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Speech notes for appearance before the
House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages
as part of its study on increasing Francophone immigration to Canada

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Mr. Chairman and dear members of this committee,

Thank you for inviting the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones to appear as part of your study on increasing Francophone immigration to Canada.

I look forward to the committee's effective follow-up on this important issue to ensure the sustainability and growth of Francophone minority communities across the country.

I am accompanied today by our General Manager, Valérie Morand.

Opportunities associated with increased Francophone immigration

With the exception of the pandemic period, during which enrollment declined slightly, French-language schools in minority settings are growing steadily across the country. Since 2016, more than 13,000 new students have joined the network, while 73 new schools have opened.

Many rights holders are discovering that they can send their children to school in French. Many want to pass on their mother tongue to their children, or reclaim it for themselves, as they were previously forbidden to learn in French.

This growth in school enrollment is largely due to students from recent immigrant families. They are helping to redefine the Francophonie, which is now highly diverse and resolutely plural.

Following the 2021 census, Statistics Canada revealed that the country's linguistic diversity continues to grow. We are also seeing this in our schools.

For example, at the Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario, one our member that covers the greater National Capital Region, students and staff from over 130 countries speak 96 languages.

Once again, according to the latest data by Statistics Canada, just over four out of every 10 school-age children who attended an official language minority school came from an immigrant background. This, once again, is confirmed by the attendance profile of students in our schools.

In Ontario, the identity survey recently carried out by the Ontario government to determine students' country of origin, year of arrival and place of birth showed that nearly one in two students in the province's French-language schools, or 44%, came from an immigrant background.

This is significant when you consider that 65% of the students in our national school network are in Ontario.

School plays a role that goes far beyond educating children. It is a key player in the integration of these students and their families.

Challenges associated with increasing Francophone immigration

Unfortunately, this role is not sufficiently recognized by the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

The French-language school system must not only ensure the recruitment, reception and retention of students from recent immigration, it must promote the transmission of Francophone culture and help families settle in our communities.

To play effectively this role, the school needs to work hand in hand with organizations that help French-speaking newcomers.

Many of the French-speaking immigrants in our network come from countries in conflict, and therefore need support to ensure their academic success and well-being at school.

Yet French-language schools face a chronic underfunding problem.

In 2009, the Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education provided \$5,200 per student for the additional costs associated with French-language schooling in a minority context.

In 2023, due to network growth and the rising cost of living, each student will receive just over half this amount, despite the program enhancement announced by the federal government in the new Action Plan for Official Languages.

Ottawa must continue to catch up financially, while the provincial and territorial governments must adapt their funding formulas to reflect the specific nature of French-language schools.

During the current school year, the Supreme Court of Canada will deliver its ruling on the issue of admission management for French-language schools in the Northwest Territories. Immigrant families and Francophile parents would like to be able to enroll their children

in French-language schools.

Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom*, created 40 years ago, must be able to reflect the new reality of our communities.

Our federation also welcomes the upward revision of Francophone immigration targets, not only to ensure the demographic weight of Francophone communities outside Quebec, but also to meet the crying need for manpower in French-language schools.

We also need to do more to promote French-first-language education among newly arrived families. At present, most are unaware of the existence of our school network. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada agents in embassies, consulates and high commissions can be part of the solution.

Recommendations

Francophone immigration helps halt the erosion of French-speaking minority communities.

In addition to maintaining their demographic weight, it ensures their vitality and long-term development.

But for this immigrant population to integrate into Francophone communities, it is important to offer them welcoming and inclusive living environments.

This is where the dual mandate of the French-language school as both a living and

learning environment plays an essential role.

Not only does the school ensure students' academic success, but it also enables the transmission of Francophone culture in a minority setting.

What's more, we would like to see the School Settlement Worker (SSW) program improved. While this initiative is commendable, the current program does not take into account the reality within our school boards.

Furthermore, as we pointed out earlier, welcoming and supporting students and staff from immigrant backgrounds comes at a cost to our institutions. Funding must therefore be substantial.

Thank you for listening. We will be happy to answer your questions.