

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, January 28, 2020

Committee Room

Inclusive Education

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Brendan Maguire, Chair
Suzanne Lohnes-Croft, Vice-Chair
Bill Horne
Hugh MacKay
Rafah DiCostanzo
Larry Harrison
Brad Johns
Claudia Chender
Tammy Martin

[Ben Jessome replaced Bill Horne]
[Keith Irving replaced Rafah DiCostanzo]
[Lisa Roberts replaced Tammy Martin]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Cathy Montreuil - Deputy Minister

Ann Power - Executive Director, Student Services & Equity

Marlene Ruck Simmonds - Executive Director, African Canadian Services

Kristen Tynes - Executive Lead, Commission on Inclusive Education



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2020

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Brendan Maguire

VICE-CHAIR

Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

THE CHAIR: Order please. Today's agenda is inclusive education, and our witnesses are from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development: Deputy Minister Cathy Montreuil; Executive Director of Student Services and Equity, Ann Power; Executive Director of African Canadian Services, Marlene Ruck Simmonds; and Executive Lead, Commission on Inclusive Education, Kristen Tynes.

We will start with the committee business which would be agency, board and commission appointments. Before we do that, we're going to get the committee to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Just a reminder to everyone to turn their phones on vibrate. Coffee and washrooms are to our left out the door. In case of emergency, please exit through the Granville Street entrance and proceed to the Grand Parade Square.

We will jump right into this and get right to committee business with agency, board and commission appointments. Mr. MacKay.

HUGH MACKAY: For the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia Board of Governors, I move that the appointments of Malcolm Fraser, Austin Jenega, and Grant Machum as governors be approved.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Is there any other business? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Under the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, for the Nova Scotia Fisheries and Aquaculture Loan Board, I move that the appointment of Ronnie Heighton as a member be approved.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Under the Department of Health and Wellness, for the Nova Scotia Health Authority Board, I move that the appointment of Beryl MacDonald as a director be approved.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Is there anything else? Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I just wanted to ask, knowing that you probably won't have the answer to this question today, but the new Sustainable Development Goals Act was passed in the last session, and there is a round table that forms a part of that Act. My understanding is that has not been reconstituted, so I wonder if the committee could get an update at the next meeting on where we are with that round table, which I believe falls under the ABCs. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: I think that's something we can look into. Did you want us to write to the minister, Ms. Chender?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That would be great.

THE CHAIR: We shall do that. Is there anything else? I just want to remind everyone that this will be the first live broadcast committee in this room. We are live, so just keep that in mind.

We will jump right into the topic. Welcome to our witnesses. I did introduce them, but if you want to introduce yourselves again.

[The committee witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We are going to give you five minutes or whatever you need to do an opening statement. Ms. Montreuil.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about Nova Scotia's inclusive education work. Today, we're here to provide an overview of our approach towards inclusive education and to answer your questions on this topic. Before we begin, I would like to articulate some of the fundamental beliefs, research, and advice around this subject.

The first is that we have a moral imperative to bring equity and inclusion to our education system, that we need to improve outcomes for all children, not just those who will excel under any system or whose families and support networks have the resources to succeed. To do this, to bring equity and inclusion for better outcomes, we need to do our business differently. We need to think differently about how our teachers and support staff and outside agencies work together. We need to think differently about how we structure our school approaches and how we as educators and administrators approach inclusion. We need to recognize that it is students and their parents, caregivers, and guardians working closely with the educational system, who can help us achieve success in a system of inclusive education.

Our job, as the Students First report wrote, is to help all students reach their full potential. As the report adds, this is both the promise and the challenge of inclusive education. For educational leaders, our job is to deliver on what is identified as inclusive education in that report: namely, the right of all students to a quality education; a student-centred needs-based approach; a multi-tiered continuum of programs, settings, and services; a positive learning environment; core values and beliefs that uphold the best interests of our students; evidence-based policies, practices, and procedures; and a commitment to excellence. These principles apply to all students within our system, be they exceptional or not.

I want to be clear: in the past, some people thought inclusive education applied only to students with special education needs. It does not. The goal of inclusive education is to empower all of our students, including those with special education needs, African Nova Scotian students, and Mi'kmaw students - all of them - to be happy, healthy, and accomplished members of their community.

We are guided in our work by the Students First report and the work of the Commission on Inclusive Education. In partnership with the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, government announced the members of the commission in March 2017 and asked that they provide a strategy or a blueprint to redirect our energies and resources so that we could have meaningful results around inclusive education.

I'm very proud of our accomplishments since the commission released its report in March 2018. In under two years, we have hired close to 400 new inclusive support staff. We have new teachers and staff for alternative education sites, more African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw support workers, more SchoolsPlus facilitators, more support and funding for professional development for teachers, and reduced wait times for early intervention services.

Guiding this work is the new inclusive education policy developed by the department with the support of numerous public education and community stakeholders. This policy, which is available on our website, reinforces that inclusive schools are equitable and culturally, linguistically, and socially responsible. They have structures, processes, and practices that are student centred, appropriate, and collaborative.

We also recognize the importance of evaluation, looking at the metrics, and determining whether or not we are succeeding. We have hired academic professionals to support us in this work. They will provide ongoing assessments of our work related to inclusive education with the first public interim report coming this Spring.

I think it's also important to listen to qualitative feedback, the first voices in our education system. It is important to appreciate and value stories from teachers, support workers, and students. I would like to share with you a few of their stories. This story is from a 17-year-old First Nations student in Trenton who was having challenges in school and then went to a new alternative school:

Before I started at the alternative high school in Trenton, I was not succeeding very well in school. I felt as if my dreams were falling apart and that I would become a disappointment to my family, as I came very close to being kicked out for the semester. My high school couldn't provide me with the extra support and flexibility I needed to continue my education, so my attendance became an issue, as my anxieties after having a baby took over my life. I cannot stress enough that coming here has been the best school decision I ever - the best. When I was welcomed by a small, friendly environment on my first day here, almost all anxieties were lifted, and I got caught up in no time.

A parent in Cape Breton shared: My son hasn't made a friend in years. He is now coming home talking about having conversations with other students, and I'm so happy for

him. Or this statement from a student: I feel like I can do this now. I want to graduate with all of my friends. Or this from a teacher: To see students begin to feel part of a school again and establish better academic standing is awesome.

What these voices speak to are successful efforts to build the right school experience for the students with exceptional lives. They speak to building a community where identity is recognized and honoured, and students feel accepted and welcomed.

As I conclude, I want to say the pursuit of inclusive education is a journey, not a light switch, one that is a priority for government. In the last two years, the government has invested \$30 million in additional supports for students, teachers, and classrooms. They have made a policy commitment to inclusive education and the changes needed to implement it. We recognize that there's a lot more to do; however, fastest is not necessarily best.

To quote the oft-used African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." With our partners, we are taking the time to implement a fundamental change in our system. I recognize that there will be many questions on this topic, so I will end my remarks by saying, thank you for asking us here today. I appreciate your questions and comments and look forward to them.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will start with Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks for being here today. I think I want to start on a positive note by saying that I think the consultations that lead to the Students First report were definitely - if I was being cynical, I'd say "only" - the best example of consultation that I've seen in my role here. I think you did manage to talk to so many people in so many parts of the province, and that was very heartening. I think the report was a great start. I think you opened your comments, deputy, by saying you're guided by that report.

I think one of the main questions we have is: What does this implementation look like? There was a very clear path laid out in that report, but try as we may, we cannot figure out what that road map is that's being followed by the department. Last year, we filed an FOI asking for the most recent version of a document called Students First Next Steps Gap Analysis and Tracking. The entire thing was redacted except for one line. The only part that was not redacted was the decision to not hire an executive director of inclusive education. That decision that we received also said the document hadn't been updated or finalized.

I guess my question is: Can you share with the public what the implementation plan is? We're on side, we believe in this project, and we want to understand the rollout so that we can be supportive and be inquisitive and be engaged in our communities around that. I guess generally, if you could address that question, and specifically because we are going into a new budget, can you give us a highlight of what's coming in the next fiscal year?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thanks for that question. Really, our starting point was to make sure that we understood Students First, understood its intent. The words are there, but we meet regularly with those commissioners to ensure that the actions that were taken were consistent with the vision and the actions they laid out, understanding that being responsive means that you don't establish up front a road plan and then follow it in a lockstep manner. Responsiveness means that you need to be a little bit nimble.

Having said that, one of the things that Students First challenged the system on is moving from siloed and isolated actions to integrated and interconnected ones. To that end, I use the analogy when I speak of the system around a braid where one strand might be: how are we changing the delivery to kids with special education needs? What's the PD for that? What are the additional resources for that? How are we engaging parents differently? Are we engaging all parents in a consistent kind of way?

[10:15 a.m.]

There's a special education strand that has to overlap with strands for our equity-seeking groups like African Nova Scotians, Mi'kmaw students, LGBTQ, and families who are struggling with poverty to ensure that the processes in our schools become more responsive to their needs. When can they meet? How do they want to meet? Where do they want to meet? Our school system, and many school systems, has a history of saying, our doors are open. This conversation is changing that from we need to be invitational, and that sometimes means people won't come through our doors, we have to lead them and go into community.

Schools are undertaking work now in doing self assessments of their practices, engaging with community around what needs to change specifically, while we at the system design a province-wide, culturally responsive pedagogy to set the table for professionals and professional learning for all educators that wasn't exclusively for teachers and principals.

We have begun in every school in this province in P-2, in terms of culturally responsive pedagogy, tying in inclusive and responsive system building for students of Mi'kmaw heritage. To that end, we have brought resources with us today aligned with Treaty Education and reconciliation. Those two threads are not inconsistent with inclusive education.

Every school, P-2, is undergoing in this school year specific teacher and school training for ways of knowing in the Mi'kmaw culture for making our environment responsive and open not just to Mi'kmaw students, but to understand that their history is our history. We have a collective history and all kids need to know Mi'kmaw ways of knowing a Treaty Education and the principles of reconciliation. In African Nova Scotian culture, the culturally responsive pedagogy has been mirrored with the development of reflective resources.

Our implementation plan is multi-stranded back to what the inclusive education asked us to do. They asked us to do certain things in certain frameworks as a blueprint and not as a to-do list. They asked us to ensure that we have somebody external to us watching this work, going out in the field, talking with parents, talking with kids, talking with principals, and feeding back into the department what that feedback is telling us in terms of changes that the system is starting to feel and implement, where we're coherent and where we're not, so that we can do real-time adjustments.

It's a multi-stranded strategy to look at inclusivity for all kids and all communities. I could go on with newcomers and with some of the other work that we're doing. The guide and the blueprint for all of that work is the Students First document, and we continue to carry it around and hold it to inform the actions that we're undertaking.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: It's definitely helpful to hear about all of that, but I guess I'll just return to my question. I understand the need to be nimble, and I appreciate it, and I think it's great that there's continuous communication both with the commissioners and with other folks.

I also recognize that this is essentially about a universal design for learning and shifting the way that we design things, but that being said, surely there is a kind of basic blueprint. I'm still confused why when we have to ask for an FOI to find out what the plans are, then receive that FOI and find everything is redacted. Can you share some basic plans of steps you're taking? If those change, no problem. If that changes on feedback, that's great, but we just want to be able to track what's going forward.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Fundamentally, the blueprint that guides our work is the blueprint that's on Page 14 of the plan. It has some big ideas. However, in meeting with the commissioners, we know that blueprint is more weighted to kids with special education needs - necessarily, given the findings of the report. We are paying assiduous attention to that, but it's insufficient, so we've gone broader than the blueprint asks us to so that we get at some of the cultural and responsive pedagogy for those equity-seeking groups that our data tells us we have to be doing better for.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: First I guess I find it somewhat disheartening that we have to actually come out and say inclusive education. To me, education should have always been inclusive. To try to identify that and say we're now going to be inclusive, I wish we were always that way.

I had a unique opportunity when I was in university - I worked with the Halifax Regional School Board as an EPA with special needs children and integrating kids from group homes into the school system at the time. That was when some of the learning centres were being shut down and students were being integrated, so I have some unique

perspectives over the years having done that. I do find that to say it's inclusive education now - education should have always been inclusive. I recognize now that it's such a huge scope with cultural needs, social needs, physical, learning needs, and everything else - it's such a broad scope. I find that in some ways, some students are starting to fall through the cracks.

My questions will be directly related to some personal issues, because my youngest daughter has actually been identified with a learning disability - she has dyslexia. She has gone through the psychologists and everything in the Halifax Regional Education Centre and has been given that designation as a learning disability.

One of the things that I noticed, she just recently this year has gone to junior high, in Grade 6, and I noticed that when she was in the elementary school, there seemed to be a lot of resources that were there to help her with her needs, but in the junior high, there doesn't seem to be as much flexibility. There doesn't seem to be as many supports there. Even things like in my daughter's case, she has a really hard time using her combination lock. I said, well, maybe we can get you another - I don't want a different type of lock, because that pulls her out from everybody else.

What I'm seeing now is in classes and stuff - before, my daughter was always very involved in education, enjoyed learning and was involved. I'm finding this year she's becoming a little bit more quiet. She feels a little bit more - when she has to do reading in the class, she's feeling that now. I'm fortunate she's very sports oriented. She really excels in sports, and we've been fortunate that way.

I keep questioning why, without having to be put on an IPP or something, there doesn't seem to be flexibility in the system to address some really simple issues. For instance, Maria - my daughter - goes to French, I find that very frustrating, because she can't read English because of her dyslexia. We've actually applied to put her into the Scottish Rite Learning Centre. I used to be on the board there, which is for dyslexia.

There doesn't seem to be that flexibility. We're talking about inclusion. Why does she have to go to French instead of taking an extra English course? Do you know what I mean? There should be some flexibilities there, as well, and I don't feel that there are.

CATHY MONTREUIL: One of the things that I've asked the system to think about is the power of the word "yet." We have opened up the conversation around accommodations: allowing kids to show what they know differently, do their work using computers, et cetera, and align our assessments, including our provincial assessments, to allow that.

The notion that we're using in the system is necessary for some kids or it's good for all. Some of the things that you're wishing would be available to your students, there's no downside to making sure they're available for all students. Right now, we're in the last

phases of the curriculum implementation for Grades 7 and 8, so some of that flexibility will roll through with that implementation for sure - necessary for some, good for all.

With things like more choice, we know kids do better with choice. Finding ways to bring in more choice for more kids, including your daughter, is part of the objective to the current curriculum implementation, and we're about to review secondary curriculum with that lens of necessary for some, good for all.

We're a year and a half into a five-year journey, where these changes are being looked at. Upfront policy work and consultation are ongoing in terms of options. I'm going to allow Ann - rather than send me notes - to maybe speak directly to some of the issues that are happening for kids with special education needs.

ANN POWER: I just wanted to mention that we have a new consultant specifically in the area of learning disabilities who will be starting in about two weeks' time, I think. We'll be working with that consultant directly with our curriculum consultants in both English and French to look at evidence-based, very current ways in which we can be more flexible and nimble in the curriculum in terms of getting specific focused instruction and interventions at the same time as thinking about how that can be done in the classroom.

For instance, if my colleagues in French program services were here, they would speak about the neurolinguistic approach, which we use in the teaching of French, which is also found to be beneficial in many other areas, in oral language and other areas that help to strengthen that. It's a matter of how you build in those supports with the French program so that it's specific to the individual student as well. We're just in the process of designing some of our supports around that in a multi-tiered system of support, which also includes teaching support teams to help teachers understand more specifically how to focus on some of the individual needs while still meeting the needs of all the students in the class.

THE CHAIR: Before we advance to the next question, we have had three questions in about 25 minutes - three questions and answers in about 25 minutes. If we can keep the answers and the questions shorter so that everybody - there's going to be a lot of questions that people want to ask, and there's a lot of answers to be had, so just be mindful of that. Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: Ms. Montreuil, what I hear you saying is that at the Primary level, some of this flexibility has already been implemented and that you're now looking at doing that at the secondary level. I know that the schools are very good at adapting programs and being flexible in adaptations, and I use my own experience. In my daughter's case, they have encouraged her to use a Chromebook. When there's a project, they have provided other - she's very great with clay, so they did a book report, and she was allowed to do something in clay. Some adaptations have been made there that work really well.

I hear what you're saying in regard to the French program, but my daughter - and I use my experience. I'm sure I'm not the only one because I'm very involved in the schools that my children attend. My daughter is in Grade 6 and reads at a Grade 3 level. Now she's going to French, and the expectation is that she's going to read French as well, where she still has a problem because of her dyslexia, reading English.

I really feel, and I'm hoping that this is what I heard Ms. Montreuil say, is that I'm really hoping that at that secondary level, there can be some adaptations made if a certain program isn't benefiting. I find it very frustrating that they pull a child out of science class to do resource in English or to do - I forget what they call it. She goes to resource and another thing for English, but she's going to French. They're pulling her out of science, which may have been beneficial, and it might have helped.

[10:30 a.m.]

The reality with my daughter is that currently she can't read English. She's having a hard time with English. To give her French instead of - do you understand what I mean? It just seems to me that they're saying you need to have French because that's core French and it's part of the program.

I don't think that every student needs to fit into every single solitary program that's there. I think that it's beneficial to be able to have the adaptations that they can go to different programs. It's not really a question; it's more of a comment, and it's a first-hand comment.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I have nothing more to add, if you want to move on.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: It's great to see four women in high-level leadership roles in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Welcome today.

You made a comment about your alternate schools. Something that I've noticed in recent years - and I attend their graduations every year as MLA - I notice that the staffing is consistent now. It used to be one year in and gone for the major staff. I've noted that they are consistently there working with students who may come in at a Grade 10 level and graduate. That's really good to see because the progress in these schools is detrimental to your staffing and the relationships that build. I'm really glad to see that. Also, there is a lot of diversity in the schools, as well, and they really build on that diversity.

Also, when I was at the Remembrance Day service at my home school this year, I noticed a lot of cultural diversity that wasn't there before. I don't know if this is part of your moving forward. Inclusive used to be special needs when they first brought in the

inclusive. Has this evolved? Is it part of our immigration strategy here in Nova Scotia? It's really good to see that change, so if you could speak a bit about that.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thank you for that, because we should start to feel differences, for sure. We invested in every educator. That's EPAs, education worker - every education worker in the province in culturally responsive pedagogy. We swept that through the province throughout last year and into this year.

We will know that we're achieving inclusion when more kids feel community - whether they have special education needs, whether they are an equity-seeking group, or whether they struggle with poverty. We want kids to walk down the hall and have other kids know their names. We want them invited to birthday parties. We want them to be able to open up the lunch that they're used to having and not be worried that other people will make fun of them because it's not the same lunch that their neighbour opens up. We want to build environments where the school environment influences the learning environment.

When kids are comfortable, when they're valued, and when they're part of community, they learn better. Sometimes it takes some explicit training for the adults, because we all know our own culture, we all know our own history, we all know our own background. It's being able to be explicit about recognizing and honouring and being aware of when it's not honoured, what it feels like - and how the adult in the building can help with that and lead that.

That is the kind of fundamental base training that we did in a very systematic and deliberate way. We're now looping back to say, what does CRP say about the selection of your learning resources, about how you group children, about how you look at the data in your school. We put in a requirement for all schools to look at their disaggregated data so that we don't go with averages, we don't go with how most kids are doing, and that we drill down.

I've asked the school system to ask three key questions: How are the children doing? How do we know? What will we do differently tomorrow because of it? That's being used to drive our work. I'm glad that you're starting to notice a difference.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I am indeed, and it's good to see because I worked in inclusive education for a number of years. You mentioned community - I feel that's really important, because our children leave school and go back to homes that may not be inclusive or have the same experiences. I'm glad the token days are gone when you did token multiculturalism; I had issues with that myself.

How are we reaching out to families to be more inclusive as well? That's a big part of this whole picture.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: I'd be pleased to answer this question. I think I would like to go back to the inclusive education policy in response to that.

When we talk about community, that is a policy that represents all children within the Province of Nova Scotia. We know this is the first of its kind: to have a policy where the expectation is for all children to have an equitable, high-quality education. In terms of community in the African Nova Scotian communities that exist - and there are well over 50 - it is, I believe, a response to what community has been asking for for over 400 years. The recognition that we now have as a result of the government and the department, a policy in education that drills down and looks specifically at how all children are doing, how do we know, and with a particular focus on equity and those groups that have been underserved.

I feel that the policy really answers back to community as a first step to say we've heard your voice, we know what you're saying, and we believe the stories that you have been bringing forward with respect to Nova Scotia's educational system. We are turning the corner and moving away from just actions to look at impact. This policy speaks back to the parents and the community.

The other way I believe in which we are moving forward to really build that relationship with communities and parents and families is a recognition that we have the responsibility to create spaces, as the policy says, for parents to be involved and motivated to be involved in our system. That means we have to create opportunities for them to be able to participate in education in the ways that make sense to them. The deputy spoke about culturally responsive pedagogy, and that's really what it's about. Do we know the learners? Do we know their families? Have we listened to them? That first-voice account is crucial, and I believe the policy definitely sets the stage for that.

The other way I believe we are sort of turning the corner here within our province is around the work that our advisory group does: CACE, the Council on African Canadian Education. There was substantial professional learning to make sure that they were well equipped and versed around inclusive education policies, substantial work done. We're continuing to listen to what they're bringing forward because they represent not just organizations, but they also have regional representation so we're very much paying attention to what they have said.

With the institution and the establishment of two key branches now within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that came out, the Glaze report, we have the Mi'kmaq Services branch, we have the Student Services branch, and we also have the African Nova Scotian branch. That really positions us as a department and as a province to be able to hear first-voice accounts around what will make the difference and what will help us reach that goal of truly an inclusive education system here within the Province of Nova Scotia.

To the deputy's point, what I'll mention is that we're looking at changing some of the systemic barriers that have existed in education for hundreds of years. The work that we're doing is monumental; we are looking at tearing down those barriers. It is a process because it means we have to look closely at everything we have done - our policies, our procedures, the way we staff, the way we listen, the way we work together - and that work is going forward. I'm very confident in what is taking place, and based on some of the things we're hearing, I believe people are beginning to sense that there is a difference.

THE CHAIR: We've done a complete round. I was just made aware by the clerk that we skipped your video.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I would like to save that for the end.

THE CHAIR: You would like to save it for the end - excellent. Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Obviously for any student to feel good about their experience at school, they need to be learning successfully. They want to be advancing more or less with their peers. I don't have the personal experience of my colleague, Mr. Johns, but I certainly have also heard from parents with great frustrations around reading and a real feeling that their child is just not being served by our system.

From what I understand, the statistic that people have shared with me multiple times is that about a third of our students have some sort of reading disability, which isn't even a disability - it's just a different way of learning. Sometimes it's called dyslexia or dysgraphia, where the Reading Recovery curriculum doesn't serve them well. One of the things that concerns me about that is that the inequity that exists in our society means that parents have very inequitable abilities to compensate where the school system is failing their children. Some parents are able to invest in those tutoring systems, go to the private companies to get the help that they need. Others are not.

It's a problem that compounds over the years, that children are not advancing towards learning because initially you learn to read, and then you read to learn. If you don't learn to read and then all of a sudden your class is reading in order to learn other stuff, that experience is, I think, understandably very frustrating for children and for their parents.

I have two questions related to that. My first is: How does the department make decisions about proprietary curriculum like Reading Recovery that is incorporated into schools?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I don't mind sharing with you that I also have a personal experience, because I have a boy with a significant learning disability. For my son, Reading Recovery saved his life. He was despondent at Grade 2 and not wanting - and I paid for Reading Recovery for my son. That doesn't mean that Reading Recovery will work for every kid with a significant reading disability. The population of kids with reading

disabilities have very different profiles, very different programs that they need and will respond to. There is not one size fits all. Over 70 per cent of the kids in Nova Scotia meet Grade 3 reading benchmarks by Grade 3.

In my previous answer, I pointed out to the committee that we have asked the schools and the systems to focus on three questions: How are the children doing? How do we know? How are we going to improve? Our policy requires schools to disaggregate, to say, how are the kids with reading disabilities doing? How are the kids of African Nova Scotian descent doing? How are the kids with autism doing? How are the kids doing? Then we take apart what will be necessary to change those numbers, to improve those numbers, to improve the outcomes for kids.

We started that work this year, down to the school levels, in terms of disaggregation. Many of our schools are doing that work around a collective, around a data wall. It means that we're going to have to look at early screening, to find these kids earlier, and to plug in the right supports for the right kids for the right reasons.

Reading Recovery is not the answer for every kid with a reading challenge, for sure. Right now the department is looking - in partnership with some community and research experts in Nova Scotia - at what systematic pieces we could put in to do early screening for reading and literacy. Then, what could we put in as a collective, as a pool of resources, to respond to what those tell us? Reading Recovery will be part of it. It's well-researched. It's well-documented in terms of its efficacy. Efficacy is always linked to how you do it. Continuous improvement is a goal of Reading Recovery like it is for everything we do.

The long and the short of it is that more kids need to be reading more effectively by Grade 3. Right now we're working with our community partners, our researchers in Nova Scotia, our schools, and our special education staff to identify what is working and what's missing. We intend on taking some action in terms of what additional resources we need to reach those kids who aren't reaching benchmark by Grade 3.

[10:45 a.m.]

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you for that. Yes, 70 per cent of children reading by Grade 3 - 30 per cent is a lot of kids who are struggling to read at Grade 3. I take your personal experience with Reading Recovery - frankly, I'm a parent and I don't really know what Reading Recovery is exactly. I read to my kids at bedtime and eventually things started to click. I just count myself lucky, frankly.

I do wonder if you can again share how the government makes those decisions about proprietary curriculum, and could you shed a little bit of light on that whole concept of proprietary curriculum? What does that mean that the department has bought into something?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Education is a complex interpersonal interaction between trained education professionals and kids supported by a whole bunch of partners. There's rarely anything that will work out of a box and so that notion of proprietary, there's lots and lots of purveyors of proprietary programs out there who like to pitch people in education.

The difference between proprietary in-a-box programs and Reading Recovery is that Reading Recovery is pedagogy based. It is looking at a very highly trained teacher in a one-on-one session with a student who's doing very direct instruction and who does it in a very tight cycle of assessment-instruction, assessment-instruction every day. It's more a pedagogical method - a teaching method - than it is a proprietary kind of program.

Before we would look at anything, we would look at the data; we would look at the research. We're fortunate to have seven faculties of education available to us in the Province of Nova Scotia, so we do crosswalks and conversations with them to ask if they have research on this. Can you get research on this? What's the thinking about this? We reject any research any company gives us that they've paid for because we don't want to have biased research inform our implementation.

We don't have very many examples of bought boxes out in the system because teaching's more complex to that and if it was that easy, every system would be solving their problems very easily by just buying the right proprietary program. Learning resources and anything that we're going to implement province-wide is complex, lengthy, and will involve research.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you very much for being here and going through the principles that you introduced earlier; absolutely excellent principles. I just want to go down a different road for a moment.

Most of the schools in my constituency are rural. I try to attend as many functions as I can and some of the innovative things that they do is just amazing. The teachers love what they do. Parents are really involved in student activities. The students, no matter what grade, are interacting and helping one another through the process and so on. The community really supports what happens in those schools.

However, some are worried that because of numbers, the school is going to be taken away. To me, that would not be helpful to anyone - students, the community - it wouldn't be helpful to anyone. What is the criteria for keeping schools in rural areas? What are the dangers of losing those schools?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I don't have very much to speak to that other than to say that right now, there is no conversation going on, nor is there a policy governing eliminating any rural schools.

LARRY HARRISON: That is very good to hear. Community is one thing you have put emphasis on, and that happens in so many different areas. It is important for schools to be in rural communities and not have the children move great distances. I just hope that if at all possible, the schools can be kept within because if they're not, the community loses a lot, and so do the children.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I have a couple of questions perhaps best directed at Ms. Ruck Simmonds. Firstly, we continually hear how important it is for students - I'm specifically speaking about Black students - to see a teacher at the front of the classroom, an administrator at the head of the school. Ms. Ruck Simmonds, if you could speak to any initiative or intentional behaviour by the department to recruit and place specifically African Nova Scotian teachers and administrators throughout our system?

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: We can certainly speak to the continuation of the scholarships to recruit interested personnel of African ancestry into the teaching profession. We have a scholarship specifically for that. I would also like to mention the master's cohort, guidance cohort, that was Afrocentric. I believe 20 or so guidance counsellors are now employed throughout our province and are working within the schools.

We do know that we have approximately 7,419 learners that are in our system, and we want to ensure that not only do they see themselves within the learning resources but are also reflected through the faculty and through all levels of the staffing, with the administrators and teachers as well as other people and staff who are working within the education system. Most recently, as a result of the inclusive education supports, we saw the hiring of six additional student support workers of African ancestry who are now working across the province. We also saw seven additional student support workers of Mi'kmaw ancestry who are working within the system.

As it relates to African Nova Scotian learners, one thing that we were concerned about and we want to make sure we align all of the supports as it relates to African Nova Scotian learners within the province, this year as a result of responses to the community indicating that they wanted to have coordinators that were of African ancestry, every region in the province as of this year has a regional coordinator of African Canadian education and services.

We work directly with those regional coordinators, and we work directly with the student support workers. We are continuing to hear back from them about the needs of students on the ground as well as opening up opportunities for consultations from parents

and families so that we're able to understand how we reallocate resources to best serve our students.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that effort and response. Secondly, I'm looking for some thoughts - we just received the report related to the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children - is it appropriate? Is it being considered as having a role, intentionally implemented, into school curriculum?

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: Two different angles: the department had representation on the restorative committees that were developed within the province. Also, there are restorative approaches that are used throughout the province in various regions, in various schools. I think the restorative approach is also cultural. It's an encultured practice. We know those practices are part of Mi'kmaw Indigenous ancestry. They're also part of the work that we're doing within our African Canadian Services division.

We're really trying to create within our schools an understanding that all children belong, and how do we create those safe spaces for students to be themselves and to be able to be inspired through the work that we do with them. I think the restorative approach speaks to relationships so that is definitely the CRP, but we know within schools and employment settings that not everything goes well. So we do need to have those mechanisms, and I believe restorative approaches, to deal with situations when conflicts and chaos occur.

The other avenue I want to speak to is with respect to the module that's being developed around anti-racism and anti-discrimination. It's for principals and vice-principals because we want to equip them with the best tools to be able to deal with the incidents when they arise in the schools and to be able to know the best steps forward that protect children from continuing to be harmed, but also equip school staff with the ability to deal with these situations when they do arise.

CATHY MONTREUIL: In addition to that, part of the work that we did in collaboration with the restorative inquiry and first voice participants particularly from the home was the DOHR project. We have a virtual reality project that we co-developed with them and Western University and some researchers to allow kids to see inside the Home from the eyes of the people who lived there - not to replicate their experience, but to open up conversations and empathy for history that included systemic biases and prejudices. It's a valuable learning opportunity. I believe it's Grade 11.

We have piloted it in a number of our schools, and part of the plan is to bring that wider to that curriculum and make it part of everybody's. It's a valuable learning opportunity to understand how the story of the Home talks about systemic barriers and biases in society and how we can work forward together. Our kids can learn about how they can be better and different. The work of that report calls on government to work way

more connected across versus in silos. There was valuable learning from the inquiry for sure that will live on and continue to inform our work.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I want to ask a question related a little bit to my colleague Mr. Harrison's. He seemed happy with the answer that there was no policy around closing schools; I'm less happy with that answer. Capital needs are something we ask a lot about because there's no policy. We don't know when a school is going to open or when a school is going to close. We have a rolling capital plan, but the updates seem to be few and far between.

Specifically around capital needs, I want to ask about universal design for learning, which we talked about earlier. We heard from the Commission on Inclusive Education that many schools actually identified capital needs as a barrier to offering inclusive programming. I'm assuming that that's pointing to structural changes that have to happen within a school. I have been to several new schools that have indicated that their resource rooms might not be exactly appropriate for the uses to which they're put, et cetera. I'm wondering how the department is working with the Regional Centres to address those capital needs related to inclusion.

ANN POWER: Of course, it's on their agendas. Each year, they do a list of the needs that they have, the highest level needs, and accessibility would be one of their priorities. Our short-term, medium, and long-term goal is to have all of our schools accessible in many different ways - not just physically accessible, but accessible through learning, accessible through different types of learning, flexibility, and so on. I think you'll see some examples of that in the video that the deputy has at the end of the session.

I will say that we're working very closely - we have a representative on the accessibility committee that is looking at the directorate which is looking at accessibility. Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal is taking the lead on that, but we are certainly feeding into that.

[11:00 a.m.]

There are education standards which are coming out of the accessibility directorate; we have two representatives on that committee, and we are working very closely with them. I think we'll have in the next few years perhaps a more structured approach in the way of examining and continuing to look at how we can continually review accessibility to ensure that we're doing the best that we can. We're sort of working with those two committees to look at accessibility across the province.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I guess just as a follow-up, from that answer, it sounds like this goes into the hopper with all the capital needs, but it's kind of given some priority

when the list comes. My question is: Do you have some dollar figure of what has been spent on capital needs related to inclusion in the last couple of years? Also, has there been any additional budget allocation in that area? We've heard about hiring specialists and other things for squeezing water from a stone, so to speak. If there's a fixed amount but we're giving these more precedence, are there other things falling off the list or are we funding it appropriately?

ANN POWER: This isn't my area of expertise; that would be Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal. However I will say, for instance, that we have built accessibility into the plans that are considered at the beginning when a school is designed. When you're designing or renovating a school, you have to consider the legal requirements for accessibility.

We also consider going above and beyond that to ensure that we have rooms for such programming options that SchoolsPlus brings to ensure that we can have our specialists coming and going to ensure that there are spaces where specialists can meet with students or where students can meet together in smaller groups. All of those design features are considered and built into school facility planning manuals.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: I reiterate what I said that the term "inclusive education" is so broad. Here we are just talking about a few things. We haven't touched on autism, and we're not talking about other learning disabilities. It's just such a broad scope of things that I find it almost overwhelming in some cases.

I did want to talk more about some of the cultural integrations, and I know that we've discussed here today in regard to students with African or Aboriginal backgrounds. I'm curious to know - and this may not be so much in more of the rural areas of the province, but I know in urban areas, in Halifax and even in my areas in Sackville, that we're having a lot of other cultures that are now coming, particularly people from the Middle East and Asian cultures. Is there anything that's happening to include them? How's that working?

CATHY MONTREUIL: We are blessed with a good number of newcomers coming in and enriching our school communities with great diversity, and they bring with them many, many gifts. I'm going to ask Ann to speak to some of our English and cultural supports to help them as they journey forward to blend both their home culture and the Canadian one in a way forward.

ANN POWER: We currently have 40 additional English-language teachers across the province, a large majority of which are in Halifax. This is where most of our newcomers are coming and settling. We have an English-as-an-additional-language strategy under development and French additional language as well. We're working very closely with our

partners that provide excellent services such as the YWCA, ISANS, and other groups and partners that help us in our supports for families and communities.

We have been doing work in the area of resources and professional learning, as well, for teachers so that they can incorporate the type of strategies that help English as additional learners when they're coming, for instance, with no language at all and may be mid-school career.

There are all sorts of things which are currently under way and it's in development right now, but we'll be working on implementing that strategy over the next few years as we go forward. There are currently about 2,200 students who have come into our system who require English-as-an-additional-language services.

BRAD JOHNS: I'd just like to follow up that within the last couple of years I have noticed, in particular, student support workers from the African heritage community. I represent a community - I grew up in Lucasville and I represent the Sackville area - and I have seen more people with African heritage backgrounds working in the school system.

At my daughters' schools, we currently have a student support worker who is doing an absolutely wonderful job. One thing that I do find about this individual is that she has been able to be inclusive to everybody, regardless of their cultural background, and that has united everybody versus creating any divisions or anything. It has been a really good experience having her at our school. I am glad to see that.

When we went to school, the faces at the front of the class all kind of looked the same. I don't feel it's that way now, particularly in the Sackville schools, and it's been positive. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Before we move on, can I just say something quickly? Yesterday was Family Literacy Day, and you want to talk about some success stories: go to Chebucto Heights in Cowie Hill and Principal Myra.

Yesterday, I was invited in to do some reading. There was a young girl and her brother from Syria who two years ago couldn't speak English and were extremely shy and apprehensive. They followed me around the gymnasium and read, *I Love My Bed* with me. If you want to see success stories on helping them become part of our community, but at the same time keeping their culture and being sensitive to their needs - Chebucto Heights.

Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I have two areas of questioning that I'll touch on. First of all, since I was elected in 2013, I think the only department that has had budget increases each year - even through the tight years of 2013, 2014, and 2015 - more investments were being made in education. I'm wondering if you could share with us and Nova Scotians the budget

increase that has happened over the last five or so years and tie that into the investments in inclusive education. Because the classrooms are complex, I would ask or suggest that even lowering the student to teacher ratios in classrooms assists in inclusive education. If you could help me understand a little bit the budget increases in Education and Early Childhood Development.

CATHY MONTREUIL: As long as you don't ask me to go too deep into this one, because I didn't bring my budget binder. I can share that over the last five years the increase to the system budget has been in the neighborhood of \$300 million - \$30 million to date in the first two years of inclusion, specific to inclusion. That \$30 million has increased things like accessible technology people, 364 new people; training; PD; and the culturally responsive, et cetera, have all come out of there. At the same time, our system is growing. So all of those things have come together. The class caps have been firmly in place now for a while and are starting to show benefits, so being able to do all of that.

I can give you an anecdote. This year we released the inclusion policy as a soft launch. We put out an invitation to all of our schools that we set aside \$500,000 for professional learning and we said to our schools, we could keep adding people and we're not saying that they're not necessary. In fact, the students first recommended that we aimed for a ratio of 1:100 EAs or EPAs and currently we're at 1:52, so we've far exceeded in some of the cases of staffing recommendations that they've given us.

We know that simply changing the numbers of staff won't build an inclusive education system so this year we put out an invitation to schools to say together, as school staff, we'd like you to target kids that you know you could be lifting, that you know you could be doing better for. Tell us what you need in terms of time, support, and learning to have different outcomes for these equity seeking groups.

We asked for that information to come into us by Christmas and at Christmas we had in excess of 20 per cent of our schools in the first invitation come forward. So those resources are a variety of tangible things like computers, important human resources like EPAs and EAs, specialist teachers, the SSWs that we've talked about, et cetera. As critical, about supporting our educators who are high quality educators dedicated to our kids to figuring out how to deliver differently to get different outcomes.

KEITH IRVING: What a great thing for Nova Scotia to have schools growing after two decades of decline in student population. I think it's reflective of a positive future for the province.

My second question is perhaps a little bit more difficult. I've got three schools in my constituency. One publicly funded - the Highbury Education Centre that's experiential learning - then Landmark East, which is a non-profit that deals with learning challenges that young people have. Then a very small school operating both in Middleton and

Coldbrook, Rowan's Room which deals with autism and kids with behavioural issues - I'm generalizing there a bit.

These are schools, particularly Landmark East and Rowan's Room, that have very small staff to student ratios: 1:1, 1:6, 2:1 and some of my constituents are taking advantage of that by putting a child that has some learning challenges in for two or three years and then they're back into the public system. It raises, for me, the question in terms of dealing with all the different needs out there and the limitations of the public system to meet all the needs of inclusion. These supplementary schools, some publicly funded, some privately funded or NGOs - how do we view those schools with respect to meeting the needs of individual students in the concept of the public school being inclusive for everyone?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Ann can speak to those stories and those specifics. I think that a responsive system has a range and continuum of services available to raise the bar and close the gap for kids that haven't been reached. I think our continuing increases in investments in general education, in the general learning environment, as well as in the specifics and the specialists. The number of educators, since we have made the training in autism available, is north of 1,200.

We're building the capacity in our system to deal with complexity and a wider range of kids. That said, some of the options parents have for those very high needs and very intensive supports are available through the parallel system. I'll let Ann speak to that.

[11:15 a.m.]

ANN POWER: I think our Tuition Support Program is evidence of the fact that we really don't see the public education system as just being one place, one school, one public building, if you will, but a myriad of supports. When the inclusive education supports came out over the last two years, there was support for alternative learning environments, some of which have been raised here. Those are meant to be flexible, where students go for certain periods of time. They may be back and forth, it may be part time, or they may need, as the deputy alluded to in her remarks, some time to just have a smaller environment because you have other needs, and that environment is a better place for you at that point in time.

Our Tuition Support Program recognizes that, and Landmark is one of the designated special education private schools to which students can go and receive funding support to do so. We work flexibly, as well, with other learning environments, such as Rowan's Room, which are not necessarily schools but places where children may have different types of programming that are suitable for them at particular points in time.

All of our Student Services staff across the province - I'll just give a shout-out to them because they are an incredible group of educators across this province. We're very, very lucky to have them. They work closely with other alternate environments to ensure

that programming is fluid and flexible so that students can transition seamlessly back and forth, as needed, and to support parents in that process as well.

THE CHAIR: Before we start, this will be the last round of questioning, and then we'll jump into the video. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm going to ask about some of the additional staff that you have added over the last couple of years. You hired a number of school psychologists and speech-language therapists in 2018. Those positions were specifically created as non-NSTU positions, and the reason provided at that time from the department and continually is that that was necessary in order for those specialists to work year-round. But as we know, and as the union has pointed out, union staff can work year-round; it just requires negotiation with the NSTU. We have teachers who work in the Summer. The union has said repeatedly that they were open to that conversation.

We have a decision from an arbitrator who has said that the removal of these specialists was an explicit violation of that agreement, ordering their inclusion back into the union. The government has sought a judicial review of this request. Deputy, I wonder if you can comment on how having these specialists excluded from the union provides better services for children, given that it's clear to me - although if you have another thought, I'm all ears - that the year-round work capacity feels like a red herring.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I know that previous attempts to get services over the Summer have resulted in a grievance of those attempts. I know that we have tried different scenarios and efforts. Our most vulnerable kids and their families need service. They need service that doesn't end at three o'clock Monday to Friday. They need service that doesn't end on June 30th.

Remember I said I asked the entire system to start with, how are the children doing? How do we know and what do we need to do? We know that some of our kids aren't doing well. They need more service. They need psychological services. Kids don't operate in isolation. They're connected to families who oftentimes also need support.

So this conversation from the beginning was, and continues to be, about how we get more service flexibly delivered to our families and how we can address any barriers that exist to limit that. From the beginning we said it was never about who represents these workers and today it's still not about who represents these workers. It's about our unyielding commitment to more service flexibly delivered to children and families.

Beyond that, I can't go deeper because it is subject to some legal proceedings, collective agreement and labour processes, so it would be inappropriate for me to go any more deeply, other than our stated objective - more service flexibly delivered beyond the school year.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, and I appreciate that it is before the courts. With respect, it's absolutely about who represents these workers because these workers were specifically excluded from the union that they had always been a part of.

I guess further to that point, can you comment on how the department facilitated those specialists last Summer to work with children and families when school buildings, to my understanding, were not in fact open? Do you have any statistics about how many specialists actually met with children over the Summer months last year?

CATHY MONTREUIL: With respect and through the Chair, we do have those data and they are before the courts.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: I remember reading somewhere that in May there were two professors from Ottawa, I think, that were hired to do a deep dive into inclusion. I'm curious to know whether or not they've actually begun doing that and what their feedback is thus far.

CATHY MONTREUIL: One of the things that we committed to was an evaluation, so we did an RFP. The University of Ottawa was the successful bidder for that. They have been in the system. They have been meeting with parents, teachers and kids. They've been in the schools. They had asked that we have a central implementation team, which includes the REDs and the superintendent from CSAP. Then each region has an implementation team that feeds to that one. The University of Ottawa interacts through Kristen Tynes' leadership and steerage, so they feed back what they're learning as they're learning. Those are the same developmental evaluators who will release a public report this Spring.

BRAD JOHNS: As a follow-up, in addition to those who are doing that report, are there other resources that the department has in place to receive feedback or is it just that one report?

CATHY MONTREUIL: The department has standing advisory groups and committees. We have the Business Education Council, the Council on African Canadian Education, the Council on Mi'kmaq Education, the Council to Improve Classroom Conditions. We have the Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Issues - a student committee. We have one on teacher certification. We meet every month with the principals in the principals' forum. We have the PACE. We've got the Early Years Partnership. We just met with all of the School Advisory Councils across the province. Inclusion is a standing item on every one of the committees every time we meet with them.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to table that document, please?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Much of what we hear about education and most government things are subject to opinion and public perception. You're a year and a half into this initiative. What do you see, now that you have this time behind you, what are your biggest challenges going forward with getting to your goals?

CATHY MONTREUIL: There's always a challenge when you have 10,000 teachers plus almost as many support staff, and then you have parents and all of the groups that I've talked about and helping everybody see the future and move in one direction. I'm very, very pleased that almost every one of those advisory groups - I didn't mention that we meet regularly with the commissioners, as well, from inclusion to make sure that we are implementing with fidelity and with movement.

Ultimately, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, and we have now put in practices - for the first time in Nova Scotia - systematic tracking at every school, and then at the regional levels, on literacy, numeracy, well-being, and it's crosscut by equity so that they have a look at those equity-seeking groups and the groups who may not be there yet.

I have to say that the enthusiasm for this work is in every corner of this province. We have amazing and dedicated teachers and educational workers, student support workers, the administrators, and they're sharing one conversation about being focused on kids and doing better for kids under their roofs. That energy and that shared commitment will serve our kids well.

I invite you on social media to watch the hashtag #WatchUsLearn, because the regions are starting to Tweet using the hashtag #WatchUsLearn to report on the work that they're doing to raise the bar, close the gap, and really going back to the promise and the challenge of inclusion as outlined by the commission. The promise is, we now have a shared commitment with a common dialogue. The challenge is, we have work to do, and we have historic marginalized groups that we need to build trust with and support. I'm confident that as long as we stay focused, we will be able to get there.

THE CHAIR: We have a video. Ms. Montreuil.

CATHY MONTREUIL: We do have a video as our wrap-up. I think when you're working in education, and generally the Chair asks for final comments, if we're at that point, then I'd like to share the video.

THE CHAIR: I have one quick question and then we'll go to final comments - seeing how there's one Liberal question left over there.

I have two children now who have entered the education system and a third going in next year. The question I have for you is: At what point will they start learning about the

Mi'kmaq, and at what point are they going to start learning about African Nova Scotians? In my generation, there was very little education around the Mi'kmaw culture and almost as little around African Nova Scotians. Most of the stuff that we learned around African Nova Scotians was actually American.

My son is in Grade 1 and my daughter's just starting Primary, but at what point are our children introduced to this information? At what point does it become a learning point in their education?

CATHY MONTREUIL: The quick answer is pre-Primary. We've invested in inclusion supports for pre-Primary. We supported a Mi'kmaw cohort of ECE so that kids can see themselves reflected from the very first time they come into pre-Primary and then enter the school system.

This year, in partnership with MK and with a lot of work and goodwill and teaching from the elders in our Mi'kmaw communities, in every school P-2 - Grades 1 and 2 - they are undergoing an in-service right now on how to incorporate Mi'kmaw teaching. These are the curriculum resources that were co-developed - and very generously - in partnership with MK and our Mi'kmaw partners. They have given the rights to teach these.

[11:30 a.m.]

These will set the tone for Mi'kmaw ways of knowing, for the culture. Because it's our youngest learners, each one is accompanied by a character puppet that speaks to the culture, the stories, and the history of our Mi'kmaw people. This will help set the table for our ongoing commitments to reconciliation and our Treaty Education. Our very youngest learners will start to understand the value and appreciate the culture and the language. These are infused with Mi'kmaw words, Mi'kmaw teachings, the understanding of the culture, and the understanding of the roles of elders.

This is a systemic rollout this year. The feedback from the people taking those in-services - one of them said:

I have been a teacher and an administrator in schools with a high First Nation population for over 20 years. I have always treated everyone with respect and tried to be understanding. I gained so much knowledge in the past three days hearing our elders' stories, things that I should have known only growing up 20 minutes from a Mi'kmaw community. I think back to many situations over my career and know I could have handled things differently if I would have had the knowledge and, most importantly, the understanding. I don't look on that with regret, but I look on it as part of my journey and an opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Okay. With that, wrap it up.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I appreciate your questions and comments. To wrap up, our job is to help Nova Scotia's students and support them as they fulfill their potential, as they prepare for their future. I think the video we're about to show you and the voices in it - teachers, education workers, and students - explain the benefits of inclusive education and the reason why this path is so important. May I request that we begin the video and end with the voices of the kids.

[Audiovisual presentation]

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We'll take a five-minute recess, and thank you for today.

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

[11:36 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I'm going to bring it back from recess. I've just been told by the clerk that there is no more committee business, so we're just going to adjourn the meeting. Have a great day, everybody.

[The committee adjourned at 11:36 a.m.]