



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2024

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

3:44 P.M.

CHAIR
Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the Subcommittee of the Whole House on Supply to order. We will continue our Estimates on Resolution E6. I believe it's the NDP caucus's turn for questioning with 50 minutes remaining.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Welcome back, everybody. I feel that the Premier and the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board have offered up some direction for the department. The Premier has said he doesn't understand why local wine owners and anyone else can't ramp it up in this province to become bottlers. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board talked about dishing it out on this file and dishing out support.

[3:45 p.m.]

I'm wondering if you could talk about how you see your department . . .
(interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. I just remind the member and all members to speak through the Chair, please.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I do apologize. I feel like I should sit farther away so it's not like I'm having a conversation at the table with somebody. I'm wondering if the minister could speak to what she sees as the role for her department in terms of compensating for the devastating effect of the new commercial wine policy.

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: For what it's worth, I like the idea that we could have more conversations in this hallowed place.

When it comes to this particular industry, and as I had noted during Question Period, the Department of Economic Development and I are great advocates and believers in our wine industry. On a personal note, last Summer I didn't take a lot of time off, but I managed to take a day and go up and ride the Magic Winery Bus, which gave me an opportunity to go to four wineries.

Again, we know that our wine industry - in addition to their primary product, which is of course their wines - has added a great deal to our province's tourism product. In that sense, I got to play tourist for a day, but much more than that, whether you take the wine buses or you visit the various vineyards, it is an infotainment. It is a very educational experience and an experience that touches on all of our senses. We are told - and I have formerly, in the past, worked in the tourism industry - that the strongest memories, the most compelling memories that we then take home with us and share with others, occur when we hit all of our senses. The ability to not only taste but see and smell and touch the grapes and so forth is a really amazing experience.

I learned a lot that day about how well individual wines have fared in terms of their results at international competitions. I remember in particular we were greeted - I don't remember his last name, but I do remember his first name was Ian - at L'Acadie Vineyards. It is one of the smaller vineyards but has had exceptional acclaim for their products on the international stage.

It is absolutely an industry in which I take interest for its value to our province, but I would point out that my department and Invest Nova Scotia tend to work with the individual businesses on their particular opportunities. Specifically, Invest Nova Scotia works one-on-one with businesses - wineries and others - on their unique opportunities for growth. We have certainly had wineries that have successfully been able to access the Innovation Rebate Program as an example, but when it comes to the wine sector, that is where my colleague and his team at the Department of Agriculture are involved. By the same token, it is the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board who is the minister responsible for the Corporation and for licensing issues in and around wines and spirits.

I have a bit of a different involvement. As I say, any time that businesses are expressing concerns, that is of interest to the department and our extended team with Invest Nova Scotia. I get briefed by my colleagues and continue to be briefed, but I certainly would have to defer to them on specifics. What I can definitely say is that we know the

former regional wine policy was deemed to be non-compliant with our trade agreements. I could not sit here and offer myself as having credentials in trade law. I've often said, in all the things I've done in my life, I usually get enough information to be dangerous.

We've had a lot of discussions under the heading of Nova Scotia Loyal about the dangers of non-compliance. What comes up again and again - and I will take it out of wine and take it to blueberries - if you are seen as a jurisdiction providing a program that provides what is deemed to be a subsidy that is non-compliant with your trade, chances are the other jurisdiction will not come back after your blueberries.

We often talk about it in the context of Nova Scotia Loyal. Our largest trading partner, which we all understand is the United States, has shown that when trade issues arise, one of their favourite go-tos is our softwood lumber industry. Again, I would have to defer to my ministerial colleagues on the finer points of this particular matter, but I do know that the danger is real. Nonetheless, our involvement with businesses tends to be at the individual business level, unless, of course, we're working with a sector proposal to do something to maybe leverage a particular opportunity.

LISA LACHANCE: We've been trying to establish the timeline in terms of this issue. It probably started last June in terms of doing active work on this. The Department of Finance and Treasury Board definitely has heard of a proposal forward on January 12th. By January 12th, the industry was writing and saying, This isn't okay, we're scared about our businesses that we've built in Nova Scotia. That's the clear context in that January letter, and it's signed by numerous winery owners.

Did you receive a copy of that letter in January, and did Invest Nova Scotia or anybody from your department reach out to either the association or any individual winery to talk about what support options are available?

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I did want to confirm with my colleagues that we were copied on that letter, as was Invest Nova Scotia. I'm fairly certain it was addressed to Minister Morrow. I know I was cc'd a copy. We were provided with a response that was sent off to the undersigned businesses quite quickly in that time period. Again, because of the nature of - I'll call it a sector-signalled issue, the Department of Agriculture and Finance and Treasury Board have continued to take the lead. Yes, as well, it is my understanding that through last Fall, the larger trade issue has been an active file. In fact, I know there were questions in the House last Fall.

LISA LACHANCE: You said you were provided with a response to send off. That's what I heard you just say - we can check Hansard later. It's just surprising that with the sector reaching out - a whole bunch of individual business names on the bottom of that letter - there wouldn't be a proactive approach on the part of your department and Invest Nova Scotia to help position those businesses for what seems to be a changing market for them.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I just want to clarify that when we were copied on the letter and reached out to colleagues at Agriculture, we were also copied on their response. I wasn't provided a response to give. It is not at all unusual, particularly for the Department of Economic Development, because we have departments like Agriculture, Fisheries, Energy. It's not at all uncommon for our department to be cc'd as part of a piece of correspondence. Very often, correspondence is addressed to the Premier's Office and will then be assigned to an appropriate minister.

I was certainly assured and satisfied that the proper people to respond to these issues were responding. But through that same period, we continued to deal with individual businesses from the wine sector on our other programs like IRP, as previously mentioned, our Export Development Program, and others. In a sense, that's where our department's value-add rests. That is, I guess, the mindset in which we continued our work.

LISA LACHANCE: I do understand quite well how government correspondence works, having worked in a variety of departments federally and provincially. I've certainly been the one to write those letters - things come in for a Premier's Office and you send them off to the right minister. I absolutely understand how that works.

I would still say that one of the things I think people underestimate about the agriculture sector is the variety of skills that one brings together for a successful agricultural venture. There's the agricultural science, which in and of itself is an incredible piece of research and application to keep up with. It's constantly changing all the time.

At the same time, they're businesses. Like you said, you went on the Magic Winery Bus. That's a business idea that wineries have collaborated on. The fact that they had a tasting room for you to go to, that's a business. Anyway, I would just think that, sure, there's a response from the Department of Agriculture, but there's also a recognition of these as businesses.

I'm going to move on. What I really want to ask about is how the department is able to support equitable economic growth through your work. What I thought I might do is use a very specific example. We were talking last night about the recent Cognizant deal with payroll rebates. You talked about target populations for employment last night as being the hiring of immigrants and new grads. I'd like to add gender into that priority area: African Nova Scotian communities and folks, and Indigenous peoples.

Within that payroll rebate program, is there an agreement on a target for the hiring of different groups of people: women, newcomers, African Nova Scotian folks, et cetera?

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Specific to the payroll rebates, there are heightened incentives available for basically three streams: new graduates, new residents, and underrepresented groups. What I am told through our folks at Invest Nova Scotia is all of these things are a matter of the negotiation of the agreements. Many of the companies - and

such will be the case with Cognizant and other companies that have entered into payroll rebates with the Province - very often have their corporate pillars established. They will often speak to us on the front end about being a company that has had some success in the support of particular areas of diversity. They may have a particular focus on women in their businesses or racialized persons and so forth.

[4:00 p.m.]

One of the issues that is real with the payroll rebates is that the employees themselves have to self-declare. That would be whether they are an African Nova Scotian or whether they would be a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This can become an issue in the auditing process that takes place to trigger the rebates back to the companies. As a result, there has been the intention in there, but the reality - in the fairness of a response to your question - is that it has not been an especially useful, successful mechanism, although the intention would be there to use that as a lever.

Pointing to something that has been more successful is Invest Nova Scotia's work to assist persons and business owners from various unrepresented groups: their programs, particularly on guidance and connection to diverse business enterprise certification, and also on trade mission trips for businesses of diversity to access new markets, information and access to the broad palate of government programs and services, export, education, and so forth.

We have a new pilot program actually: the Supplier Diversity Certification Pilot Program. This is a program that offers diverse-owned businesses. We define a business of diversity as one that is 51 per cent owned, operated and controlled by 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, women, veterans, people living with disabilities, Black Nova Scotians, African Nova Scotians, and other racialized people. This program can help those Nova Scotia-owned businesses compete nationally and internationally through certification as a diverse-owned business and help connect them with specific supplier opportunities through both government and the private sector.

A couple of real examples of individuals who have used supplier diversity certification successfully would include Harriette Schumacher. She is a Master Certified executive leadership and training coach operating her own business here in Halifax. She has WBE Canada certification and WEConnect International Certification, which has helped her attend an event called Go for the Greens as part of a Nova Scotia delegation - so again, also bringing in the trade delegations. She was able to make numerous connections and it led to a contract to provide training to Nike in the U.S. Again, Nike is a company that has identified pillars of how it wishes to do business. That is just one example.

As well, Denise Garagan, whose company is Luxe Vehicle Care, provides products and services to dealerships in the automotive industry, which has traditionally been an

industry where women were certainly less common. It was seen as very male-dominated. She, too, is WBE Canada- and WEConnect International-certified. She has attended the largest supplier diversity event in the world, which is the WBENC Annual Conference in the U.S., a few times, including in Nashville last year, where she has been able to leverage these certifications to access procurement programs within U.S. companies in that sector.

That's a very real and succeeding initiative that we have, I would say. The department has a number of partners that are very specifically aligned to certain communities. I think immediately of something like the Black Business Initiative. There would definitely be value in connecting if there are organizations from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to the department. I think we always have to be open to new avenues of communication and support.

LISA LACHANCE: As you started to talk about your registration program, I actually thought what you were talking about was the CGLCC, the Canada 2SLGBTQIA+ Chamber of Commerce Rainbow Registered certification program. I really want to have time to pass over to the honourable member for Cumberland North, so I feel like I don't really have time for a huge question around this. I guess the other question is: Why create an additional certification instead of becoming supporters of other certifications?

My example would be that becoming a registered diversity supplier with CGLCC was a fairly lengthy process to provide information about everything from my business to my personal identity, because that's what you had to prove. I assume for the Black Business Initiative and for others, they have their own processes to become a member. So you're kind of asking people to do the work twice. Anyway, I'm just curious about that.

There is a CGLCC. They're having a major event in Halifax on March 26th, so I suggest it would be great to check it out.

If they're ready, I'm going to hand it over to the honourable member for Cumberland North. I cede the rest of my time.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you to the minister and your department for being available to answer questions for us. I'll try to keep my questions quite specific to Cumberland County and questions that impact the people there.

The first question I have is around tourism. I believe Tourism Nova Scotia is under this department. I'm wondering if the minister would be willing to take a look at the Visitor Information Centre at the border and the contract that's currently in place for the retail. We have several businesses in our area that sell real, authentic, Nova Scotia local products. Right now, our understanding is that the vendor that currently sells retail at our Nova Scotia

border is not a local company and is not necessarily selling local products. They may have a Nova Scotia flag on them, but they're printed in China, for example.

I'm wondering if the minister would be willing to take a look at that so that we may be able to actually have truly local Nova Scotia products as people enter our province.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Having been the recipient of a couple of Economic Development-related trips to Cumberland County and people very generously providing a welcome basket of some sort has helped to acquaint me with some of the diversity of products that you are referring to, and undoubtedly many more, and also companies from that region that I have met at trade shows and events.

[4:15 p.m.]

Tourism is actually under the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage at the moment, but I am certainly very happy to speak to the minister of that department. As a result, I'm not familiar with what the current arrangement is, but I think to a particular business back home in my riding. They have a very good location relative to the very busy waterfront of Lunenburg. They made a very specific decision to move away from a large amount of merchandise that, as you say, is made elsewhere - it may be in the shape of a lobster, it may have our flag and it may look like a duck, but it doesn't quack - to move toward a very authentic Nova Scotian-made selection of giftware and souvenirs.

They assure me that the results of that move, in spite of the low inputs - on the front end, if you can buy an item at a low input and mark it up, which is a little bit different, because we pay for products here, particularly our artisanal products, you pay more - but they assure me that shift has made them a much more profitable organization. It has actually helped them to attract staff because there is a point of pride. So generally, without having the specifics, I would think that would be a natural fit at the very entrance to our province for so many people. Not just visitors: I always think of the entrance to Nova Scotia and the VIC at the border as a place where many Nova Scotians happily stop and take a few moments to fill themselves with a sense of pride and happiness to be back home.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Actually, many of the things that I'm going to ask the minister about probably do fall under different departments, but Economic Development really crosses all departments, doesn't it? Certainly, the artisans we have in Cumberland County are numerous, and it's a real economic opportunity for them. That's why I wanted to bring that up even though the VICs do fall under Tourism. If the minister could advocate for that Economic Development piece, it would be very helpful.

Another Economic Development piece - which technically does fall under another department but I would love to have the minister's advocacy for - is off-highway vehicle trail development. It's one of the real areas of potential for Cumberland County. We have

beautiful natural trails. We have a lot of community volunteers who have put in endless hours. One is Greg Nix. He's a retired teacher and his leadership has been phenomenal. I know the member for Cumberland South also has an equally large number of volunteers who are building the trail system.

However, we don't have the connectivity piece across the Trans-Canada Highway. Because of that, we're not allowed to actually print maps or advertise, and we're really missing out on a huge piece of economic development there in Cumberland County. It seems like such an easy fix. If we had some support, I believe, working across departments, I think that we would be able to draw in millions more dollars into Cumberland County.

A lot of the trails are there; we just need that connectivity piece. Then we can start to market - do some maps and market them, and really promote ourselves. I wanted to mention that to the minister as well. I'll open it up if the minister wanted to comment on that.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: It is true that the work of growing the economy of this province really touches on just about every department of government in some way. We have such a small but mighty team at the Department of Economic Development, but that is one of the things that we must do - stay abreast of developments in these many different areas and identify both the opportunities but also challenges like the one you've mentioned.

We know that there is great value in off-highway vehicles. I just look to pictures that I might see on any night on Facebook of folks I know who have headed to New Brunswick or Newfoundland and Labrador - not to say that they aren't making those kinds of trips here at home, but it tends to be more of if they've gone for a few days. They've put their rigs on a trailer and headed over. I think sometimes, some people - not all, but some people may underscore how valuable that tourism is because they stay in darn nice places and dine very well, and just have a heck of a good time.

Nova Scotia has a collection of trail systems that cross through all of the incredible landscape of our province. You hit upon something that is very real, because trail systems have developed over time where they don't always have those connection pieces. We had a very real case of that in, again, my constituency in Lunenburg, where the mayor of the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, the honourable Carolyn Bolivar-Getson, is a huge advocate. She has her own rig and personally loves to ride the trails but was an early believer in the value of that kind of visitor experience and tourism product.

We had a trail, the Dynamite Trail, that came to one side of the road in Cookville outside Bridgewater, and it ended. There was a major highway to cross before you could connect to the LaHave River Trail system, which can then take you all the way up to Berwick and beyond. I am happy to say that just last Fall they were able to open what is known as the Osprey Connector. It was a joint project, advocated and led by that local

municipality and the two local trail groups, together with funding through CCTH. Again, that is one avenue to look at, but absolutely, there are lots of data and evidence to the value of leveraging our trail systems for off-highway vehicles, for hikers and cyclists, because they are most often multi-use trails.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Another opportunity for us in Cumberland is the opportunity to grow our industrial park. Currently, there are vacancies in our industrial park. However, they are small lots. We've lost a lot of business to Debert and to Moncton because their industrial park had lots available - much larger - and for what people needed. Also, in Moncton in particular, one of the reasons they've seen growth and we haven't is because they aggressively went after these businesses.

It's been frustrating in the Town of Amherst and the County of Cumberland to see really stagnant economic growth, what many of us would believe over the last couple of decades as we've watched Moncton grow exponentially. We're happy for them, but we could have realized some much greater economic growth if we had that opportunity.

Many businesspeople in the community would love to see the industrial park expand onto the west side of the Trans-Canada Highway. Our understanding is that land right now is owned by the Province and/or the municipality. There's quite a bit of support through local leadership. Of course, you need investment. You need to clear the land, and you need infrastructure, water and sewer before you can open that up to large corporations. But we are the Atlantic gateway. We are the corridor. Everything from the Halifax Shipyard goes right through our backyard.

We just have so much untapped potential. The people in Cumberland want to start seeing some of it realized. I mentioned in my reply to the Budget Speech that people are just really tired. We just feel like we're being forgotten, and the common culture - you hear people say it time and time again - is that Nova Scotia ends at the tolls. People in Cumberland just feel that way. When decisions are being made, we feel like Cumberland is never considered. It's very frustrating, especially when you see such opportunity, untapped potential, especially economic potential.

Some companies have seen it and they've taken advantage of it. We have Maritime Pride Eggs, Gordon Food Service, and we have Weston Bakery. We have had some companies that have seen the opportunity, have come to Cumberland and had significant growth and success, but there's so much more potential. We really just want to be seen and heard by the provincial government. On that note, we also believe we could realize our economic potential and develop much greater if we could have some of the Maritime interprovincial barriers removed.

I know that crosses every department as well. For example, I have a businessman who just moved to Cumberland from Newfoundland and Labrador in the last year. He married a beautiful local person, and he's very frustrated. He moved his trucking company

to Cumberland County, and because his trucks are still licensed in Newfoundland, he has to pay the tolls, even though he's a Nova Scotia taxpayer and Nova Scotia resident. For him to change the licensing on his trucks - and I realize this is a Public Works issue, but it's still an Economic Development issue because he is being held back and having to pay an additional expense because of these interprovincial barriers.

He also has a tow truck that he purchased. If he licensed it in New Brunswick and used it in New Brunswick, he could use it, but in Nova Scotia he doesn't pass the laws. He's been trying to get Public Works to allow him to use this tow truck for months and months. He just can't believe the roadblocks. It's very frustrating for the people in Cumberland County that we have all these interprovincial barriers but things are okay 10 minutes across the way in New Brunswick. The rules are different in Nova Scotia, and they can't cross the border without breaking the rules. It's very frustrating and it holds us back.

[4:30 p.m.]

I'm wondering if the minister can comment. Is there any work being done in the minister's department, specifically addressing the interprovincial barriers that exist, which are holding so many businesses back right now?

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Thank you to the member for all that you shared. There's a lot there. I've made a lot of notes because I feel there were a number of things you mentioned that are important knowledge for us to have within government.

I can't speak as a citizen of Cumberland, but I must say that in my active experience of government, I have never felt that Cumberland was forgotten. In fact, that's been possibly the very opposite experience in part because of my special advisor hailing from Amherst, Mitch Maltby, but also my Cabinet colleague Minister Rushton's own keen advocacy for that area.

You mentioned Maritime Pride Eggs. It's certainly a company that has been a recipient of an Innovation Rebate to enable them to install a new robotic loader, increasing their capacity by approximately 44,000 dozen eggs a week. I don't know what that looks like. I'd be interested. What does 44,000 - if we stacked them end to end, do we get to the moon? It's a substantial investment. (Interruption) Great.

As well, I would note that IMP Aerostructures has also been able to make the decision to invest in their company, and therefore their people, through an IRP that involves automation of sheet metal profiling.

The other thing I wanted to mention, because we have had some - rudimentary in some ways - conversations with the municipality, specifically the town of Amherst in regard to the untapped potential of the business park and some properties that they own,

some properties that are held by Invest Nova Scotia, and whether there could be reconfigurations that would . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The round of NDP questioning has elapsed. It's now 4:34 p.m. We'll pass it over to our Liberal colleagues for one hour.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Thank you, minister, for taking the time to answer these questions. Deputy Minister Farmer and Mr. MacAskill, thank you so much for being here as well. I certainly want to thank the public servants in the room who help inform the minister's responses. They do very important work on behalf of Nova Scotians every single day and serve governments of all political stripes.

Minister, I've got some questions related to the collapse of the former economic development Crown corporations and the new model that is being led by Mr. MacAskill. This was done, it was stated, to find efficiencies in delivering economic development investment, according to yourself and the Premier. Could you please inform the committee how much money has been saved as a result of the collapse of those Crown corporations and the amalgamation of those groups?

THE CHAIR: Just to remind the honourable member of two things: That you're speaking through the Chair, and although I don't mind being called Madam Chair, I prefer Mister. (Laughter) Thank you.

The honourable Minister of Economic Development.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: First of all, we can parse words all day. The honourable member, the Leader of the Opposition, used the word "collapse." I tried very much through the period of announcing the changes we were making to our Crowns, and particularly vis-à-vis the creation of Invest Nova Scotia. I described it as a bringing together, a mixing. In my mind's eye, we were putting our most powerful ingredients in one bowl and bringing them together.

I would be foolish to say I never use the word "efficiencies." The Premier may have used the word "efficiencies" as well, but I actually tried to be quite mindful in avoiding that word for the most part - it may have been used - simply because "efficiencies" is often shadow language for companies in the private sector that are talking about cuts. Very often, "efficiencies" has equalled losses of jobs in many situations. I knew that was not the intention here. It was not about a fiscal exercise - i.e. the saving of money - as the first and foremost objective, and it was not about eliminating positions. It was about bringing, in the case of Invest Nova Scotia, two organizations together to be more effective and more responsive to the business community.

It now is much more straightforward. We had the former Innovacorp and the former NSBI. There would be a transition amongst our successful start-ups once they got to scaling up in further business development. Now it is a very easy transition or migration from the start-up to the scale-up - an easy movement of files within one organization. The folks who work in scale-up capacity and the folks who work in export development initiatives are in the same room. Very often, it is the process of scaling up a business that permits a business to now look at additional markets in export.

The former clients of Innovacorp - more than 50 per cent of them - would go on to become NSBI clients. What we offer to the public is that a business at any stage can look to Invest Nova Scotia for their assistance in identifying the supports that are available to them so that they can succeed.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The Premier made it very clear: "It is our obligation to the taxpayers of this province to make sure that we run an efficient government." This was said during the announcement. At the time, one would take the Premier at his word on that. I would think that the minister responsible for overseeing that would be tracking those efficiencies.

I don't think it's fair to say, either, that there were no jobs lost as a result of those changes. We lost three very capable and renowned CEOs who had a really strong and proven record of success in the province, who picked up jobs very quickly right away with national organizations, I believe. Laurel Broten led NSBI during a time when we were very successful at increasing exports. Jennifer Angel oversaw Develop Nova Scotia, which successfully implemented the high-speed program and expansion. Malcolm Fraser had more success than anybody, I would argue, at Innovacorp with venture capital spending. We saw, I think, a 35 times return on investments that Innovacorp were making at the time.

We also lost incredible people on those boards of the Crown corporations as well - people who were very well connected in the Nova Scotia business community, who had experience with Innovacorp, venture capital and investing, and contributed to really serious gains for the Province financially.

I remember speaking of that big win that Innovacorp had. That Crown corporation made over \$100 million off a start-up investment back in 2021. This happened shortly before that CEO was fired by your government. Again, as I mentioned, there was a 35 times return on investment made on that one investment. That was a clear example of success, so we did lose good, qualified people - not to take away from the qualifications of the individuals in the room at all. They're also very capable and successful people who also contributed to the success of one of those CEOs and former organizations as well.

Since the minister can't answer the question on what the efficiency savings have been, I wonder, particularly with the venture capital investments, if the minister knows how the returns under the current model for our venture capital investments compare to the

returns of the previous model under Innovacorp? Is venture capital investment still something that Invest Nova Scotia is doing? Can the minister please provide us with the numbers on how returns to date compare with returns under the previous model?

[4:45 p.m.]

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I just want to begin by saying - back to the question of efficiencies - we are not quite a year that we've had our CEO in place. You can be absolutely sure that we will be ensuring that the public funds that support the investments made through the agency of Invest Nova Scotia are well-founded. As a Lunenburg, I would not consider it any other way.

Moving on to venture capital and the honourable member's questions about venture capital: Venture capital returns take years. We continue to manage those investments, and the returns have been very consistent and, on the whole, very positive. Meta Materials to date is our one and only unicorn. I came into government, and I didn't even think unicorns were real. But very soon after coming into government, I became aware of these results relating to that particular company. It was certainly something to celebrate. It provided an extraordinary return on the Province's investments in that company, which specializes in visionware products created through nanotechnology.

Very exciting, and I think as exciting as \$100 million, which is something like 44,000 eggs - \$100 million. I understand what it says on a page, but for most of us, it is a pretty enormous figure. Nonetheless, the sorts of investments our government has been making on things like health care, \$100 million - that's the level of investment needed to make some transformational changes in our province.

I was going to say, when I last visited Meta Materials, among the greatest successes - and with every start-up, this is part of the equation, along with those returns - are the jobs and the economic activity that are created through these businesses and their operations. Having visited Meta Materials - they have what I would describe as a largely young workforce. In my world, that usually means under 40, but folks in their workforce who had come from basically all over the world and certainly all over Canada.

There was one young woman with whom I spoke, and I asked her how long she'd been with the company. At that time, she'd been with the company eight months. She was originally from Calgary. I said, My goodness, I would think there must be companies that work in this space of nanotechnology in Calgary. She said, Yes, there are, but nothing is as exciting as what was taking place at Meta Materials in Dartmouth. She and her partner had come to our province, which I still think of as a delightful juxtaposition from the many times I've said goodbye to neighbours and friends who were heading west, and they had come here. In fact, she told me that they had recently purchased a house in the Hubbards area, so more to the good there.

I would note that under Invest Nova Scotia, we are still making direct investments in these start-ups with high growth potential. We have recently also shifted some of our statutory capital into the creation of a new \$60 million fund so that we can begin to invest - become a funder of funds. I do see this as an evolution - and also a marker of the success - of the government that established Innovacorp. When Innovacorp was established, there were very few to no venture capital funds based in this province, yet we knew that there was much to be gained in these potential high-growth areas of innovation. So Innovacorp was established and a succession of leaders making investments.

From the very beginning, the whole notion around the Province's investments was that not everything will succeed. Venture capital is risky, and that perhaps even as our venture capital investment in this province began to grow, the government would take even a higher level of risk. The payoff has not only been the companies that have been able to scale and establish themselves. The nature of start-ups: Sometimes the founder sells the company and moves on to the next, and sometimes - and certainly as minister it is usually my happiest scenario - they stay in Nova Scotia, and they grow in Nova Scotia in employment and product growth and productivity.

The fact that today in 2024, we have venture capital funds here, that the activity that the government - I'm giving kudos to earlier governments that have been part of this journey. They have gotten us to a point where the activity that's been bred in our innovation ecosystems has attracted investment. We want to attract more investment, but by shifting our focus - again, not abandoning direct investment - into becoming a funder of funds, we can then leverage our public investment and leverage more private dollars and continue to grow an even more robust ecosystem for these innovative companies to be able to scale and grow and contribute to our economy.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I am concerned about the change in the governance structure that we've seen with the collapse of the Crown corporations, because they're no longer there. They're no longer operating as Crown corporations. We had independent, professional boards made up of businesspeople, people who were professional investors. I think we had executives there from Google, included with all kinds of other really impressive figures. We've lost that independence in all of this governance authority that has been brought into the minister's office, to the political wing of government.

The minister's answers make me concerned with that, because I think it's clear, based on those answers, that there's no attention being paid to efficiencies that are being found or to the returns that we're receiving as a result of those investments. I would think that would be something the minister would be very acutely aware of and paying attention to.

A further concern I have with the change of the government structure is that we're moving from a model built around an independent Crown corporation, which is important to protect taxpayers from that money being spent for partisan interests, as opposed to

economic interests. Moving that authority into a political, partisan minister's office naturally would create some concerns. Certainly, based on what we're observing and how the government is spending their money, there does seem to be a lot of partisan consideration where some of these dollars are going, and not necessarily in the best interest of the economy.

I think we've seen that with the Lunenburg Shipyard, which I believe is in the minister's own riding, where the Province bid against a private bidder for that. To then, I'm not sure, compete against the private sector - we have other shipbuilders in Nova Scotia that would have then placed the Province in direct competition with. I don't see that as being good for the economy or in the interest of private enterprise.

[5:00 p.m.]

We also don't know if the changes that were made were in line with the report that was commissioned on the Crown corporations as well, because the government hasn't released that report to the public. I'd like to know why the government hasn't released that report to the public. It has pretty serious implications, obviously, for the governance structure, the authority of economic development agencies that previously had a level of independence, authority, were being directed by businesspeople. All that power is now in the minister's office, according to the government. We're left to wonder if those changes were in line with that report. We don't know that.

Specific questions related to that: Was it recommended in the report to bring all those Crown corporations under ministerial authority, and was it recommended to fire the CEOs of each of those Crown corporations? I wonder if those were recommendations that came directly from the report.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: I think that from the very first announcement that we made about the decisions for the intended changes to our Crown corporations - and specifically the creation of Invest Nova Scotia and Build Nova Scotia - our government, our Premier, and all of the related ministers were very clear that this was about acknowledging that the responsibilities attached to the expenditure of public funds, taxpayer dollars, rested with government.

We made clear from the very beginning that - particularly in regard to what became Invest Nova Scotia - the amalgamation or blending together of those functions that had formerly been rolled out, undertaken under Innovacorp and NSBI, that this agency was to be a partner with business. Like the department itself, all things are informed by the information that is provided to us - that is sought after by us - from the business community. We have stood up these organizations, and we have conducted ourselves in that way.

Very shortly, we will have an announcement on the first appointments to an advisory board for Invest Nova Scotia. But we've made very clear from the beginning, this

is a change. It is an advisory board because at the end of the day, I as minister, and our government, are responsible for those expenditures.

I categorically reject the premise that this is so that partisan thumbs can be inserted into pies. I believe in this province, and I believe in businesses that are located in every corner and every area of this province. When there are applications to the programs we have - programs that have very clear and very public eligibility requirements and information all publicly available - we look at the business cases that are involved. When it comes to our venture capital investments, we still have an investment committee on whose recommendations I absolutely rely. That type of early investment requires a very particular skill and expertise.

I know, having met with the individual parts of Invest Nova Scotia and the teams, and meeting with that early investment team, there is extraordinary knowledge right there in our personnel, our staff at Invest Nova Scotia. We still take that to an advisory committee on investments to get their temperature on things, their read of the markets and their own experiences in that investment. It has been serving us and will serve us well, but at the end of the day, ministers are taking responsibility and government is taking responsibility.

One thing that I do wish to reference is that amongst the things we sought to achieve as well in the creation of Invest Nova Scotia - and this was never about the prior agencies having a failing grade. They were doing good work, but there were gaps and there were cracks - cracks because you had to move, perhaps, as a start-up from one agency to another agency, but gaps in the services.

As part of the work of the report that the honourable member has referenced, which was a report on 20 Crowns - which we have even more, but that initial look was at 20 Crowns - it was confidential advice to government, to the Premier's Office. When we went out and talked to the public, far too many businesses - it wasn't that they hadn't heard of NSBI. Most had heard of NSBI, but they had self-selected and said, I don't think that is for me.

Because NSBI did have a very strong mandate to be helping Nova Scotia companies to export. That remains a strong focus and a very worthwhile goal. But if you didn't see yourself as an exporting business - or we heard from businesses in various sectors including the agriculture sector, where they said, We have our Ag rep. We had a cohesion problem where the businesses that had connected to NSBI were very well served.

Again, that was intel that came back to us through that review process. We had glowing letters about - sometimes it was particular sector experts. I think of one of the Invest Nova Scotia team who works very closely with Michelin. It was the kind of letter that you read, and it was absolutely glowing in how valuable the agency is, but additionally, how valuable this individual had been to growing the opportunities of that major global player in our province.

We also heard from businesses that were saying, I don't know what they do. They couldn't put in a sentence what NSBI offered. If they weren't a start-up, fair enough, Innovacorp wasn't for them.

We were determined, and we will continue to work, because we're not done. We're in this early phase of this new organization. Mr. MacAskill sitting to my left has been working very hard to bring that team together. To their credit, they came together and did a lot of the work just naturally on their own. People knew each other from walking clients along their journey. We will continue to do that. But our goal was for there to be one place for Nova Scotia businesses to look, and to be guided in the programs across government that are there to assist them so that they can reach their fullest potential and prosperity.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Certainly, the government has taken the power and the authority in this situation. That is different than responsibility and accountability, though. In fact, having independent boards made up of experts helps ensure a higher level of responsibility with spending so that it's not just partisan interests that drive that. To be accountable and responsible for these things, we also need to have a high level of transparency.

I've asked the minister to tell this committee if certain actions the government has taken were in line with recommendations from a report that's been held private - that the public hasn't seen, and that the Legislature hasn't seen. I did not get answers to that question. Power is one thing and responsibility is another. Being transparent and accountable, I think, would be very important to achieving the objective of being responsible for these things as well.

The fact is that we are seeing political partisan intervention into the economy in very overt ways. Again, the government backtracked on the thought-out purchase of the Lunenburg Shipyard. I think that could have been very problematic. I've got a boat builder in my part of the province, in Clare. The government would have potentially been directly competing against them with that businessperson's tax dollars.

We've seen it in other sectors as well. Obviously, the recent conversations around what's happening with the grape-growing and wine sector would be another example of where there's no independent business board that is providing advice on millions of dollars that are going out to a company that is run by a very successful businessperson - someone who has very close political ties and friendships with the Premier, and who's done fundraising for the Premier overtly, and I think brought a lot of money in for the Premier and is now receiving millions of dollars in taxpayers' money.

The Minister of Economic Development, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, and the Premier - nobody has provided any economic analysis that that's a good decision for the Province, or that it won't harm a really successful grape-growing, farm-based wine industry where everything is grown and produced locally. That would be

another clear example - or at least an example where there are enough questions around it to wonder if that money is being invested because of partisan interests.

We have seen political intervention even in the regulatory process now in the Province. Recently, you can use the example of the aquaculture application in Queens County. We have a process in place for that. There's a moratorium on new fin fish farms in the water. I believe the company was Cooke Aquaculture - I could be mistaken on that - undergoing that process and waiting. Then all of a sudden, the Premier comes out and says "No, it's not happening here" before that process was concluded. That sends chills, I think, to businesspeople from one end of the province to the other.

We saw it with Cabot Links in Inverness County - a very successful golf course that wanted to expand. The Premier initially said there would be a process for that, an application would be reviewed. Then, once the political pressure mounted, the Premier decided that no, it's not going to happen there - no due process whatsoever in that decision. That's a political calculus.

I think we've seen it with how the government has handled development here in HRM with special legislation that allows preferred developers to potentially avoid going through HRM processes to get development permits and build. All of these things indicate a high degree of willingness to insert the political wing of government into economic decisions, and even go as far as to insert politics into the regulatory process.

I'm not a businessperson. I've never owned or operated a business. I've been lucky and fortunate to have been able to talk to and learn from a lot of businesspeople in the province from various industries in our resource sectors - small businesses, tourism businesses. One thing remains consistent across the board, no matter which company or business I'm speaking with. The one thing that businesses care about - that corporations care about - is regulatory certainty and having trust in a process that's going to treat them fairly.

It does send a chill through the business community - I've heard specifically from people who are worried about this - when politics interferes with those processes, and when decisions seem to be made based on personal connections, allegiances, and donors. That's a very old-school way of doing business. It brings us back to how things were done in the 80s by a previous Progressive Conservative government that also spent a lot of money and didn't achieve great returns for taxpayers.

I'm wondering if the minister is hearing this from the business community, if she thinks it's fair for the Premier or ministers to involve themselves with regulatory practices - whether they agree with the businesses or not. Aquaculture is a controversial issue. Cabot Links is a controversial issue. There are people for and against in these communities. What matters the most, I think, during those decision points that governments have to make -

particularly when those issues are controversial - is that we build trust in the process itself and don't do favours politically.

[5:15 p.m.]

This is something I am really worried about in terms of what's happening with this political intervention in the marketplace in Nova Scotia. I'd like to know if the minister and her team are planning on developing some security around this and some safeguards from this sort of political intervention in the private marketplace. We don't want to be a jurisdiction that is seen once again as a backwater, as one that's uncertain to invest in, or one where you may have to have the right connections or donate to the right people to get where you want to get.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: In your last - should I call it a question - I feel that there was a great deal of hyperbole offered. I'll begin by pointing to some facts. I will agree with you that if there is one thing that is very important to business, it is a stable environment, be that regulatory, be that what's viewed as a stable government.

The fact is that the business climate in Nova Scotia is recognized as a very good place to invest right now. That is proven again and again by companies like Michelin, which by no means had to choose Canada or even the United States. It was a very competitive process. Where would they in North America be building the tires of tomorrow for the electric vehicles and green vehicles of tomorrow? They chose Nova Scotia to make a \$300 million investment.

We have seen Cognizant, another global business service ICT company, that has now entered into a payroll rebate where they will add up to another thousand positions over the next six years, having already in just two years met the thousand that was the goal of their initial agreement that brought them to Nova Scotia.

We have seen IBM invest in a major expansion here. We have seen our federal government choose Halifax as the site of their DIANA initiative, the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic, which is a major commitment that they are making as part of NATO.

We saw a group - and the name of it is just flying out of my head, but they are seen as one of if not the preeminent group for mid-level investors in Canada - come to the east coast. They came to Nova Scotia for the first time in the Fall and had meetings at which we saw investors from all across Canada - and even one person I met was from the United States - looking to Nova Scotia because they see things happening here in a positive way. They see growth and they want to be part of that.

Respectfully, I feel like a lot of what was just said is throwing spaghetti at a wall and seeing if something would stick. I take very seriously my own responsibilities,

certainly as a minister. This all centered or came out from a conversation about Invest Nova Scotia. I believe in the changes that we made in the creation of Invest Nova Scotia.

I know factually that a closer relationship with that key agency - with appropriate checks and balances as we must have throughout government - wherein the CEO, Mr. MacAskill, joins the Department of Economic Development at our weekly briefings where we discuss the opportunities, we go at those opportunities together.

Equally, when our Invest Nova Scotia team is able to reach back into government - be it a department like LSI, which is so critical to both training up and creating the skilled workforce that we need, being able to deal with a department like Natural Resources and Renewables on key issues around reliability standards for energy, which could have been a deal breaker, frankly, on our Michelin investment - we are working as Team Nova Scotia in lockstep. That is never a bad thing.

It is absolutely not related to a partisan agenda. It's an agenda based on a government that believes in Nova Scotia, believes that we are in an extraordinarily powerful moment for our province, and we want to make the most of the opportunities ahead of us.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I'd like to thank the minister for her comments. Certainly, I don't think that every economic decision is being made out of partisan interest, but I do think there are significant ones where the evidence suggests that is the case. I think with the recent announcement with providing a public subsidy to import juice produced in other provinces - where it's also subsidized to grow and produce in those provinces and other jurisdictions - would be an example of that. The clear economic data that we've seen from the industry itself suggests that there is a much lower rate of return on spending money on something like that compared to growing grapes and producing wine in the province.

Again, there was clear political intervention and no process for the Cabot Links decision. That was all politics because people were upset in the Minister of Finance's riding. The House Leader, the member for Queens - another political intervention in aquaculture when the process to decide where fin fish farms are going to go, political intervention there before that process had concluded. We've seen it here in Halifax on the development side too - a willingness to politically intervene in due process.

The minister is right: Nova Scotia has become a place where investment has been happening, where start-ups have been growing, where we've really pulled ourselves out of a hole. The minister has inherited a lot of that because of important work that's happened over the last 10 years with the One Nova Scotia Commission with the previous government, which was very focused on increasing exports and increasing tourism, and very focused on the rural economic situation as well, particularly with the growth of the farm wine sector, which has exploded over the last 10 years. Yes, the minister, I agree, has inherited a very strong foundation to work from, and hopefully that success will continue.

[5:30 p.m.]

I do worry, though, as concern does build amongst certain sectors and certain businesses with these sorts of very overt political interventions, we may go backwards as a result of that. Again, Crown corporations and those independent boards protected the public from that sort of thing happening. They also protected governments from themselves, because we all feel the pull of partisanship. We all feel localized and broad-based political pressure. It's important that we have people who can make decisions and invest money who don't have those pressures on them so that they can do the proper analysis, so that there is certainty that this money is going into areas that are going to produce a return for the taxpayer and for the province, so that businesses can have greater confidence in a fair, reasonable regulatory process.

We are starting to hit some economic headwinds in lobster and forestry and the agriculture sector. We are seeing potential retractions there. There are problems on the horizon as a result of climate change, in labour and a number of other factors. There's not much time left, but I would like the minister to tell us what her vision is to help those traditional sectors that are the base of our wealth generation and our economy. What is her vision to ensure that those sectors can overcome the challenges they're facing currently and thrive into the future?

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the allotment for Liberal questioning. I believe the NDP has also indicated they've completed their questioning. You have up to an hour for your closing remarks, should you choose, and that would include reading the resolution.

The honourable Minister of Economic Development.

SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: So many things whirling around my head, Chair, but I have no desire to take an hour. I will, though, briefly share some thoughts that relate to the honourable member's final question, which without a watch in front of me was not aware that the clock was running out.

The question was how this department will be looking to help some of our traditional sectors in a time of headwinds. I would say that although we have done well to duck the worst of headwinds, and certainly Nova Scotia's growth has helped insulate us, we have been watching - the entire world has been watching - trying to figure out those headwinds, and to use a sailing analogy, how to set course to take advantage of the wind to get yourself as far ahead as you could.

When it comes to our traditional sectors, innovation is one of the areas where just because it is a traditional sector does not mean that there aren't opportunities. In fact, in many of our traditional sectors those are the areas - the companies and the sectors where we can make incredible gains by looking to innovation, whether it be investments in new processes and new systems, helping industries to diversify and look at new markets.

On forestry, I'll just briefly highlight an example. We know in the years that have followed the closure of Northern Pulp that our forestry industry has all of this fibre that is a waste product of trees felled for lumber and products of that nature. We have been looking and - as the government before us - offering incentives to look to innovation for ways to turn waste products generally into new revenue sources.

One of the most exciting, among a number, in the area of how we can use this resource of wood fibre is knowing that Michelin - again, a global company with very clear goals about planet, people and prosperity. On planet, they have set-in-stone goals about greening their operations. They are working with a company called Viterra that creates fuel from wood fibre that Michelin is looking to adopt.

We have many companies that are here right now but others looking to come to Nova Scotia to take advantage of the assets that we have here - chief among them our people - our highly educated workforce compared to other parts of this country and the world. They, too, are looking. We've had companies here and they have a very clear list of the things they're looking for. Access to talent is always on that list, but access to green and renewable energy is also very high on that list. Again, working across government to reach our goals in green energy to help those innovative companies to create products and mechanisms to address those needs.

In our fishery we can help to find efficiencies, certainly in fish processing and even in fish harvesting. In my home town, ABCO Industries is just one company working with another innovative company - whose name is escaping me - working on the greening of the inshore fishing fleet because we need to move away from fossil fuels, but also because when boats leave early in the morning and come back at four o'clock in the afternoon, they can potentially plug into the grid and provide energy at a time of day, say, three, four, five o'clock in the afternoon when we have high demand, and help us in this equation of managing load in the face of renewable industries.

During the pandemic and the particulars around China during the pandemic with closed borders, and people being confined to their homes and cities as part of that country's policies, we saw how much we had come to rely on China as a seafood market. Again, Invest Nova Scotia has been working to host seafood cafes in a number of Asian countries to diversify the marketplaces for these traditional industries.

Nova Scotia's economy is a constant evolution. I come from an area in particular that is very proud of our traditions. Lunenburg is the home of *Bluenose II*. I really love watching an electric-propelled fishing boat go out past *Bluenose II*. A topic for another time and a topic that I need to take up with the Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage is how we can better leverage all that *Bluenose II* represents for what Nova Scotia has to offer.

When I grew up, it was often referred to as the age of wooden ships and iron men. We're kind of past wooden ships - although we make and export some amazing wooden boats as largely recreational vessels these days - and we have men and women of many backgrounds who have much to bring to our economy, to our workforce, and our province. It is just a really exciting time in our province. Yes, I came into this position at an incredible moment in time, and I am grateful for that, but I consider it the challenge of myself in this role, working together with the extended team across Economic Development, to make the most of this moment in time so it is not simply a moment in time, but a truly new day for Nova Scotia.

With that, Chair:

Resolution E6: Resolved that a sum not exceeding \$96,782,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Economic Development, pursuant to the Estimate.

THE CHAIR: Shall Resolution E6 carry?

Resolution E6 carries.

We will take an extremely brief recess while we get set up for our next Estimates. We're now in recess.

[5:43 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[5:49 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will come to order. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as outlined in Resolution E7:

Resolution E7 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$1,999,180,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, pursuant to the Estimate.

THE CHAIR: I'll invite the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to make their opening remarks, which could be up to an hour if they wish.

The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. This is the third year that I'll be speaking to you on behalf of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and it may very well be the most exciting year yet. We are seeing the investments of the previous two years bearing fruit in both our public school and

early learning and child care systems. We're also making important new investments in supporting our children, our youth, and our workforce.

Before touching on this transformative work, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the dedicated team that I have the privilege of working with every day. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is made up of more than 200 dedicated staff who are experts in the fields of education and childhood development. Working closely with our seven Regional Centres for Education, the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, and other partners, department staff spend each day focused on improving the lives of children and young people in Nova Scotia. Their work helps ensure that Nova Scotia's children are getting the best start in life and grow to be well-rounded academically, physically, and socially: citizens prepared and able to make a difference in our province.

With me today representing this team are Sara Halliday, the Associate Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Jen Wood, Director of Financial Advisory Services. Sara and Jen help drive the exceptional work of the department and are here today to ensure I'm not forgetting anything amidst our very many programs and investments.

Our province stands at a critical juncture where decisions are made today that will shape the future of generations to come. To meet this challenge, our government's Budget 2024-25 builds on the work that we have already started and sets a path for the future. This budget recognizes Nova Scotia as a province with opportunity, where youth can grow and build their lives. This budget offers solutions to some of our most complex challenges so that people can live in vibrant, healthy communities, and have the best chance to achieve their full potential. This commitment to the people of our province is evident within the priority investments we are making in public education and early learning and child care.

This fiscal year, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's total budget will grow to more than \$1.99 billion. This includes \$126 million new dollars supporting our work, an increase that amounts to a 6.7 per cent increase over last year and is a testament to the importance government places on our mandate. This increase is made up of tens of millions of dollars to support the two key areas of our work: \$56.6 million more for our child care transformation, and \$48.7 million more in additional public education funding. These investments are in addition to the \$208.5 million to build and renovate schools in our 2024-25 capital plan that was announced last month.

With our \$48.7 million increase in public education funding is a new flagship program that will support our students, bring school communities together, and improve affordability for Nova Scotian families. I'm speaking, of course, of our new universal school lunch program. Getting this program off the ground was immensely important to me and to leaders across government. It was important to our partners and to our families,

and what better time than March, Nutrition Month, to talk about how we are bringing more accessible, inclusive, and nutritious food into our schools?

Through \$18.8 million in the Year 1 investment, we are changing the lives of students and families, including many of our most vulnerable students. Our program will start shortly after the beginning of the 2024-25 school year, prioritizing access to lunch for elementary school students across the province. This universal school lunch program will be affordable for all and free for any who need it. It will be stigma-free by ensuring food is available to every student and delivered in a way that keeps payment information anonymous.

What we learn in this first year of implementation will help us build a program that provides access to in-school lunches for all public school students. Throughout the next four years, we'll be expanding the program, supported through additional investment, until lunch is accessible in all public schools to all students from pre-Primary to Grade 12 across Nova Scotia.

In my time as minister, I've attended more than 60 school staff meetings, listening to teachers and school staff, and I have visited dozens of other schools in person. Access to food came up often: the importance, the challenges, and the successes. School staff spoke about the value of our universal free breakfast programs and the important role of school food in food security. I heard about unique school food programs like West Northfield Elementary, where lunch is prepared fresh in a specially converted space. We heard about Maple Grove Education Centre's new hot breakfast program. We heard about Liverpool Regional High School's high-impact fruit bowl program, Woodlawn High School's Panther Pantry, and Drumlin Heights Consolidated School's student-led food drives.

This input from across the province is helping shape our school lunch program. We are ensuring that we're supportive of the successful programs already in place in schools across the province. We're looking at how to support and leverage existing community connections and partnerships, all while we're continuing to invest in these existing successes.

As you're aware, the Province has been funding breakfast programs since 2005. We have repeatedly heard from breakfast program providers and school staff that breakfast programs give students a healthy start to their day, ways to learn about healthy eating, and a chance to connect with friends, classmates, teachers, and volunteers. Alongside our school lunch program, \$1.7 million will support the continued provision of breakfast in all of our schools. That means that every student will still have access to universal free breakfast. Other supports and grants that drive in-school food program innovation and creativity will also be available.

A very important piece of our food-in-schools work is nutrition. We continue to work closely with the regions, with the CSAP, and with the Nova Scotia Health Authority

to ensure that food in schools is healthy. This work is supported by our school food nutrition policy, which we are currently updating, as well as a new food and beverage standard for schools. These tools align the department, the regions, CSAP, school staff, and food service vendors to ensure that what is being offered in schools is healthy and nutritious, and that families know what to expect and can be confident in the food being offered in schools across the province. It's a key piece of our school food programs, making sure students are learning about and creating lifelong healthy eating habits.

In this way, our school lunch program directly supports government's work to transform our health care system and Solution Six of Action for Health. We know that diet plays a crucial role in health. By providing nutritious meals in schools, we are helping children and youth develop healthy eating habits that lead to better long-term health, easing pressures on our health care system, and improving outcomes for all Nova Scotians.

In addition to this exciting investment in school food, we are also keeping in mind that Nova Scotia is growing like never before, and we need to reflect this growth in our overall investment in the public school system. Our schools are now responsible for more than 131,000 students. This growth necessitates staffing space and operations to keep up, all while keeping pace with record inflation impacting sectors here in Nova Scotia and around the world. That's why we have earmarked more than \$28 million to address growth pressures through increased staffing and to offset inflationary costs, with \$2 million in additional funding for incremental operating costs to support our newest schools, École à Torbé, West Bedford School, and West Bedford High School.

When combined with our more than \$1 billion multi-year school capital plan, we are ensuring that we're able to respond to immediate growth needs and provide safe, comfortable environments for our students. Right now, 14 new or replacement schools are working their way through our school capital process. Four of those schools will open this year: Springhill Elementary School, Breton Education Centre, École Wedgeport, and Eastern Shore Consolidated School. We're also working with the Department of Public Works to identify sites for four additional Halifax Regional Municipality schools. In the meantime, our plan invests in preserving, refreshing, and extending the life of our existing schools with an unprecedented investment in capital repairs.

We also use modular classrooms to respond to immediate growth needs. Modulares are a group of classroom units connected by common hallways and include washrooms and other facilities. Each is equipped with heating, ventilation, and technology, and are safe, comfortable spaces for students and teachers. Modulares let us act fast in areas with enrolment pressures by creating an addition to an existing school. Modulares are modern learning spaces that have received positive feedback from school communities. Installation of modular units is under way now in Cape Breton.

With full bellies and facility needs met, students are ready to focus on learning, and we're stepping up here too. Looking back briefly, this year has seen a number of new

resources and curriculum enhancements that are enriching the education that we provide our students. This September, the Province purchased more than 10,000 new computers and other tech for schools across Nova Scotia, giving older students access to individual computers and younger students technology for group and classroom projects.

[6:00 p.m.]

We introduced the Life 11 pilot. Life 11 is a new course that gives high school students the skills to ask and answer important real-life questions about themselves and the world around them, big questions like: How can decisions I make now impact my future career and education options? How can I create a spending plan that supports my financial needs and values? How can I have an impact on my community?

This is also the first semester high school students can enroll in Netukulimk 12. This course merges Mi'kmaq and western knowledge systems, known as Two-Eyed Seeing, or Etuaptmumk, as students explore their local and global environments. I'm happy to say that it has been a hit - more than 60 students across three Regional Centres for Education: 12 in the South Shore, 21 in Halifax, and 30 in Cape Breton. I'm looking forward to seeing how the course grows our students' respect and understanding of how a person can live their life on Mother Earth where Spirit guides heart, mind, and actions. The department also provided design and development support for the new Mi'kmaw Language 11 course provided through Nova Scotia Virtual School.

Looking forward, we are focused on strategic curriculum changes in support of student achievement. The 2024-25 school year will see the introduction of a new literacy and math strategy supported by revised curriculum with resources to ensure our teachers are comfortable and prepared. Informed by the latest science on how children can become skilled readers, writers, and communicators, and in direct response to comments and feedback that we've had from teachers across the province, our new provincial literacy strategy redesigns Primary to Grade 2 language arts curricula and focuses older students on developing the skills to independently read, write, and communicate.

This September, we will start teaching the redesigned Primary to Grade 2 curriculum centred around our six pillars of literacy instruction: oral language; phonological awareness; phonics; vocabulary; reading fluency; and comprehension. Resources supporting this strategy will include new professional learning and web resources for teachers, technology integration to support independence, and new books to support phonics learning. We are also strengthening interventions, looking for struggles earlier, and making sure schools have the right tools to get students back on track.

Similarly, we'll be implementing a new math curriculum, applying the latest research and methods to make sure Nova Scotia students are able to excel in mathematics. While still being finalized, the new math curriculum will encourage critical thinking and analytical skills in students. It will enhance opportunities for students to think creatively

and develop problem-solving abilities that are essential for success in academics and beyond. Department staff will be working with teachers, school staff, and partners to finalize these new curricula offerings and make sure everyone is ready to go for September.

This is the first year our physical activity framework has been in schools. This framework was the result of significant consultation with a wide range of educational partners with its launch in September, marking a great milestone. The framework focuses on reducing sedentary behaviours, increasing opportunities for movement throughout the school day, and creating increased opportunities for outdoor learning.

Last Fall, I had the opportunity to introduce the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial Act. The new legislation supports publicly funded French first-language education programs and services to ensure the well-being and success of Nova Scotia's Acadian and francophone students. The new Act includes a memorandum of understanding between myself as minister and CSAP outlining a shared commitment to collaborate, and a consultation requirement for new or changing policy and regulations affecting French first-language education.

It also confirms the existing roles of CSAP and its superintendent, and introduces a new position dedicated to French first-language education within the department. This position is now fully funded within our 2024-25 budget and federally recoverable through the Official Languages in Education Protocol. Under the agreement, the federal government provides financial support for supplemental costs when providing minority language education and second-language instruction. The program stems from bilateral agreements between the federal government and the provinces and territories. It supports our work to provide quality educational programs and services that promote our Acadian and francophone communities while supporting proficiency in both of Canada's official languages for all students in our province.

Some of the resulting programming includes all French Immersion classroom teachers, from Primary to Grade 9, having the opportunity to add books to their classroom libraries; expanded resources available to teachers, Acadian and francophone families, and the French as a second language community through the Centre provincial de ressources pédagogiques; and an increased capacity to offer virtual learning in French as a second language by adding core French courses that let students in small, rural, and remote schools access courses that aren't offered in person.

All this work, as with everything we do, has been undertaken with our commitment to inclusive education at the forefront. The department has an unwavering focus on equity and supporting success for students who are historically marginalized and racialized or who come from other groups that have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved. Our inclusive education policy has now been in place for nearly four years.

In Nova Scotia, successful inclusive education requires:

- safe, caring schools that welcome families and include the broader community as key partners in education;
- teaching and supports based on evidence that promote students' physical, social, emotional, and behavioural well-being and achievement;
- promoting the independence of every student and developing their resilience as they progress through school;
- focusing on equity by supporting success for students who are historically marginalized and racialized or who come from other groups that have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved;
- stimulating and accessible learning opportunities to keep every student engaged, challenged, and inspired;
- ensuring every student sees themselves reflected throughout their schools, throughout their learning resources, and within their learning experiences;
- and everyone, including partners in the Departments of Health and Wellness, Community Services, and Justice, working together to support students' strengths and help address their challenges in a culturally and linguistically responsive, accepting, respectful, and supportive way that honours all students' cultural identities and values their experiences and their world views.

The well-being, health and safety of our 2SLGBTQIA+ students are also a priority for the department and for our government. Our guidelines for supporting transgender and gender-nonconforming students, as part of our commitment to inclusive education, were created with input from health experts and first introduced in 2014. This year, we are reviewing the guidelines in consultation with our many important educational partners to ensure the language and content is best supporting the success of all students. These guidelines, as well as our age-appropriate, inclusive health education curriculum, are one way we help students see themselves reflected throughout their school and within their learning experiences.

Part of our commitment to inclusive schools is a commitment to safe school culture where all students are supported to develop healthy relationships, make good choices, and achieve success in learning. The reality continues to be that we cannot separate schools from their communities, nor would we ever want to, so the challenges faced by communities do make their way into schools. Within our \$1.3 billion public education budget are many programs, resources, and professional supports to teachers and other school staff, as they work to foster safe and inclusive learning environments.

Many supports are already in our schools: an online, classroom-ready resource for teachers about mental health; 70 new school counsellors and 19 new school psychologists over the past five years; the services of 54 SchoolsPlus mental health clinicians co-located in schools; 79 facilitators, social workers, and 147 community outreach workers who provide a range of mental health and well-being supports and links to community organizations; more than 1,000 new positions within the inclusive education field over the past five years to support students and teachers; a secure virtual platform purchase that extends the reach of available services to students and families; mental health and wellness grants; and additional online resources for every school. Mental health and wellness resources are for overall well-being of everyone in the public school system.

Nothing within our public school system would be possible without the more than 21,000 teachers, administrators, and school staff who are charged with the achievement and well-being of our more than 131,000 students. Within this group are 10,000 teachers and 2,600 substitute teachers who are so critically important to the intellectual, emotional, and social development of our young people.

Teachers inspire, they motivate, and they empower children and youth across the province to reach their full potential and make a positive impact on the world. Supporting teachers is crucial in ensuring the success of our education system and the well-being of students. When speaking to teachers, I hear their challenges, and I'm committed to working toward investing in solutions.

The total budget for public education funding this fiscal year has grown by \$48.7 million, an increase of 3.8 per cent, bringing the total to more than \$1.3 billion. A significant part of the overall public education funding budget, this year's \$48.7 million is earmarked to support teachers in the important work they do. Guided by the department's first teacher recruitment and retention strategy, we are working to train, recruit, and retain more teachers than ever before. The foundation of the strategy is reliable data, listening to our teachers, and close collaboration with our education partners.

We are training more teachers. This year, we expanded Bachelor of Education seats at Cape Breton University, growing from 40 to 115 seats for the next three years. The university will also be testing a new virtual B.Ed. offering. The eight-month online pilot will allow students to complete the program and their practicum from anywhere in the province. This is an innovative program that covers the full B.Ed. program in a condensed time frame and continues to include practice teaching, getting those interested in becoming teachers into classrooms faster.

Through a combination of in-person and online learning, St. Francis Xavier University's off-campus programs are also expanding access to teacher training by offering B.Ed. programs in rural communities that otherwise do not have easy access to an on-campus program. These programs deliver courses outside traditional methods, allowing

people the opportunity to train to become teachers in ways that fit their lifestyles and their personal situations.

We also need teachers who reflect our communities - teachers with diverse backgrounds and experiences, particularly African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq teachers. Through a \$700,000 government investment, the department recently partnered with Acadia University and the Delmore "Buddy" Day Learning Institute. This partnership has led to the creation of a part-time Afrocentric B.Ed. program that will help a cohort of African Nova Scotians pursue a B.Ed. online while continuing to work full-time in their current jobs and remain in their communities. Where we usually see four to five African Nova Scotians graduating from B.Ed. programs each year, this new cohort expects to add 26 new African Nova Scotian teachers to our system upon graduation.

Internationally educated teachers also bring unique perspectives and experiences that support our commitment to fostering a racially diverse and inclusive learning environment. This group is benefiting from one of the department's new teacher certification initiatives, our new Teacher Certification System Online Portal. The portal lets prospective teachers apply and track the progress of their certification online, cutting red tape and improving the overall applicant and teacher experience. We're also pursuing changes that modernize the process to become a teacher in Nova Scotia, removing unnecessary barriers and aligning with other provinces.

We're reviewing our certification requirements in relation to other provinces in Canada and how they align with what we believe teachers need to be successful as they begin their careers. This move aligns requirements to teach in Nova Scotia with other career paths, like nursing, and teacher certification needs in other provinces.

Our work isn't just about new teachers. We also want to retain the talented, dedicated educators we have in classrooms today. We're committed to providing opportunities for advancement, to supporting professional development, and to listening.

One way we are listening is through our Ideas for Education program. Last year, I asked teachers and educators, including principals and vice principals, for ideas on how to improve outcomes for students. This group did not disappoint. Ideas for Education pilot programs are now in schools across every regional centre for education and within CSAP.

These ongoing pilot programs include the creation of elementary math specialist positions, a new way of assigning child and youth care practitioners in schools, the expansion of a program that promotes healthy masculinity, the hiring of more term substitutes, matching experienced mentors to new teachers, and the reinstatement of the provincial attendance policy.

There are also ideas at work in every region and in CSAP. One of my favourites, although it is hard to choose, is the addition of a Connect program within Cape Breton-

Victoria's Memorial High School's Alternative Education program. The teacher-created and initiated Connect program supports students with mental health, anxiety, and substantial attendance challenges, and it is working. The school reported seven vulnerable students graduated because of this program.

[6:15 p.m.]

Those of you who follow the regions on social media may have caught HRCE promoting one of their ideas for education this week. On Wednesday, the region shared a video about their newcomer pilot program that is supporting students at Clayton Park Junior High. The teacher-created pilot consists of two streams: a language class and guided reading groups. Newcomer students - many of whom have experienced interruptions in learning and some who have never attended school - gained a better understanding of school life and a routine while acquiring basic language and literacy skills. The Ideas for Education pilot is proving instrumental in creating a safe supportive environment for our newcomer students.

Another idea that is particularly poignant as we celebrate International Women's Day is the creation of Girls with Goals in the South Shore region. This teacher-initiated idea resulted in an experience for young women in Grade 9 to explore hands-on trades like refrigeration, electrical, carpentry, motorcycle, power products repair, and automotive.

Given its first year's success, Ideas for Education is now a mainstay of our department's work. My sincere thanks goes out to the teachers and school staff who have submitted ideas so far. I can't wait to see what great ideas come next.

As we listen to teachers, we're also listening to families, staff, students, and others who are part of our school community through our local voice work. In November, I held a town hall and invited school administrators and representatives from every school advisory council across our network of 373 schools. I reiterated that we are partners in the leadership of the education system and that, in recognition of this partnership and the importance of local voice in our decision-making, the department is taking action to create more opportunity for the voices of parents and for the community.

Starting this year, in every region and CSAP, there is an enhanced role for SACs in supporting schools and regions through a new innovation fund that provides grants of up to \$10,000 to a school SAC to support innovative ideas that promote student well-being and achievement; an annual conference for all SACs to provide policy input and to discuss common school challenges and opportunities; more input for SACs in how school funds are distributed in schools, including the Healthy Schools Fund grant; and additional parent, guardian, and community representation on SACs.

We're also enhancing transparency and engagement with school regions and leaders by having regional executive directors lead public engagement sessions for parents,

guardians and regional leaders three times a year to discuss student achievement and well-being, capital planning and repairs, and other school priorities. Parent navigation in every region in CSAP is also being strengthened to ensure families get questions answered in a timely manner.

At regional leadership tables, we are adding new diverse voices. Moving forward, we will have a regional student advisory committee that reports directly to regional executive directors and CSAP's directeur général about student issues. As well, each region will create a new regional advisory table that reflects the diversity of the region, made up primarily of SAC members, to provide advice to regional executive directors. These outcomes were based on engagement with school communities, working with SACs, parents, guardians, students, custodians and operations staff, ministerial advisory bodies, and others.

We asked how people were connecting with the education system and how they wanted to better connect in the future. Now we're seeing results. Applications are open for the \$10,000 SAC Innovation Fund.

Regions are starting to host public engagement sessions, including the South Shore region, which held their first engagement session this week in Hebbville. Our first annual conference, bringing representatives from all SACs together, is now scheduled for this September.

We will also be bringing people together for Education Week celebrations this April. Education Week is celebrated annually and is another way we show appreciation to all the educators, support staff, and administrators. This year's theme is Connections to Community. It's a timely theme for a year in which we're connecting schools through ideas for education, connecting wider school communities through local voices, and celebrating each other's successes in the new ED ConnectIONS newsletter.

All these accomplishments are carried out in partnership with the Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, Nova Scotia universities, and all our other educational partners. Only together can we build the best possible education system for our children and for our youth.

As you can see in our budget, public education is only half the story. We are also transforming child care in Nova Scotia. This transformation is now hitting its stride with families and people working in child care feeling the impacts of our work to build a system that is accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality. These four pillars - and I will reference them a lot - guide our work and are ensuring a more reliable and stable child care system for families in Nova Scotia.

Understanding this importance, the Nova Scotia government, in partnership with our federal counterparts, now invests \$333 million annually in early learning and child

care, which is an increase of more than \$56 million this fiscal year. This \$56 million increase is earmarked to continue to provide lower fees for families, create more child care spaces, enhance after-school care, and support better wages and benefits for our early childhood educators; \$42.5 million of this new investment is fully recoverable from the federal government under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement; and the remaining \$12.3 million is an investment from the province directly allocated to increasing wages for early childhood educators.

Quality child care has been proven to significantly contribute to a child's cognitive, social and emotional development, laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Our \$333 million investment is supporting the historic transformation of our system and is helping to improve the lives of Nova Scotia's children, parents, caregivers, and people who work in the sector.

We are shifting towards a more comprehensive system, fueled by the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, marking a significant departure from the past. The accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care system we are building today will benefit families across the province for generations to come.

Nova Scotia's child care system supports thousands of families, with more than 320 centres and 200 family home providers offering provincially licensed and funded programs for infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers. There are also many school sites with providers offering before- and after-school care through the Nova Scotia Before and After Program. While our federal agreements enabled the start of our transformative work and provided much-needed funding, the full picture of this change is much more than a financial story. It includes expanding a workforce, increasing spaces for children, and defining quality programming, all of which are captured in the pillars of our work.

The progress Nova Scotians are now seeing is the result of department programs recognizing the complexity of our existing system and responding to the unique child care needs of our families. Since entering the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement in July 2021, we have added more than 3,800 child care spaces. The agreement references the addition of 9,500 spaces by March 2026, a target that acknowledges the importance of increasing access to child care. We are more than 40 per cent there.

More importantly, the infrastructure we have created lays the foundation for a responsive, flexible system that can continue to grow beyond 2026. There have also been great strides in ensuring affordability for families. More than a year ago, child care fees were reduced by an average of 50 per cent for most families. I say "most" because, as of last year, more than 4,000 families received additional support from the Child Care Subsidy Program that helps further reduce costs. That subsidy results in more than 3,000 families accessing child care for free. Progress to date with affordability has saved many Nova

Scotia families thousands of dollars in 2023, savings they will see this year and next year until families are paying an average of \$10 per day in March 2026.

We're also working to build an inclusive child care sector that can offer the types of care families need. An example of this would be after-hours care like the new Health Park After Hours Child Care pilot for the children of health care workers. This pilot, located close to the Cape Breton Regional Hospital in Sydney, now has 19 children enrolled in extended hour and weekend care.

None of this progress would be possible without our sector partners, operators, and early childhood educators. The department works closely with an Early Learning and Child Care Engagement Table made up of operators, ECEs, early childhood development experts, and families who share insights and expertise.

In this transformation, as in everything we do, first-voice experiences are central to our decisions. We heard from the engagement table that to offer the highest quality of child care, we needed to professionalize the sector. Most recently, this input helped guide significant wage increases.

First, we established a wage scale for ECEs, raising wages between 14 and 43 per cent for 95 per cent of the workforce. A second wage increase for ECEs, between \$3.14 per hour to \$4.24 per hour, was announced late last year and will be implemented April 1st. This is in addition to ECEs working in licensed child care now being eligible for wage increases in alignment with the public sector. These increases, enhanced by the introduction of a group benefits and pension package for all employees of the licensed sector, walk the walk of acknowledging the important role ECEs play in our child care system.

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

Children deserve care that gives them the best start in life, and families deserve care that is accessible and affordable, regardless of their financial means, and available regardless of where they live or when they work - inclusive and high quality. We are building that system. Education and child care continue to be priorities for this government. The investments we are making in these areas are necessary to seize a more prosperous future for Nova Scotians by helping families and supporting growth.

As I said at the outset of my remarks, Budget 2024-25 builds on the work we have already started and sets a path for the future. For the Department of Education and Early

Childhood Development, this future is safe and inclusive schools where students thrive. It is no student sitting in class hungry. It is supported and empowered school staff and school communities. It is an accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care system.

Thank you. We're now happy to take any questions.

THE CHAIR: According to the practice that has developed in the Legislature, the Opposition caucuses take turns asking questions for approximately one hour. During a caucus's turn, the members within a caucus may take turns examining the minister on the Estimates Resolution. Only the minister can answer the questions. Caucuses are expected to share time fairly with the Independent member.

To begin the examination, I will now recognize the Official Opposition.

The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks. I have to say that it's good to see everyone. It's been a while. You do have a great staff, who are very dedicated to our kids. I got to see that first-hand, not only in some of the initiatives you talked about tonight around child care, but also in some difficult times and some big waves around COVID, making some significant decisions to make sure we kept schools open the best we could and made sure our kids could continue to learn. Also, a big thanks to our teachers who adjusted at the time.

I'm going to get it started with a few questions then I'll have some of my colleagues come in. They'll have more specific questions about some particulars around the province.

I'll start with the lunch program, which is great. Advocates have been asking for this for years. We've talked about this for years, and there was always this idea that we had to wait for federal funding. Is there federal funding involved with the lunch program now? If not, what was the rationale for this year compared to the last two?

BECKY DRUHAN: Thanks for the opportunity to talk about food in schools. We're in agreement about the importance of this. We've talked on many occasions about the need for food in schools.

In relation to federal funding, we learned about two years ago that the federal government was committed to providing support for universal food programming in schools. As soon as we learned that, I was in contact with the federal minister - Minister Gould at the time - to express interest on behalf of Nova Scotians to be first out of the gate with this, recognizing the importance of it and our commitment to expanding access to food in schools across the province.

[6:30 p.m.]

I spoke with Minister Gould on many occasions. She was a very collaborative, engaged minister. On each occasion, I took the opportunity to reiterate Nova Scotia's interest in being first to partner with the federal government on a universal lunch program in schools. That ministry changed hands recently, and Minister Sudds has taken over. I've been in touch with her, as well, about this issue, all the while talking with educators across the province about the variety of needs that they see, their experience in the schools, the successes, challenges, and solutions that they have. I reiterated the province's interest in taking on the support of the federal government to expand access to food in schools when the federal government was ready to move ahead on that.

I was very pleased, in one of my recent conversations with the federal minister, to get her assurance that, should we move forward with a program in Nova Scotia and subsequently the federal government came up with funding, we wouldn't miss out on any opportunity for federal funding as a result of moving ahead. That was very reassuring, certainly, and we were really pleased to receive that confirmation.

I mentioned the conversations and input that we had from school families. I've joined over 60 staff meetings. Over 60 staff teams across the province have welcomed me into their staff meetings. I've visited dozens of other schools, and many of those schools spoke to me about school food programming.

That showed up in a variety of ways. It showed up in schools celebrating and talking about the importance of the universal breakfast programs, and the fact that having those universal breakfast programs and the food available through those programs was very important to food security for their students and their communities.

I also heard from schools about the really incredible, innovative food programming that they have. We heard from one small rural school that seized the opportunity. They were one of those schools that didn't have a lunch program or a dedicated space for it. They took a small space in their school, converted it to a kitchen, and are offering fresh lunch every day. We've heard of other programs like the Panther Pantry. Many, many schools took the opportunity to talk about the ways in which they've provided school food to their students.

The third theme I heard from teachers and school staff teams across the province was the value and importance of the volunteerism, community engagement, and community partnerships that lead to the provision of food in schools. One example that comes to mind is a school in Whitney Pier - the special relationship they have with the local Ukrainian community, and the food programs that are offered with that support.

Those were the themes we heard regularly. As I said, from the moment we started talking about this, we were always committed to expanding access to food in schools. All

that, particularly the feedback and input we've had from educators across the province - now is the time to do it; now is the time to take action. We do know this is important for students. From a learning perspective, we know students learn better when their bellies are full and they're not worried about food. We know it's important from a health perspective that students are more able to learn and better set up for a full and healthy life if they have access to nutritious and healthy food.

We also know that, for many families, having affordable lunch for students - and for some families, having free lunch for students - is really important, so we're creating a program that addresses all those needs.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: One of the other things you and I talked about in the debates in the House is that we never wanted anybody asking for it. Teachers have done an outstanding job of trying to deal with those situations - I saw it in my time - where you have families and kids who are afraid to ask the question. Now you have a situation in which you have a fully funded breakfast program, and eventually a lunch program, that hopefully will eliminate that question. I can see that was the goal for everybody from the beginning.

I have been receiving a lot of calls from schools and doing a tour myself, and there are some questions around logistics. Some schools have cafeterias; some schools don't have cafeterias or kitchens. You mentioned examples of how some things have been converted in schools or there are great relationships within communities across the province. The Pier is a great example.

Under the funding that schools can receive, it's for food. We all want to push for local food, using our local distributors if we can, and working with agriculture. Will part of that money be looking at converting spaces in schools that may need infrastructure to help support the program?

BECKY DRUHAN: I want to start out by recognizing the breadth of diversity around our schools across the province, and the reality that every local school is a little different. Some schools are a lot different from one another. We know the ways in which schools will provide and meet the needs to deliver this universal lunch programming across the province are going to be as varied as those schools are. We know some schools across the province are already well set up in terms of infrastructure and programming, and it will be fairly easy for those schools to adapt into this new program. Other schools will need more support around that.

I also want to say at the outset that what each program looks like in each school is going to differ. That's a good thing, because we want to make sure we leverage the local resources that are already in place and the local relationships that are already in place. We want any food programming - but specifically this universal lunch programming - to be reflective of local needs. Although we want a universal program, which means every

student across the province has access to lunch, we also want to make sure that the program in an individual school is reflective of that school community.

Having said all that, the funding buckets, if you will, are procurement of food, the actual food; infrastructure and support to ensure that our schools have capacity to deliver the programming; and other supports, and that might be staff. Those buckets, to go into a little more depth - the procurement is really about the availability of food for each of the schools. Infrastructure will support some of those things that you asked about, in terms of facilities, but that doesn't mean every school will necessarily have to do a build-out. Again, it will look different from school to school.

I also want to say we're very mindful of how full our educators' days are. We want to make sure our educators and our schools, are supported in this work so that this does not add work unduly to their plates. We know they are busy doing all the other things they already do. The support bucket of funding will also include staff to support the work.

Having said that, I also want to recognize the reality - and I've heard this directly from so many teachers as I've talked to folks about food over the course of the last two years - that many educators and school staff, are already involved in providing food and supporting school food programming. It's not just because of the importance of that for students' learning and for their nutrition, but also because of how foundational it is for relationship development.

What we see is that breakfast programs provide opportunities to connect, have conversations and build relationships outside of the classroom - build relationships with students who may be in their classroom, maybe aren't in their classroom, and connect community members. In addition to that, they're opportunities for learning. We want to make sure, and we will make sure, that we provide staffing support for our educators, but we also want to recognize - and I want to give a shout-out to those school staff who already are involved, and are going to continue to be involved, because they see and realize the benefits.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: One last question on the lunch program for now. I guess that was my question. You've provided the rollout of what you're looking at, starting off next year. I can appreciate that it's going to be unique. You may be able to partner with outside organizations that will be able to provide it. I also know a lot of organizations provide a lot of lunches to kids in communities, just like at the Whitney Pier Youth Club. Chester is feeding hundreds of kids, and he just does it out of the goodness of his heart because he's Chester. It will be interesting to see.

I think there are lots of opportunities there where you can partner with external organizations. I was curious about the school piece because it is a big rollout and there's a lot of money involved with it. We'll all have questions and we'll be following along as we go.

Are you looking at additional staff because you are implementing this program?

[6:45 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: Yes, we have 373 schools across the province that are focused, and the first phase is on elementary schools. That will mean roughly half our schools in the first phase. You're right to identify this as being a significant operational lift, for sure. We will have one staff at the department who is tasked with and responsible for this programming. As I mentioned, in terms of the buckets out of the \$18 million, one of those buckets is supports, and we anticipate staff will be included in that, but the details will come.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I can appreciate that's going to roll out and be different any time you're doing this. I know a lot of volunteers participate in the breakfast programs. There are a lot of great service organizations that take on that role, and sometimes they can get stretched when they're trying to do that. I would appreciate that there are some folks in the department who will play a role in it. I'd be curious, as we roll it out, to see how it goes when it comes to whether you have to hire additional staff within the schools, because you're getting into some more significant meals when it comes to the lunch program.

Those are my questions on the lunch program for now. I think it's exciting. We've been talking about it for years. It's one of the tangible things you can do to help kids - nothing better than a fully belly. We know lots of them, especially in some communities across Cape Breton, that I use as an example, that have high poverty rates - much too high and have been for a generation. It's going to help a lot of kids.

I've got a couple of questions. I'm going to have a colleague come in here shortly, but I do want to talk a bit about the child care deal. I'm proud of staff in that department. They work hard. I got to see at first hand how much time and effort people put in to getting an agreement. I was there, Minister, when you made the announcement at Health Park, the daycare there. I know some of the nurses who were involved with that. They saw the opportunity right away, and I hope that can continue.

I'm looking for specifics now. You gave me some numbers at the beginning, but my first question is: How many new child care spaces opened in Nova Scotia last year?

BECKY DRUHAN: I'm so passionate about the child care work we're doing, and you're absolutely right: We have an incredible staff team at the department. The earlier team has been working flat-out since the beginning of this because it is such a significant historic shift.

We wanted to be sure the work we were doing was transparent. I wanted to let you know, in case you didn't know, we have our website - live - that provides people with

access to information on which spaces were opened and where and when. Anybody can go check that out and see details on the progress that's being made around the opening of child care spaces as we move to the target of 9,500 spaces by March 2026.

I don't have the time frame you were asking about at my fingertips. You can access it online, or we can get it for you afterwards. In terms of the overall numbers, we've created 1,097 spaces in child care centres across the province, 904 spaces in family homes across the province, and 1,860 before- and after-school child care spaces across the province for a total of 3,861 new spaces created since we started the work to transform child care.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: You probably don't have this with you, but if I can get it from staff, that would be great. That's 3,861 spaces in total. How many did you lose?

BECKY DRUHAN: One of the things that is amazing about this child care transformation is that it's allowing us to create stability in a sector that previously didn't have that. The sector is made up of operators - independently owned and run operators - who make independent decisions on their own. This work is knitting that together and creating consistency among approaches, alignment around practices to ensure that we have inclusive, accessible, affordable, and quality child care.

Over the last two and a half years, 1,031 spaces were lost as a result of decisions of operators to wind up or close or otherwise make those shifts.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: My next question is: Of the spaces that were created, can you give me a bit of a breakdown in the geography of where those spaces were created?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can speak to breakdowns for the space expansion in terms of zones. We have that breakdown for our licensed centres. Within the Northern Zone, we've created 175 spaces. In the Central Zone, we've created 406 spaces. In the Eastern Zone, we've created 255 spaces, and in the Western Zone we've created 261 spaces.

We are excited about the innovative changes we're making as well. Health Park, for example. You talked about the significance of it for your community. I think it's significant nationally, in terms of being a real innovative approach to child care. We don't see many centres at all that offer after-hours or weekend care in the way that Health Park is doing. We were very excited when that came to fruition.

I will say that the space expansion actually doesn't capture the expansion in Health Park, because Health Park has used their existing spaces to expand access. Just to put it very simply, one space may enable two or more children to attend because the child is not necessarily going to attend from 7:00 in the morning when they open to 11:00 p.m. at night

or on the weekend. That program is enabling Health Park to use existing spaces to a greater capacity than one might otherwise think.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Similar to my last question, I'll ask the opposite. Of those zones - Northern, Central, Eastern and Western - how many seats have you lost in those areas?

BECKY DRUHAN: This, again, is in relation to licensed centres, not the family homes or the before and after programming. In Northern Zone, there were a total of 169 spaces; in Central Zone, there were 257; in Eastern Zone, there were 15; and in Western Zone, there were 30.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Minister and staff, thank you for your time and efforts to prepare for today and in general. I want to go back to a comment that the minister made in Question Period related to the timeline to execute the \$10 per day child care. I know it is tough to get a full answer in 45 seconds. If the minister can add some context as to why there is - I believe she made a reference at the time to a five-year timeline to accomplish that goal. I just would like the minister to clarify, please and thank you.

BECKY DRUHAN: Thanks for raising that again. I had made note of the surprise at the time when I said that number, and then subsequently forgot about it.

The Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement was signed in July 2021. The target date for the work that we're undertaking around reducing fees to \$10 a day, creating 9,500 spaces, the work that we're doing around quality and the work that we're doing around supporting and professionalizing our child care staff - that target date is March 31, 2026. It is a five-year agreement. That's why I referenced the five-year timeline. I'm going to guess that people were thinking I was talking about five years from today, and that was not at all my intention.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for that clarification through the Chair, Minister.

What is the role of the private sector going to be? I represent a community that is predominantly filled with so-called for-profit child care operators. I'm hearing from them and from some parents that there are limitations on their ability to expand. That is, the restrictions that are the result of decisions of the department. I'm wondering if the minister can comment on it if that is true - if there are limitations on private for-profit entities to be part of the 9,500 spaces target that she referenced previously.

BECKY DRUHAN: I can say, unconditionally, we value and support our private operators. We have a significant number of private operators here in Nova Scotia, and we

have quality child care being delivered by not-for-profits and private operators all across the province.

[7:00 p.m.]

I also want to talk about what the private operators are included in. I knew from the outset, and we knew from the outset when we took office that we needed to inform our work through engagement with the sector. One of the first things that we did was to create an engagement table, and that was to involve representatives from within the sector: ECEs, operators, experts in child care, family members. We have folks who are representatives from both our not-for-profit sector, as well as our private sector at that table. They have been incredibly valuable members at the table in all of the work that we are doing to support the reduction of fees.

The 50 per cent reduction in fees is funded through this agreement and through this work. Our private operators are receiving the benefits of that, so that flows through to families who are receiving child care through private operators.

The incredible work that has been done to professionalize the wages in this sector - all of the wage increases we've had from the first wage increase of 14 to 43 per cent to our subsequent, more recent wage increases, the wage increases that will be tied to civil service, wage pattern increases, and the benefits and pension funding. All of that funding to support those wage increases and benefits also flows to our private operators in addition to our not-for-profit operators.

As we work toward a new funding model, we know that we need to continue to support operators through challenges that they may be experiencing around operational funding. We have created and continue to provide operational funding grants, inclusion funding grants - all of those benefits are available to our private operators. The one limitation that does exist with respect to our private operators is really - it's a function very specifically of the terms of the Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which was signed by the prior government. We had no involvement in that.

I know there was an eagerness to get that deal done. As a result of that, the limitation that exists in that agreement is that expansion needs to be prioritized for not-for-profit operators. This is something that we've raised with the federal government on multiple occasions. Most recently at the department and staff level, this was raised with the federal government in the negotiations and discussions around the renewal of the action plan. We have, for a long time and on a number of occasions, expressed a desire to have an interpretation of the agreement that allows us to engage our private operators in expansion. We have been advised on a number of occasions that that is not the interpretation that the federal government has taken.

Having said that, again, I've had multiple conversations with Minister Gould about this issue, and I have had multiple conversations with Minister Sudds about this issue each time. We've spoken recently. I am hopeful, based on some comments that were made recently, that the federal government may, in fact, be willing to reconsider that. So I wrote to Minister Sudds as recently as February 28th, reiterating our desire to have our private operators included in our expansion efforts. I am really hopeful that the limitation that exists in the current agreement can be rectified.

I do know that other provinces that took a little extra time to negotiate the agreement did manage to carve out some extra space for their private operators, but that wasn't the agreement that I inherited as minister. I have to be compliant with that agreement and respectful of that agreement.

I can certainly say that we are open, willing and eager to enable our private operators to expand if we would get the federal support in doing that. We want to move as quickly as we can. We are moving as quickly as we can, and I do think that is one avenue that could help position us to be able to open even more spaces even more quickly. I'm hopeful that we'll have an affirmative answer from the federal government. Regardless, we will continue to work with and support our private operators to the fullest extent that we are able under the terms of that agreement.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate the context, Minister. Having sat at the Cabinet table at the time, we did have sincere conversations about the inclusion of private operators as part of that. We know - as the MLA for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville - as I said before, that's where the lion's share of child care spaces exists. I'm always a strong advocate for them and I appreciate your confidence in the work that they do.

When you say "prioritize" not-for-profits, what do you mean by that? What qualifies the province to have prioritized not-for-profits, and therefore, I assume, enabling us to move on to a space where we can lean on the for-profit sector to be part of the solution?

BECKY DRUHAN: In terms of what that means, I guess what I would say is the federal position on private expansion under the terms of the current Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement is that it does not allow for any private expansion. That's the interpretation that they have shared with us on prior occasions. I'm not going to dive into a legal analysis, but that certainly is the position our federal counterparts have taken with respect to the terms of that agreement. I'm hopeful of two things: that they may reconsider either their interpretation or that they would be willing to renegotiate that element of it. That's really what it comes down to: that the federal folks have taken the position that the agreement does not allow for any private expansion of spaces.

Having said that, we have done everything that we can, within that interpretation, to support and make space for those private operators. As I described earlier, all of the work we're doing around wage increases for our ECEs and staff around operational support funding, around funding the reduction in fees, cutting those fees by half for families, our private operators, as well as our not-for-profit operators, are supported through all of that. They certainly receive the benefit of that funding, and they are equal partners at our engagement table with valued input into the work that we are doing.

In addition to that, there are avenues through which we are enabled under that agreement to support private operator growth. One example that we talked about earlier is the Health Park project. Although the extended hours associated with Health Park - evening hours in that daycare and weekend hours in that daycare - don't amount to counted new spaces, they do enable Health Park to provide child care to more children because the extended hours enable that to happen. It doesn't get captured in the space expansion, but it actually does have an impact for families and has enabled Health Park to take an innovative approach to growth.

As well, I would point out that our family home agencies are able to expand. We are very excited to recently launch a marketing campaign around family day homes. I am going to take this moment to plug that because this is a really, really important element of expansion, particularly expansion in areas of Nova Scotia that have historically had a harder time creating, generating and maintaining licensed child care.

The family home agency approach is really an approach that enables someone who is interested in having a smaller child care centre based in their home with a smaller number of children to work under the umbrella of an agency and receive the support and oversight of that agency. This is an amazing opportunity for people who are interested in getting into child care. It's an amazing opportunity for places in Nova Scotia that historically have had difficulty getting larger centres to open. It's an opportunity generally to expand the work that we're doing. That is another example of the ways we have worked within the limitations of the agreement to enable private operators to participate in the work that we're doing.

BEN JESSOME: You referenced that you had reached out to Minister Sudds with respect to voicing this reality here in Nova Scotia and the intent to support the progress of this file with the assistance of private for-profit providers. Is that a letter that you wrote? Is that something that you would be willing to table for the benefit of the House?

BECKY DRUHAN: Yes, I'd be happy to table the letter. Do we table it here in the usual way or would we table it on the floor?

THE CHAIR: Whatever works.

BECKY DRUHAN: I can give you some details of what the letter says right now, if that would be helpful. I must say that Minister Sudds, much like Minister Gould before her, has been incredibly collaborative, very available and accessible. I really appreciate the relationship that we have with our federal partners on this. This was following the visit that Minister Sudds had here recently where we announced and shared publicly that the action plan was complete and our renewed commitment to this work. What had happened was that there were some comments that were made during that visit that suggested that the federal government might be open to the possibility of private child care expansion.

I pointed out in the letter that, although our Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement here in Nova Scotia prioritizes not-for-profit space expansion, it's actually in contrast with the subsequent agreements that had been reached with some of the other provinces and territories, which did allow provisions for some level of private sector expansion. I know there was an eagerness on the part of the prior government to get a deal signed quickly, but as a result of that, the provision in our agreement does mean that we are at a bit of a disadvantage compared to those other provinces and those other provisions that they have.

I reiterated that enabling private sector expansion in Nova Scotia would provide us with additional capacity to create much-needed early learning and child care spaces within our province and support us in our mutual goals of increasing access to child care. I also reminded her that in prior conversations with Minister Gould, I have spoken on many occasions about the importance of our private operators to the work we are doing on the future of child care in Nova Scotia.

I noted that our provincial officials have raised this with federal counterparts. The most recent time that came up at our staff team level was in September during discussions on the action plan. Although we were advised by federal officials at that time that there was no appetite on a federal level for private expansion, I was hopeful that the more recent comments that were made reflected an openness to that approach. I reaffirmed our commitment and interest in having the private operators be involved in space creation and looking for greater flexibility in enabling space expansion. I thanked Minister Gould for her collaborative work and the supportive work. I indicated that I hoped for a positive consideration of this request.

BEN JESSOME: Alberta is one of them. What are the other provinces that have agreements that enable the for-profit spaces to be created?

BECKY DRUHAN: What's the question?

BEN JESSOME: Excuse me. I believe Alberta is one of the other provinces that does have that type of ability in their agreement. Can you reference the other jurisdictions that would be in that same category of enabling for-profit expansion?

[7:15 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I don't have the list at my fingertips, but we can get you those details.

BEN JESSOME: The last collective agreement with teachers - there was an impact felt by high school teachers in HRM where the intent was to have teachers teach to the full extent of their day, and teach eight of eight periods. I am hearing expressed concerns about the lack of non-instructional time that is creating difficult, and sometimes violent and abusive, situations outside of the classroom. Part of the testimonials that I have heard is that it is because of the limitations teachers have, when previously they had more non-instructional time with their students. We know teachers are the ones whom students develop relationships with and trust in. The efforts to put security in schools is - I am hearing - questionable at best.

I'm wondering if there is any discussion or appetite to create some flexibility so that teachers, particularly at the high school level, have more non-instructional time to build those relationships with students and make sure the hallways and the common spaces are safe.

BECKY DRUHAN: I am very conscious of the fact that prep time is something that's subject to collective bargaining. Negotiations are under way with the NSTU at the moment, so I want to be really clear that I'm not going to wade into that arena. I do on many occasions, but it bears repeating, I really do have respect for that process, and it's important that it unfolds the way that it's supposed to. I'm not going to go there with this, but I do want to provide a little context around what happened previously in relation to that.

First, at the outset, I will say - as I often do when I'm talking about issues of safety at schools - I am highly committed to doing everything we possibly can to support safe and inclusive schools. When I talk about pros and cons of various things, I never want it to be taken as anything counter to that commitment.

In relation to this question of prep time and scheduling that you described, the scheduling was actually unique to Halifax. It was specific to 16 schools in Halifax and was not in place in other areas across the province. My understanding is that in the last round of bargaining, in fact, prep time itself was bargained and increased to 12.5 per cent so that it was consistent across the province for all schools. That's just some context.

I would say that the challenges that are faced in schools around ensuring schools are safe and inclusive spaces are not unique to the HRM or to those 16 schools. That's a multi-faceted challenge and issue that manifests differently across the province, but certainly is not a unique issue that just those 16 schools are grappling with.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that, Minister. I am familiar with it. Certainly some of the, I'll say, lower-year schools did have an increase of prep time, but there was a certain, perhaps, detrimental impact on some of our high schools in the HRM. I respect the fact that there is active bargaining that we should stay out of. So through the Chair, I hear you, minister.

My last question, if I could squeeze it in in four minutes: Has the HRCE reached out to express an interest in a new school in the Hammonds Plains-Lucasville, Middle Sackville and Bedford areas?

BECKY DRUHAN: Growth is an exciting challenge to have. I do recognize that the member is in an area where that is a particular issue.

I can say that the department does meet regularly with HRCE to discuss enrolment and what trajectories look like. I can say that certainly Bedford and Middle Sackville are known to be areas that are growth areas. That is the case currently and we anticipate that to be the case into the future.

There are a variety of ways that we're going to be meeting growth needs in these schools. That includes new builds for schools. We know that this is an area where we just recently opened two co-located schools. That's not to say that growth doesn't continue and that pressures don't continue.

I will say that in addition to new schools, the addition of modulars is something that has enabled us to respond more quickly to growth in areas where we're seeing growth quickly. We have modulars that have been installed in some schools in areas of Hammonds Plains-Lucasville and Bedford-Sackville, with plans to have additional modulars. Those include schools like Basinview Drive Community School, Bedford South School, Clayton Park, Millwood High School, and Sackville Heights Elementary School. We do have more modulars in the works for other schools that need them.

Those are some of the ways that we're working to address those growth pressures.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes our first round of questioning with our Liberal colleagues here. With approximately 20 minutes left, we'll move on to the NDP.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I want to say thank you to the minister and the department for being here this evening, and hopefully getting to the answers to the questions. If not, we can look at them later.

I wanted to say that one of the reasons why I'm sitting in this seat is because of education. I was a school board representative, and I knew that my voice needed to be heard not just for myself but for others in the community.

I'm proud to say that we have SJAM, which is now relocated. We have SJAM, St. Stephen's Elementary, Joseph Howe Elementary, and Highland Park Junior High. We also have a private school, Shambhala School, in the area. We also have a number of day homes and licensed daycares, as you well know.

All of this is to say that education is immersed in a number of the things that happen in Halifax Needham. We know that across the province there is a need, as the minister spoke about, when it comes to child care spaces and spaces for folks to be able to have access to.

[7:30 p.m.]

I wanted to touch on a few things the minister spoke about in the opening remarks. I noticed that when you mentioned the school food program, the details were that it's affordable for all and free for those who need it. I'm hoping the minister can elaborate. When the feds get on board, will it be a universal program, i.e. free for all?

BECKY DRUHAN: I cannot make any assumptions about what criteria the federal government may have when and if we see funding from them for food or any commitments on their behalf.

I do want to clarify a couple things that are important for Nova Scotians to understand. I do think it helps us understand what the federal approach might be. One of the steps the federal government took was to do community consultations/engagements to understand more about Canadians' interests and needs around food in schools. They do have a report published. I am going to say all this with the caveat that I don't have it in front of me and it's not my report, but we did consult it and reference it in considering our plans around school food. The principles in that report are also reflected in the school food program we're building.

The first piece I wanted to clarify was the question of universal. That federal report is quite clear in describing what universal means. In fact, when they reference universal - and when we reference universal as well - it's really about access. It means everybody has access to food. Universal doesn't necessarily speak to the cost; it speaks to the availability and the access.

I can say we are building a universal school lunch program. That means every student across Nova Scotia, from pre-Primary to Grade 12, will have access to food - access to school lunch. That's really what the universal piece means.

When we talk about universal, embedded into it - should be imbedded into it and we do embed into it - the federal report also speaks about the need for stigma-free access to food. That is also an important element of the universal lunch program we are building. So there's no stigma and there's no knowledge, on behalf of anyone else, who may pay or what they pay when folks access school food. Those are two principles that will be fundamental to the universal lunch programming we are building here in Nova Scotia.

SUZY HANSEN: Another thing that was mentioned in the opening remarks was that there were a number of supports in place in the schools. I'm curious to know: How many student support workers are currently part of the budget? Are there new allocations for African Nova Scotian student support workers and Mi'kmaw student support workers?

BECKY DRUHAN: We had to reference a few places to get that information. The funding for our student support workers comes from a few buckets, if that makes sense. The additional over-a-thousand positions that were added over the last number of years include some of those student support workers as part of those additional inclusive education positions that were funded with \$78.3 million.

Fifty-eight of those are student support workers. I don't have that number disaggregated, but that's the number that has come from the inclusive education investments. But that's not the only source of funding for our student support workers. In total, across the province, we have 76 African Nova Scotian student support workers, and we have 44 Mi'kmaw student support workers.

In terms of the coming school year, we have a budget allocation to support increasing staff complements, but those hiring decisions at a regional level, in terms of how that staff complement will look in each region and within each school, are not yet determined this early in the year. I can't foresee at this moment what increases there may be to those student support worker complements, but we'll know that further into this year.

SUZY HANSEN: I was at Joseph Howe School speaking - shout-out to Joseph Howe Elementary. I was at their school, and I was blown away, first and foremost, by the engagement of the kids and the teaching quality, and the atmosphere as well. I was in a classroom where there were two students who both needed translators, and the ones who were translating for them were students.

There was a young girl who is Ukrainian, and then there was a young boy who is from - I believe - Somalia. There were clearly language barriers. I was asking questions - just simple things. The student - you've got to love them, they're so sweet - let me know that student didn't speak English. I said, "Could you, or is there anyone in here who could, ask this question?" The student did, which is wonderful, but I was concerned that maybe there weren't enough supports in place for these young people to be learning.

I heard from a teacher's union in Cape Breton that spoke to the same thing. They use Google on their phones, or they use little adaptations that enable them to translate language in ways that students can learn. I am curious to know: Is there anywhere in the budget where we would have an option to have a translator or technology to be able to do this work so teachers, students, and everyone in the classroom can learn effectively? I'm curious to know if that is something we have been exploring, if it hasn't already been - in this classroom, there was not - if there are any translation services specific to the classroom based on the needs of the classroom and the teacher?

BECKY DRUHAN: As our communities grow and we welcome newcomers, both in HRCE and all across the province, this is an important question. It's an important consideration in terms of how we resource our schools.

I was recently at a school in the Valley - I think it was a Grade 2 class - and I got the chance to read to them, which was lovely. They were such a gracious, sweet class. I believe they told me they were doing a project, and they had five languages in their class. This is a real question across the province. I was chatting with one of their students who was learning English as an additional language, and they were using the support of a translation app to very great effect.

The first thing I'll say around that is there is a diversity of resources that can be supportive of the needs of English as additional language learners, or French as additional language learners in our CSAP system as well. Not only is staff one of those resources but also those technological resources are important, and it's really that complement that is going to help us to meet those growing needs.

In relation to tech, those are the kinds of things that we do have access to in classrooms, including the significant investment we made this past year in increasing access to technology across schools across the province with the addition of 10,000 new Chromebooks and other devices. But of course, in addition to the technology, we do need staff to support that.

As with the answer to the last question that you had, there are a number of buckets of funding that we draw from for support for English and French as additional language students. Within our inclusive education funding of \$78.3 million, we have 44 EAL and FAL teachers who are important supports across the system for students who have English or French as an additional language, and for the educators who support those students. We currently fund 106.5. That was from the inclusive education bucket, but we actually currently fund 106.5 FTEs for EAL or FAL support. In 2023-24, an additional 21 new FTEs were added to the system, which included EAL teachers for HRCE and others across the province.

We do, in addition to that, have interpretation and translation services now available. We've allocated \$200,000 for that as another resource that's available to support

newcomers and folks with English or French as an additional language. I will say, as well, that this is one of the things that we have heard from educators about, both in my conversations with staff in staff meetings, through ideas for education, and also in visiting schools. We have seen a number of really exciting and innovative projects.

[7:45 p.m.]

I believe that I spoke in my opening statement about a pilot that's under way to support newcomers. We're excited about the suggestions that have come in through ideas for education. We've funded and resourced pilots to look at innovative ways to support newcomers in classrooms and support our educators around that. We are really excited to see the outcome of those projects and understand the ways in which we can expand even further the resources that are available to support our newcomers.

SUZY HANSEN: I know I have a short time, so I just have a quick question. There is a CSAP school that is being built on Bayers Road. I have been asked to find out the details of when it will be built, when it will be finished, and why is there not a thought of a high school on the peninsula? Because right now there are high schools on the Dartmouth side and further out, but that was the question to be asked today.

BECKY DRUHAN: Thanks for the question. We know how it is . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Unfortunately, the time allotted for Estimates today has reached the four-hour mark. The subcommittee will resume consideration again the next time the House resolves itself into Committee of the Whole on Supply. With that, we'll adjourn this meeting and I'd ask everyone to return to the Legislative Chamber. Thanks, everybody.

[The Subcommittee adjourned at 7:50 p.m.]