

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, May 25, 2021

Video Conference

Student Security: Alerts, Lockdowns and Other Protocols

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Rafah DiCostanzo (Chair)
Bill Horne (Vice-Chair)
Hon. Leo Glavine
Hon. Gordon Wilson
Hon. Tony Ince
Larry Harrison
Brad Johns
Claudia Chender
Kendra Coombes

[Hon. Ben Jessome replaced Hon. Gordon Wilson]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Karen Gatien, Associate Deputy Minister
Anne Power, Executive Director, Student Services and Equity

Strait Regional Centre for Education

Paul Landry, Regional Executive Director



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 25, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Rafah DiCostanzo

VICE-CHAIR

Bill Horne

THE CHAIR: Order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I'm Rafah DiCostanzo, the MLA for Clayton Park West, and I'm chairing this meeting this morning.

Today, in addition to considering appointments for agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding student security: alerts, lockdowns, and other protocols.

Members, witnesses, the Committee Clerk, and the Legislative Counsel should keep their video on throughout the meeting. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off. If you have another device with you, such as a phone or others, please put those on silent. I will check mine at the same time - it wasn't on silent.

Please try not to leave your seat during the meeting unless it is absolutely necessary. If you do, please leave your camera on but your audio muted. That way we know we have a quorum and we know whether you are present if a vote is called.

If you need to confer privately with the clerk or Legislative Counsel, or if members wish to confer before a vote, I may call a brief recess. If any members have technical problems, please call or text the clerk.

I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves. Please state your riding also.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel, Mr. Gordon Hebb, and Legislative Committee Clerk, our favourite, Judy Kavanagh.

Now we are starting with committee business. We will start with agencies, boards, and commission appointments. We are starting with the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage, and I'd like to ask for a separate motion for each board. Minister Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Madam Chair, I move that Michelle Smith be appointed as a member to the Cape Breton Regional Library Board.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. Next.

BEN JESSOME: I move that Diane Racette be appointed as a member to the South Shore Regional Library Board.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. Next.

BEN JESSOME: Last but not least, I move Patrice Simpson be appointed as a member to the Western Counties Regional Library Board.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next, the Department of Health and Wellness. Minister Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: Madam Chair, I move that Anne Wilcox be appointed as a member to the Board of the Nova Scotia College of Chiropractors.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. Next.

TONY INCE: I move that Carmen Davidson, Maria Lasheras, and Carrie Rice be appointed as members to the Board of the College of Occupational Therapists of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. Next.

TONY INCE: I move that Dermott Crooks and Amanda Knight be appointed as members to the Board of the Nova Scotia College of Physiotherapists.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. Last one, Mr. Ince.

TONY INCE: Last, I move that Daniel Gee, Ronald Williams, and Lauren Randall be appointed as public representatives to the Board of the Nova Scotia College of Respiratory Therapists.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? All those in favour? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That concludes appointments to agencies, boards and commissions.

We also have letters all printed here. A letter from the Minister of Environment and Climate Change in response to a question raised at the meeting of March 30, 2021. This was e-mailed to members on April 27th and again this morning. Any discussion? I see none.

We also have another letter from the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development in response to a question raised at the meeting April 27, 2021. This was emailed to all members of May 11th and again this morning.

I am assuming everybody received it. Any discussion? Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I would like to follow up on that letter because I don't think it actually answered exactly the question we were asking. The question we were asking was about the procedure for school closures and the answer was about safety and the fact that schools are now closed for the remainder of the year. I know that there is an active conversation happening about whether or not some students can return to the classroom. There are a lot of advocates of students with diverse learning needs who would like to see what's happening in other provinces happen here, where they can return to the classroom in small, distanced cohorts.

Further, to the extent that we were given any plan for how school closures would happen, that is not, in fact, how it happened here. We were told there was a Phase 2 where high school students would learn remotely and students would be spread out through the schools and that never happened.

I would just like to follow up and say with a question around specifically if we are still in this situation in the Fall, which we all certainly hope that we are not, is there actually any step between all the kids being in school and none of the kids being in school that we could anticipate? Because it doesn't feel like what has happened mirrors what we were told would happen, if that makes any sense.

I know that's coming out all over the place. I don't know if my colleagues have other similar questions, but it is certainly one that I get a lot in my constituency office. So maybe just some clarification on the actual process which leads to schools being closed.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to state the question and see if the members agree that we should send another letter or maybe just repeat the exact question that you'd like to ask and then we will see if all the members are in agreement that we should . . .

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Well, I mean, I think if you look back to the motion, which was that the committee write the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and inquire about what triggers the following events - single school closures, family and school closures, Regional Centre for Education-wide school closures, provincial school closures, online learning, and event cancellations - I just don't feel like that question was answered, so I would like to send that question back and just say: Could you provide more detail on when those specific things happen? Because I didn't feel like the letter that came back to us actually addresses those questions.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? So, I can ask the clerk: Do you have all the details that you need to send another letter to clarify further?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Yes, I do. Do we have committee agreement for me to send this follow-up letter?

THE CHAIR: If you don't mind raising your hands if you are in agreement to send another letter for clarification. Okay. Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: The next one is also another a letter from the Department of Labour and Advanced Education in response to a question asked at the meeting of April 27th. It includes an email from Carol Lowthers. This letter was emailed and Ms. Lowthers sent an email right away after the committee because she apparently had that answer and emailed it on May 18th and again this morning. All the information was sent to all members on May 18th and again this morning. Members may recall that one of the witnesses at the April 27th

meeting, Carol Lowthers, emailed the committee immediately after the meeting with answers to one of the questions about student debt. That was forwarded to the members on receipt for clarity. That information also was included in the department's letter. Any further discussion on the letter received from the Department of Labour and Advanced Education?

[10:15 a.m.]

We can move to any other business. No new business. Next, our topic for the day is Student Security: Alerts, Lockdowns, and Other Protocols. I would like to welcome all the witnesses here, and I read their names. From the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we have Karen Gatien, Associate Deputy Minister, and also Ann Power, Executive Director, Student Services and Equity. Also, from the Strait Regional Centre for Education, we have Paul Landry, Regional Executive Director. Welcome, everyone.

Before we start questions, I'd like just to ask the members if it's okay with them that we do the 20 minutes PC, 20 minutes NDP, followed by 20 minutes for Liberal, just to make it easier to see hands. If that's okay with everybody, we can follow that same procedure that we've been doing in all our virtual meetings. If all are in agreement, please raise your hand. Thank you. We will start our questions at 10:17 a.m. - sorry, Ms. Kavanagh. Go ahead.

JUDY KAVANAGH: I think we still have to hear the opening remarks from the witnesses.

THE CHAIR: Oh, I'm so sorry. Thank you for reminding me. I apologize. I believe the Associate Deputy Minister, Karen Gatien has her opening remarks. I apologize again.

KAREN GATIEN: No problem. Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss this important topic. Joining me, as was already mentioned, are Paul Landry, the Regional Executive Director of the Strait Regional Centre for Education, and Ann Power, our Executive Director of Student Services and Equity at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

We've been invited to speak about student security in our schools with a specific focus on alerts, lockdowns, and other protocols. Outside of the pandemic each day, over 120,000 students arrive at our 370 schools. We want each and every one of those students to feel safe, and we want them to contribute to keeping their schools a safe and welcoming place for their fellow students. I know this commitment to safe schools is shared by the 14,000 teachers, teacher assistants, early childhood educators, specialists, administrators, and other support staff in our education system. They all play a fundamental role in keeping our schools, students, and each other safe.

From the moment a student steps on a bus or walks through the door to the moment the bell rings and the student arrives home, their safety and well-being is our number one priority. We know that student well-being has a direct connection to student success. Safety is a broad term, which is why we have policies and protocols that focus on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of everyone in our system.

The expected behaviours that contribute to a positive and safe school environment are outlined in our Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy. This code of conduct makes clear that everyone in our system has a role to play in ensuring our schools are positive, inclusive, and safe spaces. This policy clearly defines what is considered unacceptable behaviour and guides how our schools identify and respond to these behaviours. The response is to be progressive and takes into account the circumstances, student age, and ability to understand and control their behaviour, and seeks to address harm and restore relationships.

Consequences vary from a conversation with the student and/or their parents, loss of privileges and restitution, all the way to suspension, and/or results in a referral to outside agencies like police or health care. Building safe and healthy relationships is a process that's included in our curriculum and taught to students, beginning when they enter pre-Primary and continues until they graduate. Everyone in our system is expected to follow the code of conduct.

We are certainly very fortunate in Nova Scotia. Our schools are safe, but we need to be prepared for emergencies that may arise. Our department, Regional Centres for Education, CSAP, and individual schools have strong relationships with our law enforcement agencies and other emergency services. In working together with these agencies and their experts, our Province has plans and protocols that outline how different incidents are to be handled. I'd like to take a minute to go over a few of those plans. They include:

- A fire safety program manual that outlines standard requirements for schools under the Fire Safety Act. This includes fire safety systems, inspections, proper storage of materials, and fire drills.
- A Provincial School Police Protocol that outlines how police and schools work together when police involvement is required, including who determines when police are contacted and how an investigation is carried out within the school community.
- Each school must have an emergency management plan. This plan is the responsibility of the principal and is guided by our Emergency Management for Nova Scotia Schools provincial guidelines. These guidelines help our leaders plan for a variety of possible scenarios, including evacuations, accidents and injuries, weather, or a threat requiring hold and secure or lockdown to name a few.

All of these plans and policies - which are available on our website - were established through extensive consultation within the education system, government, and with our emergency services agencies. These plans are also informed by legislation including the Education Act, the Education (CSAP) Act, the Fire Safety Act, and the Health Protection Act. There are strong, long-standing relationships between our schools and the emergency agencies that serve their communities. These ties are vital to ensuring that emergencies in our schools are responded to appropriately, with clarity, and following an established plan.

For our students to learn as well as they can, they need to feel safe, valued, and included in their school community. Our students have a variety of backgrounds and experiences. They come from different socio-economic, cultural, religious, and familial backgrounds, and these varied perspectives enrich our school communities. Nova Scotia is a leader in inclusive education, and through our provincial Inclusive Education Policy, we are improving supports for all students. One of the goals of our Inclusive Education Policy is that all students should feel they belong, that they are accepted, safe, and valued.

I believe that our work on inclusive education makes for positive and safe environments in our schools. By putting a strong focus on inclusion, we're helping our youngest generation to recognize, be sensitive to, honour, and value each other's lived experience, and the variety of cultures, teachings, and families add richness our school system and help our students to develop the skills they will need to be global citizens.

Before I conclude my remarks, I wanted to also highlight how the past 14 months or so have changed some views of the connections between students, schools, and their safety and well-being. Those in the education system have always known that for some students, school is where they get a sense of normalcy and security, where they have structure and supports, where they feel safe.

Over the past year, a lot of incredible work has been done within the system to ensure that these students remain supportive when they're learning at their school or during periods of at-home learning. It has not been easy, but these efforts have made a difference to students, and we know that student well-being equals student success. The safer, more inclusive, and more positive learning environments we can create, the better our students will do.

Our commitment to safety is ongoing. The policies and procedures I've outlined in these remarks are living documents that are reviewed and updated as required, and we continue to check in with our students on their feelings about safety and well-being. First voice on this topic is vitally important, and our student success survey provides us with important feedback directly from students. Again, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to address the committee, and I look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: It is 10:25 a.m., and we'll be starting with the PC caucus. Who would like to go first? Mr. Johns, go ahead.

BRAD JOHNS: I guess from two perspectives here, there are some questions that I think I'll leave for my colleague Larry Harrison to ask specifically in regard to some COVID questions that may come into play here.

I'm curious to know in regard to bullying and cyberbullying, some information in regard to that. Specifically, how the department protects students from bullying and what's being used to promote bullying prevention right now in schools.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gatien, I'll throw all the questions to you first, and if you'd like to give it to somebody else please let me know.

KAREN GATIEN: I will ask Ms. Power to respond, but I will just say that we take every incident of bullying very seriously, so we have spent a lot of time in developing supports in this area. Ann leads the branch in the department that oversees a lot of this work, so she's in the best position to respond.

ANN POWER: The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has a Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy which really governs which behaviours we respond to, and how we respond to those behaviours.

Of course, we respond to all behaviours proactively and early on in the life of a child in school. As we work with children, we are developing self-regulation behaviours, we're developing their empathy, we're developing their social and emotional learning. There are lots of proactive ways in which we work with children all the way through school, starting as soon as they come to school.

In terms of bullying and cyberbullying, we have embedded in our curriculum a number of areas where we address that, from the health curriculum to some of the resources and ongoing building of resiliency as we go through the curriculum. The Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy really comes into play when we're responding to behaviours, which are outlined there, and part of those behaviours are around the areas of bullying and cyberbullying.

Although certainly one incident is too many, we do teach children to be critical users of social media and to understand how to deal with and stand up to bullying. Also our proactive programs like Roots of Empathy for instance, which is from Primary to Grade 3, where we teach children how to understand how to be respectful and kind and gentle with each other so that those things don't happen on a go-forward basis.

I think the result of a lot of that work has been a decrease in incidences of bullying and cyberbullying. We would need to go back over this past two years since the pandemic started because of course we've had partial years in school, so you don't get the same data sets, but certainly for the three years following that, we saw a steady decline. That was very encouraging for us. I think we see that we are going in the right direction.

If you're interested in some of the programs and the details of the programs that we have that are embedded in our curriculum, Paul Landry could speak to some of those, sort of on the ground.

[10:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Power. Mr. Johns, would you like me to ask Mr. Landry to continue?

BRAD JOHNS: Well, I guess I'm curious specific to - I know that around 2018, there was some legislation that came in with regard to the Intimate Images and Cyber-protection Act which came in 2018. Are there any statistics in regard to how many incidences and have charges been laid since that legislation was introduced under that Act?

ANN POWER: Thank you. Yes, we would be able to look at some of that information in terms of bullying. In terms of cyberbullying there may be a Cyber Scan Unit at the Department of Justice that may be helpful to you in that regard. They would have specific information around cyberbullying, but we also have information on the number of incidences. I don't have that right in front of me right now in terms of that particular year, but I could get that for you, if you wish.

BRAD JOHNS: It's not just specific to that year. I am curious to know since that legislation has been enacted, which I think was in 2018, so it would be for the last four to five years.

I have one final question before I turn it over to my caucus colleague. I certainly thank Mr. Landry for being here today. I am curious as to why Mr. Landry is the only regional director here, and there aren't any representatives from any of the other educational centres, as well.

KAREN GATIEN: We just invited one in order to represent the regional executive directors. It's honestly the only reason.

BRAD JOHNS: Okay, thank you. Madam Chair, I will turn some time over to my colleague Mr. Harrison.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Johns. Mr. Harrison, the floor is yours.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a few questions on the COVID-19 situation. I know decisions are very, very hard to make and I am just trying to get a handle on what has taken place and what will take place in the future.

Do you have a number of how many students and education staff actually were infected with COVID-19 from April 1st until today?

KAREN GATIEN: We wouldn't have that number; Public Health would have tracked that. On our website, we certainly were showing the number of schools that were impacted by COVID-19 and having to have the short three-day closures. Once this variant increased, it just wasn't manageable for Public Health to provide us with those numbers.

LARRY HARRISON: What has the department learned from the onset of this third wave that it will use to better protect the students and the staff in the future going forward?

KAREN GATIEN: I don't know that we've learned anything different from this third wave than we have from the beginning. I'll be honest, as we've gone through the process through the school year, we've learned every step of the way. Certainly, if you may remember, in the Fall when the first case was in a school, we closed the school for the day and then we found enrolment was very low the following day, even though the school had been cleaned.

Working with Public Health in order to give them enough time to do contact tracing, for the school to have a deep cleaning, and also to increase confidence in parents and in the public, we went to the process of the three-day closure which worked very well up until this variant. Then it was just that the community spread was so significant that it really meant having to close schools for a longer period of time. Certainly we continue to try to learn about what additional supports students might need in terms of their mental health, how are the students doing.

I would say that one of the things we've really seen grow is the need for food for students. I don't have the statistics with me today, but there has been a significant uptake on the food boxes. That is a partnership that we've done with Community Services where if families call 211 through Feed Nova Scotia and their subsidiaries across the province or like organizations, we will deliver boxes of food. That, we've really learned, is quite a high need in the province. As well, more and more students miss their friends.

What we have learned this time is that really having more access to the connections - even if they are over the internet through online learning - has been really significant in increasing their engagement and keeping their engagement. Getting them outside is something we have really learned about through the whole year but is increasingly important as we've all had to sort of isolate in our own communities. How can we, as an education system, encourage and find ways for students to get outside as part of their learning?

We are really excited about the outdoor learning spaces that will be built which will be a benefit, a long-term benefit, but have come about because of access to federal COVID-19 funding. It will be good in the long term for students and will be part of their community, as well.

LARRY HARRISON: I must admit, the food aspect was one of my concerns because I know that the schools in my constituency have a program where they can help

families that are in poverty and give food to the children as they leave on a Friday, for instance, for the weekend or the coming week. I was just wondering what that process was to keep that going. You have been helpful and I am glad they are still helping with those families, no question.

My two grandkids are 11 and 14 and they are handling this very well, actually. They are getting their homework done and both of them are golfers, so they've been doing a lot of that certainly and will be. How have the kids handled not being in school? Do you get a sense over the province how the kids are actually feeling?

KAREN GATIEN: I'm glad to hear that your grandchildren are doing well and have found an outdoor learning space for themselves on the golf course.

Certainly from every region we are hearing very positive feedback about our at-home learning. Students are engaged, as I've said. Teachers, other educational workers or support workers, and administration have really gone above and beyond to help support them to be successful and so we are hearing that attendance is very strong.

For those students who do not have access to the internet, we have a means to provide them with some learning opportunities through USBs, and reach out from their teachers over the phone. Certainly, we were looking at what other supports in terms of mental health and well-being are available for students.

I think maybe what I will do is ask Mr. Landry to respond to how it is going in his region. He can give you some concrete examples and then if you would like some information on the additional supports, as well, then Ann Power could speak to that.

PAUL LANDRY: As Ms. Gatien said, it's going quite well across our region. Students are engaged, the attendance has been going quite well, and we have been encouraging our students to get outside, get some exercise, and enjoy the beautiful surroundings this time of year, especially this time of year in nature which is what we have been promoting throughout this school year.

As we know, we entered the school year a bit differently with having to wear masks in cohorting with one another, so frequent breaks to get outside and enjoy nature and do some outdoor activity has really played a big part throughout this school year. Our students have really enjoyed it, and we've received positive feedback from our teachers as well.

As we said, we've had a really good year to date, and then we had to transition to online learning and that transition has gone very well. As Ms. Gatien said, we're checking in daily with our students. If they notice something like a student is not participating, then they reach out individually to that student to contact to see if everything is okay.

That will continue as we go forward. We think we have a good plan in place from now until the end of this school year. There have been lots of good resources put into place

to support students and families to make this transition easier. As we say, it's going quite well.

ANN POWER: I agree, certainly we've stepped up supports in terms of trying to ensure that parents and students have access to the supports that they need. For instance when the pandemic first hit, we looked for ways to reach out to families and to ensure that they had access to special support if children needed more in-depth mental health counselling or access to our mental health clinicians, for example. Right now we have about 1,400 licences in the system for tele-education, similar to the Department of Health and Wellness, where you can access audio-visual support.

If students need more intense support or interventions, they can be seen face-to-face in clinics. Even though we understand that doesn't always work, there are ways in which we can reach out to families. We have SchoolsPlus that is there to assist as well and to meet with students in safe ways so that we can ensure that we have access to the supports that they need.

LARRY HARRISON: I want to thank you for the amount of work that you have put into this. To pull this off, I can't imagine the logistics of it, so thank you for that.

I do have one more question about graduates. I know how much importance they put onto graduation. It's quite a landmark in their life. Has any direction been given as to how to pull off graduations, or has that just been left to the individual schools to try and come up with something meaningful?

KAREN GATIEN: The direction that we've given is really to look at what is possible under COVID guidelines to celebrate, as you said, a very important milestone for students. Schools are in the process now of working through that and getting some advice from Public Health in the regions as well, to see what might be possible.

Certainly we're all hoping that the numbers will be a little bit better by that point. We will definitely find a way to mark this milestone. We don't know at this point exactly what that's going to look like, but certainly more information on it will be coming shortly.

LARRY HARRISON: I just want to thank you for the amount of work you've done, and hopefully things will improve as the summer goes on and we get a good start in September. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We will move on now to the NDP caucus, starting with Ms. Chender, and you have 20 seconds extra on your time.

[10:45 a.m.]

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I hit the jackpot. Good morning and thank you to Ms. Gatien and Ms. Power for doing this today - and also our representative from the Strait,

Mr. Landry who I haven't met before. It is great to have you all here. I appreciate your presence and your opening remarks.

We are still trying to sort of understand the lay of the land absent school boards. I know that HRCE is there, but there was certain reporting and engagement with school boards that we hadn't quite re-established in the same way. So I wanted to ask a couple of questions particularly around that sort of safety issue of racism and discrimination in schools.

At least in the HRM when the Halifax Regional School Board existed, they directed the superintendent to track and report these kinds of incidents through the Incident Tracking Referrals and PowerSchool. My understanding is that that related directly to the school code of conduct that we heard about in the opening remarks. So if there was something that met the definition of a discriminatory or racist behaviour in that code of conduct, it was tracked.

It is our understanding that HRCE continues its reporting. I don't know about other Regional Centres, but I wonder if Ms. Gatién or Ms. Power could share with the committee if that has indeed continued and if so, what are we seeing in those statistics? Has there been improvement since, I think 2015 is when it started? Are there trends? Has it been impacted by COVID-19? Anything you could say about that?

KAREN GATIEN: The tracking is continuing. I don't have the statistics with me today but certainly we could follow up with you. That's no problem.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, I appreciate that. I guess I will just add then to the request for after the meeting, because I assume this also probably wouldn't be at hand. Are the Regional Centres tracking and reporting the ways in which racialized students are impacted by school safety and security policies? We know that there has been a lot of discussion about the role of policing and kind of other, you know, I appreciated in your introductory comments sort of talking about how, if there's an infringement of the School Code of Conduct, it can go from a conversation all the way through any number of permutations before you might even get to a suspension or something like that.

I wonder if there's a diversity lens on those kinds of consequences, as it were, and if that's kind of being actively studied or tracked? It does seem like a timely kind of conversation and one that maybe wasn't as active throughout education, prior to the last year or two.

KAREN GATIEN: I am going to let Ann Power speak to that. If you want an example of how it is working in the region, though, Mr. Landry could certainly give you an illustration of that.

ANN POWER: Yes, I think there is a number of ways in which that is tracked and monitored. Right at the school level, schools are constantly collecting data which then feeds

into their student success plan. Each school has to look at a variety of data sets in order to inform their student success plan. They look at student well-being, achievement data, referrals - a variety of sets of data in which they can determine how their students are feeling. Do they feel that they belong in school?

We also have a student success survey which is run across all schools where students themselves speak to it and they tell us how they feel. Again, at the school level, they can use that data where it might not be immediately apparent, but students can say, this is how I am feeling about belonging in school. Do I feel that my teacher is listening to me? Do I feel that I'm a member of a group? Many questions that they respond to, and this helps each school to develop their own plan at school level to address well-being and achievement. They'll target those areas which they feel they need to improve on.

That's one way in which we do that. Another way: they will desegregate their data as well to ensure that they're looking at all the different communities which make up the diverse nature of their student population. The students who come from racialized populations, as well as students who may be at more risk for a variety of other reasons, students who may have disabilities, and other ways of breaking down your data so that you can be very focused and targeted on how you address needs within your school.

We also can look at that provincially as that rolls up, and again, it's all really for the purposes of ensuring that we can improve our system and make it better.

PAUL LANDRY: As well, we have a number of staff who support students who require so to ensure that they have the support going forward to build relationships with our students to ensure that they're doing well academically, socially, and emotionally as well, and meet any needs that they may have. We also meet regularly with our community partners groups to ensure that we're getting the full story, that we're not just hearing from students but we're hearing from parents and community members as well to ensure that students' needs are being met and that we're working well with our communities.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That's helpful. I think when we come at this conversation, there's the individual assistance that we can offer students, and then there are the systemic barriers that exist for students, and so I think we've heard a lot about the individual supports, and I think those are growing, and I think that's great, but it feels like we still have a lot of work to do in terms of dismantling the systemic barriers, so that's why I pointed specifically to disciplinary protocols, particularly system-wide ones, because I think we've heard a lot from racialized communities about the challenges and barriers that those have presented.

In particular, one timely and touchy subject related to that would be the presence of police in schools. I think there are lots of different conversations about that. I've heard some of my colleagues from other Parties ask for enhanced security in schools from police agencies regarding illegal activities, but on the other hand, we know that Black Lives Matter Canada and a lot of local advocates have in fact called for the removal of police

from schools because the sense is that if we're dealing with disciplinary issues of children we should be able to do that, I think, as was mentioned in the opening comments, in a more restorative way.

We know that Toronto District School Board removed police in schools in 2017. In 2020, Edmonton announced the end of their school program officers. In Nova Scotia, we still have school response officers and school liaison officers. I think the policy was referenced in the opening comments, and I wonder if there is a conversation happening about the presence of police in schools, and specifically whether that conversation has involved consultation or engagement with Black and Indigenous communities or organizations or even parts of the department, and if there's anything you can offer about that.

KAREN GATIEN: Certainly, as I also mentioned, our policies, protocols and guidelines are constantly being reviewed. We are actually in the process of working to convene a meeting with our policing agencies and the education sector to look again at our protocol - the least of which is the change from the language of school boards, right? We still have CSAP but we also need to reference Regional Centres for Education and to look at these very things to see if there are other changes that we need to consider and other partners that need to be at the table as part of that consultation. So I have made a note of your question as well and certainly we'll have that as part of the discussion.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate that answer, and I would hope that that conversation might engage folks outside just the educational leadership to kind of gain maybe some extra perspective needed on that conversation.

I'm going to turn some time over now to my colleague, Ms. Coombes.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, the floor is yours.

KENDRA COOMBES: One of the issues relating to school safety that we have seen in the media over the past year was around the school dress codes. In December, a Grade 12 student at Sydney Academy organized a protest against the school dress code when the outfit she was wearing was considered inappropriate. Students at the protest said that although the dress code has some restrictions for male students, they aren't enforced like they are with female students and sometimes they are enforced differently on individual students.

More recently in Kings County, a high school student says that she was suspended for bringing attention to someone wearing an offensive shirt to her school that had to with rape culture, and yet there were no repercussions for the student wearing the shirt.

Despite the fact that the removal of school boards was put forward as a path to greater consistency in policies across the province, there is no provincial policy on dress

codes. Is there any work being done to develop a provincial policy on dress codes? This is a very serious issue and many times it is the sexualization of our youth.

KAREN GATIEN: At this time, there is no provincial work being done on a provincial policy. Dress codes are determined at the school level in conjunction with the school community, so the school advisory committee is involved as well. I will say, though, that I take the member's point about sexualization culture and we are doing quite a bit of work in the P-12 system on how to teach that notion to students at an age-appropriate level, of course, beginning in Primary, so there is greater awareness.

In reference to the situation in West Kings, obviously I can't get into details about an individual school. I will say, though, that that school did revisit their discipline decision and they used what happened as a learning opportunity for the school population. So certainly we try to do that as much as possible. When unfortunate circumstances happen, are there ways that we can help educate our student population - and our staff sometimes, depending on the situation - so that it doesn't repeat itself?

KENDRA COOMBES: I've been out of high school for 13 years, I believe, and it was an issue when I was in school where women's shoulders were sexualized, as if that is something that we should be looking at. I'm wondering if the department is working with the RCEs to ensure that the dress codes are as gender-neutral as possible to reduce sexism and homophobia. If so, how is the department working with the RCEs also to ensure teachers and administrators recognize their own biases and the ways in which they can impact the way they enforce these rules?

I do see a role for the Province here with regard to the schools. If we are talking about the idea that we got rid of the school boards to create greater consistency of policy, I think that should flow through as well the codes of conduct and dress codes. I'm just wondering, is the Province having a role in this dress code at all?

[11:00 a.m.]

KAREN GATIEN: Certainly, we've set out what are acceptable standards of behaviour in the School of Conduct Policy, and that would apply to dress codes as well - that students and school members in all things need to show respect for the rights, property, and safety of themselves and others. They have to demonstrate responsible behaviour. And you're right: certain inappropriate messages are not doing that. They're not respecting other people's sexual orientation or gender or are perhaps sexualizing them.

Certainly, we've set those standards, and it does apply to how students show up in all ways at school, but in terms of the specifics of how a dress code is developed, perhaps Mr. Landry could talk about how one would be developed at a school in his region and within the standards that are set out in the School of Conduct.

PAUL LANDRY: As Ms. Gatién said, it falls to schools to work with their school advisory councils, but typically it's an educational situation that may arise. If there is what would be considered inappropriate dress - and that could range from a number of things, as you say, print on a T-shirt, to something else - typically our staff - it may involve a number of staff or it may just involve one or two - but it would involve education, working with the student, trying not to embarrass the student or draw too much attention to them if need be, and work through them to see if there's a solution that can be found, and lots of discussion and education on expectations.

KENDRA COOMBES: Let's talk about some school safety as it relates to accessibility. The Commission on Inclusive Education reported that many schools identified capital needs as a barrier to offering inclusive programming. This government has also committed to being entirely accessible by 2030. This must surely include our schools. I'm just wondering, how is the department working with the Regional Centres to address the capital needs of schools related to accessibility and inclusion?

KAREN GATIEN: Yes, it will include schools. Certainly, every new school that's built is built with accessibility incorporated, and universal design is part of that. In terms of our older schools or existing facilities, we will go through them and determine what needs to be changed. We have representation not only from the department in our facilities section but also from the Regional Centres on a built environment committee, so we're working together with government to determine what needs to be done, in what order, and we also have staff - in fact, Ms. Power is one of our staff - on a committee looking at program standards that have to happen in terms of accessibility to programming.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm just wondering, will this include a dedicated funding stream, as well as planning and implementation and support to have sex-aggregated multi-stall washrooms and change rooms in all schools converted to all-gender facilities?

KAREN GATIEN: That hasn't been determined at this time. Certainly, all of our new designs incorporate those elements, and where possible, washrooms would have been converted to that. I know even in our office building we've done that, but at this point we don't have that design done for the existing schools.

KENDRA COOMBES: We know the federal Safe Return to Class Fund was used to provide - am I out of time? There we go. Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: We have more than ten minutes of the second round.

KENDRA COOMBES: Perfect.

THE CHAIR: Next is the Liberal caucus, starting with the Honourable Ben Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Along the same subject as my colleague, Ms. Chender, I want to ask a couple of questions related to racialized populations in schools. How does the department set a baseline for an appropriate number of initiatives that are given in school to educate students and staff about racialized communities within their school?

KAREN GATIEN: We don't so much set a minimum standard. What we have at the department, in addition to the work that Ann's shop leads with students with special needs, we have our African Nova Scotian - I'm sorry, African Canadian Services branch and Mi'kmaq Services branch and we all work together. In fact, with our inclusive education policy, we've clearly committed to this work for all of us. So it's not solely the responsibility of these three branches, but certainly they help to advise and guide the work that is done.

We work very closely with counterparts in the regions as well to determine the kinds of resources that schools need in terms of Treaty Education, for example, and the honour song at every school. What are good elements that could show up at every school regardless of whether or not there are Indigenous children at that particular school. Every child should learn about Treaty Education and Mi'kmaq history and every child should learn about African Nova Scotian history in our communities.

A couple of years ago, we started with some pretty intensive sessions on culturally responsible pedagogy for teachers and staff to help them, because what we heard loud and clear was that teachers wanted to be able to teach children about these issues related to racialized communities and they didn't necessarily have the tools to do that, so they needed some practical knowledge and skills and ways of teaching.

As well, we have increased and will continue to increase the number of employees, both at the department and in the regions and in the schools that represent those communities. We are really trying, as much as possible, to allow students to see themselves in all levels of the organization and to hear about their histories at every level and in every grade.

BEN JESSOME: Comments related to requesting the data that are associated with incidents in our schools related to racialized populations would be definitely a helpful piece of the puzzle. I am wondering if we could request some information about the number of or the conscious efforts - the metrics around that to educate staff and students about these.

I know that this year, there is a focus on allyship. I have heard about a particular day that was not too long ago where this was covered in different fashions throughout one of the local schools, but one example of intentional education doesn't strike me as enough, frankly. If we could get a better understanding of how many events or intentional education efforts that the department enables throughout our schools, that, I think, would be helpful information.

We talk a lot of the time, and frankly I represent a community that has two historic Black communities and two reserves, but I do want to acknowledge that there is a particularly, perhaps in HRM, a large population of Muslim students who attend our schools, and I know, for example, perhaps Madam Chair could speak a little more to this, but I know the YMCA has done a program in one of the Clayton Park schools to educate students at that school about Ramadan. I'm just wondering how we would talk about injecting that type of program into a more province-wide application.

KAREN GATIEN: First of all, there are a number of, as you said, one-off events at schools. Teachers are always looking for ways to educate their students. The concepts of inclusion and inclusive education is embedded throughout the curriculum at all levels in all years, so it's not so much that it's one-and-done and hopefully you're at the school where it's done. It really is something that we've made a conscious effort to ensure that teachers have the tools to do that as well, whether it's resources that incorporate African Canadian culture or resources that incorporate the Mi'kmaq culture.

We also have done some work which will be released shortly on anti-racism and anti-discrimination on which we'll work with administrators to improve their practice in that area as well. To answer your question specifically about the education around Muslim history, certainly we could always be open to a discussion and learn from things that are successful at other schools. I would expect, and I could certainly reach out to the regional executive director, Elwin LeRoux, because it's obviously a metro school, to learn more about that. We encourage teachers to do that very thing throughout the province already. Not everything is a line item in a curriculum document. Curriculum is really more about outcomes. There are lots of really great activities that happen right across the province. Thank you for raising that, though. It's a really good suggestion.

THE CHAIR: If you'll excuse me, Mr. Jessome, I would like to just add a quick comment. As immigration is increasing and we're seeing the diversity in my riding and many other ridings close by, are we learning from other provinces similar to Ontario and B.C. that have had the high number of different religions, multiculturalism? What have they put in their curriculum in order to - are we preparing, because we are going that route and increasing, and this an amazing opportunity for us to reach out so they feel welcome, they feel included in our education system? I'm sorry, Mr. Jessome. You did mention my name.

KAREN GATIEN: I will just say that we're always looking at other jurisdictions, as they look to us as well in terms of we're the only ones with an inclusive education policy, so a lot of jurisdictions are asking us about that. That's a great point.

Ms. Power has reminded me as well that we do have education as an alternative language support in the system to really help students whose first language is not English or French, particularly for new Canadians. We have, if anything, increased the supports over the last few years to make sure that they feel welcome and included and able to fully participate as well.

BEN JESSOME: I just have one more question and then I think I'm going to perhaps enable my other colleagues to ask some questions as well, but one of the difficult elements to school disciplinary situations is the difficulty that staff and educators have in conveying to parents how a given student might have been an issue, not limited to issues of discrimination, but it could be bullying, a physical altercation, whatever the case is, but there is a challenge in communicating with parents of the victim how a student is being dealt with. I have a level of respect for educators who believe that there is an intentional and direct activity that goes along with disciplining a student.

[11:15 a.m.]

Part of the challenge that I've come across over the last seven years is communicating with parents who perhaps don't feel that an appropriate level of disciplinary action is taking place and because of confidentiality there is difficulty in communicating precisely what or letting parents of victims know what has taken place.

Perhaps Ms. Gatién or somebody else can provide some commentary on that and what the department might be able to do to try and create a little more confidence for some parents that the situation is being dealt with.

KAREN GATIEN: I would ask Ms. Power to speak to it and share some of our work on restorative practices.

ANN POWER: Yes, certainly that can always be a challenge and I appreciate that it is difficult sometimes when you are dealing with confidentiality and privacy and also just thinking about students from the point of view of age, developmental level, and different types of situational circumstances that may come into play.

I think our school administrators do a fantastic job of working with teachers and students in trying to come together through restorative approaches. That would be a major way in which they might come together to understand the underlying issues and to understand how we can repair relationships if those are broken, how we can work together, how we can better understand each other's points of view, and how to really become more caring and inclusive as a school community, so that it is not a question of blaming or a question of trying to ensure that someone gets their due discipline, for instance, but really thinking about, in a non-judgmental way, how we can learn to go forward from an incident, particularly because you are together for five hours a day for 195 days a year.

You have to work together, you have to play together, and it is a way of engendering the skills and the competencies that students have and need to develop to become global citizens and to become citizens and contributing members of their communities.

I think a lot of what we do is around restorative approaches. We might use circles. There are different ways that are also culturally responsive ways considering the communities from which students come and how they might approach different situations.

It really is something that has to happen at the school level and we try and ensure that as many resources and professional learning around those topics is available as possible for our staff across the province.

THE CHAIR: Back to, I believe, Mr. Bill Horne, who is taking over. You have six minutes.

BILL HORNE: I'd like to switch a little bit to inclusive education and how that has been affected by the closures and openings of schools and telecommunications or tele-education with these students and also they seem to probably be more involved with concerns with that type of activity going on, and maybe with health and security that they have or will have, what you plan for that. We'll start with that.

KAREN GATIEN: In terms of inclusive education, that work has continued. We haven't slowed down on that. We didn't fill all the positions we thought we would fill this year simply because we needed to limit the number of essential adults in school buildings, but that money is still committed and will be part of the funding going forward. We're at \$60 million now and working through what that will look like for 2021-22. Hopefully all in-person.

We know that there are 450 staff already that have been hired, and there will be at least another couple of hundred coming this year with that funding. Those are positions from guidance counsellors to speech pathologists to school psychologists and more SchoolsPlus staff. We've increased SchoolsPlus wraparound services. In terms of the inclusive add, we've also put in place student support workers from specific communities, so Mi'kmaw student support workers, African Nova Scotian support workers, and as this year has gone on, it's become even more important for the students from those communities and from other communities to have the supports that are needed, and we've made sure that they're there and they're activated and they're reaching out to students.

We've also paid attention to student mental health, so perhaps I can ask Ann Power to speak specifically to some of the work that has happened there. I know she's referenced a little bit of it already in her previous comments.

ANN POWER: We have, over the last number of years, really focused on SchoolsPlus and mental health services in our schools in collaboration and in coordination with the services that we have, such as our school counsellors and school psychologists and other social workers that may be in the system. We currently now have 54 SchoolsPlus mental health clinicians, 43 facilitators who are social workers, and 87 community outreach workers across our province, across our Regional Centres for Education, and CSAP, that are focused on assisting teachers and our specialists in ensuring that students and families and that link between community and school is one that is as tight as possible and supporting families and students.

It starts right at the classroom, when we're working with social and emotional learning programs, of which we have a number across the province. I know Paul Landry could speak to you about some of the excellent work that's going on in schools in relation to that program, such as Roots of Empathy, that start right at Primary to Grade 3. We start right at the classroom level, and then services become more intensive or more specialized as the needs of students grow. It's like a multi-tiered system of supports that we have that is really focused on ensuring that there is that safety net for children and that we are being as proactive as we can in ensuring that they are healthy both emotionally and from the point of view of their well-being. I don't know if Mr. Landry might like to speak to some of those programs at school level.

PAUL LANDRY: As Ms. Power referenced, we have some programming that we've been working with students on as they come into the schools and one of those programs is our Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) programming which we work with for our students over grades pre-Primary to Grade Six and that has proven to be quite successful. We have seen what we interpret as good results from that programming earlier as students enter school.

As well, the Roots of Empathy program that Ms. Power brought up has been tremendously successful working with our students, where someone from the local community brings an infant into the classroom and they do work with children within the classroom. I think it is every two weeks or so that they come in over a six-week period and it . . .

THE CHAIR: I'm sorry, Mr. Landry. I did give you a few more seconds. I do have to keep the time correct.

Next we are starting a second round and we will be starting with the Progressive Conservative caucus - maybe they will let you continue - for eight minutes for each caucus. So, Progressive Conservative, who would like to start? Mr. Johns, would you like Mr. Landry to continue?

BRAD JOHNS: Does he have a few minutes left? He can finish.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Go ahead, Mr. Landry.

PAUL LANDRY: Right. Just the work that is done with that program really has a tremendous effect on students. I have witnessed it myself and have gone in and been able to participate in that. Some of our students who are probably sometimes the most difficult to reach have really benefited from those types of programming and, as we say, we are seeing some positive results from that going forward.

BRAD JOHNS: I just want to - in regard to school emergency management plans and hold-and-secure plans, when I was looking online at the, I guess it's called the School Emergency Management Plan, I noticed that, and I just want a clarification on this. Who

is responsible for actually the development and implementation of the School Emergency Management Plan? Is that done provincially at the board level or individual principals of each school?

KAREN GATIEN: The guidelines were developed as part of a provincial effort led by us working with our education partners and other service organizations that would be relevant, but every school is required to have their own emergency management plan and that's done at the school level led by the principal.

Perhaps Paul could walk you through how that works if you are interested.

BRAD JOHNS: Yes, I am curious to know how there is consistency across the province then. So at the provincial level, there are just some guidelines and then the actual plan is developed by the principal of each individual school, is that right?

KAREN GATIEN: Sorry. Everything went dead on me for a minute.

JUDY KAVANAGH: Madam Chair, you're on mute.

THE CHAIR: Sorry. I had technical issues and I left and came back without touching the computer. Sorry if I missed anything and I will let Ms. Gatien speak again.

KAREN GATIEN: Thank you. Well, the Emergency Management Plan guidelines - sorry, the Emergency Management Plan for Nova Scotia Schools provincial guidelines set out what has to be in a plan and there are a number of additional documents that go with it, including a template of what we would expect in a plan for distribution and what you are expected to lay out, comparable to a business continuity plan that you would do for another organization.

Perhaps Paul can explain how a principal would go about actually establishing a plan for their school, but this common guideline with common templates is intended to make sure that there's consistency across the province.

[11:30 a.m.]

PAUL LANDRY: As Ms. Gatien said, it really flows through many different levels, starting with the Province using the template, and then it comes to the Regional Centres for Education. We work on that document as well in consultation with our administrators and some of our regional staff to help to implement that within the schools. We built it really from a local context within our region - what services are available and so on.

Then it goes to the school principal, and our occupational health and safety management team work very closely with our school administrators to ensure the documentation is complete and that it's accurate and that once again we're following the requirements within the management plan to ensure that all drills are completed, practices

are completed, and that any feedback that may come back from those exercises or those practices would be addressed immediately, and maybe having to adjust the local school-based plan.

It has lots of attention given to it. It's a big part of our planning throughout the school year, and if there are any requirements or adjustments that need to take place, we do it right away.

BRAD JOHNS: If I could follow up on that, I guess there are two main things I'm curious to know about. First of all, I do want to state that I have many schools, Primary right through to high school, that have incorporated portables on site, so I am concerned, often when there's particularly a violent incident, how those portables are incorporated into that plan, but on a provincial level I'm also curious to know - I know there are some places in the United States where they've incorporated special types of locks or additional types of barricades that can be implemented on the doors during a lockdown of the school. We haven't done that in this province. Is there a reason why we haven't? They seem like they're a relatively cheap little gadget that can be added to the doors to help add security to the doors, but my understanding is they just lock the doorknobs of the classroom. Why haven't we invested in additional barricade stuff?

KAREN GATIEN: The school design that's led by our colleagues at the Department of Infrastructure and Housing - they work with a school steering committee when a new school build is happening. The regions also would consult with us and with them when renovations like large additions and alternations, large renovations, if you will, are done at schools as well. The department - I keep saying "we" because he has advised us in the past - Mark Young advised us in the past on developing a lot of our security plans, but we do have interaction in terms of government from policing in terms of advice when the new builds are done and additions and renovations are done, and as far as I'm aware, that has not come forward at this time as a requirement.

Certainly, when new schools are built, and if it's able to be incorporated in a renovation, we pay attention to things like line of sight, making sure that the office is in a place that people can see others around them, you can see people coming in and out of the building, things like that. We build in as much security ahead of time as we can in the design certainly of new schools, and then incorporate as we go when renovations are done to older schools.

THE CHAIR: Time has elapsed for the PC caucus. I did actually add an extra minute as well. Next we move on to the NDP caucus. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I apologize in advance, because two of my children are in the midst of violin lessons right now, so we can all enjoy that part of my sons' learning if it comes through on this feed. They're not very good. (Laughter) It's okay. They just started. They are just learning.

I want to just go to inclusive education. We've talked a little bit about it and I have a couple of questions. First, as I mentioned earlier, we've been hearing from a lot of parents and organizations that advocate for children with diverse learning needs and really raising the alarm about the educational deficit for this cohort.

To quote from a press release from Autism Nova Scotia, which I can provide to the clerk to distribute but I'm sure everyone has seen it. Last week they said:

"Since schools were closed earlier this spring, students with complex needs have been sidelined while their peers have transitioned to online learning. These students no longer have access to speech language therapy, occupational therapy, learning centre/resource time, or any additional specialized resources. This is a significant time in which great progress could be made with the right plan in place.

'We are deeply concerned for Autistic students and students with disabilities who require specific supports' states Cynthia Carroll, Executive Director of Autism Nova Scotia. 'The gap in all these services have fallen on families and caregivers who are inadequately equipped to deliver the same quality of educational services. This action stands directly against the government's commitment to provide inclusive education opportunities in the province.'"

I just wonder if our presenters today can comment on how the department is ensuring that it meets the rights of these children to a public education, because what we are hearing is that there are a lot of kids in the province right now who simply are not receiving an education.

KAREN GATIEN: I'm going to ask Ann Power to respond to that question.

ANN POWER: Yes, of course we are very concerned about any change that changes the delivery mechanisms for students, particularly those who are most vulnerable, given the effect that change has on students as well as the type of supports that we can offer that are, as you point out, different online than they are face-to-face.

As I mentioned earlier, we certainly continue to have access to the services that we have. All of our specialist services continue to be available to students through tele-education. When that is not particularly around mental health, if there is a clinical indication that a student needs face-to-face services, then a referral will be made so the students can be seen in clinics. The specialists and teachers keep an eye on that to ensure that in cases where there are clinical indications, that can happen.

We also have our SchoolsPlus supports, which help to ensure that where there are additional needs that we try and get them to families as well. Our teacher assistants are working with classroom teachers to be able to provide more individual, one-on-one assistance so that when teachers are teaching in online classrooms, teacher assistants can also be helping in follow-up as the teachers do the lesson. Then there is more individual follow-up with students and parents and caregivers so that that can happen. Would we all love to be back in school? Yes, we would, but at this point in time we are doing our best to ensure that the supports that we have are as available as possible for all students and particularly those who are in those situations.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate that answer. I think what we have heard is that those in-person services are either not available or are extraordinarily difficult to access. Hopefully, that will change and you will have more capacity to do that. We do know that other jurisdictions have created a way for some small cohorts of students to receive in-class support and I am talking about those ones for whom the online environment is not feasible. Hopefully that is something that will continue to be actively considered by the department.

Also on the inclusive education topic, I wrote the then-minister last Fall asking when the report was expected. We were going to have a report on inclusive education and external evaluation and was told it would be in the near future. Obviously, the pandemic has changed the timelines on things, but I'm wondering if Ms. Gatién or Ms. Power can give me an indication of something about the findings of that report and when it might be publicly available.

KAREN GATIEN: We have the report. We have our response prepared. You're correct that it has been the pandemic that has slowed it down, so my answer is not a good one. It will be posted shortly, honest. It's just an honest delay because of so many other priorities, but everything is ready to go. It will be posted shortly.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm going to give those two minutes to Ms. Coombes just to ask that last question that she was following up with.

KENDRA COOMBES: Over the course of the pandemic, the federal government has made millions available to the Province, and it's a good thing. We know that the federal government's Safe Return to Class Fund was used to provide some support for school food programs, math, and literacy programs, to provide some personal protection equipment for staff and students, and to purchase Chromebooks. And \$5.5 million of the funds were also used to support community access to school gyms, but what specifically did the department do to ensure schools are safe for students, teachers, and staff?

KAREN GATIEN: As I know you've already heard before, we took a layered approach to it as part of our back-to-school plan. We spaced the classrooms as much as possible, so we got rid of any excess furniture that wasn't needed in classrooms, we made sure that everyone had access to personal protection equipment on a regular basis and as needed - no sort of, you've had your quota, you're up - sanitizer in all areas of the school,

and again, same process: as much as was needed when it was needed, and a regular and intensive cleaning of schools on an ongoing basis, as well as arrows on the floor guiding flow of traffic and cohorting students as much as possible.

Clearly, all of these layered measures worked for much of the year. I think no one could have predicted when we even began in September that the variants would come about as strongly as they did and with the intensity that they did. We've continued to meet on a very regular basis with Public Health. We have followed their guidance in all of these matters, including ventilation, where we made sure that every heating, HVAC system and every ventilation system - so that does mean in schools that don't have HVAC, that the windows open.

We followed their guidance in that regard, and we actually instituted additional checks over and above what is required by the manufacturer, so we did check before schools opened. We did a check, I want to say, in the Winter, and I think we're probably getting close to doing another one - I'm looking, Paula's nodding, - and those results are posted on the Regional Centres' websites. I see I'm getting the "Stop talking" sign.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the NDP, and we move on now to the Liberal caucus. Who would like to start? Any hands? Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: This may be a quick question. It's one that I've always been a little bit unsure of. Who is included in inclusive education? I'm not sure if that's a good question or not. I'm just not sure about it.

KAREN GATIEN: Everyone. I know it seems kind of trite, but everyone is included. This is really about making sure that all of our students and staff - everyone feels that they're part of the system, they belong, they're safe, they're valued. We recognize and respect and embrace their differences, whether it's their family differences, their cultural differences, socio-economic differences. They're all part of that. All means all. It's a good question.

[11:45 a.m.]

BILL HORNE: I'll pass it on to another Liberal.

BEN JESSOME: I just have a question related to hall monitors and the expectation for schools to provide that outside the classroom supervision. We predominantly rely on educators to provide that oversight. I'm curious what goes into that type of planning. We do know that there have been some increased - this round of collective bargaining had an increased level of responsibility for some high school teachers, and in terms of their in-the-classroom responsibilities throughout the day. I'm wondering how schedules will be set to ensure that the safety and supervision of students outside the classroom is maintained into next school year.

KAREN GATIEN: First of all, safety, as I've said earlier, is a top priority. We want to make sure all students feel safe and secure in schools. In terms of those other functions, there are a variety of ways that we can make sure that those duties are covered in the system. What you're referring to in terms of the changes is that there was an increase in prep and marking time in the current collective agreement, and regions are going through the process now of staffing their schools using this new change.

Really, that has had a different impact in Halifax than it has in the rest of the province. We're talking about 17 schools out of 370 in the province, and in all of those other schools, particularly high schools, across the province, those types of duties have been managed and well-covered. This is really what we're excited about with respect to this change in the collective agreement, is it gives more focused time to teaching for teachers who are the experts in that area, and it will ensure that there's consistency in the amount of teaching that happens right across the province.

How those other functions are covered - what I would suggest is actually have Paul Landry speak to how they do it in the Strait region, which has for a long time found other means to do it in ways that are different that what has been happening in Halifax.

PAUL LANDRY: As Ms. Gatién said, it really is operationalizing all of those pieces, and our school administrators and our regional staff as well as school administrators working with our teachers and support staffs in schools come up with how the building will be supervised appropriately each and every day, from the minute that buses arrive in the morning or walkers arrive or parents dropping off their children, how all that is operationalized within the building. They work together. They come up with a plan for their buildings to ensure that students are appropriately supervised throughout the school day, whether they're in class or whether they're changing from class to class or during some of their free time that may come up during the school day.

There's morning arrival, there's recess times, there's lunch times, and then dismissal times. They're all appropriately staffed to ensure that adequate supervision is there for our students, and there also may be, as students get older and into the high school ages, a free period that may arise, typically in the later grades. Students may have some options to work with within the school to either go to the library to put in some study time, get caught up on their homework, or they may choose to leave the school with permission from parents, and they would have signed documents that give them permission to do that, to maybe possibly go off site to go to lunch or go get a coffee or maybe some other visit that they want to do.

Typically, it's operationalized quite well within school buildings, and as Ms. Gatién said, speaking on behalf of the Strait region, it's really not a significant change for us. It's a positive change. Our teachers are getting an extra 2.5 per cent preparation time, and we view it as certainly a positive piece to our region.

THE CHAIR: This concludes the time for the Liberal caucus as well. If Ms. Gatién has some closing remarks, this is the perfect time to do that.

KAREN GATIÉN: Really just to say thank you very much for the opportunity to meet with you. Hopefully, we've been able to answer your questions. I know that we do have a couple of follow-up items, so we will look after that.

It has been a challenging year for a lot of people, and I really can't say enough about how outstanding our students and parents have been, so those of you who are parents, thank you as well for your support, for teachers, for the educational assistants, the other education support staff, administrators, custodians. Everyone has really helped to make this as successful as possible and really have always put students at the centre. We're very proud of the work that was done. We all wished we could have just made it a few more weeks in person, but really the ability which we were able to switch quickly and confidently to at-home learning and how well it is working is really a testament to the hard work that a lot of people have put in.

Thank you again, and I hope you have a good day.

THE CHAIR: If I may, I'd like to say thank you on behalf of my colleagues. I don't have kids in schools anymore, but I have a lot of kids in my neighbourhood, and I keep asking, and honestly things have moved so fast, as you said, adapting to the online, they switched. I want to thank you all. This has been a very difficult year and a half for everyone, but the Education Department has worked so hard, the teachers, the kids, and the department. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all the hard work that you've done.

You may leave, and we will just finish whatever is left on the agenda. Thank you so much. Lovely meeting you.

We've done all the business at the beginning. The next meeting will be Tuesday, June 29th, at 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon via Zoom. The topic is Youth Workforce, and the witness will be from the Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

The meeting is adjourned.

(The committee adjourned at 11:54 a.m.)