

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**HUMAN RESOURCES**

**Tuesday, June 6, 2023**

**Committee Room**

**Review of School Breakfast Programs  
and  
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

**Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services**

## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Chris Palmer (Chair)  
Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Vice Chair)  
Dave Ritcey  
John A. MacDonald  
Nolan Young  
Hon. Tony Ince  
Ali Duale  
Kendra Coombes  
Suzy Hansen

[Nolan Young was replaced by Kent Smith.]  
[Ali Duale was replaced by Lorelei Nicoll.]  
[Suzy Hansen was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

### In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

Judy Kavanagh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

## **WITNESSES**

### **Nourish Nova Scotia**

Lisa Roberts, Executive Director

Lindsay Corbin, Coordinator, NS Advisory to The Coalition for Healthy School Food

### **Department of Education and Early Childhood Development**

Sara Halliday, Associate Deputy Minister

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

### **Calvin Presbyterian Church**

Allison Power, Breakfast Program Coordinator



House of Assembly  
Nova Scotia

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JUNE 6, 2023**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES**

**1:00 P.M.**

CHAIR  
Chris Palmer

VICE CHAIR  
Melissa Sheehy-Richard

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. My name is Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West and the Chair of this committee.

Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from Nourish Nova Scotia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the Calvin Presbyterian Church regarding school breakfast programs.

At this time, I would like all who are here in the committee room to please put your phones on silent. Once we get that done, I will go to our committee members and ask them to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency. We'll begin with MLA Sheehy-Richard.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, committee members. For the purposes of Hansard, I recognize the presence of Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb to my right, and Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh to my left.

As per the protocol of our committee, we will begin with agencies, boards, and commissions appointments. We will ask for a motion from MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Advanced Education, I move to recommend that Cherise Hart be appointed governor of Mount Saint Vincent University Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Are there any comments or questions? Seeing none.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Agriculture, I move to recommend that Rachael Cheverie be appointed a member (designated vice-chair) of the Nova Scotia Crop and Livestock Insurance Commission.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Agriculture, I move to recommend Gloria Thyssen be appointed a member, Department of Agriculture; Keith Fuller be appointed a member, AAFC; and Dr. Scott White be appointed a member, Dalhousie University Agricultural Campus, for the Weed Control Advisory Committee.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: It's a long list, Mr. Chair. For the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, I move to recommend John-David Bridges, Jim Mills, Nicola Ray Smith, and Catherine Woodman be appointed directors of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia Board of Directors.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, I move to recommend John Watson and Leigh Ellen Walsh be appointed members of the Sherbrooke Restoration Committee.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, I move to recommend Pamela Toney be appointed Mi'kmaq Member, Strait SR on the Council on Mi'kmaq Education.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. 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 Environment and Climate Change, I move to recommend that Ogbogu Kalu be appointed a member of the Round Table on Environment and Sustainable Prosperity.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. 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 to recommend Muhammed Asrath Paro Thodukayil and Arlene Williams be appointed public representatives of the Board of the Nova Scotia College of Audiologists and Speech-Language Pathologists.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. 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 to recommend Matthew Crossman be appointed public representative to the Registration Appeal Committee of the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: This is the last one, Mr. Chair. For the Department of Justice, I move to recommend P. Earl Muisse be appointed a member of the Nova Scotia Accessibility Advisory Board.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That concludes our appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions. Just a little bit of correspondence or committee business, and I can ask our committee. I know we have some things to discuss at the end of this time with our witnesses. I also want to draw to the attention of our committee members the letter received to our committee from Kristina

King. You might have all received that. Are there any questions about this? MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes. I would like to register my deepest concerns that - I think the whole idea was how they are going to promote more diversity into the ABCs, and there don't seem to be any real plans on how to do that. There's nothing there that welcomes people, such as looking at if we want to see more regional diversity or even people with disabilities who cannot often drive to Halifax. There's nothing to talk about Zoom meetings, virtual meetings. There's nothing in there that talks about people with children who might want to participate but cannot due to child care constraints.

There's nothing there about going into community. Yes, it puts it on the MLAs to promote, but there's nothing about the actual ABC boards or commissions going into community to actually invite people to apply for the ABCs. I don't feel like the correspondence actually deals with what we were asking for. It doesn't say what their plans are to create diversity. In order to create diversity, you have to make people feel welcome. In order to make people feel welcome, you have to assess what people need, and groups and organizations that you want to have at the table and have represented.

I would request that maybe we want to send a letter back asking for an actual plan to create diversity in the ABCs.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Since it was actually raised by a member who's not here, could we at the next meeting - when the member who raised it is here - find out what his view of it was too? I totally agree with the letter, but I'd really like to have MLA Duale here, since he's the one who brought it - if my colleague across would agree.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince, did you have a comment?

HON. TONY INCE: I do, thank you. I can understand and I appreciate the letter that was sent, but again, the challenge in trying to make these ABCs more diverse and inclusive is the lack of consultations and meetings in the communities. Many community members don't trust the process as it is right now. How can you move forward and try to act as if everything is status quo when you need the involvement of community and those individuals who don't feel that they are part of this process? I would ask that we follow my colleague, MLA Coombes, with a letter.

I'm from the community. My colleague who put the request forward and I have both discussed these issues. I leave it at that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes, to close discussion on this.

KENDRA COOMBES: Just to say that with my Liberal colleagues agreeing that the letter should be written, I will formalize a motion that we write a letter asking for plans on how the organization - the Executive Council Office particularly - is going to go about promoting diversity in the ABC appointments. A follow-up with that is to include our letter that we attached prior for context.

THE CHAIR: My suggestion might be, if we have general agreement around the table, we don't need to put a motion forward. Do we have general agreement around the table that we will send a follow-up letter?

Okay, that's great.

As per our other committee business, I think what we'll do is defer that until after the end of our time with our witnesses today so we can have a good, healthy conversation here. Then we will move on to our other committee business at the time. MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: With that deferral, Chair, as you've alluded to with us today, we have members of CUPE 5047, representing over 1,800 striking school support workers in HRM. This work action is in its fourth week - one month. These workers are rightfully looking for answers from this government, and specifically from the department. Therefore, I ask that the committee extend this meeting to 3:30 p.m. to allow us to have that discussion.

THE CHAIR: Is that an ask, or are you putting a motion forward?

KENDRA COOMBES: It's a motion.

THE CHAIR: Do we have any discussion on that? MLA Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: I just want to add that we are in full support of this and had planned to move something similar in an effort to work together for all the students who are being impacted by this government. Everyone feels that they're being neglected at this time, so I support the NDP to explore what the government can do to have an emergency meeting to have this discussion. It's overdue.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I would like to speak in favour of this as well. I think we're really at an emergency state, where students have been out of school for far too long. When I think about this situation - and I think back to my own experience with my son, where we relied on EPA support for many years of elementary school - a disruption like this is a disruption in so many things. It's the school, it's access to the community, it's access to services. Kids know they want to be in school, so seeing people going to school every day and being told you're not good enough - this is the message that you're putting out, that



disabled students don't have a right to education, don't have a right to be in the classroom. You're not willing to do anything to support them.

It's a violation of children's rights and human rights. This government is just allowing it to continue. I think it's an urgent issue that needs to come to committee today.

THE CHAIR: The topic was going to come to committee today. There wasn't a question whether it was going to come to committee. It was in our committee business to have this conversation. The question right now is about the extension of the time. MLA MacDonald, do you have a comment?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: The issue we have is we have somebody on strike, and they have the legal right to strike because they didn't agree with what their bargaining unit bargained. It's HRCE and it's the union. It's not this government. Those are the two that are negotiating - or I should say should be negotiating. I will be very happy when they're back at the table doing it. For that point, I'm not going to vote to extend a meeting to discuss something that actually is in the middle of a strike and interfering in collective bargaining.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm just going to say this. First of all, to my colleagues, I am going to say I'm respectfully going to apologize for this. Under the Education Act that the Liberals proposed, under their wage freezes and ending potential strikes with Bill No. 148, but with another bill, it meant education was now under the purview of the Minister of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, not HRCEs. Sorry to say, but that is what it says in the Act.

The other thing is the Human Resources Committee - we deal with education as part of human resources. That means under that, guess what? This is our problem here. We have to deal with 5047. We need to have a fair collective bargaining process. That's what they deserve. That's what the kids deserve.

Another aspect of this: We're asking for an extension of the meeting until 3:30 p.m. - extending the meeting to deal with my letter that the Chair has decided to leave until the end of the meeting. I'm asking for an extension to deal with my letter, which does involve 5047. That's what I'm asking.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance, did you have one more comment? I'll allow for one more comment, and then we just need to respect our witnesses who've come to us today about a different topic, and then we need to move on to them. I'll give you one last comment.

LISA LACHANCE: To respond to MLA MacDonald, what is in all of our purview as legislators - we are all duty-bearers under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We all have a responsibility for all children in Nova Scotia to ensure that their right to education, and particularly the best interests of the child, are respected. We are not doing that.

[1:15 p.m.]

I think we definitely owe this community 30 minutes of our time today.

THE CHAIR: We'll address the motion to extend the meeting until 3:30 p.m. We want to be respectful of everybody's time here today.

There's a motion on the table. No further discussion? All those in favour?

Recorded vote? We'll have a recorded vote.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[1:16 p.m.]

**YEAS**

Hon. Tony Ince  
Lorelei Nicoll  
Kendra Coombes  
Lisa Lachance

**NAYS**

Melissa Sheehy-Richard  
Dave Ritcey  
John A. MacDonald  
Kent Smith  
Chris Palmer

THE CLERK: For, 4. Against, 5.

THE CHAIR: The motion is defeated.

We will continue that conversation at our committee business. Right now, I'd like to welcome all our guests here today. Thank you for coming. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

I would like to ask all of you to please remember that when your name is addressed, that's when you speak. Wait until I address you.

We will begin with opening statements. I'll begin with Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you very much. Nourish Nova Scotia was founded to support the rollout of universal school breakfast programs. The founders were driven by

the evidence that children cannot learn if they are hungry, and by a vision of a Nova Scotia where children and youth are well-nourished to live, learn, and play.

As spelled out in the Auditor General's Report on healthy eating in schools of last September, most breakfast programs now operate five days a week and serve healthy food across Nova Scotia. But there are challenges. Since COVID, more programs are relying on prepackaged foods that cost more and may have less nutritional value. Breakfast programs are nominally led - designed to be led - and reliant on volunteers, which is not realistic in many school communities. In the Halifax region right now, the lead breakfast program organizers are missing from many schools because they are CUPE members - some of them outside this building right now - educational program assistants, librarians, SchoolsPlus, and community outreach workers, who play a very important role in school food.

What we see and hear across Nova Scotia now - in this context of higher food prices and significant child poverty - is a clamour for inclusive and universal school lunch. There is not enough time, money, or people power to coordinate the types of programs that people wish for. Need for food access, hunger, is driving high participation rates and high food costs.

From region to region, student access to a healthy lunch is varied. In some regions, it varies from school to school. All the same, in many instances, people are making it work with creativity and collaboration. I want to share quickly some inspiration.

At the CSAP's École secondaire de Clare, learning centre students work with their teacher and educational assistants to operate the cafeteria. Students, teachers, and even administrative staff from the nearby CSAP office eat there regularly.

Berwick and District School is three years into a pay-what-you-can lunch program. At Kings County Academy in Kentville, a Red Seal chef and two fairly-paid cafeteria assistants, soon to be three, produce anywhere from 250 to 400 meals daily. Nourish recently hosted a webinar that allowed others to learn from their experience.

In Tri-County Regional Centre of Education, cafeteria workers are doing more from-scratch cooking, and Nourish is supporting with our local food lunch toolkit of recipes and cycle menus and with the time of our school food outreach worker.

Finally, in Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education, Northumberland Regional High School's student-led Karma Closet is regularly feeding 50 to 60 students and has big dreams to grow a lot of food on the school grounds. Again, Nourish Nova Scotia is helping by connecting them with Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture and with some donations.

Each of these examples speaks to the potential of school food to promote learning and a sense of belonging, as well as energy and nutrition. For that potential to be realized equitably, we need significant and ongoing public investment, including in people. Lindsay Corbin, coordinator of the Nova Scotia chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food will speak more to that. First, I'll just quickly clarify for the committee that while Nourish Nova Scotia receives significant public funding from the provincial government, Lindsay's role is funded through national foundations that fund the Coalition for Healthy School Food through Food Secure Canada.

THE CHAIR: Forgive me, I usually give all of our witnesses a chance to introduce themselves before we do opening statements. I guess you've covered that in your opening statement, Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: That was my opening statement, and forgive me if I misunderstood your directions. I know that we're under some time pressure here today.

THE CHAIR: Forgive me, because I was supposed to allow you to introduce yourself first. Thank you for being here. Before I carry on with our opening statements, I will ask the rest of the panelists to introduce themselves and who you represent. Then we'll go back to opening statements.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We'll go back to our opening statements now. Ms. Corbin.

LINDSAY CORBIN: I'm here to offer a Canada-wide context as it applies to Nova Scotia. I have submitted a letter in advance that is part of a national effort to increase federal funding for this important program.

As you may know, Canada is the only G7 country and one of the only industrialized countries that does not have a national school food program. Nova Scotia has been a leader in universal breakfast, but the needs continue to outpace government funding. This leads to an uncoordinated patchwork of funding that schools must apply for and still leaves them struggling to keep up.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is the largest school food network in Canada. Formed in 2014, we are made up of over 260 member organizations, including Nourish Nova Scotia, and over 120 endorsers. Together we advocate for a cost-shared, universal, healthy school food program. We also support replication of best practices for the many diverse programs that exist in schools across the country.

The Nova Scotia chapter of the coalition formed in 2021, and has grown to include over 56 members and endorsers, including the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq, and the IWK Health Centre. At the national level, the Coalition for

Healthy School Food works closely with Minister Karina Gould's team as they work toward their school food mandate. We've always relied on evidence and best practice to guide our work, which is reflected in our eight guiding principles. We're happy that these principles have been reflected in the discussion paper that the federal government used for consultation on their school food policy.

The timing of being asked to speak is perfect, because through this connection, we've developed our current strategy. This includes the letter I've submitted to this committee. The Nova Scotia Coalition for Healthy School Food is ready to work alongside the Nova Scotia government as we figure out the best options for school food in this province.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I'm going to deliver opening remarks on behalf of myself and Chris from the department. I just want to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about the school breakfast program. We're very proud of our school breakfast program and look forward to having a conversation with you about it.

I just want to thank Dr. Chris Boulter, sitting beside me, for coming with me today. Chris's portfolio includes breakfast programs. I'll also say on a personal note, I am optimistically on the end of a cold, so my voice has been failing me. I'm going to let Chris do a lot of the heavy lifting of talking today. On top of that, he's very knowledgeable about the supports and services that are available to the students in our public school system.

We all want Nova Scotia's children to reach their full potential, and we know that unfortunately for some young people, food insecurity is a reality. School breakfast programs are one of the ways we support students so when they arrive at school, they have the opportunity to start their day with a nutritious breakfast, ready to learn. This support is important for the department because we know that proper nutrition plays a significant role in creating the conditions for student learning and achievement, as we've already heard this morning.

Breakfast programs are funded through our School Healthy Eating Program - we refer to that as SHEP. As many of you know, the Province has been funding breakfast programs since 2005. In 2018, the government increased funding to allow every school to offer a breakfast program in the province. The department works closely with Regional Centres for Education, the CSAP, and Nova Scotia Health Authority to ensure that students receive healthy, nutritious food in our schools every day.

The Auditor General was very complimentary of our school breakfast program - and with good reason. It helps students start their day with healthy food provided in a non-stigmatizing way. This is an extremely important component of our school breakfast

program. Our schools, educators, and administrators are always on the lookout to ensure that students are supported. If a student needs food, we will ensure that they get food.

[1:30 p.m.]

We also know that throughout many schools in our province, they are finding unique and innovative ways to provide access to healthy, nutritious food for students. We hear of many schools that are leading initiatives or working with community partners - and again, we heard some of those this morning.

Another example: a middle school in the South Shore has a free salad bar that is accessible to all students. In Dartmouth, there is a food pantry that is accessible and free to all students.

Earlier this Spring, the Department of Agriculture collaborated with our department and Nova Scotia Health to launch a fresh food pilot in five schools across the Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education. That's at Springhill Junior-Senior High, Tatamagouche Regional Academy, Elmsdale District School, G.R. Saunders Elementary in Stellarton, and Winding River Consolidated in Stewiacke. The program includes large, portable salad bars containing Nova Scotia-grown carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, onions, apples, and other seasonal produce. They're available to students at lunchtime on Tuesdays and Thursdays each week.

I just want to take a moment to share a couple of the comments that we've received about that program so far. Lauren Brown, a Grade 10 student at the Springhill Jr./Sr. High said, "There are vegetables here I never get to have at home. I'm going to come every day it's open." and Faith Atkinson, a Grade 11 student at the same school, commented, "I can't believe we get the chance to eat all this fresh food - that's amazing! Can we do this all the time?" The excitement from these students is a testament to how impactful school programs are.

A number of schools in the South Shore have added fresh fruit in their classrooms this year, and earlier this Spring, fruit bowl pilots were added at high schools in Tri-county Regional Centre for Education and Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education. This is a great way for students to have easy access to a quick and nutritious snack throughout the day to support their learning.

School food programs are one way that schools intersect with a variety of community resources to provide support to young people. I want to thank you for the opportunity to come and speak with the committee today, and we'll look forward to your questions after.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Halliday. Ms. Power, last but not least.

ALLISON POWER: On June 10, 2022, Reverend Nick Phillips, a friend of mine in Sydney Mines, posted the following story on his Facebook page, and I quote,

“Wednesday mornings, I help out at the local elementary school breakfast program. It's nothing fancy. Yogurt, cereal, milk, apples, cheese. Simple grab and go type food that kids can eat quickly. This week there was a little girl, maybe 7 or 8. She came in quietly, asked for some food, and ate quietly, right next to the table I was serving from.

Most kids grab some food, then head off to the other side of the cafeteria with their friends. But she stayed very close. Closer than any kid I've ever seen. And she came back for seconds. Then she came back for thirds. This girl was tiny, about as big as a minute. And she was hungry. Very hungry.

Over 40% of kids in my town live in poverty. I've known this stat for several years. I've quoted it in sermons and public meetings I attend. And now I've seen it with my own eyes. I've seen the impact it has on children as this little girl ate her fill for breakfast. It is so sad that this is the reality for many children in my town.

Schools do what they can. They offer breakfast. They have ways in which kids can get lunches. But summer is coming. The schools will be closed, locked up tight.”

This post had a significant impact on me, as I thought to myself, that little girl is right here in my community. She lives in Fairview, Clayton Park, Westmount, and many neighbourhoods in Nova Scotia. The question haunted me: Who will feed this child when school is closed? What happens on Saturday and Sunday each week, on holidays and in-service days? What will happen in July and August when schools are closed for two months?

Move forward to Saturday, July 2, 2022. This would be the first day of the Calvin for Kids Summer Breakfast Program, hosted by Calvin Presbyterian Church. Between June 10<sup>th</sup> and July 2<sup>nd</sup>, I sent communications to the community schools in our area and reached out to the Fairview Resource Centre. We wanted to reach families with food insecurities to help provide breakfast foods for the Summer. Each week, families would register to come and pick up breakfast foods for their children for the coming week. We provide cereal, pancake mix or oats, juice, a can of fruit, a sleeve of Arrowroot cookies, a bunch of bananas, bread, and five snacks per child, like granola bars, applesauce, and oatmeal cookies, for example. We have also since added a dozen eggs per week.

We do not make the breakfast for the families. We provide the foods to them so that they can have the means to make breakfast at home. Originally, the thought was that the

breakfast program would run for the two months over the Summer while the schools were closed. However, over the Summer we had the privilege of getting to know the families and quickly realized that this was an ongoing need. If we stopped, we would be taking food away from children. In late August, we decided to continue with the program and have provided breakfast foods to families every Saturday since. This has enabled the children we serve to have breakfast at home and go to school with full bellies. It also allows them to have food on the weekends, holidays, and in-service days.

We know we are not just feeding children breakfast. We know we are feeding families, and that the eggs we provide may or may not be used for breakfast, but could also be used for supper. Our goal is to ensure that children have a breakfast at home so that they are equipped to learn when they arrive at school.

We started our Calvin for Kids Summer Breakfast Program with 9 families with 21 children. We are currently serving 21 families with 47 children. We work with the Fairview Resource Centre, and we receive requests for help from friends of our breakfast program families. We've also received a referral from a neighbouring church.

Our team also provides food at a 24/7 food cupboard for the community, which is located on the site of the church. A couple of our families were met there when they were visiting the food cupboard with their children.

The prices of food have increased since our program started, which being a non-profit organization can have an impact on our ability to serve. We have been fortunate to have congregational, community, and some grant support to allow us to continue to serve the families who have come to us for help. My bigger concern is, how many are we missing, and who is going to feed the children in Halifax and across Nova Scotia in a few weeks once the schools close for the Summer?

THE CHAIR: That concludes our opening statements. I'll maintain a list of questions and MLAs who will be asking you questions this afternoon. Forgive me if sometimes it's hard to kind of keep track of all the hands going at one time, but I'll keep a list, and then they'll direct their questions to you.

At this point, we'll now begin our questions. We'll begin with MLA Coombes. We will end our questioning at 2:45 p.m.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, everyone, for being here. I have one in two in my riding who live in poverty. I have one in three also in my riding. My riding is split into two different aspects, so I have one in two families living in poverty, and I have one in three kids and families living in poverty, on either side of my riding. I see the heartbreak in my office all the time.



I'm wondering - this is to Nourish Nova Scotia and the Calvin Presbyterian Church. Can you talk about the benefits of thoughtful, sustainable funding to organizations such as your own? I do have a follow-up.

THE CHAIR: That question is directed to Nourish Nova Scotia?

KENDRA COOMBES: Calvin also.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: I'd say that the benefits aren't just for funding to our organization but to schools and school food budgets - which is why Nourish Nova Scotia is a founding member of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, which has been asking for a federal investment, so that there can be a cost-shared public investment in school food.

The benefits are so many. When people talk about food, they talk about folks being hungry. There's an idea that you can think about calories and nutrition, that it's just about food, but it's not just about food, especially in the context of schools. This is why universal school food programs are so important. Being fed and being nourished in a way that isn't stigmatized - where you're not identified as the kid who needs the lunch - is so important to a child, to a learner, feeling like school is a safe place where their needs are met. If those needs aren't met, then it's very difficult to do the work that they are supposed to do at school.

Around the world, this is so normal. In Japan, in Bermuda, in Cuba, in France - we send kids to school for seven hours a day, so why wouldn't we be feeding them there? Also, gathering together over food is part of building that school community, and then there are the additional potential benefits. When you start to think about food like that, there is so much potential for learning - learning how to prepare food, learning how to be a member of a community that helps to clean up after the meal. I talked earlier about how breakfast programs are designed to be run by volunteers and how that is really not realistic. In fact, it's not what's happening in many schools - which is why the fact that in Halifax right now the Canadian Union of Public Employees members are out on strike is so challenging. They particularly play a significant role in running a lot of school food programs.

The other way that schools get around the need for volunteers is actually supporting youth to be leaders in school food programs. Particularly in Nova Scotia, we often have a junior high located really close to an elementary school. Sometimes they're across a parking lot. Well, if you can support the junior high school students to become the leaders in supporting breakfast programs for younger children, that is a beautiful space where people find their own potential for leadership, feel recognized, and develop relationships with the adults who are supporting them. So yes, there are many benefits.

Certainly, consistent and adequate funding is a part of that. One thing I'll mention is that there have been some infusions of dollars, particularly this year, where the demand for school food has been much greater and schools were at risk of running out of budget. But sometimes, if that budget isn't attached to someone whose job it is to coordinate food programs and to fully plan for how to run a program, the money can be less well-spent than ideal because it's coming at short notice or there's a short time in which to spend it.

ALLISON POWER: With regard to funding, we're a not-for-profit, so our funding basically comes from our church budget. My team gets an allocated amount. Then we have to rely on community donations or congregational donations. We've since had to go out and look for grants that might help us. The neighbouring Halifax West Ecumenical Food Bank has partnered with us a few times to help us, because the prices of food have gone up and our families have increased. Funding is important, but we don't have a source of funding. We've just been very fortunate that people have learned in our community about our program and are willing to support.

THE CHAIR: Just a reminder to all of our committee members: As per the practice of our committee, I will allow for a follow-up as long as it's pertaining to the original question, looking for clarification or something. If I feel that it's a chance to sneak a second question in, being respectful of all the committee members, I will ask that that's deferred to another round.

MLA Coombes for a follow-up.

KENDRA COOMBES: To Nourish Nova Scotia: Is the current school breakfast funding sufficient?

LISA ROBERTS: The School Healthy Eating Program budget is \$1.7 million a year. No, it's not sufficient, and as I referenced, we heard that an additional \$2 million was dispersed in January - and there were additional disbursements that have happened. We know that principals are using all kinds of different budget lines to support school food. We know, for example, that SchoolsPlus staff - who are in schools aiming to support a range of outcomes for learners related to a range of issues, including housing, including justice issues, et cetera - a lot of their time is actually spent on trying to support food access. So no, the budget is not enough. Part of the response to that should be coming from the federal government, but there's also room for the provincial government to support with more continual increased spending on school food.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince.

TONY INCE: We know that there's currently a challenge with health care, and the government is focusing on that, and I applaud them for that. We also know that within that, social determinants of health and food insecurity are part of that health. We also know that one in four Nova Scotians are food-insecure while one in three children are food-insecure -

and we also know that this is important. The impacts are devastating on children who don't have equitable access to food.

[1:45 p.m.]

My question will be to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Is there serious concern about a healthy lunch program and a universal child care program?

THE CHAIR: ADM Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I might just give a couple of opening comments and then pass it over to Chris, who might have some more detail. I think we have mentioned, maybe at this committee before, as well as Public Accounts Committee, that we were very interested in the federal government's commitment around a lunch program. Our minister has had conversations with her federal counterpart on numerous occasions to ensure that they're aware of Nova Scotia's willingness. We believe that we are in a good position to take advantage of moving forward with any frame or approach being considered by the federal government. With that said, I might just hand it over to Chris to add to that answer.

DR. CHRIS BOULTER: In addition to that, as Sara has said, we've put up our hand. We've said we want to be first. We feel we're the perfect size and have all the infrastructure in place to be first out of the gate with a universal lunch program, for sure. Again, Sara has mentioned that the minister has had some conversations already with the federal minister. I'm part of a committee that has had some conversations as well, and we continue to reiterate that we want to be there, and that as soon as they're ready, we're ready.

At the same time, I also wish to restate that in the interim, when students arrive at school and they need food, they get food. First and foremost, as you mentioned, the social determinants of health include that you can't learn and feel safe if you're hungry. There's no school in the province right now where a student would come to school, need food, and not receive it. There certainly are a variety of means right now by which schools ensure that students get food, both universally for breakfast and lunch as needed.

For example, there are three different grants that total about \$6 million provincially, \$5,000 plus \$1 per student. Those include the student success grant, the healthy living grant, and in addition to that, the healthy schools grant. That's \$5,000 plus \$1 per student. A lot of those funds are allocated by schools to ensure that any student who needs a lunch gets a lunch. I wanted to add that piece in addition to what Sara said, and again reiterate that we are ready to go with the universal lunch program, and are working with our federal counterparts to do that as soon as we're able to.

TONY INCE: Thank you, I appreciate all the work. However, I know for a fact that there are students, while we can talk about this, who are going without food. You've mentioned an interim program. My question is: What are you doing with that program and how are you going to expand it? As Ms. Power had indicated, the Summer is coming and schools are closing. What are you doing in that instance?

CHRIS BOULTER: I'd like to share a number of different pieces here. The first one, SchoolsPlus, was mentioned earlier. SchoolsPlus is obviously a support within schools, but it does operate 12 months a year. During the Summer, there are camps that SchoolsPlus runs for identified students, and certainly, when students arrive at those camps during the Summer, food is provided.

In addition to that, SchoolsPlus takes referrals in July and August. The referrals don't just happen from September to June. In a particular case, if a family was food insecure and needed immediate support, they could reach out to the SchoolsPlus program at their child's school during the Summer. SchoolsPlus would respond in a variety of ways, including connecting families to existing supports within the communities. There are many times when they will provide transportation to a family - to perhaps a family resource centre or a food bank to get food. In other cases, they would simply buy them groceries. There are a variety of means through July and August through which that occurs. That is really the work of SchoolsPlus during the Summer.

In addition to that, it was mentioned that during weekends as well, many schools do have programs that go under a variety of names but have some common attributes. They're called things like pantries, free stores. Oftentimes schools will have individual names for them, but at the core of these, schools provide opportunities for students to just go and take food home. There are backpack programs that I'm aware of, where on a Friday, a backpack gets filled with groceries and the student takes it home to the family. More on the secondary side, there are free stores where students can just walk in and pick up whatever they like when they like and just take it home.

Certainly, those are two different opportunities that schools would provide to ensure that students not only receive food while at school, but work on food security outside of the school hours as well.

Of course, we're always willing to work with partners in this area. We all have a common goal of supporting students and their families. That's what we want to do.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm really pleased to be here discussing this topic today. It's really important and passionate to me. Having provided child care in my home for 16 and a half years, I understand the importance of providing kids with healthy food. The happier their bellies are, the happier the days always went.

When I look at what Nourish Nova Scotia handed me - and students come to school hungry for many reasons - it's so very true. It could be any and all of these things, or combinations of both. Just from your opening remarks - you can see how what works in my school system, AVRCE, doesn't maybe necessarily work. Some of the opportunities, like the Calvin Presbyterian Church offers, don't always necessarily work in rural Nova Scotia, because we don't necessarily have a church close and capacity-wise to do those kinds of things.

So I think it's really important to express how important all of these people and communities, SchoolsPlus and organizations come together to work with the federal government to address this very important topic.

I'm proud of the work that my centre is doing. I look forward to what's next. On that, can you talk a little bit about what some things are that maybe are already being expanded across foods in our schools?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: I'd like to add a few more details to what was already discussed with the salad bar pilot. We're very excited about the work and the partnership with the Department of Agriculture around salad bars. Forgive me for just a moment, but I'll pull up some statistics while I'm here.

As previously mentioned, right now we're running a salad bar pilot in five schools in the Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education. It's about 9,300 students impacted by that right now.

Some of the exciting pieces about what we're doing in partnership with Agriculture is there's a focus on eating local and procuring local. That's very important to us. In addition to that, there's infrastructure that's left behind. So even once the pilot itself concludes, the equipment for the salad bar remains. In addition to having the equipment and the necessary training about the specifics of food service with a serve-yourself salad bar, there have been education pieces as well. So we didn't just put the salads in. In addition to that, teachers in those schools also did specific lessons around salad bars as well.

We've achieved a lot of success with that. We're excited about it. We are expanding salad bars to the Strait Regional Centre for Education in the Fall. We anticipate eight schools that will participate in the Strait Region. We're learning lessons as we go. We're building capacity and infrastructure around providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables that are procured locally. So that's one example.

I'd also like to share with you some fruit bowl pilots that are currently happening throughout the province. Currently, we're running two different fruit bowl pilots. They're

taking place in the Tri-County Regional Centre for Education. There are seven or eight schools there, about 3,000 students; and also in Cape Breton - and we're impacting about 4,700 students there.

In those particular pilots, what happens is there's fresh fruit that's at a central location in the school. Again, it's secondary school, so the students are a bit older. A student goes down to the area, they get a bowl of fruit, and they bring it back to the classroom. Whatever class students are in, they just have access to fresh fruit all day.

We're doing an audit in terms of waste in regard to the success of the pilot, as well as measuring the quantity. I can tell you it's been highly successful and very well received.

Those are two different examples of where we're going with food. In addition to that, we continue to do work on the new school food and nutrition policy. At a previous event, we had stated that we believe the policy will be ready by the end of 2023. We do believe that we're still on date, still on time, and still on schedule for that.

So far, there have been a number of engagements with some of our key partners around the School Food and Nutrition Policy. There's more engagement to happen. For example, we want to work with Nourish Nova Scotia on that as well. We've certainly worked with Public Health and the Department of Health and Wellness as we take a hard look at what the Auditor General's recommendations were, and ensure with the new food policy that we meet all of those recommendations.

Those are a few examples of where we're going with school food.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I do have a quick follow-up. On that, the Food and Nutrition Policy of 2023, are we looking at that maybe coming out by the Fall - or can you elaborate on that a tiny bit more? That would be great.

CHRIS BOULTER: There are actually two parts of the School Food and Nutrition Policy. There's the policy itself, but in addition to that, there's a supporting document that will be called the Food and Beverage Standards. It is actually a more robust document that really fills in the gaps of exactly - it's all the reference points and resources to implement the policy.

What we're looking at right now - and again, we've made a lot of progress on this to date. I want to be clear we're not done with the first draft yet, nor do we think we would be at this point. We do still anticipate that we will be ready to release this policy either near the end of the 2023 calendar year or the start of the 2024 calendar year. So sometime next year during the school year, we believe we're going to be ready to have this policy out.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to touch base on the effect of the current job action in HRCE on food access for students. There are hundreds of students who are not currently in school; they're not able to attend school. Do we have information on how many of those students would also be accessing food programs - breakfast, lunch, what have you? You also talked a lot about SchoolsPlus - but of course in HRCE, that's not operational. So if we have hundreds of students who are not currently in school because of the current job action, how many students in HRCE are now without their SchoolsPlus services - and we're staring down at the Summer coming along?

SARA HALLIDAY: The breakfast programs in HRCE are still all operating in schools. The schools may have made some adjustments depending on their individual circumstances, but the programs are all still running. With respect to students who are not currently in school to access that program, I know the schools are working closely with the families on those individual circumstances.

The school breakfast program is a universal program, so the program and the food are available to every student who's registered in the school or who's at school on any particular day. As far as speaking to a number of who's accessing or who's not, it's available to all the students when they are in school.

LISA LACHANCE: I did have a question that was a second part of the question, which was about the impact of SchoolsPlus not running. You've said that schools are working with individual families. How are they doing that if SchoolsPlus workers are not available to do that work right now?

SARA HALLIDAY: I know that HRCE and the individual schools are working with each family individually. There might be different supports put in place. I don't have a blanket response for you on that, but it would be individualized to the circumstance.

THE CHAIR: MLA Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: As I sit here listening to everyone speaking, you've certainly defined the term "piecemeal." We're talking about food, and the meal, so great. Everyone's doing things and we're trying to understand how it's sustainable. I think there are two people here who are bound by the Education Act to educate each and every child in Nova Scotia, and having them nourished is giving them that fair chance to that education. That needs to be highlighted.

I think the Auditor General's Report went to the department, and it noted the delivery of healthy eating in schools. One key finding was that the department does not know if healthy food is being served in schools, and that there is not a universal approach to the program in all the Centres of Education across the province. Since the release of this report, has the department addressed these findings from the Auditor General's Report? Is

this the catalyst that had you responding to, that now you're saying, we're ready to go and we have programs put in place?

[2:00 p.m.]

I know Feed Nova Scotia came here and said, I wish that everything was provided to Nova Scotians that would put us out of business. I'd like to put them out of business and have a universal lunch program going forward. That being said, there are a lot of key pieces that have to be done. I just wanted to ask: Where are we now? Even to you, Ms. Halliday, you quoted one of the children saying, "I never get to eat vegetables at home." Did you delve into why that child would say that to get to the key reasons as to why they are not getting healthy food?

I have three adult children, volunteered through the school, was there with the healthy food being introduced in the high schools. I can tell you, there's a clear path that goes from the school to the Tim Hortons and Wendy's in the Cole Harbour area - because they're not eating the healthy food. That being said, I want to look at this holistically and sustainably at the end of the day, because I know that the minister also said last Fall - and I can table it - that no child in Nova Scotia goes hungry in school.

Again, I'm trying to understand with what you're presenting here today what is actually happening, and are you just responding now to what needs to be done and what should have been done a long time ago? I know I supported the pre-Primary program when that came forward, because that gave everyone a chance. I know my children had opportunities to go to preschool and were reading by Primary, but then I found out and I asked the principal: At what point do the children who don't know how to read catch up to the ones who can read? They said, Grade 3 or Grade 4.

You want to give them the advantage at a very young age, and food is part of that solution. I'm trying to understand, is it because of the Auditor General's Report that you're responding to? It's great to hear Dr. Boulter say that you're ready to go as soon as the feds start to say that they have a plan put in place. I just wanted to get an understanding of the Auditor General's Report and your response today.

THE CHAIR: There's a question there for Ms. Halliday.

LORELEI NICOLL: Both of them.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday, we'll start with you.

SARA HALLIDAY: Thank you for your comments. A couple things jumped to mind for me, and I'll pass it off to Chris.



Schools are part of the network of support for students. There is a duty of care that schools have on students when students show up at a school for their day. I had mentioned earlier that one of the key pieces around the breakfast program is that aspect of it being non-stigmatizing. Students who need food, request food, or have the opportunity to access food during the school day - it's so important to provide that in a way where a student doesn't have to self-identify as someone who doesn't have access to food at home.

I think I had mentioned that was one of the key pieces of the breakfast program, but also, of all the opportunities that Chris was mentioning earlier, where it's a pantry cupboard, there's no one monitoring that. If you need food, you can go and access food. I can just speak from my own personal experience - my son going through the school system. He's in Grade 11 this year. He would be like, I'm going to run to the breakfast program this morning before I go out on the - and he probably would have had breakfast already that morning. But the students aren't feeling like: it's not for me. They're going. It's there. It's accessible.

I think it's important that we create the conditions to ensure that students feel safe and comfortable to access food. There are many opportunities. The administrators and the staff at the schools are doing amazing work identifying students who might need something in a very non-stigmatizing way.

The other piece I just wanted to pick up on from what you had said was the comment about the individual - we don't have food like this at home. We are an education system. Embedded in all the access and delivery of healthy, nutritious food in our schools, we are also supporting that educational piece. It is important so that as students move through their childhood and adolescence into adulthood, they are able to take with them the lessons around what it means to eat healthy, be physically active, and all the pieces that go with that. That's another key tenet for us - that there's an education component as well.

When we were preparing for this, I was talking about - and I'm going to date myself - the home economics classes that we had where we learned about those things. This isn't about food, but every time I wash my dishes and I put the silverware and the cups in the hot water first, I think about my home economics teacher. We know that those lessons live on - just to kind of pick up on that. I know that was part of what you had chatted about.

Maybe I'll pass it to Chris to talk about the Auditor General piece.

CHRIS BOULTER: Thank you, Sara, and thank you for your question.

First off, I wanted to share that the Auditor General's Report has been of the utmost assistance in terms of being very direct with regard to what the new policy had to address and how we get there. We're really leveraging that document quite a bit, and we're very focused on meeting each of those recommendations.

I did want to share that pre-COVID, in fact - I believe it was February 2020, just before March - there was a proposal in then to renew the Food and Nutrition Policy for Nova Scotia Public Schools. This work was being contemplated before the Auditor General's Report, though certainly as a result of that report, it's been extremely helpful to us moving forward.

Some of the pieces that I also wanted to respond to you with, based on the question, were around the guaranteed nutritional value. You mentioned that as well. Certainly, part of what the Auditor General reported back to us is our biggest area of vulnerability in terms of adhering to existing nutritional value standards: our third-party providers. That was very clear in the Auditor General's Report, and that is certainly being contemplated within the new school food and nutrition policy. There will be a process by which regional centres attest annually that there is adherence to the policy if they have a third-party provider.

In addition to that, we provided direction to regional centres this year. We had some schools that their contract was up with a third-party provider, and we just asked them to extend a year. We didn't want anybody entering into a new long-term contract with a third-party provider until the new policy came out. It was very clear exactly what we were expecting of folks who would be offering services within our schools.

Again, I just wanted to state that we are focused on ensuring that the food served is nutritious and at a reasonable price point, and again, really taking to heart the Auditor General's understanding that there are some vulnerabilities with third-party providers that will need to be addressed. They certainly will be within the new policy.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questioners will be MLA Ritcey, MLA Smith, and MLA Coombes.

MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is directed to Ms. Roberts.

With respect to your organization's mandates and goals, can you speak broadly about what steps are taken to ensure that no student goes hungry in school?

LISA ROBERTS: We work in partnership with contacts in the public school system. Typically, we have a primary point of contact. Often that person is a nutritionist at a regional centre of education. In some cases, that person is an active healthy living coordinator. What we do is try to provide resources and help to share learnings across the province.

For example, we've helped to develop a bunch of recipes for cafeterias. We packaged them together - called the Local Food Lunch Toolkit. These are a bunch of from-scratch recipes that incorporate local ingredients and can be produced relatively

cost-effectively, so that a cafeteria can provide a meal at that low, accessible price point - and those recipes are things that kids will actually want to eat.

That's the sort of resource we provide. I shared with the MLAs a handout on cafeteria challenges and strategies. This is based on some recent professional development that we've been supporting in Tri-County, where we sent - we call her our school food outreach worker, but really she's a cook and an incredible school food champion who has helped to transform the cafeteria services in a number of schools. She's been doing professional development at Digby Regional High School specifically, which is a school similar to the one that MLA Nicoll referenced. There's a pizza shop across the street. There are a bunch of competing alternatives. So it can be a challenge to get students to stay and eat the food that is prepared.

There's a whole series of different strategies, including offering free samples of the special at lunch time. In this case, we supported work that was being undertaken by the RCEs with the Public Health nutritionists for that region, and really came in with mentorship and coaching for the cafeteria staff.

I think one thing that was really important in that whole circumstance - which harkens back to Chris Boulter's most recent comments - is that in Tri-County, the schools that we have been working with the region to support, all of those cafeterias are actually managed and run by the Regional Centres for Education. They're not third-party-operated cafeterias. I think it will be interesting to see if we can achieve success with third-party, for-profit companies operating cafeterias, because there isn't a lot of money to be extracted from school-aged children in the food that you're going to provide them if you want that to be healthy.

The way that third-party operators tend to extract profit from cafeteria operations is by paying their workers very little - having them mostly not cooking from scratch - and charging prices where often it does make sense, particularly for a high school student to go somewhere else. You can pay \$7.25 for a not-very-good meal, or you can pay \$5.50 for a not-very-good meal, but at a fast food operator relatively close. It can be a real challenge if Regional Centres for Education are not actually operating those facilities themselves.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: My question is going to be for either of our two representatives from the department. Before I ask it, I just want to say to Ms. Halliday that your comment on Home Economics shot me back to the fact that I was taught in Grade 8 - to always wash knives first. To this day, I still wash knives first to make sure you don't get a cut.

Mine is going to be a comparative type of question. Research from the Department of Health and Wellness says that about 40 per cent of kids are using the breakfast program. My curiosity is: How does that compare with other provinces across the country?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter.

[2:15 p.m.]

CHRIS BOULTER: Certainly, 40 per cent means we serve about 50,000 breakfasts a day - just to put it in some context. That speaks very well, I think, to the universal option.

Through the policy work that we're currently undertaking and through our partnerships with the Department of Health and Wellness and Public Health - both of which have some folks who sit on federal committees as well. A lot of the feedback we get about what's happening across the country is actually through our collaborations with the Health.

One of the challenges we have is policies, or lack of policies. There's not great consistency between provinces in terms of what it actually looks like province to province. Some provinces were pretty similar. For example, we've borrowed some ideas from both Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador that were brought to us by our partners in Health who work on these federal collaborative groups.

In terms of comparison, we have had some challenges in that area. What I will say is that Nova Scotia is very fortunate to have a universal breakfast program. Not all provinces do. We do, and it's been very successful. We're always looking for good ideas and looking to our neighbours to see what's happening there that we could borrow or take with us. Most of the conversations to date about what's been happening nationally have been through Health, who do sit on these federal committees.

KENT SMITH: Dr. Boulter, just to follow up a little bit - and maybe it's more of a comparative-type question as well - I heard you speak earlier about the fact that we are ready, and we want to be leaders in the universal lunch program. Do we know if any other provinces are in the same boat as we are - that they're ready and just waiting on the federal government to move forward?

CHRIS BOULTER: That is likely the case. Certainly, what we would say from the Nova Scotia perspective is that given the success of our universal breakfast program, given the partnerships we already have - we established an inter-governmental table where we get together with the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Agriculture, and with the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture. We really try to build some capacity, this year in particular, to ensure that we have everything in place to argue that we should be first. In terms of population size, we're not too big, we're not too small. Again, we're establishing now that we have excellent inter-governmental collaboration about this issue. We continue to form partnerships with external groups as well. I suspect other provinces will also want to be first, but it's our job to make a strong case that it should be Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I believe, Ms. Corbin, you would like to answer the question as well?

LINDSAY CORBIN: Through the national Coalition for Healthy School Food, we certainly - I sit around tables with lots of folks from different provinces and territories, and as I mentioned, the coordinators of the national coalition - connect closely with the federal government, particularly Minister Karina Gould's office. Immediately after the budget was released, and there was no mention of school food in the 2023 federal budget, my reaction was that we need to get Nova Scotia as a pilot. That needs to be our next advocacy effort.

There have been some conversations about pilots, but at this point, Minister Gould doesn't want to ask for any less money because there's concern that the full funding may not come if it starts out with a smaller amount for pilots. As much as I am 100 per cent on board, I feel like Nova Scotia would be the perfect spot to do a pilot. It unfortunately doesn't seem like that's going to happen from a federal perspective, but what we do know is that while Minister Gould's office - and she herself is very committed to this - she has no funding.

What Nova Scotia and other provinces and territories really need to be doing is putting that pressure on the federal government to make good on their promise, which is why I submitted a letter requesting that Minister Druhan write to the Prime Minister, to Minister Freeland, and copying Minister Gould, of course. She's very much on board. She's not the one we need to convince.

The other piece I'll mention is related to the national perspective and other governments. We, again through the Coalition for Healthy School Food, have a very close connection with researchers, particularly some researchers at the University of Saskatchewan: Amberley Ruetz, for example. They have undertaken case study research recently, part of which they were asked by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to figure out how much school food is going to cost. This is the multi-million-dollar question.

One of the interesting findings in terms of cost that I just wanted to share really illustrates the concept of efficiency. We've talked about efficiencies in terms of cost and human resources. What was found was that the overall cost of lunch was approximately \$6.45 per person. That was just looking at five provinces. This is an interim piece of the research. They're still conducting research, including using a case study in Nova Scotia. That's the average cost of lunch, \$6.45 per person.

What was found in particular - there was a case study in rural Alberta showing that there was a lower cost of actually providing all meals. Instead of it being \$6.45 for lunch, it was \$4.47 for breakfast, snack, and lunch because of economies of scale. Those larger-scale regional models offer multiple cost savings. I would be very pleased to connect anyone around the table with the researchers for further information.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes, you're next.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to stay on the lunch program. We're talking a lot about the federal program. I'm just wondering from the department: Why are we waiting on the feds? Why are we not taking the lead and creating a universal provincial program here in Nova Scotia? Doctor, you talked about being first. Wouldn't that make us first, if we started our own universal lunch program here in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter or Ms. Halliday, who would like to take that one? Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: A couple of practical things. We don't necessarily want to get out ahead of the federal government on a universal program, because we wouldn't want to do something that would disqualify us from participating in a federal program. But we are, as Chris has mentioned, doing things in the area of lunch. We haven't completely stalled and said we're not moving forward with anything in the realm of lunch because we're waiting on the feds. We are doing some things. We mentioned the salad bar pilots and different things like that. We're working with our partners and with different departments across the province to see what opportunities exist.

We're trying to get ourselves into a position where we can be the most responsive that we can.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: In addition to what Sara has just mentioned - again, just to reinforce that I'm sure almost all if not all schools do offer free meals to students who require them at the present time. It's not a response directly to your question, I understand, but I just wanted to state again that if a student needs food at school, there is food at school for that student - be it breakfast or lunch. It's very common for schools to use SHEP, School Healthy Eating Program funding. That's directed to breakfast programs. Sometimes they do use some of that for lunches as required.

In addition, those three grants I mentioned before that total over \$6 million provincially - \$5,000 per school for three different grants, plus \$1 per student. Oftentimes, schools do choose to use those funds as well for lunches for students who show up and they just don't have food and need food. I just wanted to add that piece as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes for a follow-up.

KENDRA COOMBES: I do have a follow-up, but first I want to make a comment. With respect, we just heard that schools are reaching into other parts of their budget to feed these kids. We also know that teachers, TAs, EPAs, and others working within the school support staff are also reaching into their own pockets to feed these kids. With respect, I

don't think we can say that no child is left behind with regard to food. I don't think we can say that. I think we need to stop saying that because there are children who are left behind. There are children who are not getting food - and that money is not coming out of the provincial budget. It is people finding other places to get that food into those kids' bellies.

I don't understand - so you're going to have to explain to me, please - how the provincial Government of Nova Scotia, through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, would be disqualified from the federal program.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I don't think it's a matter of being disqualified from a federal program. I know there have been circumstances in the past where if a province is already doing something, or if what we set up doesn't meet the criteria or the guidelines of how the federal program is rolled out, then we might not fit in. I guess the point is that we don't have specific information about what it might look like from a federal perspective.

I mentioned earlier that the minister has been in close and constant contact with her federal counterpart on this issue. I know that she is very committed to it. I think it's just about trying to make sure that we are in the best position that we can be as a province when we know more.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Corbin, you'd like to respond?

LINDSAY CORBIN: Just to share in terms of the next steps that I'm aware of from the federal perspective - that they will release a report on what they heard from the consultations that have literally been taking place until this past Saturday. Minister Gould was on a Zoom consultation with students.

That report is expected to be released very soon. They are writing it now. Then the actual policy for school food in Canada will hopefully be released over the Summer - although we don't have a firm date. To Sara's point around when will we know what a federal program and policy is going to look like - that's the timeline that I'm aware of.

THE CHAIR: Our next round will be MLA Sheehy-Richard, MLA Ince, and then MLA Lachance.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I heard so much in that last round that I'm not sure which one of my questions I want to get in now, but I think my ears perked up the most at the procurement that you talked about.

I know that we started in a place where it was all local and schools, and then we got to a place where it became not as local and in school. I feel the shift. I feel the importance of working together with the Department of Agriculture, their milk programs, and these salad bar carts, which are just excellent. Again, I guess I'm grateful, because in our community we do have schools - especially now that COVID is over and we can get back into this - where they're growing gardens, they're harvesting, they're setting up their salad bars. So it's all about the educational piece as well.

I guess I'm going to have to stick with the question regarding procurement and how - if we extend the year - that might play into better facilitating and rolling out more of these pilots as we learn, develop and grow what works in each of our individual centres for education.

Could maybe talk a little bit more about how that could be important to putting this together?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: Thank you for your question. One of the things we're really excited about is through both the salad bar pilots and fruit bowl pilots - in addition to strengthening our own relationship with the Department of Agriculture, just department to department - we've also been able to network the regional centres themselves with the Department of Agriculture, which is an area of growth for us.

As we think and move forward in asking what lessons we have learned from the pilot so far, one of the big ones is: How do we buy more local? That is a significant focus of the new policy coming out. We have recently established a partnership with Nova Scotia Loyal through the Department of Economic Development to that end as well, and looking at some options to continue to grow our practice of procuring locally.

In terms of what's next, what we would want, of course, is to continue to build capacity. Again, the example I provided with the salad bar pilot is the equipment, and the training stays behind. We would expect these practices to continue with that increased capacity. We're certainly interested in continuing partnering with the Department of Agriculture, and certainly with the other departments as well. As I mentioned, Nova Scotia Loyal is a fairly new relationship that we're establishing, but it's all aimed at procuring locally and improving our practice in that area. Once again, this will be a central tenet of the new Food and Nutrition Policy as outlined by the Auditor General's Report. That was an area of growth for us as well.

THE CHAIR: I think Ms. Roberts would like to respond.

LISA ROBERTS: Just briefly to comment that, of course, Halifax Regional Centre for Education would be responsible for maybe 40, 45 per cent of the student population of



Nova Scotia. There are particular challenges here when it comes to procuring local. Too often at the level of schools, what you see are a whole range of piecemeal approaches - everything from Instacart to folks shopping flyers.

[2:30 p.m.]

So Nourish Nova Scotia is part of a working group along with Feed Nova Scotia, Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, Mobile Food Market, and JustFOOD - which is connected to the Halifax Food Policy Alliance - to establish a Halifax regional food hub, which would help to connect small- and medium-scale producers from across mainland Nova Scotia into wholesale customers in the Halifax region. That would include schools, because we know that for efficient school food delivery, you want the food to be arriving at the door. You need your people to be able to cook, not be running around and shopping during the limited hours that you're paid for that day.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I guess just the procurement - that's all going to fall in line with the other policy that we talked about, probably? I assume that's all coming together? Is that - yes, okay. (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr. Boulter. MLA Ince.

TONY INCE: My question will go to Calvin Presbyterian Church and to Nourish Nova Scotia. I'll first start by saying it's interesting that I'm sitting here and listening to all this, because I recall when lunch programs, breakfast programs and food programs began in the early 1960s. We are 2023. We're still discussing them. The reason we're still discussing them is because of the siloed approach. We're sitting in this room, and I'm looking at all the silos.

There needs to be a process where first of all, the provincial government, which is primarily responsible for education - the federal government is part of that question, too, but the heavy lifting is on the provincial government for education. We had a minister, because of the siloed approach, make a comment that no child goes hungry in a school. Again, that's a statement based on not knowing the full breadth of what you're dealing with.

My question is: Do you - both Presbyterian Church and Nourish Nova Scotia - agree with the minister that no child goes hungry in a school?

THE CHAIR: I'll begin with Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: The thing about hunger is that it's not something that you wear on your forehead. Also, the thing about youth is that youth are very aware of their peers and of their social standing. I've certainly heard stories.

I think of a conversation that I heard at a meeting of the steering committee of the Nova Scotia chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, where someone shared their experience with a family where there were multiple children. The younger children were eating at school every day and the older children were not eating. They're all coming from the same household, but the younger children were not so aware of their social standing, and were not so sensitive to the stigma of putting up their hand or somehow being identified as needing food. They were accessing food at school, but the older children at the junior high level or at the high school level were not.

I recently had a conversation with a high school principal about their cafeteria and their kitchen, which is currently being operated by a third-party provider that is trying to extract profit by feeding kids food that is not great at relatively high price points. Literally, the first line in my notes is: We have kids who don't eat. That was what the high school principal said to me.

I will say that there is progress happening in Nova Scotia right now. There's a job posting in the Annapolis Valley, which is for a permanent position. This is a position that was not a permanent position a year ago - I don't know if it was a permanent position six months ago - for a regional school food coordinator. That is a position that is being hired by the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education. That is what we need if we want to be doing school food in a robust way, in an efficient way, taking advantage of the economies of scale, incorporating procurement, supporting staff to do good work, which includes producing the maximum nutritious, tasty meals at the minimum food cost.

You need somebody who has actually got that job of being a food coordinator. You need people who have experience - be it in catering, be it feeding people in long-term care, be it from restaurants. That's a skill set. That is a really valuable skill set that I don't have, but I know people who have it. They make a huge difference when they come into the school food environments. I don't know if that answers entirely your question, but thank you for it.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Power, would you like to respond?

ALLISON POWER: One of the comments that MLA Coombes made during one of her remarks was: I don't think we can say that all children are fed at the school level - that there are children left behind. I see them on Saturdays. I also see children who are three years old who are hungry - so they're not even in the school system. The school system does a great job; I'm not going to say that. They provide food as available and that's great. Different schools that I've heard have different programs. It's not consistent. I do agree with you that it's silo-approached. I agree that people like us at Calvin Presbyterian, we saw the need and we went to action.

There is no road map to correct the child poverty and child hunger in Nova Scotia at this point. That should be a priority.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince, we have five minutes left.

TONY INCE: I'd like to just make a statement that if we are to really address this crisis - because it is a crisis- it's part of health care. Let me pull back. I've often been confronted with barriers and hurdles myself. Many times, you can't wait. You've got to take action and do it yourself. For us to be trying to push it back on the federal government, in my opinion, it's wrong. We need to take action, and we need to do it now.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I'd like to return to the situation currently in the Halifax Regional Centre for Education and in this community here. I think Ms. Roberts referenced the 40 per cent of Nova Scotia students who are in this area - so 40 per cent of Nova Scotia students who are being affected by the current job action and who need their school communities strong and back together. I guess I really want to quantify this idea that all students have access to food, yet we don't know how many students are being affected by this current job action. It seems that we don't have any data on who's not able to access food because of the current job action. It's not really clear to me.

I mean, there was some reference to individual supports being provided to families. I'm thinking ahead to Summer. I'm sorry - with all due respect, that's not the reality. I can tell you that one of my dear friends whose daughter had a very successful transition to high school, which is currently now being completely threatened - the whole year is going to be ruined by the current situation - received one call from the school, that if their daughter was going to go back to school, they had to go with them. This parent is a single parent and works, so, obviously, is not able to go back to the school, but there was no other support offered. There's been no follow-up.

With all due respect, we need to understand who's hungrier now because students are not in school, who's going to remain hungry over the Summer, and what is actually the plan to support these families because right now, it's not happening. This young person's mental and physical health are being very badly affected. They were also told that if they went back to school, it probably wouldn't work because none of the staff are there, and they don't have the supports in place.

This is one example of one child who is suffering in our community right now because they can't be in school. There are hundreds of other stories, and I would argue that there are hundreds of other students that we actually don't have a sense of who's being affected because they can't access SchoolsPlus. This "all," this "many," this "a lot," we need numbers, we need data. We need to know what's going on because this is not fair for families.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Halliday, would you like to answer that or respond? You have about a minute.

SARA HALLIDAY: I think I will just reiterate what I said earlier. We know that the situation with the strike is disruptive to our schools right now, and we know that there are some students who are not attending our schools. With respect to the breakfast program - the breakfast program is still being delivered at school. We know that food continues to be available for those students. I think you're also speaking to bigger issues related to the job action, and the HRCE is working individually with families. If they are there, they are trying to support families, they're trying to bring children back to school as safely as possible. If any family is experiencing something different from that, then I would encourage them to reach out directly to their school or to HRCE.

[2:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: In the interest of time, at this point - we were going to end our questions, MLA Lachance, at 2:45 p.m. (Interruption) Well, we wanted to end our meeting - you can go as long as you want, if you'd like, but I'd like to allow our witnesses to have final statements, if possible. If you want to make a final follow-up, go ahead. (Interruption) Okay.

At this point, we'll allow for our witnesses to offer any final closing comments they'd like.

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you for the opportunity to be here. Just really briefly, I'll say that Nourish Nova Scotia, what we offer to the silos - be they schools, be they Agriculture, be they Education and Early Childhood Development, be they PTAs - is our ability and our willingness to connect. In the end, schools are in communities, and there aren't very many successful schools that don't tap into the resources that are around the school. That includes everything from food producers to kitchens that exist in community spaces for the schools that don't have kitchens, et cetera.

That's a role that we're trying to step into, wherever we see opportunity. I don't like to see potential go unrealized. Please, anybody feel free to reach out.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Roberts. Ms. Corbin, did you have any closing remarks?

LINDSAY CORBIN: Thanks again for the opportunity. I just want to close by briefly stating that the Coalition for Healthy School Food does not believe that school food solves income-related food insecurity. It can, however, take some pressure off the family budget, and is part of several coordinated social policies that can address food insecurity more broadly.

The Nova Scotia Coalition for Healthy School Food is eager to support this government in your work to expand school food programs, in collaboration with the federal government and on your own.

THE CHAIR: Thank you to both of you. I met with many people from Nourish Nova Scotia in the Valley, and you're doing great work.

Ms. Halliday.

SARA HALLIDAY: I just wanted to quickly say thank you for inviting us here to talk about the school breakfast program today. I think we have a lot to celebrate in Nova Scotia. I echo the comments around Education and Early Childhood Development being part of that network of support for students. We want to keep students at the centre and make sure we are supporting them in the best way they can, and using the partnerships and the resources that we have at our disposal - so just want to say thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Power, would you like to offer any closing remarks?

ALLISON POWER: I'd just like to say thank you for having me. I'm still not sure how you found me. I feel like the little fish in the big pond.

Living in Nova Scotia, I will say, children from birth to age 18, if we're going with the school system, shouldn't be hungry. We shouldn't have this conversation. It would be nice to see a path forward without the silos to work together to make that a non-discussion.

THE CHAIR: I speak for everybody on the committee when we say that we're glad the little fish made it today. Thank you for coming.

At this point, we will end our formal meeting with our witnesses. We'll take a two-minute break so that we can allow witnesses to leave, and then we'll get back to our committee business. Thank you very much.

[2:48 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:51 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. If I could ask our committee members to please return to the table, we'll call our Standing Committee on Human Resources back to order. Regarding a letter sent by MLA Coombes to our committee, I think that is the only other piece of business. Is there any other business that we would attend to before we move forward with this? MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Chair, I'm quickly asking for 15 more minutes on the clock.

THE CHAIR: Are you asking for a motion?

KENDRA COOMBES: A motion for 15 more minutes.

THE CHAIR: I think we already had a motion.

KENDRA COOBES: That was 30 minutes.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? You have to put in a formal motion then.

KENDRA COOMBES: For 15 more minutes of this committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance, did you want to make a comment?

LISA LACHANCE: I was just seconding it.

THE CHAIR: Any comments around that? There's a motion on the table to extend the meeting by 15 minutes.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Regarding our letter, which you would have received - and I do believe you also received our motion - the mandate of this committee is to consider matters relative to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. We've got a hat trick, everybody. There are 1,800 school support staff who are fighting for living wages, and thousands of children are being prevented from attending school.

I move that this committee call an emergency meeting on this matter as soon as possible - per the letter submitted by our caucus - and call the Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development; the President of CUPE Nova Scotia, Nan McFadgen; and the President of CUPE Local 5047, Chris Melanson as witnesses.

THE CHAIR: There is an official motion on the table. Is there any discussion around this? Do we have a seconder? We don't need a seconder. I didn't think I did, but I saw someone's hand go up. MLA Nicoll, then MLA Lachance want to make comments.

LORELEI NICOLL: I won't speak too long, other than to say that we are in full support of this letter going forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I think following the discussion today where we considered what the impact is going to be on these students now going forward into the Summer on

other students, this is a matter of urgency. It's not clear to me how families are going to be supported in HRCE during the Summer. It's 40 per cent of our student population in Nova Scotia. I think it's really critical.

I think we've received hundreds of letters at this point from both folks who want to get back to their jobs and want a fair deal, but also from families whose children - I use the word suffering, but we aren't respecting the rights of children in this province right now. There are a lot of children who are losing a lot of progress. This is an urgent matter. This isn't going to be something that just kind of fizzles out as we get to happy graduations, and everyone goes their own way in Summer. This is having long-term impacts on children's development and education, and we need to deal with it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince, and then MLA MacDonald.

TONY INCE: We're in challenging times for most citizens on all levels. It's important that we face the individuals who are out there walking the streets and protesting us. When I was a minister, I still went out and faced them, walked in the middle of all of this. I couldn't answer all the questions, but I was out there. I didn't shy away from this.

With that, I'm going to ask if my colleagues across the floor will come out and see some of their constituents and put them at ease, at least by meeting them out there. I'll leave it at that.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Just for my colleague, I've talked to the ones who have come to see me. Nobody wants a strike, but I in no way want to get in the middle of a negotiated settlement, which is what HRCE and the union team needs to get to. Us meddling in it - and that's what it is, in my opinion - is not correct. I do not want to be in the middle of meddling.

I have talked to anyone who has come to see me. I've got friends of mine whose children are not in school. I have friends of mine who are on strike. I don't live in HRM, but I live just outside HRM, and a lot of people in my area work in HRM. I'd love to see those two come together and get a negotiated settlement, but it's for them to do, not us to try to mandate.

THE CHAIR: MLA Nicoll, do you have a comment?

LORELEI NICOLL: I just needed some clarification, but I don't now who's going to give it to me because the negotiation is not necessarily between HRCE and CUPE - it's between Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and CUPE.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I don't think - I'm not going to clarify - I guess just to your point, this isn't about meddling or mandating a settlement. It is actually taking into account the short-term and long-term impacts of what is happening and on children in this province. I think we need to get these people together to understand what is happening and what's going to be happening in the coming months. Otherwise, we're really abandoning a significant portion of our student population.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I would just say that the point of bringing them together to figure out what it is, in my opinion - and I'm not a labour expert so I can be corrected - is we're meddling in it. That's just my opinion. Again, my colleagues opposite would have better understanding than I would, but I have a problem with any part of words inferred that we're meddling into it. Those are the comments and I'll stop.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard had a comment. We have to allow all members to speak.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just wanted to say, too, that a legislative committee is not a place that either prior government brought an active negotiation to a committee. A legislative committee is not where those negotiations happen. They happen between the employer, which is Halifax Regional Centre for Education . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for discussion on this matter is over, and our committee has now come to an end for the day.

Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, for appointments to Agencies, Boards, and Commissions.

There are no more topics on the current roster, so our next meeting for topic selection will be September, and have a great Summer, everybody. We'll see you in July for Agencies, Boards, and Commissions.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:00 p.m.]