

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, April 24, 2018

COMMITTEE ROOM

**Nova Scotia Child Care Association
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Re: Pre-Primary Impact on the Child Care Sector
&
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

Mr. Ben Jessome (Chairman)
Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft (Vice-Chairman)
Mr. Chuck Porter
Mr. Bill Horne
Ms. Rafah DiCostanzo
Hon. Pat Dunn
Ms. Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin
Hon. David Wilson
Ms. Claudia Chender

[Mr. Brad Johns replaced Ms. Elizabeth Smith McCrossin]

WITNESSES

Nova Scotia Child Care Association

Ms. Pam Streeter, Private Licensed Administrators' Association
Ms. Lisa Davies, Non Profit Directors Association

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Ms. Cathy Montreuil, Deputy Minister
Ms. Janet Lynn Huntington, Executive Director, Early Years Branch
Ms. Vicki Elliott-Lopez, Executive Director, Regulated Child Care and Licensing

In Attendance:

Ms. Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 24, 2018

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Ben Jessome

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. Good morning everybody. My name is Benjamin Jessome and I represent Hammonds Plains-Lucasville. Today I will be your chairman.

Today we are convening the Standing Committee on Human Resources, and before we get moving I'd just like to take time to acknowledge the tragic incident that took place in Toronto yesterday. I think I speak for everybody when I express my condolences, thoughts, and prayers to the families of the victims who were involved in that incident.

So, as I've stated, this is the Committee on Human Resources. For those of you who are guests, welcome; for those of you who are, I guess, not guests, welcome too. Point being, if you're in need of the restroom, it's out the door to the left. If in the event of some type of reason why we need to leave the building, please leave the Granville side of the building, which is to my left, and head up to Parade Square.

We have a presentation today by the Nova Scotia Child Care Association and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. We will begin by carrying out some committee business on the appointments to agencies, boards and commissions. I would just briefly like to remind everybody in the room to please put your phone to silent or vibrate for the purposes of keeping things moving forward without too much disturbance, and perhaps we can do some introductions of our members.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, everybody. If you could bear with the committee just briefly, we are going to initiate some of the appointments that are before us today.

Ladies and gentlemen, do I have a motion from the floor?

Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: For the Department of Agriculture, Nova Scotia Crop and Livestock Insurance Commission, I move Avard Bentley as chair and member, Ruth Grant as vice-chair and member, Danny Davison as member, John C. Vissers as member, and R. Michael Walsh as a member.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Moving to the Department of Environment, Mr. Horne.

MR. BILL HORNE: To the Department of Environment, Resource Recovery Fund Board, I'd like to move Ken Meech as chair and member of that board.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

The Department of Finance and Treasury Board. Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Mr. Chairman, I so move that Rick Parker be appointed as a member of the Nova Scotia Credit Union Deposit Insurance Corporation.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

The Department of Justice. Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chairman, I so move that Eunice Harker be appointed as chair and commissioner of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Thank you, everybody, and thank you to our guests for your patience. I think what we'll do is start with the Child Care Association. You can give your opening remarks and then we'll allow the department to follow up, and then at that point we'll open up for questions from members. I'd just like to mention, please make an effort to allow me, as chairman, to recognize you before speaking. That goes for all of you as well - just so our folks who work in the Hansard booth can keep things organized. It's a little easier on all of us when we kind of go through that motion. So, without further ado, Ms. Streeter, please.

MS. PAM STREETER: First of all, I would like to say thank you for inviting me to come before the committee. To understand the impacts of the pre-Primary program on regulated early learning and care, one must first look to setting factors.

Historically, we've had low wages in the sector, that is one of the factors in determining entry into ECE training programs. This has created retention and recruitment challenges since the 1990s. In fact, 1990 was the first time that a stabilization grant was offered to the sector to help support wages.

Nova Scotia itself implemented a Recruitment and Retention Strategy in 2005-06 with funding for those entering ECE training programs, and for those in the field to upgrade. Families' ability to pay is not in alignment with the cost to provide care, and limits a centre's ability to create a sustainable salary scale.

Both non-profit and private centres took on the challenge of providing quality early learning and care programs in Nova Scotia, and in the process, we created practices such as our fee structures, to keep all levels of care affordable for families, which meant relying on preschool programs to break even.

There have been inconsistent consultative practices between the sector and the departments since I've been in the field, since 1989. Both non-profit and private directors have a history of advocating for best practices, worthy wages, and consultation.

Despite the additional funding for wages, and the monies allocated for recruitment and retention over the years, the sector continued to experience low wages and an insufficient number of trained ECEs to meet the demand. With the release of the Nova Scotia Review of Regulated Child Care in March 2016, a strategic plan was developed and released in June 2016, entitled *Affordable, Quality Child Care: A Great Place to Grow!*, which set forth the strategies and timelines to strengthen the sector. I was a little puzzled as to why that wasn't included in the briefing that we received.

Beginning October 2016, a commitment was made to establish the current wage floor of \$15 for Level 1, \$17 for Level 2 and school age, and \$19 for Level 3. As it became apparent that the new funding model would not be in place, an interim fund - the Wage Supplement Fund - was established and announced in June 2016. However, an impact assessment wasn't conducted. Centres that were not paying the wage floor would receive funding to bridge the gap. For example, if a staff would receive a little over \$2,000 annually for every dollar required to bridge the gap to meet that wage floor. For those centres that were paying the wage floor, we received a \$2,000 thank you, and in effect we felt penalized for striving to have paid worthy wages over the years and, in many cases, this eliminated salary scales and competitive advantage. The funding model also did not recognize experienced ECEs who had spent years delivering care and advocating for the sector, including worthy wages.

In addition, to access funding from the province the centres had to agree to a fee cap restricting any future ability to use revenues to rebuild salary scales and respond to increases in program costs. What should have been a welcome first step to addressing low wages in the sector, the WSF and aspects of the strategic plan resulted in a less than positive response from the ECE community.

I have included onto this document Appendix A, which just provides a little bit more history. In December 2016, the department facilitated a session that allowed for open dialogue amongst the Nova Scotia Child Care Association, Non Profit Directors Association, Private Licensed Administrators' Association, and the Early Childhood Education Action Group, to discuss a new funding formula. This meeting was the start of the Early Years branch's efforts to implement a more collaborative and inclusive approach with the associations. We were assured that our input would be sought prior to the rollout of initiatives, and I am pleased to say that this has been the case and has been very welcome, with positive results on both sides.

It is early May 2017, and with this commitment to collaboration a strategic plan is in place, an Early Years framework, an Early Years curriculum framework is being piloted and anticipation of a new funding model, and the sector is cautiously optimistic. Then, the writ is dropped and the pre-Primary is announced with a commitment to an aggressive rollout over four years. After the election, the inability to access any information regarding the pre-Primary program to assess impact on programs with a September start leaves regulated care programs in the dark and struggling to make adjustments and plan for the future.

While the intent and commitment of the directors and staff of the Early Years branch to support regulated care has been genuine and very much appreciated, the resources allocated have not been sufficient. Throughout the summer and Fall of 2017, we were encouraged to look at alternative ways to ensure program sustainability, including converting existing preschool spaces to infants, toddlers and/or wraparound pre-Primary programs and we were assured that the branch would support us. The space conversion grant recently announced funding to 51 centres, which is only 13 per cent of the centres

around the province. So, at \$2.7 million and 389 centres who could possibly have received this, some were not approved, some were approved, and others had projects that were partially approved.

The following table illustrates how preschool programs are critical to the overall viability of a centre and the ability to offer worthy wages and benefits in the current model of regulated early learning and care. So, if you take a look at the chart, you have to note that this only includes wages and MERC for staff to meet ratio working directly with children, and assumes that all spaces are filled. Insurance and other benefits have not been factored in and this example uses a minimum wage floor for a Level 2.

So, with the infant population there is a loss, with the toddler there is a slight gain in revenue, and then with the preschool population you can see that's where the greatest influx of revenue dollars would come in that would help overall to balance the program. That amount is what is left over to cover all the remaining costs such as food, lease, mortgage, vehicle, property taxes, supplies, maintenance, et cetera.

It is clear that a reduction in preschoolers and an increase in infants and toddlers is another factor in a centre's ability to offer worthy wages and benefits, as the overall revenue stream decreases while staffing, due to lower ratios in the infant-toddler age groups, increases. The fee cap means the centre will not be able to use fee increases to increase revenue. The stability offered by a fully funded pre-Primary program becomes increasingly attractive to ECEs, offering higher wages and benefits. It has been established that despite the reported numbers of ECEs available to practise in the province, regulated early learning and the care sectors continue to experience significant challenges in recruiting and retaining staff, impacting quality across programs.

The next table highlights the factors that ECEs will consider when choosing their career path. It also highlights factors that restrict the regulated early learning and care programs from establishing and maintaining competitive wage practices. First, we have ratios - 8:1 in a preschool program - lower ratios, which, while we agree are best practice, also result in increased staffing costs. In the pre-Primary program, it is a 10:1 ratio.

[10:15 a.m.]

Hours spent in direct contact with children - in most regulated care centres, if they work an eight-hour day, they are spending the bulk of that day in direct contact with children. This means that meetings often occur on personal time - PD is on personal time, and a lot of programming happens on personal time. With the pre-Primary program, it averages about five hours of direct instruction time with children, and then PD or programming time can occur in the remaining three hours in the day.

Expenses associated with the program other than wages and benefits - in a regulated centre, that would be food, property taxes, and supplies. You can read what's there. It has been difficult trying to find information regarding the pre-Primary programs in terms of wages, salaries, expenses, and so on. But what I have been reading and what came out in briefing was that food, supplies, professional development, and possibly pre-Primary program board leads all come from the dollars allocated to the pre-Primary program.

Wages - clearly, Level 2 and Level 3, \$17 and \$19, are significantly lower than the \$22 to \$24 where a lead ECE starts. I could not find out what the wage would be for the support ECE. This is a minimum of \$540 a month - a car payment, certainly a good payment to go towards a home. Over time, that adds up.

Benefits - personal days, life, LTD, health, dental, and pension - I couldn't find out any information regarding those, but historically in the public sector, and in the school boards in particular, those are all offered to employees. This varies by centre, depending on their ability to pay.

Access to PD would be during working hours in a pre-Primary program and is often outside of working hours for ECEs working in regulated centres.

Inclusion support - we have the inclusion support grant, which is allocated to a centre based on their licence capacity. The max that a centre can receive is \$39,000 per year, and this is if you have a large centre. If you have a large centre, you have multiple groups. But it staffs one person. All of the message that I'm hearing coming from the government is that pre-Primary students will have support if required in the program.

Opportunity for wage increases based on experiences - with the current salary cap in place, centres will have difficulty keeping pace with increased costs, let alone providing wage increases over time. Again, just based on current practices, school board employees have salary scales with corresponding pay increases.

Regulatory compliance, there is a cost to that - ratios, number of bathrooms and sinks, staff qualifications, square footage per child, nutrition, and so on. There is also public reporting of our compliance on the website. To date, I have never been able to see that happen when it comes to the public school system.

I would like to say that this isn't about a question of quality of program with pre-Primary versus regulated care. This is about our ability to sustain and attract quality ECEs for our programs.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Ms. Streeter. We'll move to the not-for-profit sector. Ms. Davies, please.

MS. LISA DAVIES: Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you. From the Non Profit Directors Association, what we strive to do is provide voice to non-profit early education and care in Nova Scotia.

When considering today's topic, I felt it important to revisit NPDA's principles and beliefs and their connection to pre-Primary and the impacts on the child care sector. Upon reflection, two key areas of impact became evident to us. One is human resources, and Pam certainly mentioned that. The second is enrolment.

With respect to human resources, the ECE workforce has been impacted by the implementation of the pre-Primary program in that there is an additional challenge accessing trained early childhood educators to work in the child care sector. This is not new but it is, indeed, an additional piece, which makes it even more difficult. NPDA believes that all early learning and care programs must deliver a thoughtful and intentional curriculum, which is best delivered by a workforce that is educated specifically in early childhood theory, and who hold a professional credential. We also commit to the growth and development of the ECE workforce by designing and delivery of opportunities for ongoing professional development, ongoing professional learning that promotes a culture of inquiry, reflection, and professional growth.

So, that being said, I have a list of benefits and a list of challenges as far as the impacts of the pre-Primary goal, with regard to the child care sector.

ECEs are being recognized as professionals and I think that's a really good thing. By only hiring Level 2 and Level 3 for the pre-Primary positions, the visibility of the ECE as a profession is increasing. Secondly, an increase of employment choices for ECEs. Various employment opportunities offer diversity in benefits and salaries, again increasing the visibility of the ECE as a profession.

Leaders in the non-profit sector have taken advantage of opportunities to advance their skills and to utilize their expertise by accepting employment directly and indirectly related to the implementation of the pre-Primary program. So, there are certainly benefits to the ECE community in that regard, but there are also challenges. It has been difficult recruiting ECEs with diplomas and degrees, and that has been a concern for quite some time. Recruitment and retention incentives have been in place with government support within the past 10 years, and Pam mentioned those.

The addition of 50-plus new Primary classrooms in September 2017 had a significant impact on non-profit centres within our membership, in that employees left to take jobs with pre-Primary. There are centres within our membership who have yet to fill those positions. So, although it's not a new challenge, the pre-Primary program is, indeed, negatively impacting recruitment and retention in the child care sector.

With the loss of the leaders in the non-profit sector, it has been challenging for organizations to fill these positions, impacting boards of directors and employees as they work to continue services to families.

The second piece that I want to address is that of enrolment. There's an expected reduction of families accessing four-year-old programs in regulated child care centres, preschools, and family day homes. Non-profit organizations are community-based and community-oriented in nature and design. They stem from the needs of the community. So, therefore, there are benefits with regard to enrolment in the pre-Primary program. These are the first steps to a universal system of early care and learning in Nova Scotia. We're very excited about that, because that is something that the Non Profit Directors Association holds on dearly to.

Opportunity for organizations to focus on infant and toddler programs. We know that the critical years are 0 to 6. Those earliest years of 0 to 3 we'll be able to focus on more, and certainly, Pam mentioned a series of grants that have most recently come into play, including the Spatial Conversion Grant, which allows centres to be able to meet some of those needs and make some of those changes.

The opportunity for families to recognize the value of quality programming grounded in a provincial curriculum rather than unlicensed part-day preschools operating privately. Now, I really believe that this can translate to the benefits of the Nova Scotia curriculum framework and to the child care organizations implementing it, because if families are experiencing the curriculum in the pre-Primary setting, then they're also recognizing that these are happening in quality, early-childhood settings in the regular sector as well. So, I think that that's an education piece for families. It's pretty important.

With regard to challenges around the enrolment piece, seats for preschool-age spaces are generally lower than those for younger spaces, and Pam also made mention of this. In spite of this, due to the higher number of children, preschool spaces are the money-makers of a multi-age centre. So, a centre that is infants, toddlers, and preschoolers - it's the preschoolers. You have more children so that you can bring in more fees. You need to have that piece in order to balance off the infant piece, which costs more to run or to offer. Programs risk losing this balance and may have to charge very high fees for infant and toddler spaces to make up the operating difference. We have had the infant incentive released recently, which will certainly contribute to that piece.

Programs offering only preschool spaces will potentially lose all clients, resulting in closure - for example, part day preschools or nursery schools. That certainly is a challenge for those folks who are offering these regulated programs.

Full-day programs offering only preschool spaces may retain clients due to the difficulty working and studying families are facing regarding wraparound care - that care for before and after the hours of the pre-Primary program. There is a potential for regulated centres to retain those four-year-olds for that reason. However, then you have a group of

parents who are paying and a group of parents who are not. There again lies another challenge, more specifically for the families actually.

The current government is paying attention to children and families, and we think that's pretty exciting. As I believe Pam also mentioned, we're very pleased with the pieces that are coming forward and the team that is working on these, but the investments perhaps need to look a little bit different financially.

With that attention that they're paying, they're putting commitments into action. Action creates change. Speedy change often creates fear. I believe that the speed with which this happened probably is the underlying fear for a lot of the issues that have been raised around the pre-Primary program and its impacts on the child care sector.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Davies. Moving on to Deputy Montreuil.

MS. CATHY MONTREUIL: Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about our Early Years system in Nova Scotia, including regulated child care and pre-Primary.

Before I continue, I would like to introduce my colleagues who are here with me today. Janet Lynn Huntington is the Executive Director of the Early Years branch, and Vicki Elliott-Lopez is the Executive Director of Child Care and Licensing. They're both very knowledgeable about early years in Nova Scotia, and I'm pleased to have them with me. I appreciate their work with their colleagues in the department and across the entire Early Years sector.

We recently announced our second-year rollout of pre-Primary classrooms. Currently, more than 800 children attend pre-Primary in 45 locations. This September, we hope to add over 130 classrooms in more than 80 communities across Nova Scotia. By the end of the four-year rollout, every family in the province with a four-year-old will have free universal access to a pre-Primary program in their community. We're very proud of the program. For the first time in Nova Scotia's history, we will have a provincial early learning program that will give all four-year-olds an opportunity to participate free of charge by September 2020.

There is copious research that validates the profound impact that early learning can have on a child's life. Children tend to do better in school, they transition more easily to Primary, and they experience more positive lifelong health and social outcomes. However, quality early learning opportunities can be out of reach for many families because of cost, and especially in some rural Nova Scotia communities, it may not even be an available option. The idea of Nova Scotia's pre-Primary program is to level the playing field for all Nova Scotian four-year-olds, giving children and their families a free option to access quality early learning in their own community so that all Nova Scotian children get the

same chance for a head start no matter where they live, their background, or their family's socio-economic status.

At its heart, the pre-Primary program is about setting up our kids for success. We're not the first jurisdiction to figure this out. A number of Canadian provinces such as Ontario and the Northwest Territories are already offering free universal four-year-old early learning programs. Those provinces have concluded that investment in children's early learning pays big dividends for the future health and economic well-being of the child, and by extension, the province or country in which those children live.

[10:30 a.m.]

For that reason, Nova Scotia has made a commitment to a strong Early Years system to support children and families. The system includes pre-Primary, but that's not the only component of a strong system. We know early intervention serves over 1,500 kids with developmental delays or who are at risk of developmental delays. We know that our colleagues at the Department of Community Services, Public Health, Health and Wellness and the two Health Authorities, just to name a few, are working around the clock to ensure young children and families are supported, whether it is through family resource supports, 18-month well baby visits, immunization clinics, and behaviour supports, as some examples.

We know first-hand, at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the importance of a strong, successful and sustainable regulated child care sector and the role it can play in the lives of children and families. In June 2016, we introduced a Child Care Action Plan that was based on the feedback of 7,000 Nova Scotians. The plan recommends over 20 actions to make child care more affordable and accessible for families, and work on that plan is well under way.

With the implementation of the Child Care Action Plan and pre-Primary program, we are changing the landscape of early childhood education in our province, and children and families are reaping significant benefits. But we also know that introducing the pre-Primary program has impacted the child care sector and we are addressing those impacts at the same time that we are making significant improvements to improve affordability, quality, and accessibility, in child care throughout Nova Scotia.

We have made great headway in addressing affordability; in fact, we have made more changes to the subsidy program in the past two years than in the previous two decades. In March of this year, we introduced an infant incentive to operators to ensure that infant care grows and remains affordable for families. In November of 2017, we introduced a new funding model that focuses on quality and inclusion in child care. The funding model is in direct response to what we heard from the sector and what they needed in order to thrive - more funding for wages, investments in inclusion for all centres, and more flexibility in increased responsiveness to changes in staffing throughout the year. In

addition, the department is supporting centres as they adapt to the evolving early year system and by funding them to full capacity until 2022.

We are opening up opportunities for child care growth. Earlier this year, we announced an \$8.9 million investment to help create 1,000 more regulated care spaces. It's part of a \$35 million federal investment for child care over the next three years. Just last week, we announced that 51 child care centres across the province will receive grants totalling \$2.7 million to help child care centres meet demand in their communities, while remaining competitive and sustainable.

This is an unprecedented time for early childhood educators in Nova Scotia. The skills of early childhood educators are in high demand, not just in pre-Primary and regulated child care, but in developmental intervention, family resource and early intensive behavioural intervention, or EIBI, to name a few. There is, for the first time in Nova Scotia, career mobility for ECEs. This means ECEs living and working in Nova Scotia have many opportunities to pursue employment in their field no matter where they live.

In October 2016, government invested in the wages of early childhood educators working in a regulated child care. Some highly trained and skilled ECEs at that time were making about \$13 per hour. Government introduced the province's first-ever wage floor so that ECEs with a college or diploma in ECE would make at least \$17 and \$19 per hour. We also invest significantly in training and professional development for early childhood educators. We partner with colleges and universities across the province to develop and deliver professional development, and we just increased our investment to include the development and delivery of leadership training for directors along with inclusion-related PD and support.

We also reimburse tuition costs for close to 150 individuals each year who are working towards their ECE diploma through our Continuing Education Program. Soon early childhood educators and directors will have access to online learning tailored to their needs - just in time, just where they are, just what they need. We know that supporting and growing the sector with more opportunities for ECEs is critical for a strong Early Years system.

I'll point to the experience of other jurisdictions such as Ontario and British Columbia where opportunities for ECEs were expanded to include other settings. The number of people entering ECE training programs increased, and recruitment and retention within the sector overall improved.

ECEs, like any other profession would do, return to the marketplace when there are increased opportunities. We know that there will be a greater need for early childhood educators across settings and sectors within the Early Years system over the next four to five years.

A robust ECE workforce that is responsive and supportive to the needs of children, families and communities is vital to our children's success. We want to work with our partners across sectors and departments to eliminate the barriers that exist that may limit opportunities and experiences for all children and families.

We will continue to work to maximize opportunities to contribute a fully integrated Early Years system by supporting regulated child care, pre-Primary programming, early intervention and supports that help our youngest Nova Scotians have the best start in life. We believe that children and families come first and are at the heart of our decision making, and that our contribution to a strong Early Years system goes much farther than regulated care in pre-Primary.

Thank you. We're happy to take your questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, deputy. Ms. Huntington or Ms. Elliott-Lopez, did you have anything to add at this point in time? Okay.

We're going to circle the table in order of the NDP caucus, the Progressive Conservative caucus, and then over to the Liberal caucus. Again, I will remind people to wait for your light to go on and be recognized before you begin asking or answering questions today.

Ms. Chender.

MS. CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you all for being here. I've met most of you and spent more time with some of you. I am very happy to have this opportunity to ask some questions, particularly now that we are into pre-Primary. I would echo the generous statement of Ms. Davies that we are very happy to see efforts being made in this area - children being paid attention to. We may differ in some areas on execution, but certainly the attention to the youngest members of our society is welcome.

I have a number of questions, but I want to start picking up something that Ms. Davies said, which is around universal programming. Despite our misgivings, we did support this program because we do believe in universal programming - particularly universal free programming for children. So we were happy to see that, but we have a lot of questions about why four-year-olds - why not a more comprehensive program? There was mention made in the opening remarks that this looks like it might be the first step towards universal programming for all children.

I guess I would invite any of you to answer, but maybe starting with the folks in the department. We know that when the Auditor General looked at licensed child care, one of his challenges was around the grant and subsidy program, and that they weren't being managed correctly.

We know there has been a cash infusion into the sector in the last six months in a few ways. A lot of that is federal funds coming through, which is great, but I'm wondering why - if, hopefully or if not why - there isn't a move towards a kind of universal system versus a patchwork of grants in terms of affordable for the under-fours.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Huntington.

MS. JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: If it's okay, I think we will probably all speak to this. I can start and probably turn it over to my colleague Ms. Elliott-Lopez. You asked a question with respect to why four-year-olds to start with, and looking at the question about a broader universal system, and that's a great question.

I think in Nova Scotia, timing is everything. I think we need to be looking at making sure that as we introduce a universal four-year-old program that we're constantly monitoring and evaluating that program to make sure that it is in the best interests of children.

We do know from a research perspective that children who attend early childhood education for at least two years before Grade 1 - so in the case of Nova Scotia that would be pre-Primary and Primary - perform, on average, better than other children by 15. And that's a PISA study, so we have some really good research on why we should target four-year-olds first.

We have a four-year mandate to roll out pre-Primary across Nova Scotia. Every year, every class, we will be looking at what we can do to do it better and any time you implement a new program, particularly from one end of the province to the other, there are challenges but, so far, we've managed to address those challenges onsite immediately. There's nothing that we're seeing that we're not able to deal with at the time, but we know there could be more challenges going forward.

We really want to get this program right to make sure that in the future, if other governments decide they want to explore other options, that we have a great basis to form that. We can't do that without the regulated child care sector so that's a really important message, and our deputy spoke to that in her remarks about the Early Years system. This is not just about pre-Primary; it's about a strong, sustainable early childhood education system which includes regulated child care.

We all know families rely on high-quality, regulated care in their communities. It's about supporting not just regulated child care and pre-Primary but also about supporting the needs of all children and families, whether it is through developmental intervention or EIBI or the Department of Community Services and some of their programs, their family resource centre. You're asking about universal programming and that's a great question,

and while we're looking at those types of things, we're also looking to build a strong Early Years system that supports the needs of all children from birth to six years old.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

MS. VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I will add with the zero- to three-year-olds, to Janet Lynn's point, the thing for us is about building a strong Early Years system. As four-year-olds begin to move into pre-Primary, we are putting our focus on the regulated child care system for zero- to three-year-olds. They, too, are adopting the early learning curriculum framework that's going to be launched and it's important for us to help them transition to the new reality. We see this in other sectors as well. The markets change and sectors have to adjust. They develop new business plans and they look to their partners to help them through that process and they adjust, and that's what we're working with our regulated child care partners to do. We're helping them to transition to the new reality of a changing landscape in child care and the grants that we're providing to them are in response to what we've heard through consultations, through anecdotal conversations.

I think back to when I first started my job - I've only been with the branch since the Fall - and one of the first things that I did was I got on the road and I went out and I visited Lisa and I visited Pam and I visited others to talk about their concerns and how they saw pre-Primary rolling out and how they thought that the regulated child care sector could co-exist with pre-Primary and got some excellent feedback from that. That feedback was validated through our consultations in the Fall. In response to that, the grants we've been providing are helping to build that strong regulated system for zero- to three-year-olds. The Spatial Conversion Grant, we were able to fund every eligible application, and we received 87 applications. One withdrew and we were able to fund 51 of those, so a significant number that were submitted, we were able to fund.

Out of that, we're actually seeing the creation of 144 infant spaces across the province. That's tremendous because one of the things that we heard strongly from parents through the consultation was that there were waiting lists for infants and they needed more infant spaces. They wanted more toddler spaces, so through the space conversion grant, not just 144 infant spaces but over 350 toddler spaces as well. We do recognize in hearing back from the sector that as much as they wanted to provide infant care, some of the costs were prohibitive.

For example, the installation of a sprinkler system - the Spatial Conversion Grant has allowed that to happen. It's also, through the infant incentive, contributing \$4 per day, per every infant space, so that they don't have to pass those extra costs on to families, because while we recognize that we need a strong regulated child care sector, we also recognize that we need to keep child care affordable for families. The infant incentive will not only support the child care sector in creating infant spaces, but it helps to keep care affordable for families.

[10:45 a.m.]

The Program Inclusion Enhancement Grant that we also recently launched, was to help centres to create resources and purchase tools to help their centre to create more inclusive play spaces. We now have the Inclusion Support Grant that's available to 100 per cent of centres across the province, where it was only available to 60 per cent before. We're not just giving them funding, we're coupling that with building capacity, working with them really closely to help build capacity, and I can give you a couple of examples of that. So, with the Inclusion Support Grant, we're providing them with funding to help them to offer professional development to their staff, but we're also, in tandem with that, supporting eight inclusion coaches across the province, and those inclusion coaches will be working with centres to help build capacity around a strong workforce, and nurturing relationships with families and children.

We're implementing what's called a Pyramid Model of inclusion, which has been implemented in other provinces across the country with great results. So, we're excited about that because we're working in partnership with the sector on all of these initiatives, and we know that this is a period of transition, and the transition - we'll make it through to the other end, and then we'll continue to build on this great Early Years system in our province.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Elliott-Lopez. Ms. Chender, do you have a supplementary question?

MS. CHENDER: Well, I have lots, but I'll save my supplementary.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, I think we'll do one round with one question and one supplementary. Afterwards, I think I'm going to move to one question per caucus, just in the interest of getting more questions in there, if that's agreeable to members.

Mr. Dunn.

HON. PAT DUNN: Thank you for your presentation. I am curious about - and I know this is in the very early stages - my understanding now is that you can retain a four-year-old after their year completion, some of them will have developmental delays and so on - but going forward, will that change if the family, the parents, and the educators at the school determine that, perhaps for the benefit of this child, they should be able to be retained and stay another year prior to going into Primary?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Excuse me, Mr. Dunn, was that directed at someone in particular?

MR. DUNN: Anyone dealing with pre-Primary.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Ms. Huntington.

MS. HUNTINGTON: I just want to confirm, you're asking with specific reference to the pre-Primary program?

MR. DUNN: Yes.

MS. HUNTINGTON: So, children in Nova Scotia who participate in the pre-Primary program are eligible to attend the program for one year only. That was a decision that we made last summer. It's based on Early Years research where it's very clear that children should, in the early years, transition with their peers.

What we did do, because we know that some families, whether they have children with developmental delays or typically-developing children, they don't want to send their child to Primary when they're five. We often hear that - some moms and dads just don't feel like their child is ready. So, with that, we made the decision that we would allow families to enroll their child in pre-Primary at 3.8 years of age, or 4.8 years of age. So, what that means would be children would have to be four or five by December 31st.

So, that would allow moms and dads, and caregivers and guardians, to have another year to decide if they think that their child is ready. So, we - and I know the deputy can speak more to this - we're at an exciting time from an inclusion perspective in Nova Scotia. So, what our role will be in pre-Primary is to work with that child in any way that we can, including having outside community supports to come in and support the child in the pre-Primary program, to get them ready to transition to Primary with their peers, and when they get to Primary, it's incumbent upon the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and all of our Regional Centres for Education to ensure that the supports that those children need are in place. There's a \$15 million investment in the EECD budget this year for inclusion, and the Commission on Inclusive Education made some wonderful recommendations that I know the department is working on.

So, really, it's about supporting the child when they're in pre-Primary, and supporting them when they transition into the Primary program.

MR. DUNN: Just a quick follow-up question with regard to funding for specialists who meet the needs of these students - for all the grade levels for that matter, but we're talking about pre-Primary. For example, a school psychologist.

MS. HUNTINGTON: Right now in the pre-Primary program, children - whether they're in pre-Primary, regulated child care, at home with mom and dad - have access to a range of community supports. By community supports, I mean things like early intervention, developmental intervention, public hearing and speech, EIBI program for children with autism. Those supports - whether you have a child at home, in pre-Primary or regulated child care - are provided in the pre-Primary classrooms.

Oftentimes we have children in pre-Primary that will have their developmental interventionists come into the pre-Primary program. I believe right now our statistic is - I think we have around 40 children with a diagnosis in pre-Primary from one end of the province to the other, and developmental intervention and EIBI and hearing and speech are in those classrooms all the time working and supporting those children.

When they transition to the Primary program - when they transition to public education, P-12 - that is when they will access the resources like school psychology and school-based services, but right now those children have access to the same supports that all four-year-olds, three-year-olds and two-year-olds in Nova Scotia have access to.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you for being here. You know that I'm an early childhood educator. In 2015 when the government started making additions to the program and salaries for early childhood educators, I was thrilled because I know how they've struggled over the years. I know many were doing fundraising for their own salaries and their time has come. That's how I see it. I'm a big advocate of what's happening here in the Early Years program.

With the changes, I know it's challenging for the daycares to adjust their business plans and removing the four-year-old programs. I'm glad to see that there is an incentive, especially for the infants. Can you talk about how that's going to roll out and will it be province-wide? Do you think there will be a good balance? Because infant care in rural Nova Scotia is really challenging.

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I am pleased to say that of the applications that we approved under Spatial Conversion that were seeking infant care, we approved about 50 per cent in HRM and the other 50 per cent were outside of HRM, so we are reaching rural areas of Nova Scotia. We're really pleased about that.

The way we've started to roll out the infant incentive, everybody qualifies. So those who are already offering infant care - again, because they're adjusting their business models too. This isn't about new infant spaces alone - this is about existing infant spaces as well. We heard from all child care centres that as four-year-olds move into pre-Primary, the expenses will go up for the younger age groups.

Every centre that has infant spaces has applied. Those that are within 10 per cent of our parent fee cap were all approved for the \$4 per day per infant space. So we have over 800 centres already that are well under way. In addition to that, the 144 infant spaces - as they're created and up and running - those too will get the reimbursement for those spaces.

In addition to that, we also just announced our strategic growth initiative, which is the creation of 15 centres and/or expansions across the province. We're really targeting rural areas in that. You would have heard the 11 counties that we're looking at, and as the minister has said, we're looking at areas where there are not child care centres now or where there is a substantial need for child care, and a child care centre may expand. A primary focus will be on infant spaces there.

Finally, through our Family Home Day Care Program, we're supporting \$2 a day per infant space. The reason it's less is because they don't have as much overhead as child care centres would have. They're thrilled to know that they're getting \$2 a day for every infant space that they have and/or are creating through strategic growth because, as you know, we're also creating 500 spaces through the Family Home Day Care Program through our 15 agencies across the province.

In some areas of the province, it makes more sense to support family home daycare providers over regulated child care centres. In very rural areas of the province, where the population density may not be enough to support a full-on regulated child care centre, family home daycare is often a great alternative for families. We want to ensure that they, too, are focused on the development of infant and toddler care.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: I was glad to hear you talk about the family centres. The curriculum that you are piloting right now, you talked about expanding that throughout Nova Scotia - will that be for all ages and family daycares as well?

MS. HUNTINGTON: The Nova Scotia early learning curriculum framework, the pilot has been wrapped up. Over 40 regulated child care centres and two Early Years centres participated in the pilot.

We have tremendous feedback on the content of the pilot and the implementation of the pilot. We're making adjustments now. It's going to print soon, and it will be available for all provincially-funded, regulated child care centres, I believe, by June 15th of this year, as well as the existing pre-Primary programs and the new ones that are coming on board in September. The early learning curriculum framework is a document that we're very proud of. I know that Pam and Lisa both spoke to it in their remarks.

We were the last jurisdiction in Canada to have an early learning curriculum framework. What we like to say is that we may have been the last, but we think that we are the best.

That's not just my opinion. We had a professor from a university in Massachusetts, Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, come to Nova Scotia. She did some professional development with our ECEs, and we gave her a copy of the early learning curriculum framework, and we gave her a copy of the educator's guide that supports that. She looked at that; she analyzed it; she studied it; and she asked lots of questions on it. She wrote an article in *The Washington Post* about the Nova Scotia early learning curriculum framework and about all

of the things that Nova Scotia was doing right. I remember hearing that she was so impressed with it that she wanted to write an op-ed. I kept on looking at all of the local papers to see it. I don't typically read *The Washington Post* every day. When it came out, we were thrilled and proud.

Regulated child care centres, Early Learning Centres, our Student Services coordinators at the department, our Mi'kmaq Services, and our Acadian Services - all of those individuals contributed to that document, so it was a great moment of pride for the Early Years branch and for staff, especially the staff who have worked in Early Years for 30 years who have said, for 30 years, that we need an early learning curriculum framework. That's a document that will be available for pre-Primary, and not just pre-Primary but also for children who are in the infant program, the toddler program, and the preschool program. It's a document that we can't wait to roll out provincially.

We wouldn't have been able to do the pilot if it wasn't for regulated child care. They really stepped up. When we sent out the memo to ask child care centres to participate, I remember looking at the team and asking what if nobody wants to participate, and they said well, I think they will. I said, but it's a lot of work, right? What if they don't want to participate in this pilot? They said to just trust the process.

Within a week, they had come to me, and I think we were hoping to get 15 child care centres in Nova Scotia, and we ended up getting 40. I said let's take them all because they're all going to have something to tell us. Any time we can talk about the curriculum and learn from it before we roll it out province-wide is a great opportunity.

We're really proud of that and we look forward to it becoming a staple in every child care centre and pre-Primary classroom in Nova Scotia.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Just a quick reminder, we're going to go with one question, with no supplementary, just to try and fit in a few more questions here today.

Ms. Chender.

MS. CHENDER: I want to pick up on the inclusion question. When the program was announced, we were told it would be an inclusive program. Given that that was just after the Inclusion Commission had started its work on P through 12, I had a lot of questions about that because I think that we were pretty clear at that time that we didn't actually know what a proper inclusive learning environment looked like.

[11:00 a.m.]

I want to kind of just challenge a couple of things that you said. One is that anecdotally, I know of a couple of families who have actually pulled their kids from pre-

Primary because they didn't feel like it was a fully inclusive program; and two is that it is not my understanding from the families I've spoken to - particularly in the autistic community - that families want their children to start Primary later. I think you made the comment, Ms. Huntington, that people could start either in that four year or the five year. I think the reason that most autistic children are now starting school a year later is because they're not able to have access to the EIBI program, because of the former backlog, until they're into that year when they would start Primary. It is a reality that those kids are starting school later but I don't think that that is because that's the intention or desire necessarily of the family. I think that's just logistics.

I guess my general question is sort of as you said, you know, this was a speedy implementation. I think you made some reference to sort of learning as you go and wanting each classroom to be better than the last, and that's great. I'd love to hear about how you're learning about inclusion from the other areas of the department as the department digests the report of the commission on inclusion because these children are in school buildings with all the other children. Hopefully there's alignment there and specifically to the question of autistic kids with EIBI.

One of the recommendations that we had been pushing for was an alignment, because I know in that Inclusive Education Commission report there was a lot of emphasis on alignment of departments, so to me, this is an easy one that the Department of Health and Wellness and Early Years could actually align the timing of pre-Primary in EIBI. One of the challenges we have is that children have to start EIBI whenever they come up on the list. That could be partway through pre-Primary. When I asked the minister about this in Budget Estimates, he said, well, maybe we should look at that, because the fact that a child can't repeat pre-Primary right now, a child's family doesn't know when they're going to be eligible for EIBI. So an autistic child could start pre-Primary in their four year, start their EIBI sometime during that year, and then have nowhere to go the following year.

I guess, if you could speak to inclusion generally but also specifically to that EIBI piece, I'd love to hear what you guys have to say there.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Chender. Ms. Huntington looks like she's off to the races right now.

MS. HUNTINGTON: I wrote down some of your comments, so if I'm missing anything, please let me know. With respect to your comment on what you've heard anecdotally from parents who have pulled their children out of pre-Primary, that is not information that I am aware of so I would love to know that. When I talk about making every classroom better, that's really valuable information for us to hear. We would love to hear from those families and those parents on why they think the pre-Primary program didn't work for them and what we could do to further support their children.

In terms of the offering on inclusive environment, that is happening in pre-Primary in Nova Scotia right now. I've heard anecdotally from families and parents about the

tremendous impact the Pre-Primary program has had on their child, and some of them had autism and some of them have some other challenges.

I think of a young little boy at a program whose mother was very fearful and didn't want to send her child to the pre-Primary program five days a week: he's not ready, he won't adjust, it will not be a good fit for him. Of course, the early childhood educators in the classroom at that time said, you know, we're going to take your advice on that. We're going to work with you to come up with a program and a plan that works for your child and where you feel comfortable. I believe that child went for two to three hours a week in September, and that gradually went from three hours a week to a full day, and that went from a full day to two days a week.

That child is now fully integrated into the pre-Primary program at his school. He is enjoying it. His mother cannot believe - what she said was, I can't believe the different child that he is - not only because of the pre-Primary program but at home, so she feels more supported. She has worked with her early childhood educators to get some great advice and recommendations on how to continue the learning that's happening in the pre-Primary program, at home. So, from a family life perspective, she reports that there have been some great improvements and challenges - that's music to our ears in the Early Years branch.

Our trained early childhood educators are trained in how to offer an inclusive environment for children. Our early learning curriculum framework speaks to inclusion and our educator's guide that supports that curriculum framework speaks to how we can make an inclusive environment for children in pre-Primary and regulated care, and when we're working with all children.

I'm just going through your list and I think I'm getting through it - when it comes to your question with respect to EIBI, as you know and as you've indicated, the Department of Health and Wellness funds the EIBI program and it is administered through the two Health Authorities in Nova Scotia, the IWK and the Nova Scotia Health Authority. We have ongoing conversations with our counterparts at the Department of Health and Wellness and their partners to ensure that we're able to offer an inclusive environment to support children in any way that we can.

I believe - and I could be wrong - it's 20 children right now who are in pre-Primary in Nova Scotia that are receiving EIBI in the pre-Primary classroom. I cannot speak to the clinical aspects of the EIBI program because it is administered through the Department of Health and Wellness and the Health Authorities, but what I can say is that pre-Primary classrooms are inclusive. We want to support the children any way that we can. We've done some professional development with our ECEs on how to further support inclusion. We're constantly working with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Wellness

on how we can further support children, not just with autism but other developmental delays and other challenges.

I take your point and it's something that we will once again be having conversations with the Department of Health and Wellness because at the end of the day - and we spoke about this earlier - it's about what we can do, not just at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, but the government and all of our partners to support children and families, and that includes EIBI.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Montreuil.

MS. MONTREUIL: I think it is worthwhile to take a moment to reflect that inclusive programs are good because they reflect the diversity in our society, and that this isn't just about supporting kids who need more - although that's a really important piece of inclusivity - it's also about the exposure of all kids to diversity from the time they enter preschool and our pre-Primary programs right through so that we build a strong, respectful, inclusive Nova Scotia on an ongoing basis.

So, while it's important to have the targeted conversation about additional supports for some additional kids, we need to understand that the rooms in which those kids thrive benefit everybody in those rooms.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Johns.

MR. BRAD JOHNS: I am kind of at a disadvantage as a newly elected MLA. I don't know if there have really been opportunities to question the department around pre-Primary or not, prior to this. So, for me, this is a good opportunity because it's my first opportunity and I have a lot of questions, so I could probably keep you here well past 12:00 noon on this.

I'm also at a disadvantage because my constituency is one of the ones in the province that currently does not have any pre-Primary programs, so I don't have the opportunity to pop in and see. I do have a daughter who is in Grade 5 and a daughter who is in junior high, in Grade 6, and as a single dad I have been very active with them through their whole education from Primary right to where they are now.

I'm curious to know - one of the issues that seems to be coming up from residents I've talked to is this concern about what supports are in place for parents with - I guess, what does a typical day look like in pre-Primary? What supports are in place for working parents or single parents?

I know for me, without the EXCEL program, I would be lost. Even with the EXCEL program, it's still challenging if I have to be downtown at 8:00 o'clock for a meeting or something like that, let alone trying to play in if it was pre-Primary. I am under the understanding there is no busing, that pre-Primary kids can't partake in EXCEL. I'm kind

of curious where that is and is that being reviewed to make it a little bit more flexible and supportive to single parents and parents who are both working?

MS. HUNTINGTON: I think Vicki and I will tag team on this one if you don't mind. You asked about what a day in the life of pre-Primary looks like and I'd be happy to walk you through that day. It's a very fun day, let me tell you.

So children and their families are greeted at the door by their early childhood educators and the classroom - people would think, you envision a classroom and you envision children at desks. That's not what you will see in the pre-Primary program. You are going to see various stations and tables and a water table, a sand table, a cozy corner, tents. I didn't know this until I started implementing pre-Primary, but I discovered the power of a pop-up tent in a pre-Primary classroom. I'm sure our ECEs here can talk to you about that and why that is such a great addition to a pre-Primary or to any early learning environment.

You're going to see children working and playing and that's the basis of the pre-Primary program. It's a play-based program; it's not an academic setting. I had the opportunity to visit a few pre-Primary programs since they opened and you'll just see happy children meeting and playing, and learning from each other throughout the day in a variety of settings.

I remember we went outside with the children at one particular school where I visited. They didn't have a playground and I was wondering what they were going to be doing. The ECE got the cart out of the closet and it was filled with pots and pans, and musical instruments, and the ECE said, what do you want to do today, children? We want to have a parade. So, for 20 minutes those children banged pots and pans and played with their musical instruments as they walked around the school. What they did though, and what was very interesting, was that they had to decide before they went out who was going to lead the parade, how long they were going to lead the parade, who was going to be first, who was going to be last - because the child that was last had to make sure the door was shut.

So these were all negotiations and watching four-year-olds negotiate is interesting and exciting. They went outside for 20 minutes and they had the time of their life. It was like a Disney parade for four-year-olds, I couldn't believe it. Those are the types of things and the ECE said, do you see what's happening here? Are you watching how these children are taking turns, learning good social-emotional cues, learning how to play properly.

Those are things that are happening every single day in every pre-Primary classroom in Nova Scotia. We're very proud of that and it's happening not just in pre-Primary, it's in regulated child care and any high-quality early learning environment. The intent of the program, as you know and everyone in this room knows, is to make it universal

within four years. Universal means we want as many children to be able to access this program as possible.

You've raised some good questions about supports for families to make sure they're able to attend. We know in some pre-Primary programs, the children do not require that before-school and after-school care. We've learned that through our Early Years Centre evaluation, so before pre-Primary we had eight earlier centres in Nova Scotia. One of the components of an Early Years Centre was to have an early learning program, but one of the components of an Early Years Centre is also to have on-site regulated child care. So our team worked really diligently to ensure that regulated child care would be provided to those children in pre-Primary and the other school - like Grade 2s, Grade 3s - if families wanted it. We weren't able to secure the regulated child care provider because the need wasn't there, and we were really shocked by that.

This was not in metro, this was not in downtown Halifax. These are in some rural communities where we thought that families wanted after-school care, and it turns out that they didn't need it because they had other options and opportunities for their child. Some of them were stay-at-home moms, some had grandparents picking them up. It really depends on school by school, but we know that in some cases now in pre-Primary, those children are attending after-school programs. We know so far this year that 850 families have been able to provide that opportunity to their child without providing the before-school and after-school care, but as we roll out pre-Primary more and it becomes more apparent that families need, in some cases, a place to go before the pre-Primary program starts or after the program wraps up, those are things that we're going to be working very closely with the regulated child care sector and the Regional Centres for Education to ensure that those supports are there for families if they are, in fact, needed.

[11:15 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: It sounds like some of that programming might be helpful to governors of all levels of government.

Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I will add that through the Spatial Conversion Grant, we did receive applications to convert spaces to pre-Primary wraparound support. We're really pleased to see that 80 spaces will be created through that.

We have heard from the sector that the regulations are different for them versus the pre-Primary setting. We are actually right now looking at those regulations, of course, through the lens of the health and safety of our children - that's our first and paramount interest - at the same time ensuring that the regulations can support pre-Primary wraparound support. For example, if a regulated child care provider wanted to go on-site and provide those supports on-site and partner with a Regional Centre for Education, we want to see that happen, and we want to help facilitate that.

We're working on that, and again, we'll be reaching out to our sector partners within the next few weeks. It's exciting to be moving forward to facilitate that happening because, as Janet Lynn mentioned, the more pre-Primary rolls out, the more we are going to see that that demand will increase, and we want to get in front of it.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: Truly, as I was listening to you, you brought me back 20 years when my daughters both went to daycare. I can't tell you how it prepared them, and how wonderful an experience it was for them.

I was lucky, I guess, because I lived close to the Mount, right behind the Mount, so my two daughters went to the training centre at the Mount. As you were describing it, that's exactly what the room looked like, how they were greeted in the morning, and how welcome they were. I was working part time at the time and with my second daughter, and I had no question of going full time and sending them to daycare at that age.

I think they received amazing care, and I still meet the daycare workers. They remember them, and they really had a wonderful relationship with the daycare.

It used to bother me when I heard how little they made. Those daycare ECEs were working for so little, but it was out of devotion and out of love for the children.

My question now is about the new grants that you are offering. I'm delighted to hear that you have received 87 applications, and 51 were successful. I just wanted to know the criteria, how you base it. Is there any difference between the daycares that are operating out of a home compared to a business site? Can you just explain the criteria that you based it on?

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: The criteria that we looked at was first and foremost eligibility, so whatever costs were provided to us had to be related to a space conversion. I can give you some examples of things we didn't approve, or wouldn't approve, with regard to that, so if it was the installation of new equipment, for example, for ages that they already serve, or if they needed a new dishwasher, or they needed general repairs to their roof or to their bathrooms. We wouldn't support general repairs and renovation. The work had to be directly related to a space conversion. For example, in the case of infant space creation, folks needed to install sprinkler systems if they had never had infant care before. We would support costs associated with things like that.

We also looked at the feasibility of the projects. Is it feasible once you convert these spaces? Does what you're saying make sense? Are you creating 10 infant spaces when you have six toddler spaces, and how are you going to financially support that? Is there

sustainability? Is it viable? If applicants couldn't show us that it could be, then we weren't able to approve it. Those were the key criteria.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Chender.

MS. CHENDER: I want to ask a question that came up in the presentations about workforce issues. We know that there are labour force issues. In the 2016 review of regulated child care, I know that one of the recommendations that came out was a sort of collaborative approach to work on recruitment and retention. Of course, the quick implementation of pre-Primary has really exacerbated the challenges that were identified there.

Ms. Elliott-Lopez, when you were speaking earlier - and I know you come out of labour and workforce, but you were talking about different sectors and that they have challenges, but I want to challenge that a little bit because I feel like this is a unique sector, particularly in the non-profit area because it's not your normal labour force situation. I think, as you've all acknowledged, this is a responsibility of the government to help nurture our children in their early years.

I know that Ms. Davies and Ms. Streeter both mentioned that staff are going - and I think that the chart Ms. Streeter provided was really helpful in seeing that really laid out. My children are six, six, and five, so this is very close to me - all three of them - my last one is in his last few months of regulated child care, and as much as he has enjoyed it I will be happy not to be paying for it anymore.

It has been wonderful, but I know at his daycare, Suzanne Power-Hann came and worked for you and she hasn't been replaced at the Dartmouth daycare. That's just an example, but this is someone in an administrative position with decades of experience, but from that all the way down to even those Level 1 ECEs there is clearly a huge issue.

So, I guess I would start by asking Ms. Davies and Ms. Streeter, and then if the department wants to kind of chime in - what do you guys see as the solution to the labour force issue? If there was something that you could recommend to these folks that would kind of help you - because I know it's a huge problem. Not only is it a huge problem, but as Ms. DiCostanzo said, and certainly in my experience, these folks seem to me - sometimes these folks see my kids more than I do. I acknowledge that, and that's an impact that will last with them for the rest of their lives, so these are extremely important staffing issues from a family perspective. So, I wonder what you would suggest in terms of helping you to solve that issue.

MS. DAVIES: For me it goes back to - and this is not going to be an immediate fix because it goes back to the education of the early childhood educators. It goes back to training and providing those opportunities.

I can remember sitting through graduation for both of my sons out of high school and writing down the names of people - you know when they walk across the stage and they say, this one's going here, they're going to the Mount, they're going to Nova Scotia College of ECEs, I'm writing them down. I'm going to find that person someday. (Laughter)

The challenge goes back even farther so that when folks are being recruited or suggested to go into the field or encouraged to go into the field, there is still an element of "this is babysitting". There's still an element of that lack of profession, so as we build that, as we create that and nurture that, I think we'll see a change.

I feel that a really big commitment to the post-secondary education of early childhood educators is very key to meet the needs. As I mentioned, it's so exciting that options are there for folks, whether they're in EIBI, whether they're in early intervention or working at the hospital in critical care or things like that, or in regulated child care or even home-based child care. There are options. People need to see, both the early childhood educators and others in Nova Scotia need to see, how important this role really is. Like you said, they see them quite often more than we do, as parents.

The other piece of that too is that when they do go to school, we miss them just as much as if they were ours sometimes. So that commitment, that investment, into the training of early childhood educators and really ramping that up is key.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Streeter, would you like to jump in here?

MS. STREETER: Sure. I definitely concur, the training is so important and the respect and professionalism in the field is really critical. That gets down into some of the details. As one of the charts illustrates, it's an eight-hour day with children and then there's time outside of that for programming - for PD, for staff meetings.

As anyone knows who works with children, as much as it comes from our heart and we're passionate about it, which is why we do it, it is exhausting, and can be mentally fatiguing, so when people have choices in a field, when workplaces are able to offer benefits - and I don't necessarily mean monetary - in the sector, just to have some time freed up during the day to meet together as a team, consistently, across all of regulated care, would be really helpful time. Not to use weekend time for professional development, unless it is a personal choice, but right now most of us don't even have that as a choice to make on our own. It's when it happens, even if it's evenings and weekends. That might be something that we can partner with the department, to have more conversations on how we can make that happen - a little sooner than it will take to see more ECEs trained in the field.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I would like to just take a minute to acknowledge the quality of our workforce. Having been out in the field and meeting with our early childhood educators and our directors, I am blown away by the quality of our workforce. Our regulation, I will point out - we require that two-thirds of our workforce in every child care centre across the province be trained, and that has been recognized. OECD recognizes that a certain portion of your staff has to be trained and we supersede that. We exceed the OECD minimum for quality around trained staff. I think that that's something that we need to be very proud of.

As we look to recruitment and retention, as we've seen where others have maybe gone with lowering the training, the number of years that you need for training or lowering the requirements for ratio, we know we don't want to go there, because we know workforce is the key to quality for our kids. So, partnering with our child care sector, and partnering within the pre-Primary system, is really key to help us around recruitment and retention.

Interestingly, the conundrum of having pre-Primary in place is also seen in jurisdictions as a recruitment tool. What I mean by that is it goes back to what you said, Lisa, that unfortunately, there's a perception that it's babysitting. We all know that that's not true, but the public perceives - mothers know, we know differently - but young kids, coming out of Grade 12, may not see this as a viable option. We implemented a minimum floor - \$15, \$17, and \$19 wage floor. We think that's going to help. We think that will bring people back in.

People also need to see that they have a career ladder. That's what I mean by a recruitment tool. If people can see that they can make a career out of early childhood education then they'll be drawn in to that sector. I think that we can all say the same thing about our own careers, about where we've started and where we've gone. That was certainly a decision for me in making my career decisions and when I went to university - where is this going to take me and what are my options? We are creating more options than ever before for early childhood educators. They work in early intervention. They work in regulated child care. They work at the Nova Scotia Community College. They teach in private career colleges. Now, they'll work in pre-Primary. They work for government. The majority of our branch is early childhood educators, so we absolutely want to support a quality workforce.

I can tell you some of the things that we've been doing in the short term and then I can tell you where we're heading in the long term. In the short term, one of the things that we're doing is we're partnering with our colleagues at CNS and hopefully we'll soon have some creative pieces to take out to our partners for feedback. We want to start to dispel those myths about what early childhood education is, and we want to put out an aggressive marketing campaign not just in Nova Scotia, but across the country, to lure people in to the profession of early childhood education. There are 2,700 people who are trained and registered in Nova Scotia and continuing along with their PD requirements to maintain their classification, but there's only 1,700 working in regulated child care. We know that

there are people who have chosen, even after they have received their diploma, not to work in early childhood education. We want to draw those people back in.

We're also partnering with Nova Scotia Works Employment Services Centres. They're hosting career fairs and job fairs for us. We are already seeing dividends from the little efforts that we're making in this regard, and we're just going to continue to ramp them up.

I can tell you that we have heard from NSCC that both campuses are maxed out in enrolment in the coming year. That's really exciting for us. Now we're talking to our colleagues at LAE about increasing seats and how we can create more seats across the province. We have never been faced with a time in Nova Scotia where seats have been maxed out across the province in training institutions, so that's really exciting.

When we start to talk about the longer term, this goes back to issues in recruiting since the 1990s. We need to start to think about long-term supports as well, so we're also developing a workforce strategy to ensure the long-term support and viability of the sector. We will be hosting employer focus groups through that process and determining what it is that we need for long-term viability and support for the sector.

Going back to what you said, Lisa, around training initiatives, we recently brought some of our industry in to review our training standards. Pam was there. Again, it's about equality for us and ensuring that people are getting the right training. We got excellent feedback from our partners that we're now able to integrate into our training standards to ensure that folks come out. It's not just about the number of people graduating. As we hear from our partners, it's about the quality of the workforce that are graduating. We want to ensure that we get to that. We can get to that through better training standards, so we're working on that.

We have hived off \$1 million for bursary programs to create more diversity within our workforce. We have a partnership with the Université Sainte-Anne to increase the number of francophone ECEs across the province. We're partnering with Communities, Culture and Heritage to reach out to other under-represented communities to bring them into ECE training, and we'll cover their tuition costs to do that.

We have a Continuing Education Fund, whereby folks who are already working in the field can apply for and receive their ECE diploma, and we'll cover the substitute costs when they go on their training.

We're working to try to build the quality of the workforce. Our longer term workforce strategy will look at those standards, processes, and structures. What kinds of structural supports do we need to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of a quality workforce?

We're really excited. I love the ideas that I'm hearing today and will absolutely pursue those.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think Ms. Huntington would like to interject as well.

MS. HUNTINGTON: Just one quick thing to add, I think both the deputy and Vicki, in their remarks, spoke to the fact that when there are more opportunities, there is more interest in a field.

I need to tell you the story of a master's trained early childhood educator who was born and raised in Nova Scotia and left Nova Scotia many years ago to move to Australia, where she was practising early childhood education. She heard through her network here in Nova Scotia - like I said she's living and working in Australia - about the pre-Primary program. She applied for a position, interviewed for a lead ECE position in the pre-Primary program, and moved herself back to Nova Scotia to work. The school that she was working in is very rural and very remote. She was absolutely thrilled to be able to come home to work, to work in a rural environment, and to work in a high-quality pre-Primary program. That's something that she never thought that she would be able to do. That's just one example of an ECE from the other side of the world who saw the opportunities in pre-Primary and wanted to come home.

With the marketing campaign that Vicki spoke about, we will be looking for all of those early childhood educators within the country who have a connection to Nova Scotia - or may not have a connection to Nova Scotia - to come back here. There are opportunities in a variety of fields that we all spoke about - whether it's child care, pre-Primary, or developmental intervention. The time for early childhood education in Nova Scotia is now. There are tremendous opportunities and we are working around the clock to ensure that we have a sustainable, supported work force, so that any opportunity for an ECE that comes up, they'll be able to get a job from one end of the province to the other and have a successful career in early childhood education.

MR. DUNN: What are the current requirements for someone who is interested in being a childhood educator?

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: We have various levels of classification that we provide. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is the regulating body for early childhood education, and we provide the classification. We have three key classification areas - we actually have more than that, but three key for early childhood educators. Level 1 is considered some training and experience, so a few courses; Level 2, is your early childhood education diploma which is your two-year diploma from college. You can get it at NSCC at various campuses across the province and we also have three private career colleges that offer it; and then there's also a degree program at the Mount that is offered, and anybody with a university degree is considered a Level 3 in child and youth studies in our province right now.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: You just brought up a really interesting idea about inclusion and I worked for the immigrants for many years, especially the new immigrants as they came, and I was trying to find ways for the Syrian refugees, or any of the new immigrants I worked with, for the mothers to work. I've always said to them to do the working in lunch hour, but daycare would be ideal for them because they each have five to six kids, and they love kids and they truly would be your ideal. Also, they just don't think of working, right? You know, I tried so hard to make them, but once your kids are in school, you can work.

So, do we have something to do with ISANS, maybe a program to help them integrate? To me, to get them out of the house to integrate with society is such an important thing for them, and they will be ideal candidates for you. So, I wonder if you have something like that.

MS. MONTREUIL: I think the key to a strong Early Years system is to have a diverse work force, so having people with different experiences, different routes through their own schooling, different life experiences, who have the skills, the attitudes and the willingness to go through rigorous training to be an ECE in the Province of Nova Scotia, would be welcome, because they build a richer tapestry in our programs across our communities and for our kids.

So, I will hand it off to our folks, but I think that we need to recognize that ECE is a rigorous standard that calls on a whole range of skills in order to make sure that our programs help our kids to start their formal schooling in as strong a position as we can help them arrive at.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: Yes, to the deputy's point, when we talk about true inclusion it's about embedding it within our Early Years system and children want to see themselves reflected in the work force, and that's why it's a big priority for us.

You know, you talk about newcomers and opportunities for them. I heard a story from one of our directors, she actually has - she also leads the Family Home Daycare Agency in a part of our province - she utilized some of our inclusion grant funding to translate her policies into four different languages because she has newcomer families who are now family home daycare providers for the very reasons that you say. They love children, they have the experience, and so they're starting family home daycare programs in their homes. But they often struggle with English as a second language with a lot of our regulations and policies, so she's getting those translated into four different languages - and that's what we mean when we talk about embedding inclusion and making people feel welcome in the workplace.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much.

Folks, we have about 20 minutes remaining, so we're going to try to squeeze in one more round of questioning, and I would encourage members to shorten up their preambles so that we can invite our guests to have more time for answers. That's not directed at anyone in particular.

Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: Thank you for engaging this committee on this important area of education. For myself and my family, it's a little too late to take part in this, with a daughter in university and a son in Grade 11. But I know how important it is, from engaging with constituents in the Sackville area. We're fortunate in Sackville-Cobequid, I know. We do have two sites, I believe. (Interruption) We won't get into that.

I know some of the criticism, and we hear this in other areas of service delivery, is of course recruitment and retention. We know there has been, and we have criticized it, rapid rollout of this, and the consequences for retention and the ability to recruit if there has been no change in the ability to educate more ECEs in time for this rollout. I think I have kind of heard the answer around incentives to get people into that stream of education.

Is there any anticipation of increasing the capacity of educating ECEs in the province? If not, why not? If there is, when will we see that? I know there are different levels, especially if it's a two-year program. Two years is quite a time for some of the non-profits and some of the private licensed facilities to recruit employees. I was wondering if you have a bit of comment on that.

MS. ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: That's a conversation that we need to have with our colleagues at Labour and Advanced Education who oversee the colleges and universities. I'm pleased to say we have been having ongoing conversations with them as well as with our training institution - it's across the province - about their capacity.

The other thing that we're doing is, we're exploring what a work-and-learn model might look like. So, we're looking to other jurisdictions right now to determine if there are ways that we can get people in the door and signed up for training that will allow them to work and learn at the same time, more of an apprenticeship style of model, for lack of a better analogy.

One of the other key things that we're doing is, we're implementing recognition of prior learning. Actually, we're partnering with our Nova Scotia Child Care Association to launch a pilot in the coming year around that. What that will do is, it will recognize the experience and the competencies that people bring to the field.

It's going back to the recognition of experience. Is it just a credential that we're looking at? Some of these folks have been working in the field for 20 years and clearly

display the competencies that are required to be an early childhood educator. What recognition of prior learning will do is work with people who are already working in the field.

We will work with a consultant, who will then work with subject matter experts in the field, who are working to determine what those key competencies are. Then you can actually develop exams, tests, interviews, to determine whether people have those competencies. Then you can issue a classification based on whether or not they have those competencies.

The other thing that it does is it helps to identify specific gaps in training. Rather than sending somebody back for a two-year diploma, maybe they only need a couple of courses. Then it's a lot easier for them to become trained. It's a quicker route, and it recognizes the years of experience and the competencies that they already bring to the position. So, we're really excited about that initiative, and we think that we're going to help to get to some of those things.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Johns.

MR. JOHNS: I realize time is running short. I would like to make a comment, which is that since I have been elected, it seems like there's a couple of key issues that consume much of the time of the PC caucus and that we talk about quite a bit. One of them has been the rollout of early education. I go on record saying that although we didn't support the motions and the bill that came forward, I think all of us support the concept of early childhood education and pre-Primary. I think there were a whole lot of other issues that were in play there as well.

[11:45 a.m.]

I'm curious to know whether or not there might be an opportunity for the ladies from the department to actually come to one our caucus meetings and answer some questions and just meet with our members. I know that they would really, really appreciate an hour - let's be real - they would really appreciate two hours of your time on a Wednesday if that's a possibility.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Deputy Montreuil.

MS. MONTREUIL: Thank you very much for the invitation. One of the things as I've onboarded to the Nova Scotian way is that our gift is our people and our relationships. I would be pleased to receive such an invitation.

MR. JOHNS: Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Horne.

MR. HORNE: Yes, thank you very much. It has been a wonderful conversation, although I haven't participated in it much - a lot of learning here, and I can see where you also are learning how the new system is working. It seems to be very positive, in pretty well all directions. Questions were asked about its possibilities and how we're learning out of this that our problems need to be rewarded, I guess, with a solution. I think you're doing that too.

I think it was mentioned earlier that one in four children start Primary with some vulnerabilities that need to be recognized. I'm thinking that it's going to solve problems, but maybe it won't solve all of them. Maybe you could just discuss that type of clarity that we may need to have just to show that it is successful, this new program.

MS. HUNTINGTON: Certainly. In Nova Scotia, our Early Years branch participates in the EDI, the Early Development Instrument. That's a population-level research tool that measures the developmental health of populations of children at school entry, children who are in Grade Primary. It's measured in five key domains: physical health and well-being, competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. As you have indicated, in Nova Scotia, 25 per cent of children will be vulnerable in at least one of those five domains that I just referenced when they arrive in Primary. It can be more. Children can be vulnerable in one or more domains depending on the area of the province in which they live. In some cases, we have children who are vulnerable in two and three of those domains when they enter Primary.

EDI is done in Nova Scotia schools every two to three years. We have just actually done an EDI data set in the last couple of months. That new information will be available in the fall from the Offord Centre. We partnered with McMaster University to do this test with us. What EDI tells us is that we need to do a better job supporting our children. As you indicated, the pre-Primary program will do that.

I said this when I appeared at Public Accounts Committee. I had a principal who I spoke with when we were rolling out pre-Primary. What she said to me really struck me. What she said to me was, if the pre-Primary program can help one child get a diagnosis or get some supports that he or she would not get before they enter school, that program is worth its weight in gold. Those were her words, and they have stayed with me throughout the implementation of the pre-Primary program for that reason. We know children are being served in the pre-Primary program through developmental intervention, through EIBI, and through hearing and speech.

I had a conversation with a pre-Primary lead at a regional centre for education a couple of months ago. I asked, are there any children in this program that are being serviced by developmental intervention, EIBI, or hearing and speech? She said yes. We didn't talk about which children they were - that was not what I was asking. What she did say was

that, in this particular community, that's not something that they speak about very often. That's a very private family matter.

She said what she and the early childhood educators in the classroom learned early on was that you don't see something in a child and then approach the mom right away. You have to be really careful about how you do that, and the timing of that is very important. She said that what she saw was that it took about until November or December for her to be able to have meaningful conversations with families about what they were experiencing with their children. By January, all of those families had agreed to seek supports for their children in hearing and speech and in developmental intervention. That was a really great story because she said from her perspective, she knows that community better. She knows how to have those conversations with those parents. Because there is no regulated child care centre in this particular community that I'm talking about they would not have had access to those supports if it wasn't for the pre-Primary program. While I'm talking to . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. I don't mean to cut you off, but we've got 10 minutes. If you can continue that conversation perhaps offline, I will invite Ms. Davies, Ms. Streeter, and then Deputy Montreuil to provide some brief closing remarks.

MS. DAVIES: I think one of the key pieces that I've heard here today is that there is an incredible amount of support for young children and families in this province. For me, the fact that we're talking about this and the fact that things are happening, is very positive. As long as we are working together and working in the best interests of children and families and the communities, then I think that we can be successful.

MS. STREETER: I gave a lot of information earlier and I wanted to highlight the section that does talk about the collaboration that has been happening over the last 18 months or so with the department. Being part of conversations and having opinions being sought is very encouraging as we move forward. All the new initiatives, while challenging to meet and keep up with, are very exciting as well. Thank you.

MS. MONTREUIL: I would like to thank Ms. Davies and Ms. Streeter for continuing to collaborate with the department. UNICEF has an expression or quote in their early childhood report that says, "The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children - their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born." It's clear that this program has that goal that UNICEF put so eloquently at its heart.

Our Early Years programs really are meant to strengthen all kids - not just our most vulnerable. All children and all families engaged in early learning benefit from it and are strengthened from it.

As part of my onboarding, I think the quote that I'm going to leave you with is, "A rising tide lifts all boats." That's truly characteristic of our Early Years program of which we're so proud. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: You're knowing your East Coast audience using remarks like that. Thank you, deputy, Ms. Streeter, Ms. Davies, Ms. Huntington, and Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

We do have one added last piece of correspondence. Is there any discussion on that piece of correspondence? Hearing none, thank you for being here today. I want to go on record to say that I wish my Bruins the best of luck tomorrow night. (Laughter)

This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:54 a.m.]