

**BRIEF SUBMITTED BY RAYMOND THÉBERGE,
COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF CANADA,
TO THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL
AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

OCTOBER 12, 2023

1. As Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, I wish to offer my thoughts on the topic of Bill C-35, *An Act respecting early learning and childcare in Canada*. This bill is the subject of significant concern among Francophone official language minority communities (OLMCs), as it lays the foundation for the future of the Canada-wide early learning and childcare system.
2. I applaud the fact that the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, announced in the Government of Canada's 2021 budget, aims to create new childcare spaces, facilitate the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, and make childcare services more affordable, in addition to having other positive impacts on Canadian society. There is notable progress being made toward attaining these objectives.
3. As I noted in my 2022 report, *Monitoring the Implementation of the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future – Analysis and Recommendations for the Next Five-Year Plan*, the difficulty in attracting and retaining early childhood educators and the lack of infrastructure needed to sustain early childhood educational centres have largely resulted in growing wait lists for parents seeking to enrol their children in such centres. OLMCs have not been spared from such long wait lists. In fact, some of the challenges that are inherent in operating early childhood centres are amplified in a linguistic minority context.
4. In 2016, one of my predecessors, Graham Fraser, published a study entitled *Early Childhood: Fostering the Vitality of Francophone Minority Communities*, which highlighted many of the challenges facing these communities in the early childcare sector. Today, many of these difficulties persist, along with their documented impacts on OLMCs.
5. As Commissioner Fraser noted in his report, the limited availability of minority-language early childhood services often results in children attending bilingual or immersion early childhood centres, which tend to predominantly use the majority official language. This undermines children's proficiency in their mother tongue as well as their sense of belonging to the linguistic minority community.
6. Conversely, investing in early childcare centres for linguistic minority communities ensures greater success of the language transmission process, which in turn contributes to the vitality of the community. As Commissioner Fraser stated in his 2016 report, "Early childhood development is an area for positive, preventive and proactive intervention to revitalize the French language and Francophone communities."
7. Without proper funding for these communities in the context of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, the capacities of the early childhood sector in linguistic minority communities will continue to be compromised.
8. It is therefore critical that Bill C-35 be amended to include OLMCs in section 8. This would ensure a long-term funding commitment to support early learning and childcare for these communities.

9. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities has made significant amendments to Bill C-35, including to sections 7 and 11, which concern funding principles and appointments to the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care, respectively. I applaud these amendments, which are certainly a step in the right direction.
10. Furthermore, for reasons I have outlined in this statement, I urge the honourable senators of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology to give full strength to Bill C-35's funding principles toward OLMCs by amending the bill to include OLMCs directly within the funding commitments set out in section 8.
11. I would like to thank the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology for the attention it has given to this important matter.