

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, April 26, 2022

Committees Room

**Progress Reports on the Implementation of the Canada-Wide Child Care
Agreement and the Excellence in ECE Strategy
&
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Dave Ritcey was replaced by Danielle Barkhouse.]

[Ali Duale was replaced by Hon. Derek Mombourquette.]

[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Cathy Montreuil,
Deputy Minister

Tracy Crowell,
Executive Director - Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary

Sarah Melanson,
Acting Executive Director - Early Learning and Childcare

Mount Saint Vincent University

Dr. Christine McLean,
Associate Professor - Department of Child and Youth Study

Association of Early Childhood Educators of Nova Scotia

Catherine Cross,
Executive Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 26, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Nolan Young

VICE CHAIR
Larry Harrison

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I am Nolan Young, the MLA for Shelburne and Chair of this committee. Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to Agencies, Boards, and Commissions, we will hear from witnesses regarding progress reports on the implementation of the Canada-Wide Child Care Agreement and the Excellence in ECE Strategy.

I'd ask everyone to turn off their phones or put them on silent. In case of an emergency, please use the Granville Street exit and walk up to Grand Parade. In keeping with House policy, please keep your mask on during the meeting unless you're speaking.

Now I ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record, stating their name and their constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For the purposes of Hansard, I also recognize the presence of Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb and Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh.

With the committee's permission, before we get into the question and answer, I'd like to just ensure we have enough time to do our ABCs, if we could do our Appointments, Boards, and Commissions first. Seeing yes.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, I move that John Grant, Alexander (Sandy) MacDougall, and Iain Harnish be appointed members of the Nova Scotia Teacher College Foundation Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Judy Heffern, Phillip Veinotte, and Jessica Fancy-Landry be appointed Public Representatives of the Initial Board of the Nova Scotia College of Dietitians and Nutritionists.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Our topic today is progress reports on the implementation of the Canada-Wide Child Care Agreement and the Excellence in ECE Strategy. I would ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Montreuil, do you have some opening remarks?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Good morning and thanks for your invitation to speak today about the implementation of the Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, and the Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy.

As I introduced my two colleagues from the department, I'd like to just give you an introduction to Dr. Christine MacLean in a little deeper way. Dr. MacLean is an associate professor at the Department of Child and Youth Study at Mount Saint Vincent University and has been there since 2016. Prior to that, she worked in the ECE sector in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador for 28 years. She is active in several provincial and national associations relating to early childhood education, including vice president of the Canadian Association for Research in Early Childhood, and national director for the Canadian Association for Young Children.

Dr. McLean's expertise is in the field of early childhood education, specifically in the areas of play-based learning, reflective practice in the field of ECE, child care policy development and evaluation, and pedagogical documentation in early learning settings. Along with her colleagues at the Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre at MSVU, Dr. McLean was on the team that evaluated the implementation of the provincial pre-Primary program. As well, she led an evaluation of our quality enhancement program for child care called Quality Matters. Dr. McLean is a critical friend, providing invaluable advice and expertise to us in the department as we go forward.

The Canada-Wide Child Care Agreement is a five-year journey that we are on to transform the delivery of child care. Our vision, in alignment with the principles of the agreement, is to ensure that families across the province can access quality child care when and where they need it at a price they can afford.

This vision is a new dawn. It's a new dawn for children, for families, for providers, and for early childhood educators. It realizes the vision that many ECEs and researchers have called for over the past number of years, and in fact, decades. Attempts to transform child care and to think about it in terms of a publicly-funded system have been made, but I can confidently tell you that this work is very much now under way.

Through the agreement, we've committed to \$10 dollar a day, on average, child care for families; access to 9,500 child care spaces; and increased compensation for those at the heart of child care, early childhood educators. Realizing these targets will take many steps and a lot of hard work. I am pleased to say that as of today, in Year 1, we are well on our way.

On April 1st, we moved ahead with the first fee reduction for parents accessing licensed-funded child care. All parents who access child care through licensed-funded centres, regardless of household income, were provided with a 25-per-cent fee reduction. In addition, parents will receive a cheque or credit from their centre reflecting the retroactive reduction from January to March. This represents a savings for parents of between \$3 and \$10.50 per day per child, based on the child's age, or approximately \$200 per child per month.

I'd like to read you a direct quote from a parent of two young children on what this means in practical terms for their family. Kelly MacDonald said, "The benefits are numerous - less financial worries alleviates stress which allows me to be a better parent, and the extra money allows us more opportunities to do things that we might not have been able to afford before like family trips, savings to contribute to my children's RESP, and extracurricular activities. These opportunities benefit my children's development directly and long-term."

It is also important to note that the subsidy program remains in place for all licensed child care settings. We have more than 5,300 children in subsidized spaces, and with the 25-per-cent fee reduction, the fees for 530 of those children is now \$0 each day.

To ensure that more families can access licensed care, we are committed to opening 1,500 new spaces this year as part of our 9,500 total commitment. We have heard from a number of not-for-profit providers interested in expanding, including in currently underserved areas of Nova Scotia. We look forward to announcing those new spaces soon.

We can't talk about expanding spaces without recognizing early childhood educators. We value those who work in child care. Early childhood educators do amazing work for our youngest Nova Scotians.

Through Nova Scotia's Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy, we will be providing increased wages and benefits to early childhood educators this Fall. We also funded bursaries to over 250 full-time ECE diploma students last year, including additional funds for students belonging to equity-seeking groups, as well as providing funding for more than 400 ECEs who are currently working in child care so they can earn their diploma while they work.

We received numerous positive feedbacks about the online program that allows students to work while earning a diploma. One student said, "Being able to earn a diploma while working has been a complete game changer for me. Moreover, the continuing education reimbursement program has truly made this possible. Without these opportunities, there's absolutely no way I could do it."

For added context, we see approximately 300 new ECEs graduate annually from approved early childhood education training institutions. This year, we will also see approximately 200 ECEs earn a diploma while they work, funded through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Ultimately, while the Canada wide and workforce agreements are a new dawn for families, children, and the sector, it is also a new dawn for women. We know that the child care sector is predominantly female and that access to quality child care is key to women being able to re-enter the workforce.

We can't do this work alone. That's why we've created the Early Learning and Childcare Engagement Table and sought applications from a broad and diverse representation from people across the province to help inform, consult, and support this work. We've received a tremendous response and will be announcing membership in May.

These agreements are an important investment in women, in children, and in our economy as a whole. Investments in high-quality early childhood education have been shown to have long-term benefits for childhood outcomes, as well as economic benefits. I'm excited about how this work will benefit families, children, early childhood educators, and operators, and all Nova Scotians over the next 5, 10, 20 years and beyond.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Before we get into the question-and-answer portion, I just want to remind you that this isn't 20-20-20 - it alternates, if you just want to raise your hand. (Interruption) My apologies. Ms. Cross, did you have any opening remarks?

CATHERINE CROSS: I just wanted to mention that our organization represents early childhood educators in Nova Scotia. Our members are also affiliates of our national organization. Our membership has both provincial and federal voice for matters on early learning and child care in Canada and in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I'll maintain a list of those wishing to speak. To start it off, MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: First, I'd like to thank you all for being here today. As a rural MLA for Chester-St. Margaret's, this is actually an important topic for me. To bring more families to rural areas, it is important that child care be available for them. What is being done to bring more child care to areas of the province that don't have licensed child care? I think, Deputy Minister Montreuil, this would be directed to you.

CATHY MONTREUIL: One of the key tenants of this agreement is to bring child care accessibility as one of our pillars and to make it accessible to families who historically may not have had - in rural settings is a good example - access to child care. I'd like to ask Sarah Melanson to speak to some of the direct actions we are taking.

SARAH MELANSON: In the Fall, we released an expression of interest to expand child care across the province. We opened that up to existing not-for-profit providers, and we did that with the lens of looking at underserved communities. Often, we'll talk about child care deserts - places where there's less child care than we would like to see.

We looked at communities where there was child care, where we needed child care, and we also looked at communities that were typically underrepresented in child care. We

also looked communities that even though maybe a child care centre was nearby, due to historic marginalization, they weren't accessing it. We launched that in the Fall.

[10:15 a.m.]

The response absolutely blew us away. Providers across the province stepped up and said we want to offer more child care, and these are the communities that we want to offer it in, so we're currently working with those folks now. We will have some more to announce on that very soon.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just want to start by saying - and I hate to speak for all caucuses, but I think we all think this is a fantastic thing for the province and for our children and for parents. I have a daughter who's in daycare and a son who was in daycare for three years until last Fall. He's in pre-Primary now. It's just amazing to see how much the system has changed over the last couple of years and the impact that it makes.

It's great to have representation from ECEs as well, because I see them every morning and they do amazing work. Sometimes you walk in there and the sound just hits you like a wall. Sometimes everybody's happy and sometimes not, but it's fantastic. I just wanted to start by saying that.

I'm just curious around staffing and labour and all these things - 9500 spaces over the next few years. Deputy minister, you mentioned about 300 ECEs enter the workforce every year. Does that number need to expand significantly in order to fill those spaces? What are the projections around what you might need from a workforce perspective?

CATHY MONTREUIL: We just celebrated with one of our branches the successful five-year implementation of pre-Primary during which ECE availability and training was a key feature. We're building on the successes of that five years to strengthen that even more. We know that once we improve the ECE compensation framework and ECEs can rely on being fairly compensated for their work, we've heard from ECEs who have left the field that they want to come back.

Additionally, we have launched the Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy with 11 steps, and I'd like again to ask Sarah to speak to the 11 actions we are taking right now to ensure we have enough ECEs in the future.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Melanson.

SARAH MELANSON: As the deputy minister said, when we implemented pre-Primary, we had to focus on workforce. We've been working on workforce for a few years. Knowing what was coming ahead for us with the federal plan, we began working on the

Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy last year. I would say that we are probably one of the few provinces with a strategy this detailed that really looks at our labour needs and how we're going to get there over the next five years.

In July we launched the Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy, where we're saying that our goal is to have the best trained and highly-qualified ECEs in the country. We are well on our way to achieving that. The strategy is based on three main pillars. We're looking at professional recognition of ECEs, pathways to education, and lifelong learning. No one item will help us get there. It's going to take all of these different strategies within these pillars to help us lift this field.

As the deputy minister said, the first part around professional recognition is the compensation framework. We're well on our way on that work and will be in place for Fall. We're also looking at the role in the competencies of ECEs. We're looking at what an ECE does in a centre, what is minimum training, and how we can continue to work on those things. I know Christine can speak to that also.

In particular, I want to talk to you about the Pathways to Education and something I'm really excited about - the different things we've been doing to support ECEs. The first thing we did is, we formed some really strong partnerships with our colleagues at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. We work closely with those colleagues around how to support our labour force. We work closely with Nova Scotia Works and we've created a career navigation option for people working in early childhood education.

Many of these folks have been working in this field, they have varied levels of education, and maybe they don't know what their options are - how to look for education opportunities. So we've created this partnership so the career navigators are well trained and well versed now in early childhood education. Folks can go to them and say, I'm curious about how to advance my education, or I want to get into ECE, how can I do that? That was a really important step for us.

We've also looked at bursaries for both folks who are working in the field already and for those who are attending school full time. This past year, we offered bursaries, as the deputy minister said, to all folks who were in a full-time ECE program. They're not working yet, they're the ones who are going to be graduating. We were able to offer a \$3,000 bursary to all students who were in a full-time ECE program, as well as an additional bursary for those who were from an under-represented or marginalized group because for us, this is also about really supporting those to ensure that we're increasing the diversity in the field. That's for the graduates.

One of the other things that we're doing that is really exciting for us is something we're calling the accelerated diploma. We know now that there are folks who are working in early childhood education without their diploma yet. For a variety of reasons, they

haven't had those opportunities to education. It's been hard - you're working all day with kids, and then to start figuring out how to go to school also.

The accelerated diploma has been a partnership with Nova Scotia Community College where we now have over 400 folks who are working in early childhood, doing their diploma at night online. We provide the technology supports that they need.

We're using also their prior learning. We're able to give recognition for the years that they've worked so that they get some credit toward their courses, and so some of these folks will be finishing their diploma in as quickly as 18 months. This of course means more income and more opportunities for them. We're really trying to look at the field of the variety of folks and how it is that we can support all the different folks who are working in it.

We'll also continue to be looking at our continuing education program. We're going to be looking at how we support students transitioning from high school, potentially some day looking at high school credits leading into NSCC credits. We're really trying to look at all the different parts of education. Then, in terms of life-long learning, once you're an ECE, once you're trained, how do we continue to support learning long-term? What's our professional development or ongoing coaching, and things like that?

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just going to tack onto that because we know that recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators has been a long-term challenge. The implementation of pre-primary intensified worker shortages, that was an experience by the department.

Part of the problem has been the low wage floor set by the government. I was glad to hear that you're working on it, that there's an ECE compensation framework. My question was going to be, what is that, what is that going to look like, so that's not bad. But when the government previously increased funding to support better wages for ECEs in 2016, the funding was based on getting ECEs in Nova Scotia closer to the 2012 national average. What benchmarks now, if you can share, are the department using now to present work on the wages moving?

CATHY MONTREUIL: It would be premature to give you the actual framework as we have experts looking at all of those benchmarks: the pan-Canadian benchmarks, the cross-sectorial benchmarks, et cetera. There are surveys in the field now to current ECEs and operators to help inform a Nova Scotia lens on that work. We've made some commitments for that work into the Fall, and as recently as last week, our committee work on that has assured me that we are on track.

SARAH MELANSON: I would love to add in that one of the things that's critical about this compensation framework is that - where you referenced the wage floor in 2016 - this isn't just a wage floor going forward. It's a compensation framework that will look at education and experience of early childhood educators, as well as looking at not just wages, but what options we have around compensational benefits and really looking at a compensation package.

LISA LACHANCE: Great, thank you. I wanted to circle back to MLA Barkhouse's question around the expression of interest that you spoke about, and the comments from the deputy minister around hearing from non-profits who are interested - so underserved areas and how that's developing. Then also I want to understand a bit more about the support to equity-seeking groups and how that maybe is being matched up.

SARAH MELANSON: We looked at a variety of factors when we were - I'm going to say mapping, for lack of a better word - mapping communities and thinking about the expansions. The first layer would be: where is there child care, and where is there not? That would be the first layer. When we look at some communities, it's very obvious where there's no child care. That makes that level easier.

Then the next layer, and I think to your question would be around our equity seeking communities and those who right now, even if child care is in their community, it's not accessible to them.

For us, what's critical in that is working with community. Something our deputy minister often says is, Nothing About Us Without Us. We are working with community to do that expansion. It's not us going in and expanding. If I take East Preston, for example, we'll be working closely with the East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre as they look at what the needs in that community might be, because it's not for me to say what the needs are in that community.

I think I would also layer on, from an equity, diversity, and inclusion perspective, that we also understand that various communities across Nova Scotia have had different experiences with child care and have different expectations of child care. In some communities, it may be more typical that children stay with grandmothers or aunts or neighbours. So that's for us to work with community and understand their needs.

The other thing that we haven't talked about yet is the role of family home child care. We also have in Nova Scotia a well-developed, regulated Family Home Day Care Program, where that is a home-based provider providing care in their home. We do know that some communities would be more comfortable with that, so how do we grow that system and ensure that that meets those community needs?

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It's perfect that you happened to just mention the family home-based care. My career and then three children led me to the path of staying home with them and offering family home-based care, and for 16 and a half years it was very successful. I loved it. Switched to an after-school program. I'm in a rural community where we have only one and the wait-list on that centre is two or three years minimum for infancy. So this is exciting.

I guess could we touch on a bit about the unaffordability for many and disproportionately how it impacts a woman's decision to enter and re-enter the workforce, and how will this new agreement make life more affordable for those particular families?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I'm going to start by talking a little bit about how it's going to make life more affordable, and then I might kick it over to my colleague here, Dr. Christine, to talk about the social and economic benefits of it in terms of women in the workforce, because I think that's also really exciting.

As you've mentioned, and as we all know, child care costs can be a barrier for many families. Also, many families just don't have access to spaces, whether they're not available or whether it's an affordability barrier. What the Canada-wide agreement will enable is a publicly-funded early learning and child care system. Obviously one of the major components of that is funding to support spaces.

We're so excited that as of April 1st, we were able to reduce parent fees by 25 per cent on average. In December we plan to reduce parent fees by an additional 25 per cent on average, so parents will see a 50 per cent reduction in parent fees this calendar year. That is a game changer for many families.

Of course, all of this is driving us toward \$10-a-day child care, on average, by 2025-26. It's a little bit hard to actually imagine, just the sheer benefit that that's going to have to families, and we're starting to hear stories now just from the 25 per cent reduction in fees in April. We were chuckling in the office - we heard from a number of parents that there was a mistake on their bill. It's really exciting when we hear those stories.

So a lot of really good affordability features, and as well, the subsidy continues to be available. You heard the deputy minister talk about the fact that we have, I think she said, 5,300 families who we subsidize, which provides a further reduction in fees, and this year, as of April, we saw an additional 530 kids who will now pay \$0. That is so exciting.

I think that speaks to the affordability and the direction that we're heading, and I think we've talked about accessibility, because you can't really talk about one without the other. We need to have the spaces. I will say that we are seeing an increased demand in the need for and desire for spaces since we've moved to reduced fees, and I suspect that we

will continue to see that. The space expansion part of this is so critical, as is ECE compensation, recruitment training, because those pieces very much need to go hand in hand.

[10:30 a.m.]

On that note, I'll pass it over to Dr. Christine to talk about the economic benefits of women in the workforce, which I think is really key as well.

CHRISTINE MCLEAN: In terms of the social and economic benefits of child care overall, there are short-term benefits and there are long-term benefits. The short-term benefits are, of course, women entering the workforce, and then they're able to contribute to the society through their taxes and the economic benefits of that. There's also, as you've been hearing, we're going to be putting a lot of early childhood educators into the workforce as well, and these are predominantly women, and a lot of young women.

I did a little bit of work with an economist - I'm not an economist myself - but an economist, Robert Fairholm in Ottawa, looked at the economic benefits of the workforce getting higher wages and all of a sudden having purchasing power that they didn't have before.

There are those types of short-term benefits economically, and you've probably all heard the estimates and the discussion about what happened in Quebec when they instituted their \$5-a-day, now \$7-a-day program. The long-term benefit was that the system ended up paying for itself. In fact, it was \$6 for every \$1 spent because of all the economic activity that happens when you support the workforce and you support the communities and the small businesses that these new people who are now employed are going to.

Also, when we look at child development as being a key social determinant of health, and child care is a socio-economic gradient, so as we know there's one in four children experiencing poverty in Nova Scotia, and further disproportional impacts among Indigenous children, racialized families, newcomers, and single mothers. By allowing and providing the supports that children receive and that families receive through an expansion of early learning and child care in the province, we're helping to stem the long-term costs of these types of family-level factors.

Child care is more regulated - and early learning and child care are more than economic benefits. We're looking at what's good for children too, and looking at children not just as our future, not as our own agenda, but looking at them as individuals with rights and as citizens and providing that high-quality care to them.

That's just a quick example of some of the social and economic benefits, but if there are any questions, I can elaborate on that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I saw first hand how hard everybody worked to get to this point. I see the targets, I hear the targets, I know the targets. That's great to hear, that a lot of that is on track when it comes to the wages. It's good to see that some of the fee reductions are starting a little early, so that's great too.

I have two questions - one will be for the department and one will be for Catherine. I'm looking for a bit of an update on how the private operators are adjusting to the plan, because there was some talk about that earlier on in the year. I'll ask to the department.

To Catherine, I'd like some of your comments around how the association feels things are going and how the folks that you represent are adjusting. I'll leave it there.

CATHY MONTREUIL: As we move from a constellation of operators to a public system - and remember that we're halfway through Year 1, so this is a journey and it's a change journey for sure - we're working with everybody. We need everybody to be part of a successful, universal, quality, accessible, and affordable system in Nova Scotia for our youngest kids and their families.

We continue to work with all operators. We were one of only four jurisdictions that negotiated in a role for commercial operators. They have been active in their eagerness to work with us. We met with all operators. They told us what they needed right now was stable funding that they knew about, that they could count on, and that would have some built-in ability to deal with some of the escalating costs that they're facing.

We delivered. We listened to them, we heard them, and we delivered that. For the first time in Nova Scotia, 98 per cent of all operators signed on to that funding agreement. They represent 99 per cent of all of the kids in child care in Nova Scotia.

Further, they also said that they wanted to be part of the solution, as did all operators, as did the parents, as did the ECEs. Our response to that was to put out a call for an advisory table that will work to reflect back, to let us know how it's going on the ground, and to give us their best advice. We're going to announce that table later in May.

The great news is that 98 per cent of all operators signed on because they want to be part of the solution. That's a huge opportunity for us, and we look forward to working with them.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Cross.

CATHERINE CROSS: Our members are really pleased with what's going on currently provincially and right across the country. One of the things that our members are expecting is the compensation and the recognition of their specific knowledge in early

childhood development and to be compensated for doing the work - and also, to be recognized in specific career pathways or jobs, so not just the ratio to ECE.

It's important that we define, and that in this new system it clearly articulates, what the scopes of practices are and the education required that would go along with that job - what's needed to do the work. Whether it be a director, whether it be an inclusion coordinator, whether it be an assistant, whether it be an ECE lead, an ECE - whatever the terminology will be, it's important that it is recognized and compensated.

Although salary, pensions and benefits are really critical and important, compensation is also providing the time within the day to do the work. If they're required to reflect, if they're required to document, to meet with other professionals, or family meetings - these things are now done on work time, and they're compensated for that. Not every ECE on the work may need the same level of that support, but that needs to be built in as well. There's an expectation that will be included as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This is for Deputy Minister Montreuil. As part of the announcement concerning the new agreement and the grant provisions to child care providers, the minister also indicated that the Province is creating a table to advise on our government's ongoing improvements to child care deliveries in Nova Scotia.

What is the motivation behind creating this table, and are you able to provide us with some more details? For example, what it will do, and who will be its members?

CATHY MONTREUIL: I think my colleague Sarah Melanson indicated that one of the touchstones that we operate with is, Nothing About Us Without Us. Systems are better when the people within the systems have a voice and bring their expertise and their advice to the development and to the change process

Recognizing that, the table is intentionally going to be structured to ensure that first voice is represented, that parents, workers and operators have voice, that experts and critical friends either come to the table or are called to the table to advise it in order for it to be fully informed in advising us.

The great news is we're taking a little bit longer to look at the huge pile of applications, and the fact that there is a big pile of applications is a good thing. It's a healthy thing. Being able to work that closely with people most affected by the system we're creating will make it a better system.

That's about all of the details I think I can share with you today around the process. The call for interest has closed, and now we're going through and making sure that there's balance, that there's first voice, that there's a cross-section geographically,

demographically, and enrollment across the system. There's a lot of balancing going on now to make sure that we have a really full dialogue when we come to that table.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to clarify something that Deputy Minister Montreuil mentioned earlier, just to make sure I understand - I heard the minister mention it as well in the past. You mentioned that 98 per cent of operators have signed on to the agreement. Are you referring to the initial 25 per cent reduction for this year, or are you referring to the overall umbrella agreement that will persist for years and years to come?

SARAH MELANSON: The funding for child care is provided in a yearly funding grant known as the Quality Investment Grant. Operators this year asked to know about that funding agreement and to get that stable funding agreement out as quickly as possible, and that's what we did. This was 98 per cent of operators signing on to the yearly funding agreement. That was the provision for the 25 per cent funding fee reduction.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Good morning, and thank you for the information. I've been involved with two fairly good sized workplaces for this, and I know they take their job extremely seriously. What about children with special needs? What are we doing to ensure that they're being represented in the new system?

SARAH MELANSON: As we've said before, inclusion is one of the key pillars of this agreement - affordability, accessibility, quality, and inclusive. Inclusive refers to ensuring that underrepresented communities, marginalized communities, as well as children with varying developmental needs are represented in the system.

Part of our work going forward is to help the sector, help early childhood educators ensure they have the skills they need so that they can include all children. There are numerous children with special needs now being included in child care across the system. We'll continue to work with our partners, the Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services, who provide support to ECEs in programs in including children. We'll continue to talk about this and also use the engagement table as a place to talk about that, to understand from operators, ECEs, and families what else we need to do to ensure we're building that inclusive system.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I have a couple of questions, and they're a little bit all over the map. I'll just bundle them and then throw them over.

I want to circle back to some questions around equity-seeking groups and just understanding - I should have asked this the first time - who's included in that. What does that look like? Hopefully it's thinking about persons with disabilities, as well as people from the 2SLGBTQ+ community - just wanting to know a bit more about that.

It's really great to hear that the association is excited and that sort of thing. What's the worry about numbers? Where's everybody going to come from? I think early childhood is out recruiting, other sectors are out recruiting - people who want to be part of caring work are actually going to have a bunch of choices. That's fantastic, but how are we assured that we're not all fighting over the same group of people?

CATHY MONTREUIL: We've put a lot of work into ensuring that we include all of the groups. I'd like Sarah Melanson and then Christine to speak to the importance of diversity and inclusion, what it does in the early childhood, and how we're addressing it.

SARAH MELANSON: Maybe I'll do workforce really quickly because I'll probably talk longer about the equity piece. Absolutely, around recruiting - this isn't unique to ECE, as we know, in Nova Scotia or even across Canada right now. It's a great time to be looking for work especially in, as you described, the caring profession.

Part of that strategy that I talked about earlier is really looking at recruitment, working with our colleagues at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, looking at immigration pathways - how do we support folks from other countries - looking at countries where their ECE training aligns with what we're looking for, and then specifically targeting those countries, as well as targeting key provinces or training institutions across the country.

Of course, as we do our work around compensation, that will make that more interesting for folks to join us. Absolutely, we're looking at that recruitment and trying to join in on other things that are happening there.

From an equity-seeking perspective, I believe the federal agreement lists racialized Canadians, First Nations, Indigenous, as well as folks - Francophone Acadian groups. For us, we always added into the agreement the specific attention to African Nova Scotian communities, Acadian Francophone. We are really focusing on 2LGBTQ+ communities right now. We added them for the first time to the bursary this past year, so students who identified as part of that group in full-time studies were able to access the bursary. That was really important for us.

We continue to work with all equity-seeking groups. Even if there's a group we haven't identified at this point and they came forward, I certainly would want to work with them and understand what their barriers are to attending child care. I'm wondering, Christine, if you might like to speak to that also.

CHRISTINE MCLEAN: You just made me think of something, Sarah. There's a research project that I'm currently engaged in with Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac, and we've been consulting with the department on this. It's looking at three particular groups of early childhood educators: educators who identify as Black or African Nova Scotian, or who work in African Nova Scotian communities; rural early childhood educators; and Francophone educators.

Over the next six weeks, we're going to be working with individuals from those three groups on how to support numeracy and literacy in early childhood programs. That's fresh in my mind because I met with a group last night for two hours.

There are different initiatives that are happening that are looking at inclusion. In terms of being culturally responsive and inclusive, there has been criticism of early childhood education in general as having an emphasis on Eurocentric, middle-class cultural values. It's something that the early childhood field is addressing.

One of the ways that we address this is through highly qualified early childhood educators. I'm sure that Catherine would agree that it all starts with the early childhood educators and the level of ECE-specific qualifications that they have. The higher the qualification, the higher the level of quality in programs.

The ECEs are responsible for developing an engaging learning environment that supports children's well-being, including social, emotional, and cognitive development. These early childhood educators also ensure that settings are inclusive. This means that they're culturally responsive and that families and children see themselves represented. They see their families represented in the programs. That's one of the major tenets of any of our post-secondary early childhood training programs, is to work on this inclusion and cultural responsiveness.

I also wanted to mention that there have been a lot of initiatives. I've been back to Nova Scotia for the last five years. As I said in the introduction, I worked in Newfoundland and Labrador for almost 30 years in early childhood education. Since I've been back to Nova Scotia, there have been major initiatives that have come out in the early childhood field through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

There's a new early learning curriculum framework, which guides the practice of early childhood educators everywhere in the province. It talks about the importance of cultural responsiveness, well-being, and inclusion. There's a new inclusion initiative called the Pyramid Model that centres and educators are being coached and mentored in, on how to have a more inclusive space.

The name is Pyramid, so when you picture a pyramid, there are changes that can be made in early childhood programs that affect the well-being of everybody in terms of engaging, responsive environment. Then as you go up the pyramid, you get to where there

may be children with additional support needs and so on. It's looking at overall quality. It's a type of quality enhancement.

In addition, there's also the Quality Matters program, which is where centre staff and directors sit down and identify areas that they feel they need to improve. Very often, from my understanding, it is inclusion, cultural responsiveness and working on how we meet these goals - working with their child care consultants.

I'm glad for the question, because it's an area that is very predominant in early childhood education. You were also asking about the workforce and where people are coming from. I know that the enrolment - at least at my post-secondary institution - is through the roof. There is major interest in coming into the early childhood field.

There is retention and there is recruitment. There is also re-attraction, as I think Sarah mentioned before - people who have left the field because of wages and working conditions. They are now like, hmm, did you say something about pension and benefits and compensation and recognizing my qualifications?

So I think there is an interest in people coming back to the field as well. It's a very specific - it is a field of care and education, but it's very specific to young children, and there's certainly a lot of interest.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you so much. I do have a question, but I want to say, similar to my colleague MLA Clark, we completely support this. We think this is a wonderful idea. This is a great step in moving forward for all families and for the workforce as well.

My thought is of rushed transition. When we rush things, we have to pull back a bit. I'm glad to hear the deputy minister say that sometimes we have to take a little bit longer to take a look at what that looks like. The advisory table, 100 per cent necessary. We know first voice matters and representation matters.

Just adding into all of that, I think it's just being cautious and making sure that we're doing it right and not stepping on as many toes in order to allow this process to unfold in a wonderful way for all families in Nova Scotia.

I just have a question about the bilateral agreement on early learning and child care. We know that it was signed in July and there are some steps that have been moving forward. I'm just wondering, has the department conducted a thorough risk assessment? You spoke about having to step back and take a longer look and having discussions with the operators. I'm just curious, because of the pre-Primary program and how that was implemented - and

there were some snafus along the way - has there been a thorough risk assessment moving forward for this particular part?

TRACY CROWELL: Thank you for the question. Yes, I think is the short answer. As the deputy minister has alluded to, this is going to be a journey. There is a lot of work, and we need to take the time to get it right. Part of that is the engagement piece, which we're really excited about. Given I'm kind of managing some of the products, I'm really excited to get the table stood up so we can start moving some good discussions and dialogue through the table.

I just want to talk a little bit about the transformation planning, if you will, because I think it will get to the question of risk. There are somewhere between 18 and 20 projects right now that are part of the transformation. Some of them obviously have earlier delivery dates than others, so we're prioritizing that.

We've spent some time - not enough and we're going to be spending more - pulling together the planning pieces, and making sure that we understand the interdependencies. I think one of the things that's become very obvious is that when you need to make a change to one thing, it has impacts on almost every other area of the system. If we don't understand what other impacts that's creating, it's a problem.

I would say we have a plan to do more planning. I've had an opportunity to review recommendations from the Auditor General - pre-Primary, as an example. There were a lot of lessons learned from that project that we've really tried to be mindful of and build into the work that we're doing right now in terms of this transformation. A lot of that was around making sure that we've got the proper planning pieces and the change management elements in place for that - and we're doing that.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Certainly, our pre-Primary experience - which people continue to celebrate - informed us because that was a transformation. It was a transformation of part of the early childhood system. Well, I should say there was no early childhood system. It was transformation of part of a constellation of child care centres.

What this is now is bringing a system to the entire sector. It's going to take time. It's going to take co-operation. I won't tell you we won't do another little fits and starts where our partners say, hold on, we want to talk about this more before you hit go. We now have the table where we can have those conversations, and we can hear the real voices around it say, if you hit go on this, you need to think about X, Y, and Z.

Nothing About Us Without Us will make us stronger in the end, and move from a constellation of service providers to a province-wide system of care. That's our journey. Halfway through year one, I think I'm confident with where we're sitting today and some of the decisions that, through the minister, have been made around making sure that Nothing About Us Without Us drives our practice.

[11:00 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I have to say, as a single mother of three with children between the ages of 12 and 25, I've watched and used the system. I totally just love what you guys are saying here today because I know exactly what you're talking about. I know exactly because my oldest child was diagnosed with severe Tourette syndrome and ADHD, so I understand exactly what ECEs do.

I thought I'd ask this question. The minister has indicated that the work to implement Nova Scotia's Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy is ongoing. Ms. Cross, I'm just wondering, how has the Association of Early Childhood Educators Nova Scotia been included in this process? Can you share your experience with us?

CATHERINE CROSS: The association has been included in this process. There's a key group of sector stakeholders and we are one of them. We provide feedback and speak for our members and provide that voice. Some of the project work that the association has done over the years has been supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the former Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

One of the biggest pieces that we have done in recent years has been the Early Childhood Education Recognition of Prior Learning program, whereby we developed a competency-based assessment process for educators who are currently working in regulated or pre-Primary settings in Nova Scotia, who may not meet the current classification Level 2, which prior to this was defined as the two-year ECE diploma. Now the ECE/RPL program is another pathway for people working in the sector who can apply for that classification Level 2.

I will say that it is not related to academics, so it's not a formal credential. It has been very impactful for some of the candidates who have gone through the program. It has a competency profile, which is a definition - the scope of practice, the expectation of what an ECE with a Level 2 classification or the diploma would have in terms of education, and what the expectation is of their performance.

When we talk about compensation, we talk about the benefits to children, specifically, because children are the ones who are the most directly impacted. Yes, families are impacted, but it's the children. We often speak of the benefits for their health, their social and emotional development, their physical development, additional supports if they need it, but what we don't often speak about is the risk if we don't do it right.

If we don't have educators who are adequately educated and have proper experience related to the work, then the possibility of doing harm is increased. That's

terrifying. It's not just about the moment. Many of the impacts - and I get emotional about this, because I am an early childhood educator - most of the impacts, we don't see. The trajectory, some of the outcomes, aren't laid out until puberty or even adulthood or when they're with their grandchildren. Educators do a lot of work - and Christine can probably cite all the research to back me up, but working there, that is the key piece.

There's nothing I can say that's going to stress to you enough the importance of recognizing educators who have the education and the competency. The competency is key. I'll just leave it there.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you - I have to switch my question, because that was my question, what I was getting from home. What I was getting from home is that we had a number of early childhood educators who've been in the system for 20-plus years. They would call. Even when we were in the negotiation, we announced that we'd started hearing from folks who worked in the sector. My kids were in daycare at the time. They would come to me and say, "I've been here for 20 years, so what does this mean for me under the new agreement?" So it's great to hear that that's well under way.

I'll switch my question and go to rural Nova Scotia. At the time, just before I left, we were looking at Guysborough because we had a significant issue in Guysborough when it came to child care. We were looking at the school there at the time. I don't know what the final decision is, but ultimately, it's going to be different in every community.

Pre-Primary was a huge success. I've been around the block with this stuff, you know what I mean? Things happen and you pull back and away you go. But every four-year-old in Nova Scotia has the same opportunity. In Cape Breton, when you say one in four in poverty - I would argue that that number, in some communities, is much higher. That was very significant for us. This is very significant for the island, and rural Nova Scotia, as well. I don't want to take away from my good friends from the Halifax area.

As you move into the rural, we talk about pre-Primary, but we're also looking at schools and the integration of three-year-olds into that system as well. Maybe just a bit of an update on where you are on that, and maybe if you want to talk about the infrastructure in schools as well? That's something that the government's going to have to decide on too, as they implement this into the communities that don't have the adequate space for a centre or the expansion of the program. I'll pass it to the deputy minister.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Being able to grow something in every community in Nova Scotia is a great problem to have. The landscape ahead of us, for ensuring that families have access wherever they live, means that there is not one size to this model. We've talked before about how some communities value home-centred or home-based

care. We want that home-based care to be high quality, with qualified and well-trained deliverers as a centre-based model.

We're looking at what kids might benefit from three-year-olds in spaces that are available in schools. It makes sense to use our infrastructure efficiently across the province, where that makes sense. We're looking at a variety of models, a variety of solutions, that will hopefully be the right solution for the right community at the right time.

That's our goal and that's the quest, and that will mean that sometimes we have available space in a school and a provider and the ability to support that model, and in others, it may be that the population growth of an urban centre won't allow that to happen. If not that, then what, and how do we build it in a way that those parents need?

All of that is being discussed and worked on. I would imagine we'll have more to say about some differentiation in the model in each announcement of new spaces because we're working collaboratively with the sector to find the right solution and the right way for the right communities as we speak.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to go back to the private operator question, just because this is something I heard about quite a bit in my constituency. As I said, I'm in a daycare every morning, so even if I wanted to escape it, I can't.

I just want to ask what percentage of private operators - I understand they're a little more than half of the total in the province - what percentage of private operators as of today have signed on to the Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, and what is the deadline by which they must sign up to become part of the system?

CATHY MONTREUIL: One of the things we heard from the sector is they didn't want us to impose deadlines. They wanted us to talk with them and work out solutions with them, and that's what we're committed to doing.

A key component of Canada-Wide is the 25 per cent reduction and committing to further reductions in the course of this current calendar year. 98 per cent of all providers have signed on to that funding agreement. We don't have a separate agreement; we have a funding agreement that reflects the moving forward of the Canada-wide tenets. That would include the ability to ultimately benefit from the compensation framework for ECEs, the subsidy for parents, and the fee reductions. That's what's in and that's what makes up our annual funding agreement, and that's what folks have signed on for.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I wanted to go back a little bit. I think you mentioned about these projects and how exciting it is going to be to get them at the table. I wanted to know if we could talk a little bit or elaborate on that. Besides the engagement table itself, what other strategies are we implementing to engage the sectors?

TRACY CROWELL: I did want to talk a little bit more about engagement, so thank you very much for raising the question. Obviously, we've put a call out for applications. The deputy minister provided some great information around the Early Learning and Child Care Engagement Table, and that's really one way that we will be engaging obviously broad and diverse perspectives.

We also at the same time expect that there will be other ad hoc working tables or maybe issue-specific tables that we need to set up that deal with specific targets, deliverables, commitments that we have to achieve, recognizing that some of them will have much more impact on certain groups than others and not everybody will want to be at the table to talk about those.

We expect that there will be some smaller working tables. As well, we have, even in the last while, used other ways of engaging the sector and our other colleagues. We do regular meetings and Zoom calls, of course. We've also used surveys, so we put out a survey in March around the ECE compensation work. It's important for us to understand. I'll just talk maybe a little bit about that.

I thought about this a little bit. The compensation framework work is well under way. There's a lot of really good work being done on that. I talked earlier about a system. It is really important for us as part of that work to understand how the system works today. We put out a survey to all of the operators to understand what they're currently paying for wages, what benefits are available to folks today, and even working conditions, vacation and that sort of thing, so we have a good understanding of the current situation.

That will really help us when it comes time to implement the new compensation framework, but that's an area where we may need to pull together a small group of operators to talk about how do we best implement that, so we're not creating a whole lot of pain for folks. That's just maybe one example.

There are lots of other things. Sarah talked as well about the not-for-profit expansion. We had an overwhelming response to the expression of interest, and of course we've structured that like a project because there are a lot of spaces being created and we need to just make sure that we've got proper agreements in place and we're doing proper oversight around that, and we're keeping track of those targets so that we can confidently meet them or understand if things do go off the rails.

Of course, as you can appreciate, one of my concerns these days is with supply chains and shortage of trades - I will be watching projects closely. Those are just a couple of examples. There are a number of other projects as well, like fee reductions obviously was a big one. There was a lot of work in February, March, and April around fee reduction. I know it sounds so simple to say, but the operators were absolutely key to us being able to deliver those fee reductions, and also the retroactive component of that and being able to offer a cheque or credit.

[11:15 a.m.]

Of course, the operators are happy to do it, but it's a lot of work. Our team does yeoman's work in trying to support them, but each one of these commitments require a lot of work - not just from our team but the operators as well. We ask a lot of them, and again, they're happy to do it, but it's really important that we continue to support them and understand when we implement changes how it impacts others. I guess I'll just stop there. I could talk for hours about this.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Just briefly, the other thing that we did for and with the sector this year, since we began, since July, is every operator has a contact. If they have an individual concern or worry, they have a model that they think might work for them on a go-forward basis, they have questions, they're uncertain about funding - on any of those pieces, every operator knows whom they can contact at the department. We've stood up that level of support for them so that nobody is left wandering in the forests of Nova Scotia wondering what's happening in child care. They have a one-stop shop that they can call and have a personal connection.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: There are a lot of things going on in my mind. I know we don't have a whole lot of time. The question will come after I say this, because I just have to say it.

When I think about expansion, I think it's wonderful, being able to have this care for our children and, like I said, for families. Then I also think about the housing crisis and health care. I know this is not this particular topic, but I just want to say it out loud. When we sit and discuss these issues, we also have to take into account a number of other pieces that are impactful, that are going to be amazing when it comes to our decisions that we make on housing, health care, immigration - all of these other pieces.

When we talked about 98 per cent who have signed on - which is a phenomenal number - for that 2 per cent who are possibly still being worked with and having discussions and such, I'm just thinking about other options. Are there other options for those 2 per cent to access funding without having to change to a non-profit operating model, or is this something where we're working toward the understanding of, so that they can come onboard with the next group?

CATHY MONTREUIL: The first thing is that our goal is 100 per cent. We've left the door open, and we have an open standing invite for those operators to talk to us at any point. Some of them are already.

There is a very small number - less than you could count on one hand - of folks in this sector who don't believe that this is what they want to do. They may want to join with

a private school. They're not necessarily looking to be licensed child care providers anyway. However, we've told them that we're here and that they're welcome. There are no timelines. They can come in at any point and talk with us about how they fit in the new system. I'm eternally optimistic that we will one day achieve 100 per cent.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm not sure who's going to take this one. We've talked about private daycares, non-profits - what about the ones that aren't licensed and are trying to get licensed? Is there an engagement to them to explain what the process is?

SARAH MELANSON: In Nova Scotia, across the province, there would be folks operating in an unlicensed model. They can do that with six or less children. That is completely appropriate, and some folks may choose to continue to do that. We have heard from some home-based providers that with the fee reduction, they would like to participate in a new family-home model.

Our coordinator responsible for the family-home program is constantly talking to providers, connecting them with the approved agency. Similar to what the deputy minister just said, that door is always open, and we would be most happy to welcome folks in at any point.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: This question has been sort of asked and kind of answered, so I'm going to see if I can't narrow it down for a little bit for information. In addition to the fee reduction, our government is creating new early learning positions to child care providers - sorry, provisions to early child care providers. The minister also indicated that the Province is creating a take - crap, wrong question. (Interruption) Excuse me, wrong question. Fair enough. The first part was correct. It was the second part I looked down at my other question.

I understand that we have 1,500 new not-for-profit child care spaces coming online in 2022. I'm just wondering if can you give us an update on how that is happening. Will any of them be coming to rural Nova Scotia?

CATHY MONTREUIL: We put out an expression of interest, and then worked with the operators who through that expression of interest raised their hands. More than 1,500 spaces raised their hands. However, 1,500 are ready now. We're working with them. We will work with the others on a different timeline. Again, this is a five-year journey, so we're happy to see that level of excitement.

Our minister will be announcing those spaces. A good deputy never steps on their minister's toes. However, I will tell you, yes to rural.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Two questions very quickly - I know we're running out of time. The first one is around opportunities for ECEs to get the training certification upgrade. Nova Scotia Community College plays a role, and Mount St. Vincent University plays a role. Are you working with any other schools within the province? That's question number one.

Question number two is something that came up last week where we had an operator come back to us and say that they actually saw a reduction in their funding for the year. The question was actually asked during Question Period, so I think just for some clarification around maybe that situation. Are there any operators that saw 98 per cent before, who will see a reduction in their grant for this year?

SARAH MELANSON: We'll do training first there. As regulator of the training, we work closely with the Nova Scotia Community College, Mount Saint Vincent University, as well as the private career colleges that provide the program. That bursary program that I spoke to you about earlier was available to all full-time ECE diploma students regardless of program. We're really excited that can be offered to all the various institutions.

I'd love to just take two seconds to tell you about the other really exciting initiative for us - the advanced practitioner program that we've created. We've spent some time talking about getting training for those who aren't trained. We've spent some time talking about getting people into the field. To Catherine's point about the criticalness of training and the importance of their profession, we have the advanced practitioner program for folks who already have their diploma and want to do more to advance their practice.

We are fairly sure this is quite unique. We're not sure who else might be doing something like this. It's a partnership between NSCC and Mount Saint Vincent. We had 100 spaces that we announced in March, and we had hundreds of responses. A sector that is working all day with our kids is exhausted, has their diploma, and they want more. Just from a training perspective, there are just some really great things happening.

Shifting to funding, we aren't aware of any situations of folks getting less. As you know, there's a variety of grant situations, and it can get quite confusing at times. Part of the phone calls that I've been having over the past few weeks, as the deputy minister referred to, have been around explaining those grants to folks. If any operator you folks may be talking to, if they're expressing that, then I'm happy to take a phone call and we can walk through. One line may look different, but it's here in this line.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: This is the last question I have. Again, I think you can see there's consensus across the board that we're all excited about this and just want to see it succeed, as you do as well.

I just wanted to circle back to my initial question around labour and shortages and so on. I know there are 300 ECEs who enter the system every year. In order to fill the spaces that are going to open up over the next five years, what does that number need to be? Whoever is capable of answering, I'd be happy to hear. Is it 400, is it 500, do we know?

SARAH MELANSON: As we've said many times, this is a five-year journey, and we're really right now focused on this year. Right now, our focus is on this expansion of the 1,500 spaces and the ECEs to support that. A bit of this is about that mapping I spoke about earlier. Without going down a path of crazy numbers, it's a little bit about ratios - the number of staff to children, and the type of care that each community needs.

Right now, our focus is on these 1,500 spaces, the staff we need for that, and then continually to work with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, with their workforce team, their modelling, their economist for us to really start to get to a more granular spot. We did it once before with pre-Primary, so I'm pretty sure that - feeling really good that we're going to do it again.

THE CHAIR: With regard to time and questioning, we do have until about 11:40 a.m. for questions if people still have them, and we'll try to keep it one question at a time, as well. MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I don't know if we've talked about this. I took a quick break, but I don't think that we touched on it. I know this \$10-a-day in particular, again, is just going to be amazing. Then I look toward the before and the after part of the program, and it's very beneficial for children and families, especially if they're working out of area. A lot of people in my community travel into Halifax every day. Will this before-and-after care be part of this new system, as well?

CATHY MONTREUIL: Before-and-after was something that we heard from parents who enrolled their children in pre-Primary. For those four-year-olds and five-year-olds, they were looking for what we call a seamless day. The children are in pre-Primary, the parents were saying we need something to bookend the pre-Primary program. The first wave of attention to before and after will be on satisfying that need. It absolutely is part of the overall strategy, and the first phase is looking at where we can start to build out existing and introduce new before-and-after solutions for families and services for those kids. Is there anything else to add to that?

TRACY CROWELL: The only thing I would add is just to say that as part of the expansion and the accessibility pillar that we've talked about - the 9,500 new spaces - that does include a child care centre, it includes family home child care, and it also includes the

before-and-after-school wraparound spaces that the deputy minister talked about. It absolutely does include that.

There was an expression of interest, as well, released on that. I'm not sure the exact timing - I think the Fall? We're working very closely. Our delivery partner in that program is the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, so we're working quite closely with them in terms of expansion, and the minister will probably have an announcement to share on that shortly.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: First of all, I've got to congratulate you because you all have great passion for this and what this does for communities, to know that the children are being educated in a good way, in a caring way. The budget for 2022/2023 - is that meeting the sector's needs right now?

CATHY MONTREUIL: If you're asking us, yes absolutely. One of the pieces of work is looking at the overall budget and settling into a funding formula to adequately ensure that we're paying for the cost of care right across the province. That's part of the work that's unfolding now in terms of the compensation framework for ECEs and the ability to ensure that operators can meet their operating costs outside of salary. All of that work is continuing to go on.

This year, we were able to provide that funding stable assurance for the next year for every operator in this province on the back of the funding agreement with the federal government.

LARRY HARRISON: Well, thank you for what you do, all of you.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I have one question to ask. It was talked about before, but I want to just get it on the record - this is for my colleague, MLA Ronnie LeBlanc from Clare. The Francophone side of things really is important to us. We've talked about it with many of the groups across the province, but I want to ask this for him. There was some concern around ensuring that as we open new centres, that - especially in the Acadian communities like Clare, Chéticamp, Richmond. I just want to get on the record for him, because this is something that's important to his community and the French communities across the island and the province.

CATHY MONTREUIL: Oui. Les experts actuels de la francophonie de Nova Scotia sont très importants. Yes, we know that minority language floats on a sea of talk, right? It floats on a sea of talk. Ensuring that preschool provides the oral opportunity necessary to ensure culture and that language development is really important. We have

met with that community, and they have floated a proposal to date. I've assured them that we will continue the dialogue.

[11:30 a.m.]

Some parts of our system are more ready than the system is just at the moment, but we will continue that. We know how important it is to the Acadians of Nova Scotia, and we also know how important it is for early childhood education.

THE CHAIR: With about nine or so minutes left, I have MLA Barkhouse and MLA Sheehy-Richard.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Can you tell us what place the Child Care Subsidy Program will have once the system is in place?

SARAH MELANSON: The Child Care Subsidy Program will continue to play a really important role for us as we go forward. We understand that even as we work our way toward \$10 a day on average, there will be barriers for some families in accessing that. Right now, the Child Care Subsidy Program is available for families to receive the maximum subsidy with an income of up to \$35,000, and a sliding scale up to \$70,000 a year.

Until the fee reduction, that did leave families paying still more than some could afford. That's why with the 25 per cent fee reduction, we're so excited that that's brought 530 families to zero, and even more to zero dollars a month by the time we get to 50 per cent. That will continue to be there for families.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: There must be spidey-senses going on between MLA Barkhouse and I, because that was my question. I do want to just ask for the record: Are we on track to deliver the 50 per cent reduction in the family child care fees by the end of 2022?

CATHY MONTREUIL: That's an easy yes. We're excited. There's no way on Earth we're going to miss that. The families are counting on us, the operators are counting on us, and right now we're tracking - that's one of the project pieces we're tracking, and we are very much on track.

THE CHAIR: Were there any more questions? Anybody have any? MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I don't have a question, but I just wanted to say something. I just want to say that we know within the department and amongst the other work that is being done, it is not easy work. We do truly appreciate the fact that you're all here representing groups, and, as well, your own department, and we're very thankful for that. As we know,

as was said by Ms. Catherine here, it's not just for us as families, it's not just for us as communities. It's children first, and that has a huge impact on their lives moving forward.

I just want to say thank you very much for your information and sharing, and, as well, I'm always open to getting information, so if you want to share information with me, I would truly appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Yes, just a comment because I haven't seen you in a long time. I just wanted to get on the record too: I saw first-hand when the federal government said that we have the potential for a new child care agreement which would see every child have the same opportunity - I used to say it was all about all the babies, right? We see the work that's happening now, but 10 years from now and 15 years from now, we'll see parents and children and families will benefit from this for the years to come.

I just want to say on behalf of the caucus, I know how much work went into this. This was a commitment of our government to get it done, and I watched staff, as the person who was putting the pressure on at the time, to sign the agreement. I just want to thank you. It's good to see you.

To Catherine, good to see you again. We had a chance to chat online a while back, but to all of you, to everyone you represent and all the advocates within the sector, it was a long time coming. I'm just happy regardless. You'll hit some bumps along the way, but to see everybody working together for our kids is really great. I just want to say on behalf of the caucus that we look forward to seeing what's happening. We'll always be here to support, but on a personal note, as somebody who was involved with that, I just want to say congratulations and good to see you.

CATHY MONTREUIL: On behalf of my team and the Early Childhood Development side of the department, I would just like to thank everybody for the support and the ongoing feedback. Even when it's critical, it makes us better.

The work we're doing, we also wear as an awesome responsibility. It's a privilege to be able to do this work, but it's an awesome responsibility. As you look at the future for early childhood, for children - when we were looking at Truth and Reconciliation, Elder Murray Sinclair said, education got us into this and education will get us out. That's the environment that we're seeding for these kids - to be able to understand what true equity means as they grow.

We're all adults, and we all have our futures resting on their shoulders, on how we bring these kids in and bring them to learn: the habits of care for each other, for the environment, for the eldest of us. I want these kids to treat me well in my old age. We know

that we're going to need more kids in IT, green energy and skilled trades. We want to give them a robust start so they have all of the choices in the world. The world's their oyster. We need to prepare them so that they can fest.

It's a true privilege. No matter what happens, no matter what bumps we have, the fact of the matter is, we don't have to do this work - we get to do this work, and we're thrilled. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for appearing here today. Thank you for the hard work that you continue to do. With those words, if you wish to leave - unless there are any other further closing remarks. Once again, thank you so much.

Perhaps we'll call a quick five-minute recess.

[11:38 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:46 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The committee has now returned from recess.

We have a little bit of committee business to follow up with. We've done our appointments. Witnesses at the May 31st meeting on promoting healthy living in students, we are - let me see here. Acting Deputy Minister Sara Halliday to substitute for Deputy Minister Cathy Montreuil, with the committee's permission.

Seeing nods of yes. Agreed.

We did have some correspondence that came from Université Sainte-Anne. I think that was circulated. There was also some correspondence that came through from Judy Thomas. Is there any discussion on any of those items?

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Chair, this is in regard to Ms. Judy Thomas' letter. I'm fully happy with having to send this off to the department to get the answers, but one thing I'd like to note is that in the actual Health and Wellness budget, this is identified as something to be done. We do need to accelerate the support for qualified, educated, and trained health care professionals.

I'm not going to read what's in the budget, but there are five points identified. We're more than comfortable with having that sent to the department for a comment. I believe that would be the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We can forward that off to the appropriate department.

Is there any other business?

Seeing none, our next meeting is going to be May 31, 2022, from 10:00 a.m. to noon. Subject to the committee's approval of the witness change, which we've done: the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, promoting healthy living in students.

With that said, this meeting has adjourned. Thank you, everyone.

[The committee adjourned at 11:48 p.m.]