in six different courses. We have Oji-Cree level one and level two, Cree level one and level two, and Ojibway level one and level two. We have a fantastic native language teacher. She has her own courses, obviously, but she does work with all our teachers. We offer 80 different courses, and she helps us infuse native indigenous languages into our lessons and into our daily conversation with students to help reinforce their language and to make and keep those connections.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that.

I probably have time for one more quick question, if the chair doesn't cut me off.

You also mentioned how important early learning is. Again, that's something that we've heard quite a bit from other witnesses as well. Could you reinforce that and maybe contextualize it a little bit more for us?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: I'm a high school teacher, but I worked at the Deer Lake elementary school for four years. The greater impact is going to happen at the elementary school level. To be honest with you, I do not want my job as a graduation coach to exist in 20 years. I don't want there to be a need for it. We shouldn't be playing catch-up.

Let's help students at the right age, at those early ages, so that they experience success early. It's not fair for these students to go through their entire schooling career with huge gaps. They internalize these failures. It's so much harder for them. It's not fair. It's not right.

I promise that if we invest early in childhood education, and if we offer supports to families that are struggling, that will make a huge difference in these statistics and in the lives of these students and their families.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

We'll go to Mr. Weiler for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

My first question is for you, Ms. Osborne. I know that you gave a lot of different prompts for questions to ask you, but as a graduation coach, what questions and concerns are you getting most often from students who are looking to pursue post-secondary education?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: There's a huge "What next?" factor. The students at our school have chosen to stay in their home communities to finish high school. There is the option to go out to these bigger cities. Students who have chosen to stay in their communities want to be home. They want to be with their families. Frankly, there are not enough employment opportunities within their communities.

It can be daunting to finish high school with me and then have to look for opportunities outside their communities for post-secondary education. What's next after that? How are they able to work in industries that they feel passionate about when they want to be with families and they want to be around their culture? That's what I see most often.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: To follow up on that, what opportunities do you see most often for that post-secondary education following graduation?

Ms. Nikki Osborne: In most communities, the schools would be hiring, the health offices, or the band, and there is a desperate need for skilled trades in our northern communities. That is a huge area of growth that we need to support in high schools and post-secondary institutions. We shouldn't be having to fly up skilled labourers to fix furnaces or fix roofs. We shouldn't be flying in people to repair the vehicles and other equipment used to maintain the airports.

There are people who want to work and want to stay in their communities. They love working with their hands, but there's definitely a gap. There's a gap there.

• (1635)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you for that, Ms. Osborne.

Next I'd like to ask a couple of questions of Ms. Rowles.

Your opening remarks were really interesting. You mentioned that a lot of your work in Yukon University is with indigenous people. I was hoping you could explain to this committee how you see the process of decolonizing education and how this might be able to be applied to other educational institutions across Canada.

Dr. Shelagh Rowles: Certainly, the process of decolonizing education comes from so many different levels. One thing we're really proud of is that it even comes to our legislation.

Our legislation requires us to be working...there's a legal requirement for us to be working with Yukon first nations and ensuring that the students have successful outcomes. Part of our funding, and the determination of the Yukon government in our success as a post-secondary, will be dependent on the feedback and the success rates of first nations students, or indigenous students in Yukon. It's specifically first nations students, though.

We have introduced a whole variety of programs that have come through at the request of Yukon first nations. We have something called a president's advisory committee on first nations initiatives. That committee has representation from each of the 14 first nations in the territory, as well as some of the neighbouring communities. There are some from the Gwich'in Tribal Council over in the Mackenzie-Delta area, as well as from Lower Post over in B.C. and Atlin, B.C.

We're really trying to ensure that we hear the priorities and the interests of the first nations. Through that, we have responded as far as introducing different types of student supports is concerned. We have introduced first nations navigators to be able to provide that holistic support to students within the university, but we have also introduced programs that were truly co-created.

I would say the environmental monitoring is one example of when mining companies wanted us to have an environmental monitoring program. That's a fiduciary requirement of theirs, but first nations said they really want their interests to be paramount, and for any graduates coming out of those programs to really understand what an environmental monitor should be doing from their perspective. We found that to be such an amazing model in that a number of the graduates from the program have gone on to work in the lands departments of the first nations governments and, in some cases, are directors of lands in the governments.

I think in the last question period I referenced the indigenous governance program. That's another one that was co-created. The question of having the program came from first nations as they were establishing their new governments. They really understood the important role of policy and how important oversight and broad governance are to sustainability in the future of those governments. With that, we created the degree where we find they will be honest about challenges—

The Chair: Ms. Rowles, I'm so sorry. I have to cut you off for time. Perhaps you can continue in the next response.

Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

We will have to suspend briefly to figure out the technical difficulty.

We will go to Madam Idlout, for two and a half minutes, and then we will come back to Madame Gill.

• (1640)

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

I have some questions for you, Becky.

The first question is about the funding that you mentioned. Is it adequate funding for Nunavut Arctic College? Is it adequate for the teacher education program? That is my first question.

If you could, please also reiterate or speak a little more about the cultural learning institute that you have there.

Thank you.

Ms. Rebecca Mearns: *Qujannamiik*

As far as the funding is concerned, we have enough funds to operate within what we're doing, but there is more need when it comes to our student supports and to infrastructure funding. That's really where we're lacking at the moment, whether that be for physical buildings, housing and things like that, as well as Internet and accessibility.

We are always looking to see how we increase, whether it be person years within the college or funding for programming; hence, why we're receiving a lot of third party funding right now. We've identified areas where we need additional funding for those programs, and that work is ongoing. There is still an ongoing need to increase the funding we have for student supports. Part of what we recognize too is that we're providing mental health support. We're providing food support, and things like that. These are all things that are impacted by life at home, so if you're in overcrowded housing, if you are food insecure, if you have other issues going on within the home, that's impacting your life at school...and that's where we need more funding within the college, within our schools, within our communities overall.

The second piece you wanted me to speak to was our cultural school. It's named Piqqusilirivvik, located at Clyde River. There is a question about decolonization within education and I think this is really a wonderful example of that, and a really wonderful place to visit if you're ever looking to go somewhere else to learn more about how Inuit teach. Piqqusilirivvik is run fully in Inuktitut. It's run through cultural programming. The students do research. They spend time out on the land. They hunt. They build things. They learn to sew. They learn to build tools and they learn to utilize those tools on the land. It is a genuinely Inuit-built, Inuit way of knowing, way of being and way of teaching that is utilized at that school and it's an absolutely incredible place. It's an amazing place to go to see the growth that can happen within our students when they're allowed to live within their language, within their culture, and to be able to learn from elders and knowledge keepers around them.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik*.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

Perhaps Ms. Gill is okay.

[*Translation*]

Is Mrs. Gill with us?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Can you hear me, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Ms. Osborne, I was unable to ask you the same question I had asked Ms. Mertens and Ms. Rowles earlier. We talked about conditions that could improve graduation rates in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, specifically.

What do you think should be done to achieve this goal?

[English]

Ms. Nikki Osborne: I look at this question in two ways. If we look at the short term, we need to create conditions where students are coming to school more regularly—so attendance issues....

I'm not sure if your question is about the physical conditions. Most of our schools are tiny portables. There's definitely some need for repair and upkeep. It's not uncommon for our schools to be without running water, to be without heat. There are many school closures that affect our attendance issues in our communities.

I also want to talk about the long-term conditions needed to improve graduation rates. Again, that goes to equipping students early on with the academic skills they need. It needs to happen by working with the local education authorities at the elementary school level, so having indigenous teachers in their schools is so important.

I was in Deer Lake First Nation for four years and the turnover of non-local teachers is an issue. It's hard to build on progress when you have people who are leaving. We need to make sure that we are investing in those early childhood education programs to have the success we want later on.

• (1645)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, you have 30 seconds left for your turn.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: That does not give me enough time to go any further.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

This is going to bring our first round of questions and first panel to a close.

Thank you so much, Nikki Osborne, Rebecca Mearns and Shelagh Rowles, for your testimony this afternoon. Thank you for giving us your time. I know it will greatly contribute to our study. Thank you so much.

We'll briefly suspend as we set up for our next set of witnesses. Thank you.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: I'm going to call us back to order here.

I just want to note that there will not be Inuktitut interpretation for this round, only Plains Cree, as we don't currently have the technology to support two third languages at this time. It's certainly a wonderful treat that we'll be able to have that interpretation this afternoon.

Appearing before us, we have Kevin Lewis, assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan and the Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps. From Cape Breton University, we have Marie Battiste, special adviser to the vice-president academic, and provost on decolonizing the academy. From the Université du Québec à Montréal, we have Marco Bacon, director of the office of inclusion and student success.

Each of you will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

We'll begin with Mr. Lewis.

Thank you.

Dr. Kevin Lewis (Assistant Professor, University of Saskatchewan, Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps, As an Individual): [Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows:]

I want to greet you all. I want to talk to the Creator. First and foremost, I have to thank the Creator for giving us this day.

The reason I am here today is to talk about the graduation rates of our first nation students, our youth and the ones who are going to universities and colleges. I really want to thank the standing committee for inviting me again, and I really would like to thank you for allowing me to speak in my own language.

If we are to talk about our own children, language should be at the forefront of teaching. My own reserve is Ministikwan. When we teach our children we always take our students, our elders and our parents who are involved in our Cree immersion school programming.... It is up to the elders. They are wanting us to take all our kids to the land...to know where they come from and to try to retain the language, bring back the language, in my own reserve in Ministikwan.

In 1976, and in the early 1980s, when we first opened our school, a brand new school, it went up to grade 9, and then up to grade 12. When our students came there, English was taught in that school. The Cree language wasn't even taught. Then our elders came and assessed it. This is when our elders were crying out that there was no Cree language taught.

At one time when we were teaching the Cree language to kids in our school, lots of parents who came to assist our school programming were able to read and write in our own language. We piloted this program from Onion Lake Cree immersion school. How was it that these kids were able to read and write and do the numbers in their Cree language?

I really want to talk about where we went for our Cree language teaching training. We went to the University of Alberta. That is where we all went to learn how to teach Cree. In that school, they were telling us that it is better to teach these kids in their Cree language. These kids are most likely to be very successful in finishing high school. They have to be taught in Cree and in English. When we first started in nursery school, kindergarten, and up to grade 2, by the time we got to grade 3, we saw the progress, how these kids were learning their English and Cree language at the same time. They were very successful. They were able to retain their language.

We really need to keep our language alive in our own schools and in our community, and where we come from in Ministikwan. We are very fortunate in our own reserve. We still have lots of elders who are urging us to teach and retain our language right in the classroom. We are starting to see the language loss in our schools today.

• (1655)

When the epidemic came, there were a lot of social problems and family violence that came. The reserve was very very [*Inaudible—Editor*]. There were a lot of social problems. With that poverty comes family violence, but then the elders are urging us just to keep teaching our languages. We are also wanting to teach our own children. They will be very successful.

In terms of kinship, we need to bring back the language. There, we talk about relationships. We talk about kinship. This is our very strong relationship with the land.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr. Battiste, you have five minutes.

Dr. Marie Battiste (Special Advisor to the Vice President Academic, Provost on Decolonizing the Academy, Cape Breton University): *Kwe. Halu. Greetings. Bonjour.*

I'm honoured today to be invited to speak to you on unceded Algonquin territories.

I'm here to recommend to your committee the continuing resourcing of indigenous education, learning from indigenous perspectives of success, and a trans-systemic alignment and commitment to indigenous peoples' knowledges as the foundation of first nations' learning and success.

I am a Mi'kmaq educator from Potlotek First Nation, an author and a professor emeritus at the University of Saskatchewan with my colleague, Kevin, where I have completed 28 years in teacher education, having taught courses and supervised graduates in first nation, Métis and Inuit education, anti-racist education and decolonizing education.

I'm currently working part time as a special adviser to Cape Breton University on decolonizing the academy, now in my home area of Unama'ki.

For a period of my career at the University of Saskatchewan, starting in 2005, I was the co-director of one of the five nationally funded projects of the Canadian Council on Learning—called then the aboriginal learning knowledge centre—which served learning for first nation, Métis and Inuit communities.

One project was to review graduation rates across the country and identify ways to improve them. From literature reviews, we reviewed graduation rates of indigenous students compared with other non-indigenous Canadians. We found that often these metrics were being interpreted through a deficit lens of indigenous students—in other words, what Indigenous students lacked compared to others, not what they had.

Indeed, those rates illustrated more clearly the failure of assimilation policies of residential and public schooling and their ongoing intergenerational damage to indigenous families and communities.

This realization led us to generate community workshops and collaborations with first nation, Métis and Inuit leadership and communities to identify what success meant to these communities and how learning supported it. They defined success in multi-layered processes leading to three first nation, Métis and Inuit holistic learning models. Learning was described as holistic, life long, experiential, communally activated, grounded in the language and cultures of the communities, from their land, and involving their spiritual and relational world views and growing roles and responsibilities in those places, with each other and their ecology. It also included the braiding of diverse knowledge systems of diverse indigenous peoples and conventional western education.

These themes have largely been the foundations in first nations' control of their education, as you've been hearing. Within them, graduation rates have been improving.

However, to generate better outcomes first nations schooling must have foundations that are transferred from and aligned with provincial schools and post-secondary education to create what I call a better trans-systemic fit. Without that, indigenous students are limited in the transfer of their learning from their community schools to public and post-secondary education.

Decolonization of public and post-secondary education is unpacking the colonial structures, content and outcomes, and rebuilding new structures and impacting disciplinary knowledge traditions. These are still a struggle that's unfolding.

Today, the mandate for reconciliation from the TRC calls to action, indigenization and decolonization requires new trans-systemic learning, new opportunities, and different theory and practices, some of which are not yet available in current post-secondary teacher education. A return to a type of resourcing and support for indigenous knowledges that the former aboriginal learning knowledge centre offered can mobilize the needed foundation for a pan-Canadian architecture that is supportive of the infrastructure that is needed across Canada.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which is now enacted in Canada, affirms inherent indigenous rights in Canada, but only as potential unrealized learning opportunities in and through education—public, federal and post secondary.

• (1700)

Learning for success is a focus on building for the future, on sustainability, on collective identities and on indigenous rights, a reconciliation that Canada and its institutions must continue to address.

For indigenous parents and elders, passing on what we know is an act of love, not just to our children but to the seventh generation. This can only be achieved when we re-examine the educational purposes of learning, the requirements for that education and what it purports to achieve with the graduation of indigenous students.

It is about the continuous scrutiny and alignment of indigenous knowledge content with learning in schools and systems and the honouring of indigenous contributions to the cognitive advancement, self-determination and well-being of our people. It needs to continue to affirm and honour excellence in the experimentation, exploration and diffusion of indigenous knowledge, languages and traditions that contribute to the uniqueness of the institutions and knowledges of Canada while also ensuring that graduation contributes to self-determining, flourishing communities by their successes in multiple knowledge systems.

Wela'lin, Nakurmiik, thank you, merci.

The Chair: *Wela'lin, Madam Battiste.*

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bacon, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marco Bacon (Director, Office of Inclusion and Student Success, Université du Québec à Montréal): [*Witness speaks in Nehleueun*]

Hello everyone. I greet you all.

I am very pleased to be here today.

I am a member of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh Nation in Mashteuiatsh.

I will tell you my story. I think that will be necessary for you to understand what I have to say today.

I was a student before our community took charge of education. Religious congregations taught us. For a young student starting school, it's very important to experience something profound, because it will give them the drive to continue their studies. Personally, what happened to me left a deep mark, but not in a good way. I was marked literally: I had marks on my body because the nuns knew how to use their tools very well.

Afterwards, the community took over education, but it happened all at once. Obviously, the transition was not instantaneous. So, there was a long process before the community took charge of education.

I must say that, for me, these times were not exactly happy. Going to school, that was never happy time. However, I persisted and continued following my path. At a certain point, I ended up at university. First, I did an undergraduate degree in art education, and then I did a master's degree of arts, educational stream, which let me go back to my community of Mashteuiatsh to teach.

I was truly privileged, because the first position I took in Mashteuiatsh, where I taught for 15 years, was to be a preschool teacher, meaning the kindergarten program for four-year-olds. After a few years, I moved on from the kindergarten program to teach five-year-olds. We had an Indigenous language immersion program to rekindle the fire for the Innu language in my community. After-

wards, I was able to take up my real job, that of art teacher. I taught all levels of primary and secondary school for 15 years.

I also taught CÉGEP during some of this time. Afterwards, I ended up in Chicoutimi, in Saguenay, more specifically at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. I was the director of the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite for 10 years. The mandates at the Centre des Premières nations Nikanite were mainly to develop programs; give community members access to university education; develop research projects in collaboration with communities; develop service offerings for indigenous students; and, finally, raise the university community's awareness about issues regarding First Nations and their culture, of course.

During those 10 years, my team experienced many problems associated with university education, but I'll come back to that a little later.

After spending 10 years at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, I obtained the position of director of the Office of Inclusion and Student Success at UQAM. The office isn't necessarily reserved for Indigenous people, because it serves several populations, such as students living with a disability, students with children, LGBTQ2A+ students, international students and the entire UQAM student body.

• (1710)

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Bacon, you have to wrap it up now. You may be able to add more comments during questions.

[*English*]

We'll proceed to our first round of questions.

Mr. Vidal, you have six minutes.

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

I want to thank all our witnesses for being here today and for their contributions to our important study.

Just as a quick shout-out, Dr. Lewis, I believe your mom is here translating for us again today. That's really cool. She was here during the languages study that we did a while back. That's quite a cool opportunity, and I just wanted to recognize that.

We've heard from a number of witnesses over the last few weeks about the importance of language, culture and land-based learning in the context of successful.... I don't want to focus on just graduation rates, but on successful outcomes for students.

Dr. Lewis, you talked about children being most successful, or most likely successful, if taught in both Cree and English at a young age. Can you help us make the link between what you mean by being the most successful and those outcomes that are a result of being able to do that by, from your experience, catching them at that young age? How does that lead to better outcomes?

Dr. Kevin Lewis: Yes.

[*Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows:*]

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Mr. Lewis. We're not getting the translation.

Okay.

Dr. Kevin Lewis: [*Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows:*]

I want to talk about myself and about my own journey towards education. I shouldn't really be bragging about myself and my own education, but when it comes to it, I went to school on the reserve. I grew up going to school there. Then I went to the nearby town school of Ernest Lindner. I also went to the University of Saskatchewan. The other school I went to was a residential school.

At all three institutions that I went to, not once did I ever see a first nations person work there, or any females work there, or even persons speaking the Cree language or talking about family relationships, family kinships and raising good families. When I went to university, it was same thing. Even though it was called the Indian teacher education program, I never saw any languages being taught there, or Indian ways of knowing, or Indian knowledge.

If you want to see how to teach children in terms of learning languages, then you have to include Cree, Nakota, Dene and even Blackfoot. If we can combine all those languages together at the university, then you'll be able to see the success rate. Here, you won't be able to see any high incarceration rates. You won't even see any poverty if all the first nations people can work together in terms of education. Even in the homes we would be able to overcome the poverty and even family violence.

We would like to see, and my dream is to see, these women, our matriarchal lineages, teach in those schools and teach in those institutions so that we can have role models. First and foremost, we need to have role models in those schools and in those institutions.

In terms of policy-making, we have to include first nations people to have some say and to have their foot in there. If we were able to put role models here in the House of Commons and on the standing committees, or even on school boards, then those first nations people would be able to speak on behalf of their first nations people.

My dream and my goal is to be able to see first nations languages taught in the schools and the universities.

• (1715)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I'm sorry. I was waiting for the translation to finish there at the end.

I think I'm making the connection here. I don't have a lot of time left, but I'm going to give you a quick opportunity....

I know you were sitting in the back when Ms. Osborne, the grad coach from northern Ontario, was talking. She made the comment that we must give young people a reason to graduate. We have to

create the opportunity for them to have a reason to want to graduate. I think there's a connection to what she's saying and what you're saying.

I want to give you the opportunity to tie those two together quickly, in the few seconds that I have left.

Dr. Kevin Lewis: [*Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows:*]

What I wanted to say is that there is a lack of electricians. We lack carpenters. We lack accountants. We also lack people in policy-making. We lack all the ones that I named.

If they were to attend university or any colleges to be taught all these different trades, then we would be able to support ourselves. We would be able to be self-sufficient.

This is where we want our children to be taught, so that we can have role models. They would be able to grow up to follow these role models on the reserve. We would be able to see those role models on our reserves, in our schools.

We need those people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll go to Mr. Aldag for six minutes.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thank you.

To begin, I'd first like to acknowledge that I'm gathered with everyone here today on the unceded Anishinabe Algonquin territories. I come from the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples and, particularly, the Kwantlen, Katzie, Semiahmoo and Musqueam nations in British Columbia. For me, it's really important to acknowledge that.

This is only my second meeting. I was only put on this committee last week, for my first meeting. It's a real pleasure to be here.

I want to thank my Conservative colleagues for the very warm welcome. It's a pleasure. I'm looking forward to working with everybody, as well as the NDP and Bloc members.

I'm still getting up to speed on what this study's about. It's very deep content. I'd like to thank each of our speakers today for the thoughts they've given us so far.

I have to say, Ms. Battiste, that your son sits in front of me. I told him that if he was here today, I was going to ask you for some personal stories. I won't put on you for the story. We'll focus your expertise in other areas. It's a real pleasure to have you here and to work with your son here in the House of Commons.

I have had a chance to move around this amazing country and live in the traditional territories of many first nations, from southern and northern Ontario, through all three prairie provinces and various regions of British Columbia, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. One of the things that I've seen related to education....

Ms. Battiste, your comments about decolonizing and unpacking colonial structures really resonated with me.

I hear from our Kwantlen community members, who say they want their kids to have a good education, but when the fish start running, they need to be out on the land. There's always this conflict between school schedules and traditional lifestyles.

We've heard from all of you about the importance of language—developing that language and language retention—as part of identity and success.

I'd like to give you a moment to talk a bit more about that unpacking of colonial structures. What does that look like?

I'm sure that there's flexibility in how we build schedules and curricula that will allow families and communities to get out on the land at the appropriate times without sacrificing or missing school time. It's about having language accessible from preschool right through the education system.

What else does that look like, as far as unpacking those colonial structures to lead us to greater outcomes is concerned?

Dr. Marie Battiste: Thank you for this question.

What I would like to see and what is present and available now are not in sync. That's why I keep saying that we need to have a better fit between those.

What we're aspiring for is self-determining, flourishing communities that have, want and are retaining all of the foundations of their knowledge through their languages and through the kinds of learning processes that I talk about as holistic, lifelong, experiential and community activated, in working through language and culture and working with the spiritual world views and so on, but what they are getting right now is an education in our communities.

You've heard already about the various communities that are doing wonderful things in the work they're doing in their communities and in schools and so on, but what's happening is that as these children move on to university or into public schools, those institutions are creating the dissonance, in that they don't then have the decolonized.... Those institutions haven't brought in languages and have dropped indigenous content into a few content areas, but it's all structured in a modern four-walled school. That dissonance creates the ongoing dissonance that students have of coming in and trying to develop new skills in another language system, and struggling with that in English and trying to struggle with the kinds of expectations that those create.

What I'm trying to assert is that we need to find a way to bring these structures and ways of learning together. In the public school systems and also in universities, there's this notion of indigenization and reconciliation, and those kinds of things need to have a tie-in with what is in our first nation community schools and how that fits.

I think land-based learning is one of the important elements. That is what we find in all of these. They do fit well with learning. We do have a university master's program in land-based learning at the University of Saskatchewan, but this is only in pockets of places—Nunavut and the University of Saskatchewan. We can't seem to get all of them on board to do these kinds of things to create this necessary fit, which is why I think we need to have some kind of other structure that will help us to build those promising practices and

build new theories around indigenous knowledge traditions and braiding them with contemporary modern systems.

• (1720)

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

I—

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds, Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay. I was going to say that I'm new at this committee and I forgot to start my clock, so I had no idea where I was.

I would have loved to hear from Dr. Louis and Monsieur Bacon on the same topic, but I'll leave it at that.

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aldag.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses before us today.

A little earlier, we talked about education throughout the country.

I would like to redirect our attention and ask Mr. Bacon a question. In his testimony, on the one hand, he talked about his own experience. He went through the education system and succeeded quite well. On the other hand, he told us about his professional experience, which is very rich. He went from grade school all the way to university, be it the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite, the Université du Québec à Montréal, UQAM, or in his own community of Mashteuiatsh.

If he is willing, I would like to hear him on everything we need to make sure education is made available and accessible, that it meets the needs of students and communities so they want to invest in their studies, get an education and succeed. Success is a notion that differs for every individual, but let's define it as meaning a sense of growth and development.

I give you the floor, Mr. Bacon.

• (1725)

Mr. Marco Bacon: I talk a lot. Where I was trying to get to earlier, with the journey between preschool and university levels, is that there is something fundamental for Indigenous students to succeed: we have to know their profile. Knowing a student's profile is vital, given all the difficulties this person experienced during their time in primary and secondary school. We don't have a lot of specialists who can intervene in our communities. We lack people to support students at both the primary and secondary school level. And yet, this follows them all the way to university.

Sometimes, perseverance and academic achievement depend a great deal on educational and psychosocial support. In fact, students arrive in an urban area, which means they're disconnected from their community, a little lost, without cultural reference points.

Universities created centres to offer them assistance, be it for learning or psychosocial support, but it has limits. Indeed, even if we intervene within the university, students often face problems outside its walls. That means it's out of our scope. We can't offer all our services outside the university. That means it is important for us to create partnerships so that students can get support in the urban environment outside the university.

Success or perseverance is often undermined by an incident at home. It can be domestic violence or struggling to put food on the table, for example. There are many factors. I could name several. I think the most important thing is to work on establishing bridges between environments. We see all kinds of situations. I'm telling you that we have to take the student's profile into account. I don't know if it works the same way in provinces other than Quebec, but students who come to university in Quebec have a standard profile, meaning they went through CEGEP before going to university, or they have a profile that makes them eligible based on their work experience, also known as a mature student.

It is not the same thing for students who didn't go through CEGEP. They come directly to university after finishing their last year of high school. Their experience is often very inadequate to get through university. That's why it's important for specialists to support students in various ways, such as teaching them methodology or how to use information technology. It affects learning, but there are also situations where students experience isolation in the urban settings they find themselves in. They need people to intervene and support them, so that they persevere to the end of their academic journey.

This support is a very important point, especially because there is a limit we cannot go beyond at university. There needs to be a real thought process and an attempt to establish partnerships with existing organizations, such as Indigenous friendship centres. Usually, we can find one of these centres in urban areas. They could form a partnership. Students could get support through Indigenous friendship centres, but when they're at university, they could get support from people tasked with helping First Nations.

There's some thinking to do about this. It is vital for Indigenous students' perseverance and success.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill and Mr. Bacon.

[English]

Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut*]

[English]

Just very quickly, I wanted to welcome your using my language. Normally I speak Inuktitut with an interpreter. You get the pleasure

of listening to me in English today because of the wonderful work that Mr. Kevin Lewis is doing.

I just have one question, and I'm going to leave it to the chair to time the witnesses' responses, because I would love it if each of them answered my one question.

It is based on what Kevin said in response to a Conservative question.

As indigenous peoples, we're all very quick to identify what our gaps are, and I think what we also need to learn to do is to identify what the gaps are federally and provincially. I wonder if each of you could answer what you see the gaps are for indigenous students' success federally and provincially. For example, if you're saying there aren't enough indigenous people becoming accountants or other professionals, what are the federal and provincial governments not doing enough of to get indigenous people working as bureaucrats so that we can see legislation and policies that are more in line with the indigenous world view?

Qujannamiik.

The Chair: That will be about a minute and a half each.

Dr. Kevin Lewis: *Qujannamiik.*

[*Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows*]

I would like to talk about our reserve in terms of the COVID epidemic we had. Although we were given the technology to use for each household, we couldn't even use online schooling because we didn't have cell service. When we talk about the curriculum, we need to use the following. We lack a lot of curriculum development. We lack Cree language teachers, Dene teachers, Nakota Lakota teachers, and they have no resources.

We really need to have those and this is our hearts' desire that we really need to start having them and we really need to start working and developing our own curriculum.

It is our dream; we need to have translators and we need to have interpreters in our own communities. How do we talk with these elders? In terms of written language, in terms of doing syllabics and doing the standard Roman orthography writing, we need to bring that to the elders.

I have lots to say, but all I can say is there is a lot of lack in our communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Lewis.

Go ahead, Dr. Battiste.

Dr. Marie Battiste: Thank you.

One of the things in Nova Scotia that we have now is legislation that recognizes the Mi'kmaq-L'nu language, which is a great thing that's more recent. But what we don't have...and as we have this language, some of it is going to supporting the indigenous languages in our own communities in Mi'kma'ki, Unama'ki, and beyond.

One of the things they have done is to have translated some of the curriculum outcomes and so on into Mi'kmaq, but the gap problem is that it's all around a eurocentric curriculum. We can put all kinds of Mi'kmaq language onto a eurocentric curriculum, but that doesn't help us to develop our indigenous knowledge, our indigenous knowledge traditions, or keep our knowledge traditions alive and well for the seventh generation.

What we're have right now are layers of assimilation that keep on supporting one knowledge system, and it does so by just adding into it a few content areas that are Mi'kmaq, but it doesn't really give the full nature and foundation of what indigenous knowledge is and what we're trying to retain for our children for the future.

I think all of those things that the province does, and also the federal government, do not provide the second layers of what we once did with the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, which was create another layer of an architecture of learning that extended beyond that eurocentric curriculum.

I think at this present time all of the governments working in education and learning need to build their foundations on the reconciliation of indigenous knowledge traditions in all of the systems. It is not just for us; it's for all of Canadians, and all of them could benefit from that in non-appropriated and ethical ways.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bacon, you have the floor.

Mr. Marco Bacon: I want to say that, if people go to school and get a diploma, of course, it's to start a career and work. Some Indigenous people continue their studies. They have a goal and objectives. Sometimes they are already on the labour market and go get a certificate to improve their situation.

For example, it's possible for a faculty of law to graduate a dozen Indigenous women as lawyers. I specify women, because there are still many more women than men at school. Here's the problem that often occurs: Not all of them will be hired at the same time in the community. One or two of them will be, but the other graduates don't have an opportunity. To avoid losing the skills they acquired, one solution provincial or federal governments could consider is the creation of employment programs for lawyers in urban settings, within Indigenous or non-Indigenous organizations, so that they can be hired. Organizations don't always have subsidies to hire people. However, if there were incentives and access to a graduate hiring program while candidates wait for a chance to return to their community, they could at least avoid losing their skills by working in their field for Indigenous or other organizations. That would be a good solution. Governments could create employment opportunity programs for graduates. Ultimately, there could be internships, but that's another story.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bacon.

[*English*]

Thank you so much to Dr. Marie Battiste as well and Dr. Kevin Lewis. Thank you so much for your testimony this afternoon. We know it's going to contribute greatly to our study.

That's the end of our second panel. Is there movement to adjourn?

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): First of all, I'd like to propose a motion if I have a quick second here, Madam Chair, before we adjourn. It's not to really mess things up. It's going to be really simple.

It's Eric Melillo's birthday, and given that John Aldag is newest to the committee, I'd like to propose a unanimous consent motion that John lead the singing of "Happy Birthday" to Eric.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. John Aldag: I'm not sure if Eric wants it less than I do.

The Chair: Do we have a seconder for that motion?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: We're ready to filibuster if needed.

No, that's all; that's no problem.

Mr. John Aldag: Happy birthday, Eric.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, you have to floor.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to know if it would soon be possible to talk about committee business for about 10 minutes, so that we can discuss the motions for which notice was given. I am asking now because I do not want to infringe on the time granted to witnesses, of course.

• (1740)

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, you may now table your motion.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I would have liked to do it outside of regular hours, to avoid using the committee's time. Otherwise, I'll do it when it's my turn to speak during the next meeting.

Should I ask for the committee's unanimous consent to meet outside of regular hours to discuss it?

The Chair: We can do it next time.

[*English*]

Is there a motion to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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