

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Wednesday, February 24, 2021

Via Video Conference

**Safe Return to Class Fund/
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Hon. Brendan Maguire, Chair
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Hon. Ben Jessome
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Brad Johns
Larry Harrison
Claudia Chender
Kendra Coombes

[Hon. Karen Casey replaced Hon. Brendan Maguire]
[Hon. Leo Glavine replaced Hon. Margaret Miller]
[Tim Halman replaced Larry Harrison]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Cathy Montreuil, Deputy Minister
David Potter, Director, Financial Services
Andrew Coates, Executive Advisor to the Deputy



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Brendan Maguire

VICE-CHAIR
Bill Horne

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I'm glad you're all online and ready to go.

I want to call order. It's time to bring the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I'm Bill Horne, the MLA for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank and acting as Chair of the committee today.

Today, in addition to receiving appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding the Safe Return to Class Fund.

This meeting is being held by video conference. Members, witnesses, committee clerk, and Legislative Counsel should mute until the Chair has recognized you by saying your name. They should turn on their own audio before speaking and then put it back on mute afterwards. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off.

If you have any other devices with you, they should be put on silent or flight mode. If possible, please don't leave your seat during the meeting unless it's absolutely necessary. If you do, please leave your camera on but your audio muted. That way, we know if you aren't present if a vote is called for, and also that you aren't having technical problems.

If I need to confer privately with the clerk or Legislative Counsel, or if members wish to confer before the vote, I may call a brief recess. If you have problems, please phone or text the clerk. Committee members are permitted to introduce themselves stating your name and the constituency. This will probably need to be prompted to each in turn.

For Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel, Gordon Hebb and Legislative Committee Clerk, Judy Kavanagh.

Thank you for listening to that and I hope it's clear. First, I'll ask for the committee members to introduce themselves, starting with the Progressive Conservatives.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I know we're starting a little bit late, approximately 13 minutes - we'll add that on to the end. I'd like to next just say that we'll do a 20-minute section for each, but maybe 10 minutes at a time and go to the next Party. We'll start with the PCs when the time comes.

I would ask the witnesses to introduce themselves and begin their opening remarks, starting with the Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, Cathy Montreuil; followed by David Potter, Director of Financial Services; and then Andrew Coates, Executive Advisor to the Deputy. Would you like to start, deputy?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to be here today. Joining me, as you said, are Andrew Coates, Executive Advisor to the Deputy; and David Potter, Director of Finance for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

I've been asked to speak to the Safe Return to Class Fund. This money was provided to provinces and territories by the federal government to support safe schools during the global pandemic. The parameters for this fund are broad and state that the funds can cover the following areas: provinces and territories will have the flexibility to spend funding according to their education sector's priorities in areas such as adaptation of learning spaces, improving air systems, increased cleaning sanitation, PPE procurement, support for remote learning, and health and safety training for staff.

The funding was apportioned to provinces and territories based on a per capita formula. As you know, Nova Scotia received approximately \$48 million to support our back-to-school plan.

Our back-to-school plan was developed in consultation with the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, PSAANS, Public Health, and education support unions. We had input and guidance from Dr. Lynk, Chair of Pediatrics at Dalhousie University School of Medicine and Chief of Pediatrics at the IWK Health Centre, as well as a table of IWK pediatric experts. The plan represents a layered approach to school safety.

The input from over 28,000 students, families, and teachers provided valuable data, which we put into action in the plan. Further, in June, every school submitted a reflection indicating their assessment of the needs of their staff, their families, and their students. All of that information came in and was put into the plan. We announced this plan in July and the documents are available online.

Nova Scotia's back-to-school plan provides the framework guidance for educators, staff, students, and families, so that we can keep our students learning during the global pandemic. The plan is a responsive one and includes plans for in-class learning, partial in-class learning or blended learning, or full online learning as needed. The plan was built to be nimble and to respond to COVID-19. It is regularly reviewed and updated as the science and epidemiology continues to develop.

The plan was developed using the best available Public Health advice and it represents a planned approach to learning that can accommodate any stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan also recognizes that our knowledge of the pandemic continues to grow based on the best available science, so Public Health continues to update their guidance based on advancements in the understanding of this virus.

We continue to work closely with Public Health, the Department of Environment and Climate Change, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education, as well as our unions and other stakeholders to ensure success for students and teachers.

We are always reminded of the advice of medical experts at the IWK that the best place for children is in the classroom. We've been very fortunate in Nova Scotia that our students have, for the most part, been learning in class since the beginning of the year. Why have we been so successful? We developed a strong plan and our educators, administrators, students and families have worked diligently to keep COVID-19 out of our schools.

Finally, we know that COVID-19 in schools is tied to COVID-19 in community, and Nova Scotians have worked hard to prevent the spread of the virus.

We also know that our abundance of caution approach has enabled our kids to be with friends, access supports like food and counselling, and have continued to support them in their learning in the best place for them - under the roof of our Nova Scotia schools.

The federal funding announced by Ottawa just before school began supports our plan to an ongoing layered approach to COVID-19 safety in our schools. It is being used in key areas to support Nova Scotia's education system. Minister Churchill had already announced publicly how we intend to spend this money so I will provide a brief recap:

- \$21.5 million was attributed to technology, including 32,000 new computers and server and wi-fi upgrades at all of our schools;
- 31,000 of those 32,000 devices are in the system as I speak;

- \$11 million for enhanced cleaning for buses, schools, and gyms - including money that permitted schools to open gyms to community recreational needs outside of regular school hours;
- \$1.5 million for additional PPE purchases for staff and students. That money was beyond the provided PPE that we welcomed and opened our schools with in September.
- \$4.1 million for math and literacy programs;
- \$2.7 million for ventilation, including multiple inspections, longer-term repairs, and on-call services;
- \$3.8 million for touchless water-filling stations;
- \$1.5 million for food and nourishment programs;
- \$700,000 for transition to blended learning, should we need to transition; and
- \$1 million in a contingency so that we can continue to be nimble and respond to COVID-19.

These investments support the health and safety of our students and provide the students with what they need to be successful at school. They also leave a lasting legacy for students. Our technology purchases, our wi-fi and server upgrades, our touchless water-filling stations, our math and literacy programs - all we have targeted our investments to support immediate needs, but also to provide long-term benefit, “necessary for COVID-19 and good beyond” help frame our thinking.

We also recognize the need to support our under-represented communities. We heard from these communities in the Spring about access to technology, support for parents and families, and so our back-to-school plan with these investments specifically addresses their needs.

From our experiences in the Spring, we know that access to food can be an issue for students experiencing poverty when they are not going to school, so we built food supports into our safe school and return investments.

Children can’t learn if they can’t focus, and food is a vital part of student well-being. This funding will help reduce food anxiety. It will also ensure that if we move to online learning, students won’t be left out.

At all levels and in multiple areas, we have worked to ensure a stronger present, and a stronger future, for our students, teachers, staff, and the province. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, deputy. We'll start with the first 10 minutes with the PCs to ask questions.

JUDY KAVANAGH (Legislative Committee Clerk): Mr. Chair, I was just going to remind you that this committee traditionally does its questioning just by turn. A question and a follow-up; not in the 20- or 10-minute blocks.

THE CHAIR: Okay. I'll try and keep close record of that. Good. Fair enough.

Do we have anyone who wants to ask a question?

TIM HALMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll begin for the PC caucus.

Good morning everyone. Deputy Minister Montreuil, thank you very much for your opening remarks. Mr. Potter and Mr. Coates, thank you for the ongoing work that you're doing to support our students, families, and educators.

Deputy minister, our caucus recently made a freedom of information request that we received in January of this year. There's a line in that freedom of information that states that Nova Scotia's \$47.5 million allocation of the federal Safe Return to Class Fund has been budgeted and will be spent. As of the date of that FOIPOP, not a dime of that money was spent.

Deputy, my understanding is that this program is a receipt-based reimbursement program. From the FOIPOP, we see that no receipts had been received up to December 11, 2020. Could you provide for this committee an update on how much of the \$47.5 million has been spent to date? What Regional Centres for Education have received those funds along with the CSAP?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I'm going to ask David Potter to respond to that.

DAVID POTTER: The question about how much has been spent is best answered through a description of what the process is that we undertake. That's a process that involves the CSAP and all the Regional Centres for Education in tracking and monitoring the expenditures against that budget.

The \$47.88 million was indeed budget. That was developed in collaboration with the RCEs and CSAP, based on best estimates we had at the time. We know COVID-19 is fluid and evolves, so we retest those estimates and we get new information monthly from all of the Regional Centres and the CSAP.

The money spent up front is done at the RCE and CSAP level for the bulk of these. The reimbursement component that you spoke of is really the department reimbursing RCEs and CSAP, and we'll do that at the end of the fiscal year. There's fiscal year updating and fiscal year reporting that is a requirement of the provincial processes. This funding does extend into the April/May/June portion and becomes a school year fund.

At the end of the school year, there will be a full accounting and full reporting of all the monies being spent. At this point, we're working with the RCEs to ensure that we have a robust process to track and monitor and, as the deputy said, be nimble with the funding to ensure that we're getting best value and not leaving any money on the table. The notion that the full amount will be spent is absolutely correct. We continue to work and refine those estimates as we go.

[10:30 a.m.]

TIM HALMAN: So I'm correct to say then that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is not aware or has not received information from the RCEs or Conseil scolaire acadien as to how much has been spent of that \$47.8 million. The department isn't tracking this? You mentioned processes, I don't doubt for a moment that there are processes that are being followed, but you're not able to provide for Nova Scotians how much of that \$47.8 million has been spent thus far by the RCEs and CSAP. Is that correct?

DAVID POTTER: It's not correct. I think it's more a reflection on how we're approaching the reimbursement process. The RCEs have been tasked with expending dollars. We do have information that gets reported into the department. The mechanism to report to the public and taxpayers is driven through the forecast update and fiscal update processes with the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, so there are fiscal updates, which include revised and updated forecast information.

Our reporting really for this set of funding will be reported in two steps. The first will show the [Inaudible] to the end of March, for the fiscal reporting that's made available through Public Accounts and the traditional Department of Finance and Treasury Board updates.

Then again at the end of the school year, because this is a school year, not a fiscal year, funding allocation [Inaudible] we continue to work and respond to updated revisions as Public Health guidelines may or may not be changing as the epidemiology continues to change. We want to make sure that we're fully utilizing all the federal dollars.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Just to confirm, the budget is \$21 million - 31,000 out of the 32,000 devices that were committed to have been procured, received, and are in our system. Likewise, as David says, through the forecast tracking, the other expenditures are also rolled up. As the procurement, as the installation of the water fountains - all of those

items are being monitored regionally, and they will roll up as required to account for the federal funding.

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Chair, if I may, you don't have numbers to share with us today on how much of the \$47.8 million has been spent thus far. I recognize 31,000 Chrome Books, I recognize that, but you don't have a specific number as of today as to how much of that \$47.8 million has been spent. We have to ask the RCEs. We have to go to the CSAP.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chair, we've been putting our hands up, and we need to have a list.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I'm trying to - I haven't seen anybody put their hands up.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: There are four of us who put our hands up. I saw Ms. Coombes was first, myself second, I also saw Ms. Chender put her hand up.

KENDRA COOMBES: Claudia was first.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I'm so sorry, Claudia. I apologize. Honestly, I didn't see.

THE CHAIR: I'm having a little bit of a concern here myself.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I think it's easier to do the 20 minutes, 20 minutes to make it easier for our Chair - that's what he was expecting to do. Do we want to go with that? Is that okay with everybody? It seems to be hard for him to find all the hands.

THE CHAIR: I'm having some technical problems here, I guess. As a speaker comes up, maybe we can ask Judy to have a look at the latest. The pictures are coming up - The whole laptop shows just one person.

JUDY KAVANAGH: Mr. Chair, in the upper right-hand corner of your screen, there should be the word "View" with a box next to it. If you click on that box and choose "Gallery," you'll find it easier to see everybody.

THE CHAIR: Got it. Much better.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chair, can we do the 20 minutes? The PCs have started and then we go to 20 minutes for the NDP and Liberal 20 minutes. I think it will make it easier for you today, if you don't mind.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we can try that, if that's alright with Judy.

JUDY KAVANAGH: That's up to the committee to decide.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Thank you, everyone. I think the hand thing makes it a little difficult.

THE CHAIR: We have almost 20 minutes for the PCs so we'll go to Ms. Coombes.

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Chair, with all due respect, these are critical questions to the public expenditures of the Province, so before we proceed, may we please get clarity as to the format? Is it a 20-minute round or are we doing this round-robin?

THE CHAIR: I think 20-minute rounds.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: What time did the PCs start and what time will they end? Can you clarify that, please?

THE CHAIR: Started at 10:25 a.m. with Tim Halman, so he should be good for 10:40 a.m.

BRAD JOHNS: If you subtract the five minutes that we've been talking about this and add that to our time as well, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Okay, we can do that. I'll turn it back to Tim Halman.

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Potter, deputy, just returning to the money - \$47.8 million. You can't provide a specific number for what has been spent for fiscal 2020-21. After March 31, 2021 for the remainder of the school year, what money is ear-marked for COVID-19-related issues after March 31st?

DAVID POTTER: The most obvious component of what's going to be continuing into April, May and June is the staffing related to cleaning. Bus cleaners, cleaners for the gym to ensure community has after-hours access - those positions are - through the deputy to the RCEs and CSAP - to remain in effect until the end of the school year. That's certainly one component.

The other components related to ventilation checks and bottle-filling stations, as an example - that work is ongoing now. There is no requirement to have any target met by March 31st. We use the reporting process through the RCEs to feed that information to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board to ensure they're aware for fiscal year-end reporting, but when we take the broad level view that the \$47.88 million is really eligible to be spent until the end of the school year in June, whether the bottle-filling stations get installed fully by March 31st or April 15th is not a concern related to how this funding envelope has been provided by the federal government.

TIM HALMAN: With respect to the enhanced cleaning and custodians, how many new custodians have been hired for those enhanced cleaning protocols?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Those numbers are tracked as the personnel is a regional matter. They're the employers. The regions looked at extending some hours, shifting custodial hours, hiring under contract. This is one-time money so permanent hires is not an appropriate response to one-time money.

Through the regions, through the REDs, what they've told me is they have the bodies they need to do the COVID-19 cleaning and the additional cleaning, including the community cleaning that's going on. That continues to be monitored through the director of operations in every region and CSAP.

TIM HALMAN: As you know, the Safe Return to Class Fund has allocated \$1.5 million for PPE. My understanding is that each student was to receive a mask during the first few days of school. I know my four kids received that.

In my community of east Dartmouth, a parent last week brought to my attention that their child's junior high school is undertaking a fundraiser to raise money to purchase additional masks. With \$1.5 million invested, why are schools having to undertake fundraising in our province if this money has been allocated? Could you provide commentary on that, please?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I can't speak to an individual school in the province that has not come to my attention before this teleconference. However, there are a lot of reasons why schools do fundraisers. This may be a culture builder. It may be a theme. It may be a way to get spirit built in community. There could be a whole bunch of ways. However, we've put no restrictions on any school's access. We started with two per student. We have made it clear to all of the schools, if you need more, there is more.

TIM HALMAN: With respect to that, that's a significant amount of money - \$1.5 million. You'd think there would be more than enough to go around. Is the department tracking the amount of PPE that has been allocated to the RCEs and CSAP?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Through the department and in collaboration to the department, all of the regions and CSAP have unfettered access to the provincial stockpile. While we've put a budget amount to that, it's not a ceiling. If there is more needed, more is available. The procurement processes, the supply chain are well-known, well-used. In fact, we're very happy with the very high level of use that the system is doing for PPE, sanitizer and the like. It continues to be freely accessible.

TIM HALMAN: Has Public Health advised the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on any specific testing that's required for air quality in the classroom and the internal components of our ventilation systems?

CATHY MONTREUIL: On our website is the back-to-school guidance provided to the department by Public Health and there is a section on ventilation in the guidance. The requirement from Public Health is that all ventilation systems are working as they were

designed to work. In order to ensure that was the case, we had all ventilation systems inspected, and any necessary repairs done before Labour Day. That work is being done again now, out of an abundance of caution and to increase surety.

Those reports will be available and online. The inspections will be done by the end of the month, and shortly thereafter posted. Then we're going to do another round before the end of the year. That is in keeping with the Public Health guidance on ventilation during COVID-19 in our system. We continue to do that work.

Additionally, we have also had every region and CSAP ensure that they have 24-hour access to any work that needs to get done - whether it's through contract or internal staff - so that no concern about ventilation in a school goes without being attended to quickly.

TIM HALMAN: Deputy, can you provide to this committee at a future date, within a realistic time frame, the money that has been spent so far out of the \$47.8 million? Can you get that from the RCEs and CSAP, please?

CATHY MONTREUIL: We can roll that up through our forecast procedures and through those processes that are in place to track this money - happy to share that.

[10:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Time's up for the Progressive Conservative Party. To the NDP. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think I froze during introductions earlier, so I'm Claudia Chender, the MLA for Dartmouth South. Welcome, to the department staff.

I would just love to start by thanking you for, I am sure, what has been a brand new and challenging workload over the last year of the pandemic. I have three kids in public school. I'm very happy that they're there as I talk to my friends and family and colleagues across the country, so a big thanks from my family.

Of course, I do also have questions. I find this format a bit jarring where everyone gets cut off at the end of their thought, so I'll just continue a little bit with this ventilation question.

I guess, all systems are working as they are designed to work. The now former Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, Minister Churchill, has often used the term "passive ventilation". With respect, I think passive ventilation means no ventilation. It means there are windows that can open.

I understand that practically speaking, we can only look at fixing systems to the extent that they exist. We know as the science has evolved on COVID-19, and the spread

of COVID-19 through aerosols, what's as important or more important than cleaning surfaces is the quality of the air. We also know that there are lots and lots of older school buildings in Nova Scotia that have no ventilation systems.

I'm wondering how this is being addressed. I understand that it technically doesn't have to be - within the realm of the definition that you gave us, deputy - but it still feels as though it ought to be. I'm wondering what work is being done around that.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Sure, I can start and then my colleague Andrew Coates will chime in.

I often get phone calls from across Canada, et cetera, asking me to tell them about Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia experience because it is seen to be a successful one in other jurisdictions. One of the things is that our Back to School Plan is rooted in our guidance from Public Health. These conversations, we have had and continue to have with the experts in epidemiology in COVID-19.

With that, I'll invite Andrew Coates to speak to that because he is our person at that table with Public Health.

ANDREW COATES: I guess I would just add to what the deputy was talking about there, to say that we meet with Public Health very regularly - more than once a week. We constantly talk to them about their reviews of the cross-Canadian guidance at the tables that they talk about. They provide us with their best advice and best guidance that goes into all the work that we do around the Back to School Plan.

Ventilation is one part of the layered approach to safety that they've advised us on. They've talked to us quite regularly about ventilation and it has informed the plan that we've taken. The deputy's talked about how we've had regions go from school to school to make sure that the ventilation systems are working properly.

Their guidance has been to, and I'll quote from the Back to School Plan:

- "Open windows when it is safe to do so
- Ensure ventilation system operates properly and is routinely maintained.
- Increase air exchanges by adjusting the HVAC system."

We continue to ask them about this guidance that they have provided. They will tell us whenever there's any updates to be made to any guidance in our plan. They continue to tell us that this is the appropriate guidance to have for our schools.

We will continue to follow up with them, we will continue to meet with them and talk to them about this important piece of the layered approach to safety that they've advised us on.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Chair, I think Ms. Chender has frozen.

THE CHAIR: She has, I guess. Ms. Coombes, do you want to take the lead?

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, I'll ask my question while she's getting back.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I seem to be having some difficulties connecting. Sorry, can you hear me?

THE CHAIR: I can, but the video isn't good. Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, I'll ask my question while Claudia fixes the issue on her end. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing challenges related to child care and gender equity in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia was the only province in the country that did not provide access to licensed child care for essential workers during the pandemic. All other provinces continue to provide access to licensed child care for essential workers while these services were closed to the general public.

Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, and the Yukon also waived child care fees for essential workers during this time. Here in Nova Scotia, health students in Dalhousie University volunteered to provide child care to ensure essential front-line health care workers could continue to work through the pandemic.

My question is: Can the deputy minister please explain why Nova Scotia was the only province in the country that didn't provide any support for child care for essential workers during the pandemic?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think that through our response to child care through COVID-19, one of our key determiners - in fact, we're only one of two provinces in the entire country that supported the child care sector to make sure that it remained healthy, viable, and ready when we were through the initial lockdown phase.

Certainly, there were daycare options that were articulated, tracked, and we were in contact with some of our key partners in health care around monitoring that. However, one of the decisions that we did undertake during that period was to ensure that ECEs across Nova Scotia continued to be paid, that the operational costs for our daycare centres were covered, and that our daycare centres remained viable and operational. In that work, we did strike a sector table who continue to meet, continue to advise, and continue to talk with us about the needs in the sector.

When COVID-19 stopped us all in our tracks a year ago, the sector was operating at about 87 per cent capacity of their spaces across Nova Scotia. When we were ready to stand up daycare, our daycare sector was strong and ready - 98 per cent of our daycares came back online. To date, 78 per cent of our spaces are filled. We continue to provide and have accessible supports for parents to access daycare regularly and provide the supports for them to do that as necessary.

We have been, again, one of two provinces in Canada that have maintained support for the child care sector and ensured that our child care sector was ready to come back when Nova Scotians needed them and have 98 per cent of that sector back, and back on its feet well.

THE CHAIR: Claudia, you're back online?

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I am, but my connection is not great, so I'm just going to let Kendra go ahead.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I do have a follow-up to that. Although I do appreciate and understand that the government did provide funding to keep these daycares being able to pay their workers and all that, many people had to rely on trying to find other sources of child care while daycares were closed. That includes our essential workers - many of whom are not just doctors and nurses, but also those that work in our grocery stores, and those that we really lauded as being heroes during the pandemic.

Many parents still had to pay for other, maybe often more expensive forms of child care arrangements, or had to take unpaid leave, missed shifts. When the federal government made funds available, it's my understanding this government decided to use \$17.4 million to reimburse themselves for the funding they provided to the licensed child care providers.

Can the deputy minister please explain why the department chose to keep the money rather than reimbursing parents who lost income due to lack of child care?

CATHY MONTREUIL: During the time of that pandemic, parent fees were waived and access to subsidy and those pieces were facilitated. Further, we also had supports available, if parents were looking, to connect parents with providers that remained open, and we provided those supports through the lockdown.

KENDRA COOMBES: I do have a question, and it goes back to what my colleague Tim Halman was discussing. If the RCEs have sufficient cleaning staff, why is the HRCE currently looking to fill 22 custodian positions?

CATHY MONTREUIL: HRCE has about 140 schools - I may not have that exact number off the top of my head - and they have an ebb and flow of staff throughout the year.

Through their casual force, through their existing employees, this is the time of year where we're in staffing looking forward to next year.

It has not been reported to me the inability to keep a school clean and respond to community after hours use in any site in Nova Scotia.

KENDRA COOMBES: The federal government has made millions available to the Province in support of our economic recovery, and while this is a great thing, the provincial government has operated without transparency or public accountability. Nova Scotians don't know who's making decisions about where the recovery funds are spent or what evidence was being used.

The Safe Return to Class Fund was announced on August 26th. According to the Freedom of Information request filed by our caucus on August 27th, the executive director of the African Canadian Services branch put forward the proposal to use some of the federal funding just for remote learning for Black students, including training and support for families to assist their children in blended or virtual learning scenarios.

As of September 9th, the executive director of the ESIA wrote to request funds be used to provide funding for one-time for internet access for low-income families with school-age children.

These were many needs that could been addressed through the fund. How did the department determine what the priorities were for investment specifically, and does the government have any impact analysis or other evidence they could provide to help us understand where the funds were used? I'm just looking for specifics.

CATHY MONTREUIL: With respect to the proposal from the African Canadian Services branch, part of the work that we undertook was across the government table during the shutdown where we worked with some of the African communities. We struck an educational support community and worked across government and with communities to identify differential impacts of COVID that were happening in those communities.

Those communities identified access to technology, access to the learning packages. We were the only province in Canada that provided a non-tech response during the shutdown, and many of our families - even those with tech - were appreciative of that more traditional resource. In work with some of our African Nova Scotian communities, what they said was they needed a different way to access those, and so we changed the way that they were delivered into those communities at their request and delivered them to the sources they were asking for them to be delivered.

[11:00 a.m.]

They wanted more assistance in problem-solving technical challenges and access to online learning resources, so we responded in those communities at that time and, in

fact, put that feedback into our revised and updated Back to School Plan in terms of prioritizing resources, developing high-tech and low-tech responses to accessing online learning resources from our learning Moodle through things like a USB strategy.

They wanted different and more access to anxiety and pressures as a result of COVID-19. We partnered with some of the community supports for that. Parents wanted a differing way of accessing and supporting their children with online learning. We then took their needs and their input and their suggestions and re-wrote the guidance for African support workers for COVID-19 so that we could provide the appropriate resources in the way that community was identifying and wanting it to be done.

Those learning continuity plans and incorporating those methodologies as requested by those communities - and developed in response and in collaboration with them - we went out and did a more layered and targeted needs-based allocation of the online resources and the technology to access them.

That's just a quick snapshot of the various ways that we responded differentially to community and with community as a response to that lockdown, and then since, in the work this year.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think I'll try to take the end of it if you guys can hear me.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender, less than three minutes.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I did hear your response to my initial question about ventilation. I appreciate that you're taking guidance from Public Health. I wonder, given that one of the things that we have been trying to get information about for a very long time, is school capital and the new school capital methodologies, will this ventilation piece change the way that school capital projects are evaluated?

We don't know how they're evaluated right now, but we know that this pandemic may or may not go away. I know my kids are getting sick less with all the social distancing and masks, but we hope they don't have to keep doing that. Will this become a bigger part of the department's attention going forward?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Currently, we are working very closely with Public Health and the learnings and the studies and the research that have come out of COVID-19. Absolutely, we'll continue to work with - I'm going to say TIR as well as Public Health around continuous and ongoing review of best practices in capital projects and school renewal.

There's no doubt that the more we learn, the better we do. Certainly, I'm sure that there are COVID learnings to be had. We'll work with the experts in school building and health to determine what those might be at the other side of COVID.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender, about a minute.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think my colleague froze.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, about a minute.

KENDRA COOMBES: Getting back to my original question with regard to the funding, how did you decide what was to be funded and what wasn't to be funded and is there a document?

CATHY MONTREUIL: A lot of the information that went into developing the plan came out, first and foremost, from the Public Health guidance in our Back to School Plan.

Secondly, we have over 28,000 parents and students who responded to our online survey last Spring to say what their at-home learning experience was, what their fears and concerns were, and what their suggestions were for moving forward. Then every school staff were invited to put together a structured reflection on what worked and what didn't work . . .

THE CHAIR: The time is up. Ms. Casey, you have 20 minutes.

HON. KAREN CASEY: Welcome, to the deputy and staff - providing some very valuable responses and information. It's no question that Nova Scotia is the envy of many provinces - all the provinces, I would say, and even beyond. A big component of that, of course, is our response to education.

I guess my question to the deputy would be - recognizing that there was a balance that you have to always maintain in education's perspective between academic learning and the health and safety of our students in particular, and all employees. You indicated you received a lot of information. How did you go about maintaining that balance in a difficult, unprecedented time?

CATHY MONTREUIL: The success of the Nova Scotia COVID-19 school experience couldn't have happened without a lot of help, a lot of partnerships, a lot of voices and experts. Foundationally, Dr. Lynk - as I mentioned and acknowledged in my opening comments - and the pediatric table at the IWK were sitting weekly, and now I think monthly, with the learning continuity table, with the NSTU partnership, with the PSAANS and school administrators, and with Public Health so that we can keep getting an on-the-ground read of what we're doing.

That community feedback - those variety of stakeholders through the collaborative table, the resources - the best advice around - and if we think back, our kids and the families had spent over three months under very strict COVID-19 conditions and then moved into a Summer that was not a typical Summer for them.

In working with our partners and the messaging out to our staffs, first and foremost was the layered safety approach, and thinking about how we bring our kids in, and our parents, and help them understand that - for example, every time you cross a threshold in one of our schools you should be sanitizing - a little squirt of sanitizer. How do we make routine throughout the day, the layered approach to COVID-19 safety? How do we acknowledge that people are coming back nervous, but they've also come back after an extended period of being disconnected.

Our experts were saying, keep your eye on well-being and reconnecting and building community as these kids come back - in the context of the layered safety approach.

As a result of some of that, we re-developed educational supports for the teachers on curriculum, on how to do things like small group instruction during COVID-19, on how to focus on essential learning outcomes - how to take learning outside. We asked our teachers to be very deliberate about getting kids outside, getting them moving. They'd been tied into those homes for so long. We know that movement is part of health and well-being.

It was really an approach where we looked at the whole student and all of the student, and how to support the staff. We normally run an August Summer learning institute for teachers. We often get 200 to 250 people at that. We had over 1,000 this year in our virtual institute - notwithstanding that our websites and supports for teachers, around safety, and around teaching during pandemic and those kinds of supports to help our kids, have been accessed at rates we've never seen before.

Our teachers are using those supports. Those supports were designed in collaboration with them and in response to what they said they needed. This is really listening to the people who know our children best. It's an eye to ensuring that the epidemiology and the knowledge and those experts keep us safe from a COVID-19 perspective. It was also listening to our mental health experts, our SchoolsPlus staff, the IWK table, and others on how we can bring these kids back in a way that supports their whole being and reconnecting them with their friends and the schools and the supports that hadn't been accessed or hadn't been as readily available for quite awhile.

When people call and say, how does that happen, I tell them the story I just told you. But that story doesn't exist just under the roofs our schools, however great they are, and they are great. It happens in the context of community. One of the successes, I think, is that when we built a culture of community in Nova Scotia around COVID-19 where we reiterated for kids - our four-year-olds will say things when you ask them about, I clean my hands for me to keep me safe but also to keep my friends safe.

That culture of looking after yourself so that you can look after other people has really benefited our schools as the whole, broad Nova Scotia community took on that kind of obligation and citizen impact, because our schools reflect the safety in their communities, and so we have so much to be retrospectively thankful for. Our staff, our

administrators came up with ways to get that layered approach systemized and routine in all of our schools.

The changing of the way that we teach, and even where we teach, was part of the learning of COVID-19 of the education community, and then finally, the community wrapped themselves around our schools through every safety step they took, because our schools, if you look across Canada, schools reflect the safety of the broader community.

This has really been an every-Nova-Scotian-hands-on-deck approach to where we are right now, and our kids have benefited from being in one of the few areas where for the most part, they haven't missed school. It may not be exactly like they're used to, but the parents are telling us their kids are doing well and are satisfied to be in school, our staff are feeling supported, and we continue to be responsive to changes as they're necessary and PD as it's necessary, and all of the various kinds of differentiating supports in order to keep those services in place for kids in ways that maintain COVID-19 safety.

THE CHAIR: Rafah DiCostanzo, with about seven minutes left.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Thank you, Ms. Montreuil, you've really outlined some amazing things, and really what I was thinking about, as you were speaking, was back to September just before the schools started. There was so much anxiety and fear, and I received a lot of emails - the majority of them were from the teachers. I don't remember receiving - maybe one or two from parents. I was expecting the first week of September to receive a lot of emails from the parents terrified or worried, and I didn't receive any. How did you deal with the anxiety, and how did it calm down so beautifully?

I'm surrounded by nephews and nieces, I don't have kids in school anymore, but they are so happy to have their kids back in school, and they were only upset with me just after Christmas when we extended it by one week. It was a totally different response instead of terrified of sending the kids, why are you closing it for an extra week? I explained of course that it's precautionary, just to make sure that the numbers are okay before they go back in.

How did you deal with this anxiety and how well our schools are doing? You are right, we're the envy. My sister's kids are in Ontario and she always tells me she envies our schools and how well we've done. If you can explain how you dealt with the anxiety from parents, from teachers, and how we managed that.

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think that first we have to acknowledge our teachers and administrators, educational workers, specialists - the folks who work across the system have a relentless "keeping kids at the centre" approach, and we have to acknowledge that, because we know that they were nervous. We know everybody was nervous. Parents were, kids were, staff were for sure.

[11:15 a.m.]

Remember I told you that we had the Learning Continuity table. That's a table with the union, staff, PSAANS, the administrators, access to health, the department, et cetera. In those days, we were meeting almost daily and sometimes more frequently than once a day. I think listening to the concerns and making sure that the information and the responses - there were minor tweaks being done because the practitioners on the ground were saying if we say it this way, or do it that way, it'll work better for us.

Being able to do that and then have the Learning Continuity table meet and then, later in the day, the Regional Centres for Education directors, the CSAP Superintendent, and the department met. We tried to keep everything tight and remain responsive in the regions through those conversations that were happening on the ground.

One of the things was that the Learning Continuity table was brought forward to the Canadian Teachers' Federation by our local union staff as an exemplary practice. In some jurisdictions, that kind of listening to ground - it doesn't mean everybody's going to agree all the time, but it means that - I've said to the committee before that systems work well when you find a sweet spot between top down and bottom up.

That Learning Continuity table, for us, was worth its weight in gold for the advice that it provided and the conversation that it had on how the system needed to support the practitioners so that they could support our kids in the best way they knew how.

I think that those were some of the pieces that contributed to getting our schools open and then dealing with the anxiety over time with an awful lot of listening and responding and understanding that all of our staff are very student-focused and that's why they became educational workers. If we listened to them and responded to them so that they could do what they needed to do, they would do it, and they have in a spectacular way.

Our operations staff - our cleaners, the people who look after maintenance, the people who look after routing buses, the bus drivers and cleaning between runs, and all of those kinds of things were all part of that "all hands on deck" approach. Really, a testament, too that it didn't land on any individual set of shoulders. It needed all of us. I'm so proud that in Nova Scotia, everybody stood up.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I also had another thought that came to mind as you were speaking. All these new methods of sanitizing and such, I hear that we've seen a lot fewer colds. I'm assuming fewer children and teachers are being absent. Are we collecting that data to see if we can use from COVID-19 for the future to help our kids have fewer colds? Is that being monitored or collected, that information?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I would love to step in here and take credit in Nova Scotia for lower levels of colds, et cetera. However, it's bigger than us. I think that the broader

Public Health will have lots to say about why we're seeing lower seasonal flu and colds, et cetera, and there's masks and distancing and sanitizer and all of that that underpins that.

Again, I think that as we start to emerge from COVID-19, it's what we've learned, what kinds of good practices that can be universal beyond COVID-19. Again, that lens of what's necessary for COVID-19, and good beyond.

Certainly, we're looking at an education, but I would imagine every sector is looking at. I anticipate that our colleagues in health will lead those kinds of conversations as we emerge from COVID-19.

THE CHAIR: Leo Glavine would like to say a few words.

HON. LEO GLAVINE: Yes, thank you, deputy minister and staff. Good morning to my colleagues, as well.

My question is around the breakfast, lunch, and nutrition program in our schools. Having been there for many years, I know how critically important it is. I just wanted to gain a sense of where the \$1.5 million was invested and why it would have been in those particular schools or school districts.

ANDREW COATES: I'm really pleased to speak about that aspect of the funding in this session today.

I guess I'll start maybe back when the Spring at-home learning period happened. We quickly understood that there were going to be challenges for some families and students around accessing food. We know that from the years we've operated breakfast and lunch programs through our schools that there are many students who rely on those programs and rely on them for, perhaps, their only meal of the day.

We're very pleased that we have the opportunity to provide those supports in our schools. We have a very dedicated staff who volunteer their time, in many cases, to participate in those programs. Community partnerships also play a big role.

When we were in the Spring at-home learning period, we did a couple of things. We quickly had schools donate remaining food inventories to their local food banks. That was a big help, as well, because our families certainly would access those supports. That was a quick thing that we were able to do.

We also were able to partner with the Department of Business in inspiring certain communities in our province to be able to partner with local restaurants to provide meals for students who needed them. Our SchoolsPlus staff and schools that participate in these programs play a huge role in helping get students food. It was very, very nice to see that happen - a very important support.

We took that approach, and we took those learnings from that approach into the Back to School Plan. We recognized that in no matter what learning scenario we're in for the Back to School Plan, we knew that there had to be food supports in place.

With the kids currently being in school, we've seen some increased use of the breakfast and lunch programs. We felt that it was important to invest and restock pantries and provide other food options in our school breakfast and lunch programs. We're investing money in supporting those initiatives in our School Healthy Eating Program.

We've also created a partnership through the Department of Community Services and Feed Nova Scotia to be able to provide supports for when our schools close as a result of COVID-19. When school families are notified that they're going to be required to go to at-home learning, in the notification letter we direct them on how they can access food supports through the partnership we've developed. Families are able to call 211 and navigate to real help, arrange for delivery of a non-perishable food box right to their home. That's a really great support that our families are benefiting from.

We're also having schools and regions enhance community partnerships that they have to supplement this approach so that in any scenario where schools are closed, we're able to provide additional supports through SchoolsPlus and other folks in our system to be able to do things like provide some additional perishable food items.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time is up for the Liberal Party. We now go to the Progressive Conservative Party for five minutes - Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: Deputy minister, as you and your colleagues know, in this Safe Return to School Fund, \$3.8 million is allocated for the touchless water bottle-filling stations. As you know, we found out not too long ago that the water quality in some of our schools is problematic. My question is, of the \$3.8 million spent, is any of that allocated to begin the process of remediating the water quality issues in some of our schools?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Walking a little bit back in time, folks will remember that the federal government lowered the standards. Overnight, water that was meeting standard didn't meet the new standard and all of those results were posted. We immediately put in whether a school, while we were waiting for those results - as soon as those standards changed and we started to look at what that meant in terms of water testing, we put bottled water in all of the schools across the province.

Then the opportunity came around touchless water fountains for COVID-19. When we looked at that, it was another case of necessary for COVID-19 and good beyond. We tested every single tap source in every single school across the entire province to understand that in some cases, it was soldering in a certain plumbing fixture. In other cases, it may be a problem that's further upstream. The bulk of it was going to be replacing a fixture and in this case, the water fountains.

We are under way and with this money, every single water fountain in the province of Nova Scotia will be replaced with touchless water. As they are replaced, the water is re-tested. Those results are starting to come in. This is a process that we're working on school by school by school. The folks that are doing this work have told us that by far, replacing fixtures will be in many, many cases the solution.

Right now, they're being replaced, the water is being re-tested. As the water tests safe or are meeting the new requirements, then the principal will notify the school community that it's complete, that they're removing the bottled water, and what the results were and the compliance was.

That process is under way right now. Again, this was an opportunity of something that was necessary for COVID-19. We had to close the water fountains off regardless, because of COVID-19. This is necessary for COVID-19 and good beyond.

TIM HALMAN: Thank you for your response. With respect to replacing the water fountains, what are the associated timelines and the expected expenditure for this replacement?

CATHY MONTREUIL: The expected expenditure is the \$3.8 million that we budgeted. We anticipate that work is completed in time right across the province. As I say, it's happening school by school by school. We anticipate being completed by the time school starts in the Fall.

[11:30 a.m.]

TIM HALMAN: Since I have you here, deputy, can you quickly provide a summary as to what plans are being developed to address the achievement gap, specifically as a result of the pandemic?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Once again, this is an opportunity to thank all Nova Scotians for doing what it takes to keep our schools open, because when our schools are open, our kids do best.

Some of the COVID gap that's being written about elsewhere, it's being written about elsewhere because of the number of days kids are not in school and at-home learning is not yielding the same results as quality teaching in a classroom. Our teachers tell us that all of the time, and they're not wrong. While our schools are in full-time, we're continuing . . .

THE CHAIR: Deputy minister, time's up. To the NDP. Ms. Chender - five minutes.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm going to give it one more shot, I apologize. Back to trying to figure out the parameters and accounting of the Safe Return to Class Fund from

the feds, is there an agreement or an MOU or anything that kind of lays out how that money is transferred and how it's spent, because all we've seen is an announcement?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I will start. At first, there is direction from the federal government in the forms of those communications, those are public. I'll pass off to - who am I passing off for the rest of this answer? Andrew.

ANDREW COATES: The fund is outlined in that press release, which was in the binder for the committee, which outlines the key areas that the funding can be spent on from the federal government to the province. I might pass to David to explain the timeline with which we have to report to the federal government.

DAVID POTTER: As Andrew indicated, there are timelines connected with this. The initial letter and the correspondence that was provided from the federal government was shortly followed with the initial tranche of funding, which was 50 per cent of the \$47.88 million. We received that in short order after acknowledging that we would like to receive the funding and would use it based on the parameters outlined.

Once the components of the \$47.88 million were identified, information again was shared with the federal government in order to get that second wave of funding released. That has been completed, so the government has received the full amount of the \$47.88 million at this point in time.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you for that. I guess that will just be the subject of lots of FOIPOP's in the future, but it would be great if there was something more detailed than a press release, because for those of us who are trying to understand and research and communicate with our constituents, having something more public and formalized as a document - notwithstanding the fact that time is of the issue, I understand, and that funding would be helpful.

I also want to ask about class sizes. I know you say that you're following Public Health, but obviously there are choices. We know from all of the other Public Health directives that we have seen in our province and across the country, that congregate settings are routinely limited even now. I'm wondering why there has been no discussion of smaller class sizes or no allocation of funding in that direction when we know that the fewer people who are gathering together and cohorting reduces the spread of the virus.

CATHY MONTREUIL: In consultation with Dr. Strang and Public Health in their guidance to us, they felt that a layered approach that included things like spacing where you can, cohorting where you don't, sanitizer, masks, getting kids outside, getting the air movement right in schools, et cetera, would combine as a range of safety practices to maintain COVID-19 safety in schools.

Should COVID-19 safety need a different response, or should it show up in a different way, certainly our plan has plans for that. However, first and foremost, keeping

every child in Nova Scotia in school and in the learning environment that's going to support their ongoing learning, despite a pandemic, has been job one. That has been the advice of the pediatric table at the IWK and Public Health. Again, those conversations are not one-offs - they're continuous and continuous review.

I think the proof of the pudding in the safety plan is the fact that we're one of the few places in North America where our . . .

THE CHAIR: Time is up. The Liberal caucus for five minutes. Rafah DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Would you like to finish those few sentences, Ms. Montreuil?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, I think is what my grandmother used to say. Being one of the very few places in North America and maybe beyond where our kids have enjoyed a rich, rewarding environment as a result of all of the work that I've outlined throughout this meeting is something that we continue to celebrate, but don't take lightly. We cannot rest. We cannot let down our guard. We need to continue to be very vigilant in all of the pieces that go together to make this safe environment for kids continue.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I believe you said \$4.1 million was spent on new online math and literacy programs supports in the school. Is that for homework? Is that to be used during the school? Can you just elaborate and explain why you chose to spend the money there, and what is the benefit of that program?

CATHY MONTREUIL: One of the fundamental principles that we use in our inclusive education policy and in the department is that with enough time and practice, all kids can achieve at high levels. We know that in numeracy, reading and writing, some structured and targeted support that's used in partnership with quality teaching will help kids do better. There is emerging research on the role of technology in schools as not a replacement, but another tool to aid and provide deeper learning, more practice. It provides a whole range of things, the technology-enabled learning. That's worth a meeting in and of itself.

However, in this case, we also knew that we wanted - especially for some of our youngest learners - the ability for more time and practice in reading, in writing and in mathematics. Those procurements, I think, have closed and we're in the process now so I can't speak particularly to those criteria until we're a little bit further down the procurement channel for obvious reasons.

However, having evidence-based, up-to-date and access to online learning that has some research behind it in terms of its efficacy is something that's going to enhance - necessary for COVID-19 and certainly good beyond, and will continue to use beyond COVID-19. That money goes hand in glove with the money for updating our infrastructure

- so routers, wiring and wi-fi access. As we introduce more devices into our system - not just for COVID-19, but for beyond - we need an infrastructure so that more kids can be online at one time and collaborate and interview experts across the globe as part of their in-class learning, meet with kids who may not live in Nova Scotia or Canada as part of their ongoing learning. All those kinds of opportunities that technology brings to our teachers and to our classrooms require a robust infrastructure to do it - necessary for COVID-19, but beyond.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Judy just texted me that my sound is not very loud, so I'm trying to get closer to the computer and I can be a bit louder.

A big thank for how well our schools have done and how happy the kids are - that's truly all I hear from mothers around me. They can't wait to send their kids to school, so they feel safe, they feel happy, and thank you for all the efforts that you've put in.

THE CHAIR: That's the conclusion. I would ask the deputy minister if she has any closing remarks.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to share. The word "unprecedented," I hope to never use in the future. However, it is apt. Nova Scotia has been written about and will continue to be written about, and I answer questions from colleagues across Canada and beyond around the story. It would be negligent to complete today without acknowledging that there are a lot of arms in Nova Scotia that are wrapping themselves around the kids and families in Nova Scotia in this department, beyond this department, across this department, in the regions, at the schools.

We didn't talk about some of the pieces. You're on a piece of software today that provides an opportunity to do government business in a secure online environment. We adopted this same strategy in week one to provide ongoing mental health supports to our kids when it can only be done virtually. There are so many little stories - great news stories and innovations that we developed along this journey because we had to, because we were welcomed and invited and in fact needed to be nimble and agile and find the responses in a timely way so that our kids and our teachers and our staff couldn't wait.

I couldn't be prouder of the education community, and as a transplanted Nova Scotian, I can tell you I thank heaven every day for living in this province during this pandemic.

Through the Chair, I want to thank you for giving us this opportunity. This is still a work in progress. We need to get through the March break and then come back for what I call the home stretch of this pandemic year, and make it through with strength and safety and with kids who will have learned an awful lot from this pandemic. There are many gifts that this pandemic will leave behind in terms of the learning and the development of all of us. Thank you for this and thank you for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. It's been a very interesting discussion. Very positive and of course some negative ones that required some more development of resources and so on. Thank you very much, and I'll allow you to leave as you wish . . .

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Chair, if I may.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

TIM HALMAN: Deputy minister, thank you very much for your comments. With respect to transplanted Nova Scotians, there are no transplanted Nova Scotians, just Nova Scotians.

Mr. Chair, with your permission I'd like to put forward a motion.

THE CHAIR: We may have to extend the meeting because we still have our ABCs to do and some correspondence.

TIM HALMAN: The motion is directly related to the issues I've talked about, so would it be possible to do it now?

THE CHAIR: I think so, with the agreement of everyone.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chair, I think we should let our guests leave and then start committee business.

THE CHAIR: Okay, let's just take a minute or so to allow our guests to leave. Yes.

Mr. Jessome.

[11:45 a.m.]

BEN JESSOME: I'd prefer if we conduct the scheduled committee business and if there are any new motions, we can do that towards the end of the meeting. We have ABCs that we continually get encouragement to fill, and I would like to see us complete that before any new motions are introduced.

THE CHAIR: I think we should get our ABCs in first. Mr. Halman, I hope that's okay and we'll have some time at the end. I have our time as 12:05 p.m. now to . . .

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Chair, it will only take a moment. It's directly related to the line of questioning that I brought up.

THE CHAIR: I think we'll wait on that. Those questions won't be out of our minds. You'll have an opportunity at the very end. We'll start our ABCs as soon as possible. Are we ready for that?

Ms. DiCostanzo, you have the floor.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: For the Department of Agriculture, I move that John Hamilton be appointed as a director to the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is carried.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: For the Department of Business, I move that Alex Paul, Carla Swansburg, Jeff McKinnon, Kavita Khanna, Jim Eisenhauer, Kevin Stoddart, and Sarah Young be appointed as directors to the Board of Directors of Develop Nova Scotia Limited.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Jessome, please.

HON. BEN JESSOME: For the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage, I move that Lesley D. MacDonald be re-appointed as a member to the Annapolis Valley Regional Library Board.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: For the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, I move that Mark Peck of HRM be appointed as member and chair to the Nova Scotia Municipal Finance Corporation.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is carried.

That does end our ABCs for today. We have some correspondence that needs to be followed up. There was a letter written on February 2nd from Mr. Wilson who was the Minister of Environment. I think everyone has received that.

Mr. Johns.

BRAD JOHNS: I see the correspondence here and I certainly am hopeful that Premier Rankin - knowing his background and his priority of environment - that environment is going to take a more significant role under his administration. In saying that, I certainly hope that the newly appointed minister recognizes the importance of environment, climate change, and the importance that the Minister's Round Table on Environment and Sustainable Prosperity plays. It's been a long time and we're well over a year now, and that committee does need to get filled.

I see in the correspondence, the previous minister discussing that a full round table will be filled after the Spring ABC campaign to ensure that work is carried forward. I'm just curious to know if the clerk can tell me exactly when the Spring ABC campaign begins and concludes.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh.

JUDY KAVANAGH: I'm sorry, that doesn't fall under my expertise. The Executive Council Office carries that out.

BRAD JOHNS: Okay. Is there a way, Mr. Chair, that we can get a clarification on when that begins and ends?

THE CHAIR: I think we can pass that on, yes, through the minister and see what happens.

BRAD JOHNS: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Alright, the only other business I guess is the next meeting will be Tuesday, March 30th at 10:00 a.m. until 12:00 noon by video conferencing. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding student security alerts, lockdowns, and other protocols.

You may note that if the House is sitting on this date, this topic will be postponed and the committee will meet only to consider appointments to ABCs.

Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I would like to put before the committee, and I don't know if this is a discussion topic or a motion, the clerk could probably advise us. I want to suggest that we meet in person next time. We expect to go back into the Legislature at least partially in person, we see boards and committees around the province meeting in person.

Speaking for myself as a technically adept person in the middle of Nova Scotia who got kicked out of the meeting three times, this is a challenging format, and I'm glad we're

doing it rather than not doing it at all, but I think while our environment affords us the opportunity to safely meet in person that we should take that up.

I'm just suggesting the next meeting, and we could go from there, but I guess I would seek the agreement of my colleagues on that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: I certainly appreciate the comments of my colleague, Ms. Chender. My understanding is once the ABCs were done, I'd have an opportunity to put in a proposed motion.

THE CHAIR: There's no motion that I've heard, other than that they request that we look into it. I'm willing to look at it, but we'll have to do what the House tells us to do.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Committees are their own creatures, Mr. Chair, with respect, so our committee can determine ourselves what we desire to do. We don't take instruction on that front, so I'm asking this committee to decide that we all meet in person.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman, you had something.

TIM HALMAN: Certainly I appreciate Ms. Chender's point. Before we get to that piece of business, it was my understanding following the ABCs I'd have a chance to introduce my motion.

THE CHAIR: Any motions will be firstly decided by ourselves, our committee will decide if we want to entertain Ms. Chender's, if you want to make a motion now.

TIM HALMAN: I'll take that opportunity. Mr. Chair, I move that this committee request a financial update from the . . .

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: . . . on how much of the \$47.8 million . . .

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman. Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: . . . has been spent to February 15th and where it has been spent by the RCEs and CSAP.

THE CHAIR: I would like you just to wait. I offered Ms. Chender the first motion if she wanted to make a motion for the committee.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do want to make a motion. I'm glad that I have the floor. The reason I'm raising this motion now is because the Chair

brought up the topic of our next meeting date. I'm sure that my colleagues in the PC caucus will have plenty of time to make their motion and we'll entertain it at that time.

Since I have raised the issue, I had asked before - let's just make it a motion to make it clear. I would like to put forward a motion that the next meeting of the Human Resources Committee - whether it be the full meeting or the abridged meeting that would happen in the event of us being in the Legislature - happen in person, and the place and format to be determined in consultation with the clerk's office and Legislative Television.

BEN JESSOME: If it's agreeable to Ms. Chender, I would add Public Health to that list to consult, assuming that we're in a similar place so we can likely do that. I'd prefer not to assume, but just to include Public Health, a body to help us make the decision on whether we go back or not. I don't see there being any issue, but at the same time, I want to make sure that we're consulting them as well.

BRAD JOHNS: On Ms. Chender's current motion, I would just like to state for the record that the PC caucus is not opposed to this motion and would look forward to resuming meetings of the HR Committee in person. Just for the record, we'd like that stated.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Could we take a five-minute recess just to make sure that this works for all our members - the drives in and also that Public Health is okay with the room in the Legislature. We just want to make sure that everything is okay before we say yes for our team.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to the point that Mr. Jessome made and that Ms. DiCostanzo is raising now regarding Public Health, what I would like to see us do would be to vote in favour of this, subject to any contradictory information from Public Health so that we could vote to go ahead. If Public Health then upon consultation says that's not safe, then we can revisit the vote by a poll from the clerk.

I think that we have all the information right now to vote. Of course, if Public Health comes out and says it's not safe to meet, then we can reconsider the decision at that time.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: Thank you. Ms. Chender. Obviously, we're going all over the place here. You're considering this motion. I've already put a motion forward. Obviously, we're going to need more time. Here's another motion. I'd like to put a motion forward to extend time by 15 minutes so we can further these discussions and obviously, an opportunity for me to put my motion again on the floor - which is already on the floor.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I agree with that, but can we have the motion sent to us via email so we have them in writing, please? We'll take the 15 minutes to discuss between us as a team. I'd really appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: We'll take a five-minute recess.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: We can take a mute and the video off for five minutes. We're allowed to do that, correct, Ms. Kavanagh? For 15 minutes, can we turn off our video and our mute button, correct?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Yes, if the committee is in recess, then the broadcast will suspend, so you can turn off your mute and your audio and video.

KENDRA COOMBES: Have we voted to extend time yet?

THE CHAIR: No, we haven't. We're good right now until 12:05 p.m.

BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Chair, at the beginning of the meeting, you actually said you were going to extend it for an additional 15 minutes, which would take us to 12:15 p.m. The motion on the floor would then extend it a further 15 minutes to 12:30 p.m., which would be more than enough time for recesses and all the motions and questions.

[12:00 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Mr. Johns is correct to say we have 15 minutes that was initially added at the start of the meeting. I don't believe we necessarily need to extend it beyond that. Let's take five minutes to recess, discuss this motion, come back, vote on the motion, and then Mr. Halman, I believe, has a motion to present as well.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Halman.

TIM HALMAN: It's my understanding there's two motions on the floor. I already read my motion and Ms. Chender's . . .

THE CHAIR: We didn't hear yours.

TIM HALMAN: . . . based on the premise I was told that after ABCs were completed, I could move forward with my motion.

THE CHAIR: Well, we've taken another step forward from that. We'll take our five minutes and recess.

RAFAH DISCOSTANZO: Ms. Kavanagh, please send us the motions via email. We'd really appreciate it. We'll see you back in five minutes. Thank you.

JUDY KAVANAGH: As soon as I receive it, I will forward it.

[12:00 noon. The committee recessed.]

[12:10 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: If I could ask Judy Kavanagh to read the first motion, which is the one from Ms. Chender.

JUDY KAVANAGH: "I move that HR Committee agree to hold the March 30, 2021 meeting in-person pending the advice of Public Health."

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: At this time, the Liberal caucus will vote no to this motion.

THE CHAIR: Having said that, that understands that we have the majority so at this point in time . . .

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Chair, are we discussing the motion?

THE CHAIR: I will allow a few minutes. We're going to be closing off here at 12:20. I think the 15 minutes that Brad Johns suggested I made - which I guess I did - and the five minutes that I had put on myself.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Chair, I have an appointment at 12:30 p.m. so I really have to leave at 12:20 p.m.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: With respect, we should still put it to a vote. I find it curious that the Liberal caucus is voting against this motion with no reasons given, unless somebody wants to give some reasons. We can go watch our kids play sports. We can go to a hockey game. We've spent today discussing how our children can be in classrooms with 20, 25, 26 students. Our life is more or less as back to normal as anyone in the province.

We've now not been in the Legislature for almost a full year next month. While we are meeting in this way, it is simply not as effective as if we meet in person. I want to register my disappointment with that position from the Liberal caucus and I would love to hear any reasons for that - notwithstanding appointments people may have.

THE CHAIR: I will allow Brad Johns to speak on this and that will be it for the Progressive Conservative caucus.

BRAD JOHNS: As I said previously, the PC caucus is in favour of Ms. Chender's motion. We have met in the past. This committee has met already during COVID-19 in the Legislative Chamber. Everybody met the appropriate distancing and that meeting went very well. I don't see any reason whatsoever - including any current health restrictions - that would prohibit us from doing that, so we are in favour of that motion.

THE CHAIR: Having heard that, I would suggest that the motion has been read. We should all vote individually, I guess, to pass it or turn it down.

Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is defeated.

Mr. Halman.

[12:15 p.m.]

TIM HALMAN: Mr. Chair, I move that this committee requests a financial update from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on how much of the \$47.8 million has been spent by February 15th, and where it's been spent by the RCEs and CSAP.

THE CHAIR: Any comments?

TIM HALMAN: The deputy and her colleagues were unable to give us that information here at committee today, so I ask that this committee put in that request to get that information.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: The Liberal team has no problem with that and we're in agreement with that as well. We will send the letter on behalf of the committee.

THE CHAIR: Is there any further discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please raise your hand. Contrary minded, raise your hand.

The motion is carried.

I think that ends our meeting, and I thank you all for being patient with me and getting used to my new computer and finding out where everybody is on the computer.

Thank you very much, it was a very exhilarating type of meeting today, lots of information passing back and forth. I thank you all for your comments. That ends the meeting.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[The committee adjourned at 12:16 p.m.]