

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, October 27, 2020

Legislative Chamber

**Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions
&
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Re: The Achievement Gap**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Brendan Maguire (Chair)
Suzanne Lohnes-Croft (Vice-Chair)
Bill Horne
Ben Jessome
Rafah DiCostanzo
Larry Harrison
Brad Johns
Claudia Chender
Kendra Coombes

[Suzanne Lohnes-Croft was replaced by Keith Irving.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Cathy Montreuil,
Deputy Minister

Marlene Ruck Simmonds,
Executive Director - African Canadian Services

Wyatt White,
Director - Mi'kmaq Services



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2020

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Brendan Maguire

VICE-CHAIR

Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Resources. My name is Brendan Maguire. I'm the chair of the meeting. Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards and commissions, we'll hear from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding the achievement gap.

Please turn off your phones or put them on vibrate. In case of emergency, please exit through the back door, walk down the hill to Hollis Street and gather in the courtyard of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Please keep your masks on during the meeting unless you are speaking.

Also, please try not to leave your seat during the meeting unless it's absolutely necessary. We're going to suggest that we take a break at 10:00 a.m. for everybody to stretch your legs and do their business.

Now we'll get everyone to introduce themselves. We'll start with the NDP.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We'll start with the agencies, boards, and commissions appointments.

The Department of Agriculture. Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I so move that Gordon Murray be appointed as a member of the Weed Control Advisory Committee with Perennia.

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

The motion is carried.

The Department of Community Services. Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I so move that Millie Colbourne and Murray Salsman be appointed as members of the Board of Management for the Kings Regional Rehabilitation Centre.

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

The motion is carried.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I so move that the following be appointed to the Council of African Canadian Education: Shaniqwa Thomas as member at large, Darlene Upshaw-Tynes as member for Halifax, Anthony Riley as member for the African United Baptist Association, Charmaine Willis as member for the Black Educators Association, Kimberley King-MacDonald as member for Cape Breton, Glenda Talbot-Richards as member for the Northern Region, William Crawford as member for Southwest Nova, Gerry Clarke as member at large, and Lindell Smith as member at large.

THE CHAIR: Is there any further discussion? Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: Before we vote on this, I do want to express my pleasure at seeing these appointments come forward today, having raised these at our last two previous meetings. I'm very happy today to see that the minister is bringing these forward. I do want to emphasize and point out that in the past there have been comments made at this committee that we're just kind of here to listen to things.

This is a great example, I think, of members of this committee - particularly the members in the Opposition - raising issues that they see and having them addressed by government. This is a great example of that. I certainly thank the minister for bringing these appointments forward today. I have no problem with any of these appointments.

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

The motion is carried.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: I so move that Archy Beals, Lynn Levatte, Gin Yee, Samantha Graham, and Lesley Keeley be appointed as members to the Provincial Advisory Council on Education.

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

The motion is carried.

The Department of Health and Wellness. Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I so move that the following be appointed to the Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia: Dr. April Nason, Dr. Sachin Seth, and Dr. Sunita Sharma as members of the Nova Scotia Dental Association; and Marina Crawford as member for the Nova Scotia Dental Assistants Association.

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

The motion is carried.

Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I so move that Francesca Carone and Sean Ponnambalam be appointed as public representatives to the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology.

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

The motion is carried.

We're just going to run through some committee business quickly. The regular meeting date for our December meeting is December 29th. Does the committee want to meet on that date or reschedule for earlier in the month?

There's December 15th - Veterans Affairs Committee is meeting that day if the House isn't sitting, but their meeting is from 2:00 p.m. 4:00 p.m. Tuesday, December 8th

isn't possible because two other committees are meeting that day, but a Thursday could work, like December 10th, 17th or December 16th.

Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: This is the meeting after the November 26th?

THE CHAIR: Yes, this is for the December meeting, we just want to clear this up because the meeting is December 29th. Usually around that time people are with family, or some people go away, being after Christmas and before New Year's Eve. I was just wondering if everyone is comfortable with that, if we would like to reschedule, it's something that we need to discuss. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: What's the closest date before that?

THE CHAIR: What we have here is December 15th. The Veterans Affairs Committee will be meeting that day if the House isn't sitting, and their meeting is from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Tuesday, December 8th isn't possible because the two other committees are meeting that day, but the suggestion here from staff is a Thursday, December 10th, 17th or Wednesday, December 16th. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: December 17th makes sense to me.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I was just suggesting if we can have this done at the end of the session so that our witnesses are not - we normally do that, if it's easier for our witnesses not to have to listen to all this.

THE CHAIR: Do we want to just wait on committee business? It's short, but if we want to wait on committee business we can jump right into the witnesses. Anybody? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I don't think there's any problems with the 17th - why don't we just get this done?

THE CHAIR: How does everyone feel about December 17th? Mr. Johns, Mr. Harrison? Morning or afternoon? Ms. Chender?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Given that we still anxiously await notice of the reconvening of the Legislature and the committee has to meet, let's say morning.

THE CHAIR: Is everybody okay with the morning? Great.

There's just two other quick things we can run through and then we can jump right into the witnesses. There were two correspondences, one from September 30, 2020, a letter from the Honourable Zach Churchill, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, in response to a request for information made at the meeting of August 25th. Members were emailed this correspondence on September 30th and again yesterday. Are there any questions or concerns? Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: It's just a procedural question. I'm quite okay with having the email, but I'm just curious how that reflects in the minutes and publicly? Is that just put online?

THE CHAIR: I recognize the clerk.

JUDY KAVANAGH (Legislative Committee Clerk): Once it's dealt with in committee, it becomes public information. We don't post it online, but we distribute it to anybody who wants it on request. If anybody emails me, I'll send them a PDF.

THE CHAIR: We also have an October 5, 2020 letter from the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Honourable Zach Churchill, in response to a letter from the committee arising from the meeting of June 30, 2020. This was received October 25th and members were emailed this correspondence yesterday.

Any questions or concerns? That is it. We've wrapped up our committee business. Now we'll go on to the witnesses.

Today we'd like to welcome the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. We have Cathy Montreuil, Deputy Minister; Marlene Ruck Simmonds, Executive Director, African Canadian Services; and Wyatt White, Director, Mi'kmaq Services.

We will open up the floor to opening statements. Would you like to begin, Ms. Montreuil?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. As the Chair pointed out, I am Deputy Minister Cathy Montreuil and I'm here with my colleagues, Dr. Marlene Ruck Simmonds and Wyatt White.

You've invited us today to speak to the achievement gap for Mi'kmaq and African Canadian students. I'd like to reframe our conversation as an opportunity gap for Mi'kmaq and African Canadian students rather than achievement gap.

These gaps are not reflective of inherent differences in capabilities or character, rather they are reflective of unequal education opportunities. Today I want to articulate the

ongoing steps being taken by our province to remove those inequities. I want to speak to where we are making progress and closing gaps and where there is more work to do.

I'm very proud to say that Nova Scotia has been a leader in equity and inclusion. Our inclusive education hires, our inclusive education policy, and our commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy and treaty education are only a few of the significant initiatives that will ultimately move the bar for Mi'kmaq and African Canadian students. There are many more actions and professional learning activities and we will speak to a number of them.

First, I want to highlight what I believe are some of the foundational pieces needed to enhance educational outcomes and close the opportunity gap for Mi'kmaq and Indigenous students and African Canadian and Black students.

First among these is the need to understand the connection between well-being and academic achievement. The two are connected and interdependent. We have asked our teachers and our administrators to focus on student well-being, especially this year during a pandemic. Well-being is a necessary condition for achievement and needs to be attended to along with personalized and precise instruction.

To achieve success in a system of inclusive education, we need students and their parents, caregivers, guardians, and community working closely with the education system. The education system needs to recognize the knowledge and history these important partners bring with them.

As written in the Students First Report, our job is to help all students reach their full potential and our job isn't done until all means all. This will only happen when teachers and administrators create a safe, nurturing learning environment for all students and when teachers and staff work to understand, appreciate, and value the richness of students' identity, knowledge, and ways of being.

Anecdotally, we are hearing that one of the unintended benefits of the pandemic is a greater focus on the part of teachers and staff to understand this context and connect in a more meaningful way with their students.

In the school setting, we also ask our teachers and administrators to use data effectively. We want them to chart the academic and social progress of their students and use assessment to guide instruction and effective teaching for all students, including Mi'kmaq and African Canadian students. We are targeting literacy, numeracy, and well-being for our students and we will use our school improvement plans to identify opportunity and then act with the support of teaching support teams at each and every school.

These teams include specialists, Mi'kmaw education coordinators, regional coordinators, and African Canadian education and student support workers. We also want to be aware of systemic issues in our school system and ensure that these issues are not actualized in the form of barriers, disciplinary outcomes or individual program plans, or IPPs, that play a role in preventing students from succeeding.

We know that Indigenous and Black students generally score below their school counterparts in literacy and mathematics on provincial assessments. This underachievement is not a reflection on the student, but on the system that needs to provide opportunities to learn and achieve. What is also troubling is that these students are more often put on IPPs and they are handed suspensions at a higher rate than their non-Mi'kmaw or non-African Canadian counterparts.

While we find these results troubling, I'm encouraged by the change under way in our system. For the first time, we have an Inclusive Education Policy that requires change on the part of schools and of their leaders. Our Inclusive Education Policy states the following:

“As part of the Student Success Planning process, every school will use evidence, including disaggregated data, to monitor and evaluate how students are doing and will respond with appropriate, timely supports. These identified supports will be supported by the Teaching Support Team at each school.”

The policy calls on us to accept that disproportionate outcomes based on identity often reflect systemic issues that need to be addressed. We expect staff to work with their student support networks and their families to find solutions that positively impact students. Policies alone will not drive this change. We need people in our education system to be leaders. We are actively supporting this leadership through a variety of opportunities, including training, course offerings, and changes to curriculum.

I'd like to highlight a few of our system initiatives, including:

- development of a mandatory anti-racism and anti-discrimination leadership module and mentorship program for principals, vice-principals and other system leaders;
- a new African Nova Scotian education framework has been consulted on and developed;
- development of a provincial support network for Black staff;
- a Summer learning academy for teachers of African Canadian Studies 11 and African Heritage Literature 12;

- revisions to the curriculum to enhance culturally relevant information and approaches;
- Afrocentric cohorts at schools under the Halifax Regional Education Centre and in the Annapolis Valley;
- training for Mi'kmaw and African Canadian early childhood educators to increase their presence in our systems for our youngest students; and
- working with university education programs to enhance diversity in the teaching ranks.

Professional development surrounding treaty education is well under way: schools across Nova Scotia are adopting initiatives like Orange Shirt Day to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation; student enrichment grants and a Summer scholar program have been robust and well-attended, even in a pandemic year; and student scholarships to universities and colleges, and professional learning opportunities.

Our curriculum is competency-based, outcome-based and outcome-measured. Students develop student-centred learning experiences using a range of provincially distributed and teacher-selected resources. This means that students across the province work toward the same outcomes, but the coursework can vary based on their interests, their needs and their experiences. This curriculum approach gives teachers the flexibility to design learning experiences that meet their students where they are in their learning journey and reflects their communities.

At the same time, our teachers are using culturally responsive pedagogy as they work to those curriculum outcomes. This means using approved resources and books that connect students' social, cultural, family, or language background to what the student is learning. This is important for those individual students and those students who learn alongside them about their culture, their history, and their experiences. It nurtures that cultural uniqueness and responds by creating conditions in which the students' learning is enhanced.

In Nova Scotia, our commitment to reconciliation, treaty education and African Nova Scotia learning is part of our commitment to provide inclusive education across the province. This is an important part of our curricula and will continue to be a priority. Treaty education will be offered in all grades throughout the Nova Scotia curricula, and the culture and history of African Nova Scotians is embedded within curriculum outcomes for all grades and enhanced in social studies and visual arts.

As we review the secondary school curriculum, strengthening the presence of both these cultures' history and teachings is a key outcome to that work. As you know, the global pandemic has had a significant impact on our operations. It has disrupted our normal

routines and our ability to do business as usual. That said, we are actively moving forward with the mandatory anti-racism and anti-discrimination leadership module that addresses concepts like racism and discrimination, power and privilege, impact on well-being and student achievement, and leading system change.

At the same time, I'm proud of what our teaching and support staff, our educational leaders and families and communities have accomplished: 800 teachers took the online summer learning institute program, with a focus on inclusive education and equity, this past August. Our normal turnout for summer learning is about 200 teachers.

With this work and with this being the first full year of our inclusive education policy in our schools, my colleagues and I are happy to have this conversation with you and to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to open the floor to questions now? We'll open the floor to questions. The first we have is from the NDP. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Good morning. Nice to see you all here, and thank you for that, and I think that reframing is apt. I think it's at the core of why we're here, and we're still asking questions. We know that this has obviously been on the radar of many African Nova Scotians and Mi'kmaw communities forever, but it's been firmly on the radar of at least this body since 1994, when the Black Learners Advisory Committee Report on Education was published. We know that the BLAC Report raised so many of the same issues that we are still talking about right now.

We saw a ministerial response to that report in 1995; the BLAC Implementation Review Committee report was published in 2003; we had a review published in 2009; a ministerial response in 2010. This achievement gap as you noted, deputy, was raised in the Students First report. Most recently *Count Us In: Nova Scotia's Action Plan in Response to the International Decade for People of African Descent* has included an action to, "Continue research on student achievement and the achievement gap that targets specific strategies, actions, and supports for enhancing the academic success, scholarship, and well-being of African Nova Scotian students."

My question is, and this is really a genuine question: what is the big roadblock? We have been actively discussing this, and I think the simple answer is probably systemic racism, but I'm wondering if either of our colleagues can tease that out a little bit. Why have we made so little progress when this issue has been clearly within our sights for so long?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Montreuil.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thank you for the question, because it's a driving question to our work. I can start, and I'm sure my colleagues will have value to add to this.

As we looked at the BLAC report, *Reality Check*, the Mi'kmaw report, *Students First* and all of these pieces - and one of the things that we've done is a dive on the date over time - this problem has been a wicked problem. It's been sticky. It hasn't moved much. It's moved a little bit for Mi'kmaw kids in terms of literacy and numeracy, but not enough and certainly not consistently.

When we asked ourselves those questions and went back and unpacked some of the past dialogues and actions and action plans, et cetera, one of the things that I think we came to the conclusion on is that there's been a gap between the intention and the impact. When we look back on the actions, those two things have never been woven together properly, so that we end up plotting on the progress reports over time, a series of actions disconnected from whether those actions were having the intended impact.

What we've spent about a year with our communities - not just in the department, but with educators and our communities - is looking at how we bring the impact. I think the last time I was with you on inclusive education, I talked to you about the driver in our system - how are the children doing, not what have the adults done, but how are the children doing and how do we know.

We also found that the disaggregated data - and Nova Scotia is probably one of the first jurisdictions I can find that did self-identification and disaggregated data, what they didn't do was give wide access to that data, so people didn't see it, didn't live with it, and didn't try to impact it. We've changed those rules, and not only given access right down to the school levels on those disaggregated data. What we've done is put into the policy a requisite for every school to use them in their student achievement planning.

The last piece that we did was, we constructed the student achievement planning. The other thing the system hadn't done was make mandatory regional plans connected to the research and reported on annually a requirement. Old school boards, it wasn't required, and it wasn't a requirement. It is now.

I think the accountability for actually having the impact has been an important missing layer to all of the work that many people have done over decades - that we've put into place. The last thing we did was reconstructed the school improvement plans, which used to deal with inclusion and equity separately from their student improvement plans.

We've now said to them, in your plans, we want you to work on numeracy - they've always worked on it like this - and literacy, they've always worked on it across the page. We added well-being because the sense of valuing identity and histories is core to well-being. Then we said, but you must have equity in every single layer, and you must have metrics for those.

The first year that we put those into action was this past school year, and we were rudely interrupted in March. We haven't abandoned it. So schools took their snapshot of how kids made up to the pandemic as a starting point for this year - and their work.

I think those are the essential changes. I'd like to offer my colleagues an opportunity to weigh in in their respective portfolios.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Simmonds.

DR. MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: Good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to answer that question. I think it's right to ask that question. For me, one of the biggest issues is that the concerns parents and families have had with respect to under-performance of the educational system in Nova Scotia - those concerns have certainly been raised, but if you understand how systemic racism and discrimination are manifested, we're really talking about issues of power that have existed.

With African Nova Scotian students, we have approximately 7,700 this year, or about 6 per cent - maybe close to 7 per cent - of the population. So the question has to be asked, not just in terms of the actions that were done in the past: How did people utilize their power to create an implementation process that would enable that change in the structure?

In the absence of that proactive, genuine, sincere use of power, we end up in the same situation. I can't over-stress how important that is to really create the changes. We are certainly looking at impact and being very thoughtful and mindful about what we're engaging in as a department. We can certainly run through all of this, but it's a constant reflection around whether we are making the changes that are necessary. Behind that is also the additional question: If the answer is no, are we prepared to change or are we more comfortable with continuing the status quo?

The second point for me, which is equally important is that in 2020 - October 27th - we are explicitly talking about opportunity gaps. That is a shift. That is a provincial shift.

[9:30 a.m.]

These conversations have certainly happened in communities. We've had educators talk about it - even people in post-secondary education - to say this isn't an issue that belongs with the children. It's not a problem that's internal to certain groups of children within our system. We've shown we can educate children. The problem is the gap between those who are successful and the other children who are coming in.

We know it's the opportunities to achieve. Once we realize it's not internal to any child - so a Black brain is similar to a white brain entering into the doors of education - it's how we are inspiring and engaging students and what are the learning opportunities that

we are creating so that all children can be successful? Quite honestly, these are very deep conversations to ask, as well as to answer, within a provincial system that has been established for hundreds of years.

What I appreciate about the Inclusive Education Policy is that it's calling all people - everyone who's involved in education - and more importantly, looking at what is the degree of power that you possess to make these changes for the children who are least served within our educational system.

When we ask that question, then we arrive at certainly different answers, but doing the same thing is no longer acceptable. We know if we continue to do the same things, we are reproducing and widening the gap. The students who are able to do well within our system, or the students whom the system is intentionally catering to, will continue to do well.

We know within our system now that we're also explicitly talking about racism. It exists within our institutions and it has existed within the educational system. I'm not saying anything new - you mentioned the BLAC Report. The question is: What are we doing to address that within our system? For us within the department, we know it's multi-faceted because we're dealing with a systemic issue which has been ingrained within the institutions and the layers of education.

One of the places in which we're starting is with the leaders of the educational system - the principals and vice-principals in particular. Since January 2020, we hired Ken Fells of the Delmore "Buddy" Daye Learning Institute to lead what we are calling an anti-racism/anti-discrimination leadership module and a mentorship program. This, for us, is key within education.

We know from speaking with educational leaders in the system, as well as from working with PSAANS and NSTU, that there are educational leaders who want to be equipped, they want to feel confident, in dealing with racialized incidents and incidents of racism. This module is a response back to that.

The other part in which this module is crucial is that it's also a response back to parents and families and communities who've said for the longest time that racism exists and our system has responded by saying, "Are you sure?" or, "Can you prove it?" One of the first components of the modules is entitled Disrupting the Silence. It's an intentional and explicit statement that it exists. We're not questioning, we're not looking for feedback - it exists.

We certainly have instances in the province where there are regions that are working on efforts to respond and equip the leaders. The one thing that comes to mind is the Tri-County Regional Centre for Education. They have a racial incident protocol. We

know we need to be intentional about ripping off that band-aid that questions whether or not racism exists.

Part of the utilization of that power is simply acknowledging that. We speak about first-voice accounts. We're undergoing consultations with people around the module and hearing their stories specifically. These are voices from teachers, educational leaders, community stakeholders, parents, and youth around what their experiences are within education.

The module, I think, is certainly a necessary first step towards that. What I also appreciate about it is that it is mandatory. All administrators, principals, and vice-principals will be required to take this leadership module and it sets out the expectation. The other component I can speak to really quickly before I pass it on to Wyatt is around the element of system accountability. That's another component.

We know that our system has reacted by doing things, and sometimes those things were appropriate and aligned with what should be done when there are racialized incidents, and other times they haven't been. But what we've heard from parents and families and communities is there has been a void around them hearing what has actually taken place.

[9:15 a.m.]

The system accountability is an intentional opportunity for educational leaders to report back, for there to be an open exchange of information as a public body to be able to respond back and say, these are things that we're engaging in, and how can we make sure that we are supporting and caring for the children that have been placed within our schools and our buildings. I wanted to marry the two of those, there are a couple of other components I'll mention really quickly. (Interruption)

Okay. Anyway, we're excited about the work. We know there's more to do, but it's a start.

THE CHAIR: Take your time, we've got two hours. You can keep going, it's fine.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: Okay, really quickly, I'll mention the second component and I think this is really important because the deputy led off with this, is the intersection between well-being and achievement.

What we heard from families is even though we went through this pandemic, there was a period of time in which children and their families did not have to worry about experiencing racism because they weren't at school. So as much as it was difficult, and it posed challenges for families, there was almost like this reprieve from having to carry that weight, that assault that many children experience when they enter the schools, whether or not it's name-calling or slurs or writing on the wall.

Calculating the cost in this module speaks to that element distinctively. Racism has a cost - a wellness cost. It causes people to feel anxiety, unwell. We speak about it in terms of historical trauma; it is traumatizing. Imagine having to go to school and experiencing the trauma of having to go back into the environment. So we want to make sure that our educational leaders understand that racism is not just an incident. It's actually trauma.

The last component I'll speak to is around enacting change. It's the doing. What is it that you'll need to do as an educational leader to change the system that you are in charge of within? Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. White.

WYATT WHITE: Good morning. Weli-eksitpu'k. Just to maybe complement what Marlene was talking about is our observations given the students that we support most intently share a common experience in the education system.

I think one of the most contributing factors to that experience is a sense of self-confidence, of self-awareness, especially when you're in an environment that does not reflect the community to which you're from. I raise this because I really feel as though there is a shared sense of responsibility that is growing amongst the teacher and leader force in our school system that is taking on that challenge to understand that from the moment the student steps off the school bus or out of a vehicle to arrive at the school, the teacher or principal is greeting them and that they see themselves - the teacher might say Gwe' or Weli-eksitpu'k or good morning or bonjour or however means they have to connect with that student on a cultural level.

I think a huge amount of credit for this shift, this sea change that we see, comes from the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I think their design of the 94 calls to action to which a number of them are targeted towards public schools has reached into every single Canadian at some point and demonstrated that you as an individual, as a citizen, regardless of your occupation, have a role in reconciliation.

If you happen to be a teacher, a janitor, a bus driver, a principal, you take on that responsibility because you have students for whom the system has historically taken away from their ability to access education. It's having a school system that is more reflective in seeing yourself as a Mi'kmaq student, seeing yourself with Mi'kmaq teachers and Mi'kmaq principals. We have an extraordinary on-reserve education system in our province that is unique in Canada and we have the model of how that can work really well in our neighbouring First Nations communities. Our job is to bring that experience much more closely in line with the public school experience.

I raise that point because I think it is a critical part of the sea change that is happening and as was pointed out, why I believe things are different this time around. There's a combination of that accountability through the work of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission. I think there is also an amazing uptake in the commitments and responsibilities of understanding what it means to be a treaty person, and understanding that when every Nova Scotian is to be considered a treaty person - and if you are a teacher or principal - you have that responsibility to ensure that every student - Mi'kmaq included - has access to the opportunities, not only to try to have access to it, but to be successful in attaining that.

I've heard from system leaders who are saying they really believe it's not enough to ensure that kids get across the stage. It's really about holding account to say that when they complete their high school experience, was it meaningful? Did it help answer key questions like understanding as a Mi'kmaq student who I am, where did I come from, where am I going and what's my purpose? I think that's the value that's being added back into the system with culturally responsive pedagogy or practices, treaty education, reconciliation, and education, to name a few.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks. That's really helpful and good to hear. I have a lot of other questions, and hopefully I'll get one more in, but just to follow up on that, I heard in your various remarks references to specifics - I think it was the Yarmouth area has a racial incident response plan. I know that Cole Harbour has an Afrocentric curriculum. The on-reserve education is slightly different because that comes out of a different education authority, but still we have that model that exists in certain places.

When we were here locked in battle about the elimination of the school boards - which predated you, Ms. Montreuil - one of the conversations that we heard from the government was about consistency: we're going to have a consistent application of good practice across the province that will benefit students. I've mentioned a few. Another is - as Mr. White mentioned - seeing diversity reflected in the school leadership and teaching. There are a lot of examples, obviously, that many of you have given about the things that move the needle.

My follow-up question is: How are you working towards ensuring that those specific opportunities move into all of our public schools and to the benefit of all of our students?

CATHY MONTREUIL: When you're engaging in system change and system improvement, the research will tell you that if you have a top-down approach, you will not be successful. If you leave it to be entirely organic and from the bottom up, you will not be successful. I talked to the system about a sweet spot from top-down to bottom-up, and you need to meet there.

Some of the examples that you've heard around some of the work that's going on in the province - we deliberately spent the year of development, and about six months, I think, before then - about seeding. We seeded money to schools. We seeded the system to

say, find the Nova Scotia ways - because the other thing is, if this was easy, we would be there.

We've looked at other places. Probably the most successful educational story for Indigenous education is New Zealand. We've picked some pieces from there and the Maori experience. We've looked around for where people are being successful and if there is anything wholesale at a system level we can grab. Where we can, we do.

[9:45 a.m.]

One of the pieces we've heard from community - and certainly I've experienced as deputy in the last three or so years - has been overt acts of racism and how they're responded to in the system. To Marlene's point, we went and we created a high-level framework around naming it, calling it out, consequences which are necessary, and teaching is also necessary, right? It's not one or the other. We've looked at how that's landing. Tri-County has a very successful model; we will scale it.

When we look at Afro-centric, the Afro-centric projects are interesting because they save kids. Kids are coming in at low trajectories and these staff move in on them, they wrap their arms around them, and they do a couple of things. Number one is they tell these kids that they will do well - you can do well and you will do well. Then the second thing they do is bring in - addressing the well-being piece - who you are.

Some of these kids from the Auburn program come and speak to young kids. They tell them there's two things they need to learn to do well in school like they themselves did, so they now speak from experiences being successful. They say the two things are: you have to work hard, and you have to know who you are. That's why that well-being piece and that identity piece are so important.

I have had conversations with the Auburn people to say that what they're doing is necessary and they're saving kids. I'm their biggest cheerleader. However, we have a systemic issue about why those kids enter high school with a low trajectory that isn't at the door of that high school.

One of the things that we're seeding is a learning community in those feeder schools to change the trajectory by allowing that specific intervention and instruction. Auburn just gap closes. If you have a gap that makes you unsuccessful in Grade 10 mathematics, then we're going to stop for a minute and close the gap so that you can access that curriculum.

They have some practices; I've reflected on them. I can find in good research around how kids do well, it's almost everything that that program's doing. What we need to do now, step one, is step back from that program to ask why it's necessary in the first place. That's where systemic racism lives. That's where expectations around kids and what they're capable of, it meshes with that notion. That's what we need to deconstruct and learn

ourselves forward from. There's lots of ways to do it. That conversation is happening. There will be some threads out of there that we can teach other elementary schools around trajectory, gap closing early, and around all of those kinds of things.

One of the pieces is that as Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development in Nova Scotia, I have the ability now to say to my colleagues here to bring that up, systematize it, policy it, get it out, teach it, and then hold people accountable for it.

One of the benefits around bringing this system forward is that we have that. We have some good practices in Halifax. We've got some emerging practices in Truro in terms of some relationship with Indigenous partners that we're able then to bring up and systematize. Those are some of the ability to benefit.

What we can do is, if Tri-County can address racism in ways that the community feels safer, more respected, and the system understands that we will not condone it and we refuse to ignore it, then we have a process that we can systematize. That will be the next piece of work from some of those nuggets.

THE CHAIR: Mr. White.

WYATT WHITE: Just to reach back, in one of those systemic areas that I think in looking just outside of the current public school system into the pre-service teacher education world, again, looking at what seems to be making a difference. As of late, there is a strong commitment amongst all B.Ed. institutions in Nova Scotia to take on the responsibility in being culturally responsive to ensuring that treaty education is a strong part of the B.Ed. curriculum that they offer.

There's also a recognition that students learn differently. Because Mi'kmaw language is so significantly different from English or French, Mi'kmaw students have a way of learning differently, even having come from a family or community where the Mi'kmaw language hasn't been spoken for a generation or two.

When teachers are receptive to understanding that if I make this question around math more action-oriented because it triggers that part of the brain that is a bit more sensitive for Mi'kmaw students, their outcomes are greater. We've got fantastic colleagues at St. Francis Xavier University who have done research to show how this works.

I think looking back, looking into pre-service, building that connection to ensure that they're graduating teachers who are ready and competent, and I think even more so confident to take on this challenge, and to know that they're not expected to know everything about every aspect of every culture to which the student they're trying to teach belongs, but the sense of being relational and understanding we have shared questions, why don't we learn about all of this together? - I think that's a really important point that's

making strides and ensuring that we've got a really, really both competent and confident teacher force coming into the system.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank all of you for that information. We're living in a very small world right now, and all of the cultures are being mixed, and if we're going to have a healthy community, healthy family, healthy province or healthy nation, we've got to find a way of getting all those cultures together - not to isolate them, not to bring everything into one thing, but to respect each culture as it is and have us move forward.

Unfortunately, for a lot of these students, families will not cut it. They already have their biases and so on, and the same with some communities. But for these kids, this is where we need to start, and school is the one place where these children are going to come together and share all this stuff. If we do it properly, then we know we're going to move ahead in a more productive way, no question. I do want to thank you for your mindset and heartset right now, because it is the direction we need to move in.

I just want to enter into a particular one: Horton High School. They've created a group of Grade 10 students, and they're sharing academic English, math, and also Afro-Canadian studies. Can you explain the rationale for creating that cohort of 15 - I think there are 15 in the group - and how the students were determined and how the success is going to be monitored?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Horton High School watched, talked, and learned from Auburn High School, and I just spoke about changing the trajectory of kids who are tracking low. A lot of our conversation this morning has said every parent in Nova Scotia sends us their best kid. They all should be able to do well. The differences that are showing up in this aggregated data are not in the children's DNA; they're in differences in how the system deals with the kids.

I'll let Marlene speak specifically to Horton High, but it's what we would call a Tier 2 intervention to say these kids are coming into high school and right now they're not picking courses, or they're not being registered in courses - whether or not they pick them is a whole other conversation. That leaves many doors open to them, and we can change that.

The high school said we can change this with these kids. We can instruct them differently, we can work with them and their families and change the trajectory of them so that they have more options and more success on the other end of secondary school. That's step one.

Step two is fixing why these kids are coming in with lower trajectories and gaps in their learning. Marlene can speak more to the rationale in terms of why we are replicating,

but everything we just shared about Auburn Drive High School is probably the drivers to Horton High School.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: I'm thinking it connects nicely with something that happened about a year ago: the creation of two new branches within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. With that intentional act to grow the Black leadership - the African Nova Scotian leadership - around education, it was extremely monumental. Because out of that, we arrived at a place where these initiatives that are coming from first voice communities, African Nova Scotian and African American - in this case, it comes from a regional coordinator of African Canadian education, along with the regional staff who recognize that there are better ways to educate and that we can certainly do that.

I can't underscore enough the emphasis on ensuring that our schools are staffed with highly trained individuals that are coming from our communities within Nova Scotia, as well as ensuring that they are placed within all levels of education. We came from a tradition where most of the Black staff within our province would be a custodian initially. Then over time, we have grown our complement of teachers such that we provided scholarships this year to over 438 students across a variety of professions - teachers included.

I want to underscore the importance of growing that leadership because out of that emphasis came the opportunities to be innovative and creative. These are the individuals who are working hand in hand, on the ground with the children. They know the families, irrespective of what the achievement is - they know the children.

In our African Nova Scotian framework, we've developed one of the core components: authentic self-identification. I'm sure it's no different in Mi'kmaq communities or Acadian communities. Being able to represent, speak for and speak to the issues that are impacting your communities is most essential. This would be one of those elements where I think the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recognized and supported the leadership within the system around the education of Black students.

To connect back to the cohort, I'm really excited that group of students is scheduled to graduate in 2020. Rightly said, there are about 15. We also know that there are a couple of students who were in Grade 11 who also wanted to connect back with the cohort. So that region - the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education - is working really hard to ensure that students get connected.

What I heard loud and clear as well around these opportunities is that it gives the students an opportunity to work with children from their communities - those children who look like them - and there's the opportunity to have that shared sense of learning and that

collaborative approach to education. I think that we want to see more in education where when students are working together, they're seen as helping each other.

We recognize that there is this collective responsibility - at least within our communities - that says, I'm responsible for you. It really nurtures that collectivity and really helps to promote that sense of resilience and strength that communities pour into the children.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you very much. One thing puzzled me when I listened to you. I tried to imagine if I were a student of a different culture, what it would feel like going into an all-white school, and I can't. My heart won't go there. I cannot imagine.

When this is being taught in the schools - I don't know how many African Canadian staff members there are, but the one in Horton High School is not being taught by an African Canadian. I'm wondering why that would be the case because I would think the information would come better.

[10:00 a.m.]

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: I think what's important is the context. That wraparound model is Afrocentric. We know that not all of the teachers at Auburn were Black, either. It's the experience that's created around them that is connected to who they are as children, as young people in community. It's that context from which they draw strength.

The reality is that within Nova Scotia, you're less likely to have a teacher of Black African ancestry. I think the goal of our public education system is to ensure - similar to what we heard - that all of our educators are equipped to be able to respond to all children and to teach all students. That's what our Inclusive Education Policy says.

The challenge that we have not taken up in our province is that we haven't seen all children as being capable of learning. The expectation is that all children will be taught and it is the responsibility of our system to ensure that all children are taught.

My hope is that children would be able to go to school, enter that school, as I always say, whole, receive an education, and be able to pursue their goals and their dreams and the promise. Until then, we know that's not the case - that some of the spaces they enter actually don't create that place of wholeness. I think that's even why the cohorts become even more important around that wellness issue, that sense of safety, where they can draw strength from.

We're hoping that other jurisdictions and other schools will take what is being learned and what is being demonstrated. I think parents expect that when their children go to school, they'll be able to receive their education. That is really what these Afrocentric cohorts are also delivering: an education to the learners. This is the expectation of all parents. It is an innovative approach to that.

The expectation is the Inclusive Education Policy says it's for all of us. We're all compelled to deliver. I just really want to speak to this document because it was something that was created by the department around inclusive education, *The Call to Value Black Students Lives*. This document speaks quite explicitly that the responsibility of the change for the system rests with all of us, especially with those who are in those positions of power to shift and make the change.

We haven't seen the change because of the ways in which the powers have been utilized. This document says to utilize your power, recognize the privilege, and disrupt those systems that enable the systemic racism and those structures to take place - whether it's in curriculum or discipline - that we all need to really focus and make sure that we are working in the best interests of the children: not our systems, not our traditions, but our children.

CATHY MONTREUIL: If I could briefly comment before you break. The notion about teaching about culture and identity, et cetera, rests on a phrase called "necessary for some, good for all." It's important that all of our kids learn the identities and the cultures that are in Nova Scotia.

When I speak to teachers, I remind them that long ago - for me for sure - they all went to their first teaching interview. When teachers go to the first teaching interview - because education's not especially inventive - they probably all still get the question about why you want to be a teacher.

I know back in the day, the answer for me was because I can make a change and I want to reach every student. I want to reach every kid. I don't know any teacher who a) would get hired or b) would answer that question around if I work very, very hard, I can reach about 75 per cent of these kids. That's not why they got in.

This work is about all means all, valuing every single kid, and creating our moral imperative as a profession to ensure that every student reaches their potential and that we change us, what we do, how we instruct, and our behaviour in order to make that outcome change for those kids. Really, that's the driver here. That's the conversation that we're having with teachers and principals and support staff and communities throughout Nova Scotia under inclusive education.

THE CHAIR: With that, we're going to take a 15-minute break. We'll be back here at approximately between 10:20 and 10:21.

[10:05 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:20 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: That would be 15 minutes and we're going to call the meeting back to order, and we'll move on to the Liberal caucus. Ms. DiCostanza?

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: DiCostanza is from Seinfeld. That's why I get that a lot. (Laughter)

This has been really enlightening. It brought a lot of emotions to me as I'm listening to you. I have been here for 36 years, and my experience in Canada has been amazing, truly. As an immigrant - for me to be even here as an MLA, sometimes I have to pinch myself that I am from Iraq, a girl from Iraq and have made it here. To me, this speaks to how this country, this community accepts people. That's how I see it.

Sorry to share this, but I had a young girl who was in her 20s, a Black Nova Scotian. We were writing something together. She wrote a lot of things that, for me - and I'm writing something for a magazine about how I experience racism and other things - I said no, I've never experienced this, and I realized she's in her 20s, she had experienced all this that I have not. That's when it really hit me that there is a difference. There is a difference between different levels of racism, even though I'm an immigrant who is different.

In my own country, when I was raised, I was a minority because I was a Christian. All my life, I've been some kind of a minority and had to live with it. But coming to Canada has been one of the best places that I honestly haven't felt a quarter of what I felt in England, for example. I want to understand and want to help, and I have a riding that is the most multicultural. I am blessed and I see it as an amazing gift or richness. My riding is so rich in so many ways because of its multiculturalism. Our school in Clayton Park West has over 100 languages.

I've been thinking a lot in the last couple of years because of incidents that I've experienced. I have a large community of new Africans who have moved to Clayton Park from Nigeria, from Ethiopia - very amazing people really, and some are entrepreneurs, highly educated and a lot of new kids are going to the schools. I wonder and worry, are they experiencing what the African Nova Scotians have experienced? I'm wondering and I'm trying to reach out, and as I was speaking to this young lady in her 20s, I said, what is it that we need to change this? And she said to me, Rafah, two things: education and employment.

This is what will change: the opportunity of good education and the opportunity of employment. Truly, that is for all immigrants. We do have to work harder to get there, and if you work hard, you make it here. My husband's parents came with zero English and they

worked and raised two highly educated kids who have done so well. Opportunities are here if we take them.

My question is: how can I help - and I really have tried - to make sure that the new African kids who are in my schools in my riding - are they experiencing the same racism? I wanted to know, and if you guys are looking at that, and if they're not, isn't this an example of what immigration is doing, because I don't think they're experiencing this. Maybe I'm wrong. Is there a study that we can do to see if this is just because it was embedded in African Nova Scotians? Is the racism still happening? I believe immigration - when you see yourself between many different, then you're no longer the odd one out.

As my colleague referred to, I can't imagine how somebody - I have an assistant who grew up in the Valley and she was the only brown girl in her school. She experienced it. Maybe you can have a coffee with her, Mr. Harrison. She will tell you. However, she has done so well. She has completed journalism and she's working with me. She's just an amazing person and looks at everybody as equal. We really don't see that in Nova Scotia in my riding. I want to find ways of making sure my new African immigrants don't go through the old racism. Is this happening? Are you looking at this in any way? How can I help in figuring this out?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Racism and systemic racism has its roots and power and differential power structures. One of the pieces that our research and data tells us is that, in fact, kids who are multi-generational African Nova Scotian do less well than Black kids from other backgrounds. The longer kids of Black heritage are here, the less well they do. That's a reflection on the system, not on the kids.

Racism exists and we need to be able to say that with just a period at the end of a two-word sentence. Racism exists. How it's experienced may be different, but it doesn't make it less damaging.

One of the things that we sometimes hear is: Well, we're not as bad as the United States or Britain, or fill in the blank. That doesn't make us good. One of the things that we've said is that we're going to name it and we're going to listen to community and kids when they talk about it. It's too easy to say, well, it's not as bad or you couldn't have, or I have another friend who didn't feel that way, so therefore it doesn't exist.

I think that's really important because unless the people who have power over the system are willing to say that racism exists - and let it resonate around a room - it won't change.

I think that to your point, we do have - and, in fact, we're doing some work this year on our self-identification process, allowing for more choices, so that we can start to get nuanced outcomes for different people.

The last piece that we need to be very careful about is - make no mistake, education knows how to raise scores. We could raise the scores of kids who are not achieving well and leave them devastated with respect to their well-being and the impacts of racism on them. That's why well-being and achievement have to be woven together. I don't want people to finish our systems and say, well, I graduated well so therefore I'm pretty good, if the journey to that graduation was traumatic and painful, and created everyday challenges, and facing every day with tightness in your stomach and reluctance, and feeling better when school is out than when school is in.

[10:30 a.m.]

There are a lot of metrics that we need to pay attention to as we take this journey. I think we need to be very careful about saying that if they graduated, or if they graduated and got a job, the system's done its work. Not if we left them devastated along the journey.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: I guess what I'd also just like to add is the fact that if you haven't experienced racism first-hand, you've more than likely benefited from it. I want to repeat that: if you haven't experienced the systematic racism that has created barriers for others - if it's creating barriers, that means it's opening up pathways for others - then you have more likely benefited from a system that has allowed racism to be perpetuated.

I know that's a very strong statement, but I need you to sit with that because that is the reality in which we're living in Nova Scotia. We have a system that has benefited - it doesn't matter if we're talking about justice, education, or health care - you hear the conversations. We have a system that has created barriers, but not for all.

Think about a race. All the runners are lined up to race. The gun goes off and you go ahead. As you're running, there's a barrier that gets erected in front of you but no barrier in front of someone else. The person manages to get beyond that barrier and you're still running ahead. Right away, you have a head start on that person.

As that person continues to run, then there's another brick wall that comes up. Then there's another brick wall that comes up. By virtue of the fact that there have been these systemic barriers, you've already reached the finish line. It didn't mean that you were any faster or that you trained any harder than the other person. The fact that you didn't experience those barriers meant that you reached that finish line faster and in better shape.

That's the education system that we are interrupting now. The system that says if you didn't reach the finish line, it's because of something inherent in you - you didn't study enough, you missed the class, you didn't take the right course. The system we need to create is one that says all children - because their parents are paying for an education - have the right to an education system.

Our job is to remove those barriers. We often hear about equal opportunity. We're not talking about equal opportunity. Clearly in that race, things aren't equal. In order for it to be equitable, those barriers need to be removed. That's the job within education and because it's systemic, it's hidden. It often portrays things as a matter of people having tenacity or having the will or perseverance. That is not the system that we have in Nova Scotia.

I can speak about having taught courses at university on education as it connects to immigration. Even within our country, as the deputy said, we often have this perception that we are a country that opens up its doors to everyone. We know, when we look at policies in our country, that we have decided when we're going to open up those doors and we are really particular around when we open our doors. It's often because there's something that we can gain from it, quite honestly.

We don't have this rosy sort of reputation of being open to all people. It's very specific around who gets in. In fact, I remember showing a video at the National Film Board and it was called Who Gets In? It's quite hilarious to watch. It's quite old - going back to the '70s - but it talks about how decisions were made even around immigration.

I think that position of questioning has served us well. I think as a department, we're really questioning what's beneath the surface. It looks this way but in reality, once we begin to peel back those layers, it bears no resemblance to some of the narratives that have been created around the children who are underserved in our system.

That would be one of what we in culturally responsive pedagogy are really trying to address. We call it a deficit approach, where we're not able to see the system, but we see the individuals or their families or where they're living or where they're working as being the issue when that's not the case.

I want to jump to what we said even around the differences and experiences, because you're quite right. As the deputy said, when people are coming into our system as adults or as young people coming into our system, right now they're not starting in Primary having to navigate that educational system. In fact, they're coming in many times already educated.

They're not subjected to, and I use that word, to that educational experience as generations of African Nova Scotians would be subjected to. This is the only education system that we have available to us, so never mind if we talk about Mi'kmaq children who go back thousands of years. So the experiences are not parallel.

If you come in at a junior high level, then really you just have high school, so you have three grades. You have been able to build in those foundational skills, especially around literacy and mathematics that we know are paramount to educational achievement. We are starting to unpack that because we know there are differences in Black children

within our province, and their experiences are different, and those experiences matter and we're really starting to take a look so that we can figure out what those barriers are that are being created for our children, and what the opportunities are that we now need to make sure to eliminate the barriers.

These aren't opportunities to pull children up. These are opportunities to change the system to ensure children can run their race.

THE CHAIR: Mr. White.

WYATT WHITE: I live in your riding, and I've had a chance to visit Park West and spoke with students about treaty education, reconciliation, at a Grade 6 class. I went in thinking, I'm not sure this material is quite right, I was expecting a slightly higher grade level, but the teacher insisted, no, I've got an extraordinary group of kids.

We went through the presentation and they had wonderful questions. The sense of empathy for students at that age, particularly from other parts of the world, was really, really moving for me. That was a wonderful experience. Afterwards talking to the teacher, she said, we don't just acknowledge but we celebrate the fact that in this class alone we have 19 different languages spoken.

To earlier points about drawing on this diversity as a sense of strength, I think that is where so many teachers, perhaps not necessarily all, but so many are focused on drawing on strength from diversity regardless of where the student is coming from and having that mindset of their job is to ensure that every student finds success.

One of my experiences working through the development and implementation of treaty education, a phrase that seems to stick a lot with individuals who see themselves as allies in the work, is the idea of becoming more comfortable with being less comfortable. That has to be the new norm. That has to be our door, the wedge in the door to help us think differently and think from a different perspective from the status quo.

The benefits that come from the strength of different views is a critical part of the treaty education curriculum, so to an earlier point about having these perspectives come together within elementary professional development for teachers around treaty education, there's a Mi'kmaw concept called Etuaptmumk. Etuaptmumk was coined by two elders in Unama'ki, Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall. They worked really closely with other colleagues to - from a Mi'kmaw perspective - identify this term that says, let's say in a science context, Mi'kmaw world views and western world views, when brought together like a pair of binoculars, will actually help us see the world in a much more integrated, much better way.

I think just that idea of there being a Mi'kmaw concept where bringing multiple views together despite cultural background will actually lead us to being able to see and do

in a different way and in a better way. That's the kind of encouraging attitude we are really having - elementary teachers in particular - because we have this opportunity right at Grade Primary to build that in.

I will say the impact of fear as the system is trying to adopt something new - it can be crippling or paralyzing. That's our challenge. When you think of that systemic challenge against racism, it's the fear that I might perpetuate something, and so I'm better to not say anything at all or stand by. I think that's one of those societal hurdles: We need to become more comfortable with being less comfortable and address the fears that we individually have, to do what's right for students.

THE CHAIR: We're going to have to keep it short. We only have 15 minutes left, so just a quick follow-up, please. Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: It would really be wonderful to have some kind of study in those schools where there is a high population of diversity to see if the Black and the new immigrants are facing these obstacles. Do they see this? Just to see how we can make sure that they don't go through what the African Nova Scotians have gone through - just to learn from this experience. Is immigration maybe one of the solutions to making sure that we see everybody is the same?

It's true in that school, it's an amazing thing and the education level that they come out with is incredible. A lot of them have ESL and language issues, but when they get to high school, they do very well. There is a secret that is happening in that school that I see. I want to figure out if the new immigrant Africans, which is a large population in my riding, are having the same issues. That would be wonderful.

CATHY MONTREUIL: A quick answer. As part of our work, we fund and engage the Inter-University Research Network. All of our Nova Scotian universities are engaging in research around the impacts and the programs that we're doing because we can't do this alone. We want studies and we want the feedback.

We anticipate very shortly the first developmental evaluation report. It got delayed for COVID-19, but it hasn't stopped. The evaluators for inclusive education have spent three or four visits, I think, out in the field - they don't talk to the department. They talk to the community, they talk to the teachers about whether some of this work is making the differences we intended. They're keeping an eye on what we're doing and whether or not it's having the impact.

We're looking forward to hearing back from them. We'll hear this Spring some of the first reports from the Inter-University Research Network that will continue to inform our work.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: You said, and I agree with you on these statements, racism does exist and it is systemic and that is within our IPPs. As you mentioned in the opening comments, there is an overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous students that are on IPP. My question is: how is the department addressing the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous students among those with IPPs?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Marlene and I have looked at a school-by-school breakdown of all of the IPP rates and the disproportionality. We're working now, and have worked with the people who lead the IPP program to do a couple of things.

[10:45 a.m.]

Number one is, parents in both our Mi'kmaq and African communities have not been meaningfully engaged, listened to and involved. Sometimes the system uses the student support workers as the voice and not the parent. So one of the things that we're directing and changing in terms of our processes in the system is every parent deserves to have a say, a voice in decision-making about their children.

One of the things we had a great privilege of being as part of the restorative table for the Home for Colored Children. One of the outcomes that we dedicated ourselves to as a result of that work is family-centric decision making. Through the pandemic last Spring, we worked with some of our Black communities and some of our Black social workers and others around: how does community need to be supported, want to be supported and what do they need to be different in order for their kids to maximize the opportunities?

With how our children are doing driving the student achievement conversation in every single school, it's not okay to move kids from mainstream support and general kinds of practices to IPP with nothing along the way, no conversation, and no targeted intervention or involvement.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: I can add to that, starting conversations with specialists and teachers in the field around what are those opportunities that we need to create in order to ensure greater access to such programs as IB and French immersion. We've instituted a student enrichment grant that would be available to children and their families to be able to access new opportunities.

We're also developing a resource for parents so that they understand - if we're talking about individual program plans - the process. So what is their role within that decision-making process and where are the places in which not only do they need to be involved, but also does their voice need to be heard and listened to? That's a resource that we're developing.

Part of it, as I speak to opportunities, is really rethinking what we have been doing all along and thinking about other opportunities. The one area that comes to mind readily

is around math and literacy grants that we provide to the regions to support students. What we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic was that because school was shut down, students didn't have access to some of those traditional supports.

We're working right now in terms of enhancing the math and literacy supports that would allow students to access support outside of school as well as during it. We're really trying to make sure that the work and the opportunities really respond to what we're hearing.

The other thing that has been really important for us in terms of understanding this gap that exists or how children are underserved is around the consultations that we are having throughout the province across a variety of different communities, from educational leadership perspective, as well as parents and youth. You tell us what are the things that you're experiencing, as well as what are the things that need to change from your perspective. We're very conscious within the department that we're dealing with systemic issues and our suggestions may not necessarily, once they are implemented at the ground level, really produce the change. So constantly having that opportunity to reflect on what we're doing, as well as to have the ongoing conversations around what's important, is essential.

The data collection is extremely important. The deputy spoke to the new datasets and we know that has been an ask. That is something new that we're doing: creating new datasets so we know and will be able to distinguish where are the places that are promising in terms of practising or supporting our learners if they exist, where the other places are, and how we can make sure that the students remain at the centre of the work.

WYATT WHITE: Just to reinforce that point around data, the equitable sharing of data across the system for whom Mi'kmaw students are being advocated on behalf of. I think of the Mi'kmaw Indigenous student support workers who do have a critical role, but haven't necessarily had access to the data within the system to support the needs of their students. That's happening. That's something that's becoming much more consistent across the province.

I guess the other thing, too, just to point out - the student support worker is not being the substitute for that family/community/parent engagement. I think on the surface it would appear as though that position is best placed, yet I think what it's doing is systemically pushing the hard work of getting to know families, parents, and communities off of the roles of everyone within the system, teachers and the principal included. Leadership standards are all pointing towards the need, the necessity, it is both necessary and critical that principals, for instance, have that relationship with parents and communities.

It is shifting the burden of responsibility for all of their students, but especially those who have been traditionally targeted for alternatives like IPPs, so there is, again to

that earlier point around a sea change, the sharing of responsibility and understanding that that is challenging work and it takes time. It does take time to develop those relationships and build on trust. That may not be consistent across all communities.

THE CHAIR: We're quickly running out of time so let's treat this like Question Period - one-minute questions, one-minute answers. Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: I really appreciate the discussion that we're having here today. The Inclusive Education Policy was first established back in the late 2000s under a PC government, I believe, and it was my understanding that the initial start of it was because of some of the struggles that Indigenous and African Nova Scotian students were facing at the time, so it's nice to be back here having this discussion specifically to Indigenous and African Nova Scotians today.

I have a lot of questions - I'm really enjoying this discussion today, I wish it could go on longer. I specifically want to talk in regard to the recommendation councils that are in place. Today of course this committee put members on the Council for African Canadian Education, which it brought up numerous times. I also have noted - haven't brought it up here but I will right now - that the Council on Mi'kmaq Education currently also has a huge vacancy rate, there are only two members of 15 positions on that one, and I would hope that the government, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Education will fill that now that I'm bringing it up here because it's another glaring number of vacancies on a committee that is supposed to be helping to work with the education system.

On that, my question is, exactly how closely is the department working with those two advisory groups? I know that they're there to advise the minister, but they're also there to help set policy and recommendations, so I'd like to know exactly how closely does the department work with the Council for African Canadian Education?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Actually I think the last time I counted, we have about 12 advisory committees to our minister, these two being two of them. In addition to CME, we also meet regularly with MK, and I think my colleague Wyatt talked about the unique partnership there for us to learn about the Mi'kmaw system as well as for them to influence, and it's a two-way dialogue. We work together on some of our resources. I think the last time I was with you, you saw some books and puppets to teach treaty education and some other things that were really borne out of that partnership.

The groups meet about - I'm going to say, every group has different schedules. CACE meets on an annual basis three to four times. We had a hiatus on meeting during the close-down from March to June last year. CACE was going to meet this past weekend actually, and due to an issue with a CACE member they asked to reschedule, so it will be rescheduled shortly.

Those openings you referred to on CME just opened, I think October 15th, so we're on that, and that will be coming shortly. They play an important role. Our inclusive education policy was borne out of the Students First work, and it looked at inclusion differently. It looked at inclusive education versus the special education lens of inclusion. It involved every advisory committee multiple times.

We also went out at large to communities. We also did a consultation in a box to our SACs. That was probably one of our most widely consulted policies. We're very, very proud of it and of the work. In fact, our entire conversation today floats on the back of that Inclusive Education Policy that's being looked at in other jurisdictions as a model.

THE CHAIR: That is time. We'll give the witnesses a few moments to wrap things up. Who would like to start? We have four minutes, basically.

Dr. Simmonds.

MARLENE RUCK SIMMONDS: Thank you. I'd just like to say thank you for this opportunity to share what we are learning as well as what we are doing. I want to leave you with some statistics around Black African Nova Scotian students. That being the majority of these students come to school, we know, based on a survey, looking to work, looking to learn.

We also know that they try extremely hard within the present climate to succeed, even if they're faced with barriers they work extremely hard to overcome. Our challenge is for those of us who have the positions and the power to create the system that they are working so hard to enter into to be successful. Thank you once again.

WYATT WHITE: Wela'liq. Thank you very much for having us here today. I just wanted to say that it really is an exciting time to be in the field, particularly as part of the treaty education movement, having been part of the team that went out to find out how it was working in other jurisdictions and really learn from that experience and bring it back here to Nova Scotia.

Ironically, we went to places where treaties are newer to understand how it works to bring that back to the place in Canada where treaties are oldest. I think that was really our shot at acknowledging all the extraordinary work that's happened in other parts of the country and really figure out a way at dinner tables in every home across the province for there to be a constructive positive dialogue about what that means when parents or children or grandparents explore the idea of what it means to be a treaty person. Wela'liq. Thank you.

CATHY MONTREUIL: We want to thank you. I think you can see that we're fired up. This is the work that all of us became educators and public servants to do. It's to make

a difference and to raise the bar and close the gaps by changing the system, not by changing the children.

A couple of things that we didn't talk about today that I wanted to leave you with is the voice of students is very important in this conversation. Every RED in the province has formed an advisory group of kids. The questions to them is: this is what we're working on, does it feel differently? Are you experiencing school differently? What needs to change and is what we're doing working?

That dialogue has just opened. It was, again, one RED who started it and brought it to the REDs and it's now a practice that's opened up across the province. We need student voice. We need student voice from some of the kids who have no voice in our system. The construction of those committees is very important.

We're doing this work and we haven't taken our foot off the gas during a pandemic. The pandemic provides lots of challenges, for sure, but it also provides some opportunities. When we opened schools this year, we posted a focused curriculum and said to teachers to take the space and the time to focus on who these kids are and their well-being. Get them outside.

Dr. Stan Kutcher said that if I wanted to pay attention to the health of kids in Nova Scotia - his last piece of advice before he went to the Senate - was to get them outside and get them moving. They are now more outside. One of the things that has happened with the result of them being outside is our elders have joined with community and are using that outside time to help with learning from the land and other cultural pieces. We didn't plan for that, but we're not going to let go of it now that it's happening.

[11:00 a.m.]

The other pandemic piece is 800 teachers showed up in the middle of a pandemic online to learn about this and they continue to. All of that learning is online and available for teachers when they need it just in time, just when they need it, and we've also learned that virtually, teachers are well versed now to participate and continue to learn, and now we have a virtual way of connecting this school with that school, so that this school can learn and they can learn from each other.

There's a growing list of things we've learned through the pandemic that will help add value that we're doing in inclusion.

Finally, the power of the word "yet." We feel a tremendous burden so that these communities don't have this as yet, one more time we've engaged in this work and this conversation without impacting on kids. A relentless lens on impact and accountability along with the action, and reminding the system the power of the word "yet." Because we

haven't done it, doesn't mean we won't do it and we can't do it. The phrase is, we haven't done it yet. Watch us now.

THE CHAIR: That is it. I actually allowed it to go over a little bit, so that is a great committee and thank the witnesses for being here today. It was very educational and I think we've all learned a little bit here today.

With that, the committee business is concluded. I'll just remind everyone to take their paper, bottles, and all things with them, don't leave anything behind. The clerk will send out an email in regard to the December meeting, so keep an eye open for that.

Thank you everyone and have a great day.

[The committee adjourned at 11:01 a.m.]