

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, June 19, 2024

COMMITTEE ROOM

**June 2024 Report of the Auditor General: *Preventing and Addressing Violence in
Nova Scotia Public Schools***

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Public Accounts Committee

Lorelei Nicoll (Chair)
Danielle Barkhouse (Vice Chair)
Tom Taggart
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Braedon Clark
Susan Leblanc
Lisa Lachance
Nolan Young

In Attendance:

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

Annie Baert - Executive Director, Student Services and Equity

Steve Gallagher - Regional Executive Director, Halifax Regional Centre for Education

Michel Collette - Superintendent, Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial

Nova Scotia Teachers Union

Ryan Lutes - President

Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia

Dr. Scott Armstrong - Chair



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Lorelei Nicoll

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I call the Standing Committee of Public Accounts meeting to order. My name is Lorelei Nicoll. I am the Chair. Nice to see some familiar faces. I'll remind everyone to have their cellphones on silent so as not to disrupt the meeting, and I'll ask for committee members to introduce themselves, starting on my left.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'll also acknowledge that we have officials from the Auditor General's Office here today, including the Auditor General herself. We also have the Legislative Counsel and the Legislative Committees Office present. I'll ask the member to my left to introduce himself.

[The Legislative Counsel introduced himself.]

THE CHAIR: And to my right.

[The Legislative Committee Clerk introduced herself.]

THE CHAIR: On today's agenda, as you know, we have officials with us from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Nova Scotia Teachers Union, and Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia with respect to the Report of the Auditor General: *Preventing and Addressing Violence in Nova Scotia Public Schools*.

I'll ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with the witness to my left.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone, and welcome. I will start with Deputy Minister LeRoux with his opening remarks, then we'll go to Mr. Lutes and Dr. Armstrong, in that order. You may begin.

ELWIN LEROUX: I want to begin by thanking the Office of the Auditor General for their work on this important issue, and I want to thank our teachers and school staff for their commitment to students and student outcomes.

I echo what Minister Druhan recently said. It's been helpful to see that the recommendations from the Auditor General's Office align very closely with the priority, safe and inclusive schools work under way in Nova Scotia. This alignment helps confirm that together with partners from the NSTU, PSAANS, Regional Centres for Education, and the CSAP, we're moving in the right direction. Moving in the right direction is a good thing, but what is even better is moving in the right direction at the right speed, and we accept that things need to move faster. We share a commitment to improving our data collection, supporting students through the development of a behaviour strategy, and updating our Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy and Emergency Management Plan.

We have seen from our data and heard from teachers, administrators, support staff, and communities that our tools need to be updated, programs strengthened, resources and supports made current. Last Fall, the minister announced to our entire system that this work was under way, and we've been working with partners to do this work together, ensuring participation, understanding, support, and impact. There is progress, but we understand the urgency of this work.

Minister Druhan has now directed staff to accelerate timelines, including the update to the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy. We are now committed to having the updated policy ready for review by our school communities early in the coming school year. Consultations with School Advisory Councils made up of students, parents, teachers, and community members on our School Code of Conduct Policy are already under way.

In the meantime, there are three actionable items we're pulling out and focusing on from the larger process already. We will work closely with our partners, but we want to be

clear today that we're hopeful that we can see some meaningful progress on the following items effective September.

The new Teachers' Provincial Agreement provides for significant new investments in supports. We're open to making sure these investments are directed by those people on the front lines. For example, we've allocated resources for school counsellors, but if a school decides that a social worker may be more appropriate, we are open to those alternatives and any other teacher-led initiatives that improve quality of life for students or staff.

On best use of educational assistants, our EAs are incredibly important. We want to have frank discussions about the best use of EAs in our system, including staffing levels and expanded responsibilities as appropriate.

On disciplinary action including suspensions, we understand the sensitivity around suspensions, but the time is now for this discussion. When student behaviour is so disruptive to others that they could lose the privilege of physically attending school, action does need to be taken. It's time to be clear, decisive, and serious about this in our provincial policies and direction. We are serious about taking action.

It's also been incredibly valuable working with the NSTU and PSAANS to lead this work. Thanks to an NSTU recommendation from our Safe and Inclusive Schools Leadership table, we are now immediately making changes to incident reporting for teachers.

I look forward to hearing from everyone here today, especially from our partners representing the NSTU and PSAANS. As I've said, our department is committed to taking every possible action as quickly as we can to address and prevent violence in our schools. We all want schools to be places where students thrive and staff feel supported in their work. It has always taken, and will continue to take, strong leadership and community commitment to ensure safe learning environments in our schools.

Thank you. We look forward to your questions today.

THE CHAIR: We'll now go to Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: First of all, I want to thank you all for the opportunity to be here today to speak on behalf of 10,000 Nova Scotia teachers and specialists.

Increasing school violence has become perhaps the single most pressing issue for our teachers. Children only have one chance to be kids. If they aren't provided with safe and healthy learning environments, their development can be profoundly and negatively impacted. Unfortunately, as I believe the Auditor General's report demonstrates, rising

school violence is not currently being taken seriously by our education system. In fact, it is often downplayed and minimized.

Granted, this is not a simple problem to solve. It's complicated and nuanced, and it affects each grade level differently, but we owe it to our kids and our educators to take urgent action.

The Auditor General and her team have done an outstanding job analyzing the problem. I want to thank her for making it a priority to hear directly from teachers as part of this work. Her recommendations provide a solid foundation we can build on to create safer schools, but we cannot afford to waste any more time. We need a comprehensive plan now.

As one teacher put it: "Students are physically violent on a daily basis. TAs, teachers and other students are getting physically hurt. There are times in the classroom that I feel students fear for their own safety. It's not fair to not feel safe at school and as a teacher to feel that you cannot keep your students safe." This is an alarming, but realistic description of the issue.

Let's also be clear: There is no other workplace where this would be tolerated. Yet this is the situation our educators and our kids are facing daily. Our students, their families, and our educators deserve much better than continued inaction on addressing school violence. The NSTU looks forward to collaborating on a decisive and urgent plan to addressing and preventing school violence and to make our schools safe for our teachers, educators, and our students.

I look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: Thank you for the opportunity to represent the almost 870 school-based and system-based administrators across Nova Scotia. We'd like to acknowledge the great work done by the Auditor General in her report.

The Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia shares concern, though regrettably not surprise, regarding the increasing trend of school violence reflected in the Auditor General's report. There is no question as to the negative impact these incidents have on our students, staff, and our communities at large.

We therefore welcome the recommendations of the Auditor General and commend the department for its commitment to implementing those recommendations on a province-wide basis. As leaders within public schools and school systems, administrators take their responsibility to facilitate a safe learning and work environment very seriously.

The development of a province-wide strategy with clear guidance to our members and other staff and sufficient resources allocated to implement the strategy is a recommendation our association strongly endorses. We would also like to acknowledge that several recommendations contained in the report, such as a review of the provincial code of conduct and a plan for the consistent reporting of incidents, have already been initiated by the department.

At the invitation of the minister, our association and the NSTU have been participating in the Safe and Inclusive Schools Committee, which is supporting the department as this work progresses. We welcome the statement by the deputy minister this morning that's going to increase the speed at which these are implemented.

Given the pivotal role of administrators in facilitating public safety, we recommend and request that PSAANS also be a participant in the development of the provincial strategy. In our opinion, this strategy should include, but not be limited to, the following components:

1. Professional development for administrators on preventing violence in schools and responding to incidents of violence when they take place;
2. Providing adequate administrative full-time equivalency and related resources in schools so that the principals and vice principals have the time and resources to implement proactive and reactive measures to prevent, mitigate, address, and document school violence while meeting the various complex duties listed in the Education Act;
3. An examination of pupil supervision during the school day and a plan to implement an enhanced level of supervision, identified by need, to ensure the safety of students and staff in all schools; and
4. An increase in on-site mental health support for students so that students with mental health challenges will have the needed services identified and implemented prior to violence taking place.

I look forward to your questions today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for your remarks. I will now open the floor to committee members to speak.

MLA Lachance, you have a question?

LISA LACHANCE: Actually, I have a motion. I really appreciate being able to hear from NSTU and PSAANS here at the table. We are also joined by many members of

CUPE, who of course are also the other professionals who are in our schools and in our classrooms.

I would like to make a motion that the committee welcome a representative of CUPE to the table to be part of the discussion.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion on the floor. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

As is typical in our public meetings, we go 20 minutes for each caucus. We start with the Liberals and then go to the NDP and then the PC Party.

MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for being here.

I just wanted to say up front that if there's a moment where I cut somebody off when they're giving an answer, I'm not trying to be rude. I just want to get to as many questions as I can over the course of 20 minutes. I just wanted to make that clear.

Deputy Minister LeRoux, I wanted to start with a few questions to you. In the report - I think maybe it was the first message, actually, in the AG's press release and key messages - it says, "There is an inadequate focus on preventing and addressing violence in schools at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development." Do you agree with that assessment?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I can assure the member that we are acting on all of the recommendations offered by the AG in the report. We've agreed with them all. We've also put in a timeline for actions that we will be taking responsive to them.

We haven't gone line by line and agreed or disagreed with every single one of the data points that the AG has offered. Instead, what we see is that there is action that needs to be taken, and it needs to be taken urgently, as has been offered. We are focusing more on how we respond now, given post-pandemic data trends that we can see. We've decided it's really important to create an umbrella strategy under which we will review a provincial school code of conduct. We will tie in emergency-management planning.

We recognize that we need to actually build a behaviour strategy. What we've heard from all of our employees is that there are lots of resources, but the coherence among them

is not as tight as it needs to be right now. We need more clarity. We need more standards on how we collect and use data at school level, at system level, and of course at regional level.

[9:15 a.m.]

We agree with all of those recommendations from the AG. We see that we need to work on them fast. We need to work on them quickly. We need to understand what the data tells us, and make sure that our responses to it are going to create the environment where every student can be successful in school and every staff member goes to school to do their best. When staff can do their best, students do their best. That's what we're doing.

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Lutes, I would pose the same question to you. You touched on this in your opening statement as well, but as I said, the AG said that there is an inadequate focus on preventing and addressing violence in schools at EECD. That doesn't mean going forward - that will be the case, obviously - but in the past. Through the report, we saw over the last six or seven years a 60 per cent increase in violent incidents at schools. From your perspective, and from teachers' perspective, do you agree with that statement that the AG made, that there hasn't been adequate focus on preventing and addressing violence over the last few years as there should have been?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: I agree 100 per cent with the Auditor General, and while I believe the people in our system really want to create change and I believe the minister especially wants to make schools safer, what I don't believe has happened - again, I'm not putting fault because I do want to move forward - but everyone is juggling a thousand different balls. I do 100 per cent believe that there's been an inadequate focus, not necessarily for reasons that aren't understandable, but I do think that the human resources in our schools are not there so that we can provide supports to students. If we can't provide those supports, I think we want to make schools look good instead of actually be good places. That's not the fault of the people. I think the people in the system are doing their level best, and that goes for educators, that goes for TAs, that goes for our administrators.

I think there's been a focus on other things. I think there's been a focus sometimes on - again, if we don't have the human resources to make school safer, what can we do? We can make them look safer my making our reporting - again, not necessarily in a nefarious way, but maybe not making our reporting as easy as it can be, by having some teachers, maybe some school principals, feeling pressure from others to minimize school violence in their schools. I do believe there's been an inadequate focus, and I believe that we're at a crossroads where I'm really hopeful that the department has received the message. I believe they have.

The AG herself said this requires strong leadership and this requires a change in culture where I believe the number one focus has to be safety in our schools, it has to be decreasing violence, and all of the other things that are also important come after that because we all know that students are not going to learn and our educators are not going to be their best if they're not feeling safe. And right now, they're not feeling safe.

BRAEDON CLARK: To touch on something that Deputy Minister LeRoux mentioned in his response - reading the report, talking to teachers, assessing the data, I think one thing that stands out to me is that there is a lack of consistency across the board. For example, if you look at incidents as a percentage of enrolment, some places are half as much as others. To me, that doesn't feel right either. It should be fairly consistent across the board which would reflect similar training, similar experiences, similar approaches. We don't see that in the data, so I think that's something we should be focused on: Consistency across the board so that whether you're at CSAP, or you're Tri-County Regional Centre for Education, or Halifax Regional Centre for Education, or in Cape Breton, you have the same experience and the same support.

Mr. Lutes touched on human resources, which I think is a really important piece of this. Obviously, code of conduct and policy is important too, but if you don't have people in the building who are adequately trained and enough of them, you're not going to fix the problem.

Mr. LeRoux, I wanted to you ask you: How do we address that piece of it, the human resources piece, as quickly as possible? As you've said, speed is important here. By this Fall when school starts again, are we going to see more TAs in the classroom? Are we going to see more classroom teachers at different levels to make sure that we have enough trained people in place to start to bend the curve in the right direction on this issue?

ELWIN LEROUX: Each year, we see more teachers and more support staff in our system, given the growth of our system. That's a fact. But let me tell you how we're acting and what we're doing.

If I could take one moment to just help you understand, we want to make sure that our resources respond to the problem. We want to make sure that what we're doing fixes what we're trying to fix. Eighty-six per cent of students in Nova Scotia have had no behavioural issues recorded or reported in our data management system. That leaves 14 per cent of kids who have. Another 4 per cent of those have had none of the issues identified by the AG as violent. Maybe they have tobacco or cigarettes at school - not permitted. We're down to 10 per cent of students who've had an incident - 10 per cent is a lot of kids. We need to make sure we understand who they are so that our strategies and response can actually target intervention to correct the problem.

Thinking of those 10 per cent, only 4 per cent of them show up more than once. Of that 4 per cent, more than three-quarters are between three-foot-five and four feet tall,

between the ages of five and 10. We need to understand from our data as we take action: What are we putting in our system to make sure we have impact? We want to make sure as we are taking action together with NSTU, PSAANS, and other partners . . .

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Deputy Minister, MLA Clark wishes to ask a question.

BRAEDON CLARK: You just touched on data which I think are a really important piece of this. From reading the report, it seems to me that the data are far too broad that we collect right now. Not all incidents of violence are created equal, as we know. A schoolyard squabble of my son, who is seven, and his friend is different than someone in high school who might bring a knife in their backpack, for example. How do we get to a point where we can look at the data and say that our severe incidents, or whatever you want to classify them as, are steady or falling - which would be good - or they're up 20 per cent over the last couple of years, and that's a problem? Are we going to be able to have that kind of granularity of data, and when would we have that?

ELWIN LEROUX: Here's what we're doing about that, because the answer is yes. We are working to have data standards so that we know. The minister in November asked staff to report everything, report better. We are working to make sure we have a good picture of what's happening in our system.

What I would also say is that whether you're in Grade 5, seven like your child, or in Grade 12, you should be able to go to school and learn. You should as a staff person be able to go to an environment where you can do your work well. Any violence does not belong in our school system. Our responses need to make sure to solve the problems that are created in our system as they are throughout.

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Lutes, just to touch on the question of human resources again, which I think is really important, one thing that I've heard a lot about from high school teachers in particular is changes that reduce their ability to be in the hallways to monitor the school, generally speaking. It was mentioned in the AG's report as well, essentially moving from teaching six of eight classes over a two-day period to seven of eight. One day you have no monitoring time, no prep time, whatever you might have done.

If you could just explain how that's an issue, if that's an issue. If it is, how is it? How would we address it? Does NSTU know, for example, how many more teachers we need to be in the system to get us back to a six of eight, where teachers can actually monitor hallways and defuse situations before they actually become problems?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: I think that's a significant issue. Let's first be clear that when staffing was reduced in HRCE high schools, HRCE was the last regional centre to be reduced. It was reduced in Cape Breton, I think maybe 10 years ago, likely other regional

centres in the last decade or two. Some regional centres never had it. I think what I hear from teachers is that extra flexibility that it gave school administrators to say: “Hey Ryan, you’re not teaching right now, you’re not on your prep time, can you supervise the cafeteria? We want to start a math extra help room. Can you be the person in there? We want to have an in-school suspension room where we can provide supports to our students who are having behavioural issues, who are struggling, and we want to provide an academic support. Can you go do that duty?” It’s not, “Can you,” it’s “You’re going to, because that’s your role as an employee.”

When HRCE cut staffing levels in high schools - and granted, not system-wide, but in high schools - we lost about 10 per cent of teachers, I would say, in those high schools. They were forced to go elsewhere. It took a lot of flexibility away from the schools. It took a lot of supervision away from the schools.

I think one thing that people don’t often realize is the number of students who are out of class. In a larger high school, and we have large high schools all throughout the province, from Halifax West to Cobequid Educational Centre, Horton High School is a large high school, we can have up to maybe 150 to under 200 students who have a free period. They don’t have a class with a classroom teacher to be at. They are supposed to be at a few different places, but of course, it takes humans to get 16- to 18-year-olds to do what they’re supposed to be doing.

That’s not to mention if you have a large high school where maybe you have 80 to 100 classrooms, you probably have a few students out of class, whether they’re going to the office, the guidance counsellor, or they’re just going to the bathroom. You have a significant number of students who are out of the classroom for various reasons. Those students are not provided adequate supervision with those changes. They were before and now are not. I think that’s a huge change. It’s not only a change in the data, but it’s a change in the culture of our schools. That’s what I hear about a lot: My school doesn’t feel the same as it did. I don’t get to make connections with students whom I don’t teach.

I think teachers have an ability to, like you said, prevent . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Sorry, Mr. Lutes, I asked too many questions at once. That was my mistake.

The other thing I wanted to get a sense of, if you know - and if you don’t, that’s fine. Do you have a sense of how many teachers you would need to bring back into the high school system in HRCE to restore that culture that you were just talking about?

RYAN LUTES: I don’t have exact numbers. What I remember was approximately when staffing levels were reduced, that left about 100 teachers in the HRCE to be kind of

displaced by those cuts. I don't have all the data, but I would think HRCE is around half the population if you look at elsewhere. We're looking at about 200 teachers, maybe a little bit more with some rural schools.

Again, what I hear from teachers, especially in those schools - especially the teachers who had that extra time to properly support their school and now do not - is that those 200 teachers are money well spent keeping our kids safe, providing extra supports to our schools, to our kids, to our administrators. I hear from administrators, and I wouldn't want to be an administrator in those schools. You have three to four people who are running around trying to put out metaphorical fires, but sometimes non-metaphorical fires, who are trying to keep their school safe, and it's a really impossible job for them.

BRAEDON CLARK: Dr. Armstrong, I wanted to ask you a couple of questions here in the four minutes or so I have left. There were some issues that were raised in the AG's report about the interplay between teachers, administrators, and parents, and I wanted to touch on a couple of those points.

One was that the report noted over 18 per cent - so 26,000, as a raw number - 26,000 of reported violent incidents over the seven-year period that we looked at had no reported action by school administration. I'm just wondering: How do you react to that, and how does that happen, that almost one out of every five incidents that are reported has no action? Is that standard or appropriate or is there something going on there that's an issue?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

SCOTT ARMSTRONG: I'd have to question the accuracy of that. I think that came from survey questions. Sometimes in education what happens is that if a student is not suspended - say there's an incident - people reflect on that as nothing happened. But I would say our highly educated, well-trained, professional administrators across the province deal with any incident that comes to their office. It may not always result in suspension, depending on what the incident was.

As you talked about, two seven-year-olds get in a tussle on the playground, you might not give them a five-day suspension, but you're going to do some restorative practices where you work with those students and teach them some conflict-resolution skills and others. That is typically done sometimes at the elementary level by a classroom teacher; at the high school level, it's usually done by a vice principal or a principal. Sometimes you might bring in, if the student has specific challenges or mental health issues, a guidance counsellor or some mental health supports.

I would very much like to say that our administrators across the province deal with issues when they come to the office, support those students, support those families, and contact those families of both students, if it's an altercation between two students, when

these things happen - bringing those families in, bringing the communities in as well as to support students who have these struggles.

[9:30 a.m.]

We have highly educated - most of our administrators across the province have multiple graduate degrees. They make judgment calls every day on how to deal with incidents that take place at the school. I would argue that our administrators across the province - like I think Susan Casey, the principal at West Bedford School, a very well-respected administrator in your constituency, would obviously deal with any incident that came to her office.

BRAEDON CLARK: Dr. Armstrong, in the report - you mentioned the survey there, and there were a few thousand responses on that, I believe - one of the takeaways from that was that teachers were saying that one of the reasons why they don't report incidents, if they don't, is because the perception is that nothing will happen, no action will be taken, or it's a waste of their time - whatever the case might be.

How did we get to that point, I guess, where teachers feel like, I'm not even going to bother? Where is the broken part of the chain there that leads to that kind of decision?

SCOTT ARMSTRONG: I'll respond to that question by just giving a synopsis of what happens when an incident gets reported to the office. Typically, if there's an incident, say it's a tussle between two seven-year-olds or a tussle between two 15-year-olds, those two incidents would be dealt with quite differently by the administration in that office, because of the developmental level of the children.

Typically what happens is an adult in the school, whether it be a TA, a teacher, or an administrator, will come across an incident or it will be reported to them by a student. Those students would be referred to the office. At that point, the administrator who takes on that challenge will interview both students and try to determine what happened. If it's still murky because no adult saw it, you might interview some other students who saw the incident. The first thing you do is determine what happened.

Once you do that, you would then look at the code of conduct, and we do have a code of conduct. As part of the Auditor General's report, this code of conduct is to be reviewed. That action is already taking place by the department. We're involved in that in the Safe and Inclusive Schools Committee, and the deputy minister said today that that review will be done more quickly than we had anticipated, which is good news for our administrators.

You apply the code of conduct. It could be an in-school suspension, it could be an out-of-school suspension, it could be a restorative practice. Then you would circle back to the teacher or the person who reported the incident to the office and let them know what

happened. Then the parents would be contacted, involving the parents so they know what incident happened and how we responded to it. Then that incident would be reported on PowerSchool, which is our data collection, and the action of the office would be recorded on that.

That's typically how things are handled by the administrator's office . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark, with 26 seconds.

BRAEDON CLARK: Sorry, Dr. Armstrong, I just wanted to get this in before time runs out. There was a mention that sometimes there were reports of incidents being removed from PowerSchool by an administrator. I know I'm putting you on the spot here with 15 seconds probably, but can you explain why that might happen?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

SCOTT ARMSTRONG: As the deputy minister said, different regions, and the CSAP have different ways to report . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Time is up for the Liberal caucus. We're going to go now to the NDP for their 20 minutes. MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: We're talking about data, and obviously data was a huge issue reported by the Auditor General. It's hard to know how to use the information that we have, because we know there are gaps, we know things might be underreported, and that sort of thing. I'm going to ask a very specific question that might help us dig a little deeper. One of the things that doesn't happen, of course, is the severity of the incident doesn't necessarily show up in how the data is reported. I'm wondering, with more serious incidents: How are they responded to, how are they tracked? After the Charles P. Allen High School stabbing, for instance, what would have been recorded in PowerSchool? I'll start with that question.

THE CHAIR: Your question is directed to the deputy minister?

LISA LACHANCE: If the deputy minister is ready to respond.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I'll start, and perhaps one of the regional executive directors would appreciate talking a little more specifically. You're interested in what happens at the extreme end of the scale, and that's an important discussion to have. That's why we said we're taking action on that, and we invite people to be reflecting on suspension. Is that the appropriate way and is it being used appropriately? If a student repeatedly disrupts the learning of someone in school, they might not be able to be there anymore. That exists

now. If there's reluctance or reticence or a lack of understanding on when and why and where we should use that decision, we need to clarify that. It's really important.

Just two things, and then I'll invite Steve, if that's okay. Any incident of violence that disrupts learning is a problem. We have to address all of the problems in order make sure success . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm just going to try to focus our question. Of course, we only have a limited amount of time here. With the CPA incident, for instance, can you speak to what was recorded in PowerSchool? I think the report is available; it's not been made available publicly. Were there any specific recommendations that have been adopted at the departmental level or at the RCE level from the CPA report?

ELWIN LEROUX: If it's okay, MLA Lachance, Steve Gallagher is probably the best person to answer that question for you this morning.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gallagher.

STEVE GALLAGHER: We had a panel review the incident at Charles P. Allen High School, and then they provided a fairly detailed report to us. We received it in the October-November time frame. Our staff has been working on the recommendations since.

We've not made the report public because of legal proceedings. We are very concerned that anything we would share publicly would interfere with that. Our plan is that at the conclusion of legal proceedings, I think is middle of July - maybe end of July - we'll be sharing the report publicly, as well as a report card, so to speak, on the recommendations and our work to improve based on those.

Some of that work parallels nicely with the work that the Auditor General has done. We've been working on that quietly through the course of this year. I'm looking forward to sharing that with everyone. There were some lessons learned from that terrible incident. It's important to say that that terrible incident demonstrated how effectively our systems have worked. In that moment, which arguably was one of the worst in the history of Nova Scotia, our lockdown procedures worked. Our partners in law enforcement responded remarkably quickly, and we had excellent support in negotiating the specific event and in the aftermath.

Some big lessons were learned, and I look forward to being able to share that with families and the general public on the other side of the conclusion of legal proceedings.

LISA LACHANCE: Dr. Armstrong, you were talking about how whenever a young person presents in the office after a difficulty in school - a violent incident - that there's

likely some sort of action that's taken, but maybe not necessarily recorded. You talked about restorative actions and that sort of thing.

I guess I have two questions. One is, under the old HRSB, there was a commitment, I believe school-board-wide, to restorative justice practices. There was quite a bit of expertise built up. I'm wondering where that lives now. Does the department, or HRCE, have someone leading restorative justice practices in schools? As we make our data better, are we going to start recording more of those maybe more nuanced actions in response to violent incidents?

On the question of restorative justice, I don't know if Mr. LeRoux or Mr. Gallagher want to start.

THE CHAIR: We'll start with Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I will note that PowerSchool is the student database that we use to collect information about kids: demographic, attendance, achievement, record, historic. It wasn't built as purely a behavioural tool. But within incident tracking, we do choose what follows up afterwards. A range of behaviours are auto populated for a downloadable sort of menu. It could be a referral to our CH adviser, if appropriate; referrals to SchoolsPlus, as mentioned; in- and out-of-school suspensions.

What the minister asked the entire system to do in November was to report more accurately, and from there we will figure out what resources we need to figure out what our data is saying.

You are right. Restorative approaches are one of the ways that we remediate behaviour and teach kids how to behave differently. Post pandemic, this is what our data said: All the little kids who didn't socialize are coming to school and causing a lot of incidents - a lot, significant in our data. People had to teach them, "Use your voice, not your hands," and we saw a change in our very early elementary.

There are still resources with restorative approaches at Department of Justice. Justice is a partner and supports us in that. We will look to see, when we implement data standards in our new review of the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy and behaviour strategy, what role restorative approaches play. Do we need to build capacity?

LISA LACHANCE: I want to continue on with the conversation about unassigned instructional time - less available time for supervision in the halls, less available time for those free periods and trying to get people back to learning or doing what they're supposed to do.

The other thing I've heard a lot about in HRCE, as a result of this new policy, is really a lack of ability to support extracurriculars. Again, going back to thinking about the

school climate and building a better atmosphere in schools, that's also, I think, a really important part. Are we looking at reinstating instructional time to its former levels within HRCE, or more broadly, throughout the province?

THE CHAIR: Is that directed at HRCE? Mr. Gallagher?

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Gallagher or Mr. LeRoux, who could perhaps speak to it at a province-wide level.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: What we're talking about is teacher work time. To understand the context of that, it's defined in the Teachers' Provincial Agreement. Teachers coming in this September will have 85 per cent contact time with kids, 15 per cent preparation time. The question really is: How are we using that 85 per cent of work time? Currently, we believe the best use of teachers is to teach. There are a variety of supervisor roles. They vary in name across the province, from lunch, bus, ground supervisors in Cape Breton through to school supervisors or school supervision in schools in HRCE.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to continue on, and I think this is for the deputy minister. In October of last year, when the Auditor General was actively working on this report, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development stood in the House of Assembly and said, "With respect to the specific question about rates of incidents, I can say, in fact, rates of incidents have remained stable. Perhaps, though, the member opposite didn't recognize that during COVID-19, people were not in schools as frequently and we've had an increase of students in school." I'll table that for the committee.

Now that we've seen the report, the data shows that it's clearly not the case that the incidents were remaining stable. Can you explain the disconnect there between the minister's comments and what we've seen in this report?

I guess my big question is: Was the department misinterpreting the data at that time?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I am not sure what the minister was speaking about in the House. I would say it's probably appropriate to raise that with her.

The Auditor General took a view on seven years of data, from one fixed point to another. We look at data from a variety of different places. Today I brought and talked about data current to this school year. I can share that. I don't know if the minister and the

Auditor General were talking about the same frame on data. It could have been the same years or not. I'm sorry, I can't speak to that.

I can tell you that we are standardizing data to make sure to solve for this.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It wasn't the Auditor General speaking. It was my colleague Suzy Hansen, who's the critic for Education and Early Childhood Development for our party. It was in Question Period, and she asked the minister about the increasing rates of violence in schools, and the minister said the rates were not increasing. Now we know from the Auditor General's report that they are, in fact, increasing.

The question is: Why would the minister say they weren't increasing when they were increasing? My question really is: Where was the minister getting her data? Was the data being misinterpreted?

I guess I'll just leave that. If you're not able to answer that, then I will just ask the next sort of follow-up: How many violent incidents have there been so far this year? You said you have the data for this year. How many of those incidents were physical violence incidents?

ELWIN LEROUX: I did bring data for this year, so I do have some totals on violent incidents, as you asked. I'll share them with you.

From Primary to Grade 6, reported incidents that we see in our data management system for this year, to June 7th - so that's just about a week ago; sorry, I don't know the date - two weeks Friday. It essentially covers most of this school year, as you would say.

Physical violence: 15,925 incidents from Primary to Grade 6; physical violence: 3,285 reported incidents, Grades 7, 8, and 9; and physical violence: 1,135 incidents, Grades 10, 11, and 12.

We also do work on this . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just wanted to clarify that I also would like to have the total violent incidents, and then broken out of that, the physical violence. Obviously, violence is not just physical. Do you have non-physical violence numbers?

ELWIN LEROUX: I could pull out a calculator and add those three up. I don't have that total in front of me today, so can't do that mental math.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's great. Sorry, we are very conscious of how little time we have. If you could do those calculations and get them to the committee, that would be

great, following. One of the concerns raised by the Auditor General in the report is that there's no analysis conducted of the data being collected. We see physical violence, and I will refer to my colleague in the Liberal Party and talk about how it's different when you bring a knife to school from when two seven-year-olds have a fight.

[9:45 a.m.]

However, those seven-year-olds having a fight - I will say that I personally know one of them, i.e., parent one of them - and it's not nothing. Those are actually really important, and he needs supports to change his behaviour so that he's not one of the ones bringing a knife to school. I'm not saying there's a direct correlation, but in some cases, there probably is.

The Auditor General is saying that there's no analysis of the data. Has that been started in terms of breaking out those types of incidents, and are there any findings you can share with us at this point?

ELWIN LEROUX: I believe what the Auditor General said is she didn't have evidence of analysis of the data. I think, for example, if we listened to Mr. Gallagher, he could share how they use that data regularly at regional level to make a difference for kids. Would that help answer your question better specifically?

SUSAN LEBLANC: How much time do we have?

THE CHAIR: You have five minutes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Sure, really quickly.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gallagher.

STEVE GALLAGHER: Our school supervisors - we have eight supervisors responsible for clusters of our total schools, which is 137 - on a monthly basis they're looking at the most serious of incidents and having active conversations about what they're seeing there. It's largely about deploying our resources and support of schools. I think the deputy minister's comment about the need to have a better coordinated approach is a valid one, and I certainly see that in the HRCE.

We do have a great deal of support - experts who can help schools, whether it's the equity and diversity team, our safe schools consultant, we have behavioural specialists and supports through our student services team that we can deploy into schools. A recent example would be Astral Drive Junior High. We had a walkout there in response to a violent incident. A number of our specialists were at the school, led by the equity team, for the week afterwards to meet with kids and to hear from them about what their concerns were. They spent a week there.

I think the community expected an assembly to discuss it, which of course wasn't really the right way to go. Kids signalled very quickly that they wanted to have private conversations. They met individually and in small groups with our staff who were visiting but also the school staff. At the end of the week, a bit of a plan was made for next year in terms of how we support the school moving forward.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm going to move on, but I might come back to this in the second round. When asked about what's contributing to the increase in the violence, one of the factors was school overcrowding. To the deputy minister first, can you tell me how many schools in the province right now are over capacity?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: All of our schools have room for the kids who need to go to school. We've added portable classrooms, modular additions in classrooms, and expanded supports - changed boundaries to accommodate the growth in our province. You would know that we have a very rich capital plan that's investing in expansion of schools and delivery to make sure that we have these.

The regional centres work with us very closely to forecast enrolment, and we put infrastructure in place to make sure to accommodate all of those children in our schools.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Then I wonder why overcrowding is being credited as one of the reasons for violence. If every school has room for every kid, then that seems like a strange correlation.

HRCE has reported an increase of over 9,000 students in the past five years. When will the four new HRCE schools be open for students? Maybe I'm asking you, Mr. Gallagher: Are the schools going to be enough to meet the growth? We know that in 2022, HRCE actually indicated that six to eight new schools were needed to meet the growth. Brand-new schools were already bursting at the seams. Why only four, and why, two years later, do we not have locations selected for those new schools?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gallagher.

STEVE GALLAGHER: The locations for those schools - that's happening beyond me. That's the Department of Public Works, of course, so I can't really speak to that. Our job, I think, is to identify where best to locate the schools, and then we defer to our colleagues in government to take care of it for us.

We're meeting regularly. We have a planning and growth team that meets every two weeks at the HRCE to track what's happening in our schools, and we're sharing that information with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on a regular basis. I wouldn't say that overcrowding is connected. I would say growth is causing

some of this, but that would be me making an assumption. From the perspective of there are more people in the buildings and they're bumping into each other, I think in that respect, it's likely that it's a contributing factor.

Beyond that, I really wouldn't want to speculate. I think there are lots of other people who have theories as to why we've seen an increase in violence. I think it's important to note, also, that this is an increase that's happened right across the country, and that other school systems are grappling with it.

With the support of government we have responded a great deal to growth in the HRCE. In the last six years, we've opened five new schools and added 141 modular classrooms. Today we're using 60 portables on our sites. We've reconfigured the boundaries of 50 schools. As we move into next year, we have currently three schools under construction. Two of those are replacement schools, but they'll be much bigger. One is a brand-new school. That's the one in Clayton Park.

There are, as you noted, four more announced by the minister. We are in the process of adding 28 more modular classrooms and three modular units for September, and we've reconfigured an additional nine schools at this stage. Our goal is a seat for every kid in a positive and safe learning environment, and we'll keep working to make that happen.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time has ended for the NDP caucus. We will now go to the PC party, with MLA MacDonald first.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I think everybody would agree to the statement that violence is a problem in school, and we've got more than one. But to fix a problem, you need data. You do. You have to look at it.

My questions are probably going to be - and it's probably my IT background on PowerSchool - I've seen it from a parent's standpoint. I haven't seen it from a teacher or administrator background . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA MacDonald has the floor.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: My question to you - and I think it's going to be Mr. Lutes, but it might be the department - if there is an incident, how is it entered in PowerSchool, and is the actual parent able to view it so they know it?

I'll start with Mr. Lutes, I think.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: I can only speak to what a teacher sees. I can't really speak to what a parent sees, unfortunately, about a specific incident. Certainly when teachers report an

incident, it's entered in PowerSchool. I would say there are pretty significant inconsistencies with that approach across the province. Sometimes it's put in a log entry, which administrators don't automatically get a notification about. Sometimes it's entered into another - it's not PowerTeacher, it's PowerSchool Administrator.

It's complicated, and there are significant inconsistencies, I would say, from region to region, but also school to school, how administrators are directing teachers to enter that data. Something that the Auditor General, I think, correctly recognized is that the data we have isn't as good as it can be. I understand that, and we're going to get better on that, and that's great. But we're never going to get good data when the focus is on a superficial lowering of violent incidents.

When teachers feel - and they identified this, and the Auditor General identified this - when teachers feel pressured to not report incidents, or when teachers feel "Nothing's going to get done. Nothing's going to get reported as an action. There's no point in this. Nothing's going to change," or "My goodness, I've already been hit, punched, kicked several times this year, and nothing has happened. Why am I going to do that to myself again by reporting that?" That's really frustrating - one of the data points talked about - good data that came from the Auditor General's survey: 31 per cent of educators indicating that they experience violence in schools daily. That should shock us all.

I think, again, there are great people in the system. But if a third of us had some type of safety incident in this room, there'd be a problem. This is happening in our schools daily. I appreciate hearing from the deputy minister that things are going to change going forward. I get that, and teachers hope that it's true, but teachers - and frankly our kids - have been failed before by governments making announcements and putting some reports on a shelf and not really doing anything about it.

I would say a lot of that data are not necessarily just teachers - it's also our EPAs, our TAs. We have to recognize that the vast majority of our educators are female, so we have a huge number of females experiencing violence in their schools, and it's not being dealt with appropriately by government. Again, I look forward to that changing, but it's not going to change unless there's a change in leadership tone that says violence is our number one issue and we're going to address it. There's not going to be downplaying it, and we're not going to minimize it, and we're going to report it, and everyone is going to be supported to the extent that they should be. Right now what I hear - and what I think the Auditor General heard from our educators - is that's not happening.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll let Dr. Armstrong comment on it.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: Across the seven regions in the CSAP, there are different instructions to administrators and to teachers on how to report incidents. It varies

from region to region. There are some regions where teachers can go on PowerSchool Admin and make a report of an incident. There are other regions where the administrator is the one who goes on PowerSchool Admin and makes the report of an incident. The teacher may do that in a written format or may, as President Lutes said, do it through a log entry.

The minister in the Fall, working with our committee, asked teachers to record all incidents. We started to have every incident recorded to build better data, and there is a commitment to a province-wide approach to reporting. As you said, MLA MacDonald, that will give us a good database to work from going forward. I look forward to that as an administrator. I'm returning to my school in September, where the incidents that I report or teachers report will be consistent across the province.

This stems from the fact that we had elected school boards for many decades in Nova Scotia. School boards ran their own styles of reporting, but now that we have a different system, other than the CSAP, some consistent reporting, some instructions that are province-wide are something that our members would welcome.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Getting to that, I hear there's PowerSchool and PowerSchool Admin. I guess I'll make sure I say PowerSchool Admin then, since PowerSchool is the parents' interface and PowerSchool Admin is the schools' interface. Again, coming from IT, what training do we give people on how to fill it out? I'll go to the department on this, because I write software, and if I don't train somebody on how to use it, guaranteed I'll get a lot of support calls. What training do we put in? Do you have what I would call train the trainer, which are experts that somebody contacts on that?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: It's certain that we have different actions to take going forward as far as working with staff on how best to use the tools to make sure we have different data standards and to make sure that we can make good decisions based on what's in that. We put a lot of weight in PowerSchool, how we have the student database. We've also heard from NSTU already: Make it easier for teachers.

We can't do this with the convoluted, Do I use this one or that one? This one doesn't talk to that one. We've solved that. We have information going out this week to say, We've done that. We have other improvements we have to make. Currently, there is a variety of ways that we train staff to use these tools. They vary on what access to what parts of this database do you need and for what purpose, because they're used for programming. If you need access to attendance, you should see that. Do you need access to phone numbers and personal information?

All of those things are in our training. Most of the resources for teachers that they would use to take attendance, to work with, would be online as well. Employers would

train new staff at school level on what you need to do and how you use the tools you need to get things going in the school year. Clearly, if we change what we want out of this tool, and we change some of the elements of it, we're going to make sure that there's a robust training so that everyone knows how best to use this so that we're not just warehousing data - we're actually taking wisdom from that to guide good actions going forward.

[10:00 a.m.]

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm glad of that, because yes, if you've got a bunch of data and you don't look at it, it's kind of useless. You've had people waste their time. I assume somebody will have to explain it. PowerSchool - a student is assigned an ID. Does that ID stay with them? If they were to be in CSAP and then go to HR and then go to Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education, does all their data go so that the next school has the details for it? I don't know who wants to take that. It looks like the deputy minister is nodding.

THE CHAIR: He nods a lot. Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I'm certainly happy to have other members participate in the conversation this morning, but the answer to your question is that in Nova Scotia, we all have a unique health number. It follows our health record. We access it every time. In Nova Scotia, students have a unique education number. It follows with them all of the time.

Some data flows year to year, some doesn't. The data that's needed to flow would, and data that shouldn't does not. There are some data standards around that, but yes, if a student moves from region to region, all of the necessary information to support their continued education in Nova Scotia would flow with them with that unique identification number.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Let's just say somebody had an incident. We'll pick high school just for the heck of it because I do agree, in elementary you're going to have issues, it's different - there was some bullying reported, there was a physical assault. My last question is going to be: Does PowerSchool have the ability or is it being requested to change so it can show that these are incidents, not just one? Obviously, there could be multiple things happening. Yes, I understand numbers will go up, but the point is that you want to know. I'm not sure who wants to answer that question. Dr. Armstrong seems to be shifting. I'll give it to Dr. Armstrong first.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: Typically, when there's an incident, on PowerSchool Admin, when you're categorizing that incident, there's a drop-down menu where you can only select one incident. That's something at our committee that we're working with the

department and NSTU. We've discussed and hopefully we'll be able to manipulate that so you can include multiple incidents.

Physical violence is one of the drop-down menus and bringing a weapon to school is another. Bullying would be another. There's a whole cache of different ways you can categorize incidents, but as anyone who's used PowerSchool before knows, sometimes these incidents overlap several of those categories, so it becomes a judgment call which one to categorize it as. Hopefully we're able to work with the software provider and have the ability to indicate multiple categories for incidents.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll just ask a follow-up to the deputy minister. That is something that's in the works - to talk to the service provider - which would empower a school to make that ability?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Yes, we're taking action on this. What I would say at a high level is form follows function. We need to make sure we decide what it is we need out of this. If we're going to ask an entire workforce to invest in - please write that down, please record that, please make sure it's accurate in this way, then we have to take that and do something with it. We have to make sure that at the classroom and school level, data is helping guide how we're using our resources, what we are paying attention to. Is there a trend evolving here that we need to do something about?

As shared earlier, at a regional level: What are we doing well, what are we having success with, and what isn't being solved? If, for example, classrooms are being disrupted by the same student regularly, there needs to be a decisive response on that. It's not okay to continue. We have to make sure that when we're making decisions, they're based on good data, good standards, reliable and accurate, and then we're doing something, I'll say, immediate for action to make sure that people go to school and thrive in our schools.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll defer to MLA Taggart.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I'm not sure where to start. We all, as elected folks, hear from parents, children and teachers regularly. Even within Colchester North, which is a small part of Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education, there are significant differences in the way each school is operated or managed. I have to assume - maybe that's not a good thing - that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has an Education Act. I don't know when it was last updated, but it lays out the way schools are supposed to be operated.

Since I've sat down here today, I just made note that different regions have different ways of reporting - significant differences across the province, region to region, school to school, different instructions in each region. I've heard from teachers the very same thing that somebody else has said here today, that they are under pressure to not report violent incidents because they don't want to be - because of whatever.

I guess if I could, Dr. Armstrong: As an administrator, how can that be? Is there that much grey area? How can that be?

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: We have one unifying document in terms of discipline in managing schools, which is the code of conduct. The code of conduct does give a range of responses. Each administrator of each school, whether it be the principal or vice principal, is highly trained. They have multiple graduate degrees. They understand school leadership. They're experts at school finance. They're also experts at curriculum and instruction implementation, and they also have leadership training in how to deal with student discipline. That training is what those administrators rely on.

Each case that comes to the office is a one-off case, and you have to make a judgment call of what is best for the school, that classroom, and that student, or multiple students, as you make decisions of how to respond. I guess that's the response. The code of conduct does give some flexibility, but in severe cases of severe incidents, it tells you what you do. If you have a fistfight on the playground, typically at a high school level that would be five days of suspension, and then you would put a program in place when they come back. So there's a lot more consistency than maybe you've heard here this morning, because of that code of conduct that you are required to follow as an administrator.

But there is some flexibility. We talked about at the lower elementary level, you're going to respond differently to an incident than you would at a high school level. If you look at the incidents that the deputy minister put out today, we're dealing with a lot more incidents at the lower elementary than we've seen before since the pandemic - and this is consistent across North America. It's not just something we're seeing in Nova Scotia.

Something happened during that pandemic in terms of socialization that has led to more incidents at the lower elementary level. We're seeing behaviours at the lower elementary level that we really haven't seen or dealt with before. Those administrators at the lower elementary level are dealing with incidents probably a little more severe than they've had experience with. That would indicate some of the differences you might see.

In your constituency, you would have small elementary schools like Great Village Elementary, but you also have larger schools like Cobequid Educational Centre and Central Colchester Junior High. Chad MacPherson at Central Colchester - I'm sure he deals with every incident that comes to his office in a very effective way - is a well-respected

administrator. But he's going to deal with an incident a little differently than the principal at Great Village Elementary, who has two Grade 6 students who squabble over a ball on the playground.

TOM TAGGART: Just if I could follow up - the Public School Administrators Association, Dr. Armstrong - you have a wonderful reputation in the schools that you've been in. But somebody above you gives direction too, so that's part of this administration group too. Am I correct? How much do they influence - maybe not so much yours, because you have a long-tenured school principal, but how much do they influence policy and the way policy is followed in a particular school?

SCOTT ARMSTRONG: If an incident is reported to the office, and say it's a severe incident, something that you may not have seen before, or something where it's going to require what we call an extended suspension - more than 10 days - you would be in touch with a supervisor. Every administrator has someone who's their superior. In the HRCE and Chignecto Central Regional school board, that would be a school supervisor - a family school supervisor. If something happened, I might give them a call right away to say, "Listen, this is what's happened. This is what my investigation has showed. This is what my plan is to respond to this," and I might collaborate with them a bit of if that's accurate or how that should be dealt with.

But I can tell you that no one in my career - and I've been doing administration off and on since 1994 - has ever told me: "Don't suspend a student," or "Keep those incidents down." I just don't think that's an accurate statement. There's been no effort to do that. I have not heard other administrators complain of that, but we do collaborate with each other on how to respond when it is a serious incident that may involve some extenuating circumstances, and that's where we work together.

Just like you as MLAs would meet together to talk about policy and how to implement it and how to write a party platform, we do the same thing as administrators. We talk to each other. We may have to talk to administrators in other schools, but there's always someone who's a supervisor whom we can call and collaborate with as we're responding to a more challenging and more complex situation.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart with under two minutes left.

TOM TAGGART: I'm still a little bit hung up on this whole hierarchy of the regional education centres. I really need to fully understand that, because it just seems - I know I'm repeating myself, and maybe somebody else would be happy to jump in here. I'd love to hear from them. It just seems that there's no consistency across the board. When we hear of teachers going from seven of whatever to less time in classrooms - I forget the phrase that was used - but I just fail to understand how there can be so much inconsistency.

I know there are big buildings full of administrators who are not in the classroom. I wonder how many of those have been in the classroom and how much they influence what's happening on the ground in our schools today.

THE CHAIR: If anybody can. They have to do it in 10 seconds. I'm going to have to call order, because now the time has elapsed. We will go to the second round of questions, where we have 13 minutes. We will go to the Liberal Party first. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to start with a brief comment, because I don't want to retread on ground, but I heard Mr. Gallagher when I came back in talking about overcrowding. He knows very well, we've talked about it many times, but it's a big issue. I think it's certainly part of this issue the AG identifies. Charles P. Allen High School is in my constituency, and it's one of the biggest schools in the province. It's been overcrowded almost since it opened. West Bedford School, which opened in September, great administrators, as Dr. Armstrong mentioned, awesome school; 50 per cent over capacity by the end of Year 1.

Those things have consequences across the board, including in managing behaviours. I think that just makes sense. I think that's a big issue. I'll keep pleading on this, but we need to be building schools faster in HRM in particular and in places that are growing fast, where the need is. There's no doubt about that.

I wanted to touch on teaching assistants - TAs - as well. Mr. Lutes mentioned that 31 per cent of teachers were reporting daily violence, which is of course far too high, but it's much worse with TAs, actually: 45 per cent. Almost half of the TAs were reporting violent incidents every day, and some were saying, My whole day is almost an incident. How do I parse that out? How do I break it down? It's horrible to think about, that those are the circumstance that some people are going through on a daily basis.

That's hard enough, and then there's another challenge in which TAs don't have access to PowerSchool, for example. You have to go to a teacher or to an administrator and ask, "Do you mind doing this for me?", which is another barrier. Maybe there's a reason for that that I haven't seen, but I'm wondering, maybe I'll direct it to Mr. LeRoux, and if somebody else is suited to answer, please: Why do TAs not have access to PowerSchool? Is that something that we could change?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Annie Baert would probably be able to give you detailed information if you're interested. The answer to your question: To understand, EAs, TAs, EPAs, assistants work in schools across the province. They work supervised by a principal, but under the direction of a teacher. If there are concerns in programming that an EA is delivering, typically it's done by reporting to the teacher, to working with the teacher. Some

of those things should be recorded in PowerSchool, others should be corrected or responded to by teacher.

[10:15 a.m.]

We've heard that EAs have concerns about that. No EA should go to work and be hurt in the workplace. Some EAs would have protective equipment because they're hired to work with children who have particular behavioural requirements, and protective equipment is part of that, but can they? Yes. What we've said is as we create this umbrella and new Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy connected with emergency management planning, connected with behavioural strategy, we're going to respond to community and community of employees saying: Make it clearer. Can we be sure? We don't need specific directions; we're professionals. There seems to be more variants than ought need be. Can you give better guidance, better frames, on how these things work together?

That will include employee groups like EAs. What do we expect a caretaker to do in a building if they witness, if they are injured? Those are the kinds of things that . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate what you're saying. My question: Is the intention to have EAs, TAs, assistants in the classroom, have access to PowerSchool to report these incidents on their own, independently of a teacher? Is that going to be a change that's made? Yes, no, or we don't know yet?

ELWIN LEROUX: What I can say is, we're absolutely going to have that conversation and figure out what our system needs in order to make sure when we move forward, we're intentional about the best way to do that.

BRAEDON CLARK: I also wanted to just clarify the timing of something here. The code of conduct - the reworking and reimagining of the code of conduct, which is an important part of this conversation obviously. Last week or maybe the week before, whenever the Auditor General had her press conference on this topic, the timeline at that point was, I believe, next September, so September 2025 was the idea that the code of conduct would be in place.

Deputy Minister, you made some comments earlier that seem to me to suggest it would be sooner than that. Could you just clarify so I understand: When will we actually have the new code of conduct, put a bow on it, and it's in place?

ELWIN LEROUX: We have heard from community that this work needs to be accelerated. The minister has given direction: Move faster on that. Currently it is out for

consultation with School Advisory Council members, parents, staff, community members, students. It's currently out for feedback.

It is our intention to continue to accelerate that work. We bring together for the first time every school advisory council from across the province for an inaugural conference at the end of September. We have that as a target to bring forward a near-draft policy for implementation. That would be a great opportunity for us to hear from folks in every school region right across the province, from parents, from staff. Again, we will continue to work with all of our partners.

That work will be pivotal. It will be one of the anchors in what we're moving forward with, so we do intend to make sure to give time to everyone to add feedback and input to that. We would invite people to please take part.

BRAEDON CLARK: Based on that, if the goal is to bring forward a draft policy at the end of September, is it reasonable to say that we should have a new code of conduct in place at some point during this upcoming school year, the 2024-25 school year? Is that reasonable to say?

ELWIN LEROUX: What we want to keep our eye on is the bigger picture as well. Yes, we may have elements of it ready to go sooner. The minister has asked that that be accelerated, so I have to deliver on that, and we will, without question. We also need to make sure, as we develop other components, that we don't miss that we were asked to make sure they make better sense together, that there is a harmony, if you will, and that staff aren't confused with, does this relate to that, that collectively, with a new behaviour strategy, that that actually aligns with what people are telling us in the new Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy.

So the answer is yes, we intend to have it - and I say, "near final," because we do have to make sure that people don't feel that, "Oh, it's changing again. It's changing again." It's going to be developed in an accelerated way for the Fall, with the flexibility to make sure, with NSTU, with PSAANS, and with other employee groups that we're hitting the mark on what we're intended to do with the combined forest, if you will, on these.

BRAEDON CLARK: One of the things I agree with colleagues of mine who have made this point, which I touched on earlier, is it just seems like there hasn't been a level of coordination or consistency across the board, which has trickled down and caused problems in all kinds of different ways. This is something the AG touched on in her report, Paragraph 1.13. She writes, "While all educators, support staff, and other positions contribute to preventing and addressing violence in schools, there is no one position at the Department, HRCE or CSAP responsible for overseeing violent incidents in schools."

My question to you, Deputy Minister LeRoux, is: Should there be one person whose sole job it is to tackle this issue and make sure that we move things in the right direction?

ELWIN LEROUX: As I've said, we are acting. We're trying to figure out how we respond to what the AG has offered and the wisdom that we see in all of the recommendations.

Who is responsible to create safe and inclusive schools? That's a shared responsibility among us all. All staff, all professionals - all of us have a responsibility to that, but we may need some dedicated resources to draw greater attention to it. I can tell you that we do have a point person. We have a consultant at the department who is leading this work for us, and began last Fall, recognizing the importance of - we want to see this completed. We want to bring the urgency that we're hearing from NSTU and others, and we want to show action. That's been very helpful to us.

If we determine that is necessary in a path forward, it's on the table, as well as regions and the CSAP. We want to make sure that every student goes to school and thrives. If that is going to require another adult to be the champion - to be the lead, to be the point person, to coordinate, to facilitate - then we would certainly see that that's really important.

We'll look to partners like NSTU and PSAANS and the regions to help guide that work, but fundamentally, our goal is that every student has to be successful in school. We create the environment collectively. We wouldn't want people to think, "Oh, that's their responsibility." Our relationships with students create the environment . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark, just over two minutes.

BRAEDON CLARK: I agree with your point that obviously it's a collective responsibility. It's a shared responsibility. The tricky part of that, of course, is when it's a shared collective responsibility, sometimes there's no person for whom the buck stops, right? That's the tension that I wanted to draw on. I appreciate your comments on that.

Mr. Collette, I wanted to get a question to you, if I could. Again, I'm putting you on the spot probably with not a lot of time. As you know, in the report, CSAP unfortunately had the highest incident percentage rate of violence in schools. I'm just wondering if you could give your perspective on that, and if there's anything you wanted to lay out to the committee that CSAP is doing, or just your reflections on the overall issue and how you can address it in your schools in particular.

THE CHAIR: M. Collette.

MICHEL COLLETTE: There's no doubt that CSAP has been working on a strategic plan for over a year. That strategic plan has been approved. It's based in data and consultation.

When the ministry gave direction to document everything, it was anchored by CSAP. We're discussing a strategic plan. We're researching. We want staff to document

everything, so we were very adamant with staff, principals, and teachers that the minister's direction was clear: Document everything.

Do I believe that CSAP has more incidents than everybody else? Not necessarily. Do I think CSAP has taken that directive very seriously? I do.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark with 30 seconds.

BRAEDON CLARK: I think that's an important point - our conclusions are only as good as our data. Sometimes it's hard to know where the numbers actually are and if something's happening but not being reported. It's like a tree falling in a forest. Does it make a sound? Who knows? I think that's an important point you raise, and I appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: We will now go to the NDP with MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I want to step back a little bit from the questions around data and current incidents. I'm quite concerned about how children and youth are doing in this province across a range of indicators, school violence being one of them, but also, we've seen absolute and relative increases in children living in poverty in this province. We know that families, children, and youth are under stress to have enough to eat, to be able to stay in their homes.

I think there are some bigger issues. While all of those are not issues necessarily in the mandate of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, of course this is where young people spend the majority of their time, and of course you bring your whole self to school.

We have the inclusive education policy. I believe there's an evaluation overdue for that. I'm wondering if you can speak to that, if there's an evaluation upcoming for inclusive education, on other inclusion issues. The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission is expressing deep concerns about a rise in 2SLGBTQIA+ hate, and certainly young people are experiencing that. We know that in our student success surveys; 42 per cent of queer students reported feeling unsafe last year.

I'm also wondering: When will the new guidelines be released to support trans and gender-diverse students? Two questions around inclusion: the evaluation of inclusive education and the guidelines.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I think Annie Baert would like to answer these questions.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Baert.

ANNIE BAERT: In terms of the inclusive education, I'll start with the first part of that question. It gives me the opportunity to speak a little bit about SchoolsPlus, which is unique in Nova Scotia in terms of offering wraparound supports for families to address some of those indicators that you brought forward around access to food, access to tools and resources that may help them engage successfully in their school and in their learning experience.

As of this past September, we have SchoolsPlus support available in all 372 of our schools across the province. This is including 65 hub sites. Every county has a hub site for SchoolsPlus. A big piece of that hub site is access to social workers who help coordinate access to those supports and make those community connections . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: We're so stressed for time, so I want to apologize. SchoolsPlus is absolutely an important part of the picture, but I just specifically want to get back to the inclusive education policy and if there's an evaluation under way, and the guidelines for trans and gender-diverse students.

ANNIE BAERT: Currently, from 2014, the guidelines for supporting transgender and gender-non-conforming students lay out very clear direction for us in terms of how we ensure all students feel safe in our schools. We are committed and recognize that data that you pointed to from our student success survey. We are currently doing work in consultation, and a lot of consultation with students themselves around how they would see and what they need from their schools to be able to feel safe in those schools.

LISA LACHANCE: I am aware of the process that's ongoing, and at Estimates I asked the minister when they would be released. I thought it was this June, this month. When will the guidelines be released?

ANNIE BAERT: I would say that the guidelines will be aligned and released with the other components of the work that is happening around safe and inclusive schools. Our expectation is that work will continue into the 2024-25 school year.

LISA LACHANCE: Is there an evaluation under way with the inclusive education policy?

ANNIE BAERT: I think what you're referring to is there was a commitment to a developmental evaluation, and we were working in partnership with researchers from the University of Ottawa. We received the first phase of that evaluation, and we are currently looking at how we can continue to build on the recommendations that came forward in that piece of work.

[10:30 a.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: As it stands, do you feel the Inclusive Education Policy is successful?

ANNIE BAERT: The Inclusive Education Policy is our Province's commitment to ensure that all students feel safe and included in schools, and that is something that is substantiated within the Education Act. We've put in significant investments since the launch of that policy in 2019, and we are seeing impact to all those investments that have been made.

The third part of the response to the Auditor General's report is the development and alignment of a behaviour strategy which will allow us to, in a more meaningful way, gauge the impact of the investments and how the Inclusive Education Policy is supporting all learners in our province.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just on this: There's a bit of an elephant in the room which is the folks who work closest to the students who need the help with inclusion. Those are the TAs and EPAs, and a number of them are represented here today. We know, because of their labour struggles in the last year or two, that compensation and working conditions need to be a part of the conversation on school violence, and we haven't really touched on that today. I really think that we should have another meeting, but that's a motion for later.

The risk of violence increases when the workers are overworked. It increases when workers are short-staffed because pay is too low. It increases when workers have to go to a second job instead of taking the time to recover and heal from incidents. Does retention and compensation factor into the Province's commitments, when we're talking about the Inclusive Education Policy in particular but when we're talking about school violence in general?

ELWIN LEROUX: What I've been trying to say today is we are taking action, and part of that action is working with our staff. We have to be open to listen to what's coming forward if we're going to be sure to get to the goal. I can't yet say what we will or won't do. What I can guarantee is we're inviting all of our community, especially our workers, to let us know what's important in this work. What are we missing? The Auditor General has said . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Respectfully, Deputy Minister, we don't have much time. How much time do we have?

THE CHAIR: You have six minutes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I will just speak very quickly. Personally I have a child who could benefit very well from the help of an EPA. To date he has not been granted an EPA because I'm assuming there's no budget for it. The principal puts in for it. We know that it would increase his success at school, but it's just not there.

I know you can't tell us what you're going to do but is there a commitment to making sure that every child - and a real commitment; that means dollars and cents. This is the Public Accounts Committee. We're talking about budgets. We're talking about people who are paid well to do the work to support the students. Is there a commitment today or will there be any time soon to EPAs and support staff to assist teachers and to assist students so that every child can grow and learn in the way that they need to be able to?

ELWIN LEROUX: I'm not trying to avoid your question. Nothing is off the table. I can guarantee you, we will do this work in earnest and bring forward recommendations that we think will make the greatest difference. What we want to be careful of is that in the absence of the right support, an EA looks really good. That's not to say an appropriate EA isn't appropriate, but if someone needs help with a behaviour, it may not be an EA. It may be a behaviour strategist. In the absence of the strategist, I need an EA. I have communication issues; what you really need is a speech-language pathologist. In the absence of an SLP, I'm left with . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Then I extrapolate the questions to all of those people. Yes, those are all part of the inclusion too. Is the commitment there to all of those positions?

ELWIN LEROUX: I can make a commitment today that we are doing this work in earnest. Our minister said: Do it quicker. There is no intention to not do it thoroughly and to come forward with recommendations, investments, ideas collectively that we believe are going to create the environment in our schools where students thrive, and staff go every single day and are able to do their best at work.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Lutes, would you say that you're seeing that commitment? Would you say that there's more to be done? Where are you on this in terms of the teachers themselves, but also the supports, and the specialists and all that?

RYAN LUTES: I would say that I think from most teachers' perspective, the Inclusive Education Policy is not being implemented in a way. It requires, like you said, more dollars and cents to go into humans. I think right now we're seeing a significant number of violence in schools from students who are not being properly supported. They, like your little kiddo, deserve an EPA. Instead, that EA or TA is shared between four or five students who have complex needs.

Again, I hear this often from teachers: There was a violent incident in my class today. I know that kiddo doesn't want to act out in that way, needs more support, but that EA is stretched so thin. As a teacher, I'm stretched so thin. My learning centre teacher case load is off the charts. I don't even know what my SLP looks like because they're in so many schools.

It requires time to figure things out. What I'm frustrated with is I'm not hearing the commitment to dollars and cents. It was recognized through the AG from teachers that our classrooms are more complex than ever, our classrooms are more diverse than ever. If you listen to educators - which is frankly the only data that I need - listen to teachers, they tell you: My kids aren't getting what they need. That's not acceptable.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just a quick question to close this part: We've heard a commitment to improving data collection. The report highlights that the data is limited and inconsistent and overall problematic. M. Collette, I think your comment demonstrates that pretty clearly. Will the department be sharing the data that is collected and improved with the unions representing the workers that are experiencing and reporting the incidents, i.e., the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, CUPE, and NSGEU in a small part?

THE CHAIR: To whom are you directing the question?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Deputy Minister LeRoux, please.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Yes, the department has been collecting data. I would remind us that the minister has asked staff to make sure that data is accurate in her letter of November 7th. We constantly use - and much of that data is in the public realm now. It has been FOIPOPped by a number of regions, by a number of entities, and the data is in the public realm.

We are working to identify how we would publish this data - for example, how do we control for population growth and not just incidents, so that we get a true sense of what's happening in our schools? We're working on that now. The minister has asked us to make sure to have that as we work on that total . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc, with 15 seconds.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Final question for anyone who'd like to answer: When you plug in PowerSchool what's happening, where is there a thing that says: Why did this happen? Anyone?

THE CHAIR: Order. Time is up. We'll go to the PC Party with MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Obviously, this is an incredibly important topic. I think everyone can agree on that. I have school-aged children and friends who are teachers, family who are teachers and stuff. I ended up doing a jurisdictional scan in preparation for this meeting, just looking at what other places do. Violence in schools is not unique to Nova Scotia, but their approach on how they address it seems to be different throughout the world.

Just to help me better understand and perhaps effectively address it, I'm going to expand on what Deputy Minister LeRoux had said and maybe even establish a baseline. I'd ask all witnesses: Who's responsible for violence in schools? I'll start with Mr. Lutes.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: Who's responsible at ensuring schools are safe, or who's responsible for the violence? I'm not understanding your question.

THE CHAIR: Please clarify, MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Who's responsible for addressing the violence in schools?

RYAN LUTES: At the end of the day, I think it's the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that is ultimately responsible in terms of providing policies, in terms of providing enough supports to make sure that our students and kids are getting what they need. I think at the end of the day, our society is complicated, but our kids come to the door, and I get that kid. It doesn't matter if that kid doesn't have enough to eat or comes from poverty, I'm going to try to do my level best with that student. I think that's what that student deserves.

It's like I said, a lack of focus that the AG pointed out from the department as to why we're here. We've had conversations about violence in schools for a number of years, and it's taken the Auditor General for us to have this conversation here. I think that's a disservice to our educators and it's a disservice to our kids.

At the end of the day, our kids come to the door and they deserve the education to support them. Right now, because I think of classrooms that are more complex than ever, more diverse than ever, and funding that hasn't kept up with that, that support is not happening for those students. The buck has to stop somewhere. It stops with government funding our schools to make sure all our kids and educators are getting what they need.

I think, again, by the fact that violence is up in schools by 60 per cent, that should shock us. Almost a third of our educators are experiencing violence daily. That should shock us. I'm frustrated that it's taken an AG to get us here, to actually looking at the issues, because teachers have been saying it, and I think parents have been saying it, for a number of years.

I'm frustrated. I'm hopeful that some things I heard today, I was excited about, but I think there's also been a little bit of minimizing the data - "Oh, that is not quite what is going on in schools." If teachers and kids are not getting the supports they need, believe that. They're telling you that, and they've been telling you this for a number of years.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'll pass it off to Dr. Armstrong - same question.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: At the school site, there's no doubt that our members are responsible for making a school climate that is safe and inclusive of all students. Our administrators, as I've mentioned before, are highly trained professionals. We work with people are the regional centres to try to allocate and implement resources where needed. There have been great changes in schools over the last several years. We have more money for breakfast and learning. We have more staff in schools. SchoolsPlus has been a great advantage to schools across the province.

But in the end, it's up to the school administration to support our teachers in the classroom and put practices and procedures in place to keep everyone safe. In a lot of ways, the buck does stop with the principal and the vice principals and the school-based administration, with the support of resources allocated from the regional centre.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

EDWIN LEROUX: It's a great question, so thank you for the question. I would echo what my colleague said from the NSTU. There is great responsibility at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Our minister accepts that, and our minister is giving good direction about that.

I also appreciate that in the AG's report, she calls on strong leadership and community commitment. Our staff works very hard. We have great people working in our schools, and they're saying it's getting harder. That calls on us to do things differently. We hear them. We appreciate the detail that's coming. We do need to act with urgency, but we can't act alone. If we go alone on this, we're not going to have people with us.

I appreciate hearing from parents around the room who say, "My child could." Parents have a role in this - in the understanding, in participation. Our goal is not to get a new policy out the door. It's to ensure that students and staff are successful in the work they do and in the learning environments we create.

There are roles and responsibilities in the Act. There are professional standards for teachers and administrators. We share the responsibility, but don't hear that as "It's not the department." The minister has said, and I will echo, that we have a lot of responsibility to this, and we have a lot of control. We accept that.

[10:45 a.m.]

If I may, the NSTU asked, in my words - I've heard this before, so let me say for the record: Violence is a significant issue. Direction to staff: Do not downplay. Do not minimize. If we want to make sure, that's what we're saying. Our minister said in November, and I say for the record: Report as indicated in the minister's record of November 7th, or November of last year.

I'd also tell people - where you are the frustration, you are the solution. Help us see. Participate in what will make this better. We bring together about 200,000 people a day, and then we go away. Then we come back - 200,000 people, with staff, students, volunteers. That's double the size of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality every day.

We work and we live in community. It will take community, and we'll have differences of opinion. We do need a little more guidance. We value professional judgment, but we've heard it ain't working. Something's off, and we accept the responsibility to say, We've got it. We will make sure to bring something different that is promising, and we will iterate to make sure until it's making a difference, and we will track it. We will have good evidence - evidence that has a standard that we can all look to and understand clearly: Are we getting at it?

Right now, if someone asked, If you have \$1 million, what would you do? I'm not 100 per cent sure. Would we just put in more EAs? They may put the data down, but they won't help if someone has a speech problem that we're masking. We want to hear from community, especially our employees, and help us bring forward solutions. Ideas for Education is doing that. We have an online portal. Teachers have pilots happening right now. I think I could use a child youth care practitioner differently. Here's a pilot, you do it. I think I need different supports in this area and I'd get a bigger difference. Here's a pilot, you can do it.

We're looking to frontline staff to tell us, experiment with us, do action research. Our goal is not to control. Our goal is for kids to thrive in public education, and together we can do that. We absolutely can. We accept that we have a lot of responsibility here, and we're going to get at it in earnest.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: How many minutes?

THE CHAIR: A little less than five.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: As my colleague said, obviously this is an extremely important subject. I'm a mother of three. My youngest graduated last year. I agree that COVID played havoc on our children. I also ran a daycare during COVID and

experienced the extra effort that was involved to try to bring things through, but when the kids went back into classrooms, it basically all broke loose. It's just a whole different society for those very critical years in development.

When I looked at this report and had the opportunity to hear from the Auditor General on it in a little bit more depth, 2025 did not really seem practical. I feel very optimistic in your media. That was my angle of questioning: Basically, why that long when it's such an urgent issue? I am quite pleased to think that this Fall we're going to have some more consistency, at least some steps in the right direction to actually look at trying to address this for all of our kids' sakes. They're our future. It means a lot to me.

You touched on something that we keep going around and around on - what the department's doing in this policy - but it's really key when you talk about community and the role that parents and guardians can play in helping to prevent violence in schools. There does need to be some buy-in, and I guess what I'm asking is: When you're looking at this over the course of the Summer - because you've got a couple of months here - are we hearing a voice from the parent level to try to convince the parent to also trust the administrators, and the teachers, and the EAs in the classroom to work with the children on the behavioural issues?

When trying to bring it up in the circumstance of the daycare situation, it was sometimes tough because little Johnny maybe wasn't really that way and you're trying to reiterate that. Is there going to be a voice at a parent level as well through the SACs or parent advisory councils or whatever they're properly known as now? Can you talk to that a little?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: Yes, our minister has, as you would know, directed us to create SACs and to make sure they're well-established in communities. The minister is bringing together SACs provincially for the first time this September. They represent local voices. They represent the voices of parents, of students, of teachers, and other staff within our schools.

Currently, we are listening to SACs as this policy draft is out for consultation. SACs currently have the opportunity in a virtual town hall to be providing feedback on this very important policy development. I think, as we come forward in September with a draft of sorts, that it will be the opportunity for them collectively to spend focused time on: Are we getting it right? Does it need to iterate? The voice of parents and community is really important in this.

I know my colleagues could help even describe what they're doing at regional and school levels. Our RED Superintendent also had a regional council with families, with SACs. They have a regional council with students, hearing voices from folks to influence

– they’re advisory. Help me understand how best this is going to work in this community. Help me understand best if we’re going to communicate about school violence, about different expectations for students, how do we make sure we get that right? How do we make sure, in our elementary school, we make a positive difference? How do we make sure that people understand, in this high school, how you have to have a conversation with your children about going to school in community with your peers? Those are the kinds of things we see happening at our conference.

THE CHAIR: You have 50 seconds left, PC caucus. MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: If there’s only 50 seconds, I know my colleague wanted to, but I did just want to ask a quick question. When you talk about the cellphone directive that you just did - I mean, kudos to that because I do feel that’s coming from there. Was that part of the piece of this work that you started last Fall, for example? Was that part of that?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister LeRoux, you have 15 seconds.

ELWIN LEROUX: The minister did make a directive around cellphones. Her intention is to make sure we respond to what we’re hearing in community, and that we set the conditions for learning. Although there’s great value, right now we’re hearing probably better if we don’t have them in our schools. We will also discuss that with . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time has elapsed. Now, as it is a custom, we will call for closing remarks. I will start with Deputy Minister LeRoux.

ELWIN LEROUX: I would offer my thanks for bringing this forward today. Thank you to the Auditor General and her team for the work. We appreciate the opportunity to answer your questions. We’ll work together with our partners as we continue the work forward. Thank you for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: I’ll go to closing remarks from Mr. Lutes.

RYAN LUTES: Thanks for having this really important conversation. Like I said, I believe that violence in our schools is a significant issue. It’s the number one issue facing our educators. If kids don’t have a safe learning environment, they’re not learning. If our educators don’t have safe learning environments, they’re not giving their best work. They’re trying their level best, but right now I think the system is failing them to a certain extent.

I’m encouraged by some of the words that I’ve heard here today. Like I said, I think we’re at a crossroads, and I think that the AG’s recommendations need to be swiftly - and line by line, every one of them - taken and done so in earnest. Frankly, education has been failed by recommendations that haven’t gone anywhere, and our kids deserve better than

that. I recognize things take time, but every minute that goes by that our schools aren't as safe as they can be, our kids are falling through the cracks, and teachers and educators falling through the cracks, and principals falling through the cracks. We need to do better for them.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Armstrong.

DR. SCOTT ARMSTRONG: I'd just like to close by saying that schools are microcosms of greater society, and we have seen an increase since the pandemic in intensity of violent incidents, in conflict. Basketball Nova Scotia had to close schools during the year. Parents couldn't go watch basketball games, be in the same room with their children, because of some of the behaviour of adults. Children see that, and we need everyone in the community to understand that we are modelling at all times. If adults in communities and adults in society display conflict and display aggressive behaviour, students are going to see that too.

I think there's a combined responsibility of everyone: Parents, educators, greater society, leaders, criminal justice, and other authorities. We need to get together and change the way our society's behaving because our children are watching every day.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for your presentations and for being here today. I will now see if there's an appetite to have a little bit of a recess. Not much time, okay. Thank you. You may leave, and we will go on to the next agenda item which is correspondence.

Is there any discussion on the correspondence in your agenda package? MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just have a motion here that I'd like to read.

Whereas the Auditor General's report makes clear that another school year cannot pass without action from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to reduce violence in our schools, I move that this committee request that Department of Education and Early Childhood Development work to implement the recommendations from this report before the next school year begins, including providing clear directive to teachers regarding discipline in the classroom, committing to hiring more teaching assistants and school support staff to reduce the pressure on teachers in our schools, allowing teachers to have more monitoring time, and introducing a detailed plan to reduce overcrowding in our schools. I request that the committee hold a meeting on this topic in September, and that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development be called as a witness to update the committee on its progress in implementing these changes.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to speak in support of that motion. I was going to make a similar motion. In the middle of the meeting, I felt very stressed out because there

was so much to talk about and so much to listen - and of course, as the deputy minister said, this is an ongoing process. It would be really important for us to get an interim report, as it were, before the Auditor General's sort of normal two-year check-in. We support this motion.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I'm not going to support it. I don't have it right in front of me, but there was a whole range of recommendations that need to be passed. For us to recommend or pass a motion that says that they should be passed in the next two and a half months doesn't really give anybody any time to do any due diligence and make sure that there are no unintended consequences, those sorts of things.

I don't know why we're suddenly - I mean, I know why. It's a critical issue. But I don't think we want to get ahead of ourselves. I really believe that we want to give the department ample time to do what needs to be done. This crisis wasn't created in two and a half months, and for us to suggest that the code of conduct should be put forward, and all the other different recommendations of the Auditor General be put in place in two and a half months is just not reasonable.

Secondly, with respect to our next meeting, it's certainly a very critical topic, but I think it should go to agenda setting, like everything else.

THE CHAIR: Is there any further discussion? MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: The AG is here, and I would like to ask her what her plans are for her follow-ups as well.

THE CHAIR: Would the AG approach this microphone here? She can respond to MLA Barkhouse.

KIM ADAIR: Our typical follow-up process will be in two years' time, unless the committee recommends or requests a faster follow-up timeline. However, I think the motion, from what I understood, was an update, not an expectation that all of the recommendations would be implemented by the Fall.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Maybe I could get MLA Clark to reread that, because I heard differently.

THE CHAIR: You have two minutes to do so. Just read the motion.

BRAEDON CLARK: Sure. I move that this committee request that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development work to implement the recommendations from this report before the next school year, including providing clear directive to teachers

regarding discipline in the classroom, committing to hiring more teaching assistants and school support staff to reduce the pressure on teachers in our schools, allowing teachers to have more monitoring time, and introducing a detailed plan to reduce overcrowding in our schools.

[11:00 a.m.]

To echo the AG's point - and to respond to MLA Taggart - I'm not suggesting that all of those things would be done in September. But I think we heard today that there's certainly an appetite from the department to move as quickly as possible, so I think that's a reasonable question. I'd like to put the motion forward to a vote.

THE CHAIR: Seeing nothing further - MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I apologize, Chair. It's much easier when you have a written copy that's presented in front of you.

I misunderstood the first part of that motion. Are you asking that the Public Accounts Committee direct the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to do these changes for September? Or was the request that you're looking at to get the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to actually come back here and appear as a witness, so like we'd schedule perhaps a time? Could you just clarify your comments, please?

BRAEDON CLARK: The latter.

THE CHAIR: I understand it's a check-in with the committee.

BRAEDON CLARK: Correct - not "this has to be done by September."

THE CHAIR: It's 11:00 a.m. Do you wish to go for a little bit longer? (Interruption)

KIM LANGILLE: You can ask.

THE CHAIR: I can ask you because it's the committee.

KIM LANGILLE: If you want to extend.

CHAIR: I guess we'll just say that the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:00 a.m.]