



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2024

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

11:52 A.M.

CHAIR
Lisa Lachance

THE CHAIR: Order. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will come to order. It is now 11:52 a.m. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the estimates for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as outlined in Resolution E17.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding \$6,960,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of Communications Nova Scotia, pursuant to the Estimate.

When we concluded last night, the NDP were working their way through their allotted time. They will start the questions today with 39 minutes. The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to get a little bit in-depth, specifically on the lunch program. I know that there is the option to pay what you can, and then those who cannot will receive free lunch. I'm just wondering, what is the pay-what-you-can model like? How will this be determined, and what will the prices possibly look like?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Thanks for the opportunity to talk more about school food and the universal lunch program that we're introducing. You're right: One of the pillars of this program is that food will be affordable. We are at the beginning stages of planning and implementation right now as we work towards implementing early in the next school year a program for universal luncheon in our schools.

The pillar of affordability - we definitely take reference from the work the federal government has done in engagement around this. We'll also be working with and taking into consideration local needs. We don't have a definition of affordability yet, and prices aren't set yet, but that is definitely fundamental to the program.

I think another very important element in that is the fact that it will be free for any who need it. Paired with that is that it will be done in a way that is stigma-free so that no one need be aware of who pays what amounts and that the affordable and free food is accessible to everyone without the need to self-identify or otherwise create any stigma associated with that process.

SUZY HANSEN: We know that one-third of Nova Scotia schools do not have cafeterias. What is our plan for these particular schools and are they included in the rollout initially?

BECKY DRUHAN: As we work to roll out a universal lunch program this coming Fall, our focus in the first phase is on elementary students. Phase 1 will see all elementary students having access to universal school lunch programming. As you mentioned, there are a variety of facilities currently in place, and a variety of services currently in place across our province, in terms of what is available in schools to access food right now.

We have some schools that have full cafeterias in place. Even amongst the schools that do have full cafeterias in place, there are different service delivery models. In some cases, they are locally run; in some cases, the school is involved or the SAC is involved; in other cases, we see external providers who are operating those programs. We have other schools that have taken really unique approaches to addressing lunch programming. I think of one in particular: a small rural school that didn't have a cafeteria or a space to produce food, but they took a small area in the school, converted it to a kitchen, and they cook lunch daily. Then we have other schools that currently don't have provision at all for food.

What is implemented this Fall - what we can say universally to be true is that food will be provided, but the variety of ways will be as different as the local communities and the schools. For those schools that currently don't have access to services, it may be the case that food will be delivered and provided in that manner. It may also be the case that they look to the model of that one rural school that I described and work to create facilities to produce food for lunches. I will also say that - I'm thinking particularly in the case of deliveries, but not just that - what is rolled out this Fall will provide universal access for

our elementary school students to lunch programming. We want to see continued community involvement and engagement and we want to see programs evolve.

It may be the case - I'm thinking particularly for those schools that may find that food will be delivered this Fall, that maybe what they go with on a go-forward basis may be exactly what the school community wants. Or it may be that they want to work towards a different model, so we'll be supporting that evolution based on those local community needs and desires.

[12:00 p.m.]

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to add in, because you did mention that there are other service providers that are within the schools, and some of those schools have different ways that they provide food through different services. I'm wondering: With the plan to transition these to a universal lunch program, will these private operators or these community folks be delivering this program in particular moving forward? I know you mentioned it's a pilot, so it may be something that they do. I'm just curious to know for now: Where you have service providers on the ground, will they be the ones implementing this program?

THE CHAIR: Before I recognize the minister, I just would like to ask all folks to use the honorific Mx. when referring to me - Mx. Chair.

The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

BECKY DRUHAN: My apologies, Mx. Chair. Thank you for the reminder.

One thing we've heard loud and clear in conversations with educators and community members and others through conversations over the last two years is that we have incredible things happening already across the province in a variety of spaces but particularly in relation to the provision of school food. The way universal breakfast programs are provided across the province is something that many school teams have spoken to me about and have celebrated.

Very regularly, when they talk about that, they talk about the connection to community and the involvement of other community organizations and people in that. The benefits that that brings are not just the provision of food, but also the strengthening of community that it offers, the strengthening of relationships within education, the learning opportunities it provides. We most definitely want to continue to capture and encourage and support those existing services and relationships that are happening now in relation to school food programming and, in particular, lunch programming.

We will be working closely with the RCEs, with CSAP, with our existing community partners who are already involved in the provision of school food, or who may

wish to become involved in the provision of school food, to make sure that we do leverage and support existing programs as part of the rollout of the universal lunch programming.

There's a lot of work to do, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it. That certainly is going to be the philosophy that we hold as we do this work. We recognize the incredible contributions and value of the work that's already under way. We want this to elevate, leverage, and support that, not to detract from it or discourage it.

SUZY HANSEN: I know yesterday my colleague asked a question about staffing, and you mentioned that there will be an additional staff person within the department to assist with this rollout. I'm wondering, because we did talk about community, and we say building those relationships are truly important: Is there any additional funding in the budget to be able to pay folks to do that work while they're in the schools for the period of time that they're there? To hire them on as school lunch providers or whatever that looks like? We know that their time, as well, is valuable.

BECKY DRUHAN: We have committed in our coming budget over \$18 million to support the rollout of universal lunch programming. The three areas where we'll be using those funds are for procurement - that will be for procurement of food and supplies; for infrastructure, as we talked about in relation to your last question about the building of infrastructure spaces and facilities to provide food; and the third element is resourcing for delivery. That absolutely may well be staff to support the delivery of the food programming.

I think it is important, as well, to acknowledge that in school food programs that exist now, and based on what we've heard from educators and others who are involved in the programs, there's a real celebration of and value to the contributions of volunteers and community members. Even many educators participate in the delivery of food programming, both because they see a need for that, for the nutritional element and the health element, but also because of the relationship-building that it offers and for other reasons.

We know that having that combination will strengthen this program, so we want to make sure that as we're rolling this out, yes, we are supporting with resources and supporting staff, providing other resources that are needed to provide the programming. We also want to make sure that we leverage and support and encourage the volunteerism and the philanthropy and the community connections because they are so important to this for a variety of reasons, including the nutritional value of delivering food but also those relationship components.

SUZY HANSEN: I, too, see the value in that. I say this because, coming from a community school, it's really important for us to keep those folks who have built relationships that the young people believe in and trust, but that we also recognize that they are valued in the school, and we want to give them a little something. I say this because we

used to have lunch programs or lunch monitors and that stuff happening in the schools. We would pay them for two hours to be there. They were also able to do after-school care and help out with that and still receive compensation because they're there for the whole day. In the case of SJAM, you're bused there. A lot of folks don't have transportation to be able to get back and forth, so it would be good to implement additional resources for folks while they're there in the space. That has been mentioned.

I'm curious to know: Does the \$18.8 million also include the breakfast program? Is it replacing the breakfast program funding or is it on top of the breakfast program funding?

BECKY DRUHAN: Before I speak to your question, I did want to comment because you talked about SJAM. I have to say I spoke with the staff team. One of the things that we talked about was the ways in which they are working to support their students and their community now as they wait for their new school, because it's such an active community. They talked about when that school is located in the community, how engaged families are and connected to the school. I really appreciate that question and understand why that's particularly important for them as they wait for the school that will be in their community. I know the staff team is doing an amazing job to maintain those connections and work with the circumstances that they have now with transportation with buses. I just wanted to acknowledge that. That's one example of the incredible connections that we see.

With respect to your question about funding for breakfast programs, the breakfast program funding is separate and apart from the lunch program funding. We've invested \$1.7 million in the breakfast program. That investment will continue to happen. Historically, that has been Health and Wellness funding, and it has flowed through Education and Early Childhood Development to support food programming, but that will be coming within the Education and Early Childhood Development budget going forward. Over at least the last two years, I know that we've also added funds to that \$1.7 million to support breakfast programming. Going forward now, as we're adding a lunch program, I think we'll continue to monitor how that resourcing looks, but I can say that the over \$18 million for the lunch program won't detract from the breakfast program. We'll continue to fund that.

SUZY HANSEN: We're in such close quarters that I feel like we could just talk. I'm glad to hear that, because I think that the breakfast program as well as the school lunch program will ensure a number of things that we've been talking about for a number of years are going to be started, and moving forward we'll see more progress. I'm thankful that that's something that will continue on.

I'm going to go on to school staffing. How many schools have teacher vacancies right now?

BECKY DRUHAN: Just to set some context, I just wanted to remind folks that the regions are the employers of our educators and other school staff - regions and the CSAP.

They monitor and manage staffing on a day-to-day regular basis throughout the course of the school year. We certainly keep connected with them and get reports from them on how staffing looks. We were very mindful of this at the beginning of the school year, when the hiring manifests. The hiring actually starts happening in Spring. It happens in phases over the course of the Spring, and then even through the Summer and sometimes as late as the Fall, as a result of implementing collective agreement provisions around cascading and hiring. Fall is the critical time as staff and enrolment settles out. We did check in at the start of the year with regions and CSAP, and there were no reports of any significant staffing vacancies at all. There are some pockets, particularly in specialist positions, that have historically been difficult to fill and continue to be difficult to fill.

[12:15 p.m.]

We know that there continue to be challenges around school psychologists, for example, and they tend to also be geographic challenges. It's not that every school or every region has difficulty filling those positions, but they're difficult to fill. Then we see, often in rural areas, that it's particularly difficult to get certain specialists. That is one example.

We know that French teachers also can be challenging to fill. That's been a historic reality, and I think that continues to be the case. That being said, there's been no shift this year. We keep checking throughout the year, of course. The dynamics of staffing are fluid, so at any given moment, the next day, the picture may change, but the regions are reporting no significant issues - or issues, really, around permanent vacancies.

The challenges that they report that I hear regularly from staff when I meet with staff are really more about substitutes and filling vacancies when those day-to-day or intermittent vacancies occur. Not the vacancies with the permanent positions, but if I need to be off because I have a doctor's appointment, or if we need to release people for PD, how do we ensure that we have enough substitutes to fill those vacancies? Those are the ones that I certainly hear regularly are a particular challenge, so we've really focused very heavily on addressing that specific issue, because we know these are important reasons why we need to be able to release teachers. They need to be able to take PD and collaborate; they need to be able to take time when they need it if they're sick. That was one of the reasons that we listened to the many, many teachers across the province who suggested we have more term substitute teachers and that we deploy those across the province. There were a few examples of that, but we weren't using that a lot until we heard from teachers how important it was.

I'm very excited that now, all across all of our regions and with CSAP, we have term substitutes who are either assigned to or attached to one or a group of schools or a family of schools. That helps to address the day-to-day vacancies that we see. It helps allow our school teams to plan, to be able to collaborate, and to do professional development. It has other benefits as well, because it attaches those substitute teachers to school communities, which is a really great opportunity for relationship-building. It makes their

role easier for them to do. It makes them more effective when they step into a class if it's a class that they've been connected with on a regular basis, because they have regular opportunities to develop those relationships. It's a really great inroad towards a permanent teaching assignment, so that's just one of the ways that we've worked to address the substitute issue.

We talked not too long ago about the offers that we've made for our graduating teachers. Approximately 300 offers went out to our graduating teacher class. That's another way that we're working in the future to support the needs of our schools in relation to having access to substitute teachers.

SUZY HANSEN: It just made me think about a few things. When you mentioned term and permanent, I was thinking teaching positions in particular. I remember that there are obviously numbers of permanent positions that are available. I'm curious to know: How many permanent positions are available for teachers across the province, as opposed to term positions that are across the province?

BECKY DRUHAN: The answer to that question is it's complicated. I'll explain why to kind of paint the picture. The regions and the CSAP are the employers of our teachers. We have over 10,000 teachers - that would be permanent or term teachers. In addition, we have over 2,000 substitute teachers. There is a dynamic element to whether teachers might be employed on a term or a permanent basis. There's a variety of reasons why that may be. That may relate to the dynamic nature of certain particular roles.

A permanent teacher may move out of that role and into a lead role - literacy lead or some other reason - so there's fluctuation between whether they hold a permanent position or a term position. Then depending on how you count that, you could count them as both.

To give you a snapshot, I would have to ask today, and that would give us a picture of what today looks like. That might change tomorrow as those roles shift. It relates, as well, to collective agreement provisions around the status and tenure of teachers.

SUZY HANSEN: I was asking that because, yes, it's tenure and also based on what the staff would like to see. Some want to work 80 per cent, some want to be able to be flexible. I get that. I was just curious because many years ago, there was a policy in place that RCEs - I can only speak for HRSB or whatever it is now - HRCE. At that time, they were only allocated to hire so many African Nova Scotian teachers. I'm just curious to know, is there still that policy in place where there is an allotment or a cap that you can hire only - let's just say - 10 African Nova Scotian teachers within the region? I'm just curious to know if that is something that is stood up or not.

BECKY DRUHAN: I want to be really clear in answering the specific question you asked. No, there is absolutely no cap on the hiring of African Nova Scotian teachers by any

interpretation of that. That's why it took some time to gather information about the efforts that we're all making to ensure that we do have good diversity and good representation and that African Nova Scotian people who are interested in becoming teachers are supported to do that.

It may be that the policy you're referring to - I do understand that there are local collective agreements that have equity provisions that enable the hiring of more African Nova Scotian teachers, not a cap on that. It may be that's what you may have been thinking about when you were asking about numbers of positions. We're working to ensure that we have increased diversity.

One of the announcements that we made recently, which we're very excited about, is a partnership we're supporting between DPDLI and Acadia University to have an African Nova Scotian teacher education cohort. We regularly see, I believe - if I'm wrong, hopefully someone will correct me - four or five African Nova Scotian educators graduating. We're anticipating upwards of 20 being involved in this program. We're really excited about the impact that that will have to enable and support African Nova Scotian educators to be connected to our system and become teachers.

SUZY HANSEN: You mentioned specialists, and sometimes there are specialist positions that are hard to fill. We understand that. It's been a constant. We know that they often work one-on-one with students across the schools. I'm curious to know: Are there caps on the number of students that can be added to their caseload? Or is it just a rising list?

BECKY DRUHAN: We have a variety of positions in the school system that are targeted to support the diverse needs of students, be they academic learning needs, be they behavioural, social, emotional needs. As part of our work and within the department, extending back a number of years - prior governments as well - we've added to those positions over the course of a few years and talked on many occasions about the 1,000 positions that have been added to support inclusive education funding.

There's a wide variety of practitioners and specialists who are designated for that. I think, for example, of our child and youth care practitioners. We have Achieve teachers, actually, within NSCC. We have applied behavioural analysts. We have folks who are focused on early intervention for ASD. We have behavioural support teachers. There are pre-Primary inclusion coaches, school counsellors, resource teachers, and the list goes on - probably well upwards of 25 classifications that do support those diverse learning needs. I believe all of the ones that I've listed, and many of the others that I talk about are positions that were addressed specifically by students first in the report that was done on inclusive education.

That report actually contained ratios to guide - I'm not sure if caseload is really the right word for it - the deployment of the number of those types of staff, those different

classifications of staff, in relation to enrolment and student population. I can say that in each of those positions that have been added, we are meeting ratios, and we have staff deployed in accordance with the ratios that were recommended in that report to ensure coverage. These are conversations that I have regularly with staff teams, because it is important to recognize that many of those positions are new, and we're talking about a deployment over the span of five years, which maybe sounds like a long time but really isn't a long time. It's also a time that occurred over the real disruption that we had around COVID.

[12:30 p.m.]

One of the things that we all within the system need to put our minds to now is: Does everybody know the resources that are out there, how to access them, when to access them, how to tap into them to make sure that we are getting the best use of those resources? That's a bit of a different question than whether we have the right number of the resources, and so it's important, I think, to keep both of those things in mind. You can have the right number, but not have people connected in the way they need to be connected. That's something that we've been working to do in recent years to make sure that those folks are connected in the way that they need to be so that everyone has the support they need.

SUZY HANSEN: I'll be back asking questions after, but I wanted to say I say all this because, as we know, a lot these resources have a lot of folks on their list. We want to make sure that they're not being overexhausted by the work that they do, because it is really relevant work.

THE CHAIR: The time allocated for NDP questions has elapsed.

The honourable member Halifax Armdale, who will have up to one hour, unless you choose to cede your time to the NDP or to the Independent member.

ALI DUALE: First of all, thank you, minister, for what you do for people of our province. Also, I want to acknowledge the staff, the department. Most of the time, we as politicians take credit for answering the questions, even though there are people behind who give us these answers, who have this knowledge, and who have these skills. Before I ask any questions, I just want to acknowledge you and your role as minister, as well as the department and your staff.

I'm here today to speak on behalf of my constituents. At the end of last year, I sent you an official letter through my office as well as the Premier's Office. I thank you for the response to my official letter, even though I was disappointed in terms of the language of the letter, which never gave me a definite answer on what I was looking for. We know your office and the department have a lot of projects, but I did ask a specific question, a specific request, and I did not get a specific answer. That's my disappointment.

We're here today, and I'm very interested to hear from you in person. What is the plan for John W. MacLeod - Fleming Tower Elementary School? We know this school is one of the oldest schools in our province. I would like to hear from you what are the plans and what to expect in the community to have a new school.

BECKY DRUHAN: The growth of our population is one of the amazing, exciting opportunities that we face, also the challenges that we face. I will say, paired with that, our complement of schools - we have 373 schools across the province of varying ages. We're working to build new schools. Many are under way already, in construction. One of the things that we need to do is work to preserve our old schools as well. I can say that we have had conversations with HRCE about John W. MacLeod - Fleming Tower. We know that they are among some of our older schools, John W. MacLeod being 77 years old and Fleming Tower being 61 years old. It is important that we work to ensure that we maintain and repair our existing school stock as we build to meet growth needs and refresh needs.

One of the things that I'm very proud that we have done is to increase our tangible capital asset budget. We call it the TCA budget. For many, many years, that annual budget had been \$6 million. That is a budget that supports regional improvements to existing schools. What are those improvements? Those would be things like roof repairs, boiler replacement or repairs, upgrades or renovations or repairs to school bounds, like pathways and driveways. That budget also enables accessibility upgrades for many of the schools that were built before our awareness of and focus on accessibility standards. Some of those schools are challenged with that.

For many years, that budget had been frozen at \$6 million. You can imagine, with an asset pool of 373 schools across the province, that \$6 million didn't go that far. We recognize the need, as our population is growing, to preserve and maintain and better support the condition of our existing schools. That's why we've increased that investment. We now have a budget of \$30 million a year to address those sorts of repairs.

John W. MacLeod - Fleming Tower did benefit from that increase over this past year as hardscape upgrades were completed to install and improve the safety of the pathways into the school.

We were actually able to do over 50 school projects as a result of that increase in budget. We're really happy to be doing this investment to enable schools like the one that is in your area and across the province to upgrade and maintain and preserve. We know there's more work to be done as we address the needs of the aging infrastructure that we do have and also the growth needs in communities.

ALI DUALE: Quite honestly, first of all, do you think for Nova Scotia taxpayers it's fair, as the minister responsible for this file, to convince two schools that are 138 years old to spend money and to renovate year after year? Have you ever looked in terms of the

financial incentive? Is it worthwhile to build a new school or spend on two schools that are 138 years old for taxpayers' money?

Secondly, have you ever considered the well-being of the people who go to the school, specifically the staff and children? We know these schools were built 71 years ago. You know and we know the material that we used 71 years ago. Some of them are not healthy, such as asbestos. We know the quality of the air in this school is not great. We know there is not enough sun or windows. Could you please justify how you can allow these aging schools to continue, and the willingness to continue to function while you have all this negative impact for taxpayers as well as the people who attend this school - specifically for our children, who are the next generation of this province?

BECKY DRUHAN: The reality is that we have 373 schools across the province, and they are of a variety of ages. We know that for the schools that are aging, we do need to do the work to make sure that they continue to be safe and welcoming learning environments for our students. That is why we are investing to the extent that we are investing in school infrastructure.

Right now, our five-year school capital plan is a \$1 billion capital plan. That is a plan that has a variety of ways and resources to help us address the needs of our existing school populations and our growing school enrolment. We do have investments for new schools, but we also need to recognize that that's not always going to be the way that we address our growth and our infrastructure needs.

In addition to the new schools, including four new schools that we're working to build in HRCE, we also have the addition of modular learning spaces, which school communities are very excited about and they embrace. They provide us with a very flexible and timely opportunity for addressing growth and expansion needs.

We've also invested more than ever before in our TCA budget, and that enables us to do ongoing repairs and maintenance to ensure that our existing assets are in the shape that they need to be to provide educational experiences for students.

I will say I would love to be able to do every project that comes forward immediately, right away, and have it done, but the reality is that we can't do that. We work with the regions to make sure that priority needs are met and that we continue to work to provide resources to ensure that the regions and the CSAP are in a position to support the safe education of students across the province.

ALI DUALE: I don't think I have heard from you an answer to my specific question. I do appreciate being a minister and responsible for the entire province, but I'm here today to advocate for my constituents. Their concerns and their needs are very serious. Your government announced four new schools in HRM with the capital plan. I'm just

wondering: Is John W. MacLeod one of them? If not, where will John W. MacLeod be on that list? When will that announcement be made and how?

[12:45 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I am as eager as many folks in HRM to be in a position to announce locations for the four new schools that we have announced to support the growing needs of Halifax and area. We are taking a different approach this year to how those announcements are happening because the reality is we have a very different land market this year, and over recent years, than we have in years past.

What we have found, what's been observed, is that when property is in demand, prices go up. We know that we have resources. We have committed resources to support the purchase of land for four new schools in HRCE. Public Works has a strategic, planned envelope of \$50 million to enable them to acquire land for the purpose of supporting those four schools and for other projects. We're taking a strategic approach to that to make sure that we use taxpayer money in a responsible way and we get the best possible deal for taxpayers as land is acquired.

As that unfolds, we all wait - eagerly, I think - to be in a position to talk about where those schools will be. When that process unfolds, I will look forward to announcing those locations. We know that when that happens, it will be a benefit across HRCE as we add schools and spaces to support the growing needs of our communities here in HRCE.

I do also want to just comment for a few minutes on the annual process that we have around identifying capital needs. I said before and I'll say it again: I would love to be able to do every project that schools are looking to have done. That's just not the reality of any sort of fiscal experience. We have to prioritize. We work with the regions and with the CSAP to hear from them about their priorities. The capital plan is built and refreshed based on that input and based on that prioritizing work that they do.

We'll continue to do that work. As each year unfolds, we'll get to doing additional projects. I do look forward to all schools seeing the benefit of the increased investments that we're making, both in the addition of schools, and also in the addition of modulars, which many, many communities, specifically schools in HRCE, are receiving. Also the benefit of those tangible capital asset investments, so that we preserve and maintain our existing schools but also build for our current needs and the future.

ALI DUALE: I'm not a bad language expert but I do follow my gut. I see you smiling, and I'm taking that as a positive. It might be John W. MacLeod is part of the list. I'm hopeful because it seems to me right now everything is on hold. Having said that, if that's not the case, would you be able to tell me where in your priorities this school fits, if not this time, in the future?

BECKY DRUHAN: We do review and collaborate with the regions and with the CSAP annually in terms of identifying their priorities and working with them to support improvements and investments to meet those priority needs. Because it's really important that that process be an objective process, be a process that is reflective of community needs. That's something that is, I think, a very important element of the process.

What I would suggest is for community members who are interested in this and want to be able to share their experience and ensure that their perspective on this is being understood by the regions, that is one of the reasons that we have worked to augment local voice. We introduced this year a local voice initiative to improve connection with community and schools and regions and to enable community members to be confident that their desires and their needs and their voices are heard by the school system so that the system can be responsive to those needs.

I will say we do continue with the department and our partners at the Department of Public Works, the regions, and the CSAP on an ongoing annual basis to update those priorities. The local voice opportunities, I think, are really good opportunities for community members to make sure that the schools and the regions understand their experiences and their desires.

I would suggest that it's always worthwhile for you to encourage community members to make sure that they are involved. The channel into the department and the education system is and should be so much broader than through local MLAs. That's why we've done work to increase access to local voice. We've enhanced our SAC role and the resources that they have available and their connection with their schools. I would encourage community members who are interested in advocating on behalf of their school, on behalf of their students, to make that they're connected with their SAC.

I think also that at a regional level, there are opportunities there now because we've created regional advisory committees. That will enable more opportunities for community to connect with region and make sure that their needs and desires are understood. Capital needs like a desire for a new school are absolutely some of the kinds of things that we want community members to have a direct channel into the regions to be able to talk about. That's another opportunity for community to be connected with and advocate for local needs. I did just want to mention that because I think that that's a very powerful way that people are able to use their voice to ensure that the regions have a clear understanding and picture of what those local needs and desires are.

ALI DUALE: I hate to say this, to admit that sometimes in this space we say all kinds of things, but in reality that's not what happens. I have 10 pages of concerns of citizens of my constituency. The majority of them are actually based on communications and how they felt and not knowing what the channels are and how they're able to raise their concerns. I hope with your leadership it will be the case that people will turn out and be engaged and listening and concerned and what have you. I will hopefully in the future

share with you any concerns that arise within the community. That's not the case, what's happening right now.

You mentioned decision-making and involvement of the community and having space to say what they see and what they would like to see in schools. Who makes decisions of what school should be decided and how that will be prioritized? Is it coming from the community? Is it the department that makes the decision? Is it the minister's role and the Premier's? Is it based on the needs of the community? Is it based on political announcement? I would just like to know, even though you mentioned you like to see the communities involved in decision-making. How are these decisions being implemented? How are the decisions being made?

[1:00 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: Before I talk about the process around capital planning, I do want to just respond to your comments about what you heard from the community around their access to HRCE and having their voices heard. I wanted to say that we've done work around this for that very reason, because we did hear from community members who felt disconnected from their schools, from the regions. There was a feeling that they needed better understanding of who to connect with and how they can do that. Communities wanted to be confident that their voices and perspectives were heard and that they had input on decision-making at a regional level and within the school system more broadly. That's really why we did the work around enhancing local voice.

I will say it's new. We really only introduced it in late Fall of this past calendar year. We're just a few months into the regions taking the steps that we outlined. A lot of it is just getting off the ground. The SACs, for example, have existed for a number of years, but those enhancements are just starting to come online now. I'm very excited that we'll be having a conference with all of our SAC chairs this Fall, which will be a really incredible opportunity to connect them and to have conversations about ensuring that our provincial education system is responsive to the local needs that the SACs are so well-positioned to articulate.

Similarly, the regional advisory committees are only just getting started now. They haven't existed in the past. That was never an option that was available for community members to participate in. I'm really optimistic and excited about the opportunity that those advisory committees will have to connect with the regions.

The SACs really operate on a school level, but we wanted to see that connection as well, that community connection at a regional level. Part of the reason I'm so excited about that is because as the minister I have the great benefit of having a number of committees that I work directly with and hear directly from, and I know how valuable it is.

I'm personally very appreciative of the input that those groups have. I think, for example, of the student advisory committee that I have, which is made up of students from across the province. They're able to give me very direct first-person insight into their experiences within the school system. What they share with me is so helpful to me in my role. Those regional advisory committees are really going to be a very valuable tool for community members to connect with the regions.

The regions are also just now starting to roll out regular regional public meetings. Somewhere in my papers I have the schedule of those, but I just can't put my fingertips on it now. I know that there was one locally in my area - it might have been this week. The days are blending together a little bit. That was just this week. Halifax Regional Centre for Education is also having those meetings, and those are opportunities, as well, for the broader public, not just members of the SAC or the regional advisory committees, to come and connect with the system.

I just want to make sure that you're aware of all of that so that your constituents are aware of that. I know it doesn't take away the importance of connecting as MLA with your constituents, but people do need to know what structures are in place within the education system so that they're able to connect directly. I'm really excited to see the influence that communities are able to have as a result of those improvements that we're making to enhance local voice.

To your question about the decision around capital, what I can say about that is that input is taken from a variety of areas around this decision-making. Really, the first stage of that process is the regions and the CSAP identifying their priorities. They do that in a variety of ways. Then the regions and SACs share those priorities with the department.

Then at a provincial level, there is collaborative work between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Department of Public Works, and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board to prioritize those projects that are advanced by the regions and the CSAP.

They're prioritized based on a variety of factors. Certainly, school condition is one of those factors. I am very excited and proud that we've taken action as part of our work on capital to ensure that there's a facility condition index in place so that we have an understanding of facility conditions across the province in our 373 schools.

That's only one piece of it, because the condition doesn't necessarily tell you about the ability to deliver programming. That's a very important element that gets considered as well. Also enrolment and enrolment projections are other factors that are considered.

All of those and more are factors that are considered as the cross-department team considers and prioritizes the projects that are advanced by the regions and CSAP.

ALI DUALE: I'm going to move to something in general. I thank you for responding to some of my questions today regarding my constituents and John W. MacLeod.

Something completely different, but I'm interested. As we know, our province is growing, and it's growing very fast. Being a newcomer in this country and this province, I'm wondering if, as the minister who's responsible for educating the next generation of this province, to not lose the historic piece of African Nova Scotians, as well as the Indigenous people, their history and their inheritance.

I'm wondering if your leadership and the department are willing to add to the curriculum African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities, their history, to be part of the curriculum, so that we don't lose that history. It's the reality that we're going through: The province is changing. Would you be able to share with the committee today and the people of this province: Do you believe that in order not to lose that history, this should become part of the curriculum of the school?

BECKY DRUHAN: Within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we have two branches that are focused specifically on the issues that you've raised. We have the African Nova Scotian branch within our department to focus on our education and the achievement and well-being of our African Nova Scotian students and supporting that. We also have a Mi'kmaw services branch, which is focused on the support and achievement of our Indigenous students.

There's a lot I'd like to talk about in relation to that. I'll maybe focus on the initiatives supporting our African Nova Scotian students first and then talk a little bit about those that support our Indigenous students.

The support for African Nova Scotian students is guided by the African Nova Scotian Education Framework, which is founded upon the BLAC Report from 1994. We do continue to hear about the relevance of many of the elements that were advanced by that. That's really the lens through which that work is undertaken. There's a variety of elements of that as well.

We have a number of support providers who are embedded within schools, who provide direct support to students in schools. Those include our African Nova Scotian student support workers and our African Canadian regional coordinators. They provide educational services and supports in place in schools. I've seen the benefits and the connections that those support workers provide in schools. When I visit schools very regularly, the offices and the spaces that are created by those support workers are really centres of culture and connection and spaces to celebrate. They provide services that are invaluable to our African Nova Scotian students.

We introduced the first Black Excellence Day within schools in 2022. It is another way in which we are realizing the vision that began with the BLAC Report. It's really about identifying, celebrating, and recognizing the brilliance and the gifts and the talents of our African Nova Scotian Black students. It honours first-person experiences, and it honours and celebrates current leaders, historical leaders, and allies through the province. That's something we're now celebrating annually in schools.

It's also an opportunity where resources are rolled out to support the inclusive experience in schools. When I visited, I believe it was a school in Liverpool, for Black Excellence Day last year, a number of resources were being provided to schools across the province that were in celebration and support of Black Excellence Day and to ensure that this is something that infuses the experience of schools, not just on one day but, of course, across the year.

It's also important that we have professional development available, so there's a variety of professional development opportunities that focus on this as well.

I believe your question was more focused on curriculum, specifically, but I think that context is really important. I will say that in relation to curriculum, our African Canadian Services branch is involved with the department in the development of curriculum and curriculum framework documents to ensure that that lens is put on curricula and on resources that are available in schools and to ensure that there's nothing missed in the course of that.

They're also integral in the development of new resources. One example of that is *The ABC's of North Preston*, which is a recent addition that celebrates specifically what you're asking about - the local culture, local history, and local community - so that we continue to uphold and celebrate that, as we welcome newcomers, and we don't lose sight of our history in our efforts to also connect newcomers to the school experience.

I wanted to mention, as well, the Africentric cohorts that exist in some communities across the province. Woodlawn High School now has an Africentric cohort, and Citadel High School, in addition to Auburn Drive High School and Horton High School. Those are opportunities, and it's really important, I know, that those are developed in collaboration with community and in response to community desire around that.

What I have heard is that those are opportunities that students really appreciate to take courses as a collective group. It allows those schools to be particularly attentive to the cultural needs of their African Nova Scotian school communities. Those are a few examples of the work that's under way with our African Canadian Services branch.

I do want to just mention as well - you asked about our focus on Indigenous students. I will say our Mi'kmaq services branch is doing parallel work in relation to ensuring that our Mi'kmaw students have a well-connected experience of our education

system. There are a few things - again, I could talk for a long time, but I just want to highlight a couple of things.

[1:15 p.m.]

I'm really excited about the Mi'kmaw language work and some of the new programs that have been developed in relation to that. We offer Mi'kmaw Language from Grade 4 to Grade 12. There's a Mi'kmaw Studies course in Grade 11. I'm incredibly excited about the Netukulimk course, which was introduced this year and is an innovative approach to curriculum. It embeds the concept of Etuaptmumk, the concept of two-eyed seeing, in a course that is an environmental course. It's grounded in both the western understanding of science and that scientific approach, and the Indigenous ways of seeing and being and knowing. Those are just some examples of the work that's under way with our Mi'kmaq services branch.

ALI DUALE: First of all, thank you for your response. I think my question was a direct question, and what I hear from you, most of them support what I'm looking for. Also, I was speaking from the perspective of a newcomer, to learn the history of this nation and this land, specifically Nova Scotia. I really believe, as a newcomer, it's important for us to know the history of this country. I really believe it's worthwhile to consider that this should be part of the school curriculum so the next generation of newcomers and the next generation of this province learn this history. History doesn't have to be only negative. We have also a lot of positive things that we can cherish.

I'm going to end my questions by taking this opportunity to acknowledge members of my constituency. Our children, when they leave home and they come to school, they see two things: people who serve and a structure. I would like to acknowledge that we have great teachers and we have great staff at both schools, and the community loves their service. I can say the community is proud of the school. My concern is the structure, because those two things go hand in hand. You cannot have only people in the middle of a place that's not safe, that's not healthy. It doesn't look good. Those are my biggest concerns.

I'm going to conclude by acknowledging those members of the school administration, teachers and staff, for the work they do. Thank you, Minister, for your role, as well as your staff. I have finished my questions.

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, who would like to say a few words.

BECKY DRUHAN: The few words I would like to say are: Can I just take a two-minute recess?

THE CHAIR: We will take a two-minute recess.

[1:18 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[1:23 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you to the minister and staff for being here. I know you have been thanked. Happy International Women's Day. It's appropriate, with your support staff and all three at the front table being women.

I guess I'll get right into it. I'm going to be fairly short and sweet with questions. I hope the minister is also able to but I understand there needs to be context at times. I'm not given as much time as I would like. My first question or statement would be that I appreciate the budget going from \$6 million to - I think it was \$30 million mentioned; certainly, quite an increase. My concern is how much of it is reaching Annapolis. My first question would be: Could you maybe break down that spend or any of that investment in either prior year or this coming year with plans for investment in Annapolis?

BECKY DRUHAN: I wanted to make sure I captured the variety of projects. There are some projects that are under way in Annapolis with the TCA funding. There are also ICIP projects, which are Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program projects. From a context perspective, we currently have 86 TCA projects covered by that \$30 million under way across the province; 56 of them are in active work, and the remainder are in planning stages. That's the reference to 50 that I mentioned earlier.

Of those 56, AVRCE has seven projects under way. Those projects include ventilation work at Dwight Ross Elementary School. They include heat pump replacements at Horton High School. They include fire alarm work at Middleton Regional High School and elevator work at a number of other locations - maybe some of those locations, as well, but multiple locations for the elevator work.

Then for the ICIP projects, there is also work under way at Annapolis East Elementary School for air handling and replacement and other work. There is some additional work at Dwight Ross Elementary School on the HVAC system. There is air handling work at Evangeline Middle School. There is work under way at Windsor Elementary School, and finally also at Bicentennial School.

CARMAN KERR: I appreciate that the first question I asked wasn't the easiest and the quickest to answer. A number of those schools and that information are not in my riding. There are multiple ridings within the Annapolis Valley. What I would ask of the minister and of the department is: Could they email or submit to me a really detailed breakdown of work being done in Annapolis County schools?

BECKY DRUHAN: Yes, we can follow up on that request.

CARMAN KERR: On the five-year capital plan, it looks like there are zero schools being built in Annapolis. Why?

[1:30 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I'm assuming that the question was around schools in Annapolis and from the reframing of the prior question that it's really about schools in Annapolis County, not schools in Annapolis Regional Centre for Education. What I can say is that the process that we use to identify and progress school capital projects, in particular the selection of new schools, is one that we do in connection with the regions and the CSAP. The first step of that process is the regions and CSAP identify their priorities and the schools that require priority attention. Those are then shared with the Province, and a committee from the Department of Public Works, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board works with those projects and considers factors like programming, like enrolment, like condition of buildings to determine what projects will be prioritized.

That's the process that we use to determine what projects will move forward. That's the process that was used in identifying the four new schools that were announced this year, that we specified in announcements this year in terms of locations, in addition to identifying that we would be adding four new schools, as well, to HRCE.

CARMAN KERR: Acknowledging what the minister just remarked on, how many schools were elevated to a priority by the regional department? (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: I recognize the honourable member for Annapolis, to add to his question.

CARMAN KERR: In the spirit of time, how many schools and which schools in Annapolis were elevated to a priority by our regional department?

BECKY DRUHAN: We'll have to follow up on that request.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you to the minister for following up on that. I would be curious about what was made a priority and where that gap was in that channel. I know in Middleton there were claims from my colleagues of how old their schools were at 50 years. Middleton Regional High School is 73 years old. It is suffering from all kinds of challenges, and renovations are needed - elevators, accessibility challenges. I would also like to know, for particular schools, have they elevated certain priorities for the coming year around renovations, given that the school won't be replaced?

AN HON. MEMBER: Two minutes.

BECKY DRUHAN: I recognize that we're close on time, so I just want to say that we have asked regions and the CSAP for their recommendations on the TCA repairs. We don't have those yet, so I look forward to receiving those and asking them, as well, to root them in factors, which would include the condition of those existing schools. I look forward to receiving that.

CARMAN KERR: Would the minister provide me with those recommendations for those TCA repairs when she and the department receive them?

BECKY DRUHAN: We'll follow up as the process progresses.

CARMAN KERR: I would like to clarify "following up." Does that mean sending specific details about those repairs and the details behind them?

BECKY DRUHAN: We'll take the request under advisement and get back to you.

CARMAN KERR: I'll come back and see the minister and staff after the NDP have had their time.

THE CHAIR: The time for the Liberal caucus is now expired. It is now time for the NDP caucus, with an hour.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I was wondering if the minister could talk about the revised guidelines for trans and gender-non-conforming students and indicate when they will be released.

BECKY DRUHAN: We have a number of initiatives under way and supports in place and principles that we follow to ensure that we are supporting the safe and inclusive education of our students. The well-being and health of our 2SLGBTQIA+ students is very important to us. We know from our Student Success Survey that that is an area that we need to put focus on and that we need to ensure that those students in particular feel welcomed and safe in our school spaces.

With respect to the question of the guidelines that we have around supporting transgender and gender-non-conforming students, those guidelines were developed in 2014 with community partners and based on international authorities on this. That includes partners in health and partners across education. We've heard very clearly about the importance of those guidelines and the importance of the structure that they do provide in our schools to support our gender-non-conforming and transgender students.

That being said, they are also from 2014, so there are some things that do need to be updated in relation to those guidelines. For example, they refer to school boards. We

know that there's work to be done to make sure that those are current. Teams within the department have been undertaking that work and making sure that they are engaged with community organizations and others in the path to that.

I don't have a date right now for the release of updated guidelines, but I can say that the work does continue. We are committed to maintaining the integrity of the support that those guidelines provide. I can say that is a commitment that we have.

LISA LACHANCE: I appreciate that answer, and I appreciate the time that we have had to speak about this issue, Minister. I am going to push a little bit, though, on the timeline because I believe - I am actually going to forget my dates. When the review of these guidelines was announced, I think people expected it this school year. There is actually a lobby campaign. I assume you might have received some letters around this, some concerns about the "when."

I understand the work is ongoing, and I appreciate that. I'm just wondering: Is it this school year? Is it next school year? The minister must have some goals within the department on the delivery of policy projects.

BECKY DRUHAN: I just want to talk a bit about the guidelines, because the work is under way around those. We have heard from and are continuing to hear from community on the guidelines.

We are very proud of and have had feedback that reflects our pride in the structure that those guidelines provide as they stand, in terms of the direction they provide and the support of the use of students' preferred names and pronouns and those elements of the guidelines. I can say that there will be no changes to that element of the guidelines for folks who have expressed concern that that's the direction this is going in. I just want to be very clear that that's not what is happening. Those guidelines were progressive when they were introduced, and they were created with the advice and collaboration and input of health and other professionals.

We've heard from school staff and from others, from community members as well, that they are appreciative of the protection that those guidelines provide. We will be maintaining and upholding that protection and that structure. The focus is really on ensuring that they are up-to-date, accurate with respect to language that they use. And there are also opportunities to ensure that they reflect first-person experience. That's really the work that's under way around the guidelines.

I will say that that is only one part of the work that we are undertaking and continuing to support around the support of our transgender and gender-non-conforming students, both from a well-being and from a safety perspective. I wanted to talk about some of that work as well because it is important to understand that context.

[1:45 p.m.]

Another significant piece of work that we are undertaking in relation to safety in schools is the review of our Code of Conduct with the lens of safe and inclusive schools. That is something that is going to be important for all students in school and for staff and school communities, but I think it's also specifically important for our 2SLGBTQIA+ students because the focus of that safe and inclusive school work is to ensure that our spaces are safe and inclusive and that our school communities are supported to make sure that students feel that fully and experience that fully.

That's been something that I have been very committed to and have had lots of conversations with staff who are informing the direction that we are taking around that safe and inclusive school work.

Maybe I wouldn't say it's unprecedented, but we have taken, I think, what is certainly an unusual approach in recent years, in terms of the degree to which we're collaborating with our partners at PSAANS and NSTU around that safe and inclusive school work. We're reviewing the Code of Conduct, but I've struck a leadership table with our partners at PSAANS and at NSTU to ensure that we are collaborating as we review that Code of Conduct, to ensure that it truly supports our educators to support our students. That's only a piece of the work around safe and inclusive schools.

I also want to mention that there are other elements that are really important for the safety and well-being and the experience of our 2SLGBTQIA+ students in schools. Those include initiatives like our Gender and Sexuality Alliance clubs, and the support that we have for programs like the Youth Project and other supports so that we continue to have that community engagement and close connection in schools with communities.

Those things continue to be under way and continue to be supported. I would say that in addition to those community connections, we know that it's important that our educators and staff are prepared for conversations around these issues. For that reason, all school-based administrators are receiving Three Braid Training, which is anti-racism and anti-discrimination training that will help support their leadership in schools.

We also do have resources and we continue to update them and make them available for our classroom educators to help them have conversations about pronouns and gender in ways that have pronoun- and gender-inclusive language.

Those are some of the many things that are under way in schools now to support the well-being and the inclusion and safety of our 2SLGBTQIA+ students, while we continue the work on the updating of those guidelines.

LISA LACHANCE: Within those considerations around the guidelines and the safe, inclusive school, I'm wondering if you are having any conversations around

infrastructure needs. The Citadel High gay-straight alliance undertook a research project that I believe the minister is aware of, where they connected with over 200 students, as well as school staff and teachers, around how students are able to access the gender-neutral washrooms at Citadel High School. Citadel High School is a great example to even start to contemplate because of course, it's a relatively new school and does, in fact, have gender-neutral washrooms on site.

What they overwhelmingly found in their research was that the current number and location and actual accessibility of those washrooms is inadequate. Just anecdotally, my child, who uses "they" and "she" pronouns, cannot make it to those bathrooms and make it to class on time. You just can't do it at Citadel High School in between classes, and because they're also quite secluded, I will say that the other reason why they don't bother going to those washrooms is that the washrooms are being used for other things because they're out of sight.

So I was very impressed with the Citadel High School GSA research project because it was extremely well done and well-communicated, and disappointed, I guess, to see the extent of concerns. Because while I'd heard about it from one child, it seems to be quite pervasive.

I know they wrote you a letter asking for help, and I think it would be fair to characterize that they were disappointed by your response. They were looking for ideas and support on how to undertake some of the renovations that they could do within their school. Using this as one example, I'm thinking about other older schools. I was in the Chair when we were talking about the age of some of the other schools around the province. Basically, this type of infrastructure is needed across the province. I'm wondering what your plan is for securing that to enhance the safety and inclusions of 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

BECKY DRUHAN: I do commend the Citadel GSA for their work and their initiative on that. I'm always excited and pleased when students advocate for themselves and take initiative and do that work. I was really happy to see that they did that. I'm also happy to say that just as recent as yesterday, the department staff actually met with HRCE operational team to talk about what may be possible for supporting those requests that the Citadel GSA advanced around the accessibility of the washrooms in Citadel High School.

I also want to talk a bit about the current construction standards that we have because I think the member raised a really important point around how they've evolved. Citadel High School is a relatively new school, for sure, but I can say that even in the time since Citadel High School was built to now, our standards around how we build accessible washrooms have changed entirely. So the barriers and issues that the member has described around the washrooms that exist in Citadel High School that the students involved in the GSA have written to me about, those have been addressed in our current design standards.

I can say with our new schools that are being built, and when we're able and when regions are able to undertake updates to existing schools in relation to washroom spaces, that lens on gender inclusion and accessibility means that we've addressed those issues. What we see with new schools that are being built, in terms of the standards, gender inclusion and personal privacy considerations mean that the washrooms are all now in much more visible spaces, so that helps comfort and safety.

All of the washrooms are now built with that gender-inclusive and private lens so that all of the washroom spaces are inclusive and are private. They are not separate spaces that you go to find yourself an inclusive or private washroom. They are all built that way. They are constructed in a way that enables privacy of use in the washroom, but the communal spaces, where you have sinks and mirrors, are out and connected with other learning spaces so that maintains both the privacy elements and also the security elements of washroom design.

Even as new as Citadel High School is and the improved steps that were taken to make sure that there were accessible washrooms in Citadel High School, even since that time, improvements have been made to make sure that when we build new schools, we've addressed those issues. And when we undertake renovations in existing schools, they are also done with that lens.

I will say in terms of funding associated with that, those are some of the types of projects that are included in the TCA budget, which we've increased from \$6 million to \$30 million now annually, in recognition of the need to do a variety of upgrades to schools to ensure that their condition is such that they meet the needs of our students.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm pleased that there seems to be some movement forward for the folks at Citadel High School. Perhaps I'm dating myself by referring to Citadel High School as a new school. My partner graduated from the old Queen Elizabeth High School too, so it is the new school to us, I guess.

I wanted to turn to talk about the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority education program for children, particularly with vision loss. APSEA is a program that I am familiar with for a couple of reasons. One in particular was their in-person space that was on South Street. My other child also completed a program in that same building. We spent a lot of time around the APSEA community. We would join for meals in the cafeteria when everybody was there. I have an appreciation for the power of that collective experience.

I met with parents, students, former teachers and other specialists and some folks who are currently still working with the program. I think they are really concerned that the current model of supporting in classroom and in school is not adequate to achieve the same outcomes that were being achieved, particularly with the orientation and mobility program

on-site, which was an important piece of ensuring students had the skills and the transferable skills for independence, as well as that collective experience.

Families often spoke about the fact that was the only time that their child had any time with others like them. So they were learning together about mobility and safety and that sort of thing. There is a great concern that facility seems to be shuttered.

I wonder if the minister can talk a bit about if the department reduced funding to APSEA in recent years. What is the department planning to do in terms of resuming in-person service delivery of APSEA programs for students with vision loss?

[2:00 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I just want to provide some context for an understanding of the jurisdiction and authority of APSEA just so folks are aware, as the member may be.

APSEA is an organization or agency that's responsible for the provision of services to blind and visually impaired and deaf and hard-of-hearing students across the Atlantic provinces. It's governed by a board of directors and is accountable to all of those provinces. It doesn't fall within the umbrella of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. It is connected to and accountable to our students, but it also provides services and support to students throughout the Atlantic provinces. That's just in terms of the context of the services that it provides and the breadth of those services.

We do jointly fund APSEA with the other Atlantic provinces. Nova Scotia does provide funding to APSEA for the services that they deliver to our blind and visually impaired and deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Our funding has actually increased. We haven't reduced funding. In fact, we've increased funding. In 2023-24, the Estimate was for just over \$10 million of funding for APSEA, and we're on track again in 2024-25 to be over \$10 million of funding for APSEA. Our funding for that work has increased.

I also want to say that the department has met with APSEA to understand the rationale for the change in the service model. I can relay the explanations that APSEA has provided because they are governed by the board of directors and aren't accountable directly to Nova Scotia's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development independently.

If I can simplify, what has been articulated is that the move is really about principles of inclusive education and providing access to education in communities where students live. The focus has gone from providing that centralized educational model with the South Street location to providing regionally based services to support students in their existing communities.

I have also spoken to people who have directly experienced the APSEA programming, either as students or as family members, and have heard similar questions as the member has raised. Folks have certainly had great experiences with APSEA's prior programming, and the folks who have had those great experiences are really great ambassadors for what that model was.

We know that whenever there's change, people have questions, and people may have concerns and anxieties around that. We've been assured that APSEA is monitoring those changes and is evaluating the effect and the impact of those changes. I do look forward personally and I know the department is looking forward to being updated on the results of that. We will certainly be following with close interest.

I can say that we've also heard that there were challenges with the centralized model. For those whom it worked really well for, it did, but the focus with providing regionally based education opportunities is to ensure that everyone has access. Not everyone always did have access when there was a lot of travel involved to access services.

Having said all that, though, I really am eager to hear APSEA's report back on how it's going and to monitor the impact of those changes.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm glad to hear that the minister is also interested in tracking the outcomes from this revised model, because that was actually going to be a question. I think what stakeholders have said to me, too, is of course inclusive education, but APSEA always had the in-person, semi-residential, short-term residential programming with the coaches that were available around the provinces. Now with just the coaches, there's a feeling that that's not enough, or not achieving the outcome. I'm glad that there's an outcome-monitoring process and that the minister will be following that.

I think with that, I'm going to hand it back to my colleague from Halifax Needham.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I appreciate the questions from my colleague. I thought they were quite interesting.

My question to the minister is: Can the department table a list of schools showing their ages and options for expanding modular units and renovations? I know in our last discussion, our colleague from, I believe, Hammonds Plains asked similar questions. I know it's an extensive list. I know it's a longer list, but I'm curious to know what is moving forward for growth in communities?

BECKY DRUHAN: I've got lots of information to share. I will say that I don't have the specific enrolment of the schools that I'm going to talk about, but each of the regions keeps and shares that information. The Halifax Regional Centre for Education would have

that information online and that's available, but I do have the projects, which I'll happily share now. I'm just going to take a few minutes and just organize the way that I present them.

I want to talk about the ones that are already in place. Most of these are in HRCE. Some of the modulars that we are procuring now are through the commitment that we have in our annual budget, \$40 million investments in the modulars. The ones that have been placed already were done in an ad hoc way, so I'm really happy that we now are able to project forward and plan with some regularity for the inclusion of modulars.

The ones that are already in place include Basinview Drive Community School, and there we have a modular annex that includes 12 classrooms, with a capacity of 300 students. Also currently in place is a modular annex at Clayton Park Junior High. And I think that's the school where they told me they call the original school "the mainland," and they call the modular "the island," if I'm not mistaken, which is really quite cute. This is what we see develop with modular installations, is that they get used quite uniquely in schools.

You may see a particular department - we know one of the schools has a math department located in the modulars. In other cases, and this again might be "the mainland" and "the island," they will use it for a grade. In junior highs, particularly, when we see junior highs have Grade 6 as part of their complement, they may use the modulars for Grade 6 as they enter the junior high community.

Also already in place is an eight-classroom modular unit at Duc d'Anville Elementary, and that has a capacity of 200. We also have a five-classroom modular unit at Fairview Heights Elementary, and there's an annex to that. That has the capacity of 125. Then we have Grosvenor-Wentworth Park Elementary, which has 10 classrooms in the modular annex, and there's a capacity there of 250 students. We also have modular classrooms in an annex at Park West School. There are 12 classrooms there with a capacity of 300 students.

We have Beechville Lakeside Timberlea Senior Elementary, which has a modular of six classrooms, with a capacity of 150 students. Georges P. Vanier Junior High has a modular with 12 classrooms, and they have 360-student capacity there. Millwood High received a modular unit of 12 classrooms in 2022-23, with a capacity of 360 students.

The next batch that I'm going to talk about are modulars that have gone in or are going in over the 2023-24 school year. I believe most of these - if not all - are already in place; they would have been constructed and are in place now this year. Bedford South School has six classrooms in their modular unit, with a capacity of 150 students. Halifax West High has a modular with 12 classrooms and 360-student capacity.

Harry R. Hamilton Elementary has a modular with six units and 150-student capacity. Sackville Heights Elementary School has a modular annex of 12 units with 12

classrooms, with a capacity of 300 students. Elizabeth Sutherland School has eight classrooms in its modular unit, with a 200-student capacity. Ellenvale Junior High, which is the junior high school I went to - shout-out to Ellenvale. I loved that school, I still do - it has a modular as well there now with 12 classrooms and a capacity of 360 students. Those are all HRCE schools that we talked about.

CSAP has modularity at École secondaire du Sommet with 10 classrooms, 300-student capacity. These three that I'm talking about now are in the 2023-24 school year, but they're in progress. École Belle-Baie will be receiving five classrooms as their modular unit, with a capacity of 125. And then we have Greenfield Elementary School, with four classrooms and a capacity of 100. That also is in progress, as well as the two CSAP schools that I just mentioned there. And Greenfield Elementary School is in Cape Breton.

Finally, we also have modularity that have been procured for HRCE. Two units, each of which has eight classrooms, and their location will be determined.

[2:15 p.m.]

SUZY HANSEN: You're saying the last one - you haven't found a space for them yet? Because we know there's a need, but I'm just curious. There's not a space for them in particular?

BECKY DRUHAN: Yes, the department has been working closely with HRCE to determine the location of the modularity that have currently been procured. It's really about working to ensure that we understand what space is available and how that fits in with other plans to address enrolment. Modularity are only one of the ways that HRCE and our other regions and CSAP work to address changes in enrolment and growth. We should, in the very near future, have details around where those modularity will be located.

Until we created our current capital plan - the strategic plan that includes a regular allotment for modularity - the planning around them had been, I'll say, ad hoc. It meant that there wasn't the kind of time runway that we now have because we now do have the commitment to continue to procure. What that means is that going forward we will have more time to plan, and we'll know further in advance where modularity will be going, so we'll be able to share that news with community earlier.

SUZY HANSEN: Just by looking at the numbers, I'm glad you mentioned the capital plan because I don't know what's on the list, and maybe the minister can tell me - I'm curious to know - we have five or six or seven that are in the 300-student capacity. I know this is not the case, but I just think maybe there's a delay - are we moving away from building?

When we think about where the modularity need to sit - and I can speak for my area in particular - there's not very much space for folks to even place a modular. Then I would

think, wouldn't we be prioritizing these particular spaces that are consistently growing? It's been over time, but even more so because we have huge population growth right now. Are we putting these particular spaces that have the growing need on the priority list at the capital planning level? We know that a build is going to take four-plus years, so we need to be able to say, okay, where do these fit, because we know that Bedford is growing by this amount.

I'm not an expert in that, but I will say that I had to do many sit-ins and reads on capital planning, and that literally was, like, how do we work out the growth? We need to work it out in a realistic way. When we account for growth, traditionally it used to be a 10-year plan, and that 10-year plan was nowhere near the number when 10 years came up. It was actually very low. This is why we have overload on a number of these other new schools and now we still have modulars needed.

My question is: Are these particular schools that have these large modulars, with 300 students or more, being considered as a part of the capital planning to build? Timeline is really important when it comes to taking a school down and putting it back up.

BECKY DRUHAN: The member has addressed some of the challenging issues that we are grappling with now that we have growth. I will say school planning for decades in Nova Scotia has been around decreasing enrolments, so all of the models, all of the planning, all of the routines and practices were really around decreasing enrolment. It's a really significant and exciting shift that we now have to make to plan for and address the unprecedented growth that the province is experiencing.

The member has identified some of the elements of those challenges. I will say at the outset, and I'm glad the member articulated this question because I want to be really clear in the answer, we are not shifting away from building schools. We are absolutely still building schools. The addition of using modulars to our arsenal of tools or our kit of tools to address growth is exactly that. It's an addition. It's not going to detract from our plans to continue to build schools in the more traditional way.

I will say our modulars are resilient and long-term assets. They do provide very responsive, comfortable spaces. We do see it in jurisdictions where that is what is used as a school builds, but that's not to say we're shying away from building schools. We are absolutely still building schools in addition to using modulars.

We really can't rely on the trends of the past. I also want to explain how modulars interact with the broader school planning. Our school capital plan incorporates a variety of tools. We've talked about modulars, we've talked about traditional builds, as I'll call them. Traditional builds do take a number of years to get off the ground, literally and figuratively, both in terms of the consultation and the planning, the identification and acquisition of land, and then the methods of construction. It just means that there's a longer runway for that to happen.

As the member identified, traditionally, the thought was five years, but over the last number of years when we've seen interruptions with supply chains and interruptions with labour that in many cases - or in some cases, at least - have extended to closer to 10 years. That is the reality of our traditional builds. Modularity allow us to be much more agile with meeting growth needs in communities. We are able to have modularity up and running within a matter of months of identifying a location for them.

That's why we've used modularity so extensively in HRCE, where we see the significant impacts of very quick, rapid population growth, and consequently the enrolment in schools. I also want to take the opportunity to say that just because we may deploy modularity for an area, for a community and for a school, that doesn't mean that that school is also not considered for a refresh, for a new build.

Modularity can be a long-term asset and a long-term answer, for sure. They're constructed in a very resilient way - they have a long life span. They also have the flexibility that we can use them as a mid-term option. We can stand them up quickly, and if and when we need to, we can redeploy them elsewhere, which keeps those flexible options open.

A community may, in fact, see modularity used as a short- or mid-term option while a new school is being built. Those strategies or tools, along with our strategic land purchase envelope, along with the increase in our TCA budget, allow us to be much more nimble than we ever were, in terms of maintaining and preserving existing infrastructure and then building and adding to our spaces to meet growing needs of communities.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to shift, because I want to know what the timeline is for getting schools open, but like you just mentioned, it depends - supply and demand, need, all of these things. I can't expect the minister to be able to say, Well, it's going to be a hard three years or four years. We've seen that already, so I won't ask that question.

My next question is going to be about school violence. There's been a net increase in the number of violent incidents reported at Nova Scotia schools, as we know. Eighty-seven per cent of teachers surveyed by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union in 2023 believe that that level of violence has increased in the school over the past five years and 90 per cent say they're concerned about the current situation.

I'm curious to know: How much is the department investing in additional mental health resources for the students and teachers to prevent or to intervene in violent situations?

BECKY DRUHAN: It took a few minutes to gather resources, because the reality is - and this is true for many areas of importance and focus: mental health, safety, and other areas. So much of what we invest into that does not show as a line item, on mental health or on safety. Nonetheless, those investments do support mental health and safety. In some ways it can be said that every dollar of our \$1.99 billion investment is in mental health,

because the goal for all of our staff, all of our employees with the department and across regions, is to support the well-being of our students, and elements of that are in mental health. That goes into and infuses all of the work that we do.

That could be construed as trite, but it really isn't. It's a principle that threads and underpins all of the work that's done. I do want to emphasize that, but I also want to be responsive to the question, and there are certain line items that are really about mental health. They come from a few areas and baskets.

[2:30 p.m.]

I'll first focus on the positions around inclusive education funding, because core to their function and core to their role is the support of mental health in our students. We have the added 1,044 positions in inclusive education, and they include behaviour analysts and autism and behaviour support, behaviour support teachers, child and youth care practitioners, our student support workers whom we've talked about earlier. They include school counsellors, school psych, SchoolsPlus supports, and various other nurses and other professionals whose focus is on mental health. That is a significant \$78.3 million investment which is very much rooted in mental health and well-being of students, and supporting their well-being and consequently their safety.

I have some other elements that do focus on mental health. The next one that I want to talk about is SchoolsPlus and the mental health supports that are included as part of SchoolsPlus.

I want to go back and say again, in relation to those inclusive education positions and the 1,000 of them: Each of those positions are positions that were included as inclusive education funding, but there are more of those classifications already in the system that were there prior to the additional \$78.3 million.

Now back to SchoolsPlus. The budget for SchoolsPlus for this current year is 2023-24, and I might have it here. Yes, I do. The budget for SchoolsPlus is \$19.6 million. That supports students in a variety of ways and with a variety of roles. We have 65 hub sites in every county across the province; we have social workers as part of that, 80 facilitators; we have 147 community outreach workers. We have regional coordinators, four of those, and 54 SchoolsPlus mental health clinicians. This is a really important support that we have for the health of students and particularly mental health of students.

It represents a collaboration between RCEs and the CSAP, as well as health professionals at the IWK and Nova Scotia Health Authority. It's a nationally innovative program that is very responsive to school needs and mental health.

Part of that is adolescent outreach services, focusing on brief and early intervention for self-management functions for youths aged 12 to 19 - that encompasses Grades 6 to 12

- who are at risk of mental health or substance use issues. There are 31 of those adolescent outreach workers employed by NSHA who offer services across the province in about 100 schools.

We also have, as part of that envelope and as part of that work, school-based youth health centres. I think it's important to know that we have these spaces that are rooted in schools, that are accessible and available to students to access for their health needs, including their mental health needs, helping students to get those needs met in the spaces where they are and to navigate other health care services.

Those are a couple of the larger buckets of funding that we have that support mental health in schools. Those are just some examples. As I said at the outset, there are many, many roles. For all of our staff across the province within the department and the regions, the focus is on the well-being and achievement of all of our students. This is something that I hear every single staff member talk about, whether that's at the top of their job description or not.

SUZY HANSEN: This is just a suggestion, because we have heard from a number of staff, a number of NSTU members from schools across the province, that we know that staffing is an issue. When there's not enough staff, things can happen. There has been a call for a violence strategy, to be able to explore what this looks like in different ways on many different facets and many different communities.

I would encourage the department to really take a look at what other people are doing in other areas when it comes to a youth violence strategy. I can't remember the name of what it was called, but regardless, I think it would be valuable, because our young people are experiencing a number of things that are unprecedented - that they've never had experience of before. We need to be able to navigate that in ways that are positive, that are going to promote them to be better citizens of this province.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus is now over. It is time for the Liberal caucus, with an hour.

The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I'm sure the minister knows why I'm here. The new school for our area was announced by our Liberal government in 2018, and it was supposed to be opened in 2023. Here we are in 2024, and we still don't have shovels in the ground. Parents and teachers are contacting my office weekly, and I actually spoke to the HRCE this morning. The population is exploding at that school, and we've put in enough modular classrooms. They're getting portables that had been removed put back in. We definitely need a school, and you have said that. I'm very excited to hear that there is \$208 million being spent and would like to know how much of that is going for that new school in this year's budget.

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I share the member's enthusiasm and excitement and completely understand the community being so eager to see progress on this. It has been some years since the school for Clayton Park-Fairview was announced. We know work was under way to identify a site, but I think this is an example that was taking place even before I took office, illustrating the challenges that exist now within HRM in finding land that is available for addressing growth needs, including school needs.

There has been a delay, and we completely understand that. I am very happy that the Department of Public Works has gotten to the stage through that extensive work of conducting a site assessment. We're hoping that that will be completed very soon. The next step after that will be sharing the report with the community for feedback on the site and then moving ahead. I must say, I am as eager as the member is to see ground cut on that project, for sure.

I will say, though, in relation to the specific question around funding, typically the funds are allocated when a tender is awarded. Once that stage is reached, that's when we start to see specific funds allocated. I can assure the member that our budget anticipates work being done and money flowing in association with her community school. I hope that in the very near future, there will be some demonstrable progress on that for the member and the member's community.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I'm a little bit confused. The land transfer from HRM to the province was done last Spring, a year ago. The survey was done last Summer. We've had over six months since the survey was done. What has been done since that?

BECKY DRUHAN: I do want to clarify and correct that the land has not been purchased. Halifax Regional Municipality has their own processes that make land available and enable purchasing to happen. I do not want to wade into those processes because they are HRM processes. On the provincial end of things, the questions are best directed to the Minister of Public Works because that work is undertaken by her team.

I do want to clarify that that step hasn't taken place. That does not diminish my optimism that we will see demonstrable progress on this soon. I did want to make the member aware that that wasn't accurate.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I have reached out to my counterpart from HRM, and they tell me that they're waiting for the province in negotiation. That's their wording. They've done their part, and they're waiting on you to answer them back, and that's been a long time. What is the holdup in replying to HRM?

BECKY DRUHAN: I would suggest that the member direct questions to the Minister of Public Works. The comment that, in fact, the land transfer hasn't happened yet is an accurate one. I would suggest the member follow up with Public Works and with HRM for more details around that.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Let's say that the negotiation can happen in the next month or two. Is there money that can be allocated right now for the design and things this year? If we can get it moving from HRM's side - HRM tells me they've done their part. They're waiting on the province. I asked before coming here.

BECKY DRUHAN: Yes, absolutely, there will be no barriers to moving forward with respect to planning and design and next steps on the building of this in relation to the budget. The funds will be there when the work needs to happen.

[2:45 p.m.]

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: In your plans, when do you expect the school to be built, and when do we expect students in the classrooms? Just give me an idea of what you think, because it's taken five years so far and we still don't have anything concrete. I apologize - it will be six years.

BECKY DRUHAN: I think that this situation with the new school in Clayton Park-Fairview is very much illustrative of the challenges that exist now in this current land acquisition landscape that didn't exist 10 years ago, and why we need to approach securing land for schools, the building of schools, and capital planning around schools differently than has been undertaken in the past.

I've been in this office for just slightly more than two years, so I know this has been a six-year journey for the member's community, but my involvement and our government's involvement has just been over the last two years. We're working as diligently as we can, recognizing that there are multiple parties and communities and interests involved in the securing of this land. The Department of Public Works and the Province are working as diligently as we can to move this along as quickly as we can. When that happens, when we're in a position to have the site announcement, the timelines in terms of when the school will be anticipated to open will be updated at that point.

I do want to emphasize that this is why we are approaching the announcement of, the purchase of, and the strategy around new schools in HRCE differently: because we have seen how this has evolved and has been challenging for the community while they wait. We want to make sure that we are strategic and acquire lands that will support the additional schools that we'll be building in HRCE in a way, first of all, that is responsible to taxpayer funds, in a way that makes sure we understand the market that exists, understand the reality that when a specific school location is announced or a specific project might be announced in a particular area, that drives up and influences the way negotiations may unfold. With the lessons that have been learned as this project has unfolded, we are approaching the acquisition of land in HRCE and HRM differently to make sure that when we move forward, we are more confident about where we're going to be able to develop new schools and what the timelines of those new schools are so that we are meeting expectations of communities as that unfolds.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I just want to end it by saying that it is really an urgent matter in our riding, especially because we're expecting another 10 apartment buildings where Sobey's is. Where are those kids going to go when we already have that many modulars and we're back to having portables? That is the nearest area to the new development. We had over 20 apartment buildings in Rockingham South. They're amazing, but where are those kids going? You're just not moving fast enough for the population that you want to increase, unfortunately. These are taxpayers putting their kids in harm's way in schools at the moment.

BECKY DRUHAN: I would say that if I had been present, if we had been present in government to be able to make decisions about planning six years ago when the school was announced, we might see a different trajectory.

The reality is that you do what you can with what you have where you are. Although there might have been opportunities in the past to change the trajectory of how this has unfolded, we are working as diligently and as quickly as we can to get this project on track and ensure that the community has a school as quickly as we possibly can make that happen.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: For the minister, I'll switch things up. This is around the lunch program that was announced. We're certainly appreciative of the lunch program being announced. As the minister knows, we've advocated for it a number of times over the past couple of years.

I think that the minister, and correct me if I'm wrong, mentioned in Question Period that there will be pilot sites introduced initially. Is that correct?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: In my conversations with school teams across the province, I heard a lot about food in schools. I do recall it might have been a school in Colchester that expressed an interest in being part of a pilot for universal lunch programming.

What I will say is that we are not moving ahead with any pilots. We are going full-bore this coming Fall. We are going to be rolling out, in Phase 1, universal lunch programming for all of our elementary school students all across the province. We're not delaying on this. We're going to roll ahead with all of them.

What I can say, though, is that we already know a lot about food in schools because we have so many different models for the provision of schools already under way across the province. Although they are not pilots, examples like the programs that exist now - like Kings County Academy, that has adapted their lunch program over the last years, and the

schools that have introduced salad bars - all serve as lessons, as pilots might, for how we can expand that across the province.

CARMAN KERR: Rather than use the word “pilot” or “Phase 1” with elementary schools, has the minister or the department learned of any schools in Annapolis - my area - that may not be able to move ahead on that program because of any infrastructure challenges?

BECKY DRUHAN: We have, across the province, a variety of offerings in schools around facilities for food. Some schools have really no facilities around that at all. Other schools have full cafeterias and full kitchens.

I will say to the question about whether there have been any schools identified that would not be able to participate because of the lack of facilities, the answer is no, absolutely not.

Whatever the state of a school’s current facilities, we will be moving ahead with the provision of universal lunch programming for schools across the province. It’s going to look different from school to school. For those schools that currently have fewer resources or fewer facilities available around food, we do have funds available to enhance, augment, upgrade, or update those facilities. We will also be looking at a variety of other models and we may see that some schools have food delivered. That may be the perfect permanent solution to the provision of food in schools, based on opportunities in the community around that.

There may be partnerships that evolve with restaurants or with the community college, and then that ends up being the final model for those schools. It may be that we see transitional models, where we see first delivery options happening, but the schools may choose to work toward a different option. What I can say for sure is we’re rolling out a universal program and that means food for all of our students. In our first phase, when we’re targeting our elementary school students, we’ll be providing lunch for our elementary school students across the province, regardless of what facilities currently exist in their schools.

CARMAN KERR: I appreciate that candid answer, so thank you. I’ve got two young kids in the system, so it’s dear to my heart. My next question would be around, more specifically, if there is a gap on delivering and there is a model that would be individual or work in best favour to a certain site, what responsibility lies on the school and the community working with the minister and her department? For example, I would argue Annapolis is unique. We have some of the highest poverty rates in children in the province, something we’re not very proud of and we’re very concerned about. However, an advantage we have is that we’re surrounded by farms and producers and all sorts of opportunity in agriculture that maybe not other regions have.

As an MLA and as a dad, how can we work with the department? What are our responsibilities in the community? What can we flag? What is the channel, I guess, to get this information through to the minister and her team and take advantage of the competitive position we have, but also compensate for the poverty rates that we're seeing?

BECKY DRUHAN: I do appreciate the excellent question from the member. I think that it's really important that communities are aware of how to engage with this. We know how important it is that this is rooted in community. We know that communities have individual needs and very diverse communities across the province. As the member pointed out, individual communities have their own challenges, but they also have their own strengths, and we really want to leverage that and make sure that communities and organizations are engaged as we do this work.

[3:00 p.m.]

In terms of the channel for communities and others to connect in with the work: Following our announcement of the school food program, we corresponded with and connected with the regions to connect with principals and get information - school-level information - to inform and help us do this work, and so I would say that a community role for connection is really at the SAC level.

I would encourage any organizations or community members who want to be involved and are interested to connect with their local schools, either the principals or the SACs, to share information, and we'll be building further conduits as the work proceeds. But that's an excellent connection at a school level to be able to share information. Every school principal received correspondence outlining the work and requesting information, and I think we have a very quick turnaround, because we're going to work fast to get this up and running across the province. Lots of opportunity for community engagement and input, and that's something we very much want to see.

CARMAN KERR: I realize we're at the preliminary stage, but to the minister on that process: That information-gathering, did a survey go out? Is it more anecdotal? Is the nuance in the principal or senior leadership at each school to submit an email? I wonder if the minister could clarify on specifics of how that information is being gathered.

BECKY DRUHAN: The survey that went out is, in fact, a survey. It's very specific, pointed questions, and it is to gather - let's say preliminary information, but really to fill in details that we need to know as we support this work, and that includes making sure that we have a complete understanding of what's in place at each school across the province, at each of our 373 schools, so that we have a fulsome understanding of the programming that's in place, the infrastructure that's in place, and the connections that exist and supports that exist around the current provisioning of food in schools. That will also help us understand, on a local basis, whom we need to connect with and whom the department and others doing this work need to connect with as the work progresses. I'll say as well that it

is systematic information that's being requested, not anecdotal, so it will give us a clear map of what our current state is as we move to our future state.

CARMAN KERR: My last question on this topic would be: Is there a deadline mentioned for those principals or those leadership groups to get that information in? I'm thinking that as MLA, I may not have time to reach out to every principal or leadership team of every school, but what can I post, maybe on social media or otherwise, and encourage the community on the timeline that they submit information? Just a bit of clarity on how to "rally the troops," I guess.

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member for the opportunity to clarify that. The initial survey - the deadline is actually March 8th, so that turnaround will be fast, but again, it's all information that's in the purview of the principals. It won't be information that they necessarily need to hear from the community on. As the work progresses, though, the SACs will continue to be a conduit to inform and connect with the work and be voices of communities.

There's no urgent rush for communities to reach out to be able to respond for the initial survey. It is important for folks to know that the SACs are a great channel for having discussions at the school level about what they're hoping to see in school food programming.

CARMAN KERR: I just recently became the critic for the Department of Agriculture. I've asked the minister in Question Period - it might have been one or two years ago, I forget - as an interested member at the time, how we can leverage more local food and support our local producers in that school area.

There was an example - I think I raised it in either Estimates or Question Period - where we've got a local volunteer group - parents, teachers, et cetera - that are outside the procurement process. They're able to get better deals, healthier food, et cetera from local farms, producers, and owners of businesses within agriculture that are actually in the school. I think at the time it was told to me that we couldn't veer too much away from the procurement.

I don't know if that's a question, or more flagging it for the department and the minister, of there being an appetite in Annapolis, Middleton, and every community throughout that's surrounded by farms and producers, that a lot of the kids in schools are either living on farms or connected to producers. It would just make great sense. I'm advocating as the member, but also as the critic for Agriculture, to make sure we're able to include as much local product in that region as we can versus trucking it in from other regions.

I'll move on, in the spirit of my colleague also wanting to ask questions, to daycares. We're certainly not immune to a lack of daycare spaces in Annapolis. Could the minister

elaborate on whether, in this new budget, there are any new FTEs created or new spaces created?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can confirm for the member that Annapolis has been identified as an area of focus to work to expand space in programs, for sure. We recognize that there's a need there, so there's active work under way right now to expand spaces available in licensed child care centres. Those are the larger centres.

I can also say that we have the Family Home Child Care Agency in Annapolis County in the area. It's working to establish family home providers in the area, as well, and we have a grant program in place now to support the expansion of those opportunities for people who are interested. That's a \$7,500 grant program for minor home improvements, purchasing materials and supplies to create quality care environments.

For folks who don't know, the Family Home Child Care Provider program is a program that enables families to start up child care in their homes. It is a really beneficial program for establishing child care in areas that have traditionally had challenges getting licensed child care. If the member has any community members who are interested in exploring that opportunity, I would encourage them to reach out to the department. As I said, we have grants available and this is a target area that we have right now for expansion of spaces.

CARMAN KERR: My last topic is around whether the minister supports the discontinuation by APSEA of their programs and that change of model.

BECKY DRUHAN: I'm not sure if the member was present when we discussed APSEA a little earlier. APSEA is an organization that provides support and educational services to blind and visually impaired and deaf and hard-of-hearing...

CARMAN KERR: Sorry. In the spirit of time, Minister, I am aware of APSEA and what they provide, and the services prior and the services now. I guess the question is, more specifically, does the minister support the changes that have taken place recently - the discontinuation of short-term programs, on the educational assessments, et cetera?

BECKY DRUHAN: I would say that unlike other areas of education in Nova Scotia that fall directly under the purview of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, APSEA is a joint agency that is responsible for the provision of services in Atlantic Canada, which means there's a different responsibility there and they are governed by a board. This is something that has certainly been brought to my attention and we know that there are folks who have questions and concerns because of the change in model, and there are students who had really great experiences with the old model.

I've met with APSEA to understand the reasons for the change in model. What I understand is that this is intended to be responsive to inclusive education principles of

providing access to services and supports in communities where people reside and not requiring people to travel. I've also been assured that they are monitoring this change and looking toward the results. I am also interested to hear their results and the outcomes to ensure that APEA services are still meeting the needs of Nova Scotia students and families.

CARMAN KERR: I do understand it's a joint effort, but my understanding is the executive committee of the board is made up of deputy ministers from the four provinces, and my questions were around: What do we support, as a province, on that group? What do we reject and what are we comfortable with?

BECKY DRUHAN: Just to clarify, the deputy ministers of the provinces are certainly on the board, but they're four members of a 12-member board, and they have independent and fiduciary responsibilities to that board and to the execution of the board and APSEA's functions. That's why they live a little bit, or their responsibility chain is a little different than other areas in education.

[3:15 p.m.]

I will say, though, that the APSEA team are the professionals in this space, and we do have to have confidence in their work. Having said that, we will be monitoring, and we'll be requesting regular updates and outcomes on the change to ensure that our Nova Scotian students' needs are met.

CARMAN KERR: I would acknowledge they're probably the experts in this. However, the suggestion by the minister that this is more inclusive with the change of model - I would argue against that. The families that I represent who are involved in APSEA are suggesting that there's now been a virtual component added. A lot of people in Annapolis don't have internet. You're asking a child and a student to virtually stare at a screen who is either legally blind or suffering from other challenges visually and through hearing. They're not getting the same kind of support that they need and require and expect that they would in person by losing those short-term programs. I know people in Annapolis and in rural Nova Scotia are suffering more because of these changes.

I only have a few minutes. There's mention of regional gatherings in place of short-term programming. Can the minister comment on how frequent those gatherings will be? Where will they be held, and when will they start?

BECKY DRUHAN: I'm glad the member raised that, because I hadn't mentioned it previously. The shift in programming does include those regional and short-term programs, but they're in-person programs. I don't have details at hand on how frequent, when, or where they occur, but I'm sure that APSEA can provide those.

CARMAN KERR: I would request that maybe through the minister or the department I could have more detail on that. In conclusion, I just want to read quickly a

quote from one of my families who have been involved in the program. I quote: “The independence our son has obtained will simply be unavailable to current and future generations of blind, visually impaired, deaf, and hard-of-hearing children, leaving them further marginalized and greatly increasing their lifelong dependence on an array of social service and community supports.”

I am, as MLA, asking for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to work at reinstating some of those programs and services that we’ve lost. We’re certainly feeling the impacts in rural Nova Scotia, in Annapolis. I hope the minister will advocate on behalf of these families and on behalf of other families and students across the province.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I just want to underline my concern about this particular issue as well. I have indeed heard from families in my area, people who in the past were able to take courses, group courses, and it’s not happening now. They may say that kids are getting their psychoeducational assessments, but the people I’ve been working with have not. I reached out to HRCE, and they don’t have capacity for this. The issue is that these children who are at an age where they’re supposed to be getting these assessments are not getting the assessments.

I want to bring that to the minister’s attention. I would ask that she would meet with the members of the House who are concerned about this particular issue, because there is a group of children whose parents believe they are not getting what they should be getting - these assessments, number one - and it’s hard to teach a visually impaired child things over Zoom. If it’s something that they would normally have hands-on experience with, like how to cross a street when there are snowbanks, that kind of thing, they can hear about it, but unless you’re actually physically experiencing it - and that’s what the old programming used to do - it’s just not happening.

I just want to make the minister aware of those particular concerns, and I would ask that the members of the House who have constituents who are raising this particular issue be able to meet with the minister about this and sort of bring some concrete examples to her, because these children are already dealing with a lot, and to lose that major training tool that sort of opens up the world to them is a huge, huge deal.

BECKY DRUHAN: I do want to clarify as well that I don’t have agency or direct authority over APSEA, but I can say that these concerns that the members are raising are concerns that I’ve had conversations with students of APSEA and families about before now and continue to hear about. It is very important to me that APSEA serves our Nova Scotia students’ needs. I know that they have a joint - they have a responsibility to not just Nova Scotia but the Atlantic provinces, and certainly we want to be sure that they are meeting Nova Scotians’ needs.

I will absolutely be monitoring that. The department will be monitoring the outcomes and the shift in the programming to ensure that their expectations around being able to continue to meet student needs are being met. We'll be continuing to monitor that and assess and ensure that our students' needs are being met here in Nova Scotia.

KELLY REGAN: I can assure the minister that their needs are not being met. That's why I asked for a meeting with the minister. I'm taking from that answer that the minister will not meet with members of our caucuses who have concerns about this. I will move on to another question.

Recently my colleague from Bedford South and I met with a teacher who is deeply concerned about the situation in the classroom - an elementary school teacher who has taught for many years. It was about the crushing weight of needs that teachers are dealing with right now, particularly in areas experiencing a lot of growth, and Bedford has experienced a lot of growth over the last number of years, as we all know. What she's seeing is immigrants come in after the October deadline, so we're seeing classrooms of five and six children over the cap, a multiplicity of needs. Some children are coming in and they're unable to read and write in their own home language, so they're walking into the classroom and they lack functional literacy in their own language, let alone trying to translate that into English.

Often, they're dealing with trauma as well. She was deeply concerned about the lack of support for teachers in the classroom and just really setting up our new immigrants for success. She suggested that, in fact, it would be important to ensure that these children can actually spend more time learning the basics of math and reading in addition to learning English. She just really feels that it's not fair to them and it's not fair to the other children in the classroom.

I've got one more question and then I'll just let the minister go and she can answer, because I know she may have quite a bit to say, and I don't want to get chopped up here at the end. The other thing is that in terms of schools in the Bedford Basin area, we have older ones. Fort Sackville School doesn't have a gym, it doesn't have a cafeteria, it doesn't have a library. It's really teeny. I think it has six classrooms and the gym is the hallway, in the centre. These two schools are part of the Sunnyside family of schools; they were slated to be renovated, but the explosion in population has meant that that's been set aside and new schools have been built. Eaglewood Drive Elementary does not have a cafeteria. It is a two-floor school and children who are physically disabled cannot get up to the second floor. There is no elevator. We do have some old school stock in there, and I can see there's something going on out front of the CSAP school that was Bedford Central. I don't know what CSAP is calling the school now, but it looks like there's scaffolding all around the school, so the brick may be falling off or something like that.

I just wanted to make the minister aware that in addition to the pressing needs of an exploding population, there is also a lot of really old school stock in Bedford and parents

are wondering when they are going to see a replacement for that Eaglewood School, which was on the books at some point awhile ago. Again, the population needs took over and it hasn't happened yet. I would just leave the classroom conditions and the school replacements with the minister, if she could respond.

BECKY DRUHAN: There were a lot of questions rolled up into the member's comments there, so I'm going to go through a few of them. Hopefully, I've captured them. In no particular order, I think - I've just got notes here - I'll go top to bottom with what I've captured. The first issue that the member raised was, I think, around growth generally and the question of classroom sizes and the volume of new students entering the system. I can say in relation to that, yes, absolutely, this is an issue we're experiencing across the province, but we know that particularly in HRCE, growth is something that we see more intensely in particular areas of HRCE.

[3:30 p.m.]

In relation to class size, we often talk very quickly about class caps and the concept that if we exceed class caps, immediate action should be taken to reduce that, but I think when we actually talk about it and play it out, that's not necessarily what the students or the families would want to see.

What we used to have with growth was - not a model, but a reality - that people tended to move at specific times of the year, and we would see surges in population and moving trends. I recall this from real estate years ago. There was a big move, people looking to buy in March so they could move in the Summer, and then you'd see the enrolment change in the Fall, leading up to this new school year, and you would have fairly stable enrolment over the course of the year. At that time, your class caps meant that - and, again, you would look at class caps at a particular time in the year, and that was stable.

We've seen a dramatic shift from that trend to a situation where enrolment changes on a much more regular basis than it used to. What that means from a class-cap perspective is that if you reconsider throughout the course of the year, instead of making quick changes in class configuration at the beginning of a year - before routines are established, before you make your way through certain lessons, before groups connect with one another and students develop that relationship with their teacher - we find those enrolment levels changing through the course of the year. Then we're looking at: Well, what do we do if a class looks to be exceeding the cap after the holiday, when you're months into a school year and students already have those relationships with one another and with their staff? Then the answer isn't quite as simple as "We should shift that classroom," because many students and families would say, "Actually, no. We like the class."

For those reasons, when that happens - and I will say it's a small fraction of our classes that do experience that through the course of the year - we have to look at different resourcing. It may be the case that you want to rearrange the class configuration, but the

other tools that are available, and that are often preferable to classes, are that we deploy an additional teacher or other resources into that class, so that you may be over the cap but, in fact, you have two teachers at hand to be able to handle the volumes.

I did want to clarify that, because it sounds - when you quickly talk about it - like it's pretty simple to stick with a class cap, but the reality is, for most people, they don't actually want to see that happen. They want to see it addressed in a different way.

The second issue that the member raised was in relation to newcomer support. This is a related question. The reason we're seeing the changes in enrolment over the course of a year is because we are having so many newcomers to our communities, and it's so important that we do the work to support them.

I will say that this is something I've had detailed conversations with staff teams about as well. When I've visited schools - I recall visiting one school - and there's always a nervousness, I think, among staff when the minister is engaged, and I really don't want that to be the case. I very much am of the belief that I want to see things as they are because that's how we address people's needs. That's how we best support people in the system.

I went to one school, and they were sharing some work that they were doing around newcomer support. It was a program that they offered to newcomers - English was not their first language, so English as an additional language to students, all of whom were newcomers. It was a program where they offered - I'll call it a pull-out class, where they took some time each week to take this group of students who were interested in this experience and do targeted training around English. It was an opportunity, a safe space where newcomers could ask questions and learn the language in a way that was targeted to their own individual needs.

I think there was some nervousness around sharing this with me. I think there is sometimes a perception that inclusive education means all kids in all classes at all times together, and the reality is that inclusive education can be an array of supports that are targeted to the choices and the needs of individual students.

I was so grateful to see this program in action, and I heard from other staff teams across the province in conversations that they were interested and needed support with newcomers. We've actually connected staff teams with that school to understand what they're doing and how that might apply in their own school. As one of our ideas for education pilots - ideas that were advanced by teachers across the province - we actually do have a newcomer support program that's being piloted in a number of places across the province.

Those are just some of the new things that are happening in support of newcomers across the province, but of course we also have many inclusive education supports that

exist already in the system to help with our newcomers. The member did raise a really important point. I'm talking now very generally about newcomers... (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allocated for the Liberal questions has elapsed. There are 18 minutes remaining for the NDP. I do understand the NDP will keep five minutes for the minister's closing statement.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham, with 13 minutes.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm hoping that we can continue this conversation off this particular day. I have a question about SACs, because as a parent - most parents have been part of an SAC, or community group in school, or PTA, or any of those things, and as I've been told, if you're a parent in a school you are automatically a part of the PTA. I'm just saying that we know that some schools don't actually have an active SAC, and so I'm curious to know, based on the announcement that was given a little while ago, about the grant funding and SACs being able to have a little bit more autonomy to do certain things within the school.

I'm just curious to know: How do we fill the gap? How do RCEs fill the gap when there aren't enough SAC members to make an advisory?

BECKY DRUHAN: Thanks to the member for the opportunity to talk about SACs, because, as the member has pointed out, it's important that people are involved. The more that people can know about what SACs are and how to be involved, I think that helps us ensure that we have robust engagement in our SACs. I can say that virtually every school now does have a SAC. I understand that when they were stood up initially a number of years ago, there was some difficulty in getting involvement, but one of the ways that people were encouraged to be involved was through the provision of grant funding.

We have a variety of grants that are available to school communities to support healthy living, to support achievement and well-being, and those grants, when they flow through SACs, do require SACs to be active for schools to participate. As a result of that, almost all schools now have SACs that are active, and lots of volunteers came on board to participate in SACs when that grant funding started to be provided to them.

I want to highlight that those funds also enable SACs to support participation. What we don't want to see is that folks have barriers to participating because of child care needs or because of transportation or other needs. Funding that is available to SACs actually enables the SACs to support those needs and eliminate those barriers where they may exist. I think that's a really important thing for people to know so that they can be encouraged to participate.

I think one of the things that is the biggest disincentive to being involved in something or participating in something is if you feel like your work doesn't matter, if you

can't make an impact. The work that we've done around enhancing local voice and augmenting and enhancing our SACs is really work that is designed to ensure that those SACs have impact, that they have meaning, and that they're able to provide a positive impact in their students' lives, in the achievement and well-being of their students and their schools, and in the school experience.

That's been done in a few different ways, or it's happening in a few different ways. Not all of these things have rolled out yet. There has now been an increase in funding to our SACs. We've introduced an innovation fund that provides grants to SACs of up to \$10,000 to support projects that support well-being and achievement. It's a little bit in line with the concepts around ideas for education, the understanding that people have local and innovative ideas, and we want to empower those to happen.

We will also be starting an annual SAC chairs conference, which is something we heard from folks that was really necessary. The power in SACs is that they're local, they understand local needs, they understand their local school communities. That's really important. We also want to leverage that on a system level, so we're going to do a few things. We want to leverage that local knowledge and expertise and experience on the system level, and bringing our SACs together on a provincial basis allows us to do that.

It also allows networking to happen, to enable SACs to learn from one another about what is happening at other schools. It also provides us an opportunity to be responsive to the need that was identified with SACs about what are we supposed to be doing and how are we supposed to do it? It's an opportunity for training and education to the members of SACs about how to fulfill that role and how to really be successful in making a difference at a school level. Those are just a few of the ways that we are acting to support engagement and support participation on our SACs.

SUZY HANSEN: What has changed? Those are all the same things that were happening with the SACs before. What has changed? Is it the funding that's enabling folks to participate, like child care and transportation? Are you finding that that's a reason why folks are now able to be more available? All of those things you mentioned about SACs were happening previous to - I mean, it's always happened. I just figured that there might have been something different. I just want to know that: What's different?

The other thing is how many folks have accessed the \$10,000? Is it based on someone having to apply after they've already spent a certain amount and be reimbursed? Is it like we have to come up with an idea and a plan and then we have to present it as a grant proposal? I'm curious to know: How does that happen and what are the criteria to be able to access \$10,000?

BECKY DRUHAN: We did get some information. At this time, out of our 373 schools, only six of them don't have active SACs. We're supporting the regions - I'm not sure if any are CSAP, but we're supporting the entities to make sure we have resources and

get the engagement to make sure that those remaining six schools do have active SACs in place.

[3:45 p.m.]

To clarify, there are a few different funding sources for our SACs. There are two grants - well, there was one grant when we took office, which was \$5,000 a year for every SAC, plus one dollar per student. We added an additional grant option for healthy schools, so that really doubled the funding that was available to SACs. I think that was one of the first things I did as minister. Funding that's available to our SACs has significantly increased.

As part of the recent work that we did in enhancing local voice, we added the additional \$10,000 funding opportunity for SACs to do innovative work to support student achievement and well-being. That's a bit of a different model. The other two grants that total \$10,000 per school plus the per-student funding are available to all schools and there are some particular criteria associated with that.

The \$10,000 funding - there's an application process for that. We're actually in the process of receiving applications for that from SACs now. The deadline, I believe, is April 18th, so if there are schools that are interested, we hope that they put proposals forward. That funding will be provided in advance of the projects starting. We really look forward to seeing the proposals that are implemented.

The funding has definitely changed. It's increased significantly. That's one of the things that's changed to increase engagement. The conference actually is something that I think has been raised before but we've never done - there may have been one. All right. I know there's some enthusiasm and excitement about that, but it hasn't happened for some time.

I have worked, and our department has worked, and I know the regions are working very, very hard to connect with and amplify and support engagement. That's not just specific to our SACs, but all across the system. I probably won't get an opportunity to speak to this in closing remarks, but I'll take the chance now because it's really relevant to this.

One of the biggest factors that we see as being a determinant of the success of a school, of a system, of a classroom in student achievement and well-being is collective advocacy. That's the collective belief of an educational team that they can meet the needs of their students. This is a factor that is above and beyond...

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry to interrupt. I'm wondering if I could invite the minister to start the last five minutes of discussion, and please end with re-stating the resolution.

BECKY DRUHAN: I'll just very quickly finish talking about collective advocacy because I think it's so important. It is the factor, above all other factors, that determines the success of our students. The reality is that we have a complex system. We are a team of over 20,000 individuals delivering education to over 131,000 students. There are a couple of reasons why the collective efficacy is important around this.

The first is that our classrooms are more complex than ever. The model of one teacher in front of a class delivering all their needs is not the model that we have anymore. That means that it's so much more important that our classrooms and teachers be connected with one another, that resources in the regions and the departments be connected with one another, and that schools are connected with each other so that we can leverage our collective experience and knowledge to best meet the needs of our students.

So much of the work that I've done and the department has done, that we're encouraging the regions to do, and that we're doing with schools, with all the meetings with one another, listening to each other and acting on what they're saying is to build the collective efficacy of this system. We have a system that has almost \$2 billion invested in it and 20,000 well-educated, passionate staff. We have the ability to meet our students' needs. What we need to do is gel together and that's one of the really important things that I and the department have been focused on with all of this work. That relates to the SACs as well as all of our other staff.

Before I forget, I want to thank all of the staff that I've had the opportunity to talk to over the last two years because that work informs everything that we do. I thank all of the staff who are going to continue to be willing to talk to me as we move forward and provide their insight and expertise. That informs the work that we do.

I want to thank all of the staff I have here and for whom I finally found the list, so I don't forget anybody. For the folks who are here in the room with me: Sara Halliday, Associate Deputy Minister; Jennifer Wood, Director of Financial Advisory Services; Alex Burke, Wanda Fletcher, Kelsey Davidson, and there may be some others back there.

We have some on the phone, including Deputy Minister Elwin LeRoux, Andrew Coates, Pam AuCoin, Chris Boulter, Annie Baert, Tyler Bell, and so many others at the department who helped to do this that we're here today doing, but also help to deliver the incredible education to our students across the province.

I greatly appreciate the contributions of all of them. They are an incredible team. Together, I know we have the ability and the resources that we need to meet our students' needs. I'm privileged to have the support of this team. It is a true team effort. We're a team of over 20,000 strong.

I think we may have a couple of more minutes left until the end of the day. I did want to talk specifically about some of the conversations that I've had with staff teams. I

mentioned earlier that I think staff teams often have some nerves when they speak to a minister. It just seems to be the reality of it. I want to say that it takes bravery, I think, for staff teams to be candid about what their experiences are.

Far and away, my experience and conversations with staff teams have been that they are willing to come with honesty and candour about their experiences and share their celebrations, what they're proud of, all of the things that are happening that are so positive in their schools, and also the challenges that they have, and their ideas.

There is so much power in those ideas that I've heard from all of those staff across the province. They have so much insight and knowledge. I so greatly appreciate their contributions and their willingness to be candid. I think I can roll into the resolution now.

THE CHAIR: Shall the resolution stand? The resolution stands.

The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply stands adjourned until such time as we are called to meet again. Members can return to their seats.

[The committee adjourned at 3:54 p.m.]