

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, May 31, 2022

Committee Room

**Promoting Healthy Living in Students
&
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Braedon Clark
Ali Duale
Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Dave Ritcey was replaced by Kent Smith.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Sara Halliday
Acting Associate Deputy Minister

Ann Power
Executive Director - Student Services and Equity

Dr. Chris Boulter
Executive Director - Education Innovation, Programs and Services

Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education

Susan Kelley
Regional Executive Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 31, 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'm Nolan Young, the MLA for Shelburne, and I chair this committee.

Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we'll hear from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding promoting healthy living in students. I'd ask everyone if they could turn their phones off or put them on silent. In case there's an emergency, we'll exit through the Granville Street exit. Please keep your mask on during the meeting unless you're speaking.

I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

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

Just to ensure that we have enough time for questions for the witnesses, I think we'll start with our ABCs or appointments before we move into our question and answer, if that's fine with the committee. We've done it in the past.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Advanced Education, I move that Nancy MacLellan, Kathleen Trott, and Karen Oldfield be appointed directors to the Research Nova Scotia Corporation Board of Directors.

THE CHAIR: Discussion on the motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, I move that Sean Meister, Sara Greenblatt, Katrina Swift, and Sean Williams, be appointed members of the Nova Scotia Museum Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on this motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Economic Development, I move that Maria Bartholomew be appointed member of the Peggy's Cove Commission.

THE CHAIR: Do we have discussion on this motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Justice, I move to appoint members of the Municipal Boards of Police Commissioners. I move that Anthony Thomas be appointed member of HRM, that Darren Lipsett be appointed member of Bridgewater, Dorothylane Hale be appointed member of Westville, Paul Walker be appointed member of Kentville, Paul Calder be appointed member of Amherst, Noelle Gouthro be appointed member of Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Patricia Lloyd be appointed member of Stellarton, and Sarah Flemming be appointed member of Truro.

THE CHAIR: Do we have discussion on that motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, I move that Anne Patterson, Jan Raska, and Katherine MacLellan be appointed members of the Shubenacadie Canal Commission.

THE CHAIR: Do we have discussion on that motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We also have a brief bit of committee business. It's just a witness change. I'd ask that we could discuss that before we move into our witnesses. The witness change would be at next month's meeting on strategies to prevent workplace injuries. The approved witness from the Workers' Compensation Board is the board's Chair, Saeed El-Darahali. Mr. El-Darahali advised us that he's going to be out of town on that date. He's asking whether his two colleagues could appear in his place. One is Deputy Chair Robert Patzelt and CEO Stuart MacLean. Is everyone okay with that change?

Seeing nods, that's generally accepted. Thank you, everyone.

Today's topic is promoting healthy living in students. We have some witnesses. I'd ask the witnesses if they would like to introduce themselves and begin their opening remarks.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: If you have opening remarks - Acting Associate Deputy Minister Halliday?

SARA HALLIDAY: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to speak with you this morning about promoting healthy living in students. My colleagues have just introduced themselves. I just want to say that I'm very thankful that they agreed to appear with me today. They're very knowledgeable about the supports and services available to students in our public education system. I'm very pleased to have them with me today.

We all want the children in our province to reach their full potential, and we know that the best place for children to do this is in school. Schools are safe, inclusive places where children and students have equitable access to resources to help their intellectual development, as well as their physical, social, and emotional well-being. The students in

this province come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, from different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. These backgrounds and experiences are what enrich our school communities.

I believe that our work on inclusive education makes for positive environments in our schools that promote the well-being of students. By putting a strong focus on inclusive education, we are helping our youngest generation to recognize, be sensitive to, honour, and value each other's lived experience. The variety of cultures, teachings, and families add richness to our school system and help students develop the skills to be a global citizen.

I am happy to share that public schools in the province have received the first annual healthy living grant. This grant provides schools with flexibility in designing outdoor and cultural learning experiences aimed at enhancing physical activity, well-being, and mental health.

During the pandemic, we put a greater emphasis on outdoor learning, and we see and hear the positive benefits in our students. There are ample opportunities to work with the curriculum and use outdoor learning to make students even more interested in the materials they're learning.

I've heard stories of classes going sledding to learn about friction, inertia, and velocity, or students using chalk to learn how to write sentences, or outdoor math lessons where teachers are taking a spin on classic games and getting students moving at the same time. Getting students outdoors not only improves their health but enhances their classroom engagement and builds stronger connections with nature and the environment.

In collaboration with the regional centres for education, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the department is developing a new physical activity framework that will support an increase in movement and fitness activity throughout the curriculum in all subject areas and throughout the school day. We are looking forward to implementing the framework in the 2022-23 school year.

Students also benefit from many programs that are supported through partnerships. For example, many students in our province take part in the Kids Run Club, a partnership with Doctors Nova Scotia. The Run Club is free to participate in, and helps promote a healthy lifestyle.

In addition to students' physical health, the department is also focused on the importance of supporting mental health and well-being. We know that the pandemic has been challenging for students, so our schools have worked hard to ensure that we are able to support our students as they deal with any mental health challenges that they may be navigating. For example, we have more than 50 SchoolsPlus mental health clinicians located throughout the province. These staff work closely with Regional Centres for

Education, the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, the IWK Health Centre, and the Nova Scotia Health Authority to ensure we meet the needs of children, youth, and families.

We are also tapping into the use of technology to better serve students in accessing mental health support. Tele-Education is a platform that provides confidential access to private counselling, interventions, meetings, et cetera, including the delivery of school counselling in schools, plus mental health programming and services when needed. Research shows that effective schools where students feel connected could have an impact on their health. We know that health and education are interconnected. That is why Nova Scotia takes a health-promoting schools approach, integrating curriculum, a healthy school environment, health services, and parents and community involvement for the benefit of students and staff.

An important part of a health-promoting school approach is ensuring students have access to food in the morning and throughout the day to allow students to focus on their learning. In Nova Scotia, we have a universal school-based food program that all students are able to access called School Healthy Eating Program, or SHEP. The program primarily provides access to breakfast and beverage programming in schools - although in some schools, it also supports lunch programming. Our schools, educators, and administrators are always on the lookout to ensure that students are supported. If a student needs food, we will ensure they get food.

We also know throughout many of the schools in our province, they are finding unique and innovative ways to ensure that every student does have access to food. We hear of many schools that are leading initiatives or working with community partners to get students interested in food. For example, the Chester-area middle school has a free salad bar that is accessible to all students, or another great initiative is one that is happening at Petite Rivière Elementary School. Their students are harvesting eggs from a local chicken coop. This opportunity teaches students where their food comes from, teaches them about agriculture and supporting local businesses.

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to address the committee, and I look forward to any questions you may have.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Halliday. Just to recap, too, how this committee functions. We'll go around the room - just raise your hand and I'll keep a list of the people that we have in order, and we can ask questions that way. We'll try to take questioning to somewhere around 11:50 a.m. unless we run out of questions beforehand.

With that said, MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: It was really nice to hear the fact that food is really important for kids in our schools. We understand that. You know this firsthand, working in the schools, and our caucus supports a move to a universal school food program. We know that

publicly-funded school meals are the norm around the world. Canada is the only G8 country that does not have a national school food program, and we know that universal school food programs reduce costs for families, have positive health outcomes for students, support local farms, and create good jobs.

I was pleased to learn that the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education has a five-day-a-week breakfast program in all of its schools, and a full-time dietician who sets those menus, coordinates volunteers, matches schools with social clubs. I think that's the concept in which we want to make sure our schools are healthy and well-rounded when it comes to all of these pieces.

I'd like to ask Ms. Kelley to tell us a bit more about how this model is working for those schools, and what kind of benefits you're seeing for your students.

[10:15 a.m.]

SUSAN KELLEY: Our breakfast program with Debbie Madore, who runs the program, has been in operation since 1999, actually. It's been going for quite a while. It's now in all of our schools. We do breakfast in all of our schools - even through COVID-19 we did, although it was difficult through COVID-19. We also do snacks in some of our schools as well with Debbie, and she works with some of the schools on lunches. We'd like to see more lunches, but we do have some schools where we do some lunch programming, as well.

For the breakfast program, we try to do as many things from the maximum area of the food policy. All students have access to food. It becomes a social event because sometimes a breakfast program can have a stigma. In our schools we really work hard for that not to happen. During COVID-19 we started serving it in classrooms, so then it became: Who's going to have a bagel? I was in a school recently where the cart goes to the classroom door. Students are more likely then, because it becomes a social event.

I was in a school where breakfast for P-6 students was served by the Grade 6s. They took on a leadership role, they helped with the toast, and there are always volunteers who come in. There are all kinds of stories like that. We have a school where a mom comes in once a week and makes muffins for all the students. They have muffins one day. It's a variety of things, but we try to have the healthy food, make it social.

At the high school level, we try to have it so that kids can come and pick it up as they like, and it's amazing even with high school students. They will come and eat. I recently spoke to a mom who sits on our breakfast committee, and her son was in Grade 10. She told the story about how he's also on the autism spectrum, and she says some days getting him out to school in the morning is a little bit busy, and she works, so she was forever grateful that she knew when he got to school he could have breakfast, and he looked forward to going to school and having breakfast.

We have it at the high school level as well, and students take part in it. It's a great program. We believe very strongly in it, and Debbie does a really good job. I hope I answered your question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, MLA Hansen. I'm going to build on her question, which was a very good one. I'd like to start with Acting ADM Halliday, and if anybody else has thoughts, please chime in, around school lunch programs. In the past, our party has put forward an idea for a pilot program for school lunch at a cost of about \$3 million to get that going. I'm just wondering what the department's overall view is on the implementation of a universal school lunch program, if work is underway on that, and perhaps Ms. Kelley, if you could chime in on where you see that idea as well. I'll start with Acting ADM Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: As Susan mentioned, we are committed to ensuring that all students in our schools have access to food, because it's so interconnected with their ability to learn. We want them to be in the right frame of mind and not be worrying about accessing food or being hungry when they're trying to learn. I think the schools across the province have just done an absolutely amazing job with the different innovative solutions that they've put in place to ensure that there is open access to food. Susan had mentioned about the de-stigmatization of access to food, and I think that is something the schools have done a truly remarkable job at.

Through the current funding and the programs that are available in school - it is mainly focused on breakfast at this time - but there are a number of different things happening across the province to support a lunch program. We have volunteers who would come in from the community and deliver a hot lunch maybe twice a day. That would be either free or at very low cost. I was reading about one yesterday: It was \$2 for a hot meal. It's not universal, to your point, and I think that it's a goal for all of us to make sure that students aren't worried about food.

We were very excited to hear through the federal government that there's actually a commitment through two federal ministers' mandate letters to explore what a lunch program might look like with some support from the federal government. We were obviously very interested in that commitment, and our minister has reached out to those two federal ministers to express our interest in learning more about what that commitment will look like and what that might mean for Nova Scotia. We're very interested in hearing back from those federal ministers and seeing how that might fit into the puzzle and the work that's going on right now around healthy food in schools.

SUSAN KELLEY: I'll just add on to what Sara said. We have programs in our schools. School staff are really good at knowing what kids need lunch. We have programs in our schools where they'll make bagged lunches and kids can just come and pick them

up, so there's no stigma involved for kids who need to. We also have volunteers who come in for hot lunch.

I was in a school recently where once a week they make soup and fresh biscuits. The smell of fresh biscuits at around 11:30 would make everyone hungry, and everyone comes and has soup and a biscuit together. This is a small rural P-12 school, and they all come and have lunch together. That's universal for that day, but it's not all of the time. We have a lot of that happening in schools.

We also have a pay-as-you-can program. We've got a couple of pilots like that in our buildings as well, where we're working with local businesses to bring lunch in for students who need it. Actually, Whitney Pier Memorial is a middle school and they're doing that as a pilot right now. They have a brand-new cafeteria, which is beautiful. They do that kind of program so that students can come and pay as they can or not pay anything at all, and are working with a local business.

We're working on it. We don't have everything, but as Sara indicated, food's really important. It's important that our students have full bellies going into the afternoon. So that's happening all across our region.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: My question is going to focus a little bit on the outdoor learning spaces and outdoor opportunities for activity.

Ms. Halliday, I was encouraged to hear you talk about the friction and the outdoor learning that's taking place in some of the schools. I also just want to share for the record that my daughter's school, École des Beaux-Marais in Porters Lake, has a fantastic outdoor learning space. The staff at the school and the volunteers have done a wonderful job making it a great, usable space.

I assume the department has plans to continue with outdoor active learning spaces. Will it remain a priority?

SARA HALLIDAY: I'll actually say a few comments and then I'll pass it over to Chris. He probably has better and more detailed information than I do.

One of the things we talk about a lot at the department is, what did we learn through the pandemic? We were chatting yesterday, and I said, I don't think any of us would choose to go through the pandemic if we had the choice, but we didn't have the choice, and there is lots to learn through that experience.

One of the great things that has come out of that experience is, in following Public Health direction, schools got really innovative around taking the students out and

incorporating being outdoors across the curriculum. It wasn't just for physical education - they were out there for math class and for science class. That is certainly one of the things that we have learned, and we have seen the benefits of that through the pandemic. I think it's fair to say that that is absolutely going to continue to be a focus for the department and for the school system.

The story about the friction - that was actually my personal story. My son did that. I was saying that it was one of the first times he ever came home excited. He had wiped out and he had big scratches down the side of his face, but it didn't even matter, because he was so engaged in the learning and he was actually coming home and sharing that with us. I always feel so excited about that story.

Chris, do you have some pieces you'd like to add?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter.

DR. CHRIS BOULTER: Thank you very much. Perhaps here I'll build on a story and then take it from there. I wanted to tell you a little story about Barrington Municipal High School.

What happened was, about a year ago I was invited to their Leadership 12 class, with a strong focus on outdoor learning. What had happened was that the school was able to secure a number of mountain bikes - enough for a class, in fact - where I was able to join the class and the teacher. The class started shortly after the lunch period ended. We mountain biked down a country road to the Barrington River, where there was a series of canoes set up with a local partnership. Although the schools own the canoes, they were housed in a spot, and we got in the canoes, we did some safety training within the canoes, we got out, and we biked back to the school before the end of the class.

That's an example of how it looks in practice. In biking back, I ended up biking beside a student, and we were trying to have a conversation while mountain biking. It was up a hill, so I was a little bit winded. He was doing better than I was. He talked about how he didn't have a bike at home. This was his opportunity, through this course, to literally have access to a mountain bike and not something that he had at home and certainly would not have had the opportunity to canoe otherwise as well.

This was all part of a curriculum and a Leadership 12 course with a strong focus on outdoor learning. Those are just the types of experiences that we want students across the province to have. I add that as an example, and thank you for your question. Certainly, we have implemented now our healthy living grant. The healthy living grant is an annual \$2 million school fund to support efforts to strengthen student well-being, obviously with a focus on outdoors.

Some of the things we want to do are build school connectedness in community and a sense of safety and belonging. Outdoor learning is very closely aligned with inclusive education in terms of interacting with your peers and adults within the building and outside the building as well in meaningful learning activities. Sara talked about different examples of how teachers are increasingly using the outdoors as a means to learn. It can go from demonstrating Pythagorean theorem on a soccer field to writing sentences in chalk. We were recently really interested in outdoor learning desks and different ways that we can get students outside to engage in the existing curriculum.

We have a number of examples already coming back to us from the implementation of the healthy living grant. For example, in Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education right now, they purchased some mountain bikes at different schools, cross-country skis for the Winter, other outdoor play equipment. Pickleball is something that's gaining a lot of interest, and we have several schools that have bought equipment in that way.

In addition to that, with the healthy living grants, it's certainly focused on physical activity, but there are other pieces to it as well. As part of building a sense of belonging and through movement and through engagement, these funds also support various cultural presentations and guests coming into the schools who are deliberately intended to create a strong sense of identity, cultural pride, and inclusion among students. I know some funds were used this year to host some guests around African drumming lessons - that was one particular example. We've had some other guests come into schools through this funding related to Indigenous cultural education and awareness, and land-based learning.

In fact, when we set up the criteria for the healthy living grant, the criteria were not just outdoor equipment and outdoor learning, it certainly was, there's no doubt that was the big focus within this funding. In addition to that, of the three criteria, we also had land-based outdoor learning, cultural opportunities, and health as well.

As we continue to implement this initiative, we see all kinds of great examples of outdoor learning. As Sara said, one of the silver linings of dealing with COVID-19 in and out of schools was that it has created an increased understanding of the importance of ecological understanding, of the importance of getting students connected to the land, of the importance of environmental stewardship and how that can play a role in many subject areas. And again, experiential learning, which means we don't just want to tell students about it in the classroom, we want them to go outside and experience it in that way.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for sharing those examples. Barrington happens to be in my riding, so I've got to make some phone calls when I get back. Much has changed.

Next up I have MLA Harrison, and then MLA Hansen. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you for being here and sharing this. Most of my schools are in rural areas. Could you talk a little bit about how rural areas, in comparison to urban areas, have access to the programs promoting healthy living?

[10:30 a.m.]

SARA HALLIDAY: We live in a province that is varied, so we do have very rural areas, we have very urban areas. I think it's always been a focus for our department to ensure that regardless of where you live in the province, you are able to access the various programs, whatever they may be.

For example, if we talk about the breakfast program or the School Healthy Eating Programs, there's equal access to that funding and the opportunities through that to all of our schools, regardless of where you are. We have great community partnerships, and I can say some of the best stories around partnerships that I've heard actually occur in the rural areas because the communities are so engaged in their local schools.

There are two sides, I guess, to the rural/urban question because there's also opportunities that exist. Susan's example of someone coming in and making soup for the whole school - you couldn't do that in my son's school. There are 1,500 kids who go there, I think. There are different opportunities. I think the overall goal for us is regardless of where you live in the province, that you are able to have access. When we talk about food, it's about accessing food or accessing opportunities.

Chris just talked about the healthy living grant. That grant is based on a formula. Every school gets \$5,000, and then a dollar for every student who's enrolled there. The \$5,000 base is meant to provide somewhat of a level playing field for some of our smaller schools that have smaller populations or smaller enrollment, and then some of our larger schools that have (Inaudible) - you know, it's the base plus. You'll get another decent amount based on the enrollment of your school.

We have really tried to make sure that we were thoughtful about the different situations of our schools across the province to make sure that they have an equal opportunity. If they wanted to do something like buy mountain bikes, that that would be an option for them as well, regardless of how large their school population is.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad that you mentioned the formula of the \$5,000 so that everybody gets a base, because my question was going to be about budget. When we talk about \$2,000,000, when we divide it up between schools, that's not a whole lot of money when we think about it.

Maybe you can correct me because I'm not sure if this is the exact same thing, but this particular formula was supposed to go through School Advisory Councils, and then they'd decide upon what that looks like for each of their schools?

SARA HALLIDAY: We actually have two funds, but they both use the same formula. We have a fund called the Student Support Grant, and it uses the same formula. There is a lot of involvement with the SAC through the use of those funds. Those funds were designed originally to offset - I will call it, maybe - fundraising pressures for school communities. We had heard a lot - again, back to an urban/rural, or a large versus small school - that the capacity of the communities around them differ, and we wanted to make sure that we had provided some funding to schools so that they were able to do some of those extra things, I would call it.

One of the interesting things that they've used the Student Support Grant for - there's been a lot of initiatives that are whole school initiatives, but they also use some of that funding to do other things. For example, there are students in the school who are graduating, and they maybe don't have the money for their graduation sitting fees. There's a pot of money there that they're able to support individual students, as well as groups of students. I know they work very closely with the SAC on the use of that funding.

I'm not sure on the new grant, the healthy living grant. I'm assuming there's involvement of the SACs, but maybe Chris can speak a little bit more to the specific involvement in that.

SUZY HANSEN: I was curious, but at the same time, my question is: Is there any new money in the most recent budget to expand this type of programming? Those are funds that are there, and the healthy living grant is new to my ears. Is there additional funding? When I think about the amount of money that goes into each school, is that enough, really?

SARA HALLIDAY: The healthy living grant is new funding. It was rolled out this school year and is committed to future school years. That's a significant additional amount of money for schools each year, on top of the Student Support Grant funding that they have.

There's also, I would say, another funding stream that goes to schools that will help support SAC activities. We had provided some funding to allow SACs to support the operations of their committees. For example, if we needed to provide child care services so that parents could attend the SAC meetings and be participants on the SACs, there was money there to do that, and as well to undertake different initiatives to support the mandate of the SAC, which is around achievement and the well-being of the student population.

So there are three kind of pools of money there that come into the individual schools and add up to, I would say, at a minimum, \$15,000. That's used to support class trips, guest speakers - the list is endless, of what they're doing with that money. That's in addition, I would say, to our regular curriculum supports or our regular delivery of the curriculum in the schools and the base funding that you would consider for that.

THE CHAIR: Next up I have MLA MacDonald, then MLA Clark, then MLA Sheehy-Richard. MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: A big part of providing mental health to students requires some additional resources. I assume this will be toward Acting ADM Halliday, but you can kick it off to Chris if you want. Can you tell us what resources and what have we put in place to help the teachers and the other individuals for it?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: Maybe I'll start off with some general comments, and then I might actually pass it over to Ann Power. Ann is our Executive Director of Student Services and Equity. She probably has a lot to add to my comments.

When we talk about health-promoting schools and having a safe, nurturing environment for students, obviously a big part of that is around mental health supports. We're going back to the pandemic again, but it did highlight the need for access to those supports.

A few high-level pieces: I think probably most of you would be familiar with our SchoolsPlus integrated service model that's now available to schools across the province. A few years ago, through a partnership with the Department of Health and Wellness, we put mental health clinicians connected to the SchoolsPlus sites. I would say that's been a very valuable resource throughout the province to our students and their families.

Again, that was in addition to the school-based services like school counsellors, school psych, and the other supports we have, like speech-language pathologists and other specialized services. Through the inclusive education funding over the past several years, we've added a number of additional supports that are designed to provide those mental health supports to students.

Maybe I'll just pass it over to Ann so that she can go over some of that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Power.

ANN POWER: Yes, we do. We have added many positions - almost 1,000 positions - to the system over the last four years. The large majority of them, I think, focused on supporting students with additional supports. Many of them really are focused on well-being in students - well-being and achievement, and prevention of mental health issues forming in the first place - but also in ensuring that students have access to mental health supports right at school level, so co-located services, which is really the integrated services model that we have now in education.

Somewhat unique to Nova Scotia - if you look at other provinces across Canada - SchoolsPlus really has been a very strong story of how we integrate our services, not just within the school building or across schools or across regions, but also across our health partners and our other partners in education, and even into justice with restorative practices

and other things that help students to understand how to best be able to support themselves through self-regulation and other ways of being in schools.

I think in terms of SchoolsPlus, we've added almost 130 positions over the last four years. These have helped us to - along with our mental health clinicians, there are just over 50, I think, mental health clinicians with whom we partner with the Department of Health and Wellness, the IWK and NSHA in particular. We work specifically with them to build our programming. We have child and youth care practitioners - which were new positions that we added to the system - who also help on a daily basis within the schools and classrooms to work with students on self-regulation, on accessing supports.

We have new parent navigators who have been added to our system who help parents as well to access supports in the community, which is very helpful when you're looking at a variety of different service providers, to enable them to get help quickly and to access what they need.

We also have more school counsellors in our system. We also have African Nova Scotian support workers and Mi'kmaw education support workers who help students connect to culturally responsive mental health services, as well as culturally responsive teaching and learning within our system, and to connect families and communities to those services as well. All of these form a very culturally responsive, inclusive approach to mental health in our schools. Of course, we have many services for our teachers in terms of webinars and professional learning.

As we see new issues emerging, we work with our partners to develop new programs and services. For instance, we've been working recently on eating disorders, because we've seen some rise in eating disorders during COVID-19. We quickly worked with our partners at the IWK. We have a new webinar coming out, more professional learning, and more resources for teachers so that they can understand and see the signs and work with families and the other support systems that we have in place to address issues such as that.

Sometimes our services morph and change, depending on the needs. Certainly as with, for instance, our conversation on healthy food and ensuring students are fed, we also are feeding our children in terms of their mental health and well-being, and ensuring that teachers are really watching for when those needs arise and are responsive to those.

BRAEDON CLARK: I also wanted to touch on the mental health side of things. First of all, it is great to see things in schools somewhat going back to normal. Last Thursday, I went to the musical at Charles P. Allen High School in my riding. It was awesome. You could just see how happy the kids were. I think it was the first one they had in three years, obviously. There were 300 people there - the parents, and nieces and nephews, and grandparents. That was great, from a mental health side of things, just to get that normalcy back and that excitement.

[10:45 a.m.]

One thing that the government put forward, which I think is a good idea, is the idea of having mental health wellness kits in classrooms. I asked the minister about this in the House in the Spring - I guess it would have been - and I believe the indication was that these would be in place by the Fall, if I remember correctly. Perhaps this is a question for Ms. Power. If you could just give us an update on that and kind of what that might look like in practice come September?

ANN POWER: Yes, we worked with our partners again, with the IWK, in terms of how we could best use a grant to give to schools because we knew that it wasn't really a one size fits all. It was more about thinking about your mental health within the context of your school. Of course, if you were in an elementary school, it might look different from a junior high or perhaps a P-12 or senior high.

We looked at current research, what might be a myriad of responses that schools could engage the funding for. We're hoping that what will happen in the Fall when the grants go out, that schools will really take a careful look at their evidence and their current data, such as our Student Success Survey, and other well-being ways of knowing how students are doing within their schools, and to use those to inform what they're going to use their grant for.

Each school will get a grant, and then we'll be able to work with our schools to evaluate how that went and what the best practices were, and then we'll be able to share those and network those across schools for other schools to learn from that investment.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just to clarify to make sure I understand, individual schools essentially will have discretion to figure out what these kits might look like in their individual schools. Regarding the grant, is it a one-time grant or do we expect that there will be funding going forward on a semi-regular basis?

ANN POWER: Yes, we expect it to be ongoing. It will be within parameters, so it will be based on evidence. That's why we worked with the IWK to say, what does evidence tell us are appropriate social, emotional learning resources, for instance. What does evidence tell us makes a difference for students in terms of their mental health and resources that teachers can use at classroom levels? Not really within the specialists, but more at classroom level, and what helps within school-wide approaches, for instance.

A school might say, let's get together and decide how we can use that as a full fund, and then you might have, for instance, a mental health toolkit that is available for classrooms on eating disorders, like I mentioned earlier, and it might have resources in it. So there'll be something within that or accessible through that toolkit to say, okay, let's have a session on that because we've got some indication that there's a rise in talking about that or some evidence that that's occurring within a classroom, and you'd be able to use

that. Borrow the mental health toolkit, for instance, and teachers are able to get quick access to resources that they would need.

That would be an example of how the school might use aspects of that. We have a lot of resources on our site for teachers - our e-support site that teachers can use as well to draw upon. We see it as a resource, and then schools use it depending on the needs in their classrooms and in their schools.

THE CHAIR: Next up on the list, I have MLA Sheehy-Richard, MLA Duale, and MLA Harrison.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: All this talk of healthy food in schools, and education, and being outside is making me wish I had a bigger breakfast. (Laughter)

On that, I just want to talk a little bit about rural areas especially. My kids are older now, but the bus stop for us was 7:15 in the morning. They aren't big breakfast eaters, so that led to being nauseous on the bus. The Provincial Breakfast Program is so very important for everybody. Even adults should have it in their office if they didn't eat enough, to have a snack available at the desk so that the kids could just get them. Some of them went for the full breakfast and some would take that.

Can you talk to us about how that provincial program works - I'm not sure who this goes to - then maybe touch a little bit on how and what impact COVID-19 had on that program?

THE CHAIR: Perhaps start with Dr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: Through SHEP - which Sara mentioned earlier - which is the School Healthy Eating Program - there is \$1.7 million annually that goes directly to support Regional Centres for Education and the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial around providing universal breakfast programs. We always say that we're universal because that's really important. We want, as you've mentioned, students to come to school in a non-stigmatized, universal way, and be able to access food as they need it and as it's required.

I can think of several different examples of how that looks across schools. Some of it is dependent on the grade level of school, for example. One of the things that again was a bit of a silver lining related to COVID-19 is that we took more care in ensuring that students didn't need to go somewhere to pick up food, but food came to them. Some of these practices that were adopted through COVID-19 continue to this day.

It's very common in many schools to have food baskets in classrooms every morning. It's not an issue of having to go to the cafeteria after you've put your bookbag by your classroom or in your locker. You just walk in a classroom and there's food there if you want it at a time that you want it.

We feel very strongly that the breakfast program has been a tremendous success throughout schools, and that students have universal access to that, again in a non-stigmatized way, and get food when they need it. We also know that the same funding - going back to an earlier question about lunches - also supplements those particular practices.

For example, I was talking to the Regional Executive Director of the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education, and he was telling me about a practice they have at St. Mary's Elementary School in Aylesford. There, through the cafeteria staff and through the teachers - because teachers spend time with the students and they eat with them and they observe - you get to know which students perhaps come to school without food, require food at school for breakfast and possibly for lunch, and you look at ways of supporting students and families that again do not lead to stigmatization.

In that particular school, they have a communication system where students can order lunch in the morning and just discreetly - what happens is teachers communicate with the cafeteria staff. So when students come down either for a snack in the morning or perhaps for lunch, definitely for breakfast, they just get food. There's no separate line, there's no special ticket. If you need food, you get food.

That goes back to the universal aspect of it. Again, we feel very strongly about the breakfast program and the successes that we've had throughout the province. It can look a little bit different school to school, but the overriding principle is that there's universal access to food for breakfast.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: I can't tell a better time to have this subject matter be discussed, because we have seen what COVID-19 has shown us. I have to say, we know programs come and go, and often times those programs are based on good spirit. I'd hate to see this program be a failure.

My question to Sara and Dr. Chris is: Is there any benchmark that will indicate the success of this program, and what does that benchmark look like so that this idea and this money will not be wasted? I'd really like to see a concrete idea and vision to indicate five years from now this outcome, and a systemic trace of what that success looks like.

SARA HALLIDAY: We have had our school breakfast program for a number of years, I would say. (Interruption) Since 2006. I think it's fair to say that over the years since 2006 the program has expanded and become more integrated into the daily fabric of the school. It has gone beyond a notion of providing food for students who wouldn't have food otherwise to something more, like, let's make food available to all of our students because regardless of their circumstances, you might be hungry partway through the day. For whatever reason, you want to have that access.

Even over the past few years, I have observed increases in investment of money and also of time and passion, almost, for this topic. I think that it's fair to say - we monitor it almost from afar, but on the day-to-day ground level, it's really our students and our teachers and our school staff that are observing the value of these programs every day. We were in a school last week doing a visit actually, and one of the highlights of the visit was the vice-principal showing us their set-up for food in their schools and making it available.

They have fridges, and baskets, and different things throughout the school, and they put a special symbol on it so the students know if they see that symbol on a fridge or on a - they have like a pantry that you can go into. If that symbol's on something, they know that is food that's available for anybody. There was a table set up by the entrance that just had a variety of different options of food, and as students were walking by coming in, they were picking things up on their way by.

There was no question of who needed it or not. I think that it has really developed into something that is so very integrated into the daily happenings at a school. Maybe, Chris, if you have some additional comments on that?

CHRIS BOULTER: Everything that Sara said and in addition, in terms of metrics, one mechanism we do have are the Student Success Surveys. This was something that was implemented in 2018. It was disrupted for a couple of years because of COVID-19, but I can tell you we've just concluded our 2022 Student Success Surveys and have had the highest rate of participation from Grades 4 to 12 across the province that we've had since we've implemented them.

There were some very specific questions about engagement related to the breakfast program, about accessing food, about feeling hungry, and things like that, so we'll be keeping a very careful eye on that because I do concur that metrics are important. It is important to ensure that there's some quantitative measurement of how things are going, and that the trajectory is going in the correct direction.

Once the results are compiled - and it won't be too long - we can break those down by regional centre, we can break them down by school, and we can break them down by how students identify within a school. That's one specific example of a metric we will use annually to ensure that our efforts related to ensuring students are fed at school is exactly where we want it to be. Again, quantitatively, if we take a look and see that there are certain things that require growth, we can take direct action toward that end.

ALI DUALE: Thank you for that, but, also, just a follow-up within my previous question. I think the subject matter is very comprehensive. Right now, the most answers I am getting are pertaining to food, but the issue itself is bigger than only food. We're talking about activities. We're talking about mental health. We're talking about the success of the children in terms of education.

[11:00 a.m.]

I'd like to see, even though I didn't get this specific topic's answer - if those measurements are in place, that the committee should be aware. If not, I think that it would be worthwhile, as you indicated the success of the breakfast program, to put in place other programs in terms of how a child is active within the school and what that looks like, and how much they're active outside of the school and what that would look like, and combined, what the outcome is.

I hope this will be the case. I'd really like to see every program have a structure that will show us the outcome, whatever that outcome is.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I really appreciate that comment a lot. One of the things that I think we sometimes struggle with in education is that it's very hard to pinpoint what actions or what programs specifically are making that impact. We know that all of the pieces are so integrated. One of the things that we try to do is look at all the different pieces of information or data that we may have about a school or a region or the province not in isolation, as a total.

Chris mentioned the Student Success Survey. That is a piece of work that was introduced that's been extremely valuable. It's been unfortunate that we haven't been able to complete it because of the pandemic over the past couple of years. I'm so happy that we have again been able to do that data collection this year. By happy coincidence, I guess, we had done the first round pre-pandemic, so we will have some really interesting findings from that.

We have provincial student assessments that we do at different grade levels each year. That's another important piece of information for us, but as I said, it's not the full story in a lot of ways.

The regional centres and the CSAP have been working the last number of years on their System Improvement Plans, and schools also have school improvement plans. That's really about looking at all of the information they have: achievement data, behavioural data - how many incidents of different behavioural issues were reported over the course of the year - and we now have this very important piece of information that's directly from students, that they're able to look at and say, how are our students feeling about different things? Do they feel safe when they're at school? Are they eating when they're at school, or is that a piece that we need to focus on?

It's about looking at all of those pieces together and then forming the plans and actions specific to your school and your students to try to address what you're seeing in

that information. It's been an important piece for us because you can't look at anything in isolation. You can't look at just achievement marks and know that that tells the whole story.

Health Promoting Schools, as we mentioned at the beginning, is really about that integrated piece. It's about the safe school environment. It's about your basic needs being met. It's about feeling like you belong and that you have access to the services that you need.

Thank you for the question, again. It's such an important piece for us. A lot of times in education, the other thing that is a challenge, I guess I would say, is that things don't change quickly. We're part of a big system and you're putting preventive pieces in place. You change the curriculum around supporting increased mental health knowledge of students, like self-regulation, or different pieces like that, and you don't always see an immediate response to that, or if you do, you're not sure because there are so many things happening in a school. If it's directly related to one thing that happened, or there are actually four things that happened in that school that are making this positive impact, you need to have all of those pieces working together.

It's something that we're constantly reviewing, trying to bring all those pieces together, trying to look at, for example, schools that have similar profiles but might be looking at different results, and looking at those two schools and saying: What's this school doing that might help this other school that's seeing this piece of information that they want to focus on in the upcoming school year?

It's quite complex, but I think that having those pieces together and being deliberate about monitoring them, reviewing them, looking at what we're doing specifically in relation to what we're seeing, and then tracking that and adjusting. Ann had mentioned earlier about evolving, and I think that's a really important piece of what we do, is evolve with the needs of the students and the communities that they're in.

THE CHAIR: Next up I have MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm glad you mentioned community. The old adage "It takes a community to raise a child" - I'm thankful that, being in Brookfield for 40 years, my children were raised there. There wouldn't be a better community to do that. Could you talk a little bit about the collaboration between government and then the different organizations that promote healthy living?

SARA HALLIDAY: I think probably every single person at the table could have multiple examples of the different partnerships that exist. We've shared a lot of examples already, and I couldn't agree with you more. Our schools sit within the communities, and it's the dedication of the communities and the families around them that can really enrich that school environment and those experiences.

I would think we have different partnerships at different levels. The department would be entered into formal partnerships with organizations like Nourish Nova Scotia. Then there would be partnerships and different things that happen more at a regional level; maybe Susan would have a couple of those examples. Then there are all the wonderful, individual things that are happening at each school. With school level and regional level, there's a lot of municipal partnerships and interactions.

I mentioned we were visiting schools last week, and we heard a story about one of the schools in the region that through a partnership with the municipality really was working on a pretty sophisticated gardening project. They had a horticulturist from the municipality who came and worked with the schools. The skilled trades - students built the garden beds. They started off small and it built into something very large. The municipality asked if they could plant different trees on the school property. They wanted to do different studies on different kinds of trees growing, and they had a big harvest at the end of the growing season and did a harvest meal. Everyone was welcome. People could take food home with them.

I think there are multiple levels of partnerships, and multiple things happening, but maybe Chris, if you want to?

CHRIS BOULTER: I'd be happy to provide a couple of examples. I'll sort of go mid-level, and I'm sure Susan will talk about a couple of examples at the regional level. I'd like to talk about our valued partnership with Nourish Nova Scotia a little bit and give you a couple of specific examples of how that looks.

One program that Nourish Nova Scotia has helped us roll out is called Literally Nutritious, and within the program, what happened was they had some staff record some videos around using a Crock-Pot. I was very fortunate to be one of the identified staff, so I learned a bit along the way. What had happened was Nourish Nova Scotia, through this initiative, had created some instructional videos related to how to use a Crock-Pot. They purchased a large number of Crock-Pots and families were identified through schools where a Crock-Pot and a series of groceries were delivered along with recipes, to not only provide families through school with groceries, but also the means to use them with a Crock-Pot and the instructions on how to do so.

Another specific example we work with Nourish on is around gardening. Just to build on Sara's example a little bit, it's a fairly common practice now for schools to garden on site and to have raised beds. Part of what Nourish does - in addition to supporting it through funding - is provide specific instructions on how to build a raised bed on school property, how to tend to it, what particular plants might grow best in your local environment, and then they also provide a number of curriculum-related resources as well. So the students don't just plant a garden, they also see it in the curriculum, both in the outdoor learning and the indoor learning as well.

Nourish Nova Scotia is a great example of an ongoing partnership we have. We receive many benefits right at the school level, in terms of the education around healthy eating and healthy living, and being outdoors and working with your hands and harvesting. We really value that partnership across the province. If it's okay, perhaps I'll open the floor for Susan to give a couple more local examples.

SUSAN KELLEY: We also work with Nourish Nova Scotia. We do the garden program, as Chris mentioned. We also have one which is a fundraising program called Nourish Your Roots, where schools can actually sell boxes of produce provided by local farmers, and then they can use the money to support their school food programs. That's another program that Nourish has that we take part in.

I'll give a very specific example of a school recently that did a number of things. Glace Bay High School just had the opening of a trail that they built. They got all kinds of funding from different agencies, they formed a partnership with the local businesspeople. Initially high school kids and businesses at lunch time - it wasn't a really workable relationship, but the kids got together and wanted a different look. They wanted a different social and well-being piece. If any of you have teenagers, you know what teenagers are like.

They took leadership, it was quite a leadership here, and they got funding through the federal government, through all kinds of other things. With the help of the region and a lot of other groups including a couple of Public Health nurses who took it on with the leadership group - Changemakers they called themselves at the school - and they put in a nice trail, put in a bridge. You can see it now all the way to the businesses, and there are cameras. I spoke actually with two folks who were representing the businesses - there are several restaurants down there, I think there's a Superstore. They were so positive about the kids and what a great thing it was.

There's also now a big basketball court outside, and one of the teachers recently got a grant - all part of this bigger project to plant trees. The students are outside with the Family Studies teacher and they're planting trees, they're going to have a garden, they have benches. It's just a lovely bigger project that deals with all of the things that Mr. Duale spoke about: mental health, social health, even health as to what your reputation is in the community, as well as the physical and the food part with having a garden.

We partner a lot with a lot of different agencies, and there were a lot of different agencies that gave money. I don't have the list with me, but there were a lot of different agencies in that piece.

Another example I can give you is a little school in rural Cape Breton, Riverside. It's a P-8 school that has a nice little piece of land out back, and they've built something called the Knowledge Path. They've partnered with our local chief from Membertou and a number of other agencies. They've gotten money and they've built trails. They've

expanded on the trails and put all kinds of lovely things out there that are cultural about their own community, as well as the cultures of Cape Breton. They have things like outdoor learning. They discovered - they were doing writing and classes were going outside with clipboards and they discovered that wasn't working that well, so they put standing desks right in the trees. The students go out and now they can stand or sit and do their writing and things.

[11:15 a.m.]

There are all types of partnerships, and that's an ongoing partnership in that community. The students are outside all the time. It's a lovely space, and they use it a lot. It's far more than I just described. I could go on and on, but I won't. There are lots of partnerships in these things that we do with local community, with broader pieces of government, and with cultural groups.

THE CHAIR: Lots of change since I was cleaning chalk brushes. This is pretty exciting. (Laughter)

SUZY HANSEN: Since you were cleaning chalk brushes? Well, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm just going to bring you back to food. We don't hear these stories as often, unless you're within the school or you're present in the work that the teachers and the administration and the staff of the department are doing. You hear these things and it's wonderful, because it means you're making an impact and you're doing things that are going to be lifelong. We can remember things too when we were younger - what happened in school.

The continual conversation right now is still about food insecurity. I think that was when I was in school - and I won't name how many years ago that was - and there was a HungerCount report that was clear that the root causes of food insecurity are poverty and low incomes. I represent Halifax Needham and I understand that within my own school community and the community as well, being a school board member, and all the schools that were under my umbrella - that was always the ringing piece. Food insecurity because of low incomes and, as well, poverty.

Back in January, the Premier said that for many Nova Scotians, school is a place where kids are safe. It's a place where they are warm. It's even a place where they get their meals. That's a lot of responsibility, as we know, on the education system to meet some of our most basic needs. I applaud the fact that we've adapted and there have been a number of pieces and things that have been put in place to do that work. A lot of the time, it's volunteers. It's extra hours. It's by community members.

My question is: What is the impact that poverty is having in classrooms and are schools and teachers properly equipped to address it? I know this is a loaded question, but at the same time it's valid, because we put forward legislation that speaks to a number of pieces. I know just in our last sitting there was a piece of legislation put forward on food security in the school system. Unfortunately, that wasn't something that was passed. If we could implement something that would make a huge impact and be stable and consistent, what would that look like?

My question is: Are teachers properly equipped to address this situation that is happening right now?

THE CHAIR: Acting ADM Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I think your question is about a very complex society issue, really. I think that education has a role to play in that, absolutely. We've been talking a lot today about our Health Promoting Schools approach, which is really about creating that safe space. Students and children can go to school and have their needs met and be able to learn. I don't think this is something that the education system can do on its own.

We just had a question and talked a lot about partnerships. I think that's key, and I think it's something that we are very aware of in the education system, because we are a public education system. The children come to our schools and they come from all different circumstances. We know that some of the children who come to our schools every day are coming from families that are struggling with poverty or struggling with food security. We know that what we don't want is those circumstances impacting that student's ability to succeed.

Again, this is not something that we can address alone. I think that we have a lot of supports in place for our teachers. The breakfast program, I know we've talked a lot about food today, but that's a very basic support for teachers. I'm acknowledging that there are students in front of them who may not have had breakfast or who are distracted because they're dealing with issues of hunger, food insecurity, so that's a resource for those teachers to be able to address that problem that's in front of them.

We know that our schools offer things like the backpack program, so on Fridays, there are backpacks with food that students can take home with them, because this is not just something that's affecting them during the school day. Ann spoke earlier about a number of resources that are available to teachers, the culturally responsive piece, so understanding how they're delivering the curriculum, and that there's a context to that for a number of our students.

Is there more that could be done? I think that that's probably a question where yes, there's always more that we can do, which is why we are constantly evaluating where we're at, what we're doing, what needs to be done. Ann spoke earlier about addressing needs as

they arise and different issues that we're dealing with. Circumstances happen in the world right now. We're seeing that there are rising food costs. Any of us who go to the grocery store, you're looking at the cost of food and thinking, oh my goodness, and the cost of gas. It is impacting everyone, and we know that our families who were already struggling with that continue to struggle.

One of the things that we did during the pandemic, for example, was when schools were closed, we knew that there would still be families who required access to food. We worked with the Department of Community Services and had a system set up so that families could call 211 and have access to food when schools were required to close due to the pandemic.

There are a number of things that are happening. I think there are a number of supports that are available. I just gave a very few examples. There are many more things that are happening. It's something that we're constantly looking at, and we are constantly aware of the world that we're living in and that we are educating students in, and trying to be responsive to those conditions and needs as they arise.

ANN POWER: I wanted to just mention the SchoolsPlus regional advisory committees. In addition to what Sara was saying, this is very organic and a part of the day-to-day life of schools, and as well as the current programs that are in place.

One of the ways in which we do take a more data-based approach, in terms of looking at what the data is telling us about how things are going in regions, is through this formal partnership that we have set up, and it's actually been set up since the inception of SchoolsPlus, which allows multi-sector partners to come together through regional advisory committees that are set up across the province.

They have done things like develop resource lists so that from each one of their partnerships, they understand what each other has available and what you can draw on. They collaborate and coordinate their services so that, for instance as Sara mentioned, if you have families you know might be struggling with food insecurity, there are multiple ways of getting to ensure that the families have what they need. If they might be more secure in attending Family Resource Centres, for instance, then the regional advisory group will work on it through that mechanism. Not rather than schools, we do it there as well, but just to have that added security.

I just wanted to mention that because it's been a very collaborative process. It's multi-sector, across departmental staff, including Health and Wellness, Justice, recreation, Community Services, many others at the very local level. It also allows us to ensure that we can have newcomers. For instance, we might work with YREACH or the YMCA Settlement Program so that when people are coming to Nova Scotia and moving here and we hope stay here, they can get settled and get access to the services that they need - where language might be a barrier, for instance. We make sure that we have access to translation

services and so on. That's a bit of a backbone or more formal way in which we also provide services.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll send this to the acting associate deputy minister. We're talking about the mental health resources, but which part of the department's budget is it? Is it in the inclusive funding? Where is it coming from, because obviously it's going to be around for awhile?

SARA HALLIDAY: Maybe Ann, I'll pass it back to you. The short answer is it's not in one place. There would be pieces of funding that are attached to different initiatives and different areas of the department and the regional centres. There's funding that would go directly to the regional centres that would form part of their budget. Ann's branch, which is the Student Services and Equity branch, obviously would have a big piece of their budget that would be related to that, and through Chris's branch in the development of curriculum and resources and the work that they do through Steve's branch - which I can't remember the name of - Personal Development and Wellness would also have a piece of that funding constellation.

ANN POWER: We partner with the Department of Health and Wellness, and we partner with the Nova Scotia Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre for our mental health clinicians. They provide about one-fifth of the funding, I guess is the best way of saying it. Also we partner on our school health partnership program, where we have nurses who help to develop our student plans, health plans of care across our system, and have been a tremendous addition to our system in terms of helping with everything from diabetes plans of care or other health plans of care that are needed for students, and that help inform our teachers where they might need that more medical perspective.

They also form the liaison between our Department of Health and Wellness and our health practitioners and our staff, and have been very helpful to us in development of policy, development of procedures, and so on.

It depends on each program, but we almost always have a partnership. What we're doing now, as we formalize these partnerships more and more, is to start to develop health partnership agreements, so that we are very clear about how we hire staff, how we evaluate and do performance appraisals, how we have clinical supervision, how we do all of the things that are necessary in those types of partnerships. We have advisory committees where we work together to put in the infrastructure so that this will be something that is long-standing and that will be able to stand the test of time. It's not dependent on people's goodwill or who happens to be in charge of a particular branch at a particular time but is something that becomes a part of our system.

It's been very beneficial to work with our health partners. We've learned lots about how we use language and how we share language and how one word can mean something in education and the very same word can mean something different in health. Over time,

better communication has had a lot of benefits for us, and I think going forward those partnerships are not just about funding but also about how we work together, how we collaborate, and how we effectively streamline our services to provide the best services for students.

[11:30 a.m.]

CHRIS BOULTER: In speaking about mental health from a curriculum point of view, in addition to what Ann has shared, certainly woven throughout the curriculum is addressing key components of positive youth development. Health Education is a mandatory subject in Grades Primary to 9.

We're developing some new resources and new courses at the high school level related to this as well. We want to ensure through the curriculum that every student - again, in addition to receiving supports as needed - receives some preventive messages and some experiential education related to this subject around mental health literacy, substance misuse prevention, sexual health education, and other pieces.

Again, I just wanted to stress that in addition to the focus of Student Services and Equity, there is a strong mental health focus within the curriculum, really at every grade level.

BRAEDON CLARK: It's obvious that there's a great deal of really good work going on. It's funny, I was just thinking, you go through stages in your life where you're very involved in the school system and then not. Obviously I was in school for a while, then for 15 years I didn't think about the P-12 school system. Now I have a son who's finishing pre-Primary, which has been awesome, and a daughter who's two, so I'm going to be in the school system again for the next 15 years or so.

It's incredibly important, obviously, to everyone who's involved, so I want to thank you for that. I don't want to sound negative with this question, but I do think it's important to - I'll start with Acting ADM Halliday, and then anyone who wants to chime in would be helpful.

What keeps you up at night? What one thing do you worry about when it comes to achieving this goal that we're all talking about today on healthy living for students? What is the one nut that really needs to be cracked over the next x-number of years to really achieve that goal for all students in all parts of the province?

SARA HALLIDAY: You've saved the easy questions for the end, I see. (Laughter)

It's an interesting question. There are definitely things that we think about, that we work on at the department, that we work with our partners on. There are so many amazing things happening in our schools. I can say in my experience working in education, I have

never seen a group so dedicated to what they do and to the success of our students. I just want to preface any kind of challenges with that.

I don't lie up at night worrying because the adults in the system are all working toward the same goal. We might not have it perfect. We might not always do everything. We might not have unlimited resources to address these issues, so you have to be more creative and you have to work with your partners, as we've talked about so much today.

I think that our society is very complex. We have gone through something pretty significant through the pandemic, but even prior to that, our students are dealing with issues that we maybe didn't have to deal with when we were at school - social media being one of those things. It's ever evolving, what our students are facing every day.

I think it's about having those good strong partnerships in place. I do truly believe that we can't do it alone, and we're not doing it alone. We work with our colleagues across the provincial government. We work with our federal counterparts on issues that are related to things in education - health being a big one. We work with our municipal colleagues. We work with community organizations. We have examples like the one that Ann shared related to SchoolsPlus, where you just see this amazing group of people come together from all different perspectives and walks of life. I think that in some ways it would be easier if the problems were solely in our sphere of influence, because you can focus on that, but they're not. It is more challenging to work across sectors and across groups, because you're bringing people together, so it takes longer. You need to ensure that there's a continued focus on the task in front of you or the target.

I've been very heartened over the past few years. I had mentioned earlier the system in school improvement plans that are in place in our system. Those plans have really drilled down. We're looking for achievement in math, literacy, well-being for students. I think that part of it is focusing in on those key foundational pieces that help, and bringing that focus, especially when you are working in partnership and across groups. We need to have a shared vision and a shared goal, and that needs to be focused. We need to pay attention to it, we need to be monitoring it, we need to look at what the data and the evidence are telling us, and we need to respond to that. We need to do that as education, but not just as education.

Are there lots of things in front of us every day? Absolutely. Do I believe that we have the system, the will, the expertise? I think our Deputy Minister Montreuil, who was here a few weeks ago, said to a group not that long ago: We have the expertise in our system, not one person, but in our system, to do anything that we want to do. I thought that was a really powerful message, and I really took that to heart. I thought, I don't have the answers, Chris doesn't have all the answers, but everyone together has a piece, and we have collectively the expertise that we need to actually reach the goals.

I found that was very - “heartening” to me is the word, because I think we also have the willingness to bring that expertise together and try to put the best ideas and the minds together and the willingness and the hard work that it takes to actually break through some of those barriers that we face every once in a while when we’re dealing with an issue. There are definitely things we need to work on, but I believe that we have the tools in the toolbox to be able to do that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I couldn’t agree more. I think that it does make a team, and it’s kind of similar to us with our group of MLAs. Not one of us has a single idea or expertise, but together we work really well at finding solutions.

I just wanted to talk a little bit about within the Health Promoting Schools approach: Could you give us some details about the food and nutrition policy for Nova Scotia public schools and how it’s being implemented? Another part of that is does it meet special needs, as in dietary needs for allergies? I know that the Department of Agriculture has helped a little bit with milk in school. Are there also options for dairy-free and almond milk and some vegetarian and vegan needs as well?

SARA HALLIDAY: I’ll just make a couple of opening comments and then pass it over to Chris for some more details, but we do have a provincial food and nutrition policy. It does cover a pretty wide variety of areas related to food and nutrition. I think it’s fair to say that the policy is - I believe it was from 2006, so there’s some work under way right now to look at that policy and see what needs to be revised.

We’ve talked about evolving, and certainly from 2006 to now, there are different perspectives on vegan eating and different dietary choices for health reasons and other reasons.

I will say, when the policy came into effect in 2006, it was a little bit before my time at the department, but it was extremely progressive at the time. I read through it again just in preparation for this meeting, and I thought it’s actually pretty good and more progressive than I would have thought it might be, considering it’s been - I think of 2006 as not being that long ago, but when you look at the calendar, and you’re like, okay, that’s the year my son was born. I always put it in that kind of perspective.

I think it is in need of a review, and it was probably slated for review a few years ago and was delayed a little bit. Chris, I’ll hand it over to you to talk a bit more details.

CHRIS BOULTER: It turns out I have a copy of that policy right here. Just leafing through it. As you mentioned, the food and nutrition policy for Nova Scotia is part of the overall framework of Health Promoting Schools. As Sara had mentioned, it did come into play in 2006, and as Sara also mentioned, it probably is time for a review. Through the

natural cycle of policies, it's probably a good time to look over it in the not-too-distant future.

Sara had mentioned it being innovative at the time, and I would argue, even with some revisions necessary, it has stood up fairly well. It doesn't feel that dated, having read it fairly recently as well. It's helped Nova Scotia be a leader in building a healthy school food environment.

In particular to the policy and some of the big pieces related to it, it's intended to ensure that all students have access to healthy, affordable food during the day, and in 2006 it clarified what we still believe: food at school is sold primarily for the purposes of providing nutrition and not for revenue generation. That continues to be the case.

The other thing that the policy did specifically was it used the terminology of maximum nutrition, moderate nutrition, minimum nutrition. It really set some standards for schools that continue to be implemented to this day related to the nutritional value and portion size of what gets served in schools. That continues to be the case. It guides the work of the breakfast program; it guides the work of cafeteria staffs in schools every day.

Very particular to your question around allergies, there actually are some pieces. There is a section within the policy that's subtitled Students Who May be Vulnerable. Within that particular section, it talks specifically about ensuring staff and volunteers are aware of food allergies and guidelines for supporting children with food-related chronic diseases as well. There are specific accommodations made within the policy, and specific directives related to ensuring that staff take those into effect.

We continue to implement the school food and nutrition policy successfully. We look forward to updating it with the most recent standards of Canada's Food Guide and so on, but I suspect that much of the policy will remain intact because it's a good one.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: If no one else is going to ask any more questions, I'll make some comments and maybe finish off the meeting, because we're close to that time of day.

Thank you for coming, because I think that it's really important. I'm excited as well with some federal support. Maybe together we can achieve the goals that I think everybody around this table, around all of our caucuses, and within your department at all levels, want to achieve for our children, because they are the future. We need to make sure that they are learning properly and getting as much physical activity and outdoor, outside of the box, and it's really exciting to see the direction that these programs and your hard work are taking us.

THE CHAIR: This was incredibly informative, I have to say. On behalf of the committee, thank you so much for the exciting work you're doing. I would ask for any closing remarks you may have.

[11:45 a.m.]

SARA HALLIDAY: I don't have any formal closing remarks, but I just want to thank you for inviting us here today to discuss this topic. I think we were all - I don't know if excited is the right word but - happy to come talk about this, because there are so many amazing things that are happening and we think that it is such an important topic. We're very excited that people are engaged on this topic. We're happy to come back maybe in a few years and report back on what's happened.

THE CHAIR: Awesome.

One thing I skipped over - do we have any other business? Is there any other business coming out of today? No? Hearing none, thanks again to the witnesses.

Our next meeting will be Tuesday, June 28, 2022, from 10 a.m. to noon, with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration and the Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia, regarding strategies to prevent workplace injuries.

With that said, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:46 a.m.]