

## **PACE Meeting Minutes - March 25, 2021**

Virtual Meeting – 1pm-4pm

### **Mi'kmaq Acknowledgement**

The meeting began by acknowledging that it is taking place in Mi'kma'ki traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

### **Affirmation**

The acknowledgement was followed by an affirmation.

### **Approval of the Agenda and Minutes**

Council approved the agenda and minutes.

### **Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) Update and Member Discussion**

EECD updated PACE on the school year, the implementation of the Back to School plan and ongoing work with Public Health. Nova Scotia has been fortunate to have an approach to keep students in school and has learned from the previous experiences to put in place required supports that are necessary during the pandemic, but good beyond.

EECD provided an update on Federal Safe Restart funding provided for schools. Nova Scotia received \$48.88M.

A significant portion of the funding is being used to improve technology. In addition to the 14,000 devices purchased in the summer, 32,000 more Chromebooks have been purchased and distributed to Regional Centres of Education (RCEs) and Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP). This will address the issues around access to devices that were identified during the prior at-home learning period and allow students who do not have a device at home to borrow a device if it is required. In addition, \$10.5M is being spent on server and WIFI upgrades in schools to support the new devices and improve the internet quality. This will help improve remote learning opportunities now and in the future.

Funding is also being used on public health related supports, including additional PPE, enhanced cleaning of schools and buses, as well as checking ventilation systems (including maintenance, repair and windows) and installing touchless water stations. Members discussed these measures, in particular the installation of the water stations and how they were part of the remediation solution. It was noted that all schools continue to have safe drinking water available. This has helped keep schools learning in school with all of the required additional safety measures.

Learning supports were also a major area of focus, with over \$4M being used to purchase new online learning programs for math, literacy and writing supports. We heard from schools and regions that there is a concern about math for grades 3-10 and literacy for grades primary-6; adding these new programs will help in the short term and into the future.

Lastly, EECD invested in school food. Early feedback from regions demonstrated increased use of the school food program. EECD invested an additional \$500K to address this need. It was also clear that schools could move to at home learning at any time as a result of COVID-19. As such, EECD partnered with the Department of Community Services (DCS) and Feed Nova Scotia to invest \$900K into the Food Box program. When schools close, families become eligible for emergency food boxes delivered to their home.

EECD also updated on new investments being made into inclusive education positions. These new positions will add to the positions created over the last 3 years and bring the total to over 600 new supports. A further update is to be provided at the next meeting. Members asked about the developmental review and about having future meetings on the progress and initiatives underway.

The idea of potential learning loss from COVID-19 was discussed. EECD shared initial data on how the children are doing. RCEs/CSAP are not waiting for next year to act. Literacy in grades 1 and 2 are areas they are focusing on right now. EECD plans to provide further updates at the next meeting.

Members also raised various local updates in addition, including a discussion about recent media on the student protest in Sydney and how progress on the Gaelic Studies program in SRCE can be a good example for the system.

### **Discussion on Lessons Learned**

Members discussed what is being learned during such an unprecedented year. There were many different pieces of feedback and a desire to continue the discussion in a more structured format at the next meeting.

The key areas that were discussed included the use of technology, expansion of outdoor learning, the importance of extra curriculums, community use of schools, social skill development, transition points in school, especially to post-secondary, different ways to access mental health services, the need to focus on wellbeing and crisis planning. There were many comments about continuing to push forward with building on the different options that have been introduced to support students, particularly using technology. Several examples were provided that demonstrated the successful use of technology to offer services, lessons, and support virtually.

Many parts of the Back to School plan were discussed. There was a general recognition that the measures put in place were working well and communities were confident in the public health approach when a case of COVID-19 was connected to a school. Members began discussing the uncertainty around what the next school year will look like and the impact that has on the system.

It was proposed that the next meeting include another session to build on the key areas discussed. The session would provide more targeted questions to facilitate more detailed feedback that can be used as plans are made for the next school year.