

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

2022 Report of the Auditor General - Healthy Eating in Schools

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
Nolan Young (Vice-Chair)
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Kent Smith
Tom Taggart
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Susan Leblanc
Kendra Coombes

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair,
Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Rosalind Penfound,
Interim Deputy Minister
Chris Boulter,
Executive Director - Education Innovation, Programs and Services
Dave Jones,
Regional Executive Director - Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education

Nova Scotia Health

Kari Barkhouse,
Manager - Healthy Communities, Scientific and System Performance, Public Health



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:05 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order. I now call the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. My name is Kelly Regan, I am the MLA for Bedford Basin, and I am Chair of this committee.

A reminder to all of us to place our phones on silent, and I'm going to ask my colleagues to introduce themselves, beginning to my immediate left with Ms. Coombes.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I will note that officials from the Auditor General's Office, Legislative Counsel Office, Hansard, and the Legislative Committees Office are in attendance as well.

On today's agenda, we have officials with us from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Nova Scotia Health Authority with respect to the 2022 Report of the Auditor General, Healthy Eating in Schools. I will ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, starting off to my immediate right, Mr. Boulter.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Back for a return engagement is Deputy Minister Penfound, and she's going to make her opening remarks right now.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to speak with you this morning about healthy eating at our schools and healthy food for students. I was going to introduce my colleagues, but they've been introduced to you already. They're both very knowledgeable about the supports and services available to students in our public education system, and I'm very pleased to have them with me today, especially since I've only been back in government a couple of weeks.

We all want Nova Scotia's children to reach their full potential. We also know that healthy food and healthy living, plus the tools and knowledge to lead a healthy lifestyle, play an important role in the development of healthy students and healthy citizens. We welcome the findings and recommendations from the Auditor General's Report into healthy eating in schools. The Auditor General has given us very valuable input.

Importantly, this information will support our work as we continue the development and enhancement of food programs in our schools. It will help as we update our school food and nutrition policy, and it will help as we continue to develop and implement the policy and curriculum and initiatives that enhance the health and well-being of our students. We'll continue to work closely with all Regional Centres for Education, CSAP, and Nova Scotia Health Authority to ensure that students receive healthy, nutritious food in our schools, and that existing food opportunities are adequately monitored. We have already begun updating our Healthy Food Policy for Schools, and we're actively working on the Universal Lunch Program for Nova Scotia schools.

In Nova Scotia, we have a universal school-based food program that all students are able to access called the School Healthy Eating Program, or SHEP. The program primarily provides access to breakfast and beverage programming in schools, and in some schools it also supports lunch programming. The Auditor General was very complimentary of this program, and with good reason. It helps students start their day with healthy food provided in a non-stigmatizing way.

Our schools' educators and administrators are always on the lookout to ensure that students are supported. If a student needs food, they get food. We know throughout many of the schools in our province, they are finding unique and innovative ways to ensure every student has food. We hear of many schools which are leading initiatives or working with community partners to get students interested in food. For 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.

It's also important to recognize that part of our role is helping students learn the fundamentals of a healthy life, both the importance of activity as well as the knowledge that goes with eating well.

We are committed to actively promoting and engaging students and staff in healthier lifestyles and educational outcomes. The current government has introduced a healthy living grant for each school, and we are introducing a new physical activity framework for our schools in partnership with teachers and regions and the CSAP.

We continue to promote the importance of outdoor learning, and as part of our Inclusive Education Policy and our overall approach to education, we understand and promote the importance of social and emotional well-being in addition to academic and intellectual well-being and achievement.

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

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity for us to address the committee this morning. We look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms. Barkhouse.

KARI BARKHOUSE: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the committee for having me here today to talk to you about healthy eating in schools.

To begin, I would like to affirm Nova Scotia Health Authority's commitment to working with our partners in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Public Health and Education and Early Childhood Development have a long history of working together to improve both health and education outcomes for children, including access to healthy food in schools. Public Health's standards and protocols reflect our role in supporting a Health Promoting Schools approach and school food policy development and implementation.

It is important to note that this work, along with so much of our Public Health work, has been impacted since March 2020 as staff were redeployed to respond to the pandemic. Despite these challenges, we have ensured that financial resources were disseminated, and we participated in the Auditor General's review.

There is substantial evidence that well-nourished children have better school attendance and are less likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems, meaning more time spent in the classroom to focus on education. Specific to Nova Scotia, researchers have also identified links between the quality of students' diets and their level

of achievement in English language arts and mathematics. These areas are prioritized, along with well-being, as part of the department's student success planning.

Access to nutritious food helps children and youth in school by improving alertness, attention, problem solving, social skills, and their academic performance, including standardized test scores and grade point averages. This is a perfect example of how health and education can work together to affect outcomes for children. Working together, we can support children's learning and health while reducing the long-term risks of chronic diseases.

This is not just about providing food to those who come to school hungry. It is about providing all students across the province the same level of access to healthy, nutritious foods that enable a level playing field for the ability to learn and grow and lead them in a direction of better health outcomes.

Legislation, policy, and programming should be evidence-informed, data-driven, and reflective of need. Improving all aspects of child and youth well-being will require increased availability and access to quality data across sectors. This data can provide guidance for action and can help measure progress and outcomes.

Nova Scotia Health Authority Public Health is fully supportive of the recommendations made by the Office of the Auditor General and intends to work with our partners in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to further enhance healthy eating in schools. Our public health nutritionists and provincial public policy analysts provide evidence-based approaches and best practices to support the development and implementation of healthy eating policies.

As mentioned in the report, there is need to improve data collection, monitoring, and evaluation of these programs. Even with the significant limitations of our Public Health programs due to COVID-19, we have been able to work with our partners to improve upon the evaluation of School Healthy Eating Program. Recently, our Public Health team in science and system performance worked with the provincial school food advisory to complete an assessment of facilitators and barriers to implementing school food programs in Nova Scotia - a report that you have received.

In closing, there is overwhelming evidence that health status improves with education and literacy. The high level of co-operation and coordination between and within the health and education sectors must continue to be enhanced. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Barkhouse. How we do this is the first round of questioning will be 20 minutes for each caucus, and we begin with the Liberal Party. We will begin now. It is 9:11 a.m. We will begin with the honourable Brendan Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you, everyone, for being here today. I have a lot of questions. I'll keep the questions short and if we could do the same with the answers - just direct and to the point.

My first question is: How many public schools in Nova Scotia currently offer students free healthy lunches?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Penfound.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We have just under 400 schools in Nova Scotia. In terms of the numbers that are actually offering lunch as part of the School Healthy Eating Program, I would refer that to my colleague Chris, who will have the stat.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: As Deputy Minister Penfound had mentioned in her opening remarks, right now schools do receive SHEP - School Healthy Eating Program - funding, which is primarily used for breakfast programming. That being said, any child who comes to school and presents themselves as not having food or being hungry, gets food. I would state that would happen in any school within the province.

There's no formalized, universal lunch program right now in any school within the province. That being said, we know schools find all kinds of ways - through context-specific actions that they can take - to ensure that any student who arrives at school and needs food gets food for lunch. Schools access some of their SHEP funding as part of being able to do that. They have some community partnerships. A reminder that schools have student support grants. It's \$5,000 plus a dollar per student. There are a variety of means in which schools achieve this.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The answer was that if the students want food, they can get food. One of the things that the Auditor General noted was that it was around constituency. We heard the interim deputy minister speak about a salad bar. I can tell you that of the nine schools in my community, there is not a salad bar. I can tell you that when my three children go to school, it's a granola bar or a cheese string. That's what breakfast is - and an apple sometimes.

The Auditor General noted that the level of healthy food served to students varies between Regional Centres for Education. I think one of the issues with that is that this program relies on volunteerism. When it comes to priority schools in particular - and I have a few in my community - we're not seeing the level of healthy food as other schools in more affluent communities where parents can afford to volunteer. This is an issue. There is a huge difference between affluent communities and priority communities.

[9:15 a.m.]

The Auditor General has stated that there are inconsistencies. They also stated that the majority of schools tested are not complying with the provincial school food and nutrition policy. Saying that you're giving children food, and they're empty calories that are full of sugar, doesn't help. I've seen some of the stuff. Again, I have three children who go to an elementary school that's trying its hardest.

How do you explain the Auditor General's finding that your department that's in charge of this program is not complying with the provincial school food and nutrition policy?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: The policy is in the process of being updated, which is important. To your point, if we have a policy that's updated and we're not on top of making sure it's followed through on, that's not great.

We have come through a period of over two years with COVID-19 where everybody's focus was on keeping people healthy. Packaged foods became the norm because it was safer from a health perspective. Certainly, we have apples and things like that. As part of the policy, we will be upping our monitoring and compliance efforts. To your point about variability across schools, one of the things that makes the breakfast program so successful is that it's universal, so every kid can get it.

The other thing that makes it so successful is that it is flexible, so that schools, depending on the need of the children in those schools, the capacity of the school in terms of infrastructure - some schools have cafeterias, some don't, some are bigger, some are smaller. The Regional Centres for Education, the teachers and the principals, know their student population, and they can figure out what is the best way to make that food available in a non-stigmatizing way.

I think that's going to be a key thing going forward if we have a lunch program and continue to offer the breakfast program - making sure we are flexible, that it is universal, and that we are focusing on healthy food. Certainly, empty calories are not what we're trying to deliver. Certainly into the future - now that we're coming out of COVID-19 and able to refocus our efforts - that will be something we will be paying close attention to.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: While I appreciate that answer, there's not a big difference. In fact, there's no difference between what was available pre-COVID-19, during COVID-19, and post-COVID-19. The only thing that we've seen in schools is that when they do pizza programs and things like that, the pizza is now individually wrapped. Things like that are what we're seeing now.

I know that you said that it's flexible, but it's only flexible depending on how many resources the parents are willing to put in. If you have a community that's willing and able

to volunteer - and I'll give you a good example. If you go to Sambro Elementary, those parents do five or six healthy meals a year at the school - fish and all kinds of different things. That's because the parents are able to do it. You go to Central Spryfield or Graystone, that's not happening.

The Auditor General is saying that this program is not complying. It's one thing to say that the program is working on paper and to celebrate the program, but the actual fact is that if you're giving a child a granola bar - that has a lot of sugar in it. While I appreciate those children have something in their bellies where at other points they wouldn't, it's showing that it's not necessarily working to the best ability.

Right now, I think the budget is about \$1.7 million or somewhere around there. I think that one of the issues that we may have is the funding for this program. The more we increase this funding, the better food we have available, and potentially be able to pay people to deliver in schools where they normally couldn't deliver.

Is this on the table to increase the budget from \$1.7 million - because this government is very focused on health, and this is directly related to health. When we're teaching kids that a granola bar is a healthy thing to eat in the morning for breakfast in elementary school, it's not always the best thing. I know with my children, we've introduced them to vegetables and things at a young age to try to force that broccoli down their throats or whatever.

I think one of the issues we have here is access to resources and funding. Will the department commit today - or is there a commitment - to increase it from \$1.7 million to more money to make this universal program more accessible and not dependent on how affluent your communities are?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Point taken. We can always do better in terms of the kinds of food and the variety of food that we have. After my answer, I'll invite my colleague David to talk about the things that are going on in the Annapolis Valley. We are actively working on the development of a universal lunch program that would be free to all children, universally available. What part of what we're doing is costing that? What would that cost, and how can we deliver it?

We are approaching 130,000 kids in almost 400 schools. Delivering lunch to that many people over that wide of a geographic area and that variety of schools is no small feat. There are some small schools, some big schools, some have cafeterias, some don't have refrigeration, sometimes you'd have to bring food in, sometimes it'd be prepared on site. All of those things are being factored in, as well as costing how we would do that.

It's certainly on our agenda. It's actively being worked on. We hope that we'll be able to bring something forward in the near future on that. My colleague could speak to an example.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I just want to follow up with a quick question. You're moving toward a universal lunch program. Should we not get the universal breakfast program correct before we jump into the universal lunch program? The Auditor General has specific issues with this breakfast program around access and the fact that it's not following the nutrition guide. The question wasn't about moving to the lunch program. The question was, funding and access to resources for the current breakfast program. It's sitting at under \$2 million.

We've heard from a non-partisan Auditor General saying that the current shape of the program isn't working to its best abilities. In fact - she didn't say this - but we know that it's failing in some areas, if you compare. Should we not be investing a lot more money into the breakfast program to ensure that it's doing everything it can before we take on a lunch program?

I mean, I agree that we need a lunch program. I want a lunch program. But at the same time, we need to up our game on the breakfast program. Do you not agree that there should be more funding and resources available for the breakfast program before your department turns its attention to the lunch program?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I don't think they're mutually exclusive, that we would be working on improving the breakfast program and then wait to do the lunch program. I think we can be working on those together. Certainly, part of our planning and budgeting would include trying to address any deficiencies. We accept all the recommendations of the Auditor General and appreciate that work.

In terms of accountability, in terms of making sure the policies are followed, there are several things that we are doing and can do. The deputy minister meets monthly with the executive directors of the Regional Centres for Education and the CSAP, so we do and will continue to press at those meetings the importance of compliance with the policies and providing regular updates and supports.

With regard to contractors who may be hired to deliver some of the food products - and my colleague can speak to this - we have put policies in place that mean that when we put those tenders out, an element of that is the nutritional value of the food and sourcing, where at all possible, food from our local providers. We like to support the agricultural and fishery industries.

We are instituting a yearly attestation by those executive directors at the Regional Centres for Education and the CSAP confirming that they have ensured that the policy is being complied with, and that all contractors and suppliers are meeting the conditions of their contracts.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: So if the regional school boards are meeting monthly on this program, how did we get to the point where the Auditor General has recognized such

deficiencies? Should this not have been brought to the department, HRCE and CSAP? Should it not have been brought to the heads to say that we have inefficiencies in this program and, quite frankly, we're not following the nutrition guidelines?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: How did we get there? I guess there are always all kinds of reasons for how you get there in a very large system. It's easy to point to COVID-19 every time, but COVID-19 has been a real impact of that. We're approaching two years-plus where our schools were focused on keeping children safe and trying their best to provide healthy food, sometimes probably falling short. Now that we're sort of coming out of COVID-19 or moving to a situation where we're better able to manage those things, I think we're in a good position to move forward.

I know in my role, for the short period I may be here, it will be a significant focus for us. I know it is for the department and for the Regional Centres for Education.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Will the department here today commit to either finding the money internally or requesting the money from the current government to increase the funding for the breakfast program so that we see a truly healthy universal breakfast program that doesn't vary from school to school, depending on how much volunteerism they have?

The question is: Will you find the money within your department, and if it's not there, will you advocate on behalf of the over 100,000 children in Nova Scotia to get that money from the current provincial government?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We're 100 per cent committed to healthy food and nutrition in our schools. We're 100 per cent committed to making sure we find and acquire the resources to deliver. That will be part of our planning going forward and our interaction with elected officials.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Have you requested the funding? Has any request gone in for increased funding for this program yet?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: The budgeting process is starting. We'll be identifying any resources that we might need to support the breakfast program, the lunch program, and our School Healthy Eating Program in general.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We've already seen one budget. Was there a request to the department for increased funding for the breakfast program from the previous budget?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I didn't hear all of your question.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: From the previous budget, last year's budget, was there a request from your department for increased funding for the breakfast program?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We're working on that now. I'd ask my colleague Chris if he knows that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: We'll have to get back to you on that. I would like to consult with Finance.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: As per our conversations with the Auditor General and individuals we brought in, I'd ask that information be brought in a timely manner. I'd like to have that within a week. We've seen information - not from this department, this department has always been great - where we've waited months and months for information. I ask that we get that in a timely manner.

What is the plan to incorporate local Nova Scotian producers? Again, I think this could open our children's eyes to some - I'll be frank with you. We do quite a bit of breakfasts and meals in the community. We have children in our community who had never eaten blueberries - things like that. There are a lot of great products that are grown right here locally in Nova Scotia.

The Minister of Agriculture said the target was 20 per cent. Are we anywhere near that? What is the department's plan to produce and work with our local farms?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Being flexible about where we source any of the food that's offered in schools is really important, and particularly so that we can procure food in season and in locales where it's available. If you're in the Annapolis Valley, we should be and are sourcing many products from the local environment. I think that's very important. We want to deepen that connection with local agricultural and seafood folks.

Part of the procurement process, as I mentioned, is that when the RFP goes out, a component indicates that local sourcing - I think this is interesting and important - although we may have a contract with a certain provider, we have it set up in a way that we don't have to get everything from them. A school can source on a timely basis. If it happens to be the season when there are blueberries or apples or whatever the crop might be, there's the ability to source that way as well, and always go through that provider.

My colleague would be able to explain what's happening in the Annapolis Valley Centre for Education.

DAVE JONES: In the Annapolis Valley, we have 25 region-operated cafeterias. We procure food through an RFP - we have a contract. That contract is with a Nova Scotia company. As a part of that scoring when we did that contract, local was a piece of that scoring process. We value local produce. Certainly, we value working in the Valley with local farmers.

[9:30 a.m.]

There are a lot of individual connections with schools. I was speaking to a principal last week, and a farmer was dropping off eggs because they had an egg farm down the road. There's story after story after story in the Valley of that happening. So the contract that we have, provides most of the . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal questioning has elapsed. We'll now move on to the NDP caucus - MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you all for being here. Mr. Jones, if you'd like to briefly finish your answer, I would be happy to let that happen.

DAVE JONES: There are a lot of different connections in the Valley with farmers to make sure that we have that food. The contract doesn't require us to buy from that one supplier we have the contract with. There are opportunities to purchase from others as well. It's finding the right product at the right time for the right school in the right community.

Every community is a little bit different. Every school is a little bit different. What they want to do is a little bit different, so we want to make sure there's some flexibility while also having accountability. This is what the procurement process allows us to do - to make sure we have a contract, and to make sure that we're getting best value for public dollar.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you. That was in the spirit of bipartisanship, just for the record.

I have a number of questions. I find this topic very exciting. I love talking about food, basically - but obviously, the Auditor General's Report was extremely concerning. There are a number of things that are concerning. I also found that when reading the report, and in our session with the Auditor General, that there seems to be some real low-hanging fruit to address some of the massive issues.

One of those things is that out seven of the original Regional Centres for Education, only three have a dietician or a nutritionist on staff. One of the recommendations, I believe, or one of the thoughts could be that every Regional Centre for Education and CSAP has a nutritionist or dietician on staff. That seems to me very easy. I know that hiring people at this time is not super easy, but it's something that could happen.

That would ensure the current policies are being followed more closely, and that there's someone who can be advising schools - bringing recipes into the schools and all of that stuff into the cafeterias - the ones who are working with the third-party food providers to make sure that everything is above board and complying with the policy.

I'm wondering if maybe Deputy Minister Penfound or Mr. Boulter could talk about whether that's a plan - and if not, why not?

CHRIS BOULTER: We certainly accept that recommendation from the OAG. We know there's room for growth in this area, and as the Auditor General's Report has pointed out, we do have a couple good examples to start from. We know there's been success in this area in the South Shore Regional Centre for Education, as well as in the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education.

As Ms. Barkhouse had said in her opening comments, we value our partnership with the Department of Health and Wellness. We know that there's expertise there that we have not fully leveraged to this point. Some RCEs have a stronger relationship with Health and Wellness than others, and that includes partnering with dieticians.

We know there's room for growth there. We accept the recommendation, and, certainly, as part of our increased accountability measures, that will happen.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. That's the answer I was waiting for. That will happen. When will it happen?

CHRIS BOULTER: As Deputy Minister Penfound has stated, we've already started work on the school food and nutrition policy. That work is ongoing - and even before that work is done - in terms of creating and strengthening steering committees and strengthening partnerships. Certainly, COVID-19 was a bit of a strain. We had some staff reassigned in both Education and Early Childhood Development and in Health and Wellness as well. Folks are back in their original positions, and that work is ongoing. Certainly, the partnerships and the work around how we partner with Public Health and dieticians around ensuring compliance to nutritional standards is already started. It will not be a long. We won't need to wait for full implementation of the policy for those pieces to be put in place.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you. Speaking of that, one of the things that I notice in the Auditor General's Report is that when the department accepted the recommendations, there was a timeline for when you would begin work, but there was no timeline for when you would complete work.

That's not actually super usual. Normally we see a guideline - an end goal - for the recommendation to be complete. Can you speak to that? No need to explain COVID-19, why things are taking a long time. Just tell me like, "hopefully by the end of 2023 we'll have all of this in place" or whatever your answer is. I just want a direct answer.

CHRIS BOULTER: We do hope to have the policy done by the end of 2023, for sure. Part of what we want to ensure is - as you've mentioned, many people are interested, have a stake in, and are partners with us in terms of how we deliver nutritious food to

students in schools. Through the policy development, we have a policy proposal ready. That includes a plan for how the policy will be renewed and redeveloped based on the findings of the Auditor General. We're excited to undertake the work. We're excited to do so. We've already started, in fact.

What we need to assure is that there's enough time for is proper consultation with our partners at Health and Wellness, our partners at Nourish Nova Scotia, and our partners throughout that will ensure that the product is what it needs to be and meets the recommendations of the Auditor General's Report.

The answer is "as soon as possible." Certainly, the end of 2023 is a goal we aim to achieve. That being said, we just need to make sure we do it correctly, and part of that is ensuring that there's robust consultation as part of the process.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. I appreciate consultation, I really do. I think it's important. But we do know that there are certain things that we just know need to be improved. We know that there have been two Canada Food Guides since the policy was put in place. We know a bunch of things that don't really require consultation. We know that energy drinks and Gatorade should not be available in schools.

My sub-question is: Are there any schools in Nova Scotia that have vending machines with Gatorade or energy drinks?

CHRIS BOULTER: I'm not aware of any at this time. That being said, I can't guarantee you right now that there are none, but I'm not aware of any at this time. That would not meet the food and nutrition policy, if that were the case.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's right, but we know that there are a lot of schools that aren't meeting the food and nutrition policy. I guess that kind of brings me to my next question. In the interim, before there is a new and revised school policy, how do we make sure that especially third-party food providers are actually obeying the rules and not profiting off the health of our children?

CHRIS BOULTER: As Deputy Minister Penfound stated in her opening statements, we know that third-party providers, from the Auditor General's Report, were certainly identified as being the least compliant of the groups. I have the page open right now, on 1.25. It talks about how schools run by the RCE are approximately 83 per cent compliant, whereas once you get down to third-party providers, that number is significantly less than that.

So certainly, accountability mechanisms need to be put in place. The deputy minister already mentioned some of the strategies by which we would do that. That includes reviewing contracts annually. We know that there needs to be some support through the new policy, and we accept the recommendation around how that accountability

looks for third-party providers. Who's looking at the food that's being served? Who's ensuring that it's compliant with the food and nutrition policy, and annual attestations that that's happening, site by site by site.

That is the work of the new policy. Certainly, as we revamp our steering committee between Regional Centres for Education and the CSAP and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, one ongoing and standing topic on monthly meetings is what's happening with third-party providers and how do you know. Through the new policy, there will be increased accountability measures. We accept the recommendation, we know there's need for growth, and there will be.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I wanted to ask about the comment you made, Mr. Boulter, around the \$5,000 plus \$1 per student at each of the schools. I just want to clarify, because I heard you say it but I didn't totally get it. That money which I understand - like, I know that exists, but did you say that some schools use that for their food programs?

CHRIS BOULTER: That particular grant is a student support grant. It's \$5,000 per school plus \$1 per student annually. There are some fairly general criteria in which we provide the funds to schools, and decisions are made at the site. There is deliberately some flexibility and some nimbleness in terms of how the schools can use the funds. We're aware of many examples where schools do choose to use some of those funds to supplement meals for students who identify as needing a lunch and not having food.

How the student support grant would be applied would vary site to site, but we certainly, in providing those funds, want to give them the flexibility to do that.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Right. Like my colleague from Halifax Atlantic, there are a number of schools in my constituency that are priority schools and people live with very low incomes, so food security is a massive problem, not just in school, but at home as well. Also, of course, those are the same schools - those schools may be using - I don't know for sure, but I know that there are some lunch programs happening, largely in conjunction with the library.

I don't know who's paying for what, but my point is that those same schools that desperately need to use money for food also need money for sports equipment, and also need money for playground equipment, and also need money for a school dance. Really, there's no fundraising going on because there's no money in the community, and the parents are just not able to do that volunteer work because they're working three jobs or whatever.

It seems to me - if I was in your position - that I would make that \$5,000 plus \$1 not be eligible for food, and make sure that the food is being funded, or something, or that there's \$5,000 dedicated just for food, and then there's \$5,000 dedicated for everything else or whatever. It just seems to me that it's not an even playing field when some schools

have to use that money for food and some are able to use it for the extras and the library, and all the fun things - fun but necessary things.

I guess that brings me to my question for you, Ms. Barkhouse. In the response to the recommendation from the department, it says that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development would work with the Nova Scotia Health Authority to examine how the School Healthy Eating Program funding is utilized, but there's no mention of increased funding. I'm wondering if the department is planning on increasing the \$1.7 million for the program, and if not, why not?

KARI BARKHOUSE: I'm not aware of it being increased. In 2018, we were asked to administer the funds, so part of our role is really administering those funds. I don't have an answer in terms of whether it's being increased or not.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Is there any way to get that answer?

KARI BARKHOUSE: From government, you mean?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, that's what I mean.

KARI BARKHOUSE: Yes, I'm not sure how you would get that answer.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just a thought that we should probably find out. We should probably ask the CEO of the Nova Scotia Health Authority or someone at the Department of Health and Wellness to find out if that funding is being increased, or if that is part of the budget discussion. I'm wondering if that means, Madam Chair, if we write a letter, whatever, I think we should do that.

I wanted to ask quickly about school capital planning. This is a discussion that is ongoing, but when we're talking about food security, food literacy, nutrition literacy, all of that stuff, it would be great if there were kitchens in schools, kitchens/cafeterias. Maybe not cafeterias, but at least kitchens in places where food is prepared. Is there a commitment from the department in terms of going forward on school capital planning, I know that's the Department of Public Works as well, but to make sure that designs for new school builds include kitchens or cafeterias?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Not all schools where kids eat have cafeterias, so you don't necessarily have to have a cafeteria in every school. There's certainly detailed and careful planning that goes into all new builds and all renovations. Certainly we will be taking into account what will be needed to ensure that we can appropriately implement our school food programs and currently lunch and breakfast in that planning process.

[9:45 a.m.]

Certainly it's a reasonable thing, I believe, that we should have some capacity in each building to be able to do at least some measure of food handling to allow us to properly implement these policies.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It reminds me of my high school, which is now called Bay View High School out in Hubley. We had a restaurant in our high school, where there were students who were in a particular program at the school actually learned a lot of food skills, and then if you did well on some test or whatever, you got to go to the restaurant for your lunch. It was awesome. What a great opportunity for teachers to bring students for rewards, but also for the students themselves who are preparing all the delicious food. At the time, it felt like a good idea. It was a long time ago.

I wanted to ask one last question before I hand it over to my colleague. Actually, why don't you go ahead and then I will get back to that question?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I have two questions that are burning. We were just talking about the third-party contracts. Has the department considered also including a clause to limit the profits earned by these third-party providers?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Sorry, I didn't hear your entire question. Could you repeat it?

KENDRA COOMBES: Just that we talked about third-party providers, that they're mostly not compliant or less compliant than the RCEs, so has the department considered also including a clause in the contracts to limit the profits earned by these providers?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I'm not sure that's been actively considered, although the process that's used is a request for proposals. One element of a proposal is, can you meet all the conditions that we say you need to in terms of nutrition, and also, what are you going to do in terms of your costing? I'm not sure that every single time the person with the lowest cost is going to provide the best program - that's why there are a number of things that you evaluate against.

I once heard somebody say, you don't want a nuclear plant built by the lowest bidder. I think that having appropriate criteria about nutrition and cost being one, I don't think we have or would necessarily have something that limited the profit that those companies or providers made. For one thing, we don't know their entire business model, in terms of where their profit comes from, what other things they're doing, but managing how much we pay and the quality of the service and product that we receive is certainly top of mind.

KENDRA COOMBES: Obviously, I think that when it comes to our contracts, we can say how much profit they can earn with regards to our schools and our contracts. On that, does the department also consider any criteria such as wages or local food procurement when selecting the contractors?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I don't know, but I don't believe so.

KENDRA COOMBES: With regards to the NSHA Healthy School Eating Policy, eating is more than just nutritional food. There's also, we've heard from many experts that eating fast is unhealthy, and most children and their families, often the biggest complaint is there's not enough time to eat. Are we looking at a policy to allow children more time to actually eat their food?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I couldn't agree more. I make myself try to put the fork down between each bite, which is hard, but I think it's a legitimate question. I think my colleague, Mr. Boulter, may have some information about that.

CHRIS BOULTER: Thank you for the question. We share the concern. As part of our policy review and updating, that will definitely be part of it. In terms of the discussion with the RCEs, part of the consultation will be, how does it look in schools and how do different schools currently handle this? There is some discrepancy in the amount of lunchtime that schools provide versus sitting down in a cafeteria versus going outside to play after. Depending on the grade level, there are also different developmental stages.

So although there are a number of factors that go into how much time a student would have to sit down and eat, we do recognize that is important, and certainly needs to be at the forefront of new policy development.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning from the NDP caucus has now elapsed. We'll move on to the PC caucus. Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you, Madam Chair. This is such a very important topic, and one that I am pretty excited about. I welcome you all here.

The AG Report found that the school breakfast programs are being somewhat successful. Especially, I know in my constituency, rural - the AVRCE district - our breakfast programs have been successful. What can we learn about them that might improve our school lunch program as we move forward with this?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We are, I think, appropriately proud of our breakfast program. As has been mentioned, we can always improve. Some of the things that we have learned from that program that will be helpful as we move forward - and I think the big one is its universality. It's not means tested. You don't have to prove you need the food. The food is there if you want it. It means that no child is stigmatized by the fact that they

may not have had any breakfast at home and are now going to eat at school. Every child can participate equally.

That's supported by our department as well as the RCEs and the CSAP. We're taking a system approach, but within the system approach, in terms of policy and standards, flexibility for each Regional Centre of Education, each school, is really important. As we mentioned, schools are different sizes, different number of kids, different age of kids, so being able to tailor how and what is offered and what time they have to eat - all those things are really significant. It can't be a cookie cutter approach. It has to be general parameters that work for everybody, flexibility to see what works well. I think that's happening.

I know in some schools in Dave's district, what happens is somebody's standing at the door when you walk in in the morning, and you can pick up an apple or a piece of fruit or whatever. Or a basket is delivered to each classroom - so not picking that this classroom or these children are more or less needy or deserving, which is not the case. Just making it easy. It's there for everybody, and in most cases, those baskets come back absolutely empty.

It's not always sitting down in the cafeteria to eat. It's finding ways that will work for that particular school population. I think those are some of the key lessons we've learned from the breakfast program that can help us as we move forward with potential for a lunch program.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you for that. I know that in our schools in particular - I have three kids and they were on the bus at ten after seven in the morning. It was really difficult to have somebody eat that early in the day, and by the time they did finally get to school and class started, it was nice - that's what our school did. They put the baskets in the classrooms, so even if they did have breakfast and they wanted a banana, or what they had they didn't have enough of. I am excited to think that maybe universally that will be how the lunch program is implemented, if we can get there.

Also in the AG Report, she highlighted that there have been changes with the nutrition guide, which we talked about a little bit. Can you discuss how the updated school and food nutrition policy will reflect the more modern and current knowledge that we do have about nutrition? I'm not sure if that's the deputy minister or Ms. Barkhouse.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: Thank you for your question. I'll start. Certainly, there is room for growth in terms of - we accept the recommendation that as part of new policy development, we need to ensure that we're using the latest version of the Canada Food Guide and ensure that nutritional value is just where it should be. That is the work moving forward. Again, at the forefront of new policy development is ensuring that the latest version of the food guide is directly linked and is part of the new food and nutrition policy.

We know that's our work moving forward, and we're focused on that and enthused about the work.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: My last question was kind of touched on earlier, but I do want to ask it again. I know that, in particular in my community, we have a lot of local farmers who are willing and able to give the surplus food. As we work forward, what kind of opportunities would there be to double up on that, so to speak, so that we can encourage and have more coming from our local agriculture and seafood sectors?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We have strong relationships between our department, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture - and that is replicated at the local level. I think if we put our faith in people like David who is the regional executive director to strengthen those relationships and to be very attuned to what might be happening in terms of a season, or what crops are in excess or available that local providers are best equipped to deliver, I think that's something that we can double down on. Feeding our kids locally-produced, fresh food is not just good for those kids. It's also good for our agricultural industry, our fishing industry, and it's a vote of confidence in those people and those communities that are doing the work, and those valuable resource industries.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I very much look forward to strengthening those relationships, but I'll leave it, over to my colleague, the MLA for Shelburne.

NOLAN YOUNG: I've got a quick story to share - just speaking on locally produced food, but my previous job, my previous employer at the community college, we had a greenhouse on site. I'm sure others do this in some of the other schools, but all the food would be locally produced and - well, not all of it, but a lot of the food would be in the greenhouse which would be served in the cafeteria. It gets pretty local there, but just wanted to share that.

My question is, the South Shore and Annapolis Valley Regional Centres for Education were identified as having strong and robust school meal programs. I'm just wondering, are there any learnings or best practices we can expect to see integrated into an updated school food and nutrition policy?

CHRIS BOULTER: Certainly, the Auditor General did a great job pointing out some of the very good practices in both the South Shore region and Mr. Jones' Regional Centre for Education as well - the Annapolis Valley. There are many lessons we can take from the work that they've done that is either replicated or scaled provincially.

One specific example that I would use is related to a practice that's currently happening in the South Shore around recipe vetting. They have someone right now in the South Shore who has the expertise to take a look at recipes - lunch recipes - that school cafeterias or food service providers would be using to assure the appropriate nutritional

value. That is a high-impact practice that has resulted in nutritious meals on the South Shore.

There's no doubt that we could do that provincially. It doesn't mean that we would need one person in each regional centre for education to vet recipes. We can probably coordinate that work provincially, or at the very least, not have one person per Regional Centre for Education to do it to ensure that all service providers and school cafeterias are using recipes that have been vetted for nutritional value. That will result in increased oversight, and it'll result in more nutritious meals at school. That's a very specific example of something we know that South Shore does that we know we can replicate provincially.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just curious, as well, how do schools ensure that their food services reflect some of the diverse or some of the cultural needs of students?

CHRIS BOULTER: Often, the contract, if there is one - so, with a third-party provider, there would be a contract between the school and the third-party provider. As we know from the Auditor General's Report and from how RCEs operate, in many cases the food service provider, the cafeteria, could be run by the school or by the Regional Centre for Education as well. There's really three scenarios in which a food service would happen within a school. Either a third-party provider, a school-based cafeteria, or a regional-based cafeteria.

In all three of those cases, they're all very context-specific, and by that I mean a school works with the people in their cafeteria in their kitchen in regards to very local issues around food diversity. Depending on the composition of the school, that could make for very different meals in terms of what's served and what options currently exist.

We know those conversations happen every day at the school level, where the school looks at who's in our building and how do we serve them, in many ways, and that includes the food service and ensuring that the food service reflects the cultural diversity of the building.

NOLAN YOUNG: This isn't a question, but both of my children are vegetarians, so don't forget about vegetarians when we're doing the policy.

My question is to Ms. Barkhouse. Nova Scotia Health Authority provides approximately \$2.7 million a year in funding related to promoting healthy eating in schools. How is this funding used to promote healthy eating in schools? Can we expect changes in the design of this funding program to ensure alignment with the new school food and nutrition policy?

KARI BARKHOUSE: There are three pockets of funding that we provide. One is Health Promoting Schools funding, which is \$750,000. The other was put in place when the school food policy was first introduced. We took over the administration of that in

2018, and that is around school food policy implementation. That is a \$250,000 grant amount. Then we also administer, as I said, the SHEP funding on behalf of government, the \$1.7 million.

[10:00 a.m.]

Your question was, can we see some changes in terms of how that money's administered or what it's for?

NOLAN YOUNG: How is this funding used to promote healthy eating in schools, and can we expect changes in the design of this funding program to ensure alignment with the new policy?

KARI BARKHOUSE: I do think that as we engage in some of that consultation that Mr. Boulter spoke about, and as that new policy is developed and refined and refreshed, that there is an opportunity to really target more how that funding is utilized. When the funding was first put in place, it was put particularly around the nutrition policy funding. It was 2006, and targeted to support the schools to remove pop machines and fat fryers. It was a very certain amount for those purposes.

It has been administered over the years to continue to help support RCEs in the implementation, and some of those fundings are used, as you mentioned, in terms of providing resources for dietitians and others out of those funds. I do think with the Auditor General's report and the evaluation work that we have done this year, that there's lots of information there to help with that quality improvement and to work with our partners around that.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'll pass it over to my colleague, MLA MacDonald.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm very happy that you guys started all the recommendations. It's good not only that you accepted them, but that you started them all.

I do have some questions on cafeterias. I'm fortunate - Mr. Boulter knows my area - I've got a lot of schools that were turned over that were P3. They all have cafeterias, but we have a lot in this province that don't. The last budget allocated \$175 million for building schools and renovations.

I'm assuming - which is a bad thing to do - that new schools will have cafeterias, but do we also have a plan of whether we can renovate existing schools to have cafeterias? If we can't prepare the foods, we're going to have a hard time getting the foods out if we're expanding to lunch and that. I'm not sure if that goes to the deputy minister or Mr. Boulter.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Capital spending is always a hot topic, and there are needs in many places for new schools and for renovations. Certainly, it isn't exclusively used for new builds, so the ability to examine where there might be extra infrastructure needed is there. Part of our planning around the lunch program is doing just that - figuring out which schools do have the infrastructure, the room, the facility that might be needed, depending on the kind of food service that might be in place.

Definitely there's room for that kind of consideration. It doesn't necessarily mean that every school will have a cafeteria, but looking at what do they need to actually be able to deliver. If that means renovations or new cafeterias, that will certainly be in the hopper.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thanks for the answer. I get it, that we're not going to put full functioning cafeterias in all these buildings, but we may have to renovate them, so they have some facility. It just may not be a full functioning one.

I'd also like to know about the Healthy Schools Fund that was just announced. Can you tell me how this fund is working to improve physical as well as mental health outcomes of the students? I'm assuming that will be for Mr. Boulter.

CHRIS BOULTER: We're getting close to the second year of implementation of the healthy living grants. The funding formula is very similar to what I described earlier with the Student Support Grant, which is \$5,000 plus a dollar per student.

What had happened when these were initially implemented - I believe it was around this time last year, perhaps about a month later - schools received the funding with some criteria. The criteria were related to getting students moving, getting them outside, getting them engaged in learning, and active. There's a whole variety of how schools used that funding over the past year to create culturally safe, engaging environments.

There's been a reporting structure back, of course, related to how the funds have been used. Many of the examples we have back involve activity very consistent with health-promoting schools and the idea that we want students who are well fed, who are engaged, and we want students who are active. So the healthy living grants have landed very well.

To supplement that work, we're very excited later this Fall to be releasing the physical activity framework, which we feel will complement that work. The physical activity framework extends beyond physical education classes to consider how we keep students active and moving throughout the school day. We know activity is a big social determinant of health, in addition to food.

We're really focused on that, and certainly the healthy living grants landed very well. Schools are very enthusiastic about it and are looking forward to the next year of implementation.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald, you have three minutes left.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll defer my time to the member for Colchester North.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to the witnesses. I am very encouraged to hear the conversation about school nutrition and local agriculture. I'm a rural MLA, and very passionate about the agricultural industry. I believe that there are some lessons that we can learn there. I have no doubt that the agriculture industry across Nova Scotia would be very happy to be engaged in school nutrition.

With that in mind, I want to ask Deputy Minister Penfound - schools across Nova Scotia have the School Milk Program. Can you tell us a little bit about this program, specifically on how effective it is at ensuring students get proper nutrition, but also a little bit about how it works? Maybe that would be a model.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Certainly it takes lots of planning for this to happen and to implement these policies. In terms of how it works, the department collaborates with its partners to develop a policy. We'll be refocusing on updating that policy to make sure we're taking into account the new Canada Food Guide and the recommendations from the Auditor General.

How it works is then that policy is fed out into our regional service delivery folks, who are people like Dave, who then mobilize at the Regional Centre for Education and CSAP level to see how it can work in their particular area. My colleague Chris may have something to add on that.

CHRIS BOULTER: We know the School Milk Program is very valuable in terms of supplementing funding, so students have access to dairy products. It's been very successful, as the deputy has stated.

We know what happens is funding is filtered into the RCEs and CSAP and it's managed through Finance with the regional centres. We have lots of evidence to know that things are going well with that and it's a great partnership with agriculture and food and beverage. It's certainly something we'll revisit to look for areas of growth within the new food and nutrition policy, and certainly will be part of the work with that.

We're happy with how it works now. We know RCEs and CSAP are using the funding well in regard to implementing this and ensuring students receive this at a very low or no cost at all.

THE CHAIR: Order - nicely done. We are now going to our second round of questioning. Each caucus will have 11 minutes. (Interruption) It's a record. We will now begin with Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: One of the things that the witnesses started out with was talking about physical activity and health of children. We only have 11 minutes, so I just need quick answers. Are children receiving enough physical activity in school?

CHRIS BOULTER: Physical activity has traditionally been seen as physical education class, so I'll start within the scope of having Phys Ed classes. Then as I mentioned with the physical activity framework, part of what we want to do is to provide opportunities not just during physical education class, so through healthy living grants, through a variety of experiences during the day, getting kids active, up and moving.

We have a Time to Learn document, which identifies how many minutes per week or per cycle a student should receive all their subjects: English, French, mathematics, physical education. Schools do their best to adhere to that. You can only fit so many students in a gymnasium at one time, so some schools - especially larger schools - do have some challenges around scheduling of physical education. There's no doubt about that. We know all schools do their best to adhere to Time to Learn, which includes specific minutes for physical education.

Again, I just want to state to the physical activity framework, we see activity more broadly than just physical education classes as well.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: A couple of things. They're saying children who are five years old should be getting three hours a day. They're not getting three hours a day. Children six and up, within the school, should be getting an hour a day. We know our children are not getting Phys Ed classes every day. Sometimes they're getting it once or twice a week. That's all they're getting. When it's raining or snowing, it's really difficult.

I want to pivot a little bit because you've mentioned grants a few times. I will say that while the grant system is great, it depends on the amount of effort being put in by schools and filling out grant applications. Not all schools are created equal.

One of the things that's really bothersome to me is why schools, SACs have to fundraise for playgrounds. We've talked about physical education here; we've talked about the health of our children.

Again, I will go back to some schools have a lot more capability to fundraise for a \$250,000 playground unit. We have several places in our community where the playgrounds are falling apart, there are holes in the slide, and they just take it off and the kids can't use it. I think that there has to be more emphasis on providing those kids with what they need. We have basketball courts with giant holes in them, we have soccer fields

that are overgrown. All these things that are happening. It's true. The kids are seeing this, and it has an impact on them.

[10:15 a.m.]

When we reach out to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and HRCE, they say, it's not our responsibility to provide kids with playgrounds and soccer fields, we don't have the funding or the money to fix the potholes, or it's not a priority. They don't say they don't have the money, it's not a priority right now to fix those potholes in a basketball court.

We have a basketball court at Herring Cove Junior High, if you want to call it a basketball court, that has absolutely no fence around it and the basketball court faces the parking lot. So if you miss, guess where the ball goes. It makes no sense at all. Structurally it makes no sense at all.

We talk about the food program, which is underfunded. The quality in it are just not there.

Then, our children go to - and I use the example of the kids in my area. They play volleyball or whatever, and they go to another school in Hammonds Plains or Truro or wherever, and they see playgrounds and basketball courts. They see all these different things.

William King Elementary in Herring Cove is a great example. We have to fundraise, like, \$300,000 for a playground.

We talked about the outdoor living spaces. There was a big push from HRCE and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development around outdoor classrooms and experiencing outdoors. You had to fundraise for that. There were some grants, but it didn't cover the whole thing. In Harrietsfield, we had to fundraise \$150,000 for it.

It's great to say these things, but when the department's not actually providing the funding for it, it creates inequality in our schools. Quite frankly, it's not fair.

What is the department doing to change these inequalities in the food programs, the playgrounds, the outdoor learning centres? How do we make sure that just because your child doesn't necessarily live in the most affluent community, they can get the same resources?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire, just a note from LTV. Could you pull your microphone down a bit? Folks are having a hard time hearing you - and you have just over three minutes left.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I don't disagree with the points that you make. On the food side, as I mentioned, one of the things that we're doing which hopefully is addressing some of those concerns is making sure that our food policies are universal. It's not means tested, that everybody can get the food. I think that's a really significant and very important way to approach this.

I would - with your permission, Madam Chair - toss it to Mr. Boulter to speak about the other issue about outside infrastructure, those kinds of things.

CHRIS BOULTER: As with Deputy Minister Penfound, I don't disagree with your points. Certainly I have seen some evidence of that myself in regard to different schools and some of the different infrastructure they have available to them. Our ongoing work through the grants - again, knowing what you've said - is to ensure that students do receive equitable opportunities to have facilities that serve their needs: their learning needs, their achievement needs, and their well-being needs.

As you mentioned, there was a one-time grant of \$25,000 for outdoor learning spaces. We know many elementary schools across the province took advantage of that. Outdoor learning is something we're certainly focusing on. As we release the physical activity framework, one of the things we want to do is provide a variety of opportunities so regardless of the physical plant that you're in and what's on that campus, there are opportunities for students to engage in physical activity.

I certainly hear what you're saying, and it's understood.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: My point is, in providing a \$25,000 grant for outdoor learning spaces and then asking the school association committees and the parents to raise the rest of it, do you not see how that causes inequality in schools?

It's almost - you're dangling an opportunity that not all can afford. There's a reason why three of the nine schools in my community have an outdoor learning centre - because the kids, and the parents, and the staff see these things and they get really excited. We're going to have an outdoor learning centre. We're going to have a new playground because there are these grants. I'll tell you, most of the grant writing that happens in my community comes through my office. We hire someone to do these things. Once the volunteerism is gone, again, it puts these schools at a disadvantage.

What I would say is by offering \$25,000 as a starting point - and we know \$25,000 isn't going to build an outdoor learning centre - it's putting some schools at a disadvantage. Does the department not see that?

I understand what you're trying to do, but you have priority schools - you call them priority schools for a reason. Can we not change the funding formula depending on how active the SAC is and the priorities of that school?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I think that's a reasonable suggestion, that we should be looking at whether or not the same amount of money works for this number of schools. How we figure it out I'm not sure, but I think your point is well taken and is a logical analysis of the circumstances that exist.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire, you have 30 seconds.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I love this. I just think that we can't just universally paint every school the same and every community the same, because quite frankly, they're not. It's not just about the economics of the community. Some communities are busier than others, some have more volunteers, some don't. I just want every child to be able to have the same opportunity. I think all of you do too, so thank you.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time has now elapsed for the Liberal questioning. We move on to the NDP with Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to follow up on a couple of things that I heard. Number one, to my colleague's point about vegetarian meals. I think that's a really important point, actually. Not only are a lot of families vegetarian, but also a lot of religions are vegetarian.

Vegetarian food is generally healthier and generally cheaper if you know how to do it. I was vegetarian for 10 years. At that time, I toured around Nova Scotia to schools with a school play, like a puppet show, and basically couldn't find anything to eat anywhere. This was, again, 25 years ago, but things have gotten better.

I was also listening to a thing on the radio as I was walking down here today where, because of the cost of living, the cost of groceries and the cost of food rising so much the idea of cooking or planning recipes with the season and making food stretch is also a really important thing. This connects to the local food procurement. In the Fall, the menus might have a lot of root vegetables on the menu, lots of soups. Delicious. That kind of thing. In the Spring, lots of green salads - that kind of stuff.

It would be really forward-thinking and exciting if that kind of recipe vetting and all of that was going into the school policy. I really hope that we see that coming out of it. I guess this is not really an official question, but can those kinds of requirements go into RFPs for outside, third-party food providers?

That brings me to my actual question. We're seeing in the Auditor General's Report that healthier options on school food menus are more expensive than the unhealthy options. This is what my question before was related to, but a bit of profiteering. It's cheaper to do chicken strips and fries than it is to do salads and lentil stew or whatever. Ultimately, to the Province it's not cheaper because if we have everyone eating chicken strips and fries

for their entire childhood, we're going to have some serious health issues and costs down the road.

It's funny, my daughter just changed schools. In the elementary school, there's a menu that you can choose from for the outside food provider, and they're all healthy options. They all seem mostly to fit into the school food policy. Now this year she's in the junior high, and there are all these healthy options. Then there's this list of other stuff that you can eat. God love her, she goes, "Mama, can I please have some money for lunch today so I can buy the salad? It's so good." I'm somewhat impressed by that. I think she's a strange 10-year-old.

My point is, why do we even have the unhealthy options? Why is there a scenario where there're healthy options that are more expensive? Why don't we just only have healthy food and foods that are complying with the policy? I'd like that answered, I guess.

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I'll start and then perhaps toss it to my colleagues. I think there is probably always a balance between what is great to offer a kid and what they will really eat, but I don't think we should default to that. Part of what we should be doing and are doing with our food programs is trying to teach children and have them understand the merit and value, and how wonderful good food is to eat. I think that's a legitimate thing to think about.

Mr. Young and I have the same previous employer - I know at the community college that was often the case. We had campuses where there were wonderful culinary programs, and there was effort made to serve all that food in the cafeterias. Nobody would buy it; they wanted burgers and fries.

Those are adults, but I think we're up against the same thing in our public school system. I think limiting the choices so that you don't have any, or as many, of those unhealthy choices available to you would certainly contribute to what we know is one of the social determinants of health: eating healthy. All those good things. I'm not sure if Mr. Boulter has anything to add.

CHRIS BOULTER: We do know through the Auditor General's Report that when the field testing happened in cafeterias that do what you've just described - where there's the meal and then there's all the stuff you can buy outside of the meal of the day every day - those were often the food items that had the minimum nutrition. If we create buckets of minimum, moderate, and maximum nutrition within our existing policy - we know those are big areas of risk in terms of minimum nutritional value, the stuff that you can just go grab every day.

We accept the recommendation. There's room for growth. We know there's more accountability that's required in all cafeterias, and as per the Auditor General's Report, especially third-party providers in regard to what options are there every day in addition to

the meal of the day. In reading the report and speaking with RCEs about this, I think one of the immediate areas of growth for us is to say the meal of the day, generally I suspect, has that maximum nutritional value. In many cases, there's definitely room for growth - not all. But it's those items that are served every day in addition that you have access to that are often those items of minimum nutrition. Through the work on the new policy, we need to address that. There's no doubt about that, and that's something that needs to improve.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm happy for that answer. I just go to, when will we see it improve, what's the end goal, and when do we see this? I take back my suggestion of the end of 2023. I think it should be the beginning of the school year, 2023, so how about you shoot for that one?

I guess I just wanted to ask in general - and thank you, Deputy Minister Penfound, for acknowledging the importance of a universal program so that there's no stigma and that everyone just has the same choices no matter where you are or who you are. I know that the lunch program relies on some investment from the federal government, and I know that Nourish Nova Scotia's been doing a lot of lobbying to the federal government.

I'm just wondering if you can provide an update on the discussions with the federal government. What are the timelines for the universal food program, and will the department commit to reporting back to Public Accounts Committee on that progress as it happens?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: We have been actively engaging and meeting with the federal government, as recently as this past Friday. Mr. Boulter and several other senior officials met with the federal government to talk about what they might be able to offer. Those discussions are ongoing.

We're really encouraged for a couple of reasons. Several federal ministers have nutritional healthy food in their mandate letters, so they've got the marching orders to do something about this and to do it on a national level. We're very encouraged by that. We're also encouraged by the discussions because they have knowledge that, generally, Nova Scotia can deliver. If they ask us to do something, we can pull it off.

Part of that is because we have great staff who can do it, and part of it that we're a nice size. We're not Ontario, we're not British Columbia, we're right in there in terms of being able mobilize and be an exemplar for how these programs can be delivered.

We don't have a timeline for when we'll have an answer from the federal government, but we know it is a very live file. Our activity is significant in terms of making sure that we're lined up to take advantage of whatever they can offer. We certainly would commit to reporting back to this committee when we have progress.

[10:30 a.m.]

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaking of healthy food, we have some liquid gold being pumped out right now, folks. Can't get any better than that. I don't have any more real questions, so I'm just going to wing it here. When we met with the Auditor General in camera, I did talk about this, so I'm going to talk about it again.

There's a really great book that I read when my children were young about the school food program in France. This family from Canada moved to France for a year, I forget why, but they have a toddler and she's a super picky eater. Then she goes into the school system in France where they have family-style meals in the classroom.

They clear off a table, they put the tablecloth on, they set actual glassware, earthenware, and cutlery, and the kids eat family-style. They serve themselves, and the result is - and we know this from lots of studies - a great relationship with food, fewer bad relationships, i.e., eating disorders and that kind of thing later on in life, and healthier kids and a healthier population. Kids are exposed to more flavours and more interesting things.

That to me is the gold standard - how much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: Thirty seconds.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thirty seconds. That is what we're working on as a standard in Nova Scotia. I will just also reiterate what my colleague was talking about. We need true equity when it comes to schools in general, because we both represent places where there is a huge inequity in terms of the riding itself. You can see the impacts of that on children and their learning.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for the NDP questioning has elapsed. We'll now move on to the PC caucus with Mr. Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: It's been a great conversation. I'll try to stay away from the agriculture side of it, but the comment that the feds know that Nova Scotia can deliver - I love that. I love what we've done with the school milk program. It's been a while since my children were in school, but I believe that's subsidized by the dairy industry and the Province. I think the Province absorbed the big increase in the last six or eight months. That's all good stuff.

I want to turn to Ms. Barkhouse if I can for a minute. The provincial government does a fair bit with respect to healthy eating in schools. Have community health boards or other organizations or groups like that been involved in nutritional programming for schools? If they are, can you tell us what role they play to promote nutrition in schools?

KARI BARKHOUSE: At the local level, I talked a little bit about our public health nutritionist. In Public Health, we also have positions called health promoters. We work very closely with municipalities, community health boards, and our education partners. Those are probably the three big sectors that we work with at the local level.

Each community health board across the province, as you know, consists of volunteers from the community. They all look a little different as well in terms of the issues and priorities that they establish for their community.

One of the ways that we work with community health boards is with their community health planning process. In that regard, our staff would support the CHBs with data and also best practices in terms of interventions and approaches that are most effective in terms of improving population health outcomes. That's one of the ways that we work really closely with our CHBs.

Our managers in Public Health as well, in the healthy communities section, also meet with the community health board managers on a very regular basis to try to find ways we can support them in their community health planning process.

One of the things I mentioned before, in relation to the pandemic, is that most of the staff who would have worked with CHBs were all redeployed for a couple of years. We're just getting back to that work now. Most of our staff are now returned. We do still have some who are redeployed in healthy communities work, but that primarily is the area that we work with in terms of CHBs.

TOM TAGGART: Thanks very much. I'll hand it off to my colleague for Hants East.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you, Madam Chair. I believe this is going to go to the deputy minister.

You talked about the breakfast program during COVID-19 and other school food that you had to change because of COVID-19 requirements. Can you get into some more details of what had to change and what the cost increases were? Do you know what I'm asking?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: Thank you for the question. Maybe either of my colleagues will be able to provide more detail, but I can start.

Part of what had to change was, in some instances, food was packaged so that there was not the same opportunity for the transmission of COVID-19 or whatever else, so being able to do that. There were also changes in terms of how many children would congregate

in a certain area to eat. You weren't going to put a couple hundred kids in a cafeteria all at once.

I'm not sure that there were significant cost increases, but there certainly would be adjustments in how the food was delivered. I believe my colleague from the Annapolis Valley may be able to provide some specifics.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jones.

DAVE JONES: Thanks for the question. Certainly, during COVID-19, there were increased costs related to packaging. We weren't sure what that would look like, so we were being very careful and working with our partners in Public Health to follow Public Health guidelines, to make sure that happened.

We also moved more toward bringing food to students in classrooms, rather than having them come into the cafeteria. That caused a reduction in meals that were being purchased - that looked different. I think there were some families who were concerned about having their children eat at school, because they weren't sure about COVID-19 either. So sales went down during COVID-19 for our cafeterias, for sure.

There were increased costs related to that. I don't know the exact numbers, but there were some increased costs during COVID-19 around food delivery.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm checking to see if Mr. Boulter wanted to add. He was nodding.

CHRIS BOULTER: I certainly echo what Mr. Jones stated. I think a lot of what happened during COVID-19 was really about how it was operationalized within the school.

Here's a specific example. Pre-COVID-19, you might walk into a school and there might be a table right at the front with apples, granola bars - other items that would be sort of grab-and-go breakfast items. We knew a big part of COVID-19, when students returned to the in-school situation, campus, what have you, is that cohorting was a big piece of that. What we saw a lot of schools do was transition from a central area where people can congregate and get food for breakfast, to delivering it to classrooms to ensure that the cohorting remained consistent.

So that's a bit more detail on Mr. Jones' example that he just mentioned. I don't know about an increased cost to that. Certainly, there was more effort required by staff to do that.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Finally, I'll just make a comment based on what my colleague on the end mentioned. I had a daughter who loved chicken fingers. When we went out, she never wanted fries - she wanted salad every time. The funniest part was when they'd say to me, that'll cost more money - just get her a salad. Now it's not. It's a great part. They don't say it's extra.

I do want to thank everybody for their time. That's it for us, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: I'm in shock here now. We're going to finish the questioning early here. Are there any final statements?

ROSALIND PENFOUND: I'd just like to close by thanking you for your questions and your thoughtful suggestions, and thanking the Office of the Auditor General for their excellent analysis. We have accepted all the recommendations and have already started working on them.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Barkhouse, did you have any final remarks?

KARI BARKHOUSE: Yes, we do. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge my colleagues in Public Health who have shown strength, resilience, and sheer determination to help keep Nova Scotians safe and healthy over the past two and a half years.

Before COVID-19, when you heard the term Public Health, you likely thought about immunizations or communicable diseases like tuberculosis and measles. Now we have the opportunity to share the entire breadth of what we do on a daily basis, healthy eating in schools being one piece of the work to create healthier communities and populations.

It is a privilege for us to work with our partners in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to support them in this work. Together we have an opportunity to change the trajectory of educational and health outcomes for children and youth in Nova Scotia. As we all know, the health system is under immense pressure, and if there is an opportunity to improve our children's health outcomes for the future, we will finally be putting the horse ahead of the cart. By investing the time and resources now, we'll be saving millions of dollars in health care in the future.

THE CHAIR: Our witnesses are free to go. We're going to continue on with our committee business, but thank you so much for coming out today. There were some items that we did ask for some follow-up, so if you could attend to those promptly, we would be most appreciative.

Now we will move along to committee business. We did have some discussions on the record of decision at the October 12th meeting. There was a motion left on the floor,

and this is related to the subcommittee on agenda and procedures' record of decision. This motion was the first topic for the PC caucus. I'm going to recognize Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I would ask to defer anything that's not pressing with the record of decision until a future date. We have a training session coming up on the 2nd.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on that? Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I agree.

THE CHAIR: Pretty soon we're all going to join hands and sing Kumbaya, but I think that we just need to have an indication that folks are in agreement.

I see nods all around. We will defer that.

As well, there was a motion. There's one item on the record of decision relating to the witnesses for the upcoming Auditor General's Report regarding immigration and population growth, which will be tabled on November 8th. As that date is fast approaching, we just need to agree to approve the witnesses for the matter so we can confirm the meeting.

The witnesses for that particular report are the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration and Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, ISANS. Any discussion on that? Do we have agreement? We have agreement.

There is also a motion still on the record from the September 21st in camera meeting. I just need to know if you want to proceed with that today. (Interruption). There was a motion still on the record from the September 21st in camera meeting. Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: With the unanimous consent of the House, and in the spirit of collaboration, I'd like to withdraw that motion.

THE CHAIR: I'm looking across. Can I have an indication as to whether there's agreement? I am seeing nods all around. Excellent. We will withdraw that motion. Thank you, Mr. Young.

Our next meeting date is November 2nd. It's an in camera discussion of the CAAF proposal discussion. If there's no further business, I am going to adjourn the meeting 15 minutes early. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:45 a.m.]