

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, January 17, 2024

COMMITTEE ROOM

**Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement:
Programming Impacts to Date and Funding Impact to the Province's Finances**

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
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Hon. Brendan Maguire
Susan Leblanc
Lisa Lachance

[Nolan Young was replaced by Chris Palmer.]

In Attendance:

Kim Adair
Auditor General

Kim Langille
Committee Clerk

James de Salis
Administrative Support Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Elwin LeRoux - Deputy Minister
Tracy Crowell - Executive Director, Early Childhood Development
Pam Aucoin - Executive Director, Early Learning and Childcare



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 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 the Chair of the committee.

I'm going to remind everyone to place your phones on silent, and I'll ask committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with MLA Palmer.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: On today's agenda, we have officials with us from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with respect to the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement: Programming Impacts to Date and Funding Impact to the Province's Finances.

I'll ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with the witness on the right. That would be Ms. Crowell.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I should note that we also have officials from the Auditor General's Office, the Legislative Counsel Office, and Legislative Committees Office in attendance with us as well.

I would invite Deputy Minister LeRoux to make opening remarks.

ELWIN LEROUX: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to join you today and to speak on behalf of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Executive Directors Pam Aucoin and Tracy Crowell lead our work on early learning and child care. They are joining me today to address your questions and share their passion and knowledge about the work we have done and continue to do in this transformation.

Nova Scotia's early learning and child care transformation is anchored around four pillars that will produce a system that is accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high quality. These pillars guide our work and will ensure a more reliable and stable child care system for families in Nova Scotia.

Quality child care has been proven to significantly contribute to a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Understanding this importance, the Nova Scotia government, in partnership with our federal counterparts, now invests \$277 million annually in early learning and child care, which is an increase of \$83 million year over year. This investment is supporting the historic transformation of our system and is already helping to improve the lives of Nova Scotia's children, parents, and primary caregivers, the people who work in this sector.

Prior to starting this work, the existing early learning and child care system in Nova Scotia lacked cohesion and a unified strategy. Individual operators made independent business decisions. Families reported significant differences in their experiences. The shift towards a more comprehensive system - fueled by the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which I'll call "the agreement", marks a significant departure from the past to a system unified and reprioritized in focus. The accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care system we are building today will benefit families across the province for generations to come.

Nova Scotia's child care system supports thousands of families, with more than 320 centres and 200 family home providers offering provincially licensed and funded programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. There are also many sites with providers offering before- and after-school care through the Nova Scotia Before and After Program.

The invitation to appear today referenced the program and funding aspects of the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and the

Canada-Nova Scotia Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. These agreements enabled the start of our transformative work, and we acknowledge the impact of the associated federal funding.

The full picture of change, though, is more than a financial story. It includes expanding a workforce, increasing spaces for children, defining quality programming, all captured in the pillars of our work. The progress Nova Scotians are now seeing is the result of department programs recognizing the complexity of our existing system and responding to the unique child care needs of our families.

Since entering into the federal agreement in July 2021, we've added more than 3,800 child care spaces. The agreement references the addition of 9,500 spaces by March 2026 - a target that acknowledges the importance of increasing access to child care. We are more than 40 per cent there. More importantly still, the infrastructure we have created lays the foundation for a responsive, flexible system that can continue to grow beyond 2026.

There have also been great strides in ensuring affordability for families. More than a year ago, child care fees were reduced by an average of 50 per cent for most families. I say "most" because as of last year, more than 4,000 families received additional support from the Child Care Subsidy Program that helps further reduce fees, resulting in more than 3,000 families accessing child care in Nova Scotia for free. Progress to date with affordability has saved many Nova Scotia families thousands of dollars in 2023 - savings they will continue to see this year and next year until families are paying an average of \$10 per day in March 2026.

We're also working to build an inclusive child care sector that can offer the types of care that families need. An example of this would be after-hour care, like the new Health Park after-hours child care pilot for the children of health care workers. It's located close to the Cape Breton Regional Hospital in Sydney. None of this progress would be possible without our sector partners, operators, and early childhood educators.

The department works closely with an Early Learning and Child Care Engagement Table made up of operators, ECEs, early childhood development experts, and families - all of whom share insights and expertise. First voice experiences are informing this transformation. We heard from them that to offer the highest quality of child care, we needed to professionalize the sector. Most recently, they helped guide:

- the establishment of a wage scale for ECEs, raising wages between 14 and 42 per cent for 95 per cent of the workforce;
- a second wage increase of \$3.14 to \$4.20 for ECEs working in provincially licensed child care; and

- the introduction of a group benefits and pension package for all employees of the licensed sector.

We've also supported new pathways into the sector with hundreds of people participating in new diploma and upskilling programs annually: accelerated programs getting people working faster; virtual programs providing access for people, especially those living in rural and remote areas; programs specifically supporting newcomers - French-language, Africentric, and Mi'kmaw programming that provides for more inclusive child care options. The list goes on.

Children deserve care that gives them the best start in life, and families deserve care that's accessible, affordable regardless of their financial means, inclusive, and high quality. We are now building that system.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. We now welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.

THE CHAIR: I should just let committee members know we ran through some of the rules of the committee. If members think that an answer is becoming repetitious, they'll signal to me, so I may interrupt you if that happens. Just to let you know that's what's going on.

We begin our questioning today with the Liberal caucus. You will have 20 minutes. MLA Maguire, I don't think you had an opportunity to introduce yourself, so if you'd like to do that.

MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Hello everyone. Brendan Maguire, MLA for Halifax Atlantic.

THE CHAIR: You have 20 minutes.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Let's do this. It's good to see everyone here today. Good to see you, deputy minister. We have a long history of phone calls. We've probably had thousands of phone calls over the years, so it's good to see you. Let's start with some straightforward, simple questions. How many children in Nova Scotia right now, at this point in time, are waiting for a daycare space?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: We can talk about the number of seats that we have. More than 22,000 students or children today are currently in regulated child care. We provincially do

not track the number of students who are working with independent businesses - a long wait-list.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I want to be clear. If someone comes into my office and is looking for housing, there is a list for people waiting for housing. If somebody is looking for a doctor, there is a list for people waiting for a doctor. But there's no list? It's a yes or no question. There's no list for people waiting for a daycare space?

ELWIN LEROUX: Executive Director Aucoin has some information she'd like to share on that topic.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Aucoin.

PAM AUCOIN: At this time there is no centralized wait-list function for individuals who are looking for early learning and child care spaces. We do currently have a system of over 320 providers, and family home agencies and providers as well. They have their own processes in place that manage registration and wait lists.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: You've changed the way - and I say you, government - changed the way that daycare is provided. We're moving from the private sector to a not-for-profit or a non-profit model, and yet you have no clue how many people in Nova Scotia are waiting? How is that possible? You're spending tens of millions of dollars every year, and you have no clue how many people are waiting for child care? How can you make an informed decision on how many spaces are needed - whether it's in the infant, toddler, or before- or after-school program - when you have no clue how many people are waiting?

This is why parents are frustrated right now. This is why parents are upset - because the vast majority of seats that have been created have been for before- and after-school programs. We know that, and yet infants and toddlers are being left behind. That was one of the main reasons for this program - so that parents, predominantly women, could go back to work. I'm speaking to people right across Nova Scotia who are waiting years and years for space. Their kids are aging out before they get a daycare space. How can you sit here today and tell this committee with a straight face that you have no list, and you have no idea how many child care spaces are needed at this very moment?

How are you spending the money? It just doesn't make sense. Do you not see the frustration here?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: We appreciate you setting the context of why this transformation has been necessary. The move to a stable system throughout Nova Scotia is important for those reasons. Families are counting on us to develop a system that replaces the one that you've just described. Our agreement with the federal government to 2026

actually answers most of the questions. How are we making informed decisions? We do know that we've set a target of 9,500 spaces to be created, so we know the target that we have to meet, and we're 40 per cent there.

[9:15 a.m.]

We are not only making gains, as you've described, in before- and after-school care. We have been opening centres that have been providing care for children, toddlers, and pre-schoolers, to respond to making sure that families have the kind of care that they need.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Again, what you just said there is that the private sector made a mess of this and that you're coming in to fix this. That's what you just said. You just said the system was broken and that's why we need a change, yet you can't tell me how many spaces are needed. Where does the 9,500 come from? You just said to me that you have no list. You have no idea. You've had two and a half years to gather that information. That should be the number one thing you do.

The moment those contracts were signed - in fact, it's been more than two and a half years. The contract was signed under the previous government, and there's no list. How are you making an informed decision on how many seats? It just feels to me like that number's been pulled out of the air because you're saying to me: We have no list, we have no idea.

The truth of the matter is that there are supposed to be 9,500 spaces opened by 2026. You are nowhere near that pace, let's be frank, right here, right now in this committee. To date, there are 3,861 total spaces open, and a total of 1,031 spaces closed. That means you have a net gain of 22,830, and when you subtract the before- and after-school spots, that's 970. That's fine. We know the before- and after-school spots are important, but the whole purpose of this transformation from the federal government and the provincial government was to take care of all of it, but most importantly is the infant and toddler.

The Nova Scotia Before and After Program was a huge success way before the daycare stuff came in. Let's be honest here. The EXCEL Program was something that was massive for age fours and up, and that was implemented before the federal government started bringing money down on this program. I know that because I was there for it. I know that because people around this committee, and people around this table, were against it and voted against it. One party voted for it before the funding for the Before and After Program - and it's been a massive success.

I want to know here today - I don't need a whole thing: How many spaces are there right now in Nova Scotia for infant and toddler? How many spaces are needed by 2026? Where are the daycare deserts? We know they exist. This is information you should have

at your fingertips. How many infant and toddler spaces have been opened in the last two years? How many need to be opened? What areas are in most desperate need for these spaces?

ELWIN LEROUX: I have some answers to some of the questions that are all wrapped up in there. I know my colleague will want to answer the question about where the 9,500 comes from. I can assure committee that the decisions we are making are evidence-informed decisions. (Interruption)

We have the data that we need in order to make the decisions that we need to build the system that we're intending to build. For example, as you described the EXCEL Program, that is not a provincial program, and it is not the Nova Scotia Before and After School Program. Our transformation is to ensure provincially that all families have access to the kind of care that they need. For example, in the agreement, 9,500 - you asked where that comes from. I know my colleague, Pam Aucoin, would like to answer that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Aucoin.

PAM AUCOIN: The 9,500 net new spaces that is our target underneath the Canada-wide agreement was a target that's based on 59 per cent coverage. It was a target that's consistent across Canada for jurisdictions. The number of spaces vary, of course, between provinces because that is population-based.

Our goal is to work toward the creation of those 9,500 spaces. We absolutely know and acknowledge that creation of those spaces has been a little slower than anticipated. But what we have focused on is we can't talk about creating spaces without talking about having a strong and stable workforce of highly trained early childhood educators. Every space that's created needs an early childhood educator to support the learning of children.

There are many areas of focus under the Canada-wide agreement. The deputy minister referenced the four pillars of accessibility, affordability, quality, and inclusion. We have to pay attention to all of those areas to have a balanced approach to transformation. Having all these spaces without also having early childhood educators will also not work, so we put a lot of focus on developing the ECE workforce, professionalizing the sector, increasing wages, and so on.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm glad that you touched on the ECEs because they were forced out on strike. You said that you need a highly trained, motivated workforce - and they had to go on strike to get 50 cents an hour, whatever it is. Forgive me for not knowing. Before I got to this committee, I was receiving calls and messages, and I've been getting this for months from ECEs who haven't received their back pay - something that was promised. We're well over a year.

You talk about building your workforce, yet you haven't given them their back pay. We can shake our head yes and no, but to the deputy minister, to the executive director, I can give you names of hundreds who have reached out to me. I can send you those emails. I've reached out to your department, and what I've been told is: Well, that's not on us - that's on the employer.

Well, ultimately, you oversee all of this. If employers are not giving the money and the back pay, then it's on you to step in to make sure that it happens. People are leaving the workforce because of that.

I'm still stuck on this 9,500, because you haven't told me how you came to that number. The truth of the matter is, we now have a government that's saying that they want to double the population by 2030 - or 2060, is it? Sorry, 2060; 2030, I was like, Oh my God. Good luck with that.

Has that been accounted for? People aren't going to come to Nova Scotia. You know where they're going to go? They're going to go to New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, who've already implemented \$10-a-day daycare already. It's there, it's done.

This province pulls in more money, has more resources, and yet we can't do it. It's because those provinces stepped up with money of their own to help do this.

When can Nova Scotians expect - and I don't need a history of \$10 a day; I know all about it - when can Nova Scotians expect to pay \$10 a day? What year, what month?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Executive Director Crowell wanted to answer your question, MLA Maguire.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I wanted to go back to spaces, actually, so maybe we can come back to the \$10-a-day question, if that's okay.

Again, just to reinforce what my colleague talked about in terms of the 9,500 spaces, I think that it is fair to say it was based on population of 2021, when that agreement was negotiated. We absolutely recognize the unprecedented growth in our population. It's not lost on us that when we reduced fees and made child care more affordable for families, which is absolutely fantastic - it has increased demand significantly. We fully expect that we will need to create more than 9,500 spaces.

As Deputy Minister LeRoux said in his opening remarks, we are creating long-term sustainable programs that will enable us to create spaces year over year. This is going to be a marathon. I think we're going to be creating spaces for many years to come, especially given the targeted population growth.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I don't think it's going to be a marathon; I think it's going to be a miracle if you reach 9,500 spaces in the next two years.

My question was about the \$10-a-day daycare. I need a year and a month. When will that be fully implemented?

Also, forgive me for misspeaking - it's P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador that have implemented it already. I said New Brunswick.

What year and what month can Nova Scotians expect to pay \$10 a day for daycare?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Nova Scotia has an agreement with the federal government, as we described - the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. In that agreement, we set our targets for when we will reach \$10 a day. Currently, that's set for March 2026, although we have made reductions in child care fees for families - 50 per cent reduction for most families, 95 per cent impact. We are on track to be at \$10 a day by March 2026.

I appreciate the comparisons to other provinces. Many people do that. It's hard to compare progress on a transformation one item at a time. We decided the labour force is really important. We're going to build a system that includes a robust retention program that's rooted in benefits and pension for the labour force to make sure to build a system where people will be able to work and be successful. That's part of the stability of our system. Other provinces have made decisions that put other priorities first.

We recognize that a transformation has to be built on a very solid foundation. Our pillars assure that we do that with quality programming, with workforce, with affordability, and with access to the variety of spaces that families will need.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, you have five minutes.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: See, your words don't match your actions. Building a quality workforce, a motivated workforce, and all these other things - they had to go out on strike to get that. I just informed all of you that some of them, a lot of them, have been waiting - it's been over a year - for their back pay, and they haven't received it. That's not motivating.

I don't think it's proper to essentially - I don't want to say the word insult but throw the other provinces under the bus. I think if you reach out to Newfoundland and Labrador and P.E.I., they'll tell you that they're investing in their workforce. In fact, they are. They'll tell you that they're doing everything they can to retain and attract ECEs. At the same time, they're able to walk and chew gum. They're doing that and implementing \$10-a-day daycare.

To me, I think it's a bit insulting for us to sit here in the committee and say, that those provinces haven't concentrated on their workforce or the people. They're concentrating on other things. It would be interesting if we as a committee could reach out to them and get those statistics and maybe send them to the department to show them what their statistics are like.

The reason why I'm passionate about this is because we're in a cost of living crisis. Everything is going up. I say this week after week. The only thing that's not going up is paycheques. Gas is going up, fuel is going up, power is going up. We are the heaviest taxed province in Canada, and this is an opportunity for us to really help working-class, middle-class, and low-income families who are struggling the most, who are bearing the brunt of all of this. Yet there doesn't seem to be an urgency, especially when it comes to infant and toddler. I've been here for 20 minutes, and I haven't heard a single answer on how many spaces are for infant and toddler, how many spaces are needed for infant and toddler, how many spaces have clothes for infant and toddler.

That's allowing families - mostly women - to get back into the workforce. Those are the facts. That helps families, that helps them pay their bills. I know a lot of people - single moms, single fathers, and individuals and families - who are staying home now, even to this day, because it's too expensive.

My question is: Of those 9,500 spaces, how many of them will be infant and toddler, and how many spaces today do we need? How many are we lacking for infant and toddler? Why haven't you stepped up and reached out before you shut down the private sector? They had that information at their fingertips. Why didn't you reach out to them and say, Give us your lists? How many people are on your lists? If you did, why aren't you publishing it? A lot of questions for two minutes.

ELWIN LEROUX: I know my colleague, Pam Aucoin, will have some information she would like to share. I do want to assure members of the committee, as MLA Maguire has referenced, a late pay delivery change for ECEs. I want to make sure the committee is aware that is not in the early childhood sector. That is not the group we're talking about today. That is in the pre-Primary program with three different regions in agreement with union and employers. The deadlines to be met in order for that information to flow through payroll and be actioned appropriately could not have been met. The union has been working with the employer . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Maguire has an interjection.

[9:30 a.m.]

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: That's fine, but you're the deputy minister of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. EXCEL program: I know we're talking about a certain part of this child care, but I can tell you as a father of three, I depend on the EXCEL program. A lot of people depend on the EXCEL program for child care. This is all part of it. If you don't think the ECEs are talking and speaking to their counterparts - the way we treat one should be the way we treat all, and right now, they're waiting. I just want to know the toddler and the infant numbers, and Ms. Aucoin has that.

ELWIN LEROUX: I just wanted to confirm the EXCEL program has nothing to do with and is not waiting on salary adjustments in the regions that we're speaking about in the pre-Primary program. EXCEL is not connected to the pre-Primary program.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for the Liberal questioning has elapsed. We'll now go to the NDP. Your time is to 9:50 a.m. MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: First of all, I wanted to start off - to apologize for the playback on my phone. I was reviewing reports that came out of Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario this week around the viability of their \$10-a-day daycare systems. Both provinces have signalled concerns that they won't meet their targets without further financial injections. That's both an example of Newfoundland and Labrador - where I was actually trying to check if they had \$10-a-day daycare yet - a more comparable jurisdiction I would say, and then Ontario, which is obviously a much larger jurisdiction.

I think those are two ends of the spectrum, and however they approached it first - whether it's been workforce or otherwise - they're signalling that, in fact, they're not going to make it - they don't have enough money to meet the goals. At this point, you're 40 per cent of the way in terms of your target. I'm wondering on the financial management side: how much are you on the way? Are you going to be able to do what you're supposed to do by 2026 with the money you currently have?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: The Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement is an agreement between the Province and the federal government. We work regularly with our federal counterparts. We are in a space of transformation, so we are prioritizing our investments to make sure we're building a solid foundation. At this point in all of the work we're doing, we do see that we will make the 9,500 spaces. That is our commitment, and we do believe we have satisfactory funding to meet those goals.

LISA LACHANCE: Just to confirm, you feel confident currently that by March 2026, there will be 9,500 spaces and \$10-a-day daycare in this province?

ELWIN LEROUX: Yes, I can confirm we strongly believe we will hit that target. We have a work plan and a solid foundation being built around that so we don't only meet the target, we meet it as a sustainable social program that we can rely on, and from which we can continue to build. I know my colleague, Executive Director Crowell, will have more information if you would like her to share.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I just wanted to come back to the funding. I do think the deputy minister handled it extremely accurately though. I just wanted to talk a little bit about the budgeting. When we developed our original action plan - it's important to recognize that there are more than just the 9,500 spaces in there as a target. There are many targets and commitments in there. It is incumbent upon us to obviously do the financial planning to support the action plan. As many of you will know, we've updated that action plan this year, and therefore we've updated our budget forecast to support that plan.

We are very confident, based on our experience thus far - which isn't super deep, two and a half years - in terms of what we're seeing in the cost of spaces, the workforce, \$10 a day, and many of the other targets. We believe at this point, based on what we know, that there is enough money there for us to deliver on the target that we've committed to by March 2026.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm going to ask a couple of questions around centralized registration and waiting lists, and then I'll pass it over to my colleague. One of my interests in this is also being able to collect the type of data that you would get from a centralized registration and centralized waiting list. One of the tenets underlying this agreement is around inclusion. You have a target. I'm wondering: Within that target, how do you know how many spots you need that would constitute early intervention for children with autism? How do you know what's out there and what you need?

That's part of the wait-list. Then obviously, once you've registered a child, that kind of information would be pure gold, frankly, for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and for your colleagues on the other side. Who's coming into the school system? wondering: How are you planning for inclusive early childhood education?

I guess I would just draw on my own personal experience. We did not find child care that was appropriate for our son with autism. I took lots and lots of unpaid leave, and my partner did too. The economic cost of that - I mean, we can run through the long-term effects of that. It's not a choice I regret at all, but there was certainly no other option, and trust me, we looked.

How do you know you're building an inclusive system?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Aucoin.

PAM AUCOIN: Thank you for that question and thank you for sharing that experience. We do hear about those experiences of families who have to make difficult decisions like that.

There were a few questions in there. I'll start first with your question around inclusion. It is absolutely a goal and a pillar of our Canada-wide agreement to create inclusive spaces that meet the needs of children and families. In the agreement, "inclusion" is quite broad. It's about flexible and accessible care, but it is also about ensuring that there is access to early learning and childhood for families of children who have diverse needs. Part of what we are doing - we do have a number of inclusion initiatives.

We do have an inclusion-support grant that funds operators to the tune of about \$10 million a year for supports at the centre level to support children with diverse needs who are attending their programs. It also provides training for ECEs who work within centres to ensure that they're aware of inclusive practices and know how to support the needs of children. We also have Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services, who we also fund to about \$10 million a year. They come in and, again, support families at the centre who have children with diverse needs attending programs. They ensure that the early childhood educators and others who are working directly with those children are aware of the needs and how they need to care for those children.

We're also making revisions to our curriculum framework, which is the tool that our early childhood educators use, and the goals we're trying to achieve when we work with children, to make sure it's more inclusive and culturally responsive.

When it comes to your question, MLA Lachance, about how we're tracking this information, I appreciate your comments around the wait-list. It's also something that we want. However, what we are learning - we are learning from other jurisdictions who have done a centralized wait-list sort of function or a point-in-time demand sort of function, you really need strong, integrated IT systems. It sounds so boring to say that, but it is a reality of designing a system like this that's accessible by parents, by ECEs, and by centres, in order for us to gather that information. There's been varying success in other jurisdictions who've implemented a wait-list centralized sort of registration function.

One last thing about that is that when we initially went down the road of the Canada-wide agreement, we did talk about, as part of a centralized agency, having a centralized function. That was met with very mixed reviews from the sector. Again, many of them are very used to working independently - setting their own fees, setting their own policies and programs - and the thought of having a centralized wait-list was met with mixed reviews. All of the changes that we're making foundational to our transformation are understanding

the needs of the sector, the impacts to the sector, on what we're trying to do. We really need to understand that before we would make such a big change as requiring a centralized wait-list, but it is something that, as part of our broad IT system goals, we are exploring.

LISA LACHANCE: I just want to take a minute to respond to that. We lived in Ottawa when the City of Ottawa implemented their centralized waiting list for child care back almost 20 years ago. I think the other piece that was really important there too - I mean, you talk about the independence of providers, but it's also a huge drain on child care providers to manage wait-lists. That's not where they want to put their energy. It's not what they want to be doing. They want to support their workforce and working with the kids and making sure they have the inclusive and vibrant spaces that led them to get into this.

I think for a lot of operators, it would be a lot easier. Certainly, our experience in Ottawa was that it was actually - and this was 20-year-old IT systems, and it worked really well from a user perspective.

Anyway, I'll turn it over to my colleague, MLA Leblanc.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just before I start with my questions, I just want to give a big shout-out to all the ECEs working very hard as we speak. I'm sure they just love that a bunch of bureaucrats and politicians are sitting around talking about them all the time. Shout-out to DCDC especially in Dartmouth North, which is near and dear to my heart.

Here's the thing. I have a neighbour - a friend - who went on lists for infant care when she was eight months pregnant. She is now nearing the end of her maternity leave and fears she won't be able to return to work. She cannot find any daycare anywhere in the city. What do we tell her? What is her answer? Does she have to wait another year? When are there going to be more infant spaces? Even when I was going back to work, it was very hard to find a space for a year-old child; 18 months was a little easier, but year-old children, that was tricky. I was lucky I got one. What are we doing for them, and when are folks with infants going to be able to get off lists and get into daycares?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: Thank you very much for the question. I will say that we do share your sense of urgency to create spaces for families. We want all children to have access to early learning and child care that is affordable, inclusive, and high quality. That is what we are doing.

I want to go back to spaces. I want to give you some confidence that we are going to meet our 9,500-space target. We are being guided by the space targets that were in our original 2021-22 action plan in terms of the breakdown of spaces, but we need spaces

across all age groups. There is no question infants are a priority. Infant spaces have been more costly to create. They are also more costly to operate. Therefore, when we're in a market model, it's not as attractive to have infant spaces. We do know that there is a need there, and we're working hard to create them. We've created a number of them so far.

I do want to talk a little bit about - again, I think it's important. Children need to also be able to flow through the various age groups. We need to make sure that we've got a good balance of spaces across all of the age groups. We are very much working on that while prioritizing infant, toddler, and pre-school spaces in centres and family home. To date, we have created over 3,800 spaces. We've talked about that already. We have a plan for creating another 6,600 to 6,700 spaces to get us to the 9,500 that we need, and we're very confident in those numbers. I can talk a bit about the programming that we have in place to support the creation of those spaces to provide confidence, if that's of interest.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc, you have an interjection?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, I might. If we have time, I'd like to hear about that, but I just have a couple of other specific questions first. In the initial action plan, there were 275 new infant spaces planned for 2026. Do you still feel like this is a number that is sufficient? Has it been recalculated? Can you break down the planned spaces, like where are they going to go? We're not going to have this many today, and then that many. How is it going to be rolled out?

The other thing I wanted to say is that obviously, if we need this many infant spaces, in two years, we're going to need this many toddler spaces. Then we're going to need after-school care. Don't forget about that. How is that being worked out? It feels like there are a lot of babies being born right now, and it feels like a lot of people need space.

TRACY CROWELL: Yes, we also feel like there are a lot of babies being born, and we hope to see more with the \$10-a-day-on-average child care coming. Absolutely, we feel a sense of urgency to get spaces created quickly, but they also need to be high quality and inclusive as well.

The goal in the original action plan was 275 infants. My colleague is telling me to date we're at almost 300 new infant spaces. That would be across family home settings as well as our centre-based spaces. I can tell you - and I don't have the exact number with me - that we are going to see a lot more. We still have over a thousand centre-based spaces planned to come online over the next two years. We have been prioritizing, in those settings, infant, toddler, and pre-school spaces. There are many more to come.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Are all of the 1,800-plus new and Before and After spaces funded through this agreement - are all of those spaces being used by children five and under? Is this department considering similarly expanding spaces for older schoolchildren? Just a little bit on that, and then if we have time, we'll get back to the plan to get to 9,500.

[9:45 a.m.]

Sorry, also my trusty assistant has just told me that when I talked about my friend and neighbour, I said that she had been on the list since she was eight months pregnant. I meant to say eight weeks pregnant. That's a big difference.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I want to talk a little bit about the Nova Scotia Before and After Program and spaces. We know, and as you have accurately pointed out, families need before- and after-school care. The Nova Scotia Before and After Program is a partnership with the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, based on a "let's get moving" standard. It was piloted originally back to support pre-Primary, and it has been met with tremendous success.

Again, we hear as much from families who need more before- and after-school care spaces as we do all of the other spaces. We are working very hard to expand spaces in this program. The 1,800 spaces are new spaces across the province in that program in schools. Some of them are additional cohorts. So schools that already had the program, we've added additional cohorts there, but many of them are also new schools. We have a target - so of our 9,500, over 4,000 of those spaces will be before- and after-school care spaces.

As to your question about funding, the Canada-wide agreement, as many of you may know, is to prioritize funding for children under six. As we build out before- and after-school-aged spaces, right now there is a requirement for any new before- and after-school care spaces in schools to be prioritized for four- and five-year-olds.

Again, children will not lose those spaces. Once children have a space, they will get to keep a space if they continue to need it, but any new spaces that we build in those schools will be prioritized for four- and -five-year-olds. The Government of Canada has approved this in our action plan - our original action plan.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I get that, because of course, children grow. They're going to get in at the ground level, as it were. But I'm wondering - in my riding, for instance, there are a number of private daycares that have told their families that they just can't have after-school places. We have a big lack of spaces for before and after school.

I have written to the department to ask if there are any grant programs, anything like that being considered where, you know, Christopher Robin's daycare can apply for \$50,000 to do some renovations and hire a couple more people so that they could actually start a before- and after-school program. I was told that the focus is on the young ones, but is there any thought to that, like from a different pot of money? They already have the existing infrastructure. It's not like starting from the ground up. They just want to add a

program, or if they were able to be supported to add a program to help families as they age out of daycare.

TRACY CROWELL: Our focus, at this point in time, for school-aged children - our before- and after-school spaces are for school-aged children, so . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for NDP questioning has elapsed. We'll now move on to questioning from the PC caucus. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: Just trying to get something straight in my head here, and sometimes that's difficult. This early child - this agreement that was signed hours before an election call, it would lay out the way this would roll out. Am I correct about that? It's a framework you folks work with, is that correct?

ELWIN LEROUX: Yes, the agreements that we have in place, especially those with the federal government, do lay out that framework. Next under that would be action plans. If we think about those agreements as they frame the big-ticket items, the goals, then working regularly with federal government, we file action plans and reports on our progress to say, How are we getting there in the next two years? What are we working on? What are we doing?

TOM TAGGART: So, the ECE piece of it which has been the focal point of a lot of what we've talked about here is a requirement within that framework that says - that talks about ECEs and the role that they play in this. Is that there - like, so many for each? How does that work? Is that part of the framework? The ECEs - early childhood educators - in these not-for-profit daycares? Is that part of the framework?

PAM AUCOIN: Our Canada-wide agreement under Quality does talk about the need for qualified, well-compensated early childhood educators who are obviously a critical part to our system of expansion and ensuring a quality early learning and childcare experience for children.

TOM TAGGART: As Nova Scotia spaces are created, we need more ECEs. How many will graduate this year?

PAM AUCOIN: At present, we have over 2,300 early childhood educators working in provincially licensed and funded early learning and childcare. We have a number of workforce initiatives that we have implemented in order to respond to the growing needs of the sector and shore up a solid foundation for a future expansion of spaces across the province. We've invested over \$17 million in workforce initiatives over the last few years, that funding from the Canada-Nova Scotia Early Learning and Child Care Agreement which predates the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement by a couple of years.

Since 2021 - and I say since then because a number of these initiatives, diploma-based programs, some part-time, some full-time, take between 16 months and two years to complete - we've graduated 273 new early childhood educators to the sector. In addition, 187 ECEs or individuals working in the sector availed themselves of programs that we fund to upskill to a diploma or degree-level training. We have over 600 students enrolled in programs that we fund working with our educational partners. As a result of that and the continued investment in those programs - and our plan is, of course, to continue to do that - we anticipate graduating about 300 new ECEs annually.

TOM TAGGART: That answered most of my next couple of questions. I guess knowing that we were coming into this agreement in the years prior to the agreement, or even the year prior to the agreement, was there any effort made at that time to increase the number of ECEs?

PAM AUCOIN: Yes. There have been efforts over the last several years, even prior to the Canada-wide agreement, to increase the ECE workforce. Of course, funding available under the Canada-wide agreement has certainly contributed to a number of initiatives, particularly on the compensation side.

Last year, we announced an ECE wage grid, and it provided predictable and accountable increases for early childhood educators based on education and years of experience. We were able to tie that to public sector wage increases which was certainly very well received by the sector. Just last month right before the holidays, we announced a defined-benefit pension plan, and, also, comprehensive group benefits for everyone working in early childhood education in provincially licensed and funded centres, even beyond the early childhood educators. We also did another wage increase that will come into affect in April, ranging between \$3.14 and \$4.20 per hour, and that has been very well received by the sector.

TOM TAGGART: That's great stuff. It will surely attract people to the industry, for sure. I can't not talk about rural. There are still wait-lists for many families, we all know that, especially in rural parts of Nova Scotia where the type of child care is typically limited to family home centres. What is the government doing to include the sector and families in this transformative change? What are we doing to help them out?

PAM AUCOIN: I'll speak just a moment around supports in rural communities. We acknowledge and recognize fully that early childhood educators and certainly spaces are needed across the entire province. When it comes to early childhood educators, we do have a number of workforce initiatives. For example, virtual part-time or full-time ECE diploma programs offered through our educational partners. We also have an online French first-language diploma program for ECEs. We also offer bursaries for a number of students who attend post-secondary colleges, and we've offered over a thousand of those across the sector, and it would include, of course, ECEs or students in rural campuses.

I do just want to acknowledge that family home child care, as you mentioned, is such a critical part of the growth of the sector. It is a critical part of addressing the needs of rural communities where it may not be feasible to have a larger-scale centre to meet the needs of the community. We are investing in family home child care as well. We just announced a family home start-up program for any new family homes that open - \$7,500 for a grant to address some minor home modifications, and to create some responsive learning environments for children. We also have an ECE grant for family home child care providers. They aren't employees like ECEs who work in centres, so we did have to come up with something a little bit differently to recognize ECEs who work in family home.

We have an ECE recruitment campaign that will be kicking off in the new year for providers in family home. It is a very critical part of our system and to certainly meeting the needs of rural communities moving forward. If my colleague Tracy wanted to . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I just want to say thank you very much. I'll pass it off.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard, you have 12 minutes.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It leads to the family home aspect, because prior to sitting here, I ran a family home daycare out of my home for 16 and a half years. At that time, when I couldn't find child care myself, I decided there's a need in the community - why don't I help fill that? Now all those kids are still looking for family homes. In rural Nova Scotia, we do really heavily rely on that.

I was going to ask a different question, but because you brought that up the start-up grant, I wondered if you could talk a little bit maybe about the differences between offering it in a family home setting versus more of like the Windsor Nursery School and a more institutionalized setting, if you will - a centre versus a home.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Aucoin.

PAM AUCOIN: I can certainly talk about that. We do have over 1,200 spaces within family home child care providers right now. There are about 200 of them, but we have some significant work under way right now to increase the number of family home child care providers.

On that, we have an agency model here in Nova Scotia for family home child care. We have 14 agencies that are located throughout the province. They are predominantly who our relationship is with - agencies. We fund agencies, and funds for providers whom they recruit flow through agencies. They are independent operators, sole proprietors. However, they do also abide by regulations and follow our legislation as well.

We do know there are a number of family home providers out there who are, again, filling the needs of community and operating unlicensed, and our goal is to ensure that families have access to affordable care. By becoming part of an agency and a licensed family home child care, you're then able to offer fee reductions to families, so families benefit from that. You really become part of a community of early childhood educators and respond to the needs of community. They are a little different - not employees the same as what ECEs are, working in centres - but we make sure that when we roll out initiatives - for example, recent retirement and benefits announcements that are available to ECEs who work in licensed and provincially funded centres, and we will be implementing a grant for those who work in family home settings that will allow them to self-source benefits. We will also reimburse a portion of their contributions to our RRSPs.

[10:00 a.m.]

All changes that we're making across the system absolutely take into account family home child care and their important place in the future of the Nova Scotia system.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That's really great stuff to hear. I think that as we move forward and work together, we are starting at ground zero and transforming a system that was made up of hundreds of different smaller models, and what worked for each model independently, for me out of my home, might not have worked for somebody else at another home.

Another need in particular that we see a lot of is health care professionals who are working long hours and shift work. In my younger years, I was able to open at 5:30 in the morning and 6:00 a.m. to help those individuals. That is a tough position to be in, both as the provider and as the family looking for the care. When we announced the opening of the extended hours and the overnight child care pilot in Sydney, I was like, Yes - I can see how that could be transformational - again, not only to the sector, families looking, but to help with the health care issues that we face in staffing.

At this point, is there any information to share with the committee on how that pilot's going? I'm hopeful that - I would assume it's going quite well - and maybe if you're looking at piloting that in other areas of the province?

PAM AUCOIN: Thank you for asking about our partnership with Health Park Early Learning child care centre in Sydney. We know that the workforce has changed in Nova Scotia, and as part of our Canada-wide agreement, part of our goal to create inclusive child care is about providing flexible options for families. It is no longer nine to five workdays. People also work on weekends and evenings. It's important for us to consider that.

It is, however, very different from how child care has operated in Nova Scotia, and I would say across most of the country. We did enter into a partnership with Health Park on extended hours and overnight care based on a need in the community that was identified

for health care workers. That program opened just a couple of weeks ago. There is space there for 66 children available in the evening and on weekends, and at present there's space for 12 children overnight.

Just on that, this demonstration project or pilot project here in Nova Scotia is unique. There are very few - less than a handful of - overnight child care providers across the country. It is an opportunity for us to work with a trusted partner and community to test this out and see what revisions may need to be made. We know there's a lot of interest. We do have a plan to work with the provider and families to understand how it's going, to understand how we can scale it. We will evaluate the program on a regular basis to see how scalable it is across other areas of the province. We would happily hear from any provider who's interested in offering extended hours and overnight care, and how we can support them in doing that.

There are about a dozen children now enrolled in that program, and there is one child right now attending overnight. I'm not sure if anyone heard this story on CBC in Cape Breton earlier this week about the single parent. She's a CCA whose daughter is currently enrolled in the program and had her first overnight there last week. It was just so lovely to hear her experience and how much this has meant to her and her daughter, who loved having her own little bed and her little place set up there at the centre.

Again, it's new. It's positive stories like that getting out in community that we will only see the enrollment in that program grow.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That is a cute little story because I can envision the little ones that I had in my own house. I did become quite attached to them, they became of the family, and we would take them to - Fun Fridays sometimes ended up being a cottage sleepover at my cottage. Those memories - that's a unique experience for that child as well.

Also, I just want to go back to the new growth creating the spaces. Can we talk a little bit more in detail of what we're doing to create these spaces and to get them, some of the initiatives that you're doing to create them and get them running faster? I don't know if we went into detail about that, and initiatives that helped create the 3,800 now, but some initiatives that are going to help reach that target in 2026.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I talked earlier about our target being 9,500, the fact that we've reached over 3,800 spaces to date across a number of different settings. I want to talk a little bit now about how we're actually doing that. We early on rolled out an expression of interest for our existing not-for-profit service providers to express interest in expanding their existing location or setting up a satellite site. We have about 50 projects for centre-based expansion that came out of that expression of interest. About 22 of those

are now open, and the remaining will be online, I'm going to say mostly by the end of this year.

We have seen some delays in that program, and I can talk a bit more about why that is. The construction industry, I think, is really having unprecedented times as well and challenges finding contractors in certain communities and supply chain issues and length of time to get permits. There are all kinds of reasons why some of those projects have been met with delay, but I will say the operators who have taken those on are working very closely with us, and we're supporting them where we can. They are very excited to be able to offer more early learning and child care in their communities, and they're working very hard to deliver those spaces.

That's for centre-based care. In terms of before- and after-school care, a similar approach was taken. Early on we released an expression of interest there, asking for existing not-for-profit services providers to come forward if they were interested in expanding our Nova Scotia before- and after-school program in schools. We had really great interest, so that is resulting in over 1,800 new spaces in our before- and after-school care program so far and plans to continue to increase that by another 3,000 between now and the end of March 2026.

Of course, my colleague Pam talked a lot of about what we're doing on the family home front. There's been a tremendous amount of work done on the family home front because it is such a critical component of our programming, and we'll continue to expand there as well. In December we announced a couple of new programs. One is a minor construction program. This will also be available to not-for-profit organizations. It's for minor renovations and construction. We'll give them so much funding to increase spaces in their existing centre or potentially even set up a new centre. The other program we announced - Pam has already talked about it - was the support for Family Home Day Care Start Up Grant to try to increase the number of family home providers that will work with us on expansion over the next number of years.

We're also currently working on developing another major construction program. The EOI program I talked about is really more of a major construction. New sites, major renovations, which is why those spaces are taking longer to come online, but we are right now working on another major construction program, and it will target more so some of the communities where we're not seeing the expansion that we feel we should be seeing. In some cases it is because there are no existing service providers . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for the PC questioning has elapsed. We'll now move to the second round of questioning. Each caucus will have 13 minutes, and we'll begin once again with the Liberal caucus. MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you again for being here today. To date, there are 3,861 total spaces that have been opened, and a total of 1,031 spaces have been

closed. We've heard the witnesses reference that they've opened over 3,000 spaces, but really, when you factor in the spaces that have closed, it's more like around 2,500 - 2,400 - somewhere around there, right? Of those over 1,000 spaces that have closed, how many of them were for infants and toddlers? Do we know?

ELWIN LEROUX: MLA Maguire, I don't believe we've brought that information today. We can follow up with the clerk.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would request that we send something to ask for this. Just yes or no - do you have that information? Of the 1,031, do you have a breakdown of infant to toddler to before- and after-school?

ELWIN LEROUX: Of the 1,031 spaces, we would go back and find out which independent businesses have closed or closed some of their spaces and see if we can do a relatively quick analysis to answer that question. Currently, I don't know if we have that. I believe we would be able to generate it. I would commit to getting back to you with the information that we have.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I just want to go back to - these are extremely important questions around data and facts that the three most senior individuals, I would assume, in the department who are overseeing these programs can't answer. We should have it at our fingertips. Of the 3,861 total spaces, we don't know - do we have a breakdown of that, of the 1,031 closed? You should have a breakdown of what part of the child care sector has been impacted. We should have that. We should know that of those 1,031, 400 of them were for youth and toddler, but we don't know that. Again, I'd go back to how are we making informed decisions on this process if we don't have basic data? This is basic stuff.

We're saying that we need over 9,000 new spaces opened. With the closures, we've opened 3,000 in two-and-a-half years. That means you're going to have to do what you've done in two-and-a-half-years plus every year. So, 9,000 - what was it? Sorry, 9,500 spaces, minus 3,800. Simple math, I don't know. It took me five years to go through high school, so let's be honest here. Like, 4,000-5,000 spaces, right? Are you confident that all of a sudden, we're going to be able to kick this into overdrive and meet those numbers?

ELWIN LEROUX: We are concerned when independent businesses or operators close or change the model of the number of students that they can accommodate. Every one of our operators is important in our system. We count on them, and the work that they do contributes to the overall system that we are building.

We do know that we - or we would acknowledge - we need more child care for infants, for toddlers, for after school, and we've also taken the perspective of every child care space that's taken from a family has an impact for that family, and we need to work to grow the number of spaces in the order and magnitude of another 5,700 to get to the

9,500 total - 9,500 new spaces is what we will create; it's in our agreement with the federal government. By March 2026, we will have opened 9,500 more spaces than previously.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm glad we got that on the record, but the population is growing at a faster pace than at any time in the history of this province. Those numbers, admittedly, were from 2021. We know that the population is growing faster. We know that - I would guess that the 9,500 child care spaces is outdated - that number is outdated. It's probably more. Are you looking at the population and the population projections, especially from the current government, and are you doing an adjustment, or are we sticking with the 9,500? It seems to me that if we're lucky to hit that 9,500 - and I have faith that you'll do it - if we do hit that 9,500, that's still going to be less because of the population growth than what we need in Nova Scotia.

[10:15 a.m.]

I'll send it to Ms. Aucoin. Can I give it to Ms. Aucoin?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: We can all think of this change management in a variety of ways. I'll offer a little bit of an exaggeration. The pathway to one million spaces goes right through 9,500. We have to hit 9,500 in 2026 before we aim for 10,000, 11,000, 12,000. What we recognize and what you're asking is: In order to use 9,500 and grow from there, make sure the system you build is a strong system with a strong foundation, with strong principles of the program, of workforce development, that people see a career, that this labour force calls on people who have an experience, that they really love children, and want to work there.

We believe salary and benefits are part of that. Salary and benefits become part of the way that we're making sure we can go beyond 9,500.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Respectfully, I don't accept that answer, and I'll tell you why I don't accept the answer. You're saying the path through 10,000 goes through 9,500, but you've been told that we are looking to double our population. You know that the population of Nova Scotia is growing at a faster pace than it's ever grown. The number that you have would seem to be a little outdated. Why are you not going back, revisiting the numbers, and saying, You know what? In 2026, that 9,500 actually should be 11,000 or 10,000. Meeting the 9,500 is great, but if we're still short 1,500 spaces, and if some of us are lucky to be here in 2026 and we're sitting around here and we're having this conversation again and we're 1,500 in the hole, it just wouldn't make sense to me.

We've been warned, we know the numbers are growing, we know that the population is growing, we know that we're going to need more child care spaces. Is the

department looking at the 9,500, looking at the current population projections going forward, and are they revisiting the 9,500 number for child care spaces?

ELWIN LEROUX: The commitment in the Canada-wide agreement is to provide 9,500 additional spaces by March of 2026. We're confident that we will meet that number. We do recognize, as you say, the Province intends to double its population 36 years after that, and we believe that we would need to continue growing our child care sector to meet the growth of our population, as we would in most other government agencies, social institutions. We're making sure that as we build those 9,500 new spaces that we're also paying great attention to the system we're building so that it is sustainable beyond 2026.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Chair, my question is not being answered. I've asked this question four or five times to the deputy minister. I've asked you this question directly. I'm not asking your commitment to 9,500. I said to you, and I will repeat: We know that the population is growing. We know that this number is not going to fit the population two years from now. I didn't ask if you're committed to 9,500. I said, Are you going back and revisiting, so in 2026 we are not in a daycare spot deficit? Are you revisiting the numbers? I'm not asking your commitment to the contract. Things change. They change all the time.

I think that, instead of looking backwards or maintaining the status quo, you should be looking forward and saying, You know what? For every child care space we don't create that we need, that is another family, another individual who can't go back to the workforce.

Again, the question is: I know you're committed to 9,500, I know it's not an easy task, but are you or is the department revisiting that number on the current projections that are going forward? Since 2021, this population has grown at a faster pace than it ever has. Maybe it's just an extra 50 seats. Do we know? Are you looking at the numbers and saying that 9,500 is not going to fit in 2026, it's actually 9,700?

ELWIN LEROUX: I do appreciate you trying to understand if we're growing beyond that. Currently, our work plan - the agreement and the action plan underneath it are targeting 9,500 spaces to be completed by March 2026. We would expect to be continuing to work with the federal government after that about what comes next. Currently, our commitment and our agreements speak to 9,500 spaces by March 2026.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I was going to let you finish the three minutes, but you know what I'm like.

Whose responsibility is it, then? Is it the Province's or the feds' responsibility to revisit that number to make sure that it meets the population in 2026? Whose responsibility is it?

ELWIN LEROUX: One of the great things that I'm able to see from my vantage point is a commitment from two levels of government that recognize that child care matters.

It matters differently than it did before. This is in the mandate letter for federal ministers and for our provincial minister. We believe that this is an important project, and we hope to continue the work beyond 2026 to ensure that child care meets the needs of families in Nova Scotia.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would ask that you answer the question, please, respectfully. I've been sitting on this committee for 10 or 11 years, and I give every witness the respect. I asked you a direct question, and you didn't even come close to answering it.

The question was: Whose responsibility is it to look at the current numbers and make sure that they project to the correct numbers two or three years out with the current population growth.

ELWIN LEROUX: In recognizing that both federal and provincial ministers have responsibility, I believe I've answered your question.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: So you're saying it's nobody's responsibility? You're saying it's both of their responsibility? It's not your responsibility? Who does it fall on to say that we need to change these numbers?

ELWIN LEROUX: My understanding currently is that we're meeting the terms of the agreement that we have with the federal government, and we will deliver 9,500 net new child care spaces - 9,500 new spaces from the time we signed the agreement in 2021. Those will be delivered by March 2026.

I know our minister, if she were here, would state that it is a high priority. She gives good direction in this area to make sure that we are on target to make sure to deliver . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for Liberal questioning has elapsed. We will now move on to the NDP caucus. MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: First, I'm going to ask another question about infant spaces. Earlier in my questioning, Ms. Crowell, you talked about how infant spaces are more expensive. They require more intense ratio and all the reasons, but therefore, they're not as profitable. Market-driven child care is not as likely to create spaces or maintain spaces or whatever for infants.

This, to me, is a real problem. Child care should be a public service. If we are depending, or we are reacting to profitability of spaces and therefore we have a lack of spaces, that's a real issue. What is the department doing to address that? How is the department compensating for the non-profitability - I hate even to use that term when we're talking about little babies, but this is what we're hearing, or what I'm hearing from you. What are you doing to compensate for that?

As we move forward with this plan, is it the case still that all private enterprises in child care will be transitioning to not-for-profits and everyone will be in the same playing field, or will there still be decisions being made based on profitability in the market?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I'm going to start, and then I may pass it over to my colleague Pam to talk a bit about the operational funding.

Right now, we are about halfway between a market model of child care delivery and a publicly managed and funded system. As we've talked about this morning, there are a number of targets and commitments, really foundational changes that we need to make along the way. When the agreement was signed back in 2021, it provided for continued funding for our existing commercial for-profit operators. They will continue to be part of our system, and we have been very clear about that. They were in the system before the Canada-wide agreement was signed. They will continue to have access to the same funding agreement to ensure that they can provide affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care to the children in their communities.

I will say, we value all of our operators. Many of our for-profit operators are absolutely fantastic and provide really great care to the children in their communities. The agreement is also very clear, however, that expansion - future expansion - needs to be targeted in the not-for-profit sector, and that is what we're doing. Our new spaces that we're creating will be in the not-for-profit sector.

I can turn it over to my colleague, Pam, to talk a bit about the funding. I think that might help answer how both the not-for-profit and the for-profit operators are being funded the same and what supports are in place for them.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc, is that acceptable to you?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, but I really need it targeted just on the infant spaces because I have another big question that I want to get in before.

PAM AUCOIN: Specifically for infant spaces, we are funding expansion projects and fully covering the cost at this point of the expansion projects that we have already approved to develop infant spaces, and there are additional costs that come with that because of various regulatory requirements - lighting and so on. We also have an incentive for infant space creation, recognizing that the ratio of children-to-educators is lower for infant care. To incentivize the creation of those infant spaces, we have an Infant Quality Care Grant, and we more than doubled that grant funding for providers who have infant spaces as a way of incentivizing that.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The other thing I wanted to ask is: When the agreement was signed in 2021, under the previous government, there was that number of infant spaces set. At the time - this is sort of Part A and Part B. When the agreement was signed, it was just on the heels of our pre-Primary rollout which, when that happened - say three or four years before that, before 2021, whenever it was. It was closely after I was elected, so around 2017 or so - that was rolled out with great fanfare.

Of course, we all know that pre-Primary is really important. However, we know that there was a mass exodus of ECEs who left the ECE world - the daycare world - and went to pre-Primary. I heard from many, many daycare operators in my community, and many, many families who were then saying, We don't have spots. This is crazy. Then finally when their kids would get into pre-Primary, then they didn't have after-school care for them. It was kind of a mess. It was rolled out in a way that did not contemplate the exodus of ECEs, and why wouldn't they go to pre-Primary? I mean, it was better pay, and a new challenge, and all of that stuff.

Can you talk about the impact of the pre-Primary rollout on where we are now with child care spaces, and how that has - yes, how it's all kind of come down to what we are now with needing - and I totally agree with you, Mr. LeRoux, about the salaries and pensions and benefits packages are a big piece of this puzzle but training a workforce up is also a big piece. I know that's being worked on, but where are we with that? Have we recovered from the exodus of ECEs yet? What more do we have to do to compensate for the rollout of the pre-Primary or the - I was going to say - the never mind. That's good.

PAM AUCCOIN: A lot of the work that we have done around workforce, many of the reasons that we had heard, a number of years ago, around educators choosing to leave licensed child care settings and moving into the pre-Primary program were around wages, benefits, and things like that. This is why early in our Canada-wide agreement, we had a number of commitments to address that: improving wages last year, just recently announced in December another wage increase, and the implementation of group benefits and pension plan for all ECEs and other staff working in provincially-licensed and funded early learning and child care.

We have heard many stories from operators and many stories from individual ECEs around the difference that this is making to them. ECEs are critically important across all aspects of the sector, whether it's pre-Primary or licensed child care. We're not interested in going back and forth between the two. What we want to do is create the profession where people have the choice of where they want to work, and whether it's in licensed child care or pre-Primary, and they don't have to worry about pay, and benefits, and things like that. It's consistency because all of our ECEs are in this to support the learning and development of children.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great, and would you say - the part that I didn't hear the answer to of that question, I know it was a long one - is where are we now and how many

- are we still in a situation where we have a shortage of ECEs, or have we compensated for that in the early childhood education area? Have we compensated for that exodus to pre-Primary? Have we made up the difference?

[10:30 a.m.]

PAM AUCOIN: The investments that we're making are about recruiting ECEs to the sector, and some of the workforce challenges that we're experiencing in the ECE profession are the same across all professions. Our goal is to bring more people into the sector to fill vacancies as people leave so there's just that natural attrition that happens. Also, to implement initiatives that further grow the sector so that we're always seeing that year-over-year growth that's going to support the space creation targets that we have.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm going to take from what you've just said that we are not where we need to be yet for the spaces that we have now. Do we still have ECE shortages for the current number of spaces that we have?

PAM AUCOIN: We know that we need more ECEs.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Okay, great. Lastly, I just wanted to ask about the... (Interruption) I'm going to change tack here. A recent report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that fees for some age groups like toddlers have not reached the 50 per cent target reduction yet. What is the timeline for the 50 per cent target reduction, and what is the timeline for that and then for further fees? We've heard that the goal is \$10-a-day daycare by 2026, but how are we getting to that point? What's the plan to get there?

PAM AUCOIN: We've already reached a number of targets under our Canada-wide agreement for affordability. We did reach the 50 per cent on average target that's part of our Canada-wide agreement in December of last year. The report that you referenced did only look at a specific part of the province. We took an average fee approach here in Nova Scotia. You referenced earlier that market-based model that we have here across the province, and when we froze parent fees so that we could get fee reductions in place, those fees were frozen across all programs, and there're significant variations.

Just as an example, toddler programs vary between \$25 and \$51 a day. When we looked at the average of that being \$36 a day, we applied our fee reduction based on that average. Parents who were paying more than \$36 a day have seen less than a 50 per cent reduction. Families who pay more receive more than a 50 per cent reduction, so that's why we reached that on average, and we have absolutely reached that number. Every child who's in our more than 23,000 early learning and child care spaces across the province, every family is benefitting from that. Just as an example of that toddler program, families are saving on average \$400 a month, or over \$4,700 a year, which is significant.

We know that affordability initiatives are critical. We also have the Child Care Subsidy Program. That's on top of parent fee reductions. Over 3,000 families in Nova Scotia access child care at zero dollars a day, which is amazing and wonderful to see.

We do have a goal of achieving \$10 a day on average by March 31, 2026. That's very important, we know. We also consult regularly with the sector, with the Minister's Early Learning and Child Care Engagement Table, through various working groups and surveys, and we have also heard loud and clear that while affordability is important, we cannot ignore building the workforce, building spaces to have that balanced transformation that we need to achieve.

THE CHAIR: Fifteen seconds, MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I don't have time for a question, so I'll just end by saying that I'm very happy to hear of the focus on the workforce, that there will be consistency between ECEs - in pre-Primary and in early childhood. I think that's essential, so I'm glad to hear that.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for NDP questioning has elapsed. We'll now move on to the PC caucus with MLA Sheehy-Richard again. Thirteen minutes, so 10:49 a.m.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I did have a couple more questions. As you can tell, it's a really motivational topic for me. I obviously love children, and someday it might be appealing for me to go back into that profession with these incentives that you're talking about.

Joking aside, somebody did bring up about in parts of our province we see child care deserts, I guess somebody called them earlier. I'm just wondering how we're supporting those areas in particular, and if there are already - and if there isn't, will there be - incentives, kind of like as we try to recruit doctors too in that field. I just keep doing these comparisons. Are there incentives already, or will there be targeted incentives for these harder, more challenging areas of the province?

TRACY CROWELL: I want to start by talking about our vision. It's for all families and children to have access to affordable, high-quality, inclusive child care no matter where they live. I did talk earlier about all of the various initiatives that we have under way to create spaces in communities. We do know that some communities - we also know that we need spaces pretty much everywhere across the province. There are a number of communities that have lower coverage than others, and we have some communities that obviously have a higher population growth than others.

We have to date very much relied on existing service providers, existing not-for-profit organizations, to expand their existing early learning and child care spaces or to set up new locations in other communities. That is serving us well. However, we also

recognize that there may be some communities across the province where there aren't existing operators and we're not seeing expansion opportunities the same way we are in other communities. We do need to - one of our major construction programs that we're developing now will start to target some more of those communities where we're not seeing it.

The other thing - I'll just go back to family home, because in many communities, particularly in rural parts of the province where there are not enough children under six to support centre-based, the family-home option is a really wonderful option. As my colleague talked about, there are lots of incentives to recruit and attract ECEs to provide family-home care.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That's a fair comment to make. There is that flux in community. There would be times when I would have three or four openings and feel anxious, because I was also trying to pay the bills at home, and then other times when I too would have a wait-list. I could see the challenges that are there and how the family-home dynamic could work in areas that don't necessarily need full-scale centres.

Can you talk a little bit about what resources are in place for families that are searching for child care, that already exist?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Aucoin.

PAM AUCOIN: We do have an online child care registry where families can go to search for licensed child care providers in their area and also family home child care agencies. We, for obvious reasons, do not - our registry does not include the location of individual family homes, but certainly our agencies would be happy to share information about that with you.

Also, on our website, childcarenovascotia.ca, we do have a list of upcoming projects and estimated timelines of when they will be coming online in communities for families who are looking for early childhood education spaces. In addition to that, we have staff located in community across the province, early childhood education consultants, who hear from families to understand what their care needs are, and they may have a line of sight into different expansion projects or openings that will be coming available, and they can help connect families looking for child care to a provider.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I have one more question, and then I'm going to have to pass my time to MLA Palmer at the end here. As important as it is to retain ECEs and recruit ECEs, we should talk a little bit about the operators and in particular what maybe that we're doing to ensure that they can keep their doors open. What programs and resources are available? I know we touched a little bit on how they can expand, but can we talk in particular about how they can, if they start, how we can help them grow and how we can ensure that they will keep the doors open and be successful?

PAM AUCCOIN: As my colleague Tracy referenced earlier, all of our operators across the province, whether you're a centre or a family home, are truly critical to the system of early learning and child care that we are building. We do recognize when we froze parent fees back in 2021 as part of our way of achieving our affordability initiatives and reducing fees for families, that those fees were frozen at the rates that were in place at that time. While they were set by operators, that was the model that was in place beforehand, based on what their needs were, we've also experienced significantly high inflation over the last couple of years that's put pressure on some of our operators, and we're absolutely aware of that.

Some of the initiatives that we've implemented, we have provided inflationary support grant payments to all of our licensed providers and family home providers to the tune of about \$8.8 million over April of 2022, March of 2023, and again a payment in September of 2023. We also have an Operational Support fund. That fund is available to any operator who continues to experience financial challenges to approach the department and demonstrate their need, and we will support them with ongoing operational funding. I had referenced in an earlier question that we improved grant funding for the Infant Quality Care Grant, our Inclusion Support Grant, all of the initiatives we've implemented around wage increases for ECEs, our recently announced retirement and benefits. Those costs have been 100 per cent funded by the Province and also through funding made available under the Canada-wide agreement.

We're absolutely aware of the needs of operators, and as we move towards \$10 a day on average child care, we will also be looking at an ongoing, sustainable funding model for the sector. We have numerous grant programs that we are consolidating, making simpler and more streamlined for operators to ensure that they have the funding they need to be sustainable long into the future and certainly meet the needs of children and families. Stability is very important in this sector.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: This has been a fantastic conversation. We've had a lot of great questions - detail-oriented questions, more general questions. I know one thing I've learned is that transforming child care to make it the highest quality and accessible and affordable is a very easy process. Easy peasy, piece of cake. No problem. Obviously, there are bumps in the road whenever we implement systemic change, and I appreciate, deputy minister, your comments around creating the system and building the system that will allow for better outcomes in the future for sure. I also appreciate the work being done in the department for rural communities like I represent with the home centres.

I also want to thank all of the child care providers in my area, whether they be private operators, the non-profits, those family providers who are doing just a great job for our community. The need is great everywhere, so I continue to look forward as an MLA to

working with the department and different centres to see how we can expand in our area as well.

[10:45 a.m.]

One more shout-out to you. We've had a few difficulties with a provider that had to close, and I just want to commend you on the work that - you came in and we were able to help a lot of families in the community of Greenwood when we had difficulty, and I just want to say thank you for the prompt action that you took during that process.

I think Nova Scotians, when they hear about the events of today's meeting, should be encouraged by the signs that we're putting in place and what you're doing as a department to help better outcomes in the future. My first question is around consultations. It's important that we listen to stakeholders in the community and people in the industry and parents. We had Phase 1 of consultations this past year, and this year we'll have Phase 2 in consultations around the province. Can you talk about the objective of these consultations and who will be consulted in this next round?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Crowell.

TRACY CROWELL: I will start by just saying that when the Canada-wide agreement was announced, and the action plan and the transformation journey, we made a commitment to the sector and to ECEs and to families that we would engage and consult, that we would listen, and we are doing that at every step. I want to talk a little bit about that, and then I'll home in on the public consultation that we just did.

We set up in Year 1 the Minister's Early Learning and Child Care Engagement Table. We have about 20 individuals who meet. Our seventh in-person meeting is scheduled for Saturday. That committee is made up of primarily operators and ECEs. We do have some family representatives and also some academic and other experts on the table to help guide us. It has been absolutely fantastic to have that guidance, advice, and participation and engagement at that level. That is a huge commitment for those folks to come. We meet on Saturdays, so our meetings are full-day. It's been wonderful.

We've also set up a few different working groups to help us specifically and guide us specifically through some initiatives - the wage initiative, the benefits initiative. We set up working groups for those, primarily ECEs and operators on those to help guide that work, and it's so critical to our work to understand and hear from first voice in all that we do. We've also done many different surveys to gather information on preferences and those kinds of things, and virtual calls with operators. We do a lot of those. We've just done about six in the last two weeks on benefits.

We also hear from families regularly. Obviously, they're reaching out to us on a fairly regular basis, probably more so because they're looking for spaces. We try to help,

but it's also good for us to understand what the needs are. We also have a newsletter that we've implemented, and they can use the form in there to directly ask us questions and we'll respond. We also have a team of folks out in the field working with families and centres on a regular basis. Of course, we've got a number of folks out doing operator visits as well.

We have a number of ways that we engage and consult.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for PC questioning has elapsed. I want to thank folks from EECD for coming in today. I would just note that we had some questions that weren't answered, so there were numbers around the spaces that were closed and how they divvy up infant-toddler spaces, et cetera, and also early on a question was asked about child care deserts and where they are. I didn't hear that get answered. Although the topic came up again, that wasn't answered. If you could include that and the clerk will be sending you a letter to follow up on those two things.

If you would like to make some closing remarks, by all means, you can do so now. Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: We appreciate the opportunity to come and talk about the exciting work that's happening in the sector and know that there's additional work to do. We're excited to lean into that. I would appreciate clarification on the second question, child care desert. How do we define that so we can respond properly to the questions?

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, that was your original question - I think the very first one.

MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We're looking for places that either are without spaces or in desperate need of spaces. (Interruption) No, there are no kilometres. Cities, municipalities, towns.

For example, let's say Truro is without spaces. What we're doing is - this is a term that's been brought up over and over by the department and in the Legislature. We're just looking for places that are chronically underserved for child care.

THE CHAIR: I don't think we have an exact sort of definition in terms of is it 50 per cent or something like that, but places that the department is defining as a child care desert. Certainly we had conversations about child care deserts here. I don't know if you have an actual one, but perhaps ones where the need is more acute, you could list where those were.

Any further comments from the deputy minister?

ELWIN LEROUX: We'll do our best to represent the spirit of that, recognizing that you're looking to understand where child care may have more pressing needs in the province. We'll do our best.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Our witnesses are free to go and speak to the lovely members of the media who are waiting at the back of the room. They'll take you next door for some comments, and the committee will move on to committee business.

If folks could leave quietly, it would be most appreciated.

Now we'll move back to our correspondence. The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, additional information requested from the May 17th meeting. This was information that I had asked for. I am fine with what we have there. Does anyone have any other questions on it?

The Department of Finance and Treasury Board, information requested from the December 13th meeting. Any discussion on that particular?

Just to let committee members know, our next meeting is January 24th. It is in camera. The witness is the Office of the Auditor General. It's a pre-hearing briefing regarding the Funding for Museums and Historical Sites and Municipal Grant Funding and Strategic Initiatives.

Any further business?

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:53 a.m.]