

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**HUMAN RESOURCES**

**Wednesday, November 27, 2019**

**Committee Room**

**Pre-Primary Program**

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## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Brendan Maguire (Chair)  
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Bill Horne  
Hugh MacKay  
Rafah DiCostanzo  
Brad Johns  
Larry Harrison  
Tammy Martin  
Claudia Chender

[Tim Halman replaced Larry Harrison]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

## **WITNESSES**

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Cathy Montreuil, Deputy Minister  
Janet Lynn Huntington, Executive Director, Early Childhood Development  
Denise Stone, Executive Director, Child Care and Licensing



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2019**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**

Brendan Maguire

**VICE-CHAIR**

Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

**THE CHAIR:** Order. The Standing Committee on Human Resources will come to order. My name is Brendan Maguire, I'm the Chair. Today we'll hear from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding pre-Primary. Let's just go around the table and do introductions.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

**THE CHAIR:** Just a heads up, there are no appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions today to approve. A little reminder that all phones should be on vibrate. Coffee and washrooms are to my left outside. In case of emergency, please exit the Granville Street entrance and proceed to Grand Parade Square. I ask that the witnesses introduce themselves.

[The committee witnesses introduced themselves.]

**THE CHAIR:** With that, we will give the witnesses some time to go through their speech. Ms. Montreuil.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you again this morning about Nova Scotia's pre-Primary program. Joining me this morning, and we have been through our introductions, are Janet Lynn, executive director for the early years development and pre-Primary branch; and Denise Stone, executive director for the early learning and child care branch. They're both very knowledgeable about the early years system in Nova Scotia and have supported the development and transition to a comprehensive early years system for our province. That's something I'll speak more about shortly.

Before I continue, I would like to give you more detail about how, within the department, we have restructured ourselves to better support the continued growth and development of early childhood education programs and services for children and families.

Effective next week, on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, our Early Years Branch will be officially restructured to create two separate but closely linked branches. Janet Lynn will lead the early childhood development and pre-Primary branch. This branch will be responsible for the continued delivery of Nova Scotia's pre-Primary program, early childhood development, research and evaluation, workforce development, and inclusion. Denise will lead the early learning and child care branch. This branch will continue to focus on roles and responsibilities related to regulated child care, including licensing and enforcement, child care subsidy, grants and funding, continuous quality improvement, and professional learning and development for early childhood educators. These two branches will formalize already-existing structures that will continue to support children and families.

We're on the eve of a new normal in how we support children and families and their early learning and child care needs across the province. This new normal is the development and transition to a comprehensive early years system that now includes pre-Primary programs.

The benefits of early learning really cannot be overestimated. Whether it is pre-Primary or regulated child care, when children are engaged in quality interaction with highly trained professional early childhood educators, they tend to transition more easily into Primary, do better in school, experience more positive lifelong health and social outcomes, are more likely to develop a love of learning, and stay in school longer.

We do recognize that access and opportunities can be out of reach for some families because of cost or access to a program close to home. In 2016, for example, only one in four preschool-aged children were able to access child care. Knowing what we know about the powerful and life-changing benefits of early learning, that statistic was not acceptable.

We wanted all Nova Scotian children - regardless of where they live, what their background may be, or what their family's socio-economic status is - to have the same access and opportunity to take part in early learning. Pre-Primary is an inclusive program, meaning all four-year-olds are eligible, accepted, welcomed, and accommodated into the program.

This philosophy and approach have made a big difference for many families, some of whom have told us: “We appreciate the opportunity to have this space at no cost. We are low income and while his previous daycare was subsidized, it was still sometimes a struggle to cover the expenses to have him there. Being in a social setting has been crucial for his therapies and having the financial burden lifted from that this past year.” and “The Pre-primary Program has increased my daughter’s confidence, social skills and cognitive abilities. It has been a wonderful experience for both us and our family.”

We opened the third phase of the program in September, in 205 school communities. To date, this has supported more than 4,500 children. We have created more than 600 early childhood educator jobs across the province. In September 2020, all families will have access to quality, free, universal programming for their four-year-olds. Government made a \$50 million investment for children and families the year before they start school, and we removed barriers to accessing the program.

In August, government announced that over two years, all pre-Primary children who are eligible for busing will have the option to be transported to the program. We started in September with programs in rural areas and where there was capacity on existing bus routes. This transportation option will be expanded province-wide for September 2020.

At the same August announcement, we also created the Nova Scotia Before and After Program, a physical activity-based program that gives families of pre-Primary children an option for before and after program support. That program will continue to grow in communities across the province as providers and school communities come together to meet the needs of families in their areas.

When we speak about a comprehensive system, pre-Primary is only one part. We have a strong and trusted regulated child care sector in our province that supports thousands of children from infancy to age 12, along with their families, each year. As we build up pre-Primary, we are working with the private and not-for-profit daycare sector to grow their opportunities and expand their businesses.

We have doubled our investment to the sector to \$78 million to support subsidies for families, allow operators to increase wages for early childhood educators, renovate and expand child care centres so they can bring in more children, provide training and development for staff, and open new child care centres in areas of our province where the need for child care is greatest.

The demand for early learning opportunities and child care is growing. We’ve heard from families that they wish pre-Primary would have come to their communities sooner. In fact, in some of our communities, the biggest challenge in rolling out the program is rolling it out fast enough. Space, as we know, in urban areas is at a premium, but we are not discouraged. We have a seat for every four-year-old who wants to attend pre-Primary.

The demand for qualified early childhood educators is also growing. A strong, qualified, sustainable workforce is essential to providing quality early learning programs. Twenty-six million of our \$78 million annual investment goes directly to support child care business owners to allow them to increase wages to better attract and retain early childhood educators. We have helped to increase wages from an average of \$12 per hour to \$18 per hour.

More money and more opportunities mean more demand for early childhood educators. We've created more than 600 new early childhood education jobs across the province in pre-Primary alone, and there are more opportunities in the Nova Scotia Before and After Program along with an increase in demand within the existing regulated child care sector. As we implement the final year of pre-Primary and continue to support recruitment in the child care sector, there will be an additional 250 jobs created.

The demand from Nova Scotians who want to become early childhood educators to fill these positions has, for the first time, exceeded the ability for training institutions in our province to keep up, but we have taken steps to address this demand. In July 2018, working with our partners at the Department of Labour and Advanced Education and the Nova Scotia Community College, we added 135 new early childhood education training seats. In October 2019, we again worked with these same partners to add an additional 60 new seats to the Early Childhood Education diploma program at NSCC's Akerley campus in Dartmouth. That's a total of nearly 340 seats this year alone, including online and virtual seats for ECE students.

We created a temporary tuition support program for Nova Scotians who chose to study early childhood education at one of three approved private career colleges in the province. A cultural bursary also helped to attract diverse Nova Scotians to become early childhood educators from the Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, or immigrant communities. We also supported tuition reductions for students studying early childhood education in a French-language early childhood program at Université Sainte-Anne.

The last time I was before this committee, I mentioned that we were going to introduce a program for recognition of prior learning. That means giving professional recognition to ECEs who learned from their experience and time invested in the field to qualify for an upgraded classification. That process has been completed, and I'm pleased to say the pilot saw 41 individuals successfully obtain classifications that will see their classification and wage increase.

The recognition of prior learning pilot was a partnership between EECD, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education, and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Nova Scotia.

Through an exam and interview assessment, eligible applicants had the opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved the competencies required to increase their classification. We believe this pilot is the first of its kind in Canada for early childhood

educators. We're very proud of this innovation and the work of all parties involved, including our hard-working ECE candidates, to help the pilot program be a success.

Julianne Harnish is one such candidate. Julianne began working in the field without training and believed training was almost impossible to achieve. She enrolled in a diploma program part time while working full time, but found it very difficult. Through the recognition of prior learning pilot process, her learning and expertise has been recognized and, in her words, she told us it has made a huge, positive effect on her practice and her life outside of work.

We've also seen former early childhood educators return to the workforce. One parent of a pre-Primary child who left early childhood education to stay at home with her children recently returned to the workforce. The parent said that her experience of having her child in the program was so positive that she decided to come back and work in pre-Primary as a substitute. Now she wants to rejoin the profession full time.

Every dollar we spend in pre-Primary or regulated child care to support learning, development, and the workforce is done with children in mind. We know that for every dollar spent on quality, universal early childhood education, the return on investment, on the economy, is between \$3 and \$7. That is a sound investment in societal and economic prosperity in our province.

What I have shared with you today is just a sample of the work we've been doing to build a comprehensive early years system for children and families. Many of you around this table have heard much of this information before. You may have friends and family who have benefited from these early learning opportunities. It is my department's goal to ensure that families across the province and those working on the front lines of this sector understand the supports, services, and options available to them when it comes to early learning in Nova Scotia.

To tell our families and partners more about what we're doing, how, and why we're doing it, we've produced a short video that has launched online today. As I wrap my comments this morning, we're pleased to play that video for you.

[Audiovisual presentation]

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Let's get on with the meat and potatoes section. We'll start with Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you for your presentation. I'm really interested to hear about the reorganization of the department and look forward to seeing how that rolls out, but it also kind of flags one of the big questions that we've had throughout. It was addressed a little bit in that, but it's really about labour issues.

We have advocated for a long time for sort of a comprehensive public system. We have not-for-profit and for-profit early child care, as we know, in the province, regulated by the province and by your department, but we know that there have been huge issues with workforce since the introduction of pre-Primary. That's something I know that the department has been grappling with.

I was pleased to hear about the recognition of prior learning. I think that's a great step to allow more people access, but there are a few issues. One that we hear about a lot is wages, so private and regulated not-for-profit centres simply can't afford to be competitive in terms of wages and benefits with the province in the pre-Primary programs.

As a result, notwithstanding the increased investment in grants and infrastructure, many centres have either closed or have significantly curtailed their enrolment because they simply don't have the staff to accommodate the children who are on a wait-list for their program, some of those who are four-year-olds who don't have access to before and after school and need to still remain in a different child care environment.

Can any or all of you speak to what the department is doing? I know that there are seats being added, but in the immediate term, what is the department doing to address those labour issues.

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I think what we've done in the past, and if you guys are okay with it, we'll probably just tag-team our answers because we're all connected here.

It's a great question. In terms of workforce development, we have really taken the approach at the department of this is our time. It's the best time to be an early childhood educator in Nova Scotia. Denise and I both sit on a national table where we meet with colleagues from across the country who are delivering early childhood education programs in their jurisdictions. Their biggest concern and problem, nationally, is they can't attract people to the field of early childhood education.

What pre-Primary has done in Nova Scotia is ignite the passion for ECE once again. So we're in a different sort of game than our counterparts across the country, which is really, really good. We know there's an interest in early childhood education because of pre-Primary, predominantly women - it's a predominantly female gender occupation - see, for the first time, opportunities that they never saw before. That's really important. You just don't go get your ECE credential and then all of a sudden you only have one occupation or one opportunity. There are more opportunities than ever before.

What we've discovered, which is really interesting, and I don't think we could have prepared for this, which is great, early childhood educators are now recognized in pre-Primary and they're recognized in regulated child care, but there are all kinds of other sectors that are interested in hiring ECEs. Because ECE plays such a valuable role in child development and supporting children and families, you'll see the Nova Scotia Health



Authority looking for early childhood educators. You'll see family resource centres across the province looking for early childhood educators. Early intervention is looking for more early childhood educators, recreation-based programs like YMCA and those types of initiatives, in non-ECE-related roles.

We have an interest, which is why we just added 60 seats at the Akerley campus for early childhood education in Nova Scotia, which is a unique problem. It's a unique scenario that we have across the country, but aside from opening new seats at the NSCC - it was 135 last year and 60 just recently - we've taken some steps to ensure that those individuals in community can get that program, because sometimes, for example, they can't always get to Yarmouth. I'll use the Burrigde campus, for example. We've opened collaborative seats in Digby and Shelburne, so while they're technically graduates of the Burrigde campus, they are taking their ECE diploma in community, which has been really helpful for them from an accessibility perspective.

The deputy mentioned the Tuition Support Program for private career colleges. This has allowed 110 ECE students to receive additional funding to help reduce the cost of attending a private career college to get ECE training.

The Recognition of Prior Learning initiative, RPL, is another thing. We had 150 applicants interested in that program and we had 41 be successful. That's a really good success rate. Interestingly enough about the RPL project is that we've evaluated that project so we're looking at how we can make it permanently part of what we do as part of the workforce development initiatives. We know many ECEs have worked in child care for years. They have the competencies, they have the skills - just for whatever reason they can't get the credentials, so it's incumbent upon us to look at what we can do to support that if they can't, for example, go back to school.

The francophone bursary at the Université Sainte-Anne, the workplace learning pilot that we worked with the MK board where we supported 16 First Nation ECEs to get their training, and we have a Mi'kmaq bursary at Wagamatcook - a bursary program specifically designed for Mi'kmaq students.

The other thing is the continuing education fund. I don't want to spend a lot of time on that because it has been around for a long time, but it's a fund that's available for early childhood educators at any time to access funds to go back to take Level 1 training, Level 2 training, Level 3 training. It's really a great opportunity for ECEs to advance their careers. I think that's probably all I have to talk about in terms of the workforce piece.

DENISE STONE: I will speak to closures with regard to your comment around closures. Since the inception of pre-Primary in September 2017, we've had 36 closures. Of those closures, 20 of them have identified as not being the reason that they closed - 20 of the 36 did not close because of pre-Primary.

When a centre is indicating to us that they're going to close or they're thinking about closing their operation, we do something typical to an exit interview to kind of find out why they're closing. If it's financial pressure, we try to work with them to maintain the centre.

The majority of the ones that did close, of the 36, they were part-time programs, and we would have anticipated that the four-year-olds would move on to pre-Primary. That was indeed the case - the majority of the children that were going to those preschool programs.

In the same vein, a lot of the staff that were working in those part-day programs are now employed in pre-Primary. Often it was a single person who was running a preschool program for quite some time. They made a decision to close because the four-year-olds were going to pre-Primary. Then they followed the children that they were caring for, as an ECE, into the pre-Primary program in the school system.

With regard to funding of wages, the deputy mentioned a few moments ago in her introduction that we are looking at ways to enhance wages for early childhood educators. In 2018, just a little over a year ago, we did introduce a Quality Investment Grant, which helps operators meet and/or exceed the wage floor that was instituted in 2016. We're still learning a lot from that wage enhancement. We're learning a lot from the operators around how that is or is not working for them.

There is a mechanism in the terms and conditions of that funding that if they are needing support in addition to the funding that they're already receiving through the QI Grant, we will look at that with them. We will work to help them mitigate any issues that they're having. Our finance department works closely with centres to do that. In the terms and conditions there are some mechanisms that allow them to adjust those fees to better enable them to support the staff in terms of wages.

We did say, when the wage floor was introduced in 2016, that that wasn't the end of that, that we were going to continue to look at the wage floor. As I said, we are continuing to learn about the impact of the grant that we currently have in place, and we'll be working closely with the sector in the coming months and years to keep on top of that wage floor to make sure that we're keeping up with the demand.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think with all of this work that's going on, we are coming to the end of a transition phase. Transitions are difficult for everybody, and we have put an awful lot of supports in place. Additional to all of the work that Denise described, we have struck a recent committee with individual operators and ECEs from the private operator sector to look at what business practices are posing the challenges. We have committed to bringing in some business expertise. Some of these operators have said they're ECE people, not business people, and they need some help. We said, that's fair enough, and we'll bring in some help for you. That committee just got under way. They had their first meeting on Friday to identify what the pressures are.

As we come to the end of this transition and bridge into our new normal, some of this will settle out. For instance, Cape Breton is fully implemented on pre-Primary now. Their last 20 hires happened last Spring, and only four of those 20 hires came from the sector. The rest of them were new. A mixed model is probably our best model in terms of new people and experienced people so that we can build capacity.

We know that for a whole bunch of reasons, the ECE sector in Nova Scotia now has more choice. It has more choice in terms of conditions. It has more choice in terms of hours. It has more choice in terms of age groups that people want to focus on. As we now have some of our areas fully implemented, we're starting to see stabilization in some of those employment pressures that have been experienced during the transition.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate all of that. I definitely hear what you're saying in terms of coming to the end of a transition. I would love some more information on that QI Grant. How much money has been granted? How easy is it to access? What percentage of centres are accessing it? Is there any more information whether there are any plans to expand or even to look at one of the things that I know a lot of the not-for-profit folks have been asking for, which is the extension of some type of benefit? We know that is one of the big discrepancies between being employed by the public system or the regulated system.

DENISE STONE: The Quality Investment Grant, as I said, is just a little over one year old. Of the 354 regulated child care centres that we have, about 329 have asked us to participate in that. We do have licensed child care facilities that opt out of government funding for various reasons. Of those centres that are involved in the QIG, it's actually a formula that has been developed that takes the number of trained staff required for ratio, calculates around number of operating days per year, and looks at the training levels of staff. When we're doing the calculation, we err on the side of a higher level of qualification. For example, if there is a gap with the number of trained staff that they have, we would fund to the highest qualification within the centre to give the centre the best advantage.

[10:30 a.m.]

You had another question about statistics around that grant. The number of centres?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The amount that has been granted.

DENISE STONE: Oh, the amount of a little bit over \$26 million is going towards that. The other piece is program enhancement that we've done in the past, and that's for non-profit centres to enable them to do some infrastructure upgrades.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: Ms. Stone, Ms. Montreuil, Ms. Huntington - I want to thank you and the staff for your ongoing support for students in Nova Scotia.

I think we'd all admit that there have been some hiccups along the way. Some bumps in the road. Ms. Montreuil, you've indicated this has been a transition phase. Those hiccups, I think, are on the public record in terms of capacity issues as pre-Primary was implemented, specifically, displacing some programs in our schools.

Obviously, we know that there has been a heavy impact on regulated child care. We know that early on there were issues related to insurance with the playgrounds. We know there were issues with a before and after school program and we know that there were issues with busing in the early transition phase, back in 2017-18.

You outlined in your preamble a restructuring of early childhood development within the department. My question is: How will that restructuring create a smoother transition phase as we move into the final phases of transition heading into December 2020?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Transition is normal. It's a normal part of implementation. This is my 37<sup>th</sup> September in education, and over the course of that career, there were many improvements and ways forward and all of them came with transition periods. That's kind of just part of the transition.

As we are moving to September when every four-year-old child in this province has a space in pre-Primary, we will move from transition to stabilization and continuous improvement. The reorganization is allowing us to now move on building. So, you move from implementation, which has transition, to stabilization and continuous improvement because with our partnerships with post-secondary, with our ECE practitioners, with our other regulatory partners - we're going to continually learn.

If we look at how Nova Scotia has done to date through metrics and comparisons from the McCain Institute, we're at the top of the pack across Canada and very proud to be there. However, we need to be relentless on how we improve, how we grow, how we help our early years people to continue to use the best research in early childhood development to structure their regulated child care experiences for children and families.

Again, our pre-Primary programs are situated in school communities because our data's telling us that's where the kids do best and building community, which includes our youngest learners in those communities, benefits our kids in ECE. It benefits our families and benefits the kids who are not in our pre-Primary program in terms of leadership development, building of communities, volunteerism, supporting our youngest. The reorganization is to set us in a strong place to move into solidification and continuous improvement.

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I would just add that, as I mentioned earlier, Denise and I sit on a table with our provincial and territorial partners that deliver early learning and child care across the country. We participate in these meetings, this committee, twice a year and we've just returned from that meeting.

I remember when I went to my first meeting a few years ago, Nova Scotia wasn't a player at the table. We would go around and talk about some of the things that we were doing, and it was more challenged-based: these are the challenges that we're having here and here. Nova Scotia now sits at that table in a leadership role.

The fact that we have two distinct branches with distinct mandates is going to ensure that the regulated child care sector is sustainable, because families need that. They need a strong, sustainable child care sector in Nova Scotia. I'm a mom of two children that relies heavily on regulated child care. I need it to be successful. I want high-quality early childhood educators in that program.

We also know that there are some families that never had access to that experience that I have access to, because I live in Halifax. There are some communities that don't have access to regulated child care. That's where pre-Primary comes in. Again, we need a high-quality program. We need it to be delivered by strong, qualified early childhood educators. Our branches are set up distinctly to ensure that happens, that a strong, high-quality pre-Primary program continues to grow. Education is not static, as you know.

Just opening the doors for us for pre-Primary is not good enough. We have to look at next steps and how we're going to improve and then make it the best program in the country.

TIM HALMAN: I very much appreciate your comments regarding the best possible programming. At the end of the day for me fundamentally, that's what this debate has been all about, how do we achieve the best possible programming? As educators, that's something that's always on our minds, whether it's in the classroom, or designing a lesson or unit plan, am I delivering and maximizing the outcomes? I know absolutely that's where we're at.

However, given the history of the implementation and the bumps in the road or the hiccups, in your opinion, could we have done a better job in the initial phases of the implementation? Given what we know, the hiccups related to the negative impact on regulated child care, issues related to playground equipment, displacing some programs in our system as a result of the quick implementation of pre-Primary - these are a few examples - in your opinion, do you think we could have done a better job at the initial implementation?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I couldn't be prouder of the implementation of the pre-Primary program in Nova Scotia. The proof of the pudding is in the tasting. We have one of if not the highest uptake by our families in terms of enrolment. That's a sign of public confidence about confidence in our program, how we've built it, and how we've brought our kids in.

If you have a program that's plagued with problems, families won't trust it. Our families are showing up in excess of our projections and in excess of the uptake, at this

stage particularly, and even in full implementation in other provinces. I couldn't be prouder.

Having said that, I'm a professional and my job is continuous improvement. I will always look back for lessons learned for continuous implementation to make the next thing that this department takes on better than the last, or I wouldn't be doing my job.

THE CHAIR: Rafah DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I just can't tell you how impressed I am with the things that I hear from my constituents and how eager they are to get their kids to pre-Primary. I hear it every day. I have three Primary schools in my riding. Only one still doesn't have it so we're dying to get it. It's just something wonderful.

My question today is about inclusion and multiculturalism. I was also very excited a few years ago knowing that a lot of the newcomers - they have a lot of children. The mothers would be excited. Have we seen a great uptake from multiculturalism as ECEs? What programs are you offering them? The English part - are there any grants or help for them so that even while they're learning English, they can still be job shadowing or something like that to help them with the English as well?

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: There are a couple of parts to your question. I may have missed it, so I'll just start with supporting newcomers' families and children in pre-Primary. The pre-Primary program is really set up to ensure that all children and families feel welcome. It's by building a safe, welcoming, culturally responsive program which reflects the diversity of the children in the program. The program itself is guided by the Nova Scotia early learning curriculum framework, which is culturally responsive and supports children's language, identity, and culture.

I know in your particular area, there could be schools with a high immigrant population. When we know that there are families where English is a second language, for example, we look to community to find out what's needed. In some cases, families are very hesitant to send their child to pre-Primary because they can't ask questions because there's a language barrier. In many cases, we'll translate some of our documents into Arabic, if we can. We have done that a lot, and we know that's a great resource for families.

In many cases, as you can imagine, it's about relationship building. Families will go to an open house. Some families will choose to take their children so they can see the environment and play. What we have discovered with some newcomer families is that they don't take their children. They come themselves. They want to have a conversation with the early childhood educators. They want to have a conversation with the pre-Primary lead about what's happening and what their children are going to be doing all day.

I know a school in Halifax that has an Arabic-speaking early childhood educator. That particular ECE works very closely with families to come in and talk to them about

what their child is doing and how what they are doing in a play-based program will be directly linked to and support literacy development, numeracy development, and English-language development.

I think of a particular school in Halifax where last year in the pre-Primary program, there were over 10 languages spoken. When you walked into that particular pre-Primary classroom, what you didn't see is just hello. You saw hello and good morning written in 10 different languages. The children would come in and they would point to which one was their language. That was a teachable moment not just for the children who had English as a second language. It was a learning opportunity for everyone in the classroom.

I know that our early childhood educators are trained in how to make sure that their daily practice is culturally responsive and supports culture and identity. That's happening throughout pre-Primary classrooms around the province. I want you to feel comfortable that that's happening and confident that it's happening. Our curriculum framework is set up to ensure that our founding cultures in Nova Scotia are supported but also the newcomer and immigrant population is supported.

When it comes to workforce development with respect to early childhood educators, we know that they are participating in the private career colleges. Some of them have accessed a cultural bursary to reduce their tuition costs. When we look at the international stream and the immigration stream where we're hiring ECEs, they're coming. There's a great interest from early childhood educators from around the world in coming to Nova Scotia. I believe the first letter of intent was in 2018, and I think we had close to 200 people nominated to come to work as an ECE in Nova Scotia. I believe in 2019, I think they just did their last call, their letter of intent, and I think we have over 100 at this point being nominated. They're coming. There's interest.

In the new branch, my mandate is now responsible for the classification of early childhood educators. I actually had a conversation with our manager of workforce development this week. She said the interest from early childhood educators to come and work in child care in Nova Scotia is growing. She sees the numbers of people coming and requesting a classification. That means they would come and share their credentials and their experience and their education. We would give them a level, if you will, so that they could work in a regulated child care environment. She's seeing an increase from immigrants wanting to come to Nova Scotia to do ECE.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I'm really excited about the information you're giving me. The excitement is also about how important it is for newcomers to be able to see other newcomers in the classroom. Park West School has 100 languages, and people are moving to my riding to put their kids there because they feel that they're included. They're learning so much, I don't know how they do it, truly, because they're so overcrowded, but they produce one of the highest academic levels out of that school with that many ESL students. Something is going on really well there. I'm just hoping that we will have that same effect with pre-Primary for them in the riding and how we can maybe include some different

ideas for the pre-Primary and the newcomers and how we can include them as ECEs and as kids. I think you guys are on top of it and doing an amazing job, so thank you.

[10:45 a.m.]

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I was just going to say that family engagement in the pre-Primary program is really important. When families are coming and talking to early childhood educators, those things are happening organically. There's no script. There's no "you must do this". Early childhood educators are really strong at supporting children and their families in what's needed.

We know of things happening across the province where families are coming in and they're struggling with this. They're struggling with the language barrier. They're struggling with the cultural thing. ECEs are working with them directly to do that, so if there are ideas and options and opportunities to further encourage literacy development, numeracy development, and that kind of thing, that's happening.

The other player that's at the table with us, and they have been for a long time, is ISANS. We're working with our pre-Primary early childhood educators and with our Regional Centres for Education to identify if there are other options to support newcomer families when they come in, not just the child in the pre-Primary classroom.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Martin.

TAMMY MARTIN: I want to talk a bit about the pilot Before and After Program. Through a freedom of information request, we found that some of the regulatory requirements for existing pre-Primary have been removed, like building and space requirements, the requirement for a parent committee, and staffing requirements.

I guess I'd like to ask the department: Why was it advisable to remove these requirements for the Before and After Program and if you could describe what happens with the removal or how this will affect the Before and After Program?

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I'm not specifically sure what you're referring to, but let me just talk to you a little bit about the Before and After Program, the intent of it, the governance of it, and maybe that will help address some of your questions. If not, we can go back.

Really, the intent of the NSBAP program was to remove barriers for accessing pre-Primary for young children. Families were very clear with us that they needed some extended day options, so before and after school care is a made-in-Nova-Scotia approach to removing barriers for families to attend the pre-Primary program.

It's a direct partnership with the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage, so we work really closely with CCH, and the program that was developed for NSBAP is



based on physical literacy and outdoor play. It's guided by programs and program guidelines and standards that are focused on outdoor play and physical literacy.

What we did was worked with CCH and we developed a program that would allow licensed child care providers to deliver BAP, municipal partners - so municipal recreation programs that are existing - and thirdly, recognize community providers. That would be organizations like the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club.

We have developed a standards document which all the providers of NSBAP must follow - again, grounded in best practice and research in outdoor play and physical literacy. That meets a mandate goal of the Department of CCH on their Let's Get Moving Nova Scotia initiative, so that was really important that they brought that perspective to our table.

In terms of reducing the regulatory requirements for the Before and After Program, we have said to licensed child care providers, if you're interested in becoming a BAP provider, you can continue to be licensed as you were. Many of them are interested in that because there are funding implications if they decide to take the NSBAP approach.

We've offered them an option, so some have chosen to just follow the guidelines of the NSBAP program as opposed to meeting the requirements of licensed child care. Some are both. Really, we put it in the hands of the operator to decide what was in their best interest. The program is delivered in a school on-site, so it's a seamless day for children and families.

Families will drop their child off - the providers have different hours of operation depending on where they're located - in the morning. The program will be delivered outside as much as possible; if not, it will be delivered in the pre-Primary program classroom. Then the children in pre-Primary will go to the pre-Primary program for the day and do their regular routine. At the end of the day, families will pick them up, hopefully again outside.

In terms of requirements for regulations and that type of thing, it really is a program that's designed - it's a recreation/physical-based program. Licensed child care providers are welcome to be part of that, and in many cases they are.

DENISE STONE: I can speak to the regulatory pieces that you mentioned. If you're not familiar with the current Day Care Act and Regulations, with all due respect, it's a very antiquated document, it's quite old. Although sometimes when I look at it, I think I've been working as an early childhood educator at the same time the regulations came into play. The last time there were some significant changes to the document was in 1989.

Last year, we did quite an extensive regulatory consultation with the child care sector. There were over 350 folks from across the province working in regulated child care - operators, directors, ECEs - who contributed to that consultation, and some families as well. One of the three themes that came out of that consultation was around school age and

some of the regulatory burdens that were identified because of the document not keeping up to the flexibility or the needs of the current climate.

We did make a couple of minor changes. One of them was around pre-Primary in terms of redefining. There was no definition in the regulations around what a pre-Primary child was. There were certainly infants, toddlers, et cetera, so there was a change to the definition to include that. We also made a slight change in terms of a defined preschool aged child being included in an after school program. That was not included in the definition as well, so that was changed to modernize the regulatory requirements.

Whenever we make regulatory changes, even though we may be changing or delineating pieces of the regulations, it certainly is never at the detriment of the health and safety of children.

TAMMY MARTIN: Thank you for those answers. I know that my colleague addressed this specifically, but I would like to ask, being a former union member, I spent some time at an information picket with ECEs not that long ago. The minister came and spoke with the ECEs about sitting down with them and talking about the difference in the wage gap and the lack of benefits.

I know Claudia talked about the funding and all of those things, but specifically the wage gap is huge. The lack of benefits is immense. I spoke to one ECE who is off and has brain cancer and is not getting any income because she has no benefits. I'm just curious, has that sit-down happened yet; if not, when are we going to see an improvement or see the minister sit down with these ECEs?

DENISE STONE: The minister had a meeting fairly quickly after that interaction with the folks who were at the House. He did meet with representatives of a large group of persons actually from Cape Breton, and he struck an early childhood education working group at that meeting. The person who is coming from Cape Breton is also the co-chair of the committee: Patricia Landry Martin. They had their first meeting on Friday of this past week.

I had the opportunity to come into the room and meet the participants. There are 10 people sitting on the committee from across the province and they're representing a variety of auspices. Some are from the commercial sector and some are from the private sector. We have representation from francophone, African Nova Scotian, and Mi'kmaq communities sitting as ECEs on that committee.

They came in the morning, cautiously optimistic. I understand by the end of the day they left feeling very optimistic in terms of the work that they've been asked to do over the next couple of weeks. It's going to be intense. They've got their next meetings planned for Monday and Tuesday of next week.

The minister actually came in and greeted them and talked to them about wages and benefits and the tasks that he would hope they would tackle.

What we want to get from the group, what they've been asked to do, is to give us a front-line picture. We don't often get to speak directly to early childhood educators. We hear mostly from owners and operators, and we're happy to do that, but hearing from front-line ECEs is really important. They're sharing with us not only their concerns around wages and benefits, but also working conditions.

Also, it's ensuring that the profile of the early childhood educator is raised in the province so that people understand the value of the work they do. As an early childhood educator, I'm very happy to be able to support them in achieving that goal as they go forward.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: That's a perfect segue to the profile of the early childhood educator. I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for early childhood educators. These very much are the formative years, establishing the foundation. I credit, to a large degree, the success that my four children are finding in school right now to Le Petit Voilier, the pre-Primary program through the CSAP.

Obviously, the role of the ECE is evolving and changing in our system. As educators, we know the training, the methodology, in pre-service is critical for setting those ECEs up for success with our students. Ms. Huntington, it was good to hear that they're receiving professional development and culturally relevant pedagogy. As Nova Scotia becomes a more and more multicultural province, that's critical, so that's very good to hear.

I'm curious about the programming in the ECE program, the professional development that they're receiving. A document that was very important to Nova Scotian parents was the inclusion report. To what extent is the inclusion report acting as a guide as we develop the methodologies that we'll pass on to our ECEs in NSCC?

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I just want to talk a little bit about the professional development for early childhood educators. I think the first time I came to this committee a few years ago, we didn't actually have an early learning curriculum framework. We were the only jurisdiction in Canada that didn't have one. I always like to tell the story that we saved the best for last.

I may have mentioned this, so I apologize if I did, but our early learning curriculum framework was actually identified and recognized in *The Washington Post* - I'm forgetting her name; she's a world-renowned researcher in early childhood education out of Boston. A side note: she's also Matt Damon's mother - the actor. True story. She actually wrote an op-ed in *The Washington Post* about the early learning curriculum framework document.

She came to Nova Scotia to do a conference, and when we showed her the document and walked her through it, she took it upon herself without us knowing that she was going to be writing this. What she did was she compared Nova Scotia's approach and how we look and support children and young families to what they do in the United States. She went back and forth: in Nova Scotia, they do this, and here's what they do better. It was really interesting. I would encourage you to look it up if you ever have the opportunity.

All of our professional development is grounded in that in the early learning curriculum framework, also in terms of inclusion and quality. We have, in two branches, three priorities for professional development for early childhood educators. This goes back to my original comment about education not being static, and it's not just good enough to open the doors of pre-Primary. We needed to continue to evolve and grow the quality of this program.

The research is really clear. Whether it's regulated child care or pre-Primary or another learning environment - no shocker here - you yield the best results when you have a quality program, so that's what we're focused on. The regulated child care sector has a specific program called Quality Matters that will ensure that the early learning curriculum framework guides their practice and enhances their quality continuous improvement.

We're working with Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac at Mount Saint Vincent University to develop a quality improvement program for pre-Primary to ensure, once again, that we're opening the doors, that we're delivering a high-quality program, and that we're continuing to evolve as a pre-Primary program.

[11:00 a.m.]

In terms specifically for inclusion, what we've done - and we've received support through inclusion funding - is implement the pyramid model for social and emotional learning - not only in regulated child care, but in pre-Primary. I'm going to get Denise to talk specifically about the model itself, which is based on coaching and mentoring to support the needs of all children in the classroom from a social and emotional perspective, but this is a well-documented evidence-based program that Nova Scotia is really pleased to be part of. We're working in child care on it and we're going to be starting to work in pre-Primary as well. Denise can speak to the details of the program itself.

DENISE STONE: The pyramid model is a research-based framework that uses really sound early childhood education practices to support social and emotional development in children. Earlier, I referenced my long career in early childhood education. Certainly when I started out, our training really focused on child development and that the interesting ways that children behave and show us their social emotional development was considered kind of part of what little people do.

There seems to have been a pendulum switch in a different direction. I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but - and this is not just in Nova Scotia, but nationally and

internationally - where children's behaviour has been viewed as being not typical or naughty or bad, so to speak. Children are coming with much more complex and interesting situations - challenges with home, families that are struggling in many different ways. The issues that children come to child care and pre-Primary with are very complex.

The pyramid model takes the practices that early childhood educators gain from their diploma or degree programs and matches it with the research. A lot of times, early childhood educators - especially when they're first coming out of their practice - can tell you the what, they can give you the theory behind early childhood education. Then as they develop along their practice, they start to be able to articulate why they're doing what they do - so matching the research with the practice.

If left unchecked, if left without professional learning opportunities and what we know now in terms of on-site coaching - and this is what research the pyramid model has done - it takes about 17 years between knowing the research that you get in your pre-service, to the practice that you do with children every day.

In order to close that gap and to have children's behaviour seen as just typical as part of social emotional development, which is what I was very familiar with, we've implemented the pyramid model so that there is now a match with that individual on what their professional learning goals need to be post service. There is on-site coaching, which is intense. They use an observation statistics-based observation method to show the early childhood educator - tell us what you know about your practice, show us what you're doing. We take the evidence and then we bridge that gap to help you be a better practitioner and to support the social emotional learning of children.

I do have a story that I've heard from an educator who is working in a centre not too far outside of Halifax. She has been in her practice for a couple of years - has certainly had opportunity to take professional learning in terms of one-off workshops, et cetera, and felt that her practice was progressing, but not to the state that she wanted it to be.

Pyramid model is in that particular centre. It was identified as a pilot site. She was talking to her coach and saying, I'm really struggling with transition. If you've ever spoken to an early childhood educator, they will tell you that transitioning children from one activity to the next is a challenge. It's kind of like herding cats - trying to get them all to go in the same direction at the same time.

She had identified with her coach that it was taking her and her colleague about 20 to 25 minutes to get this group of children from an inside to outside transition. That's a lot of time - a lot of wasted time for children as well if it's not productive. The pyramid model coach said to her, have you tried giving them a five-minute warning? She said, you know what, we've been doing that forever - the kids know what they're supposed to do.

So the coach said, I want to watch you do your transition and I'm going to sit back and observe, so she did that. When she went back to the early childhood educator, she said,

do you realize that I've noted in the observations that you and your colleague are giving reminders and instructions to the children almost constantly during that transition time? Just through that observation, the data that she took, they made some adjustments in the transition - not only for the group of children. They noticed that there were some children who were struggling individually with transition, likely some developmental issues involved.

So they made further adjustments for those two additional children. When they went back - and these things don't happen overnight, it took about a month of following through with the consistency of the plan that they made for the transition for the group, the transition for the two children in question. They actually changed the time from 20-25 minutes to get outside, to 5 minutes. That's taking evidence and using the evidence, the practice and research, melding them together to make a better social and emotional experience for those children.

TIM HALMAN: That's very interesting. How many pyramid model coaches do we have, and how often do they evaluate and assess the early childhood educator? Is it every two or three years? Could you elaborate on that?

DENISE STONE: Currently in regulated child care there are 20 centres that are engaged in the pyramid model process. It is not a quick process. It takes about three years for a full centre to get to fidelity. There is a pre-assessment that's done and those assessments are done every six months with the educators.

The coaching is again a fairly regular basis. It's very intense. There are eight pyramid model coaches across the province that are working with those 20 sites. Not only that, our early childhood development consultants have also been given information and training around the pyramid model, so they're able to have some conversations and to support the staff when the pyramid coaches aren't on site. It's building the capacity within that centre, so not only from that one or two staff that they're directly working with - the rest of the staff are getting the information as they're intensely working with one or two staff on site. It's building the capacity as they're doing that intentional coaching.

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I would just add that it is a small caseload. Because we want the pyramid coaches on site working closely with the early childhood educators, they don't have a large caseload of regular child care centres and pre-Primary classes. It's a small, intense caseload so that they can be there often working, observing and providing that professional development and mentoring opportunities.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacKay.

HUGH MACKAY: Ms. Montreuil, I think in the years ahead as we look back on the many successes of this government, I think that what we've done in early learning and child care will certainly be one of the landmark successes and will have benefited this province - the kids and their families - for many years to come.

Without a doubt, introduction of the changes has been disruptive to the sector, but bold action requires disruption. I think that we recognize that. With disruptions there will be adjustments in the sector. As you said, we'll go through a transition to stabilization to continuous improvement.

These adjustments in the sector, we've heard them described as bumps in the road or hiccups and such. Would you agree that it's safe to say that the benefits to our kids and the benefits to our kids' families far outweigh the hiccups encountered?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think that in implementation, you keep your eye on a variety of variables. As I said earlier, one of the key pieces is uptake. Parents give us their most precious resource when they hand their children to us. If you don't build a system that parents feel is safe, nurturing, welcoming and supportive of the children in their families, they won't come.

Once again, I would expect any implementation to have implementation challenges and I would expect that how you deal with them minimizes their impact for kids and families. I think our department has done that very well, and the staff in the regions and in partnership with our stakeholders and others. We are on the eve of a new normal and the exciting time when we get to build on the foundation that we've established to the benefit of kids and their families. This is good for kids, good for families, and good for Nova Scotia.

HUGH MACKAY: Thank you for that. There was reference earlier to an early childhood education working group and I'm wondering if we could get a little deeper dive into that one.

DENISE STONE: As I'd said earlier, the minister met with a group of early childhood educators soon after he met with them at the Legislature and listened to their concerns and then struck the Early Childhood Educator Working Committee.

The first meeting of that has been co-chaired by department staff and also by a representative from Cape Breton. There are 10 individuals sitting on that group. There were 140 applications that were interested to sit on the committee and from that, we picked a sample that fit a variety of criteria from across the province: African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaw, large centres, small, urban, rural. We wanted to make sure that we had a good representative voice across the province.

The committee has their terms of reference. They're going to be talking about the issues that directly affect them as front-line staff; we want to hear from them about that. Certainly from the regulation review that was conducted last year that I referenced earlier, we heard from early childhood educators that wages and benefits were, of course, a concern to them. Also, working conditions and the professional recognition, that the public sees them as more than just babysitters but sees them as a professional in the eyes of the public

and from their own professional stance of identity. Those are also the things that they'll be talking about as the committee goes through.

With the co-chairs, we did craft an initial agenda just to provide them with some information around funding and around the current landscape of the Province of Nova Scotia in terms of early childhood. Not everyone has the privilege, as we do, of sitting where we sit and seeing the broad picture of what's happening across the province, so we wanted to make sure that they had some basic information from which they could start having conversations.

That was the first meeting and from that meeting, the group built the next agenda for the meetings coming up. We didn't want to be prescriptive; we wanted to ensure that their voices were being heard around the table about the issues that are relevant to them. The next meetings are next week on Monday and Tuesday, and they will continue as a group to build the agenda from there, based on what their front-line needs are.

We've also created a mechanism for sharing that information out through their contacts so information will be shared out as well as feedback brought into that group through the 10 folks that are sitting at the committees. I've had telephone calls and emails sent to me from others who are not participating asking if they can have their voices heard at the table. We're welcoming people to send any submissions that they want so that I can bring it forward to the committee for reflection and discussion.

I've also said to folks who've contacted me that if you are not getting information about this committee in good time, please let me know and we'll see where the gaps are in that communication. We're hoping that that information will flow in and out of that committee as they go forward.

The ideas and the problem-solving that we hoped to have them do with us - there will be a report prepared for the minister at the end of the time that they're meeting. We've set from now until the end of December. If there are additional meetings that they feel they need to wrap up - the conversations, the problem solving and the idea sharing that they're doing - we will certainly extend that. We have a person who sits in each of the meetings and will be putting together a report that they will have a chance to look at to make sure it reflects the work that they did. Then we will table it for the minister.

THE CHAIR: We're going to do one more round, one question each. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: We've talked a lot about the details of the program, but of course our main role is around the bigger policy pieces, and particularly the legislative piece. The minister spoke many times in the Chamber when this bill was introduced about the children. Of course, front of mind for us should be the children who access the program.

We have an interesting situation from a legislative perspective around this program where pre-Primary came in with a new Act, instead of regulations. We have the early



childhood Act, which as we heard, has some fairly outdated regulations. Now we have the Before and After Program, which has a whole other set of rules. To me, this seems somewhat unreasonably cumbersome from a legislative perspective. If that's not the case, I wonder if you could explain why we need all these separate Acts.

Further, the reorganization that you've described will sort of split - some three and a half to five-year-olds will fall in one part of this new formula and some will fall in the other part, depending on whether they're accessing regulated child care or pre-Primary. Maybe if you could either describe to me the need for all of these different Acts and regulations or whether there will be efforts to streamline the system.

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: The former Day Care Act and regulations guides regulated child care in Nova Scotia. As Denise indicated, we know and we've heard from regulated child care that we really need to look at those regs to modernize them. That's a big piece of work that Denise is doing.

In terms of legislative authority to offer pre-Primary, they introduced an Act. There was actually an Act on the books when we implemented pre-Primary, so we updated that Act to give us the legislative authority to offer this program in the public school setting. That's the reason why that exists. The regulated child care sector will always have an Act and regulations to guide their regulatory authority.

In terms of BAP, it's a recreation-based program that works with the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage that has years of experience in delivering and working with partners to deliver these types of programs. I know you're speaking specifically and Ms. Martin asked about BAP and licensed child care and that kind of thing. In some communities and with some providers, they want to continue to be a regulated child care centre because they're surveying four-year-olds, three-year-olds, two-year-olds - it doesn't matter - but they also want to be able to provide that service to community in the forms of the Before and After Program. So they will want to be licensed, many of them.

If they're just delivering the Before and After Program using the standards and the guidelines that guide outdoor play and physical literacy, they're able to use that approach instead of using the licensed child care approach, if that's something that they choose to do. If they're offering programs over and above the Before and After Program, they will have to be a licensed child care provider.

While there are three different components that we just talked about - and I think you raise a really good point - it's really important for us as two branches to make sure that we are clear in our communication to providers, to families, about where each of those pieces and those programs belong.

I think that's some really good feedback for us to look at going forward, to make sure that when we're having conversations about the Nova Scotia Before and After

Program, this is what this means, and when we're having conversations about pre-Primary, this is what this means.

While families don't need to get into the sort of legislative piece, I think it's a really important reminder for us to make sure that when we're having these conversations, we're clearly communicating - not only with providers, but also with families. Thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman, one question please.

TIM HALMAN: Ms. Huntington, as you know, some private child care owners have expressed frustration over the staffing ratios; that has been a constant issue that has come up. As you know, I have heard that in some cases they're saying that the director is not included in the staffing ratio, but the department says otherwise. I'm just wondering where the inconsistency is coming from? What's being done to clarify the ratio?

DENISE STONE: I heard that question, and I was a bit confused about that, because we do have directors who are included in the ratio. When we do the grant funding, there is a clear indication that they are included in that funding mix, which is really for needing staff for ratio in a regulated child care centre. Some directors don't work on the floor, and some do. In our mix model, we do have both of those.

I have heard the statement. I haven't heard directly from owners, operators, or directors with regard to that, so I am a bit confused about that statement as well, because it does exist in both ways.

THE CHAIR: Last but not least, Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: I'm so impressed with what has been going on here this morning and with the pre-Primary program from its beginning. In my constituency of Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank, we have about five schools that will be brought in next year, when it's the final year. I have been waiting in long anticipation. We have one school that has been approved this year, and it's going very well, and probably need it at that school and I think all schools. I worry about previous years when none of the students who were pre-Primary could go to school to those pre-Primaries. We'll finally be getting caught up with everybody in Nova Scotia having this tremendous program being brought forward.

I know the program is changing as the years have gone by because of all the neat things you're doing. Busing is important. Meals are important. I'm just wondering what you can tell me about the six schools, I guess with the boundary changes and another school coming in - how that's going to be taken with the rest of Nova Scotian students getting the pre-Primary programs in their schools.

CATHY MONTREUIL: As I get older, keeping all the little tiny details in my head becomes more and more burdensome. However, I have had the opportunity now to review

each region's implementation plan for September with the leadership team for the regions around what their plans are, what the community conversation shall be, et cetera. I can share with you that I'm confident that we have a good path forward that will put our final year and our full implementation on good footing.

I can't speak specifically to the ones in your area, but I can tell you that they're part of our final wave of implementation, and I have met with each of the regions, they're in good hands.

THE CHAIR: Maybe we could do one more quick round. Let's just keep our questions and answers short. Does everyone want to do that? If we can keep the questions and answers short, that would be appreciated.

Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That might not be possible for me, Mr. Chair, but I'll do my best. I have a last question. From community to community, we know that this is a valuable program. If anything, our criticism has always been that it should be broader.

Based on FOIs that we have filed, we do know that there are about 40 per cent of kids on average who aren't accessing the program. My question is, who are those families? Do we have demographic information on kids who are accessing? Can we extrapolate, or do we have any information on the ones who aren't?

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: I can't speak specifically to individual families that are not accessing the program. What we do know, though, and the statistics are clear - when we first implemented pre-Primary, in year one we had about 63 per cent of available eligible children participate in the program. That was a good number, we were pleased with that number given the fact that it was announced in July and it opened in September, but we knew that families needed to see the program unfold and see if it was a success and see if they felt comfortable sending their four-year-olds.

Year two implementation: of the eligible children that were able to attend, we saw 75 per cent of eligible children able to attend. We don't have the year three numbers yet, but what I can tell you is we have over 4,500 children who are participating in the program this year along. That's a really, really good number. We've put over 8,000 children through the pre-Primary programs since its implementation, which is a really great number.

The other thing I want to talk to you about is the out-of-catchment process. As you know, the government wants as many four-year-olds to be able to access the program as quickly as possible, so last year the regions developed an out-of-catchment process to allow families whose community schools didn't have the program yet to go and participate in the program if there was space at a local school.

That process unfolds in October and we know that pre-Primary families also register at various times throughout the year, so they always reserve a few spots for in-catchment students. What they do is post a list of pre-Primary programs that have space available for children, so they did that in October - the regions across the province - and I think there was close to 300 spaces available and 200 of them have already been filled. Again, that speaks volumes to the desire and the need from families to participate in the program.

I had a conversation with the McCain Family Foundation about our participation rate in pre-Primary recently. As you know, it's an optional program - it's not mandatory - so families will make a decision and we will always support that decision. When I shared our statistics and increasing from 62 per cent to 75 per cent in year two - and we'll be able to have the statistic for year three shortly, we just don't have that available at this time - they thought the numbers were incredible.

They looked to Ontario and how their numbers, I think, were in the high 80s per cent and that has been a program that's been around since the 70s. Our program is relatively new and they were quite impressed, given the newness of the program and the need for it, that the families were participating. I share that with you that we know the families are interested; we're hearing all the time. I know, Mr. Horne, you've been very patient with your schools. We know that you're anxious to get them open and we know families in your community are, as well.

The other thing, too, is the barriers with respect to busing and before and after school care. Families were really clear with us right from the beginning - we need transportation options and we need before and after school options - so we're doing that. We expect those numbers to increase. Again, we will always respect a family's choice. Families will decide if they want to participate in this program or not, but whatever we can do to remove barriers to allow families to attend.

I have so many stories, Ms. Chender, about even the Before and After Program, about a mom who couldn't believe that she could get her child into pre-Primary and then couldn't believe that there was an option for that child to participate in the before and after school care. That mom has enrolled at Cape Breton University now.

We know of a family who enrolled their child in pre-Primary, but the mom did not think that she could go back to work until Grade Primary because there was no before and after school care options. That mom - and I know this particular mom personally - spoke to me about the benefit for her family from a financial perspective. She sent her child to pre-Primary, the child has before and after school, and she has re-entered the workforce.

That's a great story and sometimes when we're working really hard at the department and we've got all kinds of things coming at us, but it's those stories that we say: okay, pull up your sleeves, let's get this going. This is a real positive program and it has a significant impact for children and families, which is what our mandate is.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman, quickly.

TIM HALMAN: At a previous HR meeting, there was the topic of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot and we know ECEs have been invited to apply. How many have come through the stream?

JANET LYNN HUNTINGTON: What I know and what I can share with you at this point is, we know that in 2018, there was a letter of intent sent out and I believe close to 200 - can I just check the statistic? I think it's 200 went through the 2018 stream and 109 have been nominated through the 2019 stream. Let me just confirm that for you.

Yes. Close

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I was really happy to hear about how you've really listened to what parents were saying about the wrap-around program and the busing because I know those were issues and continue to be, but we always heard the excuse that four-year-olds weren't tall enough to be on the buses and there were all sorts of things. I'm glad to see that this has been implemented and the wrap-around programs because they're vital.

I really want to know - our overall goal was to have everyone at an even level in Primary, so what are you hearing from Primary teachers? Is this making a significant difference? Is it helping in the classroom? I know being an early childhood educator for 40 years, I know what can happen in those early years, especially with detecting disabilities and weaknesses or deficiencies in children - how we can get ahead of that and have them all have a good start in school.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Certainly the first wave of evidence we have is anecdotal evidence from our Primary teachers who are saying that they noticed a difference of kids who have experienced the pre-Primary program coming into Primary and those who have not had that opportunity yet. They've noticed that kids who have the pre-Primary experience are coming in with different levels of oral language, social skills, knowing how to be schooled and learning readiness.

We know that literacy is foundational to school success. In programs and early childhood programs where oral language is the key that unlocks the future, that as we develop oral language - oral language is how kids regulate their behaviour, it's how they have interpersonal relationships. We have a saying in education that literacy floats on a sea of oral language. That's my Nova Scotia reference, just for the committee, as I'm becoming more and more Nova Scotian. (Laughter)

You can't overestimate the short-, medium- and long-term impact of quality early childhood education. You talked about early diagnosis, but we look at it as it's about early

strength building, that we're not capturing as a learning disability or a learning problem, a developmental problem - not even problem, but a lack of opportunity. This is really about plugging kids into opportunity.

I remind educators and I remind our department when I talk with them that we have to remember how lucky we are as public servants because the work we do changes the trajectory of the rest of their lives. That's the power of early childhood education.

THE CHAIR: With that, I want to say thank you for being here today. I do want to say on a personal note that when we started this conversation a couple of years back, it was a very informed and feverish debate in the Legislature. There were some unfavourable opinions of this program, there was some negativity. Any time anything would come up like playgrounds and things like that, there was a lot of information - some of it true, some of it false - that was spread out there. It seemed like from the beginning that this was going to be a very tough program to implement and have everybody accept.

I drop off my children at school every single day. My daughter is in pre-Primary and when I drop off Rufina at pre-Primary, there is a whole host of parents there with their children who are smiling and laughing and can't wait to be in that program. I talked to you earlier about Ms. Hart who is the pre-Primary teacher at William King Elementary who is outstanding. She has done a fantastic job, and I think we need to give a lot more credit to those staff on the ground.

More importantly, we did hear a lot of negativity in the beginning, and that's part of good debate. Now the number one thing we're hearing from MLAs is, when is my school next? When am I getting the next program? When is this school being filled? That says a lot about all of you, who have been able to roll this out and been able to do an exceptional job for our children. I think you deserve a big round of applause, and thank you very much for all you have done. With that, Ms. Montreuil, do you want to take us home?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think I just did.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr. MacKay.

HUGH MACKAY: Could we have a copy of your opening remarks, please? Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We do have some committee business, so five minutes to clear out.

[11:35 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:40 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The committee business that we have today - we have correspondence from Minister Kousoulis, Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, in

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response to a request for information made at the September 24<sup>th</sup> meeting. Everybody has received that. Any comments on Mr. Kousoulis' words? No.

With that, our next meeting is December 12<sup>th</sup> from 10:00 a.m. until noon. It will be the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration and the Department of Labour and Advanced Education, regarding foreign-certified professionals finding work in their trained fields.

Any comments, questions, or concerns before we wrap this one up? Thank you, everyone. Have a great day.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:40 a.m.]